

The 243 rd Field Artillery Battalion was activated August 1942 at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, one of the earliest of the separate Artillery units to be activated after the beginning of the Second World War. Armed with the 105 howitzer, the battalion was attached directly to Army Ground Forces, with some administrative control exercised by the Third U. S. Army.

The enlisted cadre for the new battalion was drawn from the 192nd F. A. Bn. (Maine) and the 203rd FA Bn (Connecticut), both National Guard units that had been part of the 43rd. (New England) Division. The cadre men included selectees who had been assigned to the two battalions after induction. The officer cadre was drawn in part from the same two organizations, with a regular army officer, Lt. Col. Joseph L Hardin, as commanding officer. Lieutenants were supplied by a shipment of two graduates of class 26, Field Artillery Officers Candidate School, Ft. Sill, Oklahoma.

The first group of fillers (bulk of the enlisted men) reached the battalion late in September, 200 men from upper New York State who had been inducted at Fort Niagara, N.Y. The second group, approximately 70 men, arrived several days later from Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, to which they had been originally shipped following induction in the Middle West. The final large group of men came from Fort Devens, Massachusetts, approximately 200 men from throughout the New England States.

Basic training began in October, and the first battalion field problems were being conducted in November, Baker Battery had the honor of firing the first 105 rounds on Thanksgiving Day. The second and last group of officers to join the battalion, twelve Second Lieutenants from OCS class 41, reported in mid - December.

On December 31, orders came through for advance parties from Battalion headquarters, Able, Baker and Charlie batteries to report to Camp Blanding, Florida, Wilmington, N.C., Charleston, S. C., and Miami, Florida. The battalion was being transferred for immediate duty with the Eastern Defense Command, Southern Sector.

Before the battalion relieved the 102nd FA BN, 26th Division, however, it was decided to give it three months of intensive battery training at Camp Blanding. Ammunition allowances in unprecedented quantities were provided, and service practice was fired as often as twice per week. The gun crews of the three firing batteries rapidly reached a high state of proficiency.

In April the battalion was split up to assume its new duties with Combat Teams along the Coast. Headquarters and Service batteries, the latter with ammunition sections farmed out to the firing batteries, moved to Atlantic beach, Florida, on the coast from Jacksonville, where was also located the headquarters of the 144th Infantry Regiment. Each firing battery became the artillery of an infantry combat team that was built around a battalion of the 144th. "A" was at Carolina Beach, N.C., near Wilmington; "B" was at Stoney Field, on the campus of the Citadel, at Charleston, and "C" was on 79th St. in Northwest Miami.

There were unpleasant intervals during the eight months that followed, such as the swamp maneuvers for "A" and "B"; the battle of Pontro Vedro for Headquarters and Service; and mosquito fights in the Everglades for "C"; but nothing happened that was serious enough to mark a record of pleasant living that will remain a bright spot in the Army memoir of all the men who participated.

The end to inaction came at Thanksgiving, 1943 when the battalion moved to Fort Jackson, S.C., and was assigned to the 112th Field Artillery Group, XII Corps, the first Artillery higher headquarters under which it had ever served. An intensive training program to prepare for early combat service began immediately. During this period the battalion was transferred to the 203d Field Artillery Group, and took the basic training tests late in January.

Shortly after this War Department orders went into effect changing the weapon of the battalion to the eight inch gun. On February 4, 1944, the 243rd moved to Ft. Bragg, N.C., to receive its new weapons and begin training, for what was obviously to be a very early movement to the combat zone. The battalion was assigned to the 211th F.A. Group of the XIII Corps.

Neither officers or men of the battalion were familiar with the eight inch gun, the newest weapon turned out by the Army Ordinance Department, but they soon found out nobody else knew any more. The huge gun came in two loads and it could shoot twenty miles. It was towed with tractors and put into position with a crane. Firing data could be prepared only with intricate compilations of corrections.

During this training period Col Hardin was transferred to an overseas assignment, and Joseph G. Rucks was ordered in as battalion commander, along with a new executive officer, Maj. Garell Burgoon. Richard G Banks, Able battery commander, was made S-3.

