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The Experience of the 756th Tank Battalion in World War Two: A Microcosm

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LINFIELD COLLEGE

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE 756TH TANK BATTALION IN WORLD
WAR TWO: A MICROCOSM

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
HISTORY DEPARTMENT IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS IN HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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MCMINNVILLE, OREGON

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December 7, 1941, “a day which will live in infamy”, was the moment that the United States was plunged into the largest conflict that the world had ever seen. The sovereignty of the United States was being threatened at two ends of the globe by tyrannical leaders on the continent of Europe and the islands of the Pacific. In the years to come, the U.S. would have to fight to stop the spread of Emperor Hirohito’s army in the Pacific and Hitler’s Nazi Wermacht in Europe. It would take all the resources our mighty country could muster and the fighting spirit of the nation’s youth to conquer the enemy that was before us.

Our nation’s fighting spirit was displayed in battlefields the world over, but no more so than in the European Theatre of Operations by the 756th Tank Battalion. The battalion participated in many of the major battles of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations including the beach landings in North Africa and Southern France and the battles of Monte Cassino, the Rapido River Crossing, and the Colmar Pocket. The unit campaign streamers include Algeria-French Morocco, Naples-Foggia, Rome-Arno, Southern France (with arrowhead), Ardennes-Alsace, Rhineland, and Central Europe. The 756th also received unit citations including: the French Croix de Guerre with Palm, the French Croix de Guerre with Gold Star, and the Presidential Unit Citation for action in the Colmar Pocket.¹

The wide and varied experience of the 756th Tank Battalion in its conquest through the European Theatre can be used as a microcosm that mirrors the experience of the soldiers who fought in the different sectors of that theatre. The story of many different G.I.’s can be told by tracing the 756th’s journey.

To trace the 756th from its roots in the Pacific Northwest to its final battle in

Salzburg, Germany, helps one to better understand the experience of the American G.I. In the Second World War. To understand how the experience of the 756th Tank Battalion differed over time, location, and unit attachment in each facet of the European Theatre of Operations is to better understand how the characteristic American soldier's experience differed over the same locations. In order to define the answers to these questions I am going to trace the 756th from its beginning to its end, describing locations, battles, and experiences along the way. The use of unit histories and personal accounts will be blended to help explain a soldier's take on each event.

The 756th Tank Battalion (L)[standing for light], was activated on June 1, 1941 at Ft. Lewis, Washington.² This was seven months before the famed attack on Pearl Harbor that so abruptly thrust the United States into World War Two. Being activated before the official start of the war, many of the men in the battalion were men who entered the Army under their own free will, some were draftees. Many of the officers and enlisted men of the battalion had been in the Army for a period of years, some of them serving in the First World War. When the battalion was assembled at Ft. Lewis, it had no tanks with which to train, for the Army had none for them. The first equipment the battalion received was three .45 caliber Smith and Wesson revolvers and the would be tankers were forced to think of other ways to manufacture tanks. The men built what they called "H-tanks", which were 1x4 or 2x4 planks nailed together in the shape of a tank.³ With these "tanks" they conducted maneuvers. It was not until after the start of World War Two, February of 1942 to be exact, that the 756th Tank Battalion (L) got their tanks.⁴

When you think of American armor from the Second World War, you think of the M4 Sherman. The Sherman was actually a Medium tank, and being a light tank battalion,

the 756th was not issued Shermans at the beginning of the war. The battalion was first issued M1 light tanks for training and then the M3 and M5 Stuart tanks that they would use for the first part of the war.

The battalion was moved to Fort Ord, California where it conducted amphibious landing training with the Third Infantry Division in the spring of 1942, and by September they were once again moved to Fort Pickett, Virginia in preparation for deployment overseas⁵. Some of the earliest memories of the war from the men of the 756th Tank Battalion were of crossing the country on a troop train heading for the east coast. In his book, *The 756th Tank Battalion in the Battle of Cassino 1944*, Roger Fazendin explains this experience, "I was a young man then, and the memory I hold from that long train crossing is about the heart of the country. As our troop trains passed through those small towns of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and eastward, the word got out that we were a fighting unit destined for duty overseas. The townspeople came into the backyards of the towns where the trains passed through at a slower pace. People waved their hands and little flags at us, showing their appreciation and love for the young soldiers going out on those troop trains."⁶

Companies A and C of the 756th Tank Battalion departed on October 24, 1942 for North Africa. Company B, Battalion Headquarters, Supply, Maintenance, and Service Company arrived in January of 1943.⁷ Companies A and C, along with the Third Infantry Division, comprised the task force that would invade North Africa under Operation Torch. Operation Torch was meant to remove North Africa from Axis hands to allow for the use of the Mediterranean for Allied shipping. In order to start the reclamation of North Africa from the Axis, the Allies needed to capture a port city

capable of supplying an army once on the ground. The strategic objective was to capture the city of Casablanca, the largest port city on the west coast of Africa.

Algeria-French Morocco Campaign

For the amphibious landing the 756th would be attached to the Third Infantry Division with which they had trained at Ft. Lewis and Ft. Ord. The landing took place on August 8, 1942 at the town of Fedala in French Morocco. The convoy had been steaming through rain squalls as it arrived just off the coast of Morocco at midnight on the 8th. The landings were set to start at 0400 but due to the slow loading of transport craft for the run to the beach, H-hour was postponed another 45 minutes. The first elements of the invasion force landed at 0500 and the liberation of North Africa had begun.⁸

Fedala is located 16 miles northeast of Casablanca. It lies between two rivers, the Nefifikh and the Mellah. It contains a small harbor and a flat sandy beach which made it ideal for landing troops. A level shelf extends inland from the beach and rises to 200 feet above sea level. The terrain between Fedala and Casablanca is gently rolling, largely cultivated, contains a good network of roads, and is ideal for motor and mechanized operations.⁹

Fedala was thought to contain 2,500 Vichy French soldiers whose will to fight was under question due to intelligence reports that indicated the attitude of the French as uncertain. Fedala was thought to contain a battalion and a half of infantry, two or three antiaircraft batteries, a coastal artillery battery, and two troops of Moroccan cavalry.¹⁰ The soldiers in and around Fedala were under the command of French Admiral Michelier. Although the French Army generals wanted to surrender, Michelier was very adamant about the Vichy cause and refused to surrender his forces immediately.

The defenses around Fedala were menacing. On the Cap de Fedala, two 75mm guns with a range of 9,000 yards and four 100mm guns with a range of 15,400 yards could reach any point on the landing beaches or out into the Atlantic and attack the invasion force. The most powerful battery was the Batterie Du Pont Blondin which consisted of four 138.6 mm guns with a range of 20,000 yards.¹¹ Anti-aircraft and other artillery pieces were identified in the area around the town of Fedala and machine gun emplacements with searchlights directed at the ocean dotted the landing beaches.

