

## CHAPTER VI WORLD WAR II

### THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM

Following the World War, the 32nd Division, like nearly all of the National Guard Divisions, was largely mothballed. However, when the war clouds again began to gather and it was obvious that America would need the Guard. The 32nd Division was reorganized and brought back into an active status.

For the 107th Regiment, the activations started in 1937 with the First Battalion. The units received Federal recognition as follows: Headquarters, First Battalion, Detroit, April 26, 1937; Company A, Calumet, April 26, 1937; Company B, Sault Ste. Marie, April 5, 1937; and Company C, Detroit, April 19, 1937.



Company A in 1937. The officer in front is William Milford, the battalion commander from 1946 to 1951. Credit: battalion archives

In 1938, the following two units received Federal reorganization on the dates indicated: Medical Department Detachment, First Battalion, Calumet, June 13, 1938, and Headquarters and Service Company (less Band Section), Detroit, May 4, 1938.

The reorganization of the Regiment was completed in 1939 and 1940, when the following Federal recognitions were granted: Company D, Marquette, October 26, 1939; Company E (redesignated such from Company A), Escanaba, October 27, 1939; Company F, Calumet, December 4, 1939; Regimental Headquarters, December 29, 1939; Band February 19, 1940; Headquarters, Second Battalion, May 21, 1940 and Headquarters, First Battalion, May 24, 1940.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1937-1939 period, the Regiment performed summer training at Camp Grayling. Special emphasis was placed on assault boat drills and float bridging.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the ominous signs of the impending war, the Regiment was ill equipped, short of men and without a single vehicle. What equipment it did have was of World War 1, vintage. Years of neglect by the parsimonious Congress and unit inactivity could not be remedied overnight.

The outbreak of War in Europe in 1939 intensified the stateside training and filling of all National Guard units. On the Axis side was arrayed a fantastic amount of military power, the German Army having 300 plus divisions, the Italians with 70 divisions, and the Japanese with 120 divisions. Standing against this tide was the ridiculously understrength American active Army, and a mere 18 understrength National Guard Divisions.

It is interesting to note that at the time, National Guard troops were not required to serve for a period of more than a year, or serve anywhere outside of the Western Hemisphere. This law was not repealed until August of 1941 some ten months after the 107th was Federally inducted and then by a squeaky 203-202 House vote. Needless to say, it was not well received by the homesick troops, as characterized by the bitterly expressed 'Ohio,' over-the-hill-in-October!

### MOBILIZATION

In the summer of 1940, after an all train movement from home stations the sadly equipped, foot powered understrength Regiment participated in the Second Army war games at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. Those participating well remember back-breaking, full pack (50lb.) loads carried on endless forced foot marches which were killers for the ill-conditioned civilian soldiers. They acquitted themselves well, but it was evident from their performance and from that of the rest of the units involved, that if America was to be prepared for

war, an extended period of active duty training would be required. On October 15, 1940, the Regiment with the 32nd Division was activated for what was intended to be one year of such training.<sup>3</sup> The activation of the 32nd was only possible after the passing of special Congressional legislation, allowing the call-up of selected Guard units.

The 32nd Division was mobilized in the second of what was eventually 22 increments. All told, 299,045 Guardsmen, in 3,717 units were called-up. Since President Roosevelt had signed the new Selective Service Act at the same time the first Guard increment was mobilized, many new draftees found their way into understrength Guard units, but only six months after the call-up.

When the 107th Regiment was mobilized, the unit locations were as follows: Detroit, Regimental Headquarters, Headquarters and Service Company, Company C; Sault Ste. Marie, 1st Battalion Headquarters, Regimental Band, and Company B Escanaba, Company A; Marquette, Company D; Calumet, 2nd Battalion Headquarters, Medical Detachment, Company E and F.<sup>4</sup>

The Regiment's first active duty post was Camp Beauregard, an old post located deep in the heat dismal Louisiana swamps. Again, the unit's movement was via rail. After becoming acclimated to the miserable Louisiana weather and red clay gumbo, the Regiment went to work with a will.

In addition to a full training program, they constructed rifle and pistol ranges, a 30 foot bridge and  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile of roadway. The Regiment's work was outstanding enough to warrant special commendations from the Commanding Generals of the 32nd Division and Army Corps.<sup>5</sup>



Camp life at Camp Livingston, circa 1941

credit: battalion archives

On January 26, 1941, the entire 32nd Division including the 107th Engineers, moved to the newly constructed \$22,000,000 Camp Livingston, about fifteen miles northeast of Alexandria, Louisiana.<sup>6</sup> Alexandria was the center of a military complex including in addition to Camps Beauregard and Livingston, Camp Claiborne (station for the 34th Infantry Division of Minnesota) Camp Polk and Barksdale Air Field. During the months of April and May, 1941, over 300 selectees all from the U.P. were assigned to the Regiment, as it was far short of the number needed for war strength.

The 107th was still an integral part of the 32nd Infantry Division and in August of 1941 participated in the largest peacetime Army maneuvers ever held. Over 500,000 troops took to the field for two months, in maneuvers that covered over 16,000 square miles. Camp Livingston was never much of a post, but after two months of field duty in the Louisiana swamps with their chiggers, wood tic's and poisonous coral, rattler and water snakes, it looked like home to the men of the 107th. Late October saw the Regiment attach an engineer team to a Division combat team participating in -special war games in the Carolinas. Compared to the hardships of the recent two month Louisiana 'war,' the men reported the Carolina 'war' was just a piece of cake.<sup>7</sup>

While in Louisiana the Regiment performed a variety construction and a multitude of various construction projects, in addition to normal engineer and infantry training.<sup>8</sup> During the period, the Regiment was also slowly equipped with vitally needed engineer equipment and vehicles. Personal items received included new helmets to replace the World War I 'flat tops' and the 'hot' M-1 Garand semi-automatic rifle. Initially only ten of the M-1's

were issued per company. It was the bridges they built that drew high praise from the Corps Headquarters in the form of a letter commending the Regiment with the statement, 'Your 107th Engineer Regiment proved equal to the task and their two bridges over the Comrade Creek was an achievement of which we are all proud.'<sup>9</sup>



Bridging the gap in Louisiana.

