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THE OPERATIONS OF THE THIRD PLATOON, COMPANY "D",
13TH ARMORED REGIMENT (1ST ARMORED DIVISION)
IN THE VICINITY OF MATEUR, TUNISIA
1 MAY TO 9 MAY, 1943 (TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Platoon Leader)

Type of operation described: TANK PLATOONS AS A
PART OF A MEDIUM TANK BATTALION IN A
BREAK THROUGH AND EXPLOITATION

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE THIRD PLATOON, COMPANY "D",
13TH ARMORED REGIMENT (1ST ARMORED DIVISION) IN
THE VICINITY OF MATEUR, TUNISIA 1 MAY TO 9 MAY, 1943
(Personal Experiences of a Platoon Leader)

INTRODUCTION

This is a personal experience monograph of the Platoon Leader of the 3d Platoon, Company D, 13th Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, during the period 1-9 May, 1943, in the vicinity of Mateur, Tunisia.

It is appropriate at this time to give a brief resume of the events preceding the action described.

As early as January, 1942, plans for a military operation in Northwest Africa were discussed in Washington, but nothing could be done at that time because of the shortage of ships and other materiel. Finally, on 8 November, 1942, after at least one postponement, the Eastern Task Force, composed of United States and British Forces escorted by the British Navy, landed in North Africa in the vicinity of Algiers, the capitol of Algeria. Simultaneously, the Center Task Force, composed of United States Forces escorted by the British Navy, landed near Oran, Algeria; while the Western Task Force, composed of United States Forces escorted by the United States Navy landed near Casablanca, French Morocco.¹ (See Map A) Combat Command B, consisting of approximately one-half of the 1st Armored Division, was in the Center Task Force. Included in Combat Command B was the 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, equipped with M3 (General Grant) tanks.²

Two days after the invasion all organized resistance came to an end in Algeria and French Morocco,³ and the Allies turned their attention to Tunisia.⁴ It should be remembered at this point that the Allies were unable to launch an attack on Tunisia because of the shortage of ships to transport the troops and supplies. It is interesting to note that "some of the larger vessels used in the invasion of North Africa did not become available until a week before the convoys sailed".⁵

1. A-1 p. 63 and A-3 pp. 8-12
2. Personal knowledge
3. A-1 p. 78
4. A-2 p. 106
5. A-1 p. 63

Immediately the Allies started moving elements of the British First Army and the 34th U. S. Infantry Division from the vicinity of Algiers, with the mission of "occupying Eastern Algeria and Tunisia before the enemy could seize them".⁶ Other elements of the United States Army from the vicinity of Oran, particularly tanks from the 1st Armored Division, were rushed to Eastern Algeria to reinforce the British First Army.⁷ (See Map A) British Commandos, United States Rangers, and certain other units of the United States Army were involved, but an accurate tabulation of the troops involved is not within the scope of this monograph. After some negotiations with the Germans, the French Forces under General Barre decided to support the United States and British Forces, and the Battle of Tunisia was joined.⁸

Although the Axis had few troops in Tunisia at the time of the invasion of French Morocco and Algeria, they built up their forces there much faster than the Allies had thought possible; and, the Germans had patrols in the vicinity of Beja, some sixty miles west of Tunis, by 16 November, 1942.⁹

The rapid build up of Axis Forces operating on interior lines of communications, as opposed to the almost insurmountable administrative problems faced by the Allies, made it impossible to capture Tunis immediately.¹⁰ Then the unusually wet winter and poor road net further increased the administrative problems of the Allies, so that the best they could do was to keep pressure on the Axis Forces.¹¹ Occasionally the Germans launched violent attacks and on several occasions gained the initiative.¹² This situation continued from December, 1942, through February, 1943.

In February, 1943, General Patton succeeded General Fredendall as II Corps Commander.¹³ In March, General Harmon succeeded General Ward as 1st Armored Division Commander,¹⁴ and, on 17 April, 1943, General Bradley succeeded General Patton as II Corps Commander.¹⁵

6. A-2 p. 106

7. Personal knowledge

8. A-1 p. 78 and A-3 p. 18

9. A-1 p. 78

10. A-3 p. 19

11. A-3 pp. 20-21

12. A-2 p. 107 and A-3 p. 22

13. A-4 p. 7

14. A-5 p. 5

15. A-4 p. 11

GENERAL SITUATION, NORTHERN PHASE

After fighting in Southern Tunisia until April, 1943, II Corps, consisting of the 1st, 9th, and 34th Infantry Divisions, the 1st Armored Division, and Corps Troops, moved across the communication lines of the British 1st Army and moved into position on the Northern Tunisian front.¹⁶ Elements of the II Corps were disposed with Corps Franc de Afrique on the north, with the 9th, 34th, and 1st Infantry Divisions in line from north to south, and with the 6th Armored Infantry Regiment of the 1st Armored Division guarding the right flank of the II Corps and the left flank of the British 1st Army.¹⁷ The rest of the 1st Armored Division was in Corps Reserve.¹⁸ (See Map B)

GENERAL OPERATIONS TO 1 MAY, 1943

By 23 April, 1943, the entire Allied Line in Tunisia exploded into a general offensive that was destined to crush the Axis in Tunisia.¹⁹ The II Corps attack to the eastward over a forty mile front of mountainous terrain was characterized by continuous heavy fighting.²⁰ The 1st Armored Division Sector consisted of the Tine River Valley and the hills to the south, otherwise known as the "Mousetrap".²¹ The terrain was wholly unsuited for use by armor; so the Infantry fought through the hills and the Reconnaissance and Engineer Units maintained contact and cleared mines in the valley, while the tanks fired indirect fire missions and remained in mobile reserve to stop any counterattack.²²

By 1 May, 1943, the Infantry of the 1st Armored Division had captured most of the ground on the south side of the "Mousetrap", while units north of the "Mousetrap" had driven the enemy back to the last defensive positions before Mateur.²³ The time was approaching for use of the armor. (See Map B)

OPERATIONS 1-5 MAY

Before describing the operations, it is advisable to review briefly the organization of the Armored Division, especially with reference to the

