HISTORY
602nd
TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

MARCH, 1941

TO

NOVEMBER, 1945

602nd TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

COAT OF ARMS AND DISTINCTIVE INSIGNIA

WE EAT OPPOSITION

HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

THE BATTALION INSIGNIA WAS ORIGINALLY APPROVED FOR THE 602nd TANK DESTROYER BATTALION BY LETTER FROM THE OFFICE OF THE QUARTERMASTER GENERAL, DATED 30 JANUARY 1943.

THE ORIGINAL APPROVAL STATED THE FOLLOWING:

"THE PANTHER, ONE OF THE MOST DEADLY AND FEROCIOUS CREATURES, IS SYMBOLIC OF THE DESTROYING FUNCTIONS OF THE ORGANIZATION. THE INDIAN REPRESENTS THE MASTER OF SUCH DESTRUCTIVE FORCE, HIS POSTURE IMPLYING FORWARD DIRECTION. THE MOTTO, ***WE EAT OPPOSITION****, IS EXPRESSIVE OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PERSONNEL IN ACTION."*

HISTORY

602ND TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

March 1941 to November 1945

By

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Phoenix, Arizona

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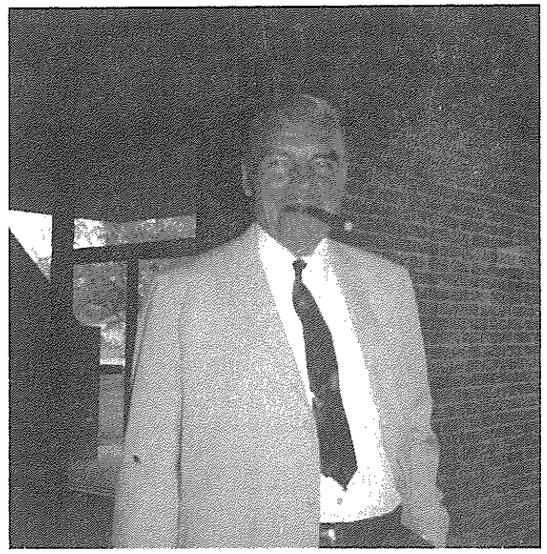
November, 1990

DEDICATION

This history of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion is dedicated to Colonel Peter J. Kopcsak. Pete commanded the 602nd from its inception until he was wounded and evacuated on November 9, 1944.



This history is also dedicated to those men who landed with us on Omaha Beach, but who died prior to V.E. Day. They are:

Richard D. Angleton
Leslie C. Banaka
Loyd P. Beliles
Thomas E. Blair
Kenneth F. Brown
Russell Faulkner
John A. Farina
James P. French
Doyle C. Haggard
William N. Heath
James E. Kisner
Joseph H. McPeek
Freddie Phillips
Phillip V.Pratt
Dudley R. Qualls
William K. Roebuck
William A. Rummel
John W. Rykowski
Kenneth Scherier
Earl F. Stevens
Standard Wheaton
Claude White
Kenneth L. Williams

Last, but not least, this history is dedicated to the men of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. No one can question, that as individuals and as a unit, they leave behind a distinguished record in which they can take great pride.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the beginning of this project, the title, "History of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion" was selected. As various parts were written, it occurred to me that the word "History" may not be entirely proper. Although most of the content is based upon primary sources, such as documentary records (General and Special Orders), personal memory and notes, Jack Coulston's letters, excerpts from Panther Tracks, and first-hand accounts of events provided by other men, I'll confess to including some of my own opinions and the opinions of others. In these instances, opinions have been identified as such. The inclusion of human interest items and comments of others are part of the primary source testimonials. The Company A and Battalion histories appearing in the Appendices have been faithfully reproduced as primary sources.

Not being a writer, I found a problem with using present and past tense and in the use of the first person personal pronoun "I" instead of the more impersonal reference to "this writer" or "the author." I hope this has not proven too confusing to the reader. However, I think this project covers the lives of the men of the 602nd from its inception in December 1941 until the unit was disbanded in November 1945.

For any inaccuracies in the spelling of names of towns and villages, I assume responsibility, for some lists were 2nd and 3rd hand and sometimes taken from hand-written notes. While a comprehensive history of only documented facts about the series of events would require the collection of multiple testimonials of persons present at each event along with documentary records of actions, dates, and places, only those substantiated facts were chosen and presented here as were needed to achieve the purposes of this project.

For their invaluable assistance with the production of this document, my thanks go to Raymond J. Young and Leonard H. Bornemann.

Last but not least, in a recent issue of Panther Tracks, there were some recollections of our Atlantic crossing. It seems for the two weeks we were at sea, there was a ship's newspaper called the "Bergensfjord Bag." Someone from this paper interviewed Lt. Colonel Peter J. Kopcsak. Pete was quoted as saying, "I consider the group of men under my command at present the most versatile and toughest group that I have ever commanded."

Pete, the men of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion have a message for you. "We think you are something special too. We each feel honored to have served with you."

Bertrand J. Oliver
Ex-Company Commander
Co. A, 602nd Tank Destroyer Bn.
June 1, 1990

PREFACE

Purpose

These writings must have a purpose. Because there is so little of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion's combat action recorded in the histories of the major units to which the battalion was attached in Europe during WWII, the purpose of these writings is to (1) establish the fact that the 602nd existed, (2) that the unit served in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany from Omaha Beach to the vicinity of the Czechoslovakian border in and around Zwickau, Germany, and (3) document that the 602nd played a major role in the destruction of enemy materiel and the killing and capturing of German personnel.

During WWII, Omaha Beach to V.E. Day, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion maintained a unit history. A unit history was also maintained by Company A, one of the gun companies. The other companies did not keep similar histories.

These two documents are the basis for this narration. No attempt has been made to rewrite them. Another source of material is the 602nd Association's newsletters, Panther Tracks that was first distributed 28 January 1980. The last two sources of information are certain letters written by our battalion historian, Jack Coulston, now deceased, and letters from other unit personnel. Input was solicited so that, as much as possible, a balanced record could be provided of the battalion as a whole.

The writer joined the 2nd Infantry Division in January 1941. In June 1942, he joined Company A, 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion as 2nd Lieutenant Platoon Leader. He later became the Company Executive Officer. On November 9, 1944, he took over command of Company A, and was officially designated Company Commander on November 17, 1944, which assignment he held until he left the 602nd T.D. Bn. around September/October 1945 after V.E. Day.

