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Gun squad of Company A, 98th Chemical Battalion firing in support of the 127th Infantry, 32nd Division. The 4.2 mortars fight a bitterly resistant battle to gain headway along the Villa Verde Trail.

A gun position of Company A, 98th Chemical Mortar Battalion on the Villa Verde Trail after a three-night battle with the Japanese. The type of terrain can be well seen from the background.

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98TH CHEMICAL

During the initial planning for the Philippine campaigns by Hdqs. S. W. Pacific Area, it was determined that a chemical mortar battalion would be required in the support of 6th Army elements in this operation. There were at that time no mortar battalions available in this theater and the request of the War Department that one be furnished was refused due to the greater priority of the European Theater and the shortage of trained units in existence. Permission was granted to reorganize an existing unit within the theater into a mortar battalion. This is the story of how a tank destroyer battalion was converted into a chemical mortar battalion and successfully accomplished its missions. In March 1944 the 641st Tank Destroyer Battalion, then stationed at Oro Bay, New Guinea, turned in its tank destroyers and was issued 4.2" chemical mortars. From then until September 1945 the battalion fought its way to the furthestmost tip of New Guinea and through northern Luzon, as a chemical unit.

The 641st Tank Destroyer Battalion was organized in January 1942 from elements of the 41st Division, Oregon National Guard. After maneuvers in the U. S., the battalion was sent to Australia as one of the component parts of the 41st Division. Training continued at various places in Australia and for a while the battalion was in position in the defense of northern Australia. It furnished a company that went to New Guinea in November 1942 to take part in the Salamau campaign. The balance of the battalion followed to Oro Bay, New Guinea, in January 1943, and formed the part of the defense garrison at this base. Up to the time of its conversion to a 4.2 battalion, the 641st had not seen any action as a tank destroyer battalion,

although it had been gathering experience and training as a unit, and invaluable knowledge of how to live and operate under jungle conditions. At this time the battalion had among its officers infantrymen, field artillerymen, cavalrymen and engineers.

In late February 1944 the battalion was issued 4.2 chemical mortars and was attached to the 1st Cavalry Division for the campaign against the Admiralty Islands. The chemical officer of the First Cavalry Division made a special trip to Brisbane to gather the complete theater stock of manuals on operation of the 4.2. With the aid of these manuals and the help of the Chemical Section, 1st Cavalry Division, the battalion began training its gun crews in operation of the mortars. Utilizing the experience gathered in the operation of tank destroyers, forward observers, and fire direction, central groups already existed within the battalion. There was also in existence first rate communications sections and mortar maintenance crews. These made the transition much smoother than it would have been under other conditions. At the last moment it was decided that the battalion would not accompany the 1st Cavalry Division on this operation, and the battalion was then made available in support of I Corps in the operation against Hollandia.

In January of 1944, the theater requested that five chemical warfare officers trained in the use of the mortar be sent out from the U. S. to augment the battalion personnel and to train the unit in its chemical warfare missions. I was fortunate enough to be chosen as the senior officer of the group and, although only two of us actually joined the battalion, I had the



Gun squad of Company A, 98th Chemical Mortar Battalion has just gotten one round "on the way." This action is taking place high on the Villa Verde Trail on the Luzon, P.I.



The mortar positions of Company A, 98th Chemical Battalion along the Villa Verde Trail. The men are resting after having repulsed three Japanese infiltration attempts to wipe out the crews of the guns.

MORTAR BATTALION

pleasant experience of commanding this battalion as a chemical unit. At this time the battalion could execute high explosive missions quite satisfactorily but was inadequately trained to carry out smoke missions, and any toxic gas missions would have been out of the question. To remedy this, three of the company commanders and three platoon leaders were sent to the chemical warfare school at Oro Bay where they took a gas officers course and also received special training in the employment of smoke. News that a mortar battalion had been organized in New Guinea spread around rapidly and soon a number of eager young chemical officers requested transfer into the battalion. These also having been trained at the chemical warfare school at Edgewood had the knowledge and ability to greatly assist in the internal training in the employment of smoke and toxics.