16. A-4 p. 11

17. A-6 p. 24

18. A-6 p. 23

19. A-2 p. 108 and A-6 pp. 2 and 3

20. A-2 pp. 108-117

21. Personal knowledge

22. Personal knowledge

23. A-3 p. 44 and A-6 p. 26

Tanks and Infantry. At that time the Armored Division was composed of two Armored Regiments and one Infantry Regiment. Each Armored Regiment was organized with the 1st Battalion of light tanks, while the 2nd and 3d Battalions had medium tanks. Each Battalion had a Headquarters Company and three Tank Companies of seventeen tanks each, with three additional tanks in the Tank Section of Battalion Headquarters Company; one for the Battalion Commander, one for the Executive Officer, and the other for the Artillery Observer. Thus we see that D Company was the 1st Company of the 2nd Battalion and equipped with medium tanks. By that time the medium tank companies were equipped with the M4 series tanks, which were equipped with radial engines and 75 mm guns, so that they were both under powered and under gunned.

During the last few days of April and the first five days of May, 1943, the 3d Platoon, Company D, 13th Armored Regiment, operated as a part of the 2nd Battalion, tactically deployed by companies to engage targets of opportunity, fire indirect fire missions on suspected enemy positions, and to guard against a counterattack.²⁴ This tactical deployment was possible only after considerable progress had been made in the area of the "Mousetrap".²⁵

After having lost all of the forward slopes in the area west of Mateur, the enemy withdrew to the hills east of Mateur, and organized his defenses where he was to make his last effective stand against the Allies in Africa.²⁶ While the 3d Platoon, Company D, and the balance of the Battalion was employed in the aggressive defense against counterattacks in the upper Tine Valley, the 81st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion of the 1st Armored Division spearheaded the move of Combat Command B (less 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment), from the upper Tine Valley, across the front of the 1st and 34th Infantry Divisions, into Mateur at about 1100 hours, 3 May, 1943.²⁷

At that time Combat Command B consisted of 2nd and 3d Battalions,

24. Personal knowledge

25. Personal knowledge

26. A-6 p. 34

27. A-4 p. 14

13th Armored Regiment, 1st Battalion of the 1st Armored Regiment, 81st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 27th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, and the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion attached.²⁸

The 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, remained in the upper Tine Valley, south of Mateur. The 3d Platoon, Company D, fired a considerable quantity of high explosive ammunition at the enemy by indirect fire method and in turn was subjected to many short concentrations of both time fire and impact fire by hostile artillery. On at least two occasions, fighter-bombers of the Luftwaffe scored near misses on the platoon.²⁹

Each night after it got dark, the 3d Platoon rejoined the rest of the company in the vicinity, and they in turn rejoined the battalion. As soon as local security was established, the refueling and ammunition resupply was effected, and the troops were fed a hot meal. Another hot meal was fed in the morning, but so little time had elapsed between supper and breakfast that the troops consumed very little except coffee.³⁰

When the American Forces entered Mateur at 1100 hours on 3 May, 1943, they found that every bridge had been destroyed by the enemy. The Division Engineer estimated that it would take at least forty-eight hours to build the bridges required.³¹ The streams were impassable to armor, so the next move was dependent upon the Engineers.³² The rapid movement of the 1st Armored Division into Mateur disrupted the timing of the Germans. "The German Commander, as Bradley hoped he might, regarded Mateur as the key to the whole situation, and brought in infantry, artillery, tanks, planes, everything he could assemble, to retake the place or at least to pen the audacious Americans within it. It was a siege. In a three day battle of the most violent character, the Nazi did succeed in preventing the 1st Armored from debouching from Mateur, either east toward Ferryville, or southeast to the break of the hills."³³ It was not until about noon on 5 May that the bridges in Mateur were completed in spite of almost contin-

28. A-7 p. 53

29. Personal knowledge

30. Personal knowledge

31. A-8 p. 55

32. Personal knowledge

33. A-4 p. 14

uous shelling by heavy artillery and the bombing by attack bombers. The afternoon of 5 May was spent in reconnaissance and the main attack was launched on 6 May, 1943.

While the Engineers were building the bridges in Mateur so that the armor could be utilized, the 3d Platoon, Company D, was busy in the Upper Tine Valley, south of Mateur. On 5 May, the 3d Platoon, with the rest of the 2nd Battalion, moved out into the Tine Valley before daylight and started their incessant hammering at the Germans.³⁴ The same day General Robinette, the Commanding General of Combat Command B and the 13th Armored Regiment, was wounded and evacuated, and Colonel C. C. Benson assumed command.³⁵ In the afternoon of 5 May, Company H of the 3d Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, made a reconnaissance in force east of Mateur, toward Bad Bad Farm. The reconnaissance, composed of one company of medium tanks, proved what had been suspected. The bulk of the Germans' antitank strength was east of Mateur, because of the suitability for the use of armor.³⁶ The company lost seven tanks on the reconnaissance.³⁷

The Platoon Leader, 3d Platoon, who was a few miles south of Mateur, saw the reconnaissance in force and the ensuing battle, but was out of range, and therefore unable to assist in the fire fight. It was not until about midnight that night when his battalion moved up to Mateur prior to launching an attack at daybreak in the same spot, that he learned that his classmate and best friend for many years had been killed in the action that he had witnessed that afternoon.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

The mission of the 2nd Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, was to break through the German lines east of Mateur, cut the Bizerte-Ferryville-Djedeida-Tunis road and continue eastward, cutting the main Bizerte-Tunis highway.³⁸ The mission of the 3d Platoon, Company D, was to protect the left flank of the Battalion during the attack and reorganization.³⁹

