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TITLE: The Battle of "Happy Valley".

SCOPE: The story of the first battle between an American tank unit and the German armor in World War II (the First Battalion, First Armored Regiment, First Armored Division versus elements of the Tenth Panzer Division) on Thanksgiving Day 26 November 1942 in upper Tunisia--together with relevant background material and other related facts.

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THE BATTLE OF HAPPY VALLEY

The 37mm gun of the little American M3 light tank popped and snapped like an angry cap pistol. This frightful engine of destruction had just scuttled into a small dry wadi, about sponsor-deep to the level of the valley floor. From the partial defile of their position on the right flank of the attack, the American banged away at the German tank it had singled out as its very own in the column of Mark IV Specials. The Jerry seemed annoyed by these attentions. Crouching about with his incredibly long, ball-ended, "souped-up" 75mm Kw K40 rifle, the German commander soon spotted his heckler. Deciding to do the sporting thing and lessen the extreme range, he leisurely commenced closing the 110 yard gap between himself and the light tank, but keeping his thicker, sloping frontal plates turned squarely to the hail of 37mm fire.

The crew of the M3 redoubled the serving of their piece. The loader crammed the little projectiles into the breech and the commander (who was also the gunner) squirted them at the foe. Ben Turpin couldn't have missed at that range. Tracer-tailed armor piercing bolts streaked out of the American's muzzle and bounced like a mangle-shot in a tiled bath from the hard plates of the Mark IV. The German shed sparks like a power-driven grindstone. In a frenzy of desperation and fading faith in their highly-touted weapon, the M3 crew pumped more than eighteen rounds at the Jerry tank while it came in.

Through the scope sight the tracer could be seen to hit, then glance straight up. Popcorn balls thrown by Little Bo Peep would have been just as effective.

Fifty yards away the Jerry paused and loosed a round which ricocheted from the wadi bank short of the American, showering sand into the open turret hatches and screaming away like an undernourished Banshee. Obviously the German gunner was adled or else the gun was not bore-sighted for such short ranges. Pretending the missed shot was only an accidental discharge, the Mark IV continued to close. For a long moment it looked as though he intended to use his gun tube to pry the American tank from its cosy terrain wrinkle and knock it into the corner pocket with a Willie Hoppe three cushion shot. But a few yards further he pulled right and mounted a small hummock, completely destroying the slight defilade advantage of the American tank now some thirty yards away.

During the short time interval consumed by these developments, the M3 commander took an estimate of the situation, held a staff conference with himself and decided that he was in a predicament known to the trade as "situation doubtful." A rapid retrograde movement to an alternate firing position was in order.

The driver, half buried in 3/4" brass was unable to receive the commander's foot and toe signals. So the commander crouched behind him and speaking into his ear ordered him to back out with all possible speed, to zig-zag, but to keep faced to the Jerry. The driver's

clear and unexcited "yes Sir!" will never be forgotten. The tank commander climbed up for another quick snoop out of the open turret hatch as the driver jockeyed his gears. The feeling as the M3 lurched backward up the wadi bank was one of relief—no one enjoys playing "clay pigeon M3."

Death, unexplainedly deferred these many seconds, struck as the light tank backed out of the wadi. The slug that was no doubt aimed at the turret, struck the vertical surface of the heavy armored driver's doors and literally caved in the front of the M3. With its driver instantly dead, the bow gunner blind, stunned and bleeding, the loader cut down by machine gun fire as he sought cover and its commander lying wounded on the ground, the little tank, though sheathed in flame, backed on through the battle until stopped by friendly hands.

The commander of this little tank that had been hit, was also the lieutenant in command of the platoon. Bursts of German machine gun fire accelerated his progress toward the wadi he had just left in his tank. Safely in the ditch his thoughts were on two things; how long would it be before the German tanks swept past him and finished him off; and how was the loss of faith in their chief weapon, the 37mm "cannon", going to effect the future battle performance of his platoon, company, and battalion? The fact that these things were milling around in the mind of that grimy, bloody, and frustrated lieutenant I can attest, for I was the lieutenant.

The little tank (now "kaput") which has featured thus far in our

story, was but one of a battalion. This light tank battalion was the first unit of American command to engage the vaunted German Panzer¹ in World War II. I proudly refer to the First Battalion of the First Armored Regiment of the First Armored Division. Of this engagement, which occurred on Thanksgiving Day, 26 November 1942, and related events, we shall hear more. This time we shall try for a slightly broader panorama than is to be had through the gunner's scope of one tank.

This battalion of ours belonged to a regiment that had been in continuous active service since 1833 and known successively as the United States Regiment of Dragons, the First Cavalry Regiment, the First Cavalry Regiment (Mechanized), the First Armored Regiment (light), and finally the First Armored Regiment. Every trooper knew that the Regiment had been organized to fight in the Black Hawk Indian Wars and that their sabers had hacked and thrust in practically every national focus since that date. From its proud standard streamed (61) battle honor ribbons, more than any other regiment in the United States Army. Few organizations in the nation's military establishment have inherited such splendid traditions as the one light and two medium battalions of the First Armored Regiment. That the Regiment was a superior organization on all counts when it left the States for the European Theater in May of 1942 was largely due to the fine esprit de corps felt by all ranks and to the fact that its men, for the most part from Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee had trained and worked together

for over a year. The majority of the officers were young reservists, but the key posts held by aggressive and capable regulars. The non-commissioned officers were excellent, seasoned, soldiers many of whom had been with the Regiment since it traded its horses for gasoline engines.

