

The waiting was over. Gun flashes broke the pre-dawn darkness of 8 November 1942 as Allied ships tried to enter the Algerian harbor of Oran. The Vichy French were going to fight after all! As the untried assault force headed towards shore, each man nervously shifted his gear and asked himself, "Am I ready?" "Can I take it?" For the men of the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion's B Company (with the 2nd Platoon, Recon Company attached) and C Company, there was an added burden. They, along with their comrades of the Recon Company 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion sailing in a nearby ship, were the first representatives of a new combat arm - Tank Destroyers - to see action. Would their new doctrine and tactics meet the test?

Stopping the Axis blitzkrieg was the Army's number one problem when the war started. It had to succeed where the armies of Belgium, Britian, Denmark, France, Greece, Holland, Norway, Poland, Russia and Yugoslavia had all failed. The response was typically American; create a whole new type of unit exclusively to stop massed armor attacks. Accordingly, the Army's hodgepodge of artillery, cavalry and infantry anti-tank units were combined and redesignated "Tank Destroyers" on 15 December 1941. Under the direction of Lt. Colonel (later Lt. General) Andrew D. Bruce, the new Tank Destroyer Command developed its own concepts, organization and tactics during 1942. Unfettered by tradition, the new command worked hard to dispel the fear of mass tank attack and developed an aggressive doctrine epitomized in the new T D motto: "Seek, Strike and Destroy." A new training site in Texas was selected and developed to handle the massive influx of new recruits. Designated Camp Hood, the facility remains today a legacy of the long forgotten T D force. Eventually, 100 battalions were activated and over 100,000 men served in the Tank Destroyers during World War II.

In the midst of all this activity, the 601st and 701st T D Battalions sailed for the United Kingdom where they completed training. They were organized as heavy T D battalions, fully mechanized and equipped for independent operations. Each battalion consisted of three gun companies, a recon company (with three recon platoons and a pioneer platoon) and H&HQ Company with administrative, maintenance and supply elements. The gun companies (A - C) were each divided into two heavy platoons and a light platoon with four Tank Destroyers per platoon. In addition, each platoon had a command halftrack, a security section transported in a halftrack for anti-personnel defense and a two vehicle anti-aircraft section to deal with the aerial element of blitzkrieg - the Stuka.

Expediency, however, was the order of the day. In place of fully tracked T Ds with high velocity guns, which were still being developed, the heavy platoons were equipped with M3 Gun Motor Carriages (75mm guns mounted on thinly armored halftracks) while the light platoons made due with the M6 "Fargo" GMC, a 37mm anti-tank gun in a large shield on an unarmored 3/4 ton weapons carrier. A 50 caliber machine gun on a weapons carrier or halftrack substituted for the unavailable anti-aircraft halftrack in the AA sections. The ubiquitous halftrack also filled in for the yet-to-be produced armored cars in the recon platoons. When B Company of the 701st sailed for North Africa, it totaled 6 officers and 203 enlisted men (including 23 from the attached Recon Platoon and 5 medics) with 8 M3 75mm GMCs, 4 M6 37mm GMCs, 16 halftracks, 4 3/4 ton weapons carriers, 3 half-ton trucks, 6 jeeps, 7 motorcycles and 3 two and a half ton trucks.

ORAN

Because the Bay of Oran was heavily defended, the Operation TORCH landings were made on beaches approximately twenty-five miles east and west of the city. In the east, Capt. Michael Paulick's Recon Company of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion assisted in the assault on the port of Arzew, whose facilities were required to land medium tanks. "Chief" Gomez, the First Sergeant, was almost blasted in the hunt for snipers when he refused to reply to the challenge of "Hi-Ho Silver" with the countersign, "Away!" He considered it too undignified. But, tragedy was avoided and the town soon secured. A few miles down the beach, Task Force Red composed of elements of the 1st Armored Division's Combat Command B (CCB) landed unopposed. By 0600, armored vehicles were coming ashore and the Task Force organized.

Since only light tanks could be landed over the open beaches, heavy fire support would be provided by the 75mm guns of B Company, 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion, commanded by Capt. Gilbert A. Ellman (FA) - one of many Redleg officers to serve in T Ds. A "flying column" of light tanks supported by B Company's 3rd Platoon under Lt. Robert J. Whitsit set off for Tafaraoui Airport, south of Oran, about 0845. They were to link up with paratroopers of the Paratroop Task Force which was to have seized the vital airfield in a daring parachute assault. Since it was unclear which French units would resist, the column was under strict orders to open fire only if fired upon. In a little more than two hours the column traversed the twenty plus miles. The paradrop had gone astray and the French still in possession of the airfield.

The "flying column" deployed for attack. While Lt. Whitsit's platoon engaged a French battery, the light tanks roared on to the airfield and soon completed its capture, enabling allied aircraft to land. Unaware that another French airfield, La Senia, was only ten miles away, the T D platoon moved on to Tafaraoui field in a bumper to bumper column. A French bomber, escorted by four fighters, flew low over the platoon. In accord with the order to hold fire, the T D silently tracked the aircraft with 50 caliber machine guns. Suddenly, the bombay opened and two bombs tumbled out. The security section halftrack was destroyed and three sergeants wounded. A lesson in tactical dispersion had been learned the hard way. The afternoon was spent firing long range counterbattery missions which eventually silenced a battery of French 75's near Valmy after sundown.

