

Tank Destroyer Battle Experience

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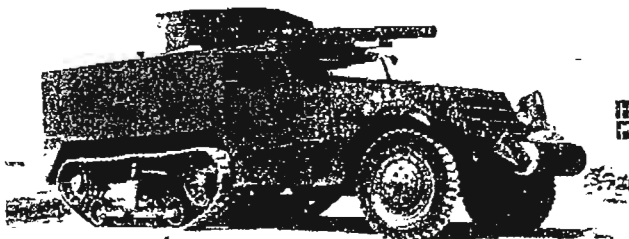
THE HARD-HITTING Tank Destroyers, the United States Army's answer to the Nazi panzer threat, have proved themselves in battle, according to reports received from the combat fronts.

Recognized as a definite need in 1940, the subject of experiment in 1941, and emerging as an entity in December of 1941 when a training center was temporarily set up at Fort Meade, Maryland, the TD's today are filling a gap in our military plan with well-trained and equipped troops from the big Tank Destroyer Center at Camp Hood—Texas' largest military establishment.

Like other components of the ground forces, Tank Destroyers have not been confined to any one particular theater or to any one front. They have been spread around the globe and used to advantage whenever employed. Their first great test, however, was in the Tunisian campaign where armored forces played a particularly important role. It was in Tunisia that the TD's hacked out for themselves a reputation for straight-shooting, aggressive battling, and it was there that the Nazis and Italians came to call them the "American Tourists" (because of the extensive traveling they did to meet armored thrusts) or the "Quarter-inch Bastards" (because of the light quarter-inch armor on the M-3 half-track destroyer).

IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Tank Destroyers were in on the beginnings of the big fight at Bataan and Guadalcanal. Fifty M-3 de-



M-3 HALF-TRACK DESTROYER

Used by the 701st TD Battalion and by the majority of the TD units in Tunisia. The M-3 was an expedient destroyer, designed to give the TD's a mobile, flat trajectory gun while more suitable destroyers were being produced. The M-3 functioned extremely well despite its limitations.

stroyers (half-track-mounted 75's) were sent to the Philippines in the summer of 1941. They fought ef-

fectively against the Japanese invasion force, knocking out light Japanese tanks, defending beaches, and acting as mobile artillery. An observer who was evacuated during the last days of Corregidor stated that the Nipponese could not have landed at either Lingayen or Lamon Bays had a sufficient force of TD guns been available to defend the beaches. This same observer believed that the TD's figured prominently in prolonging the defense of Bataan beyond the tenth day.

Despite the poor terrain conditions for armored warfare on Guadalcanal, the United States Marines used M-3 Tank Destroyer half-tracks on various missions in that theater. Under orders to support defense of the Matanika River against a Japanese counterattack, the Marines moved their M-3's into firing positions. Twelve Japanese tanks led the assault across a sand spit at the mouth of the river just at dusk. At a range of less than a hundred yards, the self-propelled 75's destroyed ten of the tanks. The leading tank tried to maneuver and escape the devastating fire. It ran off the sand spit and into the river, disappearing with its crew beneath the surface of the water. The last tank succeeded in crossing the spit but was destroyed while trying to make its escape down the beach.

ACTION IN AFRICA

Tank Destroyer Units played an important part in the invasion of Africa. Mobile, possessing great fire power, the units were found to be an ideal weapon for landing operations and were used as integral parts of task forces during the entire campaign.

Tank Destroyers accompanied the first landings in Algeria on 8 November 1942. They were part of a combined force which landed at St. Leu Beach and moved in with the flying column whose mission was to seize the Tofaroui Airport. Their use as self-propelled artillery and assault guns unquestionably played a big part in the action which secured this vital installation necessary for the establishment of landing fields. Without these fields, there would have been little fighter support for the American advance on Oran.

TD's were among the first American units to enter Oran and also accompanied the leading American elements on the long trek to Tunisia. Units of the 701st TD Battalion, attached to the First Armored Division, took the enemy town of Gafsa in southern Tunisia early on the morning of 21 November 1942, probably firing the first American shots

against the Axis forces in Tunisia. Likewise, in the closing stages of the campaign, other Tank Destroyer Units accompanied the first American troops to enter the town of Bizerte.