Colonel Peter K. Kopcsak

Pete commanded the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion from its inception until November 9, 1944. On that date, vicinity of Morville, France, he was wounded. His wounds were so severe, he had to be evacuated to the states, and he never returned to the 602nd. Major Thomas Conlin, Battalion Executive Officer, assumed command.

The "character" of Pete Kopcsak was instilled in the men of the 602nd. From 1941 to November 9, 1944, this became so ingrained in the espirit de corps of the troops that it provided the guiding force to keep on going from the time of his departure right up to V.E. Day.

In March 1990, Raymond Young found one of our 1944/45 comrades, Anthony Portera. Previous attempts had been made to find him at his old wartime addresses with no luck. The contact was the first Anthony had with any of his 602nd buddies in 45 years, even though he often wondered where everyone had scattered to after the war. The author telephoned him and received the classic example of the espirit de corps mentioned above. When the author said to Anthony, "Welcome back to the 602nd T.D. Bn.," his reply was, "I never left it."

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March 1941 to November 1945

Organization

Prior to WWII, as part of the Regular Army, the 2nd Infantry Division was stationed at Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, Texas.

Based on a March 26, 1941 directive, with personnel from various units of the Division, a new organization was formed within the Division. The "2nd Inf. Div. Provisional Anti-Tank Bn." At that time, Pete Kopcsak was G-3 of Division Artillery. Major Browning of the 12th Field Artillery Battalion was the Anti-Tank Bn's commander. Pete was asked to become the Executive Officer, and he accepted.

The unit went on maneuvers in Louisiana. They had the 37mm Anti-Tank units of the separate Field Artillery Battalions plus the 75mm gun battery of the Division Artillery. After these maneuvers the unit moved to Fort Sill for firing practice. It was there when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and it then returned to Fort Sam Houston. On December 15, 1941, when the "Tank Destroyers" became part of the Armed Forces, this unit became the "602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion." It was one of the first four units so designated. Its commander was a West Point graduate, Peter J. Kopcsak. As part of his background, he had been an All American end on the West Point football teams in 1931 and 1933.

As Kopcsak related, "General Lucas, who commanded both Division Artillery and the Anti-Tank Battalion, told me he had orders to activate the 602nd, and that I would be the commander. He let me cadre anyone I wanted from the 2nd Infantry Division. We were given only the 37mm guns and a few vehicles. Then we received a shipment of vehicles and a group of new recruits to train in basics."

Pete believed there was an important relationship between the teamwork and competitiveness of sports and Army training and combat. Another of Pete's strong beliefs was the "chain of command." Seeing how we were subsequently used in combat, no better principle could have been stressed. In addition to on-post training, the 602nd trained at Camp Bullis, Texas, which was the firing range for the 2nd Infantry Division.

Louisiana Maneuvers, 1942

In the summer of 1942, the 602nd T.D. Bn. accompanied the 2nd Infantry Division for about two months on maneuvers in Louisiana. A measure of the Army's readiness for combat at that time was illustrated by our "T.D.s." According to the description provided by Dick Barthold as it appeared in the April 1987 issue of Panther Tracks, "When I joined the 602nd in June 1942, our T.D.s consisted of La Man's towed 37s mounted on 3/4-ton trucks. A railroad tie was secured across the bed of the truck directly behind the driver's and passenger's seat. The wheels were removed, and the gun carriage was secured to the top of the railroad tie; the La Man's t rails were split and wired at each corner of the truck bed. The windshield was lowered and--VOILA!--there was a tank destroyer. We used these in Louisiana maneuvers (July/August 1942), and I believe when we first went to Camp Hood."

The headquarters of the Tank Destroyer Center opened at Camp Hood, Texas in August 1942. On September 18, 1942, Camp Hood was officially opened. Toward the

end of the maneuvers, in late summer, the 602nd left the 2nd Infantry Division for a move to Camp Hood for specialized training.

Camp Hood and Camp Bowie, Texas

The 602nd T.D. Bn. was one of the first units to train at the Army's T.D. Training Headquarters. It can be recalled how we scraped stickers off the windows of the new barracks, obtained cots, sheets, etc. for the barracks and dishes, etc. for the mess halls.

At Camp Hood, the 602nd trained on half-track vehicles as shown below.

Figure 1. Company of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Bn. in Line at Camp Hood, TX.

Some time later on, we learned that Pete Kopcsak wrote the original T.D. tactics for the T.D. School. Some of these tactics are still being used by cavalry and armored units today.

In the meantime, the 2nd Infantry Division had left Louisiana for Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. The purpose was winter warfare training. After the 602nd's training at Camp Hood terminated, it moved to Camp Bowie, Texas for field exercises in central Texas for a few weeks. The purpose for these exercises was to test the 602nd T.D. Bn. for combat readiness.

Camp McCoy, Wisconsin--Winter Warfare Training

On December 15, 1942, the 602nd left Camp Bowie, Texas to rejoin the 2nd Infantry Division at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin to be included in the "Winter Warfare Training" program.

The day the 602nd left Camp Bowie, it was hot. Wearing the woolen uniform and lugging barracks bags and loading equipment was almost more than one could seem to tolerate. Two or three days later, as members of the 602nd disembarked from the train

at McCoy into about two feet of snow and the temperature around 17 degrees below zero, all the clothing one had did not seem adequate. It was quite a contrast!

The 602nd personnel tested various articles of clothing and equipment. All T.D. personnel were issued snowshoes, special boots, clothing, arctic bedrolls, etc. Those same 37mm guns, with wheels removed, were now mounted on toboggans along with the men's equipment and pulled through the snow by the gun crews with long ropes that had knots in them to facilitate a better grip. Rather primitive to say the least, but it was a good training exercise.

In January 1943, a group of new recruits joined the 602nd to bring the unit up to full T.O. strength. They were provided basic training in the sub-zero weather by assigned members of the unit. Close order drill and classroom instruction were provided, and some did not participate in the Michigan maneuvers described below.

In February and March 1943, the 602nd accompanied the 2nd Infantry Division on maneuvers held in northern Michigan. Kopcsak said, "We were under the command of Colonel Hedin, from a T.D. Group Headquarters located in Arkansas. We were attached to the 2nd Infantry Division for the maneuvers at Watersmeet, Michigan."

