

## Training in World War II: The 51st Engineer Combat Battalion

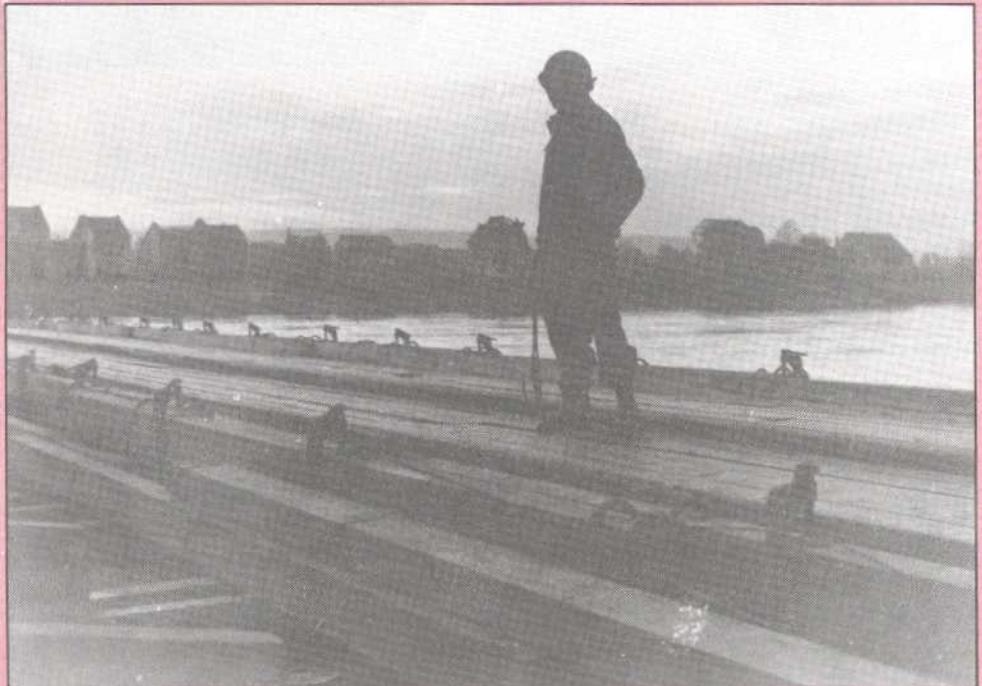
*"In no other profession are the penalties for employing untrained personnel so appalling as in the military."*

*General Douglas MacArthur*

**D**uring World War II, the American Army called together millions of civilians and molded them into units that could work together to go about the business of winning the war. One such unit was the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion (ECB). How well it trained and the successful results of that training is the thrust of this article.

At the beginning of World War II, the United States Army sent its newly inducted recruits to units for training. Engineer Military Training Program (MTP) 5-1 called for 13 weeks of basic, individual, and team training. The next phase, unit and combined training, consisted of seven to eight months of training as a unit. It was followed by training with other units, and culminated in maneuvers with divisions, corps, and armies.

One of the 131 engineer units formed in 1942 was the 51st Engineer Combat Regiment (ECR), activated at Camp Bowie, Texas. In June of that year, the 51st Engineer Regiment's cadre of 76 enlisted men and 50 officers, most of them graduates of the Engineer Officer Candidate School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, began cadre



**PFC Elder D. Cannon, Company A, 51st ECB, on a "Watch on the Rhine" in March 1945. The success of the training the 51st received in New York and England was reflected in their many achievements during World War II (U.S. Army photo).**

training. The Army training system depended on unit cadres who first received training and then trained new recruits.

A new commander, Colonel H. Wallis Anderson, took over the unit on August 17. Through example Colonel Anderson, a World War I veteran, laid the foundation for the development of teamwork and esprit de corps that bound the 51st together.

The unit moved to Plattsburg Barracks, New York, located about

20 miles south of the Canadian border on Lake Champlain, in October. The 51st chose Macomb Reservation, some 12 miles north of Plattsburg Barracks, as its field training area. There it constructed training sites in preparation for the arrival of basic trainees.

Enlisted men began arriving at the Plattsburg railroad depot on Christmas Day, 1942. The Army had inducted these men into the service from all corners of the United States, issued them

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Traffic rolls over a heavy pontoon bridge built over the Rhine River at Kripp, Germany, in 1945. This was one of many bridges built by the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion during their march across Europe (U.S. Army photo).

uniforms, and sent them to Plattsburg for training. By January 11 the strength of the regiment had increased from about 150 officers and men to more than 1,600. These recruits received a shock when they stepped off the train into 8 inches of snow and below-zero temperatures.

### Training Begins

**B**asic, individual, and team training began in January and lasted until April. The recruits learned close order drill and then trained on crew-served weapons. During engineer training the men learned how to use explosives and demolitions, how to build field fortifications, how to emplace fixed and floating bridges, and how to build and repair roads and airfields.

Temperatures reached 35 degrees below zero on several occasions during basic training, and in most places the ground was covered with 2 feet of snow. Because Lake Champlain was frozen over, floating bridge training was conducted on ice that was 3-feet thick.

In spite of these conditions, the regiment conducted training out-

side. The 51st established an obstacle course to strengthen the stamina and self-confidence of each soldier. Many of the men came down with colds soon after arriving in Plattsburg, but the health of the unit returned rapidly after extensive physical conditioning. At the end of basic training each company built two tactical bridges at night under blackout conditions. This realistic training would pay dividends in the future.

