
JUNE 13, 1919.

ENGINEERS MADE GOOD IN HOT WORK UP AT THE FRONT

**6th, for Example, Did Valiant
Combat Service With
British Forces**

108TH IN ARGONNE DRIVE

**Bridge-Building Under Fire Main
Issue, but Capturing Boche
Was Enjoyed as a Sideline**

In writing the series of articles recently completed in THE STARS AND STRIPES upon the subject of the work of the combat divisions of the American Expeditionary Forces, the writer was always keenly conscious of the fact that little or no justice could be done in a history of that scale to the magnificent performances of a great number of subordinate organizations, not only of divisional, but of corps and Army troops, whose work was as gallant and as vitally necessary to success as that of any other units. But, in describing within such a small compass the battles of forces so enormous, it was obviously impossible to do more than outline the results achieved by that decisive factor in all armies, the Infantry, supplemented occasionally by some reference to its powerful auxiliary, the Artillery.

Consequently, the labors, the sufferings, the heroisms and the successes of such troops as Engineer regiments, Machine Gun battalions, Signal Corps and hospital units, Tank Corps troops, aviation units, Ammunition and Supply trains and many others, could hardly be even referred to. But there is no soldier of the American Expeditionary Forces who does not know that the work of such units was absolutely essential, and that all the glory earned by American arms in Europe is theirs to share in just proportion with their comrades of the major branches of the service.

In order that at least a few examples of the sort of work which was performed by some of these multitudinous auxiliary units in the Great War may be recorded in these columns, it is intended to tell here something of the records of two such units, selected almost at random—the 6th Regiment of Engineers and the 108th Regiment of Engineers, the latter being the Engineer regiment of the 33rd Division. These are by no means to be regarded as extraordinary examples; rather, although the history of any organization is apt to present features peculiar to itself, the records of the

ENGINEERS

6th and the 108th Regiments of Engineers are merely typical, in a general sense, of those of many other Engineer regiments.

Back of British in March, 1918

The 6th Engineers arrived in France in December, 1917, long in advance of the rest of its division, and soon thereafter was sent to the areas in the rear of the British Armies and set at such work as Engineers are usually called upon to perform, building and repairing roads, bridges, etc. They were at that work in the latter part of March, 1918, when the first mighty German offensive crashed its way through the 5th British Army on the 21st of that month, rolling back the 11 divisions composing the Seventh, Nineteenth, Eighteenth and Third British Corps between, approximately, Cambrai and St. Quentin, and driving westward toward Amiens and the coast. Without halt or noticeable check, the attack moved on until, on March 29, the portion of its front which was approaching Amiens, on the south side of the Somme valley, was a short distance east of Villers-Bretonneux, hardly a dozen miles from Amiens, the vital center of rail communication of the British Armies on the north, both with the French Armies farther south and with the highly important ports of Dieppe and Le Havre.

It was now that a part of the 6th United States Engineers appeared upon the scene. The story of what happened to them cannot be better told than in the words of, an American soldier who was not of their organization, but who happened to be so placed as to have an intimate knowledge of their situation, Pvt. E. P. Broadstreet, Jr., formerly of the 12th U. S. Engineers, serving with the British Expeditionary Forces. Private Bradstreet says:

"When Lloyd George cabled President Wilson for men on the morning of the opening of the great German offensive, he probably had little knowledge of the handful of American Engineers that was scattered over the Somme sector. America was at that time an unknown factor to our Allies, as she was, indeed, to those same pioneers of our great Army. We had heard through the English papers of what our country was planning to do, but we were so far removed from the center of American activities that we felt like lost sheep in the fold of the British Expeditionary Forces. Among these Engineers were my own regiment and Companies B and D and the Headquarters Company of the 6th Engineers. The three last-mentioned companies had been working with the British on the Somme, building concrete bridges.

"No one who was not with the British Expeditionary Forces during those dark days of March, 1918, can realize how desperate was the condition of our great Ally. I was stationed in Amiens, the capital of the Somme, on the day that the German offensive was launched. Like a great gray tidal wave that gathered volume as it neared its known objective, Amiens, the mighty German Army gradually closed in upon the apparently doomed city.

