"SHORT HISTORY OF THE 774TH "BLACKCAT" TANK BATTALION"

On 20 September 1943, upon completion of desert training in California with the 7th Armored Division, the 1st Battalion of the 88th Armored Regiment, along with elements of other units, was designated as the separate 774th Tank Battalion. After organization at Fort Benning, Georgia, the Battalion moved in early November to Camp Rucker, Alabama, and on 21 January 1944 left for the Tennessee Maneuver Area. On 15 March, while on maneuvers, the Battalion received alert instructions for overseas movement. Preparations were rushed at Camp Campbell, Kentucky, but the shipping requirements of intervening "D" day permitted time for a month's training in Armor's secondary mission, that of indirect fire. On 25 June, the Battalion arrived at Camp Shanks, New York and on 4 July boarded the troopship, Dominion Monarch, to the strains of music by a WAC band. The Battalion arrived in Scotland on 12 July, after being delayed the last few miles by enemy U-boats. On the 15th, arrived in Southampton, England, the new home of the 774th.

The Blackcats were immediately placed on an alert for another movement and having been assigned to the Third U.S. Army, began drawing its authorized combat equipment. On 21 August the Battalion moved to POE at Portland Bay and loaded in LST's, moved across the channel on the 24th, landed on Utah Beach near St. Maur, France on the 26th.
The first mission assigned the 774th was to protect General Patton's right flank in his push through France. Here, the Battalion gave armored support in facilitating the surrender of General Bornehemmeing Elster and his 20,000 Nazi troops at Beaugency. By October the Blackcats were in Luxembourg supporting Infantry in cleaning out towns along the Moselle river and were employed in the secondary mission, sending over 11,000 rounds of indirect fire onto German soil across the river.

In early December the Battalion moved to the bloody Hurtgen Forest front in Germany to support the 83d Infantry Division in driving the enemy from the area southwest of Duren to the Roer river. December 8 marked the initial phases of the operation. The difficulties of this attack were apparent from its inception. The enemy had made extensive and strategic employment of mines throughout the area and held high terrain affording his use of direct fire weapons to canalize approaches to the Roer. On 10 December, Companies B and C attacked the key towns of Gey and Strass respectively, and met fierce opposition from enemy tanks, high velocity anti-tank guns and machine gun fire as well as undergoing intense mortar and artillery fire. Elements of the two companies and infantry succeeded in reaching the towns but were almost entirely cut off during the three succeeding days. Limited quantities of supplies and ammunition were brought them, under cover of darkness by tanks of A and D companies; over routes that had been re-mined and that were under constant observed artillery and mortar fire. Losses in tanks and men were heavy but the positions taken were retained despite strong counter-attacks and by 16 December both Gey and Strass were firmly secured, with the following known losses to the enemy: 286 personnel killed and 553 captured; 48 heavy guns and machine guns emplacements destroyed, 15 tanks or armored cars and much miscellaneous equipment either captured or destroyed.

Rehabilitation and reorganization of the Battalion was now undertaken while most of the platoons were yet engaged in the continuing operation. With many platoons reduced to 2 and 3 tanks
nach, they proceeded against heavy odds to take the towns of Gurzenich, Berzbrin, Birgel, and Winden.

All elements were alerted on the 17th of December for anti-airborne defense due to the enemy counter-offensive and increase of enemy air activity. For the following 3 days the area was patrolled day and night for enemy paratroopers. The Battalion blocked critical road points with fire and all suspicious individuals were challenged beyond doubt. Most of the tanks closed in a new area for indirect fire missions under the control of Field Artillery. Other elements made reconnaissance for prepared dug-in defense positions in their respective sectors.

