

20th Combat Engineer Association of World War II



September 2005

The First Bridge in Normandy

By Paul E. Hainault

On June 9, 1944, Company A of the 1340th was attached to the 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Division with the mission of providing a crossing of the Aure River near Trievier. First of all a road block had to be removed that was covered by German small arms fire. Three volunteers rode up to the road block on the back of a Sherman tank, planted a charge, jumped back onto the tank, and hastily retreated as the road block was blown clear. That night I moved the first platoon to the river bank to construct a 50 foot Bailey Bridge. But when we were ready to instal the far ramp, I was told that there is no far ramp. So we had to improvise by using available timber, but we had no chain saw. Even if we had a chain saw we could not use it because of the noise that would bring fire from the nearby Germans. So I was instructed, "Hainault, get your men to chop up the timber with an ax." This was no easy task to yield an ax on that very dark night without available light but with occasional fire from the Germans. It is not recorded in the History of the 1340th Engineer Combat Battalion, but I was the one that did the chopping, every last timber. What is recorded in the official history of the 1340th is the fact that the next morning the 38th Combat Team moved across our bridge on schedule. This marked the building of the first bridge in Normandy only three days after the D-Day invasion at Omaha Beach.

(See also "Another Look at the Remagen Bridge" on pages 3-4)

Website on 20th History

Bruce J. Porter (Colonel, US Army, Retired) who served as commander of the 20th Engineer Battalion at Fort Hood, Texas, from 1994 to 1996 has contact us in his position of webmaster of the website that can be found at www.20thEngineers.com. He writes that "maintaining the website is a labor of love, and my way of paying tribute to the thousands of soldiers who served under the colors of the 20th Engineers. I would like to invite all 20th Engineer veterans to share with me any memorabilia so that I might make copies and post them on this website." His mailing address is 345 Meadowlark Road, Santa Ynez, California 93460. His telephone number is 805-688-9079. We have made Bruce Porter an honorary member of the 20th Combat Engineer Association of WWII so that he will be receiving each future issue of the *Wavy Arrow*, and have thanked him for keeping alive the history of the 20th Engineers.

Lost But Not Forgotten

James Baxter Smith (D/20th; A/1340th) died December 25, 2004. His widow, Ollie Smith, writes that her husband had been in poor health for several years, and in May 2004 he suffered a stroke. He thoroughly enjoyed reading the *Wavy Arrow* which brought back many memories, some good and some bad.

Edith Noon (beloved wife of Association president) died on July 17th. Condolences can be sent to J. Kenneth Noon, 7804 Grant Avenue, Apartment #4, Overland Park, KS 66204. Telephone: 913-499-6846; E-Mail: <wavyarrow@kc.rr.com>.

20th No Longer Exists

According to Edmund K. Daley, Jr. (son of Col. Edmund Daley) the 20th Engineers no longer exists as such. On July 16, 2005, they became the Special Troops Division of the First Brigade, First Cavalry Division. The tank and infantry battalions of this new division now have their own engineer companies.

Francis Knorr Honored

Francis P. Knorr (A/20th) was one of ten veterans who were honored at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Indianola, Pennsylvania, on May 30, 2005. All veterans received "Thank You America Awards" from the French government to World War II veterans. They were presented by French consul general Jean-Pierre Alex and French consul Jean-Pierre Colet for their services during WWII. The ceremony, sponsored by the Disabled American Veterans Chapter #38 and the Indiana Township Historical Commission, included music by the Allegheny Brass Band, introductions of honored guests by Mayor Dan Taylor, a keynote address by Pennsylvania State Representative Frank Dermody, and closed with a champagne toast.



*Charles A. Hart, secretary of the Historical Commission,
with Francis P. Knorr (A/20th)*

Another Look at the Remagen Bridge

Recall that the 1171st/20th/1340th survived the November 6-10, 1944, Hurtgen Forest "trenchfoot and service as infantrymen." About a month later the Battle of the Bulge started December 16, 1944. It reached its high water mark December 26, 1944, when the weather cleared and the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Armor stopped the German Panzers short of the Meuse River. German losses were at least four times the U.S. losses in men and equipment. While Allied divisions were being shifted to counter-attack, Engineer units cleared roads of deep snow, moved enemy equipment from the roads, and removed mines. We were still assigned to the First Army, and attached to V Corps. The First Army was part of General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group.

