



Day of the Panzer: A Story of American Heroism and Sacrifice in Southern France

Jeff Danby

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This is a rarely detailed “you are there” account of World War II combat, describing a brief but bloody tank/infantry action in August 1944. Based on six years of research—drawing from interviews, primary documents, and visits to the battlefield—“The Day of the Panzer” transports the reader into the ranks of L Company, 15th Regiment, Third Infantry Division, and its supporting M4s of the 756th Tank Battalion as they grapple head-on with the Wehrmacht.

L Company was nearly wiped out during the bloody Anzio breakout of May 1944. Under the fiery leadership of Captain James “Red” Coles, the unit was rebuilt and molded into a tough, colorful bunch in preparation for “Operation Dragoon.” On August 15, 1944, they hit the beaches in southern France, joined by the tank crews of 2nd Lt. Andrew Orient’s 3rd Platoon, all veterans of Cassino.

After overcoming pockets of resistance along the coast, the tanks and infantry swept inland, nipping at the heels of the retreating German Nineteenth Army. A sudden German artillery salvo dispatched six L Company men and left Lt. Orient dead. 1st Lt. Edgar Danby, an armor instructor (the author’s grandfather), was flown in from Italy to replace him.

Despite logistics problems, the Third Division forged north through the Rhône River valley until they found the Germans holding fast, L Company and its supporting tanks leading the regimental charge. In the haste and chaos of the day, they managed to slip the German rearguard and unwittingly attacked the German LXXXV Armeekorps headquarters in the small town of Allan. Both sides were shocked by the ferocity of the battle.

Led by a rampaging Panther tank, the Germans counterattacked, knocking out the Sherman of Lt. Danby while threatening to cut L Company’s positions in half. Surrounded and facing annihilation—but steeled by the courageous leadership of Captain Coles and others—L Company held fast despite dead and wounded on all sides and 13 men captured. The seemingly unstoppable Panther, stalking the battlefield like some black knight from a Teutonic fantasy, continued to hold off American reinforcements in the morning, until the Armeekorps headquarters executed a withdrawal.

In this book, the minute-by-minute confusion, thrill and desperation of WWII combat is placed under a microscope, as if the reader himself were a participant. In this small but singular battle, the courage of US troops in their liberation of France is given full due.

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