

The enclosed pages (19-23) are taken from the battalion history of the 899th, which in turn are based on the After Action Report for 1943. They provide a good account of the action at El Guettar involving the 899th and immediate subsequent events. I thought, however, you might be interested in some sidelights to the action, and, if you don't mind, some of my personal reactions.

El Guettar was the first major battle for the Battalion. It was fought by the original concept of tactics for mechanized tank destroyers as taught at Camp Hood, Texas. The companies were under battalion control, and they were kept in mobile reserve, pending an armored attack.

Immediately prior to March 23, 1943, the Battalion less "A" Company was in the vicinity of Gafsa, expecting an attack down the Sidi Bou Zid-Maknassy Road or via El Guettar. "A" Company was in support of a battalion of Rangers and the 18th Infantry, First Division at El Guettar. On March 22, however, Lt. Col. Maxwell Tincher, CO 899th, ordered "A" Company back to the Gafsa Area under Battalion control. This proved to be a mistake, for the following morning the Tenth Panzer Division attacked El Guettar.

"A" Company was commanded by Capt. Thomas Hawksworth, who presently resides at 1174 Norton Ave., Idaho Falls, Idaho 83402. I well remember the evening of the 22nd when he returned to the Battalion, and we had a company commanders' meeting in the S-3 tent. "Let the combat officer have a seat," Col. Tincher said as Tom entered and later reported on the fighting against positions northeast of El Guettar held mainly by Italians.

The next morning (March 23) at approximately 730 hours I received a call on my radio to alert my Company, assemble at the Sidi-Bou Zid road and be ready to move to El Guettar. Order of march was "A", "B" and "C" Companies. Subsequently I was advised that German armor had attacked American positions and we were to counterattack.

"C" Company moved to the junction of the Sidi Bou Zid road, and I reported the Company ready to proceed. But there was a delay, because Battalion Headquarters was unable to contact "A" Company by radio. While waiting, I recalled that we had been issued sandbags to fill and place on the floorboards of our vehicles as protection against land mines. I ordered the crew in my M-3 halftrack and $\frac{1}{4}$ -ton jeep to fill the bags with the surrounding sand which was plentiful in the immediate area. I had the radio operator notify the other crews who had not done so to do so while we were waiting. This proved to be a wise and probably lifesaving decision. We intercepted calls from Battalion questioning "A" Company (which belatedly had been contacted) when it could be ready. I called Battalion and advised that "C" Company was ready and could move immediately. The S-3 told me to hold on, but shortly after he reported that "B" Company was ready to move out and that "C" Company was to follow "B" Company and "A" Company would follow us. This was another important and possibly lifesaving order--for "C" Company that is.

El Guettar was some 30 miles away, and after the vehicles stretched out to approximately 100 yards interval on the macadamized road, they opened the throttles for the dash to meet the German panzers.

The battle area was a valley floor that lay a mile or two beyond the community of El Guettar. The two-lane road bisected the valley. High, rugged mountains were on each side of the valley, with the southwestern portion of the valley fairly flat. Small wadis and foothills provided more cover on the northern side. A series of mounds and depressions partially blocked the northwestern part of the valley. The road cut through these mounds and depressions, providing an entrance to the valley arena.

"B" Company reached El Guettar amid a Stuka dive-bombing attack at 845 hours and charged to the arena entrance. There it was met by Col. Tincher and his S-3, Capt. Joseph Morrison, along with the CO of the 601st T.D. Bn. The latter was anxious to get help to his embattled Companies, which, along with a First Division Field Artillery Battalion, had been overrun by German tanks.

Lt. Gerald Cosdy, hero of the day, led the first platoon of "B" Company through the pass and immediately drew fire. One destroyer ran into a mine field

and was disabled. Lt. Alvin F. Koch was killed. In desperation the remaining destroyers moved off to the north side of the road and took up hull defilade positions. They exchanged fire with the Germans until evening. "B" Company lost five destroyers. Four men and one officer were killed.

In the meantime, "C" Company fanned out on the mounds surrounding the arena to support "B" Company, while "A" Company was in reserve. Late in the afternoon the Germans counterattacked with tanks and infantry but were repulsed by artillery and M-10 fire.

That evening, while moving from my forward CP to the Battalion CP for a company commanders' meeting, my M-3 halftrack hit a mine that blew off the right front wheel, damaged the suspension system and penetrated the floorboards (actually $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch steel). No one was injured, thanks to the sandbags installed nine hours earlier.

The 899th held its dug-in positions, while the First Infantry Division assaulted the enemy in the foothills and mountains surrounding the valley. In the meantime, Montgomery was driving Rommel west along the coast. In order to cut off Rommel's retreat to Tunis, General George Patton formed an armored task force to push through the valley despite the fact that the hills were controlled by the enemy. "C" Company had a major part in the early stages of this operation, leading the drive on a company front, with M-4 tanks in two columns on each side of the road. ^(ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE 899TH AND OTHER ARMORED UNITS.) X The task force, known as the Benson Force, jumped off at 1230 hours on March 30 and moved approximately 5,000 yards when "C" Company came under heavy anti-tank and artillery fire. Sgt Werner Lefebre, who reportedly lives in southern California today, and his destroyer crew had an interesting experience late on the first day of the attack.

Sgt. Lefebre was an American Italian-Hebrew who had lived in Italy and spoke fluent Italian and German. His destroyer section was on the left flank of "C" Company and was drawing fire from ^{GUNS IN} the small hills on his left. While maneuvering the M-10 and firing at anti-tank guns, the vehicle tumbled over a steep wadi incline and ended up on its side. The crew scrambled out only to be met by an Italian Captain with several infantrymen. Sgt. Lefebre spoke to the Captain, who responded:

X I need a word processor.

"Until we decide who is whose prisoner, let's go to our dugout and talk this over." The crew spent the night with the Italians. The next morning the Captain decided "it looked bad for his side" and surrendered. What a sight to see Sgt. Lefebre and his crew marching a company of prisoners back to our lines that morning.

On our right flank, Sgt. Hershel Briles, the Congressional Medal of Honor winner mentioned in the Panzer Lehr report, had his destroyer knocked out and set aflame that day--March 30. The destroyers were powered by twin GM diesel motors, and the crew kept firing for several minutes while the diesel burned. Sgt. Briles and the crew received the Silver Star for this action.

Overall, however, the Benson Force was not a great success and did not accomplish its mission. Communications were poor, coordination among units was almost non-existent, and there were several erroneous intelligence reports on enemy strength. I have always thought that we could have broken through the valley and gone all the way to Sfax ^(and the coast) in one day, if--

--Plans for the mission had been disseminated to the Companies on March 29, giving us time to prepare. (As it was, we received the orders and plan of attack 45 minutes before jumpoff.)

--The attack had started at 600 hours instead of 1230. (We had only five hours of light and then had to button up for the night. We lost our momentum and it never was regained.)

--There had been better communication among units.

--Intelligence reports had been accurate