On February 26, 1945, we supported the counter attacks to drive the Germans back to the Rhine River. On March 2nd we re-entered Germany, still keeping the roads open, building bridges, and whatever else that would be required to clear the west bank of the Rhine so that assault crossings could be made. Many of us were assigned in support of the 9th Armored Division of the First Army. On March 3, 1945, General Bradley ordered General Courtney Hodges of the U.S. First Army to close in on the Rhine between Dusseldorf and Cologne. At the same time, General George Patton's Third Army was poised to push to Coblenz where the Moselle River meets the Rhine. The objective was to destroy Germany's armed forces.

Even as Bradley was meeting with General Eisenhower in Reims, Belgium, on March 6, 1945, the 9th Armored Division commanded by Major General John Leonard was already six miles northwest of a

railroad bridge, called the Ludendorff Bridge which spanned the Rhine linking the small river towns of Remagen and Erpel. Since the Germans had demolished scores of major bridges during their retreat from the Battle of the Bulge, the U.S. forces expected that this bridge would also be destroyed, and expected that we would have to make costly assault crossings of the Rhine.

On the morning of March 7, 1945, Brig. General William Hoge moved a unit of the 9th Armored Division toward Remagen, and sent a Piper Cub to look for targets. At 10:30 a.m. pilot Harold Larsen was astonished to see the Ludendorff Bridge still standing. Larson radioed the news to General Hoge who ordered the units nearest Remagen to take the bridge. When a task force headed by Lt. Emmet Burrows emerged from the woods onto the cliff overlooking the Rhine, German soldiers were retreating across still intact bridge.

Company A of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, commanded by Lt. Karl Timmerman was the first to reach the bridge embankment. Before they set foot on the bridge, German engineers set off a charge blowing a 30 foot crater in the bridge approach. After the smoke cleared, the Remagen Bridge was still standing. By 3:00 p.m. Lt. Timmerman's unit had reached the east bank of the Rhine, had entered the railway tunnel overlooking Erpel, and had taken a number of German prisoners.

Meanwhile, Lt. Hugh B. Mott and his platoon of 9th Armored Engineers followed closely to disconnect "enough explosives to blow it to Kingdom Come." Other engineers filled in the crater that was blocking the approach to the bridge and began planking the railroad bridge to permit trucks and

tanks to cross, and commence efforts to reinforce the bridge. Within 24 hours about 8,000 GIs had crossed the bridge on foot, in trucks and jeeps, and aboard tanks. The Americans had a battered but intact bridge and a reasonably secure bridgehead on the east bank of the Rhine, Germany's last formidable defensive barrier in the west. No longer would the bridge be known by the Allies as the Ludendorff Bridge but would instead be recognized as the Remagen Bridge.

