

Roadblock Overrun 12 Hours Into First Combat Mission

Baraque de Fraiture (Parker's Crossroad) December 22-23, 1944

Bernie Haas 643rd Tank Destroyer Battalion Company B

During the time we were in training in the States, we were told we would never be deployed without infantry ahead of us. We queried of those who were telling this, "Whose, friendly or enemy?" We were assured they would be friendly. As we were to find out in actual combat, we found there was plenty of evidence that we were entitled to our doubts.

On Page 28 of the issue of *Armor* January-February, 1991, 1st Lt. John A. Nagl states "Tank destroyers were intended to defeat enemy tanks attacking en masse. They were to be held in division or corps reserve until such an armored thrust was identified. Once the direction of the enemy attack was identified, the tank destroyers would deploy to positions previously prepared along likely avenues of approach and ambush the attacking columns. Under no circumstances were the tank destroyers to engage in head-to-head 'slugging matches' with tanks, nor be split up into smaller than battalion-sized units and parceled out to front-line infantry or armored units: The light armor on tank destroyers would not allow much missions."

During the entire year 1943, we were trained on self-propelled high velocity 76 mm guns. The carriage was lightly armored with an open turret. The vehicle looked like, sounded like, and smelled like a tank. Commanders of infantry and armored divisions concluded that tank destroyers were tanks and deployed them in violation of all of the tank destroyer doctrine stated in the above paragraph.

Armor, Jan-Feb 1991 also contains this quote: "On July 21, 1941, Lt. General Leslie J. McNair, General Headquarters chief of staff, argued: Decisive action against a tank attack calls for a counterattack in the same general manner as against the older forms of attack. A counterattack may, of course, be delivered by other tanks, but the procedure is costly. There is no reason why anti-tank guns (towed) supported by infantry, cannot attack tanks just as infantry, supported by artillery, have attacked infantry (and tanks) in the past. Certainly it is poor economy to use a \$35,000 medium tank to destroy another tank when the job can be done by a gun costing a fraction as much." How does this decision consider the cost in human lives? The armor protection for 10-man gun crews of a towed 76 mm gun was far less than that provided in a self-propelled vehicle with a 5-man gun crew.

In December, 1943, many self-propelled tank destroyer battalions traded in their self-propelled M-10s for towed high velocity 76 mm guns. Many of these towed battalions were sent ashore on June 6 in the D-Day invasion and all ensuing battles including the Battle of the Bulge. As early as August some tank

destroyer battalions turned in their towed guns for self-propelled M-10s, M-18s, or M-36s each having a 5-man gun crew. The M-10s and M-18s had 76 mm high velocity guns. The M-36 had a high velocity 90 mm gun. By the time tank destroyer units reached the Rhine River in March, 1945, the stupidity of putting towed guns against German armor was realized and many more towed gun battalions had been supplied with self-propelled high velocity 76 mm and high velocity 90 mm guns. To have speed, armor was sacrificed and the open turret made attractive targets for German hand grenades, mortar shells and snipers.

The 643rd TD Bn was one of those trained on M-10 self-propelled guns in 1943 and were then trained on the towed gun in 1944 prior to going overseas in August. This towed gun was the weapon with which 3rd Platoon, Company A, and the other gun companies would be equipped throughout the Battle of the Bulge and until they reached the Rhine River in early March.

On the afternoon of December 22, 1944, the 643rd TD Bn reached Manhay, Belgium. Headquarters personnel from the 3rd Armored Division and the 82nd Airborne Division occupied positions in Manhay. Gun companies of the 643rd were parceled out (some of the 3rd Armored Division and some of the 82nd Airborne Division).

Platoon leader, Lt. John Orlando, 3rd Platoon, Company A, 643rd TD Bn was given orders by a colonel (probably Col. Charles Billingslea, commander of the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment) to travel southward from Manhay to Parker's Crossroad and report to Capt. Junior Woodruff, Commander of Company F, 325th Glider Infantry Company, for instructions as to where to set up road blocks.

As the platoon neared the crossroad, it was necessary for them to pull off onto the berm of the road to let a long column of 3rd Armored Division tanks, armored cars, and soft skinned vehicles withdraw from the crossroad toward Manhay. When the column had passed northward, Lt. Orlando's platoon proceeded southward toward the crossroad.

When Lt. Orlando reached Capt. Woodruff's CP (Command Post) at the crossroads, he entered the CP to receive instructions. His men sat in their halftracks headed southward with their guns in towing position. Three men from the 3rd Armored came walking northward past the TDs. Pvt. Edgar Kreft, a member of one of the guncrews in Lt. Orlando's platoon, recognized one of the 3rd Armored men to be Russell Bye, a neighbor from his hometown of Rogers City, Michigan. Russell asked Edgar what they were doing here. Edgar said they were waiting for instructions about where to set up their guns. Russell said there was nothing around there that wasn't occupied by Germans. He continued to say that, "We may even be surrounded by Germans now."

In January, 2006, I was given the phone number of PFC Jim Bryant, who was Capt. Woodruff's runner on December 22, 1944. He told me that he was aware that a tank destroyer platoon leader was with Capt. Woodruff for instructions about where he was to deploy his guns.