Credit: battalion archives

During this period there were three types of bridges in general use in the Army inventory. The first was an assault bridge designed to pass troops quickly over creeks and streams. The 'book' said well-trained troops should be able to erect it at the rate of 40 linear feet per minute. The 107th did it at the rate of 50 feet per minute. The next type of bridge was known as an H-10 and consisted of two prefabricated steel girders supported by a mud sill on each bank and covered by three-inch plank. The 'book' record was 57 minutes for 72 linear feet. The 107th time stood at 22 minutes! The last bridge in the inventory was the ten-ton pontoon bridge which the Regiment constructed at the rate of 6½ feet per minute, twice as fast as they were supposed to be able to. These record setting times weren't achieved merely by constant practice. Many long nights were spent by company officers and non-coms trying to figure out how to save precious minutes and even seconds from times.<sup>10</sup>



107<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment, 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, passes in review at Camp Livingston credit: battalion archives

With the American entry into World War II, on December 7, 1941 the 107th was shipped by train to Fort Dix, New Jersey, (leaving Livingston on January 2, 1942) to prepare for immediate overseas deployment.<sup>11</sup> The

rest of the 32nd was shipped to Fort Devins, The intention was to ship the 107th on ahead as an advance party for the 32nd Division to prepare the overseas camp for the Division's arrival. Shipping Division engineer units ahead of their divisions was common practice. However, in the 107th's case fate intervened, twice! First, the 32nd was triangularized, from the old square Division organization concept which resulted in the loss of one infantry and one field artillery Regiment and reduced the engineers from a Regiment to a Battalion. <sup>12</sup>To accomplish this the 1st Battalion was redesignated the 107th Engineer Battalion and the 2nd Battalion the 131st Engineer Battalion and reassigned.

While the 107th was in the mid-Atlantic enroute to an unknown European destination (Ireland) as the Division vanguard, fate struck again. Due to pressing Japanese advances in the Pacific, the 32nd was diverted from its European assignment to the southwest Pacific. As it was impractical to recall the 107th, the Battalion was relieved from its 32nd assignment. Thus ended a long and happy relationship. The 114th Engineer Combat Battalion from New England was substituted for the 107th and assigned to the 32nd Division.

The Battalion departed the Brooklyn Navy Yard on U.S. Naval Transport GEORGE F. ELLIOTT on February 18, 1942. The Transport soon dropped her anchor at Halifax, Nova Scotia where a large horizon to horizon convoy formed. Escort for the massive fleet was provided by the battleship U.S.S. NEW YORK, heavy cruiser U.S.S. PHILADELPHIA and a large number of destroyers. Although the men of the Battalion doubtlessly thought they were to be considered passengers during the trip, the men of the weapons squad were assigned to man the ship's anti-submarine guns. The duty ran for four hours on and eight off for the entire 13 day trip.

For protection the ELLIOTT mounted a total of three guns, two 3-inchers on the aft gun deck and a 5-incher forward.

To man these weapons the Navy provided a total of 31 men, which was exactly enough to man them for one watch and no more. As they were required to be manned at all times, the gun crews necessarily had to be beefed up by so-called passengers!

At the time the 107th's Table of Organization included a weapons squad in each platoon with the mission of furnishing security to work parties. The squad was equipped with a half-track armored vehicle towing a 37 mm anti-tank gun, two .30 caliber heavy (water cooled) and one .50 caliber (air cooled) machine guns and Thompson submachine guns.

Most of the additional gun crews were provided from weapons squad personnel. Under the direction of key Naval ratings, the men thus 'crewed' their way across the Atlantic.

It was an extremely rough mid-winter crossing and the 107th was a seasick outfit, except for the men assigned to the gun crews who were just too busy, cold and tired to be bothered by such a minor item.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the 107th's gun crews had no opportunity to show off their gunnery skills even though U-boat alarms and subsequent depth charging was almost continuous.

For the troops it was jammed quarters in berths five high wearing 'Mae West' life preservers constantly and chow lines (for those who could eat) hours in length.

## **IRELAND**

Immediately after debarking in Belfast, Northern Ireland on March 3, 1942, the Battalion was railed inland to quarters in small British Nissen hut camps. Veterans remembered that while the quarters weren't all that bad, the British Army rations and heavy wool underwear and socks created problems until the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps units were operations and capable of supporting standard rations. The 107th was one of the first U.S. units sent to the ETO (European Theatre of Operations) and such were-normal problems expected. The Battalion was assigned to V Corps as a Corp Engineer unit.

The 107th was initially engaged in various construction projects, which included the building of an entire general depot at Moneymore, the largest military installation ever built in Northern Ireland. The depot task was massive, consisting of railroad tracks and sidings, warehoused, living quarters, mess halls, etc., literally everything required for a complete base.

On June 5, 1942 when the work was 99 percent complete, the depot was given an inspection by the Commanding General of the Service of Supply. The comments received were extremely favorable, stating that 'the job was an outstanding example of efficiency, neatness and speed.' <sup>14</sup>

During its 11 month heavy construction, intensive training 'tour' in most of the seven Ulster counties, names like Belfast, Balymena, Coleraine, Carrickfergus, Enniskillen, Holywood, Moneymore, Larne, Cookstown, Portadown, Portrush everlasting endeared themselves to the homesick troops - tempered somewhat by bouts, when shillings and half-crowns were plentiful, of Old Bushmills or Johnny Jameson's Irish Whiskey with a Guinness Stout chaser.

