

107th Engineers:
Gooper Troopers During World War II

Don Hunt
HS 211
December 6, 1994

[Note: Original cover destroyed, contained
Student's SSN]

James Shefchik 2/17/2015

Introduction

Who among us has not heard at one time or another that worn out old line "Call out the National Guard"? In writing this paper on the valiant and brave efforts of the men of the 107th Engineers, I felt compelled to dispel some of the misconceptions that go along with being a guardsman and the role of the National Guard. The National Guard carries with it a dual responsibility; the first is to their home state and its governor during emergencies (i.e., floods, riots, etc.), and secondly to the President of the United States in the event of a national emergency. This paper in a very small way looks at the actions of those citizen-soldiers who were called to action and served their country far away from home during World War II.

Citizen-Soldiers

In times of peace guard members spend one weekend a month training at their home armory (a MUTA drill) and two weeks a year in annual training (an AT drill). The remainder of the year is spent working at "civilian" jobs, attending school, or otherwise occupying their time between guard drills. A couple of misconceptions held by some people is that guardsmen live in the armories and they never go to war overseas. The facts are that guardsmen have homes away from the armory and guardsmen have served in many foreign wars where the United States was involved.

During the years from 1937 to 1939, the 107th Engineer Regiment went to annual training at Camp Grayling, Michigan.

They spent time on survival and common task training, as well as engineer training on assault boat drills and construction of floating bridges. The regiment in the late 1930s was undermanned and using equipment left over from World War I. In 1939, there was only 18 understrength National Guard Divisions in the entire United States.¹

In 1940, the 107th Regiment took part in the Second Army war games at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. The war games illustrated what was known for a long time, that the citizen-soldiers were out of shape and ill-prepared for war should it happen. On October 15, 1940 the 107th Engineer Regiment was called to active duty as part of the 32nd Division. The activation was to be for one year of active duty training to get the men into shape. Eventually 299,045 guardsmen from 3,717 units were called to active duty.²

What's in a Name?

When the 107th Engineer Regiment was activated, it consisted of Regimental Headquarters, Detroit; Headquarters Company and Service Company, Company C, Detroit; 1st Battalion Headquarters, Regimental Band and Company B, Sault Ste. Marie; Company D, Marquette; Company A, Escanaba; and 2nd Battalion Headquarters, Medical Detachment, and Companies E and F, Calumet. The 107th Engineer Regiment was sent initially to Camp Beauregard, Louisiana by train.³

The engineers remained on active duty training in Louisiana from 1940 to January 2, 1942. Their first move was from the old Camp Beauregard to the newly completed Camp Livingston which

was also located in Louisiana. While at Camp Livingston the engineers took part in the largest-ever peacetime war games, with over 500,000 troops on maneuvers for two months. While in Louisiana the engineers worked on construction projects and on their infantry skills.⁴

The 107th was sent ahead of the 32nd Division as its advance party to Fort Dix, New Jersey on January 2, 1942. The engineers were relieved from duty with the 32nd Division while en route to Europe. The 32nd Division was sent to the Pacific due to Japanese advances. The battalions of the 107th Engineer Regiment were redesignated. The old 1st Battalion became the 107th Engineer Battalion and the old 2nd Battalion became the 131st Engineer Battalion.⁵

The 107th Engineer Regiment arrived in Northern Ireland on March 3, 1942. The engineers were one of the first units to arrive on the British Isles. While in Northern Ireland the unit was attached to V Corps as an engineer unit.⁶

On May 28, 1942, the 107th Engineer Battalion was combined with the 112th Engineer Battalion of Ohio to form the 112th Combat Engineer Regiment. The reason given for the name change to the 112th instead of the 107th was that the history of the 112th dated back to the Civil War. The 107th lineage dated back to the Spanish-American War, so the older lineage of the 112th took precedence over the 107th.⁷

Company F, 112th Engineers (formerly part of old 107th) was sent to North Africa. The unit was renamed the 522nd Engineer Company and fought in North Africa and Italy. The

