

History of the 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion

By George H. Straley

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The 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion has a proud history. The Battalion came into being as a result of a need in the United States Army for a fighting element so equipped and trained as to effectively combat and destroy the Panzer Korps of the Wehrmacht of Adolph Hitler's Germany.

It was on the 17th of April 1943 that the 13th newly activated tank destroyer Battalion – the 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion – was organized at Camp Bowie, Texas with Lt. Col. Donald B. Miller as their Battalion Commander. Men from almost every state in the Union were recruited to form its ranks, and in due time they embarked on a training program that, although essentially centered around Camp Hood, Texas, seat of the Tank Destroyer Center, was destined to carry them through a succession of training areas.

Through long, hot weeks under the scorching sun of the Lone Star State, the training progressed from Basic to Advanced, and at no time was there a failure of all elements of the Battalion to meet the standards required of the Army Ground Forces. The esprit de corps was high, and the desire to face the combat test was great. It was soon to come.

As other Battalions fell by the wayside, the 661st forged ahead. From the schedules of Advanced Training, it emerged successfully to engage in a seven-week program of rigorous maneuvers at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. Confidence in field operations was engendered and further strengthened by additional training at Camp Swift, Texas. Combined operations with Armor at Camp Bowie, Texas, and Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, rapidly brought the Battalion to the climax of its training career.

On December 22nd, 1944, the 661st entrained for Camp Shanks, New York, and on January 9th, 1945, embarked for the European Theater of Operations. Early on the morning of January 23rd, at Le Havre, France, the Battalion set foot for the first time on foreign soil. On February 9th, after two weeks of preparation at scattered points along the Normandy coast, the 661st began a long, arduous march from the interior of France to the combat zone at Bullingen, Belgium. Hard-pressed for time by higher authority, the men of the Battalion turned stevedores in order to get their equipment off the ship, only to launch a forced march of more than 350 miles

immediately thereafter, without respite. Through snow and rain, the long convoy toiled forward, arriving safely at its destination in the late afternoon of Sunday, February 11th.

It was five days later – February 16th, 1945 – that the grim test of combat came. The Battalion entered the line in the vicinity of Krinkelt and Rocherath, Belgium, in support of the 69th Infantry Division of the First United States Army. In their initial encounter with the enemy on February 25th, the men of the 661st were impressively successful. Machine-gun nests were destroyed, pillboxes neutralized, prisoners taken. Quickly following this engagement, a swift advance was affected through the Siegfried Line, and early in March, the Battalion was well inside Germany at Schmidheim.

On March 23rd, after a few days' rest, the 661st again moved into the line, supporting the 69th Infantry Division's spearhead offensive against the Rhine River, and on March 27th, the Battalion crossed this historic water barrier to unleash a series of onslaughts that toppled such famous landmarks as Ehrenbreitstein, Nieder-Lahnstein and Bad Ems. Many other towns and villages fell as the First United States Army drove for a juncture with the Ninth in the north: Eschenau, Wetzlar, Giessen, Fritzlar and Naumberg.

From the Naumberg sector was projected the eastward push to Kassel and the Werra River. Over extremely hilly terrain, and against constantly stiffening opposition, the Battalion closely supported the 69th's advance until the temporary objective was attained in the crossing of the Werra River, April 9th. Prisoners were plentiful.

There followed again a succession of towns and cities captured by the marching 661st as it pressed closely behind the armored elements in the push toward the heart of the Reich. Heilingenstadt fell, then Dinglestadt, Freyburg, Schlotheim, Kolleda and Weissenfels, where the famous old castle became a fortress for fanatical youths of the Hitler Jugend and Volkssturmers. Then Pegau, on the high road to Leipzig, was taken.

At the approaches to Leipzig, the Battalion met the sternest opposition. German flak batteries roared into action in a frantic attempt to check the advance. Initial progress was slow. Constant air bursts made it difficult for the destroyers to maneuver into suitable gun positions and engage targets. Nevertheless, flak batteries and enemy strongpoints met destruction from the Battalion's guns, and on April 18th, the infantry closed in on the historic city of Leipzig.

In all, 120 flak guns were destroyed or neutralized. Prisoners poured in. As the assault of the city proper entered its final stages, elements of the 661st were engaged in striking to the heart of the beleaguered metropolis. Under the terrific bombardment, the City Hall, nerve center of Leipzig's defenses, capitulated. Other elements of the 661st aided in the systematic reduction of strongpoints at the railroad terminal and at the Battle of the Nations monument. Many prisoners were taken. Many of the Nazi defenders who fanatically resisted were destroyed.

The Battalion as a whole fought its most impressive engagement at Leipzig, and has reason to be proud of its efforts in the taking of this city, historically famed for its resistance in the Napoleonic battles of the 18th century.

As of April 25th, 1945, the 661st Tank Destroyer Battalion had taken 727 prisoners, destroyed or neutralized many machine-gun nests and strongpoints, and marched over 1,200 miles. All this in but three months.



Coat of Arms of the 661st Tank Destroyer Bn

Superimposed upon a shield of yellow are the symbols indicative of the Battalion's service in the European Theater of Operations. Across the top of the shield is a pillbox and dragon teeth representing the Siegfried Line of the Western Front, where the Battalion fought in February 1945. At the bottom of the shield is a church steeple indicative of the battles of the Battalion from the Siegfried Line to the Rhine River through such towns as Dickersheid, Rescheid and Oberrefferchied. The curved band with the waving line represents the Rhine River, which the Battalion crossed in March 1945. The monument at the top of the shield is a silhouette of the

Monument of Nations in Leipzig. It symbolizes the actions of the Battalion, which spearheaded the drive of the First U.S. Army into Leipzig in its campaign to the east and meeting with the army of the USSR.