At this point in time Colonel Ralph Loveland was relieved of command of the 107th and reassigned as the Corps Engineer. Lt. Colonel Loren W. Jenkins assumed active command and led the Battalion throughout the remainder of the war. An officer of unusual ability, Lt. Colonel Jenkins had been a First Lieutenant in Company A (Escanaba) when the Regiment was mobilized in 1940! <sup>15</sup>

Fate soon struck the 107th again. Much to the chagrin of the Michiganders, on June 1, 1942, the 107th was allied with the 112th Engineer Battalion of Ohio into the 112th Engineer Combat Regiment. The 112th became the 1st Battalion and the 107th the 2nd Battalion. <sup>16</sup>The 112th gained ascendancy as its lineage dated to the Civil War, while the 107th officially had no lineage since even the links to the 107th of World War I were not yet official. As a result of the reorganization, all of the official records give credit for the 107th's work to the 112th Regiment. It was a cruel blow to the proud men of the Battalion.

It was a sad departure from Ulster, but duty called and the 112th Regiment was transferred to England via a ferry movement to Scotland and train transfer to devised Wiltshire, England, to a fine British Army camp.

About this time the Battalion was given a unique opportunity to demonstrate the British floating Bailey bridge. The European theater brass had apparently been of the opinion that the bridge was fine for dry gap work, but took far too long to erect in its floating mode.

Colonel Loveland, at the time, with the Chief Engineer's office, thought differently and was instrumental in setting up the Wallingford Bridge School for Thames River water crossing training. After various British and Canadian engineer units took timed cracks at the crossing, a company of the 1st Battalion of the 112th reduced a Canadian record time of three hours down to an unbelievable hour and 10 minutes. Then came the 2nd Battalion 112th's (107th) turn and after several days of hard practice, Company E went against the clock and turned in an astounding 42½ minute crossing (timing stopped when a 6 x 6 truck successfully negotiated the bridge). <sup>17</sup>Impossible claimed the brass. Prove it! An with most of the tactical brass in the European Theater of Operations looking on Company E did just that with a 4 minute crossing. Captain Cecil F. Clark, Company Commander and later Battalion Commander of the 146th Engineer Combat Battalion, treated the proud men of the unit to a keg of ale and a half a day off. The success of the demonstration was the principal reason the floating Bailey bridge saw extensive use during the war. <sup>18</sup>

On August 11, 1942, Company F, 112th Engineers was transferred to the North African Theater of Operations.

On September 7, 1942, the Company was attached to the Allied Security Command and moved to Glasgow Scotland, arriving on November 23. <sup>19</sup>There they immediately embarked for Algiers, North Africa, when they landed on December 6, 1942. The Company engaged in various security and reconnaissance mission in the area, occasionally coming in contact with the enemy. On January 25, 1944, the Company was redesignated as 522nd Engineer Company. Later the unit fought in Italy and eventually was organized into the Regular Army. Currently the Company is stationed at the Armored School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, as the School Engineer Company. <sup>20</sup>

For the next year, the 2nd Battalion of the 112th (the old 107th) was engaged in intensive training and construction projects in the north of Ireland, to include additional depot work. However, another game of musical chairs was in store for the Battalion.

On August 19, 1943, at Saunton Sands Camp Braunton, England, the Battalion was redesignated as the 254th Engineer Combat Battalion. It was under this designation that the 107th would fight through the remainder of the war. The Battalion now consisted of Headquarters and Headquarters Company plus three letter companies,

with a total strength of 29 officers, 3 warrant officers and 632 enlisted men (authorized). <sup>21</sup>Why the Battalion was not redesignated as the 107th has never been made clear!

The 112th Regiment Commander (later the Commander of the 1121st Engineer Group) stated that they were the 'best construction unit I saw during th war. They were a well disciplined, highly competent combat engineer unit, whom it was a pleasure and a honor to command.' <sup>22</sup>

Simultaneously with the organization of the 112th and 254th Battalions, the Regimental Headquarters of the 112th Regiment was organized into the 1121st Engineer (C) Group Headquarters with the command thereof carried over by Colonel Robert K. McDonough (West Point). The Group Executive Officer, Lt. Colonel Gerald Feidt, was Company Commander of Company E, 107th Engineer Regiment, for a brief period at Fort Dix. The later attachment to the 1121st of the 146th Engineer (C) Battalion (a Kentucky National Guard outfit), treadway bridge, light pontoon bridge and light equipment companies was the basic organization of the 1121st Engineer Group throughout the war.

These Engineer Combat Groups are interesting outfits, a combat concept used for the first time in this war. The purpose behind their origin was to make available more skills than could be supplied by the old style Combat Regiment, and at the same time to achieve a flexibility that would promote a more efficient use of manpower than was possible with a Regiment consisting of two fixed Battalions. In the Engineer Combat Group the only fixed component is the Headquarters staff, consisting of 17 officers and 64 men. When the Corps, to which the Group is assigned, gives it a job to do, this Headquarters does all the planning (and design if any), and then the various types of special units at its disposal are called in. Usually there are three to five Battalions and a number of special companies, say dump truck, bridging, topographic, heavy equipment, etc. And, of course, the Group may, and probably will, be handling a number of different jobs at once.

Thus, the group can be 'tailor-made' for any mission that is handed it. The setup has been likened to a general contractor-subcontractor arrangement, the headquarters nucleus being the general, and the Battalions and Companies the specialist subs who are called in when needed. Without questions, the group idea (which incidentally is also applied to general service Regiments) provides the sought-after flexibility and wide use of special skills. <sup>23</sup>



Constructing the assault training center near Slapton Sands. Credit: battalion archives

From September through October of 1943, the 254th (old 107th) was busily engaged along with some support from other units in constructing an assault training center in the sand dunes on the west Atlantic coast of Cornwall at Barnstable and one on the east coast at Slapton Sands. These facilities proved extremely realistic, even as far as building exact duplicates of German fortifications known to exist at Normandy. The sites for the centers were carefully chosen as they most clearly resembled the Normandy beaches.



Company B pouring concrete for a training pillbox.

