

# The Engineer Combat Battalion in the Infantry Role

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**E**MPLOYMENT as infantry is a traditional secondary use of Combat Engineers. This use is occasioned when the Commander finds that his normal combat troops are hard-pressed. Use as infantry presents a very serious problem in organization and training for the Engineer Combat Battalion. During World War I Engineer troops were used in this secondary role frequently and made an enviable record. Experience to date in World War II has indicated that the Engineer Combat Battalion can expect, with a reasonable degree of certainty, that it will find itself used as infantry troops in any one of several different types of infantry missions.

Commanders and Engineer Staff Officers have always been concerned lest such employment of Combat Engineers might be overdone to the detriment of engineer work and construction missions. Fortunately, the experience of World War II has indicated that Commanders have a thorough appreciation of the importance of maintaining their communications, and therefore such employment has not been excessive. However, the problem is one which merits continued thought, organization, and planning by Combat Battalion Commanders to insure maximum efficiency and successful operation when assigned infantry missions.

## EXAMPLES IN WORLD WAR II

The following experiences of one Corps Engineer Battalion, which was employed as infantry in several instances, are typical.

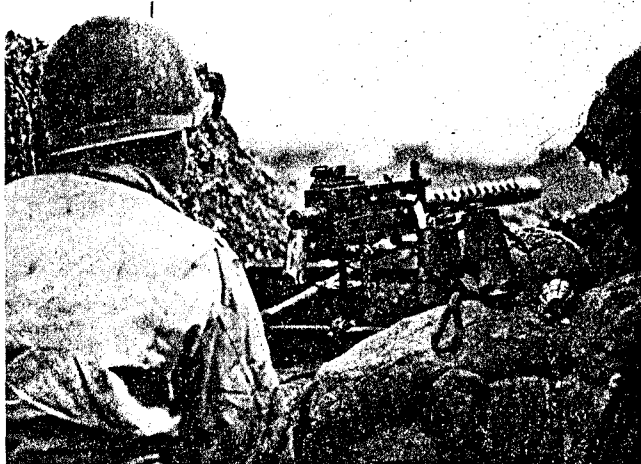
In the assault of Sicily, this Engineer Battalion, which was an interior battalion of an Engineer Combat Regiment, was detached from the regiment and attached to a special Ranger force, which was comprised of two Ranger Battalions, the Engineer Battalion, a Chemical Weapons Battalion, a Shore Engineer Battalion, and certain other supporting troops. For about a month, the Battalion underwent combined land and amphibious training with this special Ranger force in preparation for the assault. At H-hour, the force made the assault, landing at Gela with the two Ranger Battalions in the assault and the Engineer Battalion in support. The attachment continued for a five-day period during which the battalion held a section of the defense perimeter of the beachhead at Gela; and portions of the battalion were used in a task force which took the offensive from the beachhead, attacking toward Butera.

The next infantry mission came at the Salerno beachhead when the battalion, again detached from the regiment, landed as a Corps Engineer Battalion, but was promptly attached to the 36th Infantry Division, and, for three days, held a section of the defense perimeter.

Another infantry mission was assigned immediately after the regiment, in its normal role of Corps Engineers, landed at the Anzio beachhead and was assigned to defend a 5-mile sector along the Mussolini

Canal on the east flank of the beachhead.

The experiences of other Engineer Battalions in the Mediterranean Theater have been very similar to the experiences cited above. Other examples of the infantry role are those of the 19th Engineer Regiment in the defense at Kasserine Pass, the 36th Engineer Regiment in the defense missions at Salerno and at Anzio where the regiment held a sector for about six weeks, and of the 48th and 235th Engineer Combat



Combat Engineer Manning a .30 Caliber Machine Gun in the Frontal Area Overlooking the Mussolini Canal

Battalions, which were used in attack missions at Cassino.

Oddly enough, the Corps Engineer Battalions are the ones which have been used most frequently in infantry missions. This is apparently explained by the fact that the commitments of the Divisional Engineer Battalions are usually more immediate and more pressing, whereas the Corps Battalions can be taken from their normal Corps Engineer missions for short periods of time without too great detriment to those normal missions.

## IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEM

The problem is of great importance for many reasons, of which the following are a few:

Normally, when a Commander decides to employ his Engineer Combat Battalion as infantry, he is doing so in an emergency after he has exhausted all other resources. In other words, the situation is tight and the engineers *must* be good. Again, whereas on engineer missions careful supervision and co-ordination can be given at all times, in the infantry role the battalion must function immediately as a team, with every individual playing his part and without additional supervision to that which his normal commanders can give him during combat operations. Another reason is the fact that the Engineer Battalion may be

called on to execute an infantry mission following a long period of employment on engineer work, under conditions which do not permit either the training or the refreshing necessary to keep the unit in a constant state of readiness to execute the infantry mission. Again, the infantry mission being a secondary one and the battalion being organized and equipped for the execution of its primary engineer missions, the organization and training for the infantry mission may be slighted in order to achieve a high degree of skill for the primary engineer missions.

Prior to and in the early stages of the war, Engineer Battalions found themselves considerably handicapped in preparing for their secondary mission, in that little cognizance was taken of this mission in field manuals other than to state that it was a secondary mission for Engineer Combat troops. The degree of proficiency which a battalion attained in preparing itself to play the infantry role was in direct proportion to the ability, initiative, and planning effort of its Commanders. Since the war began, training literature and Tables of Organization and Equipment have taken greater cognizance of the importance of the infantry mission and the Battalion Commander now finds his battalion better equipped for such a mission. He now has *FM 5-6* to give him some guidance in training his unit for employment as infantry.

Tables of Organization and training literature are not yet, however, at such a stage of development as to permit the Engineer Battalion to execute successfully an infantry mission, without having first made careful examination and study of its organization and equipment, and having done necessary planning and training to prepare itself for the infantry mission.

Therefore, certain aspects of Engineer organization and preparation for employment in the combat theater



Moving Forward on an Infantry Mission through a Bulldozed Breach in Hedgerow

will be discussed from the point of view of service in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. The conclusions or recommendations expressed herein can not be accepted as universal, but an attempt is made to eliminate any which might appear peculiar to a particular theater and not applicable under most circumstances.

#### ORGANIZATION

Nowhere in the Table of Organization of the Engineer Combat Battalion do we see listed units such as

the Communications Platoon, or Machine-Gun Section, or specialists such as Code Clerks, Telephone Linemen, Scout Observers, Machine Gunners and Assistant Machine Gunners; yet, within the Engineer Battalion, detachments and individuals must be prepared and trained to serve these and many other specialist functions when the battalion is employed as infantry. The problem is more than that of converting a three-section Engineer Platoon into an Infantry Platoon of three rifle squads and a machine-gun section. It is, rather, a problem of establishing a maintaining within the Engineer Company a suitable infantry organization into which the Engineer Company can slip at a moment's notice. This infantry organization must be so set up as to give a sound tactical organization with properly trained individuals in each of the positions. The problem is of sufficient importance to merit the establishing of Tables of Organization in which individuals are assigned two specialist assignments: namely, a primary engineer classification, and a secondary classification for the infantry role.

In any event, the Company or Battalion Commander must insure that within his units he establishes and maintains a sound tactical organization of his combat means. Unless this organization is reviewed frequently and kept up to date at all times despite personnel changes and other interfering factors, the unit may find itself called upon but unprepared to execute an infantry mission.

The ideal is achieved by so establishing and maintaining the infantry organization that the Company Commander can give the order "As an Engineer Company, fall in," or "As an Infantry Company, fall in" and have his unit assume their places with their weapons, under their correct leaders, without hesitation.

A typical organization of an Engineer Company for combat is as follows: The platoon is converted into a Rifle Platoon, consisting of three rifle squads and a machine-gun section of the platoon's 30-caliber heavy machine gun. The machine-gun squads should be capable of being used in the platoon or of being combined with machine-gun squads of the other two platoons to form a machine-gun or automatic-weapons platoon within the company. A difficulty encountered in finding a sufficient number of noncommissioned officers to staff these machine-gun squads and machine-gun platoons, the usual solution being to employ necessary additional acting sergeants or corporals to command machine-gun squads and to use the Company Administrative Officer to command the machine-gun platoon. Many engineer units have assisted in the maintenance of their infantry organization by establishing skeleton machine-gun squads of machine-gunners on a permanent basis. While the unit is on engineer missions, these personnel can be used for local security missions, and when the unit is employed on an infantry mission the machine-gun squad is reinforced by a suitable number of ammunition carriers.

On the whole the caliber .50 machine guns have been found unsuitable in infantry missions. They are too heavy and their ammunition is of such weight that only small quantities can be carried. A suitable organization would be to have them prepared to form a caliber .50 machine-gun squad of the machine-gun platoon for such missions in which they could be used. More frequently, however, they will find their best employment left with the company's rear echelon to furnish antiaircraft protection or local security.

