

THE LAST FEW DAYS OF WWII FOR THE
2ND PLATOON OF B-COMPANY
805TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

BY: BILL OETTLE

Nothing has been said or written about the accomplishments of my platoon during the final days of WWII. Well, guess what! I'll proceed to enlighten you. Please bare with me.

These happenings that I will mention are by no means the whole story. Much much more took place. Many instances that happened 53 years ago are too vague in my mind to write them with much accuracy. I don't know if the chronological order of this information is completely correct, but I believe the incidences are.

The setting finds me just returning from a few days rest in Florence, Italy. My 2nd Platoon had pulled back off the line for some maintenance on the destroyers and rest for the men. It was now in the process of moving into position about to come face to face with the Germans again.

My platoon was ready to move up a few more yards when we received word that President Roosevelt had died. That night we made our move; the Germans had the curved mountain road zeroed in with their mortars. It was no "picnic".

After a day or so, one of my two buddies, Harold Jones, was wounded when his Tank Destroyer hit a trip-wire that set off a "Bouncing Betty Mine". Four of the crew were wounded. They were: Lt. Jennings, Sgt. Peterson, Pfc. Beiser, and Jones. Harold was hit hard behind his right ear in his neck and head and remained out of the war.

About that time, we were getting ready to leave the Apennine Mountains. At night we slept under our Tank Destroyer for protection. We were near the crest of a mountain, and an aerial burst shell aimed for the enemy exploded over us. Shrapnel from it ripped open one of our five gallon water cans.

We then left the mountains advancing northward toward Bologna. My TD was the very first one to enter the city. B-Co. 2nd Platoon's Tank Destroyers were first. I believe Leo Bower's group entered just behind ours. We parked right by a large sewer plate in the center of the street. Some Italians said the Germans had placed large quantities of explosives there. None were found. I imagine that was a stalling tactic by the enemy.

While we were there, a jeep hit an anti-tank mine on the out-skirts of town. I believe, 1st Lt. Ewaska, the commanding Officer of A-Co. was killed and the driver, Pfc. Grabb, was wounded.

After leaving Bologna, my platoon helped to capture many Germans. Several

of them held up their hands and yelled comrade. We'd just send them back toward the rear with approximately two infantry soldiers guarding them. This happened all along the way during the remainder of our spear heading.

I had taken a large amount of loot off some prisoners. Such items were: three watches, two generating flash lights, a beautiful camera and over \$200.00. I didn't have the camera long. A 2nd Lt. traded me a German P 38 for it. When the war ended, pistols were piled up, but cameras weren't. "Shucks".

When we arrived at the Po River, the Sherman Tanks couldn't cross. There was no bridge and that little ferry boat couldn't haul them. So guess what! 1st Lt. McClellan said, "Let's go." He went first in the second TD. My Tank Destroyer crossed next. When our four TDs and the Recon car got across with several dozen infantry soldiers, we started up over the levee. Just as we got up on the highway we saw two or three Germans run into a large barn. Our cannons blasted it, the roof fell in, it began to burn and we had killed all the Germans and knocked out an 88 anti-tank gun before it fired a shot. The element of surprise saved some of us our lives. The German soldiers didn't realize that we could cross the Po River on that tiny ferry boat.

On the way toward Verona, the 2nd Platoon of B-Co. moved on. My TD, with Andrew J. Pruitt at the controls, developed spark plug trouble. Carl Troutman or some of his mechanics replaced them.

We started to catch up and managed to arrive in second position when the Germans opened up on the No. 2 TD with two 20mm Ak-Ak guns. They shot a hole right in the front end of the TD. Infantry soldiers scattered, and our 76mm guns opened up. The Ak-Ak guns were destroyed and almost all the Germans were killed. One came down along the left side of the road carrying a white flag and a shrapnel damaged bloody Nazi flag. I almost jumped out to get it but hesitated a few seconds too long, and an infantry 2nd Lt. got it. That German was pretty badly injured. It was a miracle that no one on the TD was seriously wounded or killed. The assistant driver jumped up during the barrage and had his jackets and underwear torn out from under his left arm pit and the bullets never injured his body.

Farther up the road we had stopped temporarily when three U.S. P 47 Thunder Bolt airplanes began circling our 2nd Platoon Tank Destroyers. We were glad that we had air support-- at least for a short instant. Then two of the planes

dived and dropped two 500 lb. bombs at us. They couldn't hit the "broad side of a barn" or I wouldn't be writing this article. We had very large sheets of identification laying over our Tank Destroyers. Then we threw out canisters of yellowish-green smoke bombs to further help identify us as allies. Lt. McClellan and the other three gun commanders got ready to shoot down the planes if they tried that "stunt" again, but they left.

Later we stopped in a small village near the north edge of town. I was cooking a little lunch or making coffee when machine gunfire broke out about one hundred feet from me. Some Italian partisans were leading some German prisoners and a few double crossing Italians into town when the guards decided to shoot five or seven of them by a large rock wall. Well, I could have had an altogether different menu if I'd scraped off the wall, but I decided that my cooking was better.

