



ESPRIT and ENTHUSIASM
A History of the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion
by William G. McQuade

Dedicated to my late father,
Lt. Col. William T. McQuade, USAR,
whose military service has always inspired me.

P R E F A C E

This brief history was prepared on short notice for the 1983 reunion of the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Materials consulted are on hand at the National Archives, the Pentagon, the Command and General Staff College Library and in the author's personal files.

Mention of individual members of the battalion was beyond the scope and intention of this informal and hasty effort.

Errors of commission were carefully guarded against; any of omission were virtually unavoidable, caused principally by incomplete records.

An expanded version is planned; its realization will depend on the comments, suggestions, personal recollection and new materials offered by the veterans of the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Cooperation and assistance that will lead to a complete and more formal history is invited.

William G. McQuade

Reacting to harrowing dispatches coming from Europe in 1939 and 1940, the War Department activated a handful of anti-tank battalions in its search for the potential to combat and defeat the reportedly invincible German armored advantage. These early units experimented with counter Panzer measures and field tested new tactics. They gradually abandoned the too passive, static anti-tank defense that had failed dismally in Poland, France and the Low Countries. Such units were instrumental in the development of the aggressive, mobile attitude that became the essence of American anti-tank doctrine.

In terms of firepower, mobility, reconnaissance and communications the early anti-tank battalions were primitive compared to the Tank Destroyer battalions they engendered. However, their performance in the 1940 maneuvers pierced the gloom, and held promise of refinements to come.

In pursuit of those refinements, the War Department proposed to activate twenty-two provisional anti-tank battalions. Eight of which were to be raised by as many non-divisional field artillery brigades. The rest were to be raised by fourteen infantry divisions. The field artillery brigade units were to be equipped with towed 75 millimeter guns, and considered General Headquarters battalions. The infantry division units were to be equipped with towed 37 and 75 millimeter guns and were to remain with their divisions.

The "Yankee Division" was selected to form one of those units, and activated the 26th Infantry Division Anti-Tank Battalion (Provisional) on August 4, 1941, at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. This battalion consisted of two towed 75 millimeter gun batteries, one towed 37 millimeter gun battery, a Medical Department Detachment, and Headquarters and Headquarters Battery. Its personnel and equipment were assigned from the three field artillery

regiments of the division's 51st Field Artillery Brigade (See Appendix I, Section 1). The brigade's 180th Field Artillery Regiment furnished the nuclei of the new unit by contributing its entire anti-tank element: Batteries "G" and "H", and the Anti-Aircraft/Anti-Tank Platoons from Headquarters Batteries, 1st and 2nd Battalions.

Batteries "G" and "H" were 75 millimeter gun batteries and became Batteries "A" and "B" of the 26th Infantry Division Anti-Tank Battalion (Provisional). The anti-aircraft/anti-tank platoons became Battery "C", the 37 millimeter gun battery of the new battalion.

The Medical Department Detachment and Headquarters and Headquarters Battery were organized by transferring necessary personnel from the 51st Field Artillery Brigade. Subsequent transfers from Headquarters Battery, 51st Field Artillery Brigade, the 101st, 102nd and 180th Field Artillery Regiments helped to bring the battalion to strength.

With the aches and pains of any recently activated organization, the 26th Anti-Tank Battalion, as it was generally called, began its training and prepared for the Carolina Maneuvers of October and November. Those maneuvers were a period of innovation, experimentation and close staff scrutiny. A "school solution" was still being evolved; and if the battalion weren't writing the book on anti-tank operations, it surely was helping to edit it. The battalion returned to Camp Edwards on December 4, 1941, confident and experienced. They were involved with a new aspect of the art of war, and had approached their early challenges accordingly.

While the battalion was proceeding to its home station, the War Department, still pursuing refinements in anti-tank warfare, had issued a letter, "Organization of Tank Destroyer Battalions", dated December 3, 1941. This important letter, in part: inactivated the anti-tank elements in artillery

battalions and regiments in the continental United States, and constituted eight light Tank Destroyer Battalions which were to be activated by the Commanding General, First Army. One of these first Tank Destroyer battalions, the 626th, was to have the 26th Division as its source unit.

In accordance with the War Department letter, the 26th Division issued General Orders, Number 6, dated December 17, 1941. This order effectively inactivated the 26th Anti-Tank Battalion by rescinding the order that had created it. General Order, Number 6 also inactivated the anti-tank elements in the division's artillery regiments. That same order activated the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Light), less its Pioneer Company.

To accomplish this activation, all personnel of the inactivated 26th Anti-Tank Battalion were transferred to their original units. These units, in turn, retransferred the bulk of their returned personnel to the new Tank Destroyer battalion. The new battalion also acquired the weapons, vehicles, equipment and material of the division's inactivated artillery anti-tank elements, (See Appendix I, Section 2).