34. Personal knowledge
35. A-5 p. 6
36. A-8 p. 56

37. A-9 p. 778
38. Statement of Lt. Col. Henry E. Gardner, CO of 2nd Bn.
39. Personal knowledge

b. The Battalion plan for the attack called for E Company to attack on the right side of the Battalion, with the company in line of platoons in line. F Company on the middle in the same formation, and D Company on the left with two platoons in line, and the 3d Platoon on the extreme left flank in an echelon left formation. The 3d Battalion was to follow the 2nd Battalion through, and turn left to outflank stubborn enemy resistance in the hills south of Ferryville.⁴⁰ (See Map C)

c. The attack was set for 0500 hours, 6 May, 1943, by the Commanding Officer of the Regiment and Combat Command B,⁴¹ and the line of departure was a low ridge east of Mateur that ran northwest and southeast. The 2nd Battalion moved from the bivouac area west of Mateur in time to reach the line of departure just at the break of day. The ridge from which the attack was launched was fairly steep on the side next to Mateur, but sloped off gradually to a level stretch approximately 1000 yards wide from which a range of low ridges rose on the opposite side. An early morning fog blanketed the valley with a white misty shroud not more than five or six feet from the ground. The low lying ground fog made it impossible to see the ground in the flat between the ridges, and the blackened hulls of the seven burned out tanks, protruding above the misty white fog lent a particularly eerie aspect to the battle field. With hardly a moments hesitation, the 2nd Battalion moved from column to line formation, and crossed the line of departure with the Companies E, F, and D, from right to left, with the 3d Platoon, Company D, protecting the otherwise exposed left flank.

d. Due to some last minute change in plan the night before regarding the forward observer, there was no artillery preparation.⁴² It was thought by the new and relatively inexperienced Regimental Commander that fifty-three tanks could fight their way through the antitank guns alone.⁴³ Due to the late hour of arrival of the Assault Gun and Mortar Platoons, and the absol-

40. A-5 p. 6 and A-6 p. 47

41. Statement of Capt. P. G. Walker

42. A-9 p. 779

43. Statement of Capt. P. G. Walker

ute lack of visibility on the morning of the attack, the supporting weapons of the battalion were not used initially.⁴⁴

e. Nothing except the roar of the engines and the squeaking of the suspension system broke the stillness of this North African dawn. Suddenly, the purple pyrotechnics, which was the German armored attack signal, lit up the sky against the red glow of the approaching sunrise. Almost simultaneously the battlefield erupted into action, characterized by flashes from antitank guns sending out their screaming, red, high velocity projectiles in a criss cross pattern, and the almost steady flame of the high cyclic rate machine guns pouring streams of tracers onto and around the tanks as they were knocked out and started to burn. Some of the tanks hit a mine field and were disabled; while others tried to find the end of the mine field and bypass it.⁴⁵ (See Map C)

f. The Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Henry E. Gardner, who was between Company E on the right and Company F in the middle, saw the overwhelming superiority of antitank guns knock out the tank of E Company Commander, and the tanks of two of the Platoon Leaders. He ordered the remaining tanks to return to the line of departure.⁴⁶ Before he could finish his instructions, his tank was destroyed by antitank fire.

g. One of the Platoon Leaders of E Company, Lt. James Curry, managed to bypass the mine field and get across the flat with two or three of his tanks, where they hid in the narrow valleys in defilade from the antitank guns.⁴⁷ It was impossible to pull the tanks back without losing them, so they stayed there for the remainder of the day.⁴⁸

h. The 2nd Battalion had lost seven tanks in the few minutes after the jump off, including those of the Battalion Commander, E Company Commander, two Platoon Leaders of E Company, and three others.

i. The seven tanks burning in front of the position, in addition to the seven fire-blackened hulls lost by the 3d Battalion the day before,

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| 44. Statement of Lt. Col. Henry E. Gardner | 47. Personal knowledge |
| 45. Personal knowledge | 48. A-9 p. 779 |
| 46. Statement of Lt. Col. Henry E. Gardner | |

were grim reminders of the terrific power and devastating effect of the German antitank guns. Every time a round of 75 mm ammunition exploded inside a tank, the burning tank belched black smoke rings toward the sky, and the fragments could be heard rattling around inside.

J. The 3d Platoon, Company D, moved back in defilade and started firing indirect fire missions in an effort to uncover some of the well dug in and well camouflaged antitank guns. The Mortar Platoon of the Battalion Headquarters Company moved into position behind the 3d Platoon, and used one of the 3d Platoon tanks as a forward observation post. The Assault Gun Platoon fired similar missions from positions further to the rear.

K. Since the Germans were past masters of the art of war, and especially skilled in the technique of camouflage, the efforts to uncover their antitank guns was marked by only limited success. This was partly due to the fact that the Germans dug in some of their antitank guns behind obstacles with fields of fire parallel to the front line, similar to machine guns on a final protective line.⁴⁹ They dug in others on the reverse slopes, so that it was impossible to see them from the ridge.

L. In spite of the limited success of the operation, the 3d Platoon kept up the fire throughout the day, and in turn received considerable artillery fire, much of which was high velocity. The Mortar and Assault Gun Platoons, and other sections of Headquarters Company and attached units, suffered several casualties from artillery fire, while the 3d Platoon tanks received several near misses and were hit frequently by shrapnel from the artillery.

Twice the Platoon Leader of the 3d Platoon observed tanks from the 3d Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment move into an orchard on the left of the 2nd Battalion, and both times one of the tanks was destroyed by anti-tank fire. The Platoon Leader observed the action through field glasses

49. Personal knowledge

at comparatively close range, but was unable to locate the antitank guns.

(See Map C)

Leaving the 3d Platoon in charge of the Platoon Sergeant, who was to fire sporadic search and harassing missions, the Platoon Leader went to the right end of the ridge, and crawled forward to observe the area and locate targets. D Company Commander, who was particularly skilled at picking out antitank guns and destroying them, discovered a camouflaged position that he suspected was an antitank gun. He moved up one of the tanks and fired ten rounds of high explosive set on delay. Firing short of the target, and elevating and depressing the gun while firing as rapidly as possible enabled him to get air bursts over the target from ricochets, and to score direct hits on the antitank gun. It was an 88 mm gun which was destroyed, and the ammunition in some of the side trenches was set on fire.

While forward of the ridge observing the area, an enemy sniper discovered the Platoon Leader, and made the situation extremely uncomfortable for him, until the 3d Platoon fired another one of their sporadic area search missions, and discouraged the sniper long enough for him to get back.

