FIRST ACROSS THE RHINE

WHITCOMB LOCOMOTIVES HAUL THE FIRST TRAIN SENT OVER THE FAMOUS RIVER BY THE UNITED STATES ARMY

IN the Third Quarter, 1944, issue of "BALDWIN" reference was made to the work which had been performed by Whitcomb locomotives in the African Campaign. That was only the beginning of a story of achievement, the final chapter of which was written recently on German soil.

These locomotives, which have proved so valuable to the Transportation Corps, were built by The Whitcomb Locomotive Company, a subsidiary of The Baldwin Locomotive Works. They are 65-ton diesel-electrics especially designed by Whitcomb for the arduous tasks of war. Supercharged engines are used to provide sufficient power and, at the same time, permit the light axle loading required for foreign service. Continental tunnel clearances dictated the overall height and width of the locomotive and the contour of the cab roof.

After the success of the Allies in the African Campaign, our first major victory of the war, the American Army moved into Italy, and the Whitcomb locomotives traveled right along with them. The first train into the City of Rome, after its liberation by the Allies, was hauled by one of these sturdy veterans of the rails.

In June, 1944, came the Normandy invasion and the beginning of the real need for dependable rail transportation on the continent of Europe. Whitcombs were shipped across the channel from England by train ferry and were run directly onto the rails ready for service. Thereafter, they played an important part in the rehabilitation of the French Railway System. The first train into liberated Paris, as well as the first supply and hospital trains into Belgium, were drawn by Whitcomb diesels.

When General Patton was making his historic drive toward the German border, the need for gasoline for his tanks was acute. On one occasion it necessitated the immediate movement of thirty-eight cars of the precious fuel up to the front line. The Railway Operating Battalion responsible for this movement utilized one of the Whitcomb locomotives, and the tanks received their gasoline on schedule.

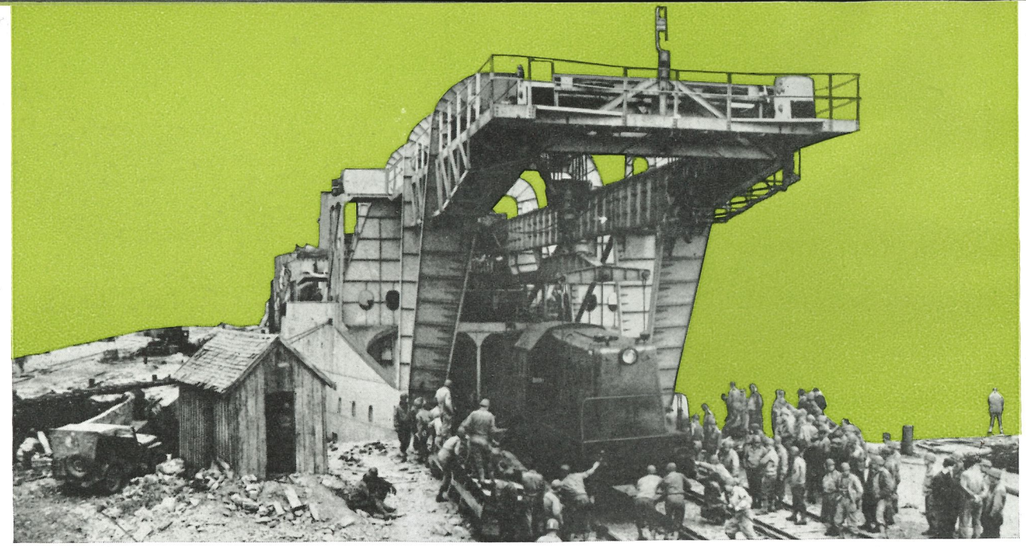
During the same drive, another of the diesel locomotives came through with flying colors, hauling a trainload of badly needed ammunition over uneven rails, pitted roadbed and weakened bridges. The GI engineer at the controls of the locomotive had received only about ten minutes' instruction in its operation before starting the trip. One of the bridges collapsed immediately after the train had passed over it but, once more, the supplies were delivered on time.

Whitcomb locomotives at a desert refueling and service station during the African Campaign.

However, the Whitcombs were scheduled to play a part in a drama more important than any staged during the first drive into Germany. On April 9, 1945, two of them powered the first United States Army train to cross the Rhine River.

Army Engineers, cooperating with the Transportation Corps' Second Military Railway Service, completed the first railroad link across the Rhine, at Wesel, Germany, on April 8, 1945. The connection consisted of a 1,752-foot, single track bridge over the river itself, and a 463-foot bridge spanning a nearby canal. The operation involved also the laying of approximately two miles of connecting track and the rearrangement of yard facilities at Wesel and Buderich, Germany.

A Whitcomb diesel-electric locomotive at the head of the first train to enter the City of Rome after its liberation.



British Southern Railway "Twickenham Ferry" unloads a Whitcomb locomotive it carried from England to the Cherbourg Peninsula.

The story of the building of these bridges is one that has few equals, even in this war abounding in miracles.

Starting construction on March 29th, at 6 p.m., and working night and day, Army Engineer troops had the main bridge ready for traffic exactly 10 days, 4 hours and 45 minutes later. The short time in which the job was completed is all the more phenomenal in view of the fact that the exact location of the bridge was not known to the Army Engineers until 10 p.m., on March 26th. Four possible sites had been under consideration but rapid military developments made Wesel the logical location.

During the construction period, six diesel locomotives were used to provide day and night service in the approach areas, bringing up and spotting materials and supplies.

The bridge is a semi-permanent structure of 23 spans mounted on special prefabricated steel pier structures resting on wood piling. The deck and the railroad track are supported by meter-beams which form the spans between the piers. (Meter-beams are rolled steel I-beams, one meter in depth, rolled for the Germans at a plant in Luxembourg.)

An American soldier hails the drivers of two Whitcomb locomotives at the head of a passing train somewhere in France.

A Whitcomb locomotive crossing the Rhine on a bridge constructed by U. S. Army engineers in less than eleven days. (Inset) Whitcomb 65-ton, diesel-electric, especially designed for European service.

Of the total bridge length of 1,752 feet, 1,074 feet are over water and the remainder represents the east and west approaches. Piles, driven to a penetration of 30 feet, were placed in groups of 21 to 24 for each pier. A total of 94 meter-beams were used, exclusive of those required to bridge the adjacent canal.

Early on the morning of April 9, 1945, the first train loaded with rations and other supplies moved over the bridge, into Germany's inner fortress, with one Whitcomb locomotive at the head end and one acting as a pusher at the rear of the train.

A Whitcomb rolls into Germany's inner fortress on the east bank of the Rhine.

One month later, almost to the day, the Germans surrendered and the actual war duty of the Whitcombs in Europe came to an end. However, there is still plenty of work for them to do, supplying the forces of occupation on which will fall much of the burden of rehabilitating the shattered railway system on the Continent.