

92nd CHEMICAL MORTAR



By LT. Col. Ronald L. Martin, Cml. C.*

The U. S. Army did not display much interest in the heavy 4.2-inch mortar for general wide-spread use until mid 1943, although most foreign armies, particularly the Germans, had already made successful use of this type of weapon. During the Sicilian campaign of 1943 the 4.2-inch chemical mortar made its first appearance in combat and was not long in winning recognition. Because of the successful record of the weapon in Sicily and Southern Italy chemical mortar battalions were in demand for the Normandy invasion. It was known, however, that only three of those in the ETO troop basis would be available. Only two trained battalions were present in England and but one other trained battalion was scheduled to arrive there prior to D-day. It was, therefore, decided to activate at least one additional battalion in England.

Accordingly, the 92nd Chemical Mortar Battalion was activated at Brockley, Somerset, England, just south of Bristol, under the supervision of the First Army. Officers and enlisted men started joining the battalion late in February and by mid-March about 80 percent of authorized strength was present. The officers and men for the battalion came from units already in England, and very little attention was given to their prior training and abilities. About one-half of the original officers were of the CWS, but very few of these had any knowledge of the mortar. The other officers were from six different branches of the service and none had even seen a 4.2-inch mortar. Fortunately, a few of these officers were from the Field Artillery and knew artillery fire techniques; a few others were from the Infantry where they had gained some knowledge of the employment of the 81-mm. mortar.

From the start, the 92nd Battalion faced a serious personnel problem. The initial group of about 400 enlisted men came from another chemical mortar battalion in England whose authorized strength had been reduced from about one thousand to less than 600 enlisted men. Considerably over one-half of this group was in the two lowest AGCT classes, four and five. Consequently, capable noncommissioned officer material for the battalion was



Covered by fire from this 4.2 chemical mortar crew (firing white phosphorus shells) elements of an Infantry Regiment move into a new position.

lacking. During March the 92nd spent considerably more time in getting rid of about 100 of these misfits than in training. The remaining enlisted men made good soldiers, won their share of combat decorations and two received battlefield commissions.

The battalion was unable to reach its authorized strength of both officers and enlisted men until long after entry into combat. Even then casualties consistently kept the actual strength far below authorized strength.

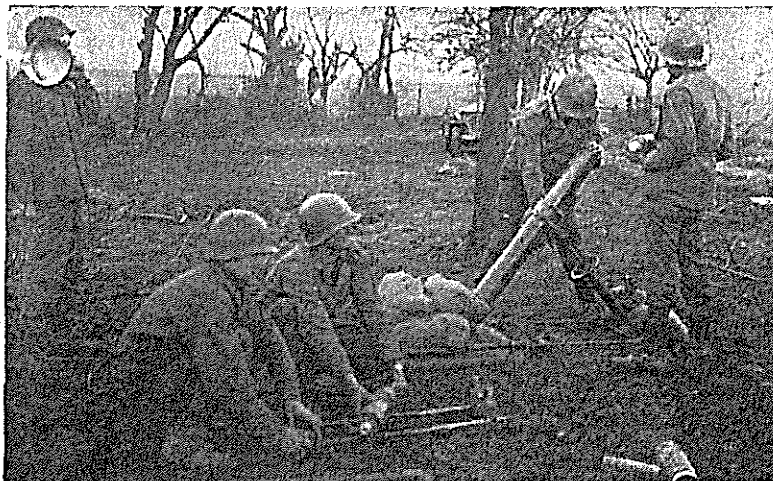
The approved organization for a chemical mortar battalion provided four mortar companies of twelve mortars each. Realizing that this organization was not possible with the available personnel, the CO of the 92nd requested and received authority to organize the unit similarly to a light Field Artillery battalion, with three mortar companies and augmented communication and ammunition sections. The advantages of this type of organization were demonstrated later when other mortar battalions were reorganized similarly, and still later when the approved War Department organization chart was changed to prescribe a similar type of organization.

