

## 41st Engineer Regiment

Q: What was your first assignment after you graduated from West Point?

A: My first assignment was a very fascinating one in the 41st Combat Engineers under "Smokey Joe" Wood, a colonel who became a general officer during the war. He was a very imaginative and colorful individual. Although not a graduate, he was a great booster of West Point. The unit was the famous 41st 'Singing Engineers,' stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, a Negro unit.

Wood was absolutely convinced the U.S. would soon be in a war and trained us very hard. He was the butt of many jokes; many of his fellow officers thought he was simply apple polishing and trying to get ahead of his contemporaries. Wood not only believed war was imminent but that it would start with an attack by Japan. He was imaginative to the point of being thought eccentric. He constantly avoided routine engineering tasks and during maneuvers employed us like a cavalry unit. He loved playing General Sheridan.

We were around a campfire during a maneuver in South Carolina, on December 7, 1941, when we learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Everyone was stunned except Wood who could have said, but didn't say, "I told you so." What he did say was, "You men haven't seen anything yet. Now that we're in a war I'm going to act like I've gone berserk. That's the way to rise to the top in time of war."

Wood's eccentricities were many-too many to go into. For one thing, he wouldn't have any married officers in his unit. He wanted each to be, like himself, a bachelor. "I want officers to be celibates, dedicated like Catholic priests to a single cause, unencumbered with the responsibility of a family." He often quoted the old saw: "If the Army wanted you to have a wife they would have issued you one."

Most of Wood's ideas, though far out, were conceived to further the Army's missions. For example, Wood hated the idea of "fatigue details? Soldiers should "train, train, train,\* he would say. "Things like peeling potatoes, cooking, washing dishes, picking up trash, and other menial tasks should be left to handicapped civilians who can't fight. Soldiers should train and fight."

Wood considered himself the best trainer in the Army. After the war broke out, new units began to be formed for which we had to provide cadres, a new cadre every month. Wood's concept was to give up his best men-"We owe it to the new units," he said, "to start them off right. Besides, who can train new recruits better than we?"

The net result of giving up our best men each month not only meant giving up our best men, but resulted in our being left with the worst ones. One Saturday morning, at an officer's call session with his 2 battalion and 12 company commanders, the commanders complained bitterly that they were being forced to command the dregs of the Army.

"All the best men you sent off," they said, "and we're left with the stupid, inept, lame, and blind. All we're left with are misfits. The worst 10 percent of our units take up 90 percent of our time."

"Can you identify the misfits?" Wood asked. "Write down the names of ten soldiers you hope never to see again." When they had done so Wood told me to pick up the lists of names. I collected them and started to put them in front of Colonel Wood, but he didn't accept them. Instead, he put them on the table in front of me.

"Lieutenant Rowny," he said, "I appoint you commander of 'J' Company, our new special training unit. These are your men." J Company doesn't exist in the Army. It was stricken from the rosters after a mutiny had occurred in a J Company during the Civil War.

I protested that I had no staff, no one to help me train the men. "For those," he said, "you can pick a man from each of the companies. Pick any man you want." Naturally, I picked the best.

This time the commanders complained. "It's only fair," Wood said, "that if you lose 10 misfits you have to give up one of your best. Transfer the men this afternoon," he said, "to J Company. I'll be around to inspect J Company Monday morning."

It was a challenge I never expected to have to meet. The men assigned me had low IQ's, they were slow, and many of them had physical disabilities.

But told repeatedly that they were the "41st's Finest," and drilled eight hours a day by the best noncommissioned officers of the regiment, they turned into the unit's elite company. Three months later, of 12 monthly competitions for best soldier, best driver, and the like, J Company captured 10 first places, 1 second place, and 1 third place. A month later, J Company was disbanded and the men sent back to their original companies. Wood had proved his point. "There are no good units and no poor units; only good commanders and poor commanders."

We were the first unit to go overseas in World War II, mostly because Wood told Washington we were ready. We weren't; but because Wood had trained us hard

we were readier than any other unit. We were sent to Liberia in early 1942 to construct an airfield and be a possible base of operations for combat in North Africa.

The day after we sailed from Charleston for our 10-day trip to Liberia, Colonel Wood opened up his secret instructions. They were in the form of a 20-page letter of instructions and five volumes of detailed plans. Colonel Wood assembled the officers in his cabin and read aloud the letter of instructions. He then asked me-1 was then the operations officer-to open the porthole. I thought it was to let in some fresh air. To the astonishment of all of us, Wood got up on a chair and tossed the five volumes out to sea.

“These damned bureaucrats in Washington don’t know how to assign mission-type orders,” he said. “The letter of instructions is all we need.” And at that he instructed us to draw up detailed plans to carry out the instructions.

To this day, I don’t know whether the detailed plans we threw away were any good. But it gave us something to do for the next nine days at sea, and we had no one to blame but ourselves for how the instructions were carried out. In retrospect, I think we did pretty well. The planning exercise forced us to think through what needed to be done.

Later in 1942, Colonel Wood was promoted to brigadier general. He returned to the U.S. to establish the cadre for the 92d Division. He had me come back to work for him. General Wood had a lot to do with initiating basic reforms in the Army. He was ahead of the times in developing concepts to promote military efficiency.

### **92d Infantry Division, Fort Huachuca**

**Q:** Where was the cadre for the 92d Division located?

**A:** The division cadre was divided among four locations. The headquarters and division artillery were at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Each of the three regiments was located in a different state, one at Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, a second in Anniston, Alabama, and the third in Fort Donaldson, Tennessee. The Army was afraid to put more than one regiment in any one state in the South. In 1943 we assembled the entire division at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, replacing the 93d Division which had been sent to the Pacific Theater.