



The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter I

Activation on 1 June 1942

Move to Camp Bowie, TX 13 December 1942



CHAPTER I

ACTIVATION TO MOVE TO CAMP BOWIE

The history of the 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion is the story of its life. In that sense it may be considered more of a biography than a narrative, but the biography of a living and breathing mass of several hundred officers and men, and not the life story of a merely material and intangible military organization, for, the 817th has been, and is to be, a living organization with spirit, and a will to carry on.

Let us go back to the vague beginnings of ~~our~~^{the} Battalion. Some-time after Hitler's legions rolled unopposed over the rolling plains of Poland and Northern France, the Tank Destroyer idea was conceived in the offices of the War Department. It was decided to activate a certain number of Tank Destroyer Battalions. The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion was to be one of them.. Then, when the time was ripe and sufficient equipment was on hand, orders went out from the War Department through the Army Ground Forces to the Second Army to have this Battalion activated on June 1st, 1942. From that date on, this Battalion has been a living thing. The crass materialism of paper work and planning ceased on June 1st and this Battalion was born. A small group of men and officers nursed it along, prepared it, filled it with men, and trained it until it reached its present proportions and its full maturity.

Let us look back on June 1, 1942 and see what the scene was and who those were that were present on that scene.

The place of activation was Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, located near the town of Fort Smith, Arkansas. It was a new camp built for armored troops, the 7th Armored Division being there at this time. Here amongst the rolling countryside with its small patches of woods, the Battalion began its first training. In all it was a pleasant

page 1

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CHAPTER I (cont'd)

place to start life, not too far from town and with adequate quarters, messes, orderly rooms, and motor parks for each unit. And, the Battalion, located as it was at one end of the camp, was away from the hustle and bustle of the crowded camp center.

So much for the scene, now for a look at the first members of this organization. The commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel Franklin H. Canlett, a Regular Army officer who had just come from the Tank Destroyer School at Camp Hood, Texas. His Executive Officer, Captain William P. Francisco, also a Regular Army officer, came from the Tank Destroyer School with Lt. Col. Canlett. Of the remaining twenty-two officers, five came from the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion with the cadre, and seventeen from the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. These latter two groups included the S-1, 1st Lt. Childs; the S-2, 2nd Lt. Fields; S-3, 2nd Lt. Sternfels; S-4, ^{Dwight} Capt. Diver, and Lts. Cranning, Powell, Thomas, Munch, and Cook, commanding Headquarters, A, B, C, and Reconnaissance companies respectively. As for the enlisted personnel, 77 came with the cadre from the 776th Tank Destroyer Battalion at Fort Lewis, Washington. These men were to whip ~~the~~ ^{the} recruits, who were to arrive later, into shape.

Camp Chaffee, Arkansas remained the home of the Battalion until December 13, 1942. It was during this period that plans for future organization and training were laid, the cadre was carefully trained in its duties, the new officers were made aware of their responsibilities, and the Battalion began, in spite of its small size numerically, to take a certain pride in itself. Officer and N.C.O. classes were held ~~nightly~~ two or three ~~times~~ ^{nights} a week to better prepare everyone for their training duties when the fillers for the Battalion would arrive. Also during this time, the Battalion Commander instituted vigorous training in motor marches, which....



The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter II

Receipt of Fillers & BUTC

At Camp Bowie

15 December 1942 to 22 March 1943



CHAPTER I (cont'd)

of course would play a large part in ^{the Battalion's} ~~our~~ successful tactical employment in the future. The Battalion became quite proficient in Col. Cangett's "Fixed Interval System" and everywhere in future training received praise for its well disciplined motor marches. It was the usual thing to take weekly forty or fifty mile motor marches and bivouacs through the Arkansas countryside. On December 13, ^{the 817th was} ~~we~~ were given opportunity to test ^{its} ~~our~~ proficiency in motor marches in a practical march from Camp Chaffee to Camp Bowie, Texas, which had been designated as ^{its} ~~our~~ new station. Here ^{the Battalion was} ~~we were~~ to receive ^{the necessary} ~~our~~ personnel to fill ^{itself} ~~out~~ the ~~Battalion~~ and begin ^{its} ~~our~~ basic training in the Tank Destroyer Basic Unit Training Center (BUTC).

CHAPTER II

RECEIPT OF FILLERS AND BUTC AT CAMP BOWIE

Camp Bowie, Texas, where the Battalion arrived on December 15, 1942 was one of the many new camps recently built by the Army to house its greatly expanding personnel. Not as nice a camp as Camp Chaffee, its buildings were of the tarpaper cantonment type instead of the two-story cream-colored wooden barracks of the former camp. Perhaps the best innovation was the gas heaters supplied with fuel from the abundant Texas natural gas fields. Nearby was Brownwood, Texas, the nearest town, which, however, offered little in the way of entertainment and did not even provide for reduced admission prices to the theatres for military personnel. While awaiting the arrival of recruits, the Battalion, as it was then, prepared the area, motor parks, and barracks in anticipation of early arrival of the fillers for the Battalion's rosters.

