

HEADQUARTERS

104TH ANTI-AIRCRAFT ARTILLERY AW BATTALION

BATTALION HISTORY

The 104th Coast Artillery Battalion (AA), Separate, was created by the conversion of three existing units of the Alabama National Guard and by the organization of three additional units. It was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Clarence H. Cowart, with Major Thomas W. Smith as Executive.

The Headquarters Battery was formerly the 23rd Signal Troop, 23rd Cavalry Division. This unit was located in Birmingham, Alabama, and was commanded by Captain Erwin M. Carnes. It has been in existence since October 1, 1939, having been formed at that time from a cadre drawn from Cavalry, Infantry, and Air Corps units of the National Guard located in Birmingham, Alabama.

Battery A, formerly Headquarters Troop, 55th Cavalry Brigade, located in Birmingham, Alabama, was one of the oldest units of the Alabama National Guard, having been recognized as Headquarters Troop, 55th Cavalry Brigade, on April 15, 1933. The unit was widely known in the past as the Birmingham Sabres, and its collection of trophies won in horse shows throughout the South is commendable. Battery A was commanded by Captain Harry A. Speaker.

Battery B was a newly-organized unit located in Phenix City, Alabama. The unit was recommended for Federal recognition on November 23, 1940, and was commanded by Captain Carson H. Booth.

Battery C was first organized as Company I, Second Infantry, in 1898. It served on the Mexican Border in 1916 and 1917. Its duty in World War I was the training of recruits at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. The unit was redesignated as Field Artillery in 1921, and again in 1939 as Headquarters and Service Company, 106th Medical Regiment. This unit was commanded by Captain James D. Finlay.

Battery D was a newly-organized unit located at Eufaula, Alabama. It was recommended for Federal recognition on November 23, 1940, and was commanded by Captain Robert D. McKenzie.

The Medical Department Detachment, located in Birmingham, Alabama, was commanded by Captain Rhett G. Barnes, a former First Lieutenant, Medical Corps, Officers Reserve Corps. First Lieutenant Norman C. Glass, Jr., Dental Corps, was second in command of this detachment.

The Battalion was inducted into Federal Service on February 10, 1941, and units remained at home stations until February 18, 1941, at which time they proceeded to Camp Stewart, Georgia. At this time the Army of the United States has very few anti-aircraft units.

While at Camp Stewart, the Battalion received intensive training in anti-aircraft operation and tactics with the 37mm anti-aircraft gun, and several of the Battalion's officers attended the Coast Artillery School at Fort Monroe, Virginia.

On April 28, 1941, Private Kenneth Waldrop, of Battery A, dies at the Camp Stewart, Georgia.

The Battalion left Camp Stewart for maneuvers in North and South Carolina on September 23, arriving at its base camp in Wadesboro, North Carolina, on the following day. It was the mission of the organization to furnish antiaircraft protection for infantry units in bivouac and on the march. During the month of November the Battalion was attached to the Fourth Motorized Division, commonly known as the "Rolling Fourth". The unit was commended by the Commanding General of that Division for the part it played in the maneuvers: Due to the critical shortage of antiaircraft guns at that time, most of the gun sections operated with simulated 37mm guns which were made of wood. These wooden pieces were jokingly referred to by the men as "37 Splintermeters".

On October 29 Private Eli Clements, Headquarters Battery, was accidentally killed in line of duty at Camp Stewart, and Captain Henry H.H. Howell died there on December 1.

After more than two months of participation in the maneuvers the Battalion returned to Camp Stewart on December 3, just four days before the bombing at Pearl Harbor which plunged the United States into war with Japan and Germany.

When war was declared with Japan and Germany the entire Camp was alerted and this organization was on duty at gun positions around the camp.

During the latter part of December, 1941, and the first part of January, 1942, all personnel of the Battalion were given a short furlough to their respective homes.

The Battalion received a warning order for overseas movement on January 9, 1942, and immediately began preparations for the movement. On February 2 the unit departed from Camp Stewart enroute to the staging area at Fort Dix, New Jersey, arriving there the next day. This movement was made by train and covered a distance of approximately 1100 miles. Two busy weeks followed at Fort Dix, during which time supplies and equipment were requisitioned and checked, the new M1 Garand was issued, and all men were given the necessary shots to bring their immunization records up to date. Before departure from Camp Stewart, the 37mm guns had been taken from the organization, so while at Fort Dix the new principal arm was issued to the batteries, this being the .50 caliber, water-cooled, machine gun.

