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The 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion at the Falaise Pocket, 1944: The Application of Tank Destroyer Doctrine in the Field

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The 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion at the Falaise Pocket, 1944: The Application of Tank
Destroyer Doctrine in the Field

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
History

By
Logan Gross
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*To my parents, Holly and David Gross,
who have supported me in all my endeavors.*

This one is for you.

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Abstract

During World War II, the United States Army employed a new weapon on the battlefield in an attempt to defeat German armor tactics: the tank destroyer. Tank Destroyer Force was created to stem the tide of German armored attacks and form an opening for American tanks to make their own counter-attacks. Since the end of the war, tank destroyer battalions have been regarded as a failed experiment, despite the evidence that they effectively did their jobs. The negative feedback in the immediate post-war period led to the dissolution of the Tank Destroyer Force. Many of the studies of tank destroyers focus on the doctrine they followed and the faults in it. However, most of the studies do not look at the successful application of tank destroyer doctrine in the field by tank destroyer battalions. This paper will examine operations of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion and its application of tank destroyer doctrine during the Battle of Chambois from August 17-21, 1944, for which it won a Presidential Unit Citation.

Keywords: Tank Destroyer, World War II, Normandy Campaign, 90th Infantry Division, M10 Wolverine, Tank Destroyer Doctrine

Introduction

The rain drowned the morning near the town of Chambois, France, on August 20, 1944. The weather, however, was of little concern to the men of 1st Platoon, Company A, 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, as they beat back wave after wave of German armor and infantry. By 0800 hours, the platoon had been sent to relieve another platoon on top of Hill 129. While in movement, it spotted a mixed column of German armor heading up the same hill. Quickly, the platoon set a trap for the enemy armor. The trap worked. With only four M10 3-inch tracked gun motor carriages, the 1st platoon destroyed 127 vehicles and crew-served weapons, took 900 prisoners, and sustained only two wounded men.

The action of 1st Platoon, Company A, 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion (TDB) on the August 20, 1944, was just one of many that secured the closure of the Falaise Gap. It was also one of many instances of the successful use of tank destroyer doctrine for battle. The closure of this gap was important because it would not only end the German presence in the Normandy region of France, but because it also might have ended the campaign west of the Rhine River months earlier. Despite the closure around German Army Group B, much of the unit escaped and regrouped to fight later in the war.¹ The 773rd TDB was in the middle of the fighting around Chambois, France, as the Falaise Gap closed around the German 7th Army. The contribution of the 773rd TDB from August 17-21 earned it a Presidential Unit Citation.² Only twenty-three of the 106 tank destroyer battalions were awarded a Presidential Unit Citation during World War II. The 773rd TDB helped close the Falaise Gap. From August 17-21, the battalion fought hard to capture Chambois and the German forces trapped in the gap. This paper will focus on the 773rd

¹ Flint Whitlock, "Imperfect Victory at Falaise," *World War II Presents Normandy Campaign* (Leesburg, VA, 2004): 72.

² See Appendix A.

Tank Destroyer Battalion's contribution to the battle and examine its use of tank destroyer doctrine on the field.

The Normandy Campaign started on June 6, 1944, as the Allies invaded across five beaches in Normandy, France.³ Within days of the landings, the Germans were able to contain the Allies near the Normandy coast. However, the German buildup was slow due to the continued belief that the main Allied invasion would come farther north at the Pas-de-Calais.⁴

Over the next week, the German defense began to strengthen as panzer divisions began to be deployed around the Normandy beachhead. These panzer divisions, created for mobile offensives, were forced to hold a system of positional defense.⁵ This defense held the Allies around the coast for longer than a month. General Omar N. Bradley on July 25, started a new offensive that produced a breakout.

Operation Cobra was a bold plan. Cobra called for six infantry divisions to attack on a five-mile front, along with three other corps attacking on the flanks.⁶ Before the infantry attacks, the German lines would be leveled by a combination of a carpet bombing as well as a massive artillery barrage.⁷ Unfortunately, like many operations during World War II, Cobra did not start well.

³ Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2013), 59.

⁴ Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht Fights to the End: The German Campaigns of 1944-45* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, forthcoming), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-27.

⁶ A corps is composed of two or more divisions.

⁷ James Jay Carafano, *After D-Day: Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 200), 12.

Operation Cobra began with an airstrike on German positions near the city of Saint-Lô.⁸ The ensuing carpet bombing fell short and landed on the American lines, killing many, including General Lesley J. McNair, who was the Commanding General of Army Ground Forces.⁹ The First Army quickly broke free towards the Gulf of St. Malo, making it to the town of Avaranches by the end of Cobra on July 31. The next day the United States Third Army, under General George S. Patton Jr., was established and began exploitation operations.

When the deadlock in the American sector front ended, the Germans became a mobile force again.¹⁰ This return to mobility allowed them to conduct a counter-attack ordered by Hitler. That attack came on August 6 near the town of Mortain, codenamed Operation Lüttich. At midnight, 2nd SS Panzer and 2nd Panzergrenadier divisions, with the addition of some seventy tanks, attacked the U.S. 30th Infantry Division.¹¹ Despite early successes, the stubborn defenders were able to stop the counter-attack and by August 9, the Germans were in retreat.

During the Mortain offensive, Generals Bradley and Eisenhower recognized that the German westward push had unintentionally created a salient that could be used to encircle Army Group B. The generals decided that First Army would hold back the German push while Third Army went east to close the Germans in.¹² On August 8, the British Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, who was in charge of all ground troops during Operation Overlord, was informed about the plan. The U.S. Twelfth Army Group would push the enemy east by running along the southern salient, as well as pushing the rear of the German army, ending at the town of

⁸ There was a brief bombing run on July 24, however, due to poor visibility, the bombers released their bombs early, killing several Americans.

⁹ Carafano, *After D-Day*, 115-117.

¹⁰ Citino, *The Wehrmacht Fights to the End*, 49-50.

¹¹ Whitlock, "Imperfect Victory," 68.

¹² Whitlock, "Imperfect Victory," 68.

Argentan.¹³ The British Second Army, of British, Canadian, and Polish divisions, would push south to the town of Falaise, and encircle Army Group B.¹⁴

The previous day the British had begun an offensive to take Falaise, Operation Totalize. The Canadians and Poles quickly came up against firm German defenses south of Caen. As the Canadians were fighting their way to Falaise, the Germans began their retreat toward Falaise with town after town falling to the Americans. By August 12, the U.S. Third Army reached Argentan, which would change hands several times before it was finally captured by the 90th Infantry Division on August 16. On the same day, Falaise fell to the British Second Army.

Despite the capture of these towns, the battle was not over. Much of Army Group B had escaped. Thus on August 16, Field Marshal Montgomery, commander of Allied ground forces, called General Bradley and ordered the Americans to move farther northeast towards Chambois while the British would move south to Trun and finally to Chambois.

Over the next six days, fierce fighting occurred around each town. The Canadians of the 4th Armored Division and a task force from the 1st Polish Armored Division fought hard just north of Chambois near the town of St. Lambert. Here, the Poles reached the high ground of Hill 262, Mont Ormel, where they would catch the 2nd SS Panzer Division trying to escape east. Meanwhile, the Canadians fought hard to keep St. Lambert proper in Allied hands as the German Seventh Army tried to escape from the area.¹⁵

Finally, on August 19 the troops of the U.S. 90th Infantry Division and troops of the 1st Polish Armored Division linked up in Chambois, closing the Falaise Gap. The German units that

¹³ Composed of the First and Third Armies.

¹⁴ Whitlock, "Imperfect Victory at Falaise," 68.

¹⁵ Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light*, 167.

remained inside the gap continued to fight hard until August 21 when they finally surrendered. Until that happened, the U.S. and British troops, in control of the high ground around Chambois, unleashed an artillery barrage on the trapped Germans that was comparable to those on the Western Front during World War I. At the same time, U.S. tank destroyers from the 773rd TDB, attached to the 90th Infantry Division, stopped countless attempts by German tanks to cut through Chambois, and escape entrapment.

Historiography

Since the end of World War II, there has been little written about the Tank Destroyer Force. Those texts that do discuss tank destroyers generally examine why they were a failed force. These authors have various explanations for the shortcomings of the tank destroyers, including faulty doctrine, weapons shortcomings, and improper use of soldiers. A more realistic view is that tank destroyers did not live up to unrealistic expectations.

Immediately after the end of the war in Europe, the General Board of the United States Forces in the European Front commissioned a study on the Tank Destroyer Force from summer 1944 to the end of the war. The report briefly explains tank destroyer development, equipment, tactics, and effectiveness before it concludes that “armored forces, self-propelled guns, and high-velocity guns be added to the infantry, revisions to tank destroyer be made and added to the Armored Force, the role of organic anti-tank defense be given to the artillery, and finally, the separate tank destroyer force should be dismantled.”¹⁶

Christopher Gabel’s dissertation that examines TD doctrine became a book: *Seek, Strike, Destroy: U.S. Army Tank Destroyer Doctrine in World War II*. In this detailed study, Gabel argues that the tank destroyer idea, as well as its doctrine, was flawed from the beginning. Gabel examines the origins of tank destroyers and the evolution of anti-tank doctrine. He explains how the tank destroyer force was supposed to be offensive; however, the language and tactics describe a defensive role. Gabel ultimately believes that the soldiers and commanders of tank destroyer battalions were the reason that tank destroyer forces were successful, not operational

¹⁶ U.S. Forces, European Theater. General Board. “Report on the Study of Organization, Equipment, and Tactical Employment of Tank Destroyer Units.” [1946]. U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center.

doctrine. This is because, according to Gabel, “commanders refused to implement a doctrine that failed to account for the realities of the World War II battlefield.”¹⁷

Gabel describes the issues surrounding towed guns versus self-propelled guns. Self-propelled guns were able to put doctrine into practice more easily in the field than towed guns. This is because they were able to move in and out of positions faster, a key factor in tank destroyer work. Towed guns, by contrast, were easier to hide. General McNair, the biggest proponent of tank destroyers and a former artilleryman, championed towed guns over self-propelled anti-tank guns, believing that they fit the mold for the perfect tank-destroying weapon. He even went so far as to try to transition all self-propelled tank destroyers into towed guns in 1943 after poor results in the field.

Further examination of the origins and evolution of tank destroyer doctrine is given in “The Evolution and Demise of U.S. Tank Destroyer Doctrine in the Second World War” by Major Bryan Denny of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. This study focuses specifically on doctrine, training at Tank Destroyer Center, the weapons selected for use, and the application of doctrine by three different tank destroyer battalions.

Denny acknowledges the non-doctrinal uses of tank destroyers by field commanders. However, unlike many historians who see these non-doctrinal uses as evidence of the waste of assets and failure of tank destroyer doctrine, Denny believes that these added uses of tank destroyers were an evolution of the tank destroyer branch and should not be thought of as failures. Denny examines the weapons used by tank destroyer units, showing their pros and cons in the different theaters of war in which they were used. He concludes his study by stating that

¹⁷ Christopher Gabel, “Seek, Strike, Destroy: US Army Tank Destroyer Doctrine in World War II” (diss., U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1985), 2.

the tank destroyer force, while not living up to its expectations, still proved to be a proficient fighting force on the battlefield, because the commanders deviated from theory.¹⁸

In his book *Faint Praise: American Tanks and Tank Destroyers of World War II*, Charles Bailey argues that tank destroyers, while effective in helping reduce casualties from enemy armor, were an idea that would never have been successful. He has several reasons for this. First, he blames Tank Destroyer Command for underestimating the quality of German armor. He then attacks the equipment used. For example, the change from a small towed 37mm gun to a massive towed 90mm gun negated the possibility of concealment, a key aspect of TD doctrine. Another example was the late arrival of the M36 GMC, a self-propelled gun that could go up against a Tiger tank. Bailey also sees TD doctrine as a fundamental problem. He argues that its defensive nature in an army focused on the offensive. Finally he saw the leading commanders as short-sighted when it came to the use of tanks and tank destroyers.¹⁹

Harry Yeide in his book *The Tank Killers: A History of America's World War II Tank Destroyer Force* gives a broad history of the development of the tank destroyer forces in combat. The book becomes selective in its narrative as the war and the tank destroyer force widens. Yeide gives many examples of how effective tank destroyers became as the war progressed. In the conclusion of the study, Yeide provides statistics for tanks killed by the tank destroyer force versus the actual tanks in the European Theater. The Tank Destroyer Force had a record of 686

¹⁸ Bryan E. Denny, "The Evolution and Demise of U.S. Tank Destroyer Doctrine in the Second World War" (diss., U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2003), iii.

