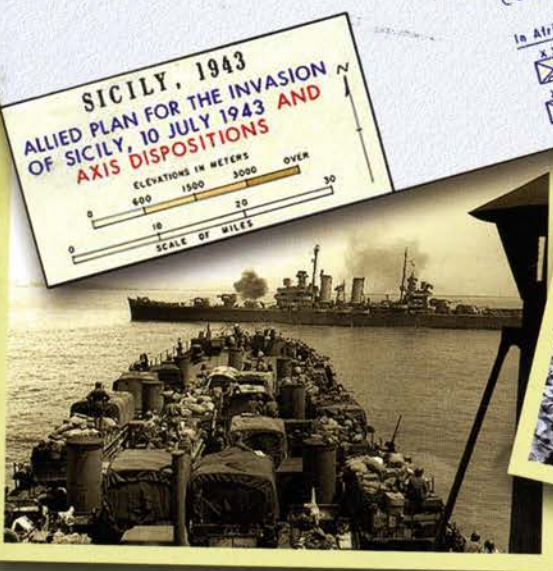
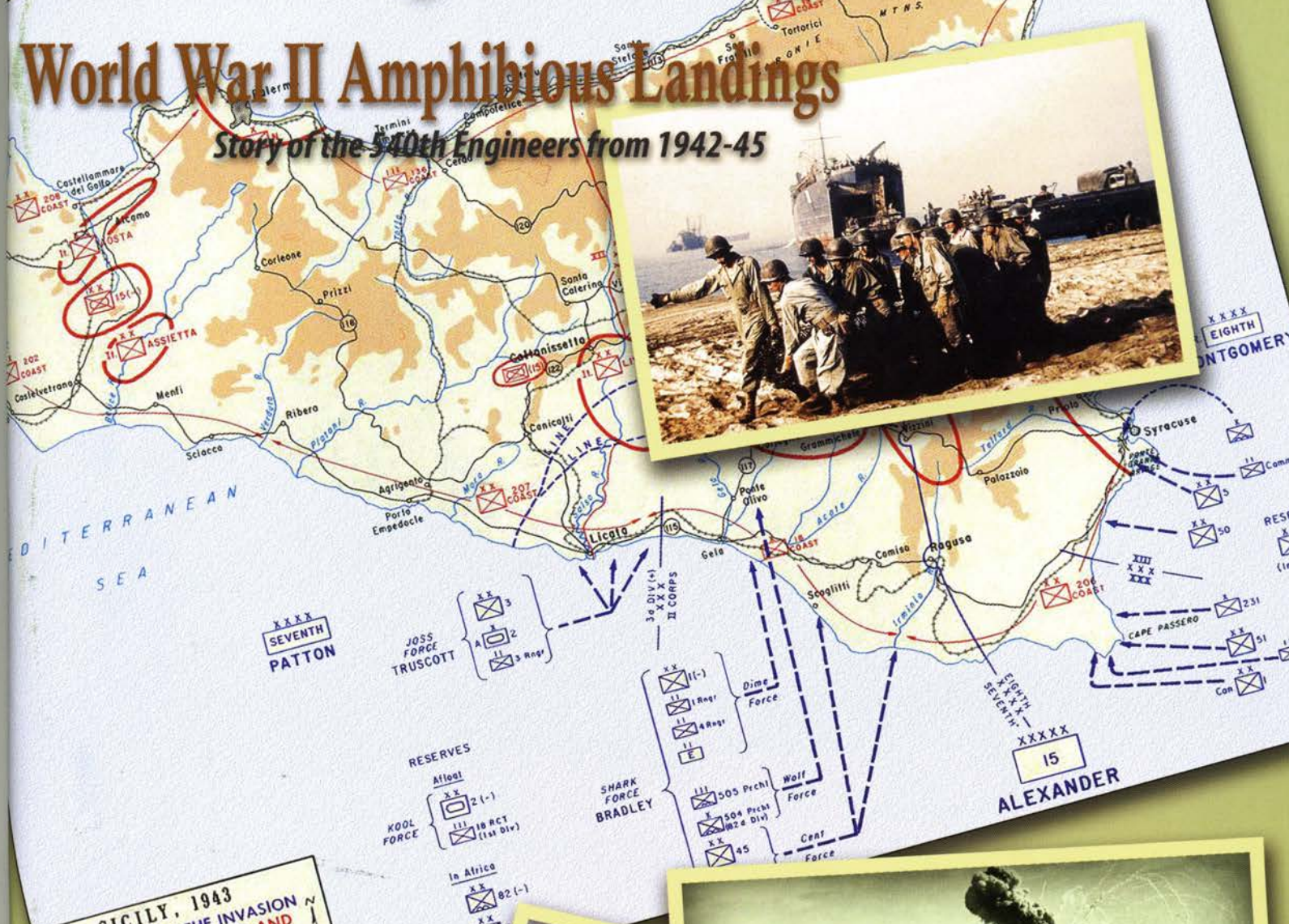


