

For Your Information

What did the WW II Signal Aircraft Warning Battalions in the ETO do?

The Signal Aircraft Warning Battalions that were in the European Theatre of Operations were U S Army Signal Corps units who worked with Army Air Corps Fighter Control Squadrons primarily to direct fighters and fighter- bombers to their targets. Each battalion had strength of about 1,000 men. Many were highly trained technicians and engineers. They were operating tactical units of the Ninth Air Force (The US Air Force was not established as a separate branch of the armed forces until after WW II). During the campaign in northern Europe air support for each of the three Armies was provided by a Tactical Air Command (TAC). A Signal Aircraft Warning Battalion (SAW Bn.) was assigned to each TAC. The 555th SAW to IX TAC, First Army, -- the 563rd SAW to XIX TAC, Third Army, -- the 573rd SAW to XXIX TAC, Ninth Army. Two battalions, the 564th & 566th, were assigned to Ninth Air Force air defense missions.

Functionally the battalions provided radar location, “friend or foe” identification, and visual front-line ground observer information to the Air Corps controllers located at the radar sites, and at the TAC operations centers where command decisions and aircraft dispatch orders originated.

These battalions were equipped with radar, radio, telephone, teletype and encryption equipment that was “state of the art” at the time. The systems they used to track and communicate with fighters were the forerunners of today's air traffic control systems, and the radar weather maps seen in TV weather reports. Every microwave oven contains a descendent of the high power magnetrons used in the radar transmitters. Almost every thing the SAW Battalions did, and the equipment they used was a big secret.

Some of the men in these units were on special duty as radio operators on offshore ships during D-Day. Others were ground observers and in radar crews that landed with light- weight radar equipment on D-Day. They provided enemy and friendly aircraft tracking and warning information to the landing ground forces. As the invasion progressed in the following weeks additional units and heavier equipment were landed. Some of the radar sets weighed as much as 30 tons. All of this great activity could not have happened if each of the battalions had not contained several hundred support personnel to prepare and serve the meals, keep the trucks and power plants running, obtain supplies and fuel, and handle the paper work. By October 1944 all of the battalions were on the Continent supporting fighter and fighter- bomber operations of the Ninth Air Force.

Veterans of the Signal AW Battalions that were in the ETO gather every year or so to reminisce, tell war stories over again, brag about their younger generations, and visit interesting sites and museums. This year they are gathering on the Queen Mary. Most of veterans who will attend traveled to Europe on the ship in late 1943 and January 1944 in the company of about 13,000 fellow travelers. The January 1944 voyage was memorable in that the North Atlantic winter weather, the high ship speed, and the continual “zig-zaging” of the ship’s course combined to provide much rolling and pitching. On occasion water came over the bow and the ship’s roll led to sea sickness for many of the” land lubber” troops. We now look forward to being aboard the Queen Mary in a calm sea.

All veterans are welcome to the gatherings who were in aircraft warning and control or related units whether they were in Iceland, Africa, and the Pacific, Alaska or the Zone of Interior. The WW II vets are now in their eighties, and a few in their nineties. Children and grandchildren are essential to the organization and support of our gatherings. The SAWBUCK GAZETTE, a “for fun” letter, published three times annually, attempts to refresh veterans and their families as to what the SAW Battalions did during the war.

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