



The Claiborne and Polk—known as Old Crime and Punishment—was built to have wrecks. The 725th Railway Operating Battalion cleaning up one of five derailments in a hundred miles.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN R. HALL

The Worst Railroad on Earth

By **BERTRAM B. FOWLER**

RIGHT at the start, let's squash the rumor that has been going the rounds of the railroad men in the 725th Railway Operating Battalion at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. There's not a word of truth in their claim that the Transportation Corps' railroad, the Claiborne and Polk—known affectionately as Old Crime and Punishment—was laid out in the dark of the moon by a cross-eyed man with the d.t.'s. It just isn't so.

Actually, the road was built by railroad men in the 711th Operating Battalion, with the assistance of Army engineers. It was built as a training area for railroad troops who would be called upon to take over a road on the heels of an invasion and operate it under combat conditions. Into the railroad the men had to build all the handicaps and hazards that might be encountered.

The rails of this line between Camp Claiborne and Camp Polk follow roughly the track of an old logging railroad. It is a fifty-mile railroad laid over the Louisiana swamp, infested with a wide variety of venomous snakes, tarantulas, scorpions and black-widow spiders; over bottomless pools of slime and ooze. The very best of it was laid on a horrendous slick white gumbo. In some places the men threw in logs and built on those. At other places, when machinery

Army engineers did a perfect—but awful—job when they built the C. and P. "Now," they said, "we'd like to see any so-and-so operate it."

slipped off the roadway and went out of sight in the mire, they built on that if salvage proved impossible. Because of a lack of earth-moving machinery, the road had perforce to follow the path of least resistance. So it twists in the convolutions of a crazy snake.

There went into the railroad even such things as the curve which the boys of the 725th call the only right-angled curve in railroad history. It was as if somebody wanted to see if a train could turn a corner instead of going around a curve.

The 711th Battalion, now in Iran, having built it, had a whirl at operating it before they left, with a sigh of relief, for overseas, knowing that anything they met up with in the way of railway-operating problems would be duck soup after the C. and P. For putting it into operation was even more of a nightmare than was the building of it under the pressure of time and the limitations caused by inadequate equipment over a terrain that would make any construction man's hair turn gray.

Other battalions came, saw and took their training. Units now serving on the railroads of five continents were trained there, and, as anyone who has seen the C. and P. can tell, were trained well.

At the present writing, the 725th Railway Operating Battalion is operating it. Made up of veteran railroad men recruited from railroads ranging from the Bangor and Aroostook to the Southern Pacific, they thought they knew their business. They arrived at Camp Claiborne, took a look—and didn't believe their eyes.

The captain who sat in the mess hall months later voiced the sentiments of the entire battalion when he said, "I've been here six months and I still don't believe it. It is just one of those nightmares that every railroad man has periodically. In the nightmare he finds himself all balled up in complications that no human being can solve. Any minute I'm going to wake up and find myself railroading again. So I'm not going to believe it."

As rolling stock to operate over this one-track, surrealist railroad, the boys were handed seven locomotives, vintage 1902, sent from some never-say-die railroad in the Middle West. They were given coaches that were grandpa's pride and joy when they first appeared. To complete the agony, they were given a batch of European-type twenty-ton boxcars having only four wheels and an aversion to curves. The one modern and efficient piece of equipment was the wrecker. And, boy, were they going to need that!

On one point the higher-ups were most generous. They told the battalion, in a fine spirit of open-handed



Louisiana livestock wouldn't believe The Green Hornet, even when they saw it racing toward them at two miles an hour.



Like Mary's little lamb, wherever the C. & P.'s wired-up old engines went the wrecker was sure to go.

benevolence, "You can have all the baling wire you want. Just keep the innards of things tied up with wire and running."

The veteran engineers talk of those days with awe. For they did patch up the old teakettles with the aid of the baling wire and manage to keep them running.

The idea was to establish a daily run from Camp Claiborne to Camp Polk and back again—a total distance of 100 miles. Train No. 71, given the dramatic name of The Green Hornet by the train crew, was scheduled as the regular candidate for this run. But in reality there were two regular runs—The Green Hornet was followed gingerly and at a safe distance by the wrecker.

Their first trip out from Claiborne to Polk amounted to starting on a major safari. The boys climbed aboard, loaded down with lunches, fruit, canned provisions and cartons of cigarettes. They said good-by to the company officers, who wondered sadly when they'd be seeing them again. And well they might, for out on the road operations sometimes became as primitive as a safari in the 90's.

