BEACHHEAD NEWS

Sunday Supplement

This Newspaper Must Not Fall Into Enemy Hands

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The Men of 100 and 1 Jobs

And the 36th Engineers Have Done Most of 'Em

By Pfc H. L. WELKER

ONE of the most reliable indexes of the efficiency of an outfit is the manner in which it moves. When the 36th Engineer Combat Group pushes on to a new position, the process is painless, matter-of-fact, and quick. It bespeaks an expertness born of long practice. An easy, unconscious cooperation that is the stamp of a smart outfit.

It takes time and constant repetition to produce this kind of ease—not only in moving—but also in the hundred and one other highly-specialized types of work that combat engineers are required to perform. Having landed at Fedela, North Africa, on D-day in 1942, and fought up through Sicily, Salerno, Anzio, France and Germany, the 36th has learned its know-how the hard way.

As with most of the older VI Corps units, the name, Anzio, sticks out in the minds of the men who were there, like a bottle of schnapps at a WCTU convention. When the guys get time to sit around and bat the breeze, the old timers usually start out with "I remember one time at Anzio—"

The 36th has good reason to remember the Beachhead. It was here that they put in more time as infantry and suffered more casualties than any other period in the outfit's history. They fought cheek by jowl with such sterling combat outfits as the Rangers, 3rd and 45th Divisions, and the 5th and 56th British Divisions. At one time, they were 47 days in the line with no relief.

The 36th first saw the light of day as a regiment at Plattsburg Barracks, N. Y., June 1, 1941. While still in the—organizationally speaking—infant stage, it participated in both the New England and Carolina maneuvers. In '42, the 36th moved to Fort Bragg, N. C., and laid the groundwork of what was to be SOP for amphibious landings by experimenting in company with the 9th Division all summer of that year.

Another battalion was added to the regiment in September, 1942, at the same time that the second battalion took off for England with the 9th Division. The 1st and 3rd were attached to the 3rd Division, and put the polishing touches on their training at Camp Bradford and Camp Pickett, both in Virginia.

In North Africa

Came the famous November 8th, and the regiment hit the beaches of North Africa—two battalions at Fedela, French Morroco, and one at Algiers. They didn't get much further, being needed to keep these vital ports in operation so that the flow of supplies could go through.

In February, the regiment formed as a whole again and went to Rabat for training. It moved again in April to Arzew, to work out at the 5th Army's Invasion Training Center. Attached again to their old friend, the 3rd Division, the 36th rolled up the coast to Ferryville to jump off for the Sicily invasion.

After making the beachhead at Licata, the regiment stayed put and operated the port until August 19th, then returned to Tunisia

Combat Engineers

This shot goes a long way to explain why they're called "Combat Engineers." The Infantry role is no stranger to the 36th which on Anzio had 47 days on the line with no relief. Here a machine gun manned by Engineers covers the advance of a squad which is going around a street corner after some hun snipers.

(163rd Sig Photo by McCroby)

Block Busting

". . . the 36th learned its know-how the hard way." And here they apply some of that "know-how" in the removal of a large kraut road block caused when the fleeing squareheads blew a railroad bridge down on the highway below. Some of the 36th boys are planting charges and then — stand back!

(163rd Sig Photo by McCroby)

The Big Job at Salerno

Engineers Used As Foot Troops In Bloody Fight

where they were attached to VI Corps, which already had one eye cocked at the beaches of Salerno. It was here that the engineers were to get their first real taste of doughboy life—an existence that was to become their intermittent lot for the duration.

D-Day at Salerno

The bridgebuilders went ashore on D-day, and sweated it out with the rest until the beachhead was secure. H Company was selected to accompany the Rangers in making a landing further up the coast, near Amalfi.

It was on this operation that Sgt Bill Belcher, who had joined the outfit only a short time before, first attracted attention. He volunteered to accompany the night-loving Rangers on a patrol. They went looking for trouble, and as usual, found it. Belcher came through unscathed, but when the patrol withdrew, he stayed behind to do what he could for a badly-wounded Ranger.

Shortly after daybreak he rejoined his outfit after crawling past German outposts. He had remained with the Ranger until the latter died.

Setting a Nazi Trap

This is another of the "hundred and one other highly specialized types of work that combat engineers are required to do." They prepare holes for TNT charges in the road. The holes are covered to let traffic pass, but the charges can be set and blown in a few minutes when necessary. (163rd Sig Photo by Bell)

Used as Infantry

In the meanwhile, the rest of the outfit was finding the going plenty tough. The 3rd Battalion was shoved into the line as infantry on the flank of the 45th Division, as the other two battalions worked like trojans building bridges, airports, ammo dumps, and clearing roads and beaches.

