

NO TASK TOO GREAT
IN REACTIVATION



CHAPTER III
OF THE HISTORY OF THE
97TH ENGINEER BATTALION
(CONSTRUCTION)

The Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950. With this development came the reactivation of many former units. On 11 September 1950, the battalion was re-designated the 97th Engineer Construction Battalion. Official reactivation came on 1 October 1950 at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The battalion was part of the Fifth Army's 20th Engineer Brigade.

Three units located at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, the 94th Engineer Construction Battalion, the 9829th Army Service Unit, and the 7071st Army Service Unit provided the cadre for the new 97th. The first group assigned arrived at Fort Leonard Wood on 15 September 1950. On 3 October 1950, COL Charles D. McDaniel assumed command. From that date through 9 October 1950 the remainder of the cadre and the balance of the assigned recruits arrived, and the 97th had attained its authorized strength of 638 enlisted men.

Early in October, under COL McDaniel's close supervision, the unit cadre began its training. Upon their arrival at this post, located high up in the Ozarks some 130 miles southwest of St Louis, the cadre was put through a refresher course in basic fundamentals of Engineer Training.

A new experience was in store for the new recruits from all over the country. 16 October 1950 was the first day of "Operation Basic," the name given to the nine-week basic training cycle to be conducted by the 97th. Draftees and RA's alike were subjected to the booming voice of the 1SG, KP and other common duties, and the daily chaotic awakening at Reveille.

The first six weeks of training covered the Basic Infantry subjects, with the remaining three weeks devoted to an introduction to Basic Engineer Training. Numerous obstacles, many unusual even to the Army, were encountered in these first nine weeks. Training facilities were sorely needed, sites were in bad shape, and training aids were practically non-existent. This could be attributed to the fact that the post itself had been reactivated only a short time before the units had been assigned to Fort Leonard Wood.

The rifle qualification records of the troops provide an excellent example of the extent to which the post was unprepared for its training mission. During the record firing only about 40% of the battalion qualified. The balance of the troops had to return at a later date for re-qualifying. Advance detachments were sent to the range each time to repair and improve the firing range.

The men of the new 97th got their first taste of field duty when subfreezing temperatures were recorded during the first all night bivouac. The next several days of the exercise saw steady daytime rains followed by freezing nights. "Operation Mudball" was in full swing by the time the toughened engineer soldiers were given the opportunity to swim, wade, and crawl through the infiltration course while machine gun rounds whizzed over their heads.

The infantry training cycle was thus brought to a close. It is interesting to note that 17 years later, to the month, the 97th would undergo a similar "Operation Mudball" at bridge training on the Rhein. A job well done, COL McDaniel arranged a weekend excursion to St Louis.

The next job in line was to extend the training to the engineering skills. This phase included practice on construction of Bailey Bridges, roads and airfields; as well as training in mine warfare techniques. After initial screening and classification, some men were awarded their MOS numbers, while others were sent to the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir for training in special skills. Still others were sent to Fort Riley, Kansas.

The biggest problem encountered during this engineer training cycle was the lack of transportation at Fort Leonard Wood. The battalion had one two-ton truck and a one-quarter ton jeep available, so the private automobiles of the officers and NCO's were used extensively. The fact that personnel of Headquarters Company were engaged fully in this training cycle prevented these men from learning and performing their normal staff functions.

The New Year saw a drain on experience as many NCO's were placed in other newly organized units. The first quarter of 1951 saw a tremendous influx of recruits. By April the morning report showed 37 Officers, 3

Warrant Officers and 2,015 Enlisted Men of the 97th Engineers. At this time many bridge size units were providing replacements for overseas units and the 97th was busy training such men as well.

Having commanded the 97th since its rebirth, COL McDaniel was relieved in June 1951 and was succeeded by LTC John A Crawford just as bivouac and field-testing season began. The first bivouac was another two weeks of mud training, but the weather the rest of the summer was favorable. By the end of August the battalion was performing in peak form, and on 6 September 1951, the alert for overseas shipment was received. The 97th was attached to the 950th Engineer Aviation Group on 10 September 1951 as the men prepared to take their final stateside leave. Thus, the yearlong training had been terminated, and the 97th Engineers set out eagerly to write the new European chapters of their proud history.

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