The gun soon was mastered, however, in a three months period of hard work on the part of every man in the battalion. In addition to learning the gun and taking the rigorous Army Ground Force firing tests, all the multiple details in connection with POM (preparation for overseas movement) had to be complied with at the same time.

The battalion left Fort Bragg on June 14, for the Camp Shanks, New York port of embarkation. The guns, cranes and prime movers had been shipped ten days earlier. After the arrival at Camp Shanks there was still a week of hurried bustle in connection with final POM requirements, but the battalion was finally cleared for shipment and qualified for 50% twelve hour passes, pending the final alert. Passes were issued on Saturday and Sunday, June 17, and 18, and each member of the battalion got a chance to spend a few hours in New York or visit relatives and friends who were in striking distance.

On Monday the alert came, and Wednesday night, June 21, the battalion marched aboard the giant liner Queen Elizabeth. The marching was not in the best military fashion, for each man was burdened with a full pack and his duffel bag, with a few unlucky stalwarts having to manage a free hand for typewriters, bags of flashlights and personnel records.

The Elizabeth, fastest liner afloat, sailed without naval escort, but took the Southern route across the Atlantic to stay within range of the air bases of Bermuda and the Azores. Leaving New York harbor on Thursday morning she came to anchor in the Firth of Clyde, of Greenock, Scotland, late Tuesday night, June 27. The trip was comfortable as far as the weather was concerned, but the jam-packed housing that put 15,000 troops on the ship made living conditions crowded and uncomfortable. The mass feeding provided a poor quality of food, and all the men were glad to see the rolling hills of Scotland through the rain that came to be accepted as part of Britain.

The 243rd along with the 256th Bn(also 8 inch guns) was assigned to Camp Stanage Park, just inside the Welsh border between the villages of Kighton & Bucknell. The housing was perambular tents, but the hospitality of the surrounding countryside more than made up for such inadequacies. Kighton, within easy walking distance, became the most popular place to visit, but all of the nearby territory was covered, including historic Glaskow a few miles to the South.

Upon arrival in England, the battalion was informed that it was assigned to the 3rd Army, commanded by the already fabulous George S. Patton Jr. and then marshalling for movement into France for a decisive strike against the Germans. The stay in England was filled with a rush of training in new developments stressed in the European Theatre of Operations and the assembly of supplies and equipment from the various depots in every corner of Britain.

Third Army Units began to move to Normandy in the last days of July, and the call came for the 243rd a few days later. The batalion moved to a marshaling area near Dorchester, and boarded LST'S in the Weymouth Harbor on the morning of Saturday, August 5. In the afternoon the Naval craft moved out in the harbor to join a huge convoy bound for Omaha Beach. The LST crossing proved both smooth and comfortable. The channel provided a few cases of sea sickness and the Navy cooks served food that earned the praise of all men aboard.

The ships beached late on the night of the 6th, and the first prime movers of the battalioin puled their guns and carriages on to French soil exactly two months after D-day. The final assembly from the various transports was completed on the night of the 7th, with the battalion in rendezvous near the town of Briquebec. The St. Lo breakthrough had been made a few days before. Half of the Third Army was racing through Brittainy and the other half was sweeping around the Southern flank of the front toward Paris. The proper disposition of heavy artillery units was a question still undecided, and the 243rd spent the night of the 8th once again in the Briquebec rendezvous.

On the 9th order came to move into rendezvous near the front, and the battalion moved through the battle-scarred country of Normandy to rendezvous near Sautilly, only a few miles back of the German counter-attack then being bitterly pressed in an effort to cut off Brittainy from the Normandy supply bases. On the night of the 9th, combat orders came to the battalion for the first time. It was to go into position outside St. Malo, and support the VIII Corps in its attack on the resort town where trapped German units were desperately fighting back.

St. Malo was under attack by the 83rd Infantry Division, augmented by one regimental combat team of the 8th Division, both supported by several battalions of Corps Artillery. The 243rd, along with the 256th, was attached to the 202nd F. A. Group, with a mission of supporting the entire Corps attack.

