TO DO OUR JOB AND DO IT RIGHT

Francis D. Morin and the 254th Combat Engineers in World War II

For Betty, Don, and Joni

With the hope that this captures some of the best of your father
And preserves his memory for those who knew him and those who came after

Dedicated with gratitude to Charles B. MacDonald and Edward C. Vickstrom
without whom this work would be far poorer

1.

April – December 1941

Camp Livingston and the War Begins

Historians disagree when World War II began. Most argue for September 1, 1939, when German forces invaded Poland. But the British military historian, Antony Beevor, places the start a few months earlier, when the Soviet Union and the Japanese fought at the Khalkhin Gol in Mongolia. That was, after all, the first armed confrontation between states that became part of the Allied and Axis powers. Other historians assert the first shots of World War II were fired in July of 1937 when Japanese forces attacked Beijing, while some say it started in September of 1931 when the Japanese invaded Manchuria. And there are those who contend that World War II was not a new war – not a *second* world war at all – but only the final, violent resolution of the Great War that began in July of 1914.

For your father, though, there's no question. For him the war began on April 2, 1941, when he was inducted into the U.S. armed forces as part of the nation's first peace-time draft. The law establishing conscription – the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 – had passed a divided Congress the previous September, and the hostility many of its members expressed towards the draft reflected the opinion of the nation. An overwhelming majority of Americans wanted to stay out of the war then bleeding across Europe, with 86% of the country opposed to sending men to fight on the old Continent. "To hell with Europe and the rest of those nations," one prominent U.S. Senator had said a few years earlier, and the country's mood had barely changed since then.

Most Americans refused to believe Hitler's Germany posed a threat to the United States. Instead, they agreed with Charles Lindbergh, who claimed the real danger to the nation came from a small, elite minority – a few, prominent interventionists who "control[ed] the machinery of influence and propaganda" – and who would lead the country into war by "quarreling and meddling with affairs abroad." One Senator, explaining his opposition to the Selective Service Act, accepted that "affairs abroad" were of no concern to the U.S., and said, "if the people of Germany want a dictator, let them have a dictator, and if they want to fight, let them fight, provided they do not bother us."

President Roosevelt, though, understood the war was "not an ordinary war" and believed the entire world, and not just Europe, faced a "great crisis." The war "threaten[ed] men everywhere," the president argued, for Hitler's intent was not to "set men free but [to] reduce them to slavery." In Roosevelt's view, the German dictator intended to cripple or subjugate as

many nations as he could, all to take the world's riches and resources for his Thousand Year Reich.

Roosevelt also warned that America would not escape Hitler's aggression "through mere isolation or neutrality," and said it was a grave mistake to assume the Atlantic and the Pacific were barriers enough to keep the war away. Even before the invasion of Poland in September of 1939, Roosevelt was troubled by the thought that the Germans would eventually breach the Atlantic and gain a hold in Latin America, bringing what he called "Nazi weapons of destruction" that much closer to the United States. After all, oceans were not an impassable obstacle; ships and airplanes marked with the Nazi swastika could cross the Atlantic as certainly as those carrying the Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes. After Hitler's attack on Poland, the president told the nation, "I should like to be able to offer the hope that the shadow over the world might swiftly pass. I cannot. The facts compel my stating, with candor, that darker periods may lie ahead."

Roosevelt's worries were not irrational. By May of 1940, Hitler had revealed an unquenchable hunger for conquest, having, as Winston Churchill said, "shattered states and bludgeoned races, the Czechs, the Poles, the Norwegians, the Danes, the Dutch, and the Belgians," and had begun dragging Europe into a "long night of barbarism." That summer, German submarines, arranged like wolf packs, began stalking the Atlantic with alarming results. In June, Italian troops led by Hitler's fascist ally Benito Mussolini landed in Northern Africa, taking the war beyond the European continent. By the fall of 1940, as Congress debated the Selective Service Act, France had fallen into Hitler's grasp, and his *Luftwaffe* was blitzing London, preparing for the invasion of England. And the shadows that worried Roosevelt grew ever darker.

Still, the president understood Americans were unwilling to send their boys to die in Europe. He hoped they would back him as he promised to use the nation's industrial might to arm England and other targets of German aggression, and that the country would supply its threatened allies with enormous quantities of guns and ammunition, airplanes by the thousands, and an armada of ships if needed. But he was a realist and knew he could not promise American soldiers. And as he campaigned for his third term as president, he reassured his countrymen: "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."

With no interest in sending troops overseas, yet recognizing that Germany was a growing threat, Congress reluctantly agreed to institute a draft and passed the Selective Service Act. But the final bill had significant limitations. Congress restricted the term of each draftee's service to 12 months of active duty and capped the number of draftees on active duty at any

one time to 900,000. Most importantly, the bill prohibited the deployment of draftees outside the territory of the United States and its possessions. In this way, Congress made it clear these American soldiers would only defend American soil; they were not to be sent to Europe to meddle in affairs abroad and fight for England or for France or for any other country that was – or that might fall – under German boots.

The president accepted these restrictions, but also reminded the country of the danger he saw. As he signed the Selective Service Act into law, he noted, "A few weeks have seen great nations fall," and asserted that "we cannot remain indifferent to the philosophy of force now rampant in the world." He declared confidently, "We must and will marshal our great potential strength to fend off war from our shores. We must and will prevent our land from becoming the victim of aggression." To begin building that potential strength, the first 400,000 men were drafted in October and November of 1940, and a second wave of 400,000 followed in March and April of 1941.

Your father was part of this second wave of "selectees" and was one of 300 men drafted from Michigan's Upper Peninsula that spring. They were assigned to the 107th Engineer Regiment of the Michigan National Guard, which was part of the 32nd Infantry Division. At the time of your father's enlistment, the 32nd Infantry was in training at Camp Livingston, the newest of five Army camps then crowded into the middle of Louisiana, all near the city of Alexandria. Camp Livingston itself sat on the edge of the Kisatchie National Forest, in a vast expanse of rolling waste land, swamps, and bogs.

Camp Livingston and the 107th

The new soldiers of the 107th faced weeks of basic infantry training, followed by specialized instruction in combat engineering skills, such as bridging, road construction and maintenance, along with the preparation of defensive positions. During its time at Camp Livingston, the 107th built a special proficiency in bridging that set standards other units struggled to match and would shape its assignments in the years to come. The officers of the unit – commissioned and noncommissioned – spent hours breaking each bridging process into separate elements and then looking for efficiencies in each element, striving to shave minutes and even seconds wherever they could, while the enlisted men practiced and refined their construction skills. Together, they reduced the time required to build every class of combat bridge then used by the U.S. Army, and in one case, they cut the time needed from 57 minutes to 22. They did this while still participating in field exercises, marches, and war games throughout the summer and

fall of 1941. And, because they were engineers, they also worked on a variety of projects around the camp, including the construction of gun ranges and roads.

They had a song to learn, as well:

Come gaze on us, we're tough young
fellows,
We're soldiers from the north.
You can tell we're educated
By the stuff we're putting forth.

Downtown we get a skate on
With whiskey mixed with beer,
We're the talk of the town for miles around
We're the Michigan Engineers.

Oh, we'll lick the Prussian Guards,
And we'll also play our cards.
We run like the devil
Where the ground is level
For about ten thousand yards.

And the girls! The little dears,
They're in love up to their ears;
They follow for miles
To win the smiles
Of the Michigan Engineers.

With sword in hand,
We take our stand,
Behind the band,
Looking, oh, soooo grand!
And we'll wear kid gloves,
We're the Michigan Engineers!

Your father shared two memories of his time at Camp Livingston. He recalled that, once, while he and his unit were training to construct bridges under combat conditions, he "buried" an Army bulldozer in those Louisiana swamps. And he buried it so deeply – so completely – he said, it never came out, and it could still be there, as far as he knew. He also hated the snakes that lived and hunted in the swamps and bogs, and he hated the cottonmouths – the "water moccasins" he called them — in particular. But every bridging exercise required a snake patrol. Whenever the men were working in the water, a few would be selected to take small boats upstream and downstream from the construction site to watch for snakes and warn the soldiers in the water when one – a coral snake or a copperhead or a cottonmouth – was heading towards them. Your father didn't like this job – with some understatement, he said it wasn't his favorite duty – but he understood it had to be done to protect his fellow engineers.

Time wasn't always devoted to training and drills. The men were free in the evenings and on weekends, and to fill their off-duty time, Camp Livingston offered many distractions. They could spend most any evening at the movies, where a recent feature film followed various

short-subjects and cartoons, just as they had back home. At the USO in Alexandria, there were clubs and hobby nights, along with bingo and other activities. The men could attend (or participate in) athletic activities, such as track meets, boxing matches or baseball games. There were dances, musical shows, talent contests, and on weekends in the fall, football games with teams of the 32nd Infantry taking on other Army units or local colleges. A group of soldiers – the Red Arrow Orchestra – even produced a weekly radio show that was broadcast by a local station. On special occasions, like the 4th of July holidays, there were organized, recreational trips to New Orleans, Lake Pontchartrain, and other areas of Louisiana.

In the field, the 107th also found ways to soften the rough edges and routine of army life. On one multiple day march, the 107th bivouac was in what one of the men remembered as an "ideal spot in the Louisiana pines" with the "perfect fishing hole." While other units were eating "regular issue rations," the cooks of the 107th grilled "a mess of sunfish." And after that meal, some of the men hated "the thought of having to leave" the woods and returning to camp.

The 107TH at Camp Livingston: in quarters and on parade

But for all the movies, the boxing matches, the baseball games, the dances, and the shows, the war in Europe was not far from their minds. As their commanding general reminded them, a "new Napoleon" was striding across Europe, and he warned, "we may be on his chart as a future victim." He told them flatly: "we have our peace, but we may have to fight to preserve it."

Events reinforced the general's warnings. Throughout 1941, while young American men like your father learned the arts of war, Hitler tightened his grip on Western Europe and expanded his conquests to the east, while the Japanese continued taking ground in Asia. At the end of June, the German army invaded territory held by the Soviet Union along a front of more than a thousand miles, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. With more than 3 million men, nearly 4,000 tanks, and perhaps an equal number of aircraft, German forces advanced rapidly into Soviet territory and brutally laid waste to everything before them. In the first weeks of the invasion, the Soviet army seemed to collapse under the weight of the German attack and suffered incredible losses of men and material. By the end of August, Hitler's troops were threatening key Soviet cities, such as Leningrad, Kiev, and Kharkov, had surrounded the port of Odessa, and were on the verge of seizing the rich resources of the Ukraine. In the Pacific, tensions escalated between Japan and the western countries with interests in the Pacific – the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands – propelled by continued Japanese aggression on the Asian continent. That summer, with their patience depleted and having few options other than armed force, the three nations stopped all trade with Japan and froze its assets within their reach. These moves effectively cut off Japan's access to critical raw materials, such as petroleum, and were "the most drastic blow" the west could take "short of actual war." But these moves did little to stop Japan, and, in the end, they only created the pretext its military leaders used to justify drastic actions of their own in the coming months.

Given all these events, President Roosevelt believed the situation was "even more serious" in September of 1941 than it had been two years before, when Germany invaded Poland. In consequence, his administration requested Congress to alter the terms of the Selective Service Act and reduce its restrictions. The debate in Congress was sharp and fierce, and the changes barely passed Congress, winning approval in the House of Representatives by only one vote.

The key revision increased the length of active-duty service of those drafted by 18 months. Men like your father could no longer assume they would home by April of 1942. Instead, with the changes, their term of service could last until late 1943 and they might be away from family and friends and the lives they had planned for two and a half years. Some draftees objected to this change, and at camps throughout the country – even at Camp Livingston – men grumbled and complained and threatened to leave at the end of their original 12 months' service. Yet, in

the end, nothing much happened, and there wasn't a flood of soldiers walking away from their camps without permission in October or November. Then, too, events soon changed American opinions about the war.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, Japanese forces, without warning, attacked the American Naval base at Pearl Harbor, the adjoining Army base at Hickam Field, and other U.S. military installations on Oahu Island, Hawaii. That night "the mess halls of Camp Livingston buzzed with excited comment." One soldier recalled, "we grinned and asked the man next to us if boat trips made him sick. And did he have his rifle all cleaned up and his underwear ready for packing? There was a lot of nervous joking." Yet their thoughts also were "kind of scrambled and confused." After all, they knew they were now "soldiers of a nation actually at war," and, as one man put it, that was "a big thing to try and grasp all in one swallow."

Within a few days, though, the men's "nervous tension" had "abated considerably." It was December, after all, and the men were "ready for a few days of fun and Christmas spirit." It was still the holiday season, and the men were looking forward to "an opportunity to relax for at least one day" – a day with "informal parties, dances, and dinners," and a day for "a few lucky soldiers" to spend with "their parents, friends, and sweethearts." It was easy to shrug the tension away with laughter: "the general attitude seems to have been best expressed by the quartermaster private who grinned and said, 'Well, I always did want to see the Far East.'" Humor was important; as one soldier wrote, "If we stop laughing, we're done."

All the same, "the men seem prepared to accept the situation for what it is. Everyone knows that it is serious, and everyone is ready to do his job." Under the laughter, the jokes, and the tension, there was resolve: "Well, it's here at last, after all these months of conjecture and uncertainty. We know now, past all doubt, that we're here for a grim purpose. And with it our daily routine takes on added meaning. We've been told for a long time that we were here to prepare for the defense of our nation. Now we know it." They understood their future would be hard and they would be asked "to make a good many sacrifices." Still, they were determined "to do our job, and do it right."

Within days of the Japanese attack, America had joined the war against Germany and Japan. Without debate, Congress amended the Selective Service Act again, this time extending the draftees' service to the end of hostilities plus six months and allowing U.S. troops to be used throughout the world, as military needs required. These events changed your father's life: he would spend the next three and a half years in Europe and would see war firsthand in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Czechoslovakia.

Your father's journey to Europe began at the end of December, when the U.S. Army assigned the 32nd Infantry Division to the European Theater of Operations, and, as part of that Division, your father's unit, the 107th, was told to prepare to ship out. At the time, though, no one knew exactly where they were going or how long they would stay.

2.
January – March 1942
Fort Dix and Transfer to Europe

The men of the 107th left Camp Livingston on December 31, 1941. This was their first experience traveling in wartime, and, as one of the men recalled, they spent three "tedious, anxiety filled" days confined to a train, under "complete black-out conditions," without knowing where they were going – they "knew from nothing," he said. It was also their first experience with having their personal mail censored, leaving some of the men horrified and the censoring officers embarrassed.

The men only learned their destination when they detrained on the second night of January 1942, and marched, with full packs and duffle bags, into Fort Dix, New Jersey. It was terribly cold – minus 10° one remembered – and, when they reached the camp, they found no heat and no blankets and no food. Some of them found snow inside the tents they were given, while others found only bare tent frames, which had to be covered before they could move in. But whether they had a tent or not, everything they needed – cots, stoves, and coal – was covered in snow. Adding to the cold, the wooden floors of their tents were iced over. The weather was so frigid throughout that January that the floors were still covered in ice four weeks later, when they were finally given billets in wooden barracks.

Your father remembered New Jersey. He was driving a halftrack near a convoy's end, and he said that, as a rule, the farther back you were in a convoy, the faster you had to go to stay with those ahead of you. At some point, on their way to Fort Dix perhaps, the convoy was winding its way through a city, and your father was trying hard to keep up. The convoy disappeared around a blind corner, and, doing all he could not to lose time, your father sped around the corner, only to find that the line of vehicles ahead of him had come to a dead stop. But he couldn't stop, and he plowed into a halftrack directly in front of him. And he hit it so hard, he shoved it into the next halftrack in line. With three wrecked halftracks and a buried bulldozer to his credit, your father wondered if the Army would think he was worth keeping.