An unaccounted for current had carried a major portion of the task force a few miles from their intended positions. The ensuing emergency maneuvers to correct their course ended up scattering the convoy and doing more harm than good. As in all amphibious landings, the one at Fedala did not go as planned. Aside from being pushed off course by an unexpected tide, the crews were slow in loading the landing craft for their run to the beach, this caused H-hour to be pushed back 45 minutes, leaving the first landing parties to come ashore at 0500. Roger Fazendin remembers, "It was 4:30 a.m. and dark. The assault wave of landing craft with the tanks and infantrymen was formed and headed for a beach landing. After a long time, they stopped dead in the water. Rutledge heard the wave commander and navy coxswain talking in the rear of the boat. Finally the coxswain came to him and asked if he had any men who could read a compass. Although all of our men knew compass work, Rutledge answered 'no' because he did not want to lose any of his tank crew to the Navy. Finally the Navy turned the whole assault wave around 180 degrees and started back for the shore they were to land on... They passed a destroyer which was firing on the shore...Her crew notified them by voice that they were heading for South America on a back azimuth (reverse heading) out

to sea. The landing was finally executed but late and confused.”¹² The landing parties of the Third Division with the support of the 756th began to arrive on the wrong beaches. Due to poor navigation by the navy coxswains and being launched from the wrong positions in the Atlantic, the boats carrying the troops to the beaches began turning up in the wrong spot. Aside from deploying troops on the wrong beaches, many of the navy’s coxswains were unprepared for landing and retracting from the beaches after unloading their cargos. The crew of the transport *Jefferson* lost 16 of her 33 landing craft, the *Carroll* lost 18 on the first landing, and 5 on the second, leaving only two in continuous service. The *Dickman* only lost 2 of their 27 landing craft.¹³ These incidents had a severe impact on the support of the units ashore as the landings progressed.

There were no LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank) LCIs (Landing Craft Infantry) or DUKWs (amphibious 6x6 trucks) at Fedala which meant that the Third Divisions supporting elements, (the 756th tanks included) had to be brought ashore one at or two at a time in LCMs (Landing Craft, Mechanized).¹⁴

Prior to the invasion, President Roosevelt and the Allied High Command broadcast a message to the people and defenders of North Africa telling them to lay down their arms and to point their searchlights skyward if they wanted to cooperate with the Allies. When the first waves of the landing forces were heading towards the beaches, the noise of their landing craft’s engines were mistaken for that of approaching airplanes. The French proceeded to turn their searchlights skyward, confusing the attacking American infantry. In an associated press release, Harold V. Boyle described what it was like to come ashore. “...As we neared the coastline, however, a bright searchlight stabbed the skies at Pont du Blondin and then swept seaward, catching our assault wave.

In a bright glare that dazzled the coxswains, we ducked to the bottom of the boat.

Machine-gun bullets ripped across the water at us. A naval support boat on our left flank opened fire at the searchlights with .50 caliber machine-guns. We could clearly see, in quick glimpses, the red path of the tracer bullets striking above, below, and to the right of the shining target.”¹⁵

Task force Brushwood, which consisted of the Third Infantry Division, was broken down into Regimental Landing Groups (RLG's) for the assault on the beaches. RLG's consisted of the 30th, the 15th, and the 7th Infantry Regiments. The attached supporting elements, the 756th included, were to help these RLG's capture their specific objectives. Capturing the shore batteries was the paramount assignment of the first waves of infantry ashore. Next was to secure control of the highway and railway bridges before the French had a chance to destroy them. Most of the shore batteries installed by the French did not get a chance to realize their potential in harming the landing forces. Many of the positions had been knocked out before or shortly after daylight. The guns on Cap de Fedala were finally silenced around noon on November 8. At 0900 Colonel Wilbur had taken command of some 756th tanks that had come ashore. He brought them towards Cap de Fedala with the idea of using them to capture the gun emplacements there. Company A, 7th Infantry being supported by the 4 light tanks of the 756th Tank Battalion assaulted the gun position. The position was located on a hill that was well protected by barbed wire. One of the light tanks cut the barbed wire and tried to proceed up the hill but hit an embankment and turned over. The other tanks along with the infantry succeeded in capturing the main 100mm battery and securing 20 prisoners of war.¹⁶

The fight to capture Casablanca was over almost as soon as it had started.

Casablanca fell to the allied invasion at 06:55 on November 11. The men who had so violently been thrust into combat were once again in a peace keeping mode. The men got a chance to experience the sights, aroma, and bustle of North Africa. The men got to visit medinas, old towns amongst the new cities, French women, culture and food, chicory coffee, and most of all, the Arabs.¹⁷

The 756th was attached to the Third Infantry Division until May 7, 1943. It, along with the Third, was stationed throughout Morocco and Algeria in the months of peace after the invasion. The division command post was moved from Fedala to the Hotel Miramar in Casablanca, and once again to the cork forest near Rabat. Here the men conducted more training, and spent time guarding different allied installations in North Africa. The men of the 756th, along with the 3rd Infantry Division, served as the guard of honor along the road to Casablanca when Franklin Delano Roosevelt arrived to meet Winston Churchill during the Casablanca Conference.¹⁸

Naples-Foggia Campaign September 9, 1943- January 21, 1944

The 756th's next engagement came after the Allied invasion of Salerno, Italy. The 36th Infantry Division landed on September 9th, 1943, and established a precarious beachhead there. The 45th Infantry Division, to which the 756th would be attached from September 18-October 1, came ashore in support of the 36th on September 10.

The trip across the Mediterranean was a lot different then the trip across the Atlantic for the initial landings in North Africa. "The weather was perfect, Mediterranean climate at its September best. The sea was calm. Despite crowded decks and congested quarters, the troops began to feel almost like passengers on a vacation cruise. Hardly

anyone was sick. The food was good. The showers worked. There was lots of time to sleep. What a relief after months of training, C rations, grime, dust, and mud, scorching days and impossibly cold nights. The men preferred to remember the receding coast of North Africa and the nurses bathing in the surf.”¹⁹ The relaxing trip across was soon broken by the sheer violence and terror of the landing on Italian soil at 3:30 am on September 9.

The invasion of Italy was different from that of North Africa. It was a two-pronged invasion with Montgomery’s British Eighth Army crossing the Strait of Messina and landing at Calabria, while Clark’s Fifth Army landed at Salerno. The British were scheduled to land on the 3rd and the Americans on the 9th. The hope was the earlier landing would draw men and material away from the American beaches at Salerno, and aid in the landing of the Americans. The British landings went smoothly until they ran into opposition from the 26th Panzer Division. This slowed Montgomery and did not cause the diversion the Americans were hoping for.

The American troops landing in Italy met more resistance than did the soldiers that landed in North Africa. The defenders of this part of Europe were battle hardened Germans, set on keeping the Americans out of the European continent. Casualties were high. The news that the Italian military had surrendered, relaxed the tensions of the soldiers, giving them a false sense of hope that the landings would be routine.²⁰

In the book, *Sparks, The combat diary of a battalion Commander*, Felix L. Sparks, recounts his feelings on the initial landings at Salerno, “Under the heady assumption of only light resistance, the 36th Infantry Division, with no previous combat experience, was cast ashore at Salerno, about 40 miles south of Naples...The Germans

were waiting. On the first day, the 36th Division suffered over five hundred casualties, but it did establish a beachhead..." Sparks goes on to recount the commitment of the 45th Division to the fight, "...On that first day, the 45th Division, minus the 180th Infantry and the 2nd Battalion of the 157th Infantry was on the water in floating reserve with no specific assigned mission...As a result of the desperate situation of the 36th Division, the 45th Division was committed on the following morning of September 10..."²¹

An overlooked section of military history is the story of the men behind the scenes, those that are in service and supply. The logistical support it takes to put an Infantry Division on the beach and to support it after it lands is staggering. All these items must be packed, loaded and stored in the most logical order of need. It takes an army of its own just to supply the fighting man. The two most important things an army needs to fight are ammunition and food. For the Salerno landings, of which the 756th was a beneficiary of their supply lines, the 45th Infantry Division had 791,200 food rations made up of 496,000 five in one meals, 186,000 K rations, and 109,200 C rations. It took 16 trucks with trailers and drivers to haul the front line rations alone. In addition to the individual level meals, B rations, canned goods cooked at a unit mess, took another 32 trucks and trailers to haul.²²

