

THE 9th ENGINEER COMBAT BATTALION DURING THE "COLD WAR"

BACKGROUND

This brief summary of the 9th ECB experiences and missions in Germany during the so called "Cold War" period are recalled by Colonel Paul S. Denison USA(Ret). Denison commanded the battalion during the period July 1964 through January 1966.

To appreciate the significance of this account one must understand the atmosphere and circumstances under which the Bn operated during this period. Since the end of World WarII the Soviet Union continuously posed a real threat to all of Eastern Europe. US forces, (supported by NATO forces), constituted the major deterrent to further aggression by the Soviets. The atmosphere throughout all of the non- Soviet dominated areas was one of constant tension and alertness. Troops patrolled and trained constantly to prepare for any aggressive moves that might spell danger. Dependents were both a comfort and a concern to those lucky enough to have them in accompaniment. US furnished housing was "fair", as compared stateside standards but the wait for housing to become available was often lengthy. Troops that tried to live "on the economy" found it be prohibitively expensive causing problems for them and often, their commanders.

On the other hand, everyone tried to live as normal a lifestyle as circumstances would permit. Living conditions were generally satisfactory and recreational opportunities were plentiful when one had an opportunity to take advantages of them. Dependents were required to keep a bag packed with the minimum of food and clothing essentials for themselves and their children so that they would be prepared to "move out" on a 30 minutes to two hour notice if a full (evacuation) order was given. There was little or no time for "goodbyes". Dependents were sent, either by POV's or bus to assembly areas, generally in France, to await further evacuation to the States. If children were in schools away from "home station" (Frankfort, in the case of Aschaffenburg high school students) they would be sent from there to an assembly area to hopefully rejoin their parent. Obviously, all of this was generally demoralizing and in some instances (very few), wives who could not tolerate this kind of pressure would simply return to the States with their children.

Troops were prepared to begin clearing their Kasernes within minutes of a called alert. All troops and equipment were expected to follow as quickly as possible, generally construed to mean 1 to one and a half hours. Obviously, this represented problems to Engineer units (with all of their heavy equipment), tank and artillery battalions, etc. Each unit headed for predesignated alert assembly areas over selected routes to minimize road congestion. Alerts were called on an unannounced and unscheduled basis. All of this obviously added to a general atmosphere of tension, but one became accustomed to it.

ORGANIZATION and FACILITIES

The 9th Engineer Battalion was fortunate to have its own “private” compound named “Smith Barracks” in Aschoffenburg, Germany, a community that had previously garrisoned many German troops during the war. Other units were scattered over the town, including the Hqs of the 3rd Infantry Brigade, with its Tank, Artillery and other supporting units. The 9th operated independently from these units, unless directed by higher headquarters for some support task to them.

The physical facilities on the “post” were generally excellent. Each company had its own separate headquarters and barracks living space, recreation room, supply and arms rooms and mess hall. The motor/equipment pool areas were combined, but each company has its own parking and maintenance areas. Battalion personnel performed major ordinance and equipment maintenance. There was a large gymnasium and parade area for use by all. Unfortunately, one company, (“A”), had to be billeted down the hauptstrasse about two blocks in another Kaserne, but it did not seem to present any major problems.

The 9th was a separate Corps battalion assigned to the 540th Engineer Group stationed in Stuttgart. The group command included two other ECB's, (the 82nd in Bamberg, the 237th in the Stuttgart area), plus both Float and Panel Bridge companies, a Light Equipment company and occasionally other units as situations required. Time and distance factors minimized “over supervision” of Bn activities by higher headquarters, which was really never a problem anyway.

The organization of the battalion was typical of the times. We had four “Line” companies, a large Headquarters company which included a “Utilities Detachment” (carpenters, plumbers, electricians and masons), and a “heavier” than usual equipment maintenance section to keep both ordinance and engineer heavy equipment operational. Finally, we had an Atomic Demolition Munitions (ADM) Platoon assigned to the battalion. Their mission was very highly classified. (Only my exec and I and one very senior S-2 NCO had even partial knowledge of details). Their targets were pre-determined and weapons storage and detonation devices were stored separately in other classified locations. Execution of weapons was only on order of higher authority, “except”.... Alternate targets could be designated but, again, it was never completely clear where authority would reside in what was expected to be a confused situation to say the least. The ADM Platoon was intensely trained and superior in performance of all of their duties and responsibilities.

