

## CHAPTER V THE GREAT WAR

### PREPARATION

With the American Declaration of War on April 6, 1917, National Guard units throughout the country were mobilized. On June 22, 1917, Company A began to drill in earnest in preparation for mustering again into Federal service. The Company still had 60 seasoned veterans from the Mexican Border duty and could be considered relatively ready for action. They didn't have long to wait, as on June 30 the Company of four officers and 164 men, accompanied by cheering crowds and the Calumet and Hecla Band (playing the Old Grey Mare), marched to the railway station and departed for war. The troops were surprised to find that the Army had arranged fine accommodations on the train, including not only coaches, but also sleepers.

The first day of July found the Company in Detroit, billeted in the old brick barracks of Fort Wayne. There they continued to train and undergo what seemed to be constant inspections. The Company was officially mustered into Federal service on July 10. Now new equipment and uniforms were issued, most of the newer recruits having made the trip in civilian dress.

By July 23 the Company had arrived at Camp Custer near Battle Creek and was immediately given numerous construction tasks. The unit was among the very first troops to arrive and before more could come, the camp had to be built. That was Company A's job.

Initiative was always the trademark of the Upper Peninsula engineers and they aptly demonstrated it at Camp Custer. It seems that there was no canteen on post, so the Company began to operate one for the benefit of their own men and the new troops arriving daily. The canteen was so popular it cleared over \$1,000 in the 13 days it operated before the Camp Commander learned of its existence and promptly shut it down. The handsome profit the Company realized was used to great benefit in the Company's Mess Fund. <sup>1</sup>

Although two new Companies had been authorized previously (to complete the 1st Battalion), no efforts had been made to raise them until June when recruiting stepped into high gear and met with an equally high degree of success. The mobilization date for the new Companies was July 15, and the location was the campus of the Michigan Colleges of Mines (Michigan Technological University). Overnight, tents sprang up on the grounds and the raw recruits began to drill. Equipment shortages were everywhere. There weren't enough tents at first so some men were allowed to sleep at home. Mess equipment hadn't yet been secured so the men ate in a local restaurant. There were over 80 students in the Battalion from the college, which was often called the Michigan College of Mines Battalion! This fact was further emphasized when Major B.W. Vallat, class of 1901, became the Battalion Commander <sup>2</sup>

The Michigan College of Mines campus was also used for a variety of other war related activities. The District Draft Board had offices in the Metallurgy Building and a special free class in telegraphy was taught by several college professors for students soon to be drafted.

The use of the campus was directly the result of a recommendation by the faculty to the Board of Control, who in turn formally offered the facilities to the government. <sup>3</sup>

Although heavy emphasis was placed on obtaining recruits solely from the Copper Country area, the new B and C Companies were filled with men from across the length and breadth of the Upper Peninsula. Copper and iron miners, genuine lumberjacks, college students and clerks, they all rallied to enlist. The largest number of recruits, however, came from the Michigan College of Mines.

World War I resulted in one permanent loss to the National Guard, the changing of all of the historic unit designations! No longer would there be a chance for confusion between the '5th Michigan Infantry' and '5th North Carolina Infantry.'

Although the original idea for a new numbering system was suggested by the National Guard, it was eagerly seized on by the Regular Army as a way of obscuring the strong regional background and historic heritage of the citizen-soldiers. There would be no repeat of a 'Roosevelt's Rough Riders,' 'Michigan Infantry,' or even the more mundane 'Calumet Light Guard' or 'Houghton Light Infantry' as emerged from the Spanish-American War. The designation of 'Upper Peninsula Engineers' was definitely out of the question! Obvious regional

names and associations would steal no publicity from the more deserving Regulars and soon to be raised draft Divisions!

The eventual numbering system that emerged was simple and successfully obscured all regional identification, but only until the public learned to decipher the Army encryption effort!

The numbers 1 through 25 for Divisions, and all Regimental numbers to 100 were reserved for the Regular Army. Divisional numbers 26 through 75 were reserved for National Guard Divisions and all those starting with 76 were held for future draftee Divisions.

Since the Michigan and Wisconsin units were organized into the 7th National Guard Division formed (starting with the 26th), it was designated the 32nd Division. The four organic infantry Regiments were in turn numbered the 125th, 126th, 127th and 128th. Each of the Division spare parts such as artillery, signal, trains, etc. were designated sequentially. The 107th Engineers became the 107th Engineers because they were part of the 32nd Division, the 7th National Guard Division formed and were the only engineer Regiment in the Division. The engineer Regiment in the 31st Division was the 106th, and in the 33rd, the 108th.

