

Damming the Flood

In Mist and Fog American Armies Sop Up Waves of German Tanks

From the scene of battle on the northern flank of the German offensive in Belgium, Roland C. Gask, NEWSWEEK war correspondent, sends the following story of Americans out for vengeance.



First Army GI's fight their most fateful battle since D-Day in scenes like this Belgian forest

In a bullet-spattered house with machine guns sticking out of its windows, we looked down upon Stavelot. From across the Amblève River, panzer machine guns poured a furious, prolonged fusillade into American positions. The barrage soon started a fire. A cloud of smoke began to mingle with the fog around one tiny red steeple barely 300 yards from our observation post. Big shells thudded invisibly on the surrounding fogbound hills of the town itself, where a few frightened civilians still peeped from doors. Otherwise it was deathly still.

For a moment we had reached a dead end. We had started out from a divisional command post above Stavelot in search of an advanced tank-destroyer unit—part of the regular TD battalion of three companies of 36 guns attached to the division. For TD's, we knew, were playing a major role in meeting the German breakthrough. The reason was that for the first time since the Battle of Normandy the Nazis were using tanks according to the book—to smash clean holes through the Allied lines and thus pave the way for armored infantry.

The TD's met the tanks head on. And down there in Stavelot on the northern edge of the river there were three TD spearheads that had seen plenty of action. Already they had helped turn back nearly a dozen vicious counterattacks, some led by up to fifteen tanks, but now it was impossible for us to reach the unit because of German small-arms fire from the south side of the river.

Ghosts With Guns: We decided instead to make for the chief TD nerve center—the battalion command post in the nearby town. On the way uphill out of Stavelot, the fog thickened. In a lumbering command car the men with me—

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a TD division liaison officer and a radio operator—kept trigger fingers on tommy guns and peered intently into the fog. This was a ghostly bit of war. Germans were all around in this hilly, wooded territory—snipers, paratroopers, and infiltrators—and they were shooting from the fog.

We found the battalion CP in a small map-hung room. The Nazi tanks were believed to be only about a mile from the town, and the CP headquarters company had been digging in to meet the expected attack. A nearby bridge at that moment was being sown with dynamite in case there was need to blow it up. In the CP itself we met Lt. Col. Stanley Dettmer, the battalion commander.

Tiger Killers: A big, sandy-haired San Franciscan, 37 years old, Dettmer looked about as tough as you might expect for a man with an unexcelled reputation as a TD wizard. Now he was talking alternately to his three companies over the field radio. In between calls he told me about his outfit. Some of his platoons—three to a company—have self-propelled 32-ton M-10s, carrying 3-inch guns and capable of 40 miles an hour. Others have towed 3-inchers, especially good for defense because of the low silhouettes when dug in. (Some TD battalions are also equipped with the Army's latest and best tank killer, the self-propelled M-36 with a 90-millimeter rifle, and some with the lightly armored super-speedy M-18 with a 76-millimeter gun.)

Outside, the artillery rumbled intermittently. A nearby American 105-millimeter battery fired two dozen rounds straight into the fog—directed by some forward observation post. Then bad news came from the radio. On the road east of Stavelot, the marauding panzer team had burst from the fog and used strong infantry forces to overrun a platoon of four towed TD's whose crews barely had time to disable their guns before abandoning them. Dettmer kept calm. He told me the TD battalion has the biggest firepower of any unit of similar size in the Army.

I walked a few hundred yards to where an M-10, well concealed behind a house, had just fired three shots at the gun flashes—possibly a Nazi tank—on the distant misty hill. Its commander, Sgt. Frank Tribe of Ogden, Utah, said the TD's most fearsome opponent is the King Tiger tank and that the main thing was "get your shot in first."

This TD work, both of Dettmer's crews agreed, is among the most dangerous of the war. One of the chief reasons is that TD's are constantly up against superior enemy weapons. For example, none of our TD's (except possibly the M-36) can penetrate the 8-inch frontal armor of the King Tiger, whereas the German 88-millimeter anti-tank gun has been able to penetrate any American tank. And to kill the Tiger, TD's must shoot for the tracks, then assault the disabled monster with high explosive, setting it afire.

I returned to the CP. Suddenly the radio began to talk. This time it was good news. One of Dettmer's towed platoons reported it had just destroyed three tanks of a Nazi column east of Stavelot without loss. You could almost feel the relaxation of tension in the CP.