¹⁹ Charles T. Bailey, *Faint Praise: American Tanks and Tank Destroyers during World War II* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1983), 140-146.

kills in the U.S. Third Army alone. However, of the two thousand tanks encountered by the U.S. Third Army, regular tanks killed more than one thousand between August 1944 and May 1945.²⁰

Steven Zaloga's book *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO 1944-45*, analyzes the effectiveness of tank destroyer battalions in the ETO. Zaloga's book is a general narrative that explains why TDBs were created and then disestablished. Zaloga wrote two other books, each discussing the development and use of the M10, M36, and M18 self-propelled tank destroyers.²¹

Of all the discussions of TDBs and its doctrine, it seems that the *successful* applications of doctrine and the usefulness of TDBs have largely been ignored. The 773rd TDB is an example of a successful TDB that applied aspects of doctrine in the field and was rewarded with an impressive tally of enemy tanks, vehicles, artillery, and other weapons destroyed in only five days.

The purpose of this paper is to examine tank destroyer doctrine and training, then examine how it was applied by the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion while it fought to help close the Falaise Gap from August 17-21, 1944.

²⁰ Harry Yeide, *The Tank Killers: A History of America's World War II Tank Destroyer Force* (Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2005), 250.

²¹ Steven J. Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO 1944-45* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005)

I: The Creation of the Tank Destroyer Force

September 1916 saw the introduction of a weapon that would change the face of future wars: the tank.²² Throughout the remainder of World War I, artillery was used to destroy thinly armored, slow enemy tanks. The interwar years saw a continued belief that towed, high velocity artillery would continue to provide anti-tank defense in European and United States armies. Meanwhile, during the 1930's in Great Britain, Russia, and Germany, tank tactics underwent constant development. During the Spanish Civil War (1937-38) the Germans showed refined employment of its new tank tactics, but stationary anti-tank guns deployed against the tanks still seemed effective.²³ Although anti-tank tactics were effective in the Spanish Civil War, the evolution of anti-tank tactics languished, while German tank tactics continued to evolve. It would not be until after the fall of France in the summer of 1940 that the U.S. Army began to reexamine its anti-tank doctrine.

German armor doctrine in the 1930's was based around the tank or panzer. These new panzer armies concentrated around massed tank units along with mechanized artillery and half-track mounted infantry units in order to break through enemy lines and then exploit the penetrations with infantry.²⁴ Motorized artillery, reconnaissance units, and motorized infantry joined the first panzer division, as well as engineer, antitank, and antiaircraft battalions.²⁵ Because the organization of these forces concentrated around a mechanized force complemented by motorized units, the old standard of an army limited by the mobility of its infantry withered

²² The first tanks were very slow, averaging 2 to 5 mph. They also had armor thick enough to stop small arms fire and machine gun fire, but not artillery.

²³ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 5.

²⁴ Robert M. Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2002), 256.

²⁵ Gabel, "Seek, Strike, Destroy," 4.

away, at least for part of the German army. The British and French put their faith in improved armor-penetrating artillery ammunition and its use in direct fire missions at opposing tanks. This was put to the test in the spring and summer of 1940, when Germany invaded France and panzer forces overcame allied anti-armor defenses.²⁶

The German plan of attack against France, called Case Yellow, was a bold gamble. The first part of the offensive was a diversionary attack in Belgium and the Netherlands with the intent of drawing the Allies into Belgium. Meanwhile another panzer army moved through the Ardennes Forest to sweep behind the British and French armies and destroy them. The Allies planned to move into a defensive position in Belgium, along the Dyle River while a token force remained in France to guard the Ardennes sector. This played right into the German trap. The Allied force in the Ardennes sector fled as its thin anti-tank defenses became overrun by the massed German panzer divisions. In contrast, German anti-tank screens, with additional help from the Luftwaffe, were more than capable of destroying any allied tank assaults they encountered.²⁷

After watching the German panzer armies drive through Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, the U.S. Army finally looked into modernizing its anti-tank measures. The artillery arm of the army had the mission of anti-tank defense in the latter half of the 1930's. By 1940, artillerymen in anti-tank units with experience facing tank formations believed their only role was to defend artillery.²⁸ They were equipped with the obsolete 37mm anti-tank gun, an obsolete weapon by 1940, as well as a handful of 75mm howitzers. In 1940, following the fall of France, specialized anti-tank companies were formed, adding extra guns to the organic field artillery

²⁶ The term “motorized” is used to describe vehicles that use tires or wheels i.e. trucks. The term “mechanized” is used to describe vehicles that use treads i.e. tanks or tracked vehicles.

²⁷ Citino, *Quest for Decisive Victory*, 259-275.

²⁸ Gabel, “Seek, Strike, Destroy,” 9.

In 1941, the army began creating separate autonomous anti-tank battalions. In September and November 1941, the Louisiana and Carolina maneuvers tested these autonomous anti-tank battalions. The anti-tank weapons included a 3/4-ton truck with a 37mm gun mounted to the back as well as a 1½ ton truck with a 75mm mounted on it.³² The maneuvers in Louisiana were lauded by General McNair as a success for the anti-tank battalions. However, the maneuvers also leaned in their favor. The rules for the maneuvers demanded that armored units could only defeat the anti-tank weapons by overrunning them. However, the anti-tank weapons effectiveness was given a generous boost, and the armored units were not working in a combined arms capacity as the Germans did, leading to the armored units being defeated.³³

The Carolina Maneuvers tested a new experimental tank destroyer:³⁴ a M2 halftrack with a French 75mm gun mounted on it, designated the M3 Gun Motor Carriage (GMC).³⁵ The Carolina Maneuvers had two results: 1) the armored force of the army decided to reevaluate its doctrine with the introduction of combined arms, and 2) anti-tank proponents decided that they had figured out how to end the tank threat.³⁶

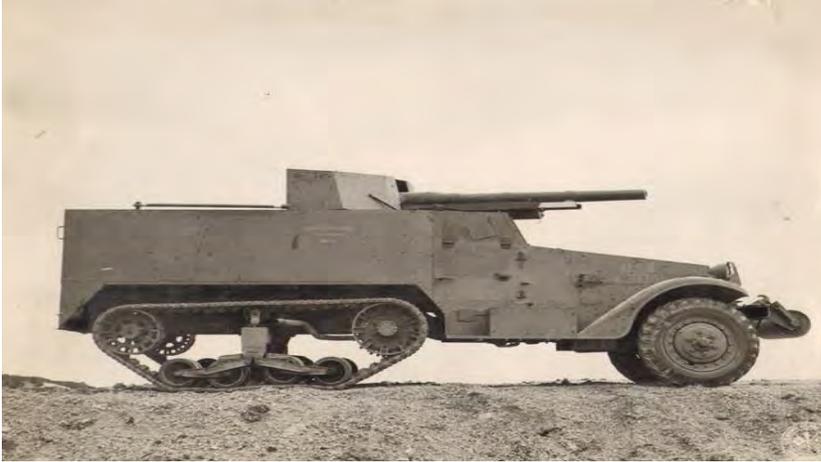
³² Yeide, *The Tank Killers*, 5.

³³ Gabel, "Seek, Strike, Destroy," 15.

³⁴ In October, just after the Louisiana war games, General George C. Marshall renamed the anti-tank units "Tank Destroyers." Yeide, *The Tank Killers*, 5.

³⁵ The M3 would see its first use in the Philippines in December 1941. It would see the action that it was designed for, anti-tank defense, in North Africa in 1942.

³⁶ Yeide, *The Tank Killers*, 6.



[Figure 2] M3 GMC, used by TDBs in the Louisiana and Carolina Maneuvers, as well as in North Africa. Image from <http://www.tankdestroyer.net/things/alliedtds>

The Louisiana and Carolina maneuvers showed the army that organic anti-tank battalions were not suitable to end the tank problem on their own.³⁷ Because of their deployment to the front line, instead of remaining in regimental or divisional reserve, the anti-tank battalions could not quickly respond to surprise tank attacks.³⁸ To solve this problem, anti-tank proponents believed that a semi-independent group that could be sent to areas under enemy tank threats. Theoretically, while in the field, these roving anti-tanks guns would stay in the reserve until they were told of a threat.³⁹

On November 27, 1941, General George C. Marshall accepted the new tank destroyer. But, the new mechanized force did not know which combat arm would control it.⁴⁰ The obvious choice was the artillery since anti-tank warfare had been the business of artillerymen. The armor arm did not want to accept tank destroyers for two reasons: 1) the armor arm was being

³⁷ Steven J. Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO 1944-45* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, Ltd), 12-13.

³⁸ After the creation of the Tank Destroyer Battalions, organic anti-tank units still existed within infantry divisions. Tank Destroyers were attached to Infantry Divisions and would coordinate with the organic anti-tank guns during defensive actions.

³⁹ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 13.

⁴⁰ General Marshall was Chief of Staff to the U.S. Army from 1939 to 1945.

reorganized after the autumn maneuvers, and 2) because armor, in the best cavalry tradition, is designed for attack, while tank destroyers were inherently defensive.

Tank destroyer units began forming on November 27, 1941. Fifty-three TDBs became active by the War Department, with remaining anti-tank battalions being taken and renamed TDBs on December 3 and put under control of GHQ which was under direct control from the War Department.⁴¹ These battalions were armed with either towed (T) or self-propelled (SP) guns. There were three numbering designations for TDBs: 600, 700, and 800. All three had a different meaning: 600 level TDs meant that the anti-tank units that formed the battalion came from an infantry unit; 700 level TDs designated that the anti-tank units came from armored units; 800 level TDBs hailed from field artillery units.⁴² In addition, the Tank Destroyer force created its own patch: an orange circle with a black panther in the center biting down on a tank.



[Figure 3] The symbol of the Tank Destroyer Force (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

⁴¹ Gabel, "Seek, Strike, Destroy," 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17.

The Tank Destroyer Tactical and Firing Center at Fort Meade, Maryland, and under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Andrew D. Bruce, was also activated on November 27th. During the inter-war period, Bruce spent his time learning military tactics at several military schools and spent time editing textbooks on military doctrine while on the general war staff of the War Department. It was at Fort Meade that TD doctrine would be developed, equipment would be tested, and TD units would be trained.⁴³ Finally, the War Department created a new ground combat arm equal in status to the infantry, cavalry-armor, and artillery: the Tank Destroyer Force.

This independence did not solve the problems that the new tank destroyer force now faced. There were arguments over which weapons would be required in the new TD force. General McNair, an artilleryman, argued that towed guns were the basic anti-tank weapon. Colonel Bruce, an infantry officer during World War I, was an advocate of the mobile self-propelled gun. He also felt like the self-propelled gun embodied the new TD motto: “Seek, Strike, Destroy.” The Armor Force suggested using tanks to fill the role of mobile anti-tank guns. Colonel Bruce did not want to use an altered tank. He wanted a new weapon, something lighter and faster than tanks.⁴⁴

There was another problem that faced the Tank Destroyer Force. There was no doctrine at the time of its conception. Furthermore, four days after the creation of Tank Destroyer Force, Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Imperial Japanese Navy. This action brought the United States into World War II.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁴ General Bruce said he wanted something more like a “cruiser than a battleship.” Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO 1944-45*, 13.

Now that the United States was at war, Tank Destroyer Command needed to form a training center. In February 1942, Colonel Bruce and General McNair moved the Tank Destroyer Tactical and Firing Center to Camp Hood, Texas, renamed the Tank Destroyer Center. Tank destroyer battalions and other armored units, began training at Camp Hood in March and April, 1942 though TD doctrine would not be finished until June 1942.

