

HEADQUARTERS
3RD UNITED STATES ARMY
FORT SAM HOUSTON, TEXAS

17 February 1943.

General Orders No. 19

Section IV.

".....is hereby given authority to activate the 295th
Engineer Combat Battalion....."

This is the story of a battalion, a baby of World War II. It was conceived in Texas, and born in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. Its life blood was drawn from New England and the Middle Atlantic States. Its cadre, the non-commissioned officers who moulded the unit into a functioning force, came from the 11th Engineer Combat Regiment then stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. The officers came from all over the United States.

There was no history, no great tradition that the battalion had to live up to; it was formed to do a job in a world at war. There was no celebration when the unit was activated on 3 March 1943. Work started immediately. The clerks, musicians, coal-miners, laborers, college men, schoolboys, sons, brothers, and fathers, civilians all, came from the induction centers, got off the trains, and were assigned to companies. These assorted men were to become the 295th Engineer Combat Battalion.

The transition was not easy; it involved sweat, blood, and tears. The battalion commander and the S-3 burned the midnight oil preparing training schedules and performing other executive tasks. The S-4 harried supply sources for materiel; the men were feverishly engaged in the intricacies of close-order drill, making beds the Army Way, and all the other details that go to make Basic Training. There were many who could not stand the gaff, and many who decided that, by hook or by crook, they would get out. Some did, but those that remained knew that their job would be hard and they buckled down to it.

Our life in the States was no different from that of hundreds of other similar organizations. There was Basic Training with the non-coms cursing and the men sweating. Then there was Unit Training when the men saw Army Engineering devices for the first time. With amazing rapidity they learned to build the variety of bridges, make assault crossings of rivers; they learned to handle mine-fields, and they hiked, and they hiked, and they hiked. It was rough going for civilians becoming soldiers. They swore and griped, cursing the army in general and engineers in particular. Their features, meanwhile, lost the indoor pallor and acquired an outdoor tan. Bodies and minds became rugged. The battalion was certainly no place for weaklings, and such training soon weeded them out.

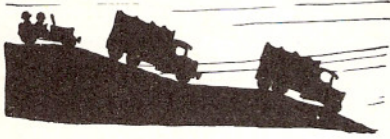
We were still training when we got our first real job. We received orders to build a road through a wooded area in Camp Shelby. What a triumph that was! In the short space of six days, where only trees, undergrowth and soft earth existed before, we built that first road. It was almost a mile long, there was a beautiful pile bridge, and culverts, and drainage canals. We talked about that job for days after!



THE ROAD CONSTRUCTION PROJECT
CAMP SHELBY, MISSISSIPPI

Now, we figured, we were really engineers. We were no longer a bunch of disorganized, removed, civilians; we were on the ball. We really threw our weight around in inhospitable Hattiesburg, Mississippi, after that. Other jobs followed: construction of a swimming pool, a firing range, more road construction and repair. Most of us felt we were ready for anything now. We had been in the army for just six months.

On August 10th, 1943, we moved from Camp Shelby, Mississippi to the Louisiana Maneuver Area. The trip was made in trucks, the huge convoy snaking its way slowly along the roads of the deep South. The CO, Major Carter, really sweated out that move. He drove his jeep up and down the length of the column, shouting and ranting, like a circus trainer getting his obstre-



porous charges where he wanted them. Woe betide the soldier who dropped his helmet and stopped the vehicle so that he could retrieve it. Next day when a man dropped his helmet, the driver of the jeep following did a Cossack trick, and picked up the helmet on the run!

We spent the first night near Natchez, Mississippi, and some of us went into the town on pass. Some got drunk, but next morning we were all there, and the trucks were lined up and on their way in good order.

In Louisiana and Texas we did road repair work, repairing bridges, replacing broken and damaged culverts, and in general repairing the damage done during the last maneuver. We slept in pup-tents, tried to keep the razor-backed hogs from the kitchen areas, and out of our beds. Not too successfully, either! We all thought we were slated for the next maneuver, and like any other outfit confronted with a Louisiana Maneuver, we didn't like it. There were snakes, and mosquitos, and rain, and dust, and no passes.