The 92nd experienced great difficulty in obtaining authorized equipment and training aids. Usually, organizations were sent to the theater of operations with their training completed and in possession of their authorized equipment. The supply plans of the Theater did not provide for the equipment to activate, nor the aids to permit training a new battalion. Consequently, the battalion spent many man-days in collecting motor vehicles, weapons and other authorized equipment from all over England, and many more man-days in devising and making training aids.

The officers of the new battalion attended classes four and five nights each week in order to become familiar with the lessons which they taught the next day. This procedure helped the officers, but the noncommissioned officers suffered because they received most of their instruction and training at the same time as the other enlisted men. There was just not enough time to give specialized and advanced training to the noncommissioned officers. Only a few of the noncommissioned officers, the ones who had received training in motor transport and communications prior to joining the battalion, were sufficiently well-

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BATTALION HISTORY



Mortarmen from a Chemical battalion setting up 4.2 inch chemical mortar near town of Kaslar, Germany. (92d Cml. Bn.)



A 4.2 mortar is throwing smoke shells to cover the crossing of 5th Division troops over the Sauer River at Ballensdorf, Germany. Company B, 5th Inf. Div., near Ballensdorf, Germany.

trained that they could relieve the officers of part of their big training job.

By mid-May the battalion had undergone sufficient training that it was capable of making a fairly decent road march and each company was able to impact its twelve mortars in the general vicinity of a large target, if they were not rushed. At about this time a persistent rumor was making the rounds to the effect that the battalion was to go ashore on D-day. No one seemed to know just when this day was to occur but everyone believed that it was to be soon.

Late in May, by what was later learned to be a stroke of good fortune for the battalion, an order was issued attaching the battalion to the Artillery of the XIX Corps. Many of the Artillery officers were old friends and classmates of the battalion commander. After watching the battalion fire a few problems these officers decided that a period of intensive training in the latest techniques of artillery fire control would prove valuable. For fifteen days the battalion, particularly the officers and noncommissioned officers, trained in the proper and simplest methods of massing artillery fires. This period of concentrated instruction proved invaluable later in combat, for the battalion was able to coordinate its operations more closely with the division and corps artillery units than otherwise would have been possible. Of course, the battalion did not always operate in this manner, but the ability to join the wire and radio nets of the supporting artillery, as well as those of the supported infantry, and the ability to use the artillery observers, as well as having the forward observers of the mortar units conduct the fire of the artillery, proved valuable indeed.

D-day arrived and passed, with mixed feelings for the members of the battalion. Some were disappointed that they didn't go ashore in the assault, others were happy that they had a few more days to train. Eventually, the order to proceed to the marshalling area arrived. On 15 June the battalion started moving to the docks at Plymouth. It had been expected that upon arrival in the marshalling area the battalion would be furnished the personnel and equipment that it was short. A briefing of the officers was also expected. Nothing of this sort occurred.

The move across the Channel was made in two groups, each with its own Liberty ship. Although the groups left Plymouth on 18-19 June the landings on the coast of Normandy were not made until 27 June, because of the sudden and now infamous storm which unexpectedly swept the coast of Normandy.

As it was impossible to approach the temporary docks or to unload to lighters the battalion lay a few hundred yards off the coast in its two Liberty ships and "enjoyed" a good ringside seat. Both ships, the one at Omaha Beach and the other at Utah Beach, were bombed by German planes at night and had a good view of the retaliatory fire by friendly AA guns. The wrecking of the temporary docks and many ships, by wind and wave, the unloading of the special ships that moved to the shore and disgorged troops and equipment, the landings on the heights above the beaches by the never-ending trains of C47 transports, and the loud and ominous sounds of war a short distance inland, were very entertaining but everyone realized that the battalion would soon be a part of all this commotion.

On 1 July, less than one hundred training days after activation, the battalion was attached to the 30th Infantry Division to support its crossing of the Vire River. The battalion commander made his first reconnaissance accompanied by only the commanding general of the 30th Division Artillery, who later rose to the command of the XIX Corps. Mortar positions were chosen within a few hundred yards of the infantry MLR, and it was necessary to prepare and occupy the positions at night. Pits were dug for each mortar, a practice which was then considered proper. This policy was soon changed because the mortars began sinking towards China after the first few rounds were fired.