On June 16, 1942, Tank Destroyer Center published Field Manual (FM)18-5, *Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Units*. This FM was the first of several documents that provided operational doctrine for the TD units. This first draft of the TD doctrinal manual stressed that TDs would be an offensive weapon. FM 18-5 opens by stating: “There is but one battle objective of tank destroyer units, this being plainly inferred by their designation. It is the destruction of hostile tanks.”⁴⁵

A TDB is essentially a mobile anti-tank defense that is to stay centralized and concealed in the reserve until called to a specific area. Doctrine called for a crew to conduct “vigorous” reconnaissance for adequate firing positions to attack an enemy tank in the preferred method for TDs: ambush.⁴⁶ Because of the light armor on a TD, it was advised that crews do not get into a “slugging match” with enemy armor. Once engaged, a crew was supposed to attack and move, using the speed of a TD, as well as the crews’ observation of the terrain, to get the edge on an enemy.⁴⁷ This became known as “shoot and scoot.”

Field Manual 18-5 stressed speed in deployment and employment. Because most of the anti-tank units had been turned into tank destroyer battalions, it was up to the organic anti-tank units

⁴⁵ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual, Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), IV.

⁴⁶ FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual*, (1942), 19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

that remained active in infantry units to hold the front line defenses from enemy armor attacks. Meanwhile, tank destroyers, being attached to infantry divisions, remained at the ready in the reserve to learn of the location of the attack. When infantry commanders told the TD crews where enemy armor was, these tank destroyer units would head to a concealed location close to the rear. In order to make it to these locations with enough time to cut off enemy armor, it was stated “the primary weapons of tank destroyer units are self-propelled guns.”⁴⁸ Although units preferred SP guns, towed anti-tank guns were still widely used.

Tank destroyer doctrine would not be tested in battle until after Operation Torch.⁴⁹ A glaring oversight was that FM 18-5 did not focus on how TDs were supposed to interact with other combat arms. For example, because TDs are not well equipped to deal with enemy infantry units, they had to request assistance and coordinate action with friendly infantry. Unfortunately, there is very little written in FM 18-5 about how much coordination was required to fulfill the semi-independent mission of TD units.⁵⁰ This lack of focus on combined arms fighting was a large gap in early TD doctrine, particularly since the enemy TDs would be fighting knew the basics of combined arms warfare.⁵¹

Despite the victory at El Guettar, TDs performed poorly in North Africa. This prompted several changes to be made to the Tank Destroyer Force. First, the balance between towed guns and SP guns was shifted. The open battlefields of North Africa better suited towed guns because they sat lower to the ground and were easier to conceal. However, after the Battle for Sicily and

⁴⁸ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual, Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 8.

⁴⁹ Operation Torch was the invasion of North Africa at French Morocco and French Algeria. The invasion was on November 1942.

⁵⁰ Gabel, “Seek, Strike, Destroy,” 26.

⁵¹ This could be said for all communication at the time.

the opening battles in Italy, TDBs wanted to have SP guns back. There were several reasons for this change. First, a towed gun required extra vehicles to move it and its ammunition. Second, the terrain made it difficult to transport the gun and the extra vehicles. Third, the U.S. army was mostly on the offensive during the Italian campaign. Towed guns were not the optimal weapon for offensive campaigns, because of their logistical demands. The balance between towed and SP guns was soon shifted again towards SP guns.

Another change required from the North African campaign was the revision of TD doctrine. The Tank Destroyer Center was not able to agree on a suitable revision until mid-1944. Finally, FM 18-5 *Tactical Employment Tank Destroyer Unit*, as well as FMs specifically for towed guns and self-propelled guns, were published on July 18, 1944. By this time, most TDBs had seen combat and learned on the battlefield the best way to use their weapons. The FM did expand on the new roles the TD would be expected to fill, and how they would interact within a combined arms team it and also incorporated lessons learned in the Mediterranean to improve the capabilities of TD units. The mission of a TD unit was expanded in the 1944 version of FM 18-5.

“Action of tank destroyers is characterized by an aggressive spirit. Their mobility permits them to be concentrated rapidly in an advantageous position. They employ stealth and deception in opening fire. They are not capable of independent action, hence they cooperate closely with other troops.”⁵²

In addition to the main goal being the “destroying of hostile tanks by direct gunfire,”⁵³ tank destroyers added secondary missions as assault guns. TDs were now required to: reinforce artillery units providing direct and indirect fire, destroy enemy pill boxes and defensive barriers,

⁵² U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tactical Employment Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

coast defense, and support invasions.⁵⁴ These added goals freed the U.S. Armor Force to go on the offensive rather than support the infantry divisions.⁵⁵

The adjusted doctrine elaborated on the original principles of how TDs should operate in the field. The new manual stated that tank destroyers apply *repeated application* of the following:⁵⁶

1. Perform vigorous reconnaissance to determine enemy strength and movement.
2. Based on gained information, move into concealed firing positions: “Tank Destroyers ambush hostile tanks, but do not charge nor chase them.”⁵⁷
3. Attack when enemy tanks were in sufficient range to be destroyed, all the while holding ground. FM 18-5 recommends waiting until the enemy is within close range (within 500 feet) for maximum effect.
4. Occupy any forward ground given up by enemy retreat.

Field Manual 18-5 (1944) emphasized the need for TDs, particularly towed guns, to seek proper concealment. The need for concealment was to compensate for the TDs’ lack of frontal armor. When it was possible, the best position for a TD would allow it to perform flanking fire that exploits tank vulnerabilities. This concept is further explained in FM 18-20, *Tactical Employment of Tank Destroyer Platoon Self-Propelled*. When a SP platoon of TDs (three platoons per company, each platoon having four guns) moved into a new area, it should look for an area that allowed for both adequate concealment, defilade firing positions, and adequate

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁵ The SP TD crews now seemed to become more akin to mobile assault guns, similar to the German Stug75 III assault gun.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁷ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5 *Tactical Employment Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 5.

observation. Once such an area is found, the gunners would set up their guns to provide frontal and flanking fire. If it is possible, two guns would be deployed in support of each other, while the two other guns are farther back provide flank protection as well as an extra defensive line to which the forward guns could redeploy.

The new version of FM 18-5 (1944) dedicated much more attention to the role of TDs in combined arms fighting.⁵⁸ It became clear that TDs were particularly vulnerable to enemy infantry, thus, FM 18-5 made it clear that TDs were to work closely with friendly infantry forces. Communication between infantry and the TD commander is to be close and constant so that both provide cover for each other. The infantry would provide support for the vulnerable TD crew, while at the same time, the TD would provide protection against enemy vehicles. In particular the infantry preferred the SP guns for the protection they provided, based on their large tank-like appearance and big gun and its 50 caliber machinegun.

Before U.S. involvement in World War II, anti-tank defense units were given the 37mm anti-tank gun as well as the 75mm gun. However, these units were under-gunned, and those guns they did have were underpowered. It would not be until 1941, at the insistence of Colonel Andrew Bruce that self-propelled guns would be tested. These were the M3 GMC and the M6

⁵⁸ In the 1942 version, only five pages of text were dedicated to the subject of combined arms fighting as opposed in the 1944 version that provided twenty-two pages of text.



[Figure 4] M6 GMC, a ¾ ton weapon carrier. It was a poor platform. This is a picture of a unit from the 773rd TDB training at Camp Young, California, 1942 (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks).

Both of these weapons had serious problems, such as the light armor, mobility, and, in the case of M6, armament. The M3 had enough armor to deflect small arms fire, but not armor piercing rounds. The M6 had virtually no armor. The M3 was mobile on most terrains. However, it was not suitable for cross-country travel like the kind it would face in North Africa. A motorized vehicle, the M6 was not suited for off-road travel. The 75mm gun mounted on the M3 was adequate, unlike the 37mm on the M6, which had to be within 100 yards to do any damage.⁵⁹

In June 1942, the Ordnance Department approved designs for the 3-inch gun M10 GMC, and began being manufactured by October.⁶⁰ The M10 was a M4 Sherman tank chassis with a 3-inch gun, with a velocity of 2,600 fps, set inside an open top turret. The system could hold fifty-four rounds of ammunition including various armor piercing (AP), and high explosive (HE) shells. The turret, which could traverse 360 degrees, did not have a power system to traverse it, meaning it took much longer to turn it than in a tank turret. The first model was incapable of providing indirect fire; this was fixed in mid-1943. The gun had an elevation of -10 to +30 degrees and a

⁵⁹ Bailey, *Faint Praise*, 41.

⁶⁰ The M10 was also known as the “Wolverine.”

maximum effective range of 16,100 yards. The M10 featured slanted armor to increase the effectiveness of its thin frontal armor. It also had a counter-weight on the back of the turret to offset the gun in the front. An M10 had a crew of five: a commander, gunner, loader, driver, and assistant driver. It was also fast, with a top speed of 30mph on a road and 25mph cross-country and with a range of two hundred miles. The M10 came with a General Motors twelve cylinder twin diesel engine, 410hp and went 1.2 miles per gallon. It came equipped with a ring-mounted .50 caliber machinegun for anti-aircraft defense and to discourage enemy infantry.⁶¹



[Figure 5] 3-inch M10 GMC “Wolverine.” Image from <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/51721095697328025/>

Colonel Bruce was not an advocate for the M10. It did not meet his standards that a tank destroyer should be much faster than a tank.⁶² The M10A1 model fixed some of the problems of the original model, including better counter-weights, a lighter engine, and slightly better speed.⁶³

⁶¹ Zaloga. *M10 and M36*, 22.

⁶² The M4 Sherman had about the same speed and fire power as the M10.

⁶³ Zaloga, *M10 and M36*, 13

This model was produced quickly and *en masse* to meet demands for TDs in North Africa. The M10 would have its combat debut in the battle of El Guettar, Tunisia, on March 23, 1943. The M10 and its sister, the faster M18, would continue to be in service until phased out for the new and more powerful M36 during the last months of the war. The only difference between the M10 and the M36 was the new 90mm gun on the latter.

The Tank Destroyer Tactical and Firing Command at Fort Hood, Texas trained TD crews and units.⁶⁴ It opened on September 18, 1942, too late for the first TDs to get any training there before being sent to North Africa in November. Many of those units trained at their home bases. The rest would go to Fort Hood.

The desire for an offensive spirit in the TD force was highlighted in the training at Fort Hood. Training, as discussed in FM 18-5 (1942), would be conducted to “develop the ability and desire of TD crews to take offensive action in combat.”⁶⁵ This did not start at the unit level, but was stressed in the individual soldiers as well. The individual cross-trained to learn his job as well as other jobs required in the TD force, so that he may become as versatile as possible. Gunnery marksmanship was taught to all crew members as well as anti-aircraft marksmanship.

Learning how to use terrain effectively was an essential part of TD training. When in the field, the TD crew was expected to locate several areas that provided sufficient cover and concealment for the ambush tactics dictated in doctrine. These areas needed to offer observation of the area the TD crews were to defend. Finally, the area had to offer several ways in and out for quick movement to and from firing positions.

⁶⁴ In 1942 when it opened, it was called Camp Hood. For the purposes of this paper, it will be called by its current name.

⁶⁵ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual, Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 129.

Doctrine emphasized how important reconnaissance was to a TD unit. Learning how to read maps was essential for everyone. Every company had a recon section. Reconnaissance units moved forward in jeeps and armored cars to locate areas best suited for ambush and observation. They were also used in forward positions to locate the enemy. They would then communicate these locations to the rest of the battalion.

Communication was essential for TDs, both in the battalion and with the units they were attached too. Radio nets between TDBs and the units they were attached to were used to direct TDs to areas threatened by enemy armor. Men in the TD crews were trained on radio equipment, geographic codes, signals, and map reading. In addition to these, the communicators learned how to drive TDs and how to be gunners.⁶⁶

Finally, the soldiers at the Tank Destroyer Center learned British commando style training. Colonel Bruce decided that the men of a tank destroyer battalion needed to be able to continue their mission even if their main weapon was out of commission. The creator of the Tank Destroyer Center, Major Gordon Kimbrell, went to England to learn commando tank-killing techniques.⁶⁷ This commando training included: reconnaissance (day and, more importantly, night), how to ford water obstacles, detecting bobby traps, demolitions, urban warfare, and how to scale hazardous obstacles, and how to create anti-tank explosive weapons like “Molotov cocktails” and “sticky bombs.”⁶⁸

A tank destroyer battalion, as described in FM 18-5 (1942), mustered 842 officers and men in three gun companies, a reconnaissance company, a headquarters company, as well as a medical

⁶⁶ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual, Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 137-8.