On September 29th, the equipment and personnel were loaded on two trains, and we headed west for the Desert Training Center. That was the time that all the railroads were advertizing the fact that Pullman Coaches were not available to the public because the troops were using them. We travelled in Day Coaches, and after three days the wooden seats felt like steel rods. The trip made quite an impression on parts of us.

Louisiana was rough, but the Desert Training Center was rougher! During the days the heat was intense, and during the nights it was freezing cold. Stuck in the middle of the Mojave Desert, in tents that seemed to exaggerate the heat of the merciless sun; with perspiration soaking the clothes during the days, and caking up like starch during the nights, we weren't happy. Major Carter, who did not often make speeches, felt he should make one then. He told us that the stay in the desert was a test; that it would separate the "men from the boys". Most of us were under twenty, but we felt we were men. The first few days in the desert saw about eighty men reporting for sick call each morning. This soon dropped off, however, especially after the "men or boys" speech.

Then we began to get passes to El Centro, California; Yuma, Arizona, and Mexicali, Mexico. The desert became less unpleasant, and eventually tolerable. Some of the men brought their wives to El Centro or to Yuma. All the men who were on the advance party got married while we were there. Five officers' wives became pregnant during this period. The El Centro Chamber of Commerce used to advertise their town as being in "California's Fertile Imperial Valley"..... we certainly found it so.

So we suffered the heat and the sandstorms and the rainstorms. In October, 1943, rumors about our going overseas spread through the camp, and we began to wonder whether it was to be Europe or the Pacific. Some of the men hadn't had a furlough yet, and they wondered whether they would get one before leaving the States. One group was all ready to leave.....they had purchased their railroad tickets and were to depart in the morning. Then came orders cancelling all leaves and furloughs, and we prepared for desert maneuvers. The CO made another speech then, and told the boys who had not had their furloughs that they would have one before they left the U.S.A. They weren't very happy at that moment however.

Maneuvers were held from October 23 to November 11, 1943. All we remember about that was the dirt and the sand, and the long blackout drives across the desert. We never did find out whether our side had won or lost. We got back to Camp Pilot Knob, and the men who hadn't had one finally got their furlough.

From November 11 and all through the month of December we had showdown inspections. That was a chore. We displayed our belongings and equipment so many times that we eventually did it automatically daily before breakfast. Finally, the carpenters began making wooden boxes, and they labelled them "Boston POE". We were pretty certain then that we were headed east. We were happy about that. None of us relished the idea of fighting in the Pacific.

After 200 showdown inspections we were ready to go. On 3 January, 1944, we departed the Desert, and a week later, travelling in Pullman Coaches this time, we found ourselves in Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts. New England's snows never looked more beautiful, but a lot of us caught colds. Many managed to get a brief visit home during our stay at Standish; then there were more showdown inspections, followed by the inevitable "dry-runs" when we loaded everything on our backs, stood in line for an hour, and then went back to the barracks. We received the last items of equipment; gasmasks and so forth. On 14 January, the telephones out of camp were disconnected. On 17 January we boarded the trains for the Boston Port of Embarkation. The public address system at the station blared, "There's a Great Day Coming, Manana." It made us smile.



At the docks there were Red Cross girls (bless 'em) with doughnuts and coffee, and a great big loud military band. With hands full of doughnuts and coffee cups, our ears full of the din of martial music, we didn't talk too much. Our hearts beat a little faster, though....it was the Big Moment. And so we mounted the gangplank into the Liberty Ship "Excelsior III", en route, we figured, to England.



We landed in Glasgow, Scotland, on 29 January 1944. There were the Red Cross girls again with their doughnuts and coffee at two o'clock in the morning. It was good to see them. Within an hour we were on the train heading south through England to Tidworth, Hampshire. When the boat docked at Glasgow, an English Lieutenant General welcomed us, told us how crowded things were in England, and that accommodations for us would not be as good as they were in the States. We thought back to the tents of Louisiana and the Desert, and we shuddered. When we got to Tidworth, however, we found stone barracks, and beds! This, we felt, was heaven, and we blessed the British.

