

COMPANY 'B'



ACTION AT HONSFELD, BELGIUM DURING THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

By
Don Smart



TERROR AT HONSFELD

The Story of Company 'B'

612th Tank Destroyer Battalion

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It was called the ghost front, from Monschau to Echternach, a cold twisting eighty-five mile sector in the Ardennes for resting battered divisions and instructing new ones. At 5:30 am on December 16, 1944 this all changed; Hitler launched "Wacht am Rhein" (Watch on the Rhine), his last desperate gamble to turn the tide in the west. Like a rolling thunderclap, the artillery barrage broke over the unsuspecting American lines. Then the Germans hurled 23 divisions against the sparsely held sector. Chaos reigned as the commanders tried to make sense of what was happening, for the soldiers in the foxholes, information was nonexistent. The front line American soldier; surprised, stunned, unbelieving and not understanding what was hitting him stood his ground. Companies, Platoons, squads and in some cases individual soldiers all up and down the front fought the Germans to a standstill. One of these small units that stood until overwhelmed was Company 'B', 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

The 612th had been pulled out of the line on December 11th to a rear assembly area at Sourbrodt, Belgium. Sgt. Devers Bryant from Newman, Georgia, First platoon, recalled, "We were eating supper that Saturday evening, when the company runner came in and told everyone to report to the company area. We were moving out. He didn't know where we were going. Since we had been on the line for so many months, I had hoped we might get a couple weeks rest." The unit was instructed to get on the road to Bullingen and report to an engineering officer. No other orders were given.

By midnight, Company 'B' and the Recon Platoon had their gear packed, vehicles serviced and a combat load of ammunition on board. Captain Kennedy, Commander Company 'B', led the unit out under blackout conditions, heading south and passing through Elsenborn and Butgenbach. PFC Bill Hawkins from Atoka, Tennessee, 1st Platoon, remembered, "I was riding in the first half-track. There was an abnormal amount of traffic going in the other direction. At every crossroads, when we stopped, I would ask the MPs what was going on. They just shrugged their shoulders and told me we were the only ones they had seen moving up. Everyone else was going in the other direction. I was getting worried."

A second order was received instructing the company to report to a tank destroyer officer in Bullingen. In a state of confusion, the unit continued to move as ordered. At 1:30 am the company arrived at the small crossroads of Dom Butgenbach and was met by the commanding officer of the 801st Tank Destroyers of the 99th Division. He informed Captain Kennedy that his



Mark VI 68-ton King Tiger tanks of the 501st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion bringing up the rear of the fifteen-mile march formation.

Peiper cornered a frightened Colonel commanding the parachute regiment, and demanded to know why he had stopped the offensive. The Colonel indicated the road to Honsfeld was mined and the woods heavily fortified by American soldiers, so he felt it was better to continue the attack in the morning. When Peiper learned this information had not been verified by patrols, he demanded one battalion of troops be rousted out of bed and attached to his command. By 4 O'clock in the morning, Kampfgruppe Peiper started up the Lanzerath-Honsfeld road, lead by two panthers and three half-tracks. A Company of paratroops, providing flank protection, was positioned on each side of the column. Peiper soon discovered there were no mines and very little American resistance. The lead panther came to a road junction about a mile from Honsfeld. American truck traffic was coming from the south, heading into Honsfeld; the lead panther simply fell in behind the last truck.



This map shows the approximate location of houses occupied by members of Company 'B' 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion during early morning hours of December 17th. Also shown is Lt. Reppa's unit at the south edge of town.

Earlier, at 3:30 am, Company 'B' pulled into Honsfeld. The little village was the rest center for the 99th division's 394th regiment. The Captain commanding the center was having a frantic day. He had been getting ready for a visit by the actress Marlene Dietrich to entertain the troops. He hurriedly sent her back and started pulling together a scratch defense force of 99th troops and a few guns of the 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion. American vehicles from the shattered Losheim Gap were pouring through Honsfeld. Jeeps and half-tracks filled with cooks, engineers, and office personnel, in addition to stray artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns lost from their units, added to the total confusion. An officer of the 801st Tank Destroyers met Captain Kennedy and told him they had the defense of the town in hand. He could bed down his men for the night and they would position the guns first thing in the morning. Sgt. Frances Hayes of Brewton Alabama, Battalion Recon Sgt., recalled, "I had a gut feeling that something was not right. Captain

Kennedy kept saying I think we're in the wrong place."