This event did not get much, if any, publicity. For example, the men were not permitted to take any personal cameras with them, so very little was recorded on film. To say the least, this was a very unique experience. Many nights, the temperature went to 30 degrees below zero and no place to get in out of the cold. (The normal pattern at McCoy was that it would be 17 degrees below in the early morning, warm up to about zero at noon, then drop off again in the afternoon and evening.) It soon became obvious the number one training priority was survival.

In the meantime, the Army had started to form Mountain Regiments that were stationed at Camp Carson and Camp Hale, Colorado, and they did their training in the Rocky Mountains. Their personnel were scattered among the 2nd Division units and the 602nd. It could be presumed their number one assignment was to help keep members of the 602nd alive. (These regiments, in time, became the 10th Mountain Division which distinguished itself in northern Italy by fighting through the most mountainous areas faced by any of our U.S. forces.)

Not much is to be said about latrines, but a certain 1st Sgt. is recalled who until this time had never seen snow let alone being forced to live in it. Suffice it here to skip his comments that could be heard a hundred yards on his walk back from what always proved to be a very frigid experience.

While the T.D. personnel were equipped with snowshoes for cross-country mobility in deep snow, the Infantry Regiments of the Division were equipped with skis. On some of the tactical problems when the men skied long distances, at times they were not able to prepare themselves adequately for a cold night in a bedroll, and reports were heard that some men died of freezing. This did not happen in the 602nd, but we had a close call.

One morning at roll call a man was missing. A check was made where his platoon was scattered out among the trees, and he was found still in his bedroll. Because of the extreme cold, he was only half conscious. About a half dozen men exercised his arms and legs and rubbed his body until circulation was restored and he became partially coherent. They got him to his feet and two men walked him back and forth until he could function on his own. He was evacuated back to Camp McCoy. As he was older than most of the men, he was later reassigned to some other unit where life was not as rigorous.

One evening, during one of the tactical periods, a group of men were manning a roadblock. One said to warm up, he was going to jog down the road and then jog back. Halfway, he had warmed up to the point that he slipped the parka top off his head. The next morning it was discovered he had frozen his ears, another "weather" casualty. In fact, word was that about a train a day left Watersmeet, Michigan to take casualties back to Camp McCoy, and not a shot had been fired. In most cases, the problems had to do

with hands, feet, ears, throats, and lungs, the latter two as a result of breathing in that frigid air when doing something strenuous.

Other hardships come to mind. Streams were frozen, and lakes were frozen several feet thick. It was difficult to obtain water and to keep it from freezing once available. Company kitchen equipment with large G.I. cans were kept busy around the clock melting snow. As the water content of snow is roughly 10%, those cans had to be filled ten times with snow to get one full of water.

Another lesson learned early was that in the field one can not take warm food and put it in an aluminum mess kit that is 10 to 30 degrees below zero. The food immediately froze into a lump, could not be eaten, and it became next to impossible to clean it out. During the rest periods, truck tarpaulins were built as a shield around and over the kitchen field stoves. By small groups, men could enter, heat their utensils, eat, and then clean them before leaving.

The Army issued special arctic sleeping bags. They could be zipped up from the inside. A part of the bag was a hood that came up over the head. During non-tactical periods, fires were permitted. Many men would lay down to sleep with the foot of their sleeping bag close to the fire only to wake up about an hour later to find out they were too close and slowly the sleeping bag/bedroll was smouldering away around their feet.

The Infantry had been provided arctic tents, but the T.D. personnel had not. They had to make do with their regular pup tents or to make lean-tos or whatever else they could improvise. One partial solution was to try to find a large pine tree with low-lying boughs where the snow under the trees was not too deep. This area seemed to provide some extra protection from the cold.

Mention was made of field testing equipment. One item was the foot gear--the "Shoe-Pac;" it had a rubber bottom section and a leather top section. In these were usually placed two felt insoles, and one wore more than one pair of heavy woolen socks. During the day, moisture would form in the shoe-pac from perspiration from the body. Another lesson learned early--it only took one night--was that one couldn't crawl into the bedroll for the night and leave the shoe-pac s outside the bedroll (or sleeping bag). They would freeze stiff into grotesque shapes. In the morning, it took a long time to work them into a pliable condition where one could get them back on the feet. The writer found the best solution was to lay on his back in the sleeping bag, put one shoe-pac up under each armpit, lay the insoles and socks across the stomach and chest so they would dry out, and then, wearing a toque (special woolen head piece with an opening for the eyes, nostrils and mouth), zip yourself in. About every hour or so, one would get so cold that they would wake up, perform what might be called calisthenics in the bedroll, get warm, and then sleep for another hour or so. This waking up process was very necessary. It kept one from freezing to death. One just sleeps and slips away otherwise under these circumstances. If the reports were true, those that died were perhaps so exhausted from their day's activities, they did not get this warning, and just slept through their lessening bodily functions until they stopped.

A new vehicle was field tested for these weather conditions. It was small, track laying, and light weight. It became known as the "Weasel." Many variations are in use today. The 602nd field tested dehydrated foods. Men were grouped in units of five and issued small gasoline stoves, a can for gasoline, utensils and dehydrated foods. The various feeding components would be distributed in the rucksacks of the group. At mealtime, melted snow would provide the water, and the food was prepared and eaten.

Rucksacks were issued to replace the regular field pack. The rucksack was much better for these conditions. The weight was distributed on the hips and lower back, rather than just on shoulder straps. It could and had to carry more. A parody of an old song came about with the chorus, "Ninety pounds of rucksack, a pound of grub or two." The rucksack also made for sad but laughable occasions. Picture the man on snow-shoes, M-1 over his shoulder, rucksack on his back, climbing a grade, he straightens up and the weight pulls him over backwards. A fish out of water is in heaven compared to a

man in this predicament. He pushes to get himself up and his arm disappears to his shoulder in the deep snow. How does he get up, floundering as he was in the deep snow? A better question, how many other men did it take to get him back on his feet?

On one occasion during a rest period, a group of men took a "tarp" from a truck, got several slender trees and put up their version of a teepee. They then built a fire inside. Normally, the men wore two pairs of woolen gloves covered by a canvas shell. One man got warm enough to take off his gloves when the fire set the tarp on fire. This individual grabbed a shovel to put snow on it. Warm hands--cold steel--; he couldn't let go of the shovel. The flesh had frozen and stuck to it; another casualty on his way back to Camp McCoy.

The author concluded, whether the situation was tactical or rest and maintenance, the "war" or other activities had to stop around 1600 hours for the men to adequately prepare for the night. One solution was to take limbs of a tree and build a framework, then cut blocks of snow to place them around the sides, top, and back. Then cut pine boughs and place about one to one and one-half feet of these on the ground to keep the sleeping bag from being directly on the ground. Otherwise, the chances of having weather casualties increased.

