

Final Reunion:

A Tribute to the Men Of the 745th Tank Battalion

Editor's Note: Captain S. Scott Sullivan delivered the following speech at the final reunion of the 745th Tank Battalion at Fort Knox this past September. The 745th was the original color-bearing unit of the 63rd Armor Regiment and subsequent 1-63 and 2-63 Armor. In many ways, the story of the 745th Tank Battalion is the story of the battle for Fortress Europe. Captain Sullivan based his address on the 745th unit records and AARs, as well as the accounts of the men themselves.

It truly is a tremendous honor to be here with such a distinguished group and at such an important occasion.... What I want to do here tonight is take a few minutes and tell a story, a very, very important story. A story that needs to be told again and again so we'll never forget it. It's the story of how these men, the very ones seated in this room — along with many others not able to be with us here tonight — how these men created a famous organization. An organization which fought in the greatest, largest, and most destructive war of all time. An organization which answered America's call to arms, traveled across the globe, stormed the beaches of France, fought its way across the entire length of Europe — sometimes only yards at a time. An organization which smashed into and crushed the most powerful military force the world had ever seen to date — the Nazi war machine. Tonight — I want to tell the story of the 745th Tank Battalion.

To fully appreciate the accomplishments of the 745th, we have to take a moment and think back to the days leading up to the war. Your fathers had just fought the war to end all wars — World War I. Against U.S. protests, however, the losers were saddled with enormous and unrealistic restrictions and sanctions designed specifically to punish and cripple the nations who had been beaten. Our country accurately predicted this was a recipe for disaster, but we let the Allied powers have their say since they had suffered so much. The years passed, and the countries of the former Central Powers became poorer and poorer, with less and less economic development. The Great Depression hit these countries even harder, and fathers in Austria and Germany started to watch their families starve; conditions became desperate for the common man. Other countries like Italy and Japan, who had been on the winning side of World War I, felt that they had somehow been cheated and didn't have the international status they deserved for their efforts fighting for the Allies.

Adolf Hitler promised a new beginning for Germany — no more humiliation or starvation. He offered the people hope from repression, but kept his future dark, horrible plans a secret. In 1933, he openly defied the Versailles Treaty and began to massively rearm the country. Germany built the most technologi-



cally advanced and powerful force the world had ever seen. She developed top-notch tanks, planes, weapons, and tactics.

German military leaders developed ways of integrating infantry, armor, artillery, and air support, which completely revolutionized modern warfare. Up to this point, countries were still training and using tactics which were not too far from those used in our Civil War — and in many European countries, the troops were still primarily on foot and horseback. With this new war machine, Hitler quickly retook the portions of Germany lost in World War I. In 1936, he sent troops back into the Rhineland, and annexed Austria in 1938. Parts of the former Czechoslovakia were seized in 1938 and '39, which dismembered that country. In 1939, Germany seized Poland, followed by France in 1940. The Nazi war machine began constructing "Fortress Europe."

As the war spread, the United States realized that if Nazi Germany conquered all of Europe, it would seriously threaten our national security and the world balance of power. Our policy of isolationism began to decline in popularity and Americans started to worry. In 1940, our government enacted the first peacetime draft in our history, which applied to over 17 million young men — the very men seated in this room tonight. After

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the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was no turning back. America plunged headlong into the war, mobilizing the full might of our industry and national will. Thus the 745th Tank Battalion was born. The Army took experienced leadership cadre from a unit called the 191st Tank Battalion and other National Guard tank units in Virginia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York. They sent these cadre to Camp Bowie, Texas, to stand up the 745th — officially — on August 15th, 1942. On October 14th, over 700 raw recruits from the Chicago area arrived to fill the ranks, and the great journey began.

For the next six months, the men of the 745th completed their transformation from civilians to soldiers. They did what we all expect new soldiers to do in basic training — physical fitness exercises, basic infantry skills training, and lots and lots of obstacle courses. They also learned how to drive, maintain, and shoot tanks. By April of 1943, they were more than ready for the next step. They loaded the unit's vehicles on flat cars and moved out to participate in the famous Louisiana Maneuvers. They spent six weeks of intense time in the field, practicing maneuver formations and firing every possible kind of gun they might see in combat. On June 6th, exactly one year before D-Day, the men loaded up the equipment on rail cars again and returned to Camp Bowie, Texas.

