

Task No 4, To A A/A Rgt, HQ 703 TD. Bn, F Feb 45

HEADQUARTERS
703RD TANK DESTROYER BATTALION
APO 230

18 January 1945

TANK DESTROYER OPERATIONS

Shortly after the German breakthrough into Belgium on 16 Dec 44, this TD Bn (90mm SP) found itself involved in movement and attachment from its normal Corps and Division to two others and then back to its normal status again. The cavalcade of events, actions and method of employment are told in the following narrative. Emphasis is placed on the type of employment for it is customary in infantry divisions to attach TD Companies and flat-boats to infantry regiments and battalions respectively, and likewise in armored divisions to combat commands and task forces respectively. However, as this operations summary will demonstrate, the field manual method did bring out several fundamental principles of TD doctrine.

The Germans had finally committed their Sixth Panzer Army - not to keep us from crossing the Roer River, which many believed would be their primary probability of commitment - but to make a major effort through the Schnee Eifel Forest into the Ardennes with the Meuse River as their first major objective.

The 1st SS and 12th SS Panzer Divisions spearheaded the attack, the 1st SS on the left, the 12th SS on the right. Both Divisions were initially successful, but the 12th SS was slowed down considerably shortly after their initial penetration, and was stopped long enough for V Corps to set up hasty defenses along a general line Monschau, Hofen, Wirtzfeld, Butgenbach, with the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division occupying the high ground about 1000 meters northwest of Bullingen.

The 1st SS Panzer Division, being more successful, had penetrated further to the west in the direction of Malmedy, Stavelot, Stoumont, thus putting V Corps in the position of an anchor for any attempts on the part of the Allies to contain the penetration on its north flank. Its position was doubly important because it was directly astride the main routes of the 12th SS Panzer Division into Malmedy, Eupen, Verviers and points north and west.

It was further known that each of the two spearheading divisions had another panzer division backing them up - the 2nd SS behind the 1st, and the 9th SS behind the 12th - thus making it imperative that the sector be strongly fortified by all available AT defenses.

Consequently the 1st US Infantry Division, attached to V Corps, had at its disposal not only its organic AT guns and its normal attachment of one TD Battalion, but also 11 90mm AA guns from the 134th AA Bn, plus the 703rd TD Bn in order to give it the necessary AT defenses in depth to insure as far as possible an adequate defense of its sector against probable strong armored pressure.

Upon the arrival of this battalion at 0730 hours, 18 Dec 44, the companies assembled in the vicinity of Sourbrodt, Ovifal, Robertville, with the battalion CP at Sourbrodt. The Battalion Commander having reported to Division Headquarters, returned and oriented the Staff and Company Commanders on the general situation, and informed them of the first mission of the battalion.

The 26th Infantry Regiment was already on the line, the 16th Infantry Regiment had just arrived, and was assembled in the vicinity of Robertville, Outremarche, Bruckberg, while the 18th Infantry Regiment was assembled a few miles to the northwest. On our left flank the 1st US Infantry Division was consolidating defensive positions; the 26th Infantry Regiment held the high ground between Butgenbach and Bullingen; from Butgenbach to Weismes and Malmedy the situation was extremely fluid, and neither side held any ground along that line.

The 16t. Infantry Regiment was setting up hasty defensive positions in their present assembly area, and was making plans to move up abreast of the 26th Infantry Regiment to secure the main highway between Butgenbach and Weismes - a most important route needed for the proposed advance of the 12th SS Panzer Division.

The 1st US Infantry Division, in addition to its own 57mm guns, had its normal TD Battalion, the 634th (SP 3-inch) attached and integrated, TD Platoons to Infantry Battalions. The mission of the 703rd TD Bn was, operating under battalion control, to initiate immediate reconnaissance of routes and gun position areas on the Division left flank and be prepared to repel any armored thrusts that might get through friendly troops on our left. This mission was given because our left flank was not yet fully stabilized, and up to that time, enemy pressure was strongest from that direction.