To fuel these trucks, and the tanks of the 756th, 800,000 gallons of gasoline and 150,000 gallons of water were brought in 190,000 5 gallon "jerry cans". Forty-two other trucks with trailers held extra uniforms, individual equipment, tents, chairs, tables, stoves, generators, stretchers, medical supplies, and necessary Army forms. The Table of Organization and Equipment authorized the 45th to have 612 jeeps, 209 ¾ ton trucks, 30 ambulances, 356 2 ½ ton trucks, 27 dump trucks, 18 four-ton trucks, and specialized

vehicles.²³

To allow the soldier to fight, the division had 6,761 M-1 Garand rifles, 5,204 carbines, 1,157 1911 pistols, 236 .50 caliber machine guns, 157 .30 caliber machine guns, and 90 .45 caliber Thompson machine guns. On top of all of this, an untold amount of ammunition was also loaded to help feed these weapons in combat. All this equipment needed to be offloaded from the ships after a beachhead was established, an amazing feat in its own.²⁴

The 756th's experience in the initial landings on Italy was different from its experience in North Africa. The battalion landed on September 17, 1943 at Salerno, eight days after the initial landings had begun. Roger Fazendin recounts the experience. "The 756th Tank Battalion landed under a lovely sunny sky on D Day plus five without incident. We had backed our fifty four tanks into the hold of an LST (Landing Ship Tanks) in North Africa at Bizerte in Tunisia. This ship ran its bow up on the sandy, sloping beach near Salerno. The bow doors opened, and we rolled them out into a sunny September Italian day. There was no firing. Ours was a tranquil landing. But at the time, not so short a distance inland, things were pretty grim. We experienced a bombing attack very near us that first night in Italy." Fazendin goes on to explain what the troopers of the 756th were feeling at the time of the landings. "...We were totally unaware. We trusted our leaders and knew their thoughts were without error and complete. Our job was to execute, believing that the program of the execution would be flawless. We knew well that this was war with all its death but there was no doubt about our leaders."²⁵

At the time of the beach landing, the men of the 756th had no idea that the Italian campaign "...would develop into one of the most bitter military actions of World War II.

Through the autumn and winter months of 1943-44, in discouraging weather conditions, in rough terrain, against a skillful enemy, Allied troops would fight across the beaches of Salerno and into the city of Naples, across the Volturno River and in the rugged mountains below Rome, across the plain of Anzio and around the abbey of Monte Cassino. When spring arrived, some would wonder what they had accomplished.”²⁶ As an example, the assault on Cassino would take many weeks and claim the lives of many soldiers, many of whom questioned the importance of the objective.

Italy had been dependent on the Germans for its survival since 1941. The Germans had had plenty of time to fortify Italy against an allied invasion once things began to turn for them in North Africa. As the allies would discover, the Germans had built a series of defensive positions across the width of Italy. The Germans incorporated many of Italy’s rivers into their defenses. The “Barbara” Line, closest to the city of Naples, ran along a ridge between the Volturno and Garigliano Rivers then up over the southern Apennine peaks to the Trignano River. Behind the Barbara line was the “Bernhard” Line, which protected the Mignano Gap. Twelve Miles north of the Bernhard Line was the “Gustav” Line which began close to where the Garigliano River empties into the Tyrrhenian Sea. It ran over the mountains to the mouth of the Sangro River where it empties into the Adriatic.²⁷ These defense lines proved to be a formidable obstacle for the allies to conquer on their drive towards Rome. The best, and most direct route to Rome was through the Liri Valley, which was protected by the Gustav Line. Not only would the Allies have to fight the Germans, but they would have to fight the terrain as well, making crossings at the Volturno, Garigliano, and Rapido Rivers. The miserable onslaught of rain helped to swell the rivers and make the ground soft. The Allies would

also have to drive the Germans from the heights of Monte Cassino and Monte Majo. These peaks were heavily fortified and the Germans were ready to repel whatever the Allies could throw at them.

On September 19, 1943, the 45th Division with the 756th in tow began to move out of the Salerno beachhead. They proceeded from Persano to Eboli and then northward to attack Naples and push the Germans back beyond the Volturno River.²⁸

The 756th's experience in Italy mirrors that of the foot soldier who was fighting along side the tanks. Aside from being inside a steel hull while in battle, or sleeping under the tank when combat conditions permitted, a tanker lived a similar life to an infantryman. He ate the same food, slept in the same places, fought in the same battle, and most of all, he experienced the same weather. Roy L. Johnson, who joined the 756th Tank Battalion at Salerno, and was a liaison between the infantry and the tanks, recalls that "The winter of 1943-44 was one of Italy's heaviest rainfall years of record. The mud and the cold in their holes made that radio lugging job a misery."²⁹ One does not often think of how war wears on the minds of the soldiers sent far from home. A tanker is no different than any other front line soldier, when after a while, the carnage and distance from loved ones begins to wear on him. Paul Cundiff, a member of the 45th Infantry Division, explains what its like to miss home, "Lonesomeness is a terrible malady to a homesick soldier. It pains at his stomach to make him think that he is hungry. It rends at his bowels and kidneys to make him think that he needs relief. It forces him to reread letters that he knows by heart, books he would never otherwise read, and it conjures up tantalizing pictures of feasts and folly. It drives him to lie down and falsely blame sand-flies for sleepless sleepy eyes. It sometimes resolves itself in reading but more often

passes only in a night of restless sleep. Friends at home were baffled by our requests for odd books, but before the flat-shaped Army-issued softbacks reached Italy we had read a hundred whodunits and worn out half dozen anthologies.”³⁰

During the period of November/December 1944 the 756th was pulled out of combat to receive delivery and training on their new tank, the M4 Sherman. The M4 was an improvement over their previous M5 Stewarts. Boasting a 75 mm gun, the Sherman had more firepower, could carry more ammunition, and was a better over-all platform for conducting armored warfare. It weighed 66,800 pounds, was 19 feet 2 inches long, 8 feet 7 inches wide, and stood 9 feet tall. It sported a gasoline engine that could drive it at a top speed of 30 mph, and had a crew of five.³¹ The 756th was now re-designated a “medium” tank battalion just in time for the arduous battle of Cassino.

Rome-Arno Campaign January 22, 1944 - September 9, 1944

One of the toughest battles of the Second World War, the battle for Cassino, was fought by the 756th only 4 months after coming ashore at Salerno. For the assault on Cassino, the 756th was attached to the 34th Infantry Division, the same division which it had been attached almost continuously to since October. The 756th entered the line at Mignano on January 10, 1944.³² For the attack, the 34th was directed to cross the Rapido River north of Cassino and open a two pronged attack down the river towards the town, and across the mountain peaks that contained the abbey of Monte Cassino. The 34th Division’s first objective was to capture the remains of the buildings that made up a former Italian military barracks some two miles north of Cassino, on a hill called Monte Villa. Crossing the river and capturing the barracks area would be no easy task. The Germans had heavily fortified the ruins of the barracks compound and had planted mines

on major avenues of approach. They had also flooded the area around the river, making the ground impossibly soft and unstable for mechanized warfare. The attack began at 2200 on the 24th of January. It was not long before the attack slowed down due to the wet ground and land mines.

