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# TANK DESTROYERS



## IN DIRECT SUPPORT

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THE RÔLE of tank destroyers in giving infantry direct fire support on fortified positions was developed on battlefields by commanders who saw, in the heavy fire power of a TD battalion, a powerful weapon to help Doughboys when the situation called for their use in this way. In North Africa, Italy, and in France the TDs have been helping the infantry get ahead. I know something about how the infantry and tank destroyers worked together in North Africa and in Italy, and this article is based on what I learned and observed while in combat with a TD outfit.

There are two types of tank destroyer battalions, one with self-propelled guns and one with towed. Both have 3-inch guns with muzzle velocities of about 2,800 feet per second. Both guns fire a projectile of about seventeen pounds. Both fire HE, with instantaneous or delay fuze, and AP. Both have very flat trajectories, 3-power direct-fire sights, and gunner's quadrants for accurate laying at longer ranges. The self-propelled mounts have armor enough to protect crew members and mechanism against small-arms fire and generally against fragmentation from mortar or shell fire. The towed guns lack the armor and mobility of the self-propelled guns but are more easily concealed and emplaced.

TD guns are overgrown snipers that can penetrate several feet of reinforced concrete at 1,000 yards with less than a

dozen rounds. However, they are no good unless they get to where you want them in time to hide themselves like any other good sniper and protect themselves as much as possible. Don't forget that.

Of course, the tank destroyer men will move in to help the infantry in broad daylight if they are needed. But a little thought and consideration in giving them time to move into well-reconnoitered positions will save them from being knocked out by enemy artillery before they have a chance to do the job the infantry wants done. Remember that, too. Decide where you want the guns, let them know what you want shot out and where, and give them time enough to get in and all set so they can really do the job.

Now let's look at some battlefield examples. At the banks of the Volturno River line in Italy the problem of our infantry was a tough one. The river flowed swiftly through a flat valley that gave the enemy a wide and open field of fire. Overlooking the river throughout the sector the enemy had strongly fortified positions in houses with masonry walls from eighteen inches to three feet thick. These strong points were generally located within mutual small

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arms supporting distance of each other. The ground generally was broken by low rolling ridges and stone terraces. Extensive cover was furnished by hedgerows, small-wooded copses, vineyards, orchards, and olive groves. It was an ideal defensive layout, but hell for the attacking infantry.

Further, the installation of bridges was seriously hampered by enemy artillery fire accurately directed from excellent OPs.

The destruction of these OPs and the securing of suitable bridge sites was the problem that faced the division commander, and it was surely a tough one. He had no tanks attached at this time. German machine-gun and sniper fire from the fortified houses were playing the devil with the advance. A staff conference decided that the tank destroyer battalion could do the job.

Reconnaissance of the river was made by both the tank destroyers and the engineers and the decision was to ford the river at one place, then swing way around and join the assault battalion. One platoon was given the mission and it moved forward from artillery positions at dusk. The destroyers pushed forward under cover of darkness. The platoon commander contacted the infantry battalion and was shown the houses that were paralyzing the advance. He selected positions from which direct short-range fire could be placed on the houses and sneaked his guns into position. At dawn he quickly destroyed the houses and the enemy pulled out and our infantry moved in.

I do not mean that the tank destroyer guns chased the Jerries away. They were hand-picked Nazis left to fight a delaying action and to withdraw when their positions became untenable. So long as the infantry had to assault these areas without support, the Jerries could inflict heavy casualties on them. When the tank destroyers rolled in, impervious to their small-arms fire, and proceeded to plaster their positions, they simply had to pull out. This supporting action by the tank destroyers continued through several days of fighting and was always effective.

In addition to saving the lives of many men, it proved to our infantry that we TDs would move right in with them and that we could really shoot. They developed a belief in the abilities of our guns—a faith that has never since been shaken in that division.

Another example of close support came on the last crossing of the Volturno. Knowing that the town of Ollivetta was going to be a hard nut to crack, one tank destroyer company was moved far forward to positions on a wooded slope facing the town. Liaison with the assault infantry was established, and as our infantry advanced up the steep slopes, the tank destroyer guns covered their advance, firing almost a rolling barrage ahead of the foot soldiers except where certain guns had to be called out to destroy houses or areas sheltering enemy automatic weapons.

This attack met brutal resistance and the Germans, as usual, counterattacked violently and promptly, but the regimental commander of the attacking regiment later said that the direct fire of the tank destroyers, delivered within seconds after being called for by radio, had saved him many casualties and that the TDs' initial coverage of the attack had been well done.

These uses of the TDs in direct support were on a smaller scale than in the attack on Montaguilla by an infantry regi-

ment. Montaguilla is in the high mountains of central Italy. Our infantry had secured a bridgehead over the Volturno, but it was rather slim and Jerry still had good observation. In order to drive him out, one regiment was ordered to attack on the right flank of the Fifth Army.