The Battalions strength was generally maintained at a little over 100 percent (700+ people). A great percentage of the personnel were very young and inexperienced. We did have some good, experienced NCO's, particularly in the maintenance area. When I assumed command of the battalion there was one Major, three Captains, an experienced CWO, and a W2 (maintenance Warrent) and between 40 and 45 very young Lieutenants,

most of them just out of college. The Major (My XO), was not an engineer but was a highly experienced pilot. (We had an H-13 helicopter and an L-19 fixed wing aircraft assigned to the Bn). In addition to flying me to various project field locations, the XO assumed primary responsibility for maintenance and supply functions in the Bn. He was a fine officer and we eventually made a good combat engineer of him, which he seemed to really enjoy. One of the Captains was the Bn S-3, one the Bn Supply officer (S-4) and the last one (who had just arrived in the Bn. a few days before I did) had been assigned to Hqs Company. About three fourths of the young Lts. had just graduated from college and this was their first assignment. They were all graduated from accredited schools of engineering except one, (he was a "Drama" major from Notre Dame and turned out to be one of my best young officers). More that half of them were married and had brought their young brides over with them... Housing or no! They were all fine, eager young people and they were a pleasure to work with.

TRAINING and FIELD EXERCISES

As a rule, training for engineer units is rather repetitive, including many of the same exercises and subjects over and over again. As a result a certain amount of lethargy creeps into the program. During the year or two preceding this summary of events the 9th (and some other engineer units) had experienced poor results on their annual inspections and major training exercises. Obviously, problems of this nature represent real challenges to the commands responsible. During the prior year, the 9th had received an "unsatisfactory" on its Annual Maintenance Inspection and ATT and, along with its two sister battalions, had failed to complete assigned construction projects at the NATO training area at Grafenwoehr. (No consideration was given to the fact that during their months for said missions the 82nd ECB and the 237th ECB were precluded from doing any constructive work by a month long major NATO training and firing exercise and weeks of constant rain which precluded any heavy construction work at all). Never the less, both 7th Army and III Corps were highly critical of the separate engineer units and were pressuring same to "shape up". 540th Group added its weight to the pressure.

It was under these circumstances that the author of this brief report assumed command of the 9th ECB. I was picked up at the airport at Frankfurt (along with my family) on the late afternoon of 14 July, 1964 by the then Bn Commander (LTC Fred Freck) and informed on the short drive to Asschaffenburg that the Bn. was to depart the following morning for its annual construction mission at Graph. My family was escorted to temporary quarters while Col Freck and I proceeded to Bn hqs. to begin briefings and the signing of classified documents. This continued to well into the evening. I asked to meet the company commanders and some of the staff. I told them I would join them at Graph the next evening. (Col Freck and I had other duties that had to be taken care of during the morning before I could depart). I told the family to go to Garmisch for a few days (a place we were familiar with from a prior tour).

These were the unusual conditions under which I assumed command of the battalion. I was a bit concerned about the circumstances, but as it turned out, it was probably an ideal situation from my perspective. I had previously served with two ECB's,

(in the 1267th ECB in the ETO and Philippians during WWII and the 13th ECB in Korea) as Platoon Leader, Company Commander, and Bn. S-3. I had considerable construction experience in these assignments plus as an Area Engineer in the Kansas City Engineer District. I felt comfortable with the fact that my first exposure to the battalion would be during a construction mission.

About mid-afternoon I was able to have the L-19 fly me to Graph. We arrived just as the Bn. convoy "tail" was closing on the post. When I arrived at the CP the S-3 was prepared to brief me on our mission and the many construction projects we were charged with being responsible for. They included many of the projects that our sister battalions had failed to complete (for reasons described above). Primary projects included major upgrading of primary roads, construction of several miles of gravel surfaced tank trails, concrete "turning pads" at tank crossings of the MSR, hardened demolition training bunkers and grenade training pits, drainage structures and other miscellaneous jobs. We had the 503rd Light Equipment Company in support to operate an already opened quarry on the base. The project assignments and the proposed operations schedule were explained. (Troops were to report for work at 0800, perform maintenance and pick up tools and equipment and be on the job sites before 0900). Return to Bn. was scheduled by 1600-1630 and maintenance was to be performed before supper.