During this first mission the thirty-six mortars fired a prepared rolling barrage across the front of the two assault regiments. The barrage lines were spaced 100 yards apart and each mortar fired two rounds on each line. The infantry followed closely behind the barrage across the open fields and the hedgerows which characterized this terrain. When a round of WP fell, announcing that the barrage was moving forward to the next line, the infantry would spring forward and seek cover near the



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next line. Over 3,000 rounds of ammunition, mostly HE, were fired during this barrage, while the Vire River was crossed and the attack moved towards Ariel. Although some critics will say that this type barrage is wasteful of ammunition, the fact remains that the infantry gained its objective quickly and without many casualties.

During this first combat operation many situations developed which had been discussed during training but about which little had been done, primarily because of lack of time, but also because of inadequate training doctrine and combat-trained officers and enlisted men. Many perplexing problems arose, among which were: proper organization of position, local security, adequate communications between elements of the battalion and with the supported troops, and means of keeping the fragile mortars in action. Moreover, the mortar positions were just behind the infantry MLR, where enemy patrols were active, but the battalion Table of Organization did not provide sufficient personnel to man our secondary weapons. The moving of thousands of 25 pound shells to within a few hundred yards of the enemy front lines was difficult to conceal. These are but a few of the problems that arose. With little exaggeration, however, it might be said that the personnel of the battalion learned more from this first combat mission of one week than they did from their three months of training.

Starting on 8 July the battalion was attached to the 29th Infantry Division to support its push south to St. Lo, the important communications center of this part of France. Making use of experience gained during the preceding week, mortar positions were selected and prepared in the daylight hours and were occupied at night. Mortars were emplaced on the surface of the ground and parapeted with sand bags. Ammunition and mortar crew pits were dug and camouflage nets were placed over the entire emplacements. These precautions were necessary because the enemy not only shelled all likely artillery positions during the day but at night sent over planes which dropped flares, followed by anti-personnel bombs when any activity or emplacements were observed.

One of the most difficult problems encountered by a mortar battalion commander, when the entire battalion was employed as a unit, was the choice of mortar positions. The commander of the supported infantry wanted the mortars to be as far forward as possible so that he could take full advantage of their limited range. He also wished to assign a very small area so that there would be a minimum of interference with his infantry installations, particularly with those of the 81-mm. mortars, and those of other attached troops. He generally did not realize that a battalion of mortars was comparable to nine batteries, or three battalions, of artillery and needed nearly as much position area.

During this period of attachment to the 29th Division the battalion had its first bitter taste of being overrun by the enemy. A strong patrol of the enemy broke through the supported infantry and reached the mortar battalion command post. Fortunately, the night was so dark that the enemy was as confused as the friendly troops and the casualties were few. However, everyone's blood pressure was rather high for a few hours.

One of the saddest experiences of the battalion throughout the entire war occurred a few days later while the battalion was supporting the 30th Division in its attack south towards Tessy-Sur-Vure. The capture of this town was the beginning of the Falaise pocket which cut off the Brest peninsula. On 24 July, two flights of P-47s dropped bombs in the battalion area but caused no casualties. On the 25th, during a mass attack by 3,000 friendly planes, prior to a large infantry attack, over 200 bombs fell in the battalion area. So many casualties were suffered by one company that it was unable to oper-

ate again until replacement personnel and equipment were received many days later. Lt. Gen. Douglas McNair, Commanding General, Army Ground Forces, who was visiting the front at the time of the attack, was killed within 100 yards of the battalion command post.

During August and until mid-September the battalion moved rapidly through France, Belgium and Holland. We crossed the Seine River about twenty miles northeast of Paris, on 31 August, just one week after the liberation of Paris. We spent three days at Evécquemont helping the townspeople celebrate both the liberation of Paris and the memory of French dead of the First World War. We formed a provisional trucking company which made a trip to Belgium to transport infantrymen in their pursuit of the fast-retreating Germans. Some of the more reckless officers and enlisted men violated orders and visited Paris, fraternized with the liberated Parisians, and forever bragged about it. *C'est la guerre!*

We entered Belgium on 8 September just north of Valenciennes, France and bivouaced at Momalle where we cleaned equipment and rehabilitated personnel. Again we formed a provisional trucking company, this time to haul gasoline and other supplies to some of the Corps units whose lines of communications were extended dangerously while their pursuit of the Germans continued. Here, a few reckless souls, including the battalion commander, broke all existing regulations and visited Brussels for a few hours. The temptation to visit some of these famous cities was just too great to resist, especially for one who never expected to have the opportunity again.