Between January 8th and the first week of February, the

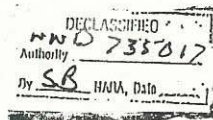
CHAPTER II (cont'd)

Battalion was brought up to full strength as a Heavy Self-Propelled Tank Destroyer Battalion. Most of the men came from the induction centers at Cumberland, Pennsylvania, and Ft. Niagara, N.Y., but a few were also sent from Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, Salt Lake City, and The Presidio of Monterey, California. Although many were used to the cold of Northern Pennsylvania and western New York they were hardly prepared for the biting frigid wind of a Texas "Norther" which greeted many as they stepped off the train. Their home towns were large cities like Buffalo, Philadelphia, or Pittsburgh, or small towns and villages such as Sayre, Meadville, Industry, or Braddock. At any rate they had only been in the army since January 3 of this year so they were fresh recruits ready to be molded into good soldiers by the well trained and long waiting cadre.

Perhaps their first and most memorable taste of army life and training was the short haircuts which all men were required to have. Of course, all resented this, but they had to learn that it was just a part of army life as ~~were~~ ^{were} the daily close order drill and hikes. What they thought of the army was of course each man's own opinion, but they all rapidly fell into line. Hikes were supplemented by overnight bivouacs which many will remember for the extreme cold. When there wasn't drill and hikes there was work on the driving course, utilizing 1/4 ton and 3/4 ton trucks, or firing the '03 rifle on the range, but there was as yet no equipment in the Battalion for Tank Destroyer training.

After training hours there was very little in the way of recreational activities for the men. Brownwood was overcrowded and had only movies and bowling to offer. In fact the only good thing about the town was the good taxi service it offered. The Post itself, had movies and service clubs, but the men were even....

page 4





*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter III

A.U.T.C. at Ft. Hood, TX

22 March 1943 to 10 July 1943



CHAPTER II (cont'd)

restricted in their use of these as the Battalion was quarantined along with other units for some thirty-two days of the total time it was at Bowie.

On the whole no one particularly enjoyed life at Camp Bowie or even found it an interesting place, but many will remember it for their first taste of army life, and the Battalion regards it gratefully as the place where ~~our~~ ^{the} fillers were received and first made a part of ~~our~~ ^{this} great unit. But, everyone looked eagerly forward to a new life at a new camp when orders were received to move to Camp Hood, Texas on March 22. Preparations were quickly made for the trip which was to be ^{partly by} rail and partly by motor convoy, and on the morning of March 22, 1943 the Battalion departed from a camp to which it was destined never to return.

CHAPTER III

A.U.T.C. AT HOOD

The trip itself from Bowie to Hood was accomplished without incident, the majority of the personnel coming by rail and the drivers and mechanics bringing along ~~our~~ ^{the} few vehicles by motor convoy. The trip was completed in one day and after arrival at Hood, where ~~we~~ ^{they} were to stay till July 8, ~~we~~ ^{everyone} moved into a new barracks area, complete with separate orderly rooms, supply rooms, kitchens and mess halls, motor pools, and two story wooden barracks as they had had at Camp Chaffee. All of the cooking and heating was again by natural gas.

Camp Hood itself was a much better place than Bowie. It was a huge camp, holding some eighty thousand men, and naturally there were more theatres and service clubs. The nearest town was Killeen, a typical spot on the desert filled with New York and New Jersey cow-boys selling trinkets to the soldiers. The busses were always....

CHAPTER III (cont'd)

crowded and the service rather poor, but ~~a~~ a good time could be had by all in Waco or Austin if one could get there. Temple and Belton were nearer but had little to offer. Some of the men struck off for themselves and found a good time in out-of-way towns such as Cameron, Texas.

The scene at Hood was not too pleasant. The camp sprawled over an area 13 miles wide and 40 miles long but it was all typical central Texas waste^{land} with prairie grass, caliche rock, and an abundance of rattlesnakes, and a scarcity of wooded areas, especially near the camp proper. However the training facilities were excellent. The ranges for every weapon from the "22" to the "3 inch" were superbly built and planned and afforded real shooting opportunities. The rolling countryside with ~~its~~^{its} gulches, wooded areas, and small mountains contained excellent terrain for tactical problems. When it came to beauty, Camp Hood had none, but when it came to training fields it had everything.

During a seven day period of grace after arrival at Camp Hood, everyone settled down, got the barracks and area in shape, and was then ready to embark on the Advanced Unit Training Center program. ¹⁹⁴³ Beginning April 1st and for the next four weeks every type of weapon including rifle, tommy gun, light machine gun, .50 cal. Machine gun, and 3" Towed Gun ^{was} ~~were~~ fired. At first ^{the Battalion} ~~we~~ had some of the original T.D's, a 75mm gun on a half track, to train with, but soon ^{it} ~~we~~ ^{was} ~~were~~ given the temporary status of a towed battalion and armed with the 3" gun M5. ^{The} ~~our~~ shooting was climaxed with the firing of the 3" guns where the gunners of "C" Company proved themselves to be the best in the Battalion. In the evenings after the firing on the ranges, there were usually classes for the officers and NCOs on subjects considered necessary by A.U.T.C. or the Battalion Commander....