⁶⁷ Yeide, *The Tank Killers*, 13.

⁶⁸ Yiede, *The Tank Killers*, 13.

detachment. By 1944, the number of men per battalion had decreased to 738 enlisted men and 35 officers.⁶⁹ These different companies used combined arms theory to proceed as a separate unit, away from normal infantry divisions.⁷⁰ In FM 18-5 (1942), the gun platoon contained two squads, each manning two guns. Accompanying these guns were two M20 “greyhound” armored vehicles for extra anti-aircraft and anti-infantry protection. Finally, an M10 ammo trailer as well as a ¼ ton jeep for the leader rounded out the platoon.⁷¹

Three platoons in this format created a combat company, which totaled twelve guns and three combat companies to a battalion, making thirty-six guns. FM 18-5 (1942) describes these platoons as either “light” or “heavy.” There was no difference except that the light platoon had a 37mm gun and the heavies would have a 75mm gun. Each company had two heavy platoons and one light platoon. Following the 1943 American defeat at Kasserine Pass in Tunisia,⁷² Tank Destroyer Command, despite Colonel Bruce’s objections, decided to replace the M6 37mm GMC and the M3 75mm GMC with the 3inch gun M10 GMC, giving a company twelve of these new guns.⁷³

The new version of FM 18-5 changed the organization of a TDB’s gun companies. FM 18-5 (1944) added an extra company, bringing the total to three gun companies. A gun company was equipped with eight M20 armored cars, twelve M10 3-inch GMCs, six ¼-ton jeeps, one 2½-ton truck, one ¼-ton trailer, and three 1-ton trailers.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 37.

⁷⁰ Bailey, *Faint Praise*, 19.

⁷¹ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tank Destroyer Field Manual, Organization and Tactics of Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 27-42.

⁷² In May of that year, Tank Destroyer Center created a new organization table as well as a new manual for towed guns.

⁷³ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 33.

⁷⁴ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 37.

The headquarters company was made up of the battalion's staff, whose primary job was to manage battalion operational needs. Each company in the battalion also contained a headquarters. By 1944, the headquarters company used three M20 armored cars. The remaining fifty-three vehicles included transport vehicles, ammunition vehicles, maintenance vehicles, staff cars, and communication vehicles.⁷⁵

The reconnaissance company was responsible for scouting ahead of the battalion to locate firing positions, enemy units, and to provide flank cover. The company was split into three platoons, each further split into two squads, each having six M8 armored cars, three M20 armored cars, and eighteen jeeps. Reconnaissance Company came with a pioneer platoon whose job was to remove obstacles like landmines and downed trees, create throughways, and also plant mines.⁷⁶

Several TDBs were then organized into a larger independent group, known as a Tank Destroyer Group. The idea of a TD group was the same as the independent armor groups. The TD Group level commanders operated at the corps and army levels, acting as liaisons between Infantry Divisions and TDBs. However, instead of the groups staying in corps reserve, the individual TDBs were attached to infantry divisions.⁷⁷

It was in France from August 16-21, 1944, during the closing of the Falaise Pocket, that the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP) would put FM 18-5 and FM 18-15 to the test.

⁷⁵ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 37.

⁷⁶ Bailey, *Faint Praise*, 19.

⁷⁷ Zaloga, *US Tank and Tank Destroyer Battalions*, 44-45.

2) Making The 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion

On January 13, 1941, the 141st Field Artillery Regiment of the Louisiana National Guard, the 166th Field Artillery Regiment, and the 190th Field Artillery Regiment (both from the Pennsylvania National Guard) became federalized and designated the 73rd Field Artillery Brigade. This new unit was then stationed at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where it would continue training in artillery tactics. During August, two artillery batteries⁷⁸ from the 141st and two batteries from the 166th as well as personnel from the headquarters batteries of both regiments combined to form the 73rd Provisional Anti-Tank Battalion. The battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Spiess, then moved to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, to begin training in its new anti-tank role.⁷⁹



[Figure 6] Lieutenant Col. Frank Spiess circa 1945. Note the special TD “brass” on the lapels (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

⁷⁸ In regular artillery batteries, there are four to six guns.

⁷⁹ *History of 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion*, 1943, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

The 73rd Provisional Anti-Tank Battalion was present at the maneuvers in Louisiana and the Carolinas during the fall of 1941. Its contribution in the maneuvers, along with other anti-tank units, provided enough evidence for General McNair and General Marshall to advance plans for specialized “tank destroyer” force. On December 15, two weeks after the activation of the first tank destroyer battalions, and eight days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the 73rd Provisional Anti-Tank Battalion was renamed the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP).⁸⁰

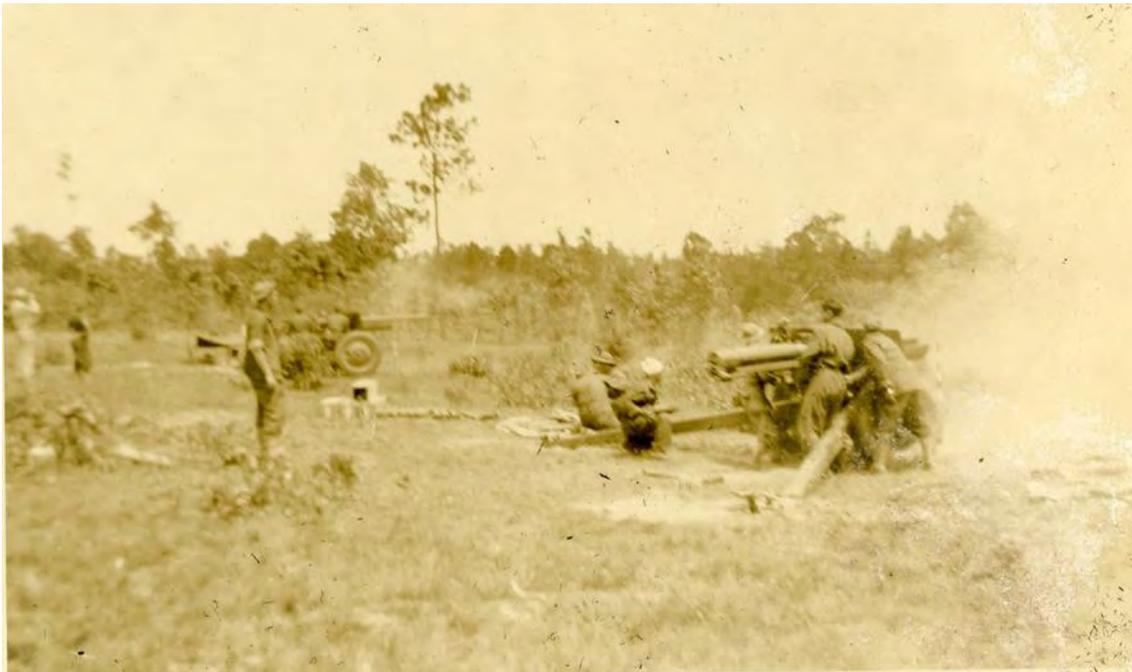


[Figure 7] An experimental light tank used at the Louisiana Maneuvers. This is an example of the weapon used against the 73rd Provisional Anti-Tank Battalion. (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

Immediately after its activation, the 773rd TDB began training at its home base at Camp Shelby. There, the 773rd TDB continued to drill in basic training and the fundamentals of anti-tank warfare on towed 37mm anti-tank guns. It trained at Camp Shelby until April 1, 1942, when

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

the battalion began a 2,100 mile move to Camp Young, California, where it would train until August 1942. Camp Young was the home of the Desert Training Center and was led by Lieutenant General George S. Patton until he was sent to North Africa as a part of Operation Torch.⁸¹ The training the 773rd TDB received at Camp Young included learning how to drive and operate in the desert, marksmanship with all types of ammunition i.e. high explosive (HE) and armor piercing (AP), formation development, bivouacs, as well as basic military skills.⁸²



[Figure 8] “Some of the first anti-tank firing, Camp Shelby, 1941.” Note the 3 inch guns (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

The main campaign in 1942 for the Americans in the European war was in the deserts of North Africa.⁸³ This prompted the U.S. Army to begin training troops for desert conditions. While at Camp Young, the 773rd TDB took part in the desert maneuvers of September and part

⁸¹ It is interesting that they would train in the desert in early 1942, since the decision to invade North Africa was not made until the summer of 1942.

⁸² *History of the 773rd Tank Destroy Battalion*, 1943, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

⁸³ At this point in 1942, the only allied country in North Africa was Great Britain and its Commonwealth.

of October. From October through November the battalion continued to train at the Desert Training Center, Ft. Erwin, California. Training consisted of: firing pistols and rifles to heavy artillery like the 75mm howitzer, training in demolition, individual physical training and close quarters fighting, and chemical attack defense.⁸⁴



[Figure 9] “2nd Platoon, Company C in California.” Note the M3 GMCs (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

The training received in California was valuable since the 773rd TDB needed to learn the specifics of its job: killing tanks. The 773rd TDB moved from Camp Young at the beginning of December to the newly opened Tank Destroyer Center at Camp Hood, Texas. It remained at Camp Hood until April 2, 1943. By July 1943, the 773rd TDB was training on the new 3-inch gunned GMC M10 “Wolverine.” Training at Camp Hood was specified for learning the details of tank destroyer work and how each company was supposed to act in accordance with doctrine.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

An emphasis was put on reconnaissance mission, problems that occur in all levels of the battalion, and the pioneer platoon learned how to lay and remove mines as well as repairing bridges. Finally, the men were sent to a one-week commando course where they were trained in street fighting, night firing, close quarters combat, the use of explosives like grenades and Molotov cocktails, and the use of small arms and machine guns as well as rocket launcher training for officers.⁸⁵ Private Harry Morgan, Company A remembered training at Camp Hood:

We then went to Camp Hood [from Camp Young], Texas for live fire training and house to house fighting. Each day for seven days, we marched and ran five miles with rifle and full field packs of sixty pounds, ran up hills and attacked this German village with the cadre acting as enemy soldiers throwing fire crackers and in general, raising hell with us. They taught us how to set booby-traps, how to use plastic explosives along with many dirty killing tricks with your bare hands, etc. Each of us had to fire a belt of ammo with a 30cal MG firing from the hip at birds...We were also placed in positions where artillery was fired over us so we could learn and remember the sounds of incoming fire.⁸⁶

The final training the 773rd TDB received in the U.S. would help prepare it for combat in settings similar to that of Normandy, France. The 773rd TDB left Camp Hood on April 2, 1943, for its final training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. The 773rd TDB was stationed at Camp Atterbury from April 11, 1943 to January 12, 1944 and took part in the Tennessee Maneuvers. During the maneuvers, Reconnaissance Company alone was able to take control of the small town of Shelbyville. The company, given little information on the town, and no information on an impending counter-attack, quickly adapted to the situation, wiping out the enemy forces and taking the town hall.⁸⁷ On October 1, 1943, the 773rd TDB was presented with its Organizational Colors: a red triangle with a tiger in it representing the 73rd Field Artillery, orange triangles and an orange bar on top representing tank destroyers, three white circles in the top orange bar

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Memoir of Harry H. Morgan, "Dad's Journal." Dan Rabe Private Collection, Missouri.