At Fort Dix, the men learned they were to precede the rest of the 32nd Infantry Division to Northern Ireland and build the camp the rest of that division would occupy upon their arrival. The engineers left the U.S. from Brooklyn on a U.S. Naval transport, the George F. Elliott, on February 18, 1942, and arrived at Halifax, Nova Scotia, late in the day on the 19th. There, they joined a convoy that included the battleship USS New York (the first U.S. dreadnaught of her class), the light cruiser USS Philadelphia, and swarms of destroyers. Their route to Ireland took

them just south of Iceland, where their U.S. escorts handed them to the care of the British Royal Navy. After having been protected by the imposing New York and the sleek Philadelphia, the small, slow British corvettes that would guard them the rest of their way disappointed some of the men. The disenchantment didn't last long though, for during this part of the voyage, German U-Boats were a persistent threat, and the corvettes proved their grit by keeping the enemy submarines at bay. Alarms and exploding depth charges became a constant part of the daily routine. But even without the U-Boats and the alarms and the explosions, the journey wouldn't have been pleasant: "Packed 4-5 high like sardines in 3 holds deep, the lads had an agonizing trip as the Elliott pitched and rolled violently in the rough mid-winter weather," one of the men remembered. "Never did you see a sicker bunch than the 107th."

The George F. Elliott

U.S. troops on a transport, 1941

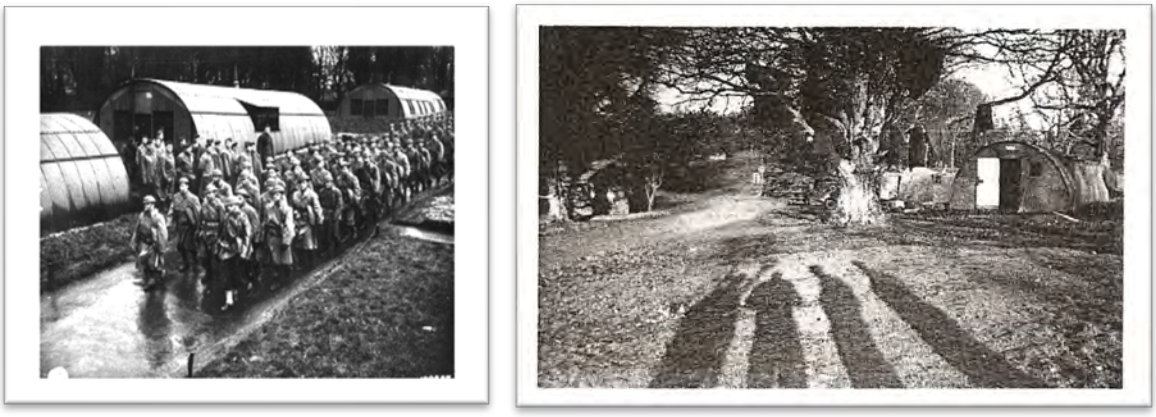
While the engineers were at sea, steaming towards Belfast, the Army changed its plans for the 32nd Infantry. After attacking Pearl Harbor, the Japanese had begun a wide-ranging offensive

throughout the South Pacific, striking Thailand, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, among many others. In response to the growing threat, the Army reassigned the 32nd to the Pacific Theater of Operations. But it made no sense to recall the men of the 107th from Europe, so the Army simply stripped them from the 32nd Infantry, transformed them into the 2nd Battalion of the 112th Engineer Regiment, assigned them to the U.S. First Army and V Corps and let them continue on their way to Ireland.

3.

March 1942 - January 1943
Northern Ireland: Moneymore and Enniskillen

When they landed at Belfast on March 3, 1942, your father's unit was among the second contingent of American soldiers to arrive in Europe, and they became part of what was called "Force Magnet." In words that would be repeated often throughout the next years, one engineer, Ed Vickstrom, wrote, "Don't recall that anyone knew where we were heading," but when they left the Elliott at Belfast, they were "promptly entrained for an inland trip to a British Army, Nissen-hutted encampment at Ballymena," he said. There, in a camouflaged British camp set among trees, they received British Army rations – grey bread, tea, porridge, and mutton – and were issued basic supplies from British Army stores. To the Americans, the rations were "unfamiliar and skimpy." The bread, "the notorious National Loaf," made with whole wheat flour with added calcium and vitamins, was uniformly disliked, even by British soldiers hardened through two years' of wartime shortages and rationing. The Americans grew to dread the all too frequent mutton dinners but enjoyed fish 'n' chips and pork steak and eggs when they could get them. They appreciated the woolen socks – "the best ever," according to some – but many didn't know what to make of the British heavy wool underwear, with its sleeveless tops and full-length bottoms.



The 107th in Ballymena and the Ballymena Encampment

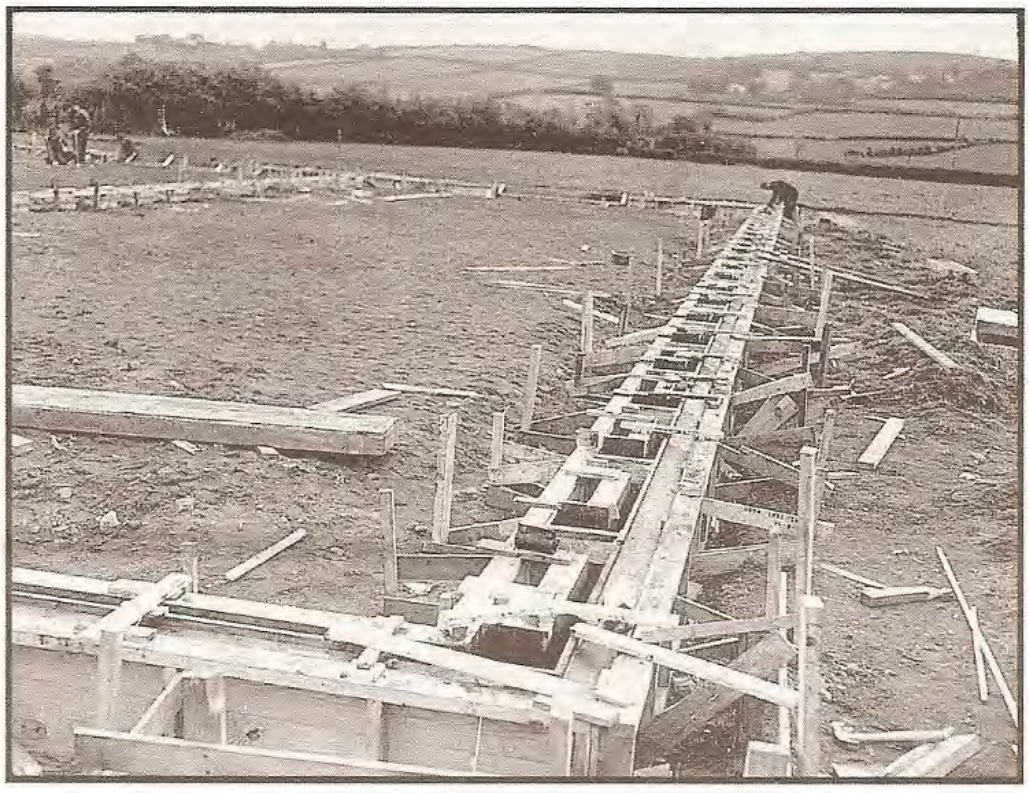
Some of those in your father's unit remembered Ireland for its weather; at least, their poet wrote: "the weather is quite changeable, from fog to sleet and rain, / and when the rains are over, the fog comes back again." Others had fonder memories of the whiskey – the Bushmills and the Jameson they would drink until their rations were exhausted. Some men's taste for whiskey was so strong they once risked much to get more. While the unit was on an exercise and bivouacked near a large country estate with an imposing manor house, some of the men

stole inside the house and tapped a whiskey barrel they found. When the theft was discovered, the U.S. Army had to pay $600 in damages to the owner of the estate. (In another version of this story, the manor house became a "King's Whiskey Warehouse," and one of the men involved became so drunk that he performed a "headlong Nazi dive bombing" stunt from a second story balcony.) Ireland also introduced many of the engineers to stouts and ales and bitters that were served warm, all of which were a change from the chilled lagers they knew from home. Some of the men developed a taste for poteen, an Irish spirit often produced in small batches at home and on the sly, and distilled from malt barley, corn, molasses, or potatoes, depending on what was available and cheap. But Ireland wasn't just bad weather and good drink, there were also Irish women, and a few of the men found brides.

In later years, the men remembered the narrow, winding roads, the rolling hills with their thousand shades of green, the affable Irish and their charming brogue, the importance of teatime in a country with no coffee for civilians, and "the complicated monetary system of pence, shillings, and pounds." Your father may have remembered being ill; he was hospitalized in July of 1942 with acute bronchitis.

From their arrival in March and over the next six months, until the end of September, the engineers built a massive depot and camp at Moneymore, Northern Ireland. When they were finished, it was the largest military installation constructed in that part of the United Kingdom during WWII, with railroad tracks and sidings, warehouses, living quarters, mess halls, and so on — "literally everything required for a complete base," Vickstrom later wrote, having become the engineers' unofficial historian. The men often worked many hours out of necessity, but during the late spring and summer, they simply took advantage of days long with sunlight. Occasionally, they worked extended hours to gain time for their own use. One group of men, one of the concrete crews, realized that their schedules always gave them three days to form, pour, and finish the concrete floor of each of the large supply huts they were building. They soon discovered they could do this work in two days, using 12- or 14-hour shifts, and, thus, could gain one day off to use as they pleased.

Moneymore under construction



In their off-duty time, the men were able to explore the pubs and cafés of the local villages. One, the small village of Moneymore itself, had a café known for its "under the table" pork steak and eggs, and another village, Cookstown, was a favorite site for "R&R," although the pub they frequented often ran out of Bushmills, and the men "had to fall back on warm mild and bitters (*Arf & Arf*)," an engineer recalled. When money was short – when a payday crap game or a losing poker hand had cleaned out their cash – there was fishing, especially up north in Ulster. As one of the men said, "the fishing was fabulous – when Her Majesty's Game Keeper wasn't around."

An engineer with a northern pike

At the end of the project, with construction completed, the men celebrated. There was a party with young women from the British Army Territorial Service, who were trucked in from a nearby camp. The regimental mess "did themselves proud" with a magnificent dinner buffet, and there was dancing with music from the regiment's own "Hungry Five" combo. Some of the men recalled it as a "gala occasion."

The men had reason to celebrate; their work was commended by both American and British brass. The Commanding General of V Corps praised "the enterprise and initiative" of the men and their officers and said, "the quality of the finished work [was] superior to the best done by civilian contractors with skilled labor." One of the British Brigadiers overseeing the project asserted it was "the finest and fastest bit of construction work" he had seen in Northern Ireland and an "outstanding example of efficiency, neatness, and speed." This praise was even more remarkable because, as one of the men put it, the 107th was "untrained, unequipped, and unintended for heavy construction." Indeed, nearly one third of the men of the 107th had no background or training in engineering or construction – had no knowledge of any of the building trades – before coming to Europe. The quality and speed of their work demonstrated the men's innate work ethic and showed how well the more experienced engineers supported and trained the novices.

Though the work had been well done and had proved the men's skill and drive, it also had created problems. The work was, in the eyes of their regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Robert McDonough, "much more continuous and heavy than normally can be expected in engineer tactical operations." Construction had consumed nearly all their time, which meant training had been neglected. Colonel McDonough pointed out that "none of the troops of the regiment have been on continuous or coordinated training schedules since the conclusion of the Louisiana maneuvers at the end of September 1941." Their work on the depot had left only Saturday mornings available for training and those mornings had to be "devoted to the maintenance of disciplinary and soldierly qualities" through "inspections, close-order drill, physical training, and small tactical problems or engineer instruction on subjects not related to construction," McDonough said. This simply was not enough to prepare the men for what they would be called upon to do when the Allies took the war to the continent.

Then, too, in the months of hard work, the men's military discipline – their "soldierly qualities" – had faded, and many had reverted to "a semi-civilian mentality." To refocus them, McDonough ordered a 20-mile hike with full back packs. It got the men's attention and "misguided minds were brought back to things military," Ed Vickstrom recalled.

Yet one hike wouldn't solve the larger problems. To correct those, the Colonel asked that the men be relieved of all construction work as soon as the depot was complete and that they be assigned no additional construction projects. This request was granted, and at the end of September, with their work at Moneymore finished, the engineers moved to Ely Lodge Camp, Enniskillen, to devote their time "solely to training." Ely Lodge was "an excellent place," lying between two connected lakes, together called Lough Erne. The surrounding country was "wide open" and "available for most all types of terrain exercises."

The men were "enthusiastic," and their morale was high, "the change from construction to training [being] most welcome," according to a battalion report. Their instruction began by emphasizing technical and engineering subjects, while tactical and unit exercises followed. Developing the skills they had demonstrated back at Camp Livingston, the men learned British bridging techniques and were introduced to the latest equipment, while some of their officers and non-coms were sent to Royal Engineer schools for advanced training in subjects such as camouflage and demolition. But overall, the training didn't go as well as hoped, and Lieutenant Colonel McDonough reported at the end of November that training was "progressing unsatisfactorily." Around the same time, the engineers were told they would soon move closer to the war, and they should expect to be transferred to England "in the near future."

But before the 107th left Ireland, your father marked his second Christmas in the army, and much had changed from the Christmas a year before. The men were now more than three thousand miles away from home, across the Atlantic, and had spent the better part of a year in a foreign country. The war wasn't new and unknown to them anymore; they had "swallowed" and "grasped" that "big thing." They had lived in wartime conditions and under wartime restrictions for twelve months. Though they had yet to see combat, they were part of an Army at war – an Army fighting in the South Pacific, in North Africa, and in the skies over Europe – and they were working to help that Army prepare for what was to come. In the last months of 1942, the U.S. began to move its forces from Ireland, consolidating them in England to prepare for the invasion of Europe. By December, the engineers' training had stopped, and their time was spent closing and guarding camps other American troops had already vacated.

And in those same twelve months, from December of 1941 to December of 1942, the war itself had changed. The overwhelming tide of German force that seemed ready to sink and drown the Soviet Union throughout the last half of 1941 stalled in 1942, and by the end of the year, Soviet forces began to push the Germans back. The Italian campaign in Northern Africa fell apart in 1941, forcing Hitler to dispatch German troops to save the effort. In the first months of 1942, those troops, the *Afrika Korps* of Irwin Rommel, shoved the British back into Egypt and threatened Alexandria and the Suez Canal. But in the fall, Bernard Montgomery, then a Lieutenant-General, launched a large-scale attack and broke the German lines, while American forces landed behind Rommel in Morocco and Algeria. By December, Allied forces had confined the *Afrika Corps* to a corner of Tunisia, where the Axis' North African campaign would finally end in defeat. Montgomery's successes in the desert added to his growing reputation and helped propel him to the rank of Field Marshal and eventual command of all British Commonwealth forces in Europe.

Meanwhile, in the Pacific, the U.S. had bombed Tokyo as payback for Pearl Harbor and had won a strategic victory against the Japanese Imperial Navy in the Coral Sea. The U.S. Navy also won a major battle at Midway, destroying nearly 300 Japanese aircraft and sinking four aircraft carriers – all four of which had been part of the force that had struck Pearl Harbor. Allied forces had scored their first success against the Japanese Imperial Army, pushing them from Buna, New Guinea, and American troops appeared on the verge of victory at Guadalcanal.

As Winston Churchill said in November of 1942, as Allied troops rolled Rommel away from Egypt and back into Libya, these victories were not the end of the war, and they probably weren't even the beginning of the end, but they were, perhaps, "the end of the beginning." And throughout 1943, the course of the war would shift into the Allies' favor.