Within weeks of the new numbering system, however, the people of Michigan and Wisconsin solved the riddle and knew the 32nd was their boys. When Division shoulder patches began to be worn after the various Divisions reached France, both the men of the 32nd and the folks at home took tremendous pride in the exploits of the 'Red Arrow Division.'

On July 23, with each's Company's strength standing at 140 men, the troops were officially mustered into Federal service. Slowly more equipment trickled in and was issued and just as slowly the recruits began to look like soldiers. The messing problem was finally solved when a college lab was taken over for that purpose. Between Bunsen KP's burners and chemical retorts, KP's peeled potatoes, and cleaned pots and pans.

Meanwhile in the deep confines of the War Department in Washington, D.C., the decision was made to assign the yet unformed 107th Engineer Regiment to the newly (July 28, 1917) organized 32nd Infantry Division. The Division was unique in that it was composed entirely of National Guard troops from Michigan and Wisconsin. The assembly point for the 32nd was picked as the dusty, largely unbuilt Camp MacArthur, Texas.

The new 1st Engineer Battalion less Company A, which was at Camp Custer, left Houghton on the evening of August 17 to begin a 4½ day trip to Waco, Texas and the Division assembly point at Fort MacArthur. As with the departure of Company A, the Calumet and Hecla Band led the march to the station and the cheering populace gave the troops a rousing send-off.

The Battalion detrained at Waco at 7 a.m., August 21. The actual movement to Camp MacArthur was on foot and must have been a real experience for the Michiganders. The temperature at 100 degrees plus and the march raised great clouds of swirling, choking Texas dust. To men used to fighting through chest-deep snowdrifts, it was an interesting change of pace. Camp MacArthur was much like Camp Custer in that both stood more complete on the designers' drawing boards than in fact. The engineers began to make the dream a reality.



Company A's company street at Camp MacArthur, Texas Credit: battalion archives

As there were no barracks yet constructed, the Battalion pitched tents and began their stay in Texas. On September 18, the 2nd Battalion of Wisconsin engineers arrived, and on September 23, the 107th Engineer Regiment was officially formed, the 1st Michigan becoming the 1st Battalion (Companies A, B, C), and the 2nd Wisconsin becoming the 2nd Battalion (Companies D, E, F). Colonel P.S. Bond, a Regular Army officer of outstanding ability, was given the command of the Regiment.

The 107th time was divided between vital camp construction projects and equally important unit and individual training. As the Regiment was assigned to the newly formed 32nd Infantry Division, it had to be prepared to move into combat as soon as the Division was ready. However, the camp needed the construction projects finished desperately in order to receive and train troops.

The importance of the construction projects can be determined just by their very nature; two 11,000-gallon watertowers; numerous bridges and topographic surveys; a complete water system; several roads; a complete rifle range; and a full trench warfare training site.

During the night of October 3, the long-lost Company A arrived from Camp Custer and the Regiment was at last complete. All during the 107th's stay at Camp MacArthur, the process of 'shaking out' and filling up the Regiment continued. Although nearly all of the officers were graduate mining engineers, virtually none of them had any military training and long delays were experienced in obtaining the required Regimental Auxiliary Staff Officers such as an Adjutant Dental and Medical Officers. To supplement their meager military knowledge, schools for Regimental Officers were held every evening for two weeks straight, and thereafter when practical. <sup>4</sup>

Into the middle of October the Regiment continued to fill with recruits in order to raise it to full war strength. The 1st Battalion received 116 additional troops from a special Camp Custer levy and 100 as the result of a special Upper Peninsula recruiting trip. Interest in the U.P. Battalion ran high, and young men at home were eager to become a part of it.

The Regiment continued to struggle with the dual nemesis of construction work and training. As the pace at camp picked up, more requirements in training in such diverse areas as cooks school, signaling and musketry appeared. In spite of the best training schedule the situation was intolerable. Veterans of the time report that virtually all training was conducted in spite of the training schedules and as extra duty.



One of the many training bridges built by the 107<sup>th</sup> in Texas Credit: battalion archives

One aspect of the training involved the rapid construction of small timber bridges of a type seeing frequent use at the battle front. To liven up the training, several public contests were held between the 1st and 2nd Battalions. With the regional nature of the Battalions, the 1st from Michigan and the 2nd from Wisconsin, interest ran high. At each contest, however, the Michigan troops proved faster than those of Wisconsin. The bridges were of the double lock span variety constructed of rough cut cedar and were built in a winning time of approximately 5½ minutes!

Bridge building contests were also held between Companies. One contest pitted Company A against Company C for the construction of a 60-foot timber bridge, with 20-foot spans and a 20-foot roadway. Company C emerged as the victor with a winning time of 17 hours.