Two reasons exist why this subject has been given this much space. First, with all these hardships, the 602nd was fortunate to have had this training. As it turned out, the 602nd participated heavily in the "Battle of the Bulge" where the snow, cold, and general weather conditions made life very miserable along with the fact that there was a war going on. The 602nd was quickly able to cope with these conditions compared to other troops who had nothing like this in their training. Weather casualties in the 602nd T.D. Bn. during the winter of 1944/45 were at a remarkable minimum. Second, why did this training take place? Members of the 602nd found out much later that, as a part of the planning for the invasion of Europe, an attack on Norway was contemplated. In North Africa, General Rommel's successes changed the priorities. Kopcsak said, "Our alert was cancelled as General Eisenhower could not get the necessary ships to send the 2nd Infantry Division and the 602nd to invade Norway at Narvik where the Germans had submarine bases. The support of the British in North Africa used up the shipping." Then Kopcsak explained, "After the winter maneuvers (and return to Camp McCoy), we received our M-10 Tank Destroyers." (The men felt we now were making progress--this was a Tank Destroyer.) A picture of the weapon is shown below, and as Kopcsak said, "It had twin diesel engines each with six cylinders and it had a high velocity 3-inch gun. A factory representative instructed us in its operation and maintenance. The 602nd was alerted for combat. When we were ready, we had a battalion maneuver with live ammunition which was observed by General Mayberry of the T.D. Center at Camp Hood along with Colonel Hedin. They were elated with this maneuver, but told me that had I requested permission to have a maneuver of this type, the T.D. Center would have disapproved my request for fear someone might get injured! They did say this type of maneuver should be given all T.D. units."

In the January 1986 issue of Panther Tracks, Jack Coulston wrote the following. "Did you know that we almost lost Col. Kopcsak in 1943? An Eagle Colonel from Army inspected us shortly after the Watersmeet maneuvers. He spent a lot of time with us and then afterwards told Pete that the morale of "the troops" in the 602nd was very high and that the servicemen had high respect for their officers. Pete explained that the officers participated 100% in road marches, in arctic maneuvers, in all such training and that we had established a rigid chain of command, wherein each rank and grade was respected from the Bn. C.O. down to the corporal. None were by-passed.

The inspector then threw the bomb--Army was activating a new Division, and Colonel Kopcsak had been requested by Headquarters to assume the position of Chief of Staff, a full Colonel's position. Pete rejected the request. He added that, "I want to be with these fine troops when they enter combat. It would be just like coaching a winning football team and then never seeing them in any of their games."

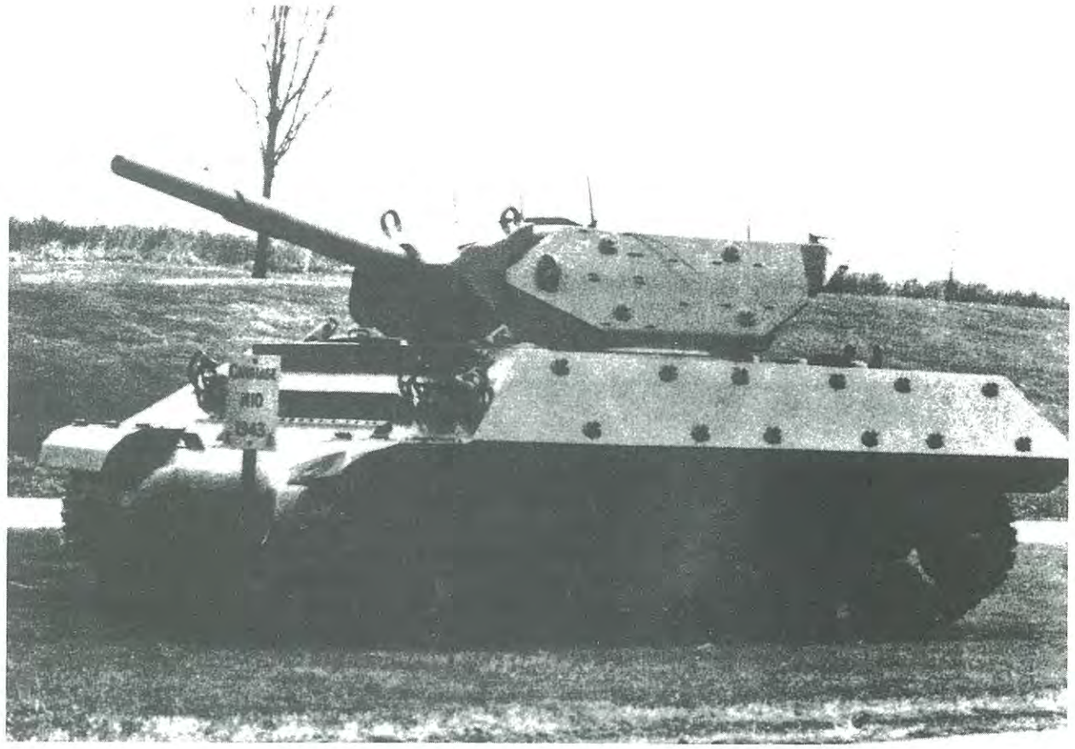

Figure 2. M-10 Tank Destroyer, 3 Inch Gun.

The 602nd as Farmers

In the late summer of 1943, it was discovered in the Northwest that there was a large amount of grain that needed to be harvested, and the usual labor force was not available. Young men had left the farms for the military service, and the usual transient workers that followed the crop harvests from the south to north were not available in sufficient numbers.

A large number of troops were ordered by President Roosevelt to these areas to do the work. August 4, 1943, the 602nd went in convoy to North Dakota. Headquarters went to Minot, and the other companies went to other areas. Company A was located in an old CCC camp at Kenmare. Other units were located at Botineau and Mohall. The town's people welcomed the troops with open arms and doors. Many friendships were made. For example, men of Company A participated in War Bond sales at the town square, making speeches and giving people a radio equipped jeep ride in return for a bond purchase.

