

CALIFORNIA MILITARY HISTORY PUBLICATION
Number 20-102

Soldiers of the Rainbow

The 1st California Engineers during the Mexican Border Crisis and World War I



California Center for Military History
California State Military Department
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The Forming of the Battalion

It was born in Sacramento on 21 July 1916 and given the name Company A, 1st Separate Battalion of Engineers, California National Guard. Captain J.A. Given and First Lieutenant A.M. Barton were its first two members and personally recruited the unit from all over the State of California. Within a week of its formation the Company A mobilized, or as contemporary histories read, mustered into federal service for duty along the Mexican border.

The Mexican Revolution had spilled over the border when Pancho Villa raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico. Because of that raid, on 18 June 1916, the President had called up several National Guard units under the provisions of the National Defense Act of 3 June 1916. The United States responded by not only placing large numbers of troops along its southern border, but also sent an expeditionary force into Mexico under the command of Brigadier General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing. From Brownsville, Texas to San Diego, California, a force made of largely National Guard formations guarded the border against further incursions. It was under these conditions that battalion was raised and accepted into Federal service.

Immediately upon mobilization, the company reported to the State Mobilization Camp at the State Fair Grounds in Sacramento for training. The unit numbered three officers and 69 enlisted men. For the next two months, they trained in infantry and pioneer techniques. They learned everything from hasty bridge construction to topographic sketching and field geometry to railroad track construction.

With the exception of a fire, which destroyed the State Fair Ground's Administration Building on the night of 3-4 September 1916, life at the camp revolved around training for the eventual deployment. On 7 September, Company A constructed a single deck bridge and participated in maneuvers with the Fifth California Infantry Regiment and a detachment from the Naval Training Station at Yerba Buena Island. Training continued until 30 September when the unit broke camp and prepared for deployment.

Nogales, Arizona

On 1 October 1916, the company entrained for Nogales, Arizona, arriving there at 0815 hours, 3 October. While at Nogales, the unit busied itself with the construction of roads and training trenches, map making and other engineer functions. It also conducted local patrols and other security functions.

Upon the return of the forces from the Mexican interior, the border area started to return to its normal routine and on 6 March 1917, the company mustered out of Federal

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service. Companies B and C from Los Angeles were later organized 12 October 1916 and 5 August 1917, respectively and did not see action on the border. However, this time of peace was to last exactly one month. On 6 April 1917, the United States entered "... the war to end all wars."

Mobilization for the Great War

On 20 June 1917, the Company A was called back into Federal Service. B and C followed in July and August. Although called back into service, it did not officially muster in until 9 July 1917. It should be noted that up until this time, National Guard units continued using their state militia titles. In order to prevent confusion between our allies, a nationwide system of numerical designations was devised and on 14 August 1917, 1st Separate Battalion of California Engineers became the 2nd Battalion, 117th Engineer Regiment. The companies were re-lettered D, E and F of the newly designated battalion.

Between its mobilization and 1 September 1917, D Company, along with F Company, busied itself performing construction duties at Camp Fremont in Palo Alto. At the same time, E Company was undergoing training at Camp Lewis, Washington. On 1 September, the battalion left by train for Camp Mills, located on Long Island in New York. With the exception of stops for swimming at Salt Lake, Utah and Valley, Nebraska the trip was uneventful and the unit arrived at Camp Mills on 6 September.

The founders of the unit were still there. While at Camp Mills, Captain Givens was promoted to major and given command of the 2nd Battalion, while Lieutenant Barton was also promoted and appointed the Adjutant of the battalion. D Company was then turned over to Captain Wallace A. Mason, who would rise in rank to become the Commander of the 2nd Battalion, Commander of the 184th Infantry Regiment between the World Wars, and the Commander of the 79th Infantry Brigade at the start of the Second World War.

While the battalion was at Camp Mills, it was united with the 1st Battalion of the regiment which was from South Carolina. The 117th, under the command of Colonel William Kelly, was to become the divisional engineers for the 42nd Division, later known as the "Rainbow" Division. The 42d was a multi-state National Guard division whose title was derived from the rainbow patch they wore on their left sleeves.

