

## Company C and 6th Cavalry Group

One could say the manner in which Third Army used the 602nd Tank Destroyer Bn. was unique to say the least. At an early date, it became obvious that M-18s meshed very well with Cavalry units. The speed of the M-18 permitted them to keep up with the Cavalry in fast moving situations, they could communicate easily by radio, and the 76mm high velocity gun gave the Cavalry a punch not available within their own organization. Therefore, it shouldn't have come as a big surprise when Company C was detached from the 602nd T.D. Bn. and attached to the 6th Cavalry Group--sometimes referred to as "Task Force Fickett."

Up until this point in time, the 602's attachments to a Cavalry unit had been only with the 2nd Cavalry Group. However, Company C was briefly attached to the 6th Cavalry Group on November 7, 1944. But, on this occasion, this was a significant move, because Company C was attached to and remained with the 6th Cavalry from November 17, 1944, vicinity of Nancy, France, to March 11, 1945, vicinity of Bitburg, Germany--a period of 3 months and 12 days.

This left the 602nd with 2 gun companies. During this time, perhaps this is the main reason Company A and Company B spent so much time "on the line" with so little relief. If an Armored Division attacked with two Combat Commands abreast, most times Company A would be with one and Company B with the other. If a Combat Command was relieved by another, the T.D. Company would remain in place, detached from the one being relieved and attached to the one coming on line. The same applied to Infantry Divisions and Airborne Divisions. If they had two regiments on line, the same circumstances would apply. The 602nd just didn't have that 3rd gun company available that could have provided relief for the other two.

With Company C roaming around with the 6th Cavalry, one always suspected they were somewhere near. This led to an interesting episode and a few tense moments on or about February 24th or 25th, 1945. While attached to the 90th Infantry Division, Company A was subsequently attached to "Task Force Speice." Its mission was to spearhead an attack out in front of the 90th Infantry Division capturing about a half dozen villages. After arriving at the furthestmost and waiting for further developments, armored vehicles could be seen coming out of a woods at the top of a hill to our right rear at quite a distance. Through the field glasses, they appeared to be M-18s that seemed to be lining up to shell the town we were in (I believe it was Upperhausen). It occurred to me that they might be Ed Aldredges' Company C. Not knowing their call signs, I got on the radio and using the 602nd frequency--hoping they were still tied in--started calling: "Hello Ed--this is Bert." "Hello Ed this is Bert." After a few suspenseful moments came the reply: "Hello Bert this is Ed." I asked: "Is that you at the top of the hill, lining up to shell the village of Upperhausen?" He said, "Yes, why?" I advised we were already in it and would not take too kindly to being shot up by our own people." After a short period, they pulled back into the woods and we breathed a lot easier.

The Battalion history for this 3-month plus period mentions only a few of the losses inflicted by Company C on the enemy. Yet you know there had to be many. Howard Stehwen recalls two events, "... but I do remember the 88 which was firing from a grove of trees northeast of our position that fired at and missed our destroyer. We then moved 4 destroyers behind a long building and asked the Cavalry tanks to lob a few rounds near the 88. After they fired a few rounds, we moved two destroyers from behind the building and one gun fired 6 rounds, the other 7 and we were told by Hutch, our platoon leader, that we had hit the 88 thirteen times, one round going into the barrel of the 88 at roughly 2,500 yards."

Howard also recalls, "... we destroyed 3 freight engines pulling out with loads of coal for destination unknown. Also, we destroyed the bull wheel on the cable bringing coal to the surface."

The writer does not know if the 6th Cavalry Group has a history published. If they do, it's a good guess that most of the losses inflicted on the enemy by Company C of the 602nd T.D. Bn. are shown as losses inflicted by the 6th Cavalry Group. Perhaps this is the way it should be. However, such a history would not show the total losses inflicted on the enemy by the men, T.D.'s, and other weapons of the 602nd T.D. Bn.

Belgium/Luxembourg: December 21, 1944 to February 3, 1945

## Battle of the Bulge

The 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (less Co. C) was operating in the Saar Valley region of France in December 1944. On December 13th, the Battalion was detached from the 26th Infantry Division which was being relieved and attached to the 87th Infantry Division which was replacing them. On December 15th, the first and third platoons of Company A were on German soil east of Saarguemines in the vicinity of Obergailback woods. The Battalion was then relieved for a period of rest and maintenance.

On December 20th, 1944, the Battalion (less Co. C) was alerted, and at 2300 hours left for "somewhere" in Belgium. The Germans were attacking through the Ardennes Mountains (later to be known as "The Battle of the Bulge"), and elements of Third Army were being diverted to that area. The 602nd was to be attached to VIII Corps upon arrival in the new zone. The Battalion arrived after an all night march in Neufchateau, Belgium at 1300 hours, December 21st. Total distance travelled was 150 miles. Company A travelled immediately east toward Bastogne. Company B moved at once to the Recogne area. At Vaux-les-Rosieres, Company A came upon elements of the overrun 28th Infantry Division, who were developing a defensive position on the Neufchateau-Bastogne Highway. The first platoon joined them. The third platoon moved to a position astride the Neufchateau/Martelange Highway. The second platoon was in the vicinity of Straimont. Early on the morning of December 22nd, the Germans, in American uniforms and vehicles, attacked the Vaux-les-Rosieres position. A tank, half track, and two trucks were destroyed. An estimated 30 Germans were killed by 602nd T.D. guns.

At dusk, when the elements of the 28th Infantry Division withdrew to the vicinity of Neufchateau, the 1st Platoon of Company A covered that movement. At that time, about 5 or 6 German tanks attacked that position and were repulsed by the 602nd tank destroyers. Two or three of the enemy tanks were believed damaged. Lt. Robert Whitman, platoon leader, 1st Platoon, received a Silver Star for that action that day. What is perhaps most significant is the fact that this action denied the Germans access to Neufchateau and all that such occupation implied. The men of Company A think they may have been the first 3rd Army troops to contact the enemy in that area, and no other combat units were seen in that sector from 3rd Army. At least, no one is aware of any 3rd Army contact prior to first light on December 22nd. On that same day, Company B took over an abandoned U.S. supply depot in Libramont with equipment in good condition that had an estimated value of \$200,000.00. Fred Prothe's letter to Jack Coulston, as published in Panther Tracks August 1987, stated "My jeep was first to cover the railroad in Libramont and take over the engineer depot and barracks."

As mentioned earlier, the day-to-day activity from December 22nd on is detailed in the two histories previously referred to.

## Historical Documentation of 602nd Presence and Action

Instead of just passing on through the "Bulge" and into Germany, there are many aspects of the activities of the 602nd T.D. Bn. during this period that need elaboration. Here is one case of the 602nd's presence being documented by someone other than ourselves. The Department of the Army had a publication entitled Soldiers. The



February 1981 issue carried an article, "The Black Soldier in the Ardennes," that is just a bit confusing. It devoted several paragraphs to the 28th Infantry Division covering the period of December 21 and 22, 1944. In part, some of the published statements were as follows:

"Major General Norman D. Cota, Commanding General of the 28th Infantry Division, ordered his small force to retire south of Vaux-les-Rosieres where he set up his division command post. His command residue had one more battle to fight. The night of December 21st, some 200 survivors of the 110th Infantry Regiment fight at Wiltz reached the 28th Division command post. Cota also had an engineer light pontoon company retained as riflemen, a few howitzers sited as single pieces around his outpost position at Vaux-les-Rosieres on the Bastogne/Neufchateau Road, and a platoon of S.P. 76mm tank destroyers from the 602nd Tank Destroyer Bn." A platoon (1st Platoon, Co. A) of the 602nd provided the majority of the firepower remaining in the 28th Division reserve when the division commander combined it with survivors of the 110th Infantry and 28th Division stragglers. On the morning of December 22nd, the unit beat off the first attack by lead elements of the German 5th Parachute Division."

The confusing part is the author included the 602nd in his list of black units involved in combat in that area at that time. This did not escape the attention of Jack Coulston, our historian, who wrote to the publication on May 8, 1982. On May 26, 1982, Jack received a letter from the publication stating that while the comments "regarding the combat action were correct," the author was "in error in including the 602nd on his list of black units."

