

761ST TANK BATTALION

By LTC Roger Cunningham, USA-Ret.



In January 1941, the War Department announced that it intended to have African American units in each branch of the segregated Army. The Armored Force, responsible for the doctrine, organization, and training of armored units, was not technically a separate branch, but it was accepted by the public as such. The War Department ignored the Armored Force's objections and directed it to organize three black tank battalions. The three battalions formed as a result of the War Department's order, the 758th, 761st, and 784th Tank Battal-

ions. Except for six of its thirty-six officers, all of its 712 personnel were black.

In the European Theater of Operations, it was standard practice to attach a separate tank battalion to every front-line infantry division. The 761st was attached to the 26th Infantry Division and welcomed by its commander, MG Willard S. Paul, on 31 October. Two days later the Third Army commander, LTG George S. Patton, visited the battalion and stirred its members by proclaiming: "Men, you're the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army...I don't care what color you are, as long as you go up there and kill those Kraut sonsabitches. Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you...Don't let them down, don't let me down."

Six days after LTG Patton's words of welcome, the 761st entered combat, beginning a period of six months in action in France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and Austria. In addition to its service with the 26th Division, the battalion supported the Third Army's 71st and 87th Infantry Divisions, the 17th Airborne Division, and the 17th Armored Group. In the Ninth Army it was attached to the 79th and 95th Infantry Divisions and the XVI Corps, and in the Seventh Army it supported the 71st and 103d Infantry Divisions. On 6 May 1945, while it was attached to the 71st Division in Austria, the 761st met Russian forces at Steyr on the Enns River, and ten of the battalion's tanks formed part of the divisional honor guard for the surrender of German forces in that country. The battalion then returned to Germany and performed occupation duties until it was inactivated in June 1946, having earned four campaign streamers--Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace, and Central Europe. The soldiers of the 761st earned eleven Silver Stars and sixty-nine Bronze Stars.

More than thirty years after the war, the 761st finally earned recognition for its outstanding combat record. Senator Richard Stone of Florida urged Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander to review the unit's history. Alexander and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown then recommended to President Jimmy Carter that the battalion receive a Presidential Unit Citation, which was presented in January 1978.

In 1996 the 761st again received belated recognition when the Silver Star that had been awarded posthumously to SSG Ruben Rivers in November 1944 was upgraded to the Medal of Honor. After being wounded when his Sherman tank struck a German mine, Rivers repeatedly refused evacuation and insisted on remaining with his unit. Three days later he was killed when his Sherman was hit while moving forward to engage German tanks. President Bill Clinton presented the medal to his family in January 1997. 



An M4 Sherman tank from Company A, 761st Tank Battalion, drives across a Bailey bridge as it moves to a forward position in France in the Autumn of 1944.

ions initially comprised the 5th Tank (later Armored) Group (Colored).

The 761st was first commanded by LTC Edward E. Cruise and originally organized as a light tank battalion at Camp Claiborne near Alexandria, Louisiana, in April 1942. Later, its personnel transitioned to medium tanks (M4 Shermans) and gained confidence in them during training at the Tank Destroyer Center at Camp Hood, Texas. The battalion arrived in England in September 1944 and was assigned to the Ninth Army. A month later, under the command LTC Paul L. Bates, it was reassigned to the Third Army and landed on Omaha Beach, making it the first African American armored unit to