

SECOND BATTALION INACTIVATED

by

Pfc Bill Smock
Public Relations

Chinese Combat Command

CHINA -- Members of the Second Battalion, 475th Infantry Regiment, went through one of the most poignant and yet common Army experiences -- that of parting with friends -- when they held a farewell banquet and party near here before the outfit underwent final in-activation.

Several hundred former members of the famed Mars Task Force gathered for the event with cooks of Headquarters Company acting as hosts and setting out a meal of mammoth proportions. An orchestra was on hand to provide the proper atmosphere for the outdoor setting.

Two companies, Headquarters and "E", were present almost en masse but only scattered representation was available from Companies "F" and "G" which were still in the field.

The story of the Second Battalion may be said to have begun June 1, 1944, when just over a thousand men clambered down from transport planes at the Myitkyina, Burma, airstrip -- wide-eyed and a little apprehensive as to what might lie ahead.

A hodge-podge of rookies who had left the United States only little more than a month previously, the men included Military Police, Quartermaster troops, Artillerymen and Infantrymen.

The battle of Myitkyina against enemy forces that included the respected Japanese Imperial Marines was underway when the men of the Second Battalion arrived and went immediately into the front lines. During the next 42 days the never-remitting enmity of the monsoons became more feared than the Japs could ever hope to be and the battalion learned to battle climate, disease and jungles at the same time it was profiting from combat's bitter lessons.

Myitkyina was proclaimed to have fallen officially on August 3rd but mopping up operations against snipers continued until the 7th. On the following day the tattered battalion began a move to a rest area, one they had to construct by their own hands upon arrival.

Extensive training followed with the outfit reorganized to become a part of the newly formed 475th Infantry Regiment. The battalion was built up to strength, largely by replacements shipped overseas immediately after finishing basic training in the cavalry.

Now known as the "Mars Task Force" and given a secret mission to perform against the enemy to the south, the Second Battalion took to the trail on November 15 and set out toward Bhamo, Burma. Heavy weapons, ammunition and all kinds of supplies were packed on mules. The battalion was equipped to travel through rough mountainous and jungle terrain completely independent of any kind of vehicle. Each man carried four days' supply of rations in a pack that averaged 50 to 70 pounds. Days of weary marching followed until the road became a mere trail and the trail a path, wandering through jungles and over mountains. Bhamo was by-passed and by December the battalion with other regimental units, was far behind enemy lines and a good two hundred miles from Myitkyina. Then it was learned that the Burmese village of Tonkwa was the battalion's immediate objective. Chinese troops were holding the village and the American troops moved in to relieve them only a few days after the town was wrested from the Japanese.

Before the battalion was properly dug in the Japs launched a vicious counter-attack to give the Americans their first taste of combat. For more than a week, the Japanese tried vain daily dawn attacks and continued artillery shelling for eleven days before they gave up and pulled out. Left behind were 250 dead Japs.

The fighting ended just before Christmas and on Christmas Eve of 1944 packages and mail began to arrive via parachute drop. The first day of the new year, however, saw the Second Battalion starting down the trail again -- toward the east and more Japs.

Provisioned and supplied by airplane drops on an average of every four days, the unit pushed on. Burmese natives told guides Jap patrols visited them occasionally but no enemy forces were encountered until the battalion made its rendezvous near the Burma Road with other units of the Regiment and with the 124th Cavalry, which was included in the Mars Task Force.

The end of the long trek came as a relief to men and overworked animals. The battalion had made many pre-dawn to after-dark marches up and down steep mountains and on occasion had waded in river beds for hours at a time, falling in swift currents and stumbling over sharp rocks. Mules had plunged down steep cliffs, packs had spilled in bamboo clumps and rivers and men suffering from malaria and dysentery had had to keep going until they could be evacuated by air.

The troops that arrived for the big fight at Loi Kang, Burma, were as rugged and inured to hardship as any American troops have ever been -- and as ready to tangle with the enemy as any U.S. soldiers in history.

The site was a "rice bowl", an approximately three-mile long rice paddy entirely surrounded by steep hills. On the far side of the hills lay the fabled Burma Road which the Japs were using to good advantage. ~~At~~ ~~to~~ haul troops and supplies.

On January 18, 1945, the Second Battalion crossed the rice paddy, after other units occupied the nearest hill-tops, and reached the opposite side at dark with every man wondering why the enemy had not opened fire on them as they strung out across the bare fields.

As soon as they began to climb the steep slopes to their objective -- the crest of the hill -- the battle was joined. After a few hours of slow advances the attack was called off for the night and exhausted men lay down for uneasy sleep in hastily-dug holes bordering the narrow path.

At about 8 o'clock the following morning a fresh attack was begun and the first men of the battalion gained the top of the hill where they dug in for a period of hours. Successive attacks gave the Americans possession of the most vital parts of the hill and positions were dug for several weeks' occupancy.

During the following period Japanese artillery fire was devastatingly accurate and concentrated and all troops agreed the "Whistling Willies" and 105's were the hardest trials to bear they had yet encountered. The artillery fire cost the life of the commanding officer, Lt. Col. Benjamin F. Thrailkill, of Missoula, Montana.

Later successive attacks completed the conquest of the hill and the destroyed village of Loi Kang but by that time the battalion had long held positions which dominated the Burma Road. Intensive mortar fire, machine gun vigilance and nightly patrols had made use of the highway by Japanese impossible. The Japs did not relinquish use of the road until they had lost several light tanks and trucks.

Following final rout of the Japanese from the entire area, the battalion moved back toward the rice paddy and the men renewed acquaintance with such delights as regular meals, unbroken sleep, and daily baths. From foxholes the soldiers moved to tents made of parachute silk and ponchos and began a rest-camp life.

After several weeks, the men boarded C-47's again for the flight over the Hump to China where the battalion was attached to the Chinese Combat Command and given the job of helping train Chinese troops and demonstrating American combat methods.

Lt. Col. John H. Lattin, of New Orleans, who succeeded Lt. Col. Thrailkill as commanding officer, was relieved of duty and sent back to the United States under the rotation system and the post was given to Major Reuben A. Holden, of Cincinnati, who supervised in-activation activities in the battalion and assignment of men to new jobs.

Men of the Second Battalion won the right to wear two bronze stars (several hundred could wear three) on their Asiatic-Pacific Theater ribbons as well as the combat infantryman's badge and the Presidential Unit Citation.

(Passed by Army Censors)