All farmer contact was through the County Agents. For example, when a farmer needed a certain number of men to shock oats or wheat for three days, he worked through the Agent. The troops would be trucked to the site each day, while others would live with the farmer for a specified period of time. Needless to say, they ate good as the chuck wagon would show up heavily laden and often. The farmer would be billed at the

going labor rate, and the money was sent to the U.S. Treasury. Many of our troops had come from farming areas. If they had a special skill, like experience running a combine, they were assigned to that type of request for help. All in all, it worked very efficiently, and in about six weeks the crops were in, and on September 21, 1943, the 602nd went by convoy back to soldiering at Camp McCoy.

Tennessee Tank Maneuvers: Camp Forrest, TN

In late September, October, and early November, the 602nd continued training and making ready to ship overseas. Preparation reached the point where our equipment was loaded on flat cars and the men loaded into coaches. They proved to be dry runs.

The 2nd Infantry Division left Camp McCoy for shipment to England. After the major components had left, at the last minute as we were getting ready to follow them, it was determined that we wouldn't. Instead, on November 11, 1943, the 602nd with its M-10s left for Tennessee Tank Maneuvers. Kopcsak said, "General Patton was in command of the tank forces. We surprised him by ambushing one of his large tank columns."

The 602nd then went to Camp Forrest, Tennessee on December 12, 1943 where it turned in its M-10s. The 602nd now field tested the T-70 vehicle that later became the M-18 "Hellcat" tank destroyer with the high velocity 76mm gun, a picture of which is shown below. In reality, the 76mm gun was a 76.2 equivalent to the 3-inch gun. It fired a 15-pound projectile at 2,760/3,000 feet per second velocity and with a penetration of 4.5 inches of armor at 1,000 yards. The projectile had a very low trajectory. The M-18 was equipped with an excellent "sighting system." For indirect artillery firing, its maximum range was 14,500 yards. The vehicle had a 9 cylinder, 480 horsepower radial engine made by Continental, a torqmatic transmission, and it weighed 17 tons.

Figure 3. M-18 "HELLCAT" Tank Destroyer, 76 mm Gun.

Kopcsak said, "It was the best vehicle to come out of Detroit during the war. In our combat tests for firing, we had 100% hits on moving targets which I attribute to the daily firing practice our crews did with the bee-bee guns we mounted on the barrels. Colonel Hedin told me several T.D. units that previously took the test had failed it. A T.D. General from Oklahoma visited us, and Dean Hart gave him a lesson on driving the M-18. The General had received reports from his other T.D. units that many of their vehicles were on deadline. We told him they must have started the vehicles without doing the preliminary warm-up to get the oil out of the bottom cylinders of the radial engine. The commanders of those units were relieved of command."

Considering how the 602nd was used in combat, the writer's opinion is that the M-18 was the ideal weapon. It was relatively light (compared to a tank), could travel fast (50/60 miles per hour on good roads), and had a gun with considerable wallop. Or, perhaps it was the M-18 that finally determined how we were used.

At Camp Forrest, the 602nd had a stroke of good luck. The gun companies, a week at a time, were to go to the gunnery range for live firing of the T.D.s and other weapons. Company A was scheduled to go first. Upon arriving on the range, we found another battalion that had just arrived, but also had just received orders to go overseas. Their ammunition was transferred to our supply and divided up so that all companies would have extra ammunition with which to work. It seems a certainty that additional firing practice paid off when our gun crews got into combat.

Jack Coulston, Bn. Supply Officer, loved to tell this story on himself. He and someone (he seemed to recall it was Lt. Tharpe) stopped at a farm near the firing range that had some turkeys for sale. Even though it wasn't Thanksgiving yet, they decided to buy one. The farmer said it weighed so many pounds, but he would have to charge them four pounds more. When questioned, the farmer said, "You want it for Thanksgiving? If you waited till then, then that's how much it would weigh." They paid the extra price, but remembered that little skinny bird, when cooked, was really awful.

Camp Kilmer-Fort Dix, New Jersey

Everyone in the 602nd expected that we would rejoin our parent unit, the 2nd Infantry Division, which at that time was stationed in England. It was the accepted view that the 2nd Infantry Division would be a D-Day force. With that in mind, the 602nd turned in its equipment and left Camp Forrest on March 29, 1944 by rail for Camp Kilmer, N.J. where it arrived on March 31, 1944. During the period April 1-3, the battalion was processed for overseas shipment. Our advance party had left for England to draw our equipment and to get things ready for our arrival there.

As they say, a funny thing happened on our way to the Port of Embarkation. Nothing happened. We just sat there on a 24-hour to 24-hour basis waiting for the green light--waiting for something to happen.

On May 5, 1944, the battalion moved by rail from Camp Kilmer, N.J. to Fort Dix, N.J. It was assigned to XVIII Corps for training and administration. The training at Fort Dix concentrated on using the Tank Destroyers as artillery. This turned out to be very significant. A T.D. Bn. with three gun companies of twelve T.D.s each was equivalent to three field artillery battalions. Platoon Leaders and Platoon Sergeants were trained as Battery Commanders. Sergeants and Corporals were trained to operate a fire direction center.

It was here that the battalion received its Battalion Colors. At a parade, they were presented to Lt. Colonel Kopcsak by his daughter, Gay.

"D-Day" in Europe came and went. Training in indirect firing continued with all gun company officers and platoon sergeants participating in the firing problems. On June 26, 1944, the battalion returned to Camp Kilmer for shipment overseas.

It was much, much later that we found out what had happened around April 3, 1944. As the ship designated to pick up us, the S.S. Bergensfjord, neared the Port of

Embarkation, it was ordered into a shipyard for retrofitting of new radar, electronic devices, and whatever the "state of the art" was at that time. That ship had the capacity to carry our battalion. We found out that when specific troops were matched to a specific ship, if that ship did not show up on time, they did not reschedule the troops to the next ship. Plans were made too far in advance, and to do so would have disrupted everything else in the pipeline from that date on. So those troops were just set aside until the designated ship was ready. And, that is what happened to the 602nd.

Cadres

Initially the 2nd Infantry Division provided the personnel for the unit that became the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. Being "regular Army," most corporals were in their second enlistment, sergeants in their third, etc. Therefore, the 602nd T.D. Bn. was an excellent source for cadre personnel for the formation of other T.D. Battalions. During 1941/1944, this happened on more than one occasion. Although the exact number is uncertain, the 602nd personnel feel sure, that with their backgrounds, these men contributed much to the formation and success of their newly organized units.

