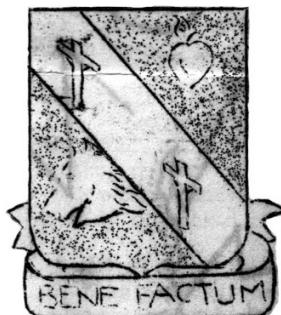


The FORTIETH

..... a Story of the 40th Signal Light Construction Battalion



"The Battle of Ardennes" did it. You call it "The Bulge" or "The Breakthrough".

It means the story of days already history that were days of work, of movement and ceaseless work, days that sometimes left you a bit scared when there was time to think. Then the men were separated from the boys. And in one Signal outfit, they were all men. That was the 40th Signal Construction Battalion.

But no one knew that back in September of 1942. No one knew that the new outfit then forming would have a proud string of "firsts" to its credit and a history of difficult jobs well done in the defeat of Nazidom. Not too many know it now. But some of those who do are generals and such people who have access to all the facts.

The War Department activated the Battalion on 21 September 1942 and then used a good army formula to give it body. They picked Camp Campbell, Kentucky, in which to mix fifty cadre-men from the 29th Signal Construction Battalion and selectees from Fort Dix, Fort Sam Houston, and Camp Robinson. The officers transferred from other outfits, from civilian communication posts, and from OCS.

The men thought that they would never forget those early days. There are little things to remember; the dates, the drunks, the games. One day they will not remember for sure. That's the day they actually became soldiers. Because that happened gradually, through day after day of class and drill and a lot of what seemed like damned useless work. Of course, there was some time to relax around the PX, shows, a Saturday night of Hoptown.

Major WJ Merrigan commanded a bunch of men until one day, perhaps it was on Tennessee maneuvers, he discovered he had a bunch of soldiers. And it was not a group that Major McNeal took overseas but a battalion. The organization now lived a life of its own. And then men that made it could be proud to belong.

This, then, is a story of a battalion.

They were ready on New Year's Day of 1944. The rumors had them ready long before that, On 10 January 1944, they pulled out of Camp Campbell on two troop trains commanded by Capt. George W Drawbaugh and Capt. Edgar Pooley. Camp, Shanks wanted to be sure that they were ready so looked everyone over again for six days.

On the eighteenth of January, they boarded the Susan .B Anthony and were proud to learn that the battalion had had a large hand in directing troop life aboard ship. Bn CO Major McNeal assumed command

of all troops on board, 1st Lt. Weinstein acted AS Ships Adjutant and M Sgt. Walker and his assistants Acted as ships clerks.

After a trip totally unlike peacetime passenger travel .over 500 men and off officers took to their land legs in Newport, South Wales and started for their next home Eynsham Park, Oxon, England. They were ready to start what many will remember as "The Battle of Britain or The Siege of the Pubs". Others think of that time as "Fun in the Black-out" or Life in a Niessen Hut".

There was fun there and, surprise to some more work and instruction. There was old knowledge to be renewed and new things to learn, like British Multi-Air-Line construction. There are still people who can take or leave it alone.

There were times to be proud of, like the time the battalion formally introduced Long Hanborough to American soldiers in the "Salute the Soldier" parade after a five mile march from Eynsham Park.

Maneuvers over her were more serious than those at home. Co. B went to Middleston Stoney, Oxon and A Co to Leatherhead and Staines, Surrey. The seriousness of the occasion from the knowledge. that the enemy was near. Bombing raids proved that and the buzz bomb was soon due.

Then came an alert. The real boat ride was due. The trip across was to be in LST's. On the third of July, the outfit hit the marshalling area near Dorchester, Dorset, and celebrated Independence Day fittingly by preparing for another liberation. Three LST's took them aboard the fifth and on the sixth they were on Omaha Beach.

By the tenth of July, the battalion had started its first job. They were working for First Army and the job was to connect First Army, First Army Rear and VIII and VII Corps. Communications were in but the line was continually being shot out by artillery fire near Carentan.

This line had to run across swamps flooded by the Germans, the Carentan Canal and a river. It was only after the job had been satisfactorily completed that the Engineers pronounced those swampy fields free of mines.

The open wire across the Carentan Canal was replaced by submarine cable to allow clearance for water traffic and then the cable replaced by a high span of open wire. There was work around St Come-du-Mont and Chef-du-Pont. Some open wire and some spiral four. And some of the spiral four looped out in the first hasty days of the invasion had to be recovered. And the enemy was never far away. In pushing open wire as far as they could go, five linesman were injured, one seriously.

This happened the 23rd of July, as the open wire was heading for Marigny. And then also near Marigny, on the 26th, a survey party captured the battalion's first prisoners.

