

Field Artillery

A Professional Bulletin for Redlegs

May-August 2002

**RESPECT
LOYALTY
HONOR
DUTY**

**In this
combined
edition:**

- The FA NCO
- The FA in History

FROM THE FA

BRANCH HISTORIAN

U.S. DIVARTY's First Combat Experience: 9th ID DIVARTY at Thala, Tunisia, in March 1943 and "How Artillery Beat Rommel After Kasserine"

In the context of Multi-Domain Operations, divisions have replaced brigades as the Army's primary tactical units, placing Division Artilleries (DIVARTYs) at the core of land warfare. Prior to the United States' entry into World War II, the Army conceptualized and evaluated DIVARTYs during the Louisiana and Carolina maneuvers. They were extensively utilized in Northwest Europe during 1944 and 1945, to the extent that Lieutenant General George S. Patton noted, "I do not have to tell you who won the war. You know, the artillery did."

While Patton's acknowledgment of DIVARTYs at the end of the war is well-deserved, it obscures the steep learning curve the Army had to navigate to effectively employ them, particularly in North Africa and during the Italian Campaign of 1943. Robert Baldrige's 2002 article, "How Artillery Beat Rommel After Kasserine," published in the Field Artillery Journal, provides valuable insight into the first combat experience of a DIVARTY in March 1943.

The 9th ID DIVARTY undertook a grueling 100-hour, 800-mile forced march to Thala Pass, Tunisia, positioning itself to thwart Rommel's advance west and north of Kasserine. The Germans had easily cut through the inexperienced and poorly led II Corps in the Army's first large-scale ground battle in the European Theater of Operations. Despite being untested in large-scale combat operations and not yet at full strength, the DIVARTY departed without the 9th ID's three infantry regiments to confront the formidable Afrika Korps.

Although Baldrige, who later received a battlefield commission and fought with the 9th ID DIVARTY in the Battle of the Bulge, was not present at Thala, he interviewed several soldiers (known as "Redlegs") who were. An extended interview with him can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rs3PXYEpTsc>. In the meantime, we have republished his Field Artillery Journal article here to provide insight into the early combat experiences of a DIVARTY as it transitioned from its initial struggles to greater competence, even before mastering its full potential.



Two great feats of the US Army Artillery in World War II were the February 1943 emergency forced march of the 9th Infantry Division Artillery (Div Arty) into Tunisia, North Africa, and the division's resulting victory in the battle against a German panzer division of Field Marshall Irwin Rommel at Thala Pass. Furthermore, the 9th Div Arty fought without the division's three infantry regiments present. The 9th Artillery had been too far away to help stop the crushing German breakthrough of the Allied lines near the village of Kasserine and the mountain pass there.¹ But it arrived in time to beat Rommel's forces near Thala Pass.

The Thala Battle. Rommel's panzers had decimated the slim line of mostly American defenders in the Kasserine area—mainly the US 1st Armored, 3d Armored and 34th Infantry Divisions. The experienced Germans kept on, quickly forging ahead toward another important pass at Thala, 30 miles northwest of Kasserine. (See the map.)

The raw, untested troops of the then soundly beaten US II Corps retreated westward in an undisciplined and unorganized disarray. Officers, even colonels, made little or no effort to recover. Vehicles and ambulances were filled with the wounded and infantrymen without their equipment. All were heading west.

When questioned by the 9th Div Arty column arriving from the west, these officers and soldiers replied that they

had been overrun at Kasserine by superior numbers of German tanks and infantry and that they had been ordered to retreat to try to reconstitute somewhere in the rear.²

By the time the Allied Force Headquarters (AFHQ-Eisenhower) knew of Rommel's ferocious attack, there were no reserves nearby to throw into the defense at Kasserine. There was no uncommitted infantry or armor to call upon.

However, most of the 9th Div Arty was some 800 mountainous miles to the west at Tlemcen, Algeria. AFHQ began sending whatever combat units they could to stop Rommel from penetrating further.³ If he got to the important supply junction at Tebessa, just across the border in Algeria, he could seriously threaten the Allies in the north and delay plans to conquer North Africa and Sicily by weeks or even months.

So, should the 9th Div Arty have been sent to fight Rommel's panzer forces without their 9th Division infantrymen? Without question, the emergency demanded it.

By the time the 9th Div Arty could get into the area, Rommel's General Baron Friedrich von Broich's 10th Panzer Division was driving hard up the road from Kasserine to Thala.⁴ Only a few British infantry platoons were in position to slow the panzer tanks and infantry. Mid-February had witnessed a major disaster for the US Army at Kasserine, and another worse disaster appeared to be looming at the western passes beyond Kasserine.