In March 1943, the 51st Engineer Combat Regiment was redesignated. Its Headquarters and Service (H&S) Company became the 1111th Engineer Combat Group (ECG), its 1st Battalion became the 51st ECB, and the 2nd Battalion became the 238th ECB.

On April 7, the 51st ECB began unit and combined training at Macomb Reservation. The men marched 12 miles to Macomb on Monday mornings, where they practiced building various types of fixed and floating bridges. Then they marched back to camp on Friday afternoons. Everyone slept on the ground in pup tents during the week.

Near the end of April, XIII Corps conducted MTP tests for the 1111th ECG and its assigned

units. The 51st ECB scored 83 percent, the highest rating of any similar organization in the XIII Corps.

Advanced training, which followed, included both infantry tactics and engineer training. It continued until September, when the battalion moved to the XIII Corps maneuver area in Davis, West Virginia. There the soldiers built roads and culverts, an airplane landing strip, and constructed a Bailey bridge and a fixed-target and known-distance range. The 51st moved to Fort Belvoir for 12 days as demonstration troops for the school, and then went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to prepare for departure overseas.

After arriving in England on January 20, 1944, the 51st received more training. This included construction of Bailey bridges, mine and booby trap training (using the latest German mines and methods), camouflage training, and infantry tactics.

### Combat Support

**T**he men in the 51st began using the training gained over the past 18 months when they landed in France on June

27, 1944. Their highly successful battalion operations in Europe demonstrated the quality of that training.

From June until November, while under First Army, the battalion moved across France constructing roads, bridges, and culverts, and sweeping areas for mines. In France and Belgium they replaced portable Bailey bridges with semi-permanent wooden bridges on major roads. The Bailey bridges were then moved forward for use in combat operations.

At the end of October, the 51st moved into Marche, Belgium, and began sawmill operations using local sawmills and their personnel. First Army tasked the 51st to produce three million board feet of lumber for its winterization program. The men of the 51st, who were trained in using chain saws, cut the trees for, and supervised the operation of, 32 sawmills. At peak production the three companies produced a total of 80,000 board feet of lumber each day.

Sawmill operations stopped on 17 December, when the 1111th ECG was assigned the battalion barrier operations along a 40-mile front against the German Army's Ardennes Offensive—the Battle of the Bulge. That evening Company C, 51st ECB, went to Trois Ponts to organize a defense of the town and prepare bridges for destruction. For three days the company held off German tank and infantry attacks until it was relieved by the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division. The infantry training the unit received in Plattsburg served them well.

### River Crossings

The rest of the battalion was assigned the mission of preparing all crossings of the Ourthe River from Durbuy to La Roche, France, for demolition. They were also tasked to establish obstacles such as minefields and

abatis on roads near the river. The battalion's key point in that defensive line was the Ourthe River bridge at Hotton. On December 20, Company B and the First Platoon, Company A, held off a German tank and infantry attack at that bridge for 7 hours.

Tiny elements of all three line companies and the H&S Company manned roadblocks scattered throughout the area and stopped the Germans cold. For its actions in the Battle of the Bulge, the 51st ECB received the Distinguished Unit Citation and the French Croix de Guerre.

During the first two months of 1945, the 51st supported both the 82d Airborne Division and the 75th Infantry Division, building bridges, maintaining roads, and removing numerous minefields and barriers. In January, the battalion constructed five Bailey bridges in four days. One was constructed at night, while under enemy fire and in terrible weather. Three days of rain, snow, and freezing temperatures had coated the bridge parts with a layer of ice. Blow torches used to melt the ice brought in enemy artillery fire, forcing the men to use hacksaw blades to cut the ice away. The winter training received at Plattsburg again proved to be useful.

On March 7, the Americans captured the famous Ludendorff Bridge over the Rhine River at Remagen. III Corps chose the 51st and 291st ECBs to build two bridges over the Rhine so that American troops could cross while the heavily damaged Ludendorff bridge was closed for repairs. The 51st built a 969-foot heavy pontoon bridge at Kripp, about 1.5 miles south of Remagen, while under small arms and artillery fire and German fighter attacks. It was completed on March 11, 27 hours after construction started.

When the bridges were finished, Major General John Millikin, commander of III Corps, praised the

two engineer battalions. "I feel that one of the most outstanding accomplishments of the entire operation was the building of the two additional bridges under artillery and small arms fire."

The 51st was assigned to General George S. Patton's Third Army on April 17. Two days later the battalion began and completed a 255-mile trip in 20 hours with just one major breakdown, which was quickly repaired. The success of the road march reflected the high state of maintenance of the equipment in the 51st and was a credit to its training.

### Mission Completed

Company A, 51st ECB, began a 325-foot class 40 treadway bridge over the Danube River at Ingolstadt on April 26. They were under direct German fire from the far side of the river during construction. The 51st crossed the Danube and finished the war maintaining roads, filling craters, and building Bailey bridges.

On May 12, Lieutenant Colonel Harvey R. Fraser, the battalion commander, called the men together and addressed them as a group for the first time since he joined the unit in mid-December. He paid tribute to the 51st for the work the men had accomplished during their drive across Europe.

Well might he have given them praise. The unit had performed in an outstanding manner while accomplishing all of its missions, both as engineers and as infantry. That it did so can be traced to the high caliber of training the unit received in the rugged, cold weather at Plattsburg, New York, and in England.

(This article is based on a history of the 51st, *The 51st Again*, scheduled for publication in 1991.)

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