With a strength of 25 officers and 420 enlisted men, including attached medical personnel, the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Light) was activated, less Pioneer Company, on December 15, 1941, at its permanent station, Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. Understrength by 8 officers and 408 enlisted men, the battalion was assigned to General Headquarters, and attached to the 26th Division for organization.

On February 11, 1942, twenty-three days after authority had been granted to activate the Pioneer Company, the 26th Division was triangularized. The resulting changes in the division's structure witnessed the consolidation of Headquarters Battery, 102nd Field Artillery Regiment with the recently activated Pioneer Company. That battery was the only unit ever to be

redesignated as a component of the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Its redesignation entitled the battalion to claim and inherit the battery's lineage and battle honors. This entitlement was of critical importance when the battalion's coat-of-arms was being designed (See Appendix II).

On April 1, 1942 the battalion departed Camp Edwards in a motor convoy and arrived a week later at the VI Corps Anti-Tank Training Center, A. P. Hill Military Reservation, Fredricksburg, Virginia. For the six and a half months spent at this station, training was vigorous, and included combat firing, platoon exercises, field problems and attendance at Ranger School in commando tactics.

In an outstanding tactical operation on May 14, 1942, the battalion, using expedients, effected a crossing of the unfordable Rappahannock River. The commendation that followed cited: willingness to assume responsibility, initiative and courage, as well as the military appearance and enthusiasm of the battalion.

On May 28, 1942, 8 officers and 379 enlisted men motor marched to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to participate in that city's Memorial Day exercises. Their motor convoy consisted of 171 vehicles of all types, and included seventeen motorcycles and thirty-six 37 millimeter guns. Following the parade, the public was invited to a display and demonstration of the battalion's equipment. A heavy downpour the night of May 30-31, forced the cancellation of the open house scheduled for May 31. After drying their equipment the battalion left the area and returned to the reservation.

Perhaps less memorable, but certainly more significant than the excursion to Pittsburgh were the reorganization and redesignation of the battalion on May 31, 1942, as a self-propelled unit, and the attendant reorganization and redesignation of the Pioneer Company as the Reconnaissance Company. The

authority for those changes was contained in a War Department letter which went on to state, in part, that the self-propelled equipment would be issued to the battalion when available from production.

Training continued, and during the last two months at A. P. Hill the battalion participated in field problems with the 26th Division, and held special combat exercises with armored units.

On October 27, 1942 the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion left Virginia, and arrived at its new temporary station, Fort Meade, Maryland. As 1942 ended, the battalion, with a strength of 42 officers and 702 enlisted men, maintained its equipment and prepared itself for the inevitable rigors of additional training.

Having departed Fort Meade by rail, the 626th arrived at Camp Hood, Texas on January 20, 1943. On arrival it was released from its assignment to the Eastern Defense Command, and assigned to the Army Ground Forces and the Tank Destroyer Center.

At Camp Hood's Advanced Unit Training Center the 626th asserted its place in the sun and went on to set records in tank hunting and physical fitness. It continued to distinguish itself by its tactical efficiency in field problems and exercises. One commendation invited the attention of the center's commanding general and praised the esprit, enthusiasm, cooperation and splendid performance of the cited unit. The personality of the battalion had been confirmed.

With the motto of The Tank Destroyer Forces "Seek, Strike, Destroy" taking on a more intense meaning, the 626th successfully completed its training at Camp Hood. The Battalion left the Tank Destroyer Center by rail on April 21, 1943. Four days later it arrived at Camp Gordon, Georgia, its new permanent station, and was assigned to the 2nd Army.

Nearly two months after its arrival at Camp Gordon, the battalion was

ordered to participate in 2nd Army Maneuver Number 2. Accordingly, the battalion left Georgia June 15, by motor convoy and rail movement, and proceeded to the Tennessee Maneuver Area. The convoy arrived on June 17, one day ahead of the rail movement.

During these maneuvers the 626th was commended for its ability to adapt itself to combined operations with the other arms. Also cited, were its loyalty, enthusiasm and professional ability, as were its standards of military courtesy and discipline. The author of the commendation, a major general, continued in his praise, and remarked about the untiring effort, interest and initiative displayed by the non-commissioned officers and enlisted men of the battalion. These maneuvers were completed on August 28, 1943, and the 626th returned to Camp Gordon on September 8, 1943, following a two day movement by rail and motor.

For the next three months the battalion continued to refine its skills, and was then ordered to the Carolina Maneuver Area. This exercise was to be in connection with the training activities of the XII Corps. With a strength of 44 officers, 1 warrant officer and 616 enlisted men the 626th left Georgia for South Carolina on December 13, 1943.