Reconnaissance Company was given the mission of reconnoitering for routes and position areas along the road from Weywertz to Kellenherberger, and late in the afternoon returned, taking an officer from each TD Company to the positions netted by the search to familiarize themselves in case of future operations in that area.

In the meantime, shortly afternoon, a task force was hastily organized from whatever units were available at the moment to proceed to Weismes and protect the evacuation of a field hospital located there. The second platoon of "A" Company joined this task force, and moved out at 1400 hours. The task force under command of Lt Col DAVIDSON of the 634th TD Bn consisted of bn Hq, Rec Co, plus one TD section of the 634th TD Bn, several light tanks and 6 Assault Guns of

the 745th Tank Battalion; "B" Company minus a platoon from the 1st Engr Bn, and our second platoon of "A" Company.

It was found at Weismes that the hospital had already been evacuated, and the task force remained in that area to secure the town. It appeared that they arrived at a most opportune time, for the following morning, 19 Dec, two German tanks approached the town from the East, and two from the West to find what defenses, if any we had there. One tank, coming from the East, succeeded in entering the lower part of the town, but was driven out shortly thereafter. At 1715 hours several tanks, with an estimated company of infantry, tried to approach the town from the southwest, vicinity of Chivre Mont, but with no success.

The second platoon of "A" Co, in road block positions facing south and southwest, fired three rounds at one of the tanks in the morning attack, but saw no action in the afternoon attack. The tank upon which they fired withdrew apparently undamaged.

During the 24 hours from 18 to 19 Dec, the 16th Infantry Regiment had completed preparations to move out, the situation on the division left flank became more stabilized, and at 1100 hours the Division Commander issued orders for the 26th Infantry Regiment to hold their present positions and expand their right flank to the railroad running between Weismes and Butgenbach, and the 16th Infantry Regiment to attack and secure the high ground along the highway between Weismes and the railroad. The 703rd TD Bn was relieved of its original mission and ordered to provide protection of the Division zone, from the south, coordinating with Commanding Officers of the 16th and 26th Infantry Regiments. In other words, this battalion was responsible for preventing any armored breakthroughs in the entire Division zone, deepening and strengthening the weak spots, and maintaining a mobile reserve ready to move to any threatened sector.

The Battalion Commander, after contacting the Regimental Commanders, ordered "A" Company (minus 2nd Platoon) to assemble vicinity of Weywertz in direct support of the 16th Infantry, and "C" Company to assemble vicinity of Butgenbach in direct support of the 26th Infantry. The second Platoon of "A" Company remained at Weismes, and "B" Company remained in reserve at their original assembly area. At 1500 hours "C" Company moved out, while "A" Company moved the following morning.

The attack of the 16th Infantry proved to be merely a movement into new positions, as no resistance was encountered, and by nightfall they were well dug in. The 26th Infantry meanwhile, had further consolidated their defenses southeast of Butgenbach, and occupied the high ground between the railroad and their original positions.

During the day, in addition to the two small attacks mentioned, three other probing attacks took place along the Division front. At 0615 hours, two tanks with infantry attacked the 26th Infantry positions from the south, toward RJ (K-869022); at 1045 hours several tanks with an estimated company of infantry attacked from the same direction in conjunction with an attack of similar strength from the east (Bullingen); at 1950 hours several tanks with a company of infantry attacked north from Faymonville against the 16th Infantry, which by that time was sitting on its objective. All attacks were successfully repulsed.

By 20 Dec indications were that strong build-ups of armor and infantry were taking place in Bullingen and Faymonville, and by the nature of the probing attacks made up to that time it was evident that our continued defense of the enemy's main routes to the northwest offered a serious obstacle toward his efforts to de-liberate the cities of Eupen, Verviers, and Liege. A strong attack, therefore, was expected somewhere along the Corps front at one or more points, and the routes we were blocking were important enough to warrant our making an assumption that our sector might be hit strongly. The 12th SS Commander must have been thoroughly chagrined at the comparative success of his Rangers as against the 1st SS Division, and no doubt would do all possible to push the attack forward for the protection of the north flank of the penetration, and, incidentally, to save his own face.