Trenching practice at Camp MacArthur

Credit: battalion archives

Other training involved the construction of an entire trench system. Dug completely after dark, it was finished after 2½ hours of continuous work. When the evaluation was finished, it was determined that Company C made the best showing, having worked at a rate of two feet of trench per man per hour. With the vast network of trenches stretching across Europe, it is easy to understand the rationale for the emphasis on 'trenching.'<sup>5</sup>

Marching and physical condition was stressed from the very beginning, but during this period outfits of the Regiment made phenomenal records for speed and endurance. There is a record of one Company which marched 16½ miles in 3¾ hours without a halt. Nearly every account of the Regiment describes one case when the unit marched 5½ miles to a training site; dug trenches for 4 hours without stopping and at the same time setting a new record for trench construction; and then marched 5 1/2 miles home. All marching in this case was done in the late afternoon or night, without halts, at 4.1 miles per hour, and all digging was done at night by the light of corn shock flares.

During December the pace of the Regiment quickened considerably and rumors concerning when the unit would ship out began to fly. More and more inspections were held to determine the readiness for deployment. In addition, the 32nd Division held special classes in gas drill that all troops were required to attend.

During their stay in Texas, the men of the Regiment started a unique tradition that still continues to this day; they presented nearby Baylor University with the school's mascot, a black bear called 'Ted,' known as the toughest black bear in Texas!<sup>6</sup>

An important part of the 107th was the Engineer Trains. Consisting of two officers and 82 men, the Trains included a horse Transportation Section and a Truck Section. Organized in October at Camp MacArthur, the Trains spent most of their time in the hauling of construction material to the various building sites.

On January 2, the Horse Section of the Trains departed Camp for France, arriving there on February 19, after a 13-day Atlantic crossing in the Horse Transport BANAMAN. With the 107th animals on the steamer was the horse transport for the entire 32nd Division, a total of some 848 animals.

The main section of the Trains departed camp on January 10 and boarded the liner TUSCANIA at Hoboken, New Jersey, on the 24th. After some delays in picking up her convoy and escort, the liner eventually reached the coast of Scotland on February 5. There the 107th received its first taste of war when a U-boat slammed a torpedo into the TUSCANIA at 6:45 p.m. of the 5th.

One of the 107th troopers later remembered that the first sitting for dinner was just finished when there was a tremendous explosion and the 'whole ship seemed to rise up and then started to tremble all over. Water, steel

and debris were thrown with a terrible crashing as high as the lifeboats...all the lights went out and everything was wrapped in darkness.'<sup>7</sup>

Immediately, the troops crowded onto the transports decks and assumed their previously assigned lifeboat stations. With the TUSCANIA listing to an acute angle, many of the boats were unable to be lowered, and under the command of their officers, men began leaping into the water. Following standard procedure, the rest of the convoy sped away, leaving \*the dying liner to her fate. Only the destroyers remained, dashing about in mad attempts to locate the guilty U-boat.

At great risk to themselves several destroyers pulled alongside the sinking TUSCANIA long enough to allow men to jump to their decks. It was by this action that most of the men of the 107th saved themselves. By 9:40 p.m. the great liner sank. The following day it was determined that of the 2,114 men, mostly from the 32nd Division, aboard the TUSCANIA, 200 were lost, but none of the 107th men were among the latter group. One of the few American liners sunk by a submarine, the TUSCANIA loss caused a sensation in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

The 107th men were taken to Camp Morn, in Winchester, England and completely re-equipped, all they possessed having been lost with the liner. The Trains would later catch up with the regiment at Langres, France on March 27.

Prior to leaving Camp MacArthur, Colonel Bond completed his report of the status of the Regiment's training, stating that 'an encouraging feature of the training was the very high professional standards and great initiative of the officers as engineers .... the excellence of the enlisted personnel, morally, physically and professionally, the splendid spirit that pervades their willingness to learn, and above all, their remarkable talent for construction.'<sup>9</sup>Clearly the 107th wasn't a run of the mill unit!

The full Regiment was programmed to leave camp in three serials, the first departing on January 11 by train, but a heavy Texas blizzard pushed the timetable back and the movement was not started until the 13th. The 107th troops had a real tour of America on the train east, passing through Dallas, Vicksburg, Birmingham, Richmond, and Washington before finally stopping at Camp Merritt, Dumout, New Jersey on the 19th. While enroute, frequent halts were made for exercise, formal parades and apparently just plain sightseeing, as time allowed. At each stop, the men were showered with cigars, cigarettes, pies and cakes. The last serial joined the Regiment at Camp Merritt on the 21st.

