

COMMANDS

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DESIGNATION: 104th Anti-aircraft Artillery
(Barrage Balloon) Battery

ACTIVATION: October 1942

CAMPAIGNS: Sicily, Naples-Foggia, Rome-Arno,
Southern France



THE 104TH ANTI-AIRCRAFT Artillery (Barrage Balloon) Battery [AAA BBB] was organized at Camp Tyson, Tennessee, in late 1942. Barrage balloons were used as anti-aircraft screens against low-flying planes. After basic training, the unit proceeded to balloon training.

In the spring of 1943, the soldiers of the 104th went on leave. Most expected to go overseas as soon as they returned, and within weeks of the last soldier's return the unit loaded onto a troop train that took them north to Fort Hamilton, N.Y.

The battery sailed aboard SS *Santa Paula* on June 10. As they crossed the Atlantic Ocean, the men played all kinds of guessing games as to their final destination. The soldiers arrived at the port of Oran, Algeria, on June 21, 1943.

The next six weeks were among the most miserable of the entire war for the battery. Heat, dust, chlorinated drinking water, dysentery and rock-hard ground were the memories of the men. Flies got into everything. The few pleasurable moments were occasional trips to Oran, Arzew, Mostaganem and the other coastal towns of Algeria.

Shortly after the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, the unit boarded the Liberty ship *Samuel Huntington* and sailed for Palermo. After unloading, the men bivouacked for a week before setting off through the mountainous center of Sicily. When the 104th AAA BBB arrived at Licata, the unit set up its balloons next to a British decoy outfit. Allied commanders hoped to convince the Germans that Licata was being used to bring in additional supplies and troops. The pretense was kept up until August 21, when the battery moved a short distance north to Porto Empedocle.

On September 3, the 104th provided cover for the British flotilla landing troops at Reggio di Calabria on the Italian mainland. The men of the 104th remained on

their assigned ships for the next four days as additional men were shuttled back and forth between Sicily and Italy. The short trips were not without incident. The 104th suffered its first casualties of the war when one of the ships it was assigned to, *LST-415*, landed at Salerno on October 7. Lieutenant Charles Chalker, Sergeant Frank Town and Privates Frank Eurmnt and Jim Stone were ordered to take the 104th's weapons carrier down to the port to pick up the unit's equipment. After loading everything onto the truck, the four men set off. Shortly after getting underway the vehicle hit an anti-tank mine that detonated. The explosion was made worse when one or more of the hydrogen cylinders aboard the truck ruptured, spewing burning hydrogen over the entire scene. Eurmnt died from inhaling the burning hydrogen. Chalker and Stone were badly burned. The lieutenant returned to duty after a long period of hospitalization. Stone was subsequently sent home.

The 104th was then assigned to set up a balloon screen over the port of Naples, which was crowded with Allied shipping. The Germans made very few attempts to interdict the vital shipping. However, Italian gangsters proved very troublesome, constantly trying to steal supplies from trucks and warehouses.

In August when the 104th pulled down its balloons and moved all personnel to a building a few doors from Naples' main jail, the men felt as if they were in prison. They had to sneak over a wall to get out at night, and there were no passes.

The 104th made a trip or two north to a beach area where it rehearsed amphibious landings, along with elements of several infantry divisions going through refresher training. It was a certainty that the 104th was going to another country, and speculation centered on southern France or Yugoslavia. When the unit loaded onto LSTs

and hoisted its balloons, the men thought sailing was imminent, but the invasion fleet—which is what it was—sat out in the Bay of Naples for eight days. One day Sir Winston Churchill cruised up and down the rows of vessels signaling his famous two-fingered V for victory sign and puffing on his ever-present cigar. That seemed to be what the convoy needed to get started, and the ships departed Naples and set a northwesterly course. When they passed through the Strait of Bonifacio, the destination was no longer in question—it had to be southern France. The Riviera came into view at first light on August 15, 1944. The convoy headed for the beach below the village of La Croix Valmer, where the 104th covered the landings.

The unit then encamped in a field near the beach. In the morning it packed up and moved over to the Baie de Cavalaire, where thousands of French soldiers landed to join the fight to liberate their country.

The 104th was assigned a villa for its headquarters there. Initially, movement was somewhat restricted because there were mines everywhere. One exploding shell, set off by a tripwire, sent a fragment in the direction of the outdoor latrine, catching one of the 104th men in the rump. He was awarded a Purple Heart.

The steady influx of troops into southern France never ceased, and the port of Marseille soon fell to the Allies. The 104th set up a balloon screen to protect the port for four months, until it became obvious that the Germans could no longer reach it by air.

On December 31, 1944, the 104th AAA BBB ceased to exist. In two years the 104th's soldiers had earned four battle stars (Sicily, Naples-Foggia, Rome-Arno and Southern France) and a bronze arrowhead. No one knows how many lives were saved by keeping the enemy's planes above the operating altitude of the balloons. □