Army Engineer

November-December 2006

World War II Amphibious Landings

Story of the 540th Engineers from 1942-45



Also featured is the 555th Combat Support Brigade in Iraq and the AEA 2006 Report to Members



Beach Landings and Beyond

Story of the Men and Missions of the
World War II 540th Engineers 1942-1945

By Marion J. Chard



BACKGROUND: Soldiers approach the beaches at Normandy in June 1944 under heavy enemy fire. Middle left: Men of the 540th crossing the Rhein River as allied forces moved into Germany in 1945. MIDDLE RIGHT: 540th men and equipment assist with beach landings at Anzio, Italy in 1943. BOTTOM LEFT: Assault landing at Anzio. BOTTOM RIGHT: Men of the 540th with a captured German flag in early 1945. Holding the flag (left to right) are William Vander Wall, William Lee and Measure Rinella (kneeling). (Photos courtesy of the author, National Archives and Army CMH)

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. The entire regiment minus 3rd Bn was then transported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. 3rd Bn was later inactivated on October 3, under War Department orders.

To further the realistic aspects of amphibious warfare, 1st and 2nd Bns moved to Camp Bradford, Virginia, and worked beside the 36th Engineer Combat Regiment. In mid October they embarked from Newport, New Jersey, followed by a short but intensive training maneuver in Chesapeake Bay along with landing exercises on the Solomon Islands (south of Newfoundland). On October 25, the 540th Engineer Shore Regiment was re-designated the 540th Engineer Combat Regiment and was already under steam as part of a huge convoy masked in secrecy.

They landed at Safi, a small port about 150 miles south of Casablanca and thus began their long precipitous tour of duty. The American flag brought ashore by S/Sgt William Vander Wall, Co D, still remaining amongst his possessions today, survived the intense fire of the Vichy French. The initial battle and the capture of the Kasba lasted three days and gave the unit their first taste of battle.

For the next several months they functioned as the shore parties for their respective combat teams, laid beach roads for vehicles, unloaded supplies, vehicles and personnel from transports, built POW camps, and helped establish a firm beachhead. In addition to weapons and hand tools, they carried mine detectors, Bangalore torpedoes, and flame-throwers. HQ and H&S Co operated the Regimental Motor Pool, and maintained military and captured vehicles and civilian requisitioned cars. They also set up and operated Quartermaster, Engineer, Ordnance and miscellaneous warehouses, all the while training for their next campaign.

Operation Husky (see sidebar for more information) commenced on the hostile shores of Sicily, with Regimental HQ, H&S Co, Medical Detachment, and the 1st Bn landing at Gela, and 2nd Bn landing at Licata. From the beaches until they reached the northern cities, they functioned as shore engineers, unloading transports and Liberty Ships,

Operation Husky L launched the WWII Italian Campaign

The invasion of Sicily was a major Allied amphibious and airborne operation involving British, Canadian and American forces, tasked with taking the Island from the Axis forces represented by Italian and German soldiers.