While at Camp Mills, the regiment got its first taste of real Army life. Being a temporary camp, there were no permanent barracks or paved roads. The men lived in squad tents along muddy company "streets". The food was simple, but nutritious. A typical breakfast would consist of oatmeal, bacon, prunes, and coffee.

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The days were spent training for the horrors of modern warfare. It was also spent doing the more mundane tasks of being a soldier, cleaning and drilling. Occasionally, the soldiers of D Company would take part in field exercises on some of the golf courses on Long Island, or go on long forced marches through its scenic countryside. Camp shows and trips to New York City relieved the monotony of the camp.

The 117th left Camp Mills on 18 October and was ferried to the embarkation port at Hoboken, New Jersey. That same day, they boarded the USS *Covington* (formerly the German liner *Cincinnati*). Shortly after dark, the *Covington* slipped past the Statue of Liberty. Contemporary reports state that the quarters were cramped in the converted luxury liner. In fact, most of the Californians were billeted below the waterline. This meant almost certain death if the troopship encountered a torpedo attack. F Company from Southern California was so deep in the ship that the propeller shafts and rudder controls ran through their quarters.

But, those same reports also noted that the food on the *Covington* was both good and plentiful, and that many of the men would go for third helpings. Life on the ship became routine almost immediately. With over 5,000 soldiers on board, each company was allowed only one hour on deck. The rest of the day was spent being bored, participating in "abandon ship" drills, and standing in line for breakfast and dinner.

On 29 October, the convoy that included the *Covington* entered the German submarine zone. Prior to this, the cruiser, U.S.S. *Seattle* and two destroyers escorted the convoy. However, from here on, several camouflaged sub-chasers would surround the convoy, protecting it from the German "*underseeboot*" or U-Boat threat. During the next three days, life belts were required to be worn at all times, drills became more frequent, and the men were required to sleep fully clothed.

Arrival in France

Late in the afternoon of 31 October, the *Covington* entered the mouth of the Loire River, and with the incoming tide arrived at St. Nazaire, France early in the morning of 1 November 1917. The locals crowded the docks because the presence of Americans was still a curiosity. Since the arrangements for receiving the troops had not yet been completed, they remained billeted on the ship for four more days!

Finally, on 5 November 1917 the battalion entrained to its training area in the Vaucouleurs district, the home of Jean d' Arc. When they got to the town of Mauvages two days later, the Californians were shocked at the living conditions of the local population. Several of the buildings were heavily damaged from air raids and sanitation was non-existent.

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Almost immediately, the regiment started a program of intense training and construction duties. One of the few distractions were nightly trips to *Cafe d'Union* and *Cafe d'Gare* in town. On 27 January, half of D Company was sent to Chaumont for construction of General Pershing's headquarters there. They remained there until 17 February, when they returned to the rest of the unit, now located at Chalindery.

The 42nd, which was one of four American divisions considered as an assault division by General Pershing. It should be noted that the division's Chief of Staff and later, Commander of its 84th Infantry Brigade was a young Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur. When the division was performing its assault mission, the divisional engineers prepared the way through minefields, and field fortifications, and would be exposed to enemy fire as often as the infantry. The time for training would soon be over and the "Rainbow" Division and the 117th would soon receive their baptism of fire.

On 22 February 1918, the 117th moved to the front line. On that day, the 117th had their first action at Habainville, in the Lunville Sector. At that time, the company was attached to a French unit, the *167^e Régiment d'Infanterie*. This was to last until 21 March 1918. The Lunville sector was officially a "quiet" sector. It was so quiet that German soldiers regularly did their laundry in the shell craters of "No Man's Land" during broad daylight. When the 42nd Division took its place in the line, the men of the 167th Infantry Regiment (formerly the 4th Alabama Infantry Regiment) saw this and decided that they did not come thousands of miles to see the enemy do their laundry. They opened fire on the Germans, and Lunville was a quiet sector no more. The 117th was now busy constructing and repairing the massive system of trenches and fortifications that made up the Western Front. Artillery bombardments soon became the routine. All of this was made worse by days and days of cold rains. Soon the division received orders that they were to move to a rest area on 22 March 1918. It would be their first of many rests that they would not get.