About noon, the Executive Officer of the 13th Armored Regiment and Combat Command B, Lt. Col. Hamilton H. Howze was put in command of the 2nd Battalion.⁵⁰ With the advice and assistance of the Tank Company Commanders, the Artillery Liaison Officer, and the members of his staff and the attached Tank Destroyer Company Commander, he formulated plans to renew the attack.

The original plan of attack was altered somewhat and the time was set for 1700 hours. Beside the one supporting Armored Field Artillery Battalion, the other two Armored Field Artillery Battalions of the 1st Armored Division reinforced the fires of the one in support. The

50. A-5 p. 6

Artillery was to start smoking the right flank of the attack and maintain the smoke screen until the tanks were beyond the first line of ridges. Preparatory fires were planned in detail to cover the anti-tank guns in front of the initial objective. The plan called for impact bursts until the tanks reached the impact area, at which time the artillery was to change from impact to air bursts. Fire was to be shifted forward as the tanks progressed. In addition to the Artillery, Company A of the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion was to remain in hull defilade position at the line of departure, and fire direct fire on certain sectors or at targets of opportunity.⁵¹ The Company of Tank Destroyers was to follow the tanks as soon as the fire was masked. (See Map C)

Infantry support was conspicuous by its absence. It must be remembered that the 6th Armored Infantry had been fighting along the south side of the "Mousetrap" since 23 April;⁵² and, due to heavy losses, were unable to furnish any Infantry for Combat Command B.⁵³

Some time that afternoon, our Battalion Commander, who led the morning attack, managed to get back to the Battalion position in spite of his leg wounds, and was evacuated. Two members of the crew returned with him, and two were killed. About the same time, Capt. Oleson of Company E returned, and was evacuated because of wounds and severe burns. A Platoon Leader of Company E, who had been pinned down most of the day, got back almost to the position when the attack started. He was almost run down by the tanks, but managed to escape. Another Platoon Leader of Company E was wounded in the abdomen by small arms fire when he bailed out of his tank. He managed to get into a hole with one of the men, but he died that night as a result of his wounds, because there was no mop up and he was not able to get back without assistance.

The 3d Platoon pulled out of position by sections, and returned to Mateur for ammunition resupply in preparation for the attack at 1700

51. A-9 p. 779

52. A-6 p. 24

53. A-8 p. 7

hours. When the last section returned with ammunition racks full, and a few extra rounds on the floor of the turret, the Platoon Leader assembled the Tank Commanders and gave them the plan of attack. The mission of the 3d Platoon was to protect the left flank of the Battalion, as it had been in the morning.

A few minutes before time for the attack, the Platoon Sergeant and the Fifth Tank Commander came to the place where the 3d Platoon Leader and the Company Commander were talking, and reported that the driver of the fifth tank was sick, and requested a replacement for him. The Platoon Leader requested the Company Commander to furnish one from the Headquarters Platoon, but was informed that none were available. Not infrequently a man would volunteer from the Headquarters or Maintenance Sections in case a tank crew was short a man. The Platoon Leader instructed the Tank Commander to change driver and assistant driver. Just as the Platoon Leader was mounting his tank to move out in the attack, the driver and Tank Commander came to the tank and the driver said that he was sick and just couldn't go. He had been vomiting at frequent intervals during the afternoon. The driver stated that he couldn't go, even as assistant driver. It was apparent to the Platoon Leader that it was now a question of whether to order him to go at the point of a gun, or to send him to the aid station. In the opinion of the Platoon Leader, the man would have been shot rather than go in the tank; so the Platoon Leader made a decision that he was to regret the rest of his life. He decided to permit the man to go to the aid station with the idea of dealing with him later, because he thought the tank would be perfectly safe. Little did he think that he would lose the tank and the Tank Commander, and suffer two other casualties in the crew, merely because he permitted the driver to turn yellow.

A few minutes before 1700, the artillery laid a smoke screen along

the right side of the battalion line of advance, and then started the preparatory fires in front of the objective. While the artillery was literally pulverizing the area with impact bursts, the Tank Destroyers fired direct fire in the assigned sectors. The 2nd Battalion launched the attack, using the forty-four remaining tanks of the Battalion. (Seven had been destroyed, and three were near the initial objective.) Every tank fired every gun, except the cal. 50 antiaircraft machine gun, at everything that even remotely resembled a target. The artillery did not change from impact to air bursts soon enough, so that many artillery shells landed among and behind the tanks during the advance. The consensus of opinion among the Tankers was that they would rather have a 105 mm hit them from behind than an 88 mm from the front. The artillery did change to air bursts, and shifted forward to include the first line of ridges.⁵⁴ (See Map C) The artillery support was nearly perfect, and it enabled the tanks to get on the ridges without a loss. The artillery effectively neutralized all of the antitank guns in the battalion zone of advance and actually destroyed some of them. Fire from the tanks destroyed more of them, but some of the guns escaped damage and might have been turned against the supply and administrative vehicles if circumstances had been different, since there was no infantry to mop up the area.

When the tanks arrived at the top of the ridge, there was no longer any preplanned fires to neutralize the antitank guns. The Germans had organized in depth, and kept considerable antitank strength in the rear. The battle then became one of survival between the tanks and the anti-tank guns.

The mission of Company D, especially that of the 3d Platoon, appeared to be of secondary importance, but on closer analysis proved to be extremely important. In the first instance, the Germans held the hills

54. A-9 p. 778

to the north in considerable strength, particularly in armor. They had contained Combat Command A of the 1st Armored Division and other troops for about three days.⁵⁵ In order to accomplish the mission, the 3d Platoon had to keep to the left up near the skyline on the ridge running generally east and west. This exposed the tanks to flanking fire from the extreme right of the battle field. This proved to be a greater threat than the left flank, because the tanks could move a few yards and be in defilade from the left flank, while the right flank was exposed for miles.