On 24 December the Battalion, less “B” Company, was attached to the 104th Infantry Division, firing indirect fire under Field Artillery control, on the towns of Duren, Karthaus, Kreuzau and Merzenich, continuing throughout Christmas and the following day. December 26, the Battalion reverted to the 83d Infantry Division and was re-assigned to the First Army, moving 62 miles the next day, by way of Aachen and Mondave/Pont Du Bonne, to a new area in the vicinity of Jeneffe, Belgium. From this date to 20 January 1945, the Blackcats were constantly engaged in supporting infantry in both defensive and offensive missions against the Germans in their breakout. Plans called for attacking with the 83d from the north flank to the “Bulge”. During this entire period icy roads, deep snow, mines, and difficulty of identification made tank fighting extremely hazardous and restricted fire and movement tactics. To cite one of many similar missions, the 1st and 2nd platoons of C Co began an attack against Petite-Langlir on 12 January with 10 tanks and reached their objective with 3 operational. On 15 January, in the course of an extremely difficult mission of flushing the enemy from the Bois De Ronce, during which General Models’ CP was taken, two enemy soldiers came forward with upraised hands. As they approached, and upon closer inspection, they were found to be shielding a bazooka team. The commander of our forward tank fired one round of HE into the group, annihilating the bazooka team. The 774th, in the Ardennes battle, assisted the 83d Division.
in the capture of the following Belgium towns: BIHAIN, PETIT-LANGLIER, LANGLIER, HONYEIZ, LONGECHAMPS, BOVIGNY and COURTIL. During their stay on the line they opposed elements of eight enemy divisions, the 2d, 9th, 130, 116 Pz Divs, 2d SS Pz divisions, 12th and 560th Volksgrenadier.

On 21 January the Battalion travelled 32 miles to Longueil, Belgium, remaining through 1 February performing maintenance, checking equipment and reorganizing. During this period numerous conferences were held relative to combat experience of tanks used with infantry and intensive training was carried on in conjunction with associated infantry units, working towards a more effective coordination for future operations.

On 3 February the entire Battalion was relieved from attachment to the 33rd Infantry Division and attached to the 78th Infantry Division, moving 53 miles to Rötgen, Germany. By the 5th all combat units of the Battalion had moved forward, through the Siegfried Line defenses, into positions with the 300th and 310th Infantry Regiments to launch a major attack, the ultimate objective being the Schwammenauel Dam, vital key to defense positions in the Roer Valley south of Duren. This huge earthen dam, held back a large artificial lake, which if entirely released by the enemy would result in flooding a great length of the valley and stopping any further advance into enemy territory on this front for a long time. Guarding the approaches to this vital dam was an area of several hundred square miles, known to be defensively prepared, and the immediate mission was to destroy the enemy in this area, before enemy engineers could perpetrate their plan to blow the dam. From 6 February to 30 February the Blackcats, in support of infantry, fought a fiercely contested battle for this ground. Many permanent enemy fortifications were destroyed by direct tank fire. Heavy machine gun and small arms resistance were overrun and enemy strong points on the high hills east of Schmidt were reduced by indirect fire. Our losses were considerable, especially in the vicinity of Schmidt which was heavily mined, but all objectives were taken and friendly engineers successfully reached the control towers of
the dam, reporting no demolitions except that valves had been jammed in an open position, letting a part of the great body of water through the secret sluice-gate. Even this was sufficient to partially flood the river and increase its speed beyond the point where it could be bridged under combat conditions.

Through the balance of February the Battalion waited on the west bank of the Roer, under daily enemy artillery fire, training reinforcements and readying equipment for the crossing. The Assault Gun and Mortar platoons kept more than busy, firing over 1,850 rounds on observed enemy targets during this period.

On 1 March the Battalion crossed the Roer and closed at Nideggen, several platoons jumping off immediately in the drive to the Rhine river. On those rolling plains the tanks were in their element and in the eight days of this fast-moving operation, the 774th was credited with assisting infantry in taking 29 towns, capturing several hundred prisoners and destroying a large number of enemy guns and vehicles. The Battalion CP changed almost daily; everyone was on the move, and on 9 March the first units of the Battalion crossed the historic Rhine on the partially destroyed Lunendorf Railroad Bridge at Remagen. On 10 March the rear elements of the Battalion were ferried across, being unable to use the bridge because of almost incessant air bombing attacks and an intense concentration of enemy artillery trying desperately to destroy our tiny hold on the east bank of the river. One Service Company truck, loaded with ammunition, had received a direct hit as it was leaving the bridge and went up in flames. By 1400 the entire Battalion was on the east bank, under heavy artillery fire to be sure, but there ready for action—the first separate Tank Battalion to reach the long-sought, and fought for goal.