The next day the battalion pulled out of the maneuver area -- an unexpected change in orders had directed its immediate return to Camp Gordon. Understandably, this abrupt change in orders generated rumors about the 626th's destiny: Preparation for Overseas Movement?, The Pacific Theatre?, The European Theatre?, Wasn't it about time -- hadn't the 601st TD Battalion, also activated on Dec. 15, 1941, already distinguished itself at El Guettar in North Africa?, School troops at Hood?, Inactivation -- impossible!

In fact, Headquarters, Army Ground Forces had ordered the inactivation of randomly drawn Tank Destroyer battalions without regard for their lineage, longevity, efficiency, state of readiness or combat potential. Unfortunately,

among those so selected was the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

Because German armor had not been encountered in the inflated numbers reported in 1940 the need for Tank Destroyer battalions had been diminished. The fates of twenty-five battalions were sealed late in 1943 when Headquarters, Army Ground Forces looked to them as a partial solution to a manpower shortage of 45,293 troops. Many Tank Destroyermen became Infantrymen as a result of the subsequent inactivations.

In addition to the inactivations, Headquarters, Army Ground Forces directed half of the remaining Tank Destroyer battalion to reorganize as towed 3 inch gun battalions. These new towed organizations, having a greater authorized strength than the self-propelled battalions, would need additional personnel; consequently, members of some of the inactivated units were transferred to the battalions that were reorganized as towed units.

Within days of its approaching inactivation, the 626th issued orders which transferred 671 of its enlisted men to four other Tank Destroyer battalions, and the remaining 24 enlisted men to Headquarters, 3rd Detachment, Special Troops, 2nd Army. Other orders released the 55 officers from assignment and duty with the battalion, and attached 54 of them, unassigned, to Headquarters, 3rd Detachment, Special Troops, 2nd Army to await reassignment. One officer was transferred to the 653rd Tank Destroyer Battalion at Fort Benning, Georgia.

On December 19, 1943, Headquarters, 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion issued Special Orders, Number 4 which inactivated the battalion, effective December 20, 1943.

Although the 626th never entered combat as a unit, nearly all of its members did. The 671 enlisted men transferred to the 630th, 691st, 774th and 806th Tank Destroyer Battalions joined outfits that would win a total of fifteen battle stars in the European Theatre of Operations. A number of the

battalion's officers would see much combat with various other Tank Destroyer battalions such as the 607th, 692nd and 822nd.

In a very real sense, the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion's motto "Suscipere et Finire" (To undertake and finish) had been vindicated.

A P P E N D I X E S

APPENDIX I

1. Units of the 26th Division's 51st Field Artillery Brigade

Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 51st Field Artillery Brigade

101st Field Artillery Regiment

102nd Field Artillery Regiment

180th Field Artillery Regiment

2. Anti-Tank Elements of the 51st Field Artillery Brigade

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion,

101st Field Artillery Regiment

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion,

101st Field Artillery Regiment

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion,

102nd Field Artillery Regiment

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion,

102nd Field Artillery Regiment

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion,

180th Field Artillery Regiment

ANTI-AIRCRAFT/ANTI-TANK PLATOON, Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion,

180th Field Artillery Regiment

Batteries G and H, 180th Field Artillery Regiment*

*The 180th Field Artillery was a medium regiment equipped with 155 millimeter howitzers. Such medium regiments were authorized two anti-tank batteries equipped with 75 millimeter guns. The anti-tank batteries in the 180th Field Artillery Regiment were Batteries "G" and "H".

APPENDIX II

Coat-of-arms of the 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion

The battalion's coat-of-arms as approved on February 8, 1943, is described in heraldic terms as :

"SHIELD: Gules a rhinoceros statant affronte or, on a canton of the last six fleurs-de-lis chevronwise of the field.

"MOTTO: Suscipere et Finire (to undertake and finish)"

In simpler terms: The coat-of-arms is a red shield on which is a standing, gold rhinoceros facing to the front. In the upper left portion of the shield are six fleurs-de-lis arranged to form a chevron.

The red shield bears the traditional color of artillery and signifies the battalion's roots and assignment to that branch.

The rhinoceros having a sturdy, vigorous anatomy, symbolizes the strength and mobility of the battalion. Its facing to the front and standing on all fours represent the combative disposition of the battalion.

The fleurs-de-lis reflect the six World War I Battle Honors earned by Headquarters Battery, 102nd Field Artillery Regiment.

The 626th Tank Destroyer Battalion's standard which contains its coat-of-arms and motto is preserved and displayed in the Hall of Flags at the State House, Boston, Massachusetts.