

ARMOR IN BATTLE

*Special Edition for the Armored Force
75th Anniversary*

Edited by

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Armor in North Africa

Editor: The following items depict combat operations of elements of the 1st Armored Division in January and February 1943. In the closing days of January, elements of the 1st Armored Division sought to secure Faïd Pass, but the effort failed. In mid-February, the Germans opened a major offensive with an armored thrust through Faïd Pass that overwhelmed American forward positions, overran Sidi Bou Zid, and isolated American infantry positions on the nearby heights. A subsequent counterattack to recapture Sidi Bou Zid failed with heavy losses.

These engagements marked the first in a series of battlefield reverses for American forces that culminated in the fighting for Kasserine Pass. The initial fighting involved Combat Command A with the 1st Armored Regiment and supporting troops. Although the 1st Armored Regiment included three armored battalions, only one (3rd Battalion) was present for these actions. Similarly, only a portion of the 81st Armored Reconnaissance Battalion was present, since much of its strength was dissipated to cover a broad frontage. When the main German thrust began on February 14, the American forces near Sidi Bou Zid quickly found themselves under attack from multiple directions by superior enemy forces with ample armor and air support. The resulting action marked the steady erosion of American combat power, followed by a retreat.

The document excerpts below chronicle the action from the perspective of 1) Combat Command A, 2) the 1st Armored Regiment, and 3) the 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment. A final segment includes impressions and lessons learned from combatants in the 1st Armored Regiment. For a narrative of these engagements, see George F. Howe, *United States Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* (Washington, D.C. 1957: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army). Also available online at the following website:
<http://history.army.mil/html/books/006/6-1-1/index.html>

1) Operations Report of Combat Command A Headquarters, 1st Armored Division

13 February 1943

About 1330 hours, our forward observer on Ksaira reported about 125 trucks moving SOUTH behind the ranges DJ [Djebel] KRALIF- DJ KRECHAM- DJ GOUBRAR- DJ BOUDINAR. Two air missions destroyed 25 trucks and reported that the trucks were loaded with Infantry. Enemy aerial reconnaissance was active in our sector. Enemy artillery shelled our positions around LESSOUDA during the afternoon and evening. All troops were alerted and notified to expect a large scale attack. All train elements were ordered to SBEITLA. General Eisenhower and General Ward visited our CP [command post] at 2300 hours. General Eisenhower listened to a description of our situation and dispositions without comment. Before departure, he decorated Col. Drake, 168th CT [combat team] with the silver star.

14 February 1943

The start of the German attack was indicated by heavy fire in the LESSOUDA area at 0630 hours.

It appeared that an envelopment of our NORTH flank was in progress. Hostile debouchment was apparently made either at FAID pass or the pass to the NORTH of FAID. Listening posts apparently were either surprised or failed to perform as ordered. There was no call for the FAID pass artillery barrage as far as was observed (Rocket signal from listening posts).

There was a heavy ground haze and the firing could be followed only flashes. A duel between tanks seemed to be in progress just EAST of LESSOUDA.

0650 hours—Lt. Col. Waters, NORTH sector Commander, reported that LESSOUDA was being attacked by tanks but that he could not tell much about it due to poor visibility. He stated that his tank company ("G" Co, 1st AR), had moved to counter-attack.

0800 hours—As many as 30 tanks were reported in a wide sweep around DJ LESSOUDA, which apparently was being overrun. The 3rd Bn, 1st AR (--), moved toward LESSOUDA with the remainder of the 91st FA Bn in support.

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0820 hours—"B" Btry, 91st FA was withdrawing to the WEST of LESSOUDA. German tanks were on the NORTH flank of "B" Btry.

0830 hours—enemy tanks overrun "B" Btry, 91st FA, WEST of LESSOUDA.

0833 hours—Twenty enemy tanks which had passed WEST of LESSOUDA were along LESSOUDA-FAID road facing SOUTH. These tanks were engaged by the remainder of the 3rd Bn, 1st AR (--), from positions between SIDI BOU ZID and the OASIS, LESSOUDA.

0840 hours—A total of 39 hostile tanks were now SOUTH and WEST of LESSOUDA.

No friendly aviation seen as yet. (Observation had been requested at 0100 hours from daylight on).

0920 hours— The number of the 1st AR tanks still in action was not known; but four or five tanks had been lost from Lt. Col. Hightower's mobile reserve.

0930 hours—The 2nd Bn, 168th Inf (--), was reported to have withdrawn into the foothills of DJ LESSOUDA.

The 17th FA Bn was ordered to the vicinity of SIDI BOU ZID to go into position there.

0950 hours—the forces on DJ LESSOUDA completely surrounded.

Division reported Kern going into position at CR T-5267.

0955 hours—another request was made for air support. Enemy planes overhead continuously.

Enemy tanks reported moving NORTH from vicinity MAKNASSY pass.

Situation reported to Division. Repeated Col. Drake's report of threatened cut-off and his request that II Corps reserve be asked to attack and relieve situation. No reply except "Roger" (G-3).

1015 hours—Tex's (LTC Louis V. Hightower, commanding 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment) tanks heavily engaged in a fire fight NORTH of SIDI BOU ZID—falling back slowly. Several tanks lost. It was apparent that the enemy was using some Mk 6 (Tiger) tanks.

1030 hours—Co "C," 16th Engrs ordered from reserve to vicinity mine field on SOUTH flank between DJ KSAIRA and DJ GARET HADID. Orders to protect SOUTH flank and to cooperate with Col Drake, 168th Inf.

Co "A," 81st Recon Bn, had bivouacked back of the mine field. They worked SOUTH from there into the valley during the day and protected the mine field at night.

1036 hours—Thirty tanks coming from MAKNASSY pass and moving NORTHWEST in V formation (Co "A" 81st).

Tex's tanks were slowly falling back toward SIDI BOU ZID. The 91st FA Bn began displacing WESTWARD on order. The 17th FA Bn, still in the process of displacement, was delayed by heavy dive bombing.

At **1126 hours**, reported to division the 81st Reconnaissance Battalion report that thirty tanks moving towards right rear SOUTH of DJ KSAIRA. 81st reported that they were delaying them but unable to stop them.

At about **1130 hours**, situation reported to Division: "Enemy tanks closing in and threatening both flanks and cut off Drake. Any orders?" First we were told to "Wait." Then came the answer: "Continue on your mission." (G-3)

1200 hours—Axis of possible withdrawal announced to units: SIDI BOU ZID-ZAAFRIA-NORTHWEST to SBEITLA road.

1208 hours—The enemy was right on top of us. We were moving CP on ZAAFRIA. All except command elements had been dispatched in advance.

1230 hours—Artillery displacing SOUTHWEST from SIDI BOU ZID. Considerable dive bombing. CP HQ tanks sent to help Tex cover withdrawal of artillery as ordered.

1240 hours—Tex reported that he was being heavily pressed and withdrawal should speed up. No friendly air support. Situation reported to Division. Communication ineffective with units.

1250 hours—Movement of CP being made cross country to SOUTHWEST—slow.

1400 hours—Our CP temporarily established about five miles SOUTHWEST of SIDI BOU ZID.

Tex forced back about two miles SOUTHWEST of SIDI BOU ZID and his flanks were being threatened. At this time three CC “A” Hq tanks joined the 3rd Bn, 1st AR (--), which had only five or six tanks left.

Col. Drake’s request for permission to withdraw from DJ KSAIRA was relayed to Division.

1408 hours—Message from Division: “Too early to give Drake permission to withdraw.”

Last orders to Drake: “Continue to hold your position” was acknowledged about this time.

The 1st Bn, 17th FA was destroyed by bombing and finally by tank attack.

1430 hours—A group of enemy tanks, which eluded elements of the 81st Reconnaissance Battalion which was protecting the right flank, advanced from the SOUTHWEST and attacked some combat train vehicles and an advance detachment of CP CC “A” which was moving towards ZAAFRIA. These tanks also later engaged our withdrawing artillery and CC “A” CP between SIDI BOU ZID and ZAAFRIA.