Captain Kennedy gathered his platoon leaders to give instructions as to the disposition of the company. He ordered the Platoon Leaders to disperse their squads in houses on both sides of the road; post sentries at the front and back doors and let the rest of the men get some sleep. Captain Kennedy got back into his command car and started back for 2nd division headquarters at Wirtzfeld to try and get a better picture of their situation. As members of the First Platoon moved into a darkened three-story house, they discovered an old Belgium man and sixteen-year old boy. The two were Peter Mueller, a middle-aged farmer and his nephew, Johann Brodel. He told the Americans that they had left the border village of Manderfeld the previous day. His nephew had refused to dig gun positions for the Germans and they feared he might be arrested. They would go on west the next day. Hawkins remembered, “we told them to stay, but in looking back, they would have been better off if we had told them to move on right then.”

Sgt. Bill Townsend from St. Petersburg, Florida, Second Platoon recalled, “My gun squad and another squad pulled some one-hundred-fifty to two-hundred yards down into the town. I parked my half-track and gun in a lot next to the house. The other squad was about one-hundred-fifty feet away across the street. I asked the Lieutenant where the Germans were. He told me they were several miles away. Put the men to bed, we would set the guns in the morning.”



Kampfgruppe Peiper entering Honsfeld. The half-track on the right is part of the 14th Calvary squadron.

The quiet in Honsfeld during the predawn hours was broken only by the occasional rumble of 6x6 trucks, jeeps and half-tracks moving through going north. Not far behind this column came two tanks, wide, low slung and larger than any Shermans. Along with them came armored cars, half-tracks and more tanks. Kampfgruppe Peiper had reached Honsfeld. Sgt. Townsend was pulling the first watch when he noticed the unusual activity. “It must have been around 4:00 am and very dark when I saw a tank, followed by a group of men, go by and then other vehicles moving slowly. I couldn’t make out any markings. I tried to contact the company HQ but all channels on the radio were jammed.” There was no shooting so Townsend was at a loss as to what to do.

At the first break in the traffic, Townsend sent one man to platoon HQ, about one hundred yards away, to find out what was going on. Nobody was doing anything. The soldier

never came back. Townsend remembered, “At daylight, we could see what was happening. I sent another fellow across the street to contact the other squad. He was captured and yelled out to me if we didn’t surrender they would shoot him.” Townsend told his men not to fire, and then the remaining squad members gave up. A German officer directed they be marched back down the road with the other prisoners.

As the first streaks of light moved the shadows back, the paratroops crept from house to house like grey timber wolves. For the young German soldiers, these early victories were heady stuff. One soldier stated, “There was Amis everywhere. We disarmed them at once and broke up their weapons. Then we drove them out into the street and started to count our loot in chocolate and cigarettes. Just when we were about to mount up to move out, all hell broke loose; firing from windows at the far end of town, cannon fire, tracers zipped back and forth, men screaming in pain.” Kampfgruppe Peiper had slammed headlong into the rest of the 612th.

Sgt. Frances Hayes said, “I awoke and heard a bunch of voices, then the sound of several vehicles going by. We went down-stairs and got our guns and ammunition. We could see there was no way out, so we got ready to fight.” Across the street, Sgt. Haynes and Lt. Basic, Second Platoon Commander, were jarred awake by the guard, R.B. Taylor. He told them a German recon outfit had gone by the house, and there were more vehicles coming. This flabbergasted the two since they were supposed to be miles behind the front. Haynes grabbed some of his gun crew, unhooked and set up the gun. By now the sound of approaching tanks was clear, with rifle and machine gun fire beginning to pop all around the area.

Sgt. Bryant was standing guard at the front door when he saw the German Paratroops infiltrating through the town. He woke his crew and got the 3-inch gun unhooked from the half-track and set up. Hawkins was asleep in a room on the third floor when the young Belgium boy shook him awake. He said, “Jump up, Jump up, the Germans are all around us.” Hawkins said, “I thought he was kidding until Sgt. Briney, the security Sgt., came up the stairs three at a time. He had a frown on his forehead you could lay your finger in and said, “No fooling boys, they got us, they are everywhere”.

Hawkins and the other men came out of their beds. Hawkins looked out the window and could see Germans in every direction. Hawkins remembered, “They were just everywhere, all around us. There were only foot troops at that time, so we grabbed our weapons and started firing. There was so much confusion, I don’t know what all happened. I ran from the basement to the top floor a half a dozen times to see if there was an escape route.”