522nd was eventually organized into the regular army and its home station is Fort Knox, Kentucky.⁸

On August 19, 1943 the 2nd Battalion, 112th Engineers were again redesignated. The former 107th became the 254th Engineer Combat Battalion which fought and served under this designation for the remainder of the war in Europe. The reason for the unit not being reverted back to its original 107th designation is that the 107th had been officially inactivated when it was officially incorporated into the 112th Combat Engineer Regiment.⁹

The engineers of the Upper Peninsula would eventually spend 5½ years on active duty during World War II. The 254th Engineer Combat Battalion was officially relieved from active duty on December 22, 1945. On December 10, 1946 the 254th and 107th designations were reorganized and finally federally recognized as the 107th Combat Engineer Battalion, Michigan Army National Guard.¹⁰ The 107th is entirely made up of units from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Preparing for War

The engineers arrived at Belfast, Northern Ireland on March 3, 1942. The engineers were responsible for construction projects which included the depot at Moneymore, Northern Ireland (the largest in Northern Ireland). In all, the 107th spent 11 months in Northern Ireland building railroad tracks, warehouses, living quarters, mess halls, and every type of structure needed for a military base.¹¹

The engineers as the 112th went to Devized, Wiltshire,

England in April 1943. While in England the 2nd Battalion, 112th Combat Engineer Regiment put in an amazing display of constructing a floating Bailey Bridge. The record for construction of the Bailey Bridge across a 220 foot barrier was one hour and ten minutes. Company E of 2nd Battalion bridged the barrier of 220 feet in just 42 minutes. The demonstration was witnessed by a very impressed group of military dignitaries and succeeded in promoting the extensive use of the Bailey bridge in World War II.¹²

The engineers spent about another year back in Northern Ireland on depot construction and in intensive training in combat engineer skills (i.e., bridges, mine warfare, and demolition). It was during this period that the old engineer concept of a regiment with two battalions was eliminated. The new idea was to have more mobile combat engineer battalions which could respond more quickly to changing conditions. The concept is like the arrangement between a contractor and the sub-contractor. The engineer units were called into action separately depending on what type of job was to be accomplished. Prior to the D-Day invasion, the engineers were busy going from depot construction in Northern Ireland to jobs building the assault training center at Slapton Sands, Cornwall, England.¹³

Training for the D-Day invasion went into high gear on March 23, 1944 with the impending alert for Operation Overlord. A platoon from Company A was attached for special duty with V Corps. The platoon acted as a security guard for V Corps

and went ashore with the first waves of troops on June 6, 1944.¹⁴

D-Day!

The engineer battalion landed on D-Day +2.¹⁵ The unit engaged in the construction of bridges across the Isigny causeway during the Normandy beach assaults in order to allow the link-up of reinforcements. Units from the 254th also built a class 40 bridge across the Vire River to connect Omaha and Utah beaches, while under sniper fire from the enemy.¹⁶

The battalion was constantly on the move throughout June and into July 1944. On July 16, 1944 the 254th was given the order to organize as an infantry unit and take part in the Battle of Saint Lo.¹⁷ The result of the action was a small break-through in the German lines. The unit suffered its first casualties of the war at Saint Lo with some 8 men killed in action, 24 wounded, and 14 casualties being evacuated to hospitals in the rear. The 254th was returned to action as an engineer battalion after the Battle of Saint Lo. The unit continued its mission to build Bailey bridges and act as support for the infantry.

The momentum of the war, for the engineers began to pick up again in late August 1944. The unit was busy clearing its area of mines, obstacles, and doing recon of territory along the front. The 254th was used by V Corps to repair bridges and roads. On September 15, 1944 the battalion was removed from duty with V Corps and assigned to the 22nd Armored Division. The mission of the unit was switched from construction to

demolition of enemy pillboxes and installations along the old Siegfried Line.¹⁸ The 254th then turned back to construction with a Treadway bridge across the Oure River. The bridge led the unit for the first time into Germany.¹⁹

On November 29, 1944 the 254th bivouac area was hit by a German V-1 bomb. The bomb injured some 25 men (who had to be evacuated) and slightly wounded 40 men. Amazingly, the bomb did not kill anyone in camp.²⁰

Where's the Front!