There they continued training in preparation for overseas deployment and, on August 14th, got the word to move. The battalion traveled immediately by rail to Camp Shanks, New York, for medical exams and final processing. On the way, they passed through Chicago — some within sight of their own homes. The 745th boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* and departed New York on 20 August. Baker Company was detailed to man the 6-inch guns in defense of the ship. The *Queen Elizabeth* made the crossing alone because she was far too fast for any military escort. It only took five days to get to Greenock, Scotland, where the battalion unloaded and boarded trains for their next home, Camp Ogbourne St. George in Swindon, England. Here the 745th continued training for the invasion of Europe. Baker Company spent the next three months practicing amphibious assaults and finding the best way to mix infantry with armor during landings. The rest of the battalion fired gunnery, especially emphasizing antiaircraft techniques using .50 caliber machine guns, basically the same model that's on my tank today. In December 1943, the battalion's size was expanded to include another tank company, Dog Company, consisting of 37mm, 17-ton light tanks. This continued until January, when the men of the 745th were chosen to train new replacements arriving from the states. From then until March, they instructed somewhere in the neighborhood of 3,000 recruits on amphibious operations and gunnery. In April, however, everything changed.

On April 3rd, 1944, the 745th moved into a place called Parnham Tent Camp to make final preparations for D-Day. There they learned how to waterproof the tanks by using thick putty to seal all the cracks and holes. The tanks were also equipped with a tall shroud, or snorkel-device as we refer to it today, which allowed the tank to travel in water deeper than the height of the tank. The troops were moved into staging areas and issued French and Belgian money. On June 2nd, Able, Baker and Charlie Companies, with other parts of the battalion, loaded the boats. The original landing date of 5 June was delayed 24 hours because of bad weather — really bad weather.

At 3:00 in the afternoon on D-Day, Baker Company hit the beach. Their landing craft carried the M4A1 Shermans as close to the shore as possible, but eventually hit bottom and had to let them out in eight-foot deep water. The first tanks of the 745th plowed through the waves to the Easy Red portion of Omaha Beach. Able and Charlie Companies would not be able to follow until about the next day. If you've seen the movie "Saving Private Ryan," then you may have some idea, I'm told, of the chaos and carnage on the beach. Vehicles and tanks were everywhere — overturned, submerged in the surf, burning. Bodies and equipment lay everywhere, and the beach was becoming clogged because the troops had not yet been able to break out through the enemy's defenses.

Of all the beaches assaulted that day, this one was the toughest. For four years, the Germans had been building the defenses encountered by the 745th that day. They had built concrete bunkers in the side of the 90-foot high cliff — angled so their fires raked the beach sideways for miles. There were numerous machine gun and fighting positions dug in at the base of the high ground, all interconnected with trenches that allowed the Germans to shift positions without exposing themselves. Mines were everywhere — floating, mounted on wooden poles in the surf, and buried in the sand. The entire area was sighted in by the German artillery, which rained constant accurate and deadly fires. This was the very beach that COL George Taylor, commander of the 16th Infantry Regiment, referred to when he made his now famous quote: "There are two kinds of men on this beach — the dead and those who are about to die. Now let's get the hell out of here!" Baker Company's tanks were practically the only ones which had successfully landed. Two sister battalions — the 741st and 743rd — had only been able to land a handful of tanks each, due to the ineffective pontoons they had instead of snorkels, and due to the rough seas. Baker Company pushed ahead through the minefields and obstacles, losing three tanks in the process, but creating the first breakthrough off the Easy Red part of Omaha Beach.

Baker Company left the beach and pushed inland. They attacked enemy positions in the town of Coleville-sur-Mer and spent the night holding their ground. The next morning, they continued the attack, taking Le Grand Hameau, and arriving at their objective at about 2:00 in the afternoon. Charlie Company landed at about 10:00 on the 7th, and immediately assisted the infantry in clearing out enemy strongpoints. They continued to attack through the night, eventually reaching St. Anne. There, they successfully withstood and repelled an enemy counterattack more than 300 strong, inflicting heavy losses on the Germans but losing only two tanks in the fight. Able Company also landed the morning of the 7th and moved inland. The next day, they fought their way deep into the enemy's lines — catching up with their sister companies. The battalion then conducted a series of several attacks, fighting hedgerow to hedgerow, destroying or dispersing the enemy with their tanks, allowing the infantry to seize ground. By June 13th, the 745th had penetrated deeper into enemy territory than any other Allied unit, helping secure the Army's precarious foothold on Fortress Europe.

For about a month, the Allies expanded the beachhead while the 745th continued to fight its way through the hedgerows. By now, supplies and reinforcements were pouring over the beaches as preparations were made to break out and continue the attack into France. In mid-July 1944, the 745th assembled

together, for the very first time in Europe, near Mestry. Here, the battalion's tanks were outfitted with large steel prongs sticking out from the front. These steel teeth were used to punch through the hedgerows and cut a path for follow-on vehicles. The tanks also had one dozer blade per company, used to bury enemy soldiers alive in the fighting positions behind the hedgerows. This technique had an enormous psychological effect on the Germans and convinced many of them to surrender. By the way, I should mention here that my Abrams company used the very same technique in the Gulf War with an identical effect on the Iraqi infantry.

