

Lineage and Honors

87th Chemical Mortar Battalion

Commanded by: Lieutenant Colonel James Batte

Activated: 22 May 1943 at Camp Rucker, Alabama

Redesignated: 26 April 1945 as the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion

Deactivated: 6 November 1945 at Fort Benning, Georgia

Campaigns During World War II: Ardennes-Alsace, Central Europe, Normandy, Northern France, and the Rhineland

In Commemoration: 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion monument, dedicated on 12 June 1998 at the former Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland

The Dragon Soldiers of the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion used their training and equipment to rule the battlefield. During World War II, this battalion was one of the most sought-after fire support units in the European theater of operations. Originally, the 87th was designed for firing chemical shells, but the Allied and Axis forces in World War II observed policies against the first use of chemical weapons. So the 87th served in the secondary role of providing conventional, indirect fire support to front line infantry troops using its 4.2-inch mortars to fire white phosphorus shells for smoke screening and high-explosive casualty effect.

The 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944 (D-day) in support of V Corps and VII Corps on Omaha and Utah Beaches. During that year, the ability of the 87th to keep up with the rapid movement of attacking infantry became almost legendary. The platoons advanced forward faster than traditional artillery units and, as a result, were more reliable in their ability to provide supporting fire when and where it was needed most. This was not easy on the men or the equipment because the battalion was sometimes required to advance three or four times a day. During the Normandy Campaign, Soldiers in the 87th were awarded twenty-two Bronze Stars and three Silver Stars for valor.

During the attack on Cherbourg, France, the 87th maintained a rolling barrage for the 8th Infantry Regiment. It was so effective that the infantry regimental commander told the artillery commander “to hell with the artillery. I’ll use 4.2s. They do a better job anyway.” Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., called the battalion the most effective rolling barrage he had ever seen.

In the battles that followed, the battalion became the most sought-after fire support unit on the battlefield. The companies never knew on any given day which units they would be attached to, but the Soldiers performed their jobs whenever they were called upon. In direct support

of infantry units, the 87th lost 11 officers and 70 enlisted men as casualties.

In September 1944, the first elements of the 87th made their historic crossing into Germany. The battalion also fought in the bloody Hurtgen Forest battle and with the 101st Airborne Division at the Battle of the Bulge, while still defeating German tanks with their mortars and saving the town of Sadzot. The battalion is credited for capturing a German command post and several artillery units.

The unit also had the sad experience of finding only three prisoners alive out of more than 4,000 in the Nordhausen concentration camp, where they found more than 25,000 bodies burned in the crematorium.

The 87th spent 326 days in combat zones, with only 9 days of rehabilitation and maintenance. They fired a total of 109,604 high-explosive rounds and 74,406 white phosphorus shells.

The Soldiers of the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion exhibited the Army Values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Veterans of the 87th have exemplified the proud tradition of the Chemical Corps that lives on today. Present and future Soldiers will carry the commitment to service forward through lessons learned from the heroes that served and are part of the Chemical Corps tradition. 🇺🇸

Endnote:

Two members of the 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion were inducted into the 2006 Chemical Corps Hall of Fame: Brigadier General James Batte and Colonel Julian Brunt.

References:

“History of Camel Orange, Company D–87th Chemical Mortar Battalion,” historical records.

John D. Hunn et al., *A Company, 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion at War*, compiled by Corporal Robert L. Greenleaf.

This information was provided by Mr. David Chuber, Chemical School Historian.

Archive information for Chemical units is maintained at the U.S. Army Chemical School History Office. Veterans are encouraged to send oral interviews, photographs, and documents to help us preserve the rich history of the Corps. For additional information or to submit information, contact the History Office by telephone at (573) 563-7339; by e-mail at <david.chuber@us.army.mil>; or by mail at 401 MANSCEM Loop, Suite 44, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri 65473-8926.