

A BATTERY GOES OVERSEAS

The last weeks of August and the first week of September were busy ones for the men of Able, cleaning and cosmolineing guns and vehicles, packing equipment and records and cleaning those wonderful shacks we called home on the Texas range. We knew that all the cleaning was for naught, the desert would take over again as soon as we were gone and beautiful Camp Barkeley Estates would again be home to all manner of creeping, slithering, jumping, crawling and biting fauna. We were going into the unknown but it just had to be covered with trees and grass!

We carefully packed our personal gear, sending home things such as our photo albums, letters we had saved and other treasured items. The 12th Armored Division had already been assigned our new mailing address, APO 262, New York, NY, so we knew we were going to Europe across the Atlantic Ocean. The general opinion was that it sure beat going to the South Pacific.

On 9 September Able was roused out before reveille to finish packing and set personal gear out along the battery street. Breakfast was next and then everybody went back to the huts to clean again and take bedding to the supply room, then outside to clean the grounds again, but no sign of moving out. Finally word was given to rest anyway possible. And then noon mess and still no orders. Rested all afternoon and then retreat. After retreat, it was evening mess and wait again. Finally we got orders, loaded our gear on trucks, loaded up and moved to the railhead. It took a long time to load and get on the train. The train pulled out of the loading area but it was early on 10 September before Able was on its way.

For the next four days the train moved north and east stopping only for fuel and water. At these times the battery was drawn up for a nice set of calisthenics! To keep the Redlegs loose, they said. There was a lot of beautiful scenery as the train moved north all the way into Canada and back, finally arriving at Orange, New York and Camp Shanks. Camp Shanks was the Port of Embarkation for Europe. Debarkation from the train was a near disaster with a long slope to climb while loaded down with gear. It was a constant dodging of rolling duffle bags, musette bags, helmets and bodies! But with high resolve and varying amounts of sweat and profanity we made it into our barracks.

The camp was not far from New York City and passes were given to several men. A few who lived nearby even got to spend a few hours at home. Morris Foltz, Howard Nelson, Paul Jarvis, Walter Litwinski, Charles Kozak and John Cheefetz visited the New York Ringside Bar and Grill. They gave everyone a full description of their experience there and had a photo that was taken of them. While at Shanks the edge of a hurricane hit the area and the men of Able had another experience. It definitely was a change from the sand and dust storms.

On 18 September Able left Camp Shanks, stumbling back down the slope to the train which took us to the Weehawken ferry which delivered us to the dock where the ship waited. There were Red Cross people on the dock handing out toilet kits, coffee and doughnuts. Then it was off to the gangplank and embarkation.

The ship that awaited Able Battery was the Victory Ship "USS General Tasker H. Bliss" which was the flagship of the convoy. The ship's keel was laid in the Kaiser Shipyard #3, Richmond, California on 22 May 1942. The ship was commissioned on 24 February 1944 and was christened in honor of Gen. Tasker Howard Bliss who was an officer in the Spanish-American War.

Description of the USS Tasker H. Bliss:

Displacement - 9,950 long tons	Length - 522 feet - 10 inches
Beam - 71 feet - 6 inches	Draft - 26 feet - 6 inches
Speed - 16 1/2 knots	Crew - 306 Troop Capacity - 3,522
Armament - 4 - 5 inch guns	8 - 1.1 inch guns 16 - 20mm guns

The Bliss was decommissioned in 1964 and renamed the "Seamar."

On 20 September 1944 the Bliss put to sea and we said "Goodbye" to the Statue of Liberty and the United States. Able was again on the way and it was again still destination unknown. The 11 days at sea were mostly uneventful except for a few cases of seasickness. Convoy watching took up some of the time. Around the Bliss at thousand yard intervals were freighters, tankers and transports. On the outer fringes were destroyer escorts. It was interesting to watch the convoy formation changes at the Commodore's signals. The chow wasn't bad if you could catch it as it slid back and forth on the stand-up tables when the ship pitched up and down. At one time we saw a pod of blue whales, they were monstrous. There were life boat drills, deck sweeping, card playing and craps shooting to keep everyone busy. Also on warm days sleeping topside was popular.

Then came the day when the Bliss crossed the 30th Meridian and Able was now officially in the European Theater of Operations! Crap shooting and poker playing continued until land was sighted early on the morning of 1 October 1944. The Bliss moved slowly up the Bristol Channel and docked at Avonmouth, England. After spending the night and all the next day on shipboard, Able was given orders to disembark at 2300 2 October 1944.

Carrying everything on our backs we staggered and stumbled down the gangplank and moved off to board a train to take the battery further inland. After a trip by train and bus Able arrived at Camp "A" near Newberry, England on the 3rd of October. During the confusion of the landing and travel three Sergeants were promoted to Staff Sergeants. The trio were Francis O'Keefe, Charles Pugrant and Samuel Eveland.

Camp "A" was a Troop Carrier Command Base of the 9th Air Force. C-47 Transport planes and gliders littered the countryside. Rumors and latrinograms rose to a new high and ran rampant through the battery. "Were we to be flown to the continent?" Able's home at Camp "A" was a huge cold hangar but the chow was good and plentiful. We learned that this base had been one of the take-off bases for airborne troops to the continent for both D-Day and Operation Market Garden.

The stay at Camp "A" ended on 5 October when Able loaded on trucks for the ride to a staging area. The area was Windmill Hill near Tidworth Barracks in Wiltshire, England, near Salisbury and Andover on the Salisbury Plain. Able's homes on the Salisbury Plain were 12 man perambular tents over wooden walls, a wooden floor and closed by a wooden door. In the middle of the tent was a pot-

bellied stove. Here we experienced the first taste of English weather with sleet, snow, fog and rain. The area was a morass of mud with wooden sidewalks. The sidewalks soon began to disappear as the cold penetrated our bodies and there was no sign of supplied stove wood. The only other fuel could only be procured by the midnight requisition of the messhall's fuel supply. Latrines were not hard to find, you just followed your nose! They consisted of large half-barrels at the end of the tent rows. An Englishman with a barrel-like tank and pump came by each day to empty them. English law forbade digging holes in the King's soil to dispose of waste.