The big St. Lo push began. Twelfth Army group needed communications to control the fast unfolding operation and withdrew the battalion from the 1st Army to help lay the lines. Those were the days of fast and frequent moves. There was two whole weeks at Argentre, an unusually long period in those days.

And the work pushed as fast. Before the enemy finally began to outdistance his pursuers, there were rough times. Jerry though they might pinch off the advance or stall it at the narrow bottle-neck of Avranches. He tried continual bombing and strafing. And just at that time, the 40th was putting in an open wire line from south of Avranches to St. James. Thirteen spans of wire were bombed out on the 8th of August.

That was just the kick-off for the race, however. The work went on at Laval, Chartres, Couperon. There were fifty and sixty mile stretches of spiral four. Then open wire for twenty four miles out of Versailles. (Gay Paree is in that area, as some will remember) Next was a seventeen mile job of two arm open wire from Verdun towards Metz.

Then the work turned north. It went from Verdun to Aubange, into the city of Luxembourg, from Aubange to Bastogne. (Bastogne was a nice looking city at that time.)

Twenty seven miles of two arm, twenty open wire came next. It started at Liege- and ended on Hitler's sacred soil! The line ended in the outskirts of much battered Aachen, strands of copper pointing towards Berlin. The 40th had been the first to string wire onto German soil.

And it hadn't been easy. Robot bombs threatened and knocked out part of the line. A K-4 was almost completely destroyed by a land mine. But the German fortress was more directly threatened.

There was a cable job at Liege repeater. Then back to the first Army. A spiral four job was started, fifty miles from Dinant to Neufchateau. It was almost done when the Germans broke through the thinly held center of our lines.

That was when the 40th was put to the test, for they were the only construction outfit north of the Bulge , the only one of very few Signal units of any kind up there where the whole position in Europe was threatened and communications needed more urgently than before.

The 1st Army again called for the 40th. Major William H. Cobb was now in command and glad that he had a competent battalion of workmen and soldiers under him.

The enemy had the weather as an ally. There was fog and snow and icy roads to battle. - All of this when lines had to re-routed , tons of line supplies to be hauled in, lines put in to the Seventh and Eighteenth Corps, back to Huy. There were shorter jobs, to the VHF stations, to other First Army installations.

All of which was done well and quickly by a Signal battalion that proved itself under fire, proved its worth so well that a letter of commendation was received from the Signal officer First United States Army.

When the back of the Bulge was broken, the Bn went back to the Twelfth Army group but peace did not come for the Battalion. The Germans had destroyed more than half of the Aubange-Jemelle line. One enemy had been pushed back but the ice and snow remained. And there were mines left behind, another truck was lost for that reason, V-1 still came over. Two men were injured by one which struck a building which A Co. had fortunately just vacated. The job from Spa to St. Vith was another trying time.

The snow and ice was leaving now, but in its place was mud, broken up roads, and shell torn country. And the Germans had sown mines liberally in roads and fields. The 40th not only pushed its job through but worked day and night helping with their mired vehicles and feeding stranded G.I.s.

The mud in the middle of February became worse until work slowed and then stopped. From the seventeenth to the twenty-eighth of February, there was a rare break-a rest. For the first everyone could clean up and rest up, work over the equipment and vehicles, get poised for the next move.

Then back into Germany again. First there was the open wire lead from St. Vith to Prum, Germany. Lt. Wood was injured surveying that one by one of the mines left behind the Siegfried line. There was an aerial cable job at Julich, then an open wire line from the north of Julich to Eupen-Gladbach. There was more cable work to be done and then another open wire job.

This next open wire job went thirty-two miles from Bad Kreusnach to Wiesbaden. But 1745 feet of that distance was across the Rhine river. A respectable enough job in itself, but also, it was the first wire across the Rhine. The 40th was first again!

There was some spiral four to be placed around Wiesbaden, work around Koenigsburg and Erlingen, then a thirty mile open wire lead from Frankfurt to Long Gons. The thirty-seven mile open wire job from Ensler to Nurnberg was under way as the war ended. But work went on as everyone counted points and traded rumors.

On the twenty-fifth of May, the battalion was reorganized under a new T/O&E as the 40th Signal Light Construction Battalion. Despite changes in personnel and equipment, it remained the same organization, ready to do any assigned job and do it a little bit better and faster than any other outfit could. And the next assignment started, an open wire lead from Nurnberg towards Munich. Operations stopped 11 June 1945.

After an inspiring record in the European War, the job in Europe was done. First into Germany, first across the Rhine, veterans of the Ardennes bulge, and the whole sweep across Europe; the Battalion had averaged 1 mile of open wire and 2½ miles of spiral four constructed per day for the whole period of action. Wherever they are next placed, their reputation will proceed them.

That is the story of a Battalion.