

HISTORY OF THE
THREE TWENTY THIRD
FIELD ARTILLERY BATTALION



E U R O P E A N E D I T I O N

Remember way back in June, 1942? Most of us were those strange characters known as "civilians", most of our officers were sweating out OCS or sneaking a quick look now and then at their shiny new gold bars just to make sure they were still there, and the 323rd Field Artillery was in one of the three regiments in the 83rd Division, an outfit that had been inactivated at the end of the first world war.

But, new times, and a new war had come, and the War Department had decided to reactivate a streamlined, triangular version of the old 83rd. So, on August 15th, at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, the original cadre of the 323rd fired a 17 gun salute in honor of Lt. Gen. Ben. Lear, who attended the ceremonies which marked the forming of a new unit in his Second Army.

After completion of the ceremonies, training of the enlisted and officer cadre was initiated, and continued until the first contingent of inductees arrived at Camp Atterbury late in October, 1942. By the end of November, all fillers had been received and the battalion brought to its prescribed strength, and initial training had begun.

PREPARATION FOR COMBAT

Those of us who formed the original battalion, continued our training through the winter and spring of 1942-43 under probably the most trying weather conditions which had been encountered in the State of Indiana in many years. We later discovered that this "unusual" weather was to follow us all over the world.

Basic training completed, in June 1943, the 323rd left Camp Atterbury and proceeded to Tennessee, where maneuvers were conducted until September. The maneuvers were quite successful, particularly those conducted in the Commodore Room of the Hotel Andrew Jackson in Nashville.

The battalion then marched to Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky, where training and preparation for overseas operations were carried out until March 29th, 1944, when we entrained at Camp Breckinridge for the New York Port of Embarkation. Things, we felt, had gotten far beyond the rumor stage by this time.

Upon reaching the POE at New York, we were stationed at Camp Shanks for final preparation for sailing. On the 5th of April, the battalion entrained for the port, and late in the evening of the same day, boarded H. M. S. "ORION". On the following day we sailed from New York harbor for England.

After arriving at Liverpool, the battalion waited for two days, until the 18th, waiting for orders to disembark and proceed to Ruabon, Flintshire, Wales. We were assigned to Camp Bryn-y-Pys near there, until May 2nd, when orders were received changing the camp area to Aston Park, Shropshire, England, just a pitch and a putt from Oswestry.

Except for a two week stretch of service practice on the artillery range at Ystradfellte, Brecknockshire, Wales, the rest of our stay in the United Kingdom was spent there in Aston Park. We spent most of our time starting, collecting, and sorting rumors about how soon we'd be following the men who had landed on the shores of Normandy on June 6th. The consensus was that it would take a considerable length of time, what with waterproofing the vehicles, organizing the loads, loading and all, but at that time, we didn't quite comprehend the meaning of the phrase, "by the most expeditious means available" . . . We learned.

On the 16th of June, the battalion departed for the marshalling area in southern England and bivouacked that night near Stone Henge in Wiltshire. On the 17th we arrived in the D-10 marshalling area, and the following day were loaded in the LSTs and were on our way across the Channel.

On the afternoon of the 19th of June, LST 288 arrived off Utah Beach and at 1600 hours, Headquarters Battery landed in France, the first element of the 83rd division on the continent, and proceeded to a bivouac area one mile west of St. Marie du Mont. Delayed by the violent channel storm, which came

close to destroying the temporary ports, "A", "B", "C", and Service Batteries were forced to remain at sea till the 22nd, when they landed at Omaha Beach and proceeded to the battalion bivouac area.

NORMANDY

We'd been hearing a lot about the hedgerows, now we were to find out what they really looked like. The maps that the army furnished for Fire Direction and the observers were excellent, and the small black lines on them didn't look as though they represented anything but boundaries of fields. We came to hate those lines and to love them, hate, because they afforded excellent protection to the Germans, love, because they gave us the same protection.