The engineers were more badly needed to bring some semblance of order to the incredible chaos that was the transportation system in the Salerno area. The roads were literally lousy with mines; Paestum, Battipaglia and Eboli were rubble heaps that had to be cleared, and there were more blown bridges in that sector than Heinz has pickles.

One of the biggest arteries opened up for a supply route was the railroad that followed the coast north toward Naples. This was restored, and lacking locomotives, a GI substitute was devised. Two and one half ton trucks, fitted with railroad wheels, did the trick.

Nazi Demolition

One reason why the progress toward Naples was comparatively slow was the extreme thoroughness with which the enemy did his demolition work. As the line moved north, the 2nd Battalion doubled as infantry again. Company H, which had remained with the Rangers, was given the unenviable task of "delousing" Naples of mines and booby-traps when the city finally was taken.

The weather got steadily worse, and the mud deepened, thus adding the headache of road maintenance to other problems.

At the Volturno, Company A, in support of the 34th Division, made the assault crossing after two attempts had been bloodily repulsed. Work immediately was begun near Montaquila on an 80-foot Bailey bridge which was to become known as "Ma's Rugged Kid." This span was under constant artillery fire, and dive-bombed daily. Practically all the work was done at night, but even so, casualties were heavy.

The "Hotspot"

The same conditions existed near Colli, where Company H built a bridge that earned the sobriquet, "Hotspot." This was another night job, and Purple Hearts came thick and fast. Not far from there, a cableway was thrown across the river to supply airborne troops on the other side.

Although it didn't seem possible, the weather became still worse.

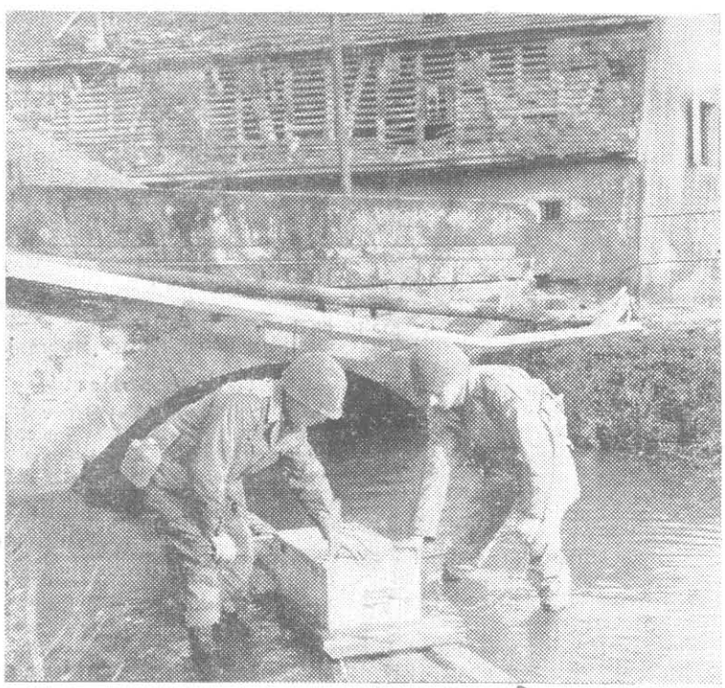
It is said that the men, on arising in the morning, used to feel their necks to see if gills had grown during the night. The Volturno, normally an amiable stream of moderate size, had swollen to a torrent, and the rampaging waters jeopardized the vitally-needed and bitterly-won bridges. Heroic measures were instituted to save them. In one instance, a span near Dragoni was preserved by anchoring it with winch cables from several half-tracks.