1450 hours—Withdrawing units moved NORTHWEST cross country, covered by elements of 3rd Bn, 1st AR. Some long range tank fire and dive bombing was received; causing vehicle losses en route. Some vehicles had difficulty crossing wadi WEST of ZAAFRIA. There was considerable disorganization, although there was no great congestion, as vehicles moved in open formation across country towards CR 5266.

1700 hours—CP was established at T-4668, NORTH of SBEITLA road, at about this time. Reorganization of units proceeding along road WEST of CR at T-5266 was started. Nine guns of 91st FA in position supporting 1st Bn, 6th Inf. Remainder of 3rd Bn, 1st AR, and 3 CP light tanks, were placed in reserve and moved to vicinity of CP. Enemy did not pursue. Enemy aviation had been apparently unopposed. Ten attacks on CP and its vicinity had been made during the action. Enemy air attacks appeared to be most effective against the 17th FA. They caused little loss to other troops, although they did slow up their movements considerably.

1800 hours—Orders issued to units to arrange for all possible recovery of vehicles in battle area during night. Few of the troops that had been engaged were available to function in recovery operations. Assistance from Division Maintenance was requested.

Editor: This report marks the collapse of American positions around Sidi Bou Zid from the perspective of Combat Command A, who was responsible for the sector. Evident throughout is frustration at the lack of air support in any form, including aerial reconnaissance flights, underscored by the frequent mentions of German air attacks throughout the battle zone. Similar dissatisfaction is indicated with the largely unresponsiveness of division headquarters, which offered little in terms of support or guidance. In fairness, the 1st Armored Division had been dispersed over a broad frontage and was not well postured for a rapid reaction to the German offensive. The dire straits of the American forces is indicated by the steady loss of tanks, rapid displacement of command posts, the loss of an artillery organization, reliance upon light reconnaissance vehicles to delay a flanking thrust by enemy tanks, and the sudden eruption of hostile armor among a maintenance company. All of these indicators suggest a force caught off guard and an inability to either seize the initiative from the Germans or significantly disrupt their actions. The inability of reconnaissance assets to provide timely and accurate information regarding German movements proved central to this development. Dependence upon a forward listening post to fire rockets and trigger an artillery bombardment into Faid Pass failed when the Germans overran the position before the warning rockets could be fired.

2) North African Campaign, November 8, 1942 to May 9, 1943; First Armored Regiment, United States Army

Beginning January 17 the Regiment began overland movement eastward and via TELERGMA, AINE MLILA, AINE BEIDA arrived in assembly area at BOU CHEBKA January 21, 1943.

On January 23 the Regiment (less 1st and 2nd Bns) moved from BOU CHEBKA to SBEITLA as a part of Combat Command "A" where it remained, carrying on reconnaissance, until it, as part of Combat Command "A," moved to vicinity of FAID PASS prepared to counter attack enemy who had driven French troops from FAID PASS. On January 31, the 3rd Battalion (less Companies G and I) with supporting troops attacked east towards FAID from DJ LESSOUDA with a mission of driving enemy from the place and securing it. Company "G" was attached to a force composed of 1st Bn., 6th Armored Infantry (-2 companies) with supporting troops which had a mission of attacking east toward REBAOU PASS from SIDI BOU ZID, taking and securing REBAOU and high ground to the north towards FAID PASS. Company "I," attached to 26th Infantry (-2 battalions) was in reserve in vicinity of DJ LESSOUDA. The force which attacked FAID PASS at 0830 hours January 31, 1943 met very heavy resistance in the form of anti-tank guns and 18 enemy tanks and were unable to gain their objective. Combat was broken off at 1000 hours, remainder of "H" Co. withdrawn; 1 platoon of "I" Co. covering artillery positions as "H" Co. withdrew. This force was also subjected to intensive aerial bombardment. Nine of our tanks were lost, 4 men killed, 80 wounded and 15 missing. The force known as the maneuvering force, to which Company "G" was attached, attacked REBAOU and after stubborn resistance gained the foothills of the mountains extending north from REBAOU, but under strong counter-attack were forced to withdraw to DJ KSAIRA where a strong position was consolidated. The attack was supported by two platoons of Company "I." Combat Command "A" took a defensive attitude and took up positions generally on a north and south line about four to five miles west of FAID – REBAOU; occupying DJ LESSOUDA and DJ KSAIRA. The Command Post of Regimental Headquarters was at SIDI BOU ZID.

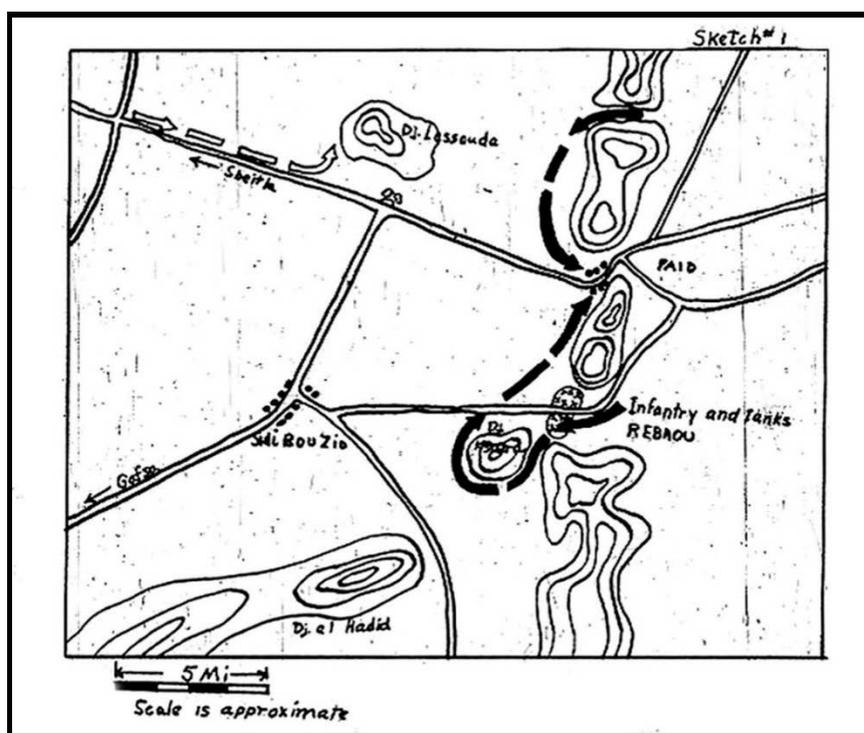
From February 1 to February 14 the Regiment (-1st and 2nd Bns) remained in vicinity of SIDI BOU ZID as a part of Combat Command "A" at which time intensive patrolling, reconnaissance, and preparation of defensive works was carried out. Company "I" was in the area of DJ LESSOUDA with part of Reconnaissance Company to prevent a surprise debouchment of the enemy from FAID. A platoon of tank destroyers and a battery of artillery formed part of this force. The rest of the regiment (less 1st and 2nd Bns) were assembled in the vicinity of SIDI BOU ZID. During this time the 2nd Battalion had had various assignments. The 1st Battalion was still at Oran.

Editor: The 1st Armored Regiment included three armored battalions and a reconnaissance company, supported by a headquarters staff, supply, maintenance, and medical service components. However, neither the 1st nor 2nd Armored Battalions were present and the reconnaissance company was split to cover more area. Hence, much of the combat power normally available to this regiment was unavailable when the Germans attacked.