Throughout the day on the 25th, battalions of the 34th Division succeeded in establishing a toe hold on the opposite bank of the Rapido, but due to withering fire from the Germans, they could do little but hold on. The 756th's tanks were having a tough time trying to cross the river in such soggy terrain. Tanks became bogged down and stuck on the most usable approach, blocking any other tanks from using the crossing. The commanding general, General Ryder, saw the need to rethink his initial strategy of attack after his forces had become entangled in the land mines and defenses laid by the Germans and the mud and the wet caused by the terrible Italian winter. General Ryder needed to send more infantry and tanks across the river, to capture the initial objectives from the attack of the 24th and to capture the high ground of Hill 213, which the Germans were using to direct devastating fire on the infantry.

Ryder was to commit another battalion to the attack. He wanted two infantry battalions to attack abreast with a platoon of tanks preceding them to knock down any wire obstacles, detonate antipersonnel mines, and destroy enemy strongpoints.³³ He also committed artillery to help soften the Germans before the advance, and then to sweep ahead as the infantry and tanks advanced.

The artillery barrage kicked off just before daybreak on the 27th of January. The moving was very slow going for the tanks assigned to the assault. Many did not make it down the slippery soggy routes to the river. Only four tanks made it across by 0915, and

these had so churned up the ground that the other tanks immediately bogged down and blocked the only useable route across the river.³⁴ The infantry committed to the attack were able to follow in the tracks left by the tanks to cross the mine fields and obstacles. Their tank support did not last long. All of the tanks were out of action by 1300, but the infantry had made it to the base of Hill 213. In the confusion that so often clogs the battlefield, the previous day's advance to Hill 213 was nullified when the infantry that had secured it was erroneously moved back across the river. Other units, seeing this retreat, panicked and followed. The retreat was not stopped in time, and the men were sent to the north to cross the river again. This forced them to cross the minefield without the aide of tanks, causing casualties. The battalion formed a defensive position around the new crossing site and dug in.

General Ryder received word from General Clark that he was to move an American unit in support of the French 3rd Algerian Division which had captured Monte Belvedere, a key position outside of Cassino. He sent the 142nd Infantry Battalion of the 36th Infantry Division. With the commitment of the 142nd towards the French, General Ryder decided to renew his efforts to cross the Rapido and take Hill 213 and Hill 56. On the 29th of January the 756th was sent to cross the Rapido at its new found crossing. When the tanks appeared at 1600 the infantry attack began to pick up speed. The 23 tanks of the 756th shot up over 1,000 75mm rounds and by daybreak on the 30th the hills had been captured.³⁵

General Ryder again pressed his forces into the attack. On February 1st he sent the 133rd Infantry Battalion to take the barracks area. The following day, the 133rd finally captured the barracks area and men from the 133rd and the 756th started to attack the town

of Cassino. The advance had barely begun when heavy German fire halted the attack.

The 34th Division men continued their attack on the town of Cassino.

Companies of men would attack with support from the 756th and other tank units, only to be driven out of the town the next day by the relentless Germans. The fighting was bitter. Each house in the town had to be cleared room by room. The German resistance was fierce, and well placed anti-tank and artillery fire knocked out many of the 756th's tanks.

The 756th was pulled out of the fight during the first week of March. David Redle, a captain in the 756th, remembered what the losses were like at Cassino, "A tank company has three platoons of five tanks each. B company now had only two makeshift platoons. Due to losses, these were only partial platoons of only two to four tanks, and even they had only partial tank crews."³⁶ Captain Fred Schmidt, who was the battalion supply officer, recorded that the 756th Tank Battalion had lost 125 men at Cassino.³⁷

Cassino had not only taken a toll on the armor crews that had been in combat, but it chewed up the infantry even more viciously. The heavy German resistance and constant shelling extracted a heavy toll on the foot soldier. John M. Roth, a member of the maintenance crew of B Company, remembers his encounter with an officer of the 34th Infantry Division, "At the time our unit was being relieved from the Cassino front line, an infantry officer of the 34th Division, and the remainder of his soldiers-ten or fifteen men-passed by us. He said 'This does not look like 180 men does it?' That, plus our losses in tanks and men, made the lasting impression that Cassino had been hell. I thank God I was in the maintenance crew and not a tanker."³⁸

The tankers of the 756th arrived near the town on Norma in the pre-dawn hours of

June 1, 1944. They were attached to the 88th Division and ordered to occupy a position near the town of Giulianello to await combat involvement.³⁹ On the morning of the 2nd, the 756th was ordered into combat in support of the 350th Infantry Regiment of the 88th Infantry Division. Companies A and B provided support and the 350th drove on Mezza Selva and secured Highway 6. The men of the 88th Division along with the 3rd Division's 7th Infantry, and 1st Armored Division were closing in on Rome. The task force, including the 756th, was only 20 kilometers from Rome, but the attack began to slow down because of the terrain. Colonel Rogers, the commander of the 756th explained in his commander's narrative that "The attack was impeded by extremely difficult terrain, being through terraced vineyards and olive groves and over rough hills."⁴⁰

The 3rd of June saw more of the same as the previous day, with the 756th capturing twelve heavy trucks, an 88mm gun, three staff cars, an ambulance, four light personnel carriers, three kubelwagens, four motorcycles, and over 60 prisoners.⁴¹

On June 4th the 756th was attached to the famous First Special Service Force, and an incident of friendly fire occurred. As wars drag on and fighting becomes intense and everlasting, errors in judgment are made. Replacements sometimes get trigger happy and end up shooting at their own units. The 756th was a victim of a strafing run by a P-40 Warhawk on the morning of the 4th. "At 0900, U.S. P-40 planes strafed Company A, though yellow smoke was thrown out. While the grenades were still generating smoke, P-40 planes returned and strafed Company A again, at 0905 hours. Eight casualties resulted, and two ¼ ton vehicles [jeeps] were put out of action...At about 1100 hours, two spitfires came over and strafed D and A Companies, but ceased and dipped their wings when all remaining yellow smoke grenades were put out. Two vehicles were

slightly damaged.”⁴² By 1300 that afternoon the battalion had closed to the town of Tor Sapienza on the outskirts of Rome. At 1530 Companies B and C began the assault on Rome in support of the First Special Service Force. By 1830 that night the 756th and the 1st SSF had secured their objective on the edge of Rome.

The following evening the 756th was re-attached to the 88th and moved to an assembly area on the north end of Rome, via the very heart of the city. Here they were assigned to task force Ellis which was made up of the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, the 804th Tank Destroyer Battalion, the 313th Engineer Battalion, and the 351st Infantry.⁴³ At 1530 on June 6th, the task force set out to capture Mazzano and Calcata. The task force encountered violent anti-tank and small arms fire throughout the night, but by 1100 on the 7th had captured their objective. Fighting continued until June 11 when the men of the 756th were pulled out of combat and sent to join the 3rd Infantry Division to occupy an area near Naples. They loaded an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) at Citavecchia and sailed for Naples. Here the men could rest and recover after a month of hard fighting. They repaired the tanks and received replacements for the 18 soldiers the battalion had lost in action.⁴⁴

Southern France Campaign August 15, 1944 - September 14, 1944

The landings of Operation DRAGOON, first known as Operation ANVIL, were conducted on August 15, 1944. Originally planned as a compliment to Operation OVERLORD, the invasion of Northern France by the Allies on June 6th, Operation ANVIL, as it was known then, was scrapped by Allied leaders in April of 1944. The Allied high command could not muster enough ships, mainly LSTs, for the invasion. However, the idea for opening a second front in France didn't die. General Devers,

commander of Service and Supply in the Mediterranean, would not let the supplies that had been allocated for the invasion to be dispersed elsewhere. Lt. General Alexander Patch was placed in charge of the newly formed 7th Army. Resurrected on June 24, the invasion didn't get complete approval until August 11, just four days before the invasion was set to take place.