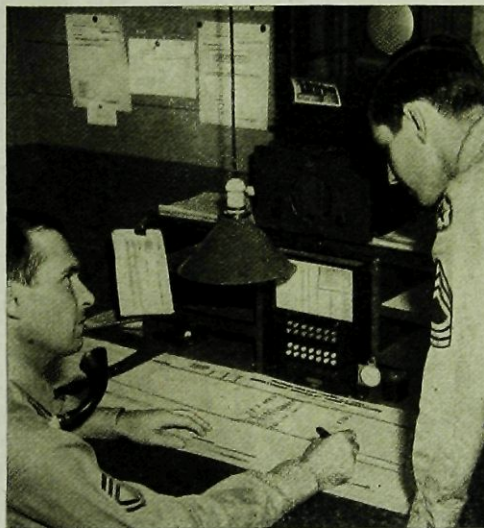
There were fascinating sights to be seen on those early runs. One was the close but temperamental partnership established between The Green Hornet and the wrecker. When The Green Hornet went off the track, the wrecker would move up and painstakingly place each car back on the track. Sometimes, in the process, the wrecker would get off balance and go off the track. Then The Green Hornet, backing up at the required speed of a mile an hour, would help get the wrecker back, so that the wrecker could put The Green Hornet back on the track as soon as she jumped it again. On one such trip The Green Hornet was off five times and the wrecker off three times. That particular trip took fifty hours from Claiborne to Polk and return.

There was one sight that would have filled the early Indians with envy, had they witnessed it. When the train had been out twelve or fifteen hours and all contact with train dispatchers lost, every so often the locomotive would helpfully belch out black smoke. The men call that "operating by smoke signals." At such times there would be a man perched on the top of the locomotive, watching for similar signals made by a train sent out from the opposite camp to find them. The smoke signals prevented them from running head-on into each other.

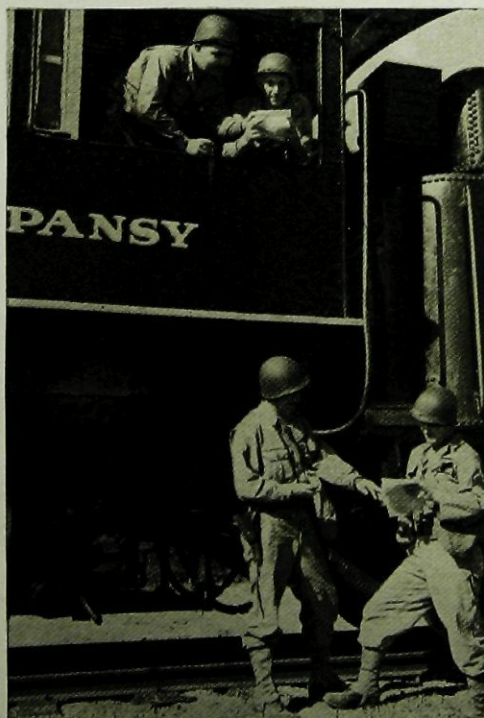
As the months rolled along, all the trainmen acquired that far-off, trancelike look in their eyes that comes when men face the incredible day after day. It became a fixed look with the brakeman on that trip when, worn-out, soaked by the pouring rain, he sat in the rear of the caboose and fell asleep.

He awoke with a start to peer out the rear door, rubbing his eyes in blank unbelief. As far as he could see to the rear was an unbroken sea of mud, with no trace of tracks or roadbed. He rushed forward and climbed over the tender, uttering loud and incoherent cries. He grabbed the engineer by the shoulder and croaked, "Man, where are you? You left the track two miles back and are cutting across the swamp!"

At first, the engineer was pretty sure that the guy had gone crazy. For there ahead of him stretched the



In the dispatcher's office two sergeants keep the Army's nightmare line rolling.



The Pansy's cab is cerise, the boiler assorted blues, the smokestack incredible.

more or less shining, wabbling and meandering pair of rails. He soon realized that with the rain the road had begun to sink. The weight of the locomotive and the two cars was pushing the track down toward bedrock, wherever that might be. Under the circumstances, there was just one thing to do—keep going with a prayer. Once stopped, the train would probably sink down with the track and roadbed.

That engineer already on one occasion had been treated to the sight of bubbles rising where a piece of equipment, plunging off the roadbed, had sunk slowly and remorselessly before his popeyed gaze.

Then there was the case of another engineer who never quite recovered from the shock that was his as he glanced back along the track to see if all his cars were still with him. The cars were, but the roadbed was waving from side to side behind him with the slow, graceful undulations of a perambulating snake. The road, laid on the gumbo, had begun to do a rumba as the rain turned the gumbo to grease.

A shuddering jar brought his gaze hastily forward again, as the train hit that right-angled curve. Old Bouncing Betsy of the Bayou, as his locomotive had been aliteratively christened, had left the rails and was bouncing along on the ties. She chewed up fifty ties before he brought the train to a stop and the locomotive and cars settled down truck-deep in the mud with a sigh of weariness.