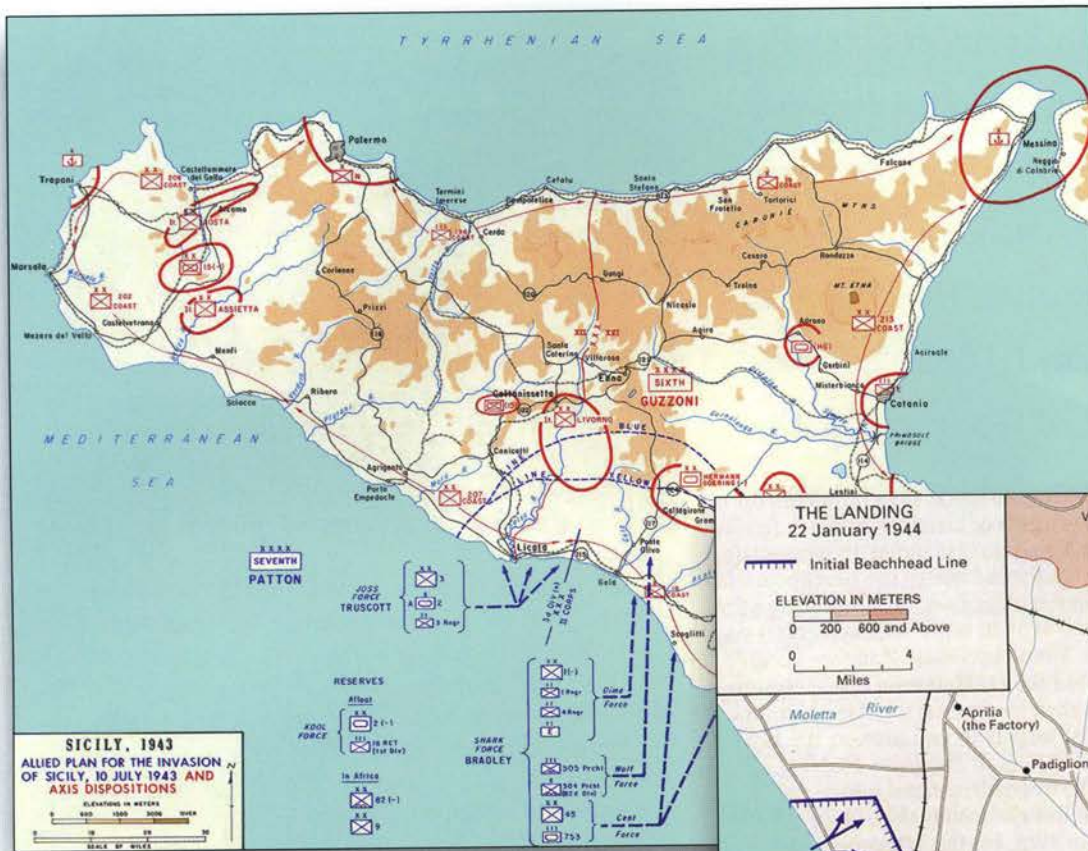
Two Allied landing forces came under control of the Allied 15th Army Group, with the U.S. 7th Army tasked to land at Gela, and the British 8th Army making separate landings at Pachino/ Licata. American engineers participated in both landings. Two German Corps (XII and XVI) and one German Panzer Corps (XIV) defended the island, though all three formations contained a high proportion of Italian units.

In the early part of 1943, following the conclusion that the invasion of France would be impossible that year, it was decided to use the troops from the recently won North African Campaign to invade the Italian island of Sicily. The strategic goals were to remove the island as a base for Axis shipping and aircraft, allowing free passage to Allied ships in the Mediterranean Sea, and to put pressure on the regime of Benito Mussolini in the hope of eventually having Italy struck from the war.