On the morning of February 14 the Germans began strong offensive action in our sector which nearly resulted in the complete annihilation of the Regiment as well as Combat Command "A." During the afternoon of 13 February our forward observers reported large convoys of enemy vehicles moving south just east of DJ KRECHEM. Air missions on this movement destroyed some vehicles and the returning planes reported enemy tanks east of REBAOU. Forward troops reported noises of additional tank engines during the night of 13-14 February and all troops prepared for the attack which we knew must be coming. General Eisenhower visited our Command Post at 2300-2400 the 13th of February. The enemy attack began at approximately 0630 hours the morning of 14 February by a tank debouchment from FAID PASS towards LESSOUDA which attack was preceded by an artillery bombardment of that place. LESSOUDA had been previously occupied by 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry which had become part of Combat Command "A," Company "G" had replaced Company "I" at LESSOUDA and Company "I" rejoined the remainder of the 3rd Battalion. Company "G," the artillery battery, and the tank destroyers at LESSOUDA were nearly overcome before the remainder of the 3rd Battalion could come to their aid. In all, enemy tanks debouching from FAID and the north, together with those that appeared approaching from the southwest must have totaled well over one hundred fifty, of which a part were the Mark VI (Tiger) type. The 3rd Battalion engaged

these enemy vehicles until depleted to the point of ineffectiveness. During the action the 2nd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery Regiment (a part of CC "A") was destroyed, the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry with Reconnaissance Company, 1st Armored Regiment was isolated on LESSOUDA, Battery "B," 91st Field Artillery Battalion lost practically all its vehicles when overrun by tanks, Company "A," 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion lost practically all its vehicles, the 168th Infantry Regiment (less 1st and 2nd Bns) with Company "A," 81st Reconnaissance Battalion, Company "A," 16th Armored Engineers was surrounded in the vicinity of DJ KSAIRA. The enemy tanks approaching SIDI BOU ZID from the southwest encountered our Maintenance Company and that organization suffered heavy losses. The remainder of the 3rd Battalion and Regimental Headquarters retreated towards SBEITLA, delaying as it fell back. A defensive line was established on the 1st Battalion, 6th Armored Infantry about seven miles west of DJ LESSOUDA the night of February 14. The 2nd Battalion, as part of Combat Command "A" attacked February 15 with a mission of relieving our forces marooned on LESSOUDA and KSAIRA. Reconnaissance Company and other troops on LESSOUDA got off under cover of darkness, however the troops on KSAIRA were eventually captured by the enemy. The remainder of the Regiment, still a part of Combat Command "A," engaged the enemy successively on the road from LESSOUDA to SBEITLA and that town was held until 1300 hours February 16 at which time the regiment was withdrawn to SBIBA and thence to TEBESSA for refitting. The few remaining M4 tanks were turned over to Combat Command "B" and a provisional battalion, composed of remaining tank personnel, together with replacements was formed and equipped with M4A2 tanks borrowed from the British. This battalion was used as Division reserve and placed in readiness about seven miles southeast of THALA, however, its use was unnecessary as the enemy was defeated and withdrew to the east of KASSERINE PASS.

From February 27 until March 12 the Regiment bivouacked in the TEBESSA area and proceeded with its reorganization and re-equipping.



Sketch of fighting at Rebaou on January 30, 1943, showing double envelopment of French defenders by German forces, shown in dark. Action triggered the abortive counterattack by the American 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment, which left the Germans in control of Faid Pass. Map drawn by unidentified member of 1st Armored Regiment staff and included in unit's historical report of action.

Editor: This report highlights the destruction of the 1st Armored Regiment as an effective fighting force. Although the 2d Battalion rejoined the regiment for combat actions on February 15, these failed to relieve the isolated forces on DJ Ksaira and resulted in additional, substantial armored losses. Note that much of the regimental reconnaissance company became stranded on DJ Lessouda and DJ Ksaira, unable to assist the regiment or track the evolving tactical situation. In effect the reconnaissance asset lost its freedom to maneuver. Consequently, the regiment fought its single armored battalion against the multiple German armored threats. It lacked the combat power to defeat these threats or prevent artillery and support assets from being destroyed.

3) Operations of 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment From January 1, 1943 to February 21, 1943 [Excerpt]

February 14 (Valentine's Day) —0600 hours, battalion alert and "standing to"; all quiet. At 0630 hours evidence of considerable activity to east of Djebel Lessouda. Attempted to contact Major Parsons and Company "G," all attempts unsuccessful. Received information from CC "A" (which had established contact with Lt. Colonel J.K. Waters, who had taken command at Lessouda the previous day) that the enemy was attacking Lessouda in force with tanks, infantry and artillery. Company "I" with Assault Gun platoon, ordered out to counter-attack parallel to the road from Sidi Bou Zid to Lessouda. The right flank of Company "I" was to be covered by a sweeping movement by Company "H" (less one platoon on reconnaissance). Both companies moved out leaving company maintenance and command half-tracks, which were collected in the vicinity of the Battalion C.P.

Lt. Colonel Hightower, who had moved out with Company "I," reported that the enemy was in possession of Lessouda and was assembling his tanks, apparently for a move on Sidi Bou Zid. He estimated the number of tanks as fifty-three (53) and asked for a bombing mission; none was received, except from the Germans. Enemy air appeared in force; Stukas, Me 109's and FW 190's bombed and strafed Company "I" and other troops of CC "A"; no friendly air present.

Company "H" ordered to move immediately to left (west) flank of Company "I" to meet an enveloping attack by enemy tanks. The missing platoon of Company "H" rejoined that company during the move to the new position.

Since the enemy's position at Lessouda threatened our position on the flank, the company maintenance and command half-tracks and several trucks from Company "A," 701st T.D. Battalion were ordered to move to a suitable assembly point well outside the perimeter of the battle, which was fast becoming a melee, on the road to Sbeitla (on Faïd-Sbeitla road) and to report their whereabouts when this had been accomplished. The Battalion command half-track and entire Mortar Platoon, moved to a point along the Sidi Bou Zid-Gafsa road about three (3) miles south-west of Sidi Bou Zid (T5852).

Enemy air activity increased in intensity and Sidi Bou Zid received a pounding with five hundred (500) pound bombs. All withdrawing troops were forced to detour to the south around the town. The company maintenance and command half-tracks were caught in this bombing and received a number of casualties. The Stukas seemed to be shuttling their loads from very close air fields.

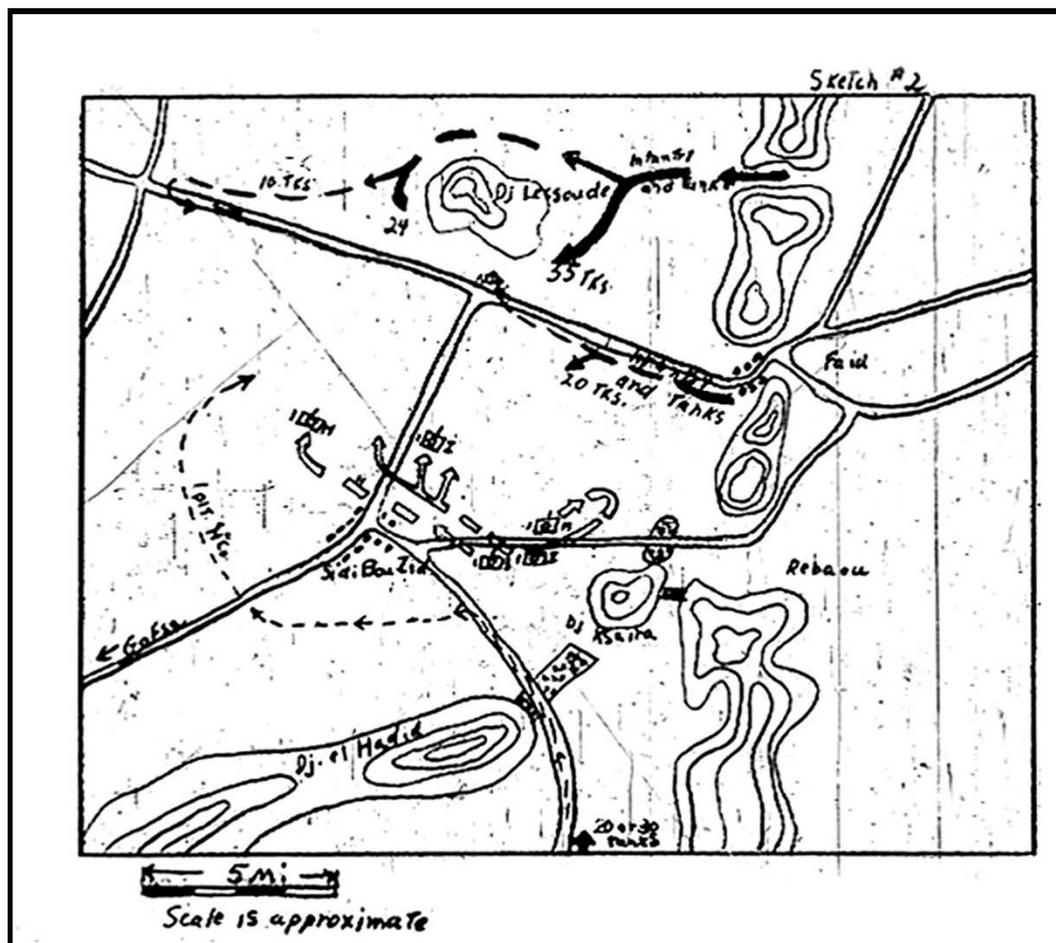
By this time (approximately 1400 hours), we had lost all but about twelve (12) or fourteen (14) tanks and were being ambushed hard by the enemy from the flank. Germans used about six (6) of the new Mark VI tanks in a deliberate push on Sidi Bou Zid and made repeated envelopments of both flanks with the lighter and faster Mark IV's and III's forcing our tanks to withdraw. (See sketch map below.)