British Outnumbered

"More heavily outnumbered by the Huns than the latter were by the Yanks in the Meuse-Argonne, the British fought desperately, but vainly, to stem the advance. Division after division disappeared in the frightful carnage out on the flat Somme plain, ill-adapted to offensive purposes.

"The British were about at the end of their resources for reserves. Already the French had started an Army to their relief. It was problematical whether it would arrive in time to save Amiens and avert the disaster which would be caused by the disruption of liaison between the French and British Armies.

"Every available man was thrown into the breach. The 19 hospitals of Amiens were combed for convalescents who could carry a gun. Men with their trigger fingers shot off were rushed out of the city. With all

ENGINEERS

the measures taken there was still a small breach that had not been filled. Brig. Gen. Sandeman Carey, of the B.E.F., had rounded up cooks, classified men, all the non-combatants of the Amiens area. As a last resort, he asked that the above-mentioned companies of the 6th American Engineers be loaned to fill the gap. Their commander consented.

Non-Combatants Go In

"These men were not combatants. They had not been trained as such. Yet they cheerfully took up the burden. I do not recall the exact date, but it was the Sunday night before Easter. They were given a chicken dinner by the British and supplied with Enfield rifles and ammunition. They were told that they would be relieved in a very few days. They had to dig themselves in on the side of a hill a few miles east of Villers-Bretenneux. A few machine guns were given to them and one gun of unknown caliber supported them from the rear. There were no supporting trenches and no supports.

"I kept track of them first through their battalion doctor, a jovial old bachelor known in civilian life as Dr. Byrne. I do not know where he came from in the States but I remember his name very well. I was regimental provost at the time and was helping the Tommy M.P. to direct traffic on the Peronne-Amiens road in the center of town. The functions of American M.P.'s with the B.E.F. and with the A.E.F. were decidedly different. We were chiefly information bureaus and, in a sense, 'welfare workers.' Captain Byrne would catch a lorry occasionally and ride into Amiens to buy chocolate and cigarettes for 'his boys,' as he would affectionately call them. I can see him yet, standing against the corner of the Hotel du Rhin, overcoat covered with mud, steel helmet pulled down at a jaunty angle over his right eye and pockets bulging with 'fags,' chocolate and cookies.

"Doc" Was a Bit Worried

"How are the boys making it this morning, Doctor?" I asked him one morning.

"Greatest boys in the world, son!" he answered, his face fairly radiant as he returned my salute. "The Boche started over the top this morning and they cracked down on them so hard that they beat it back in a hurry."

"Think they'll hold out, Doctor?" I asked.

"His face looked troubled. 'We lost our cook this morning,' he said. 'A "G.I. can" dropped right in the middle of the kitchen, and the cook went a-flying with his bully beef and hardtack. That's why I came back to get the youngsters something to eat. The Huns are digging up the hill, and unless we get better artillery support they're going to work so near to us in safety that they can come over in force enough to make it bad for us.'

"He explained how the Germans were making their way ahead by digging back and forth at an angle without danger to themselves. The situation of the American Engineers was becoming more desperate as each day passed. Only two machine guns were working. They were having trouble in getting ammunition and food. No reinforcements were in sight. They had already lost all except two of their officers and over 60 per cent of their men.

"I was standing at my post early one morning just before Easter Sunday. Down the road from Peronne came a great, hulking figure clad in an American uniform. Over one shoulder was an Enfield; over the other an American Springfield. Around his neck and waist were bandollers of ammunition. His steel helmet was dented by a glancing bullet.

"Say, buddy, where can I get something to eat?" he asked.

"I took him to about the only restaurant

ENGINEERS

that was open, for the terrific bombing of the city by the Germans had driven away nearly all of the 110,000 inhabitants.

Gave 'Em Hell in Return

"Sixth Engineers?" I asked.

"He nodded.

"Gave us hell this morning," said he.

"Drive them back?"