In the momentous days from 11 March to the 17 March the 774th tanks and the 28th Infantry, together fought desperately to hold and enlarge the northern sector of Remagen bridgehead. Immediately after crossing, the platoons fanned out with their respective infantry units, reaching as far north as Honnel and east to Kalenborn by that first night. At Kalenborn the enemy were prepared
with tank mounted 88's dug into strategic positions commanding all approaches to the town and their famous Autobahn. The infantry were driven back time after time by the withering fire, and with heavy losses. The tanks went on alone but the high-velocity shells ripped into them as soon as they left the protection of the wooded areas outside the town. It took four days of continuous and fierce attack to drive the Tigers from their lairs. Tankers who thought they did not have a chance of coming through alive stayed right in there fighting, with all the skill and guts that four months of combat had brought. One entire platoon of tanks was nothing but twisted and charred heaps of metal, another had four tanks disabled, but many of the men crawled to safety, to take their places in new tanks which were hurriedly brought up, and Kalenborn fell. From here the Battalion drove on to take town after town along the Rhine river bank, some 34 in all, capturing over 1000 PW's and killing 700 enemy. By the 21st the bridgehead, extending some 20 miles along the east bank of the Rhine to a depth of 6 to 12 miles, was firmly secured and there was now room for the big armored outfits to come in and make their weight felt. Every Blackcat tanker knows, no matter where the credit falls, that this precious victory was largely made possible by the lives of his comrades, by sleepless nights and agonizing days, by the fighting hearts and indomitable spirit of men of the 774th Tank Battalion.

With a few days for maintenance and rehabilitation the Battalion was assigned the mission, with the 78th Infantry, of protecting the long Sieg river flank for the First Army drive into the heart of Germany, the drive that their own efforts had made possible. They laid smoke screens, fired indirect fire on targets across the river, set up road blocks and made Psychological Warfare broadcasts. By 5 April the First Army's sudden swing to the north had connected with Ninth Army units, completing the encircling of the great Ruhr industrial area and trapping at least two enemy armies, including several crack Panzer divisions. On the 6th the Blackcats crossed the Sieg and the ten day battle of the Ruhr Pocket was on. Their mission was to annihilate as many encircled
enemy as possible, to destroy or capture their means of waging war, and to liberate the thousands of Prisoners of War, including many Americans. How well that mission was accomplished is best shown by the fact that the 78th Infantry, with support from the 774th Tanks, captured over 47,000 enemy personnel in their lightning smash through the southern sector of the pocket.

In a letter of commendation from Major General Parker, Commanding the 78th Infantry Division, he stated in part, with reference to the enemy resistance — "resistance which, though it may have been described as moderate or sporadic in general terms, is without such fine distinction to the brave men who met the enemy's fire and moved forward to neutralize it. There is no finer group of fighting men in the world. I am — and America will always be — proud of and grateful to you."

All units were relieved from attachment to their Infantry Regiments on the 17th and the Battalion was attached to the 7th U.S. Army on the 26th of April. In the next 3 days the Battalion travelled 250 miles to the southeast, being attached to the 101st Abn Div for operations on the 28th. During a two day stop-over in the VI Corps area near BOOS a patrol from Co A captured Major General Beyer and his staff, hiding in a nearby woods.

This attachment to the 7th Army and the 101st Airborne Division completed the record of having been attached at one time or another to every combat army on the western front.

The enemy had repeatedly declared its intention of making a last, desperate stand, in the famed National Redoubt, a mountainous, defensively prepared area south of Munich, encompassing Hitler's own hilltop retreat near Berchtesgaden. This call for the 774th was not unexpected. It seemed to be the destiny of these hard-fighting Blackcots to always be in the thick of the fray. Where ever the going was toughest, the issue of most importance, the 774th Tankers were in there, spearheading the drive, slugging it out with the enemy and coming out on top. Too small to get publicity, too busy to worry about who got the credit, like a faithful blocker,
they opened up the holes, took their losses, and moved on. While enroute this message was received from Major General Taylor, "German Army Group "G", on front of Corps and 101st Div, has surrendered. Halt all troops in place. No further advance except on orders this headquarters. Further details and orders will follow. Neccessary security measures will be taken however. Troops will fire only if fired upon." This glad news halted the Battalion's rush into the Redoubt and for the next few days were comfortably billeted nigh the Warm Sea at Kempenhausen. Not idle however; units of the Battalion were assigned a number of valuable installations to guard and were responsible for security in the area. On 8 May, after moving on to the village of Auba the following message came from the Commanding General of the 101st Division, dated 9 May 1945.