Lt. Orlando returned to the column and they proceeded southward a short distance where they set up their roadblocks and to hold at all costs. Pvts. Edgar Kreft and Joe Stitt confirmed that they set up the guns southward from the crossroad. Gun commanders, Sgt. Joseph Giordano and Sgt. Frank Martilelli set up their guns

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farthest southward. Sgt. John Sienkiewicz and Sgt. Ernest Maynard set up their guns north of Giordano's and Sienkiewicz's guns but still south of Parker's Crossroad as instructed by Capt. Woodruff...

As Giordano's and Martinelli's gun crews started digging in, they could hear German-speaking men digging in within hearing distance just ahead of them. Had they had been able to understand German, they would have known what they were talking about.

Lt. Orlando told me he went back (I assume that "back" meant northward?) To Capt. Woodruff's CP to request infantry support. Capt. Woodruff informed Lt. Orlando he had none available.

Disheartened, Lt. Orlando returned to his men with the bad news. Some time later, men's descriptions vary about when, a shelling (artillery, mortar, or a combination of the two) began toward daybreak on the 23rd. T/5 Anthony DeFoster and Sgt. Giordano were killed. The guns and halftracks of St. Giordano and Sgt. Frank Martinelli were disabled. German infantry men swarmed onto the crews of these guns taking 14 of them prisoner, including Martinelli, Kreft, and Stitt. An additional seven men were wounded. Some of the wounded became prisoners, but others were either picked up by American medics or were able to reach friendly units and returned to the 643rd later.

PFC Jim Robinson, loader on Sgt. Maynard's gun crew has told me they could hear men from Sgt. Martinelli's crew and Sgt. Giordano's crew being taken prisoner so they hooked onto their guns and withdrew to Manhay. They didn't improve their position very much because the Germans were attacking Manhay too. An officer asked PFC Robinson if their gun was operable and he reported that it was. The officer told them to set up in a position he designated. Soon a different officer came by and told them the Germans had some U.S. Sherman tanks so extreme caution should be used in identifying targets before firing. Consensus in the crew was that the designated position and added confusion of difficult identification of tanks they might be better off to select a position better suited to their own welfare and they did just that. Their decision allowed them to watch the progress of the battle. They and crews of other guns in their platoon returned to a rest area on December 26th in Les Avins, Belgium, according to battalion history.

The battalion history states that "On the 23rd, two guns, (Maynard's and probably Sienkiewicz's) of the 3rd Platoon of Company A, returned to Manhay and the gun sergeants reported an attack by enemy paratroopers and infantry had overrun their positions, some men had been killed or captured and they thought the platoon leader and platoon sergeant were among them.

Quote from battalion history—"The towed guns were sent back under Lt. McCarty to go into position and two platoons of paratroopers were sent down by the 3rd Armored Division to drive out the enemy." There is no entry that tells what happened, but Jim Robinson, in Maynard's crew, has said they were repulsed and returned to Manhay.

In training, we had been instructed to place a thermite grenade in the gun barrel if it seemed imminent that our gun would be captured and turned on us by the Germans. Sgt. Sienkiewicz determined that his gun was about to be captured and destroyed his gun. When he got back to the 643rd, he was court-martialed, broken from sergeant to private and transferred to an infantry

outfit. I talked to him at one of the battalion reunions and got this information directly from him.

I had conversation with a man who said he was in Parker's Crossroad when Capt. Woodruff was given permission to evacuate his CP. He told me there were no tank destroyers present in the crossroads itself when Woodruff evacuated his CP. This didn't make sense to me at the time since I had heard our Company A men say they were there on the morning of December 23. Information provided recently (in response to my further questioning) by Lt. Orlando, Pvt. Kreft, and Pvt. Stitt saying they proceeded southward from the crossroads where they put their guns in position provides me with evidence that if they were south of the crossroads the unknown man would not have seen any tank destroyers in the crossroad.

Lt. Orlando chose to remain in the army as a profession. He rose to the rank of major while serving through the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam Conflict before retiring. I have had a number of conversations with John at reunions and on the telephone since the mid-1980's.

He blames himself for the casualties incurred by his men at the crossroads. On one occasion, he told me that if he hadn't been on his first combat mission that night, with nothing but the indoctrination of OCS to guide him, he would have considered other alternatives when the mission appeared suicidal. He did not elaborate, but my interpretation is that he may have found out in his years in the Army that he would have been within his rights to have countered Capt. Woodruff's orders with suggestions less dangerous to him and his men.

Capt. Woodruff's runner, PFC Jim Bryant, was told to obtain a jeep to go northward to an ammunition supply that his men needed badly. Lt. Orlando told me he gave up his jeep for a glider infantry man to carry out his mission. Germans had infiltrated to the north of the crossroads and killed Bryant's driver and a passenger sitting by the radio in the back seat. Bryant, being uninjured, rolled from the passenger seat in the jeep and into a ditch alongside the road.

Knowing the Germans would be searching for survivors, Bryant continued as soon as possible into the woods bordering the road and found a log lying on the ground. It was large enough to provide some protection. He snuggled up to the log and covered himself with leaves and snow. Before long, two Germans came to the log, stepped over it without stepping on him and proceeded further into the woods.

When PFC Bryant thought it was safe to come out of hiding, he walked in the direction he thought he would find friendly troops. When he found some, they thought he was enemy and started shooting at him. In the darkness with no way of convincing them he was an American, he wandered through the woods until he found friendly troops who he could convince that he was American.

Capt. Woodruff ordered PFC Bryant a battlefield commission sometime later. Bryant declined. He was then offered promotion directly from PFC to First Sergeant of his company and willingly accepted the promotion. He later chose the Army as a career until he retired.

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