They brought the wrecker out and pulled off a job that should go down in the annals of railroading. The wrecker picked up one car and the boys rebuilt the railroad under it. With that car back on the track, the wrecker picked up the second car and they rebuilt the roadbed under that, and finally old Betsy had her turn. Thus a few hundred feet of the roadbed had been completely rebuilt.

"And unless I'm wronger than I've ever been," the commanding officer was heard to say later in a tone of black pessimism, "that's how we're going to rebuild every blasted foot of this infernal road."

Many readers aren't going to believe that one about that right-angled curve. A visiting major heard about it and registered flat and uncompromising unbelief. It was something that just couldn't be. So they took him out in a motor-driven car, or scooter, over the railroad. Racing along at the prohibitive rate of five miles an hour, he gazed in round-eyed wonder at the passing roadbed. At his own request he was doing the driving on the scooter.

The captain warned him, "Better slow down, sir. Here it is."

The major glanced around at the sweep of the curve they had just made. "A right-angled curve," he said scornfully. "Why, that curve—"

That was as far as he got. He swallowed the rest as he sailed through space. The motor-driven car hadn't just jumped the track. At that wild speed of five miles an hour she actually took off and flew.

The major landed on his tummy and slid ten feet in the greaselike gumbo. Lying so, he gazed up at the roadbed, his jaw sagging as he stared and said, "I'll be damned if it isn't true. It can't be, but it is."

In those words the major expressed the spirit that surrounds not only the whole (Continued on Page 58)

PHOTOS BY CAROLYN RAMSEY

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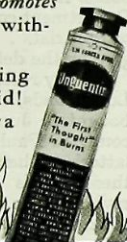
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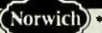
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THE WORST RAILROAD ON EARTH

(Continued from Page 13)

battalion but all living creatures who saw the happenings of those fabulous days. Even the fauna of the district would not believe. They treated the railroad with everything from mild and contemptuous scorn to angered belligerency. Cows, sheep and pigs on the track wouldn't believe the train when they saw it coming. To avoid an unprecedented death rate in the half-wild livestock of the district, the boys had to bring the train to a halt and drive the animals off the track by hand.

But the bull showed the reaction of the belligerent male. When old Betsy approached, he squared away in an attitude that kept the boys safely aboard. He stood with feet straddled, uttering low rumbles of threat. Then, sneering at old Betsy, he charged. Old Betsy shuddered, but withstood the impact, and the bull trotted away, shaking his aching head from side to side in what the boys stoutly maintain was the prevailing attitude of unbelief.

But the boys unwittingly put a righteous fear into the livestock even while they nearly scared a few fatigue-drugged section men out of what was left of their senses. One of the locomotives was rusty beyond the rustiness of the others; a disgrace even to the old Crime and Punishment. So the boys rustled around for paint—naturally, a rare commodity in such an outfit. They scared up a can here and a can there, and proceeded to express their individual artistic souls in color.

When it was finished, the whole headquarters crew gathered around to admire. The engine cab was a bright cerise. The boiler was in various shades of blue from sky to robin's egg in streaks, circles and bands. The smokestack was something out of this world. But the front of the locomotive was the crowning touch. Some lucky man had unearthed a can of rather luminous aluminum paint and put on a coat from cowcatcher to smokestack.

The boys at first were dumb with astonishment. But when their voices came back, they decided to name her. By process of elimination they narrowed the names down to two. Half of them stood out for "The Easter Bunny." The other half of the company stood firm on "The Painted Pansy."

The old girl, by any other name, would have been just as effective. She left the yards on her first run by night in a full moon with her aluminum front shining eerily. A herd of cattle on the track galloped for the swamp, bellowing in abject terror.

A section crew, finishing up twelve hours of back-breaking labor, saw her and dived for the ditches, thinking they were seeing the ghost train. They had seen everything else and were in the mood to accept even that as a reality.

On a daylight run, however, the alligators remained unmoved, especially the old bull that had climbed up the warm ballast and lay across the rails taking his sun bath. He observed the approach of The Painted Pansy with placid disdain. Even the bright cerise cab, glowing like a tropical flower in the sunshine, did not

move him. The glare of the sun on the aluminum left him cold.

The train crew alighted and held a conference. They made false dashes toward him, yelling like banshees in an attempt to bluff him, and got not even a flicker of an eyelid. The motor-driven car sent out from the nearest station to see what had happened to the missing train found them in their impasse. The intrepid officer on the scooter solved the problem by picking up a rock and bouncing it off the alligator's skull. That moved him. Under a hail of rocks he went down over the bank to the swamp, muttering surly growls.