Consisting of the 3rd, 36th, and 45th Infantry Divisions, Operation DRAGOON was set in motion. Unlike the invasion of Normandy, the units invading Southern France were combat hardened units. Many of the men were veterans of North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The 3rd, 36th, and 45th, had all conducted amphibious operations before. The 756th had been attached in some fashion or in support of many of these divisions, and had made the amphibious assault on North Africa. Although the tactics for the landing would differ, the medium over which they traveled remained the same.

The main objectives of Operation DRAGOON were to establish a suitable beachhead, capture the ports of Toulon and Marseille, and drive north to join Eisenhower's forces as they approached from Normandy.⁴⁵ The Allies chose the area around St. Tropez as the candidate for the landing. The beach had 30 miles of coastline and easy sloping ground 20 miles inland towards the Maures and Esterel hills. The beach was located 30 miles east of Toulon, and had the least amount of fortifications. Once the beaches were captured, the geography of the area would allow the Allied forces access to Cannes, Nice, or Toulon.

Operation Dragoon was no surprise to the Germans. The attack on Southern France was practically common knowledge throughout the Mediterranean. Many first rate infantry units along with elite paratrooper and commando units had gone missing

from the front lines around Rome. Spies had located these units, and gossip in the towns of Naples, Rome, and Salerno confirmed what the Germans were expecting, and invasion in Southern France.⁴⁶ Although not positive as to where the landings would take place, the Germans heavily fortified the areas around Marseille and Toulon and put the troops in these areas on alert.

After being pulled to the rear to re-supply and to recover, the men of the 756th joined the other units in training for the invasion. For the first time in a long time the men could enjoy life in the rear. They went to the shops, cafes, restaurants, bars, and other attractions of a big city like Napoli. By July the preparations for DRAGOON were in full swing. The armored, commando, infantry, and naval units all conducted refresher amphibious training off the coast of southern Italy.

The large scale amphibious training consisted of "Three periods of five days each, followed by a day of rest. The first five day period got underway on June 28."⁴⁷ The infantry's training focused on "attack of pillboxes and fixed fortifications, gapping and crossing wire, mine removal, use of flamethrowers, bangalore torpedoes, rifle grenades, bazookas, and similar specialized equipment, and infantry-tank cooperation. Assault troops were drilled in loading and disembarking from landing craft. Several landings were conducted over the beaches of Mondragone, about thirty miles north of Pozzouli."⁴⁸

On August 7th, 8th, and 9th the 756th loaded their tanks and equipment onto LSTs. For the invasion the 756th received 8 DD, or duplex drive tanks. These tanks had a special canvas skirt that was supported by wooden arms and inflatable rubber tubes that could be raised to float the tank in the water, and a propeller to give it forward motion. Upon landing the skirt could be dropped and the tank readied for combat. These tanks

would assist in the initial landings on the beach. The 756th, along with the other participating units, departed from ports in Italy, and rendezvoused off Corsica during the night of 14-15 August. On the August 12, the men of the 756th and the vast convoy were surprised to see Winston Churchill on the bridge of the H.M.S. *Kimberly* flashing his "V" for victory sign to the disembarking troops. Although an opponent of Operation DRAGOON, Churchill had shown up to support the troops assigned to the invasion.⁴⁹ The 756th, together with the other infantry divisions, comprised approximately 885 ships and landing vessels carrying nearly 1,375 smaller landing craft, about 151,000 troops and 21,400 trucks, tanks, tank destroyers, prime movers, bulldozers, tractors, and other assorted vehicles.⁵⁰

The plan was for the four DD tanks of Company A to assist the 7th Infantry Regiment, and the four DD tanks of Company B to assist the 15th Infantry Regiment. Company C was in contact with the 30th Infantry Regiment pending a combat assignment once they hit the beach. H-hour was set for 0800.

The dawn of August 15th revealed a clear Mediterranean morning. The storms that had been predicted were still out of sight. The 3rd Division put ashore on the southernmost beaches on the St. Tropez peninsula, the 36th Division headed for those in the Frejus Gulf on the eastern portion of the landing area, and the 45th Division landed in between the 3rd and the 36th near the town of Ste. Maxime.

The DD tanks of the 756th's Company A were launched at 0735 near Cavaliere Sur Mere and Red Beach, with the tanks of Company B launching near St. Tropez and Yellow Beach. Of the four Company A tanks launched, only three made it to the beach, and only two were operational. The first tank to be knocked out was hit by a short naval

rocket that killed its commander and it subsequently struck an underwater mine and was lost.⁵¹ The second tank lost its commander when he was hit by small arms fire. The two remaining operational tanks fired on mortar position and strong points to aide the infantry in their advance off the beach.

The tanks of Company B were launched some 2500 yards from shore. On their way into the beach one tank was floundered when the wake from a passing Higgins boat breeched the canvas covering that was floating the tank. The three others reached the beach and assisted the infantrymen in their fight to establish a beachhead. Initial resistance on the beach proved light, and the infantry divisions, with the 756th supporting, were able to push inland.⁵²

On August 17th, after facing considerable opposition, the 756th had reached the town of Brignoles. The 18th and 19th were spent in the vicinity of the town trying to capture it from the relentless Germans. After capturing the town, the 756th pushed deeper into France, reaching Salon by the 23rd of August. The rest of the month was spent assisting the 7th, 15th, and 30th Infantry Regiments in pushing the Germans back towards the Rhine.

On August 29th, while on their way up Highway 7 a forward artillery observer spotted a vast column of military vehicles, trucks, horse-drawn wagons, and other military equipment retreating north of the city. Art Richter, a member of the 756th, described what he witnessed when the attack was called to destroy the column. "There were so many troops and so much equipment jammed up at this point that it was hard to believe. The Air Force strafed the road and our artillery blasted the area just before we moved in. There was every kind of military equipment one could imagine including

many horse-drawn artillery pieces. There were about a hundred dead horses and those that were not dead were so damaged that we shot them. Dead soldiers lay all around. After all was assessed, 800 prisoners were taken, 500 soldiers killed, and over 2000 vehicles were destroyed. This unbelievable devastation lay along just a ten-mile stretch of highway.”⁵³

The month of August cost the 756th nine officers, 32 enlisted personnel, 16 medium and two light tanks. Eight medium tanks and one light tank were knocked out by the enemy, the others were do to mechanical failure.⁵⁴

The month of September saw the men of the 3rd Infantry Division and attached units on constant move. Company A of the 756th was still attached and supporting the 7th, Company B was in support of the 15th and Company C was in support of the 30th Infantry Regiment. The 756th mostly fired on columns of retreating German soldiers and helped the infantry capture objectives and towns on their dash towards Germany. The great advance of the 3rd Infantry Division and the 756th came to a halt around the town of Genevreuille when the advancing army met strong resistance. The ending positions for the 756th at the end of the month were as follows; Company A, Ferdrupt, Company B, Bemont, Company C, Celles, Company D, St. Ames.