Atlantic Crossing

July 18, 1944, the battalion left the port in New Jersey aboard the S.S. Bergensfjord. It joined a convoy made up of 47 tankers and three troop ships. There were a few submarine alerts and the naval escorts could be seen in the distance. The thud of depth charges could be felt inside the ship. At one time, it was reported a wolfpack of German submarines was in the Atlantic. At that point, the convoy turned north for a couple of days and the weather turned much colder, and then at some point, the convoy turned east again toward Scotland.

Living conditions aboard the ship, as remembered by most personnel, were dismal at best. Troops crowded every living space--sleeping on the floor, on the feeding tables, and in swaying hammocks. At mealtime, food was brought from a central kitchen in buckets to each table. Our Panther Tracks, April 1990, brought back some repulsive memories of the menu in referring to the Bergensfjord as the "stewed liver special."

Rough seas contributed to considerable sea sickness with resultant deplorable conditions in the latrines, men laying on the top deck, and/or draped over the rail. One sergeant was so sick he was kept alive by intravenous feeding and carried off the ship on a litter at disembarkation time. July 29, 1944, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion disembarked at Glasgow, Scotland and proceeded by rail to Moreton-in-Marsh, England.

England

July 30, 1944, the battalion arrived in Moreton-in-Marsh, a village in the Midlands area of England. The 2nd Infantry Division had been part of the D-Day invasion at Omaha Beach. Instead of any attempt to catch up with them, the 602nd found itself assigned to Third Army and subsequently attached to XX Corps.

Our battalion's advance party, which had left Camp Forrest ahead of us and who had waited so long for our arrival, had drawn all our equipment, and work started at once to get it combat ready. Because it stayed light until almost 11:00 p.m., the work days were long and a lot was accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

August 20, 1944, the battalion moved from Moreton-in-Marsh to a marshalling area in the vicinity of Dorchester, England. On August 21, 1944, the battalion moved by motor convey to Portland, England and boarded a L.S.T. (landing ship tank) for movement to France.

Channel Crossing

August 22, 23, and 24 was spent aboard the L.S.T. where considerable "trading" took place with the Naval personnel. The author remembers ending up with some foul weather gear and some canned meat that was a cut above the rations usually eaten.

The L.S.T. was equipped with a large barrage balloon. In the mid-afternoon of the 24th, we sighted Cherbourg, France. In early evening we saw the first of the invasion beaches. We arrived at Omaha Beach just after dark and waited for a change in the tides.

The Channel was as smooth as a pond. Our crossing and landing were without incident except that upon unloading, Pvt. George Girard's motorcycle spilled on the runway of the L.S.T. Both rider and cycle came out of it undamaged. On going ashore, some of the men remember seeing the first evidence of combat--a steel helmet with a 2nd Infantry Division insignia on it lying in the water with a hole in it.

France--August 25, 1944 to December 20, 1944

August 25, 1944, around 0500 hours, we felt a bump and a lurch of the ship. We were beached at 0530 hours. We ate and found our L.S.T. high and dry on the beach. The bow door was opened and by 0730 all of Company A's equipment was driven ashore preceded or followed by the other units. Upon complete disembarkation, the battalion moved through St. Laurent sur Mer into a bivouac area in the vicinity of Formigny, France.

Much to our dismay, we found even officers of other units in the area thought our M-18 was a German Tank because of the length of the barrel and the different suspension system, so in the evening the "stars" were painted bigger and brighter. Later on we were to see our first anti-aircraft fire.

The author will frequently use the phrase "because of the way the 602nd was used," for our deployment was somewhat different. Here are just two examples. Early on it became obvious we would be a fast-moving and widely dispersed unit. (In Co. A's history, November 17, 1944 is the following entry, ". . . the first platoon is 16,000 yards as the crow flies from the third platoon. Both the first and third are about 11,000 yards from Hq. platoon.") Very soon it became impractical, if just not impossible, to try to feed the men from the company field kitchens. Also, constantly trying to move duffel bags in an attempt to keep up with the men became equally impossible. In less than two weeks of landing on Omaha Beach, September 4, 1944, the duffel bags were collected and stored in a building in Vitry-le-Francais. Some of our "walking wounded" were left to guard them. From time to time in the following months, these men were rotated with other battalion men who needed time to recover from their wounds or other medical problems. The men didn't get to see their duffel bags again until after V.E. Day.

In the gun companies and perhaps also Rcn. Co., all but one of the field kitchen stoves were also put in storage. One field kitchen stove was left on the company mess truck to facilitate the feeding of Hq. Platoon personnel where possible, which as it turned out, wasn't very often. In fact, the mess truck became more of an additional ammunition and gas truck. In Co. A, while riding in the mess truck, Tom Krych had a case of ammunition fall on him breaking his leg.

Rations, when received, were broken down into platoon lots. At the platoon level, they were broken down into smaller groupings; 5 per T. D. crew, 3 on a jeep, so many for half-tracks, etc. Very few times did the rations contain meat, potatoes, etc. It was almost always canned rations (C or K) throughout the war. Small wonder that very quickly almost every vehicle had coffee pots, frying pans, etc. dangling from them as each sub-unit became its own feeding unit. (Shades of Camp McCoy and winter maneuvers.) Like the duffel bags, the men did not get to see the field kitchen stoves in operation until after V.E. Day.

In March 1990, while reflecting on the events of 1944/1945, Pete Kopcsak had these thoughts pertaining to the period starting with Omaha Beach, "The rest is covered by unit histories which are very poor. If I had it to do over again, I would put a top individual to be the Battalion Historian who would contact each unit daily and record all actions in detail. Too many entries in our Battalion History simply state that the Bn. Command Post moved from here to there but completely omit what the companies did on that date. Details of our primary battles were omitted. One occasion in particular--the 4th Armored was driven back in retreat. Barthold (Platoon Leader, Co. B) with his T.D.'s held his ground until enemy infantry were passing him and the 4th Armored Division artillery was shelling him. I talked with Major Abrams of the 4th Armored who said he had to pull back as he was losing too many tanks. When I arrived at the Bn. C.P., Major Conlin said he thought I had been captured. I had waited to see that Barthold's unit had evacuated safely. Our U.S. fighter planes were strafing the Germans and on both sides of my vehicle. I saw A. A. tracer bullets from the Germans firing at those planes. My driver sped down the road while Smith, the radio operator, fired machine gun bullets to both sides of the road and to our front.

There are many other facts that should have been in our history--like the first time Dean Hart's unit (Co. B) hit a Tiger tank and the tracer indicated that the shell had ricocheted from the tank. When the tank stayed put, we visited the tank and found that the shell went through both sides of the tank and continued forward so as to appear as a ricochet. All tank crews inspected the tank and the holes they saw were a big lift to their morale and gave them added confidence in their 76mm weapons.