Meanwhile, the rest of B Company had landed back at Z Beach Red. Personnel were ashore by 1000, but only one vehicle could be landed at a time via the small landing craft available. Part of the company made it out of the frustrating beachhead snarl and spent the day blocking the road to Sidi-bel-Abbes of French Foreign Legion fame, largely hindered by strafing from "friendly" fighters. This was the first of a number of tragic occurrences in the months ahead.

On the other side of Oran, Task force Green also landed unopposed. Like Company B, Capt. Frank J. Redding's C Company of the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion was tasked to provide fire support for the 1st Armored Division's light tanks. [1] About 0900, the western "flying column", led by Lt. John C. Eggleton's 2nd Platoon T Ds left Merza Bou Zedjar and headed east. Moving along the road paralleling the northern shore of the Sebokra D'Oran (a large salt lake), the column encountered resistance at several points. Sgt. Mitchell's T D destroyed two emplaced French 75mm guns before the force stopped for the night near Misserghin.

The next morning, November 9th, B Company's 3rd Platoon was back in action when it was sent with a light tank company to stop the tanks of a French light mechanized brigade moving north to counterattack. Near the road junction at St. Lucien, Lt. Whitsit deployed the four 75mm T Ds commanded by Sergeants Robinson, Arthur Cox, Arlow Lindblom and Rex Meridth in line on a small hill to form a base of fire while the light tank company from the 1st Armored Regiment advanced on the right flank. Another small hill topped by a two story building lay 700 or 800 yards in front of the T Ds. Lt. Whitsit ordered Sgt. Meridth's T D to fire H E at the building to prevent its use as an observation post. Just after the first round hit, French tanks crested the hill on both sides of the building. Fourteen Vichy tanks advanced down the hill, five under tow from the others, towards the T Ds, firing their short barreled 37mm guns. The T Ds returned fire as the American M 3 Stuart light tanks swept in from the right flank, guns blazing. The thin skinned French E-35 tanks were no match for the Americans and all fourteen were destroyed, ending the counterattack. Two of the French tanks were credited to Lt. Whitsit's crews. These were the first tanks knocked out by Tank destroyers in W W II. Elsewhere, B Company's 2nd Platoon served as advanced guard for a column of light and medium tanks. The thoughts of the T Ders in their lightly armored halftracks acting as "point" for the tankers can easily be imagined!

To the west, Task force Green pushed on to La Senia airfield. While Lt. Eggleton's 75mm T Ds duelled with French batteries, the "flying column" overran the field, capturing more than sixty planes. Here, the force consolidated under fire from Valmy, to the south. C

Company's other platoons unloaded to support elements of the 6th Armored Infantry Regiment, closing in on Oran.

Tuesday, November 10th saw the big assault on Oran. Task Force Red struck north from Tafaraoui airport towards La Senia while Task force Green attacked the town from the east, supported by C Company T Ds. B Company's platoons joined the move north, bypassing the French strongpoint of Valmy, amidst heavy sniping and artillery fire. Sgt. Robinson's 3rd Platoon halftrack was hit in the gas tanks and set afire by a shell; five men were killed and the driver wounded. The rest of the platoon bypassed La Senia with Task Force Red forces and was among the first Allied troops to enter Oran, their halftracks peppered with small arms fire. The 2nd Platoon command halftrack missed the order to bypass La Senia and proceeded through it and three miles beyond before breaking down in the middle of a firefight. Eventually, the French surrendered and Lt. Art Edson with four men had the halftrack towed back to La Senia. There, he arranged the surrender of 300 Frenchmen, winning the first TD Silver Star.

As the Allied forces entered Oran, French authorities bowed to the inevitable and surrendered. T D men were soon busy cleaning equipment and preparing for their next mission. So far, they had acted like horse calvary of the previous century, galloping into action to support an assault over open sights. Other employment awaited them as they supported the advance into Tunisia.

THE RACE FOR TUNIS

Operation TORCH had secured French Morroco and Algeria for the Allies. The next step was to capture Tunisia and cut off the retreat of General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps and Italian troops withdrawing from their defeat at El Alamein. While the Allies gathered forces for a quick thrust into Tunisia, the Axis acted. Vichy France was occupied and troops were airlifted to Tunis on 9 November 1942. The lightly equipped French forces in Tunisia withdrew into the hills to the west where, after some confusion, they threw in their lot with the Allies. There was no time to lose if Tunis was to be taken before Lt. General Walter Nehring's XC Korps consolidated its tenuous hold.

The few Allied forces available, consisting of the British 78th Division and Combat Command B (CCB) of the American 1st Armored Division, had to move quickly. Advancing on poor roads far from Allied airbases, their goal was to overcome the Axis buildup and capture Tunis before the winter rains put a stop to the advance. On 16 November 1942, B and C Companies of the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion headed east to join the initial assault. Since shipping was at a premium, the T Ds went by road. This involved a thousand mile road march across Algeria, past Algiers' famous Kasbah and over the Atlas Mountains on narrow, twisting roads. The weather in the mountains was cold, wet and miserable. Arriving in Tunisia, C Company headed east to Souk-Ahras on 21 November to support the main assault while B Company and its attached recon platoon headed south to Tebessa to join the Tunisian Task Force.