One of the most important aspects of the Tunisian campaign was the fact that this was the trial by fire, a proving ground for the theory that a hard-hitting, self-propelled, straight-shooting gun, whose vision was better than the tank's, was one of the answers to the destruction of hostile armor.

The first few months in Tunisia were a trial for all American troops. Our units found themselves faced with the task of cooperating with the French and the British in an effort to hold a long, thin line from Mateur down to Gafsa, a line behind which the Allied strength could be built up to move in and put the squeeze on the Axis from the south and west, while the British Eighth moved up from the south-east.

As a result, our organizations were split up and assigned to various points of the front to meet current needs and to reinforce the French and British. The TD's were used to bolster points vulnerable to

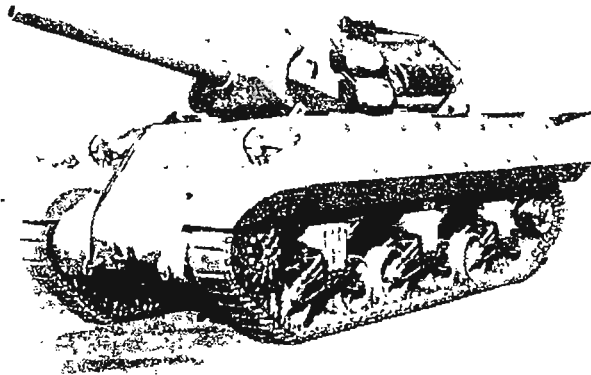
necessity, they operated with French, English, and American units and were assigned to all types of missions. They performed creditably in all situations and, despite the heterogeneous assignment of tasks necessitated by the tactical situation, they were generally successful in the completion of their mission.

Company "B" of the 701st was cited by the French and by Allied Headquarters. The entire unit was awarded the French Fourragers, and the commanding officer received the Croix de Guerre with Palm. Another TD Battalion was credited by General Terry Allen with turning back the German 10th Panzer Division and protecting the First Infantry Division's flank and supply lines at El Guettar. Individual decorations and citations were numerous. Allied commanders, especially French, were eager to secure Tank Destroyer support, and those TD units available were assigned and reassigned frequently, over many sectors. One battalion was attached to as many as nine separate headquarters throughout the campaign, under several of which it functioned more than once.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

On 22 December 1942 Allied Force Headquarters cited Company "B" of the 701st TD Battalion for actions engaged in during November. The citation reads: "A unit of outstanding courage in battle . . . it has accomplished by skilful maneuver and exceptional daring, in less than two days, the recapture of an important locality occupied by the enemy, the destruction of a strong armored column which attempted the recapture of this locality, and the capture of a motorized column which threatened its flank."

The honor was hard-earned. Company "B" had just come overland from the vicinity of Oran after completing several successful actions there. Arriving in Feriana, Tunisia, late at night after a long march, it was ordered to attack the enemy-held town of Gafsa at dawn. The mission was accomplished with the aid of two antiquated French reconnaissance cars and two P-38's, acting as air support. The company seized Gafsa before noon and took a number of prisoners and a quantity of enemy matériel. At noon the commander received word that an enemy armored column was approaching Gafsa from the east. The Tank Destroyer moved out to meet the Panzers and surprised them at El Guettar. When the smoke cleared from the battlefield, four enemy tanks were found to have been destroyed, with six escaping back toward Gabes where they were later captured, out of fuel and considerably damaged. The company commander used a "play" which had been practiced on the drill field until all concerned were letter-perfect in its execution. When action was imminent he called the play, and the practical application of the drill field was applied to the bat-



M-10 DESTROYER

The M-10 is a later model, now in use. The three-inch gun has high velocity, flat trajectory. Fifty caliber MG primarily an AA weapon, also available for ground use.

enemy armored thrusts at Faïd, Fondouk, Pichon, Guelletia, and in other sectors. These early battalions, equipped with the expedient M-3 and the later model, the M-10, proved themselves on the field of battle and earned for all times a reputation of being able to do the job rapidly and well.