There additional equipment was issued and the furious pace of inspections was again resumed. As Camp Merritt was actually a suburb of New York City, passes were granted for the officers to explore its environs, but the troops were restricted to the camp area. As many officers had as yet been unable to complete their overseas kits, the opportunity to visit the city in the hopes of purchasing the missing items was important.

Just past midnight on the 29th of January, the Regiment was called to reveille and during the dark, cold early morning hours, formed up and filed on the waiting troop trains. By 6:45 a.m. the Regiment had been delivered to Hoboken, detrained and was marching down the wide expanse of the old Hamburg-American dock, now known simply as Pier 5 of the U.S. Transportations Service. Minutes later they were boarding the ex-North German Lloyd liner GROSSER KURFUERST, now renamed the AEOLUS.

Conditions on the transport were extremely crowded and the troops were packed in tighter than sardines in a can. To minimize confusion, a meal ticket also indicating each man's bunk location was tied with a string to his person. The bunks themselves were in tiers of three and located deep in the steamer's cargo hold.

On the 30th the AEOLUS cast off and moved to a Fire Island anchorage where she waited for the rest of the convoy to form. Since the AEOLUS was still in sight of shore and the cargo was supposed to be secret, none of the troops were allowed on deck until the steamer left the following day with her convoy and escort. Other than the required lifeboat drills and expected cases of seasickness, life aboard the transport was normal until February 12 when morning and dusk stand-tos on deck were held for all troops. Because of the proximity to the U-boat hunting grounds and the high likelihood of attack at those times, all troops were required to be at their lifeboat stations, with life-jackets on. The convoy, however, avoided any submarine trouble and the 107th disembarked at Brest, France on February 16.

**FRANCE**

Upon arrival, the Regiment, with the entire 32nd, was assigned to the Service of Supply and immediately given the task of helping unsnarl the tremendous logistical backlog that currently existed. The 32nd was additionally designated as a Replacement Division for other American units. This was a great blow to a unit that had trained so well together in the anticipation of fighting together. The Division Commander, however, was able to have the 32nd relieved from this assignment, but not before an entire Regiment of infantry was stolen and reassigned to the American 1st Division [10](#) [11](#)



107<sup>th</sup> Engineers detraining in France

The 32nd Division was assigned to the Ninth Training Area to prepare further for duty in the trenches. The Division would be held in the training area until the middle of May, all the while perfecting the techniques that would eventually earn them the fearsome nickname, 'Les Terribles.'

For the engineers, this meant special training in infantry tactics, trench warfare, as well as the traditional engineer subjects.

Companies A and D of the 107th were assigned to the Engineer School in the Ninth Area, near Langres, as demonstration units. The Army Engineer School at Langres was the 'finishing school' for all engineer units newly arrived in France. Special courses were taught in camouflage, flash and sound ranging, mining, pioneering, topography, bridging and fortification construction. [12](#)

The remainder of the Regiment was employed in construction projects, not only in the Ninth Area, but also in the Seventh, Eighth, Tenth and Thirteenth Areas. It was a difficult job, not so much because of the inherent problems of construction, but rather as a result of constantly shifting Division boundaries and building requirements. Apparently the various staffs involved just couldn't make up their collective minds. [13](#)

During this period the Regiment's organic transportation was extremely poor, consisting entirely of one beat-up ambulance. Through the loss of the TUSCANIA and confusion at the rear, the situation remained unresolved for some time. Eventually it was remedied by the arrival of the Trains with numerous trucks and motorcycles.

On February 27, Colonel Bond, the Regiment Commander, was reassigned to the Army Engineer and Gas School, and Colonel Harold Fiske assumed command. However, as Colonel Fiske was too busy at the Chief Engineer's Office at Langres, the active command responsibilities fell on Lieutenant Colonel Callan, the Executive Officer. The initial period in France was extremely safe for the Regiment, with only one man being killed, that in March when the Adjutant of the 1st Battalion died as a result of a motorcycle accident.

The engineers always knew in the back of their minds that their secondary role was to fight as infantry when the situation required and on March 27 this fact was brought home. The Allied front had been sorely pressed by waves of assaulting German forces in the vicinity of Humes. With infantry reserves virtually nonexistent, a German breakthrough appeared imminent. As the nearest troops to the beleaguered front, the 107th was alerted to prepare to move into the lines. Under typical engineer procedure, the Regiment had broken down to Company, platoon and squad level and was spread out in working parties over the entire Division area. In the early hours of the morning the order went out to assemble. With amazing speed, the Regiment organized (less

Company A. which was still detached), was issued new gas masks and rehearsed in infantry drill. But rail transportation to the front was unavailable, and before an alternative could be arranged, the front stabilized. On March 31, the Regiment was released and ordered return to previous assignments.



