



THE 894th TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

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During World War II the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Self-Propelled, fought with honor in North Africa and Italy. The battalion's history takes it through six major campaigns—Tunisia, Naples-Foggia, Anzio, Rome-Arno, North Apennines, and Po Valley—in which it fought in various roles and with its elements attached to several major units.

Initially designated the 4th Antitank (AT) Battalion—in honor of its former parent, the 4th Infantry Division—the battalion was activated at Fort Benning, Georgia, in January 1940, from elements of the 4th Division's 29th Infantry Regiment. Equipped with the M1 37mm Jeep-towed AT gun, the battalion began training its new antitank soldiers using a cadre system. Officers and noncommissioned officers from

the former 29th Infantry Regiment, "school troops" at Fort Benning, trained the soldiers in this new form of warfare.

The training was on a rotational schedule, with the newly trained soldiers replacing their trainers, as the original cadre rotated to begin training other antitank units being formed. The new cadre members in turn continued training until they could be rotated to other newly formed AT units.

The unit was redesignated following an official War Department directive on 15 December 1941, activating "tank destroyer" battalions. In fact, it was redesignated four times in 1940—first as the 94th Antitank Battalion, then as the 94th Infantry Battalion (Antitank), followed by the 94th Infantry Antitank Battalion, and ending as the 894th TD Battalion (Heavy) before its inactivation as an antitank unit. It

was reactivated on 15 December 1941 with its final designation of the 894th TD Battalion (S-P).

The battalion participated in the fall 1941 Louisiana Maneuvers, still equipped with M1 AT guns. In preparation for facing German armor, its operations were concentrated on massing fire on the opposing forces. The battalion had been conducting massed fire training during the previous year at Fort Benning. Problems arose when the M1 AT gun did not prove to be as mobile as TD doctrine called for, and some questioned the penetrating ability of a 37mm round against German armor. As a result, in December 1941 the battalion was reequipped with the M3 75mm gun motor carriage (GMC), an M3 half-track vehicle mounting a low-velocity 75mm gun in the crew compartment, firing forward. Although the GMC offered more mobility and firepower

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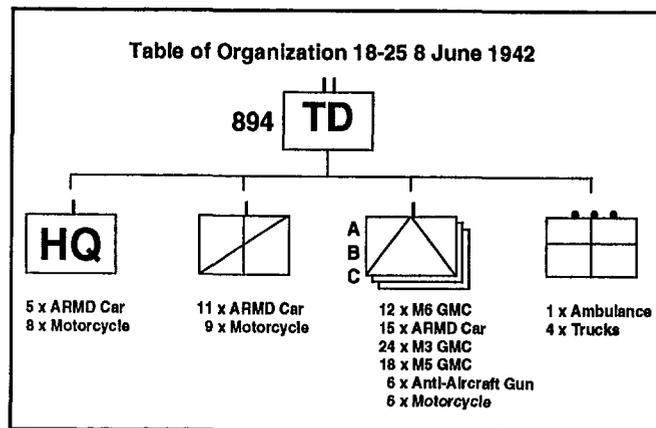
than the M1, it was still not what the TD Corps had envisioned.

The mobility of the M3 GMCs was put to the test in the South Carolina Maneuvers of November-December 1941 and January 1942. Upon completion of these winter operations, the battalion was sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for more training and preparation for movement to North Africa.

At Fort Bragg, the battalion received intensive training, replacements, and new equipment and prepared for the Atlantic crossing. The new equipment included the addition of the M4 version of the GMC. The M4 was the M37 " Fargo" 3/4-ton truck with a 37mm AT gun mounted in the bed; it was later redesignated the M6 GMC, but the M6 was used only in training exercises in the United States. The battalion's basic Table of Organization (TO) 18-25 gave the battalion a number of different GMCs. Although this set the TO for all units of this type, the 894th's TO would be modified several times during its lifetime. (The M5 GMC mentioned in the diagram was a three-inch gun in an open mount atop a low unarmored tracked chassis, protected only by a gun shield.)

