

55th Transportation Battalion

The battalion was constituted as the 55th Quartermaster Truck Battalion on 28 May 1943. On 7 July 1943, it was consolidated with the 2639th Quartermaster Truck Battalion, which was activated at Canastel, Algeria on 13 March 1943. After the consolidation the unit was redesignated the 55th Quartermaster Truck Battalion. The need for trucks in North Africa greatly exceeded what was planned. The battalion was made up of volunteers from other units already serving in North Africa. This was unusual since most Quartermaster units were organized as regiments with three battalions each. The 53rd, 54th and 55th Battalions were the first truck units organized as battalions for later that is how all truck units would operate. Each truck battalion had four lettered companies, but on 19 December 1943, the battalions were broken up, reorganized and redesignated. The four companies A through D became the 3357th through 3360th Quartermaster Truck Companies and the battalion became Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 55th Quartermaster Battalion, Mobile.

The following "Narrative History of the 55th Transportation Truck Battalion" in WWII was written by Tan Wilds:

"After only four months of service, the battalion won its first distinction. Upon transfer from the Eastern Base Section to Seventh Army, Base Section Commander, General A. W. Pence, wrote to Lieutenant Colonel W. V. Owen, the battalion commander, on 23 July 1943:

'1. During the period of four months in which your organization has been attached to the Eastern Base Section, you have built up an enviable reputation for performance of your assigned mission. Operating as you have, with the elements of your command frequently widely separated, the unfailing promptness and efficiency with which every task has been accomplished, your low accident record, and the discipline of your command reflect great credit on the individual enlisted man, their officers, and yourself.

'2. Now, as you are relieved from attachment to this Base Section, it is my desire that my personal appreciation be conveyed to each of your officers and men, and to you as their Commanding Officer, for the important part which you have played in the transportation aspect of the Tunisian campaign.'

"The battalion served in the Sicily Campaign, and began its stint in the tough Italian mountain fighting on 9 December 1943 at the Pignataro Railhead. Stubborn enemy resistance held the Allied advance in the Cassino area, except for the Anzio Beachhead, until May the following year. Here the problem of transportation to the front was particularly acute, for high ground held by the enemy enabled him to observe the narrow, shell-pocked roads that wound over the steep mountain slopes. For the most part, truck convoy movement was confined to the hours of darkness to escape enemy observers and the artillery they could call down on the supply routes. But night movements, in complete blackout, was a task calling for the drivers with nerves of steel. The soldier

behind the wheel had to guide his vehicle over roads that were none too good to start with, avoiding shell-holes, enemy mines, ditches, steep precipices, and collisions with oncoming vehicles. Once he arrived at the front and delivered his cargo, he turned around and ran the same obstacle course all over again in returning to his base.

“Typical was a night in mid-February of 1944 near Cassino, when ten of the 55th’s trucks were tapped to carry barbed wire to British Commonwealth troops at the front. The British anticipated a series of German counter-attacks, and greatly needed the wire for their security. British trucks were unable to travel the difficult roads and steep grades of the hilly terrain, so American trucks had to do the job. A convoy the previous night had met considerable shellfire, suffering one man wounded. The small convoy loaded up, waited for darkness and headed for the front with their urgently needed cargo.

“The trucks had not gone far when they were halted by a British MP, who told them a road junction ahead was under heavy fire. The lieutenant in command, realizing the vital need for the wire at the front, persuaded the MP to permit his convoy to pass regardless of the fire ahead. He then informed his men that they were about to run the gauntlet, ordered them to maintain hundred yard intervals, and hopped into his jeep to lead the way through the road junction. The convoy sped down the pitted road in total blackout at 30 to 35 miles an hour. As the lead jeep passed the critical intersection, the shelling seemed to increase in tempo. The trucks were clouded with dust and smoke, and pelted by showers of rocks and debris. Finally the last truck crossed the intersection, and as the convoy topped a rise in the road, the men could see the flashes from the guns they had just escaped, outlining the front like beacons.

“All danger was not yet past, for the darkness became so thick that the lead truck sometimes could not see the jeep only twenty yards ahead. Night hid the convoy from enemy fire, but also hid ditches and shell holes from the sweating drivers. Even with all trucks in low range and low gear, traveling as slow as three miles an hour, several trucks went off the road into ditches, and had to be winched out. All this while Germans shellfire, though less intense than at the road junction, continued to fall around them. Some times vehicles approached from the opposite direction along the narrow road. Invisible in the blackness, their approach could only be detected by the sounds of their motors. When drivers heard noise ahead, they stopped their trucks and yelled. Then two vehicles passing would pull over to the side as far as they dared, each fearing to roll into a ditch at best or down a precipice at worst, and inch painfully along until they had got by. At a particularly bad stretch of the way, a horse-man materialized out of the murk, remonstrated bitterly that the trucks were holding up his mule train, an disappeared, still complaining, into the darkness.