CHAPTER III (cont'd)

and preparatory to the coming course in tactics.

Of course the Battalion continued to make as many practice motor marches as possible and soon was quite proficient in Col. Canlett's system, complete with hand signals and drivers' disks.

A drum and bugle corps was formed within the Battalion and their participation in a Saturday retreat parade was the usual thing.

The midway mark of AUTC was the Battle Conditioning Course-- more popularly known as the Commando Course--and it was for a week of this that the Battalion marched out for bivouac on the afternoon of Sunday May 2nd. It was a five mile hike with full equipment but all made it in good shape and the bivouac, in tactical style, was set up before dark. All men settled down to a good night's sleep before the first day's grind on Monday morning.

Here let us have a brief description of just what this Battle Conditioning Course was. Each morning it was a requirement to run through a long tough obstacle course. At the beginning of the course were horizontal ropes covering a 40 foot gap which had to be negotiated hand over hand. Then followed a 20 foot rope climb to a platform, a jump off this platform and then a cross-country run of 400 or 500 yards to a water obstacle. This was negotiated by swimming or wading, depending on one's height. Following a climb up the slippery banks the water-logged men had to climb a 10 foot wall, which was always ^{slimy} ~~slimy~~ and slippery after the first few men had gone over. If one was still on his feet here, next came a 10 foot vertical jump into a sawdust pile and then crawling through ~~and under~~ 40 yards of barbed wire. Of course, while all this was taking place AUTC instructors were setting off smoke pots and quarter sticks of dynamite. After one had cleared the barbed wire field he had to climb 20 foot wooden "A" frame hurdles, and last came a run and climb up a steep hill, aptly known as "puke hill". On the return for

CHAPTER III (cont'd)

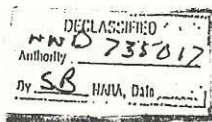
for noon day chow and on the return to evening bivouac, this whole obstacle course, the ropes excepted, was negotiated in reverse. It was really a wearing down course designed to toughen men up.

After the obstacle course was run each day, units went to various regular classes, alternated each day. Instructors were provided by ~~from~~ AUTC and covered street fighting, woods fighting, close combat, combat firing, overhead fire, and woodsmen's lore. Last but not least was the infiltration course with overhead machine gun fire and a maze of barbed wire. This machine gun fire was only 16" off the ground so everyone had to stay low even when prompted along by a quarter stick of dynamite being placed between one's legs.

Perhaps more often than any other phase of training this tough, rugged work will be remembered by this battalion, and they ended the week with forced march of 5 miles with full equipment in 50 minutes and carried off a superior rating for the Battalion from the AUTC-- the fourth unit in eight months to get this high recognition.

Of course, the day they came back from the commando course there was a grass cutting detail to be done, but by now everyone just accepted it ^{and} ~~and~~ recognized ^{it as} ~~and~~ a part of the army.

Following completion of this rugged physical training were several weeks of tactical problems where the men first learned that "there is no always or usually in tactics"--"it depends on the situation, the terrain, and common sense". This was perhaps the most interesting phase of training so far and everyone really enjoyed the problems, even though many of them were all-night affairs. At least here was a practical application of classroom and range work. Here was the first taste of what all the training was to prepare the Battalion for--actual combat tactics.



CHAPTER III (cont'd)

As the end of AUTC approached the Battalion began participating in group problems, where the officers and men showed that on a comparative basis they were just as good as any other unit. Following company tactical tests, wherein "A" Company showed itself to be the best by AGF standards, the AUTC training was completed and the Battalion stood by for a further assignment.

In the meantime orders had been received of ~~our~~ permanent status as a towed T.D. Battalion and this necessitated the inactivation of the Reconnaissance Company. This was completed during the last few days of June, ⁽¹⁹⁴³⁾ the Reconnaissance Company commander going to the staff as reconnaissance officer, and the men being divided equally among the gun companies. This naturally put some companies overstrength and the "section eights" and physically unfit of the Battalion were weeded out and transferred or discharged. This change of status definitely left the Battalion in better shape from a personnel stand point, even though many were disappointed at being changed from a fast moving self-propelled outfit to a naturally rather static, from a tactical viewpoint, towed Battalion.

Word came in early July to prepare for rail movement to Camp Phillips, Kansas. Vehicles were prepared, blocking, wire and nails secured, and personnel oriented on the move. Finally on July 8, the Battalion loaded up and pulled out in tourist pullmans for its new station. Leaving behind memories of short haircuts, Waco, Cameron, grass cutting, double-timing, commando course, and three inch gun firing, everyone was still happy at the thought of a new, and perhaps, better camp, and a change from Texas; so, up through Oklahoma and Kansas the train puffed along to arrive at Camp Phillips, near Salina, Kansas, on July 10, 1944.

1943



The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter IV

Refresher Training at Camp Phillips, KS

10 July 1943 to 10 November 1943



CHAPTER IV

REFRESHER TRAINING AT CAMP PHILLIPS

Camp Phillips proved to be no better than Camp Hood, in fact conditions were even worse than in Texas. The Battalion was again housed in tarpaper hutments as at Camp Bowie, and the wind and dust howled even more furiously than in Texas. Over all hung the terrible odor of the sewage disposal plant.