Third Place



HOW ARTILLERY BEAT ROMMEL AFTER KASSERINE

By Robert C. Baldridge



The Forced March. On the morning of 17 February, the 9th Div Arty Commander, Brigadier General S. LeRoy Irwin, hurriedly received orders to move out immediately with all his available artillery (one of his 105-mm battalions was too far away at the time) plus two regimental cannon companies that were nearby. He was to “force march” to Tebessa, meaning, “Go!—and don’t let anything stand in your way.” By late afternoon, a long column of artillery started on its now famous trek with General Irwin commanding.⁵

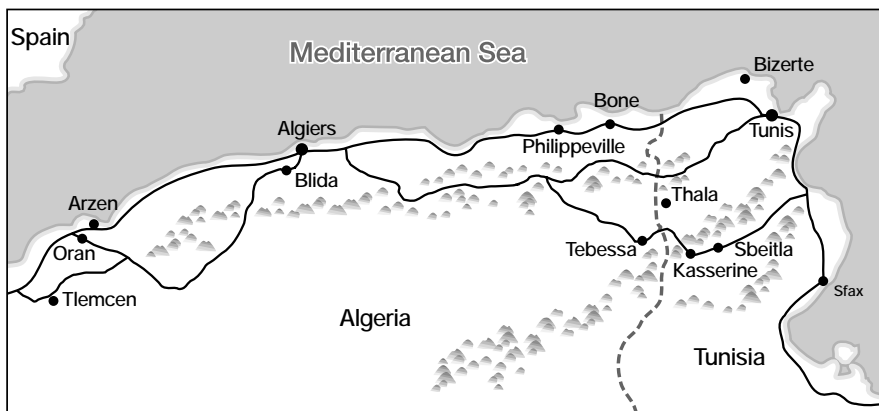
Because its 155-mm howitzers were the heaviest and the slowest, the 34th Field Artillery Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William C. Westmoreland and his Executive Officer, Major Otto Kerner, Jr., led the Div Arty column. Closely following was Lieutenant Colonel Clinton Adams’ 60th Field Artillery Battalion and the Division Artillery’s Headquarters Battery. On the way near the village of L’Arba, the column picked up Lieutenant Colonel Justin W. Stoll’s 84th Field Artillery Battalion.

The column consisted of 12 155-mm, 24 105-mm and 12 75-mm howitzers mounted on half tracks and two platoons of anti-tank 37-mm guns from the two regimental cannon companies plus 36 various caliber weapons manned by British stragglers picked up along the way. The tortuous motorized column was 11 miles long and carried 2,170 officers and men in 411 jeeps and trucks pulling guns and maintenance equipment and supplies. This was a strong combat artillery force, one to be reckoned with—if it got there in time.

Moving slowly, but almost constantly, the column would take several hours to pass by a single point. Making only short stops for brief rests, gas and rations at depots, they made the 800 miles to Tebessa and then Thala in less than 100 hours.

The winter weather was the worst—cold and rainy in the lowland plateaus and frigid, icy and snowy in the 3,000-foot high Atlas Mountains. The ancient trade roads were narrow, clay-like and slightly tilted from the middle down to the gullied sides for drainage, which caused the howitzers to slide.

At night the tight, snaky curves in the mountains made it almost impossible to see more than 20 yards ahead. Headlights were blacked out with only “cat-eye” slitted hoods. Mud in the plains and ice in the mountains covered the



Map of the Kasserine Area in North Africa

roads.⁶ Miraculously, only two of the 9,000-pound 155-mm howitzers, pulled by big Diamond-T movers, slid off the road into the ditches or the gullies as the howitzers swung behind the trucks on curves.

Near their destination of Tebessa, the retreating II Corps troops and vehicles coming at them from the opposite direction slowed the column. With the help of a few MPs, the column sped up, forcing the retreats to stand aside. The retreating troops would often call out honestly, “But you are going in the wrong direction!”⁷

Did this affect the morale of the green 9th Artillerymen who knew little of what lay ahead as they moved toward their first battle? The results of the battle of Thala answer a definite, “No.”