Credit: battalion Archives

Included in the assault training center were roads, bridges concrete walls, landing craft mock-ups, pill boxes, assault courses, wire entanglements, demolition courses and various special mockups. <sup>24</sup>The amount of material used by the Battalion was staggering. The men poured 3,800 cubic yards of concrete; used 90,000 board feet of lumber and strung nearly 1,800 miles of barbed wire! Later, numerous U.S. infantry units assaulted the mockups, using artillery preparation, straffing and live ammo as the final rehearsal for the Normandy invasion. <sup>25</sup>

One remarkable aspect of the assault training center project was that it was accomplished when the Battalion was nearly 30% understrength and had newly been reorganized! Company F of the 112th Regiment that went to North Africa, was in reality the old 107th Company C. So when the 254th was formed from the 112th's 2nd Battalion, it was short Company C. Thus, in the reorganization, Companies A and B were broken down for cadre and personnel for the new Company C. All of which left the new 254th terribly shorthanded! Platoon Sergeants acted as Platoon Leaders due to a shortage of officers.

Following the actual completion of the training center, the Battalion maintained it. This necessitated not only site support while the infantry units were cycled through the various courses, but also repairing and live fire damage at night, so that the next day all courses were operational! Since there were 53 separate ranges, the work volume was immense. <sup>26</sup>

In November, the Battalion was relieved from V Corps assignment and reassigned to the First Army. The 146th Engineer Battalion assumed the training center mission. After a motor march to Nequay, Cornwall by shuttle, the Battalion began an arduous training program including mine warfare, assaulting fortified positions, river crossing operations, gun and crew training, road blocks, chemical warfare, night operations, and landing craft embarkation.

Earlier, the Battalion was understrength. Now new replacements arrived, raising the Battalion to a 19% over strength in officers and 10% in enlisted men.

Company A was also assigned an additional task, the removal of 6,000 British mines on the Thurlestone beaches. The mines had originally been laid as a defensive measure against an expected German invasion. Because of deterioration, the mines were reduced to an ultra-sensitive condition. It was while removing the mines that the Battalion took some of the first American casualties in the European Theater. <sup>27</sup>

It was business as usual for the Battalion until March 23, 1944, when it received an alert order for Operation Overlord, the invasion to Fortress Europe.

Training for the Battalion stepped into high gear and V Corps Headquarters was well pleased with the progress. They were especially impressed with the high interest displayed by the troops and by their excellent sense of duty. Morale was very high, in spite of the fact that 50 percent of the men had been overseas for two years or longer. Doubtlessly, the certain prospect of impending action against the enemy had given new meaning to the word training.

On May 16, Companies B and C left Newquay for the invasion marshalling area. A day later one platoon from Company A was directly attached to V Corps for special duty during the invasion. The platoon served as a special security guard for the Corps and went ashore with the first waves. <sup>28</sup>

## **NORMANDY AND HEDGEROWS**

On the late afternoon of June 7, the Battalion less one platoon from Company A was loaded into LCT's (Landing Craft Transport) at Southampton. By June 8, they were ashore at Normandy and engaged in general combat engineer work under sniper fire. Blowing obstacles, repairing vital roads and breaching clearing minefields were only a few of the varied tasks performed by the Battalion during this difficult period. Although the Battalion came ashore in one of the later waves and didn't 'storm the beaches in a deadly hail of enemy bullets,' they did soon come under heavy fire, and, as in the past during the building of an important bridge.

As Corps Engineers, the 254th was under the effective control of the 1121st Engineer Combat Group. During the Normandy Beach assault, each of the Group Engineer Battalions was assigned a different task in the Corps area. The 146th Engineer Battalion had the job of clearing underwater obstacles so the assault landing craft could safely reach the beach, and the 112th Engineer Battalion was to clear the beach area of any mines. These two Battalions suffered many casualties going in ahead of the infantry. The 254th was considered the best of the three Battalions and therefore given the most critical task, of constructing vital bridges across the Isigny causeway, thereby facilitating the link-up of the reinforcing units, with the airborne assault troops.

In the hours and even days immediately following the invasion, the battlefield situation was critical. The flow of supplies and, more importantly, troops was badly impeded by deliberate obstacles, including cratered roads and destroyed bridges. One such bridge was over the Vire River, directly between the V Corps area (Omaha Beach) and the Vill Corps area (Utah Beach). The retreating Germans had completely destroyed the old stone bridge superstructure, but the foundation was still sound. Fired by the urgency of the situation, one Company of the 254th built a 70 foot, class 40 Bailey Bridge in record time over the old abutments, all the while being subjected to sporadic enemy small arms and raging artillery fire.

Later the Battalion upgraded the bridge to a class 70 to handle the increased loads of the reinforcing armor units rushing to the front. Eventually, the Bailey was replaced with a permanent timber I-beam bridge. Construction of the timber replacement bridge was anything but easy. Being a tidal river, the Vire's depth varied from five to eighteen feet. Other than at the ebb, the current was always heavy. As the river bottom was primarily rock, extreme difficulty was encountered in driving the piles for the bents. Even with constant blasting progress was slow, but in the end the engineers were successful.

By late June, the Battalion was again building bridges and again under hostile fire, this time building four class 40 bridges over the L'Aure Interfievre to bring desperately needed ammunition resupply trains to sorely pressed 115th Infantry Regiment Combat Teams. The rapid construction of the bridges under such difficult conditions was given an oral commendation by the 29th Infantry Division Commander. Later, three of these bridges were replaced with ones the Battalion captured from the retreating Germans.

Until the middle of July, the 254th changing bivouacs frequently, continued to accomplish normal engineer tasks, blowing hedgerows, filling road craters, and clearing minefields. However, at 0400 hours on July 16, the order came down for the Battalion to reorganize as infantry and move to the front lines to take part in the famous Battle of Saint Lo. There they occupied hedgerow foxhole positions vacated by the First Battalion, 9th Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. Opposing them along the Battalions mile long front were elements of the elite 5th German Parachute Division.



The Battalion's mission was to hold a mile long front and deliver preplanned heavy machine gun plunging fire into the enemy, and important road junctions while adjacent units of the 9th Infantry on the right and left flanks attacked in a wide pincer movement. As a small part of the breakthrough to spring General Patton's armored units loose out of the beachhead.

