

TANK DESTROYERS AT WORK—

Without The Book

By Lt. Col. R. L. McNelly, FA

Due to the retirement of the bulk of the Japanese Armored Forces on Luzon to zones other than that in which the 637th Tank Destroyer Battalion was operating, only one tank encounter worthy of the name occurred during the race for Manila. This took place at Ft. Stotsenberg, where six Jap medium tanks were destroyed, the remainder withdrawing into the foothills. During this encounter the battalion suffered a small number of casualties killed and wounded and lost two destroyers, one salvageable.

From here on in began a series of episodes such as turn the Field Manual writer's hair gray and cause red faces among die-hard orthodox campaigners. Finding no more tanks to conquer, the battalion's fire power was utilized in close support of infantry assaults on pill-boxes, caves, and gun emplacements by direct fire methods. At ranges of 400 to 1,400 yards enemy installations were plastered point-blank. Both APC and HE ammunition were used as well as the destroyers' .50-cal. AA guns firing directly from their turret ring mounts. This fire was found effective just prior to the infantry assault and supplemented the organic automatic weapons of the infantry.

The field day really got into high gear in Manila. No armor making its appearance, the TDs were called upon for direct fire on buildings during the street fighting and had their particular section of the Walled City to pulverize when it came time to go in after the besieged Jap garrison there. Many mines of tremendous power were encountered during the street fighting phase but fortune smiled on the destroyers: only two instances of damage to vehicles by mine action occurred, and personnel casualties from this cause were not serious. Ample reconnaissance and excellent engineer cooperation reduced this nuisance to a minimum. The toughest thing the destroyer crews had to face in this type of action was fragmentation from our own 76-mm shells as well as the 155-mm artillery bursts. Firing points in many cases were so close to masonry and reinforced concrete walls that the back-lash of flying fragments was practically impossible to avoid. There were several casualties from this source, but none were serious.

The Japs had a habit of constructing concrete emplacements right in the building corridors and in vantage points at basement level. In one instance Nip machine guns were emplaced under a church altar. Such strongholds were meat for destroyer crews. APC and HE served up in generous amounts

with a dash of condiment in the form of .50-cal. spray directed at windows and through doorways proved very efficacious as the "treatment" for fanatical Jap suicide groups.

Further examples of close infantry support were afforded during these hectic days of yard-by-yard tough going. Tank destroyers supported infantry advance elements moving along the rubble-covered river bank with direct fire from the destroyers' side of the river. Liaison and target designation were accomplished by radio across the water between infantry and supporting TDs, the infantry furnishing an SCR-300 with operator to accompany the destroyers.

These officious and tireless tank-busters were only getting started, however. When an amphibious operation was planned for an infantry unit as a flank attack on Jap positions south of the Pasig River the TDs were called upon to blast out the concrete retaining wall in various places along the opposite water's edge so that the doughboys would have steps and openings through which to scramble from the assault boats. The "busters" went cheerily to work, and by the time for the assault gaps and crude steps had been chipped from the heavy wall, nearly to water level. It wasn't necessary for an infantryman to wet so much as a foot in getting ashore (if he watched his step). To make the day complete the tank destroyer turret crews then dismounted their .50-cal. AA guns from the vehicle, set them up on ground mounts in windows and building rubble, and assisted in covering the assault with automatic weapons fire.

From across the river came a report that Japs were occupying a prominent tower on a modern steel building and looking right down the throats of advancing ground units. This was a "natural" for direct fire, but it assumed a tough aspect upon inspection. The heavy ponton bridge was still under construction and no access to south Manila was as yet available for armored weight. Positions from which to gain direct fire on the bothersome OP were practically nonexistent on the north bank of the Pasig River due to the masking effect of tremendous piles of debris and collapsed structures extending to the water's edge. Indirect artillery fire, while effective on the building itself, was a rather expensive method for sprinkling a vertical tower.

Reconnaissance further back disclosed a direct shot at this tower down a railroad right of way, in a position for only one destroyer at a time. And that tower was 'way, 'way down there. The TDs went to work. With an observer astride the ridge of the freight station roof and using the gunner's quadrant (the range finally jumped the sight diagram on the gunner's telescope), target hits were obtained at an elevation of 52.5—direct fire at 4,500 to 4,600 yards, according to the firing tables. Hardly "in the book," but it worked. Before sporadic return fire was received eleven rounds had been pumped into the tower, columns of black smoke curling up at

AUTHOR'S NOTE

One of the oldest of the TD units, the 637th TD Bn trained for two years in the Fiji Islands. It received new equipment in the Hebrides before departing for Bougainville. Since landing on Luzon as part of the assault amphibious corps it has made a brilliant record: the Commanding Generals of both the 37th (its own) and the 11th Airborne Divisions have commended its work.

each HE burst. Just to make it tough for the Nips the crew went back an hour later and repeated the process.