Reports of enemy movement through the Maknassy pass was verified by the cutting of the road to Gafsa by a force of about thirty (30) tanks, supported by infantry and artillery. The entire combat command was ordered to withdraw through the infantry-artillery reserve units located at the crossroads ten (10) miles west of Lessouda at Djebel el Hamra (T5166) and to select rally points to their rear in the direction of Sbeitla. The remnants of this battalion were to protect the flanks and rear of this movement.

The Battalion command half-track moved cross-country following the Assault and Mortar Platoons and flanked on the right (at about 1000 yards) by Lt. Col. Hightower's tank, "Texas," and about four or five other

tanks. The entire group received continuous fire from enemy artillery and tanks which were seeking to cut off the withdrawal. One group of about ten (10) enemy tanks succeeded in closing on the column from the south (left flank) and seriously threatened the success of the withdrawal. Upon receiving information of this danger, Lt. Col. Hightower swung his tank to the opposite flank to engage the enemy tanks at short range. He succeeded in stopping them completely in a daring attack, destroying four (4) of their tanks and finally losing his own.

The remainder of the move to the R.P. (rally point) was made without incident and immediate steps were taken to reform what remained of the battalion.



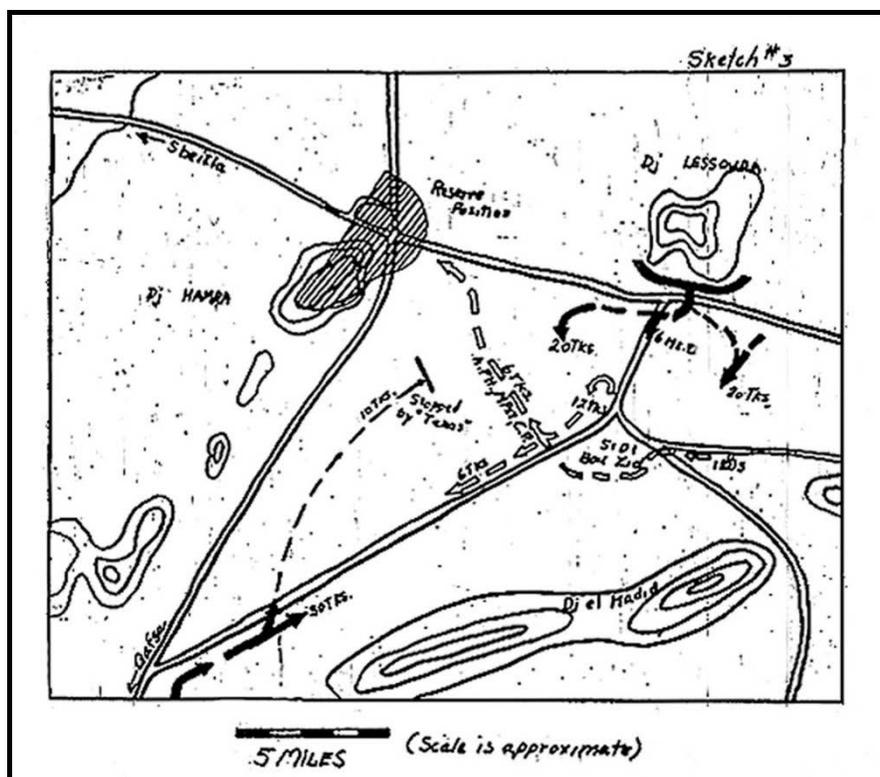
Sketch map of fighting during morning of February 14, showing German forces moving through Faid Pass, encircling Dj Lessouda and threatening Dj Ksaira and Sidi Bou Zid from southeast. German forces shown by dark arrows. Map drawn by unidentified member of 1st Armored Regiment staff and included in unit's historical report of action.

Six tanks were assembled and ordered forward to the cross-roads at Djebel el Hamra to support the 1st Battalion, 6th Armored Infantry, in outpostting that point. Battalion C.P. set up in a cactus patch to the north of the Faid-Sbeitla road about five and a half (5.5) miles west of the outposted cross-roads (T4669). Assault, Mortar, and R&I platoons, assisted by personnel of the battalion trains, set up defensive positions for the night.

Received rations, water, and blankets during the night from the Bn. Combat trains.

Casualties:

<u>Personnel:</u>	<u>K-W-M</u>	<u>Tanks</u>	<u>Half-tracks</u>
Officers:	2-1-12 (2 return at Tebessa)	44-total loss	4-total loss
EM:	4-21-124		2-missing (recover)



Map showing withdrawal of 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment through Sidi Bou Zid toward the rally point at the crossroads (shaded area) on the Faid-Sbeitla Road. Dark arrows show movement of German forces. Map drawn by unidentified member of 1st Armored Regiment staff and included in unit's historical report of action.

Editor: The casualty and vehicle loss figures highlight the intense combat experienced by the 3rd Armored Battalion. The high number of enlisted men missing in action reflected the realities of armored combat and also the continuously moving nature of the battle. Since American forces did not control the battlefield, they were not immediately able to recover the bodies of fallen soldiers, nor confirm whether any of the missing were injured or captured. The destruction of this battalion effectively eliminated the only armored asset initially deployed near Faid Pass. Forced to fight outnumbered with limited situational understanding, no air support, and limited artillery support, the 3rd Armored Battalion expended itself trying to slow the German advance. However, it could not cope with multiple threats alone. The desperate situation resulted in the battalion commander functioning essentially as a tank commander. It did not prevent the displacement of command and supply vehicles or the periodic relocation of the mortar platoon and assault guns. Hence, although the battalion lost much of its combat power, it retained its combat support and combat service support elements that proved critical to supplying the surviving tankers and later rebuilding the unit.

4) Tankers in Tunisia

Editor: The following interview extracts were taken from *Tankers in Tunisia*, compiled in 1943 by the Armored Force Replacement Training Center at Fort Knox, Kentucky. The interviews were conducted by Brig. Gen. T. J. Camp in North Africa amid ongoing combat operations. The interviews targeted a mix of ranks and unit types to provide a broad range of assessments and lessons learned for incorporation into training. The interview extracts included below address armored operations in North Africa in general, and the fighting for Faïd Pass and Sidi Bou Zid in particular. The accounts below offer insights, lessons learned, and brief accounts of combat actions from the perspective of different command echelons from battalion to tank commander.

Battalion Command

Lt. Col. Louis V. Hightower, Executive Officer, 1st Armored Regiment, First Armored Division. (Commanding Officer, 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment, during battles of Faïd Pass and Sidi bou Zid.):

In tank fighting nothing is more important than expert reconnaissance of your routes of advance and withdrawal. Several times both we and the Germans have moved up on what we thought was a good clear route only to find a dry wash, nine or ten feet high, blocking our way, causing us to withdraw. In this country, too, we've learned to move slowly so as not to reveal our position. You can't boil up to battle at high speed without broadcasting your coming in a big cloud of dust.