Among the iron men of the march were the vehicle drivers, especially those who drove the big GMC and Diamond-T trucks that pulled the 105-mm and 155-mm howitzers. They hardly got any sleep during the entire march. At the few short rest periods, their sergeants had to briskly jolt them awake in order to get them started again. Certain drivers later received Bronze Star medals for their determination along with maintenance mechanics who repaired breakdowns and road repair problems day and night.⁸

By the morning of 21 February, the column reached its crossroads destination town of Tebessa. It had nearby airfields and a huge supply depot for American and British ground and air corps personnel. At that point, the town was frantic with a hodgepodge of rumors flying, uncoordinated evacuation activities and roads crowded with ambulances, military equipment and vehicles.

When the column stopped at Tebessa, General Irwin found new orders awaiting him. He was to turn north immedi-

ately into Tunisia and head for the mountain pass behind Thala.⁹ There, he was to take command of a mixed group of American and British Artillerymen who were desperately trying to stop, or at least slow, the fast-approaching panzers and infantry of the 10th Panzer Division. Elements of Brigadier Charles Dunphie’s greatly outnumbered 26th British Brigade were doing what they could to slow the Germans. Some even were running along ridgelines firing their rifles to make the enemy think the Thala defenses were stronger than they actually were.¹⁰

The Battle. By dusk of 21 February, Irwin’s column arrived behind Thala Pass, exhausted, cold and hungry. That night was spent preparing for action—digging in the guns, unloading and stacking the ammo, making night survey data, tying plots together, aligning gun barrels by use of aiming circles and stakes, and setting up radio and wire communications—doing all the things necessary for artillery to perform effectively.

Communications that night and early the next day were mostly out as many radios were damaged by the bumpy jolts of the march. Hand-laid wires kept getting knocked out by enemy shelling.

Gun-laying instruments were not properly declinated for this location. However, Brigadier H.J. Parham, the British First Army Artillery officer, was on the scene, supplying surveys, maps and suggested gun positions, all of which sped up accurate firing operations.¹¹

The news of the arrival of the 9th Div Arty at Thala was a great boost to the morale of the Allied defenders there. They had just been consolidated under the command of Brigadier General Cameron Nicholson, Assistant Commander of the British 6th Armored Division. His small task force of infantry



and armor could not be expected to stop the German panzer division just over the next ridgeline. But a small group of his “Nickforce” tanks heroically

slowed the division down in time for Irwin’s artillery to start blasting away at it at dawn on that cloudy morning of 22 February.

Irwin had positioned himself up on the front ridge of the British forward observation post (OP) overlooking the advancing Germans. Irwin made this forward Allied OP his forward command post for all the artillery in the area.¹² A unit of British artillery already there was preparing to direct fire on the Germans on the downward slope of the ridge.

Irwin knew that Captain William F. McGonagal’s C Battery, 84th Artillery, had practiced direct fire by bore sighting.¹³ (Bore sighting is not just looking through or along the tube, it consists of making the optical axis of the gunner’s panoramic telescope parallel to the line-of-sight through the center of the tube using various instruments and methods.)

So Irwin called the four 105-mm guns of C Battery up to the ridge to go into action. Two of its guns were hit and put out of action that day, but not before the battery had destroyed two enemy Mark IV tanks plus lighter vehicles and accompanying infantry.

In addition to being shelled, the defenders were subjected to bombing by German Stuka dive-bombers throughout the day, although cloudy skies had limited both German air operations and those of the US XII Fighter Command.¹⁴

The artillery kept up a steady and relentless “drumfire” on the Germans—so much so that by later that afternoon, the howitzer ammunition was 15 minutes away from being exhausted. By the end of the next day, the 9th Div Arty suffered 45 casualties, including eight killed. It had fired 1,904 rounds.

When the 9th Artillery started firing on the morning of 22 February, German General von Broich quickly was informed that the larger blasts were obviously 155-mm howitzers. He also knew from Arab spies that troop movements had come into the pass area the previous night. Knowing that 155-mm were an integral part of an infantry division’s artillery, he became mistakenly convinced that an entire new infantry division had arrived.

His men were tired and under strength from their Kasserine fighting, and he

thought they could not withstand a fresh enemy division on the scene. He and his 10th Panzer Division stopped. With Rommel’s approval, von Broich ordered his troops to withdraw back east from where they came.

Rommel, a sick man at that time, also was disillusioned by his arguments with General von Armin in the northern sector. Von Armin was not cooperating with the new command arrangements where he came under Rommel’s command. Von Armin pulled back his troops that were threatening Tebessa.

As Allied reinforcements arrived daily in the Tebessa and Thala area, it was downhill from then on for the Germans in North Africa until their surrender on 13 May 1943.

