

HISTORY OF THE 627th TANK DESTROYER BATTALION
February 1941-February 1945
By George P. Lucas

As a result of the success of the Nazi Panzer tank divisions in blitzkrieging Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Belgium, Holland and France, the War Department of the United States had modified the French 75-MM gun and established anti-tank units throughout some of its army divisions.

G and H batteries were designated as anti-tank units in the 106th Field Artillery regiment from Buffalo, New York, a unit of the 27th Division of the New York National Guard, that was Federalized for one year of training at Ft. McLellan, Alabama, February, 1941.

On January 21, 1941, a group of draftees was sworn into the U. S. Army in the Yates Hotel in Syracuse. Another group was sworn into service in Buffalo on January 22. A third group was sworn into service in Rochester on January 23. All were sent to Ft. Niagara for processing. They were issued woollen clothing that smelled of moth balls. I dare say that they were put into storage after WWI. The coats and the pants legs were too long in many cases. I was issued a pair of army britches and wrap-around wool leggings that dropped down to my shoe tops during close-order drills. We were issued dog-tags with our army serial numbers. We took the IQ test and a personal history of each of us was compiled. We learned close-order drills on the parade grounds in 20-degree temperatures with winds with a chill-factor of minus zero degrees blowing on us from Lake Ontario. Some of us were on KP, barracks cleanup detail and warehouse storage of newly arrived military clothing, etc.

We spent approximately five days at Ft. Niagara, 312 selective service inductees, when we prepared to entrain

for Ft. McClellan, Alabama. Because it was an overnight trip, we rode in Pullman cars that were service by Redcaps. We arrived at McClellan at about 1:30 PM on Sunday, January 27. It was a dismal day, rain and a gray sky. We were met by expressionless non-commissioned officers who ordered us to mount the 2-1/2-ton trucks. Enroute to the 106th Field Artillery regimental recreational hall the scenery was not pleasant, the soil within the fort was a white sand sans any vegetation. After we reached the rec hall we detrucked and were herded indoors where we were greeted by a smiling regimental chaplain, Lt. Col. Roman J. Nuwer, who welcomed us to the AEF (Alabama Expeditionary Force).

After the welcome oratory, we were given short-arm inspection and ~~afterwards~~ were assigned to three batteries as follows: 112 men to G Battery; 112 men to H Battery and the remainder to 1st Service and Ammunition battery.

Maj. Gen. William N. Haskell was the 27th Division Commander, Col. Ronald C. Brock was the 106th Regimental Commander. 1st Lt. Leon M Schultz commanded G Battery and Capt. James R. Virtue commanded H Battery.

Monday the 28th was devoted to introductions to the battery commissioned and non-commissioned officers. We were lectured on military life.

Each battery was issued two modified French 75-millimeter guns (the table of materials called for six guns per battery), and 2-1/2-ton GMC prime mover trucks/ command cars. The gun crews took turns practicing on the real guns, while the other crews practiced around tent ridge poles. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

On the 29th/^{we}were introduced to the 75-MM guns. The modified guns were equipped with split trails, two jacks to raise

the wheels of the ground and an artillery sight graduated in mils.

On the 30th we were issued campaign hats, machinaws, gas

All the Selective service recruits in G, H and 1st Service Batteries were issued ^{personal} ~~personal~~ military dress and fatigue clothing, except Private Harry 'Tiny' Sturdevant of Corning because of his huge physique. He wore his civilian clothes for atleast six months before the army quartermaster could furnish him with clothing that fit him.

ie of the tent. A stove pipe extended from the top of the stove through the opening at the top of the tent. The first section had a damper and the top section was capped with a spark arrester. We fired the stoves after our daily drills. Sometimes the spark arrester ^{malfunctioned} ~~malfunctioned~~ causing the emitting of sparks that landed on the canvas and burned a hole or holes in it. Sometimes the holes were so large that the tent occupants slept under the winter's night sky for days before the tent was replaced or repaired. It was the street guards duty to keep the fires going during the night if there was a supply of coal in the tent.

On March 3 Battery G was ^{Quarantined} ~~quarantined~~ following the death of Pvt. Frank V. Faulisi of Corning, N. Y., from spinal meningitis. The regimental doctors misdiagnosed the disease because Frank was confined to his quarters by the doctors with a high fever. The quarantined was extended another week because Pvt. Clayton Bitker of Rochester became afflicted with the same kind of disease a week later. He recovered.

Before dark three 20-gallon garbage cans were placed at intervals on each battery street because of the distance to the latrines. They were used to urinate into. In the morning the last six men to fall in at reveille were designated as

to empty the cans and dry them out with flaming newspaper. The stench was awful. I was caught once because of the wrap-around leggings. It was the last time I put them on before mess. I was glad that my overcoat was long.