C Company spent two days at Souk-Ahras, birthplace of St. Augustine, performing maintenance on the well worn vehicles. Supply was chaotic and Allied aircraft scarce. The Luftwaffe, flying from paved airstrips near Tunis, ruled the skies. A halftrack was destroyed and four men wounded in divebombing and strafing attacks. The Allies were trying to advance through the natural gateway in the rugged hills west of Tunis formed by the Medjerda River valley. Capt. Frank J. Redding Jr, CO of C Company, was ordered to report to the British 11th Brigade Group. [2]

C Company moved out in a cold drizzle on the 24th of November, with two platoons of the British Surreys in "Bren Carriers" for infantry support, to secure the high ground west of Medjez-el-Bab (the "Ford of the Gate"), a key crossing over the river only 37 miles from Tunis. As the last of the hills was crested, a sudden mortar barrage erupted, blasting four of the Surreys' carriers. They had found the Germans. A miserable day was spent being mortared and strafed while trying to search out the unseen foe with fire. Every time a T D exposed itself and opened fire, mortars rained down and forced it to move. It was an impressive demonstration of what an experienced F O could do with proper observation. The

next day, the Germans slowly withdrew to Medjez-el-Bab amid more strafing.

On Thanksgiving, the 26th, C Company was switched to provide flank protection for CCB tanks trying to envelop the town. While moving to join the tankers, American P 38 Lightnings were sighted. The momentary pleasure at finally seeing an answer to the constant Luftwaffe attacks was soon shattered. The eleven Lightnings swooped down and strafed the C Company column. While the T D men dove for cover and gritted their teeth, the P 38s of the 14th Pursuit Group each made five passes. When they left, C Company was no longer a fighting unit. Seven men had been killed, twelve wounded and nine vehicles burned. Seven of the T Ds were out of action and almost every other vehicle damaged. Lack of adequate air-ground training for the Air Corps pilots had led to the tragic error and turned Thanksgiving into disaster at a critical juncture in the campaign.

But, Capt. Redding and C Company were not through. Hard work and ingenuity during the next three days got seven of the 75mm halftracks and three of the 37mm T Ds operational again. In the process, Capt. Redding and his men moulded a new unity of purpose. By the 30th, C Company was ready again. Medjez-el-Bab had been taken and the advance had continued, but Allied forces were stretched to the limit. Harried commanders parcelled out the T Ds in defensive outposts spread over a fifty mile area. The Allied drive had bogged down and the battle-wise Germans of the 10th Panzer Division under Gen. Wolfgang Fischer, fresh from the Russian front, seized the initiative.

Axis troops retook Tebourba on the 2nd of December. The T Ds supported an unsuccessful counterattack by American light tanks before withdrawing. Another attack followed on the 6th where the Germans handed the uncoordinated Allied units another sharp defeat. Battery C, 27th Armored Field Artillery Battalion won a Distinguished Unit Citation when it sacrificed itself to enable other American units to withdraw to positions north of Medjez-el-Bab. The Germans assault continued again on 10 December 1942. Around noon, C Company T Ds were ordered to join the light tanks of A Company, 13th Armored Rgt. under Capt. William H. Hatcher. Their mission was to attack the rear of an Axis force from the 7th Panzer Rgt. attempting to envelop and cut off the Allied positions. The winter rains were also starting, complicating maneuver. One platoon of the light tanks had trouble trying to move out of its muddy positions, reducing the Allied counterattack to twelve M3 Stuarts (A Company's Hq and other two platoons) and the C Company TDs. When the Furna road was reached, the light tanks turned right, deployed cross country and moved south along the road axis. Capt. Redding left C Company's 1st Platoon to cover the rear with its unarmored 37mm M6s and turned southwest along a dirt track with the seven M3 T Ds of the two heavy platoons to cover Hatcher's flank. A Company's light tanks soon disposed of several German light vehicles. The German commander, stalled by a French roadblock and muddy terrain, feared a trap and reversed his column to deal with the American threat.

A German force led by six Mark III tanks moving along the dirt track rounded a curve and ran into Lt. John C. Eggleton's three 75mm T Ds at a range of seventy-five yards. The 2nd Platoon T Ds opened fire immediately and knocked out four of the Mark IIIs in seconds before the lead halftrack was hit and Lt. Eggleton was killed. Sgt. Romani's T D, next in line, blasted the remaining two Mark IIIs while Sgt. Mathew's crew in the third T D destroyed an armored car towing a 47mm antitank gun. Moving past Lt. Eggleton's burning halftrack, Sgt. Romani sighted four Mark IV tanks coming over a rise 1300 yards away. His fast shooting crew quickly disposed of two of the Mark IVs. [3] Nearby, the A Company light tanks were caught struggling up a muddy slope by another German force. The light M3s, armed with 37mm guns, were hopelessly outgunned by the heavier Mark IVs maneuvering on the drier upper slopes. One by one, the Stuarts were blasted, until all twelve were burning.

To the rear, Lt. Burghardt's light T Ds on the Furna road had turned back a force consisting of an eight-wheeled armored car and a Mark III by fire and maneuver while the main battle raged. C Company's heavy platoons deployed and exchanged fire with the panzers to aid the A Company crews as they clambered off their wrecks and support reinforcements from B Company, 13th Armored Rgt. Another T D was lost to Axis fire before Capt. Redding was ordered to withdraw at 1630 hours. The German enveloping force had been stopped, but elsewhere, the Axis attack had succeeded: it was decided to withdraw that night.