The division relieved the 101st Airborne Division on the 27th and the battalion took up positions for its first combat mission a mile West of Carentan, completing its first combat registration by 1800 hours. From the 28th of June to the 3rd of July, the battalion remained in position and fired numerous missions. Combat was light and there were no changes in the front lines, but we discovered that shells come in as well as go out. Foxholes were dug a little deeper, and the steel helmet became very comfortable all of a sudden.

On the 4th of July, an appropriate day for fireworks, a heavy barrage was fired by all the guns on the beachhead signalling the opening of the great offensive against the German positions southwest of Carentan. On this day the battalion fired over 3200 rounds, which subsequently proved to be the largest amount fired by the battalion in one twenty-four hour period in the entire European campaign. Slight gains were made against desperate opposition by the Germans, the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. Later G-2 reports showed that this division was destroyed in the hedgerow fighting.

By the 14th, after a series of short displacements, the battalion had moved across the swamps south of Carentan to a new position two miles east of Tribehou. From the 19th to the 25th,

we, along with the entire First Army, waited for the clear weather which, we hoped, would signal the drive out of the Normandy bridgehead. When the 25th dawned clear and bright, we chose our grandstand seats for the spectacle of 3000 bombers hitting the German lines. Watching wasn't all we did, though. After the bombers had left, we played our part in one of the heaviest artillery barrages of the entire war.

By the 30th, the breakthrough was a fact, the division had been pinched out by the armor exploiting it, and the battalion was using its last position as a rest area. We had been in the line for over a month and had truly received a "baptism of fire."

NORTHERN FRANCE

When the 83rd Division was assigned the task of mopping up behind the rampaging armor, we received our first taste of the textbooks' pet phrase, "a fast moving situation", and the battalion motto of "Keep Them Rolling" was put to the test.

On the night of the 3rd of August, we rolled down the Atlantic coast, through Granville and Avaranches to a bivouac, a mile northeast of Pontorson, then to a firing position three miles east of Dol De Bretagne. And, in the next two days we occupied, five positions on the approaches to the fortresses of Chateauneuf and St. Malo. The only resistance encountered came from the newly liberated French and their loaded cognac bottles. No missions were fired.

"C" Battery, at this point decided that things were too quiet in the St. Malo sector, and took off with the Third Battalion of the 330th Infantry, cleaning up the Brittany Peninsula as part of Task Force "A". Their split-second occupation of position and accuracy of firing earned them a citation from the Commanding General of the task force, Brig. Gen. H. L. Ernest.

And in the meantime, the battalion, less one battery, concentrated on its part of the task of reducing the citadel at St. Malo. The naval guns mounted in the fortress once again convinced us that a man's best friend is his entrenching shovel. On the 9th of August, with the garrison of the citadel being rapidly

destroyed, the battalion was relieved from direct support of the 330th and sent on a wide end run back south, across the Rance River at Dinan, and up north along the west bank, where we took positions to reinforce, the fire of the 56th Field Artillery Battalion of the 8th Division.

Occupying a position two miles south of Pleurtuit early in the morning of the 10th of August, the battalion encountered extremely heavy mortar and small arms fire from the Germans retreating slowly to the town of Dinard. With the arrival of the 330th two days later, a drive was started on this garrison and by the 14th all opposition had collapsed with the exception of a small group still holding out on the Isle de Cezembre in St. Malo Bay.

For the first time since the entry of the battalion into combat, the forward observers had enviable jobs. One OP in particular, was situated in a large room of a chateau overlooking the ocean, and featured comfortable easy chairs from which the observer adjusted fire on the island 4000 yards away.

On the 24th, the 330th Combat Team received orders to move south to join the rest of the division in its task of protecting the right flank of the Third Army. One battalion was to remain in Dinard to execute surveillance on the island which was still holding out. Travelling more than 170 miles south to the Loire River in the vicinity of Chateau la Valliere, the battalion found out what hundreds of thousands of GIs were discovering at the same time, that it's quite a thrill to be a liberator, particularly in France.

For the next two days, light harassing fire was placed on enemy positions south of the Loire from positions in the vicinity of the town of Clere.