Another significant aspect of the actions of the 602nd T.D. Bn. is illustrated by Jack Coulston's letter January 20, 1947 to the Infantry Journal pertaining to their work on articles regarding the Ardennes Campaign. Jack commented about reading two articles regarding the Battle of the Bulge: (1) an article written by Hanson Baldwin in the New York Times Magazine Section, and (2) the Third Army G-3 After Action Report for that period. Jack brought to their attention that all articles and reports had shown the town of Libramont, Belgium to be in the hands of the Germans. This was not so, for 602nd T.D. personnel were in that town all along, and none of the authors even touched on why the Germans did not attack down the Bastogne/Neufchateau Highway to capture the 28th Infantry Division Command Post and the VIII Corps Command Post. The capture of these would have been of primary importance for obvious reasons.

Jack stated how the 602nd left Zarbeling, France on December 20, 1944, and arrived in Neufchateau, Belgium at 1300 hours on December 21, 1944. The Bn. Commanding Officer reported to the Commanding General of VIII Corps and received instructions to employ A Company and Rcn. Company in the defense of Neufchateau. B Company was to go to Recogne a few miles from Libramont and the Company B Commanding Officer (Capt. Walter D. Hart) established his Command Post in Recogne. One platoon of Company A was sent to Vaux-les-Rosieres on a defensive mission from which it withdrew on December 22, 1944. It was mentioned that the 602nd T.D. Bn. S-3's report for December 22, 1944 stated, "The 602nd T.D. Bn. was the only intact combat organization on the entire Corps front."

Jack wrote to the Infantry Journal again on June 15, 1955 for their continuing work on the Ardennes Campaign. Again he wrote on January 29, 1959 mentioning he had just completed reading The Fatal Decisions published by William Sloan Associates. That book contains the commentaries of various German generals. The section entitled "The Ardennes" by General Von Manteuffel contains the essence of Jack's contention that the 602nd T.D. Bn. played a major part in the defense of the St. Hubert, Libramont, St. Marie, Vaux-les-Rosieres, Hatrival half circle during the important period between December 21 and December 25, 1944. On page 281, General Von Manteuffel stated that, "A small enemy force had broken through from the south and was firing on the crossroads a few hundred yards north of Petite Rosieres. Tanks of the Panzer Demonstration Division forced the enemy to retreat. He reported that this was on December

22nd. The General wrote further in reference "to the German 7th Army reporting that the 5th Parachute Division had been repeatedly attacked by American reconnaissance forces coming up from the south." Jack's closing comments were: "As you will see from our unit journal, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion was the only force available at the time, and it seems remarkable that a battalion composed of two gun companies and a reconnaissance company would have been important enough for General Von Manteuffel to remember in his dispatches."

The above record highlights the vital role the Recon. Company of the 602nd performed from December 22, 1944 to December 29th. During that period, Recon. Company personnel made contact with the enemy in St. Hubert, Vaux-les-Rosieres, St. Marie and Hatrival. They not only observed their actions, but attacked their positions causing loss of equipment and killing many Germans. They also maintained contact with the 4th Armored Division that moved up on our right during its attack to break through to Bastogne.

On December 29th, the 11th Armored Division moved into that area, and the 602nd T.D. Bn. (less Co. C) was attached to it. The 11th Armored attacked the Germans on the morning of December 30th.

In May 1984, there was an article in the "U. S. Naval Institute" publication Proceedings, "Role of U.S. Marines in Defense of North Norway." The article explained the training and possible future commitment of Marines in this area. Prompted by this article in 1984, the 602nd made an offer to the U.S. Marine Corps to provide information on "Winter Warfare Training." (Article in January 1985, Panther Tracks.) They declined, but in answering wrote, "Nevertheless, I appreciate your sharing your experiences with us. Obviously, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion was a hell of a unit. I salute you for what you endured and achieved." The letter was signed: Hq., U.S. Marine Corps, Code CMC, Washington, D.C., dated 19 July 1984.

For the 602nd T.D. Bn. from December 30th on, it was just constant slugging it out with the Germans. For the next month, it was toe-to-toe fighting the enemy and the weather--helping out with the 11th Armored Division, 17th Airborne Division, 101st Airborne Division and the 87th Infantry Division.

As indicated by our "Route of March" (see Appendix III), our attack generally followed along the north side of the Neufchateau/Bastogne Highway, skirted along the western edge of Bastogne and proceeded to the northeast.

#### Conditions of Life Reflected During the Bulge

In this section, it is perhaps proper to reflect back once more on the 602nd's training at Camp McCoy and the Michigan Winter Maneuvers. No special clothing or equipment was issued the 602nd T.D. Bn. during the Bulge. But, the American soldier is a very ingenious person. Almost at once, lime or paint was found to color the vehicles, and white bed sheets were procured to give vehicles and men better camouflage protection. Army blankets were used to improvise gloves and boots--or if you prefer "booties." This was important for the T.D. crews who spent long, cold hours inside their steel vehicles. What were just blankets now appeared as beefed up bedrolls. However, while some overshoes were issued, it was not 100%, and this proved to be a problem. Men who went through the 44/45 winter with just their combat boots were very prone to developing foot problems. However, overall, the stateside training permitted the 602nd to take the Battle of the Bulge's weather conditions in stride and did not in any way deter them from performing their various assigned missions.

What were the combat conditions like? Orville Grissom remembers, "One day we were being attacked across a field where the snow was very deep. Machine gun rounds were coming in and zinging off the T.D. First, I knocked out their vehicles. They kept coming at us across the field. My T.D. was alongside a haystack that was covered with snow. Every time I fired, the blast would cause snow to fly and get on the front of the



sight. Each time I fired, I had to scurry out to clean it off with toilet paper and scurry back in to get off the next round. Some of the German soldiers went into a small building. I fired H.E. into the base of the building and blew it to pieces. Some Germans continued attacking. I lowered the barrel and fired directly at them. In a little while there were no more Germans. Like in other actions, every round I fired hit what I aimed at. That sight was A-1."

#### Nagging Questions Remaining

This will sound like the author is stretching, but a question remains, did Company A and the 1st Platoon of Rcn. Company qualify for the Presidential Citation? Army is a magazine published by "The Association of the Army." In the August 1987 issue, an article appeared, "28th Infantry Division, The Forgotten Pennsylvanians" by Col. James W. Bradin. In this article, he stated, "The 101st Airborne Division and its attached units received the Presidential Citation." The Company A history of January 4, 1945, states, in part: "At about noon the company was alerted and attached to the 101st Airborne Division, in the vicinity of Bastogne. The gun sections moved to Isle de Pres" (just on the outskirts of town). The entry for January 5th states, in part: "At noon our allegiance was changed from the 101st Airborne Division to the 513th Parachute Regiment Infantry" (17th Airborne Division).

The Bn. history for January 4, 1945 says, in part, "Company A with first platoon Rcn. Company, was sent to aid the 101st Airborne in Bastogne. . . ." For January 5th, 1945, it says, in part, "Company A, with first platoon of Rcn. Company, sent to aid the 17th Airborne Division . . . Use of Company A authorized by VCOG of VIII Corps." Was or was not Company A, and the first platoon of Rcn. Company one of the 101st Airborne Division attachments? If so, did they qualify? Did some other unit mistakenly receive credit for the action of the 602nd T.D. Bn. in repelling repeatedly German attacks and holding the Bastogne Neufchateau Road?

The 4th Armored Division must have received the Presidential Citation somewhere along the line. Perhaps a unit can receive more than one. In 602 T.D. Bn. "attachments" reference is made to "Company B being attached to the 4th Armored Division." Other questions remain:

1. Somewhere along the line did Company B qualify? If not, the 4th Armored Division, how about the 2nd Cavalry Group and so on?
2. How about Leonard Still's Recon. Company? They, or parts of the company, were attached to many of the units on our list?
3. How about Roy James and Hq. Company or the Battalion as a whole?
4. Was the overnight 150 mile march by the 602nd T.D. Bn., December 20, 1944 to head off the German attack toward Neufchateau in fact a secret mission ordered with the expectation it would serve only a delaying purpose to gain time rather than being able to hold ground and repulse the German onslaught in that sector?
5. Could some other unit not on the scene during those crucial first days have been mistakenly given credit for action of the 602nd T.D. Bn. units?

