

# Tank Destroyers in Europe

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**T**HIS article is based upon official reports by commanders and observers in France, Italy, and Africa. It has reference only to tank destroyers within the European and North African Theaters of Operation.

## GENERAL

As the African campaign drew to a close, German tanks became fewer and farther between. What had been known as large armored attacks became increasingly scarce. The Germans no longer used their tanks to the extent they had earlier in the campaign. Tank destroyers were faced either with a life of idleness or with the prospect of going out and getting a job. They chose to get a job. These first battalions in combat also proved that they could deliver the goods on these secondary missions. At least one battalion commander convinced his superiors that his outfit could shoot indirect fire and do it well. Tank destroyers were also used as assault guns in support of infantry attacks. They neutralized enemy strongpoints, knocked out pillboxes, shot up antitank guns, and overwatched tanks.

These commanders know that an idle gun is a wasted gun. They envisioned many possibilities of employment for the thirty-six high-velocity, accurate, long-range guns in each tank destroyer battalion. They sold their ideas to their superiors. Those pioneers in Africa laid the groundwork for all tank destroyers in the European and Italian theaters.

The Germans have again economized in their use of armor throughout the Italian campaign and in France. One of the notable exceptions was the German counteroffensive of last December. They have habitually employed only small groups of tanks, often only four or five tanks at a time and these in support of infantry.

Here again the tank destroyers were faced with the proposition of going out and getting a job or sitting idle. This time they were prepared for the emergency. Additional

training in Africa, England, and the United States, plus combat experience, had made many battalions proficient at indirect fire. Then, too, when the infantry needed a stone house shot up, a concrete pillbox blown in, a machine-gun nest knocked out, or an anti-tank gun taken care of, the tank destroyers were happy to step up and oblige. These missions have been accomplished so successfully that we find a policy in both the European and Italian theaters which requires that tank destroyers not employed on their primary mission will be used on a secondary mission.

Now this has not all been a one-sided transaction. The artillery has aided tank destroyers by firing on tanks out of direct fire range of the destroyers. At times it has loaned men and equipment to assist in indirect fire. It may provide fire support for destroyers moving into position. One tank destroyer battalion in Italy reports the effectiveness of this coordination. A small group of tanks had been observed in an area. Artillery fire was called on the target, and while the enemy "ducked," the destroyers moved into firing positions and delivered direct fire, knocking out two and dispersing the remainder of the tanks with several hits. This "scheme" allowed the destroyers to move into firing positions, get their hits, and move out of observation before the enemy could see and strike back.

The infantry does its turn by protecting the destroyers from German infantry accompanying tanks and by helping on projects which are designed to release more German tanks for scrap. An example of this cooperation was reported from Italy. A tank destroyer company had destroyed several tanks, but the enemy was retrieving them during the night. By getting together with the infantry, a trap was laid, and on the next night, when the Germans attempted recovery, the infantry mortars put up flares while the tank destroyers shot up the enemy recovery crews.

This brings up another development which

is of interest. It is universally recognized that a new battalion cannot be attached tonight and then be expected to function smoothly in diverse roles in the division team tomorrow. Too much depends on training, on personalities, and on preparation. Units and people must know each other in order to work together efficiently. Infantry-tank-tank destroyer-artillery coordination is possible only when the units have worked together. Today, reports from the theaters indicate that, insofar as practicable, each tank destroyer battalion is now "permanently" assigned to a certain division or tank destroyer group.

Yet another move has been made toward greater coordination of tank destroyers with the other arms. It might be stated that the field artillery has "mothered" its tank destroyer "stepsons" overseas ever since the close of the African campaign. Fifth Army Artillery was probably the first headquarters to step in this direction. The plan worked so well that most armies in Europe have assigned the tank destroyers to the artillery headquarters for training, employment, and supply. However, the tank destroyers generally function through the G-3 on their primary mission. In almost every army, corps, and division, the Artillery Officers have been given the additional responsibilities incident to the employment and coordination of the antitank means available to the unit. This imposes a heavy load on the shoulders of these commanders, so an antitank subsection has been added to their staffs to assist them in accomplishing the additional duties.