No attacks of importance took place during the day however, and he continued his probing attacks along our front. At 0615 hours a company of tanks and two companies of infantry attacked the 26th Infantry positions from the direction of Bullingen and made a slight penetration, but by 0815 hours 8 tanks had been destroyed and all positions restored. At 0730 hours an attack was launched with infantry only up the railroad between the two Regiments, with the mission, (obtained from a PW later), to seize Obermertz and proceed west into Weismes. At 1020 hours a tank plus a platoon of infantry attacked from the south toward RJ (K-869040). Both of these attacks were repulsed with heavy casualties to the enemy, and the sector was comparatively quiet the remainder of the day.

During 20 Dec, the battalion lost its reserve company, Company "B", which was detached and moved at 0800 hours to the 82nd Airborne Division which was engaged further west in a critical sector, building up a defensive line to contain the breakthrough. The loss of "B" Company upset the plan of having an entire TD Company in mobile reserve. A "string" was tied to the 3rd Platoon of "A" Co., which was designated as battalion reserve and ordered to reconnoiter routes to position areas throughout the Division sector.

The infantry anti-tank dispositions were studied and after a conference with the Regimental Commanders, the following designations were made effective:

The second platoon of "A" Company remained at Weismes; because of the probing attacks in the center of the Division sector, the first platoon of "A" Company moved to the vicinity of RJ (K-869040) and took up positions ready to fight in place, or move to either flank of the 16th Infantry; the third platoon remained in Weywerts as battalion reserve. The first platoon of "C" Company moved to Dom Butgenbach, one section on the hill just north of the town, field of fire east and northeast, one section just east of the town, field of fire east and southeast; the second platoon moved further forward also, one section taking up positions in the vicinity of (K-9203), field of fire south and southwest, the other section moving to (K-910 035), covering the two roads approaching Butgenbach from the southwest; the third platoon remained in mobile reserve at Butgenbach, prepared to move to any threatened area.

During these two days that the enemy was probing our defenses and we were consolidating our own positions, the eleven 90mm AA guns were utilized for defense in depth, and were set up in the vicinity of Sourbrodt, Ovifal, and Robertsville, covering tank approaches from the east, south, and southwest. In addition, preliminary work in constructing minefield barriers was started in front of our infantry positions along tank approaches. The Second Battalion of the 18th Infantry Regiment, which had been occupied in the north mopping up German paratroops, had, meanwhile, moved into Butgenbach, and the remainder of the Regiment was expected shortly to take over part of the Division sector.

On the morning of 21 Dec, the Germans made their largest attack up to that time, finally deviating from their small probes in a determined effort to drive the 26th Infantry from their commanding positions. They first dropped an intense artillery barrage into the Butgenbach area at 0400 hours, but it was 0900 hours before the major effort took place. A battalion of infantry supported by several tanks attacked from the south and southeast, with the mission of taking Butgenbach. The leading company was stopped dead, but the following units pressed on. The infantry was finally pushed back, but five tanks succeeded in penetrating into the Division area. Three of these were shortly destroyed, but two got into the village of Dom Butgenbach, considerably annoying members of a battalion CP located in one of the buildings.

When the attack took place, the third platoon of "C" Company was alerted, and as its intensity developed, it was ordered to proceed to the vicinity of Dom Butgenbach to knock out, or drive off the intruders. After moving hurriedly to the outskirts of Butgenbach, the platoon leader stopped his platoon, obtained information, made his plans, and went into action. One section moved into town to try and find positions from which to place fire on the two loose tanks, leaving the other section to cover its advance. Before any positions could be reached, however, one of the tanks decided to break for the woods south of the town and return to safety.

ments, but although his intentions were good, unfortunately for him he didn't quite make it. The section that was waiting on the outskirts of the town knocked him out with a round through the rear, while he was a few hundred yards away at his goal. The second tank decided it would have a better chance of escape after dark, and it too made a break for the woods as soon as darkness fell. The waiting section fired several rounds, but could not observe the results, and it was not known until the following day that it also had been knocked out from the rear.

