

I SAW AMERICA'S FIGHTING MEN IN ACTION IN AFRICA

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In the course of the North African Campaign, and in particular during the periods when Van Arnim's forces, and later those of Rommel, from time to time took the initiative between the Salt Lakes and the north, there was in the newspapers of America a considerable volume of adverse comment directed both at American leadership and, in certain extreme cases, at the American Soldier.

Since my return to England I have read through a number of these criticisms, and have been considerably disturbed at their tone and tenor.

Events have answered the critics on the score of generalship and leadership. On the details of supply and organization I do not think it necessary to comment. But should the events of the last phase of the campaign have left the faintest and most lingering doubt in the mind of any man as to the fighting qualities of the American soldier, I think I might be permitted to place my own experience on record.

I landed with the first assault boats on the beach at Oran in an operation that became from the moment of landing entirely American. I saw almost all the fighting of that brief campaign, and moved from Oran with the first American unit - a Tank Destroyer detachment - overland to Tunisia.

With a most gallant handful of the Surreys we made a contact with the enemy in the hills before Medjez-el Bab, and from that brisk afternoon this unit took part in almost every operation of importance in which American troops were engaged until the fall of Tunis.

A GALLANT RECOVERY

For most of the campaign I lived with them, sharing their blankets and their rations. They were, in the first days, as green and as raw as any troops I have ever seen, and they will not, I know, be offended by this statement, for I saw them under the stress of calamity throw off that greenness.

I saw then, with seven of their eight self propelled guns knocked out of action, with heavy casualties and with much damage, pull themselves out of their trough of disaster and make themselves into a fighting unit again.

Within four days of firing their first shot against the enemy they had passed through every stage from overconfidence to disaster and back again to fighting efficiency; and they did it without aid from outside, did it with their own sweat and their own blood.

C. Company of the 701st Tank Destroyers lived through those days to become one of the finest units of the American Army.

What I saw here at close quarters and with personal knowledge of each piece of wreckage, material and human brought back to fighting fitness, I saw happen again on a broader scale with ~~the~~ Combat Command "B", the American brigade (it approximated that) which came to reinforce Blade Force and heroic eleven in the turmoil of Tebourba.

ANXIOUS DAYS

Combat Command "B" were defeated outside of Medjez-el-Bab in the tragedy of early December. There were many factors in that defeat, but that some elements had not yet come down to the realities of War!

I saw Combat Command "B" pass through its bitter days, and I saw it four months later flung like a thin screen across wide valley before Sbeitla to stop the rush of the German Panzers at the very moment when they were flushed with victory of Sidi-bou-Sid, and make possible the orderly withdrawal of the American First Armoured Division.

Marched and counter-marched across half the countryside in the anxious days that followed, they made a wall again when ~~the~~ the enemy divided his attack in two prongs, one going North to break against the British at Thala on going south in the attempt to smash Tabessa. They saved Tabessa.

There was nothing wrong in all the reverses and breakdowns of that desperate week with the fighting spirit or with fighting quality of Combat Command "B".

Those units - one small and the other large - may be taken as a fair cross-section of the armies of America.

They were in no way picked troops in the beginning. C. Company of the 701st had, in point of fact, a reputation for "toughness" of quite another sort. But they were identical in what, for want of better term, might be called their case histories.

STERN TEST SURMOUNTED

Green in the first days, they went to battle overconfident. They received the inevitable reprimand of overconfidence, and very far from breaking under it, they used disaster itself to fashion themselves anew.

Between the "rookies" of December and the veterans of January there was precisely the difference between recruits and veterans that has existed through-out history, with this one difference - that in the American Army there was no nucleus of war salted men, there were not battle-tried "old hands" to pull the new entry together.

They had to make out of battleshocked troops and battle-scarred equipment, with their own hands, their own destiny.

C. Company, within 48 hours of its disaster, was holding the perimeter of Medjez against an expected tank attack. Even when we went into that holding line we did not know that all our guns would fire.

But the line was made, and there had been nobody to tell Captain Redding, who commanded the company, the parallel experience; there was no weight of precedent to help him.

It is part of the measure of the American troops that they have been able without "old hands" without recent experience, without immediate precedent as a guide, to make themselves soldiers.

NO RETREAT

The last I saw of Combat Command "B" was a well spaced column moving across the Dret Doukkan towards the fight of the Tabessa Road, unafraid, undisturbed, cool and cheerful with the cheerfulness of well tried troops.

The last I saw of C. Company of the 701st was a handful of men, with four guns they had left, dug in behind two weak lines of mines in the Pass of Ma-el-Abiod with a mortar battery on one flank and a few light tanks on the other. It had rained off and on for days, supply was difficult; reinforcement impossible.

They were an intensely mobile unit, forced by the harsh necessity of the situation out of their natural role. And they, too, were cheerful--cheerful through the orders they received as they began to dig in the unwieldy half tracks with the guns, were they would be not retreat.

There is no higher test for the qualities that make a soldier.

All they could have done there on the Pass of Ma-el-Abiod was to hold the enemy, if fortune favoured them, for perhaps half a day. But they knew that half-day would give time to reorganize the last defences above Tabessa itself if the enemy struck up from Gafsa and Feriana, and they knew that even that half-day would be enough to balance the annihilation, and they were content.

No country can ask more of men than that.

701st TD, 32 Months Over, Sets 450-Day Combat Mark

When the unit release on the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion came to us, we turned it over to staff writer Sgt. Jack Foisie, who served with this unit throughout the Tunisian campaign. Sgt. Foisie has added a few more intimate comments to the official story of the 701st, his "old outfit."