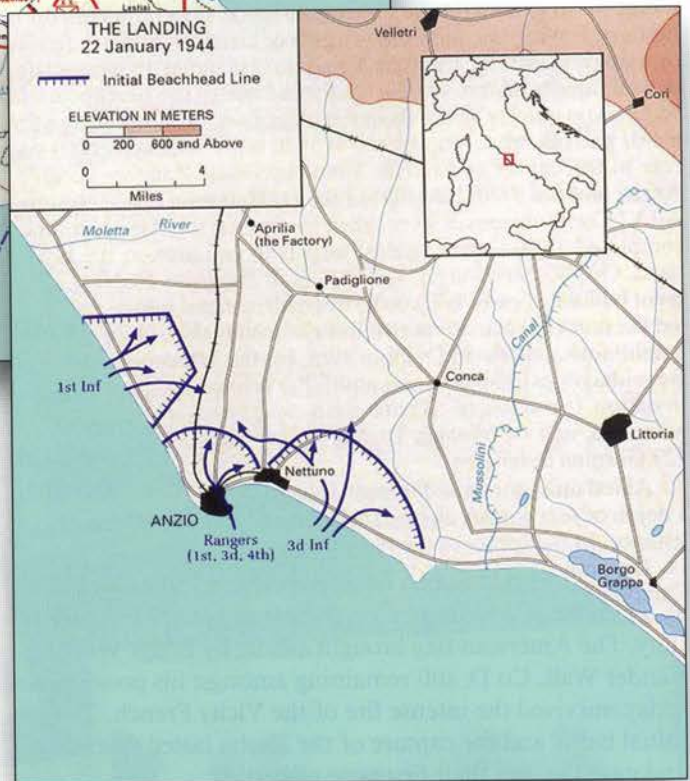
The landings took place in extremely strong wind conditions, which made them difficult but also ensured the element of surprise. Landings were made on the southern and eastern coasts of the island, with the British forces in the East and the Americans towards the West. They were mostly carried out against little opposition, the Italian units stationed on the shoreline lacking equipment and transport. Only in the American sector was there a substantial counterattack.

Engineers supporting the shore operation at Gela included the 540th Engineer Shore Regiment's 2nd Battalion. (See main story about the 540th Engineers during WWII.) Soldiers of the unit provided support to beach unloading operations including facilitating movement of over 1500 tons of supplies per day.

Four airborne operations were also carried out, landing during the night of the July 9-10 July, as part of the invasion; two were British and two American. The American troops consisted largely of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne division, making their first combat parachute jump. The strong winds blew the dropping aircraft off course and scattered them widely; the result was that around half the US paratroops failed to make it to their rallying points. British glider-landed troops fared little better; only 12 out of 144 gliders landing on target, many landing in the sea. Nevertheless the scattered airborne troops maximized their opportunities, attacking patrols and creating confusion wherever possible. **AE**



Operation maps of the 1943 Sicily landing and the 1944 Anzio landing. The former operation signaled the allied intent to move into Italy, and included for the first time airborne combat jumps. The latter involved VI Corps of Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark's Fifth Army which landed on the Italian coast below Rome and established a beachhead far behind enemy lines. Also shown is a Landing Craft Infantry vessel and a DUKWS unloading supplies and materials. (Maps from USMA archives, photo from National Archives)

