

# 709th Railway Grand Division

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With the outbreak of WW II, the War Department was faced with the serious problem of moving vast amounts of personnel, equipment, supplies, and vehicles over great distances in the shortest time possible. Their solution was to utilize the U.S. railroad system. The strength of America's railroad system lay in its management, corporate direction, personnel, and equipment. The U.S. Army Military Railway Service (MRS) was formed. Over 351,000 railroad personnel eventually served in the armed forces during the war, and some 25,000 ended up in the MRS.

Railroads "sponsored" MRS units, putting railroad personnel into the same military railway unit. Former railway employees in civilian life became military engineers, military brakemen, military yardmen, and military office workers. Sponsored units included railway operating battalions (ROBs), railway shop battalions (RSBs), and railway grand divisions (RGDs). The ROBs actually were the engineers, firemen and brakemen; the RSBs conducted major overhauls and repairs to equipment, and the RGDs performed administrative duties similar to that of the administrative offices of a railroad. The RGDs were to coordinate the functions of two or more ROBs and RSBs. They too had personnel with previous civilian railway experience, from clerical to stationmaster, and those with specific railway civil engineering skills. In many cases, each RGD had 25% to 35% of its personnel with railroad experience.

Each RGD had an HQ & HQ Co, commanded by a "General Superintendent" (a lieutenant colonel) and his staff (25 officers; 56 EM). The HQ & HQ Co had an administrative section, and four technical sections: Equipment, Engineering, Stores, and Transportation.

The Equipment Section was responsible for supervision over all RSBs, for proper maintenance of locomotives and cars, for maintenance of shop machinery, and related reports. Proper maintenance of locomotives and cars increased dramatically with the recapture of civilian track and related rolling stock.

The Engineering Section was responsible for the physical aspect of railroad operation, including track repair and maintenance, coaling and watering stations, including the quality of water, and maintenance of all signals. They also submitted reports related to these duties. This sec-



709th RGD insignia

**On a white cloth disc, it has a standard US shield with blue stripes and a red border to the shield; the unit designation "709 RGD" in red at the top of the shield, with a small SOS insignia in proper colors at the base of the shield. An attached tab with red letters and a blue border reads "Military Railway Service". The unit was authorized the COM-Z and Services of Supply SSIs.**

tion worked closely with engineer construction battalions in the rehabilitation of bridges, track, rail beds, and culverts. Again, these duties expanded dramatically with the recapture of civilian railways. These sections also had EM water chemists to ensure the clarity and purity of local water supplies to ensure proper operation of locomotives.

The Stores Sections was responsible for coordination of all supply requirements to the ROBs and local civilian railroad companies, when necessary. Fuel reserves were the main concerns. As the railroads in Europe expanded in various directions with the success of Allied operations, truck traffic was reduced.

The Transportation Section was responsible for the duties related to handling cars (assembling and classifying), tracing of car movements related to supplies and return of empty cars, and supervision over telegraph and telephone lines. This became even more important as civilian railways came back on line. It should be noted that French civilian railroads subsequently became responsible for the transportation of U.S. and Allied troops as the war progressed eastward into Germany. Casualties who had been recuperating received free rail travel while on the mend.

Near the end of the war, two new sections were activated, but not all RGDs employed them. The first new section was

Provost Marshal. Their duties were related to coordinating the railway MP battalions and companies, establishing railway guards to combat theft, handling theft reports, and conducting court martials. The theft rate was reduced remarkably following the activation of these new sections. The second new section was the Fiscal Section, which essentially functioned as an on-the-spot accounting section. It had been learned (the hard way) that the U.S. government had been overcharged or even bilked for payments in foreign countries. Manifests and bills of lading were soon "true".

The 709th RGD was activated at Camp Millard at Bucyrus, OH on March 15, 1944, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Frank E. Cheshire. The American Association of Railroads "sponsored" the division. The initial cadre was subsequently transferred to the Specialized Training Center located nearby at Mifflin, OH. After this training was completed, they rejoined the division and the entire unit underwent infantry training. Upon completion of the infantry training, several men were transferred out as cadre for the 774th RGD.

