

# Engineer Fire Fighters in the March on Rome

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**A**MONG the multitudinous tasks of the Corps of Engineers is fire fighting. It is recognized that in any area where large numbers of personnel and great amounts of materiel are brought together, especially under war conditions, fire is a major hazard, and plans must be made for its control. To perform this duty overseas, fire-fighting units are assigned to Base Sections and Armies.

The Fifth Army had several such units (formed under T/O & E 5-500) each with a strength of one officer and thirty-seven enlisted men, many of whom were professional firemen in civilian life. For the Fifth Army Fire Department, the "March on Rome" began in April, when the build-up of supplies commenced, and ceased when the drive in Italy finally lost its momentum south of Leghorn during July. In April, the Fifth Army was fighting on two fronts, the Anzio-Nettuno Beachhead, and the Main or Southern Front.

## THE BEACHHEAD FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Beachhead Fire Department was built around the 1206th Engineer Composite Platoon attached from the Peninsular Base Section. This platoon had gone to the beachhead in February, being selected for the task because it was the most experienced and best equipped unit available.

The platoon operated four fire stations, spread over approximately 100 square miles. Its equipment consisted of three Class-325 fire trucks, three Class-135 crash trucks, three Class-1000 trailer pumps, two trucks with 500-gallon water tanks, and a tank-dozzer. In addition, there were three British sections (from the Army Fire Service), each with a trailer pump, a portable pump, and a tender (3-ton lorry). Auxiliary fire-fighting apparatus included two Royal Navy trailer pumps on the Anzio docks, in addition to the portable pumps carried on naval vessels, and two Class-135 crash trucks at the Quartermaster gasoline dumps.

Two fire stations (Headquarters and the nearest sub-station) would normally respond to each fire alarm. The British units, backed up by the United States Headquarters station, covered the British dumps. Of course, most of the fires here occurred at night due to enemy air and artillery action, and strict blackout driving conditions were enforced.

Some fires were quick and spectacular, such as that caused by a burning plane crashing into a stack of explosives. By the time the firemen could reach such a fire, there was usually nothing left to do but extinguish a few burning remains. Some fires also involved front-line action. One night a hay rack took fire in a village on the perimeter of the beachhead defenses.

The firemen had just begun their work when some German artillery men figured that the fire was worth shooting at. Fortunately, the fire fighters got out safely. Burning ammunition at a night fire generally resulted in a super-fireworks display. Not only did the exploding ammunition streak through the air like Roman candles, but the fire usually drew attention from the Germans in the form of an air or artillery attack. Such action caused considerable casualties among the fire fighters.

## ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT

On the Southern Front, the 1980th Engineer Composite Platoon had just arrived from North Africa. Equipment consisted of one Class-325 fire truck, three Class-135 crash trucks, and two Class-1000 trailer pumps. Eight enlisted replacements, all trained firemen, were immediately acquired, bringing the unit up to full strength. The platoon functioned directly under the Army Fire Marshal, as did one fire-fighting section of the 1984th Engineer Composite Platoon, a Peninsula Base Section unit operating in the Fifth Army area.

Both the 1984th and 1987th Platoons of the Peninsula Base Section Fire Department worked in close support of the Fifth Army units, the 1984th covering part of the Fifth Army area on first alarm response.

Other fire apparatus in the Fifth Army area included four Class-135 crash trucks manned by Quartermaster personnel at the gasoline dumps, two Brit-



A Fire Station Well Forward, under Camouflage Net

ish trailer pumps with tenders at their dump and workshops, and a trailer pump at Army Headquarters manned by the Engineer Utilities Platoon.

Two stations responded on all petroleum or ammunition dump alarms. At night, fire apparatus responding to such fires were excluded from blackout restrictions (which generally existed only in forward Corps areas).