Nearby Salina proved to afford few recreational activities, and Kansas City at 160 miles or Wichita at 90 miles distance was a little too far for the average man to go for a good time.

The one bright spot on the record was that furloughs for all Battalion personnel were inaugurated here. Everyone had waited for what seemed like endless months since January for this and all felt happy and relieved at the opportunity to get home once again. Between July and October ^{1943?} the whole Battalion was furloughed, approximately 15% being gone for two weeks at a time. Everyone came back happier and looking much better for the rest and fun at home.

A refresher course on basic training comprised the main training at Phillips. Everyone had dry firing with all weapons again and then time on the tommy gun and rifle ranges. The Battalion was now attached to the 22nd Detachment of Special Troops and coordinated its training with them in compliance with 2nd Army directives. One of these directives called for two weeks in the field for every two weeks in garrison.

Accordingly on July 28th the Battalion moved by motor convoy to Fort Riley, Kansas for a bivouac and some firing on the range. Life was not too pleasant here as it rained nearly every day and there was an abundance of mosquitoes. Here, as part of the training everyone was subjected to overhead artillery fire. How different it was to be a year and a half later in western Germany.

CHAPTER IV (cont'd)

It was while at Fort Riley that the Battalion was alerted for movement to North Dakota to help harvest the huge wheat crop. This was to prove a strange but very welcome interlude in army life, the only disadvantage being that furloughs and leaves had to be suspended for the duration of this assignment.

In a long column of borrowed $2\frac{1}{2}$ ton trucks, the Battalion, less a small rear guard detachment, departed in motor convoy for Fargo, North Dakota on August 14. The trip was uneventful, but provided everyone with a lot of fine sightseeing and took ~~us~~ ^{them} through many small farm towns that had never seen soldiers in any number before. On August 16, after spending successive nights in York, Nebraska and Watertown, S.D., the Battalion arrived at Fargo, N.D. and was immediately assigned company areas and headquarters. "A" Company went to Leeds, N.D., "B" Company to Langdon, N.D., Hq Co to Cooperstown, N.D., and "C" Company with the Battalion Headquarters to picturesque Valley City. "A", "Hq", and "B" companies lived in pyramidal tents during their stay, but "C" company managed to find quarters in the Valley City Armory. The soldiers found all the farmers very friendly and eager and able to amply feed their new found soldier farm hands. Shocking wheat, driving teams, and bundle pitching were new experiences to many and just oldtime chores to some of the soldiers who had come from farms. At any rate, all were well fed and though the work was hard they had no complaints. After work each day everyone was free to go to town each night and dances were held each Saturday. All of the local families were exceptionally hospitable to the soldiers.

As an added attraction a wheat queen was chosen from photographs voted upon by the men, so many votes being given for each acre of shocking completed, and in a ceremony on August 30, Lt. Col.

CHAPTER IV (cont'd)

Canlett crowned Miss Rose Busch of Valley City as the First Wheat Queen of America. The local papers gave the Battalion quite a write-up on this. In addition, each Saturday jeep rides were sold for War Bonds and this vital phase of financing the war was aided by this little trick.

So much enjoyment and fun had been had by all that it was with deep regret that the Battalion left North Dakota on September 20. On the 19th the Battalion had been assembled on the ball field at Valley City and then the Battalion marched in parade through the town. This was the final tribute of the Battalion to its fine North Dakota friends before departing for Camp Phillips.

A day longer was taken for the return to Kansas and stops were made on successive nights at Aberdeen, S.D., Yankton, S.D., Watertown, Nebraska, and _____ Air Base, Kansas. The next day, September 23, ^{The Battalion was} ~~we were~~ back at Camp Phillips, this time under the wing of the newly arrived 14th Tank Destroyer Group.

Back at Camp Phillips the refresher training of basic subjects was renewed and the Battalion fired the 30 cal. machine gun, '03 rifle, carbines, and tommy gun. In with this came a two weeks tactical bivouac wherein training was discarded and all time was spent on making a realistic play at a true tactical bivouac, with outposts, outguards, barbed wire, and on nearby roads reconnaissance platoon patrols.

After return from this latest bivouac, indirect artillery fire training was given, with "A" and "B" companies firing several problems in early November. Because of lack of time and ammunition "C" company did not get to fire indirect, but all companies were able to fire on the newly constructed direct fire range.



The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter V

Maneuvers at Cowan, TN

10 November 1943 to 16 January 1944



CHAPTER IV (cont'd)

Most of October was consumed in firing the 3" guns and in a few tactical problems, both day and night. However everyone was ready for something new, and no one was sorry when word came for the Battalion to participate in the November, December, and January maneuvers in Tennessee. All equipment was checked, especially shoes, raincoats, and shelter halves, and by November 8th the trains were loaded and everyone was ready to go. On a particularly cold windy morning the Battalion left Camp Phillips and looked forward to new experiences and new knowledge in the Tennessee Maneuver Area, where they arrived on November 10, at Cowan, Tennessee.

1943?