German antitank gunnery has made our reconnaissance a particularly tough job. They drag their big 88-mm guns up behind their tanks and drop them in position. Usually the crew digs the gun in a hole, twelve by twelve by six feet deep, practically covering up the shield and exposing only the barrel of the gun. We've found those guns particularly hard to locate and they can break up your entire show if you don't pick them up in time. Apparently they use mats to hide the muzzle blast. Once we hunted a gun within a thousand yards for three days and then only found it by spotting the personnel approaching the gun position.

Generally they try to suck you into an antitank gun trap. Their light tanks will bait you in by playing around just outside effective range. When you start after them, they turn tail and draw you in within range of their 88-mm guns. First they open up on you with their guns in depth. Then when you try to flank them you find yourself under fire of carefully concealed guns at a shorter range. We've just got to learn to pick those guns up before closing in on them.

The basic training they had in the States means a lot to our boys over here. Every time they hit the ground you'll find them digging a helluva big hole. I have yet to see one man get hit in a properly dug slit trench. One of my lads dug a shallow one and he came out with a bullet hole clear through the cheeks of his tail. You don't have to mention light discipline to them. They'll hoop and holler at anyone who uses a light at night, regardless of rank.

We've also learned that it's important for everyone to know what to do with wounds, especially shock. Although I saw one man die of shock from a simple hand wound, I've also seen our men save almost five hundred casualties by prompt treatment of their wounds with sulphur drugs and proper treatment for shock. Most of the sulphur drugs are administered by the men themselves. A couple of weeks ago one of my sergeants fixed up a man who had been severely wounded on the head and neck when he was blown off a tank. Today, the man is back in action.

The support artillery gives us is only as good as their observer. Commanders must get in the habit of assigning their best men as artillery observers.

Our 37-mm guns will knock out tanks if the crews will only camouflage their guns perfectly and then hold fire until the enemy comes in at point blank range. German camouflage is excellent; it's hard to believe they can hide a gun as well as they do. The rifle grenade is a good weapon at close quarters and will knock out anything under a Mark VI.

When the Germans go into position they'll hide their guns and tanks in anything, including Arab huts. And then they dress their personnel in Arab garb while going to and from their positions. Usually they'll try to suck you inside of a 1200 yard range. They frequently use machine guns to range themselves in and you can

duck their shells by watching their machine gun fire. When they're moving they'll shoot at anything that looks suspicious and they'll generally knock down every Arab house in sight. We think that's a good idea and are beginning to follow suit. Sometimes they'll get the range with high burst smoke shells. But when we see three of those in a line we take off — that's the high sign for the Stukas. When firing, we always shoot low — even the ricochets will hit them. Most of our misses have been high.

We also need a good system for identifying friendly tanks. Once when my radio was knocked out I heard my own tanks turning their guns on me — and I really sweated out that approach. At dusk it's always hard to tell which vehicles are friendly, and we're always afraid to shoot until they're right on top of us. When the Stukas come over, the German tanks send up a line of rockets and orange smoke to show their positions.

One evening several Mark IV's followed a British tank column right up to their tank park until a 25 pounder battery spotted the strangers on the tail of the column and blew them off the road.

In using tanks in action, take it very slowly. Germans do it that way all the time. Do not shift gears once you start, particularly in the dusk, because the backfires will give you away. Keep the tanks out of column at all times. Never travel in column, travel in V, line, wedge, but never in column. Stay off the roads. Get off the roads and never use them. You don't need an assembly area for a reinforced battalion. You can go right into action without first using an area. Push your tank destroyers well forward, and keep your infantry ahead.

It is according to the situation whether the infantry goes ahead of the tanks. If it is a defense position that has had a chance to organize positively and definitely, I would most certainly have the infantry with the tanks. I would have them follow the tanks on foot, but I would have the infantry right there. Once those 88-mm guns start to bark, you can't pick them up in your tank. Attack them with infantry. Get the infantry out of the half-tracks. Don't take any thin-skinned vehicles with the tanks, they open on them the first thing. Don't take your assault guns or mortars with your tanks, because they will smash them in open country.

The artillery observer has got to be right with the assault company commander or the tank battalion commander, and I mean not more than 35 or 40 yards away. Of course that is standard operating procedure. I just mention it because it is so necessary.

Teach your commanders to stay out of the fight until they are the last tank or thereabouts. They are too prone to become interested in a personal duel, and forget about their control of the units.

A reconnaissance of the field, if you are lucky enough to be able to make it, is the most important thing I can think of.

Medium tanks don't get bogged down so easily. If you come to a bog, don't ever let them try to shift gears, shift before.

The Germans bring their 88-mm guns towed behind their tanks (maybe 75-mm guns, or both — I know they bring 88-mm guns). They tow them up and dig in. Their tanks come out and get your attention and, unless you know their tricks, they lead you right between their guns and they get behind you and get you. Don't always bite at the first 88-mm guns which shoot at you. There will be several up much closer. The first 88-mm gun that barks and the first tank are generally bait and you shouldn't plunge at them. If they stage any night attack or late evening attack and neither side stays there, they will come out and put their 88-mm guns in no-man's-land away ahead of where their tank positions are. Their tanks were within 1000 yards of the Pass, but their guns were 4000 yards ahead of the Pass.

Four 88-mm guns, if dug in, are a match for any tank company. They are the most wonderful things to camouflage I have ever seen. They are very low to the ground. You can watch the fire coming in, little dust balls on the ground give them away and show how low they are. They just skip along the ground. The pit is 12 by 12 by 6. The gun looks like a pencil or black spot. The shield is level with the piece and all you can effectively see is the tube. The crew is even dressed in Arab clothes, and they do everything to camouflage their position. You can get them out with high explosive ammunition, with your artillery. If a tank gun can find them, you can get them out. Over 1200 yards there is no use worrying about them. Their shells bounce off the medium tank at that range. Under 1200 yards, watch out. The enemy's gunnery stinks at long ranges. I feel that our men are better. If we can fight a tank for a tank and a gun, I think we can do it, and that is giving them great odds, because I would say the gun is worth four tanks, but we can do it.

You can see the shells coming. You can watch the adjustments they are making. They all seem to be short and behind. Then they get up and begin to shoot under the tank. During this time, we knocked out four tanks. We picked off the leader. You can tell after a while which is the leader by the difference in the vehicles. They pick at such things as half-tracks with two antennas, etc., and we caught on after a while. When you get one of their commanders they stop and seem sort of dazed.

The ten German tanks were sitting on a ridge shooting at half-tracks. They had been at my left rear and I hadn't seen them. There was a Mark VI, Mark IV's, and some Mark III's. They stopped on the crest and did a right flank and started to get in column. They will put a Mark VI in the middle and the others on the flanks, always making one flank heavier than the other, however. We picked out one and hit him and he stopped. We burned the next one. Then the Mark VI, which I thought was a Mark IV, came close. They are hard to identify, but have a more or less square outline, with an offset box on the side. You cannot identify their guns. We bounced four off the front of him. Then another tank came up right along side of him, and it was easy to move a hair to the left and pick him off. We had no armor piercing ammunition so I know a high explosive shell will crack a Mark IV. You should shoot low and it will ricochet and kill them in the turret, or damage them so they will be of no use.

Our 105-mm gun is good against tanks. I watched one gun hit three tanks coming in a big mass of tanks, approximately thirty tanks, and with high explosive ammunition he collapsed three of them like taking shoe boxes and shoving them flat. The rest of them scattered or moved up to the right. We had to leave because more were moving up.

The 50-mm gun is almost the same as to amount of powder as the 88-mm gun. I think their antitank guns are mostly 88-mm and 75-mm. The only 50-mm I have seen are in Mark III's and Mark IV's. Just go slow and watch them. Get your reconnaissance out in front, men on foot. If you rush right out there you will rush right into it. You want some artillery well forward. 105-mm guns shooting at over five thousand yards aren't much value. I think they shouldn't ever be over 4000 yards in ether direct or indirect fire.