⁸⁷ The Shelbyville Daily, "Shelbyville is 'Captured' by Invading Force from Camp Atterbury in Sunrise Raid," Lt. Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

representing the Pennsylvania National Guard, and finally, the Latin words “Fit Via Vi” meaning “the way is made by force” on a scroll under the bottom red triangle [Figure 5].⁸⁸



[Figure 10] The Organization Emblem of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion. Image from <http://www.tankdestroyer.net/units/battalions700s/272-773rd-tank-destroyer-battalion>

With training in the U.S. completed, the 773rd TDB received its orders to go overseas. The 773rd TDB left Camp Atterbury for New York on January 15, 1944 and prepared to leave for Great Britain. Private Harry Morgan remembered the journey to Great Britain:

One night of our five day crossing, the engines stopped. We were instructed to remain in our sacks, and to be dead quiet because of a lurking enemy sub to our front. We lay dead and quiet in the water for several hours waiting for the sub to clear the area. When it did, the captain poured on the coal, it was too fast for any sub. That is why we did not go in convoy. The sub detected us too late, the ship changed course several times...Nearing the coast of Scotland, a German recon plane spotted us and started circling out of our guns range, no doubt calling for subs. British flying boats came out and gave us cover.⁸⁹

Arriving on February 7, 1944 in Scotland, the battalion quickly moved to Wales, where it continued training. It spent two weeks practicing its work on indirect fire before being given the task of general base duties until July, when it received another two-week course on gunnery

⁸⁸ “Battalion Insignia”, *The Jerk*, No. 7, Dec. 24. Pg. 2.

⁸⁹ Memoir of Harry H. Morgan, “Dad’s Journal,” Dan Rabe Private Collection, Missouri.

skills.⁹⁰ The battalion was then ready to leave Great Britain for the Normandy coast. It left for France on August 7, 1944, and would land on Utah and Omaha beaches on the next day. The objective would be to reach the French town of Argentan, the southern pincer of a large envelopment around the German Seventh Army.⁹¹

After arriving in France on August 8, the 773rd TDB quickly began moving south towards Argentan. During the six days it took to reach the town, the 773rd TDB had its command changed. When the battalion first landed, it was assigned to the newly activated U.S. Third Army under General George S. Patton Jr., then attached to the XX Corps, and further attached to the 7th Armored Division. Following this initial attachment, the battalion was then moved to XV Corps, 5th TD Group on August 10. Its command would change two more times before the end of the Falaise Gap operations and are evidence of how hectic the weeks were from August 1-21.



[Figure 11] “Embarking for France.” Sergeant Ernie Rabe can be seen sitting on the turret of the M10 to the left.
(Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

⁹⁰ *Battalion History: 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion*, Unit history booklet, Courtesy of Diane Huggler.

⁹¹ The northern pincer was composed of the British Army 2nd Army (Canadians and Poles) who were moving toward the town of Falaise.

3) “Fit Via VI: The Way Is Made By Force”

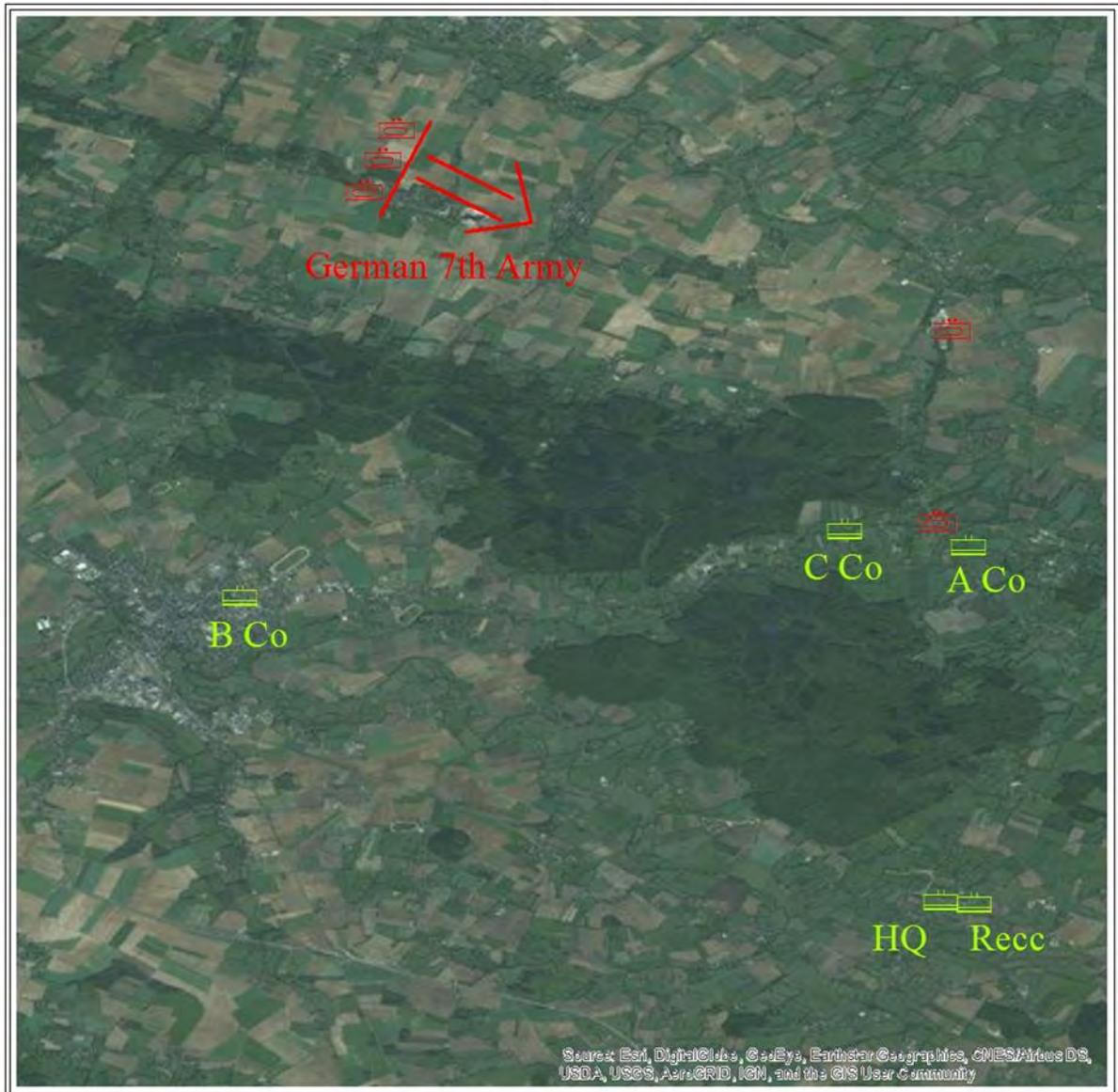
On August 14, the 773rd TDB arrived three miles southeast of its objective, the town of Argentan. The battalion then took up firing positions southwest and east of the town. They remained in this position until the morning of August 17. On August 16, while the gun companies remained in position, Reconnaissance Company was sent to the nearby town of Sai to investigate reports of German soldiers holding hostages in the town. These reports were true and after a brief fire-fight, the company liberated the town. While the 773rd TDB sat in Argentan, Allied high command decided to close the pocket farther east in the towns of Trun to the north and Chambois in the south.

The following day, the 773rd TDB was attached to the United States First Army and further attached to V Corps. The new objective for the 773rd TDB was to capture the town of Chambois. At 0030 hours, elements of the battalion began moving east to Chambois, but they had to take the town of Le Bourg Saint Leonard first.⁹² At 1600 hours, the attack on Le Bourg began with Company A and Company C taking the main roads entering the town from the south and east respectively.⁹³

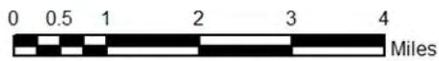
⁹² A and C companies were to support the 359th Infantry Regiment in an encirclement maneuver around the south, east and west of the town, pushing the Germans out of the north part of town.

⁹³ In the original plan, Company C was supposed to take the west road. However, they came across a blown bridge and a mine field. They lost an M10 in the mines.

17 August 1944



Source: Esri, DigitalGlobe, GeoEye, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS, USDA, USGS, AeroGRID, IGN, and the GIS User Community



Legend

-  US Units
-  German Units



[Map 1] Produced by Daniel Drennan

Le Bourg-St-Leonard is a small town located three miles south of Chambois. The town is flanked by a forest to the east and south, and the Dives River valley to the north and east. Le Bourge's placement in the area provided a commanding view of the valley, an artilleryman's dream.

Before entering the town from the south, 1st and 3rd Platoons from Company A used their 3-inch guns to open up with a five-minute preparatory artillery barrage to soften the enemy defenses. This is an artillery tactic based on indirect fire, a skill the 773rd TDB sharpened during its forty-two months of training, particularly while in Wales. After the barrage was concluded, 3rd platoon, Company A entered the town supporting 2/359th Infantry Regiment, while under heavy German artillery fire, and began searching for enemy armor.⁹⁴ From the east and also under heavy artillery fire, 3rd Platoon, Company C and 3rd Platoon, Recon Company, entered the town supporting the 1/359th Infantry Regiment. However, they did not open up a preparatory artillery barrage.⁹⁵

The encirclement worked. By 1930 hours, both companies had pushed across town, with 2nd Platoon of Company C passing through Company A's position, arriving at Company C's original objective, the western edge of the town.⁹⁶ Now in control of three sides of the Le Bourg, the Americans quickly pushed the Germans out of town. During the course of the few hours of fighting, Company A killed five *Panzerkampfwagen* (Pzkw) IV tanks and suffered fourteen casualties with two men killed. Company C killed one Pzkw IV, but lost one M10 to a mine, as

⁹⁴ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 5, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

⁹⁵ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

well as two injuries. The day's fighting was not over though. At 2300 hours, the Germans counterattacked, but they were quickly repulsed with Company A losing one M10.⁹⁷

At 0300 hours, a German artillery and rocket barrage opened on Companies A and C. However, during the previous evening, Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge, the commanding general of the German Army B in Normandy, had to move divisions from Le Bourg farther north to defend against the British Second Army while the rest of the army escaped east towards the Seine River.⁹⁸ Because of the lack of troops in the Le Bourg area, the Germans were not able to follow up their barrage with a counter-attack. The barrage did manage to knock out a M10 from Company C, killing three crew members and injuring two others.

Instead of attacking, the Germans moved to reinforce the main road from Le Bourg to Chambois. At 0730 hours, instead of attacking the reinforced German position, 3rd Platoon, Company C, while supporting 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry Regiment (IR), avoided the road, choosing to move along the Gouffern Forest, to the town of Fougy, northwest of their position.⁹⁹ The mission for the Americans was to take "Hill 129," a position which would give them a "commanding view of the western approaches to Chambois."¹⁰⁰ Once the hill was taken, the Americans could see that the east-west road below them was full of retreating German vehicles.¹⁰¹ At 1100 hours, while on Hill 129, 3rd Platoon followed doctrinal practice, staying in

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁸ Second Army was now moving south towards the towns of Trun, then finally to Chambois to close the Falaise Gap.

⁹⁹ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 7, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

the rear waiting for a counter-attack as corps and divisional artillery unleashed a barrage on the vehicles below.¹⁰²

While 3rd Platoon was moving to Hill 129, 2nd Platoon, Company C was moving from its position on the western edge of town to a new position in the north of town. This new position came in the form of an “S” curved road near the town church. The platoon then set up its M10s in a formation on the road similar to the guidance in FM 18-20: two guns on either side of the road, so interlocking fire was provided to protect each gun.¹⁰³

Platoon leader Lieutenant Charles von Behren knew that there was an enemy Panzer IV in the area. A bazooka team had been sent out to dispatch it earlier, but failed. An officer from the 359th ID was killed in his jeep by the tank, spurring Lieutenant von Behren into action. Going against doctrine, 2nd Platoon began slowly moving up the road, searching for the enemy tank. It was soon located and destroyed with one armor piercing (AP) shell.¹⁰⁴ While not strictly following doctrine, 2nd Platoon was able to complete its primary mission.

At 1930 hours, 2nd Platoon was ordered one mile north, toward Fougy, with 2nd Battalion of the 359th Infantry Regiment. Here, the platoon set up in an adequate firing position and awaited further orders. Not long after arriving in the new position, a German counter-attack began. 2nd Platoon took out two panzers, while another, after being crippled, managed to get away.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² U.S. War Department, FM 18-20, *Tactical Employment of Tank Destroyer Platoon Self-Propelled*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 74.