Though much had changed from the previous year, December still meant Christmas, and the men did what they could to honor the season. All month they received "loads of Christmas mail," enough so that one of their officers said, "The folks back home have certainly done everything they can for us." The men of your father's unit celebrated Christmas itself with turkey and all the trimmings. Like the previous year, the last weeks of the month saw them preparing to move to a new station, which, in 1942, meant they had to cancel the Christmas party they had planned for the children of Enniskillen. Yet the men still made sure each child was left a large bag of candy and nuts. That Christmas, the engineers also adopted a war orphan, named Barbara, as their "Regimental Sweetheart" and scraped together 156 pounds for her benefit. With the mail from home, the turkey dinner, and the gifts for children few of them may have known, the men did all they could to grab, hold, and share the spirit of the season.

At the end of the month, it was time to leave, and the men moved to Prospect House Camp in Carrickfergus, to prepare for the trip to England. The transfer was bittersweet. According to one of the unit's officers, "most everyone was sorry to leave this pleasant though damp country. The people here have been very hospitable to us, and we all are grateful."

On January 7, 1943, most of the engineers moved by convoy from Carrickfergus to Larne, Northern Ireland, where they spent the night, and then ferried to Stranraer, Scotland. From Scotland, they moved by train and convoy to the Prince Maurice Barracks in Devizes, England. For those on the train, it was a 30-hour journey, but those assigned to the convoy faced a four-day, 450-mile trip from Stranraer to Devizes, and arrived on January 11, 1943.

Your father, an assistant driver now, may not have taken the train, but may have been assigned to the convoy. If so, he stopped with the convoy at British camps at the end of each day along the way, where the men were provided with an evening meal, a wooden bed frame for their bed rolls, and occasionally, mattresses and blankets. Their British suppers invariably were stew, bread, and tea, though one night, there was rice pudding and on another, a jelly roll. Overall, the men found the British camps and food "suitable," though neither was what they were used to. Even the British soldiers weren't what they were used to. Although the ones they met as they moved towards the south of England were always courteous and helpful, they were, perhaps too often, "slow in their ways," as one man remarked.

It's also possible that your father, as a member of Company E at the time, may have been among the 38 men from that company on detached duty as guards at an Army stockade in Holywood, Ireland. This group moved E Company's vehicles – 19 trucks, 3 trailers, and 3 37mm

anti-tank guns – from Holywood to Devizes, leaving on January 15 and arriving on January 18, 1943.

The available records don't tell which route your father took from Ireland to Devizes. We only know that he left sometime in January of 1943 and was at the Prince Maurice Barracks by the 18th of that month. It's a sad truth, but many of the details of your father's service are simply lost to history.

4.

January 1943 – November 1943

England: Devizes, Wallingford, Braunton,

And the U.S. Assault Training Complex

At the Prince Maurice Barracks, the men of your father's unit followed an extensive training program concentrated on bridging, but also learned how to lay and clear mine fields. They received training on infantry skills as well, with instruction on weapons firing, camouflage, reconnaissance, and aircraft recognition among others, all in preparation for the invasion of Europe. They routinely took marches of 15 miles or more – and sometimes considerably more, at times covering nearly 30 miles. These marches were designed to improve the men's physical condition and present them with various combat problems to solve. On some, the problems they faced were those particular to combat engineers – clearing a mine field, bridging a water course or other gap, or constructing or demolishing defensive obstacles – while on others, the problems were meant to develop their combat skills as an infantry rifle company – such as locating and neutralizing enemy patrols, using scouts to cover an advance or to protect a unit's flanks, and disposing troops to screen a unit from hostile observation and to minimize losses from artillery fire and air attack.

Just as at Moneymore and Enniskillen, the men spent their off-duty time in nearby towns and villages. There are no reports of hunting or fishing, and there are no shared memories of particular pubs or cafés. But, as with all young men, there was an often-frustrated interest in young women. And, at Devizes, the men discovered that not all British women were shy and reserved, and some of the men – at reunions back in Michigan many years later – remembered one young woman in particular from their time at the Prince Maurice Barracks, a woman who, as one put it delicately, "wasn't exactly an officially sponsored USO morale builder."

While in Ireland, the engineers had been introduced to Bailey bridges, which were portable, prefabricated truss bridges designed by Donald Bailey, of the Experimental Bridging Establishment in Christchurch, England. Before the adoption of Bailey's design, combat bridges often required the transport of bulky and cumbersome materials that were difficult to handle, while the bridges themselves were challenging to build. Worse, the existing combat bridges could not support the big tanks and heavy equipment coming into use in the early days of the Second World War. Bailey's bridge solved these problems. A Bailey bridge could be transported in sections, none of which required more than six men to handle, could be built and placed quickly, and could carry loads of 40 tons across spans of up to 200 feet. For longer gaps over water, a Bailey bridge could float on a river's surface, using pontoons for support.

The Bailey bridge was so revolutionary that General Eisenhower called it one of the three most important technological innovations of the war, along with radar and the heavy bomber.

Bailey Bridge (Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer 2022)

Bailey Bridge (Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer 2022)

In June of 1943, your father's unit moved to the Wallingford Bridge School located on the River Thames to continue training with Donald Bailey's bridges. With extensive use in Italy, Asia, and North Africa, the Bailey bridge quickly proved itself and became the standard for relatively short, dry gap bridging. But combat engineers found the floating version, the one supported by pontoons, too complex for use in combat conditions. And it was the floating version that engineers like those of the 112th anticipated they would need when the war moved to the continent and they would be expected to bridge the larger European rivers such as the Orne,

the Seine, the Marne, and the Somme in France, the Meuse in Belgium, and the Rhine, the Ruhr, the Weser, and the Elbe in Germany.

When your father arrived at Wallingford, Canadian engineers held the installation record for a floating Bailey bridge—3 hours— but this was too slow for frontline use. At Wallingford, the men of the 2nd Battalion repeated the process they had used at Camp Livingston – ferreting out inefficiencies in the process and perfecting construction techniques – all to reduce the assembly time for the bridge. Near the end of the month, the 2nd Battalion competed against other combat engineers on a bridging course that included the construction of a 210-foot floating Bailey bridge over the River Thames. The Canadian record of 3 hours held through most of the competition until one group completed the bridge in 1 hour and 10 minutes. This new record fell when your father's company – Company E of the 2nd Battalion of the 112th Combat Engineers – finished the task in 42 ½ minutes. Challenged to repeat this achievement in front of high-ranking officers of the general staff of the Allied powers, E Company reduced their time by another four minutes.

For this effort, they were rewarded with a keg of ale and half a day off by their commanding officer. Their performance proved the floating Bailey bridge could be used in combat conditions and, thereafter, it was employed extensively throughout the war. Floating Bailey bridges would be so critical to the crossing of the Rhine and other rivers in Europe that, after the war, British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery said, "Without the Bailey bridge, we should not have won the war. It was the best thing in that line that we ever had." But as good as Bailey's design was, it was still the men of the 112th who developed and refined the construction process and proved his floating bridge could be used in combat conditions. And their bridging skills would come to define many of their assignments throughout the war.

Floating Bailey bridge under construction at Wallingford

After their stay at Wallingford, the 2nd Battalion returned to Devizes and training. At the end of July, though, they were on the move again, this time to the Devon coast, near Braunton, England, and spent the next three months constructing – and then maintaining – the U.S. Assault Training Complex. This training complex was a key component in the U.S. Army's preparation for the Normandy landings. There, American troops would learn and practice the small unit assault tactics and skills necessary to attack and displace troops from fortified positions on the high bluffs above the Atlantic coast. The complex was intended to be as realistic as possible, with near-exact duplicates of various types of German fortifications and defenses known to exist on the Norman beaches.

A portion of the Devon coast from Morte Point in the north to the Taw Torridge Estuary in the south had been allocated to the United States forces for training, but only after British commanders determined that stretch of the English shore was too rough and stormy for their plans. Yet Woolacombe Beach and Baggy Point, both of which were in the area allocated to the US, resembled the terrain of the landing sites in France assigned to the Americans. Woolacombe Beach resembled both Utah and Omaha beaches and Baggy Point offered a respectable likeness of the cliffs that marked the western end of Omaha beach, including the formidable Pointe du Hoc. Then, too, the tides and currents along these North Devon beaches closely matched those of the Normandy coast. American planners also found that an area of the Saunton Sands in the Taw estuary was well suited for training and practice in unloading men and material from landing craft on tidal beaches. If this section of the Devon coast did not suit the British, the Americans found they could adapt it to their needs.

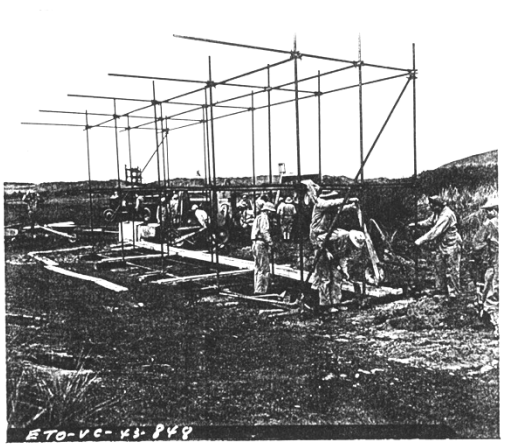
The Assault Training Complex would include landing craft mock-ups, pillbox mock-ups, wire entanglements and other obstacles, multiple assault courses, including a flame-thrower range, a rocket range, a wire cutting range, and two demolition ranges, along with miles of roads, bridges, and concrete walls. All of this had to be built in a very short time, for trainings were scheduled to start on September 15, 1943. The work originally was supposed to begin in mid-June, but the lack of site access and "confused and indefinite" plans delayed the project. The confused state of the plans was caused, at least in part, by "the secrecy surrounding the project" itself and the "unwillingness" of some of those in "higher headquarters" to release details about the complex, according to one Army report. Without sufficient details, those responsible for its construction could not determine and requisition the necessary manpower and materials. In any event, without access to the sites, no work was possible, even if the men and materials were available.

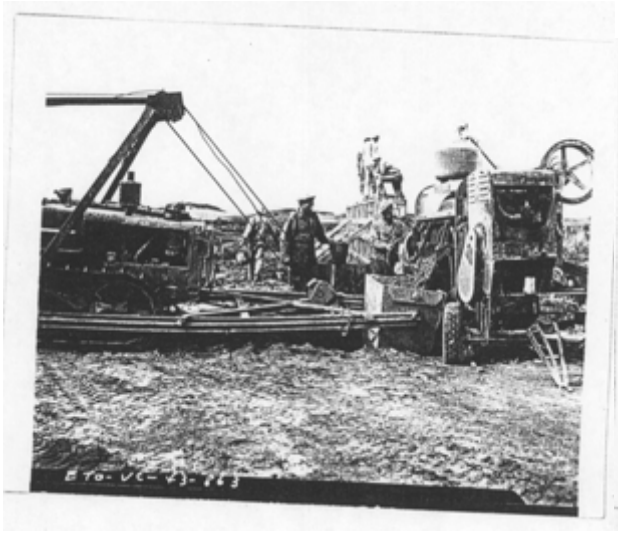
The confusion had cleared by the 23rd of July, when the plans were finished, access to the site was obtained, and the final work orders were issued. Materials were requisitioned, and the engineers were ordered to move from Devizes to Braunton. The expectation was that they would begin the first phases of the work as soon as they arrived and would be joined by additional troops "as the work developed and as the conditions warranted," their orders said.

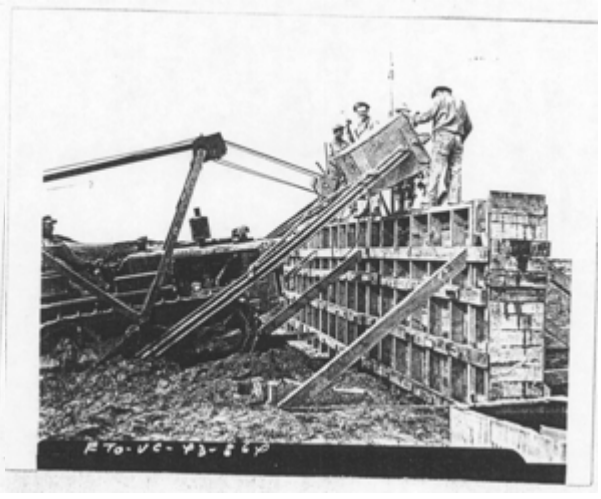
Your father's unit reached Braunton on the 27th of July. At first, they were billeted near the village of Woolacombe, on the coast, but eventually they moved into an encampment of pyramidal tents in the dunes further south, near Saunton Sands. Though the men immediately started work, they lacked materials and made scant progress. For nearly two weeks, they could do little more than basic site preparation – they excavated foundations for the various structures, including the mock pillboxes, and built the wooden forms they would need for the site's construction. They also cleared the beaches of obstacles and other unwanted objects, including the anti-landing craft posts the British had installed in 1939 and 1940 when it seemed Hitler intended to invade England.

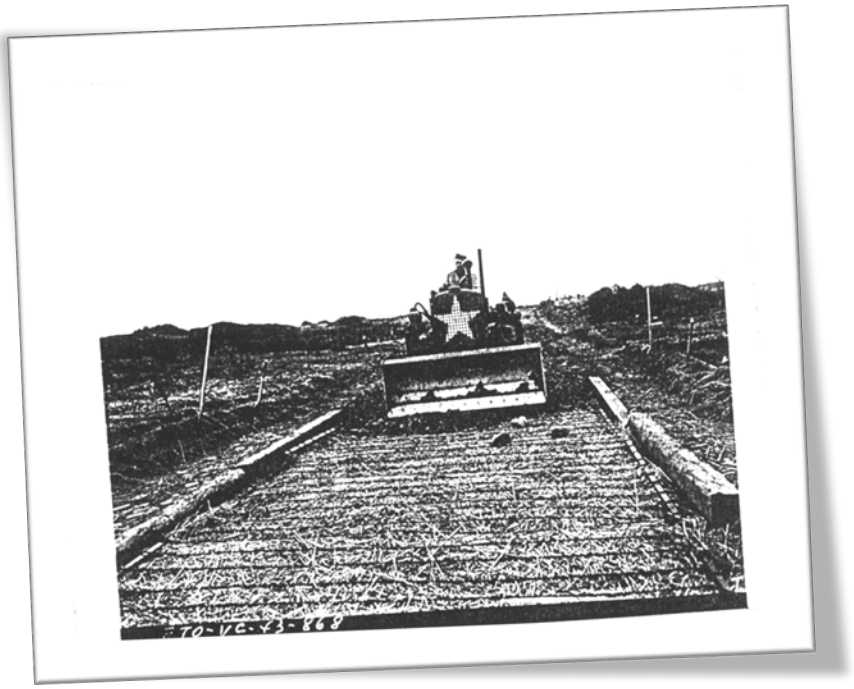
Supplies finally began arriving on August 9th, and, as the work began in earnest, the men worked 10-hour shifts, seven days a week. One engineer remembered that even this schedule wasn't enough to make up for the time they had already lost, so the men soon found themselves working 14-hour days—days that often stretched to 16 hours—with an occasional Sunday off. Given the scope of the work remaining to be done and the limited time in which it had to be done, the 1st Battalion of the 112th was brought in to assist, but they didn't arrive on site until the 25th of August. The additional manpower helped, but the work was still often hampered by a shortage of critical materials, such as cement, sand, and stone. To overcome these problems, your father's unit took over the operation of a local quarry and hauled materials themselves from points as far away as Cardiff and Southampton. These trips would have taken significant amounts of time: Cardiff was some 127 miles distant, while Southampton was more than 140 miles away. And these were miles that had to be traveled on English country roads – there were no highways then – and under wartime restrictions that limited the number of vehicles that could travel together and restrained the use of lights.

