Yank IN A TANK

How a crew of tough young Americans in a light Hell Buggy slugged it out with the Nazis in the hills of Tunisia. A fast-moving epic of the first U. S. Armored division to land in North Africa

BY STAFF SERGEANT

Charles B. Vonder Embse

with BEVERLY SMITH

AS a platoon sergeant and tank commander in the First Armored Division, I saw nearly five months of fighting in North Africa. It was the first large-scale tank fighting our Army has had in this war.

I don't know much about the high strategy of those battles—you could read about that in the newspapers—but I know how it looked from the inside of a tank.

Our company fought a lot of different kind of actions. We fought against the French for a few days until they got their politics straightened out, and then we fought beside them. We fought the Italians. And we got tangled up with three of Hitler's star Panzer Divisions, the 10th, the 21st, and the 26th.

We fought in the cold, the snow, the rain, and the mud; in the heat, the sand, and the dust; in the mountains, the piny woods, the olive groves, the dry lake-beds, the big seaports, the little Arab villages, and in some old Roman ruins.

We made some mistakes. We took some beatings. One bad day our company lost 9 out of 18 tanks engaged, almost before we knew what was happening. But our training was good and we learned fast. We improved on Old Professor Rommel's tricks as we went along. Altogether, I guess we handed out better than we took.

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I haven't any great stories of heroism to tell. The four fellows in our tank were just an average tank crew who sweated and cussed and joked through a lot of trouble together. We worked together so close that we were almost like one man. If you hit one of us on the head the other three would holler. It almost seemed we could read one another's thoughts.

That's what counts in a tank. It gives you the split-second timing that just skips you out of the way of an 88-mm. armor-piercing shell, or lets you get in the first shot on a German Mark IV tank when you meet one coming around a blind curve on a hillside. Maybe that is why—plus some luck—the four of us fought through the whole campaign, up to the time I was wounded, in the same tank. Of course, we had to put on new treads sometimes and do a lot of maintenance.

These were the other three in my tank:

The driver was Sergeant Jack Colson, from Midvale, Idaho, who used to be a cowpuncher and a truck driver. The best guy who ever stepped between a pair of levers. He could drive that tank like it was half truck and half bronco. As the colonel used to say, he could really turn her loose and let her graze. He knew where I wanted to go as quick as I knew, myself. We hardly even needed any signals. He saved our lives many a time.

The assistant driver was John M. Dylewski, a typesetter from Jersey City. John was a little older and more serious-minded than the rest of us. His parents came from Poland, and he still had some relatives over there. He had heard about how the Germans were treating the Poles, and it stuck in his craw. If anybody forgot it was our main business to kill Germans, John was there to remind us.

Staff Sergeant Vonder Embse

OUR gun-loader was Corporal Harrison O. McKinney, from Owensboro, Kentucky. Just a kid, about 18 or 19, we called him our young hillbilly. But he was plenty smart, and full of fun. When the rest of us were low he could always cheer us up with some Kentucky story or a hillbilly song.

Our tank was an M-3 light tank, weighing about 14 tons, driven by a 300-horsepower, air-cooled, airplane-type engine located in the rear. Our armor plate is good against rifle, machine gun, and light antitank fire, but if we are hit squarely by 75-mm. or heavier stuff it is just too bad. On the other hand, it can go places a heavier tank (Continued on page 102) can't go, and faster. We had a 37-mm. gun, two machine guns, an antiaircraft machine gun, tommy gun, and pistols.