WITH THE 5TH ARMY, Jan. 31—There's one great danger in writing about your old outfit. You're bound to be *molto* beaucoup prejudiced. There are other "best damn outfits" in the Army, too, I guess.

Regardless, the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion, of the 1st Armored Division, has been put "on the record," effective today, after 32 months (to the day) overseas, over 450 of which have been in combat. During that time they have been attached, at one time or another, to armies of eight Allied nations, and to eight divisions of one of those Allied armies, the American Army.

These facts are not the result of prejudiced addition on my part. It says all this in the official 5th Army biography of the 701st, prepared by Sgt. Fred Welty, a very unblased guy from 5th Army public relations, who has written more official releases on outfits than you can shake your fist at.

IN VANGUARD

Furthermore, writes biographer Welty, the 701st was among the first tank destroyer units in the American Army to open fire on German tanks in this war. Among? You can see that Welty has learned from past experience to qualify any claims which cannot be proved in the official record.

Naturally, pure patriotism allows me to claim that the 701st were the very first tank destroyers to get a ~~long tank~~ and furthermore they did it with a 75 mounted on a half-track, which were the "tank destroyers" of those days. But then, I am prejudiced.

Welty goes on to record that the 701st has marked up an "enviable record" in smashed enemy armor and motor transport in the battle areas of Tunisia and Italy, firing more than 2,000,000 rounds in doing so. "Enviably record" is probably as strong a word as can be used because unlike the Air Force, who can keep track of their shootin' up right down to the last German staff car, the 701st men, in Tunisia at least, never did keep track of how many bulleyses they scored. In those days a TD gun crew never had time to count. It was hit and run, and sometimes run and hit.

Beginning their long overseas service when they landed in Ireland with the 1st Armored Division in June, 1942, the 701st underwent rigorous training in preparation for the North African landings. Coming ashore at points to the left and right of Oran, the 701st swept inland to aid in the seizure of airfields vital to the Allied cause. Soon afterward Company C moved on to Medjez-El-Bab in northern Tunisia, where they clashed sharply with German armor. Company B was among the first American troops to reach southern Tunisia and are credited with capturing Gafsa, Sbeitla, and sweeping behind the Germans at Faid Pass to seize that important terrain feature. For this action the company was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with palms, with a citation from General Alphonse Juin, then a commander of Free French troops

HIT 1ST NAZI TANK

The rest of the battalion also gained honors. In February, 1943, Company A won the distinction of being the first American unit to knock out a German Mark VI "Tiger" tank by direct fire. The men of Company C had a book dedicated to them, "The Road To Tunis," by the British war correspondent, A. A. Divine, speaks of their battle record and of the fighting spirit and rapid "veteranizing" of the company.

Men of the battalion's reconnaissance company at one time or an-

other fought with all three gun companies

The 701st was in the thick of the Kasserine Pass battle and lost heavily in armor. After drawing new half-tracks it went on to fight at El Guettar and in the battles which led to the collapse of German resistance in Africa.

READY FOR ITALY

Preparing for the Italian campaign, the 701st drew new M-10 tank destroyers, greatly increasing the battalion's effectiveness and fire power. The battalion saw its first Italian action early in December, 1943, in the hill masses of Mt. Camino. There the men of the 701st fired five times as many shells in 30 hours as they had during the entire Tunisian campaign.

On Feb. 7, 1944, the battalion was ordered to the Anzio beachhead. It was in action at Anzio two days later, stopping at a staging area near Naples for only two hours, long enough to draw rations and new equipment. At the beachhead, the 701st helped repel every major German attack thrown against the 5th Army forces there. Company A smashed five enemy tanks in 15 minutes in an action near Cisterna. The TD outfit fired more than 55,000 rounds on the beachhead.

When the 5th Army beachhead forces broke out and drove on Rome, the 701st was again in the forefront of action, destroying 29 German tanks, a battery of 210 mm. howitzers, 30 enemy vehicles and two self-propelled guns in the 11-day period from May 25 to June 4, the day the outfit entered Rome. (They had time to count their hits

now.) It was during this drive that S-Sgt. Milton A. Downs of Soper, Okla., directed the fire which destroyed two Tiger and six other German tanks in 90 minutes.

The 701st participated in the thrust to the Arno River, and drove beyond as the 5th Army moved north. The enemy strongpoints of Altopascio and Orentano, south of Lucca, were captured by the Reconnaissance Company of the 701st, fighting as infantry and commanded by Capt. Albert B. Morrison of Charleston, W. Va. During this action S-Sgt. William Blankenship of Ironton, Ohio, won a Silver Star for forcing the withdrawal of an enemy tank by using only a pistol and a few hand grenades.

HELPED MANY

After fighting in the bitter actions of the Gothic Line, the 701st today is deployed in the rugged terrain of the 5th Army front. At one time or another the outfit has supported the 1st, 3rd, 9th, 34th, 36th, 45th and 88th Infantry Divisions but has always returned to the fold of the 1st Armored.

The 701st—pardon the repetition but the outfit never did go in for nicknames—was activated Dec. 15, 1941, at Fort Knox, Ky., one of the five original TD outfits in the Army. It was originally commanded by Col. C. C. Benson; later by Lt. Col. Harrison King, wounded at Anzio, and now by Lt. Col. Frank J. Redding of St. Cloud, Minn.

(That's about all, except for—oh, yes—the battle at Old Neil's place just off the Knox reservation. But that isn't included in those 450 combat days.)