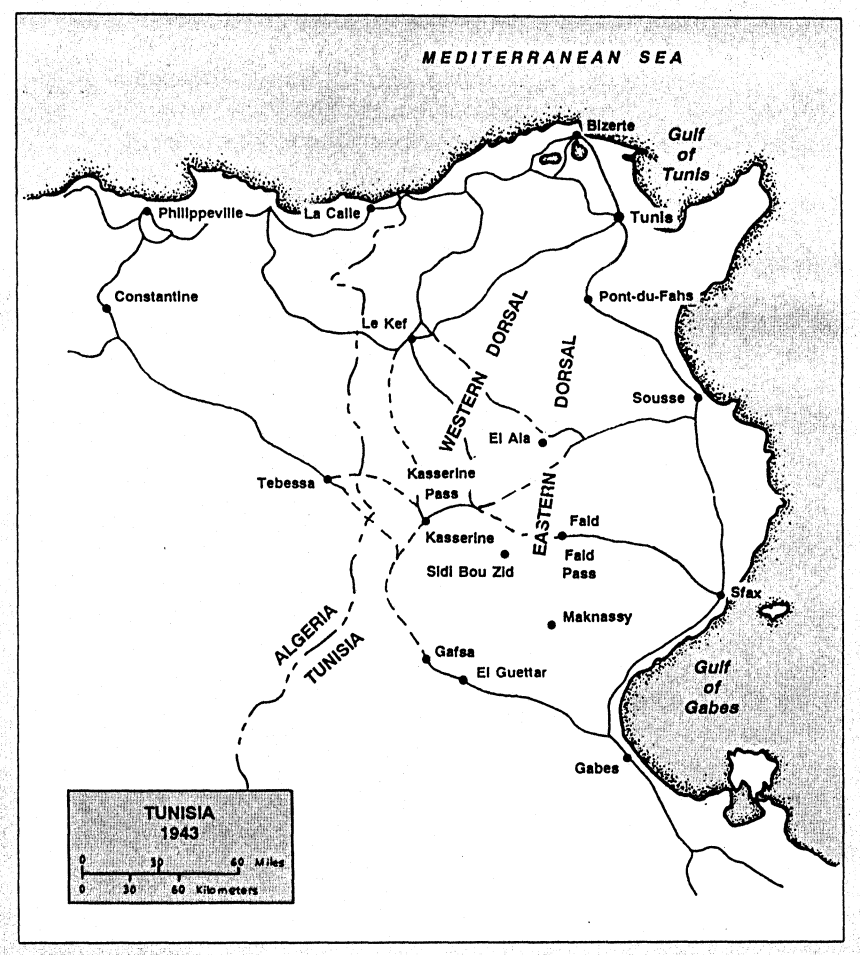
Engineers in North Africa

By Dr. James W. Dunn

United States Army engineers experienced their first European combat in World War II in North Africa. During the Tunisian campaign, which lasted from November 1942 until May 1943, Army engineers executed their primary missions of road maintenance and mine warfare, as well as their secondary mission of fighting as infantry. They also completed two new missions by functioning as amphibian engineers and aviation engineers.



Operation Torch

Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa, began November 8, 1942, when three division-sized task forces landed simultaneously at Algiers, Oran, and Casablanca. At all three sites, a company from the division engineer battalion was attached to each regimental landing team.

As amphibian engineers, the 36th Engineer Combat Regiment provided shore parties for the Eastern Task Force, at Algiers, while the 531st Engineer Shore Regiment and the 591st Engineer Boat Regiment provided shore parties for the Central Task Force, at Oran. The 36th Engineer Combat Regiment and the 540th Engineer Shore Regiment performed shore party duties for the Western Task Force, at Casablanca.

At Port Lyautey, 80 miles north of Casablanca, elements of the 15th Engineer Combat Battalion, 9th Infantry Division, helped seize an airfield adjacent to the port. This action began on November 8, when a raiding party that included engineers entered the mouth of the Sebou River to remove a navigation obstacle. Clearing this obstacle would allow the destroyer *Dallas* to move upriver and seize the airfield. The first attempt failed when gunfire from a nearby fort drove the raiders away, but the raiding party succeeded in removing the obstacle the next night. Early on November 10, the *Dallas*, with the raiders aboard, moved upriver and secured the airfield. The 888th Airborne Aviation Engineers then resurfaced the runway.