¹⁰³ U.S. War Department, FM 18-20, *Tactical Employment of Tank Destroyer Platoon Self-Propelled*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 42.

¹⁰⁴ Untitled manuscript, “Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise,” pg. 8, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹⁰⁵ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

Company C saw the most action throughout the day. Company A remained in Le Bourg, guarding key areas around town. Company B remained south of Argentan until 2100 hours, when the company was relieved by the 610th and 893rd Tank Destroyer Battalions. 2nd and 3rd Platoons, Reconnaissance Company, moved north to the towns of Fel and Chambois. Their mission was to locate firing positions, routes, and enemy tank approaches, specifically for Company B.¹⁰⁶

For the German Army in Normandy, August 18 was a dark day. First, the Canadians and Poles of the British Second Army captured Trun and began moving south towards Chambois. Second, the Americans were moving on Chambois from the south. Third, from three sides (north, south, and west) the German 7th Army was being bombarded by Allied artillery. The Falaise Gap was closing quickly on the Germans, and the Americans planned a large attack planned for August 19. The goal was to fight its way east and out of the closing Allied trap. Seventh Army was chosen to hold the gap open at Chambois, while the remainder of Army Group B escaped. On August 19, all five panzer divisions of 7th Army went into the attack at Chambois.¹⁰⁷

Company B began moving from its position at Argentan to its new objective: the high ground northeast of Chambois. The company, along with two platoons from Recon Company, crossed the Dives River and found 3rd Battalion, 359th Infantry Regiment, under attack by German infantry and armor. Personally led by its company commander, Captain William. B. Patterson, 1st Platoon stopped the German attack, destroying two tanks, two ammunition trucks, a staff car, an occupied house, and fired HE (high explosive) shot directly into German infantry.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 9, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

By the end of the skirmish, four hundred enemy troops were in American hands, and the high ground was secured.¹⁰⁸

Back on Hill 129, the M-10s of Lieutenant Nicholas V. Allender's 3rd Platoon became dangerously low on ammunition. Captain John J. Kelly, Company C commander, decided that 3rd Platoon would be relieved by Lieutenant Joseph M. Michaels and his 1st Platoon.¹⁰⁹ While on top of Hill 129, 1st Platoon located a long column from 1st SS Panzer Division as it moved east, towards Chambois, and opened a barrage of fire on the column. While this was happening, 3rd Platoon had resupplied and was linking up with 1st Battalion, 359th Infantry Regiment north of the town of Fougy.

The battle of Chambois had begun. Lieutenant von Behren's 2nd Platoon, Company C, 773rd TDB along with 2nd Battalion, 359th Infantry Regiment had the mission of taking the town. At 1600 hours, both groups reached the town and began their assault. Acting in the secondary role of assault gun,¹¹⁰ the TDs began the offensive by firing on fortified houses on the edge of the town. The Americans began to move into Chambois, where they met up with elements of the 1st Polish Division, part of the British Second Army. Private Raymond E. Almond, Recon Company, remembered seeing the Polish soldiers in action during the fighting around Chambois. His daughter Diane recounts him telling her "I remember the shoulder flashes that said Polish, they fought hard."¹¹¹ The Falaise Gap was finally closed, but the fighting was not over yet.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹⁰⁹ 1st Platoon consisted of 3 M-10s and had been in reserve since the previous day.

¹¹⁰ U.S. War Department, FM 18-5, *Tactical Employment Tank Destroyer Unit* (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 5.

¹¹¹ Private interview with Diane Huggler, done by Logan Gross.

¹¹² The last Germans would not be expelled from Chambois until 1930 hours.

With Chambois in Allied hands, the goal changed to holding it. A defensive line was created by American and Polish forces, with von Berhn's 2nd Platoon playing a vital role. 2nd Platoon was positioned along the northern and western approaches of the town.¹¹³ At 1800 hours, 2nd Platoon was embroiled in a fierce battle against 1st SS Panzer Division, the same unit 1st Platoon was firing on from Hill 129. When the battle finally ended at 2300 hours, 1st and 2nd Platoons accounted for two Pzkw V tanks, eight Pzkw IVs, two Pzkw IIIs, a self-propelled gun, and some twenty other vehicles.¹¹⁴

The dawn of August 20 found the 773rd TDB in different locations around Chambois. Company C found itself between three different areas around Chambois. 1st Platoon was atop Hill 129, west of Chambois. 2nd Platoon, which participated in the capture of Chambois, took up positions along the northern and western approaches of the town. 3rd Platoon was northwest of Fougy, between Le Bourg and Chambois. Company B had the same issue as Company C. 1st Platoon, by midnight of August 20, had secured a position looking over the northeast exit of Chambois. 2nd and 3rd Platoons, along with 2nd Platoon, Recon Company, maintained positions of readiness southeast at Fel. Company A was still south at Le Bourg along with the rest of Recon Company and Headquarters Company.

¹¹³ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 11, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

00:30 20 August 1944



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Legend

-  US Units
-  German Units



[Map 2] Produced by Daniel Drennan

August 20 would be the final day in the battle to secure the Falaise Gap. It was a rain filled day, which led to a lack of air support. At 0500 hours, 1st Platoon, Company C on Hill 129, found themselves surrounded by armor from the 1st SS Panzer Division. An intense fight began when Lieutenant Michaels ordered his three guns to open fire on the advancing Germans. This engagement lasted until around 0800 hours when the platoon, due to no ammunition, was forced to withdraw from its position. The platoon headed south to the company CP where it refueled and resupplied.

Prior to its withdrawal from Hill 129, 1st Platoon was subjected to an intense fight. During the course of the fighting, the M10 commanded by Sergeant Ernie Rabe was hit. Three of the five man crew were injured in the blast, leaving Sergeant Rabe and Private Ira Conklin to both evacuate the wounded and complete the destruction of the damaged M10.¹¹⁵ While Sergeant Rabe got the wounded men out of the area, Private Conklin returned to the M10 where he saw four remaining shells of HE ammunition. He loaded, aimed, and fired all four shots at the quickly advancing German infantry. Private Conklin killed forty infantrymen with the 3-inch gun before completing the destruction of the M10 and escaping.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, another M10 crew was under serious attack by two Pzkw V Panther tanks and three Pzkw IV. Sergeant Aubrey Rayburn, the gun commander, directed the fire for his crew “skillfully,” which ended with all five tanks being knocked out, as well as an 88mm SP gun and the capture of twenty-five infantrymen.¹¹⁷ Sergeant Rayburn was awarded the Silver Star for this action.

¹¹⁵ This was standard practice. This was to ensure that the weapon would not fall into enemy hands where it could be turned against the original owners.

¹¹⁶ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks

¹¹⁷ General Orders no. 230. December 24, 1944.

http://www.tankdestroyer.net/images/stories/ArticlePDFs2/773rd_Award_Orders-4_pages.pdf

Lieutenant Michaels now only had two TDs left in his platoon with no ammunition between the two of them. Despite attempts by Sergeant Ely, the battalion ammunition sergeant, to resupply the platoon, he was only able to get to company CP due to the fighting. There was also a delay with the platoon that was sent to relieve them. At 0800 hours, 1st Platoon withdrew towards C.P.¹¹⁸

While 1st Platoon was leaving Hill 129, 3rd Platoon, Company C, spotted a German column moving past its position north of Fougy. Once the column got within close range, Lieutenant Allender ordered his four guns to open fire.¹¹⁹ The column did not try to counter-fire, instead choosing to push further east trying desperately to escape the pocket. At 1130 hours, when the barrage was called off, one PZKW V, twelve PZKW IVs, two 88mm SP guns, and twenty-two other vehicles were destroyed.¹²⁰

As Lieutenant Michaels was moving down Hill 129, 1st Platoon, Company A was fighting its way from Le Bourg to relieve the TDs on the hill. Before the platoon arrived, Lieutenant Delbert G. Reck spotted a large column of mixed vehicles moving towards Hill 129. Lieutenant Reck had his four guns take up positions behind some nearby hedgerows where they began firing on the Germans. It did not take long for the Germans to answer in kind, unleashing a heavy barrage of fire on the American position. "If you can picture hell as fire and brimstone," Private Harry Morgan later recalled, "then, you truly have the picture [of the battle]."¹²¹ The M10s began using the "shoot and scoot" tactic laid out in FM 18-5 (1942). The use of this tactic led to the additional benefit of making the Germans believe they were up against a large force.

¹¹⁸ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹¹⁹ This is an example of following doctrine in the battle. A TD is to wait until the enemy is within close range before opening fire on it to maximize destruction.

¹²⁰ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹²¹ Memoir of Harry H. Morgan, "Dad's Journal," Dan Rabe Private Collection, Missouri.

This engagement lasted three hours and ended with the destruction of one PZKW V tank, seven PZKW IV tanks, sixteen armored cars, nineteen half-tracks, ten field guns, two AA (anti-aircraft) guns, four *nebelwerfers* (rocket launchers), and sixty-eight other vehicles, along with the capture of nine hundred prisoners.¹²²

During this engagement, Lieutenant Reck and Staff Sergeant Edward Land began directing the fire of each gun. Moving to each position, both men manned the .50 caliber machine guns when possible. Under the intense circumstances, each man kept calm, giving clear and precise directions. For their actions during this fight, Lieutenant Reck and Staff Sergeant Land were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.¹²³ Once the path was clear of enemy troops, assisted by 3rd Platoon, Company A, who came to help 1st Platoon, Hill 129 was open for both platoons to inhabit. During their climb, four more Mark IV tanks were destroyed.

While the battle was raging south of Chambois, 2nd Platoon, Company C remained in its position covering the northern entrance to Chambois. This sector saw heavy fighting the whole day. 2nd Panzer Division began a breakout attack directed between Chambois and St. Lambert to the north.¹²⁴ This attack hit the Canadians and Poles at St. Lambert and slammed into 2nd Platoon at Chambois.

When 2nd Platoon deployed north of Chambois the night before, it only had one fully functioning TD. The TD commanded by Sergeant Louis S. Schimpf was parked behind a stone wall near the intersection of the main Chambois road and a farm track, with a farm house behind

¹²² Yeide, *The Tank Killers*, 153.

¹²³ "Newsworthy activities of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion," December 16, 1944, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹²⁴ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 15, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

it.¹²⁵ This position gave the crew a commanding view of the fields around it, the fields the 2nd Panzer Division planned to use to escape the pocket.

All morning, this TD was in action against small groups of German infantry. However, early in the afternoon, a mixed column of German armor from the 2nd SS Panzer Division began rolling south, down the main road between Trun and Chambois. Seeing this column, led by three Panzer Mark Vs, Sergeant Schimpf had his crew silence the gun until the Germans moved into the trap. It was sprung and within seconds the lead tank was immobilized, causing the column to become stuck on the road. Under heavy and successive fire from the single gun, the Germans desperately tried to escape. By 1700 hours, this engagement was over, leaving destroyed all three Mark V Panthers, seven Mark IVs, two Mark IIIs, twenty-seven various other vehicles, and three SP guns.¹²⁶ Along with these victories, Sergeant Schimpf and his crew helped capture five hundred to one thousand enemy including a brigade commander. For these acts, Sgt. Louis Schimpf, Corporal Edward Bundle, and Private First Class Eric Nelson were awarded the Bronze Star.¹²⁷

During the battle, Company E, 359th Infantry Regiment was fighting off an armored attack. During the battle two TDs, possibly from Lieutenant John Snyder's 2nd Platoon, Company A, rolled into the area and began firing at the enemy tanks with no effect. Seeing this action, machine-gunner Sergeant John Hawk, 359th Infantry Regiment, took action.

Our mission was to stop everything from getting out through the gap. The Germans had to stick to the roads to get out and we cut them off. It was, the worst carnage you could imagine. There were a lot of roads that were totally impassable with wreckage, so they had to try and come through the orchards. We were attacking and they were defending,

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁶ Untitled manuscript, "Into the Breach...Filling the Gap at Falaise," pg. 14-15, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹²⁷ General Order no. 230. December 24, 1944.

http://www.tankdestroyer.net/images/stories/ArticlePDFs2/773rd_Award_Orders-4_pages.pdf

and of course to their advantage, they knew every patch of ground we were on and we didn't know what was in front of us.