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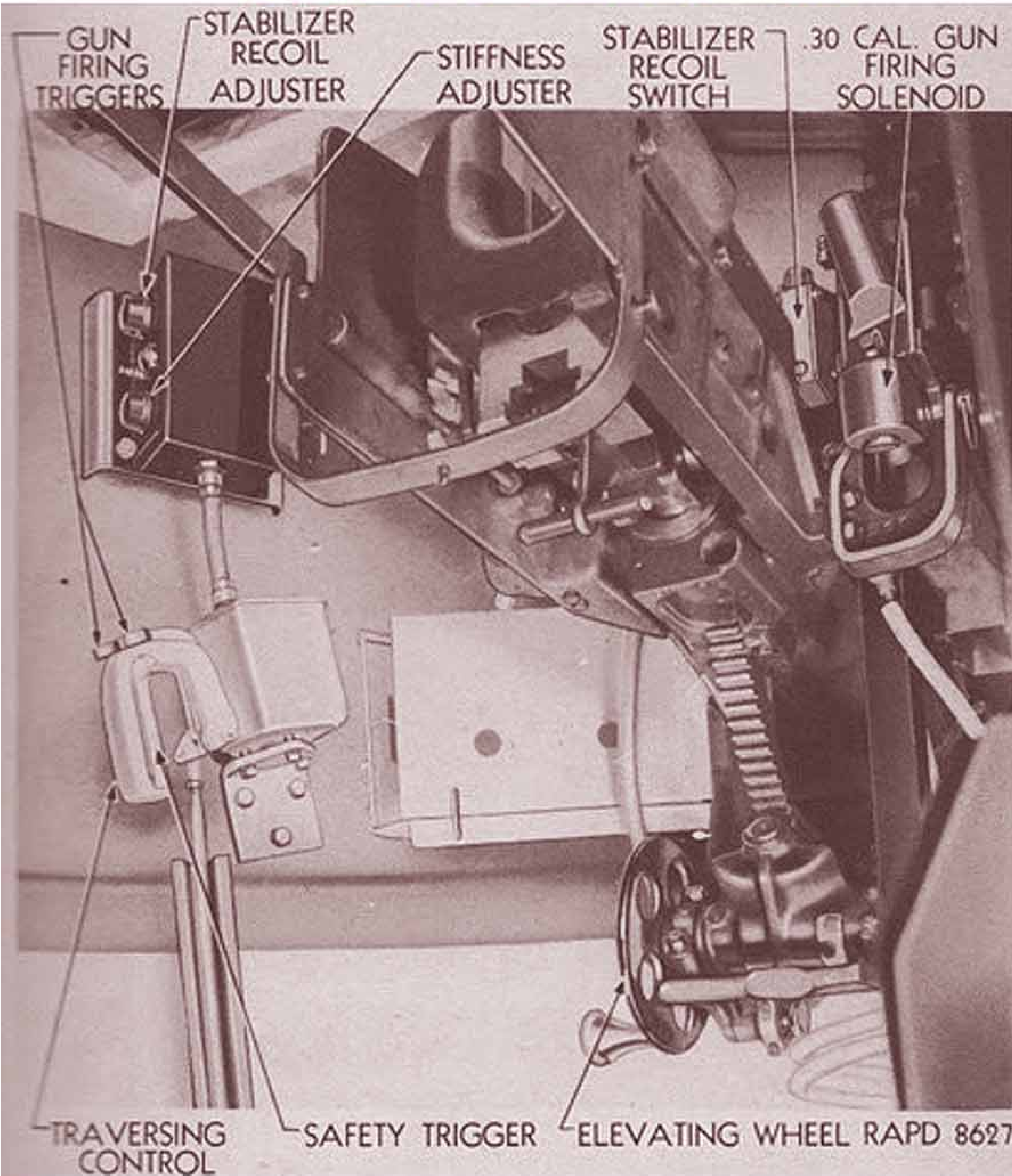

I named our tank "Kalida," which was painted on the side.

One night when we were back of the German lines, and the German flares were lighting up the sky in every direction, it looked as though we might be captured. I wondered, if that happened, how the Heinies would figure out the name "Kalida." That would be a puzzler for them, wouldn't mean a thing.

But it means a lot to me. Kalida is a little town in Ohio, population 500, about 20 miles north of Lima. My father and grandfather were country blacksmiths in that neighborhood. I was born there, raised on a farm near by, graduated from the Kalida High School, played on the ball team. My mother lives there. Wonderful farm country around there, much better than anything I saw abroad. So I think "Kalida" is a pretty good name. Maybe it brought us luck. The only Germans who got close enough to read it were PW—prisoners of war.

ON THE night of last November 7 we were on board a transport off the North African coast. We had crept through the Strait of Gibraltar a couple of nights before under cover of darkness. We had boarded this ship in England nearly three weeks earlier and had spent a good deal of time cruising around in the Atlantic to confuse the enemy about where we were heading for. We were good and tired of that ship.

We landed at a little cove about 50 miles west of the seaport of Oran. Our company was to go south, then west, grab and hold an important airport until reinforcements came along, and then swing northward and attack Oran from the south.