A complete hospital built by the 107<sup>th</sup> in Chateauvillain, France Credit: battalion archives

The Regiment was continuously shifting its units from location to location and task to task as the situation dictated. During this period the 107th is credited with constructing not less than five complete hospitals.

Although assigned to the 32nd Division and therefore principally charged with supporting them, the 107th projects carried them far and wide and frequently found them working with other units. Eventually they had worked for the 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th and 13th Division After completing a series of projects for the 3rd Infant Division, the Division Commander attempted to have the Regiment reassigned to his unit. However, this plot 'steal' the 107th failed and the Regiment remained with the 32nd.

On May 18, the 32nd Division moved into the lines the Alsace Sector. The 107th was still engaged in various high priority projects and didn't join the Division until June 26. The move to the front was conducted in typical fashion with the troops jammed into the famous French 40 and 8 box cars. By regulation, the cars could hold troops or 8 horses. The men, jammed tightly together a hot, unventilated car, bitterly complained that horses got the better treatment.

As soon as they arrived in the sector the Regime moved into billets just to the rear of the front lines Immediate tasks performed included the construction vital roads, wire entanglements, bunkers, camouflage and mapping defensive positions. At irregular intervals the working parties would be under German artillery fire, and arms, helmets and gas masks were carried at times. The sector was considered a 'quiet one,' one which there was little action and troops could introduced easily to trench warfare. However, the Americans had other ideas and soon began to liven the sector up, with raiding parties and harassing artillery fire.

movies continuously picture World War I infantry attacks as being nothing more complicated than thousands of troops 'pouring over the top' of the trenches to rush the enemy lines. Yet there was much the way of careful planning and preparation that we into each attack. Before the actual assault, it was necessary to either cut or blow paths through the vast network of enemy wire. This was distinctly an engine task. On many occasions the 107th sent out night wire cutting teams, all made up of volunteers, and usually more men volunteered than were needed.

During a raid on the night of July 14 a team from the 107th moved into the no-man's land to blow a gap through the wire for a raiding party from the infantry. Although frequently interrupted by bursts of searching machine-gun fire and brilliant overhead flares, they succeeded in blowing a 15-foot gap in the wall of bristling wire.

Rushing through, the engineers charged the enemy trenches expecting any second to be joined by the infantry raiding party, but they never arrived! Apparently in the dark and confusion the attacking infantry missed the gap. Nevertheless, the engineers reconnoitered the enemy trenches and returned with vital information. Two of the engineers were separated from the group and were forced to remain hidden in a shell pocket in the middle of no-man's land until the following night, when they infiltrated back to their lines.

Life at the front wasn't only unhealthy due to the enemy action, but disease also took its' toll. At one time half of the Regiment was ill as a result of trench fever, although no fatalities were recorded. In response to the

heavy German offensive at the Marne, the 32nd Division with the 107th was shifted to that sector, arriving on the 25th of July.

## MARNE

Arriving in the sector, the 107th was greeted by what seemed like an endless drizzle of cold rain and an unending sea of mud. The first night was spent in the nearly deserted village of Fleurines with troops huddled - in rain-soaked pup tents.

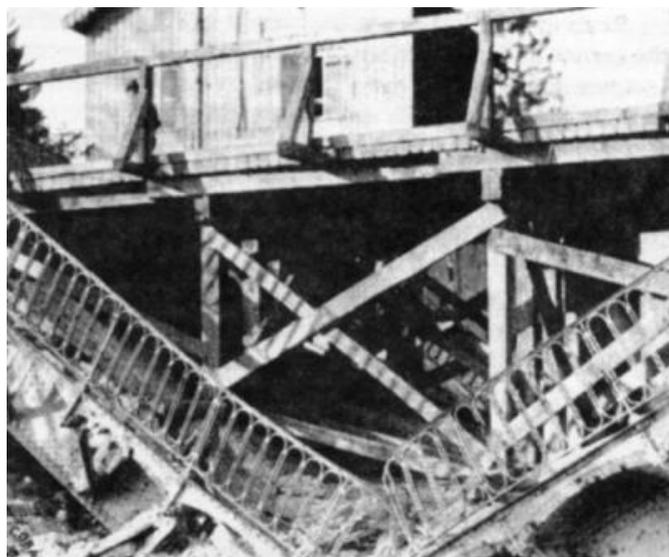
The following day the Regiment boarded a convoy of trucks and moved through to the front, passing through one shell-torn village after another. The 107th was still a green outfit and at every opportunity many of the men eagerly hunted for souvenirs. By late that night they arrived at the central square of Chateau Chierry. The men were billeted everywhere and anywhere. Some ended up in cowsheds, while others enjoyed the comforts of the Hotel DuCygne, with, of all things, clean towels!

