

Fire Support for 14 Divisions.

MORTARS IN NORMANDY

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PRIOR TO D-DAY there were only four chemical battalions in the United Kingdom—the 81st, 86th, 87th, and 92d. The first three of these battalions had arrived well trained for normal ground force operations, but with little or no prior training for amphibious assault work. Since the capacity of the Assault Training Center was limited, and the number of troops required to complete the course comparatively large, it was possible to put only the 81st and 87th battalions through the course. These two battalions were therefore selected as part of the assault elements scheduled to land on D-day.

During the winter of 1944 it became evident that the arrival of additional chemical battalions, provided in the ETO troop basis, was going to be seriously retarded. It was decided, therefore, to attempt to remedy this condition by activating and organizing a battalion in UK.

The organization of the 92d Battalion was started under the supervision of the First Army. This battalion was completely organized, equipped, and trained in approximately 90 days, starting with a small cadre from the 81st Battalion.

Thus, it was demonstrated that, if the emergency is acute enough, a chemical battalion can be made ready for combat in a considerably shorter period of time than the eight months normally allotted. In spite of the successful completion of this project, however, the difficulties inherent in activating a combat unit such as this, in the theater, were so great as to discourage further attempts.

During winter and early spring of 1944, several large tactical exercises, involving one or more divisions and supporting troops, were held in UK, with special emphasis on landing operations. The chemical battalions participated. As a result of these exercises, it was conclusively demonstrated that T/O 3-25, 7 Sep 43, under which these battalions were organized, was totally inadequate to permit their effective employment in the field.

The 86th and 92d Battalions, which were not designated for employment on D-day, were able to correct this deficiency, at least in part, by taking a certain proportion of their mortars out of action and reducing their fire power accordingly.

However, the 81st and 87th Battalions, which formed a part of the assault forces, could not operate effectively on

the beaches and through the early stages of a landing operation, even after employing similar corrective measures. The problem was solved in the case of these two battalions by attaching, temporarily, a detachment of the 120th Chemical Processing Company to the 81st Battalion, and a similar detachment of the 113th Chemical Processing Company to the 87th Battalion.

Approximately 125 men from each processing company were so attached. These men worked initially as ammunition carriers, and performed other duties not requiring knowledge of chemical mortar technique. The service they rendered was an important factor in the initial successes achieved by the two battalions.

Chemical battalions have two separate and distinct tactical missions. The principal mission is close support of Infantry. A secondary, but highly important mission, however, is to act as a substitute for Field Artillery in situations where artillery either cannot be made available or cannot function efficiently, owing to rugged terrain or other unusual conditions.

In amphibious operations, it is this latter mission which makes chemical battalions of such high value.

Usually it is at least several hours, and sometimes more than a day after H-hour, before artillery can be landed and put into operation; whereas chemical mortar units can land immediately behind the initial assault wave of Infantry, emplace and fire their mortars directly from the beaches, later advancing into the interior and continuing fire as the situation permits. After a beachhead has been firmly established and a general advance into the interior commenced, chemical battalions should gradually revert to their normal role of close support of Infantry. That was what happened during the invasion of Normandy.

If necessary, provision can be made to fire the 4.2 directly from landing craft, prior to arrival at the beach, by installing special base plate mounts in the boats, and changing to standard base plates upon reaching shore. This practice is particularly valuable in establishing smoke screens on or near the beach, directly in front of the landing waves of Infantry.

Gunner ducks as mortar shell heads for German positions beyond Norman hedgerows.



Thorough training in the firing of 4.2 mortars from landing craft was given at the Assault Training Center. It included not only the technique of fire but the proper coordination of infantry movement in connection therewith. Preliminary plans for the employment of the assault mortar battalions in this role were prepared, and the necessary smoke ammunition provided. Shortly prior to D-day, however, the Navy, which is in complete control of amphibious operations until troops reach shore, vetoed the firing of smoke by any means other than from naval vessels, prior to landing. A great disappointment at the time, it actually made no difference in the end, since the sea was so rough on D-day that it would have been impossible to fire mortars from landing craft, anyway.

On D-day, the 1st Infantry Division, with the 81st Chemical Battalion attached, landed on Omaha Beach. Here the Germans threw everything in the book at the attackers. Mortars were used to fire on machine-gun nests and to lay smoke to cover the advance of the attacking force.

At this same time, the 87th Chemical Battalion, attached to the 4th Infantry Division, landed on Utah Beach. For about six hours 4.2-inch mortars were the sole "artillery" support of the 4th Division. The next day "A" Company stopped two enemy counterattacks by intense barrages. The Battalion continued to support the advance of the Infantry towards Montebourg and St. Mere Eglise. The ruins of these two villages stand today as grim witnesses of the destructive power of the 4.2 mortar. Three days later, "B" and "C" Companies were attached to the 101st Airborne Division for bridging the Douve River and the attack on Carentan. The use of WP was officially credited with being a strong factor in the capitulation of Carentan.

The 81st Battalion moved on, still supporting the Infantry through the towns of Foret de Cerisy, St. Margaret d'Elle and Comains. During the next few days the Battalion was divided up between the 2d and 29th Divisions.

