

THE CRUNCHIN' KITTIES

By Dunbar MacNemar

DURING the summer of 1941, the United States was nominally at peace while Europe was ablaze with war. Germany controlled practically all of the continent and its army was deep in Russia. "Blitzkrieg" was the word heard and read everywhere, and the core of the Germans' "lightning war" was the tank.

Using armor in masses barely dreamed of in World War I, the Germans had ripped through the more conventional forces of Poland, France, Britain and now, the Soviet Union. Then, even as today, the U.S. Army staff pondered what it should do if it was confronted by an enemy so superior in armored forces.

According to a General Headquarters study, "...one of our urgent needs is for development, organization and immediate action on the subject of defense against armored forces ... requiring the use of a special force of combined arms, capable of rapid movement, interception and active ... defense tactics. ..." From that, the tank destroyer force was born.

A War Department directive established the Tank Destroyer Tactical and Firing Center at Fort Meade, Md., under the command of Lt. Col. Andrew D. Bruce. But once the Army had a center, nobody seemed too sure what to do with it. Something had to be done, though, because by this time the

United States had entered the war. First, the center was moved in February 1942 to Camp Hood, Texas, where there was more elbow room.

Next, a large contingent of British officers was imported to give needed combat experience. *Hard Pounding*, a book on British antitank experiences in North Africa, became the center's bible. The first live-fire commando course in U.S. Army basic training was introduced at the center.

The center began cranking out enough specially trained troops to fill a battalion a week. As originally organized, tank destroyer units came in two varieties: self-propelled, which were in the majority, and towed. The TD battalions were the nearest thing in World War II to the modern combined arms team.

The self-propelled tank killers had a headquarters company, a reconnaissance company, and three gun companies that each had three platoons of four guns. Each platoon had two sections of two guns, a security squad and, at first, an anti-aircraft section. The battalion was so highly mechanized that one British officer was led to note waggishly, "It seems like every PFC has his own jeep."

The towed battalions were set up in a similar manner, but without a recon unit. The guns they used were conventional split-trail, high-velocity, three-inch guns pulled by halftracks.

If the guns or tracks were knocked out, the men were expected to engage on foot. Training films and photos of the period show soldiers facing enemy vehicles with pistols, gre-

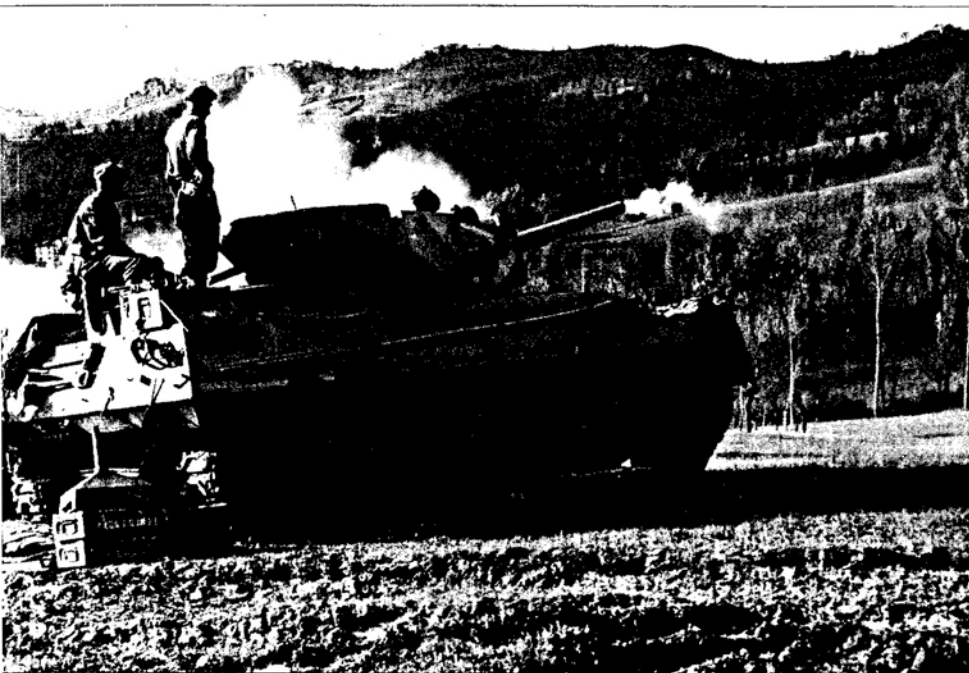


nades and whatever else was at hand.