During this "Buck Rogers" act an amusing dialogue was monitored on the platoon radio. Close frequency made audible a conversation between a cub plane and an artillery battery apparently firing into the same area. The cub observer was taking the battery to task for not advising when it had fired. Informed that the battery had not fired and that the cub was in so many words "all wet," the mystified observer croaked back, "Well, somebody hit the target—who in h— was it?"

While all this was going on in scattered positions throughout the city the Reconnaissance Company of the battalion was engaged in its own little private war at the mouth of the Pasig River. In addition to other duties, the battalion commander had been placed in command of a provisional force which was charged with security and clean-up of the Division zone north of the river after the bulk of the infantry had crossed south in pursuit of the Japs. This provisional force consisted of elements of the tank destroyer battalion reinforced by the Division Reconnaissance Troop and some tanks.

No missions presenting themselves elsewhere for the TD Reconnaissance Company, it was assigned to secure the area including the mouth of the Pasig and extending north approximately two miles along Manila Bay. The three 81-mm mortars of the TD firing company maintenance sections were collected, some HE (heavy) mortar ammunition obtained, and the whole "shibang" turned over to Reconnaissance Company. With their automatic weapons, bazookas, and the improvised little triplet mortar section those Recon Co men made life miserable for the Japs directly across the river. Would-be suicide swimmers bent on night demolitions and other deviltry in our areas were quickly dispatched; many barges attempting to evacuate besieged Nips from the Walled City and Ft. Santiago were sunk or burned. OPs maintained by the Recon force spotted many lucrative targets for artillery fire in enemy-held positions. They took on all comers, including Nips escaping onto the sea wall which ran at an angle into the Bay. Mortars were used to plaster this wall and in one instance a Jap machine gun nest on a not far distant jetty was knocked out by bazooka fire, the bazooka man firing indirect fire adjusted by a forward observer located in a neutralized enemy gun position. Rather a novel bazooka problem, to say nothing of the fact that "the book" says the firing company maintenance sections retain their mortar for firing recovery screens with the only ammunition officially authorized for issue to the sections—smoke. All of which suggests that when the shootin' starts you throw everything but the kitchen sink (the Japs even threw some of these out the windows of the Manila Hotel) and then look up the book later.

It was at this stage that some more interesting tasks faced the destroyers. One section of M-18s mounting the 76-mm

battalion weapon was maintained near the river mouth in cover positions at all times. As lucrative targets appeared the OPs would notify this local "fire department" and out would dash the destroyers to take up firing positions along the waterfront. Much good hunting was experienced in the form of tugs, barges, and miscellaneous craft fleeing from the now trapped enemy positions. Small boats were strafed, tugs set afire, and gasoline and ammunition barges blown sky high. One evening the Japs set forth about dusk in what appeared to be a makeshift armored boat of some sort. Covered on sides and pilot house with boiler plate or salvaged ship siding, it waddled with difficulty into the Bay at about 8 knots an hour. Keeping well behind the sea wall until far from shore, the wily pilot was about to make good his escape when the destroyer on duty let



On Leyte an M-10 tank destroyer advances ahead of infantry to blast Jap pillboxes at Ormoc

him have it with APC as he emerged from the far end of the sea wall. At 3,000 yards after a difficult adjustment two direct hits were registered and the tug burst into flame. That destroyer crew added another Nip flag on their hull, and they deserved it. Much enemy personnel, materiel, and supplies were thus prevented from being evacuated to Bataan and points north.

During all this duck-pond phase many miserable Filipinos escaping the tortures of internment at Ft. Santiago were fished from the river by Reconnaissance Company men manning the river posts. Many of the rescued gave much valuable information as to Jap activities south of the river. One picked up along the bank was asked during his examination as to the status of enemy water transport, how many barges still remained with the enemy. He replied that as far as he knew few if any barges were left. "Tank destroyers blow all up," he added with an explosive gesture of the hands.