On February 16 the Battalion entrained for Boston, Massachusetts, arriving there on the morning of February 17, covering a distance of approximately 640 miles. The train ran directly to the docks where personnel boarded the USA Transport No. 244, the former White Star Liner Queen Mary. Shortly after noon on the following day the ship weighed anchor and sailed out of the harbor, its destination known only to a very few. Men from the Battalion manned guns on board the transport during the entire voyage.

On February 22 the ship dropped anchor off Key West, Florida, about twenty miles from the coast, where it proceeded to take on fuel and supplies. While anchored at this position numerous submarines were reported in the area, just as they were on many occasions throughout the voyage. At this state of the war, the German submarines were harrasing our shipping all over the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, and Mediterranean Sea, sinking tremendous numbers of our supply vessels.

Four days later the ship was underway again, and for the next ten days no land was sighted except for a glimpse of unknown islands in the Caribbean Sea. It was reported during this period that the ship went almost to the mouth of the Mississippi River, avoiding submarines.

The Queen Mary entered the beautiful harbor at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on March 6. Two days were spent there while the ship took on fuel and supplies. Though unknown to personnel aboard ship at this time, enemy espionage agents radioed information concerning the location of the Queen Mary to outside sources. This fact was brought out some time later when these agents were arrested.

The ship departed from Rio de Janeiro on March 8 enroute to Capetown, South Africa, at which point it arrived on March 14. During this leg of the journey reports were issued from Rome that the Queen Mary had been severely damaged by torpedoes, but this, of course, was only an attempt to get the United States or Britain to reveal the whereabouts of the ship. While at Capetown the ship took on fuel and supplies. Here, General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander-in-Chief of all Australian Forces, and a contingent of Australian soldiers boarded the ship. The ship departed from Capetown on March 15.

On March 21 all personnel aboard the Queen Mary were alerted when a fire broke out aboard ship in the early hours of the morning. Fortunately, the blaze was quickly brought under control and the ship proceeded on its way. This action took place while the ship was in the Indian Ocean and well out to sea.

The coast of Australia came into view on March 23 and on that day the ship dropped anchor at Freemantle, West Australia, to take on fuel and supplies. At this time it was announced that the Battalion had been assigned to a permanent station at Brisbane, Queensland. It was reported that the original destination of the Queen Mary was the Netherland East Indies, but these were already occupied by the enemy so the plans had to be revised.

In the afternoon of March 24 the ship weighed anchor and departed for Sydney, New South Wales, and after an exceedingly rough voyage in the Great Australian Bight, often referred to as the roughest waters in the world, it arrived in Sydney's beautiful harbor on March 28. This was the end of the long voyage of approximately 19,000 miles which required 40 days. Shortly after midnight, in a driving rain, personned disembarked and proceeded by ferry to the wharf, where they immediately entrained for Brisbane, Queensland.

The Battalion arrived at Camp Ascot, Brisbane, Queensland, in the early morning hours of March 30, after a 700-mile journey wherein large crowds assembled at every railroad station along the route to greet the soldiers, who were among the first contingents of the United States Army to arrive in Australia. Actually, they were the first antiaircraft units to arrive in the Southwest Pacific Area.

After eight days at Camp Ascot the Battalion began to move out to take up positions in the vicinity of Brisbane. At this stage of the war the Japanese Army and Navy had not been stopped at any point and were regularly bombing the northernmost parts of Australia, including Horn Island, Cape York, and Darwin, in their advance southward, and there seemed slight chance that they would be halted before they could enter Australia. Consequently, a defense line had been drawn up just north of Brisbane.

Battery A moved to Lowood Drome and proceeded to emplace guns to afford antiaircraft protection for the airfield, while the remainder of the Battalion moved to Archerfield. Later, on April 26, Batteries B and C left Archerfield and proceeded to Amberley Field to give that area antiaircraft protection. On May 9 Battery A moved by truck from Lowood Drome to Petrie Field, Petrie, Queensland.

On May 25 Batteries B and C moved back to Archerfield and joined Headquarters Battery and Battery D in preparation for a change of station. Battery A completed the formation of the Battalion on the following day. As it later developed, this was the last time the entire Battalion would be intact for a period of almost two years.

The Battalion boarded the ATS Robert Gray at Hamilton Wharf, Brisbane, Queensland, on June 1. The ship weighed anchor at 10:00 PM, destination being Cooktown, Queensland. After traveling for four days inside the Great Barrier Reef the Robert Gray arrived in the harbor at Cooktown on June 5. During this trip there was a submarine alert just offshore from Townsville, and a convoying destroyer went into action and dropped depth charges, with unknown results.