Not only were the men of the 756th fighting the Germans on their retreat, they were also fighting the weather. The month of September was miserable and wet. The terrain had turned from open and suitable for armored operations, to soggy, wooded, and hilly, forcing the tanks to stay on pre-existing roads.⁵⁵ They were not able to conduct cross-country maneuvers, and the Germans took advantage of this disability. They mined the roads and used heavy artillery fire to slow the American advance. This is where one

of the 756th's Congressional Medal of Honor winners won his award. This award is reserved for gallantry in the face of great danger. It is the highest honor a soldier can receive. It is usually awarded posthumously, the action for which it is one usually takes the life of the soldier.

Lieutenant Zussman's Medal of Honor citation reads, "Lieut. Raymond Zussman, 0-1014997, Cavalry, Company A, 756th Tank Battalion, for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty, in action involving actual combat. On 12 September 1944, at 1900 hours, Lieutenant Zussman dismounted from his command tank and proceeded on foot, armed only with a carbine and followed by a lone M-4 tank, and assaulted Nory-le-Bourg, France. Forging ahead on the tank into blazing small-arms fire, he located and neutralized an improvised roadblock which had been booby trapped. Although intense enemy machine-gun and small-arms fire from a German position only 50 yards distant ricocheted off the hull and turret of the tank, Lieutenant Zussman stood beside it, fully exposed, firing on the enemy with his carbine and directing the tank's fire. When three Germans fell dead, the remaining eight surrendered to Lieutenant Zussman, who immediately proceeded to direct the fire of the tank on another center of resistance, killing three and compelling an additional seven to surrender. Having already exhausted his carbine ammunition, he seized a Thompson submachine gun from a member of the tank crew and advanced well in front of the tank, toward a group of houses occupied by the enemy. Machine-gun and small-arms fire opened up on him from another enemy strongpoint 75 yards to his right front. Disregarding bullets which kicked up the dirt at his feet, he again stood in an exposed position and directed the fire of his tank until resistance was broken and 20 Germans

surrendered. Leaving the tank behind, he rushed toward and enemy strongpoint in a house, firing his submachine gun as he ran, while the Germans tried to stop him with small-arms fire and threw hand grenades in his path. After a brief fire exchange, he brought up the tank and directed its fire on the house, forcing 11 more Germans to give up. His submachine gun blazing, Lieutenant Zussman again dashed forward into rifle and automatic weapons fire to another German held house, emerging after a short exchange of fire with 15 more prisoners. As the Germans fled before his whirlwind attack accurate tank fire accounted for 11 more killed. Noting an ideal antitank position, he plunged forward alone to reconnoiter. His submachine gun fired; his voice was heard above the tumult, shouting "*Hände hoch!*" and in a few minutes 30 prisoners, including the crews of two AT guns, filed around the corner. As night fell, he again went forward alone, to a truck; there was a hand grenade explosion, but when the smoke cleared Lieutenant Zussman returned with another prisoner. With lightning rapidity, Lieutenant Zussman had overwhelmed one enemy position after another. Fighting against all odds and on his own volition, he had blasted his way into and through the strongly defended town ahead of the infantry, killing 17 and capturing 92 soldiers, and capturing 2 antitank guns, one 20mm flak gun, two machine guns, and two trucks. Lieutenant Zussman was killed in a subsequent action."⁵⁶

October of 1944 played out much the same way as September had, with the 756th's tanks supporting their respective units on their advance inland. They had made it to the town of Vagney before they were pulled out of the line on the 14th and sent back to St. Ames to refit. They were once again put back in the line on the 20th to support the infantry in their push up the valley. The roads were narrow, the terrain soggy, wooded

and unfit for armored operation.

War is a place of many hardships and atrocities, but interwoven are stories of kindness and sincerity. One such story is recounted in the unit Journal of the 756th on October 7 by S/Sgt. Travis F. Widener Jr. "S/Sgt James E Haspel and his crew consisting of T/4 Frank C. Manak, Cpl. Cletus J. Offerman, Pvt. Raymond V. Brennerman, and Pvt. Robert H. Paagett, along with T/4 Jesse B. Rickerson Jr. and crew consisting of Cpl. Raymond W. Colley, Cpl. William J. McNrue, T/5 Elbert Rainwater and Pvt. Max M. Kristal were ordered to set up an advanced roadblock in their division sector. It was a rather hot corner that the tanks occupied and they were happy to see that a typical stone French farmhouse was right near the cross-road. They moved their tanks into position, set up a guard detail and a few ventured into the nearby house. As they came in a nervous Frenchman went out. He shouted back over his shoulder that the soldiers were welcome to stay, but that it was a little too rough for him and he took off to the rear. Three days later the Frenchman returned and made several important discoveries. First, the Krauts had left, second the tankers were just about to leave, and third (perhaps the closest to his frugal French heart) the house was cleaner than it was when he left. The stock-- two cows, some pigs, and several chickens were still present for duty. More than that, the stock had been feed and watered and the cows had been milked on schedule. Being from Texas and Montana, T/4 Manak and Cpl. Colley had the necessary skill for these chores. Said S/Sgt. Haspel, 'He was a nice old geezer and some of the boys were lonely for some work on the farm anyway. The house was clean when we came so we left it that way.' Said the Frenchman, 'Vive la Amerique!'"⁵⁷

The resistance to the 756th on their push to the border was light through most of

the months of November and December 1944. By the end of December the Germans were starting to tighten down and the resistance towards the advancing Americans was increasing.

January 1945 found the tankers of the 756th supporting the infantry around Hurburg, Fortschwihr, and Urschenheim and helping them push towards the Colmar Canal. The 756th helped cover the river crossing at the Ill River and the Colmar Canal. The battle for the "Colmar Pocket" was one of the heaviest battles the battalion had been in since leaving Italy. First known as "the bridgehead around Colmar", the names changed as the resistance of the Germans increased. "The Third Infantry division was to learn that it was a pocket bulging with fortifications and sudden death; and an area whose elimination was to develop into our second greatest fight of the entire war-some said the greatest-..."⁵⁸ It was at this point that the men of the 756th started to see the superiority of the German armor when "One of our tanks bounced 5 shots off a German tank at a close range. In some cases enemy projectiles passed completely through our tanks. The effect on the morale of our tankers is obvious."⁵⁹

The initial fighting for the Colmar Pocket began on December 15 when the 30th Infantry and its supporting units commenced its attack on the Germans through heavily forested and hilly, mountainous terrain. Company I encountered enemy personnel outside of Sigolsheim on hill 651. The battalion swept southwest clearing hill 672 and 621 after meeting with heavy small arms and machinegun fire from the Germans. The attack into the pocket continued and elements of the 756th were attached to the 30th Infantry to help with their attack on Kayserberg near the Weiss River. The fighting continued up the open valley towards the town on further into the pocket. The 3rd was

withdrawn from the lines to be moved and re-supplied in preparation for the final attack on the pocket that would begin on the 22nd of January.⁶⁰

The feelings of the Third summed up what was on the minds of the soldiers facing the upcoming offensive. "...The cold, bone-chilling winds; the quality and spirit of the German defenders as evidenced during the grim fight for Kayersberg, Sigolsheim and Bennwihr, and the day-and-night bitterly-fought patrol clashes; the trench foot and the frostbite; all precluded any tendency toward individual desire to tangle again full-scale with the enemy."⁶¹ The objective of the Third Infantry Division, with support from the 756th, was to cross the Ill River clearing the way for tanks to help capture the bridge at Neuf-Brisach. The 7th Infantry was to push to the south and clear the area around the Fecht and Ill Rivers. On the 23 of January the 30th Infantry succeeded in capturing a bridge at Maison Rouge but while trying to cross their supporting armor units, the bridge collapsed leaving them without armored support. The Germans counter-attacked and drove the 30th back across the Ill River. On the 25 of January the 15th Infantry recaptured the bridge position at Maison Rouge and were able to erect a bridge over the river to get their supporting tanks across. The 15th was able to hold off a counter-attack and continue on to the towns of Riedwihr and Holtzwihr with support from the 756th and attached armored units.