G and H Batteries were engaged in thirteen weeks of basic training before they trained with the other units of the 106th.

A regimental dance was held on Sat., Feb. 24, in the permanent post gymnasium. One hundred fifty men were selected from the 106th to attend this dance. A problem confronted the hosts because there were fifty girls from Birmingham, Jacksonville and Anniston. The committee issued red, white and blue strings to three groups of fifty men each hoping to solve the problem which got out of hand after the third dance. So they gave up.

On April 7 Governor Herbert H. Lehman of New York State reviewed the 27th Division during a two-day stay which included the 106th regiment.

On May 1 sixteen men from Battery G were promoted to the ranks of sergeant and corporal. I was promoted to the rank of corporal. I was assigned as a gunner on the 75-MM gun.

On May 27 we headed for maneuvers in Tennessee. The maneuvers would provide tests for the new mobile kitchen equipment, which replaced the old wood burning ones, ~~blitz-~~
~~krieg~~ mobility against the 3rd Armored division commanded by Maj. Gen George Patton, interrupted sleep and delayed meals, long marches and eating canned rations.

On July 1 most of the men of the 106th were given 10-day furloughs. It was a welcome respite from the daily routine of a GI.

When we returned to Ft. McClellan we fired the 75-MM guns against moving box targets. The exercise was a total success. We were well trained, and proficient in anti-tank tactics.

Battery G engaged Battery H in gunnery competition: Dropping the tails gates, jumping off the prime movers, uncoupling the guns from the trucks, moving the guns to a designated area, splitting the trails, jacking up the wheels and sighting a designated target. Battery G won by big margin so that the gun crews of Battery H had to clean the four guns and prime movers to the satisfaction of 1st Lt. Charles Cameron of G Battery.

On Aug. 7 a convoy of 1200 vehicles left Ft. McClellan for the Arkansas Louisiana maneuvers. It was a three-day trip. The exercise pitted the second army against the third army. It was the largest maneuver in the military history of the United States. The areas were infested with copperhead snakes and red ants. On one occasion G-battery personnel raided a watermelon field while in convoy on a p--- stop. The farmer chased the convoy for several miles. He complained to the commanding officer. We had a shakedown inspection. What we did to hide the evidence was to pour out the sand from the ammunition boxes and hide pieces of watermelon in them. We learned later that the melon farmers sued the United States Government for their losses. I don't know whether or not they recovered any amount of money.

On Sept. 13 a tropical storm of growing intensity hit the maneuvers area. Our clothes and personal gear were saturated. It took us three days to dryout.

The anti-tank batteries were engaged against the 1st armored division that was equipped with new medium tanks.

Also, the B-25 medium size bombers and the high-speed B-26 Martin medium size bombers participated in this gigantic exercise. The bombers demonstrated their awesome aerial power by dropping 100-pound bombs on 100 obsolete army tanks. These maneuvers demonstrated that the army was not ready for actual combat because of leadership faults, lack of fighting equipment and poor tactics..

The 27th Division returned to Ft. McClellan on Oct. 1. Later that month the soldiers were issued the new steel helmet that is still in use today.

After the infamous attack on Pearl Harbor, Hickam and Wheeler airfields, Schofield barracks, and other military installations on Dec. 7th, the 27th Division was alerted to prepare to move to Ft. Ord, California. About 60-percent of the men in G and H Batteries were transferred to the 106th. Both batteries had their 75-MM guns and prime movers transferred to the 27th Division. The remaining personnel of G and H Batteries worked 24 hours a day loading the material onto flat-bed railroad cars in Gadsden, Alabama. Some non-commissioned officers from the ^{headquarters and} training batteries of the 104th and 105th Field Artilleries were transferred to the newly designated 627th Tank Destroyer Battalion which was formed by a General Order from the War Department as of Dec: 15th.

Shortly after Christmas Day the 627th was fully complemented with men from the 33rd Division ^{with} ~~that~~ ^{was} stationed at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. The ^{new} Battalion consisted of Headquarters company, Reconnaissance company, A, B and C Firing companies. We were issued 37-MM split trail guns that were drawn by 3/4-ton weapons carriers.

Right after New Year's Day we moved from tents to barracks next to the General Hospital. It was the first time in almost a year that we slept in a warm building. We spent the time in overnight bivouacs and simulated anti-tank problems on the military reservation near Gadsden.