Relative to that 4th Armored Division retreat, I read a German history book written by a German Major General who was on the front of our XII Corps. He said that Hitler had ordered them to destroy the 4th Armored Division, so they consolidated the best tanks available to them and made a hard attack against the 4th, but General Wood, Commanding General of the 4th Armored Division, outfoxed them by retreating and calling for an air attack against the Germans."

The Biggest Tank Battle

In Panther Tracks, April 1986, mention is made of a period in the Alsace-Lorraine campaign that is described as follows: "That was the largest tank battle on the Western Front by the way." Other references have been made to the period where numerically more German and U.S. tanks were engaged than in any other period. For example, Panther Tracks, August 1987, reported on a letter from Ivan Curry which said, "Gene Collins remembers being in the middle of that gigantic tank battle near Arracourt, Bures, and Reichicourt on September 21, 1944. During all the thunderous shelling-smoke-fog and bullets, he was cranking the motor manually at the rear of his T.D., so they could start it and get the hell out of there and find a better shooting position. Gene says he felt naked as a plucked chicken and sure was glad to get back in the T.D. That was some vicious battle, and I remember it only too well. Seems the Krauts had 500 tanks in the Foret de Parroy along the Main Au Rhine Canal, and indications were they wanted to slam straight into Patton and whip his a--. A. Co. and B Co. were flanked on the right and left of the 4th Armored attack, and C Co. was mixed in with the 4th Armored's C.C.R. which had been committed to the action. A heavy thick ground fog obscured the whole action, and both sides met head on and slugged it out toe-to-toe. When the Krauts retreated about noon that day, they left 161 armored vehicles destroyed; the 4th Armored and components lost 159. I inspected the battlefield about 1600 hours that afternoon, and it appeared that the poor old 704th T.D. Bn. had been totally wiped out. Gene! You were engaged in the greatest tank battle of Western Europe--a very scary and noisy situation."

One senses that something very important is missing here! Company A's history for September 21, 1944 says in part, "Luneville was definitely secured and our unit went

northeast about noon to take part in the Great Tank Battle about Bures (Bruyeres) and Reichicourt. Our C.P. was established in the forest south of Arracourt. . . ." Nothing more specific than that is mentioned. Yet the Battalion history for September 17, 1944 shows, "Company A knocked out six tanks, six anti-tank guns, and killed 100 of the enemy." In part, the entry for September 29, 1944 shows, "B Co. knocked out one tank. A Co. knocked out 8 Tiger tanks, 3 armored cars and an unknown number of personnel." These examples are used only because of the numbers involved, but they really don't tie into the subject above. I have no reason to believe the enemy losses caused by B and C Companies wouldn't have been similar during this period if complete and accurate records had been kept. For some reason probably no one can explain, in the Bn. history, there are no entries for September 20, 21, 22, and 23. Perhaps things were happening too fast and furious to be recorded at all.

While our Battalion is fortunate to have the Company A history to supplement the Battalion history, Company A's has some of the shortcomings of the Battalion history. Heaven knows the work they put into it is appreciated, but the fact remains that it was maintained by Hq. platoon personnel, on their own initiative, and while it lists on some days movements of units, etc., it is void on that date as to all that happened at the platoon level. An appropriate side comment is that a lot of the 602nd history is included in the various issues of Panther Tracks, which have been distributed over the years. It is in bits and pieces, paragraph by separate paragraph, and article by article, but a lot of it is there in the reproduction of the stories of people and events that have been sent into the editors; first Gene Collins until 1984, Jack Coulston until 1988, and Ray Young to date. A gleaning of all these stories would make a book all by themselves.

In an attempt to get some first-hand information concerning the events of September 17, 1944, the author received the following from Walter L. Alexander. In part, he recalled the following: "Now on the September 17, 1944 action as to the 100 enemy knocked out, I recall very clearly Roy Considine's platoon was defending an artillery O.P. and a valley. The enemy infantry was advancing. The O.P. personnel asked me if I could fire on them. I replied I could, but they will shell us off this hill as they have us zeroed in. He said they would run us off the hill anyway as he was firing all the artillery he had. Before I brought fire on the enemy, one of our M-20s came up on the hill. (The Company A history indicates this event took place on September 25, 1944, which indicates this heavy action must have taken place around September 17-19.) I advised them of my intentions and that the enemy surely would counter with artillery. However, they wanted to see the shooting. The crews of the two T.D.s were instructed to keep their motors running and fire five rounds each at a range of 1,100 yards by firing one round and then traversing 5 mils to the right--the other to the left--and when the 5th round was fired to get the hell off the hill. As expected, they did counter with artillery and badly damaged the M-20, but not the crew. While under fire, I hooked the tow cable of the M-18 to the M-20 and pulled it off the hill."

Lawrence Otis recollected the events of September 29, 1944 as follows. "The Third Platoon received a message that enemy tanks were in the vicinity of Bathlemont, France, and were under attack by the Air Force. We were not far from there, so we proceeded there at once. As we approached the town, we could see several P47 fighter planes overhead. Suddenly, one plane spotted us approaching and, mistaking us for Germans, dived and strafed our column. He must have recognized us and pulled up just as he fired as no T.D.s were hit. We moved into the outskirts of the town and Sgt. Clifford Henne, gun commander of the #1 destroyer took a position along the side of a building. From there we could see several tanks in a wide valley that sloped gradually away from us.

I was the gunner on Sgt. Henne's T.D. Several tanks were knocked out, but some were still moving, trying to escape the valley. I was given an estimate of 800 yards to one tank, a Tiger. It was moving slowly, so I lined up my sight with about a one-half lead and fired. The armor piercing shell struck the tank in the side, stopping it at once,

and it started to smoke. I was then told to fire at another Tiger tank that was moving at the same range. I fired and had another hit with the same results as the first tank. It stopped and started to smoke.

Sgt. Henne then pulled back to let another destroyer into position as this was the best place from which to fire. The second T.D. had the same successes as we had. None of the crews got out of the tanks that we hit."

There just have to have been dozens of similar events, but if all of them are ever recorded, it will have to be at another time. Obviously, that is a project in itself.