"Did we? Say, buddy, we used up all our Springfield ammo on 'em and they started after 'em with our Lee-Enfields. Sure hope we get reinforcements soon though. Every time they come over we always lose some of the boys, and they ain' many of us left."

"Going back up?" I asked; and the next instant was ashamed of the question as saw the look on his face.

"Say, buddy," he answered, in a rich Kentucky drawl, 'mah daddy is deputy sheriff at Catlettsburgh, Kaintucky, an' it he evah thought that a boy of his'n backed away from a German, 'cept to get a bit when Jerry wasn't workin', he'd take more out an' shoot me hisself."

"We had a drink and then walked back to my station.

"Goodbye, old man," I said, shaking his hand with a lump in my throat. "These sure are hellish times."

"Right you are, buddy," he replied. "Par ammunition, par grub and par reinforcements. But the old 6th is goin' to stay as long as General Carey wants 'em to. Only tell the Gen. to hurry up those Tommies, or there won't be enough of 'em left to make a squad."

"And stick they did, to their eternal glory. With the aid of a young lieutenant in the Royal Air Force, who hovered over them during the last few days sweeping the Hun trenches when the latter gave signs of attempting a raid, they stayed until they were finally relieved by a battalion of British troops, about the 6th of April."

What 108th Did

We have now seen, from the viewpoint of an outsider, a little of the glow of superb courage and unflinching determination which burned in the hearts of one small group of American "non-combatant" troops, animating them to remain at their post of duty through days of grueling hardship until they came almost to annihilation. In the case of the 108th Engineers, their record is set forth in adequate official reports to American General Headquarters; those documents which, above all others, are essential to insuring to any organization its just and permanent place in history, but which, in many cases, unfortunately, have been so hastily or incompletely prepared that justice can be done neither to the living nor to the dead.

The 108th Engineers, commanded by Col. Henry A. Allen, arrived at Brest on May 18, 1918, and at once went to work building waterworks and an electric light plant at Brest, and Adrian barracks and a Y.M.C.A. building at Pontanezen camp. After about a week there, the regiment was sent to the Amlens-Albert area, under the 4th British Army, the 1st Battalion being placed under the 3rd Corps and the rest of the regiment under the Australian Corps. Here the troops had a very short training period and were largely equipped by the British, but from June 18 to August 24 they were on constant duty near the front, bivouacking in dugouts and working almost always under shell fire.

The labors of the regiment were of infinite variety, including a great deal of road building and demolition and light railway construction and work was often done in direct co-operation with British Royal Engineers, and tunnel, railway and pioneer companies. The continuous and never-ending task was the work on the trench systems of the second line of defense, or main

ENGINEERS

line of resistance, in the regions west of Villers-Bretonneux, Corbie and Albert. Here many miles of trenches and wire entanglements were constructed, with machine gun emplacements, concrete gun turrets and observation posts.

Pontoon Laid Across Somme

One piece of special work which was done every night for five weeks by details of from 10 to 20 men each night, was the laying of a pontoon bridge across the Somme near Corbie. This bridge furnished the only means of communication by which the ration and ammunition wagons could reach the front lines and it had to be maintained nightly regardless of difficulties, although it was under direct observation by the Germans and was under heavy fire of high explosive and gas shells every night and all night. Practically all the men of Companies D, E and F, in rotation, served on the details which laid this "silent" bridge after dark in the evening and took it up before dawn in the morning, and it required constant attention while it was in place, because it was frequently partially wrecked by shells and had to be immediately repaired.

To the details which were always working with the British and Australians along the actual front often came the task of accompanying raiding parties into No Man's Land, cutting the enemy's wire in front, repairing damaged British wire and patrolling the intervening ground while the raiders were in or near the German trenches. About July 23, the enemy having retired some 2,000 yards across the Ancre river in the vicinity of Albert, Company B, 108th Engineers, supervised the construction of new front line trenches by British Infantry and with its own personnel examined all the abandoned German dugouts and shelters before the Infantry were allowed to enter them. The work, always conducted under shell and sniper fire, had to be done in the day time on account of light, and it was exceedingly perilous because many of the shelters were mined and laid with man traps, which had to be cleared or sprung.

