

20th Combat Engineer Association of World War II



July 2006

20th Engineers Back In Action

Last year we reported the bad news that the 20th Engineers no longer exists as such. On July 16, 2005, they became the Special Troops Division of the First Brigade, First Cavalry Division. The tank and infantry battalions of this new division now have their own engineer companies. Now we can report the good news. On Tuesday, February 28, 2006, the 20th Engineer Battalion opened a new chapter in its long history. An article in the Killen, Texas, *Daily Herald* for March 1, 2006, reports that the 20th Engineer Battalion "uncased its colors during a ceremony at the 4th Infantry Division's Cameron Field at Fort Hood and officially unveiled the face of what will become a model for all Army Engineer battalions." Lt. Col. James Rayner is the new commander of the 20th Engineer Battalion.

The article goes on to explain that, "formerly part of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 20th Engineers cased their colors and scattered their troops in mid-July 2005. Just a few months later, in October 2005, the Army decided III Corps needed a modular engineer battalion to assist brigade combat teams in current and future missions, and selected the 20th Engineers for the job." The 20th Engineer Battalion now consists of five modular companies which are identified by numbers, not by the traditional letter scheme. According to a military announcement, they include "a Headquarters and Support Company (HSC); a Forward Support Company (FSC) with combat service support assets such as maintenance, supply, and transportation; two maneuver augmentation companies; and a sapper company."

Major General Randal Castro, commandant of the U.S. Army Engineer School at Fort Leonard Wood, observes that, "Engineer battalions of the past were designed for an Army that was dominated by an open and rolling fight. The complexities of today's fight require an organization that is designed significantly different from anything in the past. The battalion's modular structure will allow engineer soldiers to better support the needs of the maneuver commander on the ground. What makes the 20th Engineers unique is their capability to operate as part of their parent battalion or operate separately in support of other units." The Battalion will ultimately be assigned to the newly-forming 36th Engineer Brigade, part of III Corps at Fort Hood. Lt. Col. James Rayner reports that the 20th Engineers have already received deployment orders and will be returning to Iraq in the near future.

So what was different in the 20th Engineers of World War II? Generally only an entire Battalion could operate independently as a self-sufficient unit in WWII. In the new 20th Engineers each company maintains its own operational control which permits it to operate independently, thereby providing greater flexibility.

Lost But Not Forgotten

Joseph J. Szvetitz, Jr. (C/1340th) died May 9, 2006, at St. Luke's Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, at the age of 85. He participated in the invasions of North Africa, Sicily, and Normandy, and was taken prisoner of war during the battle of the Huertgen Forest. He spent the remainder of the war in various POW camps. He retired in 1983 as chief mechanic for the city of Allentown after 25 years of service. His daughter, Maryellen Szvetitz-Eichelbaum writes that thanks to the efforts of one of his grandsons, an honor guard of seven came from Baltimore to participate in the burial.

Doris Wolczanski (spouse of Walter Wolczanski, A/20th) died March 20, 2006. Many will remember how Doris was affectionately dubbed "The First Sgt" for the service that she rendered to the 20th Engineer Association. She arranged for the 1998 Reunion at Niagara Falls and the 2001 Reunion in the Catskills, New York. For a time, Doris also maintained a website for the 20th Combat Engineers. At press time, we have learned that Walter is now taking chemotherapy for lung cancer.

Ruby Phelps (widow of Curtis Phelps, B/20th) died May 14, 2005.

Letters Received

Raymond R. Davis (A/20th) writes: "One day I was driving an officer in our jeep leading a convoy. When we got too far ahead of the convoy, the officer told me to pull off the road and wait. When we stopped, I got out of the jeep and started walking around. Then I spied a mound of dirt near the front wheel of the jeep. Then I walked around to the passenger side of the jeep and saw another mound of dirt. "It looks like we have driven between two tank mines," I told the officer who quickly said, "Let's get out of here." After we pulled back onto the road, the officer told me to go back to locate the convoy. When we met the convoy, we discovered that the command car of the convoy had hit another mine. We were just lucky! I often think of this but for the life of me, I cannot remember the officer's name."

Anna M. Russ (wife of Peter J. Russ, C/1340th) writes: "Peter enjoys reading the *Wavy Arrow* because it brings back memories of his war-time buddies. He is now 88 years old and is unable to drive or walk without a walker. He had very serious re-construction surgery on both of his knees about a year ago. Otherwise he is still rather healthy. Keep up the good work with the *Wavy Arrow*. God bless the 20th Engineers and all the memories of the years it has kept Pete in touch. He sends the best to all."

Don Wharff (Warrant Officer) writes: "I am now living at Foxwood Springs Living Center, a retirement facility in Raymore, Missouri. I am able to drive and walk, and I participate in many activities at Foxwood. I do enjoy reading the *Wavy Arrow*, and I enclosing a contribution to keep it coming on a regular basis.

Robert V. Jarratt (H&S/20th) has moved. His new address is 208 West Due West Avenue, Apt, 505, Madison, TN 37115. His new telephone number is 615-860-1889.