Although World War II effected various modifications in the details of tactical employment of the armored division, the basic concepts of the correct use of armor was the same in 1942 as at their writing (1928). The modifications were mainly in the field of closer cooperation between assaulting tanks and infantry which was brought into full flower in the case of the First Armored in the attack and breakthrough of the German siege lines around the Anzio Beachhead and subsequent fall of Rome on 4 June 1944. However, the doctrine of seeking out and destroying the enemy's armor was uppermost in our minds and hearts. Tank against tank to the finish was our main purpose in life. Secondly, but equally important, was the principle of the penetration, the deep and furious thrust, and the exploitation of the enemy's rear.

The idea that the light tank should be relegated to secondary attacks and screening missions had not germinated at that time. The light tankers expected, and usually got, missions of equal responsibility with the medium battalions. I do not mean to imply that the division and unit commanders considered the light battalions as having the same fire power and punishment absorptive capabilities as the

mediums. They considered the light tank elements as being unfortunately armed with a small gun, but tank units nonetheless.

The First Battalion, prior to Thanksgiving Day of 1942, was extremely proud of its M3 light tanks. Through long months of range work, field maneuvers, and constant maintenance the personnel of the battalion came as near loving these little tanks as man can love a weapon. When viewed for the first time the vehicle appeared to be awkward, for it seemed to be as tall as it was long. This illusion was furthered by the nearly vertically hung driver's doors which gave the tank a "chopped off" look just below the gun mantlet. The extremely cramped, manually rotated turret perched on the forward edge of the flat top deck, reminded one of a hat box about to fall from the top shelf of the hall closet.

But the thing that caused the spectator the most slack-jawed amazement was the needle-like little 37mm "cannon" protruding from the turret, strongly suggesting the bill of a woodpecker. "Surely," the on-looker muttered to himself, "they didn't build that much tank merely to tote around that squirrel rifle?"

The early recognized inadequate flotation afforded by its eleven inch track caused this fourteen ton tank to become hopelessly "bellied" in soft ground that contemporary enemy tanks of four times their weight rumped through with ease. Another deficiency was the crying lack of visibility while buttoned up. The driver peered through a narrow prism protected slit. The tank commander, considering his even greater need

for vision, was even worse off than the driver and bow gunner. He had to rely on tiny glassed peep holes in the so-called "pistol ports" in the sides of the turret for the panorama of vision necessary to fight his tank. His forward vision was dependent on the low-powered telescope gun sight. This shortcoming was multiplied by five in the case of the platoon leader. Recognizing this handicap, the battalion commander managed to scrounge some crude revolving periscopes from the British, and paste them on the turret for the commander's use prior to the first action. These proved of little value and it became a battalion SOP for platoon leaders and all tank commanders to go into battle with their overhead hatch open in order that platoon control and tank movement could be accomplished, guided by the risky thrusting of the head out of the hatch for frequent "look-sees". This inadequacy was to cause the death of many irreplaceable officers and noncommissioned officers of the First Battalion whose exposed heads were hit by enemy small arms while they were leading and/or fighting their units.

On hard ground the M3 light tank handled with ease, and was agile and fast. Its 250 HP continental 7 cylinder radial air-cooled engine gave it a high horsepower weight factor for a contemporary fighting vehicle. The 1.5 inch armor plating² (maximum) was to prove adequate against light HE fragments and small arms except those of the Guerlich or "squeeze-bore" type, and no more adequate against tank, antitank, and hollow charge fire than that of our heavier tanks.

By and large, the three main weaknesses of the M3 light tank were:

1. The 37mm gun was inferior to all German tank and antitank weapons in contemporary use.
2. The vision from a buttoned up tank was inadequate for all members of the crew.
3. The narrow track afforded very poor flotation.

Before coming to blows with German tanks, the battalion was aware of the vision and flotation weaknesses, but had a great and abiding faith in the prowess of the 37mm "cannon".

Leaving the Regiment in North Ireland, the First Battalion moved to Scotland by way of England in the early fall of 1944. We worked like beavers fabricating water-proofing rigs from sheet metal, hose, gasket-goo and oiled silk. Then, together with other elements of the First Armored Division and in complete ignorance of our destination, we boarded the three original tank landing ships of this war.³ These tabby converted oil tankers, flying the white ensign of the Royal Navy, were conveyed by an escort of five armed trawlers on a twenty day voyage from the Firth of Clyde to the assault landings at ORAN during African Invasion on 8 November 1942.

The true story of the Allied fighting against the valiant but bewildered Vichy French forces in and around ORAN, ALGERIA, from the eighth to the tenth of November 1942 has been almost obliterated by certain quasi-official embroideries on the fabric of fact. Suffice to say the First Battalion, First Armored Regiment, accomplished its

mission with a verve and efficiency that was exceptional for a first action.

Like any body of troops that experiences a dashing and not too costly victory, the battalion thought quite highly of itself. This self adoration is desirable and healthy up to a point. That point, in the opinion of the author, is exceeded when troops develop a careless attitude toward the enemy based on the outcome of skirmishes under a set of conditions stacked in the victor's favor. That is why I believe the battalion commander, Lt. Col. John K. Waters,⁴ had in mind when he addressed the troops after the battle of Oran timely: "We did very well against the scrub team. Next week we hit German troops. Do not slack off in anything. When we make a showing against them you may congratulate yourselves."

The move across Algeria to the railhead at SOUK AHRAS, Tunisia on the French colonial railroad was no better or no worse than some of the "goods wagon" junkets the Battalion had experienced in Great Britain replete with flaking journal boxes, broken couplings, and runaway cars. This move under Axis dominated skies would have been many times more hazardous had it not been for the fact that the key points, bridges, tunnels, and passes along the entire right-of-way were well guarded by French Colonial troops, happy to be back in the fight against the Axis. The high level plan, of which our move was a small part, was to beat the Germans to the occupation of as much of Tunisia as possible and block the main supply and evacuation route of Rommel's Afrika Korps

which was being driven back by Montgomery's splendid British Eighth Army slugging westward across Libya.