CHAPTER V

MANEUVERS

The train trip was uneventful, as usual, except for one rather amusing incident where the Group Commander got off at Evansville, Indiana, to stretch his legs, and the train pulled out without him. However he caught up the next morning as the Battalion was unloading at Cowan, Tennessee.

From Cowan, a motor march was made to a bivouac area some ten miles south of Murfreesboro where the Battalion stayed for twelve days before the problems were to begin. The weather was exceptionally cold and the cooks found it very difficult to thaw out the frozen meats issued in the rations. A few passes to Murfreesboro and Nashville were available, but it was such an inconvenience getting there that few men left the bivouac area. During this time, vehicles were brought up to peak performance, duffle bags stored, and all equipment combat loaded. When the signal for the first problem to start was received,

the whole Battalion was ready.

Contrary to popular belief, maneuvers are not a continuous phase of mock warfare lasting a month or two, but consist of week long problems, the first commencing November 22nd, after which a critique is held and errors and questions brought forth by the problem^{are} discussed. The two opposing sides are the Reds and Blues and this Battalion was with the Reds the first two weeks and the Blues thereafter. During the first two problems the Battalion saw some real action, in the first one "C" company holding up the whole 14th Armored Division for 3 hours. During the remaining 6 problems, however, the wet weather usually caused the enemy tanks to bog down and there was little for the T.D.s' to do.

During the whole maneuver the weather was the worse force to contend with. Rain alternated with extreme cold and made life miserable for all. Christmas was a particularly bad day with continuous rain and sticky mud, but it taught each and every man how to live under trying conditions and was certainly beneficial to him when he came under identical conditions in combat a year later, almost to the day.

It was after the third problem that Lt. Col. Canlett, the Battalion Commander, was relieved of his command, and Major William H. Bardes, then a maneuver umpire, given command of the Battalion. Pending his release from Maneuver Director Headquarters, Major Rummele, the executive officer commanded the Battalion until January 1st, 1944, when Major Bardes arrived to take command. Major Bardes, a New York National Guard officer, with a background in Tank Destroyer work from the 802nd T.D. Battalion and the 2nd T.D. Brigade, soon took a firm hand on battalion policies and principles and carried the battalion successfully through the remaining problems,



The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter VI

POM-Preparations for Overseas Movement

From Camp Campbell, Ky to Camp Breckenridge, Ky

16 January 1944 to 12 July 1944



CHAPTER V

(cont'd)

ending the maneuvers with a rating of "satisfactory".

After the last problem rumors ran wild as to the next camp the battalion was to call home, and after preliminary orders for movement to Ft. Bragg, N.C. were cancelled, the Battalion prepared to move to Camp Campbell, Kentucky. On an exceptionally cold day, January 16, 1944, the Battalion left its final maneuver bivouac area and began a 70 mile motor march to its new station, arriving there on the same afternoon.

CHAPTER VI

P. O. M.

The Maneuvers over, the Battalion now had behind it an excellent record in Basic and Advanced unit training, 3" gun firing, both direct and indirect, physical training, motor marches, and of course, maneuvers. Now began the period of PCM-Preparation for Overseas Movement. Here at Camp Campbell was to begin the completing of a series of qualifications that would make every man in the Battalion eligible and ready for overseas service.

While at Camp Campbell, which was a well laid-out armored division camp about 30 miles north of Nashville, right on the Kentucky-Tennessee border, and which was located in a well-treed rolling farmland, the Battalion had more tactical problems and began qualifying all personnel in all basic weapons.

The camp itself, was well supplied with recreational facilities such as theatres, service clubs, and even a roller skating rink. Off the post there wasn't too much. The biggest recreational item was the furloughs granted everyone here. Fifty percent of the Battalion



*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter VII

P.O.E.—Camp Miles Standish, MA

12 July 1944 to 22 July 1944



went at a time and by February 20 all officers and men had a two weeks' trip home, or wherever they wanted to go.

Back from furlough there was more individual firing, and attendance at several demonstrations, one of which "An Attack on a Fortified Position" was put on by "A" Company.

The stay at Campbell didn't last long however, for on March 10⁴⁴ an unexpected order came to move by motor convoy to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky 100 miles to the north, on March 12th, for completion of PCM requirements. This new camp was even better than Camp Campbell. Located just 30 miles south of Evansville, Indiana, it was near a good railroad net, and Evansville itself was a recreational mecca for all men. It was while here that many men were able to make a trip home, utilizing the Battalion Commander's liberal 3 day pass policy.

Here at Camp Breckinridge PCM was begun in earnest and completed. There was transition firing in the tommy gun, carbine, and rifle; field firing for machine guns; indirect fire training for the 3" guns, and finally the firing of the guns themselves by artillery methods. The officers had night classes in map reading and indirect firing. The days were full of work and some always overflowed into the nights. It was here that the AGF firing test took place, just as ^{there been} ~~we had had~~ the Air Ground Liaison Test at Campbell. It was another step toward the completion of PCM, and "C" Company's gunners proved themselves to be the best of the Battalion. Lastly there were Military Intelligence Tests for reconnaissance platoons and S-2 section, and Malarial Control and medical tests for the whole battalion—the latter being carried out in a blinding rainstorm, as had been the night infiltration course.