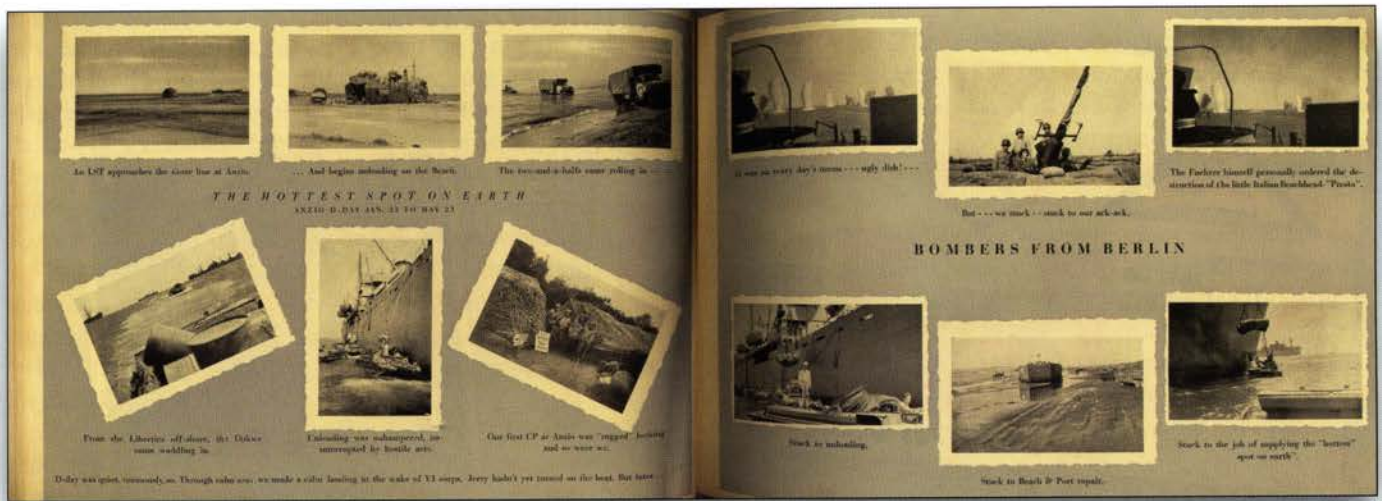


operating the newly introduced DUKWS from ship to shore, establishing dumps, and performing a multitude of other tasks assigned to them. They were responsible for keeping the supply lines open for the 2nd Armored Division, 1st, 3rd and 45th Infantry Divisions, and the 82nd Airborne Division.

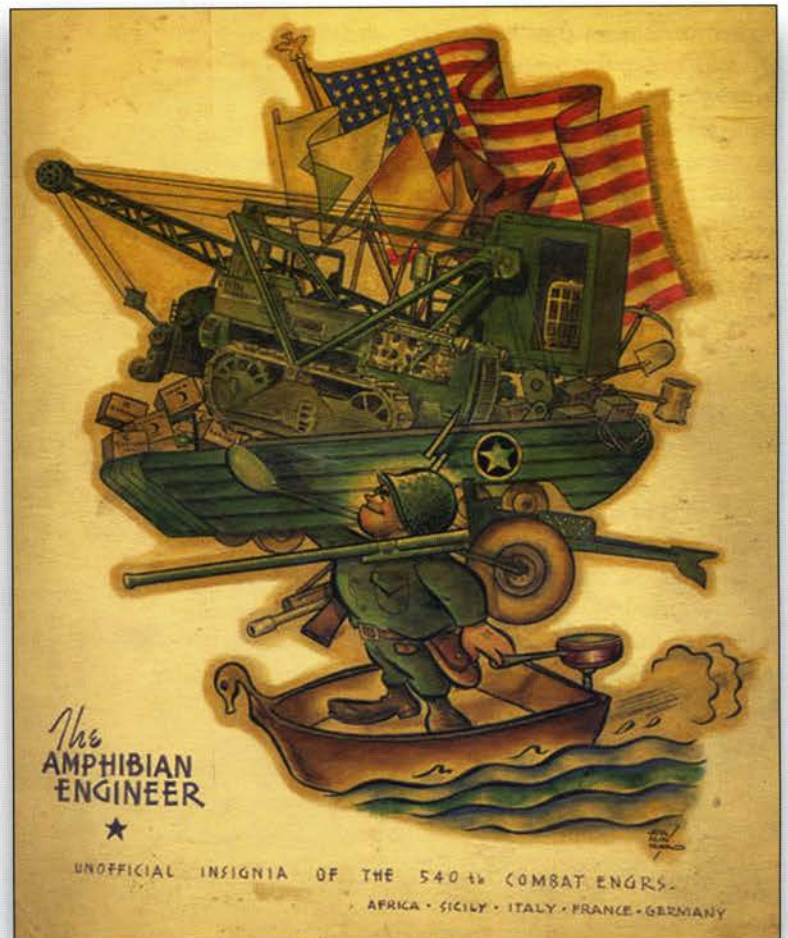
At Brolo, 2nd Bn supported the infantry on two missions, which helped in the advance on Messina and the consequent clearing of the enemy from the entire island. This landing met stiff resistance, resulting in the loss of two

engineers with three wounded. Shortly after both of these amphibious landings, enemy resistance collapsed, and Messina fell to the Allies on August 17 1943, ending the Sicilian campaign.