Details of the action along the Bastogne/Neufchateau Highway for December 22nd are listed previously in this narration. Jack Coulston did not get into all the day-to-day activity, but he came up with these questions in his January 20, 1947 communication to the Infantry Journal.

1. "If Libreumont was as important as I think, wouldn't the fact that it was actually held by our own forces help in the study of the Battle of the Bulge?"
2. Did the Germans realize the weakness of the VIII Corps front?
3. If so (after December 22nd), why did they hold off their attack down the Bastogne/Neufchateau Highway until December 30, 1944, when the 11th Armored Division was in position to repel such an attack?
4. Could the 602nd T.D. Bn. take credit for forestalling a German attack on the VIII Corps front by its vigorous armored maneuvers which might have caused the German Commander to think that a fairly strong American Armored Force was in position in that area?

#### Germany, February 4, 1945 to May 8, 1945

After the "Battle of the Bulge," the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, attached to the 87th Infantry Division, moved to the northeast through such towns as Houffalize and St. Vith, Belgium, parts of Luxembourg and Auw, Germany. The Battalion History for February 1, 1945 says, "Both companies (A & B) are operating inside the German border." On March 12th, the Battalion was attached to the 89th Infantry Division. The day-to-day events of February 2nd to March 24th are detailed elsewhere.

#### Rhine River Crossing

By March 25, 1945, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion had reached the Rhine River. The 602nd was attached to the 89th Infantry Division at the time. At 0200 hours, May 26th, the gun companies took up positions overlooking the Rhine in support of the crossing of the 89th and fired upon castle towers and other locations across the River in which were located German Observation Posts from which they were directing artillery and mortar fire. The crossing was successful, but heavy resistance prevented the 89th Division Engineers from putting in a bridge. It was learned that the 87th Infantry Division to the north had been successful in getting a bridge across a more narrow section of the River at Boppard.

Two Task Forces were put together, Company A with "Task Force Ingell" and B and C Companies with "Task Force Johnson." Company A and a unit of the 89th Recon. Company (Ingell) went north to Boppard and crossed at 2000 hours. Companies B and C (Johnson) made the same move either prior to or after "Ingell." The two Task Forces moved south on the river road toward Kaub in rear of the 89th Division's bridgehead and eased the pressure sufficiently that a bridge could be started.

Task Force Ingell ran into heavy resistance in the vicinity of Kaub. Task Force Johnson headed east approximately 6 miles to Struth. On March 27th, the attack continued. On March 28th, the two Task Forces, having completed their missions, were disbanded and Companies A, B and C were attached to the Division's three Infantry Regiments for the next day's operation.

Would you believe? After the war, the 89th Infantry Division produced a book. Finally, we had someone who documented participation of the 602nd T.D. Bn. in one of their operations. Here is an excerpt from the portion covering the crossing of the Rhine River. "To exploit the bridgehead and spearhead the 89th beyond the Rhine, two Task Forces crossed the 87th Division's bridge at Boppard and streaked down the east bank late on March 26th. A Task Force commanded by Lt. Col. John R. Johnson and composed of the 1st Bn., 355th, 1st Platoon, Cannon Company; Companies B and C, 602nd T. D. Bn. smashed Kestert in a three-hour battle and then veered east from the gorge toward Struth. The 89th Recon. Troop and Company A, 602nd T.D. Bn., cleared the east bank of the river from St. Goarhausen to Lorch."



### Ohrdruf Concentration Camp: April 4, 1945

We had heard of the German Concentration Camps and the atrocities that took place in these camps. These camps had been in Eastern Europe and other areas overrun by Russian forces. Ohrdruf was in the Allied section and in our zone of operation. It must have been fate that brought men of the 602nd T.D. Bn. to the gates of that camp the morning of April 4th.

The Bn. history makes no specific mention of this camp. Members of the 602nd who did not participate in the actual liberation of the camp had an opportunity on a later date to see for themselves what it was like. A line in Company A's history says: "We came away more aware of what we were fighting for."

Therefore, the record of this event is more in the specific comments of those men who were involved and the pictures that were taken at the site that morning.

Elvin G. Beeson said, "I have tried to forget everything, but I can still remember this: My T.D. was the first one into the camp. Some of the captives survived and they were climbing all over us. Soon the Captain ordered us back into our T.D. There were Germans outside in the woods, so we went and fought them."

An article by Braden Phillips stated: "As Commander of the lead Tank Destroyer that entered Ohrdruf Concentration Camp, Elvin Beeson was among the first four soldiers to witness the unimaginable. No American had been inside a Nazi death camp until that day."

Joe Brown said, "I think one reason we were sent to Ohrdruf was to get the records of the SS. Sgt. Haleson and I plus others in his section opened the vault in Ohrdruf SS Hq. and removed the ledgers and American money. This was turned over to Corps Headquarters."

After our reunion in St. Louis, an article in the Post-Dispatch quoting 602nd veterans said, in part, "Hardly anybody ever heard of Ohrdruf except us, because it was small by comparison. Ohrdruf in Germany was the first Nazi Concentration Camp liberated by American Forces in W.W.II. It was April 4, 1945, and the men from the 602nd say they were the ones that broke through its steel and barbed wire gates."

There is one comment in the Bn. history that ties in with one man's recollection. For April 4, it states: "Company C, with the 355 Regiment, moved to Gotha. . . ." Howard Stehwien, Company C said, "Our company entered Ohrdruf but remained there a very short time. We then moved to Gotha arriving on the afternoon of the 4th. I do have pictures of the acid pits, burning rails, and people murdered before we arrived."

In part, here are some quotes from a letter Stan Spalding sent to his parents. They received it from him on May 5, 1945 and gave it back to him upon his return home. "I have read of such things (Nazi forced labor torture death camps), but like most other people have let them slip in my mind as being propaganda. Well, actually seeing one and talking with the people of one of these hell holes, why it is all too real. The place is entered through a double barbed wire fence close to 12 feet high. . . . In the courtyard you are greeted with the awful smell of dead humans. . . ."

Here is another account of the events of that morning. It's taken from a Jack Coulston letter dated January 24, 1985. It covers three conversations he had with Recon. Company personnel. Brown and Arnold reported, "about looking through the gates, firing on the S.S., seeing that young dead American. . . ." Lt. Graham told him, "Sgt. Beeson of his platoon was first in the camp."

Raymond Young recalls the following, "Paul Portnowitz and I had been asked to reconnoiter a certain area in the vicinity of Ohrdruf to the north. Shortly after daybreak we heard German machine gun and small arms fire and soon sporadic bursts of our own machine guns. We proceeded toward the sound of the firing, and we could see what looked like a brown wooden fence. At that moment, one of our M-18s came into sight and smashed through the fence. A German command car was traveling east away from

the camp and another M-18 fired at it. German soldiers, on foot, could be seen running east, and these too were fired upon.



Figure 6. Lime Covered Decaying Human Bodies Found at Ohrdruf.

The M-18 that had gone in came out and headed north where some shooting was still going on in the woods. Paul and I went inside the fence to see what was going on. There were some of our men there. I think one was our Recon Company Commanding Officer and one of our Lieutenants. They were walking around the bodies that had been shot in the courtyard just inside the main gate. Paul talked briefly to one of the surviving inmates, and we followed his directions to the open burial pits and pyre area."

A summary material provided by Leo Laufer indicates they observed the 602nd T.D. M-18 break through the gates of the camp and TD personnel remove records, etc., from the camp headquarters.



Figure 7. Courtyard at Ohrdruf Camp Showing Inmates Massacred By SS Guards As 602nd T.D. Bn. Arrived April 4, 1945.





Figure 8. Partly Burned Bodies on Burning Pyre and Burial Ditch.



Figure 9. Concentration Camp Facilities

Because of the work of our historian, Jack Coulston with the Holocaust Center, we learned of a survivor of Ohrdruf. His name was Leo Laufer.