While the machine gun crews were busy, the remainder of the Battalion was largely employed in patrolling, a constant probing to the German front to determine the enemy strength, positions and if they were withdrawing. During much of the time, the enemy shelled the Battalion's positions with artillery and mortar fire and swept them with machine gun and small arms fire. The enemy fire, along with numerous S-mines, accounted for 22 men wounded in action (WIA) and 8 killed in action (KIA). The Battalion's first KIA occurred during this time, Private Ernest Zanen of Company B.

Relieved of the infantry mission on July 28, the Battalion returned to their bivouac positions, 'sadder, wiser, dog-tired and with much greater respect for the Queen of Battle, The Infantry. <sup>29</sup>



A triple-single Bailey Bridge.

Credit: national archives

From August 1 - 9, the 254th operated in close support of the rapidly advancing 35th Division. Again coming up to the winding Vire River, the Battalion built an 80-foot double single Bailey bridge and four treadways to allow the Division to cross. Characteristically the engineers were again in front of the unit they supported. Also during this period, routine tasks such as road maintenance, repair of road craters and sweeping roads for mines were continuously performed.

The Battalion was switched from the 1121st Group to the 1171st Group from August 10 - 19 to support the rapidly advancing 2nd and 29th Infantry Divisions. Missions included repairing an arch bridge and bridging dry gaps with captured bridge equipment as well as road maintenance.

On August 20, the 254th was again under the 1121st Group, now in support of the 4th and 90th Divisions. This period saw very rapid movement and consequently engineer missions increased. Work in removing road blocks and keeping the roads passable grew, as well as the dangerous job of sweeping them for mine. The Battalion's water points were constantly being shifted to keep up with the rapidly advancing units. During the month of August alone, over 234,110 gallons were pumped.



One of the many water point locations. Note the "Snortin' Bull" sign. Credit: national archives

During August, one platoon of Company B. <sup>30</sup> was attached to the 102nd Cavalry. The Cavalry had the mission of keeping in close contact with the retreating enemy and the engineers, after dividing into small groups to accompany the points of the CAV's different columns, the job of clearing mines from in front of the attacking tanks!

The Battalion entered Paris, in support of the 4th French Armored Division, but unlike World War I, their duty was to clear enemy obstacles and recon bridges. <sup>31</sup> Movement was rapid during this period of pursuit of the disorganized retreating enemy.

As is becoming obvious, as a Corps Engineer Battalion, the 254th was constantly being shifted from unit to unit. In effect they were used as reinforcements for any difficult engineering task facing any of the Divisions within the V Corps area. This employment was typical through the end of the War, and is in fact the same mission assigned to the Battalion today! During the early part of September, 1944, the Battalion was in close support of the 8th Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division. In addition to the expected road repair, the 254th also rebuilt two bridges at LaFere. Shifted on from the 8th in general support of the 4th Infantry Division, a treadway bridge at Fumay was repaired and later removed by Company A.

On September 11, the Battalion was under the direct control of the V Corps Engineers and used to repair roads and bridges in the 5th Armored Division area. Briefly, two officers and 41 enlisted men were attached to the V Corps Military Government Police Battalion.

The Battalion was directly attached to the 5th Armored Division on September 15 and assigned to work under the direction of the Commanding Officer of the 22nd Armored Engineer Battalion. Engineer missions included: the complete destruction of 43 enemy pillboxes and capturing 103 enemy prisoners (the pillboxes were part of the Siegfried Line, in the vicinity of Wallendorf, Germany); the construction of a class 40 timber bridge across the Our River and the construction of 24 feet of Treadway Bridge and approaches at Niedersgegen, Germany. This marked the 254th's first entry into Germany.



A Sherman tank crossing a timber trestle bridge built by the Battalion. Credit: national archives

On the morning of the 22nd, the enemy destroyed the timber bridge and mined the road approaches. An American vehicle was destroyed by one of the mines and blocked the road. Responding to the situation under the leadership of Captain Ames Minor, Company B removed the vehicle and cleared the mines to allow the armor to move up, all the work performed under sharp small arms fire. For his gallantry in action, Captain Minor received the Silver Star.

It was while attached to the 5th Armored that elements of the Battalion frequently came into close enemy contact. The situation at the front was so unstable that security had not been posted along the FEBA (Forward Edge of the Battle Area), thus enemy units often infiltrated during the dark night.

On the nights of September 18 and 19, one platoon of Company B was ordered to guard the bridge previously built by Company A at Wallendorf. In the predawn hours of the 19th, enemy engineers made an attempt to demolish the bridge with prepared charges, but were driven off by determined fire from the B Company platoon.

Since a stronger effort by the enemy was expected again on the critical bridge, the entire Battalion was ordered to Wallendorf with the mission of protecting the bridge. Hastily, the Battalion dug in positions on the hill above the river and town. During the night of the 20th, the enemy again made a strong attack on the bridge, now supported with mortar and heavy machine gun fire. Company C received the worst of the enemy onslaught, suffering 14 casualties. But the determined resistance drove the Germans off, and kept the bridge intact!

On September 22, the Battalion was relieved from the 5th Armored and back with the 1121st Group, but still under an alert for an for an infantry reorganization. The brief attachment to the 5th Armored was a costly one, the 254th suffered 31 combat casualties.

Ironically, the Germans did finally blow the hotly contested Wallendorf Bridge, but only after the 254th turned its protection over to the 28th Infantry Division. <sup>32</sup>

October was a comparatively quiet month for the Battalion. Although the 254th was back in support of the 4th Division (under the direction of the 1121st Group), the primary work was road maintenance, filling craters, ditching, minor bridging and culvert construction. Periodically unit trucks and drivers were organized into Provisional Truck Companies and detailed for transportation support to other units. The last part of the month saw selected men receive training in heavy float bridging, as well as mines and booby traps, all items of increasing importance to the unit. The Battalion's three water points broke all previous records, pumping 732,026 gallons!

Road maintenance was nearly always a Battalion mission and although it isn't glamorous, it was vital. When the roads weren't passable, the advance stopped. Nothing moved, infantry or armor! It is difficult to realize just how much road the Battalion maintained. In October it was a mere 109 miles. In September events moved so fast, no accurate estimate could even be made!