Fully realizing that the hindsight of even a syndicated columnist is vastly superior to the most sagacious foresight of any field commander living or dead, mention of the G-2 picture that filtered down to our level must be included in the telling of this tale. Intelligence had it that the German Command, thrown into near panic by our sudden and successful invasion, were evacuating 10,000 troops per day from the ports of TUNIS and BIZERTE. Further, the only enemy armor in Tunisia consisted of a few obsolete Mark I and II tanks and the rest of the forces to oppose us were made up entirely of a raggedy-bobble of SOE troops armed with rifles and 75mm mountain guns.

The figure 10,000 proved to be correct, except that they were coming in--~~not~~ leaving. The rest, we found out, was totally incorrect.

Joined by our wheeled vehicles which had travelled by road, we marched north and east to BEJA. We had become a part of the so-called Blade Force of the British First Army. In this force we were brigaded with a lancer regiment mounted in crusader and Valentine tanks under one Colonel R. C. Hall. Soon, we were to have the honor of becoming the cutting edge of this Blade Force.

Major Edson Schall,⁵ our very capable executive officer, had gathered the battalion officers at the bivouac north of BEJA to receive orders from Lt. Col. Waters that would bring us into contact with the enemy. The only general fear of the men and officers of the First

Battalion that night was that all of the Germans would escape before our gunners could punch their one-way tickets to Valhalla.

Lt. Col. Waters returned from the headquarters town of BEJA with a bemused grin and one of the most quaintly phrased missions ever given to any fighting force in the entire history of the profession of arms. The First Battalion was to establish a "tank infested area" of some 100 square miles in extent to either side of CHOUICHI PASS which connects the TINE RIVER VALLEY with the PLAIN of TUNIS.

Rolling over the peculiar verbiage of this mission, it was easy to visualize the rock-ribbed terrain as the hide of a vast, gaunt, and mangy steer, and tanks the infesting ticks, spreading hoof and mouth disease with every nip. How was this "infestation" to be accomplished? The British commander left that entirely to the imagination and daring of our battalion commander who had plenty of both, backed up with field soldier horse sense.

At that stage of the campaign our base of supplies was in the BEJA area some thirty four miles from the center of our "infestation" as the crow flies, and tank battalions do not fly like crows. Supply pressure from the rear, as it then existed, would have let us die on the vine. Our battalion supply convoys created "suction" and brought up gasoline, ammunition and British "Compo" rations at night. Post Exchange supplies were unknown then.

The sponson mounted jettison drums (two per tank) for extra fuel extended the operating range of the battalion by eighty gallons of

fuel per tank. A quick release feature allowed the drums to drop off in case of attack and the tanks continued with their normal fuel load intact.

Aside from its integral mortar and assault gun platoons, the Battalion was to have no artillery support. Maintenance was likewise entirely our own affair. Infantry support, unfortunately, simply was not present. Air support for the entire Army front (if it could be called a front) was furnished by little more than one bone-weary, understrength squadron of Royal Canadian Air Force in Spitfires brought forward minus ground crews. The pilots armed and repaired their own planes, filled in bomb craters in their wheat field and highway runways by hand, and flew their beautiful ships on whatever fuel came to hand. But these few Spitz had many many square miles to cover.

Such was our background as the First Battalion wound its way cross-country over the goat tracks of the BEJADUAK hill mass past the Biblical-like figures of the upland Arab shepherds. It was first light on the clear, crisp, morning of November 25. We were the right assault group of the Blade Force marching out to "infestate."

The Luftwaffe was overhead in strength as we debouched onto the flats of the TINE VALLEY a little north of the area later to become known as "The Mouse Trap". These enemy planes, some 30 bombers, had business elsewhere, namely the bombing of BEJA. Two Spitfires engaged

the fighters (HE-109s) covering the bombers (JU-88s) and one Jerry went down. A shot-up Spit glided in trying for a level landing and crashed beyond the hill.

The TIME VALLEY was the near edge of the area we were to "infest". A range of low, but precipitous djebels separated this valley from the TEBOURDA, DJEDEIDA area on the edge of the PLAIN of TUNIS. These hills were cut by the three-mile CHOUCIUI PASS, boasting a good hard surfaced road.

Lt. Col. Waters realized that we must hold this pass (see map) during the entirety of our "infestation" mission if we were to operate on both sides of these rugged hills (they could be called mountains). Therefore, adequate tank strength was left in physical possession of CHOUCIUI PASS throughout the operation.

C Company was sent through the Pass on a reconnaissance mission that made tank history, while B Company was to hold the eastern portal of the Pass. To meet the very live possibility of a German attack down the Mateur road from the north that might seal the rear exit of the Pass, A Company was left to keep the back door ajar.

Lt. Red Yale⁶ of Headquarters Company discovered two Italian Senovante light tanks (mounting very effective 47mm guns) humberling along the road from Mateur toward the mouth of the Pass. He quickly led the battalion command tank section against them and knocked them out in short order. Meantime the battalion reconnaissance platoon under Lt. Bill Beckett had located a farmhouse strongly held by the

enemy only a mile and a half north of our pass on the Mateur road.

Major Carl Siglin,⁷ commanding A Company, was ordered to try to dislodge the defenders of this strong point but not to become so involved that it would interfere with his primary mission of holding the rear of CHOUICHI PASS. This farm, that A Company was to put pressure on, similar to most of the earlier ones in this region, was actually a substantial stone and plaster fort built to be defended against marauding bands of Arab bandits who plundered this area before the French had established law and order. The farmhouse was actually a group of buildings connected by a thick wall, the whole forming a rectangle about a large tree-planted courtyard. The wall had a fighting parapet and was loopholed for masonry. A high cactus and tamarack hedge shaded either side of the Mateur road adjacent to the front gate of this African stronghold.