Leo wrote, "For a month or so before the U.S. Army arrived in the vicinity of Ohrdruf, the Germans were building fortifications along the perimeter of the camp. On March 31, when artillery fire could be heard, the Germans rounded up all the inmates that were fit enough and started marching them north toward Buchenwald." In 1986, Leo was the main speaker at the 602nd's reunion in Denver, Colorado.

All the above has been rather grim. On the lighter side, there is an entry for April 27, 1945 in A Company's history. "We were issued four bottles of Coca Cola per man today at 5¢ each. Boy was it a treat. It is the first thing civilized that we have had to drink for a long time." Guess it proves the saying--"little things mean a lot"--depending on the circumstances.

Through the month of April, it was obvious the German Army had fallen apart. Resistance in spots was light and brief, and an attack continued to the east about as fast as our men, vehicles, and support units could move.

## V.E. Day, May 9, 1945

As of V.E. Day, May 9, 1945, while assigned to the First Army, the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion was generally on a north/south line in the vicinity of Zwickau, Germany. Hq. Company and the Bn. Command Post were at Zwickau; Recon. Company was at Zenlenroda; Company A was at Oberheinsdorf along the Corps restraining line near the Czechoslovakian border; Company B was at Vielau and Company C was at Lichtenstein.

## Secondary Missions

This document would be far from complete unless a section on "Secondary Missions" was included. While basically trained as Tank Destroyers, significant use was made of the 602nd in performing those so-called secondary missions.

Previous mention has been made of our Artillery training. At the time Third Army was running low on supplies, including the standard artillery ammunition, there was an adequate supply of T.D. armor piercing and high explosive ammunition. In the commendation to the 602nd from Hq., 183rd Field Artillery Group, 1-DC-B, reference is made to the period 21 October 1944/26 October 1944. During this period, the 602nd T.D.'s provided artillery support in the 35th Infantry Division, 26th Infantry Division, and 4th Armored Division sectors. A total of 138 missions were fired, and 2,192 rounds of ammunition were expended. One is confident the Germans found little comfort in those high velocity shells as they came screeching into their positions.

Comment has also been made about the 602nd being attached to and working with cavalry units. One of the things that made this compatible was the number of radios in each unit. Good communications could be established. On one attack, the Cavalry was to go down into a valley, take a town, cross a bridge, and move to the high ground on the other side. The T.D.'s were to support with fire into and over the town. Across the river the road went to the right and up over the hill. A machine gun position, and apparently an observation post (O.P.), along this road was making it difficult for the Cavalry to advance. The Cavalry Commanding Officer radioed the T.D. Company Commanding Officer and asked if a T.D. was in position to see that road. A check resulted in him being advised that the road could be seen, but the exact spot the machine gun was firing from could not. A high explosive (H.E.) round was asked for to land about half way up the hill along the road. The Cavalry Commanding Officer adjusted that fire until the word came back, "Cease fire, the white flag is up, they're coming out."

The M-18 Tank Destroyer was not a tank, even though some people thought it could be used as one. However, there are endless examples of the T.D.'s successfully working as "direct support of Infantry." Two examples come to mind.

During the assault through the Siegfried Line, as the Infantry worked their way through mine fields and attacked the pill boxes, our Tank Destroyers were there overlooking the action to provide help as needed. The other example that comes to mind is the attack on Sarre Union, France. The T.D.'s fired over the heads of the Infantry in the assault on the town.

This photo was taken by Pfc James A. Ryan, a U.S. Army Signal Corps photographer during the attack. The caption stated, "This (602nd) T.D. was part of a platoon that had just fired 100 rounds at a German barracks supporting an Infantry Bn., and they were replenishing their ammunition. The date was December 2, 1944. Shown on the T.D. is Lawrence Otis; handling round is Thomas Atkins; on the right are shown Robert Hanley and Victor Palmo. Inside the T.D. was Harold Carlson."

There are also many, many examples in free flowing situations where the Infantry rode on the T.D.'s and jointly were the first Americans to enter many cities, towns, and villages.





Figure 10. Larry Otis and Crew in Action Vicinity Sarre Union, France, 1944.

#### Post-V.E. Day--May 10, 1945 to November 1945

News of the German surrender was received with mixed emotions. At last, our guns were silent after having done their job.

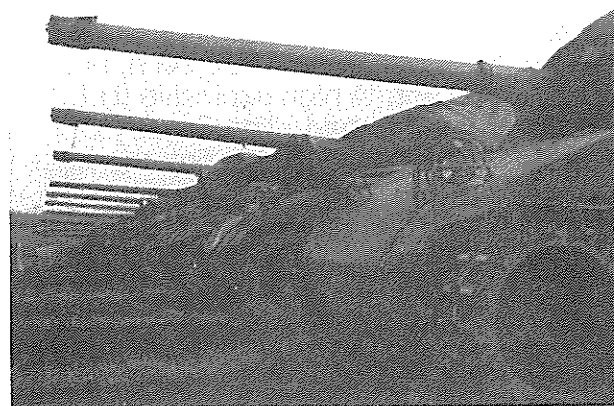


Figure 11. M-18s Resting After a Job Well Done.

For the few weeks prior to May 9th, V.E. Day, it was obvious the war was about to end. Two thoughts came to mind: (1) The war was still on in the Pacific. Would the men of the 602nd become a part of the continuing conflict there? (2) Would the 602nd as a battalion be shipped out to who knows where? The Army came out with a point system for length of service, time overseas, and campaigns participated in. The 602nd T.D. Bn. was made up mostly of "high point personnel." Would the high point men, if they so desired, be returned to the states?

Questioning minds were soon put to rest. The 602nd was designated part of the Army of Occupation. The battalion would remain in Germany. "Points" were frozen. Personnel desiring release from the service would return to the states at some future date. Because of its background, the 602nd had a high percentage of regular army people, and they would continue to serve out their time and future assignments as the army saw fit.

Meanwhile, as a prelude to V.E. Day, the leaders of England, the Soviet Union, and the United States had made some geopolitical decisions at Potsdam and Yalta. The 602nd was advised that it was in a part of Germany that was to be turned over to the Russians (Soviet Union). During the summer of 1945, as part of the American troop's pull back in geographical increments, the 602nd moved to the west.

Officers of the 602nd were advised of the day the Russians were going to come in and occupy the area we were in. One memory that stands out vividly was the "policing of the area requirements." Not a single item of U.S. Army property was to be left behind, not a combat boot, a sack, a mess kit, a spoon--nothing! When we left each morning, that area would be re-occupied before that day was over. After a few of these moves, U.S. troops (the 602nd) were west of the area to be occupied by the Russians. In time, that was the area which became East Germany.

U.S. servicemen had fought, been wounded, and died in the war troop movements through this area. The author recalls what a bitter pill it was to him to be giving the area up to the Russians as we moved out and they moved in. (The strong personal opinion of the author should probably not be recorded here, because it is really not a part of the history of the 602nd. However, he never did agree with the Potsdam/Yalta decisions. He believed history will prove it was the basis of the turmoil in Europe from 1945 to 1990, the so-called "cold war." Then looking at what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989-1990, he believes one can conclude the idea was bankrupt from the very start.)

After withdrawal to the west out of the territory which later became part of East Germany, the 602 TD Bn. stopped for a period of time in the vicinity of Merkes, Germany. While there, we were given a "guard" assignment worthy of comment. There were underground salt mines in Merkes. During the war, gold, art treasures looted from other countries, and other items of value were stored in these mines by the Nazi hierarchy. In our movement east through this area a few miles to the north, this was not known. However, this fact finally came to light, and 602nd TD Bn. personnel were called upon to guard the removal of these items as they were being recovered by Allied Higher Headquarters.

In the Pacific on August 10, 1945, the Japanese government asked clarification of unconditional surrender terms. On August 14, 1945, the United States and their allies received a message from Japan accepting surrender. On September 12, 1945, aboard the battleship Missouri, the Allies and Japan signed the surrender agreement--V.J. Day. Three years, eight months and twenty-two days after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, World War II ended.

Just about that time, the status of the men of the 602nd changed. Men with high points were beginning to be transferred to other units getting ready to ship back to the United States. By October, a large percentage were on their way back home pending discharge, if that is what they desired. Those wishing to remain in the service were reassigned accordingly. The 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion was disbanded in November 1945.