“Finally the convoy reached its destination near a small town. Bearded Sikhs unloaded the wire, while German artillery opened up on the town. Luckily no shells hit the unloading area. The trip back was much easier. The moon came out and lit the road, and the Germans turned their artillery in other directions. By 0330, the convoy reached the bivouac area, and all hands turned in for a well earned rest.

“Another rough night came in Mid-March of 1944. The British had just punched across the Garigliano River, and were holding ground north of the stream against German counter-attacks. At first the front was supplied by pack mules or jeeps pulling trailers because trucks could not negotiate the mountain trails. American Engineers, working under cover of darkness, rapidly improved one trail to a point where it was believed trucks could get through. True, the “road” that resulted did wind along steep ravines, crossed the Garigliano via pontoon bridge, and had not yet had all the mines removed from its sides, but outside of that it was ready. The 55th was chosen to take the first convoy through. Thirty trucks, including seven machine-gun trucks to protect against air attack, four with winches to pull less fortunate vehicles back on the road, and two jeeps made up the group that was to carry a load of ammunition to the front. The convoy left bivouac at Vairano at noon, and proceeded to the Base Ammo Dump, loaded up, rendezvoused with British guides, and waited for darkness.

“Finally the convoy started down the “Sun track,” as the British called the road, in pitch darkness. For three miles to the town of Laura, drivers followed the cats’ eye on the vehicle ahead, but once past the town it was total blackout. A participant, 2LT David Halley, described the scene:

‘The guiding pinpoint of light ahead was gone and each driver had to follow the road more by instinct than by sight. There was just enough light that by steady concentration the new white stone could be dimly made out as it passed under the running board. But had it not been for the English accent out of the blackness, “Watch that bloody right turn just ahead!” or “To the left now!” it is sure that at least some of our trucks would have gone rolling to the bottom of the ravines we could see and knew were there even though we could not see them in the darkness. The thing that worried us most was that fact that if we went more than four feet off of the road we might “jolly well hit one of those bloody mines of Jerry’s.” It is a “bloody” feeling to go riding along wondering if you are still on the road, waiting for your front wheel to blow up into your face.’

“After much twisting and turning, the tense drivers heard the rattle of boards and the soft sound of flowing water that meant the pontoon bridge. That bridge, and another they were to cross on the return trip, had been washed out several times by waves of water that the Germans had released from the dams upstream. Would a wall of water come smashing down again? Although shells whined overhead and explosions rocked the valley the trucks reached their destination, and a nose count showed none missing. After unloading, the convoy headed back over another road. An artillery duel had started, but fortunately all shells flew by overhead. The problem going back was to get by the English engineers working on the road. It took frantic shouting and screeching brakes to avoid head on collisions in the murk. Then passing drivers selected spots on the shoulders they hoped contained no mines, and squeezed their vehicles by as best they could. One driver heard the motor of an oncoming vehicle too late, pulled over to avoid a head on collision, and went through a soft shoulder twenty feet down the upper slope of a steep ravine. Luckily this was a machine-gun truck, and the mount kept it from rolling farther down. No one was hurt, and the crew bedded down to wait the arrival of a

maintenance crew with a wrecker. The rest of the convoy made the trip back in safety, just in time for a hot breakfast after seventeen hours on the road.

“As the 55th served through its second year of existence, it could point to some impressive statistics. The average tour of duty overseas for men of the battalion was 22 months as of 23 September 1944, and the War had eight months to go. Seventy percent of the men in the unit, on that date had been present when the battalion was activated in Algeria, April 1942. In eight months during 1944 three of the 55th's truck companies drove the equivalent of over six round trips to the moon in vehicle miles. From April to November, inclusive, the 55th recorded 1,911 dispatches, 3,217,327 vehicle miles, and 189,999 tons of supplies transported.

“D-Day in Normandy came 6 June, two days after the capture of Rome signaled the end of the stalemated Italian front around Cassino. On 15 August came the landings in Southern France, where the 55th went ashore from LSTs in the early days of the invasion. The 3359th Quartermaster Truck Company was attached to the Airborne Task Force on the right flank while the 3357th, 3358th and 3360th served in the direct support of the army units that swept northward through the central sector. Reaching the Swiss border in two weeks and effecting a junction with the forces in Northern France in a month, the front lines moved in a lightening advance that extended the Zone of Communications tremendously, greatly increasing the problems of supply. Dumps and supply points were moved north day and night, mainly by trucks. The first supply routes from Delta Beach to the railhead at Grenoble called for drivers of the 55th to make a round trip of 450 miles, men of three companies hauling 2,630 tons of supplies between 5 and 27 September. This and other missions strained trucks and drivers to the utmost. Vehicles could not be maintained properly, and drivers forgot about rest, as transportation units started to bring men on the line the supplies they need. When the going was toughest, the 55th was there.”

