

# The 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion: Devotion to Duty

*By Captain Joanne A. Medina*

In the archives at the US Army Chemical School, we have located documents and photographs detailing the extraordinary service of the men in the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion during World War II. The history of the 86th deserves recognition. The commander of the 86th, Lieutenant Colonel Wesley B. Hamilton, said that “the history of this battalion contains many deeds of valor on the part of individual members of this organization, yet standing high is the record of the entire battalion of 672 officers and men, together with all former members and reinforcements, who have performed all duties and tasks as a ‘team’ in an unsurpassed manner.”

Originally, the 86th was designated to fire chemical shells, but Allied and Axis forces in World War II observed policies against the first use of chemical weapons, so the battalion served in their secondary role—providing conventional indirect fire support to front line infantry troops. The 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion used its 4.2-inch mortars to deliver white phosphorous (WP) shells (for smoke screening and casualty effect) and high-explosive (HE) shells.

In May of 1943, the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion (Motorized) consisted of cadre from the 1st Separate Chemical Company at Camp Swift, Texas.<sup>1</sup> The basic training program consisted of short, intense, and rigorous missions to prepare the battalion for close support to infantry forces (conditions that the unit would face during combat operations).

Under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton, the 86th departed Camp Swift, Texas, on 11 April 1944. Traveling by rail and ship, the battalion made stops in Greenock, Scotland; Port Sunlight, England; and Stonehenge, England, before arriving in France on 29 June. Bravo Company ran into trouble en route when their ship either struck a mine or was torpedoed. Company commander, Captain Edward M. Overbeck, and his men immediately went into action to save Soldiers from the sinking ship. The explosion on the ship tore apart loose hatches and dumped Soldiers below deck. This was extremely dangerous because the lower level held many



**A gunner from the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion**

motor vehicles, some loaded with HEs. The ship was rapidly filling with water and oil. Captain Overbeck immediately took control of all other units on deck. Disregarding his own personal safety, he went to the lower level and instructed the safe removal of more than 50 wounded personnel and ensured that every man was safely aboard the landing ship, tank (LST) that came to the rescue. Bravo Company went back to England to reorganize, while the rest of the battalion continued on to France to participate in missions leading up to D-Day. Captain Overbeck and several of his men received Bronze Stars for their actions, bravery, and heroism.

The battalion’s first mission was to provide combat support to the 8th Corps. During this time, the battalion fired more than 11,500 rounds of mortar ammunition for

close support of five divisions. Although they were created for combat support, chemical mortar battalions often found themselves in other supporting roles. The experience of Alpha Company on 6 and 7 July of 1944 is a great example. On D+25, Alpha Company docked in the man-made harbor of Beachhead Utah, surrounded by the floating hulks of other ships that never made it to the shore. The company was attached to the 90th Infantry Division in support of the 358th and 359th Regiments.

The 90th began its attack in the early morning of 3 July. All through the day, the mortar crews of Alpha Company persisted in the battle and created an opening for the infantry troops. The 86th fired seven smoke screens while the 90th was forcing a bridgehead across the Seves River. An eyewitness at the scene reported that “machine guns and rifles were blasting all over the place, and you couldn’t begin to count the dead . . . .” But the best gauge for measuring the accuracy of the mortar fire was the speed of the advance of the 90th—a half mile in a half hour. Later, many captured Germans wanted to see this “automatic artillery” that was so deadly in its speed and accuracy. Two infantry division commanders later recommended Alpha Company for commendation for its superior battle performance and devotion to duty during the counter-offensive.

The battalion went on to Northern France and contributed immensely to the captures of Saint Malo, Dinard, and Cap Frehal in August of 1944. The battle plan called for the mortar companies to fire WP on the fort at Saint Malo. On 16 August, Charlie Company fired hundreds of WP rounds on the citadel. A communications wire that ran from the fort to the outside was cut with the assistance of the 86th. A day later, the enemy capitulated. In his surrender, the German commander, Colonel Andreas von Aulock, cited the WP barrage as his reason. Two officers and two enlisted men from the battalion were among a group of American officials who accepted the surrender of Colonel von Aulock at the citadel at Saint Malo.