In Drive of August 8

On the morning of August 8, the Fourth British Army began its great offensive along the Villers-Bretonneux front for the purpose of driving the enemy back from the Amiens salient and recovering the valley of the Somme to the old British lines before St. Quentin and Cambria. The night before the attack Company D, 108th Engineers, began constructing a road from the reserve line to the outpost line at Villers-Bretonneux for the passage of the advancing troops across the forefield shell crater zone, Company F began a similar one from Glisy Woods to Hangard Woods by way of Cachy, while Company E reconnoitered preparatory to repairing the railroad from Amiens into and beyond Villers-Bretonneux.

That night Company D filled up the trenches and shell holes for a road about 18 meters wide and five kilometers long, the men frequently being obliged to take shelter in shell holes for longer or shorter intervals, owing to violent outbursts of enemy artillery or machine gun fire. Having, nevertheless, finished the road an hour earlier than the time allotted, at 4:00 a.m. the men took position with their rifles beside the Canadian Infantry, ready to give any assistance possible to the attack. After the attack went over, the Engineers kept the road in repair and between 4:30 and 9 a. m. there passed over it units of nearly every branch of the service, including three divisions of Cavalry, Tanks, Artillery, Field Hospital, Signal troops and mounted Engineers. Company F built its road and then, at 4:30 a.m., ten minutes after zero

ENGINEERS

hour, proceeded to the front line trenches, filled them up and then on 12 successive lines of German defenses, they cut the wire and filled the trenches to a breadth of 20 meters, doing the work under a German counter-barrage which killed two men and wounded nine before the completion of the work at 8 a.m.

The work of Company E on the badly demolished railroad from Amiens to Villers-Bretonneux was begun on the night of the attack. Cuts which had been filled with debris from tunnel construction had to be cleared of large quantities of earth, which was carried away in any way possible, by narrow gauge railways, wheelbarrows or boxes. The old two-track line was re-laid as a one-track line, the fit rails and ties from the unused track being torn up and relaid as necessary to make one complete track. Through the railroad yards at Villers-Bretonneux, when they were reached, the main line was merely a mass of twisted and tangled rails, so, to save time, a side-track was utilized through the yards, here as elsewhere, many rails that had been broken or bent by shells, being removed and replaced by rails taken from sidings.

Praise From British Generals

For three days the men worked unremittingly under direct observation of the German airplanes and under bombing and shell fire, being finally relieved by three companies of Canadian Railroad Engineers. The gallant and tireless labors of all of these units of the 108th Engineers were warmly commended by many British commanders under whom or for whom they worked, including Maj. Gen. A. E. W. Harmon, commanding the 3rd Canadian Division, and Maj. Gen. H. W. Higginson, commanding the 12th Division.

The 33rd Division was detached from the Fourth British Army and placed under the command of the Fifth Corps, First American Army, on August 26, and after a short time in rest and training, the 108th Engineers moved up near to the front line just west of the Meuse, where the 33rd Division was to attack in the general offensive of the Meuse-Argonne, on September 26. The ground which would have to be crossed by the 33rd in beginning this attack, was, perhaps, the most difficult which lay in front of any of the divisions, as it embraced the marshy valley of the Forges creek, at and just above its confluence with the Meuse. The low ground was nearly a kilometer wide. In the course of about a dozen reconnaissances made by parties of Engineers between September 16 and 24, the conditions of the terrain were accurately determined and arrangements made for passing the Infantry safely across it.

The creek bottom was full of water and pocked with shell holes full of water or overgrown with vegetation, there were many gabions and wire entanglements all over it and in the old head-race of the Raffecourt Mill there was about a kilometer's depth of water. The only possible existing means of crossing was the partly demolished roadbed of a former German 60-centimeter light railway, which was mined at various points and under accurate registration from a number of machine gun nests on the rising ground beyond.