Integral to the maintenance of roads was a close and adequate supply of rock and gravel. To be assured of this support, the Battalion operated its own shale and rock quarry! In October the quarry crew produced over 5,200 cubic yards, all used by the 254th in road maintenance. <sup>33</sup>



A replacement timber trestle bridge built next to a Bailey Bridge.

Credit: national archives

Most of November passed quickly with the 254th operating in support of the 4th and 99th Infantry Divisions. Major tasks included replacing two class 40 timber bridges near Wirtzfeld washed out by heavy rains, digging emplacements for the 11th AAA Group and miscellaneous routine road work.

While bivouaced in an area termed 'Buzz Bomb Alley', a disaster occurred on November 29 when at 9 p.m. a German V-1 'Buzz Bomb' came thundering and roaring into the Battalion area exploding at treetop height in the center of the Company C and Headquarters and Service Company Command Posts. Large trees were uprooted and splintered like match sticks, shacks in which personnel had been living were leveled and torn to bits, tents and tarps ripped and punctured from flying debris. The explosion also destroyed an impromptu lighting system utilizing a captured German generator, forcing the medics to work on the injured in the dark. Although by a miracle, no one was killed. 25 men were evacuated to the hospital and 42 received lesser wounds. <sup>34</sup>

## THE BULGE

The Battalion earned its bread and butter as an engineer unit, but it was as infantry that it experienced its finest hour in an action that was later to be called the 'Battle of the Bulge.'

At midnight, December 16, the Battalion command post received a message from the 1121st Group putting the 254th on a two-hour alert for an infantry mission and directing the Battalion Commander to report to the G-3, 99th Infantry Division at once. Although Lt. Colonel Jenkins left at once, the roads were so jammed with traffic, mostly light tanks and AAA (Anti-Aircraft Artillery), that he couldn't report until 1 a.m. on the 17th.

The G-3 briefed the Commander that the enemy breakthrough occurred to the southeast and the axis of advance was up the Honsfeld - Bullingen highway. The 254th was to move immediately to form a defensive line south and east of Bullingen, Belgium to protect U.S. tanks and tank destroyers that were reportedly clogging the area roads.

When the Commander returned, the Battalion was formed into two echelons: the forward set up a command post at the road junction of St. Vith and bivouac roads in Bullingen with the line companies dug in on the south and west side of the town, while the rear echelon, under the command of Captain Reginald Fairfax of Headquarters and Service Company, moved rearward to the vicinity of Warmes, Belgium. By 6 a.m. the forward units were in position; Company C in the north, A in the center and B in the south. The movement to battle forced the men to evacuate their comfortable dug-in-for-the-winter bivouac positions. As always seems to happen, the breaking camp and move was done in the dark of night.

As soon as the Battalion established the command post (CP) at Bullingen, all other units in the area were notified of the situation and runners were sent to locate the tanks and tank destroyers the 254th was supposed to protect. When the runners returned, it was with the information that none could be found! Regardless, however, the Battalion's mission was to defend and defend they would!

All around the 254th's positions swirled the confusion of routed American Army, fleeing from the unexpected German onslaught. Company B brought one straggler into the CP, a sergeant from a tank destroyer unit, who reported he had escaped from the enemy after being captured near Honsfeld. The wildeyed NCO reported that enemy armor was headed to Bullingen in strength. He had counted 12 German tanks and could hear more! A bit later, a Lieutenant from a tank destroyer outfit walked into the CP to warm up. When questioned, he replied he had a platoon of armored infantry with him in half-tracks. When further questioned where his own CP was, he replied, 'I'm mobile. The Germans are coming and I'm leaving.' With that comment, he left.

At approximately 6 a.m., four flares, blue, white, red and white appeared to the right of Company B. Five minutes later, tracked vehicles could be heard approaching. Since there was the chance that the noise could be from division units still front of the engineer's positions, fire was held. In spite of the dark, armored vehicles could just dimly be seen moving towards the waiting engineers. When shouts in German were heard, there was no longer any doubt and the 254th opened fire with rifles, grenade launchers and machine guns. Immediately, German infantry leaped from the Panzers and half-tracks. The vehicles withdrew while the German infantry pressed their attack forward. They stormed to within 15 yards of the Battalion's positions, before being driven back! Later, the Germans were indentified as part of the elite 9th Parachute Division and 1st SS Panzer Division!

Twenty minutes later, the German infantry again charged forward, now under the close supporting fire of their tanks. Now large caliber shells exploded on the hastily dug in engineers as their positions were swept by 20 mm and machine gun fire. Despite the heavy fire, the Battalion again repulsed the surging German infantry. In both attacks, the Germans had suffered heavy losses, due to the sustained and accurate fire of the men of the 254th.

There was a brief respite of ten minutes before the Germans renewed their attack. But it was enough time for the Battalion to evacuate its wounded. The dawn was now breaking.

The third German assault surged forward like a firestorm. This assault was led by a dozen heavy Panzers and Tiger Tanks. Since the 254th had no anti-tank weapons, the tanks swept on and over-ran Company B's positions, crushing two machine guns in the process and Company B's fine Platoon Sergeant Charles 'Snake' Senical. But the men stayed in their foxholes, allowing the fearsome tanks to pass through and then rose to deliver a deadly fire on the following infantry. Their fire was so intense the infantry withdrew and maneuvered around the Company's flank. In the desperate fighting, one Panzer was knocked out by bazooka fire and two more damaged. The area forward of the position was littered with dead and wounded infantry. Simultaneously Battalion Headquarters was driven out of its Bulligen CP by a troop of Mark IV enemy tanks.

Since the Battalion was overrun, the G-3 of the 99th Division ordered them to fight a delaying action, falling back on Butgenbach. Company C, the northern most unit, was ordered to fight out of town, northwest along the railroad tracks; Company A back towards Wirtzfeld and Company B and Headquarters down the Bullingen-Butgenbach road. This all was easier to order than execute!

Company C managed, after a sharp action, to fight its way through the town to new positions north of Bullingen. During the fight, the unit had literally been cut in two. Many of those that reached the new position arrived in groups of 'two and three. Many others were killed or captured!

