

CHAPTER 14

Gafsa and El Guettar

The following morning "A" Company was detached from the 899th TD Bn. and attached to the First Infantry Division to protect its detrucking as its troops embarked on the re-taking of Gafsa, Tunisia. The Division was moving on then, into the mountains located just south of Chott el Jerid, which was normally a dry lake bed south of Gafsa. We remained in those positions protecting the Division's supply line until that route was secured, when we were pulled back and into reserve positions.

We bivouaced in the oasis of El Guettar. I guess it was the season for rain, since we had some gully washers and the clay became bottomless. It was at this time, on the 18th, that Sgt. Ruffatto and I went forward to reconnoiter for defensive positions astride the highway to Gabes. We were stopped at one point by a raging torrent coming across the highway. The only time any streams flow in that country is during and immediately after a rain. So, the Tunisians had done just what they do in Texas when faced with such a situation, a concrete roadbed was laid across the stream bed. The flash floods would come and go in a matter of a few hours, and no one was in that much of a hurry around there, anyway. While we waited for the flood to subside, we watched a venturesome soul in a Jeep attempt to make a crossing. He didn't even reach midstream before his vehicle and he was swept off the crossing and into the raging torrent downstream. And we had declined to attempt it with our heavy half-track! Anyway, the Jeep driver was in the maelstrom with nothing to keep him afloat, for seat belts had not been invented yet. Had he been using one he would have been dead by virtue of having his fate tied to that of the Jeep. He was not doing too well as it was. He was taking a beating slamming into the large boulders in the stream bed. We had no trouble visualizing his death very soon from the pounding he was taking, or by drowning, or both. So, Sgt. Ruffatto, our driver, Pfc. Grodlund, and I raced downstream to a point on the bank well ahead of him. With Sgt. Ruffatto, the heaviest of we three, acting as an anchor on the bank, Grodlund and I formed a chain and waded out into the roaring stream hoping to reach the struggling driver. We missed him. Not knowing if we would have another chance, we again ran downstream to another point where we thought the curve in the streamflow might force him closer to the bank. We repeated our earlier act, but this time threw one of our field jackets out to him, while holding a sleeve. This time he was able to seize the sleeve and we dragged him out. He was conscious and hadn't suffered the physical damage we feared, nor had he ingested much water, so we helped him back to the highway and his companions who had watched dumbfounded. I wrote up the event citing Grodlund and Ruffatto for their efforts in saving the man's life. They were each awarded the Soldier's Medal in recognition of their heroism.

After reconnoitering for the positions of our platoons astride the highway, we returned to bring up the Company. Under the direction of the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Teddy Roosevelt, grandson of the original, we took up those positions. We dug in one platoon of tank destroyers on each side of the highway, holding the third platoon in reserve, available to reinforce either or both of the other platoons, should the need arise. When I say dug in, I mean exactly that. The

The destroyer crews dug pits on the reverse slope of the hill large enough to conceal the destroyer, leaving only the gun and the turret exposed above the hilltop. A pretty hard target for enemy gunners. They had a fine field of fire the length of this large valley. It reminded me of the wide valleys found in the State of Nevada.

We enjoyed our association with the First Division. They treated us royally, and my men were suitably impressed. For the first time since leaving Casablanca they saw that our mail and PX rations got to us. Our food rations were received regularly and all in all, we were treated like guests of the family. General Roosevelt would walk around our positions and engage the men in conversation about themselves, their weapon, and their tactics, for tank destroyers were unknown to them in the form of M-10's. He was older than most officers in combat, and I imagine an exception was made at a high level for him to have been permitted overseas at all. He walked with a cane and took a genuine interest in all the men. I guess he was a father figure to all of us, and as a result my men would have gone anywhere with him. As a matter of fact, I received many requests from the men that we arrange to have the Company assigned to the First Division permanently, inasmuch as they didn't have their own TD battalion. I'm sure, too, that the men proposed the same arrangement to the general.

Shortly before this, General Patton had been given command of the newly formed II Corps, so we began to be conscious of his presence in the field. He believed in seeing, and being seen. In fact, he was so visible with his chrome-plated helmet and pearl-handled revolvers that in the exposed positions he insisted on visiting, he became a hazard to everyone around him. At the same time, though, no one would refer to him as that SOB without looking over his shoulder first. He did not depend on maps his staff marked up in his headquarters to tell him where his troops were. He visited them, and no one was safe from one of his visits. As a result, SNAFU's when under his command were rare, indeed.

