

The 36th Engr(c)

(RUGGED)

For info on 2nd Bn Tvrn 50
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PRELUDE:-

Consider the fact that during WWII until the invasion at Normandy censorship was very severely enforced and troops were forbidden to keep diaries, notes or photographs and it will be apparent that the accuracy of this document is slightly in question because of the author's fading memory (60 years is a long time)

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The year was 1941 and the war in Europe was still raging. Our leaders had come to the conclusion that our armed forces needed expanding and advanced training. The draft was in effect and training facilities were being expanded and/or improved.

Among the various needs, the Army needed engineers, so among all other choices, it was decided to establish an Engr unit at Plattsburg NY where there already existed an Army post (formerly used by a world war I type infantry unit)

It was a very nice post on the shores of Lake Champlain and on the outskirts of the city of Plattsburg. There were brick buildings for troop barracks, and mess halls- and brick buildings for officers quarters and a brick building for the hospital. In fact all the buildings were brick permanent construction and in excellent condition.

The surrounding grounds were well manicured and there was a great grassy parade grounds with a reviewing stand - and this was just greatly suited for the new tenants because marching and parading was high on the agenda for teaching recruits close order drill and to hold full-field inspections. Plus of course the weekly parade. In a way , the Plattsburg facility was ideal- it was far enough removed from other military centers to provide a certain isolation from top brass visits and at Plattsburg The Army unit was actually "top dog" for the community. Yet old habits are hard to break and the city folks had, over the years, developed a bad attitude towards soldiers.

The 36th Engineer (combat) regiment was similar to other combat engineer regiments with companies A,B,C,D,E,F plus a Headquarters Company (H&S). The new troops began to arrive about mid June(1941). Each company had its own separate troop billets and mess hall.

The equipment arrived piecemeal and many items remained "short" during the first few months(especially the needed motor-pool items). The transportation originally was a fleet of Chevrolet 1 1/2 ton trucks which just were not a satisfactory choice for a unit such as the 36th and were later replaced with 2 1/2 ton 6x6 trucks which served very well.

Ultimately each company had three trucks per platoon, plus 2 trucks for company administration (Mess + Supply). There were four 1/4 ton jeeps and 3 Harley Davidson motorcycles. Also included was a truck mounted compressor. The combat equipment consisted of one half-track vehicle and one 37mm canon per platoon

Included in the TO&E equipment was blacksmithing equipment (which includes a heavy anvil and a portable forge) - you see - 1941 and the engineers were still responsible for shoeing horses - left over from WWI. The 36th carried this equipment all through WWII.

Enough of the information on organization and equipment - training needs some discussion

At Plattsburg, the training area was "Macomb Reservation" a large plot of land located west of the post, 12 miles distant. That is where all field training was done. A bit awkward, but it was workable.

On a schedule, the troops would "hike" out to the reservation on a Monday morning and train during the daytime - bivouac over night and train all morning the following day, then "hike" back to the Post during the afternoon of the second day. This process was repeated Thursday and Friday and on Wednesday "hiked out, ran a short training schedule and "hiked" back to the Post. This meant that the troops "hiked" sixty miles a week as part of the training. These men were soon in top physical shape.

While at the reservation, the training subjects consisted of bridge building, mine field (laying and removal), gun emplacement, revetment, highway repair techniques, and use of associated tools. In addition, demolition type subjects (use of explosives). Infantry tactics and maneuvers were also on the agenda. It was a great area to train - no outside disturbances and no one to complain of the noise resulting from the training.

Early August 1941 a military maneuver was held at Ft Devens Massachusetts and the 36th participated - not the best or most effective maneuver, but it gave the troops ideas of their shortcomings in the training and places where emphasis was needed. The unit returned to Plattsburg following the maneuvers.

Mid September 1941 a large maneuver was held (mostly in North Carolina) and the 36th participated extensively in this maneuver. Based at a peach orchard in Norman N.C. To my recollection this maneuver was a 2nd Army affair and lasted till early December. It was a most important factor in the development of the "field readiness" of the 36th.

The citizens of North Carolina were exceedingly kind to the troops and helpful in many ways throughout the maneuver period.