We collected back up away to see what we could do. I was reconing through the bushes and found a lone infantryman with a bazooka rocket, but he's got nobody with him. [I] said 'what are you doing,' and he said, 'I'm trying to get these tanks that in the brush over there, but I've got no back up and I have to put it [the bazooka] down to load it.' I said, 'well, I'll back you' and I loaded and defended him, he started shooting and used up all his rockets, the tanks that were in the bushes left."¹²⁸

Although the enemy had been driven off, Sergeant Hawk's position was still surrounded by superior enemy forces. During this time, Sergeant Hawk was wounded in the leg. TDs from the 773rd TBD rolled toward Sergeant Hawk's position, but were stopped by the fighting around a dried up stream.

Our position was, we were on one side of the field back with the tank destroyers [773rd TDB] and the Germans were on the other side. This stream bed, which was about fifteen or twenty feet deep was in the middle and there was no way a tank could get across it. And Tanks behind us and tanks in front of us with visibility how it was, the tank destroyers wouldn't see them. Can't see them, can't shoot them. Well, I could see them and I knew darn well.

You aren't thinking of the consequences, you kind of think of a solution. If you're standing in the middle, you could see both ways, and I said, 'if I line you up, will you shoot and then we'll correct.'

I exposed myself standing out there trying to look like a fence post in the orchard. Say 'go twenty feet to the left, raise it up three feet, something like that. And, these guys are good, they were good. They'd put, like an armor piercing, right through a building, and uh, then they would put another one in right behind it, a HE [high explosive]. The Germans were getting shot by somebody they couldn't see. So we knocked out a couple of them and the other backed off, and uh, it was literally the turning point of the whole battle."¹²⁹

Not long after driving off the last tank, Sergeant Hawk was wounded a second time while attacking another tank. He was taken to an aid station by members of the 773rd TDB. Sergeant Hawk was later awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions at Chambois.

¹²⁸ Oral history of Sergeant John Hawk done by Brian Williams, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-bPDvrXNSQ&t=44s>. Transcribed by Logan Gross.

¹²⁹ Oral history of Sergeant John Hawk done by Brian Williams, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-bPDvrXNSQ&t=44s>. Transcribed by Logan Gross.

Various movements by other units of the 773rd TDB were made throughout the day. By 1700, 2nd Platoon, Company A, moved into position on the northern edge of Chambois, reinforcing 2nd Platoon, Company C. At 1900 hours, 1st Platoon, Company C, now refueled, resupplied, and given another TD (giving the platoon 3 guns) also moved to north Chambois to further reinforce the position. During the early morning fighting, 2nd Platoon, Recon Company, managed to capture a cipher device, which was sent to England. 3rd Platoon, Recon Company, assisted in holding back an attempted breakthrough near Company CP. The remainder of Recon Company spent the day rounding up prisoners around Fel and Fougy.¹³⁰

Even Lieutenant Colonel Spiess, the battalion commander, found himself in action. By 1015 hours, 1st Platoon, Company A was on Hill 129, however, their exact location was unknown to HQ. Lieutenant Colonel Spiess decided to investigate, bringing the battalion S-3 and a guide from Company C CP. They arrived at the missing platoons' position southeast of Hill 129. While there, Lieutenant Colonel Spiess helped capture forty German soldiers as well as a staff car, which was searched for papers.¹³¹

¹³⁰ After-action report of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion, Col. Spiess Collection, Jackson Barracks.

¹³¹ S-3 is the battalion operations staff officer.



[Figure 12] Lieutenant Col. Spiess in a captured German staff car, *kubelwagen*, during the Battle of Chambois 8/20/1944 (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)



[Figure 13] "A column of captured German prisoners," taken during the battle of Chambois (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

By the end of the day, the remaining German units still inside the pocket began surrendering, ending the fighting in Normandy. Once relieved on August 22nd, members of the 773rd TDB were able to walk around and see the effects of their actions. Private Robert E. Almond of Recon Company remembered the smell in particular.

Well, the one [battle] is most memorable is the one at the first action, our first combat, and I mean, you can't explain it to anybody that wasn't there. In one section of dead German soldiers, and they still had horse drawn artillery, the [smell of the] animals and the men combined were so bad that the artillery spotters that were flying above, they were throwing up because of the stench of it. You couldn't take two steps in any direction without stepping on a dead body of a soldier. You couldn't describe it.¹³²



[Figure 14] Pvt. Robert Almond near Zella-Mehlis, Germany, April 1945 (Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks)

¹³² Interview with Robert Almond done by Hannah Farwell, Diane Hugglar Private Collection, New York.

Another soldier came through to see the results of the fighting in the Falaise Pocket. He was the Supreme Commander Allied Forces, General Dwight D. Eisenhower:

The battlefield at Falaise was unquestionably one of the greatest 'killing grounds' of any of the war's areas. Roads, highways, and fields were so choked with destroyed equipment and with dead men and animals that passage through the area was extremely difficult. Forty-eight hours after the closing of the gap I was conducted through it on foot, to encounter scenes that could be described only by Dante. It was literally possible to walk for hundreds of yards at a time, stepping on nothing but dead and decaying flesh.¹³³

August 20 was the last day of fighting during the operations to close the Falaise Gap. On August 21, 1944, the 773rd TDB was relieved of its positions around the Chambois area. In the four days between August 16 and August 20, the 773rd TDB "inflicted staggering losses upon the enemy, attacking them relentlessly wherever they were encountered, contemptuous of overwhelming odds."¹³⁴ At the end of the battle, forty-one German tanks, eighty-two other vehicles, and many artillery pieces laid destroyed along the roads between Le Bourg St. Leonard and Chambois. The 773rd TBD later received a Presidential Unit Citation (PUC) for its actions around Le Bourg St. Leonard and Chambois.

¹³³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1948), 279.

¹³⁴ General Orders no. 27 February 1, 1945, Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

4) Conclusion

Since the end of World War II, many historians and government studies have classified tank destroyer doctrine as faulty. There have been numerous studies done on the topic; all reached the same conclusion. There are different rationales behind these conclusions: inadequate equipment, misuse of the asset that was the TD by higher commanders, and an inflexible doctrine.

Due to the nature of fighting and terrain during the Normandy Campaign, certain elements of TD doctrine became impossible to follow. This is true for the 773rd TDB during the Battle of Chambois. Instead of remaining in the rear as a reserve unit, the 773rd TDB was positioned as front line defense. Further, the 773rd TDB was spread around Chambois instead of being concentrated in one area. However, the 773rd TDB also employed other, equally important, elements of TD doctrine. These elements range from mobile employment, or “shoot and scoot,” to the mantra for anti-tank operations: offensive spirit.

During the battle to close Chambois as an exit for German Seventh Army, members of the 773rd TDB applied segments of doctrine, as well as aspects of training in artillery functions, to keep the area closed. First, TD doctrine demanded the application of “offensive” tactics. When reading FM 18-5, it seems as though the offensive spirit possesses defensive undertones. TDBs, coming from the artillery not the Armored Force, use tactics more akin to a mobile artillery battery. TDs stayed in the reserve, near artillery, participated in artillery barrages (an offensive tactic), and moved from position to position on the field. This offensive spirit was shown on August 20, by Sergeant Schimpf’s TD crew, on August 18 by Lieutenant von Behren when searching for an enemy tank in Le Bourg St. Leonard, on August 20 by Sergeant Rabe and Private Conklin as they continued to fire on enemy infantry even after their crew had been

seriously wounded, and finally, on August 20 when Lieutenant Reck and Sergeant Land who moved from gun to gun, calmly and skillfully directing the fire from the platoon.

The 773rd TDB also employed ambush tactics in several instances during the Chambois battle. Sergeant Schimpf's TD crew north of Chambois is an example of this. By August 20, the M-10 under Sergeant Schimpf was the last fully functioning gun in 2nd Platoon, Company C. Sergeant Schimpf had his gun positioned behind a stone wall, concealed from enemy armor coming down the north road toward Chambois. This move was successful, when, on the afternoon of August 20, a column from 2nd SS Panzer Division began moving down the road, and Sergeant Schimpf was able to ambush and destroy much of the column. Another example of successful ambush tactics was performed by 3rd Platoon, Company C. On the morning of August 20, Lieutenant Allender witnessed a German column moving between his platoon's position and Hill 129. His platoon managed to attack the column without being fired on in return. A final example of a successful ambush came from 1st Platoon, Company A. On route to take over Hill 129, this platoon took up hasty positions behind nearby hedgerows and began firing at a large German column also moving up the hill. Although they received heavy fire, no guns were damaged, and the M-10s were soon on the move, destroying any remaining tanks on their way to Hill 129.

The "shoot and scoot" tactic was successfully used by 1st Platoon, Company A during the same engagement just described. The use of this tactic not only kept enemy shells and small arms fire from destroying the M-10s, but it also had the added effect of making the Germans believe they were against a superior force. 1st and 2nd Platoons then followed movement patterns described in FM 18-20 to reach the top of Hill 129. This movement involved each platoon leap

frogging the previous platoon, covering each gun as the other moved. When able to, defense in depth was applied to create deeper screen of artillery fire, and added flank cover.

Secondary missions given to TDs in FM 18-5 (1944) were also met at Chambois. Indirect fire was heavily employed at Hill 129. 1st Platoon, Company C and later 1st Platoon, Company A provided extra artillery fire to the other 15 batteries of III Battalion, 359th IR. This was an example of indirect fire. On August 20, 2nd Platoon, Company C provided direct fire during the attack on Chambois proper. Not only did it provide direct fire on enemy armor and artillery in the town, but they also acted assault gun on enemy pill boxes in the form of reinforced houses.

Finally, the 773rd TDB implemented its training well on the field. Sergeant Hawk's comments on the TDs speak to the level of proficiency the 773rd TDB displayed in the battle. He remembers them as being "very good" and after the TDs had destroyed two tanks and scared off another, Hawk said that "that was literally the turning point of the battle."¹³⁵ Not only does this demonstrate the skill of the TD crews, but it also speaks to their ability to work well with inter-arms combat. Another report, this one from 5th Tank Destroyer Group commander, Colonel Leslie E. Jacoby, gives an idea of how important TDs were in inter-arm warfare:¹³⁶

What is not in the field manuals on tank destroyer use is the effective support which they render to a fighting infantry at the time of actual combat. An infantryman has his fortitude well tested and the mere presence of self-propelled tank destroyers in his immediate vicinity give a tremendous shot of courage to the committed infantryman. For example, at Chambois (during the closing of the Falaise Gap in August 1944), an infantry battalion moved towards the town with utter fearlessness to enemy artillery, mortar, and small arms fire when accompanied by some M10s. However, the M10s were delayed in crossing a stream for about thirty-five minutes. During the time, the infantry battalion continued to their objective which dominated a roadway leading to Chambois. They fought infantry, they bazooka-ed some armored vehicles including three tanks on the road, but on realizing that the M10s weren't firing, they started a retirement. Leading the

¹³⁵ Oral history of Sergeant John Hawk done by Brian Williams, "Medal of Honor Book," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4-bPDvrXNSQ&t=44s>. Transcribed by Logan Gross.