On January 26th, a large German force counter-attacked against the men of the 15th south of Riedwihr. The attack was driven off when Audie Murphy used a radio to call in artillery and fighter bombers to bomb the Germans. For his heroic actions on that day he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The 15th Infantry secured Riedwihr on the 26th and Holtzwihr on the 27th, pushing on to the Colmar Canal on the

30th.

After securing a spot for a bridgehead over the Colmar Canal, Bailey Bridges were erected and armored elements of the 756th in support of the 7th and 15th Regiments crossed the Canal. They attacked Urschenheim and Horbourg taking them while forward elements reached the Rhine-Rhone Canal on the 31st. The 15th and 30th Regiments moved south along the canal reaching the area north of Neuf-Brisach on the 1st of February. The Colmar Pocket was finally destroyed when the Third Infantry Division took Vogelgrun on the 5th and Neuf-Brisach on the 6th of February. "Since this platoon entered first, it took all the prisoners. In one building in the north part of town there were thirty-eight. The others drifted in in groups of three and four until a total of sixty-seven had been accounted for. There was no fighting in the town. By 1115 it was radioed that the town was clear of the enemy. The ending was anti-climatic as the fighting which preceded it had been fierce."⁶²

The 756th took heavy losses during this month, losing 16 tanks to artillery, bazookas, mines, tanks, and bridge collapses. One problem the 756th experienced with these losses, and had been experiencing for a long time, was the lack of trained replacements. They would receive new tanks and "armored replacements" for the injured crews, but would have to spend extensive time training them. Most of these replacements had received two weeks of training with an armored division, if that. The problem got so bad that the 756th was moved to the rear during the end February through March to train all the replacements.

Through February and into March the 756th was able to receive some rest. The beginning of February saw them still supporting the 3rd Infantry Division in destroying

the Colmar Pocket. Upon the closing the pocket on the 6th, the 756th was operating in the area of the Rhine-Rhone Canal and were ordered into defensive positions on February 8th. The 756th was to block the Rhine from East of Baltzenheim to the east of Vogelgrun. On the 22nd they were attached to the 103rd Infantry Division with the stipulation of remaining in defensive positions to train the new recruits. Over the course of the month the enemy resistance and counter attacks had lightened up. The commander of the 756th in his comments on the month of February stated that tanks should only be employed in platoon strength. This gives them less of a chance of being picked off by enemy bazooka fire. He also states that the men must be given rest, and that being constantly "on edge" degrades performance.⁶³

On the 3rd of March, after being in defensive positions since the 22nd of February, the 756th was once again attached to their much familiar friend, the 3rd Infantry Division. Still being held in reserve, the men were moved into the 3rd Division's training area at Lironville. Here the men conducted inspections of vehicles, equipment, and troopers, and received extensive driving instruction. Two ranges had been set up in Lironville to instruct driving and gunnery. The men spent 30 hours on both ranges. They fired approximately 1,000 rounds on the gunnery range, rotating driving and gunnery personnel so as to obtain the maximum number of trained drivers and gunners. The men were also trained for river crossing. Company C departed for Lyon to conduct training on the use of DD tanks for river operations, while Companies A and B trained on the use of pontoon rafts.⁶⁴

On the 14th of March the tankers began to move towards the front lines for their push on the Siegfried Line. Company A, attached to the 7th Infantry, moved to Achen,

Company B, attached to the 30th Infantry moved to Rahling, and Company C, along with the 15th Infantry, moved to Dehlingen. On the 15th the attack began, but the Siegfried Line proved to be a challenge.

The Siegfried Line was built to stop the advance of infantry and tanks. It got its protection from natural obstacles such as rivers, lakes, and forest but also from man made obstacles. In places, German engineers had constructed series of "dragon's teeth" which were objects that looked like pyramidal teeth made of reinforced concrete. They rose 2-5 feet off the ground and were impossible for armor to run through. These teeth were set amongst other blocking obstacles that were guarded by pill boxes.

Pillboxes were usually 20 to 30 feet wide, 40 to 50 feet long, and 20 to 25 feet tall. Half of the pillbox was underground and the walls and roofs were anywhere from 3 to 8 feet thick. Made of concrete and reinforced by wire mesh and small steel rods, the pillboxes were very formidable. They had slits in them for machine guns and their field of fire over-lapped.⁶⁵

The Dragon's teeth proved to be a formidable obstacle that stopped their advance until they could be cleared. While supporting the infantry Company A expended 2,000 rounds of 75 and 76 mm, and 40,000 rounds of .30 caliber machine gun ammo.⁶⁶ The reason so many cannon shells were expended is explained in the Commander's Narrative for the battalion. "Firing upon the obstacles proved ineffective, firing at the bunkers and pillboxes proved in the most part harmless except to beat down enemy fire temporarily, but placing 5 or 6 rounds in the same spot on the pillboxes a penetration was obtained about 60% of the cases."⁶⁷ Company A broke through the line on the 20th and pushed the retreating Germans back across the Rhine. Preparations were made to cross the river in

pursuit. Company A's first tank crossed the Rhine on 1000 on the 26th, reaching Trennfort at the end of the month.

Company B moved to attack the Siegfried Line on the 18th. Once the obstacles had been conquered, they pushed through to Offstein by the 24th destroying a field artillery emplacement and vehicles and taking prisoners. At 1600 on the 26th B Company tanks began rolling over the Rhine via an allied held bridge in the Town of Worms. Company B was at Haingrund at the close of the month.

Company C's experience was very similar to that of Company A and Company B. They met stiff opposition at the Siegfried line expending 1,870 75 and 76mm tank shells and 36,000 .30 caliber machine gun rounds.⁶⁸ They pushed to the Rhine River and at 0630 on the 25th their DD tanks began to arrive. All in all 14 DD tanks arrived to be used for the crossing. Seven of the DD tanks were to support the 7th Infantry, with the other seven supporting the 30th Infantry. Of the seven tanks supporting the 7th, three sunk while crossing the river, one was knocked out on the opposite bank, and three survived to fight the enemy. Of the seven tanks supporting the 30th, only one sunk in the crossing, and six were able to provide support for the infantrymen. Company C's regular tanks that they had swapped for the DD tanks were brought across the bridge at Worms and exchanged. In crossing the river, Company C learned that "DD tanks should not be used for river crossing" for a myriad of reasons.⁶⁹ Company C ended the month of March at the Main River near Worth.

The month of April began to show that the sun was setting for the German Third Reich. After crossing the Main river at Worth, the 756th fought its way to Nuremberg, reaching the outskirts of the town on the 19th and 20th. Attacking from the Northwest

Sector, they succeeded in capturing the town by the 21st. The tanks crossed the Danube on the 25th and ended the month at Grunwald. According to the Commander's Narrative the month of April saw "rapid advances against scattered and weak resistance" but upon reaching Nuremberg they encountered "house to house fighting" with "bitter resistance".⁷⁰ Over the course of the month the 756th lost seven medium and two light tanks. They also helped in capturing 17,010 prisoners of war.