During this period of our attachment to the First Division we were continually harassed by our Battalion Operations Officer, Joseph W. Morrison. He never made the effort to visit us, even though the rest of the battalion was in reserve in Gafsa and he wasn't overcome with things to do. Instead he pestered us by radio all day and all night, requesting our location and a report on any activity around us. He would not accept the fact that although we were committed and in the line, we just didn't have myriad things to regale him with. I understood his situation. He wanted to be in a position to put information on the Corps situation map and thus draw attention to himself. He wanted to get himself back to Camp Hood as an instructor with combat experience, and if he couldn't experience it himself, then he would get it vicariously. While we were across the valley from him, I finally got so tired of his incessant inquiries that I turned the radio off. Under the terms of our assignment we had no responsibility to him and the battalion at all. Our entire time and attention were dedicated to the First Division. We had ample communication with the First Division and because of our attachment, all our radios should have been in their radio net. I guess this really upset Joe, or maybe he was just reflecting the

ambitions of our Battalion Commander, for I was to hear from him later.

According to Division Intelligence the Germans were massing some 300 tanks at the far end of the valley, which I would judge to have been about 20 miles away. It was expected that they would attack right down the valley and hit us head on astride the main highway. About the time that this attack was anticipated, General Roosevelt came by to give us our relief orders. II Corps relieved us from attachment to the First Division and re-attached us to our battalion. It seems that someone on General Patton's staff had decided the attack would come from McNassey, a point some miles north of Gafsa. The rest of the battalion which had been in reserve at Gafsa enjoying hot rations, and another working Roman Bath, was already moving to new positions north of Gafsa in order to be in a position to repel the expected attack. We joined them about nightfall on the 21st. and found that since we had already had some time in combat, (without firing a shot), they had reserved a place for my company right out in front. Well, my men were no fools, so in that sand, they had those destroyers in pits and hull down before they relaxed. It would have been impossible to dislodge them. Since we were out of the line, our mess sergeant moved in with hot food; my Executive Officer, Lt. Young, brought up fuel for our vehicles, and mail for the men. We were ready!

The next morning, March 23rd., while we were eating a hot breakfast, Major Lorance, the Battalion Executive Officer, started calling me on the radio. My communications sergeant tried to reply, but the transmitter apparently wasn't putting out. We had one other radio capable of communicating on that channel, Lt. Young's, but he had gone back to the battalion rear echelon. I told Sgt. Oprea to keep trying to reply, and if he got through to tell them I was on my way to battalion headquarters. It wasn't very far anyway. He was also to get Lt. Young and relay my instructions for him to alert the company for possible movement, for from other radio messages we had learned that the battalion was about to move.

When I arrived at the battalion headquarters I found Col. Tincher pacing up and down stroking his chin and staring at the ground, apparently unable to do anything. Major Lorance and Capt Morrison were attempting to get the battalion organized to move into El Guettar, to the positions we had vacated the day before! They pouted about not being able to communicate with me, and said that they were going to have to send another company into our old positions because they were unable to communicate with me. I pointed out that even though they had positioned us in what they thought would be the foremost positions for the attack from McNassey, we could be rolling back through the rest of the battalion before anyone else could. In fact, as soon as I learned the situation I had my driver send a message through battalion communications to Lt. Young to bring the company back through battalion headquarters. He replied that the company was already rolling in that direction, the direction we had to take back to El Guettar.

The head of my column arrived at battalion headquarters expecting to roll right through to our old positions, but Major Lorance halted it. He had already ordered "B" Company to lead the battalion column, to be followed by "C" Company and finally by "A" Company. It must have been half an hour before the head of "B" Company's column arrived at the battalion CP. In that time we could have been well on our way to El Guettar and the attack

was already beginning. My men were champing at the bit. All I would have had to do would have been to tell them to take up their previous positions, and gotten out of the way. They would have gotten there and been firing hours before "B" Company finally made it. It might have had a decided effect on the outcome of the battle. But Hoyt wouldn't let us go. He had issued a march order, and by God, that was the way we would proceed!

When he finally released us, I sent the wheeled vehicles by the road, and I joined the First Platoon Leader in his destroyer. We took off cross-country in echelons of platoons. The drivers pulled out the hand throttles on those GM Diesels and let them run against the governors giving us an even 45 miles an hour. Those destroyers rode like baby carriages and we arrived in our assigned position of reserve at least an hour before the other two companies did. Meanwhile, there was a battle to be fought and all we could do was to sit in the rear and listen to it. The Battalion Commander and his staff arrived somewhat later and held the other two companies from going into any position because he had not yet reconnoitered them. The attack increased in intensity. I begged him to let my platoons take up the positions they had prepared earlier, but he, still pouting, refused. So, we sat there in mobile reserve while he assigned the other two companies their positions and they moved into them. To say my entire company was disgusted is an understatement. It was such a stupid move on his part, and he received some derogatory comment from General Roosevelt because of it. The General was expecting to see the company which had prepared the positions occupy them, "A" Company.

My Company was committed to action some six days before the rest of the battalion. Then, when it rejoined the battalion to repel an expected attack from another direction, it was placed on the vulnerable side of the battalion formation. As a result, when it developed that the attack was coming right at El Guettar, the place where "A" Company had dug in earlier, we had to pass through the battalion in order to be on the point again, where he wanted us to be. I wondered about Col. Tincher's insistence that we be the forwardmost element of his battalion at all times, for this is an honor that is usually passed around. Someone on the Battalion Commander's staff told me in confidence that "A" Company had been structured as Col. Tincher's "shock" company, being composed of many whom he considered to be "disciplinary problems". I never learned how we managed to earn that distinction, but if the men in my company represented disciplinary problems to the Colonel, I hope I can always be assigned to a disciplinary company! They were superb.