The 3d Platoon Leader's tank was approximately even with the Company Commander's tank and the other lead tanks of the Battalion. (The Company Commander never let anyone get ahead of him.) On topping a small rise in the ground, the Platoon Leader discovered a small caliber antitank gun about fifty yards ahead, sighted down the depression running diagonally to the line of advance. The crew swung the antitank gun toward the tank, and the Platoon Leader forgot all about fire commands. Fortunately, the gunner had the gun turned to the front, and he saw the antitank gun about the same time the antitank gun crew saw the tank. Since the tank was moving fairly fast, it was within thirty-five yards of the gun when the gunner fired. The shot was slightly off center, but it was low enough to explode on the near side of the gun pit, and it wrecked the gun as well as the crew. About this time the Platoon Leader found his voice, and he yelled so loudly that he frightened the driver, who got on the interphone to ask the gunner if the Lieutenant had been hit. At that time the Platoon Leader had the press button type microphone and the microphone was not on. What is more, the driver had ear phones covering his ears.

By this time the 3d Platoon was receiving considerable fire from the right flank, so it was natural that the platoon side-slipped down

55. A-6 p.46

the hill to be in defilade behind the secondary ridges that ran generally east and west. Further south and to the right, the terrain was much rougher, so the progress was slower. The Platoon Leader discovered an 88 mm gun about eight hundred yards diagonally to the right with the gun pointing to his right. He gave 800 yards to the gunner, who fired and the round was high. He gave 700 yards, and the round was over; he gave 600 yards and the round was still high. In the meantime, the gun crew started traversing the 88 mm gun to lay on the Platoon Leader's tank. About that time the Platoon Leader got a bit frantic and started screaming "Four! four!", meaning range 400. Fortunately, the next shot was close enough to stop the gun, which got off one round that was wide of the tank by about a yard. The tank gunner fired five or six more rounds to completely destroy the gun.

About this time the Platoon Sergeant called the Platoon Leader on the radio and informed him that the second tank in the platoon had to withdraw, because he had a projectile stuck in the gun. When this happens, it is necessary to get the rammer staff and get out and push the projectile back out of the gun. The battlefield is no place on which to engage in such activity. That was prior to the time the armored units started carrying the 75 mm howitzer cases to shoot out the projectile in case it got stuck during loading.

The Platoon Leader had moved down hill far enough to be in the 2nd Platoon zone, and close to the Company Commander. Simultaneously, the two tanks came under fire from an 88 mm gun about four hundred yards to the front. The Platoon Leader's tank fired a short and an over, and, before he could split the bracket, the Company Commander scored a hit alongside the barrel. The gun burst into flames and continued to burn most of the night.

The Company Commander ordered the Platoon Leader, via the radio, to

get back up on the ridge to protect the left flank. Immediately the Germans responded to this move by firing both high explosive and armor piercing shells. The Platoon Leader could see the guns firing and could see the red ball coming when they fired armor piercing projectiles. Upon closer inspection through field glasses, the Platoon Leader discovered that there was at least one Mark VI (Tiger) Tank, firing at a range of 3000 yards, which was the maximum range for direct fire on our inadequate sights. The round landed not more than three-fourths of the way to the target, whereupon the Platoon Leader decided the best chance for survival was to keep moving.

The Platoon Leader communicated these instructions to the remainder of the Platoon, because the volume of fire was increasing and it was getting closer. Knowing that the Platoon, which was strung out behind in echelon, would follow without instructions, the Platoon Leader turned slightly to the left to get up the hill and out of the impact area.

Almost immediately, the Company Commander called the Platoon Leader and urged him to get higher on the hill. The Platoon Leader asked who was going to take care of the Mark VI on the right flank. The Company Commander enquired, "What Mark VI Tank?", and switched his radio to another channel. About a minute later the Platoon Leader and his crew were hitch hiking.

A near miss to the right rear of the tank had broken the track, and immobilized the tank. Knowing the utter futility of trying to compete with high velocity guns equipped with adequate fire control instruments at that range with the 75 mm gun, the Platoon Leader ordered the crew to abandon the tank. The soundness of this decision was proven by subsequent events. ^{what?} The Platoon Leader formed his tank crew into a diamond patrol formation, and set out across the fields to the tank re-organization area, which was in a depression about three-fourths of a

mile from the disabled tank. While crossing the intervening space on foot, the Platoon Leader and his crew were fired on at a range of about 400 yards by one of the 75 mm tank guns of the left battalion. The crew hit the ground and the shell hit some fifty feet beyond and did no physical damage.

Upon arrival at the reorganization area, the Platoon Leader of the 3d Platoon reported to the Company Commander, and started organizing his sector for the defense and posting local security. The Platoon Sergeant reported the loss of the fifth tank, which left the platoon with two tanks present, one at the battalion rear, one destroyed, and one disabled.

The fifth tank was the one that the Platoon Leader had permitted to enter the fight with a four man crew. When the limited supply of ammunition that can be carried in the turret was expended, it was necessary to stop the tank and the driver pass ammunition from the racks under the turret and behind the driver and assistant driver. Usually, the assistant driver does that while the tank moves. When the tank stopped, the guns on the right flank of the Battalion laid on the tank, and broke the track. Not realizing the futility of engaging in a fire fight, the Tank Commander continued to fire. The Germans concentrated on the disabled tank that was firing back, and literally pulverized it with high explosive shells. First the radio and interphone was knocked out, then the periscopes in the turret, followed by the turret traversing mechanism, but not until the last round of ammunition had been fired. The crew was trapped in a disabled tank, out of communication and ammunition, while the Germans laid on the high explosives. Concussion and shock wrecked the instrument panel and all of the interior control mechanisms. Finally the Tank Commander alerted the crew to evacuate on his order through the top hatches, rather than through the bottom escape hatch, because many of the low rounds were hitting under the tank. During the

evacuation, more hits were sustained which killed the Tank Commander, broke the Driver's leg, and wounded the Loader. The Corporal Gunner took charge and evacuated the wounded from the vicinity. He stopped one of the rear tanks of another platoon, and put the driver on the back of the tank, so that he was brought to the reorganization area. Meanwhile, the Gunner took the wounded Loader with him to the line of departure. On the way back, the two men took four prisoners with only one cal. 45 pistol between them. The submachine gun carried by the Loader was smashed by shrapnel during the evacuation.