Besides the 888th Engineers, other engineer aviation units in the Western Task Force were the 887th Engineer Airborne Company and the 1st Battalion, 21st Engineer Aviation Regiment. The Central Task Force had the 809th, 815th, and 817th Engineer Aviation Battalions. These aviation engineers resurfaced damaged runways on airfields in the landing zones. Then

they moved on to build airfields in Algeria to support future offensive operations in Tunisia.

Late that fall, the British First Army's Tunisian drive stalled in front of Tunis because of strong German opposition, bad weather, and supply problems. General Eisenhower, then commander of the Allied Forces Headquarters, halted the offensive on December 24. He decided to go on the defensive until spring, when the rainy season ended. He sent the U.S. II Corps to southern Tunisia to protect the First Army's exposed flank. Later they were to take the offensive against Rommel's line of communication, when the Germans withdrew from Libya.

The II Corps became operational at Tebessa, in southern Tunisia, on January 6, 1943. Its engineer strength consisted only of the 19th Engineer Combat Regiment and division engineers from the 1st and 34th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division.

Clearing mines in Kasserine Pass, February 1943.

Southern Tunisia

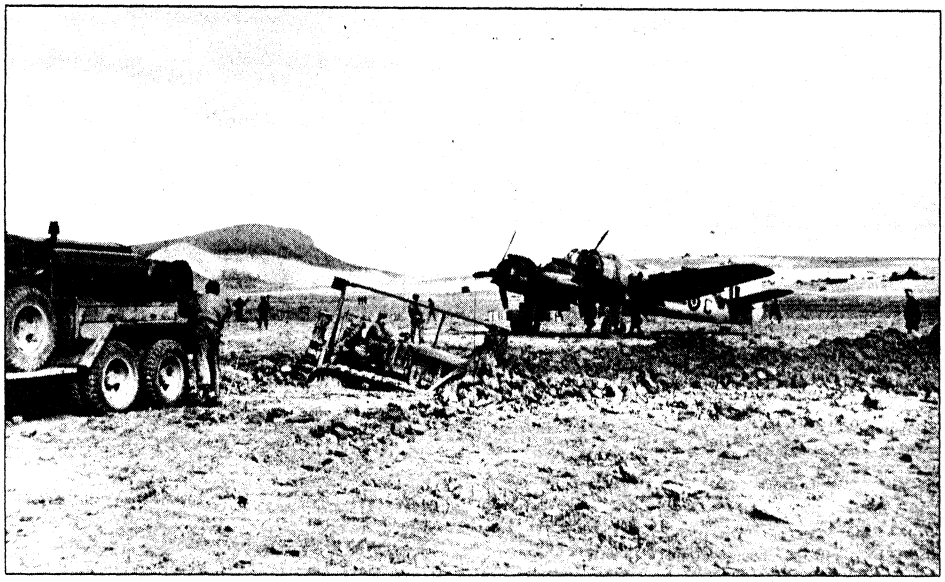
Allied intelligence, based on Ultra intercepts (intercepts of the German high command's code) predicted the Germans would attack the weak French forces in central Tunisia. Instead, their advance in the south, out of Faid Pass toward Sidi Bou Zid on February 14, inflicted heavy casualties on the U.S. 1st Armored Division.

On February 16, in conjunction with a general withdrawal caused by the German attack, the II Corps ordered the 19th Engineers to organize a defensive line at Kasserine Pass. In addition to his own regiment of 1,200 engineers, Colonel Anderson Moore headed a force of 2,000 soldiers made up of the 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division; three artillery battalions; and a tank destroyer battalion. Colonel Moore ordered his engineers to emplace mines and organized the artillery and tank destroyers. He positioned the 26th Infantry Battalion on high ground on the left, covering the road to Thala, and his engineers on high ground on the right, covering the road to Tebessa.