In Tunisia TD units performed not only their primary mission, the destruction of hostile armor by direct fire, but were also assigned to, and performed, missions as mobile artillery, rear guard actions, flank guard actions, general task force reconnaissance, airport defense, advance guard, and divisional protective screen actions.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that the tank destroyers functioned as effectively as they did. Of

tlefield. Nothing was left to battlefield inspiration. The action depended on the perspiration which had been expended on the drill field for its successful execution. This is a practical application of the principle of applying the lessons learned on the drill field to the battlefield.

Returning to Gafsa, the company was ordered to Sbeitla, a hundred miles to the north, where the Germans had captured the town along with two companies of French infantry and large quantities of matériel. Leaving Gafsa at dusk, the company marched fifty miles to Feriana, refueled, and started the thirty mile trip to Kasserine at dawn. The panzers had advanced as far as Kasserine and turned back. The country was strange, the TD's were unsupported, and maps were sketchy and some were even incorrect.

The company advanced cautiously through Kasserine and surprised the enemy eating the noon meal at Sbeitla. Flanking the town, the company again used a play which had been practiced on the drill field and poured a heavy, accurate fire into the fourteen tanks on the outskirts of the town. Eleven enemy tanks were destroyed and three escaped. One destroyer was disabled temporarily and one man wounded. Prisoners were again lined up, civilians interrogated and released, and booty seized. After French forces had garrisoned the town, the company retired to Kasserine, where it got its first sleep in four days. In the past thirty hours it had been in three actions, won them all, destroyed fifteen tanks, captured six, and traveled four hundred miles—not a bad beginning for the first Tank Destroyer Unit in action in Tunisia.

Tank Destroyer Units carried their load and played an important part during the withdrawal of American forces through Kasserine Pass in February. Rommel was attacking through Faid Pass and Sidi bou Zid, pushing the Allies back along a wide front. Retiring American forces fought a delaying action at Sbeitla to cover withdrawal through Kasserine. Destroyers, attached to armored units during this action, played their part.

Dawn of the 17th of February found destroyers of the TD Battalion some distance in front of supporting forces, holding a broad front. Just before noon some sixty enemy tanks approached. Sixteen panzers worked their way around the left flank using a covered route of approach. Shortly thereafter the Tank Destroyers took the hostile tanks under fire, destroying seven. During the fight the enemy tanks closed in to approximately two hundred yards before retiring out of range. Units of the 701st TD Battalion were also engaged in rear guard action during this withdrawal.

A BIG KILL AT EL GUETTAR

One of the most decisive Tank Destroyer actions took place at the battle of El Guettar on 23 March

1943, when thirty-one guns of a TD Battalion destroyed over thirty enemy tanks of the Tenth Panzer Division, disabled others, and inflicted heavy losses on German infantry.

Attached to the First Infantry Division, the TD Battalion was placed in front of the defensive position occupied by the division southeast of El Guettar village. The TD mission was to protect the division artillery and to prevent tank counterattacks.

The division was to attack on the morning of the 23d. However, at 0500 TD reconnaissance parties, entrenched in the valley in advance of the division defense, captured a German motorcyclist, part of the advance guard of the Tenth Panzer Division. General Allen's division was warned that the Nazis were attacking. Until this time no more than fifteen or twenty enemy tanks had been reported in the sector.

The panzers attacked at dawn, thrusting at the TD positions and the artillery emplacements with over a hundred tanks. One force of thirty tanks hit the American right flank with the intention of cutting through and severing the division supply lines to Gafsa. The panzers were turned back, leaving four dead tanks and towing four disabled Mark IV's. In the American center and left flank the tanks attacked in lines and in groups of six. The TD companies there fired from defilade, shifted positions, dodged 88's and enemy infantry; and knocked out tanks as fast as they could load and fire. At noon what was left of the panzers retired, and an infantry attack was launched by the Nazis in the late afternoon. During this attack, the German infantry advanced in the open, standing upright. The tanks reappeared but remained in the background, milling and raising dust with no intention of advancing.

The TD Guns used HE in direct fire on the infantry, inflicting heavy losses. Divisional artillery laid down concentrations, and the attack was broken. The Nazi force retired toward Gabes, terminating their activities in that sector. General Allen was high in his praise of the Tank Destroyer Battalion. It had helped hold the front line under heavy attack by three times its number of tanks, and had successfully withstood strafing and dive-bombing by the Luftwaffe, sniping, machine-gun and mortar fire from infiltrating German infantry, and concentrated German artillery fire. Twenty-one of their thirty-one guns were disabled, though eight were recovered and repaired at once. Personnel losses were comparatively light.