In July 1942 the battalion moved to a staging area at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, and a few days later to the Brooklyn Navy Yard (the New York port of embarkation) and sailed for England. Upon arrival in Liverpool, the unit occupied a portion of Camp Tidworth, on the Salisbury Plain, to conduct field exercises. Operations continued, with the battalion moving north to Swindon. And finally, the battalion deployed to North Africa in late December 1942.

After arriving in Oran, Algeria, on 16 January 1943, the battalion linked up with Combat Command B (CCB) of the 1st Armored Division, part of II Corps, in mid-February. Although most of the battalion was with the CCB, two of its



companies were assigned to the 9th Division. (The 894th had been scheduled to participate in Operation TORCH, the Allied landing in Oran, but had been quarantined in England because of a case of spinal meningitis in its ranks.)

During the battles in Kasserine Pass (19-20 February) against the 10th Panzer Division of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's elite Africa Corps, the 894th helped stop the German thrust toward Tebessa, Algeria, and over the next two days again halted the enemy's westward attack at Djebel el Hamra and pushed back the light tanks and armored cars of the German 33d Reconnaissance Battalion. (The M3 GMCs became known as "purple heart boxes" because the thin metal of their sides was no match for machinegun bullets, much less for the German tank cannon rounds, and many casualties resulted from rounds tearing through and bouncing around inside.) Battles against the Africa Corps continued at El Guettar, Sbeitla, and Sedjenane before the II U.S. Corps and the 894th began to push west.

By mid-March 1943 the battalion was assigned as one of seven TD battalions under the 1st TD Group, which had just arrived in North Africa and was now part of the II Corps.

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Although the 1st TD Group was not a command and control element at the time, it did provide much-needed logistical and administrative support.

By the end of March the 894th began moving east across the rugged terrain of the North Tunisian desert, still part of the II Corps. As the Africa Corps continued to withdraw, the Allied forces continued to advance. The II Corps had the 9th Infantry Division moving along its northern flank with the Mediterranean Sea to the 9th Division's left flank and the 1st Armored Division on the corps' right flank (Map 1).

Leading with the 9th Division's reconnaissance troop, the 894th's reconnaissance company was the first U.S. unit to enter Bizerte, Tunisia, on 7 May 1943. Moving through the city with the 47th Infantry Regiment, and with the 9th

Reconnaissance Troop clearing mines ahead, the 894th's reconnaissance company took up positions along the ship channel looking southwest and waited for the rest of the II Corps to complete its move to the Tunisian coast.

Because the M3 still lacked the protection and mobility for rapid operations, the battalion was pulled back to South Oran in the summer of 1943 and given the new M10 GMC, which was based on the M4 Sherman tank. The M10 was armed with a three-inch main gun and a .50 caliber M2 heavy-barrel machinegun. With a maximum speed of 30 miles per hour and a range of 200 miles, this new TD gave the battalion the speed, mobility, and firepower it would soon need to meet Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's 14th Panzer Army in Italy.

Training with the new TDs continued in the desert until early September when the battalion was attached to the 34th Infantry Division, IV (U.S.) Corps, and began preparing for deployment to Italy.

Initially, the battalion participated in Operation AVALANCHE, the September 1943 Allied attack at Salerno. The battalion landed at Bagdolia, near Naples, and began moving slowly northward across the Volturno River and numerous ridges and streams. After moving along with the rest of IV Corps, the battalion hit the German Gustav Line at Cassino and all but halted. Like the rest of the Allied

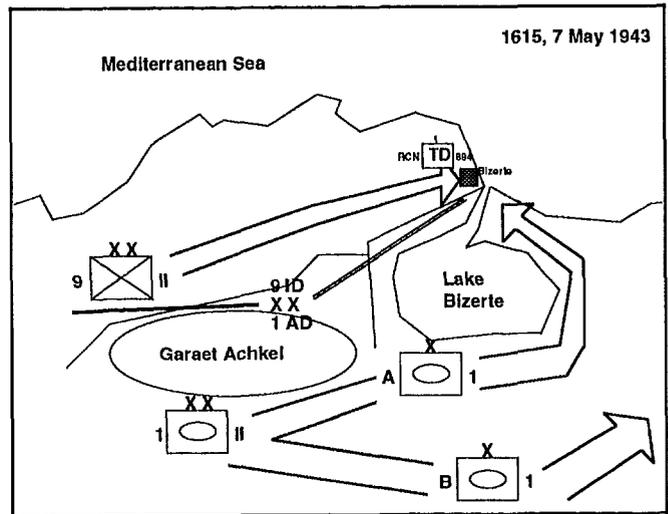
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forces, it was unable to penetrate further.

