

Military Police and Engineer Special Brigades: The Normandy Invasion

By Mr. Andy Watson

The invasion of Normandy was enormous. Aside from its historical impact and effect on the course of World War II, it was a massive effort that encompassed many thousands of Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen among the Allies. As with other major battles and invasions during World War II, the Military Police Corps not only participated but had an active role in ensuring victory.

Planning for the invasion, military strategists strived to ensure success on all levels. Military police missions such as circulation control, force protection, and enemy prisoner of war (EPW) management would require numerous military police units. Based upon their need, there would be a large number of military police involved in the landings at Normandy. Consider just the divisional military police units included in the assault forces for 6 June 1944—1st Military Police Platoon, 1st Infantry Division; 29th Military Police Platoon, 29th Infantry Division; 4th Military Police Platoon, 4th Infantry Division; 90th Military Police Platoon, 90th Infantry Division; and the military police platoons of the 82d and the 101st Airborne Divisions. (Although listed as divisional military police platoons, these units were larger and actually closer to company strength.)

Military police units at the corps level tasked for the invasion included Companies A and B of the 507th Military Police Battalion, with B Company becoming VII Corps' Military Police Company. The 518th Military Police Battalion's companies would be divided between the V and VII Corps. The 428th Military Police Escort Guard Company would be assigned to V Corps for the invasion and later attached to various divisions within V Corps. Company C of the 509th Military Police Battalion, a First Army military police unit, would also take part in the invasion. Some First Army and V and VII Corps military police Soldiers were freed from their normal assignments and attached to a relatively new type of unit, engineer special brigades (ESBs).

Although named engineer special brigades, these units were composed of many different branches of service needed for the assault. Some of the specialties found within ESBs were engineers, amphibious truck companies, signal units, chemical decontamination sections, quartermaster units, and military police units. Military police units assigned to the ESBs

included the 449th Military Police Company, which was attached to the 1st ESB and took part in the D-Day invasion. The 301st and 595th Escort Guard Companies were also attached to the 1st ESB and would arrive a few days later to assist in EPW control. The Provisional Engineer Special Brigade Group contained the 5th and 6th ESBs as well as Companies C and D of the 783d Military Police Battalion and the 302d Military Police Escort Guard Company. The 210th Military Police Company was attached to the 5th ESB, and the 214th Military Police Company was attached to the 6th ESB. Other escort guard military police companies attached to the ESBs would serve following the initial landings.

Through amphibious training and conditioning, these Soldiers honed their military policing skills on beaches in the United States and England as they waited for the assault. Attachment to an ESB meant constant training and also a frontline position against a heavily defended beach. Units attached to the ESBs also wore a conspicuous arc on their helmet, which a few veterans have referred to as the "high-water mark." Similar to the brassard and ubiquitous "MP," this was another symbol for instant recognition. Though the patterns differed between the ESBs and their landing areas, the arc signified personnel who were authorized to remain on the beach. ESB members would remain on the beach under fire while clearing mines, traffic, EPWs, and any other obstacles necessary for the invasion to succeed.

The first and third platoons and a portion of the second platoon of the 214th Military Police Company were directly attached to the 149th Engineer Battalion. The remainder of the second platoon was attached to the 74th Ordnance Battalion. The military police trained within these units for the coming battle. On 6 June 1944, the Soldiers of the 214th Military Police Company were en route to Omaha Beach when they had to abandon their transport. Their

landing craft was hit, first by mines and then by German artillery. Evacuating the burning craft, the Soldiers made their way to the "Dog White" section of the beach in neck-deep water. Once on the beach, brigade members realized that the previous assault group of infantry and Rangers was pinned down by devastating enemy fire. Bolstering the first assault group's forces, ESB Soldiers from all branches helped push the enemy back. Members of the 214th Military Police Company immediately took over traffic control and evacuated the wounded under enemy fire. Despite the danger, only four members of the company were wounded on the beach. As the fighting moved inland, the 214th established traffic control points and, by 13 June 1944, created a brigade stockade for EPWs. For their part in the assault, Staff Sergeant William T. Orr and Sergeant James S. Powell of the



Military police on a landing craft vehicle, personnel (LCVP) awaiting transport to Omaha Beach as a wounded Coast Guardsman is transferred to a larger vessel.



German prisoners are searched and questioned at the Normandy beachhead in 1944.