A Company attacked with two platoons, the 1st and 2nd, and was surprised at the density of fire received. Whereas this small arms fire did not have effect against our tanks (at this time), neither did our machine gun or 37mm fire have any appreciable effect on the stone walls. However, our fire into the cactus hedge along the road did annoy the crew of two antitank guns sufficiently as to cause the greater number of their shots to go wild.

The 2nd Platoon lost one tank and had another disabled, the commander of which was killed as he tried to get his tank back into action. The terrain around the fort was as flat as a billiard table and offered

no cover other than knee-high vineyards. In revolt against a feeling that our attack was on the futile side, I took the command tank of the 1st Platoon through the vineyards to the south of the farm and right up to the wall. So doing we killed a number of pot-helmeted infantrymen in a zig-zag trench before the wall who had the audacity to stand up and fire their rifles and Schmeisser machine pistols ("tarp guns") point-blank at my tank. Very effective fire from the loopholes in the wall had by now knocked out every vision prism in the tank, and had even hit the small exposed end of the 37mm scope (our only sight). We bore-sighted several rounds of 37mm HE at one very active loophole and apparently blasted the machine gun off of the parapet behind. However, at this time we found that the 37mm gun would not return to battery and decided not to use it again. Snatching very hurried peeks from our open turret hatch, I collected my platoon for another try when orders to return to the Pass came over the radio. My command tank was out of action for some time due to the damage done to the 37mm tube and other parts by armor-piercing machine gun ammunition squirted at us at that farm. The great number of little projectiles embedded in (but not penetrating) the tank's plates gave it the appearance of having a three day growth of beard.

From selected positions the battalion 81mm mortar platoon and the 75mm howitzer assault gun platoon hammered away at the fortified farm buildings until it was decided that the ammunition expended was wasted. Aside from knocking shower of red terra-cotta tiles from the stoutly

beamed roofs our shelling produced no visible effects.

This was but the first of many times when every man and officer longed for the assistance of the irreplaceable infantry and the blessed support of artillery. To take this strong point, A Company would have had to dismount some tankers to scale the walls, and whereas later in the war our men had to substitute for lacking infantry or engineers on several occasions, it was deemed unwise here. A Company returned to the eastern mouth of CHOUIGUI PASS, still keeping a wary eye on the approaches and exits of the fortified farm.

Suddenly shouts of "Here they Come!" and "Take Cover!" reached my platoon from company maintenance section down the road from us. A Company's tanks were in camouflaged positions overlooking the Farvia road near the point it entered the canyon-like pass. Across the road was a deep dry gulch. The plane that had just popped over the hills from the south buzzed low over the company. The roar of the plane was followed by a combination earthquake and bombardment of dirt clods. The JU-87 had laid its egg and gone. Everyone felt very foolish and said so.

That first plane had tested us for air defenses, and the result had apparently satisfied the Jerry squadron leader for now there was a swarm of planes orbiting out over the valley. I noticed with a warm glow of pride that all of the so-called antiaircraft 30 caliber machine guns in my platoon were manned. The flesh and blood of A Company was the equal and better than anything the Jerry could fly, but

our antiaircraft weapon just was not worth a tiddley-damn against aircraft.

This misconceived abortion was mounted on a spring-up cradle bracketed to the backside of the turret. The metal belt boxes on the cradle mounts were made too loose. Even with the field expedient of cardboard shims stuffed in beside the belt, every fifth or sixth round would soon work loose due to the vibration of the moving tank and cause such frequent jams when the gun was put into operation as to render it practically useless. An alternative was to load the gun with a belt from inside the tank immediately before use. This solution was impractical against air attack which was over and gone before loading could be accomplished. In manning the gun, the gunner felt as exposed as a fireplug does to every passing dog. The only feasible way was to stand on the back deck of the tank a la Humphrey Bogart, beat your chest, and dare the Luftwaffe to make a pass at you.

The Jerrys had quit playing merry-go-round now and were streaking off over the valley in a long column of troopers gaining interval between planes as they amount. The lead plane peeled off and headed our way at 500 feet. A Stuka (JU-87) diving, with the flexed appearance of its dihedral wings, its non-retractable landing gear thrust downward and forward like the talons of a pouncing eagle was enough to turn the stoutest sporting-blood to pale plasma even without the added distraction of strafing guns and screaming dive brakes.

The lads in the maintenance section let fly with their '03 rifles

from behind their halftrack. I got off about ten shots from my command tank between three jabs.

The next plane released his bombs further down the line and we had a fresh belt for him when he came over us. Our tracers seemed to arc squarely into his prop as we gave him a good lead. Not over 100 feet up, he absorbed about one half a belt with no discernible effect. The following plane over was a ME-109 on a strafe job. I did a back flip off of my tank hoping that the other gunner had done likewise. Seeing it was absolutely foolhardy to man those guns, I order the men to take cover in or near their tanks. If we had had .50 caliber guns, adequately mounted, we would have been able to talk back. Only one plane so far seemed to be in trouble from our fire and this was probably caused by the .50 caliber on the company command halftrack manned by 1st Sgt. Henry Surovsky.⁸

Nine times the Jerry's came back with a mixed flock of fifteen planes including ME-109s, Stukas (JU-87s) and the two-engined JU-88s. Several of the bombs they dumped on were the large, torpedo-like eleven hundred pounders, but the majority were of the one hundred and ten pound general purpose variety.