The surrender of Germany to the Allies on May 7, 1945 put an official end to hostilities, but all armed conflicts didn't cease right away. "During the first four days of this period our tanks operated with the rapid moving spearhead which ended up in Berchtesgaden and Salzburg."⁷¹ They reached Berchtesgaden on the 4th. For the rest of the month the battalion conducted mop up operations. It was organized into reconnaissance type units for finding and silencing bands of enemy resistance. The men were able to explore some of the sights around Berchtesgaden, including Hitler's Eagles Nest. The 756th lost no tanks during the month of May, and the men were happy the war was finally over.

The men of the 756th had come a long way. A core group of men had emerged that had been with the battalion since Ft. Lewis. These men had traveled many thousands of miles, over two continents and many different countries to conclude the war at Hitler's Eagles Nest in Berchtesgaden. They had overcome scorching deserts, torrential rains, freezing cold winters, and the relentless mud that plagued them through most of Italy. They had lost friends and comrades along the way to the tune of 640 casualties, 111 of which were killed.⁷² The men of the unit had won two Medals of Honor, three Distinguished Service Crosses, forty-four Silver Stars, two hundred and forty eight

Bronze Stars, and six hundred and twenty Purple Heart medals.⁷³

Their story is unique in the fact that they were one of the few units to participate in all areas of fighting in the European Theatre of Operations. The battalion was engaged in combat almost continuously for 26 of the 32 months that they were overseas.⁷⁴ To exam their journey at any one point, is to better understand what it was like for the soldier fighting along side of them in that particular campaign. The 756th's story is a microcosm for the story of the many different sectors of the war. I set out to tell the story of the 756th, but I in turn shed light on the many other experiences soldiers had while fighting in these theatres independent of the 756th's journey. It is important to try to understand what many veterans will not talk about. It is important to collect and to put into a narrative what it was the men went through and what it was like to be with them over 65 years ago. So much of what is written on this topic is never read. It is housed in archives and in libraries waiting to be discovered. I had no idea of the existence of the 756th before my chance encounter with a man whose grandfather was in the unit.

In uncovering the story of the 756th, I uncovered the stories of many different men who served in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany. I hope that now you have a better understanding of what it was like to be a tanker and what the terrain, weather, food, and livelihood of these men were like. This small glimpse can be related to the larger scope of the Second World War. These experiences are analogous with the many thousands of other men who served in the same Theatres of Operation as the 756th.

¹ Jeff Danby, "The 756th Tank Battalion", <http://www.756tank.com/Campaigns.htm> (accessed September 23, 2009).

² United States and Donald G. Taggart, *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 571.

³ J. Lee Mudd, "Honor, Fidelity, Courage: The History of the 756th Tank Battalion and the Development of the Tank-Infantry Team" (master's thesis, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2001), 10.

⁴ Roger A. Fazendin, *The 756th Tank Battalion in the Battle of Cassino 1944* (Cave Creek, AR: Stories Unlimited, 1991), xv.

⁵ Fazendin, xv.

⁶ Fazendin, xv.

⁷ Fazendin, xvi.

⁸ George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West*. United States Army in World War II, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1991), 123-125.

⁹ United States and Donald G. Taggart, *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 14.

¹⁰ Taggart, 14.

¹¹ Howe, 118.

¹² Fazendin, xxi.

¹³ Howe, 125-126.

¹⁴ Taggart, 13.

¹⁵ Taggart, 16.

¹⁶ George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West*. United States Army in World War II, (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1991), 118 /United States and Donald G. Taggart, *History of the Third Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 18.

¹⁷ Taggart, 37.

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- ¹⁸ Mudd, 20.
- ¹⁹ Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1969), 3.
- ²⁰ Salerno to Cassino, 92.
- ²¹ Emajean Jordan Buechner, *Sparks: The Combat Diary of a Battalion Commander (Rifle), WWII, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Division, 1941-1945* (Metairie, La: Thunderbird Press, 1991), 70-71.
- ²² Flint Whitlock, *The Rock of Anzio: From Sicily to Dachau, a History of the 45th Infantry Division* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1998), 71.
- ²³ Rock of Anzio, 71.
- ²⁴ Ibid
- ²⁵ Fazendin, xxiv.
- ²⁶ Salerno to Cassino, 3-4.
- ²⁷ Rock of Anzio, 98-99.
- ²⁸ Rock of Anzio, 98-99.
- ²⁹ Fazendin, 17.
- ³⁰ Paul A. Cundiff, *45th Infantry CP: A Personal Record from World War II* (Tampa: P.A. Cundiff, 1987), 97.
- ³¹ M4 Sherman Tank, <http://www.2worldwar2.com/sherman.htm> (accessed January 19, 2010).
- ³² Fazendin, 149.
- ³³ Salerno to Cassino, 370-371
- ³⁴ Salerno to Cassino, 371.
- ³⁵ Salerno to Cassino, 373.
- ³⁶ Fazendin, 121.
- ³⁷ Fazendin, 149.

³⁸ Fazendin, 149.

³⁹ Mudd, 43.

⁴⁰ Mudd, 44.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Mudd, 47.

⁴⁴ Mudd, 48.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Southern France*, U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/sfrance/sfrance.htm> (accessed January 15, 2010) 6-8.

⁴⁶ William B. Breuer, *Operation Dragoon: The Allied Invasion of the South of France*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987), 33-35.

⁴⁷ Taggart, 192

⁴⁸ Ibid, 193

⁴⁹ Bruer, 65

⁵⁰ Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Southern France*, U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/sfrance/sfrance.htm> (accessed January 15, 2010) 10-11.

⁵¹ NARA, Commanders Narrative, August 1-3, 1944, 1. Thanks to Jeff Danby for supplying me with the information on a CD from the National Archives.

⁵² NARA, Informal Report on DD Tanks, 756th Tank Battalion, 1.

⁵³ Cheryl Esposito, *The 756th Tank Battalion in the European Theatre*. (Privately printed, 1999) 38.

⁵⁴ NARA, Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, August 1-31, 1944, 3.

⁵⁵ NARA, Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, September 1-30, 1944, 1-4.

⁵⁶ Taggart, 388.

⁵⁷ 756th Tank Battalion, Unit Journal, October 7th, 1944.

⁵⁸ Taggart 283.

⁵⁹ NARA, Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, January 1-31, 1945, 5.

⁶⁰ Taggart, 301.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Taggart, 322.

⁶³ Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, February 1-28, 1945, 4.

⁶⁴ Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, March 1-31, 1945, 2.

⁶⁵ Charles B. MacDonald, *The European Theater of Operations: The Siegfried Line Campaign*,

<http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/Siegfried/Siegfried%20Line/siegfried-ch02.htm#b2> (accessed January 27, 2010).

⁶⁶ Commander's Narrative, March 1-31, 1945, 3.

⁶⁷ Commander's Narrative, March 1-31, 1945, 3.

⁶⁸ Commander's Narrative, March 1-31, 1945, 4.

⁶⁹ Commander's Narrative, March 1-31, 1945, 6.

⁷⁰ NARA, Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, April 1-30, 1945, 5-6.

⁷¹ NARA, Commander's Narrative, 756th Tank Battalion, May 1-10, 1945, 1.

⁷² Esposito, ii.

⁷³ Jeff Danby, "The 756th Tank Battalion", <http://www.756tank.com/IndAwards.htm> (accessed January 23, 2009).

⁷⁴ Esposito, I.

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