By September 14, the men had finished the work the commander of the training complex identified as mandatory for the center to open. But as the first trainees arrived, it became clear that some details had been overlooked requiring last-minute work, and the men quickly finished additional latrine facilities, storage sheds, marking signs, and various other items.









The 254th Constructing the Assault Training Complex

With primary construction finished, your father's battalion worked on those elements left undone at the time the center opened, but also became responsible for maintaining and servicing the complex. These tasks required significant time and effort as the engineers had to provide construction support during training exercises and to repair those elements of the complex damaged during training. Multiple sections of the complex used live ammunition during drills, and live ammunition damaged obstacles, structures, and other features of the courses. The amount of work required was enormous. As one of the battalion's officers reported, "Some idea of the volume of the work done by the maintenance crews will be obtained by reminding the reader that there were fifteen 'live run' ranges, 36 'dry run' ranges, and two hedgehog areas. It was not uncommon to have … troops operating on all assault ranges daily…. On all the 'live run' ranges, live ammunition was used which meant that the wire [entanglements were] destroyed by Bangalore torpedoes and mortar fire, and concrete was damaged considerably by artillery fire and the fire from supporting tanks."

Some idea of the work involved also can be gleaned from the fact that your father's company was responsible for maintaining and repairing all 84,000 linear yards of barbed wire entanglements placed throughout the site. Most maintenance and repair work had to be conducted at night so that the facilities were operational and open for training the next day. In addition, at this same time, your father's company also operated the training complex's railhead (the point at which supplies were unloaded and distributed), while remaining responsible for the construction of any roads required by changes to the complex and the

maintenance of all roads already present at the site. Adding to the demands on the engineers, throughout this entire period the battalion was operating with only 70% of its allocated personnel.

During these months, your father and his fellow engineers "were quartered in tents in the sand dunes" and for most of the time they were there, they had no heat. Still, making the best of the situation, they found they could hunt rabbits "for fun and meat" in the dunes. As one soldier remembered, the men would check out pick handles from battalion supply, form a large circle, and begin bashing the ground to start the rabbits running. Once flushed, the rabbits were easy prey, and the men could quickly gather enough for "a tasty company mess." But when the local game warden learned of this, he stopped them, accusing "the well-fed Americans of unsportsmanlike conduct, and short-changing local butcher shops of essential meat supplies for civilian consumption," according to Ed Vickstrom.

They could spend their little time off-duty in the "picturesque towns" of Woolacombe and Ilfracome, and, if they had some extra cash – "a bob or two" – they could hike into Braunton for "a pint and an order of fish and chips," remembered one engineer. Then, too, there were the Land Army girls camped near Croyde – young women who worked on local farms as their part of the war effort – and there were the beaches, where some of them recalled "the local bathing beauties" would enjoy "well deserved breathers" from their war effort jobs and relax in the sun and the sand. Many of the men were puzzled by the way in which "a gal could … undress and wiggle into a bathing costume" behind a bath towel "without showing anything."

Just as in Ireland, their construction work earned them commendations. The commanding officer of the Assault Training Center praised the men for their "untiring efforts … without regard to the hours of duty involved or of the weather," and for their "fine work and the successful completion of a difficult construction mission." Lieutenant Colonel McDonough (who continued to command the 112th Combat Engineer Regiment until mid-August of 1943, when he was promoted to Colonel and given command of the 1121st Engineer Combat Group) recognized the men for having gone without passes and furloughs and for having "worked long hours despite the lack of light, heat, and water, in order to complete the mission on time." It was, he said, "a very difficult job performed in a superior manner." The commanding general of V Corps, Major General Leonard Gerow, was "pleased to note … a task well performed." All of these recognized the engineers' ability to do whatever jobs the Army handed them and to do them well.

As in Ireland, though, a massive and difficult construction job had left them no time for training. In October, the new commander of your father's unit, Lieutenant Colonel Loren Jenkins (known

as “Jiggs” to his men), conceded that the Assault Training Complex work had been “an excellent training project, a good health builder, and an excellent opportunity for recently joined officers to show their ability,” but he also knew his men still had much to learn and they were running out of time to learn it all. Consequently, he asked that his men be relieved from their duties at the complex and returned to training. This request was granted, and at the end of October, their construction and maintenance assignment ended. On the 1st of November, the engineers began leaving the Assault Training Complex and the Devon coast and moved south to Newquay, in Cornwall, to restart their training. The move took seven days, as the battalion shuttled by motor convoy to their new duty station.

But, before they left, the unit was reorganized again. The 2nd Battalion of the 112th (which was the old 107th) was renumbered the 254th Engineer Combat Battalion in mid-August, and this would be the designation the unit would carry for the rest of the war. The 254th, called the “Snortin’ Bull” by its men, was part of the 1121st Engineer Combat Group (along with the 112th and the 146th Engineer Combat Battalions), and, like the 107th and the 112th before it, was attached to the U.S. First Army and V Corps.

The engineers adopted a bull driving a bulldozer as their unit insignia:

When formed, the 254th had two line companies, along with a Headquarters and Service company and a medical detachment. A month later, the battalion created a third line company by moving existing personnel from its other companies. On September 11, your father was transferred to the newly formed company – which became Company C – and eventually he would be assigned to C Company’s headquarters platoon.

At the time Company C was formed, the 254th didn’t have enough officers to command it. So, the company’s initial leadership came together in the last three months of 1943, as six officers new to the battalion joined one veteran to take charge of C Company. Yet even the veteran officer, 1st Lieutenant George Anderson Jr., wasn’t much of a veteran; he had been with the

254th only since September, having joined the engineers while they were working at the Assault Training Complex in Devon. The newer six included Lt. Reginald Fairfax, who eventually rose to Captain and became the company's Commanding Officer. Another new man, Lt. Adolph Silberman, was one of the last to be added and was put in charge of the company's headquarters platoon – your father's platoon. Together, these officers – Anderson, Fairfax, Silberman, and the other four – would lead C Company through the invasion of France. Two would be killed in action in July of 1944 outside of Saint-Lô during Operation Cobra, the U.S. Army's drive to break-out of Normandy. One, who always seemed "a little lost," would be transferred out of the 254th in November of 1944, leaving only four of the original seven to see the men through the Battle of the Bulge. One would be lost in that battle, when Lt. Anderson would be captured near Büllingen, Belgium, and become a prisoner of war. Two more, including Captain Fairfax, would leave the company in January of 1945. At that point, only Lt. Silberman would remain, and, of the company's original seven officers, only he would serve with Company C from the 254th's early days to the end of the war in Europe in May of 1945.

5.

November 1943 – May 1944

Newquay, England

November of 1943 found your father's unit – the new 254th – in Newquay, England, on the north coast of Cornwall. There, the men started "an arduous training program including mine warfare, assaulting fortified positions, river crossing operations, gun and crew training, roadblocks, chemical warfare, night operations, and landing craft embarkation," as outlined in a unit report. Also, early that month, the 254th had a temporary station in Aveton Gifford, England, in south Devon, where they removed mines from nearby beaches. These mines had been laid years before as part of the British defenses, at a time when Germany appeared determined to invade England. Removing them was no easy task, for the mines, having been in place for several years, had begun to corrode and had become highly sensitive and unstable. A few months later, Company A of the 254th would learn how dangerous these old mines could be.

Drawn by the 254th's photographer and artist, George Molentin,
for the unit's Christmas Card – "Greetings from Europe"

Throughout their stay in Newquay, the men were billeted in local hotels and rooming houses, with your father and C Company assigned to the Trewlany Hotel. Although the men of the 254th were no longer living in tents pitched across sand dunes, they still weren't warm – their hotels all were drafty and cold. Typically, each room was individually heated by a small fireplace, in which coal or coke was burned. But both were rationed and scarce, and the weather was damp and bitter, with nearly constant winter winds blowing in from the Atlantic. At one hotel, one engineer decided the lack of heat was caused, at least in part, by a dirty and

clogged flue. Using one of the unit's large air compressors, he inserted a hose into his fireplace's chimney and started to blow it out. He failed to appreciate that all the fireplaces in the hotel were connected, and, as he increased the compressor's power, thick, black-brown soot began blowing into all the hotel's guestrooms. He was embarrassed, his fellow soldiers were angry, and the U.S. Army had to pay "a hefty" bill to clean up the mess.

During November and December, the men of the 254th continued their training, focusing on "laying, recording, and removing hasty and deliberate mine fields" and on "assaults of fortified localities, in which problems of field firing of individual and crew served weapons were incorporated." They also worked on the siting and construction of roadblocks, crossing craters and small ravines, and using the Bailey bridge. Some of this training took place at night. In addition, several men were given special instruction in chemical warfare, in camouflage, and in reconnaissance. Those with responsibility for the battalion's vehicles learned how to waterproof them. By the end of December, Lt. Colonel Jenkins believed his men's "basic training" was "satisfactory" but remained concerned that they still needed "more training in small unit tactical" skills.

December brought your father's third Christmas in uniform and his third Christmas away from home. For the men of the Snortin' Bull, there surely would have been cards and packages from family and friends and the Army's reliable turkey dinner. But the official reports of the unit make no mention of parties or celebrations or Christmas activities of any kind. And none of the unofficial sources still available – the memories shared in the unit's newsletters, including reports of conversations among old friends at reunions and articles written by the 254th's informal historian, Ed Vickstrom – describe that Christmas, or even refer to it at all.

But Christmas 1943 *was* different from the two before it. There was growing confidence that the Allies would win the war, and some even believed the war might be over before the next Christmas. Lt. General Jacob Devers, then in command of all U.S. troops in Europe, told the men to "face the new year with confidence. The enemy has been forced to take the defensive in every theatre. Final victory is no longer uncertain. In concert with our Allies, we have both the manpower and the material to bring this war to a successful conclusion."

Devers was right to say that the Axis powers were on the defensive. The Soviets had pushed the Germans back all along the eastern front, retaking much of the territory the Germans had captured in 1941. American and British bombs fell on German cities by day and by night, threatening German industrial production and disrupting its transportation network. American and British forces were driving up the Italian peninsula, clashing with Italian and German troops, and defeating them in fierce battles. In the South Pacific, the Allies had retaken Papua and Guadalcanal, ending the Japanese drive to the south. Slowly, island by island, Allied forces were forming "a band of steel" strong enough to cut through the Japanese defensive perimeter and were inching towards Japan itself.

President Roosevelt shared Devers' assessment of the war, telling those in the U.S. armed forces that they, "fighting with skill and bravery," had "met and overcome a determined enemy on the land, on the sea, and in the air," and had "destroyed his dreams of conquest." Roosevelt was also confident in "certain victory," and said, in his Christmas message to the nation, "I can say to you that we may look forward into the future with real, substantial confidence that, however great the cost, 'peace on earth, good will toward men' can be and will be realized and insured. This year I can say that. Last year I could not do more than express a hope. Today I express a certainty." But he was also cautious and tempered his confidence with the painful recognition of what achieving victory might mean: "the cost may be high, and the time may be long."

The president could have been talking of your father – and *to* your father – when he said, "Some of our men overseas are now spending their third Christmas far from home. To them … I can give assurance that it is the purpose of their government to win this war and to bring them home at the earliest possible time." But he warned, "The war is now reaching the stage where we shall have to look forward to large casualty lists – dead, wounded, and missing. War entails just that. There is no easy road to victory. And the end is not yet in sight."

He reminded the nation why the war had to be fought and why it had to be won. He told his audience that the nations of the world had no choice but to oppose Japanese aggression and

the Germans' imperial ambitions to rid the world of the belief that any nation could seize what it wanted, enslave its neighbors, and deny them the right "of self-government without molestation." As the president concluded: "we fight for a better day for humankind – here and everywhere."

Yet, for your father and for the men of the 254th, Christmas might not have been a time to think of better days for humankind. Their thoughts might have been more personal; their minds might have been filled with thoughts of better days for themselves. As one young American nurse in England wrote to her father about that Christmas, "If it were more like the holiday season, I might grow fearfully nostalgic, remembering all sorts of things and all sorts of wonderful times." Yet she couldn't stop remembering other Christmases: "I even find myself thinking of how the table looked, and how I felt in civilian dress, and of going to call on Auntie, and [then] hating myself for feeling sentimental about everyone." She told her father, "You have no idea how important the most trivial things become," and admitted that she longed for "the same sort of Christmas, with stockings and trees and puddings" as she had known in the past. "And when Christmas comes, that is what I will be thinking of."

It might have been the same for the men of the 254th. One engineer, thinking about the holidays, would later write: "Christmas is near enough to think about sending gifts home. Home is far away, loved ones are still near. If only we could celebrate Christmas in the usual way…. If only we could be home for THAT day."

The new year – January of 1944 – brought more training. Some exercises covered infantry topics, such as assault problems, scouting and patrolling, close order drill, bayonet drill, and defense against chemical attacks, while others covered engineering skills, like fixed bridging, demolitions, river crossings (including Bailey bridges, rafts, and ferries), and the crossing of craters and ravines. There were more marches and mass athletics and night operations.

January also brought the 254th's first multiple casualty incident, with four men killed and one severely wounded while on an operational mission. On January 7, Company A was sent to Torcross, on the South Devon coast, to participate in experimental work with other elements of V Corps. This work included the laying and recording of mine fields, hasty road construction on beach sands, and gapping certain coast defenses expected in Normandy. On the morning of the 8th, men from A Company were removing mines the British had laid on one of the nearby beaches a few years before. The mines were old and badly deteriorated. As one of the men was defusing an M5 mine, it exploded, killing three soldiers instantly and wounding two others, one of whom soon died of his injuries. A witness wrote it "was an unholy mess; some [victims] had to be cut out of the barbed wire and the guy who was putting in the pin could only be

found in pieces." Despite the accident, A Company remained in Torcross for the rest of the month.

For all three companies of the 254th, February was much like January. A Company remained in Torcross and continued its experimental work, while Companies B and C stayed in Newquay and continued their training, following a course much like the one they had followed in January. Near the end of February, on the 22nd, C Company moved to Torcross to work with Company A, but this stay was short, and C Company was back in Newquay by the first of March.

Training continued in March, with several new subjects offered. The men were now learning about booby traps (laying and neutralizing), military roads (construction and maintenance), battlefield self-preservation, primary and secondary weapons, bivouac and field sanitation, and supply discipline. Selected men began learning the radio procedures they would use in France to maintain contact among the line companies and battalion leadership, and the communication processes they would use with the 1121st Group, or with the higher echelons above that group.

In the first few days of March, B and C Companies participated in a field exercise called "Exercise TEAL" with other units of V Corps. This may have been part of a series of large exercises called Duck I, Duck II, and Duck III, which were designed to test assumptions and tactics for the invasion, while giving the men a chance to practice the assault skills they had been taught. After TEAL, B Company spent several days in Torcross, training with one of the U.S. Army's standard pontoon bridges, while A Company's work with V Corps ended, and they returned to Newquay on the 10th. Some of C Company's men were given another construction detail – building Nissen huts for other elements of the 1121st Group – while the rest continued their training.

The big news came on March 25th, when the 254th was put on alert for "overseas movement." This alert included the unit's orders for Operation Overlord, the invasion of France.

Under these orders, the 1121st Engineer Combat Group remained attached to V Corps, which, using the 29th Infantry Division and the 1st Infantry Division, would attack a French beach given the code name "Omaha." The men of the 1121st Group would support the 29th Infantry, which was responsible for the western half of that beach. Once the beachhead was secured, one of the 29th's objectives would be to drive west along the coast, seize a small in-land port and a key bridge, and connect with American forces who had landed further west, on the Cotentin peninsula, in an area the Allies called "Utah Beach."