Sgt. Haynes got his gun set and loaded just as the first panther pushed its big 88 snout into the intersection and turned right to come down the street. He waited until two other vehicles had made the turn, and then fired on the last tank. At about fifty yards, he hit it right in the turret rails, knocking the big gun off. The recoil kicked his gun rails up against the house and stabilized the gun for the next shots. He lined up on the lead tank and disabled it with one shot. The middle



Members of Sgt. Bryant's crew, killed at their gun.

tank was traversing its 88 trying to find the anti-tank gun. The third shot knocked this tank out and all three started burning. Sgt. Haynes remembered, "A fourth tank pushed around the corner, but backed up behind a building when it saw the first three burning. I got off another shot but missed the tank."

Sgt. Bryant remembered, "The Germans had taken cover in a barn about fifty yards away and were shooting at the house. I put a shell into the barn; hay, wood, men flew everywhere. The Germans took off down the street. Every time I fired the gun, I had to jump up on the rails to keep it from

kicking back from the recoil; the ground was so hard it wouldn't dig in." The second gun crew was also trying to get their gun in position, but it was too late.

Company 'B' had brought Kampfgruppe Peiper to a halt; however, it could not last. More and more of the ten mile column came crowding into Honsfeld; tanks, SS troops and German Paras began to spread out and surround the 612th's houses. A tank got behind the house that Sgt. Bryant was firing from and sprayed the area with machine gun fire. The crews didn't have any protection, Bryant was shot through the hand and shoulder, and five of his crew killed at the gun. Unable to slew the gun to bring it to bear on the tank, the survivors ran for the protection of the house. The Germans started lobbing mortar rounds to knock out Sgt. Haynes' gun. Haynes ran for the house, but as he reached the door, a round exploded hitting him in the left calf muscle and knocking him off his feet. Sgt Haynes said, "I climbed to a second floor room and managed to bandage my leg. As I was lying on the floor, an 88 round came through a window, went over my head and out the opposite wall. It was a good thing my leg wound slowed me down, I had planned to start shooting at the Germans out that window."

Hawkins remembered, "When the tanks moved in and started firing through the windows into the house, the situation got hopeless. Lt. Gribbon was the senior officer and he ordered us to break up our weapons and follow him out, we had to surrender." Across the street, the Lt. Basic also decided his group had to surrender to keep from being slaughtered.

For the 612th, trying to surrender became as dangerous as combat. They were facing a unit with a reputation for ruthlessness and brutality nicknamed the "Blowtorch Battalion" by other units of the 1st SS Division. With three of their vehicles burning, German dead and wounded laying in the street, some members of the Kampfgruppe decided to take Hitler's exhortation to conduct this offensive with a "Wave of terror and fright" and without "human inhibitions." The murders started. Sgt. Hayes said, "We went down stairs and out the door. Some

of the men were already standing along side of the tanks with their hands over their heads. One tank fired just as I got to the steps and knocked down about five men. A friend of mine had both legs shot out from under him. As he was calling for help, the tank swerved to the left and ran over him. It went right by me and kept going.”



Men of Company 'B' shot after they had surrendered.

Sgt. Bryant recalled, “We ran back into the house but a tank stuck the gun in the window and the crew started hollowing “Rausch”. We went down to the basement; however the German soldiers came in and marched us out to line up.” Lt. Gribbon led his group out using a bed sheet as a white flag. Then Lt. Basic’s second platoon plus men from other units, approximately one hundred in all, joined them. Sgt. Bryant said, “They went down the line taking gas masks, overshoes, watches and rings. My watch had stopped so the German gave it back to me.”

“At first, the killing seemed to be random incidents.” Hayes explained. “Two of us were walking side by side past the moving tanks when a single shot hit the man next to me in the chest. I grabbed him, but he was dead by the time I got him lowered to the ground. The rest of the tanks just drove on by.”

Hawkins again, “They had got us in a formation by the side of the road when the tanks going by opened up with machine guns. The guys started dropping to the ground or scattered into the woods. I stayed in the ditch with my face in the mud, scared to death. I saw Lt. Gribbon run behind a small barn and hide. Some German Officer finally got the firing stopped. I don’t know if someone gave the order to fire or the German troops started on their own. They were definitely SS soldiers.”

Sgt. Haynes said, “I was lucky, I dropped in a drainage ditch along side of the road. I could feel the bullets going over me but I didn’t get hit. The firing stopped and I got to my feet. Most of the men around me were dead. I started walking to get back to the group, no one shot at me again.” The scene in the road became total confusion according to Sgt. Hayes. The German Paras kept trying to round up the scattered GI’s while the German tanks and armored vehicles in

Kampfgruppe Peiper kept rolling by, sometimes running over the dead. The German medics then set up an aid station to treat their wounded and forced the GI's to help.