On 15 September a move was made to positions on the west bank of the Albert Canal, just opposite Maastricht, Holland, while the 30th Division was clearing the area around the famous fortress, Eben Email. Only one mission was fired and then the Canal and the Meuse River were crossed, after which the battalion moved into an assembly area at Mesch, Holland.

Throughout this period of over six weeks the Germans were retreating so rapidly that few fire missions were necessary. A few cities were "liberated" and some German soldiers, mostly stragglers, were captured. We encountered small groups of the enemy which had been bypassed by the rapidly advancing infantry but, except for a few shots from snipers, the marches were uneventful. Of course, it was frequently difficult to maintain march discipline because of the cheering Frenchmen, who desired to bestow all types of favors, including wine and kisses, on the American soldiers.

For two days after reaching Holland the battalion was attached to the 2nd Armored Division which advanced on and captured Sittard, Holland, and then turned towards the Siegfried line and Germany. This Division moved so rapidly against light enemy resistance that the battalion was unable to get into position and fire any missions. Many valuable lessons were learned during these two days, the most important being that an attached unit should not depend on an armored division for local security. Small pockets of enemy resistance were bypassed and the following troops had to do the cleaning up. This can prove embarrassing to a chemical mortar battalion, or any other similar unit.

On 19 September the battalion went into positions in the orchards of the town of Scherpenseel, Germany to support the 30th Division in its attack southeast through the Siegfried Line. From then until 2 October, when the big attack started, one platoon on the battalion's flank fired many probing missions. The firing was limited to this one platoon to prevent revealing the positions of the other mortars. The battalion area was very restricted and the positions were less than a thousand yards from the outer pill boxes of the enemy. Counterbattery fire fell

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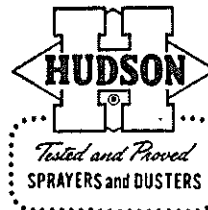
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on and near this platoon frequently but they were so well dug in that there were no casualties.

We made a number of attempts to burn hay stacks and buildings which were thought to conceal gun positions but WP shells proved unsatisfactory for this purpose. The lack of a good incendiary shell was a big disappointment to all the supported commanders. Frequently, however, a WP shell started a fire; usually when the fire was not wanted.

The first mission of the battalion during the attack of 2 October was to cut the barbed wire entanglements in front of the enemy defenses. Then a rolling barrage was fired in front of the advancing infantry, the rate of movement being controlled by forward observers with the attacking doughboys. Later, the battalion fired missions on the flanks of the infantry positions to deny enemy observation and stop counter attacks from these directions. For the next three weeks the battalion was frequently broken into companies, and even platoons, to support various attacking elements of the division. At the end of this operation part of the battalion was in or near Kerkrade, Holland and the remainder was near Wurselen, Germany. Both cities were part of the gap which sealed off Aachen, Germany. During this operation we fired nearly 25,000 rounds and suffered 30 casualties.

The battalion received one of its many commendations from the CG, 30th Division after this operation. An even more appreciated "commendation" was from the battalion commander, 1st Bn., 117th Inf., who wrote in a XIX Corps publication, *Breaching The Siegfried Line* that he believed "that the most effective of any supporting fire came from the 4.2-inch chemical mortar barrage; it was this more than any of the other supporting fires which, laid 150 yards ahead of the assault companies, and also firing accurately into deflated German positions, kept down enemy fire until B and C Companies stormed across the river." He was referring to the Wurn River which was in front of the fortified positions on the high ground along the far bank.