At Start of Argonne Advance

It having been determined to cross the swamp by means of planking and passerelle bridges, the latter consisting of sacks of straw about 2.7 meters by 1.5 meters each, lashed together, planked over and provided with side ropes, a dump of necessary material was accumulated at Cumières, three kilometers in rear, and on the night of September 25 Company D was assigned to the assault battalion of the 131st Infantry and Company E to the assault battalion of the 132nd Infantry, to

ENGINEERS

build passages across the marsh, maintain communication over it until the Infantry had passed and to put and keep bridges in good condition for the following echelons. Four other companies, together with some Infantry companies, carried material up to the Brody and Massin trenches, on the front line, and dumped it over for the construction companies to use, the work being much impeded by the masses of Infantry gathered in the communication trenches.

From 2:30 on the morning of the 26th until the assault went over at 5:30, the Engineers were working at top speed, while over their heads roared the thunder of the American Artillery preparation, and the answering shells and machine gun bullets of the Germans searched the marsh around them. Partly protected by squads of automatic riflemen and bombers they laid long passageways of planks, bridging the countless shell holes with duck boards, cleared barbed wire, brush and debris, laid the passerelles and marked them with white tape so that the Infantry could follow them, and, arriving at the creek and the mill race, set the bents of bridges from 16 to 20 feet long, floored them and made the approaches.

In all, nine passageways were made across the marsh, and 11 bridges built. Over these, immediately after zero hour, the Infantry went forward to victory, at some of the bridges numbers of Engineers standing in the water holding the structures in place as the Infantry passed until sway-bracing could be properly secured. Seven men of the Engineer companies were casualties from machine gun bullets or shells and later, in going forward with the second wave to the new front line along the Meuse, eight prisoners were captured in dugouts.

After a number of days of hard but not exceptionally dangerous work in building and repairing roads toward the new front areas of the 33rd Division, across the trench and shell-torn zones of the old lines, the Engineers were warned to prepare for building bridges across the Meuse for the attack of the division toward Consenvoye. The requirements of the attack determined the location, after numerous reconnaissances, of one bridge just south of Brabant and another about a kilometer south of Consenvoye. As the 33rd Division was not to advance until after the other divisions of the Seventeenth French Corps had attacked east of the Meuse, the bridges were not to be commenced until about zero hour. Unfortunately, no pontoons were to be gotten, so resort had to be made to bent bridges, which were much slower to build. Company E, assisted by Company A, was assigned to build the bridge at Brabant, and Company C, assisted by Company B, to build that at Consenvoye.

The site of the Brabant bridge was under the high bank east of the canal, so the enemy's heavy shelling on the morning of the attack did not damage the bridge, though the carrying parties were exposed to direct observation and constant fire for about two kilometers in crossing the valley with material. One man was killed and a number were wounded in this way, but the bridge was ready before 8:30 a.m., and soon thereafter the Infantry was crossing it. The bridge site near Consenvoye was under the enemy's observation and the men working there were under fire for more than five and one-half hours, but only three casualties resulted, because many of the shells fell in the water or on soft ground.

Capturing Boche a Sideline

The river at this point was found much deeper than expected, so that many of the

ENGINEERS

previously prepared bents had to be spliced in order to make them long enough. This work caused the construction to take about an hour longer than estimated, additional material needed being brought from a German dump about a kilometer distant, which had been previously located by a reconnaissance. Here were secured a number of sections of light railway tract, which were used to weight down the bents and to stiffen the structure. While engaged in this perilous regular business of their branch of the service, the Engineers managed to find time and opportunity to capture 45 German prisoners and a gasoline locomotive.

Next day, in response to an urgent need Company B and a platoon of Company E, under heavy Artillery fire, completely repaired the demolished permanent bridge at Consenvoye between the hours of 8.30 a.m. and 6 p.m., putting in one 22-foot and two 16-foot spans, built of heavy timbers from German dumps or old buildings. At the same time they made passable for wagons and heavy Artillery the approaches and the roads leading up to the bridge, so that it could be used as soon as finished. This bridge was shelled continuously by the enemy for nine days after its completion. On October 19 the regiment was at last relieved and sent to a quiet area and it did not again come into an active sector before the armistice. But it had amply proved that the lot of the Army Engineer is something more than drawing maps.

The Stars and Stripes

OldMagazineArticles.com