C Company headed north towards the bridge over the Medjerda River at Bordj Toum as part of the 1st Armored column commanded by LtCol. J. R. McGinness. A skirmish in the darkness near the bridge led McGinness to mistakenly conclude the way was blocked. He reversed the column and directed it to head along a dirt road toward the Medjez-el-Bab bridge. The result was disaster. It had been raining for three days and nights and the dirt track became a quagmire as the heavy vehicles tried to struggle forward in the darkness. One by one, the vehicles bogged down helpless in the cloying, sticky mud and were abandoned by their dejected crews. It was a complete victory for General MUD. CCB lost more than a hundred vehicles. When morning came, C Company had lost its five remaining 75mm T Ds, the 37mm M6 "Fargos" and the rest. The exhausted T D men walked out on foot with one vehicle, a 3/4 ton weapons carrier. [4] The race for Tunis was lost.

TUNISIAN TASK FORCE

When B Company, 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion parted company from their C Company comrades on 21 November 1942, it headed south to Tebessa and a unique odyssey. Behind it, the Allied forces marshaled for the drive on Tunis soon faded in the dust. Ahead lay central and southern Tunisia, an arid, rocky desert of gravel and scrub, broken by wadis and steep, barren hills called de Jebels. The rugged terrain, reminiscent of the NTC at Fort Irwin, was dominated by the steep mountains of the Eastern and Western Dorsals. Running north and south, these heights blocked movement east and west, except through a few, key passes. Control of these passes would dominate the fighting for the next six months.

Securing these passes (held by a thin screen of inadequately armed French colonial troops) was the mission of Lt.Col. Edson P. Raff's Tunisian Task Force. Composed of the 2nd Battalion, 509th Parachute Infantry and what few miscellaneous units could be spared, the Task Force faced a daunting challenge. With no tanks and little artillery or transport for the lightly armed and relatively immobile paratroopers, Raff had little to control such a vast area. Thus, when B Company arrived with its 75mm halftracks, he wasted no time. Capt. Ellman was told that his men, exhausted from six days on the road, must be ready to attack at dawn. A small detachment of paratroopers and French had been chased out of Gafsa, forty-seven miles to the south.

After refueling, there was time for a half hour's rest. Then, back on the road. When dawn came, Capt. Ellman deployed the attached 2nd Platoon, Recon Company forward to locate the enemy. Unsure of what to expect, he placed the vulnerable, unarmored 37mm T Ds of the light platoon in the rear with his two heavy platoons on either side of the main road. Two antique French armored cars were the only support. As the advance started, two P 38s roared overhead and strafed the town. The Recon vehicles came under fire from outlying buildings and split into two sections to cover both flanks. While the heavy T Ds silenced the snipers by blasting the buildings with 75mm H E, the French armored cars sped forward along the road, only to be lost in a minefield.

With no infantry, the T Ds used fire and maneuver to press the assault. One heavy platoon and the command group made a frontal assault on the town while the other heavy platoon made a flanking attack. Aggressiveness paid off. Using their halftracks like tanks, the T D crews entered the town firing as fast as they could. Aided by a young French civilian who helped point out the German positions, resistance was soon crushed. In addition, the T Ds chased some 300 arabs who had been armed by the Germans through the groves and osais and rounded them up. Defensive positions were setup once Gafsa was secured.

B Company was tired and vehicles needed attention, but it was not to be. Shortly after noon, word was received that an Axis column was on its way from Gabes to retake the town. Since the terrain around Gafsa provided few positions to deploy the high silhouetted halftracks, Capt. Ellman decided to move east and find better ground for an ambush. At 1430, the Company left Gafsa for El Guettar led by Lt. Smith's Recon Platoon. It was followed by the 2nd Platoon (heavy), command group, 3rd Platoon (heavy) and then the light 1st Platoon. Using this formation, the 2nd Platoon provided a base of fire to support the recon elements, while the 3rd Platoon could be maneuvered for a flanking attack. The

vulnerable, unarmored 1st Platoon provided a reserve. Capt. Ellman noted, "This formation proved to be extremely efficient, both here and in later battles." [5] About 1600, the Company was entering El Guettar as the lead recon jeeps topped a small hill east of town. Facing them on the next hill were ten Italian tanks. The tanks immediately opened fire with their 47mm guns. A contact report was radioed in and the recon crews dispersed, losing one jeep when it overturned. [6] Its crew crawled back to safety. Capt. Ellman deployed the 2nd Platoon to the left where Lt. Edson's fast shooting crews soon destroyed four tanks, one at a range of 3500 yards. The 3rd Platoon moved through an oasis to the right where they engaged the other six tanks, trying to escape. None was stopped, but they were found a few days later abandoned, damaged and out of fuel, a short distance down the Gabes road. During the fight, Lt. McKnight's 1st Platoon maneuvered south as a flank guard.

B Company returned to Gafsa around dusk, planning at long last to get some sleep. But there was to be no rest; Capt. Ellman was informed the the Germans had captured Sbeitla, 120 miles to the north. The French general commanding the sector wanted the T Ds to do something about it. The Captain later commented, "I guess by this time he thought we were a pretty handy bunch and was ready to send us any place to do anything." [7] So, the exhausted T D crews refueled and headed for Feriana about 2230, leaving behind the 1st Platoon to reinforce the defense of Gafsa. Arriving at midnight, B Company had time to catch two hours sleep before returning to the road. It was 76 more miles through Kasserine Pass to Sbeitla. In his command halftrack, Capt. Ellman brooded, "... I disliked taking my outfit on another overnight march which would terminate in a battle against uncertain odds and perhaps in a type of mission which we had not been trained to accomplish. However, I also knew that there was no one else to call upon." [8]

Using the same basic formation as the previous day, the vehicles were staggered so that each had a field of fire. One 2nd Platoon 75mm T D was moved up, immediately behind the Recon Plt. It rode with a shell in the chamber, ready to open fire as soon as contact was made. After yesterday's sudden encounter, Recon was instructed to scour every possible hiding spot to avoid a trap. Five miles east of Kasserine, a road block was encountered. Surprised that it was undefended, B Company moved cautiously forward. A cold rain started, limiting visibility. The T D men huddled tensely as they neared Sbeitla, alert for the first sign of contact. Just around noon, the lead recon jeeps crested a hill and there, unexpectedly, was the town. The maps were wrong. They skidded to a stop and carefully observed the town, but there was no response. Sbeitla's garrison was having lunch.

