

*William  
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## ON THE ROAD TO ROME

There is a difficulty in describing a Tank Destroyer action as one armored vehicle fighting another because in most actions I have observed or taken part in, the Infantry was either being given very close support or was actually riding the TDs until a shell hit close by, or a machine gun opened up, or a road block manned by German anti tank weapons appeared on the other side of a turn, or what-ever-it was shooting, firing from buildings, behind stone walls or as in this instance, right through the front open door of a stone house which appeared to be intact.

Company 'C' 636th TDs, 1st Platoon had approximately thirty assorted infantrymen aboard, cautiously entered the town outskirts of Velletri. One whiz-boom and a TD was knocked loose from its tracks. Three TDs made flank turns dumping their infantry cargoes and moved out of sight among the trees and groves leading towards center of the town. Another sharp crack and they knew there was one or more 'Tigers' loose and unseen. The Ranger Platoon was truck and Jeep mounted, following the last TD when things started popping. Rifle and machine gun fires started up between the TD borne Infantry (now dismounted) deploying through the trees and scattered buildings. The CG, 36th Infantry Div was somewhere in the area and our first mission was to keep an eye out for his welfare but we hadn't seen him. Corporal 'The Fox' had crawled over to me, pointing at a large stone house. "Bet there's a Tiger in there, come in from the rear, busted the walls and has the stuff covering him up good, all except for the gun". "How do you know?" "I seen his a-- end when he backed in after that first shot". I sent a man to each of the scattered TDs and passed the information to them. A second TD Platoon had arrived but stayed well out of sight around a bend in the road. This Platoon was soon engaged with four Tiger tanks which had taken up positions along a tree line to the left flank of our positions. The Tiger tank is an unwieldy monster when positioned in a wooded area. The M-10 TD can run circles around him, and this did happen. The second TD Platoon came through

a small screen of bushes, off the road, and in close formation with gun turrets turned to the flank, ran full speed (about 30mph) right up on the rear of those four Tiger tanks positioned in the tree line. The Germans never had a chance to back their armor out of there or move their turrets before 3" APs and HE shells from the fast moving TDs hit them broadside and in their engine compartments. The TDs made a half circle<sup>s</sup> and were on the Tigers from the opposite flank, giving them a repeat of the first treatment. Four German tanks were blown up in less than five minutes. The TDs didn't stop to count Coups but kept right on into the center of town. A long barrel poked itself out of the house the 'Fox' had pointed out. An M-10 TD screamed around the far corner and into the house from the rear, ramming the Tiger tank at the point of his right rear sponson. The Tiger tank with the churning bull-dog M-10 at his rear was pushed out into the street, taking the ~~front~~ until now undamaged front wall with him. The TD reversed, backed out just as the entire house collapsed on<sup>g</sup> the Tiger, preventing his hatches from opening. The lone TD fired on<sup>e</sup> HE<sup>shell</sup> into his engine compartment and blew him up. The Ranger Platoon scooted around dismounted, and began to collect dazed German prisoners as they crawled out of buildings and from beneath shrubbery. Actually I have never seen any of the grand rushing and sweeping as described by Correspondents. There seemed to be more creeping, crawling and short dashes involved, except perhaps for the TDs which had to move fast to survive. Speed and maneuverability were prime requisites when you have a twenty eight to thirty ton (fully loaded) lightly armored machine in direct support of infantry in most situations. We lost one TD with its driver. The crew bailed out after the driver was shot right through the forehead. The TD had turned a corner on the outskirts of Velletri right into an anti tank gun behind a road block of logs. The dead driver froze at his steeringbrakes and the TD went right over the road block, anti-tank gun and crew before it slewed off the road and into a ditch. Most TD jockeys do not drive with the hatch closed, except in those instances where accurate mortar and overhead artillery bursts are present.

The 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion entered the city of ROME and kept right on going- right on through and out the other side heading north after the fleeing German army. One silly note I must reveal, not to be found in any historical record; Our famous 'Chicken Feather' Exec decided to place his verbal imprint upon our entry as a Battalion.

"I order all of you to wear your steel helmets! We must show respect for this Holy place!"

A TD Driver's helmet is normally used for one of several purposes, none of which are as a head covering. Helmets have many uses or did have during those days. To this day I glance at my own personal steel pot as it rests upon a shelf in my Den and work room. Across the top slanted from top to right bottom is a deep slash caused by a shell fragment from a 180mm gun which had ranged in on our 'private quarters' and although there is no break in the metal head gear, had my head been inside this thing- I'd still be sucking my soup through a straw!