So, there we were, "B" Company occupied our old positions on the one side of the pass, while "C" Company occupied those on the other side, each with two platoons in reserve. The pass was a cut in the hill through which the Gafsa-Gabes highway had been constructed. I walked up and visited both companies. Kirk Adams, commanding "B" Company seemed to be in some sort of a trance, while Clarence Heckethorne, commanding "C" Company was organized and ready. Neither of them could understand why "A" Company was not

permitted to take up its old positions, those now occupied by parts of their two companies.

We were bombed and strafed by flights of JU-88's a few times, and a couple of German fighters came in to let us know they were around. I suppose that was intended as a distraction to take our attention off the ongoing attack. In answer to our question frequently asked, "Where is our Air Force?" we were told that our overwhelming air superiority held the Luftwaffe on the ground. Some of their airfields apparently did not get that word, for we saw quite a few of their airplanes, and we never saw any of our own. Consequently, we cut loose at anything that flew with impunity. They flew low enough that we could reach them with our .50 caliber machine guns, and we knocked a number of them down. When we also knocked down a Spitfire, and later a P-38, General Patton issued orders that we were not to fire at any aircraft unless attacked. As a result we were a bit more discerning in our selection of aircraft targets, but we did not wait to be attacked.

It was quite an experience while laying on my back in a roadside ditch to watch the bomb bay doors open on those JU-88's, see the bombs emerge and watch them drop until they hit the ground at some other point, thankfully. I was surprised at how unimpressive the result was, as long as someone wasn't hit by the fragments, the damage was limited to a slight depression in that rock-hard ground.

The full force of the attack came at 1655 on that day, March 23, 1943, after overrunning positions of 105mm and 155mm howitzers, and a couple of TD battalions. I was never able to discover just why that artillery or the destroyers, for that matter, were out in front of the infantry and the main line of resistance. I had to stay with my company in reserve in order to be ready if called upon, so I had little first hand knowledge of what happened. Afterwards, I was able to discover that the attack was made in the strength expected, towing their anti-tank guns behind the armored units. The gun crews were carried on the towing unit up to a point they had established as a line of resistance when the guns and the crews were dropped. A protective screen was established behind which their armored units could duck, sucking our armor into anti-tank gun range. As the main thrust approached our lines we must have given them a pretty good reception for the attack was repelled before they got into our main line positions.

In the course of the battle, Col. Tincher ordered a platoon of "B" Company's destroyers to proceed through the pass on the highway and engage the enemy tanks. I don't know what Kirk Adams told those crews, but they went through the pass with their gun muzzles facing the rear, and covered. The gun tubes were even secured in the travelling locks! Having no other armament, they could bring no weapon to bear on the enemy. As a result, they were knocked out, as they came through the cut never firing a shot! I'm not sure the crews even knew that there was some unpleasantness taking place out there. So, "A" Company didn't get into the action at all. The Colonel sure showed us! I understood that his twisted reason-

ing held my company responsible for those losses, for his "shock" company should have been committed instead of one of the other companies! If we had been in those positions we had prepared it would never have been necessary for anyone to go out through the cut. With our firepower and the field of fire we would have had we would have had a field day, and with no losses either, the way those destroyers would have been dug in. But the vindictive nature of the Colonel was yet to be seen.

As you would imagine, those four destroyers knocked out with their guns facing the rear and in their travelling locks were a source of considerable embarrassment to Col. Tincher. No one would believe it until they saw it, and plenty of sightseers saw it after the battle. I was surprised that a picture of them didn't show up in Life but in those days the press was always upbeat and not investigatory.

The Colonel let it be known, through Hoyt Lorange of course, that he would like someone to go out there and turn the guns around on those burnt out hulks but no one volunteered that I was aware of. If someone had, they probably would have been unable to move the turret anyway because of warpage caused by the heat. I couldn't believe that Kirk Adams didn't drag them out of there with his other destroyers for it would have been at no risk after the attack, and would not have been difficult. But there they sat, while Graves Registration people gathered what remains there were, and any dog tags which survived the fires. So ended what turned out to be the last attack by the enemy in that sector, but we had no way of knowing that.

