

When Engineers Fight as Infantry

The amphibious assault on Gela
by a Ranger-Engineer force

By Col. STANLEY W. DZIUBAN

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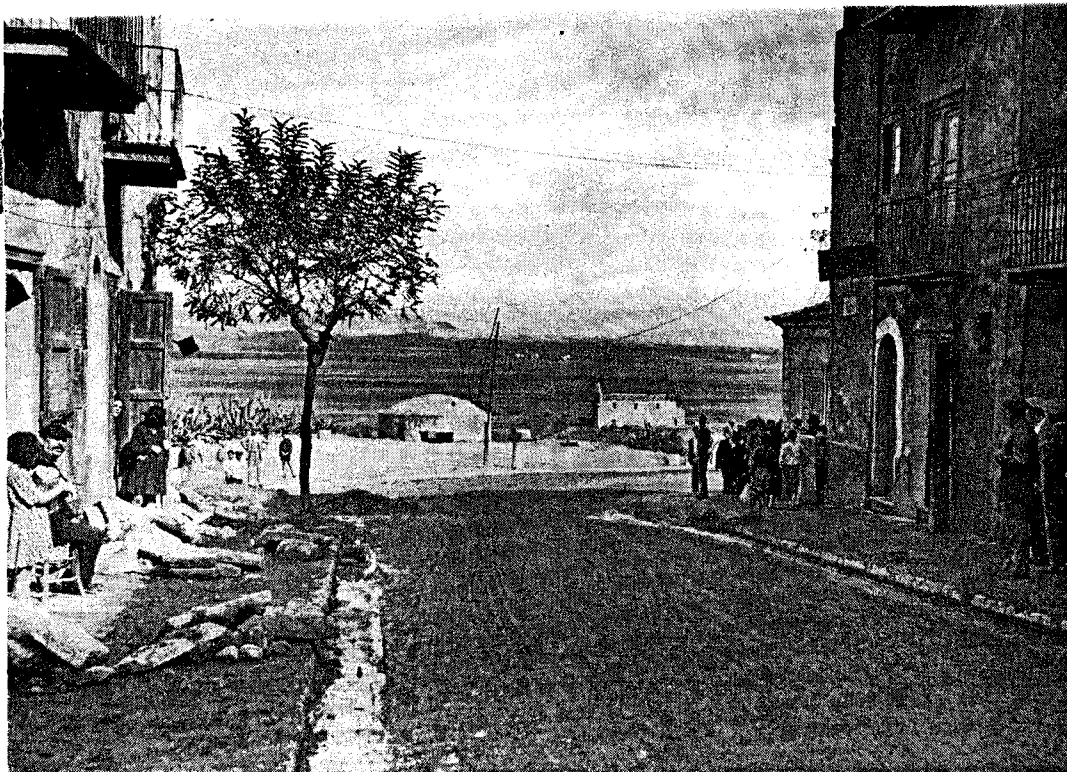
ON D-day the 1st Battalion, 39th Combat Engineers, wedged in between the 1st and 4th Battalions of Col. Bill Darby's Rangers, assaulted the beach at Gela, Sicily, fought through the center of the town and set up a defensive position between similar positions of the two Ranger battalions. During the rest of that day and for several days following, the engineers, fighting alongside the Rangers, carried the battle to the enemy.

These engineers fought as infantry, as engineers did on other battlefields of the Second World War (as well as in our earlier wars) and were to do seven years later in Korea. And as they are prepared to do today. In Europe, for example, Army and engineer commanders continuously exact from their engineer battalions (corps and army as well as divisional) the highest possible degree of readiness for combat missions, especially to fight as infantry.

In this article I am going to describe that battle because it shows what engineers can do with rifle, machine gun, bazooka and light artillery when they are given an infantry mission.

Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily by General Patton's Seventh Army on 10 July 1943, was directed as the follow-up of the Axis collapse in North Africa. The bulk of the assault force, the 1st and 45th Infantry Divisions, was assigned to General Omar Bradley's II Corps. The 1st Division, nucleus of the assault force, comprised its organic 16th and 26th Regimental Combat Teams (the 18th was detached) and Force X. The latter, also referred to as the Ranger Force, or the Special Force, consisted of the newly-formed 4th and the existing 1st Ranger Battalions and the 1st Battalion, 39th Engineer Combat Regiment, as its assault elements, together with a 4.2-inch mortar battalion and other supporting elements. Lieutenant Colonel William O. Darby, commander of the 1st Ranger Battalion which had provided cadres for the 1st Division and other volunteers who filled the new 4th (and 3d) Ranger Battalions, was designated to lead Force X.