214th Military Police Company were awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action against the enemy. Also recognized within the 214th were First Lieutenant O. L. Davis, Staff Sergeant Donald Wesslund, Private William J. Dollar, and Private George F. Lord Jr., who were awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

The 210th Military Police Company landed on the "Easy Red" section of Omaha Beach. During the first days of the landings, the Soldiers of the 210th Military Police Company helped medics and provided security for the 5th ESB headquarters, in addition to their primary task of traffic control. In the days following 6 and 7 June 1944, the 210th expanded its duties into law enforcement to prevent pilfering and apprehend Soldiers who had gone absent without leave. Two military police Soldiers from the 210th were wounded on 7 June 1944 and evacuated to England for hospitalization. The 210th would continue to have casualties from beach operations in the weeks following the initial assault.

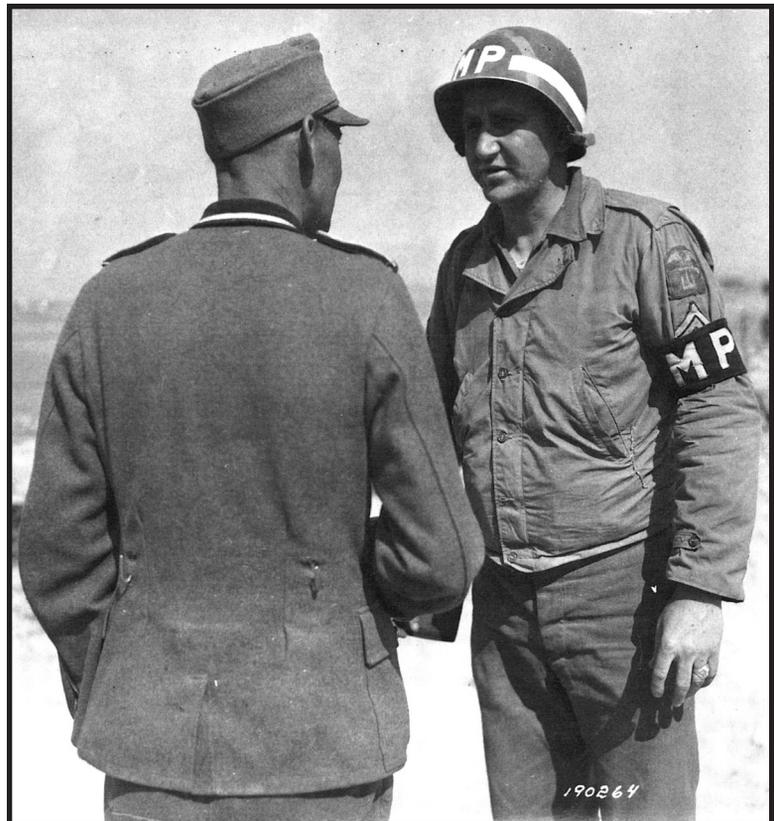
At the time, the 302d Military Police Escort Guard Company was not considered a frontline unit since 57 percent of its members were "limited service" personnel averaging 28 years of age. However, the 302d landed on Omaha Beach on the afternoon of 6 June 1944 with its elements scattered on the "Easy Red" and "Easy Green" sections of the beach. During the first few days of the assault, the 302d had numerous casualties from artillery and mortar fire but persevered and established a stockade for EPWs. By 20 June 1944, the stockade had received and processed 3,290 EPWs.

The 449th Military Police Company took part in practice invasion operations for six months with the 1st ESB. During breaks in training, the military police Soldiers would also perform military police duties in nearby English towns. The 449th also had the added responsibility of guarding the top secret planning room for the 1st ESB portion of the invasion. The 449th landed on Utah Beach at approximately 0800 hours on 6 June 1944. Although enemy resistance was lighter than on Omaha Beach, there was a constant threat of artillery and sniper fire. To counter these dangers, the 449th kept men and vehicles moving off the beach to make room for incoming waves of Soldiers and supplies. The military police Soldiers also oversaw EPW

operations and within four days had supervised the removal of 4,000 EPWs to England. Casualties for the 449th during beach operations consisted of seven military police Soldiers wounded and one killed. The following 449th members were awarded the Bronze Star Medal: Lieutenant E. J. Barattino, Technician Fourth Class D. Feingold, Corporal E. G. Streich, Corporal J. Feinstein, and Private H. Kuperberg.

In the days immediately following the initial assault, other ESB military police units landed at Normandy. The 301st and 595th Escort Guard Companies maintained beach evacuation pens filled with German EPWs and processed the stream of new prisoners. Companies C and D of the 783d Military Police Battalion assisted in directing the considerable amounts of beach traffic four days after 6 June 1944.

In the coming months, beach operations became more routine and less dangerous. Battle lines moved inland and many military police units followed. Most military police units attached to the ESBs were reassigned, but they continued processing many thousands of EPWs and also kept supply lines operational. Although the beachhead was secure, the war in Europe loomed ahead.



Corporal Ernest Streich, 449th Military Police Company, speaks to a German prisoner, 8 June 1944, at Utah Beach.