Pearl Harbor incident happened as the 36th was en route to home base at Plattsburg. Having returned to home base, the training turned to amphibious technique and invasion doctrine. (the role of engineers therein). To facilitate the training, the regiment made a permanent change of station and moved to Ft Bragg N.C.

The whole regiment and all of its vehicles moved to Ft Bragg N C where the 9th Div was stationed.-permanent change of station for the 36th Engr Regt (C).

Shortly after arriving at Ft Bragg a meeting was arranged with the 9th Div to explain the mission of the combined Infantry and Engineer forces - The plan was to develop a teamwork concept that would enable this troop combination to successfully land on hostile shores and gain a foothold there.

To facilitate the training there was placed at the disposal of the Army element access to landing sites in the Chesapeak Bay (Near Solomon's Island) and several ships the Navy had equipped with LCV and LCVP deisel powered personnel landing craft. Plus a few LCMs (small ones).

The training plan provided for Army troops to load simulated invasion support supplies and embark,headed for the Chesapeak Bay to conduct practice landings of troops and supplies to establish a practice beachhead. Each exercise usually took about 2 weeks. Successive parties of engineer soldiers were sent to the Chesapeak and the ships were rotated between sessions to accomodate all of the combat teams . This activity was conducted throughout Spring and Summer of 1942.

Each combat team consisted of a regiment of Infantry and a company of combat engineers - plus support troops such as Artillery, Signal, Medical. With this plan for manning, a company of Engineers was combined with a regiment of Infantry and on this basis a battalion of Engineers was needed to function with a division of infantry. Since the 36th Engrs had 2 battalions,this would accomodate 2 Regiments of Infantry. Not quite a perfect fit for a 3 Regiment Dividsion.

(As you will see later this situation was solved ,late Summer 42, by assigning a 3rd Battalion of Engineers to the 36th making it the only army engineer regiment with 3 battalions)

All of the Summer of 42 was used by the 36th Engrs and the 9th Div to train and develop these combat teams.

At about mid September the 2nd Battalion of the 36th was sent to join a force being assembled by tht Allies for a mission in the European Theater. Accordingly, the 2nd

Battalion and a regiment from the 9th Div departed USA (the balance of the 36th Engr Regiment remained at Ft Bragg.)

(At this point we will focus on the 2nd Battalion - Reunion with the Regt will occur later)

As we departed USA we were a part of a combat team made up of (I believe this is correct) the 39th Infantry Regt of the 9th Div. Co "D" of the 36th was aboard the USS Samuel P Chase with a regt of 9th Div, Co"E" was aboard the USS Thomas Stone with the 39th regt of the 9th div,, and Co "F" was aboard the USS Westpoint with a regt also of the 9th Div.

Shortly at sea, we joined a huge assemblage of ships that was purposely Just sailing (sometimes South and then change and sail North for awhile) just treading time waiting for other components to join the force. Ultimately the force was assembled and the assemblage of ships headed for Europe. Then this combination stopped at Belfast, Ireland and the troops went ashore for ten days. We had been asea for over ten days and badly needed the exercise. This stay was cut short to conduct a practice landing in Scotland. We landed at 2:00 Am near the Firth of Inverary. A successful landing and a pleasant break from what was getting a little monotonous.

Following the Scotland experience, Our group headed for the bay at Glasgow, Scotland where we picked up some special personnel and started on our way.

Shortly after departure from Scotland we were advised that we were part of a force called The Eastern Assault Force - on our way to conduct an invasion of North Africa, possibly at Tunisia or Algiers. It was a large armada with dozens of ships travelling in one large convoy. there was even a small "aircraft carrier".