The 39th Engineer Combat Regiment under Colonel Thomas C. Green had landed at Oran at the end of January 1943 and had spent the following months in that area doing jobs for its parent

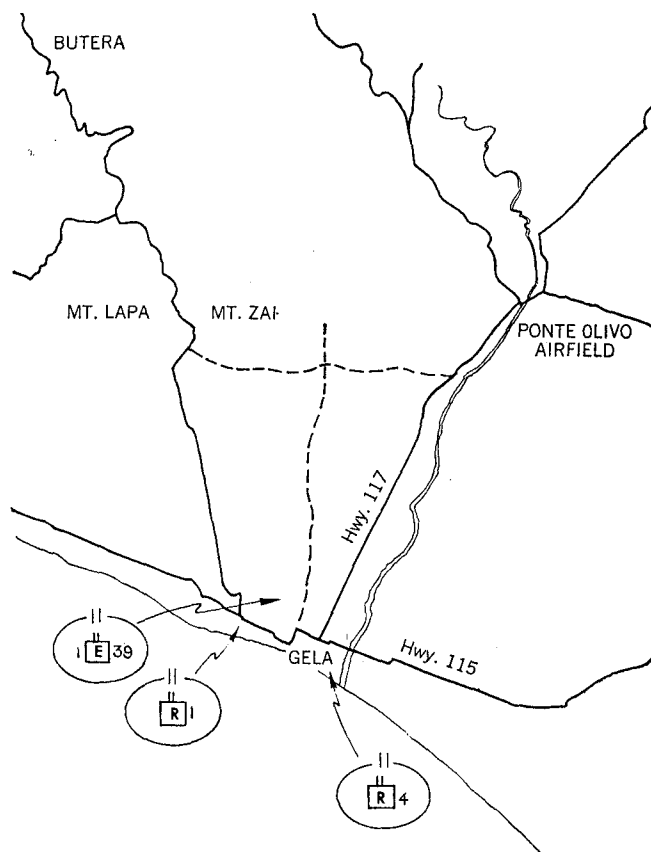


Concrete pillbox at the inland edge of Gela covered a street intersection and the plain that reached to the mountains to the north

unit, VI Corps, and for the Mediterranean Base Section. As the Axis surrender in Tunisia in May drew near, preparations for the next major effort were hastened by the Allied Headquarters. The 1st Battalion of the 39th Engineers, apparently selected for a special role, was released from its engineer missions to begin an intensive period of infantry training.

In an ideal spot for the purpose in the Atlas Mountains near Magenta, some 100 miles south of Oran, the unit was able to concentrate on reaching a peak of proficiency with its weapons, communications and tactics. The eight-man headquarters detachment of the early World War II interior battalion had to be reinforced with men and equipment to make it reasonably self-contained for independent missions. Training emphasized the reduction of fortified positions.

The future became a little clearer when the battalion was attached to the 1st Infantry Division in early June and ordered to the Fifth Army Invasion Training Center at Arzew, Algeria, for the two-week period of amphibious assault training being given all the assault elements of the



forthcoming operation. In addition to the usual practice in making small circles in LCVP's, the training emphasized night operations and the breaching of obstacles. The engineers reached the right stage of psychological readiness when they were called upon to demonstrate to and to instruct the superb Ranger units in techniques of crossing and breaching various types of obstacles.

Now attached to Force X, the battalion spent the remainder of June in completing waterproofing of its equipment and other preparations and in participation in the full-dress rehearsal CONQUEROR at nearby Zeralda on 24-25 June. Finally, on 5 July, the battalion was combat loaded on APA 13, the U.S. Coast Guard-manned *Joseph T. Dickman* together with the 1st Ranger Battalion, whose headquarters also formed the Force headquarters.

The mission

For the assault of Sicily, the initial objective of Force X was the fishing village of Gela, population 32,000, which sat atop a mound 150 feet high, some three miles long parallel to the sea, and about 4,000 yards deep. Between the mound and the Mediterranean lay a beach about 1,000 feet long divided into halves (Red on the left about 50-60 yards deep, Green on the right some 30 yards deeper) by a 900-foot concrete pier jutting into the sea. Photo reconnaissance showed the beaches were covered with fishing boats, which suggested that the beach might be free of mines. From the rear of the beach the ground rose steeply to the town with egress provided by a winding road and two foot paths.

To the north, Gela looked across a treeless cultivated plain, studded with poles installed as anti-aircraft and antiglider obstacles, toward the nearest hills a few miles distant. Leading inland across the plain from Gela was Highway 117. About five miles away, the Ponte Olivo military airfield sat in the corner formed by a fork in the highway by a branch turning to the east.