The unit left the NY POE on September 20, 1944 and arrived in Liverpool, England eleven days later. For some unusual reason, the 709th RGD spent only four days in England on directed hikes before being shipped to France. The division was an organic element of the 2nd Military Railway Service. On Oct 14, they finally received their first assignment - damaged and dormant Port of Le Havre. The division also began directing traffic that included processing tremendous numbers of German POWs. There were no intact rail lines or standing bridges within the immediate area, and the transshipment of supplies was hopelessly bottlenecked.

Coordinating activities with engineer construction battalions and engineer general service regiments, the 709th RGD began improving the flow of supplies over local non-rail corridors. Supplies were offloaded from ships onto trucks, trucked across town on specifically designated roads, offloaded from the trucks to DUKWs to cross the multitude of waterways in the immediate area, and then transferred to freight cars on good existing tracks. From there, the supplies moved with rapidity across France. What was once a trickle became a flood. The 709th RGD controlled

the 722nd ROB, 724th ROB and 743rd ROB at this time.

However, on November 9, the division was transferred to Malines, Belgium, near the Port of Antwerp. There arrival was timed with the unleashing of the V-1 rockets into Antwerp. Occasionally, the V-1s fell short and struck Malines. The 709th did not suffer any casualties, but many men of the unit spent hours rescuing injured and removing bodies from the debris of what had once been a structure.

While the 709th was stationed in Malines, a liaison team consisting of two officers and three EM was assigned to Antwerp to coordinate railway traffic. Various other liaison teams were sent out to different locations within the operating area to inspect and direct the activities of the ROBs and RSB in the division's chain of command.

Not quite a month later, the 709th moved up to Brussels and had a change of COs. Lt. Col. Cheshire was replaced by Lt. Col. Merle M. Shappell. With the German breakout leading to the Bulge and the goal of recapturing Antwerp, the 709th fell back on its infantry training and posted guards and checkpoints in the vicinity of Brussels. New Year's day brought an attack by the Luftwaffe on nearby airfields. In the hit-and-run attack, two British planes were downed and AA fire knocked down two attackers.

Infantry replacements were taken from the 709th, leaving the division shorthanded

during the crisis of the Bulge. Lines of transportation and communication belonging to the 709th were being cut by the German offensive. Evacuated equipment was jamming traffic ways of supplies coming down from Antwerp. The under strength division managed to correct the traffic way problems before the Bulge salient was pushed back. The 709th had the responsibility of maintaining all the rail lines, both military and civilian, in Belgium during the offensive, and ensuring that supplies met the increasing demand. For their efforts, the 709th was awarded a Meritorius Unit Commendation, the highest award for a service unit. The 709th was the first RGD to do so.

The risk of enemy attack was not the only danger faced by this administrative unit. In February 1945, a major fire erupted among more than 75 cars, some containing white phosphorus, in the switching yards at Soissons, France. The fires caused numerous explosions, and two officers of the 709th managed to clear the yard at great personal risk, with a loss of only four cars.

Replacements for those men sent to the infantry eventually arrived, and the 709th was given new operating territory - Holland and Germany. As it moved in newly acquired territory, the mission was subjected to the vagaries of destruction. Some railroad facilities were not damaged at all, others were completely destroyed, and the remainder were somewhere in between. The 709th successfully directed the repair and

rehabilitation of the rail tracks, culverts and bridges as needed in their new territory.

By the end of the war, the 709th RGD had the largest span of control in the ETO. It supervised the 734th, 741st, 743rd, 744th 752nd ROB, and the 755th and 763rd RSB. The demobilization of ground forces rapidly occurred in the 709th's span of control, such that only the 722nd, 744th and 752nd ROB were under its command in June 1945. The 709th was soon transferred to Calais, France, in anticipation of a transfer to the SWPTO, but the end of the war with Japan caused a change in deployment. The administrative unit instead docked at Boston POE and personnel furloughed or otherwise discharged. A small cadre (nine officers, one EM) was transferred to Ft. Eustice, VA in January 1946 and inactivated in 1950.

#### Bibliography

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The 709th RGD poses in Brussels in 1945. SOS SSIs can plainly be seen on several of the men.