Three jeeps advanced towards town; halfway there, they spotted Italian tanks camouflaged in an orchard. Infantry was dug-in between the tanks with machine gun nests forward of their positions. The jeeps were also seen and the Italians opened fire with 47mm cannons and machine guns. The jeeps retired, zigzagging to avoid being hit while the lead T D supported them with its 75mm. The Recon Platoon marked the enemy tanks with 50 caliber tracers, forcing them to button up. Lt. Whitsit's 3rd Platoon deployed to the right, behind a hill mask, while the 2nd Platoon moved by bounds past an old Roman arch, a relic of the past, to take up a position on the left flank. A recon section accompanied each platoon to protect it from infantry, allowing the T Ds to concentrate on the Italian tanks.

Lt. Whitsit's crews on the right opened fire and drew the enemy's attention while the 2nd Platoon completed its maneuver. They knocked out all the tanks they could see at a range of 900 yards and forced the infantry in the orchards to retreat. When Lt. Edson's T Ds reached their position on the left flank, a cross fire was formed, enabling the T Ds to engage the tanks no matter which way they moved. Eleven Italian M13/40 tanks were soon burning. The three remaining tanks and a group of Germans in trucks escaped from the rear of the town when the lead T D in which Lt. Edson was riding was immobilized by three 47mm hits. Capt. Ellman then ordered his men to cautiously close in on the town firing heavily. Bowing to the T D firepower, 70 Italians eventually surrendered. Their spaghetti dinner and several German vehicles were captured. The townspeople, who had been locked up while the arabs looted, were rescued. A company of paratroopers arrived to finish clearing the town. Later, French infantry and artillery showed up to outpost the town, releasing B Company to return to Kasserine and finally, at long last, get some sleep. The entire

Company was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Plam for its actions on 28 November. [9]

At the far end of the Allied supply line, B Company learned to exist on French rations. These consisted primarily of cans of sardines, large tins of red wine and lots of bread. Ammunition was also low and an ammo truck which had gone astray on the march from Algeria was sorely missed. It was decided to try some French 75mm rounds. After all, the T D 75mms had been developed from the famous French 75. By December 1st, B Company was back in action, supporting an Allied attack on German positions at Faid pass. AT 0730, P 38s strafed the pass and the 2nd and 3rd Platoon T Ds moved into the pass supported by about 50 French infantry men. Once again, the T Ds were being used as tanks. An anti-tank gun and two artillery pieces were knocked out before the open-topped T D halftracks were hit by heavy machine gun fire from concealed positions on both flanks. Two men were killed and six men of the 2nd Platoon were wounded before the T Ds were able to withdraw. The French ammunition also proved to be a flop; its low velocity caused it to hit so short that the normal sights were useless.

Meanwhile, the Recon and 1st Platoon vehicles were busy dodging mortar fire on the flat ground beyond the pass. At 1020, four P 38s roared overhead. Suddenly, one of them dove down and strafed a 1st Platoon halftrack. Two men were killed and two more wounded in yet another tragic case of mis-identification.

French and American infantry units attacked the Axis positions for the rest of the day, but could not secure them. After dark, Colonel Raff ordered the 1st Platoon to reoccupy its former positions to prevent the enemy from escaping. Lt. McKnight and his crews gamely advanced in their unarmored M6 37mm "Fargos" without infantry protection in the dark. They were met about 2100 by 50mm anti-tank fire backed by small arms and mortars. All night long, the unsupported platoon fought alone. By morning, two men were dead, one wounded and one missing. The 3rd platoon moved up at dawn to support the light T Ds, while the 2nd Platoon turned back an Axis column, destroying two trucks.

Seven Ju 88s roared in about 0900 and strafed the exposed T D positions. With no place to hide, the strafing was deadly. Four men were killed and another four wounded while two halftracks and a 3/4 ton were badly damaged. That afternoon, the T Ds were withdrawn to Sidi bou Zid. During the days that followed, they were strafed and bombed daily. Allied aircraft were based too far to the rear to provide much relief. When the winter rains reduced the terrain to a quagmire, B Company - wet, miserable and cold - was withdrawn to reserve positions.

As the final days of 1942 waned, the men of B Company and C Company, 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion could be proud of their achievements. Later, during the heavy fighting in months ahead, aggressive T D tactics would be criticized. But, during the fast moving early days in North Africa, "Seek, Strike and Destroy" proved invaluable, enabling small forces to perform deeds all out of proportion to their size. Often called on to perform missions they had not been trained for, T Ds undertook each one without complaint. They acted as armor, calvary and assault guns. Maneuver, ability, aggressive leadership and audacity were used to make up for material shortcomings. As a new type of unit, T D capabilities were unknown to most commanders. "No one seemed quite sure just what they were for, but were certain they could do the job in question." [10] They did.