The first round into the German lines was fired by Charlie Battery late in the afternoon of the 10th. Germans were not the target. It was a registration on a tip of land being made by an observer from a liaison plane. Profitable targets were not long in developing however, the most spectacular being Harbor-isle of Cezembre, whose guns were a constant menace to troops attacking strong points in the town.

The 243rd furnished more than a full quota of observers in the St. Malo attack, and fired several missions in direct support of the infantry, in addition to regular counter battery and interdiction fires. Guns and ammunition dumps on Cezembre were destroyed, and German strongholds on the mainland were also attacked, in the general assault that finally led to the surrender of all forces except those which held out on Cezembre, nearly two miles out in the harbor, and the fortress citadel, where the St. Malo garrison commander, Col. Van Aulock, had retired to continue the struggle. Von Aulock, refusing surrender in the face of the inevitable destruction of his fortress was a temporarily famous figure as "The Madman of St. Malo". His impregnable fortress, the Citadel, turned back infantry attacks in force the needed air and artillery support, and the possibility of a long siege seemed imminent.

One final assault was planned. Heavy artillery was to pound with direct fire the portion of the fort above ground. A squadron of P-38's was to follow with a gelatin-bombing attack, and the infantry was to move up for the hand to hand assault under cover of the smoke from this attack. Charlie Battery of the 243rd was selected to fire the direct fire mission.

The dangers were obvious. The guns had to be emplaced within 240 yards of the fort, where even light machine guns could be effective against the crews. Because of the normal minimum elevation of the eight inch gun is 10 degrees, the guns had to be emplaced on a forward slope of 10 degrees to provide direct fire. The friendly darkness of only one night could be used in the emplacement, and it would have to be done entirely by the wench methods, for the situation made cranes impossible.

The soil was almost entirely rock, and the sweating connoneers could not finish the excavation of the pits and the erection of parapets until dawn. A smoke screen was placed in front of the fortress for concealment until the moment of attack, which came at 0900.

The first round was effective, and the guns began their systematic work of destruction by first knocking out all gun emplacements on the side of the fort that they faced. The effectiveness of these first rounds well paid for itself, for no counter-battery was received during the entire firing. Most of the structure of the Citadel above ground was reduced to rubble when a halt was called to the firing after 112 rounds. White flags appeared from among the ruins-- the "Madman of St. Malo" had decided to give up.

For several tense moments it appeared that the surrender was coming too late. The P-38's were seinging into position to begin their attack at the appointed time, and communications with them failed temporarily. The "Cease Fire" did not reach the planes until one of them had dropped its fire load.

The direct fire feat of the battalion attracted the favorable attention of military leaders throughout the European Theatre of Operations, and was described in a War Department Combat Bulletin and a Twelfth Army Group Artillery Report. The Commanding General of the 83th Infantry Division and the Eighth Corps Artillery ordered commendations for the men who participated.

With only the Isle of Cezembre left to hold out a few days longer, the 243rd moved with the main elements of the Eighth Corps to begin the siege of Brest, the major Brittainy port. The march across the peninsula was one of the highlights of life in France for the men of the Battalion. Thousands of French people, joyously celebrating the liberation of their home country and

the expanding attack upon the last of the enemy at Brest, lined the road from St. Malo to Lesneven to watch the American troops moving up for the battle.

After two days of bivouac near Lesneven, the battalion went into position near Coatmeal, and fired the first rounds of the preparation for the initial attack on Brest. Able and Baker Batteries were laid to cover most of Brest, proper, and Charlie was laid to cover the LeConquet Peninsula to the West of Brest, known to contain many enemy batteries and an undertermined number of troops.

LeConquet soon developed into the principal target of the battalion during the early stages of the siege. Bullock (the battalion telephone code name) observers soon discovered there 380 millimeter howitzers, free to traverse in any direction, active far beyond the German lines in the area. Although accurate observation was impossible at the long range necessary (14,000 yards) effective interdiction could be fired, and the guns (identified in the Corps by 243rd concentration numbers G1,G2, and G3) were rendered relatively useless to the enemy until they were finally knocked out completely.

A week after the attack began, Able Battery was withdrawn to join the artillery task force that supported the 2nd Division drive down the Flougestel-Daoules peninsula into the Brest Harbor. Operating seperately and attached to other units, the battery handled many long range missions in support of the Corps' East flank.