The three battalions of the 1121st engineers, the 112th, the 146th, and the 254th, were each given different assignments. The 146th would land in the first wave on D-Day and clear the obstacles in the water that blocked access to the beach. The 112th would follow and was to locate and disarm mines and booby traps – tasks the men called "delousing" – in the operational area of the 29th on the beach and beyond, supporting the infantry as it advanced south and east into the French coastal countryside. A small group of the 254th – 40 enlisted men and one officer from the 1st Platoon of A Company – would also land on D-Day itself, attached to the HQ Company of V Corps. These men would be responsible for delousing all command post areas occupied by the Corps' HQ.

The bulk of the 254th would come ashore on D Day +2, when the beachhead was expected to be secure, and support the 29th Infantry in its advance to the west. Your father's battalion was selected for this assignment because its bridging skills were crucial to ensure the infantry's advance would not be blocked by the numerous rivers that cut through western Normandy and the Cotentin. This assignment is what the men expected, because their training had led them to understand they eventually would be called upon to bridge other European rivers, and the sense they would be in the forefront of a contested crossing of the Rhine began to weigh on some of the men.

Throughout April and May, as they waited for the invasion though, the men continued their training, concentrating on bridging, mine warfare, and road construction and maintenance. The engineers also underwent machine gun training, including range and combat firing for all gun crews. The 254th's officers spent time studying aircraft identification, counterintelligence, first aid, and many more subjects among their other duties. But no matter how intensely the men may have been training or how busy they were, an official 254th report from this period notes: "Esprit de corps of both officers and men has reached a new high. No doubt this can be attributed to the fact that the majority of men now feel that after two years in the United Kingdom the time for them to participate in active operations against the enemy has come."

The men also began their final preparation for what their orders called a "short overseas movement." They waterproofed vehicles, turned in excess equipment, identified and replenished any equipment shortages, marked their duffle bags and other gear, and attended orientation lectures. Ed Vickstrom recalled that all the lectures and training left "each man knowing what his squad/ sect[ion]'s role would be, something about the battalion's, and little to nothing of the big picture." This is probably how the U.S. Army wanted it, since a man can't tell what he doesn't know, and maintaining secrecy was an overriding concern.

On the 11th of May the 254th received its “overseas warning” order from the Commanding General of the 29th Infantry Division. Five days later, B and C Companies left Newquay for marshalling areas near Falmouth, on the southern coast of Cornwall, and, in the early days of June, they boarded the craft that would take them to Normandy.

Marshalling and Loading; U.S. forces near Southampton, England

6.

June 1944: Operation Overlord

Normandy, France

Operation Overlord – the Allied invasion of France – called for landing an immense force of more than 325,000 men and 50,000 vehicles across 50 miles of coastline in six days. The French coast was divided into five separate landing zones, forming something of a reclining "L." The long arm of this "L" held four landing zones and stretched along the Norman coast from the Baie de l'Orne in the east to the Baie d'Isigny in the west. The fifth zone – the short arm of the "L" – followed the coast of the Cotentin peninsula as it jutted into the English Channel and ran northwest from the Baie d'Isigny to the village of Quinéville. American forces were responsible for the two most western zones, beaches called Utah and Omaha, while British and Commonwealth troops were to lead the attacks on the other three: Gold, Juno, and Sword.

The naval force supporting the invasion was massive, with over 5,000 ships, including 130 warships – battleships, cruisers, and destroyers. Although the bulk of this armada was made from American, British, and Canadian ships, it also included Belgian, Dutch, French, Norwegian, and Polish craft. This naval force was not only responsible for landing the soldiers, but also had key missions in the invasion, including attacking German defenses on the coast and clearing mines from the waters in front of the beaches. These tasks, along with the protection and

support of the armada itself, added 2 battleships, 3 cruisers, 12 destroyers, 33 mine-sweepers, and 695 other ships to the naval taskforce pointed at Omaha. Moving just those men to be used in the first assaults on Omaha Beach from England to France required 7 transports and 248 landing craft of various types.

American plans for its two beaches had some similarities, but also many differences. The scope of their main objectives illustrates the point. The forces of V Corps landing on Omaha were expected to neutralize the beach defenses and then continue inland to occupy a line of high ground about 2 miles from the shore. The westernmost point of this line was near the Vire estuary in the Baie d'Isigny, while its easternmost point was just south of Bayeux, where V Corps would connect with the British forces who had landed at Gold Beach. Thereafter, while defending the Allied lodgment on the beaches, the Americans would move to capture the town of Isigny (near the Vire estuary), and the British Commonwealth forces would take the cities of Bayeux and Caen. These actions were expected to gain enough ground to allow room for the build-up of troops, equipment, and material within the lodgment necessary to support subsequent advances into Brittany and along the line of the River Loire in the general direction of Paris.

The expectations for VII Corps' landing at Utah were, perhaps, more aggressive. Their objectives were to cut across the neck of the Cotentin peninsula, driving a wedge between the German forces there and those in Normandy, and to seize the strategic city of Cherbourg. That city, which sits at the northern end of the Cotentin, was a deep-water port the Allies hoped to use as a point of supply as they swept the Germans from France. The forces at Utah also were expected to push east to the town of Carentan and join with elements of V Corps, thereby forming part of a unified Allied front, which, if all went well, would stretch across the French coast from Ouistraham in Normandy to Quinéville on the Cotentin.

Another key difference was how the landings would be made. Utah would be attacked from the air and the sea. The 82nd Airborne and the 101st Airborne were to be dropped behind the beach in the early hours of D-Day to prepare for the amphibious landing of the 4th Infantry Division and the 70th Tank Battalion on the beach itself near dawn.

At Omaha, there would be no Airborne prelude. Rather, beginning forty minutes or so before the first assault troops came ashore, the beaches and the bluffs above them were to be prepared for the invasion by extensive bombing from the air and shelling from the sea. The 8th Air Force was to drop more than 13,000 bombs – nearly 2,000 tons of high explosives – on the defenses behind the beaches. The bombing was expected to destroy the concrete blockhouses, batteries, and casements where German troops waited with their artillery pieces and other

guns, ready to decimate any attacking force. At the same time, other elements of the U.S. Army Air Corps were to demolish the defenses on the beach itself, individually targeting each key emplacement and fortification, while the guns of the battleships *Texas* and *Arkansas* would fire on the German strongpoints and batteries near the shore.

After this overwhelming barrage, dozens of tanks, an engineering task force, and eight companies of infantry, all from V Corps, would land within a ten-minute window and carry out the first assault missions on Omaha. These troops would be steadily reinforced until more than 34,000 men and 4,400 vehicles were to be on the beach. Within hours, a second force was to follow, adding some 25,000 more men to the attack. Each unit was to land at a particular point, where it had a specific, limited task to perform, whether neutralizing a certain defense, opening a gap in some obstacle, or clearing a section of ground between the water and the base of the hills that overlook the beach. The invasion's success depended on the completion of many small tasks, which, in the aggregate, were expected to lead to some major result, such as opening a path from the beach to the bluffs.

The final assault plan for Omaha covered 326 legal-sized pages and included 23 maps and charts. The sheer scope of the resources employed, and the detail of the plans couldn't help but inspire confidence. As one officer put it at the end of an early briefing, Normandy looked like "another miserable two-day job with a hot shower at the end." But it wouldn't work out that way.

At the beginning of 1944, the target date for the invasion was May 1st. When the American General Dwight Eisenhower took charge of Overlord and the Allied Expeditionary Force, he called for an expansion of the plans and postponed the invasion for a month. Within June, there were only two possible windows when key conditions met Overlord's tactical requirements. The plans required long days (to allow the maximum use of air power to protect the attacking forces) and wanted a full – or nearly full – moon (to provide sufficient light the night before the invasion for the fleet to maneuver, for bombers to locate their targets, and for the landings and movements of the airborne troops). At the start of the assault, the tides had to be sufficiently low to expose the obstacles on the beach so they could be destroyed, but rising to allow later landing craft to approach closer to the edge of the beaches. The planners also wanted two high tides during daylight, so that the maximum number of men could be unloaded while the beaches were at their most narrow – increasing the men's safety by decreasing the amount of open space they had to cover under German guns. These conditions all could be predicted and charted months in advance, and, in June 1944, they only occurred with a full moon on the 5th, 6th, and 7th, and again (but with a new moon) on the 19th, 20th, and

21st. To take advantage of the full moon and to preserve his options, Eisenhower selected June 5 as the invasion's new target date.

Simple logistics required that the invasion force would begin loading many days before the target date, for it would take time to pack all the men and their equipment onto transports, time to cross the channel, time to move the men into their landing craft, and time to gather those craft in the proper strength and order for the assault itself. This meant that both the initial attacking force and key elements of the follow-up forces had to be preloaded on the ships that would take them to France. And so, some men, including your father and the other engineers of B and C Companies of the 254th, began taking their places on their assigned ships on Thursday, June 1.

U.S. forces in a landing craft in an English port, waiting for D-Day

To those who watched the troops boarding the ships in English ports in those early days of June 1944, the men seemed to share an odd mixture of excitement and apprehension. There was "excitement at being part of such a great enterprise and apprehension of somehow not coming up to expectations and doing what was expected," one said. (Coincidentally, years later, several of the Apollo astronauts would share the same mixture of emotions; one recalled saying a silent prayer as the rocket beneath him ignited: "Dear Lord, please let our mission be successful; but if it must fail, please, don't let it be my fault.") The sense that history was being made was obvious; the V Corps' journal noted "The attempt to do what had been contemplated by all the great military leaders of modern European History – a cross channel invasion – was about to commence."

But the men could only wait, because the invasion also needed good weather, and the conditions of the weather wouldn't be known – couldn't be known – until the target date was closer to hand. On Friday, June 2nd, the weather looked troubling; on Saturday, it looked worse. Late on the 3rd of June, Overlord's chief meteorologist, Group Captain James Stagg, issued such a gloomy forecast that Eisenhower postponed the invasion for 24 hours.

So, the troops waited some more. Ed Vickstrom remembered these as "boring stressful days" when "every man shared equally the physical discomfort and the mental concern about the immediate future." Still, men on the transports and other ships looked for ways to pass the time. Many gambled – dice and poker games were common – some slept, and some studied the French phrase books the U.S. Army issued for the invasion. Some in Company C of the 254th remembered the wait being relieved by regular, steamy encounters between a British officer and a woman, which one of the men watched, "bug-eyed," through binoculars while narrating "blow-by-blow details to his all-ears shipmates." Another American wrote of his waiting comrades: "All are tense, and all are pretending to be casual. Bravado helps."

Late on Sunday, the 4th, Captain Skaggs and his colleagues concluded the weather would break on the 6th. It would not be ideal weather, but the invasion could go forward. General Eisenhower gave the order, and D-Day was set for June 6, 1944.

With Eisenhower's decision made, the massive armada sailed from England for France, and, on Tuesday morning, the 6th of June, the invasion began. In all five zones fighting was hard and steady, and no landing went to plan. None of the Allied forces reached all their objectives, but by the end of the day they were ashore in strength and held French territory they would never surrender.

As Wednesday morning broke and the situation on the beaches clarified, General Eisenhower and General Bradley (commanding the U.S. First Army, then consisting of V and VII Corps) became worried about the large gap remaining between the Utah and Omaha zones. They began to believe there was a serious threat the enemy would wedge themselves there and prevent Bradley's forces from connecting the two beachheads. Thus, linking the two Corps became a top American priority, and one that couldn't wait. Bradley ordered Major General Charles Gerhardt and the 29th Infantry Division to move inland, drive west towards the 101st Airborne on the Cotentin, and close the gap. Bradley identified Gerhardt's objective as the town of Isigny, an important road junction at the western edge of Normandy located on what was then one of the two major roads connecting Normandy and the Cotentin peninsula.

This movement of the 29th Infantry would have a significant impact on your father and the 254th. A small, in-land port, Isigny also sits at the confluence of the Aure and Vire, which were the first major rivers American troops from V Corps would reach as they advanced towards the territory held by VII Corps. And by bridging the Vire under fire, C Company would prove how well they could perform the tasks for which the Army had trained them.

(That an order issued by some remote general to some other unit set the engineers' objectives and shaped their work would become a recurring experience for your father. Decisions made far above the 254th – decisions made for reasons they probably never knew, and decisions made for tactical or strategic purposes no one probably explained to them – would color and define most of their days and nights throughout the war.)

Yet General Gerhardt and the 29th already had three objectives that morning. A force of U.S. Rangers was isolated and under attack at Pointe du Hoc – about six miles to the west of Gerhardt's men at Saint-Laurent – and required immediate support. There was an urgent need to consolidate the division's positions behind the beach and silence the remnants of enemy resistance still active there. And the American beachhead still had to be extended to the south, towards Longueville.

Gerhardt did, however, have three infantry regiments under his command. Two – the 116th and the 115th – were already on the beach, though both had been battered and mauled on D-Day. One battalion of the 116th had been hit particularly hard – losing nearly half of its men – and its units were still badly scattered. Still, Gerhardt assigned the first two objectives to the 116th, while he ordered the 115th to advance to the south, leaving his third regiment, the 175th, to take Isigny.

That morning, however, the 175th was still on the water, crossing the Channel, and its men weren't scheduled to begin landing until 10:30 am. Even in the best of circumstances, it would take the regiment hours to come ashore. But Omaha Beach on June 7th wasn't the best of circumstances. Waves of landing craft – stuffed with men and machines – crowded towards the shore, making schedules meaningless, and the first men of the 175th wouldn't put their feet on Omaha's sand until after noon. The beach itself was a confused jumble of burned-out tanks, trucks, and landing craft, with cast-off equipment, such as life vests, gas masks, and Bangalore torpedoes, scattered everywhere. Men clustered here and there among the mess, trying to reunite with units that had been strewn almost chaotically across the beach. Gerhardt could only hope the confusion and the chaos wouldn't delay his men too long. Then the Navy crushed those hopes by unloading most of the 175th way down the beach – far to the east – and more than a mile and a half away from their intended landing point.

As the troops of the 175th worked their way slowly west towards Saint-Laurent and Vierville, the beach was also far from safe. German artillery rounds fell from time to time, enemy soldiers in trenches and fortifications on the bluffs above the beach worried GIs with sporadic machine gun and rifle fire, and American engineers continued to explode obstacles and mines all around. Evidence of the previous day's brutal fighting was everywhere. Deloused areas had been marked with tape, but beyond the tape, bodies of American soldiers remained where they had fallen. More bodies were stacked outside the tents where medical teams were treating casualties. A temporary cemetery had been marked off, and captured German soldiers were digging graves and burying the dead.

The last men of the 175th did not land until after 4:00 pm, and the regiment did not arrive at its assembly area until past 10:00 pm, wasting the entire day. Gerhardt, impatient to begin the drive to Isgny and the Vire, was furious.

Omaha Beach, June 8, 1944

In the meantime, on the morning of the 7th, the force General Gerhardt ordered to rescue the embattled Rangers was delayed because the situation around the village of Saint-Laurent remained unsettled. The road west towards Pointe du Hoc was under enemy fire, and the Germans still held a strongpoint in the bluffs above the village. From there, small groups of men with rifles, supported by machine guns and mortars, harassed American forces on the

beach below. A ferocious naval bombardment finally cleared the area, and a column of men from the 116th Infantry, along with several companies of U.S. Rangers supported by tanks, pushed out of Saint-Laurent and started towards the Pointe.

Throughout its advance, the column often faced resistance from German rifles and machine guns hidden in prepared positions. But each time opposition appeared, American tanks came forward, sprayed the enemy with heavy fire, while the infantrymen and the Rangers kept moving forward without stopping. Near noon, having advanced five miles or more, the column reached a crossroad. There, heavy German artillery fire from the southwest stopped them and forced the tanks to pull back. The men and armor regrouped and advanced again, only to fall under a merciless barrage that blanketed the road for a quarter mile and killed at least 30 American soldiers. U.S. artillery and naval guns struck back, and the troops started forward once more, but the enemy artillery returned as strong as ever, and the advance stalled.