On the 28th of August, the battalion departed from the area en route back to Dinard. An assault had been ordered on the Isle de Cezembre and the battalion's presence was needed to support the attack. Arriving there, we occupied positions from which heavy harrassing fire could be placed on the island. We also got the opportunity of watching the Air Corps in action with precision bombing using HE and gelgas bombs.

The day before the assault, the garrison surrendered, and on September 2nd, all opposition in the area ended, and the battalion girded its loins for the battle of Angers.

Angers, a beautiful Breton city just north of the Loire, had been virtually untouched by the war. The stores were open, the cafes sold wine and cognac, and even though our francs didn't buy an awful lot, we took advantage of what we could get. After more than two months of almost constant fighting, working and sweating, we were happy to be able to relax. After two months of seeing nothing but destruction, ruin and death, we were overjoyed to feast our eyes on beautiful homes, beautiful parks and equally beautiful mam'selles.

But the good things came to an end, as they always do, and the unit was displaced from Angers to Chateau la Valliere on the 13th, where we once again picked up "C" Battery, which had been released from its mission with Task Force "A". The battalion was about to begin another phase of its march across Europe.

THE RHINELAND

On September 24th, a little more than three months from its initial landing, the battalion left France, crossing the Luxembourg border at Esch. Positions were occupied the following day in the vicinity of Aspelt with the mission of reinforcing the fires of the 908th Field Artillery Battalion.

The 26th saw the first round of the battalion to land on German soil sent on its way by the third section of "B" Battery, Private James Ray pulling the lanyard. Appropriate wishes were inscribed on the shell by the cannoneers.

With the division holding a greatly extended front along the Moselle River, the battalion found itself occupying various positions along the river line. In one of these positions, the battalion OP was visited by Prince Felix of Luxembourg who observed the effect of our shells falling on the German side of the Moselle.

In preparation for the attack by the 330th Infantry across the Moselle River, the battalion on the 10th of November moved to an assembly area in the vicinity of Filsdorf. Due to the flooded

condition of the river, the battalion continued to occupy the assembly area until the 12th when firing positions were taken in the vicinity of Mondorf. The mission at the time was to fire defensive fires in support of the 330th.

In a sense, we were almost tourists, enjoying to a considerable extent, the sightseeing privileges of tourists. The situation in our sector was fairly quiet and some of us even got to go into the quaint old city of Luxembourg. We ate ice cream, well, it was almost ice cream, and we saw trolley cars for the first time in quite a while. Sort of made us a little more homesick. Things didn't look very warlike.

There were a few things, though, that somewhat convinced us. We'd hear a far off rumble that sounded like a few hundred bombs landing in the distance, and we'd see a long trail of smoke rising into the air. A little later we found out what they were, the highly publicized V-2 with which the Germans were going to turn the tide, and gain ultimate victory. And V-1, its little playmate, paid us a visit or two. Several times the observers manning our OPs on the Moselle had to sweat out a runaway buzz-bomb that was heading back towards its launchers, but which didn't quite make it.

But then we had to go back to work. The battalion was alerted on the 29th of November and on the 2nd of December moved with the 330th Combat Team up north through Belgium to a small town in Germany called Zweifall. It was located on the edge of a large forest, known as the Hurtgen Forest. The name didn't mean much to us then, even though the news bulletins had been telling us what a rough time the 4th Division was having going through it.

Part of the trip up there was taken at night, and since we were behind the army light line, we used our lights. "I'd sure like to be stationed back here where they don't even have to worry about blackout", we told each other, as the headlights flashed on such road signs as "Arlon", "Bastogne", "Houffalize", and "Werbomont". It started to snow. "Should be pretty country when there's snow on the ground", we thought. Before very long we were due to find out. Before very long, in a

civilian sense, that is. The next month in Germany was to turn out to be a long, long time.

