

The following is extracted from an article originally published in Army Magazine, September 1962. It provides an overview of how combat engineers were often employed as infantry during World War II. The focus of the article covers the amphibious assault on Gela, Sicily by a Ranger-Engineer force. Original text reprinted with permission of the author.

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When **Engineers** Fight as Infantry

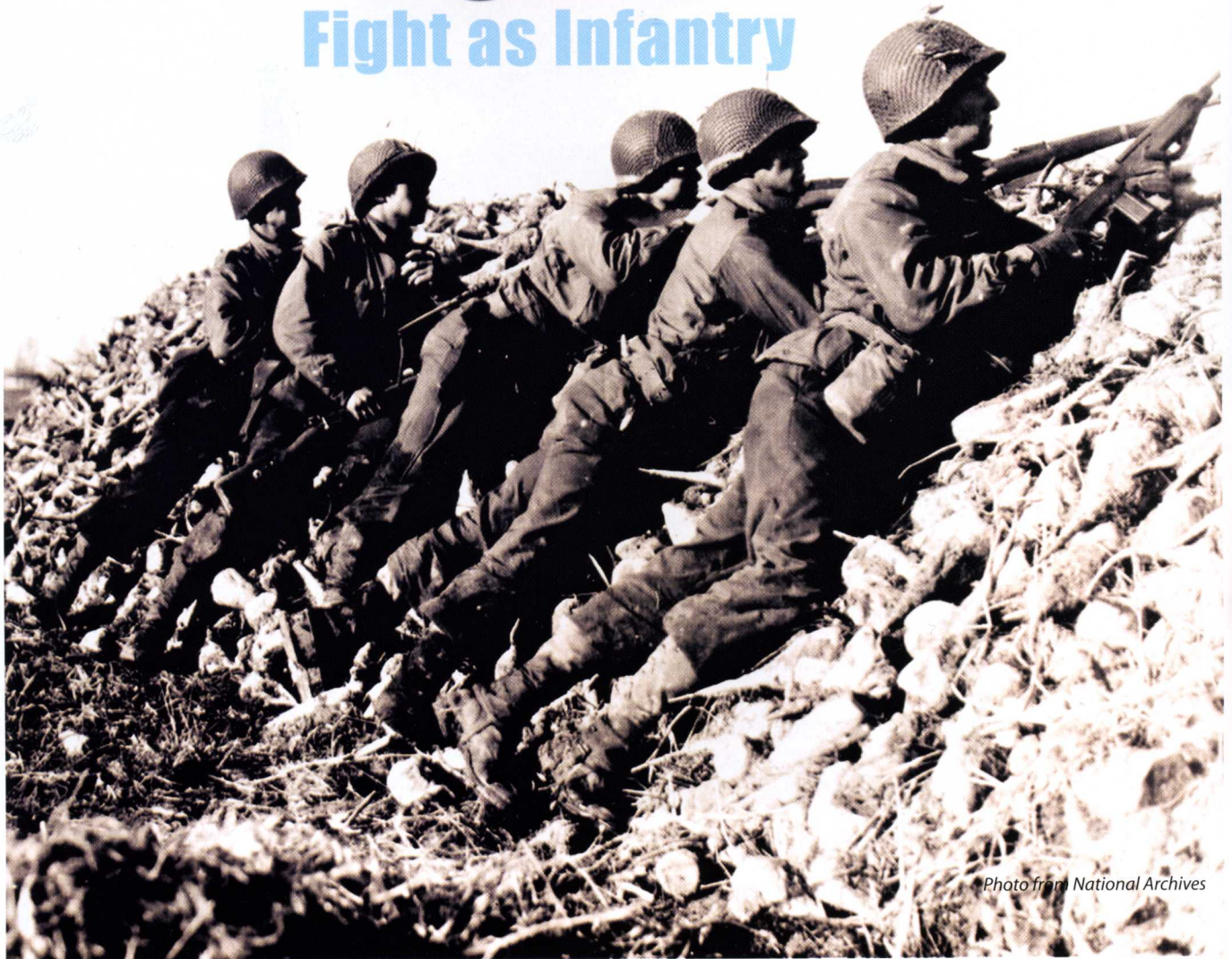


Photo from National Archives



On D-day, the 1st Battalion, 39th Combat Engineers, wedged in between the 1st and 4th Battalions of Colonel 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 1962). 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 attached) and Force X. The latter, also referred to as 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 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 3rd) 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 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.

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 (amphibious landing craft), 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.

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 in 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 antiaircraft and anti-glider obstacles, toward the nearest hills a few miles distant. Leading inland across the plain from Gela was



Troops storm ashore during an amphibious assault operation during the Second World War. (Photo from National Archives)

Highway 117. About five miles away, the Ponte Olivo military airfield sat in a corner formed by a fork in the highway by a branch turning east. Gela lay in the defense sector of various Italian elements. 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.

The task of Major 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 3rd 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) and carrying a squad armed with one heavy machine gun and two light ones. The half tracks proved 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 marshaled 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 reserve force) 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.

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 and 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 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.

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 in the street would create a cloud of dust under which the engineer attackers could quickly advance to within hand grenade range of the enemy position. A fragmentation grenade would destroy it.

The force had closed on the perimeter which was its objective not long after daylight. 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. Fiore

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, which also withdrew. In preparation for meeting further counterattacks, digging-in continued throughout D-day. Engineer casualties on D-day had totaled 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 enemy's reserve force were made toward 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 Ranger force lines.

The second attack, of about twice the strength of the first, started a little later down the road 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% casualties. The remnants of this force also needed to be pried out of their cover in the ditches of the open plain. Two engineer halftracks of Company C moved out once more against the automatic weapons and antitank guns of the Italian force. The 450 officers and men remaining were taken prisoner and escorted within Force X lines.

On 13 July (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 days ahead before the capture of Sicily was completed on 17 August 1943.

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. 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. **AE**

The author kindly provided Army Engineer magazine with this story of courage as written in 1962. He commanded the 1st Battalion, 39th Engineers at Gela, and as such was able to provide a special first-hand account of the combat action on Sicily during the Second World War. He remains active today as a student of Army Engineer history.