On April 11, 1944, the battalion saw its first action at Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea, where Company B landed at Aitape with the task force that protected the 6th Army's left flank. The balance of the battalion landed on either side of Hollandia and fired only a few small missions, one of which was a smoke mission. These were virtually unopposed landings and the greatest enemy the companies found was the mud through which they tried to move in keeping up with the Infantry. Company B moved out of Aitape and joined the task force that was to take part in the operation against the Wakde-Sarmi area. Wakde is a small island off the coast of New Guinea that was required as an air strip. The two platoons from Company B landed first on a really small island close to Wakde and emplaced their mortars so that they covered the landing of

the Infantry on Wakde. They then re-embarked and landed on the mainland where they supported elements of the 6th Division in the bloody fighting for Lone Tree Hill. Company D in the meanwhile had been attached to the 41st Division to take part in the Biak Island campaign. The fighting on this Island marked the first encounter in the Pacific with the intensive cave fortifications developed by the Japanese. Mortars were in constant use as their high angle of fire could penetrate openings which flat trajectory weapons could not reach.

The 3rd platoon under the leadership of Lt. (now Major) Ben Bell formed part of a regimental task force that attempted to bypass some of the caves by a flanking move along the beach. The Japanese drove a wedge between the regiment and the main body of the Division. The regiment was then ordered to withdraw by sea and Bell's platoon formed the rear guard which opened fire and kept fire on the hills above the beach until the entire regiment was evacuated. When the last element of the regiment had left the beach, Bell and his men piled up their mortars, removed the sights with them, and two tanks that were with the platoon fired on to the pile of barrels to destroy them. A Dukw came into the beach and evacuated the men with just what they could carry on their backs, leaving the two tanks to fight their way through the Japanese road block. Three days later the mortars were recovered when a successful drive up the beach was made again. However, the tank fire had seriously damaged two of the barrels so that they could not be re-used, and for the rest of the Biak operation the company operated with only two platoons.

Through July, August and September 1944 there was a series of operations in New Guinea in which Company B and then Company A took part, and the beginning of October 1944 found three of the companies back at Hollandia at base camp undergoing refresher training. At this time, accelerated training was carried on within the battalion on the use of smoke. New equipment was being drawn and preparations began for the major operation towards which all 6th Army elements were pointing—the return to the Philippines.

The battalion was assigned to I Corps for the Luzon operation and in turn Corps attached two companies to each of the assault divisions. The companies then left at intervals to join their divisions and train with them in preparation for the assault landings. With the development of the technique of firing mortars from landing craft, a demand was created for trained mortar crews to man these craft. Company A was temporarily attached to the 7th Fleet, and manned four LCI (M)s. The battalion less Company A landed at Lingayen Gulf on 9 January 1945 to begin the longest uninterrupted campaign in its history—173 days in action. During the course of the next 6 months they were to fire 1350 missions and expend 106,685 rounds of ammunition while sustaining 6 killed and 54 wounded. A few of the outstanding incidents that occurred during this campaign will illustrate some of the capabilities of the battalion.

Probably the most outstanding individual was Capt. Gilbert Doolittle, a chemical warfare officer, who joined the battalion in New Guinea. Doolittle had been with the San Francisco Procurement District during the early part of the war and then had a short course at the Infantry School and came to the 98th as one of the chemical warfare complement. He was initially the battalion S-2 but due to the temporary loss of Capt. Frank Stubbs of Company A, Doolittle took command of the Company and fought it through the opening weeks of the campaign.