On 21 March, the German Army under Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff launched the first of a series of four major offensives, hoping to end the war before the full force of the American Expeditionary Force could be brought to bear on the Western Front. These offensives, known as the First through Fourth Ludendorff Offensives, would last until 6 August 1918.

The Allies were in trouble, and Pershing offered the entire A.E.F. to be placed under the command of Marshal Foch of France. The 42nd Division relieved the French *128^e Division*, and became the first American division to occupy a divisional sector by itself. D Company had its second action in the Barracat Sector starting on 30 March 1918. It was reported by Captain Mason, in his narrative of the battalion's operations, that the sector "became quite active at times, the officers, and men becoming accustomed to shell and gas attacks..." The regiment marched out of the line on 18

June 1918 bound for another trip to the rest area, and once again, it would be postponed. Instead, they boarded train cars marked "*HOMMES 40-CHEVAUX 8*" (40 men-8 horses). Contemporary histories commented the belief that the prior occupants using its cars were of the four-legged variety.

On 28 June, after 20 and 30-kilometer marches and train movements, they finally got to the town of L'Peine. There, they prepared for an attack west of the city of Rheims. However, this operation was canceled and the regiment marched off to the Esperance and Souain Sector and entered the line at Suippes on 5 July. During this time, the 2nd Battalion became the reserve infantry for the 84th Infantry Brigade. On 15 July, with the opening of the Forth Ludendorff Offensive, the battalion joined the 1st Battalion to relieve the 165th Infantry Regiment in the Champagne-Marne Sector and remained there until the 18 July 1918. Almost immediately, an early morning German artillery barrage resulted in over 14 percent of D Company being killed or wounded. Captain Mason characterized combat after the initial barrage as, "...considerable annoyance from gas shells, but suffered no serious casualties."

On 25 July, as a part of the French-American counteroffensive, the battalion, again serving as the reserve infantry for the 84th Infantry Brigade, arrived at Foret-de-Fere and followed up the advance to the Vesle River. On 6 August, they were relieved and returned to Foret-de-Tardenois.

The St. Mihiel Offensive started with a four-hour artillery barrage 01:00 hours on 12 September. When it lifted, the engineers of the 117th went "over the top" and worked their way through the barbed wire and field fortifications. When they finished their "sapper" missions, they fought on as infantry destroying machine gun nests and taking many prisoners.

The battalion then moved to the Argonne, where it would participate in the last major campaign of the war. At 03:00 hours on 14 October 1918, the battalion moved out again as the reserve for the 84th Brigade. From 2 November, D Company was on the division's left flank, serving as infantry, while the rest of the regiment served as engineers. Now the 42nd was part of the drive toward Sedan, where they arrived on the afternoon of 7 November. Two days later, the battalion was ordered to the rear. On 10 November, they arrived at Bar-Sur-Buzancy. It was there that the war ended for the 2nd Battalion, 117th Engineers. Overall, the 2nd Battalion had spent 193 day in action with only 63 days out of the line.

Occupation Duty and Demobilization

After moving through France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the 2nd Battalion crossed the Sauer River at Bollendorf and entered Germany at 14:50 hours, 2

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December 1918 as a part of the Army of Occupation. On 18 December, the regiment arrived at Mayschoss where it would remain on occupation duty until 10 April 1919. On that date, the regiment left for Camp Pontanenzan at the French port city of Brest. Three days later, they departed Europe on the USS Pueblo and arrived at New York on 28 April 1919.

The regiment then moved to Camp Merritt, New York where they were deloused and assigned billets to await transportation to the West Coast. The regimental headquarters and the 1st Battalion were sent to Camp Jackson, South Carolina where the regiment was officially demobilized on 14 May 1919. The members of the E and F Companies, 2nd Battalion were sent by train to Camp Kearny for discharge, while D Company was sent to the Presidio of San Francisco.