The various IGs' trooped in and out of the Battalion and pronounced it ready and fit for combat in excellent shape.

CHAPTER VI

(cont'd)

Then came the weeks of boxing, crating, working, and weighing. Each man had to have the right ^{amount} ~~amount~~ and kind of equipment. Finally vehicles and guns were turned into ordnance, and all boxing of ~~the~~ ^{our} minimum essential equipment (MEE) was completed. Now, they awaited movement orders.

Finally, word came to move to the Port of Embarkation on July 12. In a few days, all equipment was loaded, and on the morning of July 12, to the martial strains of the 75th Infantry Division Band, the Battalion, in two sections marched down to the train and boarded her. Training was complete. POM was complete, and the Battalion was at long last going overseas. The first train went to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts, more familiarly known as Camp "X", via ^{New York City} ~~NYC~~. The second went via Buffalo and Albany. Enroute many of the men from Pennsylvania and New York passed within a block of their homes, but as censorship had already been imposed at Camp Breckinridge and the trip was a secret one, they could not get off the train or leave word with any passersby. By the afternoon of July 14th the second train had arrived at Camp "X", its secret destination, and the whole Battalion was ready for processing at this Port of Embarkation.

CHAPTER VII

P.O.E.

Camp Miles Standish was a pleasant little camp located amidst the scrubby trees growing in the sandy soil near Taunton, Massachusetts. When ^{the 817th} ~~we~~ stepped off the train and the loudspeakers announced, "You are now at a secret destination", everyone knew they meant business at this camp. Immediately there was a showdown inspection of all individual clothing and equipment and then followed training in the

page 17

form of a series of movies and lectures designed to brief the Battalion in P.O.E. and shipboard procedure. Interspersed with the films and lectures each man was given his last shots for tetanus and typhus fever. Finally, everyone had his equipment and had completed his requirements.

All was not training and hard work, however, for recreational activities were quite ample. Several service clubs and theaters dotted the post, and the PXs were well stocked with ice cream, cokes, and beer. There were several opportunities for passes to Taunton and Boston and most men took advantage of them. For those who didn't care to go to town, there was a superior telephone service and practically every man called his home to hear his family or friends voices for the last time for a long time to come. Of course all conversation on military matters was forbidden but there were few who wanted to waste precious words and minutes on military matters.

One of the bright spots of the camp was the cafeteria style mess where "seconds" were always available and the food was always good.

1944
Finally on July 21st came ^{the} ~~the~~ last showdown inspection and after that ^{the Battalion was} ~~we were~~ ready to go. On July 22nd with each man carrying his full equipment, the unit was marched to the train and loaded by plan into the passenger coaches. The Battalion preceded other units from Camp "X" to the ship by two days as they were to be the advance detail for the ship and take care of many details aboard her. By nine o'clock in the morning the train was alongside the ship--a gigantic beauty, the former "George Washington." The Red Cross girls passed out coffee and doughnuts and one by one the men and then the officers filed aboard the ship. ^{Each man was stepping} ~~He had stepped~~ off of American soil.



*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter VIII

Long Sea Voyage

July 1944



CHAPTER VII (cont'd)

after two years of training. Now ahead was Europe, combat, victory, and eventual return to the good old U.S.A.

CHAPTER VIII

LONG SEA VOYAGE

First, a brief description of the ship which was to carry this Battalion and many other units to Europe. It was now christened the "Mount Vernon", but had formerly been the elite "George Washington" of the American Lines. It was a huge affair, some 700 feet long and seven main decks deep. The naval officers were quartered on the sun deck and the boat deck, the army officers on the "A" deck, and the enlisted men on the promenade, "B", "C", and "D" decks. Quarters for all were very crowded, but the ship was fitted out for efficiency and not comfort. There was ample space on the fantail, ~~and on the fantail~~, and on the promenade and boat decks for exercise, however, and no one had to stay in his cramped quarters.

As has been said before the Battalion was the ship's advance detail and as such drew many details. Some of these proved to be very hard work, but some brought added "eats" to the workers. It was through these jobs and details that the immensity of the ship and its inner workings were brought home to the men. Each night the "stores breakout crew" carried bushel after bushel of potatoes, gallon upon gallon of ice cream, and literally tons of meat and other food up into the ship's giant galley.

The journey itself was without incident. There were daily boat and gun drills but no enemy vessel put in an appearance. At night, of course, the ship was totally blacked out and in sharp contrast to it ~~our ship~~ was a fully lighted hospital ship which passed one night in mid-Atlantic.

Each day there was amateur entertainment provided by the ship's passengers in the form of burlesque comedians, singers, dancers, and a band, and they all helped to ease the monotony of the ship's voyage.