This briefing was interrupted by a phone call from BG Roy Kelley, 7th Army Engineer, an old friend and acquaintance from our joint service in the Office of the Chief of Engineers. After greetings General Kelly told me of the situation concerning both Army and Corps attitudes relative to recent performances by engineer units in general, and that it was up to the 9th to restore confidence in their engineers. He said that he and LTG Truman (Corps Commander) would be down for a visit in three or four days. I told Gen. Kelley we would look forward to their visit and do our best to do what was expected of us. I then asked that all officers available be asked to assemble in the Hqs. Co. mess hall for a brief meeting. I introduced myself to those I hadn't met and told them of my brief conversation with Gen Kelley. Without further comment I told them I was going to tour all of the job sites the next day and would meet and talk to each of them at that time. I learned that the recently arrived Captain was Citadel graduate and a Civil Engineer. I resolved to appoint him CO of "B" Co. (The assigned CO had stayed in Aburg scheduled to "rotate" in three days). I announced the change at the Officers Call I intended to have that evening. Specific project assignments for each company were also outlined by the S-3 at the meeting.

I spent the next day as I indicated I would and was impressed with the magnitude of the problem we were faced with. It was quickly apparent that we would not get the job done on the leisurely schedule described to me the evening before. On my return to the CP I asked for the officers to gather in Hqs. Mess again. After a few general observations I told them I was impressed with the challenge we faced and suggested it represented a great opportunity for the 9th show everyone what the Bn. as really made of... But we couldn't do it based on the schedule that had we had begun to work on so we would make a few "adjustments". Reveille would be called at 0530 hrs. and we would be on the job sites by 0700. Hot lunch would be served in the field in so far as possible. Work would continue until 1800 then back to garrison for supper. Maintenance would be performed at

night (mostly by personnel who had not had too many job tasks during the day). We would run this schedule six days a week and “adjust further” if necessary. I asked if there were any questions, suggestions or if anyone saw any problems. There were no comments, just lots of smiles. The S-3 told me quietly after the meeting that he was afraid the troops would “revolt” when told of the revised schedule. I responded that we would take a chance.

I had also requested a meeting with all Bn. NCO's (squad leaders up) at 1930 hrs. in one of the company mess halls. After introductory remarks I gave them the same pitch I had given to the officers with reference to the impressions that some people in higher headquarters seemed to have regarding the 9th ECB, with several references to the “history and pride of the 9th” sprinkled in. I mentioned the expected visit by the Corps Commander and asked that everyone brush-up on the proper method of reporting and to be prepared to describe what the job was all about and to answer questions when asked. I then again asked if there were any questions or suggestions. Again silence. After a brief pause the Battalion Sergeant Major stood up and said, “Sir, the Colonel can count on us!” I left the meeting with a good feeling.

The enthusiasm of the troops on the job sites was immediately apparent. I tried to briefly speak with as many of them as I could without interfering with work. The jobs showed promise of proceeding faster than I had hoped. The weather was beautiful and I hoped it could stay that way. I received word that the 540th Group commander would visit on our forth day on the job, with the Corps Commander (LTG Truman) and 7th Army Engineer on the following day latter. I was pleased to have this early opportunity to meet Colonel Art Sirkamp (Group Comdr) and to “dry run” the general's visit the following day. We attempted to “stage” the most interesting and “showy” projects for the general's visit. I wanted to go anywhere there was major concrete work, drainage structures, blast pits and roadwork under way.

When Gen. Truman arrived I met him at the CP and started my briefing as quickly as possible. The general interrupted me almost immediately saying “he had heard enough talk from his engineers, what he wanted to see was action and results”. I said, “Fine, then let's hit the road”. We went to my hand picked sites where personnel responses and the work in progress were both impressive. Gravel trucks continuously passed us as loads of gravel were dumped and spread on the MSR and an adjacent tank trail under construction. After the forth site the general said he had seen enough. He said very little, but it was obvious that he had been impressed. Before departing for his flight back to Corps, he asked me “if we were going to finish the job”? I responded that if the weather held and he would give me another dump truck company we would finish. He turned to Gen. Kelley and said, “Get him his trucks”. Kelley said that every truck in 7th Army was “on mission”. I volunteered that there was a truck loaded strategic reserve Panel Bridge Company in the Graph compound that we could unload and reload within two hours if the need arose. Gen Truman told Gen Kelly to “look into it”. The next day I got my trucks!