Off for Anzio

Shortly thereafter, the outfit pulled back to the Naples area, and when the Anzio-bound convoy pulled out of the harbor, the 36th had ahead of it the mission of supporting the assault elements, preparing emergency landing fields, demining roads and preparing Corps

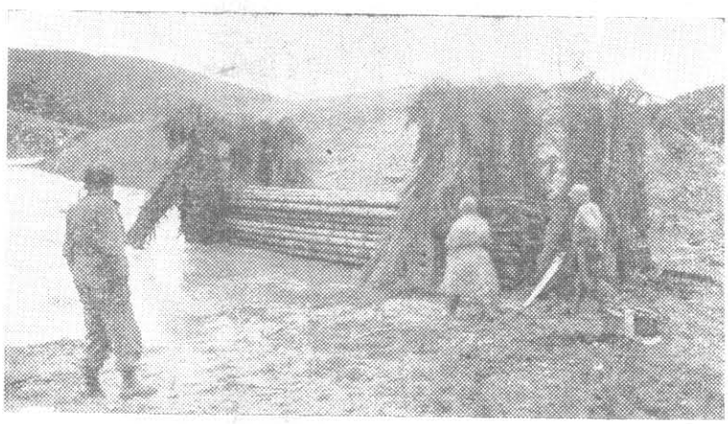
Weather Worry Always Present

Death in a Box



Flirting with death may be a trite phrase, but it's stark reality for men of the Engineers, two of whom here remove a floating box of German TNT found beneath a bridge near Wissembourg. (163rd Sig Photo by Bell)

'Let's See, Now---'



Here, members of the 36th ponder a huge log road block left by the boche who further tried to complicate matters by blowing dikes and flooding things in general. PS: The block was removed. (163rd Sig Photo by McCroby)

The 36th Knows Anzio

Engineer Patrols Made Link-Up On Highway to Rome

dumps for gas, ammunition, rations, etc. Company H was to go in with the Rangers again.

By early afternoon, the port was cleared. Boats began unloading at the quays.

After the initial jobs were complete, the 2nd and 3rd Battalions went into the line with the 45th. The krauts threw attack after attack in an effort to wipe out the Beachhead, but the line held. The casualty toll mounted daily, and the 36th had it's share.

On Feb. 10th the entire regiment occupied a sector on the left flank of the Beachhead, which was under command of the 56th British Division. There they remained until the end of March, when they were relieved by the 5th British Division. They came out, grimy, hollow-eyed veterans, who had taken every thing the enemy could hand out, and never faltered.

But They Had No Rest

There was no rest for the tired engineers, however. Hospitals had suffered from the constant shelling and bombing, and many observation planes had been destroyed. Revetments were needed, and badly. The 36th built them. And when this was done, they immediately returned to the front, relieving the 1st Special Service Force in positions along the Mussolini Canal.

Sgt Belcher again became the topic of conversation. He showed a collector's passion for weapons. It didn't matter much what nationality or type they were. Quantity interested Belcher. His foxhole was a small arsenal, and he, himself, earned the name that still sticks to him—"Fort Belcher."

He would wait until nightfall, then sally forth, so burdened with weapons that he could hardly walk. It wasn't difficult to pick a fight at Anzio, and he never had to look far. After blasting away until his ammo was exhausted, he'd return to his hole to wait for the next night.

The Breakout

Along about the middle of May, the men who had sweated it out so long on Anzio began to see the gun flashes to the south, and speculation ran high as to when the breakout would occur. They didn't have long to wait.

On the morning of the 23rd, a 13-man patrol headed by Sgt Chester B. Foster set out to capture a bridge near the Littoria road. They found it blown, and continued on—their second mission being to contact somebody—foe or friend.

They proceeded down the road to Borga Grappa, where they encountered a group of Italians, gesticulating and talking up a storm.

Being unable to make head or tail of what it was all about, the patrol walked through town, and on the other side met Lt Buckeley, of the 48th Engineers, and his driver. The 48th was a II Corps outfit, and both parties simultaneously realized they were the principals in an historic situation—the linkup between the Anzio and Southern forces of the 5th Army.

The next big job for the Engineers was the capture of Velletri—a beat-up town at the base of the Alban Hills which served as the enemy's anchor of defense. The 36th went in as infantry to do the job, acting in conjunction with the 36th Division, which swept around to come in from the north. After a brief, bloody, house-to-house battle, the city fell.

