

## History of 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion, World War II

The 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was constituted on 25 February 1943 and activated on 5 May 1943 at Camp Van Dorn, MS. This temporary World War II post located two miles from Centreville, MS was named for CSA General Earl Van Dorn. He was a native of Mississippi and had been an officer in the United States Army prior to the War Between the States.

The cadre of the 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineers was mostly from Plattsburgh Barracks, NY, which was supplemented by twenty officers from Class 29 of the Engineer OCS at Ft. Belvoir, VA. By the first of June 1943 enough newly inducted men had arrived to begin basic training. Upon completion of basic training came nine weeks in the Louisiana Maneuver Area, followed by more training at Camp Van Dorn before heading for the Port of Embarkation on 17 February 1944.

After several days at Camp Shanks, NY the Battalion boarded the SS Cristobal at the port of New York and set out on 27 February 1944 on a 12-day voyage to Swansea, Wales. The Battalion's first temporary station in England was at Fargo Tent Camp on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire on 10 March 1944, where it became part of First Army, and was attached to the 1109<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Group. Less than a week later the move was made to its new English "home" in Over Norton Camp, near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire.

Training in England from arrival in March until departure on 21 June 1944 for the marshaling area for transport to France consisted mostly of road work, river crossings, and laying and clearing mines, not to mention learning to drive on the wrong side of the road.

While at the marshaling area waiting for a storm in the English Channel to subside, all vehicles had to have a waterproofing kit installed on the engine in case it was necessary to drive through water in unloading at Utah Beach in France. The Battalion departed the port of Weymouth, England by LST on the night of 26 June and landed after an uneventful crossing on 27 June. Most of the landing craft were able to beach themselves at high tide so that a majority of the battalion vehicles could drive off at low tide not needing the waterproofing.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 1944 World War II began for the 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineers, with headquarters one-half mile north of Blandamour in Normandy. From then until VE Day, 8 May 1945, the Battalion performed every possible kind of combat support engineering work as a part of the 1109<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Group, except for brief special assignments. The Group was assigned to 1<sup>st</sup> Army from 12 Mar 1944 to 6 Aug 1944, to 3<sup>rd</sup> Army from 7 Aug 1944 to 28 Sep 1944, and to 7<sup>th</sup> Army from 29 Sep 1944 to July 1945.

The Battalion participated in the campaigns of :

- Normandy
- Northern France
- Ardennes-Alsace
- Rhineland
- Central Europe

Salzburg, Austria was the Battalion's last post before returning to the United States after the war. The Battalion was officially inactivated on 8 March 1946 at Camp Kilmer, NJ.

The usual list of combat support engineering assignments includes building and maintenance of routes of communication, construction and demolition of obstacles, construction of bridges, water supply, fighting as infantry when necessary, etc. The 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineers did all of that, plus that most important of all assignments: Improvisation. When you need gravel, operate a gravel pit. When the gravel is too wet to use, find a way to dry it. When you need lumber, operate a saw mill. When you can't get stringers long enough, move the trestles closer together. When your assignment is to build a type of bridge you've never seen built before, build it anyway. When you need another tar heater, use an abandoned German field kitchen. When a crane is too light for a job, counterbalance it by chaining two trucks to the rear. Whatever assignment the 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion was given, it found a way to do it.

The most important task the 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineers was called upon to perform was the building of forty tactical bridges in France and Germany, totaling 4,844 feet. These ranged from single-lane class 40 to double-lane class 70 and from 28 feet to 978 feet in length. Bridge types built were Treadway, timber trestle, timber pier, steel stringer, pile bent, single-single Bailey, double-single Bailey, double-double Bailey, and triple-triple Bailey.

Bridge building got off to an impressive start, with the first assignment being construction of a 635 foot Treadway bridge across the Seine River northwest of Paris. This bridge, completed at 1600 hours on 20 Aug 1944, was the *first allied bridge across the Seine River* during World War II. Although this bridge was built during daylight hours, many subsequent bridges were built at night during blackout conditions.

The 163<sup>rd</sup> Engineers never had an official battalion crest approved by The Adjutant General, but it did have an unofficial crest designed by a commercial artist, T/5 Walter Rogerson, who served in the S-3 Section of Battalion Headquarters. It was posted on all the bridges the Battalion built, and is the principal graphic on the memorial plaque. It consists of an imaginary "stripped-assed ape" holding a hammer in one hand and a rifle in the other, with a bridge truss in the background. This symbolized that the Battalion's most important mission was to build bridges while providing for its own security.