Headquarters Battery and Battery D disembarked at Cooktown onto the harbor boat Poonbar which docked on June 6. Units marched from the wharf to a deserted Catholic convent where they bivouaced. While at this station Battery D's mission was to afford antiaircraft protection for the jetty and airdrome at Cooktown.

On June 9 the Robert Gray sailed from Cooktown harbor and on the following day dropped anchor at Portland Roads, where personnel of Battery C disembarked to lighters and were transported to shore. The unit bivouaced a few hundred yards inland for five days and then began moving by truck convoy to Coen, Queensland, a distance of approximately 95 miles, arriving there on June 15. A small detachment was left at Portland Roads to guard supplies and equipment, while the main part of the battery at Coen was to furnish antiaircraft protection for the airdrome located there.

After leaving Portland Roads on June 10 the Robert Gray continued on to Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait, arriving offshore on the night of June 12. The following morning the ship docked at the jetty at Port Kennedy, Thursday Island. All personnel and equipment were unloaded and transported via small craft to Horn Island. Within a very few days Batteries A and B had all of their guns in position on the airdrome situated there.

The Battalion had its first air raid on July 7, 1942, when Horn Island was raided by sixteen medium bombers at 11:53 AM. Batteries A and B did not go into action as the planes were flying at approximately 20,000 feet, well out of range of the .50 caliber machine guns which were the principal weapon of these batteries at that time. No casualties were sustained by our forces in this raid, in which about 200 anti-personnel bombs were dropped.

Battery D embarked onto the Baralabar at Cooktown and all personnel and equipment were transported to the ATS John Jay which was anchored outside Cooktown harbor. The ship sailed for Thursday Island on the following day, arriving there on July 15. While on Thursday Island, Battery D was issued 4 Omm Bofors guns, the first of this type issued to American troops in the Southwest Pacific Area.

Headquarters Battery boarded the HMAS Baralabar on July 14 and sailed from Cooktown harbor, bound for Horn Island. The unit arrived at Horn Island on July 20 and disembarked. A bivouac area was set up about a mile inland.

On July 16 the Battalion suffered its first casualties. Chaplain Albert M. Hart, T/5 Atwell E. Moore, Privates Albert W. Moore, Rufus B. Humphries, and Philip R. Mills were flying from Coen to Horn Island when the B-17 in which they were riding crashed while landing at Horn Island, killing all nineteen of the occupants instantly.

In the meantime, Battery C departed from Coen, Queensland, on July 14, and returned to Portland Roads to await embarkation. The unit boarded the transport Anhui on July 22 and sailed for Cairns, Queensland, arriving there two days later. On the day of its arrival in Cairns, Battery C was issued 40mm Bofors guns. After four days at Cairns, Battery C sailed for Milne Bay, New Guinea, and arrived there on July 30. On August 4 Milne Bay received its first attack from the enemy in the form of an air raid. Five days later Battery C moved into position for the defense of Gurney Field, Milne Bay.

Battery D, meanwhile, moved from Thursday Island to Merauke, Dutch New Guinea, between August 4 and August 15. At Merauke the Battery set up its guns for the defense of the jetty and the airdrome which was being secretly constructed there. In addition to affording anti-aircraft protection at Merauke, Battery D was constantly on the alert to furnish seacoast and infantry defense, since the enemy was located a short distance up the coast. Though the enemy had been temporarily checked on the northern coast of New Guinea when he was decisively defeated in the Coral Sea battle, his advance in the Dutch New Guinea sector was still unhampered. Had the enemy decided to move into Merauke in force at this stage our forces could have offered only slight resistance due to lack of numbers, hence this mission was often referred to as a "suicide mission". For many months Battery D operated under the strain of this possibility, but for some unknown reason the Japanese never made an effort to capture the position. Not until December, 1942 did the enemy commence operations against Merauke in the form of air raids, and

from then until May, 1943, Battery D sustained numerous air raids, ranging from one to twenty-two planes, but always the damage to military facilities was negligible and only one member of the Battery was slightly injured during the period.