Midnight on the 16th of December 1944 the 254th was alerted and ordered to form a defensive line south and east of Bullingen, Belgium. The enemy an elite unit of the I SS Panzer Corps overran Allied positions on December 17, 1944.²¹ The 254th along with units which had been part of the Allied front fell back to positions in Bullingen and Butgenbach. The engineers in their fall back positions held the towns and were relieved at the new front by the 26th Infantry Regiment and 1st Infantry Division late in the day on 17 December 1944. The actions of the engineers in holding their part of the front helped stall the German offensive. The unit later received the Presidential Unit Citation for their actions in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge.²²

Victor Bridge

The Rhine river is one of the most impressive rivers in Europe and is a natural barrier to any advancing army. The Germans in their retreat had blown many of the bridges that crossed this vital defensive line. Although, the Allies had

captured the famous bridge at Remagen it was extremely unstable. The result was that many bridges had to be built to get men and material across the Rhine to continue the fight. The 254th was given the assignment to bridge the Rhine. On March 22, 1945 at Niedersbrseig the 254th put in place a Treadway bridge. The engineers built the bridge in just 14 hours. The bridge went into the record books as the longest tactical bridge to that time at 1,370 feet. The Victor Bridge, as it was called, was heavily used by convoys of Sherman tanks and normal traffic.²³

War Concludes in Europe

In April 1945 the war for the engineers was drawing to a close. The 254th saw extensive use in repairing damage to roads, railways, and bridges caused by the fighting. The unit also was used to transport German POW's and even received groups of surrendering Germans who found themselves on the wrong side of the front.

The 254th finished its service as part of Patton's Third Army which was in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia in April 1945. The 254th was in Pilsen only one week when it was ordered to Camp Lucky Strike near Maille-le-Camp, France. The unit assisted in camp operations, guarding German POW's and sorting out troops to be sent home or to the Far East. The 254th returned to the United States and was deactivated from federal service at Camp Myles Standish, Massachusetts on December 22, 1945.²⁴

Endnotes

- 1 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 28.
- 2 Ibid., p 28.
- 3 Ibid., p 29.
- 4 Ibid., p 29.
- 5 Ibid., p 30.
- 6 Ibid., p 31.
- 7 "Victor Bridge Updated". The Bull Sheet. p 2.
- 8 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 31.
- 9 "Victor Bridge Updated". The Bull Sheet. p 2.
- 10 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 40.
- 11 Ibid., p 31.
- 12 Ibid., p 31.
- 13 Ibid., p 32.
- 14 Ibid., p 33.
- 15 After Action Report. 1 February 1945. p 3.
- 16 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 34.
- 17 Ibid., p 34.
- 18 After Action Report. 11 June 1945. p 9.
- 19 After Action Report. 11 June 1945. p 10.
- 20 After Action Report. 1 February 1945. p 11.
- 21 Beck, Alfred M. The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Germany. p 467.
- 22 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 37.
- 23 "Victor Bridge Updated". The Bull Sheet. p 9.

Endnotes

- 24 Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineers! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. p 40.

Bibliography

After Action Report. 254 Engineer C Battalion. 1 February 1945. p 1-14.

After Action Report. 254 Engineer C Battalion. 11 June 1945. p 1-10.

Beck, Alfred M. The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Germany. Center of Military History, United States Army. Washington, D.C. (1985). p 1-566.

McKee, Alexander. The Race for the Rhine Bridges. Stein and Day Publishers. New York (1971). p 323-347.

Stonehouse, Frederick. Combat Engineer! The History of the 107th Engineer Battalion 1881-1981. 107th Engineer Association, 1981. p 28-40.

Toland, John. The Battle of the Bulge. Random House. New York (1966). p 1-178.

"Victor Bridge Updated." The Bull Sheet. 107th Engineer Association. April 1994. p 2, 9-10.