

DESIGNATION: The 540th Combat Engineer Regiment

ACTIVATION: September 11, 1942

CAMPAIGNS: Algeria-French Morocco, Sicily, Naples-Foggia,

Rome-Arno, Anzio, Southern France, Ardennes-Alsace.

THE 540TH ENGINEER Shore Regiment was activated at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, on September 11, 1942, and consisted of regimental headquarters, headquarters and service company (H&S), three battalions and a medical detachment. Minus the 3rd Battalion, the regiment was transported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, shortly thereafter and from there to Camp Bradford, Virginia.

It was in Virginia that the regiment began to familiarize itself with amphibious warfare techniques, working beside the 36th Combat Engineer Regiment. In mid-October the 540th arrived at Camp Kilmer, N.J., in preparation for overseas movement, and while still at sea it was redesignated as a combat engineer regiment.

The engineers landed at Safi, a small port about 150 miles south of Casablanca, in November 1942, and were involved in a three-day battle against Vichy French forces. For the next several months the regiment provided shore parties; laid roads for vehicles coming up from invasion beaches; unloaded supplies, vehicles and personnel from transports; built POW camps; and helped establish a firm beachhead for the Operation Torch landings.

Next came Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily on July 9, 1943. Once ashore the regiment repeated its performance in North Africa, acting as shore engineers and unloading Liberty Ships laden with supplies. Throughout the initial stages of the campaign, the engineers worked hard to meet the needs of the 2nd Armored Division, 1st, 3rd and 45th Infantry divisions and 82nd Airborne Division.

At Brolo, the 2nd Battalion supported infantry units on two important missions that helped speed up Lt. Gen. George S. Patton's drive on Messina. The regiment lost two killed and three wounded and was still actively engaged when the Sicilian capital fell on August 17, 1943.

Next stop would be the Italian mainland. The fall of Naples gave the Allied armies what they needed most, a port. The shipping facilities had been wrecked by the departing Germans, however, and the

540th was called on to help clean up the mess. The regiment cleared the harbor and restored shipping facilities within 24 hours. For the rest of the year, the engineers were kept busy clearing minefields, repairing aqueducts and erecting and maintaining Bailey road-bridges.

The new year saw the regiment attached to the battle-tested 3rd Infantry Division for Operation Shingle, the amphibious assault on Anzio. The regiment was vastly expanded with specialized units and personnel temporarily assigned, swelling its ranks to some 4,200 men.

The January 22, 1944, Anzio landings went smoothly and all elements of the 540th were unloaded by 0800 hours on D-plus-2. Once ashore, many of the men cleared minefields and other beach obstructions. The Germans quickly recovered from their initial surprise and launched counterattacks intended to hurl the Allies back into the sea. By February 6, the pressure had become so intense that VI Corps was forced to move its headquarters underground. During one of many raids on the beach area, a bomb landed near the Company E officers' bivouac, killing 1st Lt. Walter Wagner and 2nd Lts. Robert Nichols and Frank Williams.

On May 25, 1944, forces pressing forward from the beachhead met with Allied armies advancing from Cassino, and the long-awaited advance on Rome finally began in earnest. On June 5, 1944—one day prior to the epic Normandy landings—the Fifth Army marched into the "Eternal City." Responsibility for clearing mines and booby traps, disease prevention, rounding up German holdouts and the clearing and reconstruction of the harbors of Civitavecchia and Piombino fell to the engineers.

In August 1944, the 540th joined other elements of the Seventh Army en route to southern France. As part of Operation Anvil, the regiment landed with the 36th Infantry Division near Frejus and St. Raphael. Although casualties among the invading troops were light, the engineers



suffered two killed and 29 wounded during the first three days of the landings while engaged in clearing the beaches.

On December 18, the 540th was put on alert status, should the Germans attempt to cross the Rhine River and retake Strasbourg. Meanwhile, the unit made a survey of existing fortifications, including the Maginot Line, removing mines, clearing roads and continuing to build bridges.

The year ended on a dreadful note when a jeep carrying Captain Thomas Hudson, Company E, and his driver, Tech 5 Charles Bay, were killed near Langensoultzbach in a strafing incident. On New Year's Day 1945, headquarters received word that enemy infantry and armor had surrounded the entire 1st Battalion. Fighting as infantry, the battalion was able to extricate itself. As the month progressed, 2nd Battalion was also called to serve as infantry in support of the 45th Infantry Division. Meanwhile, the 540th continued to strengthen its defenses, and as of January 31, final reconnaissance in the Vosges and Hagenau sectors was completed.

The regiment was reorganized in February, then officially became the 540th Combat Engineer Group. It continued road maintenance, bridge building, advanced infantry training and simulated assault, crossing and ferrying exercises until late March when it was attached to the 3rd Infantry Division at Grunstadt.

Ferrying troops across the Rhine began on March 26, while construction of a heavy pontoon bridge measuring 1,020 feet was completed in a remarkable 9 hours and 12 minutes at Worms. The operation cost the group 39 men.

On April 4 the 540th moved to Heidelberg, and at the end of the month it continued to construct Class 40 and 70 Bailey bridges, destroy enemy ammunition dumps, guard its own dumps, build POW enclosures, clear roadblocks and mines and improve the road net for evacuation hospitals.

From the time the 540th crossed the Rhine until Germany's surrender, the organization traveled 251 miles, constructed 12 fixed bridges and maintained roads in an assigned area of 6,369 square miles. In compiling this record of service, the group suffered 78 KIAs and 232 WIAs. □