The number two tank of the platoon that had returned to remove the projectile lodged in the gun took several prisoners on the way back. The third and fourth tanks of the platoon destroyed several guns of various sizes, killed and captured several Germans. They could not take the prisoners along, so they disarmed them, and destroyed their weapons, except the side ^{arms?} arms, and sent them back to the Battalion rear. Some of the prisoners went back, but most of them did not. There was nothing else the Tank Commanders could do and still accomplish their mission.

Thus we had broken through the German main line of resistance east of Mateur with comparatively small losses, even including the losses by the Battalion early in the morning, and the losses on the reconnaissance in force the day before. On the night of 6 May, 1943, the 2nd Battalion and the attached Tank Destroyers bivouacked within the battle position, and made plans to exploit the break through as soon as ammunition could be resupplied.

THE EXPLOITATION

While the new Battalion Commander, without the aid of any staff, was making plans for resupply and exploitation on the following morning, Company D was given the mission of sending out a reconnaissance patrol to

reconnoiter a route to the southeast to the Mateur-Djedeida road, with the idea of moving the Battalion there before daybreak if the area was suitable for tanks. Company F was assigned the mission of silencing a machine gun that had been firing into the position from several hundred yards in our left rear.

The 3d Platoon Leader volunteered for reconnaissance patrol, because he was without a tank, the 2nd Platoon Leader had been slightly wounded, and the 1st Platoon Leader was not one to inspire confidence on such a mission. The Platoon Sergeant and several men volunteered to go on the reconnaissance. As soon as the patrol was organized and oriented, they started out. Low black clouds reduced the visibility to practically nil and the occasional showers that fell during the night drenched the members of the patrol to the skin. Shelling by both friendly and enemy artillery, particularly the firing of white phosphorous by friendly artillery, and the occasional flare up of the burning anti-tank guns made it utterly impossible to get accustomed to the darkness. The Platoon Leader and the members of the patrol were unaccustomed to patrolling at night, so that it required about five hours to work their way through the German positions, avoid the two patrols they encountered, and return with the required information.

The Platoon Leader got back barely in time for the Officers' Call at 0230. The Platoon Leader informed the Battalion Commander that the area was suitable for tanks, but contained many prepared positions, several of which were believed to contain antitank guns. At this point, the Company Commanders of both D and F Companies suggested that the Battalion move north and disperse just prior to daylight in the high ground that contained no antitank guns. This would enable them to defend to the north, east, or south, and would move them further away from known antitank and artillery positions on the south and would not

increase the resupply problem.

This plan was readily adopted by the Battalion Commander, and was executed at the proper time. The Germans shelled the area throughout the morning and made it impossible to repair the 3d Platoon Leader's tank.

During the morning of the 7th, number two tank returned to the 3d Platoon, bringing the strength to three tanks, but before resupply was effected, the number three tank got the track blown off by the incessant shelling. Now the 3d Platoon strength was two tanks.

The tanks were moved back by Companies to an ammunition supply point about a mile and a half to the rear. By 1100 hours the attack was resumed, and the Battalion crossed the Bizerte-Ferryville-Djedeida-Tunis road, which had been cut by fire at daylight that morning. About this time the number two tank broke the shaft on the turret traversing mechanism. This rendered the tank inoperative as a fighting vehicle, because the turret had to be locked in position. The 3d Platoon Leader ordered the tank to return to Battalion, while he continued with one tank. The attack continued along the main Mateur-Djedeida-Tunis road to a road junction where a road connected the Mateur-Tunis road to the main Bizerte-Tunis highway. (See Map D)

Earlier in the day, the fighting had been against scattered strong points with strong artillery support, but as the Battalion progressed, the artillery fire diminished, and the Battalion found an 88 mm battery abandoned. While the Tankers were wondering what the Germans were up to, the Germans opened fire from a mutually supporting strong point. Some of the overwatching tanks and Tank Destroyers quickly eliminated that threat and the Battalion moved on. At the road junction, the Battalion hit a well organized and strongly defended position that was particularly strong in antitank defenses. A violent fire fight took place, and Lt. James Curry, Commanding Company E was killed when a freak hit

slammed the turret hatch cover down and crushed his head. The Battalion of Tanks and attached Tank Destroyers deployed in particularly bad tank terrain, and reduced the resistance by fire. Due to the fact that the artillery had two other Tank Battalions to support, the 2nd Battalion had no artillery.⁵⁶ The terrain was unsuitable for the maneuver of armor, so it got dark before the tanks could move onto the position. The following morning, 8 May, the destroyed guns and enemy dead gave mute evidence of the effectiveness of the combined fires of the tanks and tank destroyers. On 8 May the 2nd Battalion and attached Tank Destroyers attacked northeast across terrain that was unsuited for the employment of armor. By mid afternoon, the 2nd Battalion was in sight and range of the main Bizerte-Tunis road, and was looking for a passage down from the heights.

When almost down on to the coastal plain, the 2nd Battalion encountered a wadi that was a natural antitank obstacle. The D Company Commander's tank threw a track when he attempted to cross the wadi. One of the Headquarters Company Command tanks got stuck while trying to bypass the first tank. The Platoon Leader, who had taken over the Platoon Sergeant's tank, brought up his tank to extricate the other two that were stuck, and threw a track off his own tank. The Battalion Commander decided to move the Battalion back up the hill, and find a passageway onto the coastal plain further north. The mission was to cut the Bizerte-Tunis road at the intersection of the Porto-Farina road,⁵⁷ which was two or three miles to the north. The Battalion Commander instructed the 3d Platoon Leader, through his Company Commander, to remain there and guard the tanks until such time as the Maintenance Section could repair them. Two tanks from F Company had thrown tracks, including a Platoon Leader's tank. This brought the number of disabled tanks to five.