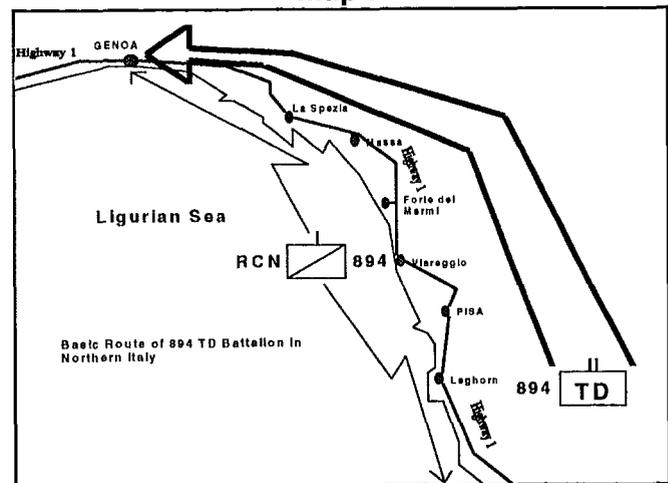
With the 36th Infantry Division's attack across the Rapido River stalled (the division's regiments were nearly decimated by the defending Germans) and no way to link up with IV Corps units, the 894th was pulled back from Cassino and began preparations for the coming Anzio operation. (See also "The Rapido River Crossing: A Battle Analysis," by Captain David M. Toczek, in *INFANTRY*, November-December 1993, pages 18-22.)

While the line companies were waterproofing their vehicles, the reconnaissance company received the new M8 and M20 reconnaissance vehicles. Both were six-wheeled, lightly armored cars; the main difference between them was that instead of the 37mm gun turret, the M20 had a machinegun race ring installed over the open crew compartment and mounted an M2 machinegun.

With Company B detached to a regiment of the 34th Division, the 894th participated in the Anzio landing, the disastrous Operation SHINGLE. Landing in the early morning of 22 January 1944 with elements of IV Corps, the units met only light resistance from Kesselring's defending troops. By that night, however, the ease of the landing was overshadowed by the realization that the defending German soldiers occupied the high ground in well-prepared fighting



Map 1



Map 2

positions. Kesselring had 20,000 Panzer troops moving to Anzio, and by 25 January no less than eight divisions were moving from France, Germany, Northern Italy, and the Balkans to surround the beachhead.

Moving north, the Allied forces slowly made their way through the Padiglione Woods, part of the heavily forested area in the Alban Hills. By 28 January these forces had reached Carroceto. This small village, along with the village of Aprilia (also known as "The Factory"), would change hands many times during the next several months. (See also "Anzio Beachhead," by Captain Brian K. Coppersmith, *INFANTRY*, July-August 1994, pages 22-28.)

The battle began at 2300, 28 January, and from the beginning it was extremely hard for the IV Corps to capture and maintain control of the Carroceto-Factory complex. By 0615 the next day, success was limited to a left flank attack by Number 3 Company, 1st Battalion, Irish Guards, 24th Guards Brigade, of the 1st (British) Infantry Division, to which a platoon from the 894th had been attached. In the course of the attack, the 894th succeeded in capturing 55 prisoners, removing German positions with three-inch main gun fire, and in some cases, driving the TDs right through the

A 37mm antitank field gun crew prepares for action. (Photo courtesy The National Infantry Museum.)



German fortifications and helping drive a wedge between the defending German 3d Panzergrenadier and 65th Infantry Divisions.