The 745th prepared for the breakout, known today as Operation Cobra. Essentially the Allies would carpet-bomb an area three miles wide — theoretically pulverizing everything below — and then push seven divisions (that is roughly about 100,000 troops total) through to turn the Battle of Normandy into the Battle for France. The 745th's tank companies were attached out to the three infantry regiments of the Big Red One. On 25 July, the bombing began with spectacular effects. Although the men of the 745th were some miles from the impact area, the earth still trembled and windows rattled in nearby buildings. The 745th fought alongside — or more often — in the lead of the infantry regiments, providing the essential support and responsive firepower that only tanks can give. The battalion fought against enemy tanks in fortified positions, cleared towns, outmaneuvered dug-in German 88s, and protected the flanks so that Patton could push his 3rd Army south to begin the drive across France. Until mid-August, the 745th continued to push the enemy counterattacks back, withstood bombing and strafing by enemy planes, and endured near constant artillery shelling.

The great thing about telling the story of the 745th Tank Battalion is that it is the same as telling the story of the whole war in Europe. The men of the 745th fought in every major American battle there was to mention. After the successful breakout from Normandy they helped close the Falaise Gap — basically annihilating the entire German 7th Army and eliminating organized resistance in Northern France. The Germans were fleeing to the Siegfried Line to defend the border — and the 745th was right on their heels. In September, the battalion slammed into the German 15th Army, which was also in the process of retreating to the Siegfried Line to defend the Fatherland. In this collision of moving forces, now known as the Battle of Mons, the 745th, as part of the Big Red One, helped complete the destruction of five top-notch German divisions in three days with minimal losses. That same month the battalion, led by Baker and Dog Companies, attacked and successfully breached the Siegfried Line, which had been declared impenetrable by the Nazis.

The 745th didn't stop and rest on its achievements — it continued to advance. In October, they entered the Battle of Aachen. Defended by fanatical SS troops, this ancient fortress-city, dating back to Charlemagne, was a nightmare to attack and clear. Every house — each made of stone and brick — held a machine gun nest or heavy weapon of some kind. The fighting was house to house, pillbox to pillbox. The tankers of the 745th bravely supported the infantry by firing directly into the openings of the bunkers or using the dozer tanks to pile up dirt in front of them. Although very vulnerable in the city, the tankers of the 745th aggressively attacked and helped turn Aachen to rubble. On October 21st, the defeated garrison surrendered — outmatched, outmaneuvered, and outgunned.

The battalion prepared for the next task — the Huertgen Forest. Essentially a man-made obstacle, the Germans had planted trees in a belt to give cover and concealment to the defending

infantry. The trees were just close enough so that a tank couldn't quite fit between them. The soggy ground and constant snow and rain made maneuver off the roads nearly impossible. The cold and wind were incredibly bitter, hard, and painful. Into this hell went the 745th on November 16th. In this battle, these men faced a seemingly impossible task. The Germans defended to the last man, artillery and mortar shells fell like rain, and the poor weather prevented effective air support. Enemy soldiers were everywhere, behind every tree and every rock. The men here tonight will remember desperate smaller battles like the fight for Hamich, Hill 232, Heistern, Luchem, and the old castle at Point 104, where SGT William Tucker earned his Distinguished Service Cross by repelling an enemy counterattack of two hundred men and several tanks, using only well-aimed artillery fire. In all of these smaller battles — each an impressive victory by itself — these men here tonight proved their worth.

The battalion thought it might get a rest break when the Germans, in their last big gamble of the War, counterattacked through the Ardennes Forest with 24 divisions — 10 of them tank divisions. The 745th rushed to set up defensive lines stretching east to west from Butgenbach to Weismes, Belgium, as part of the Big Red One. The German high command was betting on being able to capture our huge supply base to our rear in Liege, Belgium, and drive on to Antwerp, splitting the Allied effort in two. The stubborn and remarkable defense put up by the vastly outnumbered 745th, along with the infantry regiments of the Big Red One, was key in stopping the entire German onslaught. By mid-January 1945, the battalion had stubbornly held its ground and began destroying the remaining, retreating enemy forces. This battle was clearly the turning point in the war. The Battle for Germany proper was now underway. The Nazis had gambled on surprise, better equipment, bad weather as cover, and superior numbers to throw the Allies back into France and possibly even off the continent. They had risked everything but had not counted on the fighting spirit of the Americans. Germany's military leaders began to realize all was lost, and it was now merely a matter of time.

