



## BIRTH AND BAPTISM OF A BATTALION

by  
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ON a drizzling, overcast day around the first of March last year, hundreds of soldiers began arriving at a camp south of Bristol, England. A few of them were from the 81st Chemical Bn but most were officers and enlisted men from the Infantry, Ordnance, Artillery and even the Medical Corps.

They were brought together for the purpose of activating the 92nd Chemical Bn and most of them had neither seen nor heard of a 4.2 until they arrived at Bristol.

Yet, less than three months later this battalion was in the line in Normandy, dumping HE and WP into the German positions across the Vire River.

Although I was a CWS officer, I knew very little more about the chemical mortar than the rest of the battalion. My background had consisted almost entirely of Replacement Pools. I was commissioned at Edgewood in the 22nd class, going to OCS directly from the University of Maryland, and then followed

tours of duty at the Edgewood ORP, the Camp Sibert ORP, the Camp Reynolds ORP, and the 10th Replacement Depot in England. My only other assignment before joining the 92nd was with the 79th Smoke Generator Company which was operating in Bristol harbor.

With the newly-activated 92nd, we really did some intensive learning. Starting practically from scratch, we alternated classroom work with field exercise until, at the end of two months, we were able to go into the field preparatory to moving across the channel. We were attached to the 19th Corps Artillery and held a shoot for them.

After observing our shoot, they decided we would fit into their set-up better if we used artillery firing methods. So—a month before we saw action—the battalion had to be completely re-trained.

The first thing done was to change the T/O. Because we were short of men, we made three firing companies of three platoons, each with four guns. Battalion and company fire-direction centers were established and the communication sections expanded.

While we were basically for direct infantry support, our fire direction centers enabled us to tie in with the artillery. In that way we were able to fire concentrations sent down from the artillery when necessary, and if one of the artillery observers needed our fire he could communicate with us and fire our guns. Another outstanding advantage of the FDC was that we could mass the fire of as many guns as we needed quickly and accurately. The FDC was run by the Company S-3 with the help of a S/Sgt. A computer from each platoon calculated the data for his platoon and phoned the information down. We built slide rules, similar to the artillery slide rules, to speed the calculations. The forward observers never had to carry range tables or do any calculating. They simply phoned or radioed their information to FDC where all the calculations were made and where all commands to the platoons originated.

A recorder was also brought into the platoon to keep records of all fire commands and the sight settings of each gun. When time permitted, the recorder asked each gun what its setting was and checked the reply against his own record.

We took classes in the new firing commands; in forward observing; in directing fire. Because we were being trained in the use of the aiming circle, it became

necessary to learn a new way of going into the mortar position. Since the type of firing we were to do required the use of the new sights, they were flown over to us. At first we had a lot of trouble with them and it took us forever to sight a gun. But, with practice, we got used to them and came to prefer them to the old sight. By reciprocal laying with the aiming circle and new sight, we were able to lay our guns so that we could put down a perfect pattern without adjusting each piece.

D-day came and went while we were in the midst of reorganization and training, and we finally embarked around the 20th of June. We were on a Liberty ship and that was the period of big storms in the channel, so that it was eight days before we were able to disembark in small craft. Simultaneous with our landing, troops were debarking from about a hundred other vessels so things were pretty snafu on the beaches. I had ten jeeps with me and the beach control waved us on to the first road leading away from the beach. We lined up bumper to bumper with tanks, ordnance trucks, ambulances, weapons carriers, and crawled inland. An MP at a crossroads waved us into a field and there we were gradually sorted out.

When the company was together:

*"The dead lay everywhere." Nazi who has fought his last battle lies sprawled beside hedgerow.*





Ten-minute break in a shell crater. One man is alert while squad catches shut-eye.

again, we set out to join the remainder of the battalion—which had landed on another beach. On our way, we passed through Carentan, which had been taken by us two weeks before. The column was held up briefly in one of Carentan's narrow streets and, as we sat there, snipers opened fire. Sniper fire is an unnerving and infuriating thing to green troops. Most of the time you never know where it comes from. You're just standing around and—zing—a bullet goes by you. At first everyone grabbed a gun and let go in all directions, until we almost became more of a menace to each other than the snipers were, and we had to enforce a rule that no one could fire on a sniper unless he could practically see the color of his eyes.