On Feb. 21, 1942, the battalion moved from Ft. McClellan to Camp San Luis Obispo, California. Our troop train consisted of Pullman and baggage cars. The baggage cars were used to cook our meals. It took three days to reach the camp. Everytime a freight train approach, we were side tracked. ~~In the daytime we would detrain~~ and do calisthenics.

While at San Luis Obispo, we were assigned to defend Pismo Beach and Morro Bay. We occupied these areas when a Japanese submarine fired on Santa Barbara. We encountered some problems with the MP's in town. They were from the South and did not care for Yanks. We slept in pyramidal tents that were heated by heating oil fired Sibley stoves.

On Feb. 21 we moved by truck from San Luis to the East Garrison of Ft. Ord. Again we slept in pyramidal tents that were heated with heating oil fired Sibley stoves. At the Fort we were assigned guard duty and defense of the Monterey Bay area. The battalion personnel was ^{entertained} ~~entertain~~ by actress Patricia Morrison. We were inoculated with Yellow Fever serum that was donated by the Rockefeller research foundation. About 75 percent of us contracted yellow jaundice. Some of us with severe cases were hospitalized in the General Hospital.

On March 20 we moved by truck from Ft. Ord to Bayshore Kennel Club in Daly City which was adjacent to the famous Cow Palace.

On June 22 we boarded the So President Johnson at the

Port of Oakland. Six hours outside of San Francisco the Pacific Ocean ^{became} ~~was~~ very choppy, causing many of us to become seasick. Many of us did not eat the evening mess. ~~that evening.~~

We reached the Port of Honolulu nine days later because our convoy zig-zagged all the way. We disembarked from the ship and boarded narrow-gauge railroad cars that took us past Pearl Harbor where we saw the upper structures of the sunken ships and past Wheeler airbase where ~~there were~~ ^{we saw} remnants of damaged aircraft. Then we detrained at the Wahiawa military evacuation area that offered us a panoramic view of Pearl Harbor. Later we were given the history of the Hawaiian Islands and the culture of the Polynesian people. Our stay here was devoted to field problems and lectures.

On Aug. 14 we left the Island of Oahu for Hilo, Hawaii, which was an overnight trip, aboard the inter-island ^{ship} SS Waialeale. Upon arrival we rode by trucks to South Point, the Southern most part of the Big Island. The place was desolate, sandy and without any vegetation. I felt as though I was in the French Foreign Legion. We lived in wood army barracks. We were on guard duty 24-hours a day.

On Oct. 19 we left South Point. Company B was stationed at Waiohinu. We were quartered in billets. Our assignment was to defend South Point and Kimo Point near Naalehua. We were given six French 75-MM guns with box trails and six prime movers. The other companies of the 627th were assigned to guard the area around Hilo and the General Lyman Airbase.

While at Waiohinu some of our non-commissioned officers were advanced a rank and ordered to Tank Destroyer School in Camp Hood, Texas.

Later Company B moved to the former city of Olaa where

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we were quartered in billets in a sugar cane field. Later we moved to an area between Olaa and Pahoa. One of the platoons was assigned to guard the sector to the North around Hawi. Another platoon, commanded by Lt. Allely, was assigned to defend the Kona coast. I was in that platoon. We built gun positions at Honaunau (city of refuge) and at Kailua Bay. We occupied the gun position at Kailua Bay at sunset.

Company B was moved to defend the General Lyman air-base in Hilo and guard the utilities.

Some of our men were placed on detached service to service the Kilauea Military Rest Camp.

Lt. Col. Walter F. Alt was relieved of his command of the 627th. He was transferred to Gen. Gibson's command. Lt. Col. Maurice Fitzgerald succeeded him as the commander of the battalion.

While enroute to the platoon at Kealahou, Corporals Erhardt and Eastman were involved in a serious jeep accident. Their vehicle left the road and plummeted down an embankment. Erhardt died by being impaled on a broken sapling and Eastman had one of his arms severed below the shoulder. Because of first-aid training he unconsciously stopped the bleeding with his wrist belt. Corporal Erhardt's remains were interred in the Hilo cemetery.

On June 1943 we received the M-10 tank destroyers and armored cars. Companies B and C were stationed at the former Conservation Corps camp on the fringe of Kilauea volcano. We practiced anti-tank maneuvers and tactics in the Hawaiian Volcanoes National Park. It was an ideal place for such exercises.

While at this camp site we were placed on combat alert.

We were engaged in tactical problems day and night. Our security sections were given specialized combat training. Each man had to qualify as a marksman. As happened once before, the combat alert was lifted. As a result, we practiced firing the guns on the tank destroyers as artillery pieces. These exercises were very satisfactory. We used topographic maps and observation posts.