During the period of 24 August to 19 September 1944, the extremely high volume of accurate, close support fire

provided by the 86th played a huge part in the fall of Brest and the capture of the Crozon peninsula. It was there that the German prisoners of war nicknamed the WP shell *Whispering Death*, because it could not be heard in flight. The assault on Brest began on 15 September, and the city surrendered the following day. Personnel from the 2d Infantry Division cited the effectiveness and accuracy of the 4.2-inch mortar in street fighting situations. Personnel from the 86th were able to fire the mortar over tall buildings and provide support to within 100 yards of the front lines.

The 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion supported the 28th Infantry Division in the Battle of Hurtgen Forest (November and December of 1944). This was the only



**Troops fighting through a street in Brest**

time in the battalion’s history that it was committed to the support of just one division. The battalion received a commendation from the commanding general of the 28th for its exemplary and heroic work during the attack on the town of Schmidt, Germany. On 1 December 1944, the battalion completed its 150th day of combat by firing the 100,000th round of ammunition.

During the Battle of Ardennes (the Battle of the Bulge, 17 December 1944 through 16 February 1945), the battalion proved its fighting capabilities and strength by assisting with the enemy hold on the left flank. As forces of German tanks and infantry rolled toward our lines, the 86th fired mortars repeatedly. WP blinded and burned the enemy Soldiers—tank drivers lost their sense of direction and drove off roads into ditches, into men, and into other

tanks. The enemy lost momentum and began retreating. At times, division artillery, armor, and infantry withdrew under Charlie Company's protective fire—fire that was largely responsible for holding up the enemy advance. After the enemy was pushed back, the battalion was relieved of duty and designated for reorganization. The newly redesignated 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion consisted of a headquarters company and three weapons companies.

The Rhineland and Central European campaigns were the last World War II missions for the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion. The 86th supported V Corps in the final assault on the Roer River and the advance to the Rhine River. When the Remagen bridgehead was established, Alpha and Bravo Companies were attached to the Seventh Corps to assist in holding and expanding the bridgehead while preparations for the breakthrough were made. Units from the battalion assisted in closing the Ruhr pocket, while the remaining unit assisted V Corps with the drive across Germany.

Alpha Company was providing support to the 69th Infantry Division when it made contact with elements of the Russian infantry (which eventually cut Germany in half and virtually ended the war). On 28 April 1945, all companies in the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion were relieved from the line; on 1 May, the entire battalion moved to Eschebach, Germany, and assumed a role that was new to them—security details responsible for protecting

installations and enemy materiel and contraband. It was in Eschebach that the unit celebrated *Victory in Europe (VE) Day*.

In eleven months of combat, the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion expended 152,257 rounds of HE and WP ammunition; engaged in 315 days of combat; traveled across France, Belgium, Germany, and Czechoslovakia; and participated in all five major battles in the European theater of operations. They were attached to three Allied armies, seven US Army corps, and 27 US Army divisions. Of the 817 men that saw service with the unit, 40 were killed in action and 336 were wounded. A total of 198 decorations were awarded for bravery.

The men of the 86th were initially authorized the shoulder sleeve insignia of the First Army and later the Third Army. But it was Private First Class Robert Schnell (1st Platoon, Alpha Company) who created an unauthorized version. He stated, "We never had an official 86th Mortar patch, so I designed the skunk patch. I added the mortar shell and 4.2 inch to it. I had them distributed. We weren't supposed to wear them, but I think some of the boys did." Several designs for a distinctive insignia were proposed after the war, including some suggested by the mortarmen themselves, but none were officially produced.

The story of the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion is important for all to remember. The sacrifices and devotion that these men exemplified—these Dragon Soldiers—illustrate the proud tradition of the US Army Chemical Corps. They are heroes—men who were willing to pay the ultimate price so that future generations could breathe the air of freedom. 🇺🇸

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The battalion name changed from the 86th Chemical Battalion (Motorized) to the 86th Chemical Battalion on 14 May 1944. The battalion was redesignated the 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion on 15 February 1945.



**Soldiers crossing a footbridge across the Roer River**

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*Captain Medina is a recent graduate of the Chemical Captains Career Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. She is currently stationed at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.*