We buzzed southward. After dark we got orders to bivouac for the night. We drew our tanks in a circle, facing outward. It reminded me of pictures of a camp in the covered-wagon days. This formation would be a setup for aerial bombing in the daytime, but gave us good security at night in strange country. If planes had come over with flares we could have scattered in a few seconds.

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We slept right in the tanks, but with one man always awake in the turret. At night, under combat conditions, we always slept in the tank. It is not easy at first. The space is so small that you can move only a few inches in any direction; then you bump into a steel wall, or a gun breech, or an ammunition box, or a tommy gun.

But soon you get used to it. After a few days in action you are so tired that the armor plate feels as soft as a feather bed. You sleep in one position until you get cramped, then you scrunch around a few inches and go to sleep again.

The steel of a tank gets mighty cold at night, and plenty of those African nights are below freezing.

In the morning we ate some cold canned food, had a drink of water, and moved westward about dawn. Soon we could see a column of smoke rising from the airfield, about 10 miles away, which was our first objective. Later we heard the field was being bombed by planes from an aircraft carrier.

We captured the field that day. It was not much of a fight. The French infantry around the field did not have the weapons to stop our tanks, and a couple of our tank destroyers which had come up helped us to knock out a field gun in a hangar.

But we did not have much to hold the field with. Seven light tanks, running low on gas, and two tank destroyers, each with only a few rounds of shells left for their guns. That afternoon, just as we began to get things cleaned up a little, 75-mm. shells began plowing up the field around us. The French had brought up eight of these guns and were firing on us from the direction of the village of Valmy. The guns were only about 2,000 yards away.

Our tank destroyers could not reply; they had to save their little remaining ammunition in case of a tank attack on the field. So the colonel sent five of us light tanks to clean up those eight 75's. This was going to be tough, and we knew it, but we felt cocky. We set out briskly enough.

But when we came over a hill a few hundred yards from those 75's, their blast seemed to hit us right in the face. Those shells, each one sure death to a light tank, were screaming right around our ears. There was also plenty of machine-gun and 20-mm. fire. We scuttled back behind that hill to think things over.

Thinking only made it worse. As long as those 75's were firing on the airfield, the field was no good. Our mission was a fizzle. Those guns had to be silenced. We decided this time to go in full speed, all guns blazing. This way we hoped to confuse and pin down the French gunners.

BY THIS time it was getting dark and had begun to rain. I was in the turret of "Kalida," Jack Colson was at the levers. (You steer a tank with levers instead of a wheel.) His indirect vision, which is a periscope arrangement, was misted up by the rain, and I wouldn't let him open the slit because I was afraid he would get a machine-gun slug in his face. He was blind, and could steer only by signals I tapped on his shoulders with my feet.

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I could look through a slit in the turret, or stick my head out of the top of the turret.

In the drizzling dusk, we went over that hill like an old-fashioned cavalry charge in the movies, only faster. Our tracer bullets were firing at the flashes of the 75's. We surged up across a railroad track at racing speed and fell—all five tanks—into a wide, deep ditch. That was nearly the end of us right there. If our training hadn't been good, the shock would have knocked us out. If our tanks hadn't been good, they would never have crawled out of that ditch. Jack Colson did the prettiest, quickest job of getting "Kalida" out that I ever saw.

Once beyond the ditch, we chased around after those 75's like a bunch of hunting dogs. We were so close now, and dodging so fast, that they couldn't swing their guns fast enough. (We found later that we knocked out seven of the eight.) Then back to the airfield, without the loss of a single tank, though we had been hit plenty by machine-gun and 20-mm. fire.

That evening our supplies of ammunition and gas were nearly gone. But we found some French aviation fuel and gassed up with that. And about four in the morning our first ammunition trucks caught up with us. Boy, they looked good. We slept in our tanks again that night.

Next morning we joined other American forces moving on the seaport of Oran. Not much of a fight—French resistance was almost over here. Soon after we entered the southern part of town a large part of the garrison, French Foreign Legion troops, surrendered. We put their commanding officer on top of one of our tanks for a guide and headed through the streets for the Grand Hotel, to round up some officials and some Germans and Italians there. Most of the citizens were already treating us like liberators, bringing out tangerines and wine. We hadn't eaten any tangerines or oranges for the seven months we'd been in the British Isles, and they tasted swell.