In the morning the unit again moved forward, now on foot, another 14 miles, eventually halting in the early hours of the 20th in a patch of woods near Jaulgonne. The engineers had little sleep that night as there were no less than eight separate gas warnings. The constant firing of a French artillery battery only a mile away wasn't exactly a lullaby. <sup>14</sup>

All during the march forward the 107th passed through areas of increasing devastation. Plodding along the single shell-torn road leading to the front, the men were only a small part of the heavy traffic moving up. The entire 32nd Division was on the march to replace the 3rd Division on the line. By July 30, the 32nd had completed the relief of the 3rd.

During the entire period the 32nd was in the lines, the 107th was constantly engaged in heavy road clearing operations. There was only one road to the front and the task of keeping it open for the critical flow of supplies forward and casualties back was difficult indeed. Bridges were continually either being repaired or rebuilt, culverts dug, and shell holes filled. All the while, the engineers were under the constant harassment of enemy artillery fire and even occasionally strafed by German aircraft. Fortunately, casualties were few. As normal engineer procedure, the Regiment was spread over the entire Division area. A Battalion here, a Company there, a platoon over beyond the hill, but all were working toward the same goal, keeping the road network open.

The remarkable record of keeping the road to the front open is best typified by the bridge of Coulonges. It had been a 25 foot steel girder bridge before being completely destroyed by the enemy. Within 18 hours after the first of the 32nd's advancing infantry reached the demolished bridge, the engineers had replaced it. Since normal construction supplies were not available they salvaged material nearby from destroyed buildings. The hastily built bridge was strong enough to carry not only all the Division traffic, but also a train of 20 ton artillery pieces! <sup>15</sup>



The bridge at Coulonges being rebuilt by the 107<sup>th</sup>. The original bridge destroyed by the Germans is visible in the foreground. Credit: battalion archives

A natural obstacle to the advance of the 32nd was the River Vesle and plans were drawn up for the assault crossing with a pontoon bridge. In preparation the Regiment kept a 14-truck train of bridge material in readiness for the moment when the Division would call for its use. In preparation for the assault bridging, the engineers continuously conducted bridging recon missions. Frequently these missions involved the deep penetration of the enemy lines. That these missions were dangerous is evidenced by the three Distinguished Service Crosses awarded to members of the special recon teams.



The engineers waiting along the roadside to attempt to force a pontoon bridges crossing of the Vesle River  
Credit: battalion archives

On August 7, the 32nd was relieved by the 28th Division. However, the 107th was kept in the lines since a river crossing attempt was planned that night. It failed when the infantry was unable to secure the near side of the river and the 107th was withdrawn on the 9th.

During the 107th Marne campaign, they had built six bridges and repaired five; had built five culverts filled three large mine craters; had demined three bridges and culverts; constructed one kilometer of new road and repaired 32 kilometers of old; had cleared three towns of debris; and constructed two dugouts; all in maintaining a detail of ten officers and 30 men daily on engineer reconnaissance from which were made seven maps in 535 copies. <sup>16</sup>

Resting in the rear, the Regiment was heartened by the arrival of Company D only recently released from the Langres Engineer School. In preparation for the next spell at the front, drills in wire, recon, infantry tactics and trench warfare were conducted.

It is important to realize that there really were no 'rest periods' for the engineers; when the Division was at the front, the engineers were busy with combat missions. When the Division moved to the rear for rest, the engineers were charged with establishing ranges, bivouacs, maintaining roads, etc. Just as the old adage states 'there is no rest for the wicked,' neither was there rest for the engineers!

### **OISE AISNE**

On August 24, the 32nd was ordered to relieve a French Division in the Oise Aisne sector. The 32nd would become the first and only American Division in the French Tenth Army. By the 26th the 107th had begun its long, slow march to the front, through torrents of cold rain and a living sea of thick mud. Again, the roads were clogged with the heavy traffic of one Division relieving another. Relief of the French Division was completed during the late hours of the night of August 27.