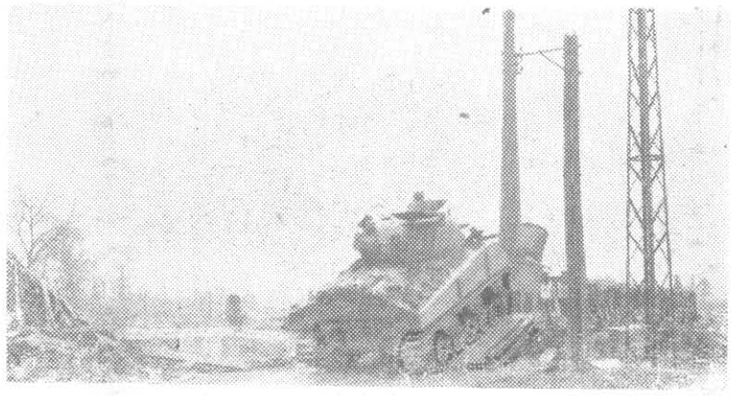
Followed then the usual grinding routine that is the lot of Engineers supporting a big push—mine sweeping, road repair, and mopping up by-passed pockets of enemy resistance. At Rome, the outfit bridged the fabled Tiber, then moved up to make the port of Civitavecchia serviceable as a supply base for northward-racing troops of the 5th Army. Some elements worked as far north as Grosetto before the Engineers were relieved.

Ready for France

Preparation for the coming invasion of Southern France followed a familiar pattern—stocking up with items they knew they'd need, brushing up their amphibious technique, waterproofing vehicles, and myriad other details that were already an old story.

In such an operation as the Riviera landing the role of an Engineer regiment is staggering in it's enormity. Landing on D-day—once more with the 3rd Division—the 36th had to accomplish the following in a matter of hours: Operate as a beach party, clearing the way for the division; construct, repair and maintain vital roadways, construct ammo, ration, chemical,

Up---and Over-r-r!



". . . men and officers concur it's the greatest engineering invention to come out of this war." The reference is to the Bailey bridge which here supports an American armored leviathan as it rumbles across a stream. (163rd Sig Photo by Valentine)

Soon the Boom

It's another kraut-blasted bridge, dynamited in such a way to cause a headache in road block form. But it's a headache the 36th GIs are going to remove, using TNT in lieu of aspirin tablets. (163rd Sig Photo by McCroby)

A Dozer Delivers

Maybe they'll cuss it sometimes, but the engineers are quick to expound on the merits of the bulldozer. This one, used by the 36th, sits in water while GIs attach a chain around a large concrete block to be pulled away. The flood was caused when the hurrying heinies blew some dikes. (163rd Sig Photo by McCroby)

The Landing In Southern France

Bridge Building . . . Steady Infantry Work . . . Mines And Booby-Traps

ordnance, engineer, and air corps dumps; lay out de-waterproofing and troop assembly areas for both American and French forces; demine beaches and roads; clear out underwater mines and obstacles; construct an air strip for light observation planes, operate a gravel pit; plan and put into operation a traffic control system for clearing supplies and troops through the beach area; and construct field hospital sites, and PW stockades.

The Big Job

Working with Duckws, the outfit was able to unload as many as 30 LCTs and 40 LCMs at a time. During the period it operated the beach at Cavalaire, the 36th cleared through a total of 66,936 tons of supplies, 16,625 vehicles, and 86,291 men.

On August 29th, the 2nd Battalion, ignoring sniper fire, entered Marseilles to do the initial job of opening up the port. By the 2nd of September, seven berths were in operation. Not, however, before 340,000 pounds of explosives had been removed from the city, most of it having been planted in the port area.

After this job, the regiment formed again and headed for the front, which, in the meantime, had swept up the Rhone Valley. Moving by way of Grenoble, they caught up with the rest of the VI Corps in the vicinity of Besancon. Then, another period of bridge building and road maintenance.

No Fancy Stuff

Unlike the engineers in the kodachrome publicity which used to flood the slick-paper magazines in the States, the 36th goes in for very little fancy engineering, or trick stuff. The commanding officer, stocky Col Mark M. Boatner, who used to boss a 34th Division Infantry Regiment, will tell you that the main job of such a unit is to keep transportation arteries to and from the front, flowing free and easy. All else is subordinate.

The gadget that they use most is the Bailey bridge—and men and officers concur that it is the greatest engineering invention to come out of this war. It supercedes the old D-10 steel truss, and is not only lighter, faster and more easily handled, but will support twice as much weight.

The Bailey—as it is commonly referred to— is a British invention that made its first appearance on North African battlefronts. Our Army liked the idea, and by the time the Italian campaign was under way, our engineers also were equipped with them.

