

LUXEMBOURG

day 13

The journey by truck to Luxembourg jarred the bones and organs of every man aboard, but at least it was uneventful. The men were completely exhausted after almost nineteen hours of constant, rattling travel when the trucks came to their final stop. Somewhere in a secluded part of Luxembourg, they were at a small camp, nothing more than a bivouac area.

Under any other circumstances this would have been considered a beautiful place. Even in the darkness the mountains could be seen in the distance silhouetted by the moonlight in the cold crisp air. But they were exhausted. All of them. There was no desire to admire the mountains, or forest, or the edges of clouds reflecting silver from the moonlight. There was only the desire to be shown their tents, to unroll their wool army blankets, and to sleep for as long as they would be allowed.

Too tired even to be hungry, Melvin found his assigned tent and cot. Without saying a word to anyone he removed his boots, flopped back on the moldy-smelling canvas cot, dragged the wool blanket over himself, and immediately began to snore. Indiana and Starlight might as well have been a galaxy away.

Tuesday morning, March 6, the men who had arrived the day before were allowed to sleep late, until 7:00 a.m. The cots had been the most comfortable thing they'd known in days. It was warm and dry, and the tent provided welcomed shelter over their heads. The mess closed for breakfast promptly at 8:00 a.m., so they had just enough time to wake and enjoy a somewhat hearty breakfast of runny scrambled eggs, stale biscuits, jam, and warm coffee. Melvin's appetite was back in full force. He ate it all.

The past 36 hours had been a whirlwind. They had come from Southampton, England, across the channel and all the way inland to somewhere in Luxembourg. Even though they were near the mountains, it was considerably warmer now that they were far from the coastline. The weather in fact was quite nice now. When Melvin left the mess tent, he noticed the morning sky was bright, crisp and clear except for the haze that lingered over the tops of the distant mountains to the north.

Melvin and a small group of other soldiers were ordered onto the back of a two-and-a-half-ton olive-green truck. "Where to now?" was all they could think. Through casual conversation during the ride, they discovered that the one thing they all shared was training in heavy equipment with limited tank driving experience.

Thankfully this drive was a short one. It took them through a thick forest and out into a large meadow. Randomly positioned around this meadow were a great number of tired-looking, battle worn Sherman M4 tanks. It was a staggering site. Every soldier in the truck was

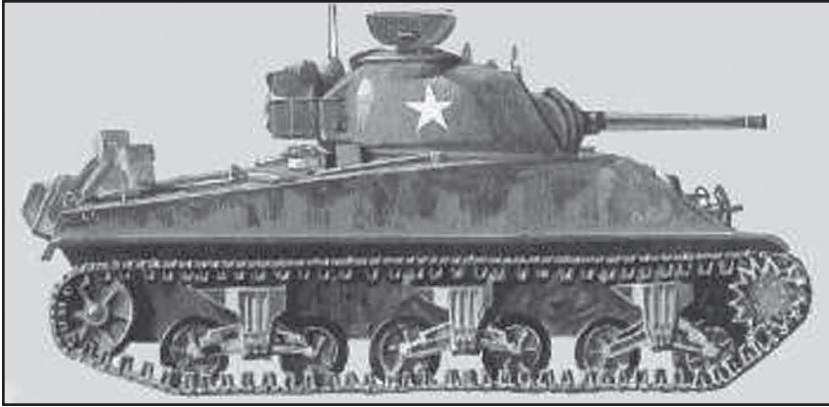
suddenly very much aware of the reason he had been transported half way around the world. Training was over. They were neck deep in the life and death business of war now. That reality hit them square in the stomach like a heavy fist.

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Even today, the M4 Sherman medium tank is still a very impressive piece of armor. It is the quintessential tank that most of us recall when we think about the armor used in World War II.