### TRAINING

In the training of an Engineer Combat Battalion a considerably higher degree of proficiency should be attained in the preparation for the infantry mission than for the engineer mission. The reason is simply that, while somewhat incomplete training for engineer missions may cause slower execution of such missions and require a greater amount of supervision during the missions, no other serious effects will result. On the other hand, if the unit is not thoroughly prepared for an infantry mission, both as individuals and as a team, it may not only suffer a large number of casualties from an unsuccessful infantry operation but also may fail to accomplish the assigned mission.

The usual training of specialists and individuals must be done without neglecting certain individual training which, although easily overlooked, is essential to the successful execution of infantry missions, for example, the training of observers and patrols. In individual training, a good criterion is to train three men for each job, just as three men should be trained for each engineer specialty. This provides an adequate number of personnel for operation on a two-shift basis over protracted periods of time and provides replacements.

In combat training, good squad and platoon operations should be emphasized. The Company or the Battalion can not operate successfully if it is not built up of well-trained small units (squads and platoons). Infantry field manuals should be used freely as guides for this infantry training.

### COMMUNICATIONS

The Engineer Company lacks much of the equipment which the normal Infantry Company has to provide for communications in the infantry mission. The SCR 536, issued to an Infantry Company for its company net, is an ideal radio net in the infantry mission. This equipment should be obtained for any engineer unit which is to serve for an extended period as infantry.

The battalion should conduct training in establishing wire communications when used as infantry platoon communications personnel who, by carrying breast reels of combat wire and laying it as the company Command Post advances, can maintain wire communications at all times.

There are several applications for signal projectors and, if not readily obtainable, they can be easily improvised. They should be in the hands of the company and used for signalling purposes including the projection of illuminating flares at night.

### INTELLIGENCE

Within both the company and the battalion, careful selection and training of intelligence personnel must be accomplished in order to insure that there be avail-

able personnel capable not only of reporting accurately what they see under all conditions but of evaluating and disseminating resulting intelligence in all directions. This will mean a slight build-up of the battalion's intelligence sector to provide teams for the manning of battalion observation posts.

### ADMINISTRATION

The company or battalion in the infantry role will find that its administrative arrangements will vary greatly from those in the engineer role. Particularly, Corps Combat Engineers have always been able to operate as one echelon with kitchen and baggage train forward with the personnel at all times, and with the men's individual baggage accessible to them. The company and battalion must be so organized as to be readily broken down into two echelons, the forward or combat echelon, and the rear echelon consisting of the kitchen and baggage trains of the battalion. The members of the combat echelon must in this instance have blanket rolls prepared which can be moved forward to the combat echelon when required. The kitchen and baggage trains, which will include the bulldozers and prime movers, the air compressor, and the other engineer tools, must be capable of functioning under one officer as a battalion train (or an independent unit) capable of bringing forward hot meals or blanket rolls when required. The feeding of an engineer unit deployed in a defensive situation is a problem which the unit will not find itself prepared to solve unless it has specifically planned and organized for doing so.

### COMBAT EXPERIENCE

Upon entering a combat zone, most Corps Engineer Battalions will find themselves in an excellent position to obtain some degree of individual combat experience prior to the first assignment of an infantry mission to the battalion. As the engineer missions of the battalion permit, it can be arranged for the key officers, noncommissioned officers, and other personnel to be sent for short periods to infantry battalions, thus giving them actual experience in the problems which they may one day have to solve themselves. This will not only give them a greater confidence in their ability to handle their infantry assignments, but will give the other men of their units greater confidence in their leadership.

The frame of mind of the men and their mental readiness to execute a combat mission successfully must always be kept in mind. Their training and preparation should have been such as to instill in them confidence of their ability to accomplish infantry missions which, as a matter of course, they should expect to receive during their operations in the combat zone.

Not infrequently, Engineer Commanders have held that as engineer missions permit, it would be desirable to employ the Engineer Battalion occasionally in the infantry mission, although such employment might not be required by the situation. Such practice, it is claimed, would give the battalion experience which could prevent the deterioration of readiness which occurs as a result of protracted periods of engineer work without opportunity for infantry training or combat experience. Many factors, including those of the engineer missions at hand at the time and also of the casualties and losses which may be suffered, must be given consideration before such employment.