Tech. Sgt. William Tinnelly ~~was~~ ^{succeeded} Leon Benfield as our 1st Sgt. Benfield was transferred to another unit with S/Sgt. Ziezula.

While on the Big Island, some of our men formed bowling teams, a basketball team and a soft ball team. The softball team won the armed forces championship. The basketball team did well too.

We returned to Oahu in the Spring of 1944. Some of us were quartered in the non-commissioned/officers homes in Schofield while the others were stationed in Wahiawa. Most of the time we engaged in tactical exercises. Ames Curchin was given a field commission as a second lieutenant. We fielded a football team that played in the Honolulu stadium. The football gear was furnished by Special Services. They did rather well. The team was coached by John Ksionzyk who became backup quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League.

In Dec. of 1944 the majority of the men of the battalion were given a 30-day R and R leave. We sailed from Honolulu Harbor aboard the SS Matsonia without a naval escort. We arrived at San Francisco three days later. Then we were transferred to Angels Island where we were issued woolen clothing. A few of the men R & R'd in California and others in the Illinois and New York States. We traveled by Pullman car to Ft. Sheridan and Ft. Dix. From these military bases we traveled by rail coach to our home towns.

While at home on the R and R in Buffalo, George Rich, the mess sergeant of C Company received a letter from the army finance division that his wife was married to five GI's. She was receiving five subsistence allowances each month.

After the 30-day period we returned to Ft. Dix where we were given a 15-day R and R because of transportation problems. Afterward we traveled by Pullman cars to Ft. Lawton, Washington, where we were quartered for approximately three weeks.

We boarded a Swedish freighter with a name that translated into English "Fountain in the Woods." The trip to the Island of Oahu took five days. We were trucked the staging area at Ft. Kamehaha where we learned that the 627th T. D. Battalion was dissolved as of Feb. 1, 1945.

We were told that the firing companies would become Quartermaster Companies, the Reconnaissance Company was to become a Graves Registration Unit. I don't know what became of Headquarters Company.

EPILOGUE

The men in the three quartermaster Companies were billeted near the outskirts of Honolulu on the same street as the Hawaiian Prison. The men were assigned daily to work in the quartermaster warehouses throughout the Island. Six men were more fortunate, they were in charge of trucking the Okinawan Prisoners of War to the various quartermaster warehouses.

Some of the dissatisfied men transferred to combat units because they felt humiliated sorting WAC bras and panties. They participated in the invasion of Okinawa and the retaking of the Phillipine Islands. Some of them were awarded Purple Hearts.

In the Spring of the year Congress passed a law that any

*Review -
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date 15 Apr 1945*

GI with 88 or more points was to be free of combat duty. Because most of us had more than the minimum points, we were stuck on the Island of Oahu in the Hawaiian Command for the duration of the war.

After the war against Japan, those of us to be discharged boarded the old Naval carrier The Saratoga at Pearl Harbor. It was a three-day trip to Alameda where we were transported by an army boat to a staging area in Pittsburg, California. About a week later we boarded an Army air transport at Travis Airforce base. Because the ground crew overfilled the airplane tanks with gasolene that spilled over the wings, the flight engineer cancelled the flight till the next day. We slept in the barracks at Lowery. The next day we arrived at the Newark airfield after dark. As the plane was landing we were treated to the spectacular sight of an illuminated Statue of Liberty. I then thanked God that I was an American. My stint in the army was well worth it.

After an overnight stay at Ft. Dix, N. J., we were given physicals and instructed to apply for disability compensation. Afterward we were interviewed by non-commissioned officers who went over our military records, part of which was to be included on our Honorable Discharge Papers.

We were discharged at 10:45 PM and transported by army bus to Trenton where six of us hired a taxi to Grand Central Station in Manhattan. We boarded a crowded train for Buffalo. We had to stand all the way to Schenectady. It was a milk train that made every stop along the way.

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I wish to thank Jerry Pratt, Bill Dinki and Ed Malczos for helping me to make this historical account of the 527th T. D. Battalion as accurate as humanly possible.

George P. Lucas

The 627th T. D. Battalion Veterans Association has held an annual reunion, except for two dark years, ever since the first one at the TWO-BIT CLUB on lower Main St. in Buffalo in December 1945. The late John Egan was the prime mover behind the reunions. He died in February 1985.

Subsequent reunions have been held on a rotating basis in the cities of Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse. Because of the ill-health and death of some of the organizers in Rochester and Syracuse, the reunions have been held alternately between Buffalo and the Corning area.

Harry 'Tiny' Sturdevant is the perpetual President of the association and George P. Lucas is the secretary-treasurer.