The 9th Div Arty was awarded a distinguished unit citation for conspicuous gallantry and heroism in battle on 21, 22 and 23 February 1943.¹⁵

The Thala Battle, which one could say was won by the artillery, was America’s first land victory over the Germans in World War II. It led to their surrender and withdrawal from North Africa and, thus, to a much safer opening of the Mediterranean and on to Sicily.

Lessons Learned. The 9th Div Arty’s forced march and success at the Thala Battle provided many lessons for artillerymen that still hold true today.

Quality Leadership. An early 9th Division Commander was Major General Jacob Devers, later commanding general of the 6th Army Group in wartime Germany. The 9th’s Commander in North

Africa was Major General Manton Eddy, later 3d Army’s XII Corps Commander in Germany and then commander of the reactivated US 7th Army in post-war Germany.

General Irwin and Lieutenant Colonel Westmoreland both had excellent training at the US Military Academy at West Point. Many others of the 9th Artillery, such as Colonel Alexander Patch of the 47th Infantry Regiment, later Commanding General of the 7th Army in wartime Germany, knew the value of leadership and training in making the 9th one of the war’s premium divisions.

Practical Training. This proved to be of paramount importance.¹⁶ Fortunately at Thala, the 9th Artillery had had more than its share of practical training. It was a regular army division and was manned by the early 1941 draftees who were the best America had to offer.

Training at night was obvious for fighters, but not so much for truck drivers. The 34th FA had many such night exercises in the states, including for its truck drivers.¹⁷

The night training helped in other ways. The Artillery needs the skills to recon and set up new firing positions quickly, especially at night. The Artillery can’t just stop and fire effectively like a rifleman or tank can.¹⁸

In the states, C Battery, 84th Field Artillery conducted bore sighting training, even though it was considered unlikely the battalion would need this skill in combat. The instruments and methods were designed for 1,000 yards, but



The Thala Battle, which one could say was won by the artillery, was America’s first land victory over the Germans in World War II.

at Thala, the battalion needed its bore sighting skills for short-range direct fire.¹⁹

Also while in the states, all ranks, officers and enlisted, were trained to be able to perform the jobs of their immediate supervisors in the 34th Field Artillery. Officers were required to know what went on at least two levels down.²⁰

The 34th had practiced widening or closing the spread of a battery's four guns from the normal 200 yards to 800 yards, or even positioning guns next to each other, as conditions required. This practice is desirable in deserts, plains and mountains and useful at Thala.²¹

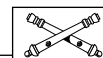
Massing Fires. It was only after Thala that the importance of massed firing was realized and understood and that a centralized (fire direction center) FDC was the way to control it.²²

Forward Command Post—Irwin's locating at a good forward OP and making it his forward command post was a pivotal strategy at Thala. His tactics were in contrast to those of the Commander of the US II Corps, Major General Lloyd Fredendall, who located his command post 70 miles back in an underground mining bunker.²³ It sounds basic today, but the concept of having a command post so far forward was new then.

Allied Cooperation. The Allies cooperated at Thala Pass, consolidating their efforts to stop the German panzers. Today, our armed forces operate similarly under many types of command arrangements all around the world.²⁴

Much has been written about the North African campaigns of the US Army,

from the November 1942 Operation Torch landings in French Morocco and Algeria on through to the May 1943 conclusion in Tunisia where the Germans were thrust out of North Africa by the Allied forces of America, Great Britain and the Free French. The Thala Battle, immediately after our disaster at Kasserine, was neither a long nor large one, but it was the turning point in North Africa, avenging Kasserine. At Thala, without the 9th Div Arty, the outnumbered and outgunned defenders certainly would have been overrun. The Germans retreated from Thala Pass and, just under three months later, from North Africa.



The author interviewed the following people for this article:

Leon Birum, Union City, Indiana—First Lieutenant Executive Officer of B Battery, 34th FA Battalion, later a Major

George Connolly, Marblehead, Maine—Second Lieutenant Reconnaissance Officer in B Battery, 34th FA Battalion, later a Colonel (USA, Retired)

Donald Harrison, Colorado Springs, Colorado—First Lieutenant Forward Observer (FO) in B Battery, 34th FA Battalion, later a Colonel (USA, Retired)

John Lannon, Pawtucket, Rhode Island—First Lieutenant Anti-Tank Platoon Leader and FO in B Battery, 34th FA Battalion, later a Captain

Aaron Lubin, Fresh Meadows, New York—Private First Class in the Anti-Tank Platoon, then a Sergeant in the Fire Direction Center of Headquarters Battery, 84th FA Battalion