Belligerency was not confined to the bull and the alligator. The battalion set up a camp in a grove of pines near a swamp to house a construction crew. All went well until the first mess call and the boys lined up for chow. From the direction of the swamp came a babel of rumbling snorts, grunts, growls and yells. Before the startled men were aware of what was happening, the horde was upon them—a herd of half-wild pigs from the swamp had smelled the food and come arunning.

The construction lads had to arm themselves with clubs and fight for the supper they had sweated for under the brassy Louisiana sun. They won, but the hogs have continued to make life hideous, rooting around the commissary at night and trying to crawl under huts and tents, keeping the camp in a state of perpetual siege.

Through the saga of horrendous events the boys never forgot that they were rail-

road men. They stuck to their tradition and even made railroad men out of the youngsters brought in to fill up the ranks. There before them was the challenge of the construction engineers' unholy inspiration, and they accepted standing up and swinging. Gradually a semblance of order grew out of the deliberately arranged chaos. They jacked up tracks and built a bed beneath them. They laid ties and ballasted. Everyone from the locomotive engineers down became gandy dancers.

A gandy dancer, in case you don't know, is a section hand. The term arises from the method of tamping ties. With one foot you drive your shovel down along the side of the tie. Then by convulsive movements of the foot you work the ballast under the tie where it belongs. The boys say that most of them kept jerking a foot convulsively even when they slept. But they found one poor devil out on the parade ground doing a gandy dance, and called the squad to cart him away to the psychiatrist.

As the roadbed took on a semblance of likeness to that of a railroad, the speed limit climbed up to five miles an hour and derailments decreased from hourly to only daily occurrences. The 100 miles from Claiborne to Polk and return was finally accomplished in twenty-four hours, then in twelve.

The right-angled curve, by the application of sweat and near-genius engineering, became merely a bad curve. The inside rail went down and the outside went up. Piling driven in the bad spots prevented the roadbed from crawling around restlessly on the slick gumbo.

Now somewhere overseas a certain bunch of construction engineers would probably develop symptoms of acute frustration if they only knew. For the boys of the 725th Battalion have worked a small miracle. They have made an operative system out of the old Crime and Punishment.

The Green Hornet makes her uneventful run to Polk every morning. She comes back in the afternoon right on the ball. The Painted Pansy, with just as much baling wire as ever around her working parts, pants in from her fifteen-mile-an-hour run bearing her feather of smoke like a victor's plume. The gorgeous hues of her paint job have dimmed somewhat under the glare of the Louisiana sun, but not the memory. That remains as fresh and vibrant as ever. Most of the livestock and the alligators remember and move now with the toot of the whistle. However, if any "too tired" or still defiant creatures choose to resist the whistle, the engineer, by releasing the cylinder cocks, hurls a hissing spear of steam fifty or sixty feet ahead of the engine—a moving sight!

Looking back on the glories of their accomplishment, the boys are growing a little bored. Their job now is merely to smooth out remaining rough patches and work out wrinkles that will boost the old C. & P. up into place with the private roads. But they have no real heart for the job. Their eyes are on farther fields. They follow the news of new invasions eagerly. Somewhere over there a railroad is waiting for them. And that railroad, my friends, hasn't a ghost of a chance. It is practically running on schedule now, as far as the 725th Battalion is concerned.

RAILROAD REVERIE

By E. R. YOUNG

The little boy stopped in the middle of the hayfield And cocked his head and listened for the sound.

It was there, it was coming, it was growing, it was coming,

It was coming, it was growing all around.

Far away, but growing nearer, growing nearer, growing nearer,

Coming closer, coming closer, coming closer all the while;

Rumble-rumble, rattle-rattle, clatter-clatter, clank-clank,

Chugger-chugger, chugger-chugger, and it reached the final mile.

The little boy, rooted in the middle of the hayfield, Cupped his eyes to shade them from the sun,

And heard the far-off whistle

and the far-off rumble

and the far-off rattle of the railroad tracks as the heavy giant train roared on.

Catch-a-teacher, catch-a-teacher, patch-his-britches, patch-his-britches,

Catch-a-teacher-patch-his-britches, catch-a-teacher Whoosh!

Chugger-chugger, chugger-chugger, smoke upon the hayfield,

Cinders in the boy's hair and soot upon his face;

Laughter in the boy's heart, joy in the boy's feet, Laughter in the engineer's face.

Chuggerchugger growing fainter,

Catchateacher patchisbritches,

Catchateacherpatchisbritches,

chuggerchugger sssssssssssssssss.

And the little boy turns to other business of the day

As the heavy giant rumble rumbles out and fades away.

(Much too busy, much too busy, Many things to do!

Much too much to do!)

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