That night, V Corps reconfirmed to General Gerhardt that Isigny remained his Division's primary objective. The 175th was given the support of two companies of the 747th Tank Battalion and ordered to take the town. The 115th was to drive inland and protect the left flank of the attacking force. The 116th was instructed to return to Pointe du Hoc to assist the Rangers (though their situation was no longer as dire because they had been reinforced and resupplied by sea late that same day). More importantly, after connecting with the Rangers at the Pointe, the 116th was to clear German positions at Grandcamp and Maisy, which threatened the advance on Isigny.

Grandcamp, a seaside resort with a small port about eight miles to the west along the Norman coast from Saint-Laurent, and Maisy, a small farming village less than a mile inland from Grandcamp, were both among V Corps' unmet D-Day objectives, and the drive to Isigny only increased their importance. Grandcamp was one of the enemies' strongest coastal positions in the Omaha zone, and its location and fortifications made it a significant threat. Maisy's significance lay in the three German artillery batteries nearby, all three of which could direct fire onto both Utah and Omaha beaches. The U.S. Navy shelled Maisy on the 6th and again on the 7th, damaging all three batteries but destroying only one. A German officer recalled the Navy's shelling caused terrific casualties among the batteries' personnel, but the survivors were able to continue firing their remaining artillery pieces and still menaced the invading forces. Indeed, it's likely the artillery fire that had stopped the 116th's drive towards Pointe du Hoc had come from these guns.

Back across the Channel, also on June 7, those pieces of the 254th still in England – all battalion command personnel, the Headquarters and Service Company, and the remaining three platoons of A Company – loaded onto transports at Southampton and crossed to France overnight. They, along with Companies B and C, including your father, landed on Omaha Beach the next day, Thursday, June 8. The engineers mostly came ashore on segments of beach known as "Dog Red," "Dog White," and "Dog Green," all of which were near a gap called "Exit D-3" in the invasion plans. Roughly, these segments stretched westward from Saint-Laurent to Vierville, while Exit D-3 itself was near the present site of the *Monument SIGNAL d'Omaha Beach*, slightly to the west of Saint-Laurent.

Monument SIGNAL d'Omaha Beach, Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer 2022

Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer (Omaha Beach) 2022
(Vierville is out of frame to the right)

On the 8th, the beach was much the same as it had been the day before; it was "still fragile" in the words of one engineer. German artillery sometimes still fell on the landing areas, enemy

snipers were still hiding in the bluffs above the beaches, medical tents were still overrun with wounded, and graves were still being filled with the dead. Years later, one engineer said the one sight he would never forget was "a red-headed medic … kneeling by another wounded soldier giving him first aid and sulfa drugs. Both were dying together." Another man said that, among all the confusion on the beach, he was quickly separated from his unit, Company B of the 254th. He searched the beach for hours without luck and finally sat down and fell asleep.

The muddle at Omaha meant it would take the 254th nearly all day to land, gather, and move to its assigned bivouac areas. Ed Vickstrom, in his role as the Snortin' Bull's historian, wrote: "it took some doing before the dispersed companies, smaller units and even individuals, could assemble a short way inland as an operational battalion pointed towards its pre-invasion assigned bridge missions."

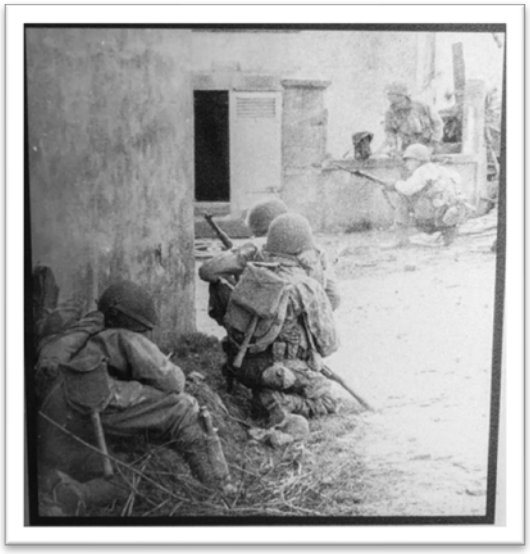
U.S. forces land on Omaha Beach, sometime after June 6, 1944

Bluffs above the "Dog" sectors of Omaha Beach between Saint-Laurent and Vierville 2022

The first entry in the battalion's daily journal upon reaching Normandy was made at 8:00 pm on that Thursday and reads simply: "Bn less Company B in area." The disorder at the beach may

explain why B Company was missing, but the experience of that company's first platoon also suggests an answer. As those men landed, the officer in charge of beach operations urgently needed combat engineers to delouse the area around one of the beach's exits, and finding men from the 254th, he ordered them to do the work. This was a long and tedious process, since the massive amount of shell fragments and other splinters of metal littering the area from the previous days' fighting made the engineers' mine detectors useless, forcing them to search the entire area by hand. Having worked late into the evening, they spent their first night in France in a farmhouse near the beach. That first night, the "steel umbrella" of American anti-aircraft fire over the men and the beach, with the red streaks of tracers and the "dazzling fireworks" of charges exploding, "made for a truly spectacular sight," Vickstrom later recalled, while admitting that, at the time, he and his fellow engineers might not have appreciated the display. After all, they were, he said, "more concerned with earthly priorities. Like finding cover and staying healthy."

As your father's company came ashore, it was sent to support those forces General Gerhardt had ordered to advance along the Norman coast to the west. Units of the 116th, along with elements of the 743rd Tank Battalion, reached Grandcamp on the afternoon of June 8, where they met resistance from prepared emplacements and pillboxes and from snipers scattered throughout the town itself. After fighting that continued until nightfall – fighting that many of the men described as more brutal than D-Day – the Americans overcame the Germans and pacified the town.



Grandcamp June 1944

Grandcamp 2022

Other elements of the infantry and armor swept inland, towards Maisy, and met little opposition at first. The naval guns had left the small village and the surrounding area shattered, and, for the first hours, the tanks and the infantry were able to brush aside all threats easily. But late in the day, as they approached a German strongpoint to the southwest of the village, near the German batteries, the Americans came under a mortar and artillery barrage, supported by machine gun and small arms fire. Although the American tanks destroyed two enemy pillboxes, they were running low on fuel and out of daylight and decided to withdraw. The men of the 116th stopped their advance and dug in for the night. The next day, units of the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions, together with men from the 116th and tanks of the 743rd, silenced the batteries, seized the sites, and took hundreds of prisoners.

Maisy Village June 1944

Countryside near Maisy Battery 2022

Maisy Battery: Bunker and 150mm Howitzer 2022

In support of these operations, the men of C Company deloused roads by removing mines and booby traps, and cleared debris and rubble left by the extensive shelling of the previous days. The battalion journal also records that your father's company captured 24 prisoners that day, one half mile south of Maisy.

It's possible Company C's prisoners were Polish soldiers or other men from eastern Europe assigned to the batteries at Maisy; there were Polish troops among the prisoners taken there by the Rangers and the infantry on the 9th. These eastern troops – *Osttruppen* in German – had been brought to France, forced to construct the Atlantic defenses, and then were expected to defend Germany from the English and the Americans, so as not to drain men from the German armies on the Eastern Front. Yet few of these *Osttruppen* wanted to die for Germany, and throughout the battle for Normandy many refused to fight and often ran or surrendered at their first opportunity. But we'll never who the prisoners were; the 254th's records never mention them again.

On that same day – June 8th – while the 116th Infantry was attacking German positions along the coast, and your father's company was taking prisoners at Maisy, General Gerhardt personally led units of the 175th to Isigny. As planned, tanks from the 747th Tank Battalion accompanied Gerhardt's troops. Having easily overcome the intermittent opposition they met along the way, the soldiers and the tanks were within a half mile of the town just after midnight. Naval guns had shelled Isigny earlier that day, and fires burned here and there.

Shortly after 2:00 am, Gerhardt, anxious to continue the attack, ordered the tanks to advance, with infantry to follow behind. At first, there was little resistance, but then snipers slowed the American advance, forcing them to fight from house to house. When a sniper fired on the GIs from the steeple of the town church, a tank put an end to the rifleman – and the steeple – with one 75mm round. Towards 8:00 am, a company or two of *Osttruppen*, led by a few German soldiers, launched a disorganized counterattack that quickly failed. After that, the Americans controlled the town, though they still faced occasional sniper fire throughout the day.

(The German army, like the American army, had few, true, snipers – men armed with high-precision, long-range rifles with telescopic sights – yet American action reports tended to call any hidden or camouflaged German rifleman a "sniper.")

U.S. forces in Isigny, June 9, 1944

Two important bridges crossed the rivers that ran near Isigny. One of these bridges, in the town itself, straddled the Aure, while the other, about two miles to the southwest, crossed the Vire on the road to Carentan. This city at the base of the Cotentin peninsula was a key objective for the 101st Airborne in their drive to connect the American beachheads, and it sat nearly seven miles west of Isigny, across the rivers Vire and Taute. Thus, the second bridge at

Isigny was the more important of the two, as it joined Normandy to the Cotentin and was crucial if the Americans were to link the Utah zone and the Omaha zone.

When the 175th moved into Isigny, they found the bridge over the Aure was still intact, though its flood gates had been set to allow the river to inundate the lowlands to the east of the town. The troops advancing down the Isigny-Carentan road discovered the Germans had destroyed the bridge on the Vire. Gerhardt quickly called for engineers to clear mines, rubble, and debris from Isigny, and to open the road to the Cotentin.

Responding to Major General Gerhardt, Lt. Col. Jenkins sent your father's company to Isigny to delouse the area and clear the road. He also had the battalion's Assistant Division Engineer, Captain William Bainbridge, survey the crossing of the Vire. Other sections of the 254th waded and paddled through the mud and the water to the east of the town and, under "light and spasmodic enemy fire," according to battalion records, built multiple crossings across flooded farmland and the rising tributaries of the Aure to allow the 116th Infantry to continue its advance and to supply ammunition to the 115th.

Company C was in Isigny within hours, using a liberated French diesel shovel to remove rubble and debris from the road to Carentan and make it passable for American troops and armor. As the men of Company C worked, Captain Bainbridge examined the Vire and the remains of the bridge on the Isigny-Carentan road. He found that, although the Germans had completely burnt the bridge's wooden structure, its stone abutments were intact and could be used to support a new bridge. Bainbridge reported his findings to Lt. Col. Jenkins shortly after 8:00 pm, and, almost immediately, Jenkins assigned the bridging project to your father's company.

254th photo of Isigny, June 1944

Isigny 2022

Although Isigny itself had been pacified, enemy forces still held ground to the west of the town, and German machine gun emplacements dotted the west bank of the river. Troops of the 175th Infantry attempted to cross but met with intense mortar and machine gun fire and took close to a dozen casualties. The crossing only succeeded when additional American forces reinforced the troops at the river and supported their advance with automatic weapons and mortar fire. Once across the river, the infantry dug in on the west bank and provided cover for Company C's bridging efforts. Working through the night and through periods of small-arms and artillery fire, your father's company built a "class 40, double-single" Bailey bridge.

("Class 40, double-single" describes the load capacity of the bridge and its construction method. The "class" refers to the bridge's load bearing capacity, and, for example, a "class 70" bridge was the highest class and could support a 39-ton tank on its transporter. The next two words identify the number of truss structures used on each side of the bridge and the number of truss stories used. A "double-single" had two truss structures on each side, arranged in one story. Bailey bridges could have up to 3 truss structures per side, arranged in up to 3 stories.)

By 5:30 am the next morning, the 10th, the bridge was finished. The engineers prepared it for hasty demolition (to prevent the Germans from using it in a counterattack), left 10 men behind at the site for maintenance and security, and returned to their bivouac area, arriving there shortly before 9:00 am. Company C had worked at Isigny for nearly sixteen hours but surely the men had been awake and on their feet for more than twenty-four.

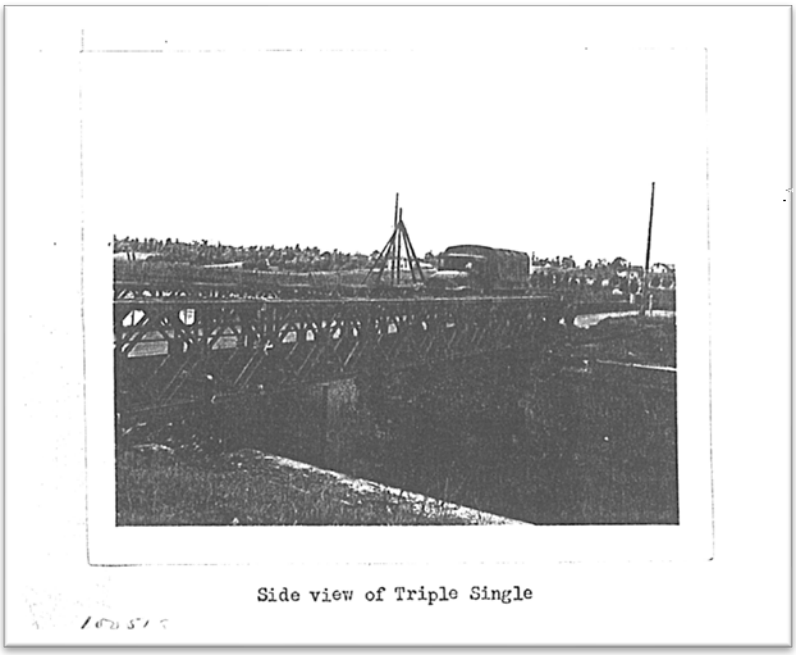
Your father's unit finished the bridge at an opportune moment. Fighting in the area increased over the next few days, as U.S. forces concentrated on solidifying the link between the Utah and Omaha zones and gaining additional territory to secure their position. And while the 175th

Infantry was taking Isigny and the 254th was bridging the Vire, the 101st Airborne attacked Carentan.

The German troops there were remnants of the 6th *Fallschirmjäger* Regiment who had fought the 101st earlier in the week, with the Germans losing perhaps as many as one thousand men in the process. After a difficult, two-day struggle, culminating in a ferocious bombardment from American artillery, mortars, and naval guns, the Germans abandoned the town late in the night of the 11th, and the 101st took possession. The American position was strengthened when armored infantry arrived in Isigny the next day and took control of the bridgehead on the west side of the Vire. With the 175th holding Isigny, the 101st in Carentan, and American troops and tanks commanding the road and the bridge that joined them, U.S. forces, relying on C Company's hard work, had connected Utah and Omaha.

(Fallschirmjäger regiments were German paratroops and were generally considered some of the Germans' best soldiers. By 1944, with the Luftwaffe rarely able to provide transport and support for airborne actions, the Fallschirmjäger primarily became ground-based infantry.)

All this activity required substantial use of the 254th's bridge. Traffic was so heavy, both in volume and weight, that, almost immediately, Company C had to upgrade the bridge's load bearing capacity. On the 12th, with German artillery falling in the area, the men of C Company returned to the site and went to work. By early in the morning of the 13th, they had transformed it into a Class 70, triple-single bridge.



254th photo of bridge at Isigny

On a less momentous note, but one with significant personal impact, the men of the 254th were happy when the word came down on the 13th that they could finally remove the special fatigues the U.S. Army had issued to all its men participating in the invasion. As protection against chemical warfare, these fatigues had been impregnated with chemicals of their own, and they were "hot, stiff, abrasive, sticky, clammy, and smelly when wet," Ed Vickstrom recalled. They also could not be washed since that would remove their protective chemicals. Some of the men had been wearing them since they boarded the ships that brought them to France back on the 1st of June, and Vickstrom remembered they were "ripe" from weeks of "dirt and sweat." It was, he said, "a relief when they could be dumped."