The 1st Armored Division withdrew through Kasserine Pass on the 17th, as the engineers prepared to stop any enemy effort to force the pass. German patrols and preparatory artillery increased in intensity through February 18th. Their probing attacks the next morning failed to penetrate the pass, but that afternoon a strong German effort forced Company D, 19th Engineers, out of its defensive position. A counterattack to restore their position failed, but by evening, although weakened, the line remained intact. Before dawn the next day, German soldiers forced the infantry on the left to withdraw, thus exposing the engineers' left flank. That afternoon the engineer line broke, and the Germans were through the pass.

In defending Kasserine Pass, the 19th Engineers' casualties were 11 killed, 28 wounded, and 88 missing. Their 3-day holding action, however, allowed time for reinforcements to take strong positions in hills beyond the pass. These forces stopped Rommel by February 22, and the Germans began to withdraw through Kasserine Pass to their original positions the next day.

As the Germans withdrew, the Allies took the offensive in southern Tunisia. The II Corps, with engineer reinforcements that included the 20th Engineer Combat Regiment and the 175th Engineer General Service Regiment, attacked south through Gafsa toward Maknassy on March 17.



Engineers repair an airfield in North Africa, January 1943.

The 1st and 19th Engineers removed mines and turned almost 100 miles of trail into dirt roads that the 1st Infantry and 1st Armored Divisions used in their advance.

Attacking toward Maknassy, the 1st Infantry Division had to break through a strong defensive position on high ground east of El Guettar. At dawn on March 21, after a night infiltration movement of about 10 miles, the 1st Ranger Battalion, supported by a 1st Engineers' mortar platoon, attacked the rear of the defensive position; the 26th Infantry, supported by Company C, 1st Engineers, attacked the front. The Germans began to withdraw by noon, and the way to Maknassy was open.

The German withdrawal into northern Tunisia squeezed the II Corps out of the line in the south. The II Corps then moved north, onto the left flank of the First Army, for the drive toward Bizerte and Tunis. The engineers found that the hilly terrain and lack of maneuver room made the German-blown bridges an effective deterrent to their advance. The 16th Armored Engineer Battalion's capability with the Bailey bridge, which they had trained with in England, helped to solve that problem.

Northern Tunsia

The final offensive, in northern Tunisia, began on April 24. The 20th Engineers supported the French Corps d'Afrique and the 9th Infantry Division on the left, while the 19th Engineers supported the 34th and 1st Infantry Divisions and the 1st Armored Division on the right. The engineers maintained almost 100 miles of macadam and 250 miles of dirt roads during this attack. With the advancing infantry units following the high ground, the engineers built almost 75 miles of new roads to connect the main supply routes with the pack mule trails in the hills.

During this last offensive, the 15th Engineer Battalion, 9th Infantry Division, successfully used its engineers in support rather than attachment, thus keeping engineer assets under centralized battalion control. A company supported each of the two attacking regiments, while a platoon supported the reserve regiment. Each company used three echelons to provide a small group of reconnaissance engineers for forward infantry elements. An engineer platoon maintained mountain trails, and the rest of the company helped the artillery displace forward. The remainder of the engineer battalion was under division control for use where needed most.

When the North African campaign ended on May 13, 1943, the engineers had gained more than 6 months of experience in 20th century mobile warfare. They had made some mistakes and taken some hard knocks, but they had learned a great deal.

In Operation Torch, the amphibian engineers learned the value of establishing a good working relationship between the Navy and the landing force. The aviation engineers learned the amount of effort required to maintain and construct airfields in a theater of operations. While the combat engineers had known they could be used in infantry missions, they now understood the need for realistic infantry training. German land mines were new to the engineers, but their ability to overcome these obstacles grew with each encounter. The Bailey bridge, new to American engineers, rapidly became their favorite device for spanning rivers and repairing roads. After the North African campaign, U.S. Army engineers moved to Sicily and Europe, where they applied what they had learned in North Africa.

Additional Reading:

Beck, Alfred M., *The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Germany,* U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988.

Howe, George F., *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West,* U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957.

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