Sheldon Stoddard, Portsmouth, New Hampshire—First Sergeant of B Battery, 34th FA Battalion, received Battlefield Commission to Second Lieutenant

Bert Waller, Poway, California—First Lieutenant Communications Officer in Headquarters Battery, 9th Infantry Division Artillery, later a Lieutenant Colonel (USA, Retired) (Now Deceased)

Edward Winsch, Garden City, New York—Scout Corporal and FO in C Battery, 84th FA Battalion, later a First Sergeant

Robert C. Baldrige is a World War II veteran with service in the 34th Field Artillery, 9th Infantry Division in England, France and Germany. He received a battlefield promotion to Second Lieutenant and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his actions as a Forward Observer with the 9th Infantry. Mr. Baldrige graduated from Yale in 1948 and is now retired from the textile industry. He is the author of *Victory Road*, his World War II memoirs. He also authored the article "Atomic Annie: First Nuclear Cannon" that was featured in the December 1996 *Military History* magazine. Mr. Baldrige, who is 77, is a member of the US Field Artillery Association, The 9th Infantry Division Association, The Association of the US Army, The Army Historical Foundation, Inc., The Council On America's Military Past and is a member of The National Order of Battlefield Commissions. He resides in Lawrence, New York.

Endnotes:

1. Interview with George I. Connolly, Marblehead, MA, Second Lieutenant/ Reconnaissance Officer, B Battery, 34th Field Artillery, 9th IN Div. The 9th Division was strung out over a wide area and not a unified, cohesive division until the end of the North African Campaign.

2. Interview with Leon "Buck" Birum, Union City, IN, First Lieutenant/Executive Officer, B/34 FA/9th IN Div.

3. George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative* (Fort McNair, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1957), Pub. 6-1, 466.

4. Ibid., 407.

5. Captain Joseph B. Mittleman, *Eight Stars to Victory: History of the Veteran 9th Infantry Division* (Washington, DC: Ninth Infantry Division Association, 1948), 89-91.

6. General Omar Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Holt, 1985), 27.

7. Interview with Donald L. Harrison, Colorado Springs, CO, Second Lieutenant/Forward Observer, B/34 FA/9th IN Div.

8. Interview with Sheldon Stoddard, Portsmouth, NH, First Sergeant, B/34 FA/9th IN Div.

9. Martin Blumenson, *Kasserine Pass* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 273.

10. Interview with John Lannon, Pawtucket, RI, First Lieutenant/ Forward Observer, B/34 FA/ 9th IN Div.

11. Interview with (now deceased) Bert C. Waller, Poway, CA, First Lieutenant/Communications Officer, HQ Battery, Div Arty, 9th IN Div.

12. Bert C. Waller, *Commanders We Knew, 9th Infantry Division in World War II* (Privately Published, October 1990), 5.

13. Ibid., 99; interview with Edward Winsch, Garden City, NY, and Aaron Lubin, Fresh Meadows, NY, C Battery/84th FA/9th IN Div.; Lubin, "The Battle of Thala," *Octofall*, 9th Infantry Division Association Newspaper, August-September, 1997.

14. "The AAF in Northwest Africa," *Army Air Force Wings at War Series*, (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1992), No. 6, 29-36; Blumenson, 7-81.

15. Mittleman, 91. The citation reads, in part, "Although enemy forces were entrenched only 2,500 yards distant and there were only three platoons of friendly infantry in front of the artillery, the unit maintained constant and steady fire with such deadly effect that enemy tanks units were dispersed and driven back. The cool and determined manner in which... 9th Division Artillery entered into battle after an almost incredible forced march contributed in great measure to the defeat of the enemy's attempt to break through the Thala defile."

16. "Thorough technical, psychological and physical training is one protection and one weapon that every nation can give its soldiers before committing them to battle..." Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 175. "Eisenhower had learned much. He was going to make it a fixed rule, he promised, that until the war was won, no unit in his theater will ever stop training, including units on the front line." Stephen Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 175.

17. Interview with Connolly and Birum, both of whom are mentioned in Samuel Zaffiris' *Westmoreland* (New York: Morrow, 1994), 51-3.

18. Interview with Connolly.

19. Waller, 99; interview with Winsch and Lubin.

20. Interview with Connolly.

21. Ibid.

22. Dr. Boyd L. Dastrup, *King of Battle: A Branch History of the US Army's Field Artillery* (Fort Monroe, VA: US Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1992), 210.

23. Blumenson, 273-4.

24. Eisenhower became famous for understanding the problems allies had in their relationships with each other and his success in solving them