#### Today

At the present time, men of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion have a very active Association known as the "602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion Association, Inc. A news-



letter, Panther Tracks is published quarterly. Association reunions are currently held every two years. Previous reunions were as follows:

- 1990 - Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- 1988 - Las Vegas, Nevada
- 1986 - Denver, Colorado
- 1984 - St. Louis, Missouri
- 1982 - Williamsburg, Virginia
- 1980 - San Antonio, Texas (602nd T.D. Bn. Association formed June 22, 1980)
- 1979 - Tyler, Texas (Marian Stanberry and Joe Parnell hosted a gathering in Joe's backyard. Idea of forming an Association was presented by Gene Collins and discussed.)

1946-1979 - Informal get-togethers were held in various parts of the country.

It was at one of the early reunions that Gene Collins, who was founder of the Association and president for several years, developed the slogan that has held us together through the years, "Let us sustain this common bond among uncommon men."

For some time, Colonel Kopcsak and his wife Ruth have resided in Germany. As an indication of that "bond," they have attempted to come to the United States every two years to attend Association reunions; they have made all but one of them.

#### Other Unit Histories

Where possible, histories of other units to which the 602nd was attached have been examined. They show little or no mention of the combat action of the 602nd. In at least one instance, the activity of the 602nd T.D. Bn. is shown as having been the unit's own. In Zwickau, Germany, a man was killed attempting to remove demolitions from an important bridge. It was a very heroic act considering the bridge was being subjected to machine gun and rifle fire. The history of the unit to which we were attached at the time lists the man by name, but it does not include the fact that he was from Rcn. Company of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion.

If one goes by the histories of which the author is aware for the units to which the 602nd was attached, it seems as though the 602nd almost did not exist. It is fair to conjecture that they knew the 602nd was attached to them for a specific mission or for a short period of time and, therefore, felt no need to record our attachment and/or combat actions.

Overall, the purpose of this document is to correct the situation mentioned above. It should be evident to the reader by the sections covering the route of march, list of attachments, enemy losses, 602nd losses, the Battle of the Bulge, and citations/medals/awards that the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion did not land on Omaha Beach and just sit there playing in the sand waiting for V.E. Day to happen.

#### Citations, Medals, Awards

There is an expression in the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion that goes like this, "There were far more heroes in the 602nd than the number of medals issued." With 20/20 hindsight vision, it appears some Army units worked very hard at getting as many medals as possible awarded to their personnel. The 602nd does not appear to have been one of them. Perhaps it was because the battalion had trained so hard and long that when it came to combat action, it was thought the men did what was expected of them and what they had been trained to do. The writer does not contend that this was the case or whether it was right or wrong. However, with the kind of hindsight mentioned above, there is a sense that many more individual actions should have merited special recognition.

In a letter to the writer dated June 2, 1987, Jack Coulston expressed his views on this subject. He had done a lot of work advising the Army of several individual actions which he thought should be recognized, or to upgrade a citation previously awarded. It seems the Army had stopped processing these requests back around 1952/1953. Jack was disappointed, but in thinking the number of citations might be lower than one thinks they might have been, he may have come up with the best conclusion. He wrote, "The real reason was that our criteria was far higher than most." There is so little recorded on this subject in our histories--or unit journals--it almost seems impossible to start this section and make any sense out of it. However, using the histories available, following is a listing of citations, medals, and awards received by 602nd Battalion personnel.

#### Presidential Citation

Company "C"--The 6th Cavalry Group, with Company C attached, was cited for extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty from January 9, 1945 to January 13, 1945, by overcoming heavy German resistance in an area called the Huldange pocket. As per General Order No. 40, 26 April, 1946 listing Company C, the citation read in part,

"After having performed an exacting mission under difficult conditions for a period of nearly 2 weeks, the 6th Cavalry Group (with Company C attached) was committed the night of 8-9 January 1945 on a 5,000-yard front along the general line Villers-la-Bonne Eau--Betlange--Farin Fuhman with the mission of aggressive patrolling to follow up any enemy attempts to withdraw. When it became apparent on the morning of 9 January that the Germans had so organized the ground that it was impossible for the infantry on both flanks to advance, the 6th Cavalry Group attacked on its own initiative and over and above the requirements of its own mission, but in furtherance of the corps mission. In order to make this attack successful against a numerically superior and well-dug-in enemy, a special task force was constituted, composed of elements of the various components of the group. This task force spearheaded the attack, and the 6th Cavalry Group, making full use of its mobility and fire power, captured the towns of Betlange and Harlange. The attack continuing through the night, despite bitter cold and deep snow, was delayed only by serious obstacles, including mines and blown bridges in the vicinity of Watrange. At daylight, 10 January, these obstacles were quickly by-passed and the 6th Cavalry Group drove on. Taking finely calculated risks, all leaders made maximum use of mobility and fire power in relentlessly seeking out and destroying the enemy. Open flanks were ignored by small units in the interest of speed. This speed, plus the aggressive fighting spirit of all personnel, made possible the capture of the towns of Lutremange, Watrange, and Turchamps, and the zone assigned to the 6th Cavalry Group was cleared quickly. Having completed its mission, and by doing so, making possible the advance of the units on its flanks, the 6th Cavalry Group, in furtherance of the corps plan, requested and was granted permission to advance far beyond its original objective. The group drove on and assisted in the capture of Sonlez. The outstanding action of the 6th Cavalry Group broke the back of the German resistance in the Harlange pocket, which had held up the corps advance for a period of 11 days. The determination and indomitable fighting spirit of these courageous officers and men exemplify the finest traditions of the military service."



### Belgian Government Awards

Per decree No. 1578, 3 January 1946, Lt. Colonel Thomas J. Conlin, 602nd T.D. Bn. was awarded by the Belgian Government the awards of "l'Ordre de la Couronne avec Palme" and also "Croix de Guerre avec Palme."

### French Government Awards

Per Decision No. 1147, 30 October 1945, on recommendation of the Minister of War, the President of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, Chef des Armees awarded "For Services Exceptionnels de Guerre rendus au cours des Operations le liberation de la France" the Croix de Guerre avec Etoile de Bronze" to the following 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion men:

1st Lt. Harry W. Arnold  
Sgt. James C. Winney

Sgt. Lawrence J. Otis  
Cpl. Donald J. Scherdin

While records of individual actions are unavailable, it is known that Lawrence Otis had been commended by the Company Commander on 18 September 1944 for some "good shooting" in the vicinity of Luneville, France. This may have been the reason he was designated to be the Company A recipient.

The French SOLDIERS MEDAL was awarded to Alex Pleva.

Per Decision No. 342, 29 January 1945, by order of the General of the Army Juin, Captain Walter D. Hart was awarded the Croix de Guerre avec Etoiles d'Argent (with silver stars) for "services exceptionnels de Guerre rendus au cours des operations de liberation de la France."

### United States Awards for Individual Actions

Soldiers Medal--By action of the Secretary of the Army, "For Heroism in France, 22 September 1944" and under the authority of the U.S. Congress, the SOLDIERS MEDAL was awarded to Sgt. James B. McCarthy.

Records of men who received this award and citations for some known to have received it are incomplete. Where citations are available, excerpts are given.

### Silver Star Medal--

**PETER J. KOPCSAK**--Per General Orders No. 43, 16 December 1944, "... distinguished himself by gallantry in action on 9 November 1944 in France. Task Force A, 26th Infantry Division, commanded by Lt. Col. Kopcsak, launched an attack northeast of \_\_\_\_\_, France. The advance of the task force was stopped just west of \_\_\_\_\_, France by heavy artillery, mortar, small arms fire, and anti-tank weapons. Despite the heavy enemy resistance and excellent enemy observation, disregarding his own personal safety, Lt. Col. Kopcsak was on the ground with the reconnaissance elements of the Task Force directing operations and giving encouragement and inspiration to his troops to move forward. Lt. Col. Kopcsak's aggressiveness, courage, utter disregard for his own personal safety and tenacity of purpose reflect the highest credit on his character as an Officer and upon the military service."