We were not new to air attack, having been bombed by the French and strafed by Americans at the Oran show. Between raids I noticed none of the intended panic the Germans were trying to create. Men kidded each other about waiting for the next bomb to dig their foxhole in the flinty ground. The deep wadi across the road was very popular until

a hit on the side of the gorge sent boulders the size of beer kegs cascading down into it.

One bomb landed squarely in the center of a small herd of goats on the hillside and killed or maimed most of them. The crippled animals bleated pitifully until one lad packed his '03 rifle up the slope and mercifully dispatched them. I will never forget the insolence of one Stuka pilot, the last plane in one of the raids. Instead of following his pack off over the hills, he put his craft into a sharp bank and flew low and leisurely back over the area, tilting his wings for a better look at us. His begoggled head was plainly visible. He waved his arm at us in derision. Then his rear gunner sprayed us as this satanic angel of death sped off for another load of bombs.

As suddenly as they had started, the succession of raids ceased. The company was remarkably lucky--only one man was killed and a few slightly wounded. Although A Company had been sitting ducks for several hours, not a single tank was out of commission. They were not to be so fortunate in the grim days ahead.

In a check made after the bombing it was determined that there was only one man unaccounted for. He had been a crew member of the tank knocked out in the vineyard by the fortified farm. This man, wounded and unable to crawl out under the grating machine gun fire, had been left by his tank commander only after he had threatened to kill himself with his pistol unless left. The third platoon made an unsuc-

cessful twilight foray to find this man, one of two brothers named Smith in the Company. Further search with tanks was abandoned for fear of running over him.

Major Siglin had a very deep and personal concern for every man under him. When his officers were unable to suggest any feasible plan to retrieve Smith, the major climbed into his peep saying "I've got to bring him in, will anyone who knows about where he lies go with me?" Without hesitation Sgt. Swartz, the wounded man's tank commander, got in beside him. Loosening the machine gun mounted on the right of the hood, Sgt. Swartz said "Let's go Sir."

We stood in a silent group watching our company commander and the sergeant speed down the road to certain death. Enough light remained to enable the Germans behind the farm walls to shoot accurately. Two large haystacks blazing brightly did not help our cause.

A sudden uproar of the fast German machine gun fire dashed our rising hope. From the white tracers, we judged at least three guns were converging fire on the rescue party. But then we saw pinkish tracers, widely spaced, returning. Sgt. Swartz was shooting back.

They got back with the wounded man. None of them had been scratched. The peep resembled a sieve. Three tires were flat, the punctured radiator was spurting steam, and the burned-out engine gasped and knocked. Our company commander was now without a peep.

After dark the First Battalion, minus a security detachment from B Company left in the Pass, was assembled at a spot two miles south of

CHOUIGUI on the TUNIS side of the mountains. This place had been designated directly by Blade Force Headquarters, but was not to the liking of the battalion commander. We put out our usual 360° outpost system and prayed that our supply convoy would get through. It did. When Lt. Col. Waters returned sleepless from conference at Blade Headquarters in BELJA (about 40 miles from this spot) it was with the news that we had been sent the wrong map coordinates and should be on the east side of the Pass. He had the welcome news that we were to be Blade Force reserve the next day. Allowing the troops the maximum sleep, the battalion mounted up early on Thanksgiving morning 1942 and was back in positions about the eastern entry of CHOUIGUI PASS by first light.

It was in "Wrong Coordinates bivouac", as it came to be known, that we learned of C Company's magnificent raid. The reconnaissance mission that C Company had been given included the checking on the condition of the bridges across the Mejerda River at the towns of TEBOURBA and DJEDEIDA in the interests of our forces advancing from the southwest toward them. The missions also included the destruction of any enemy troops or installations encountered, as a part of our overall battalion mission of "infesting" the area.

The action started as Major Rudolph Barlow⁹ moved his company through the pass. Halfway through the pass, Lt. Hooker in the lead tank of the advance guard met an enemy reconnaissance detachment

in several Volkswagens and blasted them to bits without slowing down. At the town of CHOUIGUI, immediately over the pass, Jerry motorcycle troops and Volkswagens were encountered in company strength. Complete surprise aided C Company's gunners in littering the area with destroyed vehicles and Nordic corpses.

From CHOUIGUI Major Barlow turned south and raced to TEBOURBA at 35 mph to investigate the bridge at this town. Lady Luck was riding with him. At the bridge they caught the German guard detachment in the open and wiped it out. Feeling certain that by now all German installations in the area must surely have been alerted, Barlow took to the olive groves for cover as he moved on DJEDEIDA five miles to the east and only fourteen miles from the heart of the port of TUNIS.

After two miles the olive groves became rather scant. Hooker, still the advance guard commander, breasted a ridge for a look over what lay ahead. The company was electrified at his report that he was looking down on a German airdrome packed with parked planes!

Major Barlow instantly formed a line of foragers with two platoons in line on either side of his own tank (Hooker's platoon on the left and Hanes on the right). Webster's¹⁰ platoon followed closely as a second wave. No time to ponder the academic question of keeping a reserve, just get in there and blast hell out of those planes. The beautiful poetic justice of the whole thing was that these were the very planes that had pounded A Company so relentlessly this very afternoon.

So over the rise and down on the airdrome charged the seventeen light tanks in perfect keeping with the traditions of the old First Cavalry Regiment. Seldom, if ever, has one lone tank company enjoyed such a juicy plum of exploitation. The planes were fat geese on a small pond. The tanks blasted them with 37mm HE, riddled them with cannister, and set them afire with .30 caliber tracers. Several tanks enjoyed themselves in an orgy of destruction, physically crushing lines of parked aircraft by running over their tail assemblies. Planes taxied into each other, or scudded off across the field with a tank in hot pursuit. One tank commander stationed his tank at the end of the runway. When a frenzied pilot would try to get his plane up, the tankster would disintegrate the upper half of the pilot's body with a charge of cannister and the plane would skid crazily away to crash and burn.