In the army and corps artillery section, we generally find an antitank subsection composed of two officers and two enlisted men. In the division artillery section, we generally find an antitank officer with two enlisted assistants. The antitank subsection may be attached to the artillery S-3 subsection for administration but usually deals directly with the Artillery Officer on all other matters.

The duties assigned to this antitank subsection generally include:

1. Preparation of plans for the employment of tank destroyer units.
2. Recommendations for the allotment of tank destroyer units to other units of the command.
3. In conjunction with other interested arms, the coordination of the antitank fires of all cannon-equipped troops.
4. Coordination of requests for antitank missions to be performed by the air forces.
5. Recommendations concerning the employment of massed artillery fires and supporting aviation to break up hostile tank assemblies and disrupt tank attacks.
6. Collection and dissemination of information concerning the terrain and the capabilities and limitations of enemy armor as it affects the action of the unit from the standpoint of antitank defense.

#### ORGANIZATION FOR INDIRECT FIRE

Until recently, the tank destroyers had only sufficient fire control equipment to permit them to perform the simpler mechanics. The battalions lacked personnel and equipment for survey, fire direction centers, and communications. The artillery necessarily did much of the work. These problems seem to have been overcome in most units. Equipment has been provided and crews have been trained so that the tank destroyers now can lean less heavily on the shoulders of the artillery. However, complex arrangements are avoided.

The tank destroyers normally execute indirect fire missions by individual company. The customary procedure is for a tank destroyer company to reinforce a field artillery battalion. The company has its own fire direction center and communications system and is capable of operating harmoniously with the artillery battalion.

Less frequently, a complete tank destroyer battalion may be employed in much the same manner as one of the organic artillery battalions of the division. This requires the tank destroyer battalion to establish a fire control center, and each gun company to establish a fire direction center. Most tank

destroyer units are neither sufficiently trained nor equipped to operate directly with division artillery on indirect fire missions.

The procedure of employing a tank destroyer platoon with a field artillery battery has generally proved unsatisfactory for several reasons, among which are the following:

1. The tank destroyer company commander loses control of his platoon.
2. The field artillery battery and its associated tank destroyer platoon are required to operate on the same party line, which results in confusion.
3. The tank destroyer platoon does not have a fire direction center. The field artillery battalion fire direction center is hampered because of the necessity to plot and compute the additional tank destroyers whose gunnery characteristics differ greatly from the artillery pieces.

#### TYPES OF INDIRECT FIRE MISSIONS

Some indirect fire missions which are assigned to and successfully executed by tank destroyers are:

1. Reinforcing the fires of field artillery battalions.
2. Deepening and extending the zones of fire of the field artillery.
3. Targets of opportunity.
4. Counterbattery.
5. Harassing missions.
6. Interdiction missions.

Many units report that they most often fire harassing missions and observed fires on targets of opportunity. In one relatively quiet sector, a tank destroyer battalion habitually took over the night harassing and interdiction missions so that the artillerymen might sleep. These destroyer men caught up on their sleep during the day.

#### TANK DESTROYERS USE ARTILLERY AIR OBSERVATION POSTS

Many divisions have reported that their attached tank destroyers are permitted to work with the artillery cub planes. One division artillery commander has adopted a system for the general support air obser-

vation post to work directly with the tank destroyer battalion attached to his headquarters. This commander describes the process substantially as follows:

Each tank destroyer has a radio channel which allows the tank destroyer to work on the artillery air-ground channel. Each company commander "listens in" on the air-ground net during the hours of daylight. When the air OP spots a target, he calls "Hello Xray—tank at (coordinates)." The tank destroyer company commander in this zone answers the call and notifies the platoon concerned of the target. The designated platoon commander checks in on the air-ground net and has the four destroyers of the platoon listen in. The platoon concerned then changes the identification panels on the tank destroyers that are to engage the tank, for identification by the air OP. The air OP then works directly with the platoon commander of the tank destroyers concerned. He assists the tank destroyers to sneak to positions from which they can engage the tank with effective direct fire, and keeps them informed of any movement of the target. This procedure is of great assistance in driving off or destroying tanks which are too close to the infantry to be engaged by artillery fire.

A similar procedure has often been used to shoot the tank destroyers in on an indirect fire mission.