**NORMAN E. MCGOWEN**--was granted the award for "... gallantry in action in connection with military operations against the enemy on 10 December 1944, in France. S/Sgt McGowen observed one of his tank destroyers receive a direct hit from enemy artillery fire and ran to the burning vehicle. Carrying two wounded men back to positions safe from falling shrapnel, he returned again to the burning vehicle to search for the wounded gun commander. When he discovered the gun commander, crawling from the tank with both legs blown off, he immediately placed tourniquets on both his legs and carried him to a position safe from falling shrapnel to await further medical attention. The gallant actions and conscientious devotion to duty displayed by Sgt. McGowan constitute the highest traditions of the Armed Forces and reflect great credit upon himself."

**MAX W. ROBOTNICK**--From XII Corps History, p. 228. General Eddy gave the award for distinguishing himself, "... by gallantry in action on 27 September 1944, near Bures, France. Pvt. Robotnick became separated from his platoon which was forced to withdraw near Bures, France, and he spent the night hiding in bushes and ditches. The town of Bures was in enemy hands. About 0600 hours on 27 September 1944, Pvt. Robotnick started for a farmhouse near Bures. The farmhouse was under heavy artillery and mortar fire. Pvt. Robotnick, armed only with an M-1 rifle, observed one of the enemy leaving the cellar of the farmhouse. He captured the one escaping enemy and succeeded in capturing 11 more of the enemy in the cellar, including one officer, after warning them they would be wiped out if they offered resistance. Pvt. Robotnick's daring and combat skill reflect great credit on his character as a soldier and upon the military service."

**ROBERT W. WHITMAN**--Per General Orders No. 30, 26 February 1945, the award was granted for, "... gallantry in action in connection with military operations against the enemy on 22 December 1944, in Belgium. During the German counter-offensive, Lieutenant Whitman personally took an exposed position in order to direct fire against enemy artillery and mortar installations. With his platoon of Tank Destroyers, Lt. Whitman, rather than withdraw to safer but less strategic positions, held his defensive positions which were under constant enemy observation. When six heavy enemy tanks followed by an infantry company launched an attack, Lt. Whitman, through his skillful direction of fire, repelled the threatening forces and consequently retained his positions. With no thought of the advancing enemy troops and with complete disregard for his safety, Lt. Whitman held his ground until such time when he received orders to withdraw. The tenacity of purpose and courage exhibited by Lt. Whitman constitute the highest traditions of the Armed Forces."

**OTHERS**--According to the 602nd T.D. Battalion history, other men receiving the Silver Star award were: **WALTER D. HART, OTHA H. SHANNON, and PHILLIP BONELLI.**

### Bronze Star Medal--

The record of Bronze Star Medals is also incomplete, and most citations are not available to the writer. As per General Orders No. 29, Hq. VIII Corps, 22 February 1945, the following men were awarded the Bronze Star Medal for valor.



**First Lt. HENRY F. ALTERGOTT**, "... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 18 December 1944 to 27 January 1945, in France and Belgium."

**Second Lt. CHARLES F. KILBORN**, "... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 25 August 1944 to 26 January 1945, in France and Belgium."

**Technician 5th Grade MELVIN W. GOFORTH**, "... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 28 August 1944 to 23 January 1945, in France and Belgium."

**Technician 5th Grade GEORGE J. ORLANDO, JR.**, "... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 28 August 1944 to 23 January 1945, in Belgium."

By command of Brigadier General Robinson and under General orders **S/Sgt HOWARD C. STEHWIEN** was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for distinguishing himself,

"... by meritorious service in connection with military operations against an armed enemy as Platoon Leader, Company "C", 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, from 27 November 1944 to 3 May 1945. During the advance across France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Germany, the tank destroyer platoon, of which he was platoon leader, made an enviable record, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy while sustaining very light casualties and no loss of vehicles. The calm spirit of aggressiveness displayed by Staff Sergeant Stehwien when under heavy fire gave inspiration to the men under him. His devotion to duty and remarkable leadership reflected great credit upon him and were in keeping with the best traditions of the Armed forces of the ' States."

Under General Orders No. 46, 26th Infantry Division, 1 December 1944, **PETER J. KOPCSAK** was awarded the Bronze Star Medal,

"For meritorious service in connection with military operations against the enemy of the United States between 6 November 1944 to 9 November 1944 east of \_\_\_\_\_, France. During general offensive operations of the 26th Infantry Division and attached troops in France, Lt. Colonel Peter J. Kopcsak commanded Task Force A, 26 Infantry Division, composed of 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, 761st Tank Battalion, one platoon from Company C, 101st Engineer Combat Battalion, and Company K, 101st Infantry Regiment. Task Force A achieved an initial breakthrough in the vicinity of \_\_\_\_\_, France. This success of units which had not previously worked together was directly attributable to the thorough study of the terrain and briefing of all commanders by Lt. Colonel Kopcsak. Heavy concentrated enemy fire having stopped the advance elements of his command and communications having temporarily failed, he went forward on foot, disregarding his personal safety, to direct the operations of the leading elements and encourage aggressive action. He continued in this courageous action until wounded by enemy artillery fire. His display of personal bravery, fine leadership, tactical skill and initiative reflects the highest credit upon Lt. Colonel Kopcsak and the armed forces of the United States."

From the office of Commanding General, Headquarters VIII Corps the award of the Bronze Star Medal citation for **LODI VALENCICH** reads in part,

"... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 17 October 1944 to 29 January 1945, in France and Belgium. When his platoon leader was wounded and evacuated, Sergeant Valencich immediately took over command and continued with the mission. Sergeant Valencich led his platoon in reconnaissance missions into enemy territory while under heavy enemy artillery, mortar and small arms fire. As a result of the hazardous missions, information concerning the number and type of enemy personnel was obtained. With this information, further allied advances were permitted. The continuous devotion to duty displayed by Sergeant Valencich symbolizes the highest traditions of the Armed Forces and reflects great credit upon himself."

The Bronze Star Medal citation for **JULIUS S. ORSAK** was,

"... for meritorious achievement in connection with military operations against the enemy from 28 August to 26 December 1944, in France and Belgium. Sergeant Orsak served as a platoon leader in his battalion. His courage and skill in the performance of his duties were a source of inspiration to the men under him. The nature of the platoon's missions was such that frequently the platoon commander was obliged to leave him in complete control for long periods of time. Sergeant Orsak assumed this additional responsibility and handled his men in such a manner that the platoon's high fighting efficiency was maintained throughout every engagement. His courage, initiative and tenacity of purpose reflect the highest credit upon himself and exemplify the highest traditions of the Armed Forces."

The Bronze Star Medal Citation from Headquarters, 89th Division for **Walter D. Hart** read that he, "distinguished himself by meritorious service in connection with military operations against an armed enemy as Commanding Officer, Company "B", 602d Tank Destroyer Battalion, during the period 28 August 1944 to 14 April 1945 in France, Belgium and Germany. Working with Infantry, Armored and Field Artillery and Cavalry units, he successfully led his unit in combat, constantly setting a high standard of leadership. On one occasion in the vicinity of Monocourt, France, while under heavy enemy mortar and small arms fire, he led a tank destroyer to within seventy-five yards of the enemy's lines and successfully pulled out an armored car which had bogged down in the mud. On another occasion he led a task force of tank destroyers and cavalry seventy miles into enemy territory, capturing and destroying large quantities of enemy material and equipment and taking many prisoners. Captain Hart's leadership, initiative, devotion to duty and tenacity of purpose reflected great credit upon him and were in keeping with the best traditions of the armed forces of the United States."

The 602nd T.D. Battalion history entry for 19 April 1945 states, "More than two dozen Bronze Star Medals were awarded to officers and men of the battalion. In almost every instance, the ribbons and citations had been previously presented, but the actual medals had not been available until recently." For the same date, the Company A history entry indicated that additional men whose names are not included above went over to the battalion to receive their Silver and Bronze Star Medals. Those men were: **S/Sgt Harold T. Haynes**, **1st Sgt. James Wilson**, **Sgt. James B. McCarthy**, **Sgt. Marion F. Meredith**, **Cpl. Eldred T. Brown**, and **John N. McPherson** (rank not listed). **Joe B. Murray**, Medical Attachment was awarded the Bronze Star Medal "for evacuation of a man at night along a route that ran parallel to the front (26th Infantry Division). As of V.E.