After such a show of strength we became exceedingly wary. We began a program of feeling out the enemy for our own attack down the valley. "A" Company was ordered to the right flank again, in a position not far ahead of the point at which we had supported the First Division in our first action. A day later, though, we were brought back to the left flank and ordered forward of the pass to reinforce elements of the Ninth Infantry Division which was taking a pasting in the mountains along that flank. In preparation for the move up, I reconnoitered positions in the afternoon, and after dark led the Company out to them. The mountains themselves were impenetrable to vehicles, so we were limited to positions along the base of them. As we crawled along the route of approach in absolute darkness, we encountered troops of the Ninth Division in headlong retreat. They had no weapons only the clothes they wore, and told us how the enemy was hot on their trail. While in conversation with one of the men in the pitch black night, he asked, "Say, aren't you Tom Hawksworth?". I replied that I was, indeed. He then identified himself as Sid Gustafson, a fraternity brother from Bozeman who was a class behind me. We never saw each other and it would have been most inadvisable to show a light of any kind. A week or so later when we were close-by the Ninth again in the woods near Bou Chebka, I tried to look Sid up, but found he had been killed shortly after our nighttime encounter.

As the fleeing troops continued to the rear, they became aware of the size of the unit coming up to reinforce them and the fire power it had. They became somewhat less frantic and finally realized what they had done.

From the numbers of them who had hitched a ride with us as we moved up, I think we must have swept them all up. At least when we looked around our positions in the early light it appeared so. We shared our rations with them and gave them weapons, for we always had a surplus picked up on the battlefield. They didn't stay long with us after that. They felt so much more secure, not to mention ashamed, that they reorganized and sought out the rest of their outfits. I can't tell you how completely demoralizing it was to be overwhelmed by fleeing troops with tales of the enemy right behind them. So much more so when it occurs in total darkness. The thought that perhaps we could rationalize our own withdrawal crossed my mind, but when I thought how impossible it would be to justify it in the cold light of day I sought comfort in the execution of our mission. You can bet that when the cold light of day came, I was happy that none of us were swept away by the tidal wave of troops in headlong retreat. Our salvation just might have been the total darkness which prevented the enemy from exploiting the route they had effected. They couldn't see either!

The following morning at 0300 we moved forward again probing a little farther.

From our first commitment we became aware that we just could not have enough .50 caliber machine gun firepower when it came to laying down a withering amount of devastating fire. As long as carrying the ammunition was no problem why put up with piddling .30 caliber machine guns. Once you see the difference in the effectiveness of those two weapons, the .50 would be your choice, as it was ours. As was our wont, we set about correcting that deficiency in the Table of Equipment by the means we knew best, scrounging. We stripped the weapons off every knocked-out vehicle we found until we had four, instead of the authorized one, .50 caliber machine gun and skate mount on every M-2 half-track. We replaced the .30 caliber machine guns on the M-3 half-tracks and the Jeep pedestal mounts with .50's. Then to make them even more effective, our Battalion Supply Officer, Capt. Chilson made a deal with the Ordnance depot to get aircraft loaded .50 caliber ammunition. Where our ammunition load was normally one tracer followed by four ball cartridges, the aircraft load was one tracer, one armor-piercing, one incendiary, and one ball cartridge. In the air or on the ground that is a devastating combination, and we made good use of it in shooting down a number of German aircraft, as mentioned earlier.

As part of the probing we were conducting a regiment of tanks was dispatched up the center of the valley to see what opposed them. Because of their radial aircraft engines with air-cooling and low torque output they had to be run at close to maximum governed speed to get anything out of them and still not become overheated. As a result the noise was considerable, and they threw pillars of dust into the air overhead because of the high volume of cooling air they required. They announced their presence wherever and whenever they moved. When one artillery piece on the opposite mountain side fired on them, they immediately fled, the entire regiment of 72 tanks taking up positions of shelter in the nearest ouedis! Then, as the opportunity presented itself, they straggled to the rear. These crews were

all infected with the Kasserine Pass Disease!

I visited an artillery observation post which was dug into a small hilltop not far from where I had established my command post. It was covered with camouflage netting, and access to it was by a trench on the back of the hill. The observer pointed out vehicle traffic moving across the valley quite a distance away, partially concealed by low-lying hills. His guns were zeroed in on several aiming points from which he would give reference coordinates. A dust cloud swirling behind the hills he said was caused by a truck convoy, and that he would plaster it when it hit a certain point visible to us. Sure enough, knowing the time of flight of the projectiles, he issued a fire order to his batteries so the shells floated over us whispering quietly, and onto that convoy exactly where he had predicted. There wasn't much left of it.

In another probing action, the battalion was placed under the command of a bird Colonel Benson, who had been given a task force for the purpose of attacking and pushing through to the British Eighth Army located somewhere between our position and the city of Gabes on the Coast. "A" Company was ordered to proceed along the base of the mountain range where we were already deployed, behind the cover of the First Reconnaissance Squadron of the First Armored Division. At jump off time the First Recon was nowhere around, so we went by ourselves. We continued cautiously forward from one ouedi to the next until we began receiving heavy weapons fire. That is fire from weapons heavier than the usual rifle and machine guns. We were in an excellent position to watch any advance made by the troops in the valley, and they didn't. Couple this with the fact that we had no ground support for our destroyers and there was no point in pushing much farther ahead and risk being pinched off. I had little time to ponder the decision, for about noon the recon troop arrived, their arrival heralded by much noise from their light tanks, and the billowing clouds of dust which their tracks as well as their engines threw up. This naturally attracted the attention of the enemy gunners, and they opened up with everything that could throw a shell that far. They threw an awful lot of stuff at us in a very short time.