“They grabbed the three medics assigned to Company ‘B’; T/5 Michael Kardos, PFC Robert Farley and PFC James J. McGinnity to help treat the Germans.” Hayes said. “As they were pushing and prodding us back in line, our guys could see buddies laying in the street and ditches, shot down with their hands over their head. A German officer jerked two 612th men out of line to carry a wounded SS officer to the aid station. They complied; however, the one at his head wrapped his hand around the German’s throat and strangled him as they walked. They laid him on the floor, put their hands over their heads, walked back and got in line. When we marched off, our medics were kept behind. We never saw them again.”

The ground troops rounded up the prisoners and started the march south to captivity. Two men, Lt. Gribbon and Staff Sgt. Billy F. Wilson, managed to stay hidden and escaped. PFCs Charlie Morris and Ronayne White decided to stay in the ditch and play dead. Miraculously the German soldiers left them lying with the other dead GIs. They stayed in the ditch all day as the vehicles of Kampfgruppe Peiper went by. In later years, Charlie Morris would say, “We stayed there until about 12:30 that night. German soldiers coming by would step over and kick us or other motionless men to see if there was a reaction. Sometimes the kick was pretty hard, so it was difficult to keep from grunting.” The next day all four made their way back to 612th headquarters. Their stories documented the first atrocities of the Kampfgruppe Peiper.

The group kept merging in with other captured GIs as they marched back to the east. Their danger was not over. As they marched past the oncoming line of Kampfgruppe Peiper’s column, tanks would run at them and several times German soldiers would simply shoot a prisoner making the rest dive for the ditches. The guards would prod them out of the ditches to start the march again. Many of the prisoners were suffering from wounds. Sgt Haynes and Bryant, both wounded, had their legs go numb during the fifteen-mile march. They knew to stop would have meant a quick bullet to the head, so they kept going on pure willpower. Hawkins recalled, “The old Belgium man and boy were marching with the rest of us, however, at the first stop they were taken behind a building and shot. The thought since they were in the house with us that they were collaborators.” Hawkins was partly correct. At the Café Palm an SS man marched the two behind a barn. As the boy protested that they were Belgium, he was shot in the head. Peter Mueller turned and was struck by a bullet in the neck. Another shot hit him behind the ear and he fell to the ground and feigned death. When the soldier left, Mueller went into a nearby house for help. He was bandaged and no further harm came to him. The killing of Johann Brodel was the first recorded ‘Atrocity’ against the Belgium civilians.

Captain Kennedy was at Division Headquarters at Wirtzfeld when a call came through that tanks were attacking Honsfeld. He immediately started back to Honsfeld via the Bullingen road. On the road, he met elements of the 801st Tank Destroyer Battalion, who told him they had been overrun by hordes of German tanks and infantry. He left his jeep and continued on foot to a hill overlooking Honsfeld. In the early morning light, he could easily see what the situation was. German tanks and troops were everywhere and it was evident that his two platoons and the Recon platoon were lost. With a sinking heart, he retraced his steps to Bullingen and from there joined his remaining platoon at Dom Butgenbach. The third platoon had their guns positioned and dug in ready for the onslaught they felt would hit soon. A Company of light tanks and stragglers from the 99th division bolstered the defense line. By 7:00 am the little group was prepared to give a good account of itself.

Shortly before nine, Kampfgruppe Peiper roared out of Bullingen, the vehicles filled with captured fuel. Outside Bullingen, they turned onto the Bullingen-St Vith road, away from company B's Third Platoon, dug in at Dom Butgenbach. The platoon all gasped with relief. The Kampfgruppe's route would take the column through Thirimont and Ligneuville passing by a small isolated crossroads named Baugez. This crossroads would mark the next atrocity committed by Kampfgruppe Peiper and forever brand Jochen Peiper a war Criminal. The official U.S. Army history estimates that by December 20th, Peiper's command had murdered approximately three-hundred American prisoners of war and at least one-hundred unarmed Belgium civilians from twelve different locations on the Kampfgruppe's line of march.