ON joining the rest of the battalion we went into action around the first of July. The division to which we were attached was to make a crossing of the Vire River and we were to support them with the fire of the massed battalion. Our mission was to supply a 90-minute rolling barrage and we fired at the rate of one round every 30 seconds.

At the Vire River, we dug a pit for each mortar and another pit for ammunition. This turned out to be impractical for continuous fire. The ground was muddy and when it became necessary to shift emplacements, you were forced to lift the gun piece by piece out of the pit and thus put it out of action. Afterward, we retained the pit for ammunition, but built sandbag ramparts around the gun whenever time permitted.

IN this action, we fired HE exclusively, except that one gun in each platoon fired a WP shell on the last round for each phase line, which were 100 yards apart. When we got too far ahead, or too close, to the advancing infantry, our forward observers phoned back corrections.

When our mission was finished, we were pulled out of the line for a rest—of one hour. Then we moved up in support of another division.

At the time of the St. Lo breakthrough, two of our companies were in the line, and "C" company, to which I belonged,

was in reserve. So we had box seats for the depressing spectacle of our own bombers blasting American troops. The first day was bad enough, but when the bombers came over the second day and did it all over again, we all felt pretty suicidal.

One of our companies took a lot of casualties in that misdirected bombing, so we went in to replace them. What followed gives, I think, a very accurate picture of what is known as the "fog of war."

We moved up at night along a road that the Germans were shelling heavily in an effort to choke off the supply of our forward units. The dead lay everywhere.

On reaching our position, we dug in and our company commander sent me up to the Regimental CP to inform them of our arrival. At the CP, they told me the regiment was moving up and that they wanted us to displace forward with them. While we were talking a German shell landed outside the window; the next one crashed into the rear of the house.

The regimental staff said, "Well, we'll be moving along," and they went out one door. I went out the other.

I returned to the company and the next day set out with the CO to find out where the regiment—let's call it X Regt—had moved to. We found the CP of another regiment in the same division, but they didn't know where X was located. As we were leaving, the colonel said cheerfully, "Oh, if you do find X Regt, let me know where they are, will you?"

WE continued our tour and came finally to another regimental CP. This looked like the right one and we reported. They were both surprised and pleased to have the support of a 4.2 mortar company. Their surprise and pleasure was explained when we bent over the situation map and, from it, discovered that this wasn't X Regt either.

Eventually, we did find the right CP and got the company moved up into position supporting them. We were firing at 1500 yards and the regiment was to attack at dawn. However, there was a German position that the Regimental

CO wanted knocked out before the advance and the only way to do this—because of the range—was to move the 4.2s right up to the front line as far as they would go. The platoon of which I was executive officer moved out first. We were tooling along the road to the front when we heard a plane overhead—it was night and that's when the Jerry bombers come over. He dropped a flare and, while we were caught in its glare, unloaded a string of anti-personnel bombs on us. I was in the last Jeep and dove for the ditch but I wasn't fast enough.

Ten minutes later, with the other casualties, I was being carried back to an aid station, so I never did find out how the mission or the attack made out.

AS for the duties of a platoon executive officer, they are intimately concerned with the men of the platoon and the firing of the mortar. You should see to it that all men dig slit trenches and that each trench has some kind of a roof over it. You will find that the platoon operates best, even in the field, when authority progresses through channels. Give your instructions to the non-coms, and have squad leaders you can depend on—for they are the ones who actually run the platoon. Your men must be interchangeable and all of them should know how to operate the sight. If possible, have a phone to each gun—when artillery is going off it's almost impossible to give orders by voice alone. Improvise night aiming stakes here in this country—don't wait until you are overseas. *And check every shell before it is fired!*

As platoon executive, you must be familiar with methods of setting up the platoon for firing; you must be familiar with fire commands and that involves knowing the aiming circle, the sight and the base deflections of each gun. I strongly recommend using a recorder in the platoon to keep track of firing data. You must be thoroughly trained in directing and observing fire and be ready to take over the instant a gun goes out of action.

And, lastly, you had better like the men of your platoon, because as executive officer you will live at the mortar position.