Because of the close liaison required between the attacking infantry and the engineers, part of the 107th went 'over the top' with the 32nd Division's 64th Brigade during the night of August 30. The resulting engineer intelligence reports that arrived at Division Head quarters were accurate and fast, faster usually than the infantry reports. The attack was part of a general assault by the French Tenth Army, and the casualties were appalling. They were so terrible that Company B was pressed into service as stretcher bearers. Braving enemy sniper fire and machine guns, the men dashed across the battlefield hauling wounded comrades to rear area aid stations. The 32nd's part in the attack drew high praise from General Pershing, who noted in his diary that 'our 32nd Division has done splendid work in the attack...' <sup>17</sup> Pershing considered the 'Gemultlichkeit boys' of the 32nd to be among the best in the AEF. <sup>18</sup>

The night of September 1, the Division was relieved by the 1st Moroccan Division. Although most of the 107th went to the rear with the Division, a detachment had a special mission and remained at the front. The Regiment had kept a number of wagon loads of bridging material in readiness for the expected forced bridging of the Ailatte River. As the Division had been relieved before the crossing could be effected, the material was ordered delivered to the French. The point of delivery was not in a safe rear area, but rather right at the shore of the river, in an area under enemy fire.

The approach route was difficult and dangerous. Each wagon load had to be driven down a relatively protected draw, across an open field, swept with machine-gun fire and well registered with artillery, to the foot of a French bunker. On the dark night of September 5, the engineers moved forward, and one wagon load at a time delivered the bridge. By the end of the night the draw was littered with dead horses, and equally dead men, but the mission was accomplished. The French Division Commander congratulated the Colonel of the 107th for the bravery of his men, saying, 'all men of the detachment displayed the very greatest composure and bravery in accomplishing their mission under the most difficult conditions and under violent enemy artillery fire.' <sup>19</sup>

## MEUSE ARGONNE

Sunday, September 22 saw the 107th again on its way to the front. Again in the grey drizzle of a French rain, but now leading the way and blazing the trail for the rest of the Division.

On the night of September 25, the 32nd initiated a strong offensive. Under the protection of heavy artillery barrage, the Division advanced directly through the town of Avocourt and reached positions on the far side. For four years Avocourt had been in the center of no-man's land. As a result there was practically nothing left of the town but rubble. To supply the Division, the town's road network had to be opened and the nearly impossible task was given to the engineers.



The destruction of war. An approach road to Avocourt littered with debris.

Credit: battalion archives

Heavy fall rains had reduced the entire area to one vast ocean of nearly bottomless muck. Special obstacles consisting of 25-foot square, 6-foot deep pits were dug by the retreating Germans across what was left of the main road in areas where deep mud made detours around the pits impossible. As a result desperately needed supplies were tied up in traffic jams that stretched for miles.

The engineers worked with a will. Roads were 'corduroyed' with any available material on hand, the pits were bridged with rough timber, and where hard bottom could be located, mud was scraped off the roads. Within seven hours, the road was open although barely. For four long, hard days, the 107th worked on the road, all the while in a cold driving rain. Slowly the worst sections were repaired, the road widened, and finally completely opened.

During this time part of the Regiment was assigned to other important tasks. Recon parties were especially active, being used largely to map roads, locate bunkers, defensive positions, billets and evaluate captured supply dumps. Removing enemy mines was another engineer task performed during this period.

During the early and middle of October, under the threat of an impending enemy offensive, the Regiment also laid out two separate Division defensive lines, to include the excavation of all positions. The work was

done entirely at night and under searching enemy shell fire. While at the front during this period, rain fell nearly every day and fires of any kind were out of the question. They only provided a fine aiming point for enemy artillery.



Part of an 1,800 foot plank road built through a sea of mud. Credit: battalion archives

On October 19, the 32nd was relieved by the 9th Division, the 107th being withdrawn some three days later. Although in theory resting, road work and other projects went on as usual. To solve the mud problem, a plank road 1,800 feet long and 12 feet wide was constructed, much of the while under the strafing fire of enemy aircraft.

On November 6, Company C was called on to perform a particularly difficult bridge construction mission at the village of Sassey. The bridge in question had originally been of the masonry arch type, with seven 50-foot spans some 20 feet above the river. The French had blown two spans on the west end during their retreat, which the Germans retreated, they again blew the bridge. When Company C arrived on the scene, the bridge was located in no-man's land, one kilometer in front of the lines and 200 yards beyond the farthest Division outpost. the bridge was actually under the control of neither side. As is, the bridge was useless and had to be repaired before the American attack could resume. The Germans were well aware of the importance of the bridge and kept constant patrols in the area and had artillery registered.

