

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

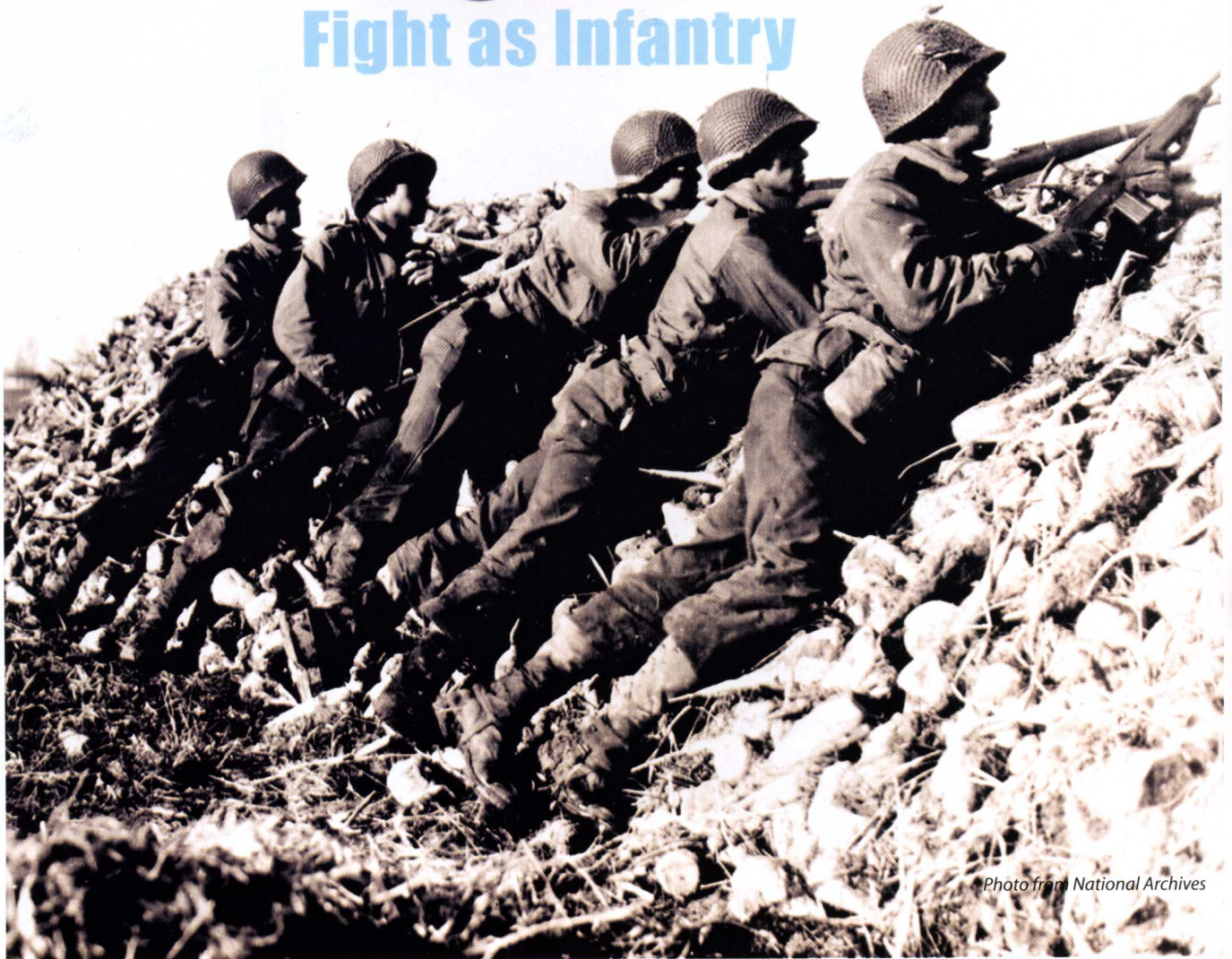


Photo from National Archives



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