As we headed for the Grand, a sniper shot from a window at a tank about four ahead of mine. He wounded a Frenchman who was just handing a tangerine up to the man in the turret. Instantly the gunner in the next tank raised his 37-mm. and blew the sniper right out of the window. Almost at the same moment a tank-destroyer fired with its heavy gun and practically blasted the corner off the building.

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We patrolled the streets that day. I ran into a sergeant in the Foreign Legion who came from Columbus, Ohio. He had been in the Legion about fifteen years. He was sure glad to see us, and helped us all he could. He had to go off and do some interpreting before I even found out why he left Columbus to come to a place like this.

Next day the French signed an armistice with us and there was a big celebration. We were sent about 50 miles east, camped in pup tents on a hillside in the rain, and spent 10 days teaching French officers and noncoms how to operate and maintain American tanks. One day we are shooting at one another; the next we are friends. They were good fellows and learned fast.

I was always handicapped in North Africa by not knowing any foreign language. French, or even Italian or Spanish, would have helped. If I ever have a son, I'm going to have him learn at least one foreign language.

AFTER a couple of weeks more we moved up about 500 miles to the German-Italian front in Tunisia. We traveled on a French freight train, with flatcars for the equipment and old "40 hommes, 8 chevaux" boxcars for the men. It took us a week to get there—less than 100 miles a day. The French have a funny way of running a railroad.

Up at the front we got our first dive-bombing. When those Stukas come down on you, their sirens shrieking like the screaming of some wild animal, the bombs deafening you and shaking the earth, the machine-gun bullets sewing patterns all around you—why, it really scares the daylights out of you. The first couple of times. Then you learn that they don't hurt the tank unless they score a direct bomb hit, which is very seldom. You learn how to get up on the tank with your own a.a. machine gun, keep the planes high, and spoil their aim, even if you don't knock them down. You always feel better when you are fighting back.

We got so we didn't mind a dive-bombing attack nearly as much as well-directed artillery fire. When those artillery shells start searching for you, up and down, back and forth, on and on, you really want to get out of that place. You do get out, unless it is critical.

It was critical one day in March down near Maknassy. We were holding a ridge against a counterattack by Rommel's men. We had tanks, and infantrymen dug into deep fox holes. The Germans started off with one of the hottest barrages I ever went through. It went on until it seemed we couldn't stand it any more—that we would break.

There was a moment's lull in the ex-

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plosions, and we heard one of the boys in a fox hole singing, in a kind of wailing, mournful tune:

"If it hits you,
You will holler—
Yes, indeed!"

Everybody started laughing. It broke the tension. After that we were all right. When the German attack swept into the valley, we stopped it in its tracks and rolled it back. . . .

OUR first serious action against the Germans came late in December. By that time the Germans had thrown back our first dash toward Tunis and Bizerte. They had poured across the narrow Sicilian straits a lot more men and power than we had been able to bring up along our thousands of miles of supply lines. The Americans and the British and the French were harder pressed than the people knew at home.

The French, without tanks or modern equipment, were holding a section west of Pont du Fahs. The Germans weren't supposed to have any tanks there, but their armored cars were bothering the French. We were told that we were to be "a Christmas present to the French," "to help them deal with those armored cars." It didn't turn out that way.

The plan was for us to join the French in an attack which would clean out the German armored cars and seize favorable positions nearer Pont du Fahs. It had been raining for days, and once you left the roads the mud was too soupy even for our light tanks.

The first day the advance seemed to go well. Our tanks went up the roads, cleared out some light German opposition, and reached their objectives. Through some mistake, the French infantry didn't arrive to consolidate the positions, and our tanks were withdrawn. Next day we tried it again, and ran into—not armored cars, but big M-4 tanks. The Germans were putting on an attack of their own, in force. I looked through my field glasses and saw a dozen of those big tanks, some of them dragging behind them guns with long barrels—the dreaded German 88's.

We could have run for it. But to have let the German tanks through that road that day, before forces could be brought up to meet them, would have been serious. We were ordered to hold, and hold we did. But we took a terrible shellacking. We dodged around, spitting at the Germans with our little 37 guns. Every now and then one of their heavy tank shells or high-velocity 88's would hit one of our light tanks and smash it. The wounded would crawl out, and

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those who could walk would carry or drag those who couldn't. No ambulances could come up into that kind of fire.