The 55th Battalion was inactivated at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey on 24 March 1946.

The War Department directed that the Quartermaster turn over its truck units to the Transportation Corps effective 1 August 1946. Consequently, the 55th was converted and redesignated as HHD, 55th Transportation Corps Truck Battalion on 1 August 1946 and activated at Fort Knox, Kentucky the same day. It was then inactivated at Fort Knox on 12 April 1948. The 55th was reactivated at Fort Eustis, Virginia, on 4 October 1948. It was redesignated as the HHD, 55th Transportation Truck Battalion on 3 June 1949.

E. J. Cassaras remembered, “Many of us were not trained to do the jobs we were assigned. I for instance, was an able bodied seaman, having served aboard the FS209 and the LT464 in the year before we shipped out to Korea. Little did we know that when they asked if you could drive, you would be transferred to the 55th.”

The battalion headquarters left Fort Eustis early in July 1950 aboard a troop train bound for Fort Lewis, Washington. It then shipped out to Yokahama, Japan, arriving the middle of July. The soldiers stayed at the motor pool in Yokahama until they shipped out to

Korea. It landed at Inchon in the early hours of 16 September 1950 the day after the Marines had landed. After 2 days on the beach, the battalion proceeded to Kimpo Airfield, where it unloaded cargo planes and relayed the supplies to the front in support of IX Corps. It was in Seoul when Gen MacArthur and Korean President Rhee reclaimed the capitol. We were involved in relaying cargo to the front when the Chinese attacked in December 1950. The trucks of the 55th then evacuated the 2nd Infantry Division running through a gauntlet of Chinese ambushes. It took the trucks of the 55th Battalion several trips to bring the 2nd Infantry Division back.

After their retreat the 55th Battalion went back as far south as Pusan to stage from. As the front lines stabilized, the 55th advanced north and staged in various areas, among them Taegu, Taejon, and Wonju, this time moving both troops and supplies

Cassaras remembered, “We were like a yo yo, going from retreating all the way to Pusan and back We froze, and many times the only way we could get warm was to empty a can of gas into the ground and light it. Many times we would be stopped on a return trip, and told to carry troops and supplies by officers of other units.”

The US Army began to rotate soldiers back individually after a year in theater as replacements came in to take their place. Cassaras rotated back to the United States on 26 November 1951.

In 1951, the 55th had the following companies attached to it:

- 74th Transportation Truck Company
- 107th Transportation Truck Company
- 252nd Transportation Truck Company
- 505th Transportation Truck Company
- 540th Transportation Truck Company
- 665th Transportation Truck Company
- 715th Transportation Truck Company

In November 1951, the battalion had the following companies:

- 74th Transportation Truck Company
- 505th Transportation Truck Company
- 514th Transportation Truck Company
- 541st Transportation Truck Company
- 584th Transportation Truck Company
- 665th Transportation Truck Company

The 55th Battalion was inactivated in Japan on 25 March 1956.

While on inactive status it was redesignated as HHD, 55th Transportation Battalion on 22 June 1960. It was then reactivated in Korea on 24 June 1960. It was converted and redesignated as Headquarters and Company A, 55th Maintenance Battalion. Organic elements were concurrently organized by conversion and redesignation of existing units. It was inactivated in Korea on 1 May 1970.

The 55th was reactivated in Germany on 16 July 1982. It was reorganized and redesignated as the 55th Support Battalion on 16 October 1984. It then ceased to be a transportation unit. It was inactivated in Germany on 30 June 1991.

Campaign Participation

WWII:

Tunisia, Sicily, Naples-Foggia, Rome-Arno, Southern France, Rhineland, Ardenes-Alsace, Central Europe.

Korean War:

UN Offensive, CCF Intervention, First UN Counter-Offensive, CCF Spring Offensive, UN Summer-fall Offensive, Second Korean Winter, Korea, Summer-fall 1952, Third Korean Winter, Korea, Summer 1953.

Decorations

Meritorious Unit Commendation, Streamer embroidered EUROPEAN THEATER

Meritorious Unit Commendation, Streamer embroidered KOREA 150-1951

Meritorious Unit Commendation, Streamer embroidered KOREA 1952

Meritorious Unit Commendation, Streamer embroidered KOREA 1953

Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation, Streamer embroidered KOREA.