I also will state that our Colonel for so many good and bad times, Colonel Van Pyland was a man among men! His successor, Colonel ---- was more of a stickler for the formalities but he did have enough fighting soldiers remaining in the 636th TD Bn to see him safely through the rest of the war which hadn't stopped after we passed through the 'Eternal City'.

At this late date I can't recall whether I was a First Lieutenant or a Captain when the Battalion was informed that its Tank Destroyer role and mission was undergoing a change- but this didn't happen, as later events and the invasion of Southern France would tell.

NORTH FROM ROME to CIVITAVECCHIA & Field Marshall Kesselring's Hq

As Historians go, they are after all not infallible. In this particular action just eleven months to the day before the war's end, the Germans surprised everyone by making a stand which could completely annihilated the entire 142d Infantry which had been moving fast, closed up formations not expecting a strong German resistance. The road block was a formidable one, well sited with a tremendous support in machine gun and mortar fires, well backed up by towed artillery and tank weapons. The infantry had been caught flat footed that is to say the Infantry Commanders who as replacements were relatively new. One Platoon of TDs, Company 'A' 636th TD Battalion provided the impetus to break through the block. One innovative Sergeant who had a reputation for coming up with the unexpected which somehow usually worked out, pulled his machine off the road where he had spotted a stack of railroad ties. In addition to the lumber there were piles of properly sized  $\frac{1}{2}$ " boiler plate. With some assistance the railroad ties were fastened to the front of his M-10 and the boiler plate lashed to these. In addition he had boiler plate fastened to the sponsons and piled on the rear deck of his machine. He dismounted the turret mounted 50 cal MG and had several layers of boiler plate placed and lashed on top of his turret. He was a portly man and couldn't fit his bulk through the Driver's hatch so the plate had to be moved sufficiently for him to fit himself into the driving seat of his machine. No crew members were admitted! The Gun turret had been swung around to travel position and the turret locked in place. He gave his instructions to the Major of Infantry who was to lead an outright suicide assault upon the road block. The road block and a considerable area flanking it was smoked in by mortar fire thus blinding the enemy.

Two TDs were assigned straight run position on each side of the road and slightly to the rear of the by now hardly recognizable M-10. The Sergeant didn't earn his Silver Star by covering his machine with railroad ties and boiler plate. He earned his medal plus a Purple Heart (#3) by revving up to high speed and moving straight down the center of the road flanked by rapid firing 3" guns directly at the road block which he hit at center going an estimated 40 mph at the time of impact. The TD tore into and over the road block plus 2 88mm towed anti-tank guns complete with crew. The flanking M-10s hosed each side of the smoke shrouded road with cannon and machine gun fire. The oncoming Tank Destroyer was hit many times with 88mm shells which blew up the railroad ties but did not penetrate the vital frontal armor. The boiler plates on the M-10's turret sailed off, crashing into the sides of the block. The oncoming M-10s suffered hits which tore off tracks and driving sprockets. Behind this mass of metal came the Infantry at a dead run, fanning out to lay down fires to front and flank. The German armor turned tail and drove off in retreat. The towed artillery guns were deserted by their crews, a few of whom were captured. The brave innovative Sergeant had to be pried out of his seat with a broken back and a torso riddled with metal splinters. He was evacuated and lived to rejoin his unit which was then in Europe. Thus a road block was attacked and broken in a very unorthodox manner. Strangely enough, such heroic actions are seldom written about- except perhaps for those men who earned the CMH, and whose exploits were then reported after the fact, not during the heat of battle. No one can really write about the feelings, the sensations, unless he's been there, participated in, and more than often felt the bite of an unseen bullet or shell fragment with the numbing sensation that follows and the screaming pain that takes hold as realization sets in that 'this is it!' Sergeant ----- is a brave man because he knew what he was doing and he knew that his chances were next to Zero. No where is this man's act depicted more graphically than in the very brief paragraph, part of a General Order issued by Hq Fifth Army.

The Tank Destroyers have never in the written Histories of Units, or the after-action Reports following particularly difficult engagements been given a kind word or due credit for their incredible, versatility and effective use in the many and varied roles assigned them. Here once more, on the road, chasing the fleeing Germans we have a graphic example.

*Photo*  
 Train of 141st Jeeps hold up while advancing infantry destroys enemy oppositions." Now the truth of the matter, the Infantry loaded Jeeps are pulling over to the side of the road to give that 636th M-10 TD in the rear a clear path and firing sight to his front. He will come down this road and attack the road block which in this instance was an 88mm gun barricaded behind several fallen trees and a disabled tank, supported by several machine guns on the flanks. So why can't several words be said for the men who roll along with the Infantry in their mobile, lightly armored vehicles, the Tank Destroyers?

There are few instances where the Division tank units have ever engaged at close quarters the numbers and the fire-power of enemy armor encountered by the Infantry.