"It is my pleasure to announce that the war in Europe ended in victory this morning at 0011 hours. It is an occasion for solemn rejoicing and thanksgiving. I call on all of you, regardless of sect or creed, to give thanks to the God of Battles who has brought victory to our Armies and destruction to the enemy. The troops will form today in memorial services for victory, and for remembrance of our Dead who made victory possible.

I do not know what the future holds for us but whatever it is, I count upon each officer and man to meet the coming events with the same fortitude which carried them along the victorious road from Normandy to Berchtesgaden.

In the bright afternoon sunlight of that 9th day of May the men of the Blackcat Battalion formed in a beautiful green field nigh Grassau, with rugged, snow capped Alps towering above them, and with bowed heads lifted their prayers beyond those peaks for their departed comrades. Their names were read. The list was long. Three volleys were fired in their honor and as the muted echo rolled back from the mountainside and blended with the strains of taps, a silent prayer welled from each man's heart that these, our honored dead, shall not have died in vain."
POST COMBAT ACTIVITIES

The end of actual combat meant no immediate relaxation of duties for the 774th. Within a few hours after the official cessation of hostilities on 9 May the battalion was alerted for movement and on the 10th travelled to Bergen, Germany, a small community 28 miles north-west of Berchtesgaden. The battalion immediately undertook the establishment of Military Government, the operation of road-blocks and collecting points for prisoners of war, the care and disposition of the multitude of displaced persons in the area, and assumed responsibility for security in its assigned sector. During the stay in Bergen, the men were given an opportunity to visit Hitler's retreat at Berchtesgaden and many spent a short period at the 10th rest camp nearby.

On 12 June the battalion moved to Bad Reichenhall where they were quartered in what was formerly a large German Army post. On the 18th they were attached to the 11th Armored Division and moved 112 miles to Ebensee, Austria, an industrial town east of Salzburg. They immediately formed a composite guard company for the purpose of guarding 27,000 SS troops in an open prison enclosure at Altheim. The balance of the battalion was soon engaged in the establishment of two large concentration camps in Ebensee itself and was charged with the task of screening and guarding of over 37,000 SS prisoners of war as they were brought by rail into the new camps. It was here that the battalion first lost any sizeable number of the old men in the readjustment shuffle. Over 80 men with less than 70 points were transferred to the 756th Tank Battalion with the 8th Infantry Division, an equal number of new men coming to us from the 756th.
On 13 July more than 120 high point men left to join the 42d Tank Battalion, the 11th Division, and again an equal number of new men joined the 774th. After almost a month of long hours and hard work by every officer and man in the battalion the two PW camps were operating efficiently, and on 14th of July the Blackcats moved back into Germany, this time attached to the 14th Armored Division in the vicinity of Haag, Germany, approximately 30 miles east of Munich.

Fortunately, they found their duties here somewhat lighter, consisting primarily of maintaining a few road blocks and being responsible for local security. Now, for the first time the Battalion found time to inaugurate an educational program with the unit. By August 30th preparations were completed and a battalion school opened in the local school house. Almost two hundred men were enrolled in twelve courses offered in the school plus an additional 120 in auto mechanics classes conducted in the individual company areas. Even the enthusiasm which greeted the war's final ending with the announcement of Japan's unconditional surrender failed to dampen the interest of the men in taking this opportunity to prepare for their return to civilian life. This interest is evidenced by the fact that men of the 774th are focusing their thoughts on the happy day when they will resume their normal peacetime lives as useful American citizens, and it seems safe to prophesy that they will achieve the same high degree of individual success in their peacetime endeavor as they so consistently and gallantly displayed throughout the war.
Disclose 774th Tankers Fighting Along With 83rd

Disclosure that the 774th Tank Battalion is now fighting along with the 83rd Infantry Division "somewhere in Luxembourg" was made this week.

The tankers of the 774th have assisted the 83rd in the capture of Grevenmacher, Echternach, Werneldange and other towns in Luxembourg, especially along the Moselle River sector. This same tank battalion, commanded by Lt Col N. K. Markle, Jr., has assisted the 83rd's Field Artillery by furnishing indirect fire on targets of opportunity, pillboxes, enemy observation posts, railroad and other similar targets.

The outfit was attached to the 83rd in August and joined the infantry in patrolling the Lorraine River. During this operation, the tankers assisted the 83rd in the capture of Brigadier General Boett-Hemming Elster and 20,000 Nazis at Ben together, France.