GENERAL

These few examples of Tunisian actions indicate that Tank Destroyers aided materially throughout the entire campaign. Among the first to join battle, they played equally important roles in the final stages of the crushing of the Afrika Korps. Other actions, too numerous to mention and chiefly concerning individual platoons and companies, have

been recorded. The lessons learned have been translated into new training and are now an integral part of the fast-growing TD tactical dossier.

The general conclusions drawn from the Tunisian experiences show that the Tank Destroyers employed their flat trajectory, high velocity weapons with unusual accuracy both in direct and indirect fire missions.

Battlefield experience has proven that the development of the Tank Destroyer, initially the M-3 and then the M-10 and now a new and improved weapon, has justified its existence. Their record stands for itself: in Tunisia, tanks destroyed, 137; 88's knocked out, 18—a conservative estimate from available official records.

Offensive Spirit in Defense

[Translated at the Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, from a German article in *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* 17 May 1943.]

THERE is no soldier who does not prefer violent attack to silent, stubborn defense. But war does not ask what a person would like. Defense which saves forces is often the necessity of the hour, and the commander who could not depend on his troops' resistance as much as on their force of attack would be in a bad way. The German soldier, although conditioned by temperament and training primarily for strongest forward movement, has also proved his superiority by masterly conduct of defense in the most recent phases of the war. It has thus been confirmed that all good characteristics of the German fighting man acquired during generations and all the basic principles of military training and development tested through the decades hold true in defense just as well as in offense. And finally it has become evident that certain tactics of defense may very well make use of many elements of offensive tactics. Defense conducted on mobile lines does not dampen offensive spirit; for it demands daily, as the culmination of defense achievement, a new counterthrust which often seeks to penetrate the enemy's position and even his assembly areas.

Defense requires just as high ability of the soldier as does attack. It demands highest development of psychological forces; for it is clear that, while the spirit of attack is promoted by the impetus of forward movement, stability and resoluteness in waiting can be nourished only by almost inexhaustible will to victory when positions are held only with difficulty against a foe confused, perhaps, but numerically superior and as a rule with strong reserves at his disposal.

The resoluteness and confidence in victory is unstable in our soldiers, for it is based on a sure feeling of personal superiority which has been proved to be justified against every enemy in all theaters of war and under all conditions of land and climate. This is not only, not even primarily, a matter of training. The enemy also knows how to use weapons and move skilfully in the terrain. Excellence of

weapons, also, is not decisive, though it is very important. Basically, the decisive thing is consciousness of one's own worth, which causes the will to assert itself at any cost. Therefore the grenadier is ready and mentally able to wait in his trench when hostile tanks rush forward. He lets them roll past in order to be able to grapple with the hostile infantry following, and he knows the steel giants will soon be taken care of by heavy defensive weapons farther back. Thus the gunner behind the machine gun is able to let the dense wave of attacking hostile infantry come up within a few paces and then annihilate it more effectively with the dense sheaf of his fire. It would take only a slight jamming at the decisive moment for him to be overwhelmed by the attack, but he does not think of that. He controls his heart and imposes iron calm on himself because he knows how strength increases with resoluteness.

Of this spirit is born the battle tactics of men against tanks. Where, for some reason, antitank weapons are lacking in a sector of the front, the infantry might well feel itself unprotected and abandoned. It is far from that. The infantry attacks the enemy and, as we know from hundreds of reports and statements, it lays him low. Perhaps this example is best suited to show the strength of German defense: Two or three men stalk the hostile tank while others attract the attention of the tank crew. They jump onto the steel monster and adjust a pole charge to the tread in such a way that the vehicle is smashed to fragments a few seconds later. They tear open the turret hatch; and, perhaps with only a pistol in their hands, they force the crew to climb out and surrender. They are resourceful and audacious. They have not slackened in defense but have remained active, as in the days of violent advance.

The German soldier will also prove himself in the future both in attack and defense. The success of defense is not less important than that of attack. The aim in both cases is the weakening of the enemy until final victory.