While this track-throwing contest was in progress, the Germans had moved in a battery of 88 mm guns that had been preceding southward on the

56. Personal knowledge

57. Statement of Lt. Col. Hamilton H. Howze

main Bizerte-Tunis road. One of the Platoon Sergeants from D Company had observed the battery of four guns leave the main road, go on to a secondary road, and go into position some hundreds of yards beyond the main road. Once again the 2nd Battalion was in dire need of artillery support and there was none available. The fire control instruments on the tanks were inadequate for that range; the 88 mm battery could not be brought under effective fire. Given a little more time, the tanks would have destroyed the battery of 88 mm guns, but that was not part of the mission.

The battery of 88 mm guns opened fire on the disabled tanks by indirect laying, and the tanks returned the fire; but, since neither had adequate observation, the duel did not amount to much. The guns fired on the tank assembly area while the D Company Tank Commanders were being briefed and wounded the Company Commander slightly and two of the Platoon Sergeants seriously. The Company Commander remained in command, and was not evacuated.

It got dark before the 2nd Battalion was able to occupy the road junction; however, the road junction was interdicted by fire.

After organizing the defenses of the five disabled tanks, the Platoon Leader was directed, via radio, to put the Platoon Leader from F Company in command and return to the bivouac area. Upon arrival, the 3d Platoon Leader found the three tanks of his platoon that had been disabled on the evening of the sixth and the morning of the seventh had been repaired and brought up. Thus the 3d Platoon, Company D, had three tanks with which to complete the exploitation. Soon after dark the enemy who had been firing sporadically all afternoon, opened fire with everything on the coastal plain. At first it was thought that a counter-attack was getting under way, but since none of the rounds hit anything, it was decided that the Germans were destroying ammunition the easy way. The Platoon Leader counted no less than nine vigorously burning fires

that appeared to be vehicles. Apparently some of the Germans decided that the war was over.⁵⁸

Daybreak 9 May, 1943, found the 2nd Battalion attacking northward astride the Bizerte-Tunis highway. At the Porto-Farina junction, the Battalion turned right toward Porto-Farina. (See Map D) Company E, now commanded by Lt. Philip G. Walker, captured an Italian Regimental Headquarters. Lt. Walker left another officer in command of Company E, took the Italian Commander in a commandeered jeep, and started out. Lt. Walker met the Battalion Commander, and the two accompanied by the Italian Colonel, went to the German Headquarters, and induced the General to surrender.⁵⁹

In the meantime, the Battalion had been proceeding against very light and sporadic resistance. By the time the Battalion Commander returned to the Battalion, the orders to surrender had been communicated to the various enemy units and the Germans began surrendering by the thousands. In many cases, they came in their own transportation. The 2nd Battalion moved on, and took up positions along the sea between the towns of Raf Raf and Ras el Djebel to prevent destruction of equipment and escape from Africa. Shortly thereafter all resistance in II Corps zone came to an end.⁶⁰

The 3d Platoon had killed a large number of Germans and destroyed vast amounts of enemy materiel, while suffering only three casualties. Most of the men had been fighting in Africa since 8 November, 1942, so they had been through "Tunisia's mud and blood", where "too little, too late" was the rule rather than the exception. What could be more fitting and proper for those veterans who had tasted the bitter pill of defeat at the hands of the enemy earlier in the campaign, than to witness the complete destruction of an army?

58. Personal knowledge

59. Personal knowledge and statement of Capt. P. G. Walker

60. A-10 p. 22 and A-11 p. 68

61. A-4 p. 4

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

For the first time, in the North African Campaign the 1st Armored Division was used as a unit and in an offensive role. It is interesting to note that this was under the leadership of General Bradley, "The Infantry Specialist".⁶¹ In fairness to the former Commanding Generals of II Corps and the 1st Armored Division, circumstances had not permitted the use of the Division in its proper role until this time.

The armor was used in the only logical place on the entire forty mile front.

Since there was not enough infantry for both Combat Commands, it was sound logic to give the infantry to Combat Command A, who was attacking through rugged terrain to the north. However, the absence of infantry was a serious handicap, and only under the most unusual circumstances should a commander ever permit a force to be committed without infantry. It cost the 2nd Battalion at least one officer by not having infantry to mop up. Most of the enemy soldiers that were routed out of their holes and disarmed by the tankers did not surrender until three days later when the campaign was over. Thus the enemy might have rearmed and fought against some other unit.

The lack of preplanned artillery fire on the antitank guns in front of the objective was a serious mistake that cost the 2nd Battalion men, tanks, and valuable time. Even the reconnaissance in force the day before did not reveal all of the astounding number of antitank guns concentrated on the only terrain suitable for the use of armor. The use of the assault guns and mortars organic to the 2nd Battalion would have had no material effect on the outcome.

The policy of Combat Command Commanders designating the exact minute of a tank attack, uncoordinated with other arms, to coincide with first light, without considering conditions of visibility proved to be

61. A-4 p. 4

very costly when the 2nd Battalion ran into a low lying ground fog that completely obscured the antitank guns, but silhouetted the tanks against the white background. Apparently the antitank gunners could see only the tanks that got into the fog, because the other tanks were not fired on.

Combat Command B violated the principle of mass in that the three tank battalions were sent on separate missions with only one field artillery battalion to support the three. The same mission could have been accomplished quicker by massing the three tank battalions and having artillery support for all three. Furthermore, a second and third wave of tanks to mop up would have compensated for the lack of infantry. There are times when it may be advisable to split off elements of the command to reduce isolated centers of resistance, but, in this case, it was only necessary to break the enemy main lines of resistance, cut his communications, and prevent his escape. It would have simplified the planning and control to have combined the forces.

The only element of surprise was achieved when Combat Command B failed to follow the tank artillery attack with infantry. As a result, ^{many} much of the infantry and antitank gun crews that escaped the tank attack remained in position during the night waiting for the infantry attack, and did not attack the tank battalion in bivouac. If the information about the failure to follow up with the infantry had been received in Berlin, it would have clinched der Fuhrer's conviction that the Americans were military idiots.

The hasty estimate of the situation and quick decision by the Battalion Commander when the full strength of the enemy antitank guns was discovered, saved most of the tanks for a later successful assault.