The Italian campaign was initiated under heavy artillery fire and bombing and strafing attacks, as the landing party prepared the way for the 45th Infantry Division on the beaches of Salerno. It was here on September 12 that F Co, 2nd Bn, participated in a special mission with the now famous Darby's Rangers. Operating the small port and beaches, they unloaded vast quantities of supplies and equipment, and aided in establishing a firm foothold. Under the exerted pressure by the Allied Forces Naples fell, but the city and port were left in shambles. Presented with one of the biggest challenges the 540th encountered in the ETO, the men showed their true grit, cleared the harbor



TOP: Two (actual) pages from a remarkably thorough, large and carefully arranged collection of images and illustrations which was edited and published in 1945 Germany after the war, by the S-2 Section of the 540th Engineer Combat Group, specifically for the men of the unit. Photos were contributed by numerous individuals from the unit, capturing many events in which they had participated LEFT: A propanganda poster printed by the Germans to attempt to demoralize the allies. It did not work. BOTTOM: Original World War II artwork by Joel Minkoff who served with the Intelligence staff of the 540th. (Images courtesy of the author)



and restored shipping within an amazing 24-hour period. From September until December 1943, the engineers cleared substantial landmine fields, repaired aqueducts, erected Bailey bridges and maintained roadways, all under the increasingly inclement conditions of the encroaching Italian winter. In January 1944, the 540th were attached to the 3rd Infantry Div, and preparations began for Operation Shingle, the assault on Anzio. With the addition of a number of specialized units, dump operation personnel, Ordnance, Engineer, Signal Corps and Navy personnel, the landing party in its entirety was grouped and trained, bringing the total strength of the 540th Engineer beach party to approximately 4,200 men. D-Day at the Anzio landing went smoothly and all elements were unloaded by 0800 hours, January 24 (D+2), due in no part to the element of surprise. The beaches were found to be free of mines, with the exception of the extremities of Red and Green Beaches. On January 24, Yellow Beach was opened by Company F 2nd Bn, which subsequently turned operation of the beach over to a British Beach Party.



TOP: Hand drawn and painted "license plate" showing the essential organization of the 540th Engineers. RIGHT: Three buddies during the war. BOTTOM: A (then) Secret basic map used during the war. An allied tank crosses the Rhine River courtesy of the engineers. (Artwork and photos courtesy of the author)

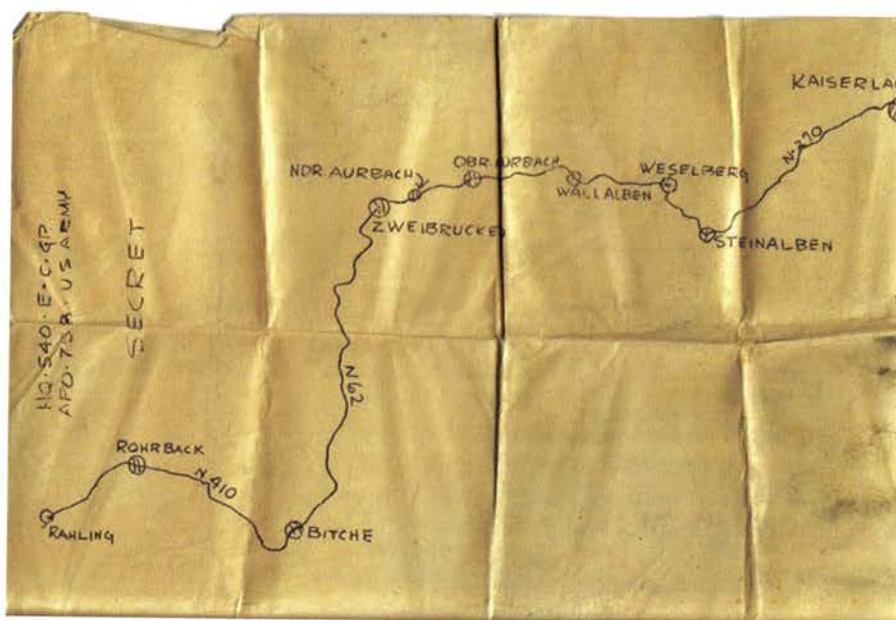
By February 6 the intensity of the enemy action became so severe that VI Corps moved its HQ underground. Tec 5 Walter Poniedzialek, H&S Co, remembered how they had to bury their trucks to keep the machine shops running while under constant harassment from the enemy's huge guns. During one of many raids on the beach area, a bomb landed near the Co E officers' bivouac, killing 1st Lt Walter Wagner, and 2nd Lts Robert Nichols and Frank Williams.

The 540th was accorded particular honors when Col George W. Marvin met up with British General Sir Harold Alexander on February 14. General Mark Clark, commander of 5th Army, sent a congratulatory message to the regiment on this occasion and then again for their vital role in making Anzio the "4th largest port in the world" on March 28.