Company A, through a communications problem, hadn't received the order to move. Since the unit was still holding its original positions, it stayed in place.

Company B, however, had a far more difficult time. When the Germans overran the Battalion, the unit was cut off and consequently couldn't withdraw down the Bullingen-Butchback road. For the moment they simply disappeared in the German surge.

Headquarters and Service Company was able to quickly form a new defensive line west of town. To give the appearance of having more strength than it actually did, men were constantly shifted from position to position!

The 254th Battalion Headquarters used any and all available men to hold the new line, including cooks, drivers, clerks a motley collection of stragglers from the 99th Division Headquarters and two tank destroyers.

The Headquarters line was clearly visible from the town and when the German point arrived at approximately 8 a.m. and recognized the line of positions, it turned south on the St. Vith road. The Battalion mission of turning the enemy advance was achieved!

At about noon, two platoons of Company B reached the Headquarters positions after working their way through the woods. As soon as the new men were positioned into the line, three mobile anti-tank guns from the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion moved into the hastily assumed defensive line and immediately opened fire.

Seeing the danger of the engineers line, the Germans brought up artillery and swept the positions with shellfire. At 1 p.m., under the cover of several newly arrived light tanks, the engineers slipped out of their positions and established a new line at the crossroads. At 3 p.m., the Battalion was relieved by the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division which was hastily moved up from a rear rest camp.

Company A, still holding the original forward positions, having been by-passed by the advancing enemy, was subjected to shelling and strafing at 3:45 by their own troops. The unit was so far forward, everyone thought they were Germans. Under his own authority the commander withdrew his Company and successfully rejoined the Battalion.

Withdrawn to Camp Elsenborn to reorganize, the Battalion was given the mission of digging defensive positions of slit trenches, gun emplacements and barbed wire entanglements. The job in spite of foul winter conditions was done in record time, urged on doubtlessly by the fact that the Germans were shelling the area! The Battalion also prepared obstacles including minefields, abatis and craters, but none were executed when the enemy advance was halted.

The Battalion rear echelon didn't get away without a scratch. During the heat of the action, German panzers drove them out of Waimes, forcing the rear echelon to move to Spa. <sup>35</sup>The 254th had taken a terrible beating in personnel and equipment, but their tenacity in blocking the German advance had prevented the capture of important supply dumps west of town and had saved the vital north shoulder of the Bulge and prevented a drive into Liege, Belgium. It was this action of the Michigan engineers that successfully knocked the German timetable out of kilter and allowed the subsequent defense of the Bulge to be successful. <sup>36</sup>For their furious combat without support and against overwhelming odds, the 254th received the U.S. Distinguished Unit Citation and the French Croix de Guerre with Silver Star. <sup>37</sup>The cost, however, was high with 28 casualties and 54 men missing in action. For their gallantry in action during the Battle of the Bulge, three members of the Battalion received Silver Stars and 11 Bronze Star. <sup>38</sup>Fifty German soldiers were also captured during the action.

January saw the Battalion operating about 15% under strength, mostly due to battle losses and engaged in routine road maintenance. Recent heavy snowfalls forced the men to use D-7 dozers to plow some sections of the MSR (Main Supply Route) as well as clear airstrips and areas for artillery emplacements.

The 254th had another encounter with a V1 'Buzz Bomb,' this time there were happily no casualties. On January 1, one struck 300 yards south of the CP (Command Post), but only burned and didn't explode. The same day a German fighter (ME 109) crashed and burned next to the Company A area. Although bombs on the burning aircraft exploded, no one was injured. <sup>39</sup>

During most of February the Battalion operated in close support of the 78th Infantry Division. Since the 78th was advancing through large sections of the once impregnable Siegfried Line, they required not only normal MSR road maintenance, but, also sweeping roads and shoulders for mines. The cold weather had caused severe frost heaves, calling for special attention. In some critical points, the road was impassable and required a new corduroy base. Over 1,100 yards of corduroy was eventually constructed. Additional jobs included clearing several minefields, destroying enemy pillboxes and bunkers, removing enemy demolition charges for an abatis. <sup>40</sup>In another mission, Company B removed 2,375 pounds of enemy charges from two railroad bridges in Rotgen. An oddball mission required Company A to construct a special ramp to allow the unloading of 36 heavy artillery tractors from railroad flatcars.

During part of the advance, a road block in depth consisting of large craters was encountered on a hairpin curve near Dedenborn near the Roer River Dams. Company C breached the obstacle by filling one crater with

rock blown from the cliffs above it and bridging another with 70 feet of class 40 Bailey Bridge. The curve was extremely tight and great difficulty was experienced in just getting the Bailey material into the site.

The Battalion did have enemy contact. While on a reconnaissance mission at the Dedenborn roadblock, an eight man enemy patrol was surprised and captured! <sup>41</sup>



To bridge the Rhine River the Battalion built the 1,730 foot Victor Bridge and set a record the still stands for the longest tactical floating Bridge ever constructed. Credit: battalion archives

## **BRIDGING THE RHINE**

The battalion next came to the forefront of history in March of 1945 when the advancing Allied armies reached the wide barrier of the Rhine River. On the near side were the Allies, on the far side were the Germans and the river stood in between as an impossible obstacle. Although the bridge at Remagen had been captured, its' half destroyed condition and imminent collapse prevented its use as a supply line. The only choice was to build new bridges and one of the missions fell on the 254th.

The Battalion performed admirably, bridging the Rhine at Niedersbrseig (Honningen) in under 14 hours and in the process constructed the world's longest tactical floating bridge. At 1,370 feet, it stood as a marvel of combat engineering. The bridge saw extremely heavy use. Actual bridge construction took a mere 12 hours. There was a two hour delay waiting for material! Within five days of its completion, 6,378 vehicles in various convoys including many Sherman and medium tanks had crossed, plus the normal traffic. <sup>42</sup>

In advance, the 254th had practiced in England until they were able to construct floating bridge equipment at a rate of 220 feet in 42 minutes. The actual bridge construction started early in the morning on March 22 with Company B installing the critically important upstream cable. <sup>43</sup>

Two days before, Company A had started building the approach roads, doing much of the work at night with searchlights borrowed from a tank Battalion.