My M-2 command half-track was backed up against the forward bank of a ouedi and that of my 3rd. platoon leader, Robert C. Henderson, was parked a short distance away from mine. His was the lead platoon that day. As the artillery fire followed the light tanks into our ouedi, Lt. Henderson and his platoon sergeant were approaching my half-track. One of the projectiles cut him in two. He died instantly. Another hit a jeep and fragments killed his platoon sergeant. First Sergeant Ruffatto was not far away from my half-track advising some soldiers that diving under a tank is poor protection from artillery fragments. He knew that shell fragments ricocheting off the tank bottom and the tracks were much more dangerous than those which plow into the ground. When he became aware that Lt. Henderson and his sergeant had been hit, he dashed around the half-track to assist them, not know their condition. He had not yet reached them when another projectile came in, passed right through Sgt.

Tank Destroyer

Ruffatto's leg and exploded against the front hub of my half-track. When the shelling started I was on the ground beside the half-track, as were my driver, and communications sergeant. For some shelter from the shelling we got into the half-track again, for even slight armor is some protection against the fragments. A direct hit would have been something else! We hadn't seen Sgt. Ruffatto, but we heard him calling for help, and when we located and went to him he was lying face down with no apparent damage. However, when we rolled him over the nature and extent of his wound were quite obvious. We thought the projectile to have been a 75mm shell. It had passed through his leg, midway between the knee and the ankle taking a substantial portion of the shin bone with it. Fortunately, it had not exploded until it hit the wheel hub. We put a tourniquet on the leg, and splinted it using pieces of camouflage net support poles which we carried lashed to the half-track. Having done this we dragged him back to the shelter of the vehicle where we administered an ampule of morphine. As soon as the shelling let up we lashed the bodies of Lt. Henderson and his sergeant on the broad, flat hood of the half-track for easy transport to the medical clearing station where we left them and Sgt. Ruffatto. He was feeling no pain, for someone else, not knowing he had already been given morphine, gave him yet another dose before the first had taken its full effect. After the pasting we had taken we weren't exactly wild about returning to our previous position, but since we couldn't very well do otherwise, we did. Lt. Henderson's blood stained much of the hood of my half-track and was a constant reminder for as long as I had that vehicle, of his sacrifice.

Bob Carter, commanding Recon Co. called me on the radio to determine what was happening, if anything. His platoons had been detached from his command, so he was floating around from one position to another to see what was taking place. He came over to my position and we climbed a low hill in an attempt to assess the situation. We found that we were the foremost element of Task Force Benson, and indeed if we had moved much farther forward, we would have been cut off from the remainder of our forces.

While Bob and I were looking over the situation, a half-track towing a one-ton trailer containing an operating generator-set pulled up out of the woods and parked beside us. That half-track had more radio antennae than a porcupine has quills! A white-haired bird Colonel stepped out, came over to us demanding to know who we were and what the situation was. We reported to him and he asked where our battalion commander was. We told him we had no idea, and further that neither of us had seen him for a period of some weeks. (We knew Tincher was so far to the rear that it would take a week to get beans to him!) It turned out that this colonel was Benson, the commander of the task force bearing his name. He told us to stay right there with him, and we would see our battalion commander shortly. He went over to his half-track to issue some instructions and returned to where Bob and I were standing.

While waiting we traded information with the Colonel. Our "C" Company had encountered mine fields and shell fire losing three or four destroyers out in the center of the valley. From our position on the hill we had an excel-

lent view of the entire operation and could actually see the destroyers which were responsible for the smoke columns. Strangely, the First Recon Squadron had earlier pulled back somewhere to the rear as if the quitting whistle had blown, but we didn't mention this to the Colonel, nor did he ask their whereabouts.

Sure enough, after a while here came Col. Tincher in his Jeep. He reported to Colonel Benson who proceeded to dress him down in a manner more severe than a sergeant working over a recruit. As he started, Bob and I managed to drift off out of earshot so we would not embarrass Col. Tincher by overhearing the rebuke he was receiving. When Col. Benson noticed this he ordered us back saying he wanted witnesses of the one-sided conversation. He called Tincher a disgrace to the Military Academy, and told him that if he were not where those destroyers were burning by nightfall, he would try him for cowardice on the battlefield, running in the face of the enemy, and a number of other equally distasteful charges. Col. Tincher, whom we considered a psycho case anyway, did little but stand there stroking his chin and contemplating the ground. When Benson dismissed him, he hunched down in his Jeep and we didn't see him for another few weeks. He made no attempt, as far as we were able to determine, to reach the burning destroyers as ordered. He returned to his rear echelon headquarters and stayed there. None of the charges which Benson said he would lodge against Tincher were ever made. In any case, Task Force Benson was stopped in its tracks.