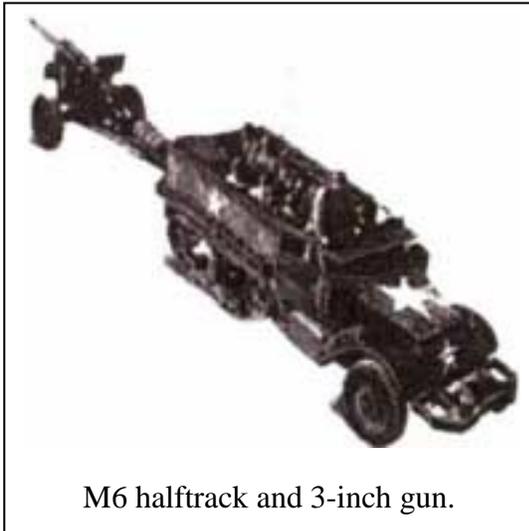
The full story of the Honsfeld tragedy was confirmed in mid-January after the town was liberated. Captain Kennedy and fellow Officers from the 612th traveled to Honsfeld to investigate the fate of the missing men. As they searched and questioned town personnel, an old man in a worn brown habit approached them. The priest revealed that he had been present when the men were killed and then helped bury them. When the bodies were exhumed from the mass grave, seventeen were identified as being men from the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. The resulting search, after war's end, did not turn up the three 612th medics in any POW camp nor find evidence of their graves. The young men, dedicated to trying to save lives, simply vanished, to be listed forever as "missing in action, presumed dead."

The members of the 1st SS Panzer Division, Kampfgruppe Peiper in particular, discovered the Americans had a long memory and no sympathy for soldiers of the Waffen SS. At wars end, the U.S. Army began the hunt for soldiers who were involved in war crimes against soldiers and civilians in the Ardennes, rounding up five hundred former members of Kampfgruppe Peiper, along with commanding officers of the 1st SS Division. Of these, seventy-three were put on trial at Dachau in 1946. Among the witnesses that returned to testify were Staff Sgt. Billy Wilson and PFC Charles Morris of the 612th TD Battalion. The US military tribunal sentenced forty-three to death, including Jochen Peiper, twenty-two to life and eight to prison terms. All death sentences were eventually commuted. The last member of Kampfgruppe Peiper to leave prison was Jochen Peiper in 1956.

THE 612th TANK DESTROYER BATTALION'S MARCH ACROSS EUROPE

By
Don Smart

The 612th started coming ashore at “OMAHA” beach on June 14th. The gun companies were assigned as teams to the 2nd Infantry Division Regiments: company ‘A’ with the 9th, Company ‘B’ with the 23rd and Company ‘C’ with the 38th. Each of the gun companies had three platoons armed with four 3-inch guns/platoon towed by M6 half-tracks. The Headquarters Company was composed of two reconnaissance platoons in addition to supply, medical and administrative units.



M6 halftrack and 3-inch gun.

The 612th was involved in the slugging match through the hedgerows, the capture of hill 192, the Vire offensive and the capture of St Lo. Continuously moving with the front lines of the 2nd Infantry Division, the unit established 7 CP's during the next twenty-one days. The 612th advanced to Tinchebray, closing on the Falaise pocket, then was attached to the Third Army for the Brest offensive. This offensive was launched on August 20th with the 612th attacking every conceivable type of target. The campaign was successfully brought to a close on 18 September and the 612th started a 692-mile motor march across France that culminated at Manderfeld, Belgium.

They occupied a front line sector on the Siegfried line. On December 11th, they were relieved and assembled at Sourbrodt, Belgium. They were to support the spearhead the offensive against the Schuemanuel Dams on the Roer River; however, the Battle of the bulge got in the way. Company ‘A’ had moved to Hofen to support the 9th Infantry when the “Watch on the Rhine” hit. The battle of Hofen was one of the most decisive actions of the Ardennes Campaign. Company ‘A’, along with men of the 99th Infantry Division drove off multiple vigorous attacks by the Germans over a four-day over a four-day period. The Company was awarded the unit citation for this action. Company ‘B’ was less fortunate. Routed to Honsfeld, they took the full blow of the Kampfgruppe Peiper and suffered four officers and one hundred twenty eight men missing in action. Company ‘C’ supported the 2nd and 99th in defense of the Elsenborn Ridge.

As 1945 dawned, the 612th was relieved and converted to self-propelled M-18 TD's. This completed; they rejoined the 2nd Division in closing the sides of the “Bulge” on the way to



St. Vith. They breached the Siegfried line and headed for the Rhine River. Deployed to protect the famous Remagen Bridge, they crossed in late march and joined the race eastward. They participated in the battle of Leipzig then moved to the Mulde Rive to await the Russians. It looked like the end of the trail; however, new orders sent the 612th south to the Third Army and Czechoslovakia.

On May 8th, they were in Pilsen and after 10 months and 23 days the European war ended for the 612th. The Battalion is authorized to wear five Bronze Stars on their ribbon for participation in the five campaigns. Few Battalions were so long and continuously engaged with the enemy. A record to be proud of.



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