I worked against hostile infantry some. We got a few of them and they went in their foxholes. We shot at them and don't know whether or not we got a lot of them. They will stand there and use those 20-mm cannon at you, but it doesn't bother you. I did run across a small German or Italian tank and found the tail end of a rifle grenade near it and the tank was burned and blasted to pieces.

Stukas with 500 pound bombs really don't hurt the tanks unless there is a direct hit, except for the dust. You have to move out of it. When the Stukas appear the Germans shoot green and white, or green and red, flares, changing every day — they also shoot a blast of orange gas to identify themselves. Another thing, they mark a target with three smoke shells. After these three bursts you had better clear out, for they will be over in about one minute.

They use a lot of high burst ranging. The artillery will shoot one, apparently getting the range from a map, and they will hit one overhead and then drop right down on you. It is easy to dodge an 88-mm gun because they start with machine gun bullets. When they begin hitting you, turn suddenly right or left to avoid it.

Bore sight to beat hell but don't let the boys try to do it at 1000 yards so the axis of sight and tube coincide, because when you are shooting at 6000 yards there is no telling where it will hit. Keep your sights parallel. Bore sight on a distant object; the more distant the more effective. We had one tank which threw a track which we couldn't possibly get started, and we had a lot of ammunition. That commander stood there with his glasses and proceeded to throw a lot of high explosive shells. German tanks went in all directions. That quadrant is very worth while; and glasses are necessary.

Before we put a single round of ammunition in our carrying racks we try them in their guns. A lot of them won't fit, and the battlefield is a bad place to find it out, although I know of two sergeants who climbed out under fire and rammed the shells out.

At Sbeitla it was the tanks that bothered us more than the antitank guns. There were just too many. With a detached air, we were just seeing how many of them we could get before they got us. The Germans will come up about 60 yards at a time, sitting there looking, then moving again. The Mark VI was the main threat. Our boys always came out of the top of the tank, not the escape hatch. Sometimes the Germans machine gun the crews and other times they don't bother. I was very thankful for my good physical condition. We had to run about half a mile before even halting. The country was very flat and they could have got us with machine gun

fire. Our losses were from burning gasoline. Shells seemed to end up in the gas tank invariably. The projectile goes streaking through the whole tank dragging the gasoline out with it, and the first thing you know, the whole thing is aflame. It burns very fast. They hit my tank 6 times before they got the gas. An 88 shell went in right behind the left rear bogie and hit the gas tank.

Company Command

1Lt. Harry T. Holtzman, Company "D," 1st Armored Regiment:

This battalion tried twice to crack the pass east of El Guettar. The start for Gabes was made too late. The first day we reached a mine field at dark and had to stop; you can't operate tanks after dark without infantry in front. The second try — we were the third of three companies — I put one platoon in front and two in reserve to meet 88-mm guns or counter attack. This is best, to put platoons in the formation which can best be controlled. This is dependent on terrain. Give the platoon leader his objective, sector, and the position of the company commander and of other platoons, and let him work to the objective as best he sees fit. Keep in contact by radio. The old teaching of over-running antitank guns is impossible here; 88-mm guns are almost always protected by tanks, mines, and other antitank guns.

My tactics in an attack: Platoon in inverted wedge to proceed when it sees fit. Move cautiously. Company commander behind company working from observation post to observation post, even up to 100 yards from leading platoon.

During this attack on the Pass protected by the mine fields the tanks had to proceed in column through the mines. The Germans let the entire company go through the mines. One tank was lost by fire from a Mark IV tank, but the remainder pressed on. Having gone through the mine field I engaged a Mark IV tank. The description of the engagement will demonstrate some of the Germans' tactics and some of ours. The Germans opened fire from a well camouflaged position, 2000 yards on the flank, with a 77-mm gun; supporting artillery fired an air burst to keep the tank 'buttoned up' and thus obscure vision. I was able to observe the flash. Immediately we turned this tank, which had been caught from the vulnerable flank, head into the gun, thus placing the heaviest armor towards the enemy. The enemy's shot was short. I began to back up, the only thing to do when caught in the open. After I reached better ground, the German and I both started maneuvering against each other among the low hills. Finally I caught the German coming around a hill the correct range to which I had already found by firing two rounds of high explosive ammunition. My first round of armor piercing ammunition immobilized him. I fired several more into his Mark IV tank. He did no more damage. We expended altogether 18 rounds on his tank.

Our tank track had been hit twice and the tank was limping. Jerry always picks a command tank. When you are being shelled by indirect fire, as we were then from 88-mm guns, keep moving in a circle to throw his range and deflection off. In the meanwhile a second platoon had come up as requested of Col. Talbott by me, and got into position to do indirect fire. The 88-mm guns were spotted at 6000 yards. The platoon began to fire high explosive ammunition, semi-indirect fire (by guess and by God), and dumped in 200 rounds. Results were not clear. In the meanwhile a platoon of M10 tank destroyers had arrived. Then two German Mark II tanks appeared near the knocked-out Mark IV tank. They were destroyed by the fire of the tank destroyers and of our tanks.

In teaching tactics the terrain board training is most valuable. We made a board of the Sidi bou Zid battle area and reviewed ours and the enemy's movements. The terrain board need not be elaborate. Give students model tanks, give the platoon leaders objectives, and let the entire crew solve problems. Give the situation and let them dope it out.

If you run into one of the 88-mm guns, there will be two more. You can't crush those antitank guns. They are employed in depth and are protected by mines, tanks, and smaller antitank guns. When an 88-mm gun is located, leave one tank to engage it and send the rest of the platoon to the flanks to locate other guns. These antitank guns are employed in depth with 88-mm guns in the rear. The 88-mm guns open fire first, drawing the tank commander's attention. The tank will make this gun his objective and, if possible, advance on it, until he is caught from the flanks by 47-mm guns and/or tanks. Tanks will draw our armor towards the 88-mm guns. Solution at El Guettar was to send two reserve platoons to the flanks and call for artillery support.

At El Guettar no high ground was available to artillery observers. Tankers did observing for from one to five battalions at one time. I would have every man in the battalion a forward observer able to give initial data and adjust fire.

Platoon Command

1Lt. Herbert F. Hillenmeyer, Commander, Company "H," 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division. (Platoon Leader, Company "H," during battles of Faid Pass, Rebaou, Sidi bou Zid.):

Sir, if we're going to get anywhere, we must put greater emphasis on good reconnaissance. I know of one instance where we went into battle not knowing what was there. We saw the enemy tanks go into Faid Pass and that night we had a dry run back in our concentration area. Next day when the attack came off we found the thing was a blind — the Pass was covered with deadly antitank stuff. It plastered our one company that went in.

The Germans always seem to know what's there before they attack. They use air-photo reconnaissance. For several days before an attack we can set our watches by the JU-88 that comes over each morning and evening taking pictures. If we fire on him he'll hurry home and come back with a pack of Stukas.

Those 88-mm guns have been causing us trouble because it's hard for us to knock them out with our flat trajectory weapons. They're dug in too deeply and we need real artillery support with good observation to root them out. When you fire on the German tanks, they play a bag of tricks. First they stop, causing you to think you knocked them out. When you turn around on something else — wham! They open up on you.

As a platoon leader, I learned that you've got to lead your men. When you get out in front, they'll follow you easily. If you're moving in sections, the platoon leader must go in the forward section. And what's almost as important is the fact that every man must know what's going on. You've got to take them into your confidence and explain the show to them. They'll always respond with better fighting.

You've probably heard this too, before, sir — but the smaller units are simply not given enough time to prepare their individual plan of attack or maneuver. Higher headquarters should realize that we need some time to get the show running.

It would really be worth the time, over in the States, for the men to shoot at night with tracer bullets. The Germans use all tracers and sometimes they raise hell with the troops. Tracers throw a helluva scare into you anyhow; every one looks as if it's headed straight for you. The Germans are cracker-jacks at night fighting — our men need more training in it.