Miraculously, it didn't rain for the four plus weeks we were at Graph. Our work raised a dust cloud that hung over the whole post until it settled late at night, only to be

raised again the next day. The 9th ECB was nicknamed "The 9th Engineer Dust Generating Battalion" by those who didn't appreciate what we were doing. We did finish every assigned project two days before our "tour" was up. I asked the Post Engineer if he had anything else we could do. He assigned us a little fencing job, which we completed the next day. I instructed everyone to begin maintenance of equipment and to take some time off. BG Kelly had called me earlier to tell me that Gen Truman had been impressed and to congratulate us and thank us for a job well done. Having left my family under the circumstances described above I was anxious to get "home" as soon as possible, but I elected to lead the battalion back home on the road march back to Aburg the next day.

Back in garrison I ordered two days maintenance of personal and organizational equipment and as liberal a pass policy as regulations would permit (particularly for married personnel). I scheduled a Retreat Parade formation (without weapons), for the upcoming Friday afternoon and invited families that might like to come. We had a very good "PA" system for the compound area and I asked for music as the battalion formed on the parade ground from their company areas. I also instructed that the flag be lowered to the "Star Spangled Banner" (rather than "To the Colors"). When the Adjutant reported that the "Bn. Is Formed" to me I gave the command "Present Arms" and the colors were lowered. I then command "Order Arms", and, "At Ease", and then gave a very short talk. I thanked the families that were present for their support and patients while we were gone and told them what a fine job their men had done at Graph. I then told the troops of the very complementary reports we had gotten from our higher headquarters regarding our accomplishments and thanked them for a job well done. I reminded them that they had demonstrated that they could do anything they set their minds to and that kind of performance would always be our goal for the future. I announced that the next day would be a holiday. I then called the troops to "Attention", and then gave the command "Dismissed"! There was some obvious confusion for a moment, then a cheer went up and the troops broke ranks. Thereafter our retreat parades (when time and circumstances would permit them) were pretty much "by the book".

The following week I reviewed past training schedules and found they were very "spotty" because of the frequent interruptions by major maneuver and/or company support requirements place on us by higher headquarters. Never the less, we set up training objectives for each company based on their prior training and support experiences. We had access to a moderate sized training area available on the outskirts of Aburg where we did some obstacles training (barbed wire, mine field laying, marking booby trapping and removal), etc. We also constructed our own panel and timber bridge sites (obtaining heavy timber was a problem), and then practiced "dry" demolitions training on our finished products. Some small unit tactics training could be done in this area also. Our "still water" floating bridge training (Class 60, Class 60 Trestle, M-2A4 and Foot Bridge) was conducted at Compo Pond on the outskirts of Hanau. Of course the real training in these tasks was accomplished during our major field exercises involving all of these subjects. The Infantry wanted to be able to "swim" their APC's in the pond so we did a little deepening of the water by some dredging and raising the dam elevation slightly.

Things then pretty much fell into a routine, broken only by the frequent small and/or major exercises mentioned above. I called occasional officers calls to discuss our activities and problems and asked for comments and suggestions. During the first of these sessions I mentioned it had been my experience in my prior engineer battalion tours during WW II and Korea that engineer units always seemed to be called upon for a variety of construction jobs, not just combat engineering type tasks. I suggested that any time they were "on the road" that they should be on the lookout for stockpiles of any type of construction materials; observe roads and bridges thinking about how they would destroy them, bypass them or reconstruct them if called upon to do so. Then we would discuss their observations at subsequent meetings. We always talked about the next upcoming major exercise and how we would approach it in so far as possible. I encouraged them to have similar type meetings with their NCO's. Additionally, I sought small projects that would employ the construction and equipment talents of the Bn. Contacts with local German authorities resulted in jobs to construct sports platz and school playground areas, some rural road work and small drainage structures and a small timber bridge. One excellent project utilizing the talents of the Utilities Detachment involved construction of a small addition to a local orphanage. The Germans furnished materials for all of these projects, plus a couple of skilled tradesmen assistants for the orphanage job. Group was always advised before we undertook any of these projects (other advanced permission was not required, but higher headquarters always seemed to appreciate the favorable press that resulted from our efforts).