Beginning in 1942, one thousand M4 Sherman's per month were scheduled for production. It was increased to two thousand per month as the war progressed. That gives us a clue as to the casualty rate of the much smaller, less heavily armored U.S. tanks, as compared to the German models. Approximately 48,000 Sherman tanks were produced from eleven different manufacturers throughout the war. The name "Sherman" was actually coined by the British, not a reference to the U.S. Civil War general. Among U.S. troops, it was sometimes referred to as a "Ronson" because the ammunition in the earlier models had a tendency to catch on fire if the tank took a hit. Ronson was a cigarette lighter manufacturer that advertised with the slogan "Lights the first time." The Germans nicknamed the M4 the "Tommy Cooker" in reference to a small field stove the Allies carried in WWI and into WWII.

Generally speaking, the M4 Sherman was never de-

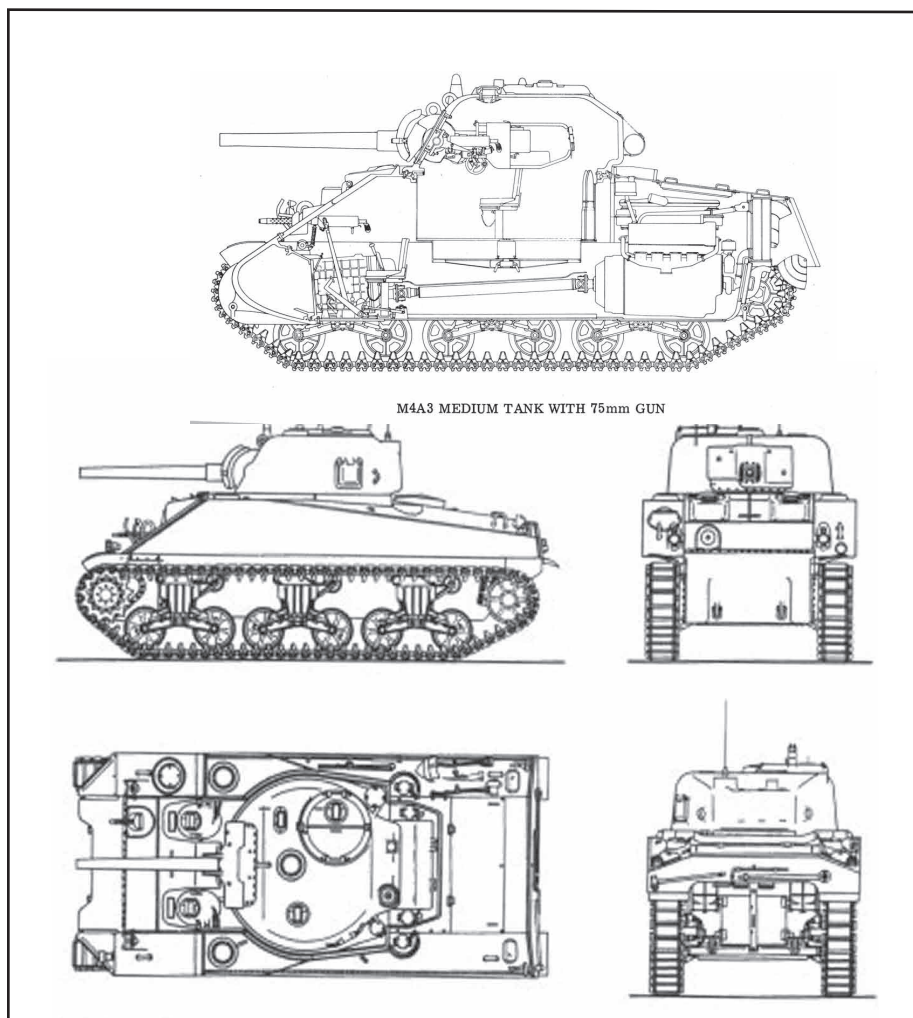


M4 Sherman tank

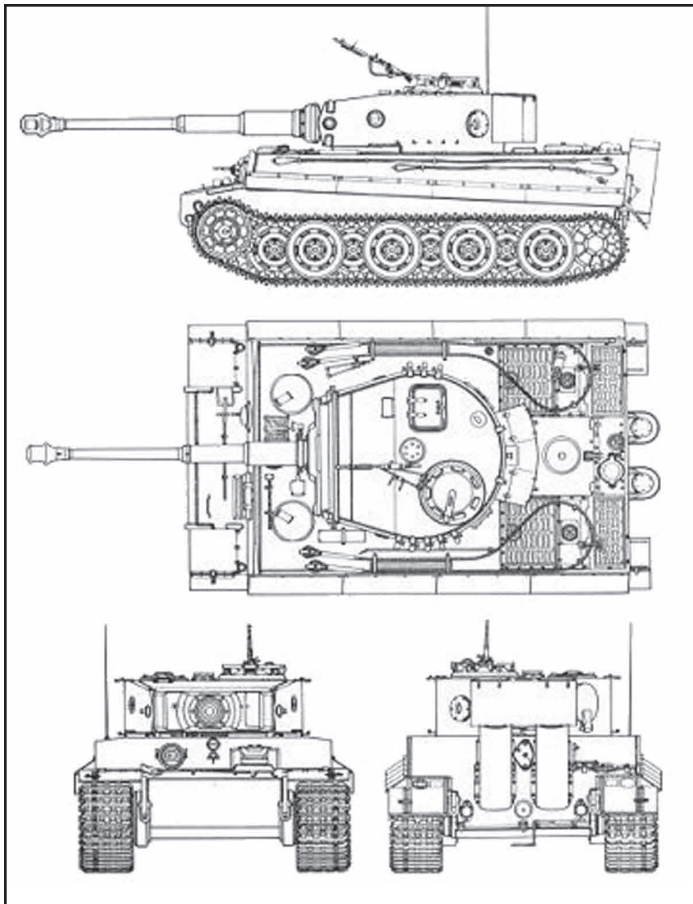
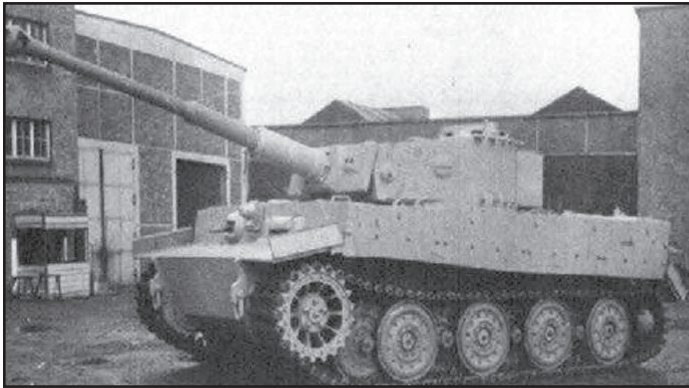
signed to fight head to head with other tanks, particularly the heavily gunned, heavily armored German Panzer and Tiger tanks. With an armor thickness of as little as one-half inch to three inches it was much lighter than its German counterpart. The M4 Sherman weighed in at only 34 tons (as compared to 50 – 75 tons and the four- to six and one-half-inch armor of German tanks). Powered by a Chrysler A57 multi-bank 30-cylinder radial gasoline engine generating 425 horse power with a 175-gallon fuel

capacity, five forward gears and one reverse, the M4 was intentionally designed for speed and mobility over firepower. The tank was meant to serve primarily as an infantry support weapon that had to be capable of moving rapidly with ground troops.

The M4 was fitted with a 75mm main gun (later mod-



M4A3 Medium tank with 75mm gun



German Panzer Tank

els were upgraded to a 76mm gun) mounted in a fully traversable turret, which meant that the gun could rotate 360 degrees. The German Panzer and Tiger series tanks had a limited degree of movement much to their disadvantage. The M4 had a .50 cal anti-aircraft machine gun mounted atop the turret, and two .30 cal Browning machine guns (1 mounted in the coaxial and 1 mounted in the bow in front of the co-driver/machine gunner). Ammunition for the main gun was stored in catacombs inside the tank near the Loaders postion. Approximately 97 rounds of high-explosive, armor-piercing, and smoke-producing shells were stored. Also 300 rounds of .50 cal and 4000 rounds of .30 cal were on board, mostly in metal containers situated on a narrow ledge to the right of the co-driver/machine gunner.