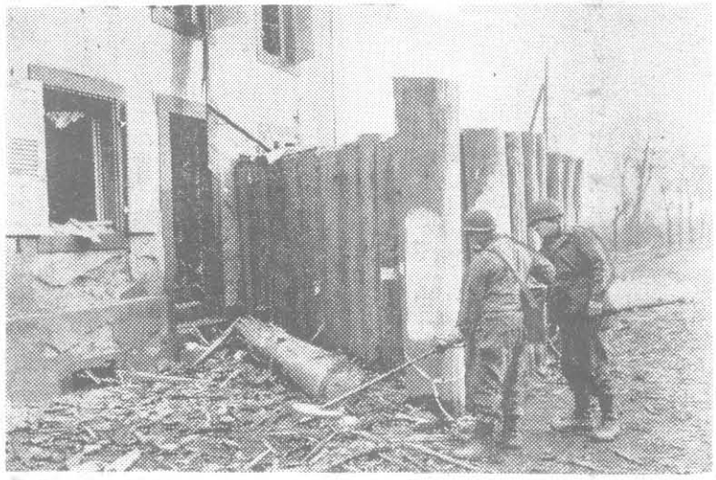
How They Build 'Em

Briefly, in the language of a non-engineer, the bridges are built in the following manner: First, the site is selected, with an eye to the proper approach. The type of bridge is decided on, with the consideration in mind that it must bear a minimum load of 40 tons. Of course, length is the prime factor here. Then the framework of the bridge is put together—a section at a time—and pushed by hand over rollers, out across the gap. Naturally, there has to be a counterbalance at the other end, so that the end they are pushing will not fall in the stream. When the bridge is long enough to reach the other bank, there are rollers there, ready to receive it. After being secured, it is decked over.

All parts are simplified and standardized much in the manner of the mechano sets kids find under their Christmas trees.

When the Moselle crossing loomed, the 3rd Battalion was elected to support the 36th Division, and the 2nd Battalion the 45th. It was rough work. On October 7th, Company H went into the line with the 36th Division, while the rest of the outfit built floors and constructed roads for the 10th and 11th Field Hospitals.

From Rambervillers through Baccarat, it was steady infantry work, with the 45th, 36th, and 117th Recon. Such towns as Bru, Jarmenil, and Menil-St-Barbe fell to them. All of them were mined and booby-trapped to the teeth.



". . . the business of clearing such stuff . . . is routine for the engineers . . . usually 20 to 30 mines are found around the elaborate road blocks . . . " (163rd Sig Photo by Valentine)

Mines, Booby-Traps

The business of clearing such stuff, although beaucoups dangerous and a casualty-producer, is routine stuff to the engineers. Usually, 20 to 30 mines are found around the elaborate roadblocks. But according to the men who know roadblocks best, the best—or worst, according to which side you're on—type is a series of trees felled across the highway. These are easily booby-trapped and hard to clear. The best method found so far is to winch them out of the way with a cat.

In preparation for the final breakthrough into Alsace, it was planned to construct seven bridges across the Meurthe River simultaneously, to serve the 100th, 103rd and 3rd Divisions. The operation was carefully planned, alternate sites for each span having been selected. However, as is often the case in the grim, unpredictable business of war, certain things cropped up that had not been taken into account in the original plans—such as pockets of enemy still full of fight, zeroed-in artillery, and foul weather. But in spite of flood, fire-fights and having to work under a smoke screen, and sometimes in the dead of night, the bridges were built.

It was during the Alsace campaign that the 36th had the heart-breaking experience of having to destroy it's own handiwork. In this case, there were two bridges —one at Haguenau, the other at Wissembourg — in which the men took particular pride. The spans were of a permanent nature, with I-beam foundations, and represented a lot of work. But even as the construction was under way on one of them, demolition charges were set in place.

When the German counter-offensive in the Seventh Army sector was mounted at the beginning of the year, the engineers watched their beloved bridges go sky-high. During these trying days they were again in an infantry role, and remained so until late in February.

Change to a Group

About the middle of February, the 36th became involved in T-O problems, and emerged as a Group instead of a regiment. Actually, the strength is pretty much the same, but the chief difference is that operations are decentralized. Each battalion was given a number, and can operate, if necessary, as an independent unit.

Many tales of individual heroism were written during the cold, bitter fighting during the war in Alsace. Sgt Charles E. Harrison, of the 2828th Engineer Battalion, earned a Bronze Star bringing in a wounded kraut under heavy fire. His company was in direct need of information as to the enemy's strength.

These are but a few of the highlights from the history of a bunch of engineers, who have, by actual count, spent more days fighting as foot soldiers than they have building bridges or mending roads.

Encircled

A huge roll of barbed wire forms a frame for these engineers who fumble in last winter's cold to open a spool of the prickly stuff. Winter multiplies an Engineer's troubles. (163rd Sig Photo by Brown)