In the afternoon, when we were finally ordered to withdraw, we had only 9 of 18 tanks left, and some of those were damaged. We took what wounded we could into the tanks, and held them in our arms.

That was a bad day. Our lieutenant colonel, a Georgian, one of the finest officers and men in the world, was one of the casualties—killed by a German shell.

Later that evening we heard there were still a couple of our wounded up there at the front. A lieutenant brought one of them back. Then Sergeant Jimmy Whalen, of Grand Rapids, Mich., Private Fred Porter, of Texas, and I went back up there for the other boy, a nice kid named Chapman.

We sneaked up as far as we could in the tank, then wriggled a couple of hundred yards through the mud to where Chapman was. The Germans must have thought an attack was on, the way they were laying down the machine-gun fire.

We found Chapman, badly shot up in the leg. I gave him a shot of morphine from one of those little plastic tubes we carry with us—a wonderful blessing they are—and he felt better. We couldn't carry him, because anything over two feet off the ground would catch those machine-gun bullets. We had to wriggle along and drag him between us.

When we got back to the tank he was too badly wounded for us to put him in the turret. We wrapped him in our blankets and laid him on the back of the tank. Then, as gently as we could, we drove the old Kalida back to safety and to the dressing station.

They pulled us back then to behind Medjez el Bab and we went into bivouac to reorganize and re-equip. It was wonderfully concealed among the trees. The Germans bombed a camp on the other side of the hill every day, but they never found us.

DURING the following weeks our armored division was busy backing up and reinforcing a line about 150 miles long. Men, equipment, and help were on the way across the oceans and skies, but they hadn't arrived yet. We had to do with what we had. We would plug a hole in the line here, make a swift raid there, pull a bluff all the way along the line. If the Germans had known, they might have broken through in January.

I guess we moved around so much, jabbed at so many places, that we seemed to have twice as many tanks as we really had. Once, I remember, we in the Kalida rolled almost without stopping for 48 hours. We ate as we traveled, took turns driving, took turns sleeping. And never fired a shot in anger, except at dive-bombers, during the trip. I hope that march confused the Germans as much as it did us—we never did learn the purpose of it.

At other times, under cover of woods or olive trees, we would hold an outpost for days at a time, never moving, just sitting there watching and waiting. One thing you never realize until you get into combat, even a hot campaign like that in Tunisia, is how much time you spend just sitting. "Settin' and

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sweatin',” as the boys say, or "Sweating it out."

We four in the Kalida had learned a lot by this time. One of the most important was this: how to have hot meals and coffee at all times. We still had the canned C-rations, but we put the cans back on the screen over the exhaust and heated them boiling hot. We also heated a canteen of steaming water, mixed it with our concentrated coffee, added some canned milk, and had a fine mug of Java. And don't think it didn't make a lot of difference on cold nights and mornings. I hope all our armored divisions know that trick by now.

We got no fresh milk. The cows in Tunisia are scrawny things, not like our cows back in Ohio, and the milk is dangerous. The first glass of real cow's milk I got was back in the Halloran Hospital in New York in June—and was that good!

We did get good, fresh eggs—bought them from the Arabs (the boys always call them Á-rabs). Original price, 4 cigarettes for an egg. Later price, 2 packs of cigarettes for an egg. We boiled the eggs in our steel helmets.

We also used our steel helmets as a basin to bathe ourselves from. We got no real bath for four months, until we had a shower bath in Tébèssa. But I remember one day in the mountains when we found a beautiful little stream, fed by melting snows above. It was cold as blue hell and clear as a bell. We piled out of Kalida looking like a bunch of bearded old bums. A minute later we were splashing around in that ice water, yelling like a bunch of kids.

You remember things like that, in pictures, sometimes good, sometimes bad.

I REMEMBER the day when, with good infantry and artillery support, we rolled up a hill and overran an Italian position. They left so fast that we found hot bowls of spaghetti still steaming on the tables. And a beautiful, silver-mounted accordion that one of our boys knew how to play.