A Battery began to receive some of its combat equipment while at Windmill Hill. Able also became accustomed to English mode of life, monetary system and warm, putrid beer. The stay at Windmill Hill was not uninteresting, with passes to London, Salisbury, Winchester, Andover and Tidworth. Of course, everyone had to visit the famous Stonehenge located just a few miles away. During the stay at Windmill Hill Lt. David Weston was promoted to 1st Lt. As Able's Recon Officer.

On 30 October orders were received to prepare for movement to France. On 6 November, Lt. Walsh with 45 men, left on the Advance Detail, their destination, Cherbourg, France. The detail moved to Southampton, England where they boarded an English transport ship, H.M.S. Queen Emma, a wallowing rusty old tub of a dowager. It had been captured from the Germans in World War I. The detail was aboard the Queen Emma for two days in the harbor, the ship putting to sea on the 8th of November. It was a bouncing ride across the choppy English Channel, arriving at Cherbourg on 9 November. Loading on trucks that made their way through leveled French villages and runny French mud, the detail arrived at Advance Camp, a collection of "doghouses" which were wood floors with low walls that were made the size of a two-man pup tent. It was to be home for the next 13 days. The detail labored in mud and rain, cleaning up the vehicles, removing cosmoline, grime and bits of rust from the guns. This equipment replaced our equipment that had been requisitioned by Gen. George Patton and his 3rd Army. The guns were calibrated and tested by firing into the English Channel. During off hours, the men received their first internal inoculation of Calvados, a potent French liquor or embalming fluid. The French sipped from tiny thimble glasses, the detail drank from the bottle, much to their own sorrow next day. Here it was also learned that Calvados could be used as a substitute for lighter fluid.

Meanwhile, back at Windmill Hill, the rest of Able Battery was alerted on 9 November to make ready for their Channel crossing to France. Rumor said that the 12th was going to 9th Army and orders came through reading the same. Came 10 November and the Battery left Windmill Hill and went to Weymouth, England. Coffee and doughnuts were handed out by the Red Cross and the men of Able boarded LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks) for the journey to the continent. The voyage across the Channel was made in good time over the choppy waves and Able minus the Advance Detail landed at Le Havre, France without mishap. A Battery remained aboard until 13 November when debarkation orders were received. Able Battery was trucked to Gonnevillle, France to billet until further orders were received. It was a rainy trip with a bitter cold wind blowing. A Battery remained at Gonnevillle until 18 November and then relocated to an area at Belmesnil, France.

The advance detail arrived on 24 November with the M-7s and half-tracks to rejoin the battery. On the 25th, work on the vehicles began to make them ready for the trip to combat. A movement alert came to Able on the same day. Came the 27th and the Division was released from 9th Army and assigned to the 7th Army. The tanks were loaded with ammunition and small arms ammunition was issued to the men on 28 November. Now we knew it wouldn't be long!

Able moved out on 29 November on the way to the front, to travel on a route through Rheims, Soissons, Metz, Luneville and arrived at Baccarat, France in the afternoon of 1 December. Baccarat was located on the Luneville Plains where the last great tank battle was fought earlier. The trip impressed everyone with the ruins of war. The Battery was billeted in the old French cavalry barracks at Baccarat until 5 December 1944 when orders were received to move into the line. The moment of truth had arrived!

The first combat firing position for Able Battery was at Waldhambach, France where the Battery remained until noon of the 6th when movement was made to Butten, France on west edge of the Bitche area, near the famed Maginot Line, where the Battery supported fire of the 44th Infantry Division Artillery. Able remained at Butten until the 8th, then moving to Rahling, France where the Battery did it's first heavy firing in combat. At Rahling Able fired the first combat round of any type ammunition in the 12th Armored Division. A Battery of the 493rd had fired the first artillery round but not at a combat target.

The Battery then moved to Rohrbach, France to a position near the Maginot pillboxes, there Able fired the first 12th Armored Artiller round into Germany. The target was Utweiler, Germany on 18 December.

At Rohrbach, on the 19th, the Battery received it's first taste of counter-battery fire, being under fire for one and a half hours and then scattered fire during the night. It was during this fire that A Battery suffered it's first combat casualties. Henry Moritko was hit in the shoulder by shell fragments and became Able's first man to receive the Purple Heart medal. During the shelling Obie Hill from the 572nd AAA unit attached to Able was killed to become the first death with the unit in combat.

On the 20th, Able displaced to Bettviller and from there to Hoelling, France where on the 22nd, Captain Brassell was wounded by schrapnel while looking for an alternate position. Lt. Walsh assumed command of the battery. On 23 December Able fired its first propaganda shells and saw the first casualties from them come marching in with hands high.

The 24th, Christmas Eve, came and with it a new BC for Able Battery. Captain Lawrence A. Gobeille, our former BC in the states returned to us. During these latter days of December 1944 the Spirit of Christmas touched A Battery's Redlegs. Small firs and pines were cut from the forests and decorated with tinfoil, colored paper and ration can lids. All units of the battery seemed to display a tree. Small gifts were placed under them; cigars, cigarettes, candy, books and other items, all so that each man received a gift. There were also gifts from home to be shared. It wasn't home but it was Christmas. Turkey was served to all personnel for Christmas dinner. It wasn't like Mom's but Sam Eveland and Able's mess crew did a great job.