Day, a list of men in Company A was made showing what medals and awards had been presented. Additional recipients were: Bronze Star (Three Clusters)--**S/Sgt Harold T. Haynes**, and Bronze Star Medals to **Benny H. Erwin, Lorne P. Beaudoin, Thomas G. Connor**, and **Willie L. Deering**.

In the June 1985 issue of Panther Tracks, a letter to Jack Coulston from Ivan Curry reads as follows: "Marvin Moore, one of our real heroes, showed up at the 1980 reunion and recounted the time his T.D. was blown to Hell by a German mine. It broke his arm and there were other damages. Alfred R. Downey lost both his legs and Freddie Phillips was killed. One of our worst tragedies. Tip your hat to Marvin--he still got them out of the wrecked T.D. before going into shock." How many other events are there of similar heroic acts that never were recorded and for which no medals were given?

#### Purple Hearts--

There is no day-to-day record in either the Battalion or Company A's unit journal of men awarded the Purple Heart. However, Jack Coulston had procured from various military archives copies of hundreds of pages of records, and he was sorting out this information in his files. During the 1987/88 year, he began to record in Panther Tracks the names of persons found to have been awarded Purple Hearts.

A listing of these names from Panther Tracks, April 1987, December 1987, and May/June 1988 plus information from the Battalion and Company A unit journals is shown in Appendix VII. In the writer's opinion, had other companies maintained a unit journal in the manner of Company A, a more complete list of men awarded Purple Hearts could be obtained over and above the 129 listed in Appendix VII. It seems reasonable that the total would likely have approximated the 145-150 range for the Battalion.

#### Legion of Merit

**PETER J. KOPCSAK** was awarded the Legion of Merit, "For exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services from 15 March 1945 to 15 May 1946. As Chief of the Personal Affairs Branch and later as Assistant Chief of the Miscellaneous Division, G-1 Section, Colonel Kopcsak was largely responsible for the establishment of the Personal Affairs Program of Army Ground Forces. Without precedent or past experience to guide him, he organized and administered this program in all its aspects to include all the personal affairs of hospitalized officers and enlisted men in Army hospitals. His tact, persistence, and skill--displayed at all times--contributed to the sympathetic solution of the problems of over 250,000 hospitalized Army Ground Forces patients who, by having the information and entitlements due them, were enabled to better combat the mental depression resultant from their wounds and thereby shorten their hospitalization period. Colonel Kopcsak's work was an outstanding contribution to the military program of the United States."

#### Other Outstanding Recognition

**JULIUS ORSAK**, 602nd T.D. Bn. 1941-1945, was "regular Army" and he remained in the military service until his retirement in 1958. In his latter years, he had several important and interesting assignments, one of which was serving for four years on the Armed Forces Board, Ft. Knox, KY. In recognition of this, he was elected as President of the National Retired Enlisted Men's Association from 1966 to 1969. He was another 602nd veteran receiving an honor he so very much deserved.

#### Unsung Heroes

"There were far more heroes in the 602nd than the number of medals issued." How about the "unsung heroes"? There is nothing in our unit journals covering the combat action of the nine gun platoon "Security Sections"--the men out in the mud and the snow providing protection to the Tank Destroyers. It may have been only natural for our journals to concentrate on "Enemy Tanks Destroyed" and the like, but how about those men out on the ground? What percentage of our Purple Heart Medals went to these people?

Leonard Bornemann was a member of the Security Section of his platoon. The T.D.s were in a holding position and the machine guns were set up out on the flanks. The rest of the story is told in the section on Prisoners of War.

It seems this section should be called: "How About"? How about the mechanics who kept the Tank Destroyers and other vehicles running? Many times under the absolute and utmost deplorable conditions, they kept them going. How about the armorers who helped keep the weapons firing? How about the personnel who maintained our communication equipment? How about the cooks who found themselves performing combat duty? How about the supply personnel? How about the men who took out the gas, ammunition, and rations? What about the Company Recon. Sgt. who saw to it that the mail got out to the platoons with the least possible delay? How about the men from Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company? The gas truck drivers, the ammunition truck drivers and so on?

Jack Coulston, Battalion Supply Officer throughout our combat action documented one of these experiences. In Panther Tracks, September 1944, of Clifford McMahan, Battalion gas truck driver, he wrote, "He was on his way to Dean Hart's unit when he was put on a wrong road by an M.P. After driving two miles, he came under direct fire from guns in a fortified position. He backed up in the face of fire, drove through a protective draw and back under fire to Hart's position as he knew they were out of gas. His truck was hit quite a few times, but it did not blow. You can imagine what would have happened if the 1,400 gallons of gas had exploded. He would have been roasted!"

Jack Coulston also documented another experience of his in a letter dated 24 September 1983, as he was recounting one of his experiences of 4 November 1945. He said, "I had to take some ammunition to the front one night--found one Company on the side of a steep hill with the Germans on the other side--so I only took one truck up the hill. I got out of my command car to talk to the platoon leader and Sgt. while the truck was being unloaded when--Wham--German 88's started over our heads. I dove for cover as did everyone else. After it was all over, I looked up at the truck, and there was the driver sitting in the cab with his foot on the brake. The driver grinned and said, 'Hell Captain, the brakes are bad and although everybody hit the dirt, I couldn't. If I had, the truck would have rolled down the hill and you really would have had an explosion.' He had sat there during the entire bombardment."

How about the Battalion Medical Detachment? It is thought by the writer that the 602nd had something unique here. If men were wounded or ill, they did not want--if they could help it--to be evacuated through the units to which we were attached, because of the chance that upon recovery, they would not be reassigned to the 602nd. At the same time, the 602nd did not want to lose their personnel if it could be avoided. To this end, in effect, the 602nd Medical Detachment became the 602nd Army Field Hospital. Unless a man absolutely had to be evacuated to the rear, he was retained so that in a nominal length of time, he could be returned to duty in his own company, platoon, or section. Were the Battalion Surgeon alive, he should be commended for this extra effort.

This writer can attest to the effectiveness of this arrangement through personal experience. Around the time of the "big tank battle," early one afternoon, "I found I could not keep my eyes open. It must have been the combination of lots of dust, glare, and



extensive use of field glasses. It was as though I had become snow blind. Instead of using the medics of the unit to which we were attached, I had our own medics take me back to the Bn. Hdq. There they kept me in a dark room for three days constantly putting wet compresses on my eyes. The second incident was late at night on February 1, 1945. On the way back from the Infantry Regimental Command Post, I checked in with the medics of the infantry unit to which we were attached as I was freezing and burning up at the same time. They discovered I had a very high fever and guessed I had pneumonia, or was getting it, and wanted to evacuate me through their channels. I declined and went back to the Company A Command Post, got Lt. Whitman to take over, and went to our own Battalion Headquarters. Our Battalion medics took over and on February 6th, I returned to the company."

It would be very interesting to know just how many 602nd men were retained in the organization by this special effort on the part of our Battalion Medical Detachment personnel.

#### Commendations

From Omaha Beach to V.E. Day, four Battle Stars were awarded to the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion: Battle of France, Battle of the Ardennes, Battle of the Rhineland, and Battle of Germany.

#### Verbal--2nd Cavalry Group

As extracted from our Battalion history for September 11, 1944, the following entry appeared: "Battalion commander received verbal commendation from Colonel Read, Commanding Officer, 2nd Cavalry Group for work of this battalion for the period 8 September 1944 to 10 September 1944."