The battalion was blessed with excellent mess sergeants and staffs. I determined to have a "Best Mess" competition with the winner to be named based partly on the results of our next Army food service inspection and judging by others. (To be by outside judges from Group and one of our sister battalions). This was to include "dressing up" the mess halls and day rooms of each unit. Our officer and NCO wives groups got into the act and the results were amazing. I was afraid the resulting "frills and fineries" might be too much. (Of course food quality and all other "good mess" factors were included in the considerations). As it turned out "B" not only seemed to impress everyone the most but they went on to win the Army wide "Best Small Unit Mess" award for the year. That settled the issue!

The remainder of our major exercises for the year went very well. Our ATT was held far to the south in the Schwabisch Mountain area near Sigmaringen, an intentionally long road march away. A unit of the new German army was to play our "aggressor". When we captured a prisoner we had to interrogate him in Deutsch. My S-3 and two senior NCO's were reasonably fluent in German, so it went fairly well. The prisoners weren't permitted to speak English (though' most all could). The Bn was given a "Satisfactory" on the exercise. Our annual Rhine River crossing exercise (near Speyer) went very well. We constructed three 3 or 4 float rafts (including a Class 60 approach ramp section) and a combined (married up) Class 60-M2A4 for our major bridging project. We cut almost 11 minutes off of the years "best time" to date and earned an "Excellent" on the exercise.

One other notable event is worthy of mention. During mid-winter, 1965, a major tactical exercise involving a Corps assault river crossing of the Donau River (near Ulm)

was planned. Two full Divisions and support troops were to participate. The assigned mission of the 9th was to support an assault infantry crossing, construction of two Class 60 rafts and a Class 60 bridge to carry APC's and artillery. When we arrived at our assigned crossing site the river was at flood stage with ice flows and a current velocity of 10 to 11 feet per second, completely prohibitive of safe crossing conditions. A total of five bridges were to be constructed. All five engineer commanders at each site were simultaneously advising their headquarters of the conditions and recommending that at least the infantry assault crossings be aborted. After a brief pause we were ordered to attempt crossing three partially loaded assault boats as a test. We proceeded to do so and the small boats disappeared into the gloom (escorted by a bridge boat). They managed to get across but they couldn't get back. The decision was made that the Infantry assault crossing would be "simulated", but bridge construction was to proceed.

The crossing site was about 200 meters wide. Bridge boats had great difficulty operating under the river conditions and even pulling the upstream guy cable across and getting it anchored on the far shore was a problem. Never the less, we proceeded with construction on what was to be a two hour job but eventually ran into an almost seven hours working under almost impossible conditions. (Five bridges were to be constructed and it seemed that the whole army was stacked up behind us waiting to cross for the "attack"). None of the other units were having any luck at all with completion of their bridges either. When the Corps Commander (the same LTG Truman spoken of earlier) learned that the 9th was almost across, he came to our site to "urge us on". We reached the far shore just as he arrived and he wanted to order his assault units forward to cross. I had to advise the General that though the bridge was across I had to post it with a "cautionary" two & a half ton limit and even that was advised against. Needless to say, he was very unhappy and then said he would "swim his APC's across". I cautioned against that also, but a Sgt. volunteered that he could get one across and proceeded to try. Un-requested, I sent a bridge boat with him. About mid stream the vehicle track caught a rock pinnacle, flipped over taking on water, and grounded on the bottom. The bridge boat managed to save him, but he would have drowned had it not been available to help. (Gen. Truman then ordered that the waiting assault units precede with the crossing over the fixed bridges in Ulm to continue the exercise). We held the bridge in place until the next afternoon using all bridge boats operating at full throttle on the downstream side to insure holding it in place. By late morning the river levels and stream velocities decreased to the extent that I allowed an artillery piece to cross before we started to dismantle our equipment. None of the other four bridges were ever completed. At the Corps after-action briefing at Corps Hqs. Gen Truman complemented the 9th for its performance during the exercise.

SUMMARY

All of the events described herein tended to keep troop morale at a high level and to enhance the reputation of the 9th Engineer Battalion. The officers and men of the Bn. always responded positively to every challenge they were faced with enhancing the long outstanding history of the unit.

Army policy at this time allowed only one-year tours for command of Engineer Battalions. As a result of a set of unique circumstances late in my tour as commander (the Viet Nam conflict and delays in the selection process for officers to attend Senior Service Schools), I was privileged to command the Bn for over 18 months. It was one of the finest and most rewarding experiences of my career.