After 11 of the planes had been destroyed (except two that managed to take off) and all personnel that could be found were killed, the same attention was given the hangars, the shops, the gasoline stores, and all other supplies. The official count was 36 planes, Stukas, JU-88s and fighters destroyed. There were many crated planes in the hangars as well as those in the shops that were not counted. The unquestioned German air supremacy in the first phase of the Tunisian campaign had been dealt a serious blow. No publicity was ever given this valiant achievement. However, almost a year later Major Barlow was awarded the British Military Cross in recognition of this glorious and effec-

tive raid.

C Company's victory, though complete, was not without its cost. One tank disappeared completely, the fate of its crew unknown. The battalion also lost one of its finest and ablest platoon leaders, 1st Lt. Bud Hanes, and one sergeant tank commander. These men were killed by aerial strafing from the several planes that managed to escape. As has been pointed out previously, it was necessary to leave the turret hatches open on the M3 light tank in order to see to operate. These were our first, but not our last of such losses due to the poor visibility of a bottlenecked tank.¹¹

Had Lt. Col. Waters realized when making his pre-dawn dispositions about the TIDE VALLEY portal of CHOUICUI PASS that he was setting the stage for the first engagement of an American armored unit versus a Panzer unit in World War II he could not have done a more professional job. Happily unaware of what the day held, but looking forward to a Thanksgiving Day feast of British Compo mutton stew with hardtack biscuits, the troops were in fine fettle as they prepared for rest on Blade Force reserve. But before they relaxed, basic loads of fuel, ammunition, rations and water were reconstituted, weapons and engines were checked, all vehicles and installations were camouflaged, deep foxholes were dug (no urging necessary), and all outposts and air-alert guards posted. We had no infantry, no artillery, and no air support. We were on our own, by ourselves, and isolated from friendly forces by many miles of unprotected road.

C Company was left to plug the eastern gate of the Pass from the PLAIN of TUNIS. A, B, and Hq. Companies were positioned on the western, of "Happy Valley" side. A Company had so dubbed the TIME VALLEY because of its jolly experiences there playing catch with the Luftwaffe bombs. The pseudonym soon came into general usage in the Battalion.

The battalion command post and Hq. Company were established at St. Joseph's Farm, some two miles west of the Pass entrance. A Company was bivouaced high on the slope of a hill, like a cocked fist three fourths of a mile south of the Pass gate, while B Company was located close on the north side.

The shades of Gaius Julius Caesar and the great Napoleon must have counseled Major William Tuck¹² as he placed his platoons while daylight seeped over the valley that morning. They were smuggled up on the reverse slope of a small ridge that paralleled the CHOUCHE PASS-MATEUR road until the turret weapons were just able to command any movement on the road which lay 50 to 100 yards away and at a lower elevation. After each tank was carefully planted thus, it was camouflaged under its garnished net.

Except for one high-flying flight of enemy bombers, no aircraft were seen that day. As they drank their concentrated tea and soaked leaves rolled in toilet tissue, the troopers griped about the turkeys the base troops at ORAN and ALGIERS would enjoy that day.

Major Siglin was over at the battalion command post when we saw them coming. Lt. John Deck,¹³ the maintenance officer, and myself

were conversing with 1st Sgt. Surowski at the command halftrack. Movement was observed on the Mateur road up by the fortified farm. Surowski seemed quite excited, but Deck and I could see nothing to be agitated about through our old issue, World War I low-powered binoculars—in fact one could almost see better with the naked eye. Sgt. Surowski passed us his powerful French naval binoculars (a trophy of ORAN) and our eyes bugged in fascination. A long column of dust had reached the walled farm. Vaguely discernible in the billowing dust were large vehicles each mounting a long boom-like affair. Our immediate speculation was that a German engineer column of mobile derrick equipment was blundering into us. We hoped they would continue so that we could ambush them.

A few seconds later the wonderful German optics had picked up movement in our area and instantly high velocity shells came screaming in. These shells were so fast that there was quite a time interval before the reports of the gun reached us even in the acoustically near-perfect African atmosphere. With Surowski's binoculars glued to my head, I gulped as realization dawned that these were German tanks. They were the Panzerkraftwagen IV Special, mounting a long-barreled, high-velocity 75mm rifle of a type unknown to us.¹⁴

Instantly Lt. Deck, the second in command, ordered the platoons to make ready for action. Camouflage nets were jerked down, bedding rolls and musette bags were tossed out and engines were warmed up. All manner of extraneous gear, the stuff a tank company acquires by scrounge or by

conquest to make field soldiering more livable was jettisoned on the spot. There was barely enough room in our little iron boxes for the business at hand.

While A Company, cranked up and ready to roll, was waiting for its commander's return from battalion headquarters it was witness to a brilliant, if futile, assault by the battalion assault guns led by Lt. Ray Wacker. In those days an assault gun platoon consisted of three 75mm pack howitzers which had been jerked rudely off their wheels and mounted willy-nilly on the patient back of that horse of all work, the Army halftrack.

Wacker moved his little battery in a wedge formation on a course across the valley floor to intercept the German tank column. At something under 1000 yards, he emerged from a thinly planted olive grove and methodically opened fire. From our height, and because of the clear air we could see the cannoneers work. The section leader used the field expedient method of pacing to set out their aiming stakes and to parallel the guns. In a few seconds they ranged in with the center gun and then all three opened up with ten rounds as fast as they could yank the lanyard.