#### XII Corps--9th T.D. Group

The December 1987 Panther Tracks contained the following: "According to the official XII Corps Station list, we were the only unit attached to the 9th T.D. Group during September and early October 1944." A letter dated 16 October 1944 from Major General M. S. Eddy, Commanding General, Headquarters XII Corps to Lt. Colonel James W. Bidwell, Commander, 9th T.D. Group referred to one point that fighting of the last few weeks had punched home so obvious and so clean cut he wanted it to be known to all soldiers and officers. General Eddy said the point was, "The Germans, even the best and most experienced of them are visibly frightened of us." They are frightened by the superior equipment, the more skillful tactics, and above all, by the magnificent courage and will to win shown by the troops of this Corps." He said further, "We are now between rounds of a fight to the knockout. The last round saw the Boche stagger back into his corner. While we are gathering our strength for the kill, he is hanging on the ropes. He cannot last another -- he is bound to go down. I am confident when the next round comes up, that the troops of the 9th T.D. Group will show the same courage, the same skill, and the same driving determination to get this war won, that have won for us our successes to date. I congratulate the 9th T.D. Group on its performance in the past--I wish Godspeed and early victory."

On 23 October 1944, Lt. Colonel James W. Bidwell, Commanding Officer, Headquarters 9th Tank Destroyer Group wrote Lt. Colonel Peter J. Kopcsak, Commander, 602nd T.D. Battalion as follows: "I am passing this (the commendation cited above) on to you as I feel that the fine work the 602nd T.D. Battalion has accomplished, in the carrying out of all combat missions and orders, has been the mainstay of any success attributed to the 9th T.D. Group. I wish to commend you, your officers, and men. Your organization reflects in combat the excellent training standards and ideals that has always been apparent in your leaders and men." He said further, "I know that, when the

final phase of this campaign is set in motion, the 602nd T.D. Battalion will show a bulldog determination and purpose to win. This, in conjunction with the other arms, will bring to our side complete and irrevocable victory."

#### 183rd Field Artillery Group

In October 1944, Colonel W. H. Bartlett, Commander, 183rd Field Artillery Group, FDC-B wrote the Commanding General, XII Corps Artillery as follows: "During the period 16 October to 26 October, elements of the 602nd T.D. Battalion were attached to the 273d F.A. Battalion and the 738th F.A. Battalion operating under this headquarters. During this period, they performed valuable service in furnishing supporting fires in the 35th and 26th Infantry Divisions and the 4th Armored Division Sectors. In this secondary role, they fired 138 missions, expending 2,192 rounds of ammunition on observed and on harassing and interdiction fires. The gun crews were always prompt in furnishing fires when and where needed, day or night. I wish to commend the officers and men of the above unit for their fine display of cooperation and desire to do all in their power to kill Germans and destroy their equipment and installations."

#### Hqtrs. XII Corps Artillery

On 30 October 1944, Brigadier General Commanding Officer Headquarters, XII Corps Artillery wrote the Commanding Officer, 602nd T.D. Battalion, "The service rendered by the 602nd T.D. Bn. in support of the Corps Artillery, coming as it did at a time of critical shortage in artillery ammunition, should serve as a keynote of the coordination and cooperation between the various arms that is so necessary to the success of any operation. I add my commendation to that of the group commander."

#### 9th Tank Destroyer Group

The 602nd T.D. Battalion history shows that during the month of November 1944, various platoons and companies were attached to the 26th Infantry Division units for action against the enemy. On 26 November 1944, a letter from the Corps Commanding Major General to the Commanding General of the 26th Infantry Division read, "When I tell you that some of the bitterest fighting of our entire front during the last three weeks has taken place in your own zone, I tell you nothing that you and the 26th Infantry Division do not already know. Some of you may not know, however, that your skill and gallantry in your first major engagements have won the respect and admiration of the whole Corps--and even, I feel sure of the German troops facing you."

Some of Germany's finest fighting forces are on your front, including the tough and tested 11th Panzer Division. I can give no higher compliment to your division than to assure you that, if these battle-tried German troops expected to deal easily with a new and untried American division, they have received one of the great surprises of their careers. The remarkable speed with which your fighting troops have acquired the spirit of veterans deserves commendation second only to the high courage and constant aggressiveness with which you have battled across Lorraine."

#### Hqtrs. 28th Infantry Division

Both Battalion and Company A histories indicate that from December 21 to 23, 1944, inclusive the 602nd T.D. Bn. was attached to VIII Corps after an all-night 150-mile march to Neufchateau, Belgium. On 7 January 1945, Major General Norman D. Cota, Commanding Officer, Headquarters, 28th Infantry Division wrote to the Commanding Officer, 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. He said, "During the period 24 December to 31 December 1944, your Battalion was attached to the 28th Infantry Division for operations



against the enemy. Due to the nature of the actions, these operations were among the most difficult known to warfare, and they were carried out under the most unfavorable circumstances. During the entire period, your Battalion constantly offered faithful and unhesitating obedience to all instructions issued by me, and its conduct reflects great credit upon the Battalion and upon you. I hereby commend you for your excellent services."

#### Hqtrs. VIII Corps

On 17 January 1945, in transmitting the commendation from General Cota to the Commanding Officer, 602nd T.D. Battalion, Major General Middleton, Commander VIII Corps said in his endorsement, "It is with pleasure and gratification that I forward this well deserved commendation. I desire to add my commendation to that of the Commanding General 28th Infantry Division."

#### Hqtrs. III Corps

On 25 January 1945, Major General John Millikin, Commander Headquarters III Corps, transmitted a commendation to the Corps from General George S. Patton to the Commanding Officer, Company C, 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion (Captain Edmond S. Aldredge). General Patton said, "The speed with which the III Corps assembled, and the energy, skill and persistency with which it pressed its attack for the relief of BASTOGNE constitutes a very noteworthy feat of arms. You and the officers and men of your Command are hereby highly commended for a superior performance." Major General Millikin, Corps Commander, added "The Corps Commander is gratified to transmit the Army Commander's commendation to the units of Corps, Troops and Divisions participating in the relief of BASTOGNE. The uncertainty of the enemy situation, the stubborn enemy resistance, the disregard for losses and the teamwork which all units displayed in gaining the goal of relieving BASTOGNE were the contributing factors that made the operation such an outstanding victory, and will be highly valued in the history of each unit. The Corps Commander adds his commendation for the performance of this task well done."

#### Hqtrs. 89th Infantry Division

Major General Thomas D. Finley, Commanding Officer Headquarters 89th Infantry Division forwarded to the Commanding Officer, 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion on 29 May 1945 the following: "During the period from 12 March 1945 to the present date, your Battalion has been attached to this division for operations against the enemy. During this attachment your Battalion, as component parts of task forces and in direct support of infantry regiments, greatly assisted the division in the assault crossing of the Rhine River and in the advance of the division east thereof. The action of your Battalion has been characterized by wholehearted determination and cooperation. At all times our relationships were pleasant and cordial. It is with a great deal of regret that we part company."

I desire to commend you, your officers and men for your excellent work and efficient service in combat and to express, on behalf of the officers and men of my command, my appreciation for a fine performance of duty."

#### General Conclusions

From the information presented in this document, it becomes crystal clear that the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion not only existed; it was one of the first combat units of its kind ever organized. The factual record shows also that the 602nd, while not organizationally attached to any one Division, as were some other similar types of Battalions, served in front line combat with many different military units as needed in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany after landing on Omaha Beach August 25, 1944.

Further documented evidence reveals that not only was the 602nd the only intact organized combat unit for three days between Neufchateau and vicinity and Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge, but also that during this time, they repelled German forces attempting to enter such towns as Vaux-les-Rosieres, Neufchateau, and Petite Rosieres. Presence and action of Battalion units in or near Libramont, Recogne, Hatrival, St. Hubert, and St. Marie may have also prevented German soldiers from entering those towns.

The record, taken from after action reports, of enemy losses in men and materiel inflicted by the 602nd T.D. Bn. and the 1943 after action Presidential Citation for extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance awarded Company C as part of a 6th Calvary Task Force assigned to clear out the Harlange pocket attest to the Battalion's combat effectiveness. The relatively low incidence of casualties to the 602nd TD Bn. can be attributed to the unit's skill in maneuverability and tactics derived from participation in three state-side training maneuvers, superior marksmanship skill of gunners, and discipline in the chain of command which enabled expert leadership by officers and non-commissioned officers in command to achieve maximum effectiveness, **with minimal losses**. Unquestionably, as individuals and as a unit, the 602nd T.D. Battalion achieved a distinguished combat record.