Only one displacement was made by the other two batteries of the battalion during the Brest campaign. As the battle entered its final stages, a movement was made to positions Southwest of St. Renan. From this position the chief activity was firing at enemy gun positions on the Crozon Peninsula, last stronghold to fall. Two observation posts were set up on the mainland shore to conduct fire on gun positions across the bay by means of bi-lateral observation, with the plotting and computations being made in the battalion fire direction center. Firing the guns of three other battalions (155 rifles, 8 inch howitzers and 240 howitzers) in addition to its own, this 243rd counter-battery team was credited with destroying 23 enemy gun positions during a week's operation.

During the closing days of the Brest campaign control passed from the 3rd to the 9th Army, and most of the Corps artillery was bivouaced, after the final surrender, at Coetquidon, a French artillery training center near Rennes. Here order came for the 243rd to return to the 3rd Army, XX Corps, on the front near Metz. A five day march was made across France to reach the major fighting front, along a route that offered a rare sight-seeing tour to the men of the battalion--Rennes, Laval, Le Mans, Chartress, Paris, Chalons-su-Marse and Verdun. Two memorable nights of the trip were bivouacs in the Bois De Vincennes, in Paris and the city park in Chalons. The long march was a severe test for the M10 and T2 prime movers of the battalion, but the maintenance practiced by drivers and mechanics proved to have been more than adequate, with no break-downs occuring on the entire route.

Assigned to the 203rd FA Group, the battalion went into position on a high hillside near Villedieu on October 2, with all six guns laid to cover Metz and German installations to the South of the Fortress city. During the first week support was given the Fifth Division task force attempting to take Fort Driant, with normal harrassing and interdiction fire conducted against rear area targets in Metz and beyond the city.

Early in October a German railroad gun of at least 380 millimeter size put in its appearance along the 3rd Army front, shelling rear area installations and higher unit headquarters. One gun of the Able Battery was detached and placed in position near the town of Batailly to fire at the "phantom" railroad gun. A day later orders came for to detach Charlie Battery to the XII Corps, East of Nancy, for the same purpose, and the remaining gun of Able was sent to Rombas, further North of Batailly. Baker Battery was displaced nearer the front to enable it to fire at possible positions for the railroad gun.

A 240 howitzer was placed with each of Able Battery's guns, and battalion headquarters moved to Homecourt, a small industrial town between the two battery positions, on October 15. The period was during the worst of the acute shortage of ammunition that occurred all along the front at the time, and few of the guns did any shooting. Baker Battery was for a few days assigned a captured German 155 battery and fired several hundred rounds of ammunition without restriction, using as gun crews men recruited from the motor, wire and ammunition sections. The monotony was broken for battalion headquarters with the furious one day attack made by the 90th Division on the town of Meziarales-Metz, when all ammunition restrictions were momentarily lifted and two more batteries, one 240 and the other 8 in howitzer, were assigned. On Nov. 1, the battalion was attached to the 195th FA Group, under which it was to remain throughout the remainder of combat.

Despite an apparent lull along the front, preparations for a big 3rd Army offensive were underway. Charlie Battery was placed in the vanguard of 12th Corps artillery being massed for a drive towards Saarbrochkan, Baker was left in position opposite Metz to support the right flank assault of the XX Corps on the city, and Able moved into bivouac just outside Luxembourg, before going into position at Zouftgen to fire in support of a projected smash across the Moselle above Thionville.

The general attack began on November 7, but moved sluggishly at first, largely because of heavy rains that brought the Moselle to its highest flood stage in years. During this period the battalion commander Colonel Rucks, was designated to coordinate artillery support for a task force of the 95th Division charged with taking Thionville and moving up the river to meet the Fifth Division at Metz. Forward observation and Liaison sections, drawn from Able and Headquarters Batteries, worked with him on the mission that saw heavy casualties among the troops engaged, including three among the 243rd detachment. During the action Capt. William S. McLean, battalion S-2, Distinguished himself with intrepid work as liaison officer with the assault infantry battalion, and Lt. Charles Hillegas, adjusted 8 inch howitzer fire down to 50 yards in advance of our infantry.