We were continually impressed by the fact that the Germans had heavy artillery mounted on mountains where they could command the low ground and hit everything in sight. General Patton had advocated in the tactics he taught at the Armored Force Center, that armor could disregard the enemy on the hills, and just punch right through the valleys. Again, the Germans not having the benefit of this philosophy, just sat up there and knocked out his armor! This tactic was not lost on Capt. Morrison, our Operations Officer bucking for an Instructor's berth at the TD School. So, during the ensuing lull in the action and while we were anticipating another armored attack, he ordered the combat company commanders up on a mountain located on our side of the valley, to reconnoiter positions for our companies. He had a good idea, but he picked the wrong mountain, for it was solid rock. No way could we take any vehicles up it, let alone dig out a place for them to stand. We reminded him that all the intelligence we had received considered this attack imminent, but he insisted that we walk over this solid rock mass and pick out gun positions. It didn't seem to matter to him that from any position we might establish on that mountain that the enemy would be out of our range anyway! He was steadfast in his determination that we move onto that mountain and we had better get cracking in order to complete our reconnaissance and the move before nightfall.

The combat company commanders hadn't seen each other since I had joined the First Division some weeks earlier, other than the short visit Bob and I had. We were all interested in what the others had to relate. The thought struck us, too, that if we were wiped out by shell fire, the battalion would be without any combat company commanders, but knowing how

Task Force Benson
115

Col. Tincher's devious mind worked, that might have been his plan in the first place. We went as far as we could by Jeep, and then climbed the mountain to the height Joe had indicated. It remained abundantly clear to all of us that what he proposed was patently impossible. From the place we left the Jeeps to our proposed emplacement it was solid rock. Joe's plan, of course, included digging those huge destroyers into the mountain! We had no leaders, only pushers with maps to give them the information they should have sought out on the ground itself.

While we soaked up the welcome warm, Spring afternoon sun enemy aircraft swooped down the valley bombing and strafing our companies. Simultaneously, their artillery started laying down barrages all over our lines. Here came the attack, as scheduled. We had no communication with our commands, so all we could do was to watch it, realizing that this was an opportunity which rarely comes to anyone. It was just like watching a demonstration from the bleachers at The Infantry School at Fort Benning.

So we relaxed and enjoyed the show. Everything proceeded in the classic manner. The air strike, the artillery barrages, and then came the tanks, with their infantry following close behind. As was the German practice, they were towing their anti-tank guns and carrying the crews on the tanks. These, guns and crews, they dropped off to form a defensive screen behind which they could retreat when and if pursued, and they headed into our lines. Our tank force was well to the rear, of course, for the only function which they seemed capable of performing was to put in an appearance when conditions were too calm to pose a threat to them. Our infantrymen, with their bazookas, the artillery, and our tank destroyers were able to stem the tide. I should mention that the infantry mortar men were superb. They could drop a mortar bomb into someone's hip pocket in nine tries out of ten and were extremely effective against the tanks and the crews they were carrying outside. Before long, the tanks which were able, retreated to pick up their anti-tank guns and crews and continued to the rear with the few infantrymen who had accompanied them in the attack.

It was over. It had been quite a sight on that April 1, 1943, and "Smokey" Joe Morrison was the fool. We came down off that mountain and rejoined our outfits passing the word to Joe that he was off his rocker. The order to occupy the mountain was never issued, although we fully expected it to be. Had that mountain been more hospitable, it would have been a good defensive move, other than the fact that we would have been completely out of range of the attackers and they ours!

On April 7, Task Force Benson mounted another attack. From our vantage point we couldn't see that much took place, but then we couldn't see the infantry activity in any detail from that distance. They broke through and as the rest of the enemy line withdrew to the next line of defense we all started to advance. This sort of thing is infectious. As some group breaks through at one point the morale of everyone else in the line adjacent soars, and its possible, as it was in this case, to dislodge the entire opposing line. Once dislodged, we wanted to keep them moving in order to deny them the opportunity of digging in some place. On our sector we overran artillery emplacements where the Italians left by the Germans to cover their withdrawal were playing cards in the gun pits, or sunning

themselves on the ramparts. They waved to us and we waved back continuing with the drive while we could. The troops behind us would gather them up and send them to the POW stockades in the rear. I'm sure when dinner time came they would be looking for someone to feed them, quoting all the pertinent passages on the treatment of prisoners-of-war contained in the Geneva Convention!

We soon ran out of any enemy presence in the area of our advance which was right along the base of the mountain range we had been hugging when Task Force Benson attacked the first time. I couldn't see any reason to continue travelling through the rough terrain, so we headed for the highway in the center of the valley. We were the vanguard of the advance from this point on because no other outfit could travel as fast or as far as we could on a given amount of fuel. The infantry, having done their job of punching through were relaxing and would follow along later in trucks when needed. It was exciting to realize that you were spearheading one of those arrows which appear on situation maps in headquarters all over North Africa, and perhaps even in Life Magazine!

