

= 827th Tank Destroyer Battalion =

The 827th Tank Destroyer Battalion was a tank destroyer battalion of the United States Army active during the Second World War . It was activated in April 1942 as a segregated African American unit , deploying to Europe at the end of 1944 and attached to 12th Armored Division . It saw action during Operation Nordwind in January 1945 , where elements of the battalion performed creditably . However , its overall combat record was marred by severe disciplinary problems and insufficient training . It was withdrawn in February , and assigned to rear @-@ area duties ; while it nominally remained active for the remainder of the war , it had been effectively disbanded .

= = Background = =

The US Army 's basic wartime racial policy , established in 1937 , dictated that both whites and African Americans were to be inducted into the Army in equal proportions and strength , but that they were to be assigned to segregated units . Black soldiers could be led by white officers , but not vice versa , and unit composition was to be strictly controlled by the War Department . The mix of combat and support service units was , in theory , to be roughly equal between both groups . This caused tension between the Department and operational commanders , with the latter generally unwilling to provide places for black combat units . In practice , almost all combat units in the pre @-@ war period were white .

In response to growing pressure for a more equal distribution , the White House issued a statement in October 1940 which , while reaffirming segregation , provided that , " Negro organizations will be established in each major branch of the service " . The first black armored units , which had been a matter of great public interest , were activated in early 1941 . Two black tank destroyer units were formed that December , as tank destroyer battalions were treated as a separate arm of service . A further five were activated in 1942 , and four (in addition to two planned , but later canceled) in 1943 .

= = Early service = =

The 827th Tank Destroyer Battalion was activated on April 20 , 1942 , at Camp Forrest , Tennessee , one of five such battalions created that year . Initially armed with 75 millimeters (3 @. @ 0 in) M3 GMC half @-@ tracks , it later received the self @-@ propelled M10 tank destroyer before being reorganized as a towed battalion , equipped with trucks and 3 " anti @-@ tank guns . It finally returned to a self @-@ propelled unit , equipped with M18 Hellcats . At no point during this constant reshuffling did the unit ever receive a full allocation of equipment . At the same time , the original officer cadre was replaced twice ? first with black officers , then with white officers from other disbanded segregated battalions . By the time the battalion sailed overseas , it had seen eight separate commanding officers .

The unit emerged from these repeated reorganizations in very poor state ; training was inadequate , with the unit repeatedly failing battalion competence tests , and some areas of combat training ? notably indirect fire ? were avoided altogether . Discipline and order within the unit was equally low ? in September 1944 , the battalion held two courts @-@ martials for murder . The situation was so dire that the battalion 's commander felt it was likely that he would oversee the disbanding of the battalion or its conversion into a non @-@ combat service unit (the latter of which had already happened to a number of other segregated tank destroyer battalions) .

The 827th was originally scheduled to be sent to the Pacific theater , but in February , 1944 , it was declared insufficiently trained and held back for further preparation ; a different unit was substituted at the last minute . The next six months did not show great improvement in quality , but nonetheless the battalion was eventually sent overseas . It arrived in Marseille in late 1944 , deploying to the front in December , attached to the 12th Armored Division .

= = Combat = =

The first portion of the 827th to be deployed for combat was a single company in support of the 714th Tank Battalion of the 12th Armored Division , on 20 December 1944 . Failing to see action , the company was withdrawn to reserve after three days on the line . Discipline proved to be a problem during this period , with men abandoning their guns to collect firewood , despite assistance and advice from the 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion (an experienced and well @-@ regarded black unit operating in the same area) . A second company was used for screening purposes in the first week of January , also not seeing combat , while the remainder of the battalion narrowly avoided being assigned to an indirect @-@ fire role it was completely unprepared for .

On 6 January , the battalion while still attached to the 12th Armored Division , was assigned to participate in Task Force Wahl led by the 79th Infantry Division , which was defending against the January , 1945 , German counteroffensive in the Alsace @-@ Lorraine region . Disciplinary problems persisted ; the company ordered to lead the move was unable to deploy as most of its men were absent , and the remainder mostly drunk . By the time the battalion managed to move , one of its officers had shot a man ? and been shot himself ? while trying to restore order among his company , and in a separate incident a sergeant had been assaulted by one of his own men and , defending himself , accidentally shot a bystander .

The following two weeks saw a period of prolonged combat , as the task force slowly fell back to the pressure of the German offensive , with the battalion split up among various commands and often cut off or out of communication . The infantry units the tank destroyers were assigned to expected to take full operational control , often giving inappropriate orders more suited to tanks than to the lightly armored M18s , breeding resentment among the battalion 's crews . At the same time , the 827th had trained with the expectation that the gunners would fire only on the direct instruction of their own officers , which limited both their ability to co @-@ operate with outsiders and their willingness to adapt and improvise during small @-@ scale combat . Vehicle commanders regularly argued about orders , or refused to act on them without their " own " commander present . In one case on 9 January , an infantry commander threatened to shoot a M18 crew if it did not engage a German tank stranded on the roadside .

Not all elements of the battalion suffered similar problems , however ; on the same day , 9 January , B Company destroyed eleven German tanks advancing on the village of Rittershoffen , with four more the next day , while another section working with the 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion in Hatten nearby accounted for nine . These units remained with the infantry in the village for several days , unable to withdraw , and acquitted themselves well in close fighting . This was all the more of an achievement when it was considered that , leaving disciplinary problems aside , the battalion suffered from major training deficiencies and was entirely combat inexperienced . One member of the battalion was awarded the Silver Star , while the 79th Division recommended a crew which had fought in Hatten to receive Bronze Stars ? it is unclear if these were ever awarded .

= = Service duties = =

Following reports of disciplinary problems , VI Corps ordered an investigation , which took place over four days while elements of the battalion were still engaged at Rittershoffen . It recommended that the battalion be withdrawn and retrained before returning to combat under a new commander , while Major @-@ General Edward H. Brooks , the corps commander , instead recommended that the battalion be entirely disbanded and its men distributed to other units . General Alexander Patch , commanding Seventh Army , agreed with Brooks , suggesting that a new tank destroyer battalion be formed from the men of service units , themselves replaced by the men of the 827th . This was contentious , however ; the number and status of segregated combat units was a matter of intense political debate , and converting a black combat unit to a service one , in favor of white troops , was likely controversial .

As discussion continued , the battalion was withdrawn from the front lines , leaving Task Force Wahl on 23 January . It returned to 12th Armored Division , where three platoons were committed to combat to support the fighting in the Colmar Pocket in the first week of February . The remainder of

the battalion was kept in reserve , where the disciplinary problems , including assaults on civilians , grew to the point at which the commander had to request outside assistance to restore control on 5 February . The battalion was removed from its attachment to the 12th Armored on 12 February ? by request of the divisional command ? and withdrawn to the rear area of XV Corps to take up guard duties .

The battalion 's future had been referred to Sixth Army Group , the controlling formation , for further consideration ; after some debate , they requested the investigation be reopened with a particular focus on the enlisted men of the unit . The second inspection showed that the enlisted men were broadly competent at their duties , but that most of them preferred rear @-@ area duties over combat roles . The inspection recommended that the enlisted men be transferred to one of the segregated infantry divisions . In the event , the unit was assigned to Sixth Army Group headquarters , where it was used in a service role . It remained nominally active ? to avoid the political fallout of deactivating a black combat unit ? but its equipment was transferred as replacements to other battalions and the battalion itself was virtually disbanded as a combat unit .