¹³⁶ In the 5th TD Group, the 773rd TDB was apply given the code name "Hellfire."

parade to the rear was a short lad known as 'Shorty.' Shorty in the lead was the first man to see a platoon of M10s who had finally gotten across the stream. Shorty took a good look at the M10s, turned around, and shouted to the other men, 'Hell boys, what are we retiring for, here comes the TDs!' The entire company in mass immediately reversed their direction and returned to their excellent positions, and to say they fought for the next few hours with unusual bravery is stating it mildly. The point I am trying to make is that the appearance and the knowledge that self-propelled tank destroyers were at hand was a major reason that the infantry attained success and victory. Often men die or suffer to retain or exploit IF the inspiration furnished by the presence of self-propelled tank destroyers in known...¹³⁷

The 773rd TDB proved its value in the battle at Chambois. In the battalion's first combat experience, it won a coveted Presidential Unit Citation. The men of the 773rd TDB showed skill and spirit during the battle at Chambois. During the Battle of the Falaise Pocket, the 773rd TDB suffered six enlisted men killed, four officers and twenty-seven enlisted men wounded, while also suffering ten M10s damaged but returned to battle, and four M10s destroyed. It continued to show its usefulness through the rest of the war. Moving through the Lorraine region of France, through the Battle of the Bulge, across the Rhine, through Germany, and finally, in Czechoslovakia, the men of the 773rd TDB never faltered in their duty. At the end of World War II, when Tank Destroyer Force was disappeared, the 773rd TDB became the 773rd Tank Battalion and served in Korea. However, it was its stubborn defense of Chambois that cemented its place in history.

¹³⁷ Zaloga. *M10 and M36*, 22. Although Col. Jacoby does not mention the TDB by name, the 773rd TDB was the only SP TDB in the Chambois area during the battle.

Appendix A

773rd Citation

WAR DEPARTMENT
Washington 25, D.C. 2 April 1945

GENERAL ORDERS }
NO. 22 }

X-T-R-A-C-T

BATTLE HONORS -- Citation of units..... Section XII

XII -- BATTLE HONORS. -- AS authorized by Executive Order No. 9396 (sec. I, Bul. 22, WD, 1943), superseding Executive Order No. 9075 (sec III, Bul. 11, WD, 1943), citation of the following unit in General Orders, No. 27, Headquarters Third United States Army, 1 February 1945, as approved by the Commanding General, European Theater of Operations, are confirmed under the provisions of section IV, Circular No. 333, War Department, 1943, in the name of the President of the United States as public evidence of deserved honor and distinction. The citation reads as follows:

"The 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion distinguished itself by its outstanding, heroic achievements during the final phases of operations to close the Argentan-Falaise pocket. Assigned to close support of the 90th Infantry Division in action centered in and around Le Bourg St. Leonard-Chambois, France, during the period 17 August to 22 August 1944, the battalion inflicted staggering losses upon the enemy, attacking them relentlessly wherever they were encountered, contemptuous of overwhelming odds. In this bold action, a total of 41 enemy tanks, including 5 Mark V tanks, 82 other vehicles of various types, and many artillery pieces were destroyed. The brilliant accomplishments of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion and the courageous determination and conspicuous heroism, many times displayed by each member, are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States.

By order of the Secretary of War:

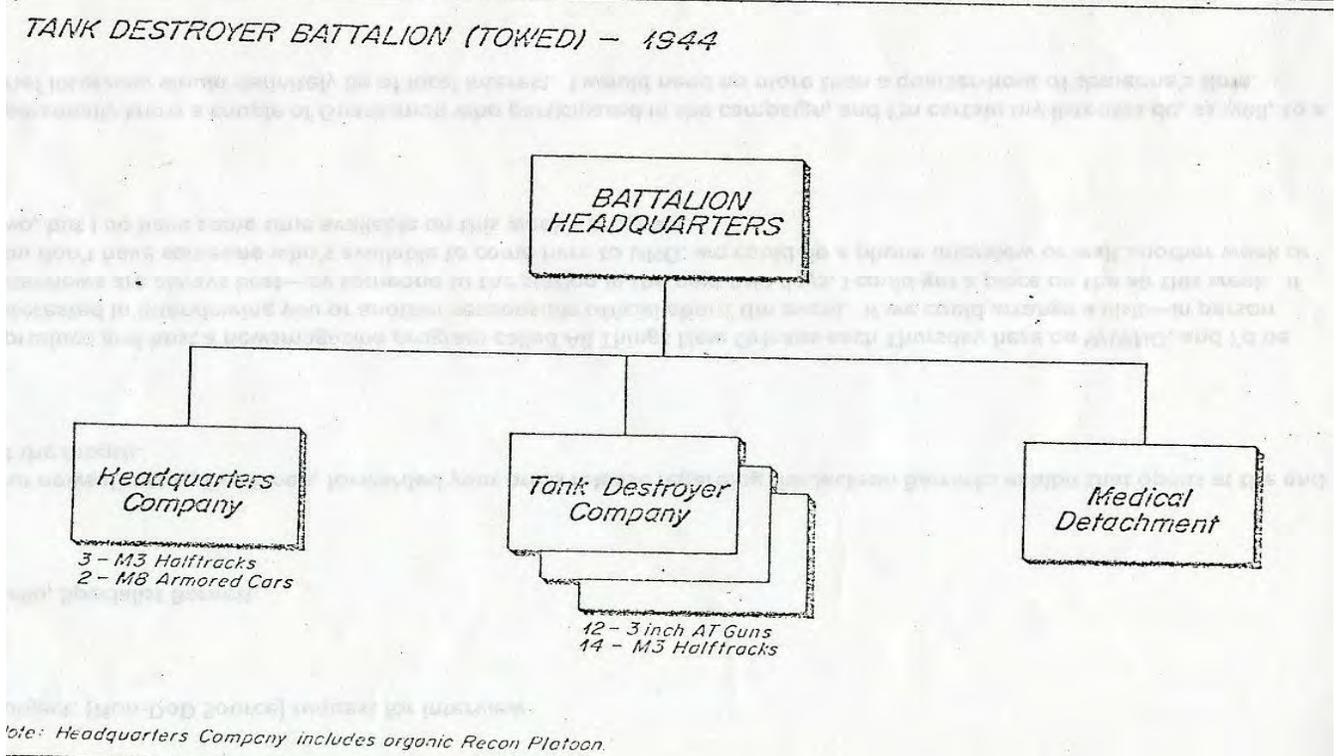
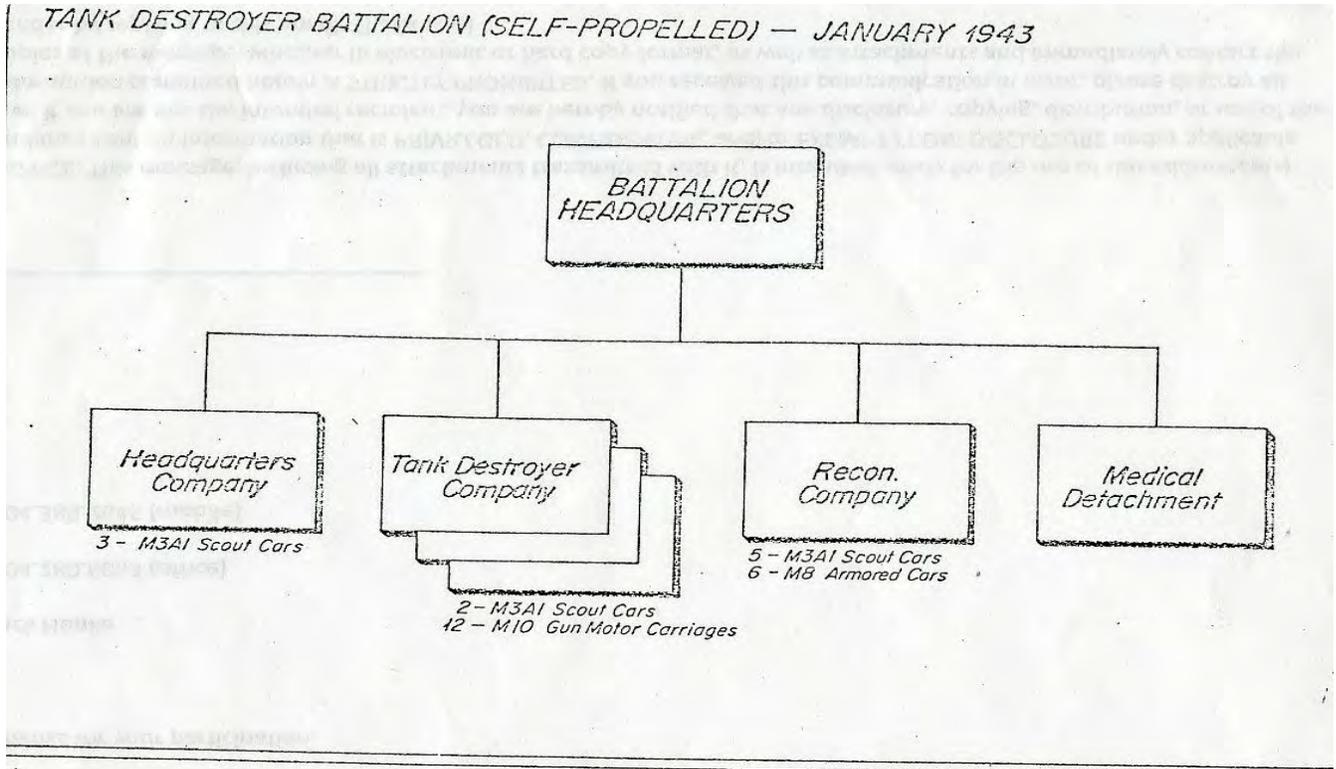
Official:

J. A. ULIO
Major General
The Adjutant General

G. C. MARSHALL
Chief of Staff

Appendix B

Tank Destroyer Battalion Organization, 1943



Appendix C

Chain of Command 773rd TDB August 8, 1944

Battalion Headquarters

Lt. Col. Frank G. Spiess.....C.O.
Major Robert L. Moore.....Executive
Capt. John Maida.....S-1
Capt. Ellwood H. Furst.....S-2
Capt. George I. Blomquist.....S-3
Capt. Lynn F. Williams.....S-4

Headquarters Company

Capt. Kenneth F. Lanz.....C.O.
Mr. Ward C. Johnson.....Pres. O.
2nd Lt. Richard D. Hagar.....Executive
1st Lt. George H. Beckmann.....LNO No. 1
1st Lt. Wm. R. ZheutlinLNO No. 2
Vacant.....Trans. O.
1st Lt. John Sharp Jr.....Motor O.
1st Lt. John T. McMahon.....Comm. O.

Reconnaissance Company

Capt. Howard R. Emhardt.....C.O.
1st Lt. Thomas M. Michaels.....Executive
1st Lt. John O. Sharp.....Pnr. Pltn
2nd Lt. Leon M. Wood.....1st Pltn
2nd Lt. Walter E. Schewe.....2nd Pltn
2nd Lt. Charles Thompson.....3rd Pltn

Company A

Capt. Wilton J. Richard.....C.O.
1st Lt. Delbert G. Reck.....+1st Pltn

1st Lt. John W. Snider.....2nd Pltn
1st Lt. William J. Maus.....3rd Pltn
2nd Lt. Cyril A. Trust.....Executive

Company B

Capt. Wm. B. Paterson.....C.O.
1st Lt. Benjamin W. Philips.....+1st Pltn
1st Lt. Kenneth C. Sutter.....2nd Pltn
2nd Lt. Robert B. McKenna Jr.....3rd Pltn
2nd Lt. William J. Vargo.....Executive

Company C

1st. Lt. John J. Kelly.....C.O.
1st Lt. Joseph M. Michaels.....+1st Pltn
1st Lt. Charley H. Von Behren.....2nd Pltn
1st Lt. Nicholas V. Allender.....3rd Pltn
2nd Lt. Gus Sakellaris.....Executive

Medical Detachment

Capt. John D Singer.....Bn. Surgeon

[+ = Second in Command]

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Archive Collections

Dan Rabe Private Collection. Collection is in Missouri. Use with the permission of the family.

Diane Huggler Private Collection. Collection is in New York. Use with the permission of the family.

Frank Spiess Jr. Collection, Jackson Barracks.

Frank Spiess III Collection, Jackson Barracks.

Oral Histories

Private interview with Diane Huggler, done by Logan Gross.

Oral history of Sergeant John Hawk, interviewed by Brian Williams,
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Maps generated by Daniel Drennan

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Vita

Born in 1990 in Metairie, Louisiana, Logan Gross would graduate from John Curtis Christian School in 2009. He then graduated from Loyola University New Orleans in 2009 with a BA in music industry studies. Logan is an avid performer of classical and jazz music, and currently plays trumpet in the New Orleans Civic Symphony.