As we crossed Belgium and entered the Vaterland, which Hitler had promised the master race would never be invaded, the snow turned to sleet and then to rain. We were blacked out by then, and a lot of us didn't see the dragon's teeth or the knocked out pill boxes because of the rain. Back in garrison it was a standard loke that the 323rd would never have any trouble getting through mud or slush. We'd seen the worst the world had to offer, in Atterbury, Breckinridge, and in Wales, and we'd had our share of it in Normandy and Luxembourg, and we thought we were pretty efficient bog-trotters. But the mud in the Hurtgen Forest turned out to be just a little worse than all the others combined. It was up to our knees in the roads, our trenches and gun pits filled with it as soon as we dug them. We managed, though, and some of the men even got to like it. At least, the day we occupied that position just west of Grosshau, when about twenty-five Jerry planes came in to strafe us just as we were pulling off the road. A lot of the men showed no hesitation at all in diving head first into it.

That was the day we really learned to appreciate our ack-ack. The boys on the quads and Bofors showed the Luftwaffe what they were made of. They had had a few cracks at the Jerries back in Normandy, but this was what they'd been waiting for. Of the twenty-five that showed up that day, more than twenty were blasted out of the sky. Yep, we decided that they were handy guys to have around.

Slow but steady progress was made, out of the forest, into Gey, to Strass, and up to the Roer. Sheer, grinding power was what did it, there was no room to maneuver, no hard ground to roll around on, slashing the enemy to ribbons. It was an artillery fight, ours against theirs, and there was no doubt of the outcome.

A milestone was passed on the 8th, when the battalion fired its 50,000th combat round. That's a lot of death to throw at the Germans in less than six months, but a lot more was to be thrown before we finished, and we knew it.

And then one morning somebody said "Merry Christmas" to us. We didn't think it was, and except for turkey and a few extras on the menu, it was just another dirty, cold day of war.

THE ARDENNES

Down to our south, on the front we had left only a month ago, all hell had broken loose. The Germans had broken through, para-troops had been dropped, confusion reigned, according to the reports we'd been hearing. With the rumors pared to the truth, we realized that the situation was quite serious, and all of a sudden, another of those lightning moves faced us. On the 26th of December, we were pulled out of the line, assembled near Aachen and sent south, back down the roads we'd travelled over a few weeks before, as one of the divisions sent to stem the tide.

We began to find out what that lovely country looked like with snow on the ground, blanketing the hills and woods. Frankly, we didn't care an awful lot about it. By the time we were finished, we were convinced.

On the 27th, the battalion occupied its first position in the vicinity of Les Basses, Belgium, reinforcing the fires of the 322nd Field Artillery. Through the 30th, position and mission remained unchanged.

The infantry teamed up with the armor, pushed the Germans back, side-slipped to the east, pushed them back a little more, and repeated the process. We in the artillery followed right along with them. Positions were successively occupied in the vicinities of Soy, Izier, Bra, and Lansival. Enemy artillery, mines, and the weather combined to make this the roughest situation the battalion had yet faced. "B" Battery was particularly hard hit during this period.

The final combat position occupied in the Ardennes was near the town of Joubieval. From this jump-off, the 330th, with the 3rd Armored, cut the St. Vith-Houffalize road and was pinched out of the rapidly narrowing salient.

On the 22nd of January the Battalion was ordered to a rest area in the vicinity of Grande Hoursinne, Belgium, where the next two weeks were spent in recuperating,, refitting and picking up reinforcements

THE DRIVE TO THE RHINE

The 6th of January saw us once more on the roads to Germany. Strict security was observed, no contact with civilians was permitted, unit markings were removed from the vehicles and the black triangle was removed from our clothing.

Positions in the vicinity of Merzenhausen, Germany, were occupied. Our mission was general support of the 29th Infantry Division in its attack across the Roer River in the vicinity of Julich. From the 8th of February, the battalion position remained unchanged and, as part of the security precautions, no firing was permitted during this period other than registrations. The original attack planned for the 9th of February was delayed due to flooded conditions along the Roer River caused by the German defensive action of blowing the flood gates controlling the waters of the Schwammenauel Dam.

During this period about all we could do was sweat. During the night, the Luftwaffe was extremely active, the skies for miles around were lighted with flares, tracers and ack-ack shell bursts. "A" Battery succeeded in capturing a German parachute flare right in one of its gun pits, and a few days later a jet job bracketed "B" Battery's guns with a couple of 500 pounders. It's funny how a man is able to curl up right inside his helmet and still have space left over, isn't it?