Gela lay in the defense sector of various Italian elements. At the beach was the XVIII Coastal Brigade; behind the beaches in reserve were various Mobile Groups and the Livorno Division under General Chirieleison. The village was defended in all directions by concrete pillboxes and barbed wire with its approaches from the beach defended by anti-personnel and anti-tank mines as well. In and about Gela, whose infantry defenses were manned by the 429th Coastal Battalion of the XVIII Brigade, were artillery and searchlight positions.

The task of Major General Terry Allen's 1st Division was to capture Ponte Olivo airfield by daylight D plus 1 and thereafter to seize other objectives to the north. After capturing Gela early

on D-day, Force X was to hold it to protect the left flank of the division and then to advance, continuing such protection and linking up with the 3d Infantry Division on the left.

Each Ranger battalion comprised a headquarters and six companies of 68 men each, organized into two platoons and a weapons squad containing one 60mm mortar and one caliber .30 light machine gun. What each 450-man battalion lacked in personnel strength and weapons it more than made up in skill and courage. Companies A, B and C of the 1st Battalion, 39th Engineers, each contained three rifle platoons of 35 men each and a heavy weapons platoon. The latter included three half-track personnel carriers (over which had been installed chicken wire panels to fend off grenades which might be met in street fighting) each carrying a squad armed with one heavy machine gun and two light ones. The half-tracks proved to be quite an asset to the lightly-armed Ranger Force. Hand and rifle grenades, 2.36-inch bazooka rockets and the usual small arms augmented the fire power of the companies.

The Force X plan was intensively studied in relation to a relief model of Gela aboard the *Dickman* as the amphibious force marshalled for the assault. At H-hour, 0245 on 10 July, each Ranger Battalion was to land in two waves, the 1st on Red and the 4th on Green. After these two battalions had established themselves on the beach and reorganized, the Engineer battalion was to land between them. The three battalions (there was no Force reserve) would then advance through the village, the Engineers directly northward, the 1st and 4th Rangers turning to the west and east respectively to clear those ends of the village and the high ground adjacent.

The landings

Heavy weather delayed the movement of the amphibious fleet elements to their stations. Fortunately for the landings, the weather improved just before midnight. The Force X battalions loaded into their landing craft and circled in their assembly areas, the Engineer Battalion using 17 of the *Dickman's* 30 craft. Once away from the *Dickman*, communications within the Force were cut off, except as control craft could provide liaison, and the movement was in the hands of the Navy command and crews. The assault forces detected, beach searchlights, artillery, and in due course, automatic weapons opened up. Naval gunfire promptly disposed of the searchlights. At 0240 a great demolitions explosion badly damaged the pier.

Two waves of Rangers landed between 0255 and 0305, the 1st receiving some casualties from gunfire and mines, the 4th on Green taking heavier casualties from the greater resistance encountered



Bagged by Company C, 39th Engineers on 11 July 1943, these Italian soldiers are on their way out of the war and to a prisoner collecting point in Gela

and from more heavily mined beaches. The fishing boats seen in aerial photographs proved to be in dead storage. Both beaches contained many anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. As the two waves of each battalion crossed the beaches and climbed the bluff, they silenced some of the pillboxes, bypassed others.

The two leading Engineer assault companies were placed on the beaches at 0325. One landing craft was hit by artillery fire and sank in the shallow water, but no one was wounded. With heavy gunfire continuing, the attackers could not be sure that they had been preceded by the Ranger elements. They were somewhat reassured as they approached the beach by the appearance of the pier, from whose tip a machine gun continued to fire. Through small error, both companies were placed abreast on Green beach, instead of as planned. Company B, under Captain Theodore Arendale, worked quickly up the bluff in the darkness. Company C, under Captain James C. Wilde, worked to the left and into its sector and then climbed the bluff. Both companies knocked out additional emplacements, leaving the mopping up to Company A under 1st Lieutenant Harold Hanson, which landed at 0332.

As soon as the three battalions of the Ranger

Force were at the top of the mound and at the edge of the village, the advance across the village began. Resistance from the Italian defenders was light, scattered, and dispirited, and was quickly overcome by small arms fire and hand grenades. A simple technique dealt with enemy defenders or firing positions which were met in the built-up areas. An HE grenade thrown up the street would create a cloud of dust under cover of which the engineer attackers could quickly advance to within hand grenade range of the enemy position. A fragmentation grenade would destroy it.