So many things happened that I can't relate or even remember all of them. I don't know why Lt. McClellan was in such a hurry-- I wasn't, and I don't believe the other fellows were either, but we didn't dare express that to "Big D".

Well, our four Tank Destroyers of B-Co. 2nd Platoon rolled right into Verona and ended up way down town. I don't know who decided to stop-- the infantry, Lt. McClellan or both. It certainly was a hot-hot spot. We stayed in or around our TD's the rest of the night. A huge German ammunition dump was burning, and shells that were exploding added to the array. I believe Capt. Magura the C/O of B-Company, the driver, and two medics were captured when they tried to reach us. They turned down the wrong street. "Wow!"

Later that night we heard much cannon fire way behind us. More TD personnel were trying to reach us. A German convoy met them at a large intersection, and the German officer asked the Tank Destroyer fellows which was the right road to Milan. When the officer realized the TDs were American, he opened up on them with a machine gun. At point blank range the Americans fired HE shells from their 76mm cannons. All the Germans in the convoy were killed. I believe Leo Bowers and others entered in on this action.

Another thing that stuck in my mind over the years besides the horrible suffering and horror brought on by war or the loss of a friend or buddy & etc., was something that happened either in Verona or another town where we stopped temporarily. People were rejoicing and handing us Italian salami, bread, and wines.

An older Italian man approached my leading Tank Destroyer crying and gesturing and bent down and kissed the front end of my TD. The older I get the more that seems to mean to me. I wonder what had happened to his family or loved ones. Who knows?

As we began to enter Borgo, Italy, the M-8 Recon car ahead of us was badly hit. Fire and very large sparks flew. We stopped but didn't see where the cannon fire came from, but Lt. McClellan's crew did. It swung out by us and fired seven shots. Three projectiles hit the SP tank. After the first shot or two by TD No. 2, the Krauts fired at my TD. They had my Tank Destroyer zeroed in, but the projectile from TD No. 2 knocked off the alignment, and the enemy projectile hit on the shoulder of the road right by my side. Dirt and rocks flew--the shell roared and fluttered as it rolled or spun past. Then I knew why Lt. McClellan chose to ride on the 2nd Tank Destroyer and not mine. My crew was lucky again, but my friend, Harold Coleman, was killed and Pfc. Rhoades was wounded.

About 13:00 hrs. we left Borgo, Italy with infantry support. We were stopped just north of town by some German officers in a jeep. They said the war was over, so we promised to pull back into Borgo until 16:00 hrs. and wait for an answer. We heard nothing from the U.S. or the allies, so we started advancing again. We had gotten about one half mile north of the town when we were stopped by two SS Troopers in a culvert. They were snipers. They shot and killed seven of our infantry soldiers in just a few minutes. An infantry Second Lt. or someone else captured them. They were brought right in front of my TD and made to stand in front of a German fox hole. The 2nd Lt. had their side-arms. I know one was a Luger, and I believe the other one was a P 38. He shot them in the bellies and they fell into the fox hole.

Then the German officers came past again, and the war was officially over. Dirt was kicked on the German SS Troopers to bury them. Someone asked the "American German" 2nd Lt. if he searched them. He replied "Hell no", and started to uncover them. The red headed one's head was bobbing around. Some infantry soldiers yelled, "stomp his head!" The 2nd Lt. stomped it and reburied him.

The War ended the 8th of May, 1945. That's my final memory of war as I saw and lived it as an 18-19 year old.

A week or two after the war had ended, quite a few of our Tank Destroyers

were in a convoy heading toward the southern tip of Lake Garda. My TD was first, and Lt. McClellan was riding in a jeep up front. His jeep turned part way around and they looked back. We stopped and saw that the Tank Destroyer behind us had turned over on the highway and remained upside down. An MP in a jeep had been passing the convoy. He had cut in front of the second TD and slowed down. The TD with steel tracks slid right over the jeep crushing the transmission gears out of it and three of the wheels flat. The driver was thrown clear and received an injured knee. The TD crew had allowed two Italian girl hitch-hikers to ride in the turret which was strictly against the rules. One girl was thrown clear and had a concussion but lived. The other one wasn't so lucky; the turret cut off both her legs between the knees and hips. The gun commander got a twisted knee or leg while the loader didn't fare so well. He was that little guy that had gotten his clothes shot off with 20mm Ak-Ak guns earlier. He had remained in the turret and lost almost all his fingers and both arms were crushed. Miller, the driver, got a bad knot on the top of his head, and Harold Jones, who had gotten out of the hospital, didn't get hurt. The gunner, Durkin, wasn't wearing his helmet. His head hit the concrete, and he received a bad concussion. He died that night in a hospital. We helped to right the TD. I believe Leo Bower's crew assisted us.

These are only a few of the incidences with the Second Platoon of B-Co. that made up the last few days during and immediately after the war.

I hope and pray that our young folks won't have to experience what so many thousands did during WWII and in other more recent conflicts.

by: Bill Oettle