I have personally often pounded into the stubborn heads of the 'Book-minded' Officers ~~with~~ whom I have come in contact with, "EXPECT THE ENEMY, THE GERMAN, TO DO THE UNEXPECTED because much of the tactical doctrine which we have learned, has come from the books the German has written!"

Rommel to my estimation was more of a Coyote than a Fox! His splendid Staff did the work and he collected the accolades-General Guderian the German master strategist in Armored warfare was a student at Fort Knox many decades ago. He stressed the anti tank capabilities of specially designed, lightly armored fast moving, heavily gunned motor carriages. General Patton knew him at that time, stated, "The anti-tank ~~Tank~~ weapon as you envisage it will never be constructed!" Many years later the Germans tested

the forerunner of the very effective and greatly feared Jagdpanzer-jaeger (Tank Destroyer) with its high speed, low silhouette, powerful gun and maneuverability. The weapon was tested in the Soviet Union against the Russian tanks of that early day during their invasion of the Soviet Union. The Russians captured many intact and gave them a more powerful gun, turning these Russian copies of the German ingenuity against their inventors. We have come up with many versions of a 'Tank Destroyer' but the best, the most feared by the Germans and the least understood by the Americans was the M-10 Motor Carriage Tank Destroyer. There was nothing graceful about this squat in appearance, ungainly looking vehicle with its resurrected (World War I) Naval (Submarine) 3" cannon. The Tank designers derided it, the Aberdeen Ordnance Testing facility gave it a short life as an expedient to be used as an interim 'Item' until their design could be placed in production. The short battle life of the Tank was good for business, the more we lose the more we produce etc. Few gave thought to the human element which was during war also expendable, a statistic, a mark on a graph and a Gold Star in some Mother's window. I have had the experience of being in on the ground floor when anti tank weapons were being considered. I have served and manned, driven and helped repair in the field, the M-3s, the T-12s, the M-10s and the M-36. The M-10 was the best! In the Attack as a close support Infantry weapon with anti-tank, artillery and outright Tank Destroyer capabilities. The Half-tracks with their World War I French 75s I knew well, for at one time I was a horse artilleryman who learned his trade on the old wooden wheeled 75mm gun. Now I'm digressing, so on with the show! I have driven the German Tank Destroyer and I have fired its high velocity gun many times. The M-10 is still the best!

## FIRST BLOOD AND A GREAT LOSS

After the war had ended, the military intellectual who had chosen a military career as a lifetime profession, found himself a prisoner of war. Field Marshall ALBERT KESSELRING, the number one defensive specialist, sat hunched up on a corner of his cot as he faced his interviewer, Seymour Korman, a Chicago Tribune war correspondent.

He was asked, "Field Marshall, can you tell me honestly, what do you consider to be the finest American Division to have opposed you?" Kesselring had been nurturing a mangled cigarette, answered in bursts of German, sputtering as he spoke.

"Your 3d and 36th Infantry Divisions who have constantly upset our plans by their unorthodox fighting and audacity, at the way they turned up unexpectedly in places which we had thought to be secure. They utilized certain long flanking tactics, diversionary feints, and tactical movements which would have turned a military tactician green with envy. They have never gone by the book and I am sorry to say that we ourselves wrote many of the books. I find it extremely unlikely that a Lieutenant of Infantry in our forces should be able to make decisions your young officers with no previous battle experience were able to make. Do you know that one rash young Lieutenant with a small unit managed to penetrate my Command bunker at Civetti-vechia? Were it not for the sacrifice of a junior officer assigned to my personal Staff who managed to sound the alert before he was shot, I might have found myself the prisoner of a Lieutenant of your Panzer-jaeger (Tank Destroyers), he left his calling card on the body of my unfortunate junior officer. We had only five minutes to set off prepared demolitions which effectively sealed off that part of the tunnel complex which as you know was also a part of the Italian submarine pen complex, of course designed by German engineers and architects. Some day, should I live, I hope to meet this young man. I am curious as to how he managed to enter undetected, proceed as far as he did, and no doubt escape the way he entered."

NOTE: Field Marshall Albert Kesselring had made reference to the Ranger Platoon, 636th Tank Destroyer battalion, 36th Infantry Division. This was one of the 'harder nuts to crack' referred to by Colonel Van Pyland, former CO, 636th TD Bn.

BUT THIS IS NOT WHAT TANK DESTROYERS ARE TRAINED FOR?

Many years later as a Major, Army CIC, I met  
Albert Kesselring in Tzouma, West Germany and  
introduced myself. We did have quite a conversation  
"on the record." (TAK)





**TRAIN OF 141st JEEPS** holds up while advancing infantry destroys enemy opposition.