After the assemblage passed through the Straights of Gibraltar about 5AM the Thomas Stone fell victim to a torpedo dropped by enemy aircraft. The damage was limited to the after section of the ship , damaged the Screw and disabled the ship. That was 7th of Nov 42. (A seagoing tug was summoned and it towed the Thomas Stone to the invasion site - arrived a day late)

The rest of the force continued and the planned invasion took place on schedule on the 8th of Nov at Algiers,Algeria

The 36th Regt (C) (minus the 2nd Bn) had moved to Camp Picket (Virginia) and was attached to the 3rd Infantry Division. This combination left Norfolk Va on Oct 24 (1942) and made the invasion of North Africa at Fedala (near Casablanca)

As it turned out, The elements of the 36th Engineers were especially trained to organize and operate the beachhead for the invasion stage. Following the successful

invasion the assault troops moved inland in pursuit of the enemy and there was no further role planned for the Engineer Shore party - so after the landing there was no mission assigned to the Engineers and these troops remained close to the invasion point and proceeded to do regular military training. true for both landing sites - Rabat and Algiers.

As the battles in Tunisia intensified, the 2nd Bn of 36th regt was called upon to maintain the MSR from Algiers forward and at one point operated a supply depot at St Charles and just before the German troops surrendered "Co "E" had assumed a role in and was part of the action in Tunisia.

Following the German surrender The 36th Engineer Regt was recombined at Arzew, Algeria (near Oran and on the Mediterranean) and there began preparation for the next invasion - the invasion of Sicily . This was in June 43.

The invasion of Sicily took place 9 July 43.(by 7th US Army). The 36th Engineers furnished the Shore Parties and operation of the beachheads at several points along the southern shore of the island. Company "E" put the 3rd Div and the 45th Div ashore at Licata Sicily. As soon as possible after the invasion, the Shore Regt moved to operate the port which was a lot more effective. Hence as soon as possible Co"E" started operating the port at Licata. Other Engr units at other invasion points did likewise.

This invasion was headed by General George Patton and his troops performed extremely well - had Sicily under control in about a month - The British made their invasion near Messina and were slower moving than the Americans.

An aside, for the invasion of Sicily the available equipment had changed drastically - there were new and improved small craft for use to transport small groups LCVPs, new and larger LCTs greatly improved (over the former LCMs), and completely new LSTs, (landing Ship Tank)s. and LCIs for landing large group of Infantry (Landing Craft Infantry)s. All in all, such great change was making the Invasion technique more sophisticated. And the forces were ready to proceed with great confidence. It is worthy of mention that the invasion armada included one LST rigged to provide launching of small aircraft (these small aircraft were priceless - providing convenient and reliable observation of the landing site and action).

Only a few weeks following the invasion of Sicily, the Regt was alerted to return to Tunisia to prepare for the invasion of Italy. Accordingly, early August found the 36 Engr Regt in Tunisia preparing for an invasion of Italy.

This invasion to be conducted at Paestum (In some accounts it was said the invasion took place near Salerno) on 9 Sept 1943, by the 5th US Army on the west

shore of Italy and the 8th British Army on the East shore of Italy. At this point the 36th Regt had been assigned to 5th Army and attached to IV Corps Corp. The American forces spearheaded by the 36th Us Infantry Div(No connection to 36th Engr Regt). The actual invasion was strongly opposed during the first day - The 531st shore regiment operated the beach and suffered heavy casualties. The 36th Engr Regt was called upon to assist the beach operation.

This invasion period was characterized by heavy artillery from both sides and some lack of coordination of the infantry to the extent that it became necessary to improvise a perimeter guard to protect the forces at work on the beaches and supply dumps.

As part of this perimeter defense, the 36th Engr regt got its baptism by fire as the engineer troops were committed to this front line arrangement and some casualties resulted. The Engineers gained high praise from the Corps Commander for their performance as infantry.

By the end of the seventh day, the German forces began to withdraw which allowed our forces to gain ground and enlarge the beachhead. In this encounter, the 105 mm canons were almost never silent - one officer commented, "I think by now these cannon are 107's" The artillery was effective in disrupting counterattack by the enemy. The 2nd Bn of 36th (less Co D) had successfully held the left flank of the defensive line established to protect the beachhead

As more and more acreage became available (the enemy was retreating,). the 36th Engr Regt was busy repairing roadway and bridges which had been destroyed by the retreating enemy. The Infantry were pushing the Germans slowly North along a roadnet that passed through Acerno and Montella on to Montemorano and thru Avelino then Atripalda and Benevento. As the infantry advanced, The Engineers followed closely . The tasks falling upon the 36th consisted making sure the MSR could support 40 Ton to insure the passage of the max Corps load. This meant rebuilding or reinforcing the bridges and /or culverts - clearing debris (results of our bombing) to keep the highway clear and open. Some of the activity included land mine removal and Boobytrap removal from highway surfaces and large buildings. The Engineer battalions were strung out along the MSR and as the front moved the Battalions just did a leap-frog with the rearmost unit taking over the newly available area to work.