The full use of experienced subordinate commanders and staff by the new and relatively inexperienced Battalion Commander was the determining factor in planning for the successful attack.

Summary

The use of preplanned artillery concentrations in front of the objective before the afternoon attack, and the use of tank destroyers for direct fire support was an excellent example of a coordinated attack using all available support.

The cooperation of the various arms in the successful attack, and the prompt and effective response to every critical situation as it developed throughout the exploitation, was instrumental in achieving the ultimate objective. The almost perfect teamwork of the elements of the 2nd Battalion in their mutual support throughout the entire campaign, especially the latter phase, was responsible for the wonderful morale of the unit and their Esprit de Corps.

Condition of tanks in the platoon

The tanks of the 3d Platoon, Company D, were in very bad mechanical condition, and it was only the most diligent efforts on the part of the tank crews that kept them running at all. The Platoon Sergeant was a qualified tank mechanic and several other men were fairly good mechanics. The Platoon Leader had been in the hospital most of the winter months, and the Platoon had been without an officer much of that time. When the M3 (General Grant) tanks were replaced by M4 (General Sherman) tanks, most of them were tanks that the 2nd Armored Division had used on maneuvers in the Zone of the Interior. Naturally the platoons that had officers in command received the best tanks. This left the derelicts to the 3d Platoon. The shaft in the traversing mechanism had been breaking at frequent and regular intervals on the number two tank. This happened again on the morning of the 7th, and the tank was out for two days. The Platoon Leader's tank was almost worn out, and was extremely hard to shift. This was a contributing factor in losing the tank on the afternoon of 6 May, 1943.

That the M4 tanks with the 75 mm gun was obsolete before it reached the fighting forces is a well known fact. The tanks of the 2nd Battalion

had no indirect firing equipment, except a quadrant when they were received. The tanks of the 3d Platoon were equipped with indirect firing equipment captured from the Germans and Italians at Kassarine Pass.⁶²

The superior armament and fire control instruments of the Germans enabled them to reach far beyond the effective range of the 75 mm gun and disable at least two tanks, one of which was destroyed. The Company Commander and two Platoon Sergeants of Company D were wounded on 8 May because of inadequate armament and fire control instruments to take the enemy under effective fire.

The Platoon Leader of the 3d Platoon failed to exercise good leadership when he allowed a driver to go to the aid station instead of going on the attack. He should have ordered the man to go in the presence of witnesses, and tried him if he refused. In fairness to the man and the Platoon Leader, it should be pointed out that the man had been an exceptionally good soldier and driver throughout the preceding months of the campaign. This ^{exemplary} ~~explanatory~~ performance of duty prompted the Platoon Leader to be lenient with the man at a time when stern measures should have been taken.

Secondly, the Platoon Leader should never have permitted the tank to leave the line of departure with only four men in the crew. Here again the Platoon Leader misjudged the situation. The four tanks of the platoon could have accomplished the mission without risking an undermanned tank.

While summing up the action of the 3d Platoon during the period of 1-9 May, 1943, it is important to remember that the platoon was part of a battalion which was the tactical unit, and the company commander controlled the platoons through the platoon leaders. Careful coordination and planning was done before the action; but, once the attack was launched, it was difficult to exercise control over the individual platoon.
62. Personal knowledge

toons. The platoon leaders controlled the actions of the platoons partly by radio, but mostly by example. In a battle for survival between tanks and antitank guns, there is little time for radio conversations. The 3d Platoon was permitted some independence of action while accomplishing the missions assigned by the Company Commander.

The 3d Platoon fired several hundred rounds of 75 mm ammunition during the last days of the Campaign in Tunisia. Some of this was of doubtful effect on the enemy; but, judging from the fire that he returned, it either hurt him or annoyed him. In any event it gave the 3d Platoon something to do, kept up the morale, and induced the Germans to expend huge quantities of ammunition. The 3d Platoon destroyed no less than six antitank guns while they were firing. At least three of these were 88 mm guns. Several other guns were destroyed by fire from the tanks while they were neutralized by the artillery and tank destroyers. Some prisoners were taken, and many were killed or wounded, but it was impossible to assess the damage accurately. All of this was accomplished while the platoon lost one man killed, two wounded, and one tank wrecked by high explosive shells.

Two tank commanders of the 3d Platoon were awarded the Silver Star, and the Platoon was cited to the Division by Letter, Subject: Citation, File A G 2006 (Misc.), dated 26 June, 1943, Headquarters 1st Armored Division, A. P. O. 251, New York, N. Y.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons reemphasized in the operations are:

1. Without overwhelming superiority of supporting fires, armored units cannot attack well organized and strongly defended antitank positions without suffering ruinous losses.
2. Conversely, armored units can successfully attack well organized and strongly defended antitank positions, provided they utilize all possible supporting fires and attack en masse.

3. Tanks should attack without infantry support only in dire emergencies or when organized resistance is breaking down.
4. Firing preplanned artillery concentration is one of the most effective methods of neutralizing antitank guns in a hasty defense position.
5. When an attack is uncoordinated or far enough removed from other action that it does not affect any other action, considerable latitude should be permitted to allow the commander on the spot to use his best judgment and initiative. The plan should be flexible.
6. Operating without artillery support is hazardous. When the artillery is limited, the units which the artillery is supporting should be close enough together so that any one of the units can be supported. Their timing should be such that the full strength of the artillery can support each separate attack in turn.
7. Tanks attacking en masse should attack on a narrow front and in considerable depth, in order to concentrate all available fire support on a small area.
8. It is especially important for new commanders, with limited experience in a particular kind of operation, to utilize his subordinates and staff, in planning for the operation.
9. Speed is the most important element in an exploitation. Once a break through has been made, the unit should concentrate on speed, and subordinate all other details to that.
10. Commanders can afford to take risks after a break through has been effected that would be inadvisable before.
11. Do not allow a man to get "sick" just before an attack, regardless of how good he has been. Deal with him as sternly as necessary to prevent it.
12. Only in defense or dire emergency should a crew-served weapon like a tank be permitted to attack with a short crew, especially if it is going to render them vulnerable to the enemy.