In the meantime, the enemy was making a drive against our positions at Milne Bay, where Battery C was located. On August 26 several enemy warships and troop transports entered Milne Bay and succeeded in landing troops under cover of fire from their destroyers establishing beachheads in the vicinity of what was later to be known as Turnbull Field in honor of an RAAF squadron leader who was killed in action during this operation. On the following day, eighteen enemy dive bombers and fighters attacked Gurney Field numerous times but were driven off by anti-aircraft fire, part of which was furnished by Battery C. Some of the enemy aircraft were shot down on this date. The battle continued unabated until September 10, when hostilities ceased, with the enemy thoroughly and decisively defeated. Today, at Milne Bay, there is a large monument located near Turnbull Field, marking the furthest advance of the Japanese toward Australia. They were never able to cross Turnbull Field, though hundreds were killed in the attempt to do so. After being driven from the area the enemy never returned to Milne Bay. However, from September, 1942, to May, 1943, well over thirty air raids were made on the airdromes and shipping facilities there, ranging from one plane to seventy-six. Fortunately, during all of these raids Battery C sustained only two slight casualties due to enemy action. Battery C probably destroyed several planes while at Milne Bay, but official credit was not given to individual anti-aircraft units by the Anti-aircraft Commander there. The organization was awarded a Presidential Citation for the part it played in the Papuan Campaign while at Milne Bay.

In August, 1942, the Battalion was redesignated as "104th Coast Artillery Battalion (AA)".

During the latter part of August, while at Horn Island, Batteries A and B were issued the 40mm Bofors gun.

Headquarters Battery, Battery A, and Battery B remained at Horn Island until December 1, 1942, when they departed aboard the ATS David Bushnell, bound for Townsville, Queensland. Upon the arrival of the David Bushnell at Townsville on December 3, after a voyage of approximately 800 miles, all units moved to Armstrong Paddock, just outside the city limits, and set up a bivouac area. Even while its equipment was being unloaded from the ship, Battery A was alerted for movement, but the task force was later dissolved when it was determined that the secrecy of the mission had been violated. By some means the composition and destination of the force became common gossip around Townsville, and since it was known that enemy espionage agents were operating in this vicinity the movement had to be cancelled temporarily.

On December 12, 1942, Technical Sergeant James B. Hodges, of Headquarters Battery, was killed while engaged in making necessary repairs to electrical wiring when he accidentally came in contact with a live wire carrying 240 volts. Though artificial respiration was administered for more than two hours, three injections of adrenalin given, and an artificial lung used, Sergeant Hodges never regained consciousness and no definite pulse beat was ever noted. This casualty occurred at Armstrong Paddock, Townsville, Queensland.

On February 10, 1943, Captain Robert M. Hardy, then in command of Battery C, departed for the United States. He was the first officer of the Battalion to be returned to the United States on a duty status.

The Battalion suffered another casualty on March 8, 1943, when First Lieutenant James D.T. Naismith, Battery B officer, passed away at the 12th Station Hospital, Townsville, Queensland, a victim of Septicaemia.

Headquarters Battery moved from Armstrong Paddock to Camp McClung on April 17, a distance of approximately five miles.

On May 3, Colonel Cowart and Captain Scheuing were transferred to General Headquarters in Brisbane for return to the United States. Major Finlay assumed command of the Battalion and about two weeks later Captain Sides, who was then in command of Battery D at Merauke, was appointed Battalion Executive Officer.

During May the organization was redesignated as "104th Coast Artillery Battalion (AA) (AW)".

On May 14 Batteries A and B boarded the ATS Key Pittman and sailed the following day for Goodenough Island. These batteries arrived at Milne Bay on May 18 and disembarked for trans-shipment. Loading aboard the Dutch Transport Van Swoll was commenced on May 23, and four days later the ship sailed for Goodenough Island, arriving there on May 28. Both batteries immediately began preparations for setting up gun positions for the defense of the airdrome on the island.

Meanwhile, Battery C received a warning order for movement from Milne Bay on May 23, and an advance detachment departed for Oro Bay, New Guinea, on May 31. The remainder of the Battery boarded the ATS Key Pittman on June 10 and arrived at Oro Bay the following day, and from there movement was made by truck to Dobodura, where the Battery set up anti-aircraft defenses on airdromes situated there. While at Dobodura the Battery sustained many air raids, though most of these were made by aircraft which were well out of range of the Bofors gun and offered no target. On one occasion approximately seventy-five enemy planes raided the area and about fifty were destroyed by our aircraft. Out of one particular flight of thirty enemy aircraft not one escaped to return to its base.

Tragedy once again struck the Battalion on June 20, 1943, when Privates Hansel Lewis of Headquarters Battery, and Jim Bradley, of Battery D, were drowned in the Merauke River. At times the current in this river is extremely strong, and such was the case when these men were drowned. Their boat was swamped when they were almost on shore, but the current was so strong that they had no chance to save themselves nor to be rescued.