While carrying on their primary mission of heavy employment all tank destroyer companies also maintained constant patrols throughout the city, spotting guerrilla disorders, answering calls to erase Jap snipers and straggling suicidal saboteurs, and in general maintaining order in the chaos of a wartorn city. This was accomplished with "jeeps" and M-20 patrols.

Much enemy equipment was also destroyed from vantage points in this area by the 37-mm guns of Reconnaissance Company's light tanks. Obtained in lieu of the car, armored, M-8, the light tank proved of great value and a favorite with the

men. On one mission en route to Manila a tank destroyer Reconnaissance Company platoon patrolling with two light tanks, an M-20, and five "jeeps" mounting a .30-cal. machine gun each, ran into an enemy supply installation along the Nip route of withdrawal. In a sharp 25-minute engagement 51 Japs were dispatched to their honorable ancestors (actual count; many more fell in rice fields and in cover positions), two 47-mm AT guns knocked out, a Jap cargo truck destroyed, three buildings blown up and set afire (apparently they contained gasoline and explosives), and general chaos and confusion spread among the enemy. The platoon withdrew and returned to base with only one man wounded, not seriously. During this encounter the ¼-tonners fired their .30-calibers point blank from the highway and hand-to-hand combat was engaged in at a few points.

This account would not be complete without a reference to what is probably an apt example of the adage "from the sublime to the ridiculous." The sublime accomplishment for one tank destroyer crew occurred during the battle for Ft. William McKinley. A destroyer came face to face with a well dug-in Jap naval gun. Both foes saw each other almost simultaneously, for the Nip 5-incher let loose with a point blank blast which might well have cleaved the destroyer in

two. The alert driver, however, swerved to the flank without reducing speed and took cover in a convenient revetment previously deserted by the enemy. Stealthy observation dictated the proper time to pull into a hull down position from which the destroyer later put several rounds of APC into the breach of the naval gun and finished off the enemy crew with .50-caliber fire from its machine gun.

An almost unbelievable corollary to this episode turns us to a ridiculous but stirring example of alertness and superb gunnery. A destroyer of the same company emerged from cover to observe a Nip officer making tracks over a field about 800 yards away, en route to a "better 'ole." The Jap's speed was matched only by that of the gunner in the turret of the destroyer. Ripley or no Ripley, believe it or not, that gunner traversed and tracked that Jap on the dead run. The first round of 76-mm HE caught the Jap squarely. All that could be found of him later were pieces of his honorable sword and his revolver. The latter reposes with the platoon as a reminder that it can happen here (if only once in a lifetime). Needless to say the destroyer sergeant could not appreciate this practical joke by the gunner. The sergeant had been robbed of his target just as he was about to open up with the .50 from his ring mount position.



For long range fire across the Roer River the tank destroyers of the 2nd Armored Division, Ninth Army, had to dig ramps to gain extra elevation.

PROPER USE and ABUSE of TANK DESTROYERS

By Lt. Eugene T. Oborn, FA

Much has been written and remains to be written on the employment of high muzzle velocity tank destroyers to obtain the maximum amount of effectiveness from each individual weapon. In the final analysis, the relative proficiency of a tank destroyer unit and its weapons is measured by the amount and kind of enemy equipment destroyed as opposed to its own losses in combat through enemy action.

In the accompanying table appears a comparison within a Tank Destroyer Battalion (899th) of the accomplishments and

losses of the component gun and reconnaissance companies. For the most part the gun companies have worked with the same respective infantry regiments of the same infantry division (9th) since D-day, June 6, 1944. The table covers a period of approximately seven months of combat. In it "M-10s destroyed" means that none of these weapons were repaired on the spot, or within a reasonable time.

"A" Co was attached to a regiment which permitted use of the guns under company control. Recommendations of its

ENEMY EQUIPMENT DESTROYED (OVER 7 MONTHS' PERIOD)

Co.	Tanks					Guns				Rock											
	Ren ault	Mk. III	Mk. IV	Mk. V	Mk. VI	SP 75- mm	105- mm	AT	Field	Guns 88- mm	20- mm	AT Gren Empl	Laun 88-mm	Str Pt	Pill Box	MG Nest	OP	GP Vehs	PW	M-8s	M-10s Destroyed
A	....	1	7	14	....	5	3	10	1	3	13	2	....	1	32	49	3	4	465	....	2
B	5	2	5	5	....	3	....	13	....	1	....	....	1	....	12	8	1	7	59	....	13
C	....	....	1	8	1	....	....	8	2	....	1	1	....	4	13	21	....	4	1,173	....	9
RCN	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	1	....	....	5	....	3	158	0	....

commander have, in the main, been followed. This employment favors the present type of battalion tank destroyer organization; missions were assigned generally and the company officers and NCOs were permitted to use their own initiative in accomplishing these missions.