Footnotes

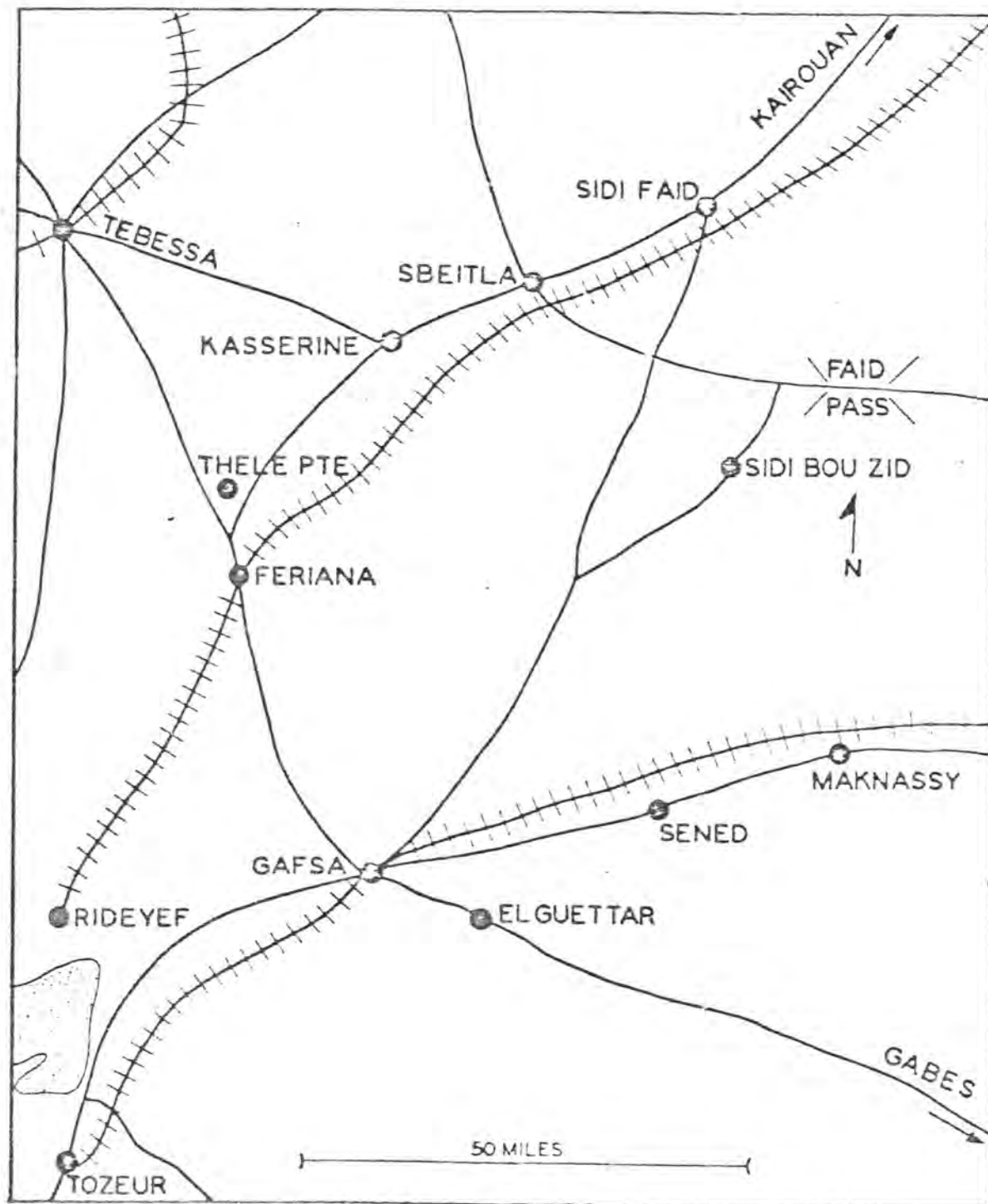
1. Capt. Redding later commanded the 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion in Italy. He passed away 24 May 1985.
2. A detailed account of C Company's early actions titled Road to Tunis was later published by British correspondant A. A. Devine writing under the pen name David Rame.
3. Sgt. Louis Romani was later awarded the first T D battlefield promotion to 2nd Lt. for this action.
4. C Company served as M Ps until re-equipped in January 1943.
5. T D Combat in Tunisia, TDS 117, U S ARMY, dated January 1944, page 7.
6. The jeep was not recovered. Its radio was later used by the Axis to try and lure the T Ds into a trap. Capt. Ellman and his men, recognizing the use of a callsign that had

been obsolete since that day at El Guettar were not fooled.

7. Ibid, page 9.
8. Ibid, page 9.
9. The T Dmen were later amused to hear that Lt. Col. Raff, who was miles away, was awarded the French Legion de Honor and made a full colonel for their exploits. Capt. Ellman was promoted to major after the Tunisian campaign and returned to the States where he wrote an account of the actions titled "Panther vs Panzer" for the Military Journal. Lt. Whitsit was promoted to captain and took over B Company while 2nd Lt. Edson was made a 1st Lt.
10. Ibid, page 9.