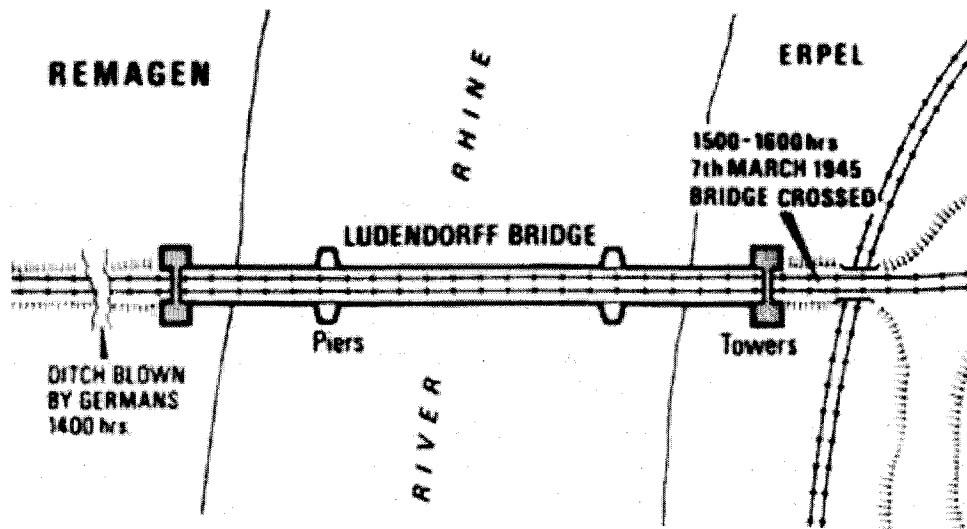
As the news traveled up the chain of command, everyone expressed both surprise and delight. When Bradley telephoned Eisenhower at Reims, Belgium, Ike said, "Hold onto it, Brad. Get across with whatever you need, but make certain you hold onto that bridgehead." While Ike was elated, Adolph Hitler was infuriated by the capture of the Ludendorff Bridge since he had previously ordered that not a single bridge was to be captured by the Allies under penalty of death for those responsible. He sent an execution squad to single out five German officers for immediate execution. Four of the five were immediately killed; the fifth man, Captain Willi Bratze, escaped execution only because the Americans had captured him.

Hitler also ordered an all-out assault to destroy the bridge; he sent in jet aircraft for the first time in the war in an attempt to bomb and destroy the bridge. Anticipating this U.S. anti-aircraft artillery was brought in a concentration of guns half again as dense as that on Normandy Beaches, and the German aircraft failed to hit the bridge. However, on March 9th long-range artillery scored a hit that closed the bridge for five hours. German underwater swimmers armed with explosives tried to destroy the bridge; they were picked up by powerful searchlights before they reached their objective.

Enemy artillery struck the bridge again on March 11th, and eleven V2s fired from Holland landed near the bridge.

Almost immediately after the Remagen Bridge was captured, the 86th Engineer Heavy Platoon Battalion was using five reinforced platoon rafts to transport some of the vehicles across the Rhine. The 51st and 291st Engineer Battalions on March 8th commenced building pontoon and treadway bridges under heavy artillery fire on both sides of the weakened railway bridge. On March 10th men and vehicles of the 99th Infantry Division poured across the Rhine passing signs at either end reading, "The Longest Tactical Bridge Built First Across the Rhine Constructed by the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion and the 998th Treadway Bridge Company." The timing for this was fortunate because the weakened bridge collapsed into the Rhine on March 17th. Of the 200 engineers who were working on bridge repairs, 28 were either crushed during the collapse of the bridge or were drowned in the icy Rhine.

As part of the First Army's bridgehead expansion, the 20th and 1340th crossed the Rhine at Honnigen on March 25, 1945, on a 1,372-foot Treadway "Victor Bridge" built by the 245th Treadway Bridge Company. The 20th and 1340th were then off in support of the 9th Armored and the 69th Infantry Divisions in pursuit of the retreating Germans. The surprise crossing of the Remagen Bridge probably saved about 5,000 American lives which otherwise could have been lost by an assault crossing of the Rhine. In addition, capturing the Remagen Bridge helped to shorten the war in Europe. exactly two months after capture of the bridge on March 7, 1945, the German armed forces surrendered on May 7, 1945, to take effect at midnight, May 8, 1945.



The above illustration of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen, March 7, 1945, is from <www.onwar.com>.

The article on "Another Look at the Remegan Bridge" was jointly prepared by editor George Griffenhagen and assistant editor Truman Setliffe obtaining most of the information from the following publications:

Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1997.

John T. Bookman and Stephen T. Powers, *The March to Victory*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1986.

Omar N. Bradley, *A Soldiers' Story*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1951.

Ken Hechler, *The Bridge of Remagen*, Interview on Internet at <www.appalchinapower.com>.