At the time this action took place it would seem that the first platoon, which was much closer to the town when the two tanks got in, would logically be the one to go after them. However, they were in such a position that, had they moved into town from the east or northeast, they would have had no cover, and would have been under direct observation. It was, therefore, thought best to move destroyers in from the west where they could have access to the buildings from concealed routes.

During this period the only further changes in our lines consisted of the movement of a company of the 18th Infantry into positions on the high ground vicinity of Konigsbach to strengthen the right flank of the 26th Infantry.

At the end of the day, when the action had quieted down, the third platoon was ordered to return to Butgenbach the first thing in the morning, because there were now too many destroyers on the left flank of the Regiment, and a redistribution was necessary for protection against possible attack in other sectors. When the morning of 22 Dec came, the justification of the order was aptly proven, for at 0500 hours a battalion of infantry supported by several tanks made a strong attack toward Butgenbach from the southwest. The section of the second platoon located at (K-910035) knocked out the lead tank, and the others withdrew, but the infantry continued and successfully penetrated toward the TD position. During this infiltration a half-track filled with infantry attempted to flank the destroyer on the right, and was completely demolished by several rounds of HE from the TD. When it became evident that the destroyers would be overrun if they remained, the section leader ordered a withdrawal to another position about 200 yards to the rear.

One of the destroyers would not start and was abandoned. However, rather than destroy it immediately the section leader backed the other destroyer out of immediate danger, but took up a position whereby, if necessary, he could fire a round into the other vehicle and render it useless to the enemy.

Before the enemy had an opportunity to consolidate their gains, our own infantry counterattacked, and late in the day succeeded in restoring the lines. During the counterattack the destroyer which had backed off to keep from being overrun participated by firing several rounds of HE into a house directly beside the abandoned destroyer, and driving a group of enemy infantry from the building. The destroyer was later recovered intact.

While this section was taking place the third platoon and remaining section of the second platoon moved from their positions of the previous night to the vicinity of Butgenbach, and set up road blocks covering approaches to the town.

This ended the enemy's attempts to eliminate our stranglehold on his route of advance and until the battalion minus "C" Company, moved on 25 December 1944 to join the 82nd Airborne Division it was not engaged further.

Throughout this attachment to the 1st Infantry Division the major part of the action fell on one company. However, the entire situation proved conclusively that the fundamentals of many Tank Destroyer Doctrines are well founded.

With the employment of an additional TD Battalion, plus (11) eleven 90mm AA Guns, a defense in depth was accomplished which would surely hold against an extremely strong armored thrust. In addition, the advantages of a highly mobile reserve were brought out in the ability of the reserve units to take favorable positions in depth, and move quickly to threatened areas.

This employment also resulted in bringing to the fore a few lessons which no one can afford to disregard. Even though we escaped without mishap, it might easily have caused considerable difficulty. First, reserves must be husbanded carefully, and as soon as they have completed a mission they must be prepared to return to a reserve role immediately, or additional reserves must be available to take their place. Secondly, but so important in this war of mobility, is the matter of vehicle maintenance. Vehicles have to be ready to move at any time, day or night, and constant attention must be given them to insure that they are in condition to roll.

Finally, the usefulness of self-propelled TD's was again emphasized. Exploiting their mobility to the utmost SP's can effectively assist in stopping a tank attack. When the 12th SS Pz Div finally was relieved by a Volksgrenadier Div to permit the Panzers to slideslip further into the bulge, 23 knocked out tanks could be counted in one infantry battalion's sector -- many probably knocked out by artillery, at least eight and perhaps more destroyed by the M10's of the 634th TD Bn, and the three accounted for by the 90mm SP's after they had broken through the forward defenses.

W. B. Showalter
Commanding

Showalter

SWETT

3-2

(1 Incl: Overlay of AT Defenses)