In the case of "C" and (particularly) "B" companies, also attached to regiments, recommendations of the respective company commanders were frequently not followed. The result was the use of their destroyers on missions which should and could have been accomplished by tanks, artillery, heavy weapons, or the riflemen themselves, all of which were available.

Tank destroyers are extremely vulnerable to antitank fire. If these weapons continue to be used to precede leading infantry elements in attacking enemy resistance, and to gain ground which is to be seized and held by the infantry which follows them, the concept that tank destroyer units in combat are most effectively organized into groups and battalions is wrong. The infantry regimental commander would be inclined to use tank destroyers properly if a company of tank destroyers were made an organic part of each regiment, in place of their being attached from army troops. He would then assume responsibility for his own protection against tanks—a condition which would promote serious thought before he dissipated his destroyers on secondary missions.

It is perfectly feasible that a company of tank destroyers could replace the antitank company, which at present is an organic part of each infantry regiment. Such an organization of antitank weapons would also place the responsibility for obtaining vehicular and personnel replacement on the individuals who have ordered tank destroyers on missions which caused losses which were unwarranted, in terms of the losses they were able to inflict on the enemy. Obviously, as replacement destroyers and trained crews became more difficult to obtain, the regimental commander would be forced to change his methods to more proper employment of these high velocity weapons.

The alternative to such an unnecessary reorganization of TDs is to assign missions and allow TD men to carry them out. Vigorous foot reconnaissance before moving destroyers into primary, alternate, or cover positions, as well as reconnaissance for through routes of ingress and egress, are maxims of TD employment which cannot profitably be violated. When, however, as sometimes happens, friendly tanks are not available to make the attack with the infantry, the tank destroyer platoon leader contacts and remains with the infantry commander throughout the advance, receiving his missions from him but carrying them out in his own way. When a suitable enemy target is located the lead destroyer of the platoon is informed of the situation by means of the infantry

"Walky-Talky" radio, which the platoon leader and the leading destroyer of each platoon carry, and the tank destroyer platoon leader is allowed to make his own decision, using his own ingenuity and initiative as to how the job can best be accomplished. He, his gun commanders, and his reconnaissance corporal must be allowed to reconnoiter. The TD company commander must be informed of the proposed plan of his platoon leader, and approve or disapprove it, before the guns are moved.

If tanks are available for an advancing task force, then tank destroyers should follow, not precede, the tanks. The tank destroyer weapons and personnel must be employed only in preparing to destroy enemy armor.

But in all cases, firing positions should be selected in such a manner as to provide flanking fire on enemy armor, and the positions must be in depth and mutually supporting. Too many times TD guns are ordered into positions (by infantry officers) from which enemy tanks can be stopped only by penetrating their thick frontal armor—a frequent impossibility. The proper solution is to have well reconnoitered and carefully selected ready and firing positions covered by a security outpost, in contact by wire communication through which to sound the alarm in case of hostile armored activity. Range cards should be prepared for each probable firing position in order to obtain hits with the least amount of adjustment after opening fire. Ammunition, and the range table for firing Shell, Illuminating, up to ranges of 4,000 yards, should be placed in each destroyer. This will permit one destroyer of a platoon to illuminate an area, while the other three bring direct fire on enemy armor, if the enemy attacks with armor at night.

A solution to another vital problem is to have reconnaissance company personnel, both officers and men, trained in actual gunnery work so that in battle, when the cards are down and trained replacements are needed immediately, they can be drawn without delay from the reconnaissance company. Green reinforcements may be trained for reconnaissance and gunnery in the reconnaissance company.

Experience of the TD battalion upon whose experience most of this article is based, has shown that when appropriate field manuals are followed and the supported unit allows TD personnel to exercise their initiative, the desired results will be obtained with far fewer losses. It is when the basic principles are violated that analysis, discussion, and reeducation—or, as a last result, reorganization—are in order.

Only when the maximum possible amount of enemy armor and equipment are disabled or destroyed, as against each friendly tank destroyer put out of action, have we achieved the optimum, successful tank destroyer operation.