#### IN SUPPORT OF INFANTRY

The tank destroyers have done much work in support of infantry. The general lack of strong armored opposition has permitted them to reinforce the organic antitank elements of the infantry and at the same time render assault artillery support. One of the most outstanding examples was reported from Cherbourg and its surrounding fortifications. Tank destroyers assisted the infantry by moving into well covered positions and firing at emplacements. After five to ten rounds, the white flag would appear. When the infantry worked up to the most important fortification in Cherbourg, they were temporarily halted. The Germans ma-

chine-gunned anyone who came near the entrances. The American commander called up tank destroyers to cover the operation. He ordered the destroyers to fire on the steel door of one tunnel entrance. Then he called upon the Germans to surrender. The answer was that General von Schlieben, the defense area commander, Admiral Hennecke, commanding naval forces in Fortress Cher-

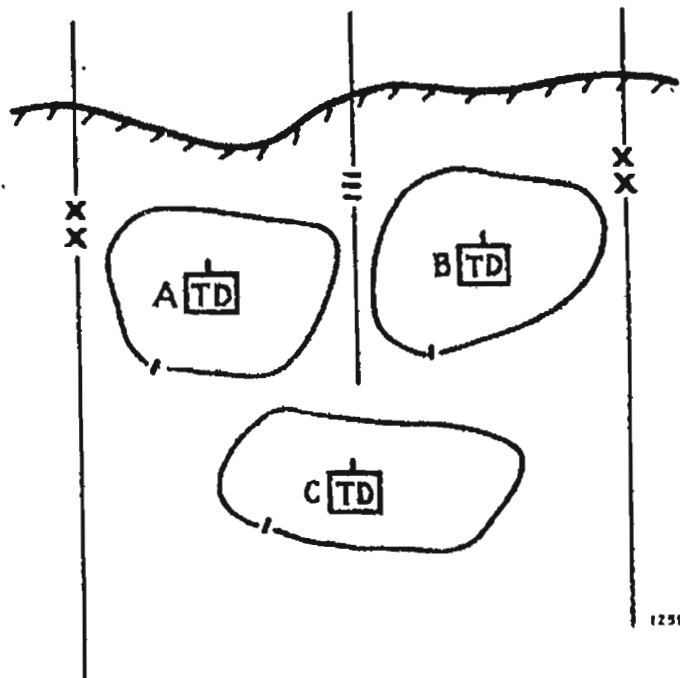


FIGURE 1.

bourg, their staffs, and about 800 other Germans capitulated. That was virtually the end of the defense of Cherbourg.

A tank destroyer company in Italy reported on a more everyday type of direct support to an infantry regiment. During one afternoon, this company knocked out two 170-mm self-propelled guns and was directly responsible for the capture of 150 Germans and for the killing of many more.

#### VERSATILITY

Let no one get the idea that all companies of a tank destroyer battalion must execute the same mission at the same time. A self-propelled battalion reports from Italy that in one phase of an attack, one tank destroyer company was supporting the infantry attack, another was supporting an armored attack, and the third was reinforcing the artillery. A reconnaissance platoon from the reconnaissance company was attached to each

gun company. The report goes on to say that despite this variation in employment, the battalion was able to supply and control all three companies.

It has become a normal thing to read of a tank destroyer battalion executing its primary mission and with one gun company reinforcing the fires of the artillery. This employment often produces the best results.

#### EMPLOYMENT WITH SMALL UNITS

It is generally conceded that the attachment of tank destroyer units to echelons lower than the division artillery is undesirable. However, circumstances may make it impossible for a commander to control all elements of his battalion. These conditions probably arise most often during a pursuit.

In Italy, during the fast moving advance north from Rome, tank destroyer companies were frequently attached to infantry regiments because the distances involved and the difficulties of communications sometimes made it impossible for either the division commander or the tank destroyer battalion commander to control the antitank defense of the entire division sector.

During this same operation, some small task forces were formed with a medium tank company as the nucleus. These task forces usually included an attached platoon of M10 tank destroyers. They were attached on the assumption that the tank company commander knew that the destroyer is a supporting weapon to be used on overwatching and antitank missions, not as another tank. These tank destroyers functioned in the same manner as with larger armored units. They overwatched the tanks and protected them against heavily gunned and heavily armored German tanks and against antitank guns. They were also used both as antitank guns and as assault artillery to protect the flanks of the task forces.