On each day of the trip, as ^{the ship} ~~we~~ went ever eastward, the clocks were set ahead an hour due to ^{the} ~~our~~ location on the earth, and finally an extra hour to harmonize with the British Double Summer Time, more popularly known as "Double-Bubble Time". With this time change taking place each day ^{everyone} ~~we~~ soon found it daylight at 9:00 PM and then 10:00 or 11:00 PM. By the time ^{the ship was} ~~we were~~ in sight of Scotland on July 31, the sun did not set until 11:00 and it was still daylight at 1:00 AM. This was a phenomenon ^{everyone had} ~~we were~~ to get used to in England, and later on to a lesser degree in France and Germany.

After riding at anchor off Grenⁿoch, Scotland for half-a-day, the Battalion, less its baggage detail, debarked onto a lighter and went ashore at Grenⁿoch where a train was boarded that was to take the battalion on the first leg of its long travels in Europe. The long sea voyage was over, but many other journeys were to come.



*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter IX

The United Kingdom

August 1944



CHAPTER IX

UNITED KINGDOM

"Any gum, ohum" and "Any candy, Andy"- These were almost the first words heard from the kids of the U.K. and for as long as the Battalion was to stay there they were to be heard.

Grennoch, Scotland, where the Battalion boarded the train was just a small coastal town on the Firth of Forth below Glasgow. Soon the Battalion, in ~~two~~ separate trains was on its way to better sights and its final destination, Chepstow, Wales. Both trains moved through Glasgow which proved virtually untouched by bombs, and as was seen in all Scottish towns passed through, typically neat and clean.

The English coaches were surprisingly comfortable but there were no messing facilities, and meals enroute consisted of "coffee" and doughnuts^W, "K" rations, and English meat pies, the latter bought by individuals at station stops. Unfailingly at each stop, no matter where it be, a crowd of children would gather to beg for candy or gum, or maybe even a few coppers, which of course no one had. Finally after about a 20 hour ride the battalion arrived at Chepstow and proceeded in the dark early morning on a long up-hill march to the tent camp which was to be home for the next 21 days.

The camp itself was composed of pyramidal tents with concrete floors, Nissen huts, and wash and latrine hutments. Usually the water pressure was very low and water was hard to get, and there were no immediate showering facilities or places to heat water. The English seemed to be blessed with a lack of flies, but they had an overabundance of bees, which continually plagued and annoyed the ~~kitchens~~ and mess lines. However orders soon came that the Battalion was to be here only 21 days so anything was bearable for that time.

Here at Chepstow the Battalion had one ^{mission --} ~~certainty~~ to equip itself

completely and be prepared for immediate combat. Now the Battalion had come overseas with only minimum essential equipment so this mission entailed drawing about all its equipment and modifying the vehicles according to Third Army requirements, to which Army the unit was now assigned. Of course hand in hand with all this was an ~~ex-~~ensive and intensive three weeks of training culminated by firing all the machine guns and 3" guns to zero them in.

The drawing of equipment entailed travels all over England, Wales, and Scotland, but soon it was all assembled. The Battalion Motor Maintenance ^{and} personnel set up an assembly line for modifications and soon everything was running smoothly, and half-tracks had their baggage racks, and the jeeps their wire cutters and rear gas and equipment racks.

While here, there was still time for passes to ~~Chepstow, Newport,~~ and Cardiff, and this means the men did get to be acquainted with the English people and their "funny money" of pounds, shillings, and pence. However they weren't too impressed with England or the people and were just as glad when orders were received to move to a marshalling area on August 22 - just 3 weeks to the day after the Battalion had arrived at Chepstow, almost totally without equipment. Now the unit was ready for combat.

In a motor convoy the Battalion moved on August 22 to ~~Weymouth~~ assembly area. It was to be an overnight stop and everyone was happy for the rest as the trip had been long, and it had rained almost throughout the journey. Enroute many quaint little towns were seen, with their thatched roofs, and many of the townspeople had remarked at the names on ^{the} ~~our~~ vehicles - "Couglin's Casket", "Allegheny Avenger", "Hitlerosis", "Blondie", or "Rita".



*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter X

Channel Crossing to Utah Beach

25 August 1944



CHAPTER IX

(cont'd)

The next morning and afternoon the final leg of the trip on British soil was made and the Battalion arrived at Portland Bill ready to load onto the L.C.I's and L.S.T.'s. After only one month away from the United States the battalion went aboard these landing craft, fully equipped and fully armed, ready to immediately step into combat when the bows were opened and the ramp let down on the beaches of France. The vessels, particularly the L.S.T.'s had surprisingly good accommodations, there being bunks for all and plenty of good hot food, and plenty of hot water for a good shower. Life belts were issued in event of a sudden need and on the night of August 23rd, the ships pulled away from shore to join a convoy.

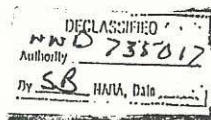
CHAPTER X

CHANNEL CROSSING

The Channel Crossing was very uneventful, but at the same time was an interesting and welcome experience. Most of the Battalion was aboard ship from the afternoon of the 23rd to the morning of the 25th of August and during this time everyone received his French invasion currency and all had a chance for a last good hot shower, and were fed several good hot meals.

The ships carrying the Battalion moved in a straight line convoy, two rows of ships abreast at about 600 yard intervals, to the vicinity of the Isle of Wight where the convoy was further enlarged. All the while each ship had its own barrage balloon aloft and the whole thing was a marvellous sight.