Of these thirty rounds directed against the lead tank, a good many hit the tank directly and all were close. Quickly Wacker shifted fire to the second and third tanks and gave them a dose.

When this hail of 75mm HE (high explosive) shells first landed about them, the Germans halted and took stock. But now they moved

unbarraged out of the dust and smoke cloud kicked up by the shells and started sending screaming bolts of steel at the assault guns. The initial German shots were close, and had they been HE instead of AP (armor piercing) they would have hurt someone. Likewise, if Wacker had had any of the HEAT (high explosive antitank) ammunition that was in critically short supply at the time, I am certain his stout-hearted gunners would have killed those first three tanks.¹⁵

Battalion, seeing the futility of their attack, called the platoon back to St. Joseph's Farm. Wacker instantly threw smoke shells at the Jerry's and executed a classic disengagement without the loss of man or gun. Although the assault gun fire did no damage to the Mark IV's other than possibly scratching their paint, the platoon's spunky assault did gain time for A Company to get set to launch their attack.

During Wacker's cannonade, Major Siglin raced back to A Company in a borrowed jeep. He laid out the plan of battle in the length of time it took him to swap the jeep for "Iron Horse", his command tank. We were to attack the German column at once, closing diagonally on their right flank while B Company was to fire on the enemy's left flank and rear without leaving their present defilade position.

For that attack A Company mustered twelve of her normal seventeen tanks. It was a tribute to our mechanics that we had only one loss due to mechanical failure and that had been a bad airhorn fire at BEJA. My platoon was down to three tanks, without a transmitter amongst them. I could receive orders but could give none except by arm and hand signals.

The 1st Platoon was on the company right flank as we boiled down from the hill and headed for the long column of thirteen Mark IVs. The commander of my other two tanks, Platoon Sergeant Bud Hall and Sergeant Swartzkopf, grinned encouragement at me as we took up line. These men were superior tankers and anticipated every change of direction or shift of fire. I can honestly say I don't believe any lieutenant ever commanded a better combat platoon than this one.

Before coming out of the scattered olive trees, I stopped by tank long enough to knock out an Italian Semovente light tank which was crawling along several hundred yards on the flank of the Jerrys. Two APs stopped him cold and one HE set him to "brewing" as the British so aptly put it. My crew cheered as the Glanz¹⁶ burned.

But by now several of A Company's tanks were brewing. A burning tank is a fearsome sight, a stage prop from the bowels of hell brought up to decorate the battlefield. Initially they belch long searing tongues of orange flame from every hatch. As the ammunition goes off the hull is wracked by violent explosions and the turret spouts sparks like a Roman candle. Silver rivulets of molten aluminum from what had been the engine pour out and puddle on the ground. When this inferno subsides the many gallons of lubricating oil in the power train and the hundreds of pounds of rubber on the tracks and boggy wheels will continue to burn for twenty-four hours creating a dense column of black smoke that can be seen for miles.

A Company's flanking maneuver had been so swiftly executed that the Jerry tanks had scarcely moved from column formation on the road. They swung their long wicked rifles toward us and gave A Company their undivided attention. While thusly engaged with A Company, B Company was pecking them to death from the rear.

By this time I had been shot out of my tank and was lying in my nice ditch, very disgusted with the 37mm tank gun and wondering what a German bayonet would feel like. The fact that I did not find out was due to the First Battalion's fortunate disposition about the Pass, to B Company's fire and to A Company's maneuver. Nine of the thirteen Mark IVs would never move again under the Swastika. German tanks were difficult to burn, but these specimens were literally riddled through their engine doors and decks and were valuable now chiefly as scrap.

At this stage in the battle, enemy trucks were sighted dismounting infantry just north of the fortified farm. The remaining tanks of A Company were joined by B Company and together they had a field day against this German infantry. The Jerrys that had de-trucked here were hunted down in the vineyards by Lieutenants Radin¹⁷ and Carter¹⁸ of B Company. The gates of the fortified farm were forced and that place turned into a death trap for its defenders.

During this mop-up stage the gallant and well-loved commander of A Company, Major Siglin, was instantly killed by an armor piercing round that holed the turret of "Iron Horse". Guierro, his devoted command-tank sergeant brought the major back to St. Joseph's Farm.

With tears streaking the dust on his dark Apache Indian face, Sgt. Guierro hastily replenished his ammunition load and returned to the battle without a word.

Throughout this entire action, Doc Ben Cohen, the battalion surgeon, with the battalion chaplain, Father Brock¹⁷, cruised about in Doc's medical halftrack heedless of the enemy fire and effected rescues from knocked-out tanks and picked up wounded where they lay.

During my 100 mile ambulance ride back to the British field hospital that had just been bombed out of its buildings at the port of BONE, ALGERIA, our vehicle was strafed twice. No one was hurt. One of the four patients carried by this ambulance was a German Oberlieutenant from the Mark IVs we had destroyed. The Jerry could speak French. So could the British medical orderly riding with the patients. The Jerry and I conversed through the Englishman. He let it be known that we Americans would lose the war because we built such poor tanks. When I reminded him of his current status, he cursed and shut up. When we were strafed, he laughed. I asked him why he was laughing when his own countrymen were trying to kill him. He replied that in any event I would die first. That was true, my litter was slung directly above his.

The first Battalion did combat patrol duty for the famed First Guards Brigade (Coldstream and Grenadier Guards Regiments) and worked with that great reconnaissance unit, the Derbyshire Yeomanry. By this time Brigadier General Oliver, commanding general of Combat Command B, First Armored Division, had assembled the bulk of his command on our front.