Toward the end of October the rains began to be a serious consideration. Much of the roadway in this area was unpaved and that meant mud would be a consideration, too. The troops while performing Engineer tasks were constantly harassed by enemy air assault. The allies had a considerable strong air arm, just it is impossible for the air coverage to be present continuously

By November the front line had been advanced to vicinity of Volturno on the Volturno river. The heavy rains caused flooding of the river and our temporary bridges were destroyed by flood a couple of times. The progress was stalled - the terrain just was too difficult to cope with. German troops blasted the highway off the mountainside - repair was most difficult if not impossible and toward Christmas there were rumors of a possible withdrawal to initiate an alternate strategy. Accordingly, at about Jan 5th, the assault force was assembled in the vicinity of Naples, planning an end-run invasion for another point along the Italian coast.

This was the beginning of the famous ANZIO OPERATION. D Day was January 22nd. The mission of the Regiment was to clear and put the port of Anzio in operation, support the advance of the VI Corps assault elements, prepare an emergency landing field, and clear Corps dump areas.

The landing was practically unopposed. It was a complete surprise where there were only a few enemy in the area. However, there was substantial enemy air activity as daylight allowed same. The port was cleared by early afternoon and began to accept landing craft. However darkness brought much artillery and enemy bombing. The Germans eventually used the "ANZIO ANNIE" (a large railway cannon) to harrass the city of Anzio and inflict considerable damage on our troops.

Thus began what was to be the the most "rugged" period (to date) in the history of the regiment. On the 30 January the 2nd and 3rd bns were committed as infantry (attached to the 45th Div) to establish a defensive line, generally 8 miles north of the port, and extending from the sea inward about 8 miles. During the skirmish that followed, "F" Company had over 25 casualties.

By Feb 10 the beachhead had been established 8 miles deep and over 20 miles across. The entire regiment was committed (attached to the 56th Div(BR)) on the left flank and for 45 days successfully held their sector. Not bad for a non-infantry unit. Casualties were high, tho, 75 KIA and 336 WIA.

Besides the enemy action there was a serious problem caused by TRENCHFOOT. The troops in position along the front were continuously exposed to the weather and it rained a lot plus several times the temperature dropped below freezing. This resulted in a large number of casualties (over and above) battle casualties. The quartermaster did not have an adequate supply of overshoes. Some were issued on the basis of 1 pair per 10 men.

Relief came on March 26th and the regiment reverted to VI Corps control and engineer tasks.

There followed a period of intensive training - to capitalize on the recent experience

and assure readiness of all the new members (replacements). There must have been upward of 600 replacements during the time on the beachhead

Also the regiment provided work details to assist the Field Hospitals ((now in place on the beachhead) There was no shelter to protect the nurses. (The German artillery misunderstood the presence of these large tents etc - thinking it was a cover for supplies, they frequently dropped shells on these tents.). So the engineers built revetments to protect the nurses and other hospital personnel.

On May 8 the regiment was committed on the right flank of the beachhead to take over from the First Special Force and provide infantry cover for a strip along the Musalini Canal. The 805 TD bn and other field artillery were attached as supporting artillery. The First Special Force was chosen to spearhead the breakout from Anzio (now in planning stage).

The engineers conducted active patrolling , reaching out to the south trying to establish contact with the elements of the 5th Army now trying to reach the beachhead

During this phase of the Anzio operation the 36th had these casualties , 14 KIA, 70 wounded and 1 MIA.

The breakout started on May 23 and proceeded quite well - Heading for Rome! En route there was a battle for possession of Vellerti. The 36th was again committed (May 31) as infantry to assault the town and wrestle it from enemy control. The 1st and 2nd Bns were chosen for this duty. This battle lasted approx 2 days.

(This is the point where I departed on rotation - brief return to USA)