To solve the problem, Company C prefabricated the missing spans, moved in under the cover of darkness, and with great effort, rebuilt the bridge. Working at night, with no lights, and under the threat of being exposed by enemy patrols, the work was extremely hazardous. When completed, the spans safely carried 15-ton loads. <sup>20</sup>



The Sassey Bridge

credit: battalion archives

While working at Sassey, the engineers were not solely occupied with the bridge construction. Some distance away they spotted a German machine gun nest, which evidently had not yet sighted the engineers. In the best John Wayne tradition, a Company engineer team of two officers and eight men stormed the nest and captured the position. Because of the difficulty in obtaining construction materials, and the problems inherent with night construction, it required three nights of work before the bridge was repaired. A short distance in front of the masonry arch bridge was another destroyed bridge, this one over the Sassey Canal. The same night the first bridge was completed the Company hauled another prefabricated bridge over it and began to span the Canal. Work on the second bridge continued during the day while under sniper fire, but it was rapidly completed. <sup>21</sup>

Although the Armistice was signed on November 11, there was no rest for the 107th. Road work still continued and new construction projects were added.

## OCCUPATION

With the defeat of Germany, the 32nd Division was selected as one of the occupational Divisions. On November 17, the long march to Germany began with the 107th sending recon teams far in front of the advance guard. During General Pershing's parade into Luxemburg, the Regiment performed as military police and the Regiment Commander acted as the Parade Marshall. The German Border was crossed on December 1, and the Division advance was finally halted on January 24.

During the occupation the 107th was given a tremendous amount of responsibility, being charged directly with the upkeep of 200 kilometers of roads, 120 of which had to be completely rebuilt; the general supervision of all public utilities in 80 towns; constructing and installing a complete set of road signs in the Division Sector; and construction of various mess halls, stables, barracks warehouses and hospitals.

Leaves during the occupation were frequently granted, with the officers usually going to the south of France or England, and the men to any of a number of Corps Recreational Centers. Boxing, wrestling, basketball and football contests were often held to relieve the monotony of the occupation duty. Finally on April 8, the Division was relieved and started the long trip home. The 107th, however, was the last of the Division to leave, staying until the 23rd.

After departing France on May 5 on the steamer HAVERFORD, the Regiment arrived at Fort Dix, New Jersey on the 18th. At Fort Dix all Regiment men from the east and south were discharged and the remainder sent on to Camp Custer. By the 28th, the Regiment was demobilized, the men mustered out and homeward bound on the special train sent directly from the Upper Peninsula. The 107th Regiment no longer existed. The 'war to end all wars' had been fought and won. Never again would the nation need the Guard, or so it was thought!

During the great war the 32nd Division spent six months under fire with a mere ten days in a rear rest area. The 32nd met and vanquished 23 German Divisions, took 2,153 prisoners and gained more than 38 kilometers of ground without surrendering a meter. Casualties for the Division were high, in excess of 14,000 troops.

As a vital and integral part of the 32nd, the 107th took its share of losses, being roughly equal to ten percent of the Regiment's strength. The 107th also took its share of honors, receiving two Distinguished Service Crosses, ten Legion of Honors, 38 French Croix de Guerres and eight special individual citations. In addition the Regiment earned Campaign Streamers for Aisne-Marne, Champagne, Alsace, Oise-Aisne and Meuse-Argonne. <sup>22</sup>

Colonel Bond, the ex-107th Commander, paid special tribute to the Regiment when he stated in a letter to Lt. Colonel Callan That:

*'to have been separated from command of the best Regiment that ever went forth to battle was the most disagreeable experience of my life and one that I shall never cease to regret.'* <sup>23</sup>

Because of space limitations and a lack of specific verifiable historical information, many of the best 107th exploits have been omitted from this report of the World War I campaigns. Suffice it to be clearly understood that the engineers performed with uncommon ability in a war situation that by its very nature called for a heavy emphasis on military engineering.

Midnight requisitioning was a common engineer supply method used to obtain such sundry items as tents, blankets, generators, gas and even complete shower baths. But the favorite target seemed to be motorcycles. At the beginning of the war, the Regiment had been issued eight Indian motorcycles. By the time the 107th reached Germany, the Indians had completely disappeared and were replaced by 45 Harley-Davidsons, all liberated from 'undeserving' units. <sup>24</sup>

The infantry motto may well be 'Follow Me', but in the static war situation of World War 1, the infantry was powerless without the engineers first going ahead to blow the wire entanglements, construct bridges over barriers and recon enemy position. The importance of the road construction work in maintaining the vital supply network is self-explanatory. In this case, it was really 'follow the engineers,' for they lead the way!

### **'THE RED ARROW'**



The famous Red Arrow insignia of the 32nd Infantry Division signified that the Division shot through every line the enemy put before it. Following World War I, the 32nd Division was the primary National Guard unit of Michigan and Wisconsin.