Battery D departed from Merauke on July 22 and arrived at Milne Bay six days later, where defenses were set up for the protection of Sixth Army Headquarters. This voyage was made aboard the British Transport Yuchow.

Headquarters Battery boarded the Dutch Transport Karsik at Townsville on August 10 and sailed for Milne Bay, arriving there three days later. For two days the Battery staged at Waga Waga, then moved across the bay to KB Mission, joining Battery D there.

On September 8, 1943, Sergeant Pettus T. Bruner, of Battery A, was accidentally killed at Goodenough Island. He was making a trinket out of a .50 caliber shell, which had the slug and powder removed, when the primer exploded upon application of a torch, driving a small splinter of the shell into his heart and causing almost instantaneous death.

Just fifteen days later, the Battalion suffered another casualty when Private Ernest K. Gutshall, Battery C, died of a heart attack at Dobodura, New Guinea.

Headquarters Battery and Battery D boarded an LST at Milne Bay on October 19 and sailed for Goodenough Island on the following morning, arriving there in the afternoon of the same day. Battery D immediately set up defenses on Goodenough Island for the protection of Sixth Army Headquarters.

Battery C moved from Oro Bay, where the Battery had staged for movement, to Goodenough Island on board the SS John Deere on February 3, 1944. When this Battery arrived at Goodenough Island and joined the rest of the Battalion it marked the first time the entire organization had been assembled together since June, 1942. Battery C did not set up positions at Goodenough Island, but bivouaced and carried out an intensive training program.

On February 18, 1944, Private Samuel L. Graham, of Battery A, was accidentally killed in line of duty on Goodenough Island.

Major Sides was transferred to Hq 116th AAA Group on February 21, and on the following day Captain Conner was appointed Battalion Executive Officer.

During the first part of March, 1944, all batteries of the Battalion were issued the new M-51 Multiple Machine Gun, excepting Battery C which had received them in January while at Dobodura. Immediately upon receipt of these guns an intensive training program was begun to thoroughly familiarize all personnel with all phases of operations with the weapons. Also, during March the entire Battalion conducted a training program designed to harden all troops for a forthcoming operation.

On April 1, 1944, the Battalion received a Field Order from the 24th Infantry Division and four days later the organization moved to a staging area. For the movement and initial operations Headquarters and D Batteries were attached to 24th Division Headquarters, Battery A was attached to 21st Infantry Regimental Combat Team, Battery B was attached to 19th Infantry Regimental Combat Team, and Battery C was attached to 34th Infantry Regimental Combat Team and left in reserve.

After a practice landing on New Guinea shores on April 9, the unit departed aboard LST'S and LCI's from Goodneough Island on April 17, and two days later the convoy arrived in the Admiralty Island group, where the task force rendezvoused. A strong naval escort joined the force at this point, including carriers, cruisers, and destroyers.

The task force divided on April 21, with units proceeding to Aitape, New Guinea, and Hollandia and Tanah Merah Bay, Dutch New Guinea.

On April 22 the Battalion, less Battery C, which arrived on D plus two, arrived at Tanah Merah Bay. One hour after the infantry had landed on the beachhead, the LST's on which the Battalion was transported hit the beach. Considerable difficulty was encountered because roads had to be constructed in a swampy area, and congestion of vehicles, supplies and troops was extreme. The Battalion remained on the beachhead for ten days with all guns in position. Due to the fact that our air force had practically annihilated the enemy air force in this area, only one enemy plane was over the beachhead during this period, and it is believed that one contained high-ranking Japanese officials who were evacuating the area.

Headquarters Battery, Battery B, and Battery D left the Tanah Merah Bay beachhead on May 3 enroute to Hollandia, leaving Battery A in position on the beach.

After arriving in the vicinity of the airdromes Battery C joined the Battalion and with Batteries B and D went into position for the defense of the airdromes. During the rest of the operation, which officially ended on June 6, only three or four air raids were made on the airdromes and only on one occasion was the enemy aircraft in range.

During the operation the Battalion accounted for several Japanese killed and taken prisoner. Only one slight casualty was sustained by the Battalion, and that occurred when a member of Battery B was injured by flak during an air raid.

On June 15 the Battalion was redesignated as "104th Antiaircraft Artillery AW Battalion".

On August 6, three officers and twenty-five enlisted men of the Battalion were awarded the Bronze Star Medal for meritorious achievement during operations in New Guinea over a period of more than two years and for action in the Hollandia operations.