In the last paragraph of his battalion history, Wallace A. Mason, now a Major and Commander of the 2d Battalion wrote,

"We left Camp Merritt on May 10, arriving in San Francisco about seven days later, where we were discharged from the service of the United States, and there ending the service and designation of the Second Battalion, 117th Engineer Regiment."

The unit would remain inactive throughout the 1920s and the first half of the 1930's. In 1935, even though it was inactive, this unit was amalgamated with the 40th Division Quartermaster Trains. On 12 May 1936, Company D, 117th Engineer Regiment was brought back to active status as Company A, 115th Quartermaster Regiment in Sacramento. The two Los Angeles companies, E and F, of the old 2nd Battalion were also brought back as Companies C and D of the 115th.

Today, the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 115th Area Support Group (Roseville) and the Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 578th Engineer Battalion (Manhattan Beach) proudly display the campaign honors, CHAMPAGNE-MARNE, AISNE-MARNE, ST. MIHIEL, MEUSE-ARGONNE, LORRAINE 1918, and CHAMPAGNE 1918 as a link to the men of 1st California Engineers and the 2d Battalion, 117th Engineer Regiment.

Appendix A. Jackson Ried's Letter

During the Second World War, the Commanding General of the 42nd Infantry Division, Major General Harry G. Collins, received a letter with an old hand embroidered Rainbow patch. It was from Mr. Jackson Reid, a former member of Company D, 117th Engineer Regiment. This letter and the enclosed patch symbolized the feelings that the Northern Californians who served with the Rainbow Division had for that unit, even though 25 years had passed. The following is a reproduction of that letter:

Dear Sir,

Am enclosing the shoulder patch taken from my uniform of the last war and ask that you give it to some member of the Engineers of your division. I've had considerable difficulty getting this from my daughter, or I would have sent it before.

Like all other former members of the 42nd, I know that the young men who constitute the Division will make a name for themselves when they get to France. We haven't been too proud of the American Army as yet - while the Boche seem to be no better, they certainly seem to be good - and that will never do. The damned Dutchman never lived who could be better than a Rainbow. Please tell the "kids" we're betting that they'll prove that.

You wont have Douglas MacArthur, true - nor will you have the famous "Down in your Hol'" Johnson, or many others, but I'm sure the present officers can ably fill their shoes.