David E. Pergin, *First Across the Rhine*, Atheneum Press, New York, 1989.

H&S Company/20th In 1941

William A. Thomas (H&S/20th) writes: "I was going through some memorabilia the other day and found the program for the 20th Engineers H&S Company 1941 Christmas dinner. I thought that some of the H&S fellows may like to see it so I am enclosing a photocopy." The program includes the roster of the company as of December 25, 1941, which is headed by Company Commander 1st Lt. David P. Hale, Jr.; followed by 1st. Lts. John J. Cain, Hugh P. Carter, Charles W. Flanigan, and Leland J. McCleish; 2nd. Lt. Samuel M. Burney; Master Sgts. Marshall J. Burnett, Duval L. Dunnavant, Carl B. Felts, Thomas N. Haddon, and John Jacobs; Mess Sgt. Frederick M. Trigg; and Supply Sgt. Jack H. Miller. The 1941 roster also identifies six Technical Sgts.; three Staff Sgts.; six Sgts.; seven Corporals; forty Privates First Class; and 104 Privates. The only ones that your editor can identify as a member of 20th Combat Engineer Assn. of WWII during the past dozen years is William Thomas, Donald Wharff, and the late Andrew L. Harvey, all of whom were Privates in 1941. Anyone who would like to receive a photocopy of this 1941 Roster of the H&S/20th can obtain one by sending a request to Editor George Griffenhagen.

Letters Received

Edmund K. Daley, Jr. (Son of Col. Edmund Daley) writes: "The June 1, 2005, issue of the *Fort Hood (Texas) Herald* features an article explaining how the families of soldiers in the 20th Engineer Battalion, who deployed to Iraq in March 2004, are now participating in the Association of the United States Army "Adopt-A-Unit" program. This program focuses on strengthening ties between the military and civilian communities. Soon the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 29 also adopted the 20th Engineers thereby becoming a part of the "extended family." With the assistance of Toyota Financial Services, a May 17th welcome-home party was held at which more than 800 members of the community attended. The returning members of the 20th Engineers and members of their families also had the opportunity to win door prizes with the grand prize being a 2005 Toyota Tundra."

Gerald M. Goodman (Officer) writes: "The *Wavy Arrow* is a great connection with our past and a reminder of the contributions we made in our services to the U.S.A. Enclosed is my contribution to keep the *Wavy Arrow* waving."

Lilya Mae Smith (widow of Dan M. Smith, Hq/1171) writes: "Dan's children and I look forward to reading each issue of the *Wavy Arrow*."

Irene Urkevich (widow of John Urkevich, A/20th) writes: "I was looking through the Roster and saw Dominick A. Funaro of H&S/20th listed under Missing Persons. He is living in my home town at 60 East Street, Mechanicsville, NY 12118 and his telephone number is 518-664-8550." **Editor's Note:** We are delighted to place Dominick on our mailing list.

Wavy Arrow Contributions

We thank the following for having made a contribution to keep the *Wavy Arrow* coming to you on a regular basis. Please consider one if you haven't made a contribution recently.

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| Edmund K. Daley, Jr. (son of Col. Edmund Daley) | \$50.00 |
| Gerald M. Goodman (Officer) | \$25.00 |
| Paul E. Hainault (Officer) | \$25.00 |
| Lilya Mae Smith (widow of Dan M. Smith, Hq/1171) | \$25.00 |
| Ollie Smith (widow of James Baxter Smith, A/1340th) | \$10.00 |
| Irene Urkevich (widow of John Urkevich, A/20th) | \$25.00 |
| Donald M. Wharff (Warrent Officer) | \$15.00 |
| Mildred Willis (widow of Richard C. Willis, B/20th) | \$25.00 |

Send Contributions, Letters, Articles, Photographs, Obituaries, and other News Items for inclusion in future issues of the *Wavy Arrow* to editor George Griffenhagen, 2501 Drexel Street, Vienna, VA 22180. If it is more convenient, you can send it by e-mail at <ggriffenhagen@aphanet.org>.