Past experience had indicated the necessity of operating two-piece fire stations, that is, two fire or crash



trucks at each station. Water supply being the greatest problem, once a fire occurred, each truck carried 300 gallons of water in its booster tank, enabling it to operate one small stream 12 or 15 minutes. Two trucks enabled the fire fighters to maintain a continuous stream on the fire until additional help could arrive. Tanker trucks from the Water Supply Battalion or additional fire trucks were available in case of a serious fire. However, it usually required from 20 minutes to an hour for these to reach the scene.

Careful inspection work by firemen kept fire hazards to a minimum. The only serious fire to occur during this period broke out in a salvage pile at an

or seriously injured.

Surprisingly, on three occasions, two fires occurred in the Army area at the same time. This does not include fires due to enemy action, which may start a number of blazes in the same general area at one time.

#### THE JOINING OF FORCES

After the Beachhead and Main Front joined, the 1980th passed through the 1206th, who closed down to two stations in order to recondition its equipment. Three new Class-325 trucks arrived for the 1980th just prior to reaching Rome, and two replacement trucks arrived for the 1206th about a month later, when they were covering Civita-vecchia.

The Rome Fire Brigade was found to be well equipped and well manned, and there was no need to place military apparatus in the city, since there were no dumps there. In fact, it was necessary to call upon the Italians to assist the military units. On one occasion a gasoline dump north of Rome caught fire at the same time that an ammunition dump in the Anzio area was burning. This resulted in nearly all of the military apparatus being in service. Three fire trucks were called from Rome to assist the five American trucks fighting the gasoline fire. This fire, caused by a backfire, was spread through the gasoline dump by burning 5-gallon gasoline cans

which were being hurled through the air for distances as great as 50 yards. Thousands of gallons went up in heavy smoke before the blaze was extinguished.

With the arrival of the new fire trucks, plus replacement personnel for the casualties suffered by the 1206th during its stay at the Beachhead, the platoon organization was changed in order to provide more efficient protection. Each platoon was divided into three 11-man sections, each manning two fire or crash trucks and a weapons carrier or jeep. The Headquarters Section comprised the fire lieutenant, and four enlisted men including the fire chief. A reserve fire or crash truck was also kept at Headquarters to be used as a replacement for any truck that was out of service or for other emergencies. Two trailer pumps were also made available to each platoon, these being used as standby pumps when large water supply sources were available.

Under this arrangement, the Fifth Army Fire Department was able to operate six independent stations. Eight firemen were required to be on duty at each station. An inspection of the first alarm area was made daily, in order to acquaint personnel with installations and to correct fire hazards.

Excellent co-operation was received from all services, dumps, and other installations generally following suggestions made by firemen on their inspections. Military police were of material assistance in reporting fires promptly and clearing the road for fire apparatus. Also, the Fifth Army Fire Department enjoyed mutual aid with the Air Force and British Army Fire Service units in the Army area, as well as close support from the Base Section Department.



Captured German Ammunition Dump Going Up in Smoke

ammunition dump in the French Corps area a few days prior to the big attack. The two-piece fire fighting section, plus quick response by nearby personnel, proved its value. The first section to reach the scene attacked the fire with one truck, using the other truck to supply water to the first. With the arrival of additional trucks, quick work was made of the blaze and little damage was done.

#### PROBLEMS DURING THE ADVANCE

In May the attack started, and several unexpected problems confronted the Fire Department. With the rapid advance, the Army area increased considerably. Dumps opened and closed overnight. The 1980th Platoon which covered the Army dumps, moved forward by bounds, normally operating two stations (having only one Class-325 and three Class-135 trucks). The day before a move, the rear station would send a rig forward, leap-frogging the forward station, so that the new house would be in service prior to closing the old station. The 1984th followed us up to the Garigliano River, and later relieved the 1206th at Anzio. An Air Force Platoon moved into the Army area to cover forward airfields, and they worked with our units when the occasion demanded.

The second problem we faced was the unexpected number of fires in abandoned supplies. Both the enemy and our own troops left behind large quantities of equipment. In many cases, ammunition and inflammables were found mixed indiscriminately. On several occasions, fires occurred in mined or booby-trapped areas, adding further hazards. However, no serious fires occurred, and no fire fighters were killed