In a scrap we throw high explosive stuff until the enemy comes in range and then we change to armor piercing. Sometimes we set the high explosive for delay, fire low, and watch the Germans duck wildly as it ricochets over the ground. I'm also concerned, sir, with another question of tactics which is probably none of my business. But we had always been taught that the Germans attacked at dawn or in the early morning light. Actually, however, they're even more apt to hit at dusk with only half an hour of light left in the sky, just to confuse you. Then they'll throw everything they have at you — including their star shells and Very lights — in an attempt to put you on the run. We don't fire on planes until they start firing. If we did, we would have had the Stukas on our necks every time.

It's extremely important that we keep our star markings. Several times we were about to open fire on our own tanks, until we saw their markings.

Platform Command

Sgt. Baskem Bennett, Tank Commander, Company "H," 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division:

I almost lost my driver and assistant driver once when the tank caught fire as the turret was turned to the rear position. They were able to get out only when another man in my crew jumped back in the burning tank and turned the turret, allowing these two to get away.

(Asked to give an account of his experiences in the battle of Faid Pass, Sergeant Bennett continued):

We had started across the field, sir, when suddenly ten German tanks came up on our flank. They opened up on me and hit me three or four times before they came through. Meanwhile we were firing continually.

About that time two 77-mm shells went through the turret and I discovered that my tank was on fire. I called down to the driver and radio man, but they must have been hit, because they didn't answer. The tank was burning badly now so I jumped out with the remainder of my crew. Our tank was burning yet, but it just kept going forward, and we jumped into a ditch and watched it go.

Soon we were surrounded by German tanks. We lay in the ditch for several hours until one of the German tanks started toward us. We thought he was going to run us down so we stood up with our hands over our heads. The German officer in the tank spoke good English. He asked me where our side-arms were and we told him we didn't have any. He asked where our carrier was and we pointed to our tank which had traveled several hundred yards down the field before burning out completely.

The German officer then pointed towards our lines and told us to go so we took off quickly. All together we fired about 20 shells. We hit two tanks and I know one was really knocked out because I saw it go up in flames.

Sgt. Butler, Company "I," 1st Armored Regiment:

I was the tank commander of a medium tank. We did reconnaissance work. I was in action at Faïd Pass.

At Faïd everything was vague. We didn't have enough information concerning where the enemy was. If we could get correct information in this respect, we could do a better job. For example: (pointing to a map) When we first moved up here (southeast of Sidi Bou Zid) we were told that there would be one 105-mm gun and several 88-mm guns, and that is all. Then we went on a reconnaissance (north of Sidi Bou Zid) and found many heavy mortars and ground guns, probably 47-mm guns. This was in the Pass. When we left and tried to get out we were attacked by Messerschmitts and Stukas. This shows that the German air and ground forces are well coordinated. Finally we got out and withdrew to the vicinity of Sidi Bou Zid. We were told that we'd have an alert the next day. They seemed to know something was going to happen, but they didn't know what. Then after the fireworks started we went towards the oasis along the North road. My tank was the point, in support of the colonel. We were told to pull off the road because we had been fired upon. Here is where we lost most of our tanks, because we pulled off the road and stopped. I believe that tanks should keep on moving, even if slowly. Thus, for example, the other day we were in a scrap near the bridge. We tried moving around and didn't get hit at all.

The tactic we use is to have one section of the platoon advance while the other section covers it.

I'd say one must act on his own a great deal of the time. You can't wait to be told when to fire or where to fire. When you see something which you think worth firing upon, take the chance. The function of the officer is to keep the men together and tell them what is going on. The soldier has to use his individual judgment. You should keep your troops on the alert always, ready for quick movement.

At Faïd we were too close to the Pass. We didn't get a chance to maneuver. They came around on the left and cut us off in retreat. We ran through the German lines and up into the mountains. Most of the company did likewise. We were pretty much depleted.

Sgt. James H. Bowser, Tank Commander, Company "H," 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division:

Yes sir, this is my third tank but I've still got all of my original crew with me. We were burned out of our other two tanks under fire.

Our ammunition supply has been good — we've always gotten the stuff we needed although we had to quit our two tanks long before we used up our ammunition. A tank commander has got to remember that he can knock the track off a Mark IV long before he can hit it with armor piercing ammunition. The high explosive ammunition might be OK against the Mark VI's, but we always saw too many of them to give it much of a try.

The Germans usually open up with their machine guns while they're ranging you in with their heavier stuff. The driver can tell when they're coming close so he keeps moving and ducks them. I hardly ever talk to my driver in battle — I just let him keep driving. We always stopped to shoot but we did turn the stabilizer on when we were moving. I guess the stabilizer's all right for what it was built.

Editor: “Stabilizer” refers to the gyrostabilizer fitted to U.S. tanks. It helped to keep the gun set along the vertical axis, which facilitated target acquisition and reengagement, particularly when the tank moved. It made firing while moving slightly more accurate, but this practice was generally discouraged in doctrine.

The gunnery instruction they gave us in the States was good. No sir, I wouldn't change it. There's just one thing you must remember when you're fighting Germans. When you shoot at them they stop and try to kid you into thinking you knocked them out. Then when you turn your back on them, they open up again. Sir, we shoot until they stop and then keep shooting until they burn up.

Sometimes we've attacked with the sun in our eyes and that makes it pretty tough on the gunner. He can't see where he's shooting while the Germans sit back there and pop anywhere they want to.

It's a good idea, too, to check your ammunition closely. Once I had to climb out of a tank during an action to ram a bent shell case out of my gun, and then hurry back in before the machine guns got me.

Asked to give an account of his experiences in the battle of Faid Pass, Sergeant Bowser continued:

I'm on the right of my platoon leader and he's in the center. I've got another tank on my right. We start in at daylight, move down the Pass between the mountain and the marsh, and pretty soon at nine o'clock we run into the Germans. They started in with their machine guns but we just let it rattle by and then they opened up with their heavy stuff. I looked to the center and saw the lieutenant's tank go up in fire. So I turned my gun on the antitank gun that knocked him out and smashed it with my first shot of high explosive ammunition. We knew that it was really hot; nine of our tanks had been cleaned out. They knocked my track off but I said, 'Hell, we'll sit here and use her as a pillbox.'

Then one of my boys said our tank was burning. I didn't know how long it had been on fire. Still the fire didn't look too bad, so we stuck by our guns and kept shooting until an explosion almost rocked us out of the tank. One of my crew was wounded but the others were all right, so we took off towards our own lines. We walked for two hours and carried the wounded man with us. Several times along the way German airplanes strafed us.

Sgt. Neal, Company "I," 3rd Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment, Maknassy, 4 April 1943:

I am a platoon sergeant. In the action at Sidi Bou Zid I was the driver for the platoon leader.

During the first week we were near Sidi Bou Zid guarding the Pass. We were equipped for indirect firing. All of our tanks were in the vicinity of the Pass — set back about 5 or 6 miles. We'd come within 2000 yards of the Pass every morning, fire into the Pass, and pull back. We were just back of Lessouda Mountain. On the morning in question, we were in the cactus patch southeast of Sidi Bou Zid. We got up and had orders to be on the alert. Suddenly we saw firing where 'G' Company was. We fired back. It lasted one hour. Then we pulled up towards the north and along the road in line formation. At this time hell broke loose and we continued to fire. When we first opened up the targets were hard to see. Then we saw firing from the mountains to the east. We fired until we had orders to pull out and go back to Sidi Bou Zid. We went back and remained there. Tanks kept coming. We pulled out and were met by a line of tanks from the southwest. That's where we lost four other tanks, including our tank. We were fired on by Mark VI tanks and 88-mm guns. Our tank was hit in the turret. It listed and caught on fire. I believe it was a Mark VI tank which hit us. We all got out of the tank and lay in a ditch all night while German tanks passed us. Then we went into the mountains and walked to Kasserine. We lived with the Arabs and ate their food and water.

What I've learned here in Africa is that it is important to respect, not fear, the 88-mm guns. You must keep in turret defilade. They can knock you out at 3000 yards. I have also learned that tanks must have support. If we had air and infantry we could have done a good job. If the infantry had been ahead of us at the Pass, they could have helped quite a bit.