For that reason, hand-to-hand combat was pushed, and the Fairbairn fighting knife became a popular weapon. In martial arts classes, a 69-year-old former Singaporean police chief flipped knife-wielding officer candidates at will and instructed them to bring him back "a basketful of Japanese unmentionables."

Trainees learned about other

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Left, M-10 tank destroyers provide field artillery support near Bologna, Italy, in late 1944. • Lower left, an M-10 crosses a German stream in late 1944. TDs looked like tanks — the M-10 and M-36 chassis were based on the famous Sherman tank — but they had open turrets and traded armor for speed and a big gun. • Below, a 703rd TD Battalion M-36 speeds past a dead panzer in Belgium in January 1945. German tankers used spare track and mesh side skirts on hulls and spaced armor plates on turrets to help defeat armor-piercing shells. Obviously, the measures weren't always enough.



"Next, they'll be showing us can openers," one candidate reputedly remarked.

The tank destroyers' insignia was a reproduction of the Army's first motorized tank-killer, a halftrack mounting a French 75mm artillery piece. The corps' shoulder patch was a black-edged yellow disk with the "crunchin' kitty," a black cougar biting down on a German tank.

The experts at Camp Hood continuously revised their doctrine of tactics and equipment. They started with the premise that, if the infantry couldn't handle an enemy armored thrust, it should stand aside and let the TDs take over. The tank killers would spring forward in overwhelming numbers — a company against a tank platoon, a battalion against a company, and a group or brigade against a battalion.

The problem with the doctrine

was, the infantry would probably be overrun and lost by the time the TDs engaged the enemy. So the mission was changed. The tank destroyers' primary job became keeping the enemy tanks off the infantry in the first place. When the Allies began to take the offensive, the thinking was that friendly armor would break through enemy infantry lines and slash around like the old-time cavalry while TDs took care of any enemy tank thrusts.

Tank destroyers weren't to sit around and wait for the enemy to attack, however. As the corps' motto stated, they were to "Seek, Strike and Destroy." The method: high speed, big guns and overwhelming numbers. It rarely worked out that way.

The TDs started with half-tracks; later equipment was more effective. They received the M-10, essentially an M-4 Sherman tank chassis

exotic tank-killing expedients as well, including Molotov cocktails, the then-wondrous rocket launching bazooka, and sticky bombs, which were tar-like wads of explosives. The sticky bomb gave new meaning to the story of David and Goliath. The user was expected to sneak up on a tank and sling the gooey mess at it. The bomb would presumably punch a hole wherever it stuck.

with an open turret and a high-velocity 3-inch anti-aircraft cannon.

This was followed by the M-18 Hellcat, also on an M-4 chassis, but lighter, with a 76mm gun, and powered by a radial airplane engine that gave it a top speed of 50 mph. One of the fastest vehicles the Army has ever made, the Hellcat reputedly could outrace a speeding jeep. The Ordnance Corps considered the M-18 its outstanding achievement in armored fighting vehicles in the war.

These weapons could easily handle older German light and medium tanks. By the time the Allies invaded Europe, however, the Germans had fielded the heavy Tiger and medium Panther tanks. The two were rough stuff.

The Tiger's 88mm gun and the Panther's high-velocity, long-barreled 75mm could make Swiss cheese of anything in the Allied armor inventory. Early on, U.S. tankers and TDs could take a Panther only from the side or the rear. The Tiger seemed to quit only when it ran out of gas or got stuck — its weak spot was its rear, but the trick was to live long enough to get a shot at it. U.S. crews either had to be lucky or, more practically, had to outnumber the enemy heavily.