The work of actually constructing the bridge proceeded rapidly with the material being supplied by the 990th, 994th and 998th Engineer Treadway Bridge Companies and Detachment 1 of the 508 Engineer Light Pontoon Company. <sup>44</sup>

The possibility of heavy interference by the enemy was expected and to prevent any such attempt, the airspace above the bridge site was well guarded by patrolling Allied fighters, and an entire Battalion of infantry was used to secure the area. However, all the enemy was able to muster was an occasional round of artillery or mortar fire on the far shore.

When the bridge was three-quarters complete, a near disaster occurred that almost caused the loss of the entire bridge. It seems that the upstream cable sagged due to the heavy current and several of the upstream kedge anchors were accidentally installed over the sagged cable. As a result, when the cable was drawn taut, the anchors pulled loose and the bridge threatened to break away. Fortunately, several Navy LCVP's were available and were able to nose the snaking bridge back into position until repairs were made. <sup>45</sup>

When completed, the center pontoons had a mere ten inches of freeboard, and round-the-clock maintenance was required to keep the unwieldy structure operational. Crossing armor was a special problem as they continually attempted to accelerate, resulting in damage to anchorages and treadway. The Battalion only stayed with their marvelous bridge for a short period, crossing the now named Victor Bridge a day after completion in pursuit of the ever-changing front.

If anything, March could be called the 'month of bridges' for the men of the 254th. Besides the world record Victor Bridge, they also built a 110 foot triple single Bailey Bridge over the Oleg River at Germund and two 80-foot double singles over the Urft River also at Germund. A 110 foot double single reinforced to a class 40 with timber bent was built over the Weid River at Neiderbreit. The unique use of a timber bent was required since sufficient bridging was unavailable to construct a 'pure' bridge of the proper classification.

The previously mentioned 110-foot Bailey caused some special problems. The near and far banks of the Olef River were heavily mined. Both Riegel and Teller mines were embedded on the pavement and approaches of the original reinforced concrete bridge before and after its destruction and were further covered with debris. Because of the reinforcing steel, mine detectors were useless. This necessitated hand probing and clearing. After it was felt that all mines were cleared, the new Bailey was built. Unfortunately five hours later, an explosion occurred under one of the near shore base plates while a medium tank was in the middle of the bridge. This caused the bridge to buckle in the center and damage the approaches. The engineers salvaged a potentially disastrous situation by first repairing the approaches and then erecting a 24 foot treadway span over the damaged Bailey center. Shortly, the critical bridge was again open for traffic. <sup>46</sup>

In addition to their bridging, they also found time to maintain 190 miles of road, supervise the removal of road blocks with civilian laborers, destroy two enemy ammunition dumps and remove numerous minefields.

March also saw a much deserved honor for the Battalion when Lt. Colonel Jenkins was awarded the French Croix de Guerre 'for exceptional services rendered in operations for the liberation of France.' <sup>47</sup> During the critical period December - March, Major Jesse D. Kelsay, a Regular Army Master Sergeant, was the Battalion Executive Officer and Major Albert Wynot, its' S-3 (Operations) Officer.

April saw the men of the Battalion rapidly moving forward, pushing their way through the backwash of war. Since they were engineers, they also had the job of sorting the mess out.

They performed reconnaissance on railroads for the condition of track, bridges, switches and location of rolling stock; searched bypassed villages and towns for enemy troops; cleared mines; received surrendering Germans; destroyed recently captured ammo supplies; transported newly freed Allied prisoners; guarded a local winery; and operated a 134 mile long railroad!

The railroad job started on April 16, 1945 and lasted until April 30. The Battalion had the mission of repairing and operating the railway, running from Killeda to Naumberg which was later extended westward to Muhlhausen and eastward to Leipzig.



Repairs included replacing rails, clearing track blockages and damaged engines, rolling stock and installing 1,790 feet of new track. The railroad stations in each of the previously mentioned towns were also repaired and made ready to serve as railheads.

While most of the bullwork was done by civilian laborers and the actual operation of the railway was by civilian personnel, it was all under the supervision of the Battalion.

The '254th Railroad' hauled a variety of freight, primarily gas, oil, food forward and German POW's and released Allied POW's to the rear. All were critical to stabilize and bring a degree of order to a country ravaged by war. <sup>48</sup>

The Battalion eventually finished the war in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, as part of Patton's Third Army. There they principally supervised German POW's in clearing the city of bomb debris and restoring utilities. There the 254th was one of the first units to meet the Soviet Army. While the Americans occupied the western part of Pilsen, the Russians occupied the eastern part.

On May 7, 1945, the Germans surrendered. While for many units, their jobs stopped with the fighting; for the engineers there was no such luck. It was time out for a brief celebration and then back to work as usual!

After a week on duty in Pilsen, The Battalion was ordered to make a three-day motor march to Maille-LeCamp, France where it immediately went to work constructing one of several redeployment camps. Known as Camp Lucky Strike, its purpose was to sort out units and troops for deployment back to the states or to the Far East where there was unfinished business with the Japanese!

Again, it was German POW's doing the heavy bullwork under the Battalion's supervision and guarded by Polish displaced soldiers. It was here that some of the 'high point' 254th veterans were transferred to the 234th Engineer Combat Battalion. They were now under the command of Lt. Colonel Philip C. Satterthwaite, the old Commander of Headquarters and Service Company in Louisiana!

With the end of the war, the Battalion was officially deactivated at Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts, on December 22, 1945. The 107th designation was regained on December 10, 1946, when the 254th and 107th were consolidated, reorganized and federally recognized as the 107th Engineer Combat Battalion Michigan Army National Guard.

During World War II, the Battalion spent five and a half years on active duty. It completed eleven continuous months in a combat zone, engaging in five campaigns from the Normandy beachhead to Central Europe. To commemorate these actions, the Battalion colors proudly carry campaign streamers for Normandy, Ardennes Alsace, Belgium, Rhineland, Northern France and Central Europe.