Coincidently, as the men of Company C worked to improve the bridge over the Vire on the 12th, General Eisenhower visited Isigny. He reviewed the damage U.S. naval guns had wreaked on the town, watched the USS *Texas* shell German positions near Carentan, spoke with General Bradley, whose headquarters were nearby, and lunched on C-rations with senior commanders of the U.S. First Army. Bradley was nervous throughout Eisenhower's visit, and he couldn't help but think of how "an enemy sniper could have won immortality as a hero of the *Reich*" with one well-placed shot.

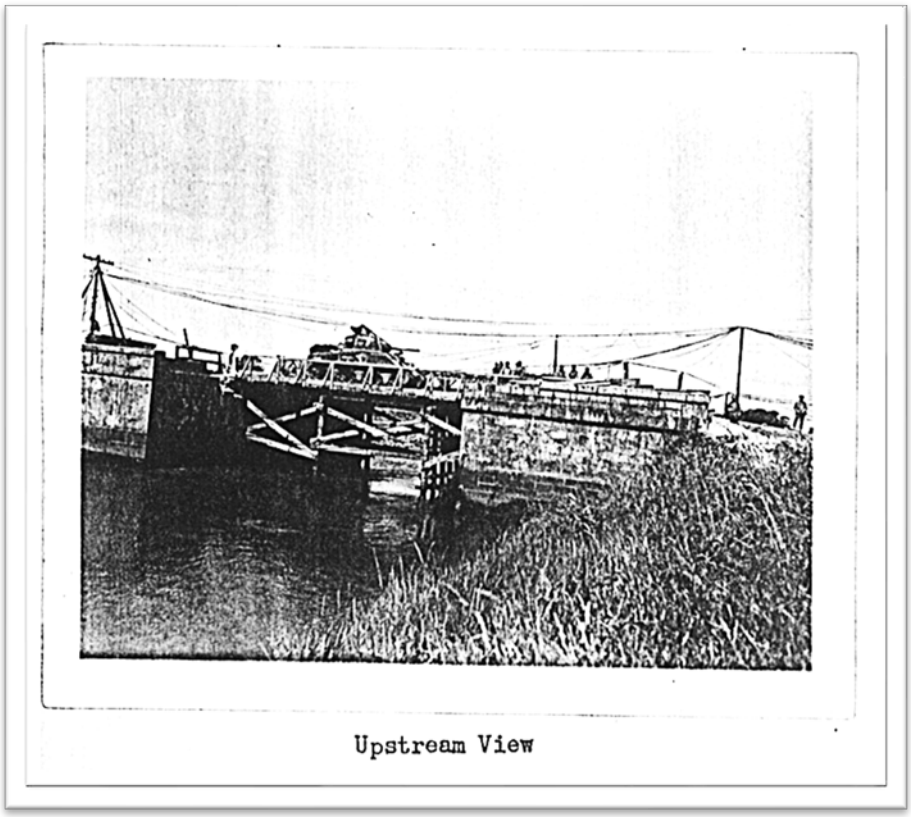
At the same time, the German generals in the area were concerned that the Americans had joined their forces in the Cotentin with those in Normandy. They were determined to break this link by retaking Carentan and ordered an attack for the 13th. These orders were intercepted by Allied intelligence and shared with the commanders of the U.S. First Army. General Bradley responded by having the 2nd Armored Division move portions of its Combat Command A towards Carentan from positions east of Isigny. At the same time, V Corps was told to be prepared to destroy the 254th's bridge over the Vire if the German's were successful in reclaiming Carentan or if they began moving mechanized columns towards Isigny. Once again, Company C drew this task, and one of its platoons, with a "responsible officer," dug in along the Vire that afternoon and waited for an order to demolish the bridge.

The German attack on Carentan began at 5:30 on the morning of the 13th but slowed when it fell into an ambush set by the 101st Airborne, using riflemen concealed in the trees along one of the major roads into the city. Although suffering moderately high losses, the Germans pushed on. The attack came to halt when the Germans found themselves faced with the Shermans of the 2nd Armored Division's Combat Command A, tanks that had crossed over the Vire that morning on Company C's improved bridge. The German soldiers had no armored support and did not even have any of the light, but highly effective, German *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapons. They had no choice but to retreat. By early afternoon, the Americans were able to attack in full

strength and moved to take a key German position on the southern edge of the city. That position was held by *Osttruppen* who ran as soon as their German commander was killed. At nightfall, U.S. troops still held the city, and their possession wouldn't be challenged again.

After securing Carentan, U.S. forces expanded their control over the Cotentin and moved to seize the port of Cherbourg. The bridge over the Vire became the crucial connection between the peninsula and Normandy and was the path of supply for U.S. efforts throughout the month of June. Once again, the amount of traffic flowing over the bridge meant it had to be enlarged, and, on the 20th, Company C of the 254th was given the job.

The work wasn't easy. To start, they had to build a second bridge, a temporary Bailey bridge, to allow traffic to keep flowing into the Cotentin while they dismantled the existing structure and constructed a permanent I-beam and timber bridge to replace it. The design for the permanent bridge required the engineers to drive 12 piles into the riverbed, but the first two broke as they were being pushed through the stony river bottom. So, the men had to blast their way through the rocks with high explosives. The new bridge took five days to build and opened to traffic on June 27, 1944, in time to start supplying the build-up General Bradley required to take his next major objective, the city of Saint-Lô.



254th photo of upgraded bridge

Current Bridge 2022 (downstream view)

Vire upstream from current bridge 2022

Vire downstream from current bridge 2022

At Saint-Lô, the 254th and your father would take their places on the front line and experience war face to face as infantry.

7.

July 1944: "Operation Cobra"

Normandy

Near Bérigny, France

The original plan for the Allied invasion was to establish "a beachhead with adequate ports," and then "drive along the lines of the Loire and the Seine Rivers into the heart of France, destroying the German strength and freeing France," General Eisenhower wrote. With these objectives in mind, the U.S. First Army intended to capture the port of Cherbourg within eight days after the first landings and to take Saint-Lô – with its road network connecting Normandy and the Cotentin peninsula to the heart of France – one day later. The Allies hoped to push out of Normandy no later than 20 days after the first troops set foot on the beaches and to be at the Loire within a month from D-Day.

But six weeks of struggle and disappointment followed the success of the initial assaults. Cherbourg would not be taken until the 1st of July. Saint-Lô would not be in American hands until July 18, while U.S. forces would not break out of their initial landing areas in Normandy and the Cotentin until the end of July.

Horrible weather and strong German resistance upended the Allies' plans. The summer of 1944 was unusually wet, with near constant rain often turning roads and fields into mud, making it difficult for American tanks, trucks, and infantry to move forward. Thick cloud cover often obscured the battlefields and erased the advantages of Allied air-superiority. Massive storms destroyed the artificial harbors the Allies had built at Omaha and near Gold Beach at Arromanche and slowed the flow of men, equipment, and material across the Channel. Then, too, throughout June and July, the Germans fought tenaciously to contain the invaders, though they were "at no time able to collect the strength to constitute a serious offensive threat," in General Eisenhower's recollection.

The largest problem for the American forces, though, was the Norman countryside itself – a patchwork of small fields that cut the landscape into a kaleidoscope of irregular shapes. Some were narrow, ribbon-like strips, some had outlines that followed the natural contours of the land, while others were nearly rectangular or square. Regardless of their shape, though, the fields were all enclosed by dense hedgerows – "walls of dirt – embankments on which trees and shrubs flourished," Ed Vickstrom wrote, noting that "the French word for the terrain formed thereby is '*bocage.*'" Many of the hedgerows in the *bocage* were 10 feet high, thickly woven with bushes and briars, and interspersed with large and small trees, all growing out of solid earthen mounds. The hedgerows formed natural obstacles, nearly impenetrable by men and

often impassable by tanks. They provided cover for defenders, concealing well placed positions that could rake an entire field with machine gun fire. To advance through the *bocage*, troops were often forced to break into small groups, leaving them without sufficient force to dislodge the enemy. Moreover, with their maze-like jumble of odd and haphazard shapes, the hedgerows frequently left soldiers disoriented, not sure of their location, unable to tell if the troops they could hear in an adjacent field were friendly or deadly, and confused as to the direction of their objectives. Hedgerows running in parallel formed hidden ditches and paths, unmarked on any map, but known to defenders who had lived in the area for months or years. The Germans used these paths to sneak behind attacking forces and trap them between their emplaced machine guns and squads of men with rifles and hand-held machine guns. Summarizing the problem, Vickstrom wrote that the hedgerows made "for a nightmarish arena for ground combat," and were a "defender's delight."

Norman *bocage*

Parallel Norman hedgerows

With the American advanced slowed, the engineers of the 254th spent the first weeks of July engaged in what would become repetitive operations for them – blowing hedgerows and clearing minefields. They also repaired roads and maintained and improved the Main Supply Route (MSR) road network in their area of responsibility. They established and operated water points, and opened and operated sand, gravel, and shale pits. They even built an underground war room for the headquarters staff of V Corps and a shower – with a stove to heat the water – for Major General Gerow, then in command of the corps.

Although much of this work became almost routine, it still could be dangerous. For example, on the 13th of July, as men from Company C were removing mines, they were caught in an artillery barrage, and a few days later, two C Company men were injured by a German S-mine as they cleared another minefield.

(The German S-mine – Schrapnellmine or Springmine in German – was one of the most common anti-personnel mines used in the war and was often called the "Bouncing Betty" by U.S. troops. When triggered, the mine shot up about 3 feet into the air and then exploded, spraying shrapnel in all directions. If a soldier stepped on one of these and heard the distinctive "click" of the mine's trigger, the recommended action was to freeze in place and keep the mine from launching into the air, hoping the ground absorbed the explosion and the shrapnel. It was better for a soldier to lose a leg than his life, but as Ed Vickstrom commented, "easier said than done.")

During these same weeks, Saint-Lô became General Bradley's main objective. He considered its seizure essential if the U.S. forces were "to gain suitable terrain from which to launch Operation Cobra," which was to be a massive attack southward, allowing the U.S. First Army to finally break out of its lodgment and sweep into western France. Eisenhower had wanted Bradley to strike towards Saint-Lô as soon as Cherbourg fell at the beginning of July, but Bradley needed nearly a week to reorganize and regroup his forces. When the advance finally began, it was slowed by the *bocage*, the stubborn German defense, and that summer's atrocious weather. It was the third week of July before American troops held Saint-Lô.

With the fall of that city, Bradley immediately turned his attention to Cobra. He envisioned this as an all-out effort using nearly every American resource in France to break-through and destroy the German divisions pinning the U.S. forces in Normandy and the Cotentin. Eisenhower agreed with Bradley's plans and believed that "by throwing all our weight into an offensive at this stage, we should not only achieve our objectives but that, in the long run, the cost of our victory would be the less." Cobra called for broad action, with five Allied corps across a long front, but the focus of the plan was a concentrated assault just to the west of Saint-Lô. That attack would be preceded by an intense bombardment of German positions by the Army Air Force, which Bradley hoped would severely weaken – if not absolutely extinguish

– the enemy's desire to fight. After the bombs fell, infantry of VII Corps would advance to open a gap armored forces would then break through. Meanwhile, diversions and other actions along the line also would occupy German attention, making it impossible for them to reinforce the troops near Saint-Lô bearing the weight of the American assault. Eisenhower and Bradley were sure the Germans had no reserves immediately available and were confident they had no ability to launch a serious counteroffensive. Thus, they believed their forces could simply overwhelm the enemy troops to the southwest of Saint-Lô and batter their way out of Normandy and the Cotentin.

On July 17, Lt. Col. Jenkins learned the 254th would play a part in Cobra, not as combat engineers, but as infantry in a diversionary operation by V Corps on the east end of the front, miles away from the main point of attack. The men would be placed among four infantry regiments then holding a line that curved around a German salient and ran east some 15 miles from Saint-Lô to the town of Caumont-sur-Aure. The engineers would be located near the village of Bérigny, at the tip of the salient, in ground occupied by troops of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division. The 23rd Infantry Regiment would be to the engineers' immediate right, while the 9th Infantry Regiment would be dug in on their left. Twenty battalions of artillery – both U.S. and British – were spread behind the infantry.

The Third *Fallschirmjäger* Division controlled the ground in the salient and occupied strong defensive posts along two high ridges with excellent visibility into the American lines. The first ridge was closest to V Corps' positions and was commonly called "Hill 101." The enemy used this hill to block the Allies from moving to the southeast beyond Saint-Lô. The second ridge, higher than the first, generally followed the line of a highway that ran between Saint-Lô and Caumont. Approximately halfway between those two towns, and in the center of the ridge, lay the village of Saint-Jean-des-Baisants, about four miles to the south of Bérigny. Though the German paratroops holding the salient were outnumbered by the men of V Corps in the area, they had fought furiously to hold their territory during the American attack on Saint-Lô and refused to be dislodged.

As a diversion from the main Cobra efforts to the west, V Corps' four infantry regiments would strike the second ridge in a pincer movement along the Saint-Lô / Caumont highway and connect in Saint-Jean-de-Baisants. If successful, the Americans would encircle the forces on Hill 101, thereby removing a serious obstruction to the Allied advance. Success would also deflate the German salient and shorten V Corps' front. V Corps' attack was planned for Cobra's second day.

Until then, Jenkins' men were to support the infantry on their flanks with continual harassing machine gun fire, with 8,000 rounds to be fired in each 24-hour period as directed by officers of the 9th regiment. The engineers were also expected to undertake regular patrols to retain contact with the infantry units on their flanks and to determine the location of enemy units in front of their position. Once the attack began, the 254th would remain in place while the infantry advanced towards the second ridge – the 9th to the left and the 23rd to the right. During this advance, the engineers would continue to provide supporting fire from their machine guns as directed by the 9th regiment. Lt. Col. Jenkins was told to have his machine guns and their crews in positions designated by the 9th Infantry by 1600 hours on the July 18. The remainder of his men were to be prepared to move into place on 30 minutes' notice after 1700 hours. Cobra would start the next morning. But before the engineers could take their assigned positions near Bérigny, the weather turned to heavy rain again, and Cobra was postponed.

The 254th moved into its new positions on July 19, and found themselves in a swampy, wooded lowland between irregular hills carved into a multitude of fields by hedgerows, with the village at their back. C Company arrived in their assigned area around 8:00 pm that day, and its men were settled just before midnight. Ed Vickstrom recalled that moving into a complex of well-prepared combat positions was "an eye-opener," and "the ingenuity and work of the 'ground-pounders' in the hedgerow/ sunken lane terrain was impressive even to hairy-eared engineers accustomed to mucking dirt." The position held by your father's company was the worst in the battalion's area. "The access lane leading to positions C took over was called 'Purple Heart Lane' by the infantry," one member of the company recalled, "and for good reason, because we had to bend low and run to-beat-hell across an opening, dive and roll right to avoid a concealed sniper."

The weather remained terrible for days. General Eisenhower remembered "the men … were compelled to huddle in their foxholes under the dripping hedgerows in conditions of extreme discomfort, while the enemy, similarly entrenched behind the natural defenses of the country, was alert to every movement. It was not until after 6 days of waiting, more miserable to the American troops than any others in this campaign, that the opportunity for action came on 25 July."

In those six days of waiting, the men of the 254th didn't just huddle in their foxholes, though. They took on the "defensive roles of manning roadblocks, outposts, [and] firing positions," Vickstrom said. They quickly learned – "in real time" – the basics of "harassing fire, mine warfare, friendly/ enemy booby-trapping," and everything else required of an infantry rifleman,

except for operations in attack, he remembered. According to the Battalion History for July 1944, the men spent much of their time patrolling – "a constant prodding to ascertain the enemy positions, his strength and possible withdrawal." The Battalion History also records that "during most of the time we spent in these positions the enemy shelled us with mortar, artillery, machine gun, and small arms fire." The German soldiers in front of the 254th's position "were active and aggressive nocturnal patrollers which kept everyone alert and generated lots of night flares and fireworks," Vickstrom recalled. During those six days, he said, the engineers met "the harsh reality of front-line action against a skilled, determined enemy."