And the day when we sat in our tank on a hill near Sbeitla, at the beginning of the big German smash that later carried them all the way through Kasserine Pass. It was a grandstand seat for a huge tank battle which raged all over the miles of valley. Our medium tanks knocked out a lot of the Germans, but we lost a lot too, and the Germans had too much power for us. As night fell the battlefield looked like the biggest fireworks show on earth. Lots of the tanks were blazing and we shuddered when we thought of the men inside. The thing a tank man dreads most is fire and being too badly hurt to get out in time.

Now our men and tanks were streaming back along the road just below us. A retreat of your own people is a terrible thing to see. It makes you physically sick. Never mind—we got it back later on, with interest.

Later we were drawn back of Sbeitla and took up a position among some old Roman ruins. A romantic kind of spot, until the shells began to fall. The tank next to mine had a boy named Bauerle in it who understood German. He got his radio on the German frequency and heard the Germans talking. They were in high spirits. One of them was saying, "We're going

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to get plenty of souvenirs for you this time." (That meant us.) But when they came through Sbeitla our tanks and guns laid down such a barrage on them that they had to pull back for a while, and our disorganized forces made a safe withdrawal.

We have it on the infantry in this—every tank has a radio. When things were quiet we could get stations in England, France, Spain, and Italy. The German station in Tunis had a girl they called Sally who talked with a real American accent.

"Hello, suckers," she would start out. "What are you doing in Africa, anyway? Why aren't you at home with your girls and your folks? Never mind—you'll get home some day. Two or three of you. . . . And how about some good old American jive?" And she would put on a lively American record. We laughed at her propaganda and enjoyed the American music. I often wondered what happened to "Sally" when the Allies suddenly stormed into Tunis in May?

The two-way radio is a wonderful thing for handling tanks in battle, but it has its dangers. The enemy, miles away, is listening. If you leave your mike open you may drop an unguarded remark. Or the orders may be coming from a German.

One day when we were moving forward I heard our captain say, "Watch it, Shaffer. Watch out for German tanks up that road." A minute later I heard a voice with just the faintest German accent: "Okay, Shaffer. It's all right now. All clear. You can come on down the road." Shaffer wasn't sucked in, but it gives you a funny feeling.

It was late in March that I had my most satisfactory scrap with a German tank. After the Kasserine defeat we had really gotten going well. We stormed back through Kasserine, Feriana, Gafsa, and Maknassy. We were so close on Rommel's flank that he had to send his armored division reserves, which he needed to hold the Mareth line, to counterattack us.

We were in a nice position on a ridge. A few hundred yards away across the valley was a precipitous hill. The German tanks had to come around the edge of that hill to get at us. We watched that spot like a cat at a rathole.

A big German Mark IV started to edge around that corner. The minute he came around I hit him with my .37. It didn't stop him and he fired at me with his .77. By this time Jack Colson, quick as a flash, had backed us up about 50 yards. The German shell hit just where we had been. The German tank came farther around the corner. I hit him again, backed up, and again saw the shell hit where we had been. Once more the same maneuver, and then I had him where I wanted him: within reach of one of our new M-10 tank destroyers, with its new, high-velocity, heavy gun—and with the best gunner in the Army behind the sights.

"Hit him," I yelled, and that big gun roared. The first shot blew a hole in that Mark IV that I could have crawled into. What a gunner! How I wish we had had him and his M-10 in some of our earlier scraps. Especially that bad day back of Pont du Fahs. I don't even know that gunner's name, but he was a wonder. You won't believe it, but one day I saw him

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hit a German truck at 8,500 yards with his first shot. Another time he hit a German .88 gun at about 600 yards with his second shot, blew its barrel straight up in the air, and clipped it off with his third shot. . . .

WELL, there's not much more to my story. A few days later I was on top of Kalida, manning the a.a. gun during a dive-bombing attack, when a machine-gun bullet hit me in the left wrist. It plowed through my wrist watch and smashed the bone. A slight wound, really, but it put that arm out of commission for quite a while. I have had the best surgical care in the world, and I think my last operation will just about restore that arm and hand to full normal.