Technician 5th Grade James E. Kelly, radio operator, became the first man of the battalion to be twice decorated for valor.

As Patton's Army moved from Moselle to the Saar, all three battalions of the 243rd followed closely behind the doughboys and tanks. Able crossed the Moselle at Thionville, and in the midst of a half dozen displacements that led it to the banks of the Saar became the 1st battery of the battalion to fire a round into Germany. Baker crossed the Moselle from its frontal position at Metz, and moved around the South side of the city. During the latter part of the great six weeks offensive action, III Corp Artillery became operational, with Baker battery as one of its attached units. This resulted in the battalion

having a battery operating at the same time in each of three Corps. Charlie Battery wore out its first set of tubes firing long range interdictions in advance of the XII Corps attack, and got anonymous headline in most of the newspapers in the state when the streamers announced that Third Army Eight inch guns were shelling Scarbrucken, the first great German industrial center to be subjected to artillery fire.

The Saar offensive was six weeks of back breaking labor for the battalion gun sections. Displacements were made regularly into positions that were usually quagmires of rain and mud, but the cannoneers showed their stamina by always having the guns ready to fire at the required time.

The second week in December found Able in position near Guerstling on the neid River, with one gun in Germany and others thirty yards inside France. A few miles South, opposite Saarlautern, was Baker, but on the sixteenth orders came to displace far to the South, near Saarbrucken position occupied by Charlie.

Then suddenly the Ardennes counter offensive began, as von Runstedt's armies smashed into Belgium. The Third Army was ordered on the offensive to strike from the South into the enemy's flanks. But the long line from Luxembourg to the Seventh Army had to be held, and the XX Corps was assigned the job with two divisions and two cavalry squadrons to stretch out over the front, and one division, the 90th, was pulled out when it had been built back up to strength. The 243 fell back to the vicinity of the town of Laumesfeld, high in the Saar-Moselle pocket. The III and XII Corps, moving North, decided not to take along heavy artillery, so Baker and Charlie returned to battalion control.

A few days before Christmas the first heavy snow of Winter fell and soon froze on the ground. The ice and snow continued until late in February. Winter war was not pleasant but it was in many respects easier to take than the mud of milder days. Well instructed in how to adapt themselves to the worst weather, the men of the battalion took good care of their health, and not a single case of trench foot developed during the Winter, at a time when that malady was the major cause of non-battle casualties along the front.

The days in the Laumesfeld area were uneasy ones, for a German attack through the lightly held area was expected momentarily. During most of the period only a cavalry squadron held several miles of the front within a few miles of the battery positions, and on several occasions the Hillock OP across the Saar from Marzig was without even this protection. Despite the uneasy fear about the impending German attack, other distractions contributed occasional excitement. A robot bomb struck less than one hundred yards from an Able gun position. German air activities was at its highest peak through this period, and position areas were strafed on Christmas Day and January 1. On the later days, when the Battalion CP was strafed, battalion machine gunners received credit for knocking out an ME-109. On January 14 American P-47's, slightly mixed in directions, strafed the area.

As the tide of Battle of the Bulge began to change, Charlie Battery was once more called to XII Corps. On January 14 it moved to Boch, Luxembourg, to fire interdiction on communications centers through which the German retreat was moving, notably Bieburg and Trier. Operating its own fire direction center the battery maintained a heavy harrassing and interdiction schedule daily until late in February, softening up the area for the February XII Corps offensive that was the first move in the Rhine offensive all along the allied front.

The remainder of the Battalion continued in the Laumesfeld region until the 94th Division moved into the area and began its first preliminary offensive feints. The first displacement was a few miles forward to the village of Remeling, from which an Able gun fired a long range mission for a high performance aircraft that brought an official commendation from the Corps for the efficiency of the gun crew. In February while the battalion was in the Remeling area a large scale XX Corps offensive, featuring the 94th Infantry and the 10th Armored Divisions, was launched Northeast towards Saarburg, a stronghold that had been within range of an Able Battery gun back in November. During the period of the attack on Saarburg, the counter-battery mission fired from Hillock air OP's reached a peak of success. Lt. Richard P. Beck, principal air observer, was at the peak of his brilliant work in locating and knocking out enemy batteries, achieving a record unequalled by any other Third Army artillery observer.