On 13 June the 87th Battalion was

attached to the 9th Division, except "B" Company which was attached to the 82d Airborne Division. These units were in the process of sealing off the Cherbourg Peninsula. Cherbourg fell on 27 June. The Battalion had some trouble with German snipers during this period. "A" and "B" Companies were attached to the 9th Infantry Division for several days, supporting its advance.

From 13 June to the first week in August the 81st Battalion, supporting the 2d and 29th Infantry Divisions, moved forward very slowly, firing from the same position for several weeks at a time. This was in the strongly-prepared German positions around Hills 192 and 195 and the St. Lo area. The Infantry could fight until exhausted and be replaced by others, but the mortarmen had to stay by their mortars, supporting the attack. By this time the Infantry had learned of the terrific support afforded them by 4.2s and were calling on them more and more.

About 1 July the 86th Chemical Battalion arrived in France. It was attached as follows: "A" Company to 90th Division, "C" to 79th Division, and "D" to the 82d Airborne. "B" Company had an accident in the channel on the way over: The ship carrying the company either struck a mine or was torpedoed, causing several casualties and the loss of most of the company equipment. It was not possible to re-equip and put the company into action until several weeks later. The 86th Battalion supported the infantry divisions in the attack on the high ground south of Pont l'Abbe and St. Sauveur.

The 92d Battalion arrived in France about the same time as the 86th. Within a few days of arrival it was attached in entirety to the 30th Infantry Division and went into combat. On 1 August the Battalion was still in support of the 30th at Tessy-sur-Vire, and shortly afterward was relieved for a short rest.

The 92d Battalion accomplished everything expected of it during the Normandy Campaign, although it was a little late in getting into the picture, and its record as a whole is as outstanding as any.

From about 28 June to 20 July, the 87th Battalion was in support of the 4th and 83d Divisions in the advance south of Carentan. The next day the Battalion was attached to the 1st, 4th, and 9th Divisions for the attack on St. Lo.

During late July and early August, the 86th Battalion was attached to the 8th and 83d Divisions for the great attack on the fortress at St. Malo and the strong points at Dinard. Mortar fire of HE and WP played a very large part in the surrender of the citadel on 17 August.

August was a busy month for all the mortar battalions. By 6 August the 81st had fought all the way from Omaha Beach to the Vire River, keeping the Germans constantly within the range of their 4.2s. A few days later the Battalion was attached to the 2d and 29th Divisions for support in the push through Vire, Tinchebray and Sourdeval. From 20 to 26 August, the Battalion was attached operationally to the 80th and 90th Divisions. It then moved into the Falaise Gap area on support missions in the final stages of this operation.

From 27 August to 1 September, "A" and "B" Companies were attached to the 4th Division and continued after the retreating Germans towards Belgium. "C" and "D" Companies attached to the 28th Division, participated in the Honor March and Victory Parade in Paris on 29 August 1944, later resuming their pursuit of the Germans.

The 86th was also busy. Attached to the 2d, 8th, and 29th Divisions, this battalion supported the attack on Brest from 25 August until 19 September, when the great seaport fell. Almost 50,000 rounds of 4.2 ammunition had been fired against the defenders. It was here that prisoners declared, "The fire from the heavy mortars is inhuman." Others stated they had nicknamed it "Whispering Death." On top of this testimony, the praise from supported infantry commanders was lavish.

The 87th Battalion, during August, was attached to the 1st, 4th, and 9th Infantry Divisions. The German retreat caused the companies to displace forward frequently. Around Mortain there was considerable activity in blast-

ing out strong points of enemy rear guards. Forward observers had a field day blasting out these points and interdicting the lines of retreat. Large bodies of troops were literally cut to pieces when caught in the open. This was one of the most effective demonstrations of the rapid close-in support a 4.2-inch mortar unit can give to a supported unit. One regimental commander stated that this close-in support, delivered so quickly and effectively, was a major factor to the success of his regiment.

By 25 August the companies were in assembly areas, after long marches in the vicinity of Etampes, Corbeil and Arpajon. The next day saw the liberation of Paris, and on the following day the Battalion crossed the Seine in pursuit of the Germans.

During the period from D-day to 1 September, the chemical battalions expended almost 150,000 rounds of HE and about 90,000 rounds of WP. Battalion casualties included: 55 killed, 137 wounded and three missing.

With the fall of Paris, the Normandy Campaign came to an end. In the ensuing dash of the American armies across eastern France and through Belgium, the battalions were employed to a very limited extent. However, the work of the battalions on the Siegfried Line is an epic in modern military history, of which the Chemical Warfare Service will be forever proud. These latter operations lack the color and dash of the Normandy Campaign, and hence their story may hold less interest for the reader. To the military student, however, the accomplishments of the chemical battalions during the past four months have been of pre-eminent interest.

So few 4.2 battalions are available, and they are considered so indispensable by corps and division commanders that they have been kept constantly in action, without any rest. For months at a time, they have endured every possible hardship of severe weather, difficult terrain, and enemy action. They have also been called upon to execute missions for which the mortar was never designed, and these missions, too, have been successfully executed.