After months of appalling conditions and determined resistance from the Germans, a joyous day was experienced at 0731 hours on May 25, 1944 when the forces pressing forward from the south at Cassino, met the forces on the Anzio beachhead.

One day prior to the Normandy landings, 5th Army proudly marched into Rome and the responsibility of clearing mines and booby traps, disease prevention, rounding up German defenders, and the clearing and reconstruction of the harbors of Civitavecchia and Piombino, fell to the engineers throughout the ensuing summer months.

August's Mediterranean seas welcomed 7th Army as they sailed from Naples to their new destination, the coast



of southern France. As part of Operation Anvil the 540th were to land with the 36th Infantry Div near Frejus and St Raphael. Although casualties were light, the unit suffered the loss of Pvt Robert Stecher, and eleven wounded. Co F sustained the largest number of casualties when a dozer encountered Teller mines on D-Day + 3, resulting in two KIA's, two fatally injured and twenty-seven wounded.

The maintenance of roads, rails and bridges, along with the construction of bridges and culverts, were a major concern throughout autumn and the early winter months of 1944 as the regiment rolled northward. Training also began for the Rhine River crossing.

On December 18th, the unit was put on alert status should the Germans attempt to cross the Rhine and retake Strasbourg. Meanwhile a comprehensive survey was made of existing fortifications including the Maginot Line, augmented by mine removal, road clearance and continuing construction of bridges. The year ended on a dreadful note when a jeep carrying Captain Thomas Hudson, Co E, and his driver Tec 5 Charles Bay, were killed near Langensultz-bach in a strafing incident.

Reports reached HQ on New Years Day that enemy patrols and tanks surrounded the entire 1st Bn, who were acting as infantry. As the month progressed 2nd Bn was also called to action as infantry in support of the 45th Inf Div. Meanwhile, the regiment continued to strengthen defenses, and as of January 31, final reconnaissance in the Vosges and Hagenau sectors was completed.

February saw the re-organization of the unit as they became the 540th Engineer Combat Group, with 1st and 2nd Bns becoming the 2832nd and 2833rd respectively. The group continued road maintenance, bridge building, advanced infantry training and simulated assault crossing and ferrying exercises until late March when they were attached to the 3rd Inf Div at Grunstadt.

Troop ferrying began across the mighty Rhine on March 26, while construction of a heavy ponton bridge measuring 1020 feet was completed in a record 9 hours and 12 minutes at Worms. The organization sustained a loss of thirty-nine men; Captains Frederick Woods and Bernard Cohen were wounded.

On April 4, Col Marvin was relieved of command and was transferred to HQ 5th Army. Lt Col Daniel J. Manning assumed command, and the regiment moved to Heidelberg. As April turned to May, the 540th continued to construct class 40 and 70 Bailey bridges, destroy enemy ammunition dumps, guard their own dumps, build POW enclosures, clear road blocks and mines and improve the road net for Evacuation Hospitals.

From the time the 540th crossed the Rhine until the surrender of German forces, the organization traveled a distance of 251 miles, constructed twelve fixed bridges, and maintained roads in an assigned area of 6,369 square miles.

The regiment had one of the longest records of continuous service in WWII, and received a Unit Meritorious Service Award as well as a Presidential Unit Citation. Seventy-eight were killed in action or died of wounds. 232 were wounded in action. 301 men received Purple Hearts, and over 200 other individual decorations were given, including two Distinguished Service Crosses, thirty-five Silver Stars, sixteen Legions of Merit and fifty-seven Bronze Stars. **AE**

The author is the daughter of T/ 5 Walter Poniedzialek who is a veteran of the 540th . She lives in Alger, Michigan and is very active in relation to documenting the WWII history and traditions of engineer units that served with the 540th Combat Engineer Regiment, and VI Corps. She is the webmaster of www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com.



The author and her Father (Walter Poniedzialek) when she was five years old after the war. A 540th "reunion hat" which has been proudly worn by veterans of the unit. Also shown is a World War II photo taken of Walter Poniedzialek, prior to his departure overseas. Photos of this type were then placed with loving care in the households of those who remained behind. (Courtesy of the author)