Wishing you and the Rainbow every possible success and honor, I remain,

Yours very truly,

*Jackson C. Reid
D. Co, 117th Engineer Regt*

Appendix B. Colors of the 117th Engineer Regiment

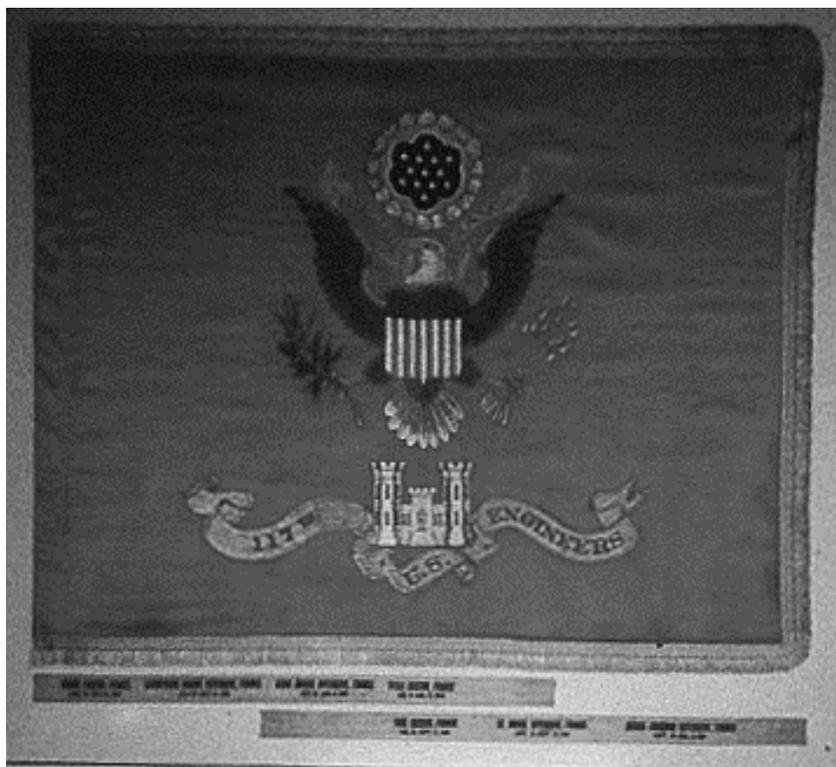


Figure 1. Regimental Color, 117th Engineer Regiment

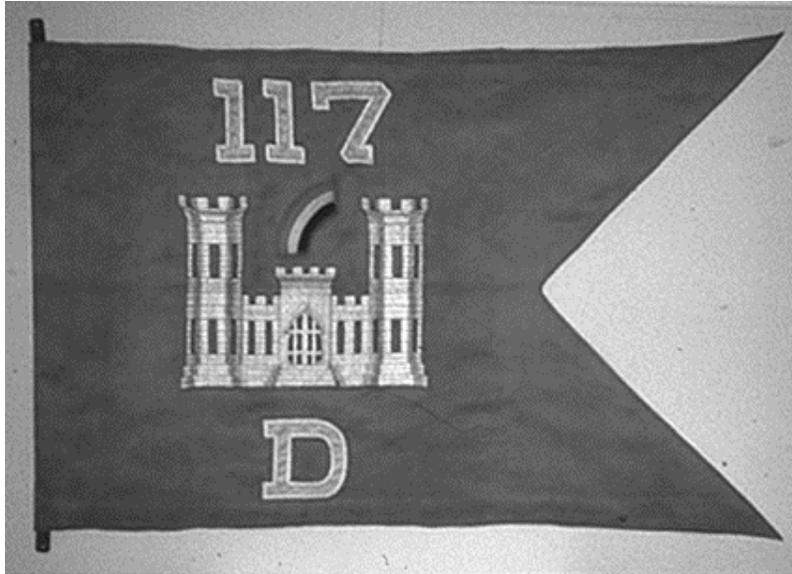


Figure 2. Guidon, Company D, 117th Engineers

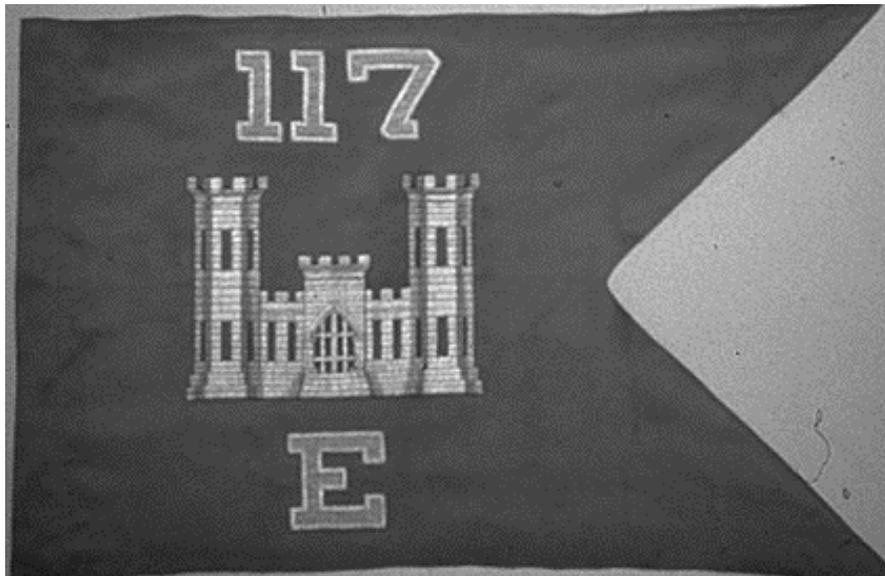


Figure 3. Guidon, Company E, 117th Engineers