Subsequent operations

The Force had closed on the perimeter which was its objective not long after daylight, at about 0400 in the 4th Rangers sector, at 0505 in the Engineer sector, and at 0600 in the 1st Rangers sector. All began to dig in for the counterattacks which were expected. They soon came. About mid-morning, nine or ten Italian R-35 Renault tanks penetrated down Highway 117 into the village at the right end of the sector of Company B, 39th Engineers. Fire from the Company's bazookas caused the enemy to withdraw leaving three disabled tanks behind. At the west end of the Engineer sector, Company C assisted the 1st Rangers

in stopping an attack by an Italian infantry battalion of Mobile Group E, which also withdrew. In preparation for meeting further counterattacks, digging-in continued throughout D-day. Engineer casualties on D-day had totalled one officer and eight enlisted, all wounded.

More attacks came the next morning. Heavy armored formations of the German Hermann Goering Division attacking from Ponte Olivo airfield were deflected from Gela by artillery fire and dealt within the sector of the 26th Infantry, on the right of the Ranger Force. The same morning two attacks by elements of the reserve Livorno Division were made from Monte Lapa and Monte Zai towards the west end of the Gela mound. An enemy infantry battalion supported by artillery advanced between 0730 and 1100 to within 800 yards of the Force X positions but were stopped by naval support and 4.2-inch mortar fire. At this point a force of five Engineer halftracks solved the problem of disposition of the enemy forces who remained pinned down in the cover of the ditches of the open plain. Sallying forward to the enemy positions with machine guns blazing, they forced the surrender of the 300-odd men in the Italian battalion, who were promptly marched as prisoners into the Ranger Force lines.

The second attack, of about twice the strength of the first, started a little later (although intended as simultaneous) down the road from Butera and to the west of the first attack. By noon it too had been badly mauled by naval and mortar fire, which inflicted over 50 per cent casualties. The remnants of this force also needed to be pried out of their cover in the ditches of the open plain. Two engineer half tracks of Company C moved out once more against the automatic weapons and antitank guns of the Italian force. These remained silent in the face of the fire superiority established by the half-track force which, supported by two medium tanks of a platoon by then attached to Force X, forced surrender of the Italians. The 450 officers and men remaining were taken prisoner and escorted within the Force X lines.

These abortive efforts ended the counterattacks in the Force X sector, and that afternoon the commander of the Italian force ordered the remainder of his reserves to hold defensive positions on Monte Lapa and Monte Zai, astride the Gela-Butera road about six miles from Gela. With the Hermann Goering attacks also repulsed with heavy losses elsewhere in the 1st Division sector, General Terry Allen late in the afternoon of 11 July (D+1) ordered a general attack along his front the next morning. The Ranger Force was assigned the task of capturing Mt. Lapa and Mt. Zai.

At 2300, Colonel Darby issued his orders for

a night attack to take place at 0300 on the 12th. Advancing in column toward Butera, the 1st Rangers were to "peel off" to the right and take Mt. Zai, which they did by 0500. The 1st Battalion, 41st Armored Infantry Regiment (—A Company), newly attached to the Ranger Force, was to "peel off" to the left and take Mt. Lapa, while the 1st Battalion, 39th Engineers, followed in column as a reserve. The 4th Rangers remained in Gela to secure that village.

However, the attack of the 41st stalled, and daybreak found the 41st and the 39th Engineers exposed in the open plain before the heights leading up to Butera. During the morning they were subjected to intense artillery fire. Almost unbelievably, no casualties resulted. The combination of wet, loamy soil and time delay after impact so muffled the bursts that practically a direct hit was necessary. Colonel Darby then ordered a combined attack by the 41st and the Engineers. By 1500, the attackers, having met only slight resistance, were on their objective.

With these positions secured, the 39th Engineers then undertook their last infantry task in Sicily. Later in the afternoon a reconnaissance in force was made by two half-tracks penetrating three miles further along the road to Butera. After encountering a defended road block, whose mines disabled one vehicle, the force was able to return and report that the only resistance encountered in the area reconnoitered was passive antitank mine defenses and an isolated machine gun position which had been captured.

The next day, July 13 (D+3), a general reorganization took place in preparation for further advance against the retreating enemy. The 1st Battalion, 39th Engineers, was released to rejoin its parent unit, which began landing in Sicily that day. There lay many ahead before the capture of Sicily was completed on 17 August 1943.

In full perspective

Apart from offering an interesting account of an unusual infantry operation involving engineer troops, the foregoing may help to see the combat engineer mission in its full perspective. It has always been a major one, and, on the nuclear battlefield, may be many times greater. Army engineers should look forward to the likelihood of additional difficult infantry missions for the combat engineers. If these are not of the complexity of an amphibious assault, they will usually be assigned in some emergency situation when carrying out the mission will be equally difficult and important. When the job is toughest and the situation is at its worst, delivering the best performance will be critical. As they have in the past, Army engineers will deliver. Commanders can be expected to make use of this bonus.