On 15 December 1942, a brave handful of vehicles, twenty-four men and three officers (volunteers) were turned over to CCB to partially re-equip the First Battalion of the Thirteenth Armored Regiment, which had likewise had heavy losses. Our battalion went to CCB reserve. On the same day, the Tenth Panzer Division was withdrawn for refitting. The Battalion believes this was more than a coincidence as it had fought elements of this division almost daily since the memorable battle on Thanksgiving Day.

Soon thereafter, the First Battalion entrained for ORAN (during the trip a bombing raid on the train caused another train to ram the rear cars) for replacements—men and vehicles.

Refitting at ORAN the First Battalion set out the savage near annihilation of the Second and Third Battalions of the First Armored Regiment, at KASSERINE PASS who together with other elements (but not all) of the First Armored Division and other American troops were out-gassed but never out-fought by three Panzer divisions plus strong infantry and air support. That the First Armored Regiment, together with its First Battalion was able to play a decisive role in the final phase of the Tunisian Campaign was proof of its undying and magnificent esprit de corps. Throughout the long and bloody Italian campaign the grim morale that had been welded into the fabric of the units of this granddaddy of all American armored divisions by the fire of the Afrika Korps paid off in many hard-fought victories.

Even a casual look at the superior combat records of this unit will

bring home a significant fact. That fact is that the American soldier, properly trained and led, with pride in himself and his unit, can give a very creditable account of himself even against odds and though armed with inferior weapons. When given a sporting chance with equal or better weapons, he is the best all around fighting man on this planet.

Our great industrial establishment, our wealth, and our science produced the weapons that decided the last war. But in the field of armor, other than that we far out-produced the enemy, we certainly deserve no bouquets. Of course our tank design improved slowly as the war progressed. Too slowly, from the author's limited but stubborn viewpoint. At the present we have the armored vehicles we should have certainly had by 1943. We in armor can thank God that research in our field is now going on ceaselessly. Should the need arise (and given time), we could put armored vehicles into production that could dominate any battlefield, proud examples of American science and skill. Then for those tankers who sowed the sepyr of the 37 and who reaped the whirlwind, for those who bled and fought at Happy Valley and a hundred other places, I would like to personally put a round clear through an enemy turret at 1000 yards. Then I would say "rest easy boys, this time she didn't bounce."

HAPPY VALLEY FOOTNOTES

1. Though the 1st Bn. 1st A.R. was the first American tank unit to fight German armor in this war, its members were not the first American tankers to do so. Selected American test personnel had been sent to Egypt in early 1942 and attached to the British Eighth Army. There, in American tanks, they took part in several actions about the time of the great victory of El Alamein in October 1943. Lt. Col. Joe Abbe, of the Tactics Department, The Armored School, was among these.

2. Maj. Gen. G. M. Barnes, Weapons of World War II, p. 219-221.

3. The ships H.M.S. Misos, Batjacura, and Tasajara were called Maricaibos as a class because they had been converted from oil tankers that had plied the waters of Lake Maricaibo, Venezuela. They were the first of the sea-going tank-landing ships.

4. Lt. Col. John K. Waters was later taken prisoner by the Germans when troops of the 1st Armored Division were overrun around Faid Pass and Sede Ben Zid.

5. Lt. Col. Edson Schull, became battalion commander early in 1943 and later was made Commanding Officer of the First Armored Regiment during the march north of Rome.

6. Lt. Red Yale, perhaps the coolest and most aggressive platoon leader in the First Battalion, was killed in action while leading A Company during the fierce breakthrough at Anzio in late May 1944.

7. Major Siglin, Major Tuck and Major Barlow, commander of A, B, and C Companies respectively had received battlefield promotions in recognition of their outstanding feats during the Battle for Oran, 8-10 November 1942. They continued for some months in the capacity of company commanders.

8. First Sergeant Henry "SI" Surowsky is at this writing (1948) first sergeant of AGF Board #2 at Ft. Knox, Ky.

9. Major Rudolph Barlow, now Lt. Col. Barlow, later commanded the First Tank Battalion shortly after the reorganization of the 1st Armored Division, and commanded it through the Po Valley Campaign.

10. Let Lt. "Daniel" Webster was later captured by the Germans. He managed to escape in northern Italy in 1944 and make his way back to Allied territory.

11. The German Mark IV tank, our chief opponent during these times, had an excellent all around vision cupola for the tank commander. Our tank designers finally allowed one to be put on our tanks in late 1944.

12. Lt. Col. W. Tuck commanded the First Battalion during the bloody Italian campaign. He was given official credit for being first in Rome, 4 June 1944 after the Battalion had participated in the breakout battle of the Anzio Beachhead.

13. Later, ^{as} Captain Deck, ^{he} succeeded Major Siglin as commander of A Company.

14. The Mark IV tanks of earlier vintage with which we were academically acquainted carried a very short barreled 75mm cannon of relatively low velocity.

15. Hollow charge weapons such as the HEAT shell and the AT Rifle Grenade were in very short supply. We had none. The "Bazooka" AT rocket launcher had not been introduced to the African War as yet.

16. "Cinso" was a disparaging term we used for the Italians. We took up the British term of "Jerry" for the Germans. "Kraut" never became popular in Africa.

17. Lt. Frank Rudin, later captain, was killed leading B Company during the Anzio breakthrough (see footnote 6). Captain Rudin was instantly killed by small arms fire while looking from his open turret hatch on his M5 light tank. Although the M5 had succeeded the M3, it still contained the M3's three outstanding weaknesses:

- The 37mm gun
- Inadequate vision
- Poor floatation

18. Later, as captain, Carter commanded C Company. He was seriously wounded in the leg in northern Italy.

19. Father Brock was later captured by the Germans. In prison camp his bold and firm attitude toward the Nazi prison staff regarding the rights of prisoners under the Geneva Convention earned him the gratitude and admiration of his fellow prisoners.

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