But on the morning of the 23rd, at 0245, a heavy artillery barrage was fired in preparation for the crossing of the Roer by the 29th at 0330. Our battalion alone fired more than 2900 rounds and there were dozens of battalions of guns ranging from three inch anti-tank guns to 240 howitzers participating in the preparation.

We continued in support of the 29th till the next day when the 330th Infantry was committed, and we reverted to Combat

Team control. The first artillery unit to cross the river, we occupied positions near Broich on the 25th.

With the attack progressing well, and German resistance light, we displaced in rapid succession to the towns of Mersch, Busch, and Grefrath on the 26th. The forward observers were treated to the spectacle of watching the firing batteries move into position before the infantry companies to which they were attached occupied them. And the army as a whole saw something that had never happened before, but which was to become commonplace as time went on. Entire towns surrendered, white flags were flying on every building, and the herrenvolk were lined up on the streets waiting to greet us. Here for the first time, we discovered that there are no Nazis in Germany. Also, for the first time, we saw German towns virtually unmarked by the war. They were too small to be hit by the bombers and no resistance developed for the artillery to work over. On the 2nd of March the battalion occupied positions near Morgensternshiede and fired its first rounds across the Rhine.

By the 7th, all resistance west of the Rhine had ceased in the vicinity of Neuss and Dusseldorf, and the battalion occupied positions there, firing defensive fires in support of the 330th till the 20th.

CENTRAL EUROPE

Relieved by the 95th Division on the 20th of March, we moved back to an assembly position on the German-Holland frontier where the division underwent training for river crossings. With part of the time devoted to resting, we spent some time becoming acquainted with the Dutch. We became as well versed in the use of guilders, as we were with marks, francs, and pounds.

With our training completed, the division was assigned the task of supporting the 2nd Armored Division in its exploitation of the Rhine bridgehead, and on the 29th of March, one year to the day of our leaving Camp Breckinridge, we crossed the Rhine River. Following the armor, we moved rapidly along the

north edge of the Ruhr, making no contact with the enemy 'til the 11th of April. Mobility rather than firepower again became the watchword. With the infantry using any form of transportation it could acquire, from bicycles to busses, the division raced on heading for the Elbe River.

The operation consisted of a series of short jumps and rapid moves with the batteries prepared to pull off the road, shoot and move on again. Several times it was necessary to do an about face and fire to the rear to convince small, stubborn groups of by-passed Germans. From the 11th to the 20th, the battalion was in position near Wernigerode, supporting the 330th in its mission of clearing out the Harz Mountain area. It was a period of uncertainty, with pockets to be cleaned out, civilians to be checked, and double security to be posted. Ammunition trucks, racing to keep the supplies up with the rapidly moving units, were ambushed miles behind the lines, if any particular place could be said to be the "front lines", and small groups moved with multiple machine guns for protection, something we hadn't done since maneuvers way back in Tennessee. We still hadn't found any Nazis in Germany.

On April 20th, the combat team rejoined the division in its bridgehead across the Elbe at Barby. For us, the war was virtually over, we waited for the Russian armies to make contact with us. And on the 2d of May, "B" Battery fired the battalion's last rounds in the European war. With the official announcement of "Victory in Europe Day" on May 8th, we became occupation troops with the mission of military government.

Most of us have learned a lot in the past year. We learned that it takes more than just one branch to wage a successful campaign, that the Infantry, the Air Corps, the Artillery, can't do it alone, but that all of them must work as a team towards final victory. We've learned that every man and every job is important for that successful teamwork.. Our primary mission is to support the Infantry, and it can't be done if any one man fails, the observer, the radio operator, the wireman, the cannoneer, the ammunition handler, all are equally important.

Most of all, though, we've learned to appreciate the United States. We've seen a lot of interesting things over here, some of us have made friends, and all of us know a lot more about the state of things than we did when we left the States last April.

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Booklet, Too

Passed By The Censor