Mid-February 1945 found the battalion halted, performing much-needed maintenance, and getting ready for a massive attack against the defenses in the Roer River area. The 745th launched the drive to the Rhine River with Able Company being the first to cross the Roer River. The battalion moved across the Cologne plain and encountered stiff resistance. The Germans had laid thousands of mines and hid numerous antitank guns to ambush the Americans. As a result, the 745th began to conduct more and more night attacks. The fighting was so severe that, by the end of February, Able and Dog Companies were down to two tanks total — due to the enemy's guns and the deep, muddy sugar beet fields.

The battalion fought its way from one small village to another — always moving toward their objective, the city of Bonn and its bridge across the Rhine River. In early March, the battalion conducted a night attack to capture this critical bridge. Able Company moved in with the elements of the 16th Infantry Regiment and sneaked quietly into the city. They found the bridge and began to secure the area but not before the Germans unfortunately blew it up right in front of them. The battalion continued to clear the city, even destroying a tank and antitank gun on the university campus. The ancient city of Bonn was now in the hands of the American Army — thanks largely in part to the 745th Tank Battalion.

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very heart of Germany. The 745th moved down to support the expansion of the bridgehead and crossing. They crossed the Rhine and continued the fight. The Germans were putting up a heavy fight, attempting to push us back over the Rhine. Artillery and mortar fire was continuous. As the 745th pushed deeper into Germany, the Wehrmacht threw everything they had at them. The 745th took town after town and repulsed multiple counterattacks, all of these actions directly contributed to the American Army keeping the bridgehead and building enough combat power to break out into the Ruhr Valley and link up with the American 9th Army. As the 745th moved through following the breakout, their job was to eliminate tough pockets of resistance — always a tough job — which were bypassed earlier.

The battalion then pushed on to assist the Big Red One in seizing and clearing the Harz Mountain area. Here the Germans were well-organized and the mountainous terrain kept tanks mostly on the roads. The 745th met the challenge, and from April 12th through 21st fought bravely and scored record numbers of kills and prisoners. Incidents like 1st Platoon, Able Company’s performance on 18 April were an example of how formidable and experienced the 745th had become. The platoon alone captured 50 enemy vehicles near Rubeland and, if that wasn’t good enough, went on to ambush an enemy column the same day to destroy 30 more vehicles and capture a thousand prisoners. The combined effects of actions like these broke the German will and mass surrenders began. The German Army was crumbling and the war in Europe nearly over.

The 745th, however, wasn’t done yet. They went on to relieve elements of the 97th Infantry Division on the Czech border. It was now the beginning of May and all indications were that the Germans were about to quit. The 745th didn’t quit — although given the mission to defend — they kept attacking and edging deeper in Czechoslovakia. They pushed so far that the division had to give them orders to stop on May 6th, but not before Dog Company had made the historic linkup with Russian Forces at Karlsbad. The German High Command surrendered two days later — the Allies had taken Fortress Europe.

Time did not stop for you there, however. Even though you returned home — victorious — and started to rebuild your lives, your battalion’s legacy continued, and continues on today. It lives on in the actions of the present-day 745th Tank Battalion — now called the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 63rd Armor

Regiment. Every soldier in these units today wears your crest — this crest right here on my uniform. It has the seven tracks, the four-sided square, and the five-pointed star — all standing for the 745th Tank Battalion and the star representing Texas were it was born.

We’ve even updated it to reflect your great accomplishments. We added a Belgian Lion for your deeds in that country and the decorations you won, and a French fleur-de-lis for your bravery in France and the awards they gave you. A diagonal yellow stripe represents the Rhine River and the bitter fighting through the heart of Germany.

We did all of this so you’d know we hadn’t forgotten. We treasure the legacy you left to us and judge our own actions by it. We’ve trained hard and fought our own battles hoping you will judge *us* worthy to carry on your traditions. The 745th Tank Battalion indeed still lives. It lives on in the memory of the people of France and Belgium where they still fly our flag on VE day and welcome Americans with tears in their eyes. It lives on in the gratitude of a modern-day democratic Germany, which due to your courage in battle and humane treatment afterwards, convinced them to willingly embrace our ideals and work harder than any other defeated nation ever, to become one of our strongest Allies and supporters. It lives on in the people of the Czech Republic — who come and hug our troops in uniform when they see them wearing the Big Red One patch. It also lives on in the hearts and minds of its present day soldiers who, even as we speak, prepare to deploy to Kosovo to guarantee that the peace and stability you bought for Europe, with your sweat, blood, tears, and lives, is not lost during our watch.

I stand here tonight — on behalf of those troops — and officially thank you...

I thank you for your service...

for your courage...

and for your example you left for us to follow.

God bless you all.

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