Meanwhile, Company B, still detached from the battalion, helped the Sherman tanks of the 46th (British) Royal Tank Regiment close the gap created by the 24th Brigade's attack. Company B was awarded a Distinguished Presidential unit streamer for this action—along with its fight against the enemy attack on the 5th (British) Grenadier Guards Brigade and the 3d Battalion, 504th (U.S.) Paratrooper Regiment the next day at the town of Carroceto. The British units nicknamed the company's soldiers "The Fighting Tank Busters."

By the time Allied forces had broken out of the Anzio beachhead and made their way north, the 894th had suffered 20 percent casualties, either from the intense German artillery bombardment of the beachhead or from moving about the battlefield.

Moving up the Italian coast, the 894th remained with the 34th Infantry Division through the Rome-Arno campaign from late January to early September 1944. During that time, the battalion's missions ranged from acting as tank destroyers in platoon and company sized units to operating in the indirect artillery fire support role.

Detached from the 34th Division and attached to the 92d Infantry Division (Forward) for the duration of the North Apennines campaign (September 1944 to April 1945), the 894th made its way to the town of Viareggio, once a resort, where it was attached to the 2d Armored Group, subordinate to Task Force 92 (Map 2).

On 6 October 1944, following a two-hour artillery preparation, the task force began its attack against Monte Cauala, the first phase of the attack toward the town of Massa and, ultimately, the port of Genoa. Defending this rugged mountain terrain was the German 42d Jaeger Divi-

sion and, by the end of October, the 232d Grenadier Regiment as well. Fighting continued throughout the month and by 23 October the offensive was halted as few Allied gains had been made. It was not until the end of November, with the attachment of the 366th Infantry Regiment to the task force, that the 92d Division made gains toward Genoa, with the city of Forte dei Marmi being taken. One company of the 894th was attached to the 366th Infantry Regiment for this mission.

Throughout the North Apennines campaign and into the Po Valley campaign, the battalion's reconnaissance company had the task of maintaining security along Task Force 92's

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coastal flank, which included both Highway 1 and the area west to the Ligurian Sea. Once the 894th (minus) reached Forte dei Marmi, it was pulled back from the front for a much-needed rest, although the company attached to the 366th Infantry continued operations.

By April 1945 the battalion (minus) was still with the 92d Division at the start of the Po Valley campaign. Company A was attached to a unit of tanks and infantry known as Task Force Curtis. Under the operational control of the 473d Infantry Regiment, the task force had the mission of clearing the sector west of Massa.

As the 92d Division moved North toward the Frigido River, the defending enemy thwarted attempts to cross on 10 April until the commander of the 2d Battalion, 473d Infantry, brought up a platoon of TDs from the 894th and had

them fire across the river into numerous enemy-held houses all afternoon. By evening, the 2d Battalion had crossed the river, and by the next day, Massa was controlled by the 92d Division's 473d and 442d Infantry Regiments. By 19 April the port of La Spezia was under 92d Division control, and it was the TDs of the 894th that had led the 473d RCT into the town.

By 23 April the port was completely under Allied control. While the platoon of TDs was assisting the 2d Battalion, 473d Infantry in the assault on La Spezia, the rest of the 894th continued north toward a crossing point at the Po River and on to Milan. Two days earlier, working with the Brazilian Expeditionary Force, the 894th (minus) had helped liberate the city of Bologna (Map 3).

By the end of April, General Mark W. Clark, commander of the 15th Army Group, had placed the 92d Division under his operational control and ordered it to continue its attack northward. On 24 April, 1st Platoon, Company A, 894th TD Battalion, was attached to the 370th RCT and ordered to attack to the limit of Cisa Pass-Cerreta Pass. Once established, the attack to the port of Genoa began in earnest.

Enemy units facing the advancing elements of the 92d Division and the 894th TD included remnants of the 148th Grenadier Division, the 70th Panzergrenadier Division, the 4th High Mountain Battalion, Italia Division, and the 135th Fortress Brigade. The 92d Division's objective of Genoa lay only 110 miles away and, through determined fighting, that objective was taken in only 60 hours.