On 7 November the battalion, less one company which remained with the 30th Division, was attached to the 29th Division to support the drive to the Roer River. One of the mortar companies was attached to each of the assault regiments of the 29th. When the assault regiments were rotated the mortar companies continued with the new assault regiment, consequently little rest was possible.

Some of the toughest fighting of the war took place during this operation which carried the American forces to the west bank of the Roer. The mortar companies had difficulty supporting the infantry for a number of reasons. Little cover was available and the infantry commanders wanted the mortars in the front lines. Moves had to be made before enemy land mines were cleared. Besides, the mortars were expected to fire missions night and day for long periods of time. There were sufficient crewmen with artillery pieces to permit part of the gun squads to rest while others fired missions but this was not possible with the limited number of mortar crewmen, especially after frequent casualties had depleted the squads.

The battalion had a rather quiet time from early December, when the Roer was reached, until just before Christmas Day. The infantry was holding the west bank of the Roer, expecting orders to cross as soon as the waters subsided a bit. Although in firing positions and firing frequent missions during most of this period, the battalion was able to clean and repair equipment and to recover from the brutal treatment of the preceding month. Thirty-six casualties had been suffered. Two of the nine killed in action were platoon commanders. The

training of replacements always had to be done while in firing positions. Hence, we always welcomed periods when the firing was light or when few displacements of position were required.

The battalion had hoped to spend Christmas in its presently occupied positions. However, on 23 December, the battalion commander was reconnoitering for mortar positions in the Lammersdorf-Simmerath area, fifty miles to the south, where the 78th Infantry Division was holding the north flank of the bulge caused by Von Runstedt's break-through. The one company which had been with the 30th Division remained in the vicinity of Plummern and assisted the 102nd Infantry Division of the XIII Corps to hold the Roer River line while most of the other divisions moved south to the Bulge. These attachments continued until early February, except for a period of about one week, when the battalion, less one company, was sent about 75 miles north to join its third company which had remained with the 102nd Division. The purpose of this move was to join in a large scale attack that was being made in conjunction with the British on the left flank. This period of confusing attachments lasted until early February, just before the 78th Division reached the dams which controlled the flow of water northward on the Roer River.

The battalion was finally reunited and attached to the 29th Division to support the attack across the Roer, through Julich and onward to the Rhine River. This attack started on 22 February and ended when the 29th reached Muenchen-Gladbach at the Rhine on 1 March. Upon completion of this operation the battalion moved into an assembly area at Gusten and carried on a program of rehabilitation of men and equipment, and training for nearly two weeks. On 13 March the battalion was released from the XIX Corps and attached to the XVI Corps. After a move to a new assembly area in Karken, near the border of Holland we made preparations for the impending crossing of the Rhine River.

The plans for the Rhine crossing placed the battalion in support of the 30th Division. On the night of 20 March we moved into positions near the town of Wallach, a few miles south of Wesel. The 30th and 79th Divisions, under XVI Corps, were to make the main effort of the Ninth Army, after a complicated scheme of deception had deceived the enemy as to the plans for "Operation Flash-point." The attack was to be made in conjunction with that of the British, on the north flank, with all allied forces under the overall direction of the 21st Army Group. It was hoped that this attack across the Rhine and along the northern edge of the Ruhr industrial area would lead to the final defeat of the Wehrmacht.

Tremendous fire power was concentrated in the zone of the 30th Division to support the crossing, the largest amphibious operation on the continent. Twelve battalions of artillery and one mortar battalion were to fire along the division front. The fires of the 92nd Chemical Mortar Battalion were divided into three phases. Phase one called for 40 minutes of neutralizing fire on the dikes along the east bank of the river. In phase two the battalion was to place 20 minutes of concentrated fire at the maximum rate on the points where the troops were to land and where the bridges were to be built. The attack would then jump off and for 270 minutes (phase three) the 4.2-inch mortars were to fire on several small towns which appeared to be enemy strongholds. The attack started at 0100 and by daylight the far shore was well in hand. After the attack started the battalion moved to positions a few miles north of the original positions, to help neutralize strong resistance which had developed on the buderichen Diike area of Lip-Perdorf.

The battalion did not cross the Rhine until the day