As the initial phase of the general Third Army attack ended with XII and XX Corps joining above Trier, Charlie Battery once more returned to XX Corps control, but not to the battalion. It moved into the Saarlautern area, quiet since the 95th Division bridehead of December, to support the 26th Division holding the long line along the Saar. In the meantime, in the Northern Corps sector, some of the hardest fighting of the war was developing, with the Germans making what was to be their last determined stand anywhere East of the Rhine.

Throughout the major portion of this engagement the battalion was once more split up, with Able being assigned to the 270th FA BN., a 240 howitzer unit that had been in the same group since October, and the battalion headquarters retaining control of Baker and Charlie Batteries of the 270th. While attached to the 270th, Able was forced to make the only rearward displacement made by a battalion during the war, except for the general retreat that came as a result of the Battle of the Bulge. A security outpost posted by the battery was overrun, but no casualties resulted. Baker Battery also luckily came through with no casualties when it received its heaviest shelling of the war at midnight on the 11th of March. (1945)

The two batteries under the battalion fired heavy concentrations throughout the action. When the 26th Division, relieved by the 65th, moved North to join the 80th, 94th, and 100th Armored in the final all out push, their work was particularly effective. In the Village of Haustedt, a few miles East of the Saar, TOT's fired by the batteries in two days of heavy fighting were known to have knocked out several field pieces, at least twelve nebelwufers and killed an unestimated large number of men and horses.

The last Nazi resistance around the Saar began to crumble on March 18, and the battalion joined in the chase across the Saar land and Palatinate to the Rhine that followed. Early in the action Able Battery set a heretofore unequalled record for heavy artillery in combat by going into position twice and registering each time during one twelve hour daylight period. From Meunchweiler on, however, there was no time to go into position. The gun remained on wheels, barely able to keep up with the rapid advance.

On March 21, XX Corps artillery was put in position to support the last Third Army Rhine crossing, scheduled to be made North of Mainz. Charlie Battery, which had been on wheels from the time the 65th Division first

penetrated the Siegfried line at Saarlautern, rejoining the battalion for this position. The guns were emplaced in the vicinity of the town of Oberolm, covering a front that ranged from the outskirts of Frankfurt on the East to the Rhine immediately North of Bingen on the West. Firing was light because the opposition to the crossing was not heavy. At 0230 on the morning of March 28, Charlie Battery fired a six-round concentration in support of VIII Corps troops Northwest of Weisbaden, and the 243rd had fired its last round in the European war.

Early in the morning of March 28th, orders came to move to Simmern, Germany, West of Bingen, to act as military police in the Army rear areas between the Saar and the Rhine. The next area policed was a large territory North of Frankfurt, where the battalion was officially made a 3rd Army MP Unit, complete with painted helmets. From this area, which centered around the resort town of Bad Neuheim, headquarters were moved to Lehr, East of Frankfurt, and from there to Bamberg. On May 5th the battalion was policing an area that included Nurnberg and all the territory from Bayreuth West to Hanau, on the outskirts of Frankfurt. Upon being relieved of this assignment by the 4th Infantry Division, 70th Infantry Division and the 38th Anti-Aircraft Brigade, it was assigned to the operation of Prisoner of War cages.

As the war ended, Col Bucks and Major Banks were transferred from the Unit; Col. Rucks the twelfth Army Group war crimes section, and Major Banks to military government. Major Burgeon assumed command of the battalion, and Captains Eldon B. Wood and Robert E. Lee, members of the original officer cadre, were named Executive and S-3 respectively.

During its eight months of combat it had participated in the major battles of St. Malo, Brest, Metz, Thionville, Saarlautern, Dilligen, Ensdorf, Saarbrucken, Moselle-Saar Triangle, Ardennes, Sarr River and Rhine River. It fought under two armies and four corps, gave support to 16 Infantry Divisions, four Armoured Divisions, two cavalry squadrons and two Ranger Battalions.