Late in January the 20th Infantry, 6th Division, to which Company A was attached, moved to clear the Cabaruan Hills. Doolittle, acting as liaison officer, moved forward with Company G as the assault company of the second battalion following a heavy preparatory barrage from both artillery and mortars. The three mortar platoons of the company were prepared to lay down a heavy smoke screen covering the entire enemy area. While Company G was moving into the Hill area, some of the enemy suddenly opened fire from the left and right flanks in the rear. In the meantime Companies E and F were pinned down by heavy fire from a knoll. During the confusion that ensued, Doolittle discovered that he was the only officer still on his feet and ordering his radio operator to open contact with the infantry battalion CP, Doolittle succeeded in halting the withdrawal and in reorganizing Company G. The mortar platoons, also on Doolittle's orders, commenced fire with smoke covering the enemy positions and setting fire to the brush and grass where some of the enemy were hidden. The enemy fire ceased almost instantly and Doolittle re-assembled the remainder of the Infantrymen and organized patrols to go back on the hill and evacuate the wounded. When all of the wounded were safely evacuated, Doolittle withdrew the Infantry back to their starting positions.

During this mission Company A fired 1117 rounds of high explosive and 737 rounds of WP. Doolittle was awarded the Silver Star for his gallantry in this action. Twelve days later, at the town of Munoz, Doolittle was killed while attempting to drive a Japanese tank away from his forward observation post, located well within the Japanese lines. Four men from Company A volunteered and went forward to recover Doolittle's body.

Another outstanding operation was that conducted by Company D at Lupao where in the words of General Mullins, Commanding General 25th Division, "On many occasions the effective and extremely accurate fire of the 4.2 mortar was the deciding factor which enabled a regiment to sense its objective. This was especially true in the attack on Lupao, Luzon, Philippine Islands where the proximity of opposing lines prevented artillery support, and mortar fire was used extensively." In this action two platoons infiltrated behind the Japanese positions in the town and moved rolling fire through the town burning down houses and destroying camouflage around dug-in tanks. The ammunition and supplies were brought in once a day by trucks of the platoon under tank convoy which fought their way in and fought their way out of the platoon positions. The forward observers of the platoons in operation were bringing fire down directly in front of themselves to clear the way for the Infantry assaults. This operation which lasted for three days was only one in a series of operations involving Company D in support of regiments of the 25th Division.

Shortly after Lupao, the concluding operation at the town of San Jose was fought which liquidated the Japanese armored division that had impeded the progress of I Corps divisions. During this phase of the Luzon campaign the 98th Battalion fell back into its original role of tank destroyers and was credited with destruction of 26 Japanese tanks and a share in 16 others. The Luzon campaign was ended as far as the battalion was concerned on the 30th of June 1945. The battalion was re-assembled for the first time in the year and a half at one camp. Intensive training was carried on to train new replacements that had joined the battalion late in June and was to train the battalion as a whole in the firing of smoke and gas missions. The battalion was at its base camp north of San Jose on Highway 5 when the war ended.

Due to its unorthodox origin and the fact that most of the officers and almost all of the enlisted personnel in the battalion had had no formal chemical warfare training, improvisation in a great many matters was the rule in this battalion. From the start of the Luzon operation to its conclusion officers were being lost at a steady rate due to rotation and illness. Instead of attempting to get replacements from pools, the battalion used the high caliber of officer material present among its NCO's and 18 were given direct commissions. Of these 18, 16 were given battlefield promotions to 1st Lieutenant before the Luzon campaign ended.

Along administrative lines, battalion headquarters always functioned with an absolute minimum of personnel. Command responsibility was divided in that operational control of the companies was always delegated to the divisions which they supported. However, administrative control which included all personnel matters—Class II and Class IV supply items and maintenance of motor vehicles and communications equipment was kept by battalion headquarters. This retention of administrative command gave the battalion commander flexibility and he could place additional support with the company that needed help most.

It can be readily seen from the way this battalion carried out its missions that only a short training period is required to transfer an organization, trained in the use of crew served weapons using forward observer and fire direction center techniques, to a mortar unit that will be employed primarily for HE missions. However, chemical missions will require a great deal of additional training for operation sections and fire direction centers as well as forward observers.