The challenge posed by these monsters led to the fielding of the M-36 Jackson, which mounted a 90mm gun. Designers thought the gun too heavy for a tank, but just right for the lighter-armored TD chassis. Tank destroyers had the M-36 by fall 1944 and put it to good use.

The M-36 could take on any German tank. In the last two weeks of November 1944, the 702nd Tank Destroyer Battalion alone killed 26 tanks, including 15 Panthers and a King Tiger (an improved, more heavily armored Tiger), two self-propelled guns, two anti-tank guns, two pillboxes and two halftracks. It lost eight vehicles to the enemy.

By comparison, many U.S. tank units were still armed with ineffective short-barreled 75mm and long-barreled 76mm guns. Tankers wouldn't see a 90mm Tiger-killer until the M-26 Pershing heavy tank began trickling into Europe in early 1945.

As the Allies got the better of



The way tank destroyers got started: With their halftrack-mounted 75mm cannon, a TD crew ambushes a medium tank (center background) in 1942 maneuvers at Camp Hood, Texas.

the Germans, the fears of massed armored attacks wore off. TD training began to feature an additional duty: indirect fire under the control of field artillery. Many TD soldiers were converted to infantry, which was always in short supply.

TD colonels, large in number, hardly ever really commanded anything in combat. And they were a frustrated lot. When there were enough TD battalions that every division had one, each regiment received a TD company. "Host" battalions received TD platoons and parceled them out to host companies. A TD colonel would have had trouble finding his outfit, much less commanding it.

And then, there was the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans' last-ditch armored offensive in Belgium. The surprise Nazi thrust gave U.S. tank destroyers a chance to show their stuff. And they did. One green platoon of the 811th TD Battalion, for instance, scored 14 kills on an SS panzer regiment before it was overwhelmed.

TD units took heavy losses in the battle, and many were cannibalized afterward to make up manpower and equipment shortages. They began to lose even more of their identity. The TD recon companies had all along been used in any way the division saw fit. They often augmented division cavalry and were used for special task forces. One even guarded Third Army headquarters wearing MP brassards!

When the war in Europe was over, tank destroyers in the Pacific continued busting pillboxes and helping the artillery. The Japanese weren't keen on armored warfare, though, and what few tanks they had were generally small and easy kills. And then that war ended, too.

What to do with the tank destroyers now?

The "crunchin kitties" had

been effective, inflicting twice as many casualties on the Germans as the average line unit at one fifth the cost in lives and materiel. They had a better relationship with the "poor bloody infantry" than tank outfits — they were always at the infantry's side. But some senior armor officers, including Gen. George S. Patton, just didn't like them or the TD concept. As First Army's World War II after-action report put it:

"The tank destroyer mission, as originally conceived, has been superseded. . . . Tank destroyers should be replaced by a tank which can equal or outgun enemy tanks and which has sufficient armor to protect itself . . . from normal anti-tank and tank weapons." In other words, make killer tanks, not tank killers.

After a contingent of the 811th TD Battalion headed the victory parade down New York's Broadway in January 1946, the tank destroyers went out of existence. Many of the more than 100 battalions that had been established were reborn as armor or cavalry units. Surplus self-propelled mounts were palmed off as tanks on emerging would-be military powers, and many towed weapons became sunset guns for retreat ceremonies at Army posts around the country. The tank destroyer force became a part of history.

In October 1983, 265 members of the Tank Destroyer Association held a reunion at Fort Hood to recall the old days — and to get a glimpse of the future. They met and "adopted" Company E (Anti-Tank), 2nd Battalion, 41st Infantry (Mechanized), 2nd Armored Division. The modern-day unit, armed with the M-902 Improved TOW vehicle, is a new breed of Army tank destroyers. As some of the World War II veterans mused, a good idea is hard to keep down. □