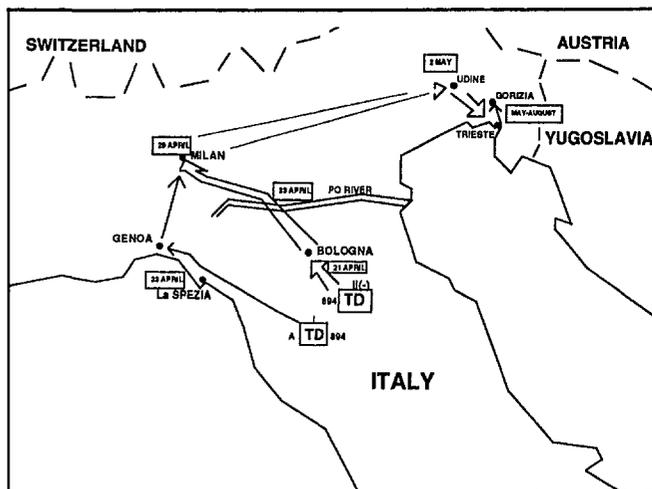
By May 1945, with the war in Italy nearly over, the battalion received orders for its attachment to VI (U.S.) Corps and its continued movement. That movement was now to the

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northeast, first to the city of Udine and then to Trieste to establish road blocks to keep Yugoslav partisans and elements of the Yugoslav and Russian Armies from moving into the city. Additionally, TDs from the 894th conducted security operations near the border along the established demarcation line at Gorizia, northeast of Trieste, and worked with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) escorting captured soldiers from the German 5th Army past Yugoslav partisan units.

With the end of the war in Europe, the 894th was replaced by the 88th (U.S.) Infantry Division along the border. The battalion was disbanded at Trieste, and its soldiers and equipment moved south to Florence to prepare for movement back to the United States.

On 8 September 1945, the 894th TD Battalion was officially inactivated at Florence. Like the other TD battalions, the 894th was no longer needed; the Army's focus was now on bigger tanks and newer doctrine. But this was not the end of the battalion.



Map 3

In July 1953 the battalion was redesignated the 894th Tank Battalion (120mm Gun) and received the tanks and equipment of the 131st Tank Battalion, Alabama National Guard. After 18 months, the battalion was reactivated, in December 1954, and assigned to Fort Knox, Kentucky, to serve as Armor School troops. While at Fort Knox, the battalion had a few developmental 63-ton T43/M103 120mm tanks, until 1956 when it received the M48 90mm tank and was redesignated the 894th Tank Battalion (90mm).

As school troops, the battalion's soldiers were responsible for providing equipment and personnel for all Armor School training. This included field exercises, tank gunnery ranges, and all instruction conducted at field locations. Soldiers and officers of the battalion continued to work with the student officers and soldiers attending the Armor School until the battalion's final deactivation in June 1958.

During its time in service, the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion received numerous battle honors and individual awards. During 543 continuous days of fighting, it is credited with destroying 46 German tanks and self-propelled guns, 38 wheeled vehicles, 27 field artillery pieces, 101 machinegun nests, 20 observation posts, 17 ammunition dumps, 21 pillboxes, and one ME-109 Stuka dive bomber, along with other smaller targets. Its casualties totaled 52 killed in action, 373 wounded, and 31 missing in action.

Despite the specific nature of its mission, as implied by its name, the 894th Tank Destroyer Battalion rarely fought as a pure tank destroyer battalion. Rather, its elements were attached to many different units within various divisions, where its soldiers carried out a broad range of missions in the types of combined arms operations that are the cornerstone of today's doctrine.

Captain F. Patrick Filbert, a Military Intelligence officer, is the 101st Military Intelligence Battalion's electronic warfare liaison officer to the 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, and will soon take command of a company in the battalion. He previously served as a tank platoon leader, an assistant S-3, and a battalion liaison officer in the division's armor battalion and served as an assistant brigade S-2 during Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM. He is a 1986 ROTC graduate of the University of Hawaii-Manoa.