Figure 4: M-18; Half-Track; M-20

602nd Prisoners of War

Our only record of having any of our men taken prisoner happened on September 26/27, 1944. Co. A was working with the 2nd Cavalry in the vicinity of Bures (Bruyeres), France. The 3rd Platoon was off by itself with some of the Cavalry personnel. Suddenly they found themselves under artillery fire and outflanked. The German infantry had moved up during the artillery barrage and several men found themselves cut off. Some men were able to work their way through a woods and back to our lines. Two, out in the open except for a clump of bushes they were hiding in, decided to wait for nightfall to make their move. Unfortunately, some Germans came to that position and set up machine guns right alongside the bushes that concealed them. As no movement was possible, they waited hoping the Germans would move out in the morning. As luck would have it, they were discovered early the next morning and taken prisoner. The two men were Leonard Bornemann and Stanley Gumienny.

They remained together for some time, being moved from one P.O.W. camp to another, but eventually they were separated. From the time of their capture until they returned to the United States, their experiences could be the subject of a book just concerning that time period.

On January 15, 1990, Leonard and his wife, Marge, who live in St. Louis, visited Ocala, Florida and visited with Stanley and his wife. They had never seen each other since 1945. Their meeting, Leonard on the left, Stanley on the right, was just 16 days short of 45 years since they last saw each other.

Figure 5. Ex-Prisoners of War Reunited.

Task Force "A"

The period of November 4-14, 1944 deserves special mention. German resistance was very well organized. Third Army had slowed down. The 602nd Tank Destroyer Bn. was "on the line" at the time.

Pete Kopcsak said, "The 26th Infantry Division joined XII Corps of Third Army in October '44. (The 602nd, less one platoon of Co. B, was attached to the 26th Infantry Division on 27 October 1944.) I visited the Division Commanding Officer and oriented him on what I knew of the Division sector, which we had been patrolling previously, and gave him all the information I had from our experiences in battle from Normandy to that area. I pointed out that the large fortresss of Dieuze was in front of the Division sector and it was connected with strong defense lines to Metz on the north flank and with Colmar on the south flank. There was a kink in the line to the immediate front, a town occupied by German scouts who were tapping 3rd Army communications with wireless intercept devices. Recent studies of German historical reports reveal that they knew exactly what troops faced them--even names of the commanders.

The Division received permission to attack and remove that kink. This was at the time that 3rd Army gas and ammunition was being withheld to stop its rapid advance. The (initial) attack was made solely by the 761 Tank Bn. It was not successful." Kopcsak said, "The Division gave a report to Corps and to Army. I was summoned to come to the Division Headquarters. To my surprise, there stood General Eddy and General Patton with General Paul, the Division C.O. General Patton said, 'Pete, I am proud of the record your T.D. Bn. has had since entering Normandy, and I am attaching the 761 Tank Battalion to you so they can benefit from your experienced combat troops.' General Paul chimed in that 'he could also give me some Infantry to ride the tanks, some engineers for bridge repair, and an observation plane to form a special "Task Force A."' Among other things--General Patton punched me on the shoulder and said, 'Go get

them Pete.' My instructions were to establish a bridgehead on the east side of the swollen Seille River in the vicinity of Moyenvic and to advance to the east as far as possible. I did not ask for an artillery barrage in this area as I wanted to take the Germans by surprise. I was right in this respect, as recent German historical records point out that they always knew where to counterattack, since it was standard procedure for the Americans to reveal their direction of attack by commencing with an artillery barrage."

The Bn. history says in part, for November 4, 1944 "Plans were made for future operations. Contact made with following attached units: 761 Tank Battalion, Co. K, 101st Infantry Regiment, one platoon of Co. C, 101 at Engr. Bn." November 5, 1944, ". . . continued in making plans for future operations." November 7, 1944, ". . . continued making plans for future operations. All commanders briefed from 1330 to 1500 hrs." November 8, 1944, ". . . Commanders rebriefed for future operations." November 9, 1944, ". . . Task Force A, commanded by Lt. Col. Kopcsak . . . moved from the vicinity of Athienville . . . to attack as ordered. . . ."

Kopcsak said, "For the attack I issued a 5-paragraph Field Order to the commanders of the Tank Bn., T.D. Bn., Infantry Bn., and Engineers in substance as follows: (1) All information I had on the enemy. (2) to our north, the 80th Infantry Division and 35th Infantry Division would make river crossings south of Metz, while to our south the 26th Infantry Division would attack Dieuze. (3) Our Task Force would cross the bridge over the Seille River at daybreak. The 761 Tank Bn. would move rapidly to destroy Moyenvic and then continue eastward with their attack. The infantry troops riding on the tanks would dismount and protect the tanks from enemy bazooka fire and remove mines in their path. "A" Company of the 602nd T.D. Bn. would defend the left flank of the tankers while "B" Company of the 602nd T.D. Bn. would defend the right flank of the tankers. The Engineers would keep the bridge repaired. (4) Instructions on ammunition and full supply and medical support. (5) Communications and synchronization of watches."

As it's not the intention of this history to give a day-by-day, shot-by-shot description of combat action, only the result will be mentioned here. The attack was successful. In addition to crossing the Seille River and taking Moyenvic, the Task Force moved through Morville and approached Hampont.

Kopcsak said also, ". . . further advance to the east was more difficult, as our troops had to bridge tank traps and remove mines while under enemy fire." It was at this point Pete Kopcsak was wounded by artillery or mortar fire. The 602nd history for 9 March '44 reads, in part, as follows: "Lt. Col. Kopcsak wounded at about 1500 hrs. and Lt. Col. Hunt assumed command of Task Force "A". Major Conlin assumed command of the 602nd T.D. Bn. . . . The Task Force withdrew to the vicinity of Vic Sur Seille at 1700 hrs. as other units continued the attack to the east."

Kopcsak reported, "I could not walk as a large shell fragment was lodged in my right ankle." He was evacuated. In the hospital in England, Pete found out that all ambulatory patients were sent to the U.S. While after being wounded, Pete wanted to quickly return to the Task Force, fate decreed it was not to be.

Battalion history recorded, "From 10 November '44 on, units of the 602nd continued to work with the Infantry regiments of the 26th Infantry Division."

Kopcsak reported, "I read about the events subsequent to my evacuation. The 26th Division did not capture the fort of Dieuze, the divisions to the north made little progress, so General Patton ordered his reserve crack 4th Armored Division to take advantage of the bridgehead that had been made by Task Force "A". This success was nullified when the Third Army was ordered to the Ardennes (Belgium) the following month."

On 14 November '44, "Task Force A" was officially disbanded.