At the conference preceding the attack, the infantry commander got permission to use a tank destroyer battalion as support. Reconnaissance was carried out in the afternoon before the attack and during the night the tank destroyer battalion crossed the Volturno, some vehicles across a ford, others over a treadway bridge. The guns were moved far forward to selected positions, dug in, and camouflaged. Extra ammunition was carried forward with the guns. There was very careful coordination with the infantry. A liaison officer with an SCR-510 radio reported to the assault battalion commander. The tank destroyer battalion commander and the infantry regimental commander occupied an OP on the most advanced point held by our infantry. From there they could observe the entire action. The infantry commander had wire and radio contact with his battalions and the tank destroyer battalion CO had the same with the three gun companies, plus direct contact with the liaison officer. All pieces had been accurately boresighted on the North Star during the night. At the first light of dawn, each gun of two companies was assigned a certain zone to cover extending from the German front lines up the slopes and through the town. The third company was in position toward the north from which position it could fire enfilade fire close in front of the infantry. This company was held in reserve for the purpose of attacking targets of opportunity or destroying fortifications that might hold up the Doughboys.

The initial attack was made without preparatory fire in order to gain surprise. Orders to open fire were to come from the tank destroyer battalion commander. Shortly after the start of the advance, German machine-gun, machine-pistol, and mortar fire were encountered. In a matter of seconds the tank destroyer guns opened up on their zones and in a few minutes calls came from the assault battalion for fire on definitely identified buildings housing German strong points. These were assigned to the "overwatching" company. Continuous reports of progress from the assault battalion supplemented information the infantry commander and the tank destroyer battalion commander were able to pick up by direct observation of the troops in the attack. Thus, control of the fire of guns was easy and the coverage of the town was excellently and accurately accomplished. The ranges varied from 700 yards to approximately 2,500 yards—duck soup for a 3-inch gun.

This action was a part of the general delaying action being fought by the Germans. In customary fashion, when the fire got too hot they withdrew, permitting our infantry to advance rapidly with very slight losses compared to what we had expected.

The next example of direct support of infantry by my TD battalion occurred in the fighting for Cassino during January, February, and March. I shall not go into details of the arrangements for the attacks as they were all very simple and consisted primarily of the closest possible coordination with the infantry, positive communications, reconnaissance, and secret occupation of the positions. These

are “musts” and whenever they are properly performed, success should follow.

Cassino was known to be a hornet’s nest of German pillboxes and strong points. It was also known that some armor was hidden in the vicinity of the town. Hence, when it was decided to attack it from the north with armor and infantry, tank destroyers went along in close direct support of the assault troops. One gun company moved into position at the right for this purpose. The three platoons were to the north and east of the town, covering all possible exits at ranges of from 400 to 700 yards. They remained silent until resistance was met. Then they methodically destroyed the points of resistance. Only one German tank came out in the face of one platoon and, as the platoon sergeant expressed it, “he kinda committed suicide.” The attack did not take Cassino, partly because of rubble that stopped the tanks and the exhausted and depleted condition of the infantry. But one thing happened during the attack that I want to bring out in order to show the confidence the infantry had in the tank destroyer gunners.

There was a very prominent three-story house in the northwest corner of the town. Lieutenant A, commanding the TD platoon on the north, received a message from the infantry that there was a German 50mm. AT gun in the third floor firing through the western window. Our infantry had got into the ground floor of the same house. Would Lieutenant A please knock the gun out? Lieutenant A crossed his fingers, said yes, put four rounds of HE in the

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window, destroyed the gun, killed the crew, and never scratched a Doughboy.

Sure, it was only 400 yards away, but had the infantry assaulted that gun it would have lost men, for snipers and machine guns were covering it. That is the kind of confidence good infantry gets to have in the tank destroyers when they work together.

A half dozen rounds of 3-inch high-velocity shells fired from a distance will just as effectively destroy a pillbox as the assault of it by an infantry platoon, and there will be slight casualties if any. The tank destroyer can do it, will do it, and loves to do it. They can save the infantry lots of men.

When a Jerry machine gun pins you to the ground it’s rather risky to stick your head up in order to definitely orient yourself so you can get out your map and figure out the coordinates of the machine gun position and call for artillery fire. But it’s easy to call the tank destroyers and say, “There’s a so-and-so in the two-story white house with a blue roof that has a hole in the east corner, in the northwest corner of town, who’s got me stymied. Please take him.” Or, if time has permitted and close planning has been done, maybe you only have to say, “MGs in house number 14 holding me up. I am 100 yards short and will take cover.”