I wasn't interested in using the highway itself because the vehicles which were using it were travelling too slowly for us. But the terrain on the immediate side of the highway was much smoother than it was where we had been travelling, so we fanned out on a company front, echeloned by platoon with all 12 of our destroyers. On that smoother terrain the drivers pulled out the hand throttles and let the engines run against the governors, giving us a steady 45 miles per hour. With our diesel power we easily outdistanced the gasoline-powered tanks and early in the afternoon they were dropping by the wayside, out of fuel. Although we had the same fuel capacity as they, our diesels were far more economical, as well as being more powerful than their radial aircraft engines. Our destroyer crews wouldn't have traded vehicles with the tankers no matter what the incentive, because in addition to all the mentioned advantages of diesel power, our men could use Coleman stoves in the destroyers for food preparation without fear of blowing themselves up. We could smoke in them without fear, while the tankers were worried about striking a spark on the deck with anything of metal. The advantages of diesel power were many, indeed.

It was one of the first warm days we had experienced, that Spring of 1943. The desert was in bloom and the fragrance of whatever flowers there are in that country filled the air. I have never smelled that fragrance anywhere else. If I did the hair on the back of my neck would certainly rise! As we rolled along the crews became bolder in their assumption that the enemy had really pulled out, and since there was no obvious terrain feature which would afford a good defensive position for them, we felt somewhat secure. Gradually the destroyer crews got out of them and rode on the rear deck on the engine air inlet gratings. With the full tracks those destroyers rode like a rocking chair, so it was a good place for sunning oneself. About the time our mountain range fell away to the north we noticed a gathering over on the highway. It turned out to be the meeting of our forces with the British Eighth Army which was moving across our front. The linkup had finally been made.

Task Force Benson

Because the security of the left flank had been our responsibility, I assumed that it would continue being so. The terrain off in our new direction, 45° to the north, was much more rocky, so much so that the wheeled vehicles and half-tracks had to find a road of some sort or lose their oil pans and other parts of their undercarriage. So, I transferred to the lead destroyer, leaving the other vehicles to wait for my Executive Officer, Lt. Young, as he came along and to give him the message to wait there until I sent a guide back for him. Then we took off again at about the same clip we had been travelling earlier. Incidentally, Bob Carter told me later that he got into the pictures taken by the news media at the link-up with the British Eighth Army.

Col. Tincher and the rest of the battalion were so far behind us that they were out of radio range. This isn't as strange as it might seem, for we were using FM radios, good usually for line-of-sight communications, and even then not for very great distances. So we continued on our storybook cruise of Tunisia for the remainder of the day, circling the wagons, so to speak with a mobile artillery unit which caught up with us at nightfall. This was much more fun than we had ever had in training and look at all the ground we had covered! I sent a guide back for Lt. Young and shortly after dusk our Company Supply Train came up. We had hot chow along with cookies and cake which our kitchen staff had prepared while sitting around the battalion rear echelon unable to get food to us earlier. We replenished our ammunition to the point that not only were our racks full, but we had four cases of four rounds each lashed on the rear decks of the destroyers. Extra cases of small arms ammunition were carried there as well. We had discovered that we could perform a function for comrades-in-arms by carrying ample supplies of small arms ammunition. We could afford to be generous, for it certainly was no strain on our destroyers or half-tracks to carry it. We refueled the destroyers and had time to read the mail which Lt. Young also brought up. It had been a fantastic day. One you hear about, or read about as you are here, but are seldom if ever privileged to experience. We were completely equipped and ready to go again.

I had no idea where the other elements of our battalion were, but found out later that when contact had been established with the Eighth Army they were ordered to break off and stop where they were. Tank destroyer battalion tactics were developing, and that development led to the usual detachment of individual companies, and sometimes platoons from battalion control, and attachment to combat units for close support. Such was the case here. We had been attached to Task Force Benson and were thus under Col. Benson's control, although we had had no contact with his headquarters since the break-out.

Had we been in radio contact with someone, we no doubt would have received similar orders, but having none, we were prepared to proceed with the last mission we had been assigned. Early the next morning, April 8, 1943, we began to get feeble traffic from one of the battalion staff officers who was attempting to find us in that vast waste using a command car in all that rock. His transmission got stronger so we were able to give him some guidance to our location. As much as we would have liked to spend