At 19' 10" long, 8' 7" wide and 12' 3" tall, the M4 had a rather high profile. Many Shermans had been sent to Russia on the lend-lease program. However, they were declined due to the high profile they presented. Having a top road speed of 26 mph with an effective range of approximately 100 miles, they could climb over vertical obstacles 24 inches tall and power up a 60-degree incline. The M4 Sherman could ford up to three feet of water and cross trenches seven and a half feet wide. A crew of five included a commander, gunner, loader, driver and co-driver/machine gunner.

There were only two aspects in which the M4 Sherman was superior to the 700 horse power German Panzer and Tiger series tanks. That was in its sheer

numbers and the ease of field maintenance.

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The truck circumnavigated the meadow, stopping only long enough at select tanks to call out the name of one passenger. That soldier climbed out, and the truck continued to the next tank. At last it was Melvin's name that was called out. He made his way to the back of the truck, jumped out and watched the truck drive away trailing a cloud of dust.

As he stood there in front of a battle scared tank wondering what to do next, he was approached by a Lieutenant tank commander.

Many commanders had found themselves without a tank to command due to the recent battles. His duty since the loss of his tank was to meet and assess the new drivers. After a brief salute, mostly shrugged off by the indifferent Lieutenant, Melvin was asked if he could "handle this thing." Pride, sense of duty, or just plain old determination caused Melvin to respond with a hearty "no problem" even though he hadn't had many hours of specific M4 tank driver's training at Ft. Knox.

The commander climbed up into the turret following Melvin, who had slid into the driver's seat behind the right and left brake levers.

Melvin flipped the ignition switch on. As he pulled the tank into gear, he fed the engine a bit too much gas. Since the commander had chosen to remain standing with his

head and chest above the turret hatch to get a better view, his head was suddenly snapped back. This was going to be quite a ride! Melvin found his way to a narrow dirt road, and still a bit too ambitious, only slightly let up on the gas which enhanced the bumps and crags.

The road took a sharp left turn a short distance in front of them. It was a blind turn and nearly 90 degrees at that. Approaching much more quickly than he'd intended, Melvin pulled back hard at first on both brake levers. Then he relaxed the right lever and pulled back even harder on the left in order to spin the tank sharply to the left and around the corner. The commander grabbing a good hand hold and bracing himself against the back of the turret hatch was amazed that he had somehow managed to stay upright after being slung to and fro.

But just as the tank spun the corner without giving up too much speed, both Melvin and the commander noticed, too late, the thick low-hanging branch of a very old, heavy tree. Managing to drop like a rock to keep their heads from being taken off, they both heard the loud crack of splitting wood and the sharp ping of metal on metal.

Returning to the meadow after the short test drive, the Lieutenant finally decided it was relatively safe to raise his head up out of the turret once again. He looked around in disbelief. The little "encounter" with the tree limb had sheared the .50 cal anti-aircraft machine gun off of its pedestal mount on top of the turret. Unfortunately in less than 24 hours Melvin and the crew of this tank would be leaving for Trier, Germany, and battle. What

was worse, they'd be leaving for battle *without* a .50 cal anti-aircraft gun. It was lying in the middle of a bumpy, craggy road somewhere in Luxembourg.

The next morning, Thursday, March 8, began early as had each day for the past two weeks. It was also a morning full of anxiety. The crew had been assembled the prior afternoon and designated as part of Combat Command B, 11th Tank Battalion. They had met for the first time at the assembly. Most had already heard about the mishap with the machine gun and didn't offer any comment. Compared to what they had come through recently, a bumpy ride and a broken gun were minor problems.