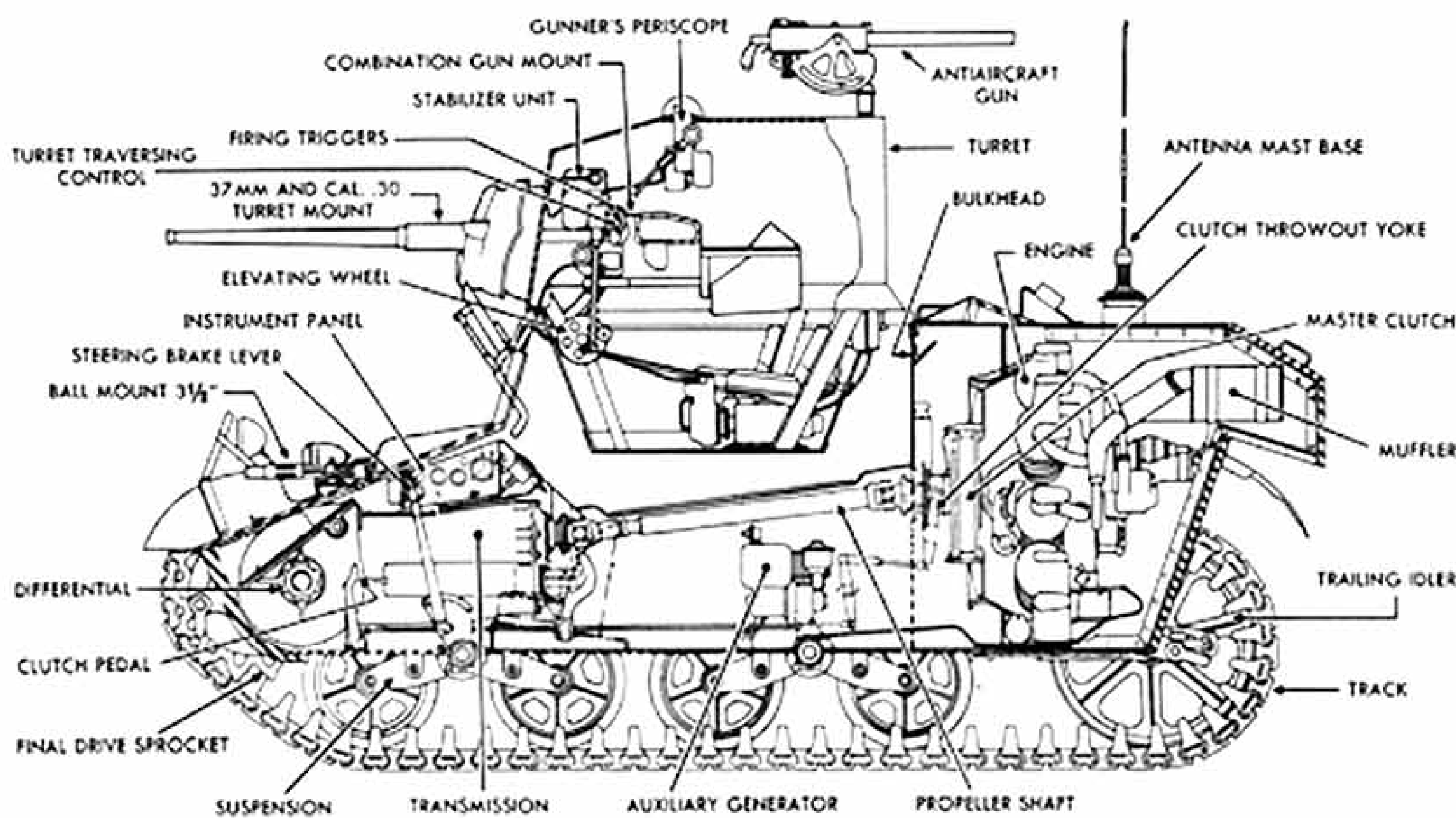
My buddies in Kalida—Colson, Dylewski, and McKinney—gave me a shot of morphine, bandaged me up, and I walked back a few hundred yards and joined some other wounded in an ambulance. Colson took over command of Kalida, and she kept rolling.

I was sent the thousand miles or so back to Casablanca by ambulance, by plane, and by hospital train.

One night early in May some of us were still awake in the Casablanca Hospital. It was after midnight, and we were sitting and talking. A nurse came in and whispered, "The Americans have captured Bizerte." We let out a yell. In a minute the whole hospital was awake, whooping and hollering.

That was the happiest moment I had until I got back to the U. S. A. and called my mother long-distance out in Kalida, to tell her I wasn't badly hurt.

She could hardly talk, and neither could I.



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