Random Recollections (July 1940 - November 1943)

By Truman H. Setliffe

The 20th Engineer Regiment (Forestry) was created soon after the U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, to produce lumber from French forests for constructing bridges, docks, hospitals, and warehouses. At its maximum strength, the 20th Regiment had 368 officers and 19,385 enlisted men. The first unit of the 20th departed for France on November 17, 1917, and the last of the 20th Engineers returned home in July 1919.

On July 1, 1940, remnants of the World War I Regiment was redesignated as the 20th Engineer Combat Regiment at Ft. Benning, Georgia. In the summer of 1941, the 20th pre-war training included a major part in the Louisiana maneuvers. By the first week of October 1941, the 20th returned to Ft. Benning where they listened to radio reports of Hitler's conquests in Europe. Then on December 7, 1941, they were shocked by radio reports of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Orders for the traditional "one year draftee discharges" were cancelled and the 20th was brought to full strength. The 20th's commander, Bill Heavey, was ordered to join General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell in Burma, and the Regiment's executive officer, Eugene Caffey, took over command of the 20th Combat Engineers. General George Patton was also at Ft. Benning preparing the 2nd Armored Division for war.

On February 2, 1942, the 20th moved to a tent city at Camp Blanding (later Ft. Blanding) training in basics such as floating bridges and equipment maintenance. Under Caffey's direction, training included lectures on "Military Justice, Regulations, and Procedures." At the end of the lecture, Caffey walked on the stage and said, "Military justice and discipline are simple. Just do what the man says," and he walked off.

In mid-June 1942, the 20th moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, but the expected embarkation for England was cancelled. So they moved to Camp Pickett, Virginia, to continue training including "amphibious assaults from floating craft to dry land." Colonel Caffey decided to grow a beard, and he ordered that anyone who did not shave for two days had to get his permission to shave. Everyone decided not to shave. The ploy was to establish the 20th Engineer Combat Regiment as different from all other outfits. It was a gimmick to boost morale and it worked. Later Caffey ordered everyone to shave because beards interfered with wearing gas masks.

On September 30, 1942, Regimental Headquarters and the First Battalion returned to Camp Kilmer, and on October 22, the 2nd Battalion left Camp Pickett for the port of embarkation at Newport News, Virginia, where they boarded the *Hugh L. Scott* and set sail for parts unknown. One week later (November 1st) Headquarters and the First Battalion shipped out of New York Harbor. At the time of departure no one knew that the destination was Casablanca in French Morocco as part of Operation Torch. After the 2nd Battalion landed on November 8, 1942, and were joined by the 1st Battalion ten days later, their first assignment was unloading ships at the Port of Fedela. On November 19, 1942, the entire Regiment set up a tent city in the Casablanca horse race track called the Hippodrome. General Patton's quarters were located in a walled-villa across the street.

On March 15, 1943, the Regiment left Casablanca for a 1,100 mile convoy to Tunisia where Rommel's Afrika Korps had launched a major attack on the U.S. II Corps. It was here that the Regiment faced its first direct bombing attack. As soon as they heard the sirens and ack-ack, everyone headed for slit trenches, except Captain Jim Myers who ran to his pup-tent and laid on his air mattress. His explanation was, "if they get my air mattress, they might as well get me!" Jim survived to return to Michigan after VE Day.

April and May 1943 brought both good news and bad news. The 20th moved further into Tunisia to support the U.S. Ninth Infantry Division. Colonel Caffey led a party of the Regiment to check the port facilities in Bizerte and to clear the city of the few remaining Germans. On May 8, 1943, the 20th hoisted the first American flag over Bizerte. After the Germans surrendered on May 12th, the 20th Regiment was ordered to the Sedjenane Valley to remove mines which the Germans had left behind. That led to the bad news.

Colonel Caffey left the 20th on May 25, 1943, to command an Engineers Special Brigade for Patton's Seventh Army, and Colonel Dick Arnold from General Eisenhower's staff became the Regimental commander. After studying mine removal for a week, Arnold ventured into his first mine field on June 6, 1943. But 2nd Lt. George Lux who accompanied Arnold tripped a wire which set off a bobby trap. The explosion killed Arnold on the spot. Lt. Lux suffered compound fractures of both legs, but survived the war to attend one of the later 20th Reunions. On June 20, 1943, Colonel Edmund K. Daley was named the commander of the 20th Engineer Combat Regiment.

Within ten days of Daley's assumption of command, the 20th landed on D-Day (July 10, 1943) at Licata, Sicily, as part of General Patton's 7th Army. The Regimental headquarters and 1st Battalion supported the Third Infantry Division in the race for Palermo. The 2nd Battalion supported the 82nd Airborne Division in its sweep to clear the west end of the Island, and constructed airport runways at Trapani.

General Patton was obsessive in his desire to reach Messina opposite the toe of Italy before Britain's General Montgomery who had landed at Gela which was closer to Messina. After capture of Palermo the 20th's mission was to open roads and bridges along the north coast and on to Messina ahead of Montgomery. Patton accepted the surrender of Messina, and Montgomery was furious. The two generals feuded throughout the rest of WWII.