We should have plenty of reconnaissance. We will have a much better chance if we know what we are doing.

ARMOR IN BATTLE

Sgt. Becker, Company "G," 1st Armored Regiment:

Don't lose your head; being jittery in battle ruins a lot of communications. Keep your head — main thing.

Don't button up your tank or you can't see anything.

Sgt. Sipes, Company "G," 1st Armored Regiment:

New men need more training. They haven't enough gunnery and no driving instruction. I am a tank driver and was in action in Faid Pass. I didn't get my tank out. I button up my tank when not in bad terrain. I fire as a part of the platoon if possible; if not, I fire individually. I fire in hull defilade and fire both while moving and still. I have learned not to rush into anything you can't see. We fight too fast, should go slower and be sure of ourselves. The best way is to fight as a platoon. Cover each other as they move forward. I haven't been able to use the blitz tactics they taught us. Our tactics is for some in hull defilade as the others move forward. In my tank an 88-mm shell came through the turret and set fire to the powder; only four got out, two out of the door and two out of the turret. I don't think the door should be locked. If the gun is to the rear, you can't get out the door. I have an M4. There should be a larger opening hole, so in case the turret is to the rear, you can get out. As a driver, I pick out targets and maneuver into position with the help of the tank commander. I know never to pull up over a hill without stopping in hull defilade and observing first.

Maintenance

Question: How close up is your maintenance company?

Maj. Mills, Regimental Motor Officer:

Just back of companies and battalion when in combat.

Col. Peter C. Hains III, Commander, 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division:

The Battalion had crossed 500 or 600 yards across a bridge which was under fire. The maintenance was also across. A message came in to the Command Post: 'Need some of Pappy's boys'. (*Pappy is the motor officer and Pappy's boys are his men.*) I asked if any big boys were needed; the answer was, 'not just yet.'

Brig. Gen. Camp: This was a perfect radio message. Here is an example of a bad radio message: 'Colonel, my command post and command half-track are 100 yards down from that tank burning on top of the hill. Jerry is shooting everything that moves in or out here. I am going to wait and move out when I think he can't see me.' I was beside this half-track which had been hit by a splinter when the shot hit the tank. —TJC]

We have two pappy's, but we don't think the Germans know them, or what each does.

The medium tank had damaged a track. We sent a wrecker over under cover of darkness — a distance of thirty miles. The wrecker was not needed, but it did escort the tank back, as it was thought that track would not hang on. The tank had 31 track connection guides broken loose and the tank was started back to the service park on its own power without repair with the wrecker following in case needed. The tank came in without repair.

Question: Where do you change engines?

Maj. Mills:

Back with rear echelon maintenance if situation warrants it, closer if situation is possible — in regiment.

Col. Hains:

The maintenance company got cut up at Sidi Bou Zid. They are now doing swell military police duty and guarding mine fields.

Training Recommendations

Col. Hains: We don't wear tin hats in tanks, but they are never out of hand's reach.

Make your training program include more battlefield tactics. The driver is less important than the gunner. The gunner should have a higher rating. More training in:

1. Physical conditioning.
2. First aid (men have saved and can save each other's lives).
3. Marksmanship in major weapons.
4. Observation with field glasses.
5. Estimation of terrain, range, etc.
6. Personal reconnaissance.
7. First and second echelon repair for all crew.
8. All ranks should know how to set up, use, and maintain communications.

Lt. Col. Hightower:

A lot more and better target practice is needed for tanks. It is better to miss 500 rounds in the United States than one round here.

Col. Talbott:

We have now learned to move over normal dry bunch-grass terrain without dust. During the February 15th Sidi Bou Zid battle, part of our reconnaissance trapped on top of Lessouda Mountain observed dustless German tanks creeping at very low speed, for many hours, to reach proper position for a surprise attack.

Radio instruction should get to the point where every ordinary soldier can check and use every set. Procedure is important. No extra chatter. Everyone in the company can operate sets.

German planes will wheel overhead and pretend to 'peel off', thus attracting attention of the ground troops. While this distraction is taking place, German tanks will attack the flanks. We call this the 'Smith Brothers' Act.

1Lt. Harry T. Holtzman:

An officer is a school teacher before and during combat. Talk constantly over the radio to the men you lead. Most of the 1st Armored Division is well-trained, but one must keep reminding them of their training. During our training we jump from one thing to another too much. This is thought to hold interest, but really accomplishes nothing. We need longer, more interesting periods. Men who have been in combat want more training.

The major training subjects we need are, first, all kinds of gunnery. In small arms we stress too much correct position and range procedure. We need training under combat conditions at longer ranges and especially 'pot shots' and fire and movement combined.

Try to arouse interest in learning first aid. The most valuable asset when a tank is hit is to know the use of sulphur powder and pills and the treatment of burns, puncture and laceration wounds. In a JU 88 bombing April 1st, the men were caught outside of the tanks.

Everyone in the Armored Force should be able to drive a tank properly. Everyone should be able to do everyone else's job so that he can carry on under casualties. The higher gears on a tank are seldom used in combat. One gear is used during approach and attack. Slowly moving, dustless tanks have a terrifying aspect.

Sgt. Hagler:

Every man must know his job and the tank commander must know them all. The most important thing I have learned here is the German employment in depth of antitank guns. In tank versus tank, our M4's can handle them two to one, and everyone here will tell you the same. We're learning. The last battle, El Guettar, went better than the one before (Sidi Bou Zid). When going into a battle where you expect to lose 10 tanks, take 25 extra.

Sgt. Becker:

It's a funny thing, being tank commander. You have got to run the crew, be stern, and show leadership. I had a new driver for an M3 tank. I told him to drive up a slope to a certain place and then stop. He got excited and went all the way up the hill. I told him to back up to the right place. He got excited again and went all the way back down the hill. He wouldn't listen to the inter-phone communication so I hollered to the 37 gunner to stop him, as I had my head out. Finally we stopped him and we drove up to a safe firing place and I asked him why he didn't pay attention to me. Over night, I explained how I wanted him to drive and how I wanted him to pay attention, and I told him if he didn't I would close his slot up completely and make him drive blind. That fixed him. I think I have a good driver now. You can't do nothing unless you have a good driver. He must go where you want him to go.

I am lucky, as I have never lost a tank, but how I don't know. We saved two tanks out of the company. When our platoon leader told us to withdraw, we withdrew by backing up. He became confused, perhaps because his gun was pointed to the side. Instead of backing up he turned at right angles and ran up on a ridge. He didn't come back.

Editor: The views expressed in these passages are generally self-explanatory. Tactical guidance stresses the importance of reconnaissance and the resultant failures when combat units simply “move to contact” with little understanding of the situation facing them. Other tips emphasizing the importance of tactical movements at low speed to avoid dust and detection, movement by bounds, gunnery, and tactical leadership reflect the lessons learned the hard way by American tankers in North Africa. Repeated descriptions of the power of the German “88” reflect the impression made by this weapon, which repeatedly devastated U.S. tank formations. The views concerning German tanks reflect a mixture of respect and comprehension that enemy armor was not invincible. The references to heavy American tank losses, especially during the fighting at Faid Pass and Sidi Bou Zid, came as an unpleasant surprise to the 1st Armored Regiment.

Moreover, continued engagements with German tanks and antitank guns soon eroded confidence in the M4 Medium tank (Sherman). Its tendency to catch fire after being hit resulted in soldiers dubbing it the Ronson or Zippo, after popular cigarette lighters. Most personnel considered the gasoline engines the cause, but subsequent analysis in the United States attributed the tendency to burn to ammunition detonation. German armor piercing rounds tended to pierce the armor and then explode. When this occurred inside the M4's turret, detonation of the main gun's 75mm rounds followed and a catastrophic kill resulted. Later models of the Sherman moved much of the ammunition into the hull and adopted wet stowage to reduce the chance of detonation should the vehicle's armor be pierced. The final comments of officers and NCOs regarding training recommendations reflect a number of common sense ideas that retain their relevancy in the 21st century.