The convoy turned south and then east from the Isle of Wight towards the Normandy beaches and land was sighted on the evening of the 24th. The tides were not correct for a landing, however, and it was necessary to wait till early the next morning. Then the ships





The 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Chapter XI

A.D.S.E.C. in France & Belgium

25 August 1944 to 30 November 1944



CHAPTER X

(cont'd)

came close to shore, and as the water receded, beached themselves on the shores of France--on Utah beach.

CHAPTER XI

A.D.S.E.C.

When the L.S.T.s' opened wide their bows and let down their ramps on Utah Beach in Normandy on the morning of August 25, the battalion little realized what was in store for them as they drove off the ships onto the beach. But, the Battalion was determined to do its best, whatever might be its task, and to have ^{its} ~~the name of the battalion~~ ranked with those of the best units on the continent. Events have proven that they did not aim too high.

Though attached to the Third Army, the first assignment was to the Advance Section of the Communications Zone, more familiarly known as ADSEC. Immediately a long motor march was made, and this was to be, the rule, rather than the exception while with ADSEC, from the beach to the sector of France just north of the Loire River, where 20,000 Germans still held out. The route taken was through famous, but battered St. Lo, Carentan, Vire, south and east through France, with "A" Company establishing headquarters at Gorren, "B" Company at Montsurs, "C" Company at Sablé, and Headquarters Company and the Battalion Command Post at Mayenne. Each company was assigned an area within the Battalion sector and all men went about their tasks getting the feel of things and acquiring "know-how." The tasks were numerous and seemingly without limit. The Battalion did counter-intelligence (CIC) work; aided the CID (Criminal Investigation Division); established liaison with French and Belgian officials and members of the famous FFI and similar Belgian organizations; counteracted the newly

CHAPTER XI (cont'd)

flourishing black market; gathered information on V-1 and V-2 bombs; and located vast stores of enemy equipment and ammunition--some of which the Battalion was to have the satisfaction of seeing fired back at him over the tree tops of the Hurtgen Forest in Germany. All of these tasks were performed in addition to the primary mission which was to safeguard and secure the lines of communications--involving, of course, train guarding; bridge guarding; patrolling; rounding up of PWs', snipers, and saboteurs; and reconnaissance for new routes.

The Battalion's duties with ADSEC took it all over Northern France and most of Belgium, the various units setting up successively as follows: "A" Company at Gorron, Rambouillet, Sezanne, all in France, and in Chimay, Belgium; "B" Vcompany at Montsurs, Voves, Chateau-Thierry, Revigny, all in France, and finally just west of Mons, Belgium; "C" Company at Sable, Chateaufort, Riquebourg, Le Cateau, all in France, and Seneffe, Belgium; the Battalion CP and Headquarters Company, together with the two Reconnaissance platoons at Mayenne, Mereville, Missy-sur-Aisne, and Selles, all in France, and Presles, Belgium. The general route of advance took the Battalion from its initial position on the Normandy beaches south to the area around Mayenne, then east through Le Mans and Chartres. From here they went through Paris and north to Compiègne and Soissons. Further advances took everyone yet further north through Cambrai and Valenciennes and east into Belgium via Mons and Charleroi. Here the travels with ADSEC ended, for the Battalion moved on November 30, from the vicinity of Charleroi to a combat marshalling area at Schalkhoven, in the Flemish part of Belgium, just south of Maastricht, Holland.

The Battalion's association with ADSEC at an end, it had been enriched by a knowledge of the vast amount of work that is needed to



*The 817th Tank
Destroyer Battalion*

Chapter XII

Marshalling Area-Presles, Belgium

30 November 1944 to 9 December 1944



CHAPTER XI

(cont'd)

maintain the battle units, and everyone had learned to better appreciate the problems of ^{an} ~~our~~ army's supply personnel.

With this tribute from the Commanding General, the Battalion left ADSEC:- " General Plank desires to commend you for the outstanding manner in which your organization has assisted Advance Section in successfully accomplishing its mission. You have represented a substantial contribution to the operations of the Allied Forces in the European Campaign." Now the Battalion was ready for the final test of all its long months of training and preparation in the United States and in the United Kingdom. It was ready, and determined, to make its motto-"overpowering"-mean something to the enemy.

CHAPTER XII

MARSHALLING AREA

After a six hour motor march from its assembly area in the vicinity of Presles, Belgium, the Battalion arrived at its combat marshalling area, near Schalkhoven, Belgium where it went into the field and lived in its pup tents. Nearby was the 78th Infantry Division, to which the Battalion had been initially assigned, but which it soon left for an assignment with the 8th Infantry Division.

Here in the gooey mud and almost constant downpour of rain, the Battalion refitted and made final efforts to get itself ^{into} ~~into~~ ~~its~~ tip-top shape for the initial combat operation.

As a protection against possible strafing by enemy planes, each man dug a slit trench beside his tent, but fortunately there were no attacks. Schalkhoven, however, seemed to be on the direct V-1 "Red Ball Route" from Germany to the port of Antwerp and there was almost a continuous stream of V-1s' passing overhead.