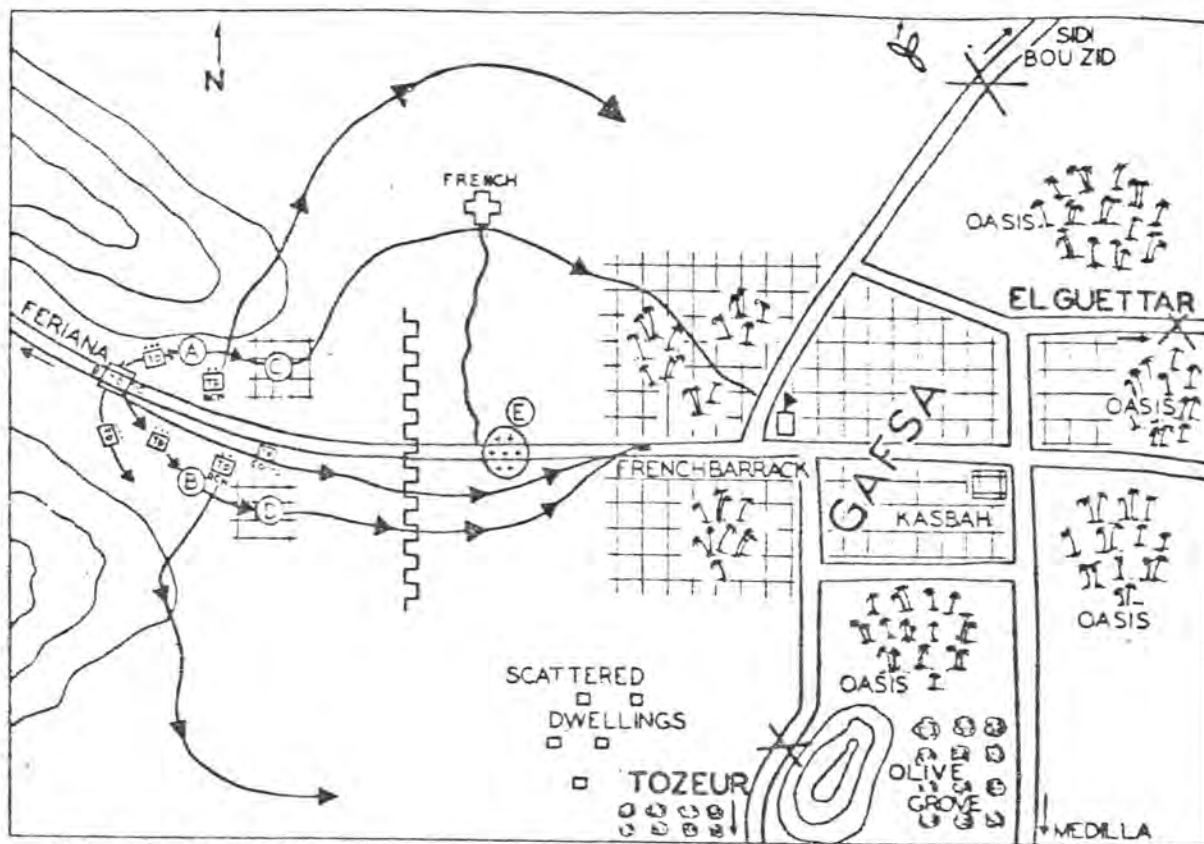
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3. "Old Ironsides" The Battle History of the 1st Armored Division by George F. Howe, 1954, The Battery Press.
4. Operation TORCH by Vincent Jones, 1972, Ballantine Books.
5. "Panther vs Panzer", Military Journal, by Maj. Gilbert Ellman, FA.
6. Road to Tunis by "David Rame" (A. A. Devine), 1944, MacMillian Co.
7. 601st Tank Destroyer Bn. History by 1st Lt. Edward L. Josowitz, 1945, Anton Pustet, Salzburg.
8. T D Combat in Tunisia, TDS-117, by the Tank Destroyer School, January 1944.
9. The Campaign for North Africa by Jack Coggins, 1980, Doubleday & Company.
10. After Action Reports of: B Co. 701st T D Bn Period - 27 Sept. '42 to 12 Feb. '43 and C Co. 701st T D Bn. Period - 3 Oct. '42 to 24 Jan. '43.
11. Correspondance and personal experiences of Jack Cumacenko (3rd Plt. B Co. 701st T D Bn.) and Arthur C. Edson (2nd Plt. B Co. 701st T D Bn.).