The 20th moved to a tent camp staging area in the Palermo port area in mid-October and the Regiment departed Sicily on November 20, 1943, aboard the Army's leased transport ship *Sloterdyke* -- not so lovingly called the "Slaughter House." The departure was a little more than one year after the 20th landed in Casablanca in North Africa.

So between July 1940 and November 1943, the 20th Engineer Combat Regiment and its off-spring (the 1171st Group, 20th Battalion, and 1340th Battalion which were created in England) had prepared for World War II, completed two D-Day invasions (Casablanca and Sicily), and were headed for England to prepare for another year and-a-half of combat including June 6, 1944, D-Day landing on Omaha Beach in Normandy, and five more combat campaigns. No one said it was going to be easy, and it wasn't.

Another 20th Engineer Wedding

Grace Horn (widow of George E. Horn, Officer, B/20th) writes, "Your description of Major Auld's wedding brought back memories of my own wedding. I met my future husband at Camp Picket, Virginia, in 1942 just before he departed for North Africa. I subsequently joined 50th General Hospital stationed in Scotland, and in January 1944 we met again when we decided to get married. On April 3, 1944, I took the train to Taunton in Somerset, England, where Lt. George E. Horn was stationed as an officer with Company B of the 20th Engineers. The purpose of the trip was to get married. However fate intervened and George had to go to General Omar Bradley to obtain permission for our wedding. The next day we were married at the Methodist Church in Taunton (see below photograph). I enjoy the *Wavy Arrow* and await each issue.

Editor's Note: After World War II, George Horn remained in the military service as captain with 2nd Engineers, C Battalion, in Ft. Lewis, Washington. In 1947-1948 he served as the first chairman of the 20th Combat Engineer Association of WWII prior to his transfer to Guam as airport engineer. He returned to Fort Leonard Wood Missouri in 1953 as a major, and was elected secretary-treasurer of the Association in 1955. He held this position until January 1956 when he was transferred as executive officer of the 17th Armored Engineer Division in Germany. George Horn died of a heart attack on October 4, 1956, in Germany. In August 1957, Mrs. Grace Horn was elected as one of the first honorary members of the 20th Combat Engineer Association of WWII.



George and Grace Horn were married on April 4, 1944, at the Methodist Church in Taunton, England. Attending the wedding were (on the left) Lt. Col. Jonathan Sonnefield, 20th Engineer Battalion commander, and far right Captain Edwin Lutz, B Company commander. Grace does not remember the name of the woman on the far left but is sure that she was the wife of one of the civilians near the camp.

What's In Your Foxhole?

Albert Biggiani (H&S/20th Band) writes that while he was in the Huertgen Forest, a shell came in and exploded high in the tree tops directly over our heads and wounded one of my buddies. We all ran for our foxholes but to our dismay we found them filled to the brim with water. Later we learned that the shell was a short-round fired by our side. After that we had to worry about falling tree tops. This story reminds your editor that he found something even more unusual in his foxhole. The first evening after landing on Omaha Beach, Company B of the 1340th took up position in one of the areas surrounded by hedge rows where we dug foxholes around the perimeter. After I returned following guard duty, I discovered a dead German soldier in my foxhole. The Kraut had apparently been serving as a sniper in the tree adjacent to the area where I dug my foxhole. The advancing infantry obviously killed the German sniper, but the corpse remained in the tree until it fell directly into my foxhole. What did other members of the 20th and 1340th unexpectedly find in their foxhole?

Wavy Arrow Contributions

We thank the following for having made a contribution to keep the *Wavy Arrow* coming to you on a regular basis. Please consider one if you haven't made a contribution recently.

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| James C. Appleby (friend of the editor) | \$25.00 |
| Albert Biggiani (H&S/20th Band) | \$25.00 |
| Edmund "Mick" Daley (son of 20th commanding officer Daley) | \$50.00 |
| Raymond R. Davis (A/20th) | \$20.00 |
| Grace Horn (widow of George E. Horn, Officer, B/20th) | \$50.00 |
| Robert V. Jarratt (H&S/20th) | \$25.00 |
| Joseph Kleinfeld (H&S/20th; H&S/1340th) | \$25.00 |
| Peter J. Russ (C/1340th) | \$25.00 |
| Don Wharff (Warrant Officer) | \$25.00 |

World War II Museums

The National D-Day Museum in New Orleans has been honored with a U.S. Congressional designation as the country's official National World War II Museum. It is back in action after the damage produced by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and offers a variety of programs. Perhaps the most impressive is an International Conference on WWII to be held at the museum November 16-19, 2006. The National D-Day Memorial in Bedford, Virginia, is also still open as an outdoor facility for daily visits except on holidays.

Send Contributions, Letters, Articles, Photographs, Obituaries, and other News Items for inclusion in future issues of the *Wavy Arrow* to editor George Griffenhagen, 2501 Drexel Street, Vienna, VA 22180.