The one thing that everybody remembers about that trip was that conditions were quite crowded. Bunks were so close together that when a man wanted to turn over while sleeping, he had to get out of the bunk and get back in reverse. The medical officers lived in the "Insane Ward" of the boat. Chow was fairly good though. After the 'operational rations' we forced down our gullets in the desert, the chow on shipboard was almost bearable. There were three or

four movies shown, each about twenty times. It seemed that everytime we would walk through the mess hall between meals, Bing Crosby would be on the screen singing "White Christmas" from the movie "Holiday Inn". We had to take turns walking around the deck; there wasn't room enough for everyone to be up there together. The huge convoy with its escort vessels, destroyers, air-craft carriers, and speedy corvettes darting about between the boats, made an impressive sight. Some men stood by the rail for hours on end.....but didn't notice the convoy; they were too occupied with internal problems!

We stayed in England for six months. We admired the beauty of the countryside, and we saw what the Nazis had done to the cities. We learned to drive on the left side of the road, and we learned to drink English beer (although we never did learn to enjoy it). We made dates with the English girls - WAAFS and ATS, and we had dances and learned the English dance steps. We liked England. Some of us found the girl of our dreams and got married. Most of us decided we would wait until we got home, though.

Then we began to prepare for "D-Day", the long awaited "Second Front." In April we moved into the field near a small sleepy village called Hindon, in Wiltshire. We were there with our sister units, the 82nd Engineer Combat Battalion, and the 234th Engineer Combat Battalion, all under the 1115th Engineer Group Headquarters. In the center of the bivouac area there was a black pyramidal tent surrounded by barbed wire, and guards were always mounted around it. In that tent were plans.....our work and our time for landing on the Continent. It held our destinies.

The sixth of June, 1944....."D-Day"....found us with ears glued to radios listening to first reports of the landings in Northern France. We were still in Hindon. Then we really started to prepare. "Dry-runs" all over again, loading the trucks ready for embarkation, practising descending ropeladders. We were eager to get going.

The Big Moment did come at last; actually there were lots of big moments. The battalion was divided up into three serials, and each serial was on two or more boats. The first wave started from Hindon a little after midnight on 13 June. There was battalion headquarters, parts of each line company, and the medical detachment. They reached the marshalling area in Winchester at 0830 that morning. Before dawn two days later, half of them were awakened and sent on their way to the Southampton POE. The other half was awakened a few hours later and they too reached another set of docks at that port. They all sweated out a day and a night, sleeping on the quayside, before they got on the boats. The first half, after moving into the Channel, had to return to port because their ship's anti-mine apparatus was not working. The second half joined their convoy, stayed the night off the Isle of Wight, and then started off for France. They saw the coast at about noon on 18 June. They surveyed the coast defenses, and the wreckage, and the boats sunk near the shore. It all looked very grim. That night the skyline glowed with the glare of fires and bursting shells, and they were still on the boats in the Channel. Then came the air-raids. Every ship and every ack-ack battery in the neighborhood opened up; tracer-bullets streamed across the sky, the 90 mm. guns on the ship felt like 10 inchers to those in the ships' holds. Barrage balloons caught fire and fluttered to the earth or the sea; bombs seemed to drop all around. We suffered no casualties.

Next morning we started to unload the boats. What a job that was. The vehicles lifted overside by the ships' hoists careened back and forth almost uncontrolled; the smaller boats bobbed up and down; men hanging on to the guy ropes were swung all



over creation. Then the vehicles would be lowered to the floating dock or the LCT below, crashing alternately against the sides of both vessels. The trucks would strike the deck of the lower vessel, then bound up like frightened horses as the boat dropped into a trough of the waves. Clamboring down the rope ladders from one boat to another was a major hazard, but we all made it. Then came that short trip to shore, and finally driving off the boat onto Omaha Beach, hoping that the waterproofed engines would hold out.



OMAHA BEACH. 18 JUNE 1944

Those that got off that day drove to the prearranged marshalling area near Isigny; those that didn't get off that day stayed in the channel for up to eight days while a severe Channel storm blew itself out. That is the way it was with all the groups that followed. Each had its little adventures, each had their delays and sweat jobs; everybody made it eventually. Soon we were all together again in a little town named Briqueville in Normandy.