SKETCH ONE

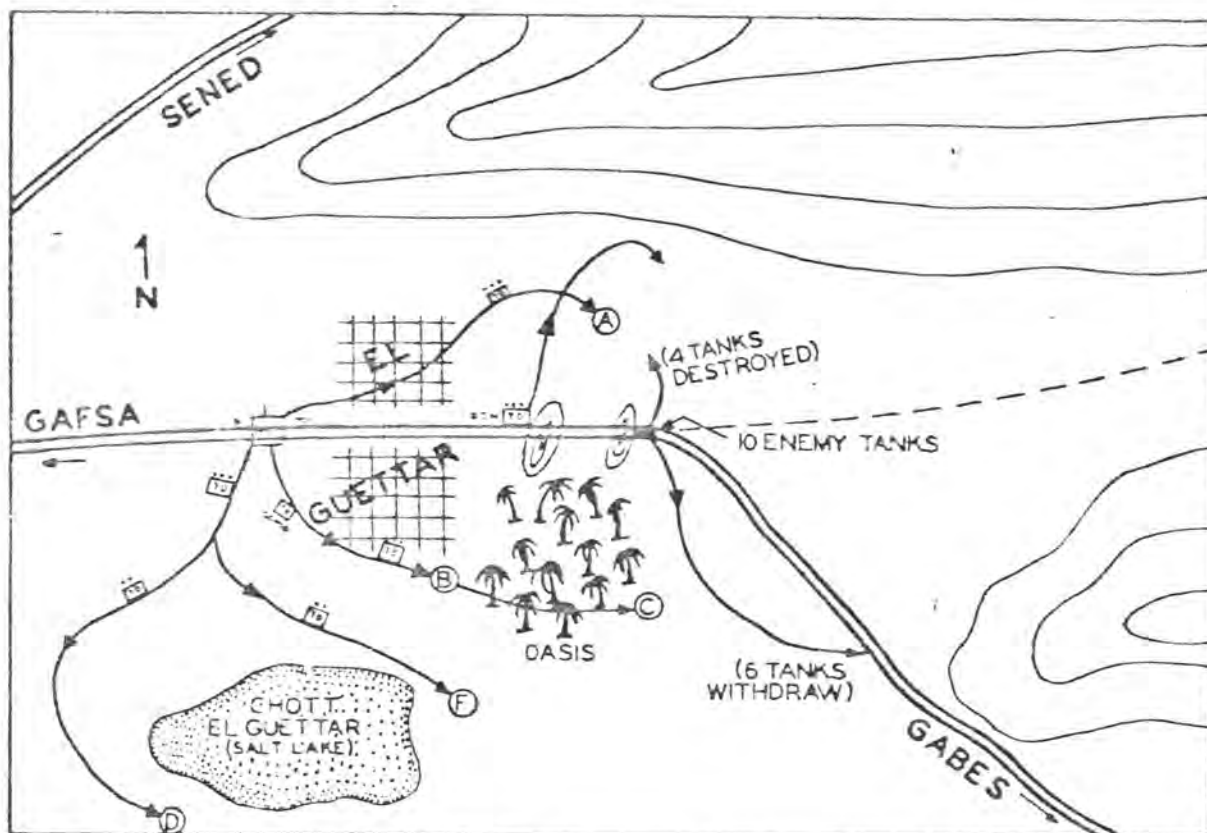
CENTRAL TUNISIA



SCALE 1"=800 YARDS
(APP)

GAFSA

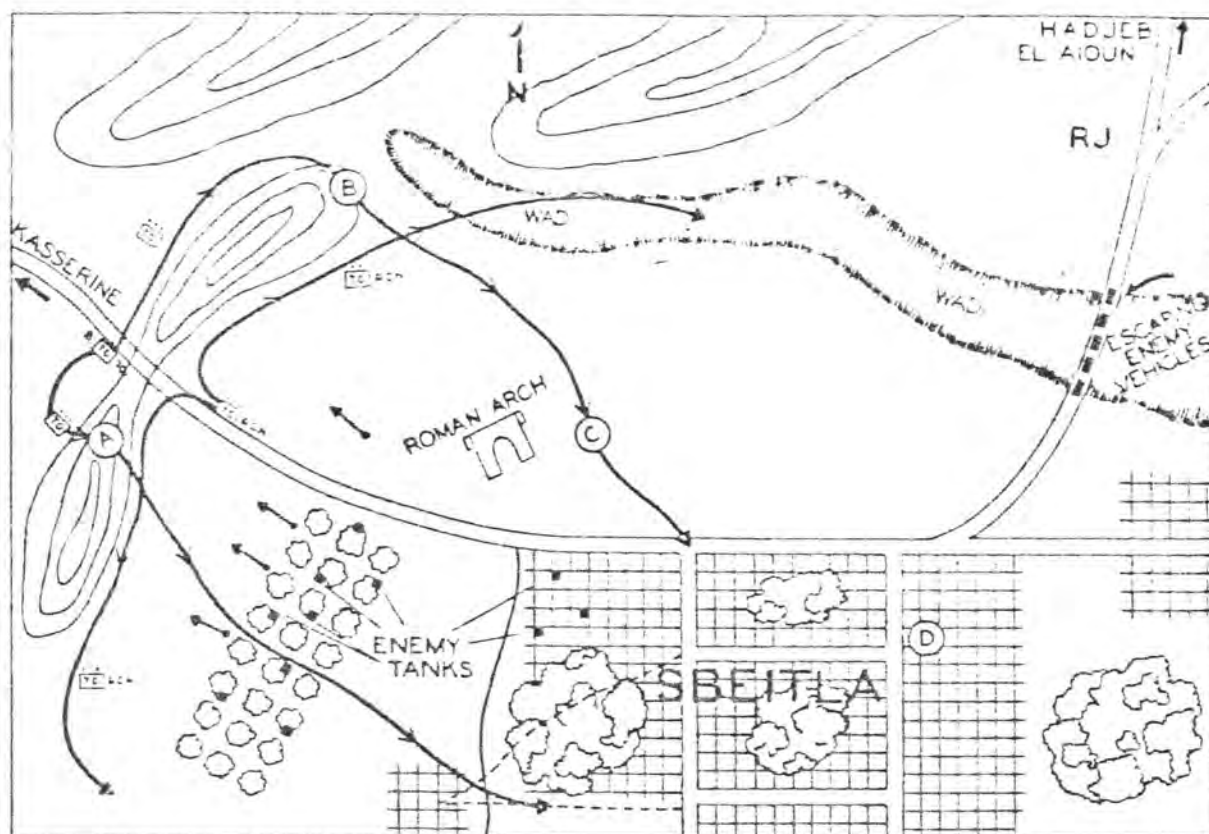
SKETCH TWO



SCALE 1"=800 YDS
(APP)

EL GUETTAR

SKETCH THREE



SCALE 1"=800 YDS
(APP)

SKETCH FOUR

SBEITLA