#### WITH INFANTRY DIVISION IN DEFENSE

It is not intended to leave in the mind of the reader the thought that tank destroyers have not been employed on their primary mission—the destruction of hostile tanks by direct gunfire. They have been and are the

principal weapon for protection against enemy armor. Combat teaches best how to function in this role. I should like to point out some popular opinions which have been garnered from reports on combat experiences. These might best be expressed in reference to an infantry division in the defense when an armored attack is an enemy capability.

A tank destroyer battalion attached to an infantry division on the defense should normally occupy antitank positions initially (see Figure 1). The forward tank destroyer positions ordinarily are advanced no farther than the reserves of the front-line infantry battalions. These positions are selected in daytime and, if possible, are prepared and occupied during darkness. Each destroyer is completely dug in and camouflaged. Guns are placed so as to be mutually supporting and, whenever practicable, sited for flanking fire. Alternate positions are prepared when time is available. It is considered impracticable to attach any tank destroyers to the infantry. However, the tank destroyers and the antitank weapons of the infantry must be effectively coordinated.

If the two forward tank destroyer companies can adequately cover the division sector in width and depth, at least initially, the rear gun company may occupy indirect fire positions and reinforce the artillery (Figure 2).

This procedure is somewhat at variance with the former concept of holding at least the bulk of the battalion in mobile reserve well to the rear and of committing them to previously prepared positions only after the actual location and direction of the enemy tank attack is reasonably determined. It has been learned, and too often the hard way, that the movement to these prepared positions during daylight is likely to be discovered. Once discovered, we have lost surprise and, of more immediate importance to us, we have laid ourselves open to being knocked out by enemy artillery and bombing.

In both eventualities, we have lessened our chances of successfully accomplishing our mission. Then too, we may not discover the approach of the enemy tanks until they are well into our position, the infantry has been overrun, and we can no longer fight on ground of our own choosing.

#### TRENDS

In retrospect, I believe it is possible to discern certain trends which seem to have

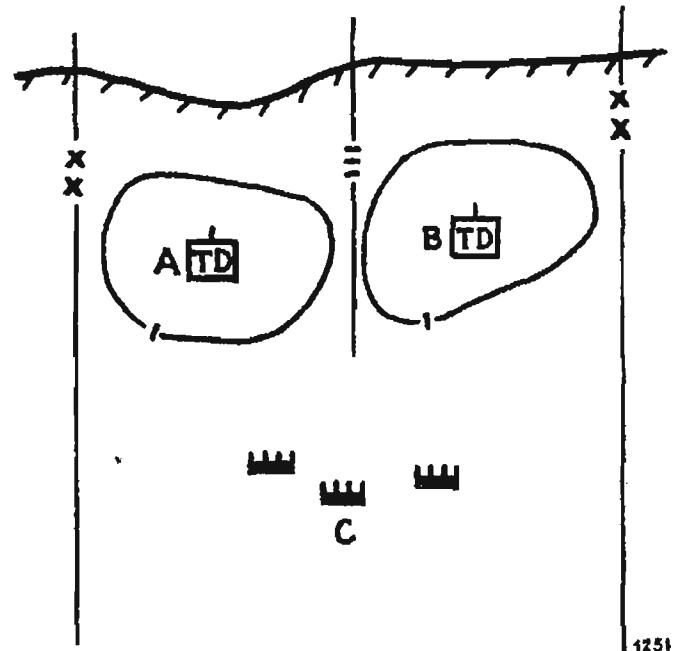


FIGURE 2.

been at work in European theaters ever since the close of the African campaign. These are:

1. A trend on the part of German armor to conserve itself, to employ only small groups of tanks.
2. A trend toward closer association of the tank destroyers with the field artillery.
3. A trend toward a greater coordination of tank destroyers with the other arms.
4. A trend toward using tank destroyers almost entirely in support of the other arms on both their primary and secondary missions.
5. A trend toward continually using tank destroyers in distinction to constantly holding them idle in mobile reserve.