another day as we had the previous afternoon, we had to sit tight until we received the orders he had for us. Finally, Lt. Miller appeared with instructions to pull back and rejoin the rest of the battalion. So, we started the trip back, but took a short cut, another route than the one we had followed in getting where we were. All the wheeled vehicles and half-tracks were with Lt. Young and on their way to the rear on the highway, so we could pretty well travel wherever we wanted with our destroyers. We came upon what seemed to be a well-travelled track which seemed to go where we were headed. On the way we came upon what must have been a high level headquarters of the German forces. It had been pretty well shot up by the Air Force, and recently, too. A number of bodies were laying about. From the appearances, the attack must have been the day before, but strangely, the Arabs hadn't been there yet to strip the bodies and make off with anything else they could use or barter with. There were wheeled trailer-mounted living quarters and offices; power generating plants and massive cables laid on the surface of the ground connecting various facilities. The former occupants who could, left in somewhat of a hurry. Vehicles with which they had tried to escape were stuck in the sand, or out of fuel. One motorcyclist was gunned down beside the motorcycle he was trying to extricate from the sand. We gingerly poked around, afraid that there might be booby traps in place, as there usually were, but finding none, we became braver. I managed to pick up a couple of German pistols, a Luger, and a Walther P-38 complete with holsters. The men with me found many souvenirs for themselves, too. We found that four Ford 1½ ton trucks were operational as was a BMW two-door convertible in Afrika Korps camouflage paint. We fueled them with gasoline on the scene in their "jerry" cans, so we were ready to go. We put drivers in the vehicles, pulled them out of the sand with the destroyers and resumed our journey.

We passed a couple of small cemeterys where German dead were buried. I don't know where they buried the Italians (Eye-Ties) but each German must have been issued a grave marker with his uniform, for every grave had an elaborate iron-cross type grave marker with name, date of birth, and date of death. It gave you an eerie feeling to notice that the date of death was the day before you encountered the cemetery. Knowing the penchant of the American soldiers for souvenirs the Germans would booby trap most everything given time, but particularly helmets, pistols, binoculars, etc. Graves were no exception for they have been known to booby trap the grave marker and of course the helmet laid on the grave. It paid to be extremely cautious, for many an American had been killed or seriously wounded by such booby traps.

When we rolled into the battalion assembly area with our four trucks and the staff car, you could feel the envy everyone felt, for they had nothing to show for their efforts, whatever they had been. Lt. Young and I slept in the convertible since it had fully-reclining bront bucket seats. They were far more comfortable than a blanket on the ground. All the vehicles were painted with the Afrika Korps desert camouflage paint with the Iron Cross outlined in black over it, and the palm tree of the Korps. They certainly stood out among our olive drab painted vehicles, even with the streaks of our camouflage paint.

I don't think Col. Tincher was too pleased that his "disciplinary" and "shock" company seemed to have all the fun. The vehicles appropriated were distributed one to each of the other companies, with the exception of the BMW which I kept. We didn't have use for the trucks, nor the drivers to spare for them. I suppose Col. Tincher thought we should make him a present of the BMW, and of course Major Lorange was a bit more outspoken in his desire for it, but I kept it. Spoils of war, don't you know!

The entire sector where the II Corps had been deployed was turned over to the British Eighth Army and they continued their sweep northward towards Tunis. On April 9th, our forces in that area were withdrawn to assembly areas en route to the North where we could resume our pressure on the enemy forces pressing them, too, back towards Bizerte and Tunis.

In the process we went back through El Guettar and Gafsa, turning north again after bivouacing once more in the area where we had been pulled out to repel the original attack upon El Guettar. The next evening as we convoyed north, and after we had bivouaced for the night, Major Lorange came up the column to tell the company commanders that Col. Tincher had been relieved of his command of the battalion because one of our men was seen wearing one of those dark green, knitted, caps with the little visor. General Patton hated those hats with a passion because they didn't look very regimental in his view. He had been quite emphatic that they not be worn, never mind that they were extremely comfortable in that country during earlier months. To wear one was tantamount to being found without one's leggins or neck tie. Can you believe that we wore neckties and leggins at all times?

The story is told of General Patton showing up on the front line about the time of the battle of El Guettar. First of all the men tried to get him to get down out of sight to avoid his inspirational visit bringing a hail of fire down on them, what with his shiny helmet and ivory handled revolvers. They didn't succeed, of course. He then demanded to know why a man laying face down on the reverse slope of a slight hill immediately in front of him was not wearing his leggins, demanding that he be severely reprimanded. The sergeant told him that wouldn't be possible because the man was dead. The General, not to be put off, was reputed to have said that the least he could have done was to die in the proper uniform! He was also reputed to have reduced a bird colonel in his own headquarters to his permanent rank for appearing outside his quarters without his leggins. The General's philosophy was that if you looked like a bum, you fought like a bum. He did have a point.

I was elated to hear the colonel had been sacked, and fully expected we would have a new battalion commander in due course, but I was to be disappointed. Maxwell was restored to command a couple of days later. The euphoria lasted until we bivouaced in the cork forest near Le Calle. That was the only incident I heard about in which the General reversed himself. I guess that he might not want to mar such a sterling soldier's record.

While in the cork forest near Le Calle we were ordered to turn over our

captured vehicles to the forces of French General LeClerc. We were happy to do so, because the French needed them badly, but we were indeed sad to see our sleeping quarters of some four days taken away from us. Keeping the vehicles would not have been very practical, anyway, for sooner or later they would need replacement tires and parts, and we had none for them. Here, too, I was ordered to report to Col. Tincher in his headquarters.