For Company C, the first night on the front was tense, with small arms fire, mortars, and a few artillery rounds directed into their positions. Colored flares and tracer rounds from German machine guns lit the sky from time to time. There was a nervous hour when the company command post lost contact with one platoon. After 45 minutes of silence, and unwilling to wait any longer, they sent a runner, who reported back in 15 minutes that all was well, but that he had to teach the man on the telephone how to operate it. The company's first patrol of the area, led by a sergeant from the 1st platoon, left at 4:00 am and returned an hour and 45 minutes later.

U.S. forces patrolling in the *bocage*

During the next days, Company C would send patrols out regularly. They went every hour to contact the infantry on the engineers' flanks, but the patrols towards the German positions took place either in the darkness of early morning or in the fading light of the evening. Either way, the men hated patrolling. Ed Vickstrom wrote, "several expressed their opinion that patrol duty was the worst assignment by far. Routed in no-mans-land randomly sown with AP [anti-personnel] mines and frequently covered by well-hidden snipers was no bargain in any man's book. 'A hair-raising experience,' they said." This was a common reaction across Normandy, and the least favorite task of every U.S. soldier throughout the *bocage* was patrolling. Few men liked leaving the company of their platoon, and a night patrol was the worst of all.

The 254th lost its first man to enemy gunfire on the morning of the 20th, when a popular sergeant from B Company, checking on his men, was killed by a German rifle shot just after 7:00 am. Two more men from Company B were killed three hours later, one while improving his foxhole, and the other while investigating suspicious noises behind a hedgerow. C Company had its first casualty that afternoon, when a sergeant was wounded in the hand by mortar fire. The wound was minor, closed with four stiches, and the sergeant returned to his position within a half hour. But by the end of Operation Cobra, your father's company would take a disproportionate share of the battalion's casualties; five of the eight engineers who would be killed near Saint-Lô in late July of 1944 would belong to Company C, and nearly half of the men wounded in battle for whom a company assignment is known would come from C Company.

On the 21st, the men experienced an artillery barrage, with both U.S. and German shells "going over [their] heads." The clerk keeping the C Company journal recorded, "those 88s scream to beat hell!"

("88s" were German anti-aircraft guns, which, because of their power and versatility, were often used as anti-tank weapons and as artillery in support of ground troops. The guns were so common that "88" came to be used by American troops to refer to all German artillery.)

The men of C Company were close enough to the enemy's positions that they could hear German voices. They could also see enemy soldiers working – laying mines, preparing defenses, even chopping and cutting wood – and moving to and from one of their outposts. Every day, the Germans shot at the engineers with rifles, machine guns, mortars, and artillery. The men soon "learned to distinguish the fearsome crack" of incoming rounds "from the equally distinctive sound of friendly outgoing" artillery, Ed Vickstrom recalled, and said they also acquired "a grudging respect of German mortar skills."

In return, the engineers harassed the Germans with machine gun fire as instructed. They also placed AP mines, acted as artillery spotters, and destroyed targets – German defensive structures, perhaps – in front of their positions. To limit penetration of their area by German patrols, the men rigged booby traps, including explosives triggered by trip wires. One of the men remembered a night when one of these traps went off: "BOOM goes the booby trap followed by a whispered 'Achtung Otto!' and the sounds of a fast retreat. Come daylight we find a dead pig with a long leash around its neck – they were using the pig as a lead." Another of these traps killed a wandering cow.

Since the engineers were on the front line to support the nearby infantry with machine gun fire, those guns had to be manned around the clock. Sitting with a machine gun through the night was a lonely assignment for two men that often left them uneasy and jumpy. One engineer remembered one night when he and his partner heard suspicious noises from behind a hedgerow close by. After a few tense, uncertain moments, the men grabbed hand-grenades, pulled the pins, and threw them at the noise. After the explosions, the noises stopped. In the morning, they peeked behind the hedgerow and found a dead mule.

On the 22nd, a man on duty at a Company C roadblock was shot in the left foot. He claimed the shot came from somewhere in the distance, but his story was suspicious, and experience said that men with such wounds had often shot themselves to earn a medical ticket away from the front. The shrewdest shot themselves through a sandbag or other material to eliminate the tell-tale powder burns of a self-inflicted wound. Such injuries were common enough that

special hospital wards were created to treat these men so they could be kept away from other soldiers, as if cowardice were contagious.

On the 24th, German planes appeared over Béringy in the early afternoon and strafed the area held by Company C's third platoon. An Me-109 dropped some small bombs into the area as well, injuring two men. An American P-47 quickly arrived, shot the plane that had dropped the bombs, and the Messerschmidt burst into flames in the sky over the engineers.

Yet most of their time on the front passed in a routine of anxious boredom pierced by moments of concentrated alarm and dread. For example, other than the unusual attack by the *Luftwaffe* on the afternoon of the 24th, C Company filled most of that day sending out patrols who came back saying all was quiet and taking hourly reports from each platoon repeating that everything was quiet. Shortly before 2:00 pm, the first platoon reported rifle fire from their front which they returned. Within five minutes, though, all was quiet again.

And all stayed quiet until 6:30 that evening, when the first platoon reported rifle shots and a burp gun firing, which they answered with fire of their own. The quiet returned and wasn't broken again for nearly two hours, when one man reported seeing a German "sneak into [a nearby] barn." But when the barn was searched, no one was found, and the soldier who reported the sighting said the German must have "slipped out [the] back way." And, as before, the quiet returned.

("Burp gun" was the soldiers' name for the common German MP40, hand-held submachine gun, which earned its name from the guttural sound it made when fired.)

Typically, the enemy was more active at night, and the night of the 24th/ 25th was no different. From 10:30 to 11:00, German 88s shelled the area, and the men repeatedly heard automatic arms fire to their front. Shortly after midnight, flares were seen 150 yards from C Company's positions. A few minutes later, one platoon saw flares in an adjacent field and reported that one of their outposts had thrown a grenade. Ten minutes passed and they heard rifle shots. Then a booby trap exploded and more flares lit the sky. At 12:30, Company A reported a volley of mortars landed nearby. Some men heard a few rifle shots around 1:00 am, while six artillery shells struck near A Company's command post. The night was quiet again for 30 minutes or so, when Allied guns began laying shells in an area held by the enemy. Shortly after 3:00 am, another platoon saw a flare which was quickly followed by the sounds a burp gun and rifle shots. Twenty-five minutes later, the C Company journal recorded yet another flare and

another rifle shot. At 4:00 am, a burp gun fired again. German mortars woke the men at 5:30, and another night had passed.

The weather broke sufficiently for Operation Cobra to begin on July 25. Shortly after 9:30 am, the U.S. attack began with an intensive wave of heavy bombing to the west of Saint-Lô as the prelude to the ground-attack that was to follow. But the bombing went terribly wrong, and some U.S. B-17s and B-24s dropped their loads on American troops, killing more than 100 men and wounding close to 500 more. Many more bombs fell on enemy positions, though, and the attack devastated the German defenders. The bombed area "looked like a moonscape; everything was burned and blasted," wrote German Lt. General Fritz Bayerlein. He continued: "The survivors were like madmen and could not be used for anything. I don't believe hell could be as bad as what we experienced." Nevertheless, enemy troops still defended their positions aggressively, and the American attack failed to secure its objectives. Yet Major General J. Lawton Collins, the commander of VII Corps and responsible for the American forces at Cobra's heart, believed the infantry had accomplished just enough to give his armor sufficient room to begin their thrusts against the German positions. Taking a chance, he decided American tanks would take the lead when fighting resumed the next morning.

On Cobra's first day, the engineers and the neighboring infantry regiments harassed the German troops in front of them with their usual rounds of machine gun fire, to which the Germans responded with small arms fire, a few artillery shells, and a short mortar barrage. Until 11:00 pm, when Company C's clerk recorded his "Preparation for 'H' Hour," had begun, the 25th appeared much like any other day your father's unit spent at the front, and nothing was mentioned about the major operation taking place to the west. But the 26th would be different.

As "H Hour" approached, the tension and jitters of combat began to seep into the engineers' records. In preparation for the attack, the C Company clerk was required to contact each platoon every half-hour for a status report. In one report he learned a Company outpost "was getting hotter than hell!" with flares going off directly over their heads and small arms fire aimed at their position. At 11:30 pm, he lost communication with one of the platoons and then at midnight he spent an anxious half hour trying to clarify a confused message from another platoon while trying to locate a sergeant who seemed to be missing. At one point, his anxiety clear, he wrote, "What a night! Phones working bad, really sweating out reports!"

For two hours, C Company's first platoon acted as artillery spotters for American and British guns registering their targets. The Germans responded to this activity with mortars and artillery of their own. Things quieted down around 2:00 am and stayed quiet until shortly after dawn,

when nearly 250 Allied guns began a twenty-minute artillery barrage on enemy positions. At 5:20 am, the 245th "opened" V Corps' "part in Exercise 'Cobra' by long range MG [machine gun] fire," the battalion journal recorded. Martin Blumenson, in his account of Operation Cobra in the official U.S. Army history of this period of the war, "*Breakout and Pursuit*," wrote that at least twenty-five .50-caliber machine guns had been "previously emplaced … to deliver flanking fire across the regimental front." The Germans responded again with artillery and mortars. At 5:45, the engineers stopped firing and "had ringside seats" for an "awesome artillery barrage," as one of the men recalled. The company clerk recorded this barrage was "really a heavy" one, and that, after ten minutes, it began creeping deeper into the enemy positions. In another ten minutes, the artillery was falling far enough away that he could report the "ground [was] not shaking anymore." The engineers' machine guns began to fire again.

At 6:30 am, with the barrage continuing and the company's machine guns still firing, the company clerk was "trying to boil a pot of coffee," and noted there was "no shelling from [the] enemy." About 15 minutes later, the clerk recorded: "fighter bombers overhead, dropping bombs on enemy – the ground really shakes."

Near 7:00 am, the Germans began hitting American positions with sporadic mortar fire. One shell landed on a C Company position and wounded three men seriously enough that they had to be taken to the hospital. The enemy artillery renewed its firing about one half hour later, and by 8:00 am, several C Company positions reported that shells were falling in their areas. About the same time, one platoon reported a sniper was firing at them and said they were returning his fire. Twenty minutes later, the same platoon reported that German 88s were "landing to beat hell 50 yds immediately [to their] front." After this barrage stopped, the sniper began harassing them again, but soon seemed to be drifting away. Within a few minutes, the sniper fell quiet, and German mortars and 88s started to drop into the position of his original target. Approximately 20 shells hit the trees in the hedgerow the men used for cover. The shelling continued for a half hour or so and then stopped. Fortunately, no one was killed and there was only one minor injury – S/Sgt. Harold Rucker had a shrapnel wound in his back. The medics dressed his wound, and he returned to duty. Throughout these hours, the machine guns of the 254th continued to fire at targets selected by the 9th Infantry.

For their part, the infantry regiments of V Corps advanced. Though the 9th Infantry Regiment faced strong resistance, they pushed steadily forward for almost two miles and were close to their first objective: the Saint-Lô – Caumont highway. On the other side of the action, the 23rd regiment advanced nearly a mile before the Germans stopped them with a fierce storm of artillery and automatic weapons fire. Still, by the end of the day, U.S. forces had cut through the first lines of enemy defenses and were closing in on the Saint-Jean-des-Baisants ridge.

Perhaps more importantly, they had occupied a significant force of German troops and had prevented them from reinforcing those positions to the west that were Cobra's true objective. Success came, however, at a high price – the infantry assault cost nearly a thousand American casualties.

Just before noon, the engineers' portion of the battle appeared to end, and the only remaining evidence of combat in the area was the sound of U.S. artillery firing in support of the advancing infantry. Still, men of your father's company had spent a restless night and then had been in a shooting war for over six hours. In this time, they had witnessed two tremendous artillery barrages and American airplanes bombing German positions with sufficient ferocity to make the ground shake. They had fired their weapons in support of advancing troops and had been the targets of German rifles, mortars, and artillery. Through all of this, only four C Company men had been wounded and none had been killed. It must have seemed lucky to have been so close to the fury of war and have not suffered more losses. But their casualties would come.

Around 3:00 pm, Company C sent out a patrol led by Lt. Frank Adams to locate German positions in the company's zone of responsibility. Adams and the four men he took with him quickly disappeared into the hedgerows. Several hours later, with the patrol long overdue, another C Company officer, Lt. Norman Watkins, volunteered to find the missing men. Watkins had been Adams' roommate back in England (back before the men lived in foxholes and had actual rooms to share), and they were good friends. Four enlisted men agreed to join him, and they set out sometime before 6:00 pm. Within minutes, they were in trouble.

Discovered in the *bocage*, Germans attacked Watkins' patrol with rifles and mortars, and at least one man was hurt. Another made his way back to a company outpost to summon help. Other engineers rapidly answered his pleas, and Company A, for example, said "they [were] on their way with all available men." Nearby infantry began firing their mortars at the German positions striking at Watkins and his three men, and squads of engineers set out to relieve the trapped patrol. Word soon filtered back that two more men in the stricken patrol were injured.

At 7:25 pm, Company C told battalion headquarters that a "patrol [was] pinned down by mortar and arty [artillery] fire. Several injured. Relief squads sent but are pinned down also – more injured." C Company also "requested arty and mortar fire" from adjacent positions. A short time later, Company C's journal recorded a call "for more morphine," while the artillery it had requested started falling on German positions in front of the 254th's area.

The fiercest fighting stopped around 8:00 pm, as the big Allied guns mostly silenced the German mortars. The relief squads were pulled back, and six injured men were evacuated. Mortars

continued to fall occasionally until just before 9:00 pm, when C Company's journal noted the shelling had stopped and the "whereabouts of Lt. Adams [were still] unknown."

The next afternoon, C Company sent out a patrol to search for both Adams and Watkins. Within an hour, the men reported that Lt. Watkins was dead, killed by an S-mine, it appeared. An hour and a half later, two more patrols left: one to retrieve the body of Lt. Watkins and the other to continue the search for Lt. Adams and his men. The men collecting Watkins stumbled into German anti-personnel mines, and several of them – including two medics – were injured before the body could be secured. Lt. Adams and his men were finally found in a ditch rigged with multiple booby traps; four of them were dead, and one was seriously wounded and immediately evacuated. As best as the events could be reconstructed, it appeared the patrol had been spotted by an enemy force, and when they fired on Adams and his men, the Americans dived for the protection of the ditch, triggering anti-personnel mines hidden there. Placing booby-traps in locations offering quick and obvious protection was a common German practice throughout the war.

The final toll from the two patrols and from all the men sent to find or help them was five dead and at least ten men wounded, including two medics. The majority of the dead and wounded were from Company C.

Your father earned a Purple Heart on the 26th. But the existing records don't tell us how he was wounded, only that his wounds did not require evacuation. From the few, terse entries in the battalion records, it seems most likely your father was wounded in the fight to relieve Lt. Watkins and his men. But it's impossible to say conclusively, and it's always possible he may have been injured in some other incident that simply went unreported in the existing records. We'll never know.

As for V Corps, its infantry regiments continued their attack on July 27, but against noticeably weaker opposition and with modified plans. Instead of working their way down the highway between Caumont and Saint-Lô and connecting behind the St. Jean-des-Baisants ridge, the 9th regiment and the 23rd crossed the German position a mile short of the highway and connected in front of their original objective. Though not a complete success, V Corps' assault kept enemy troops from the main Cobra attacks, isolated Hill 101, and eliminated the Bérigny salient.

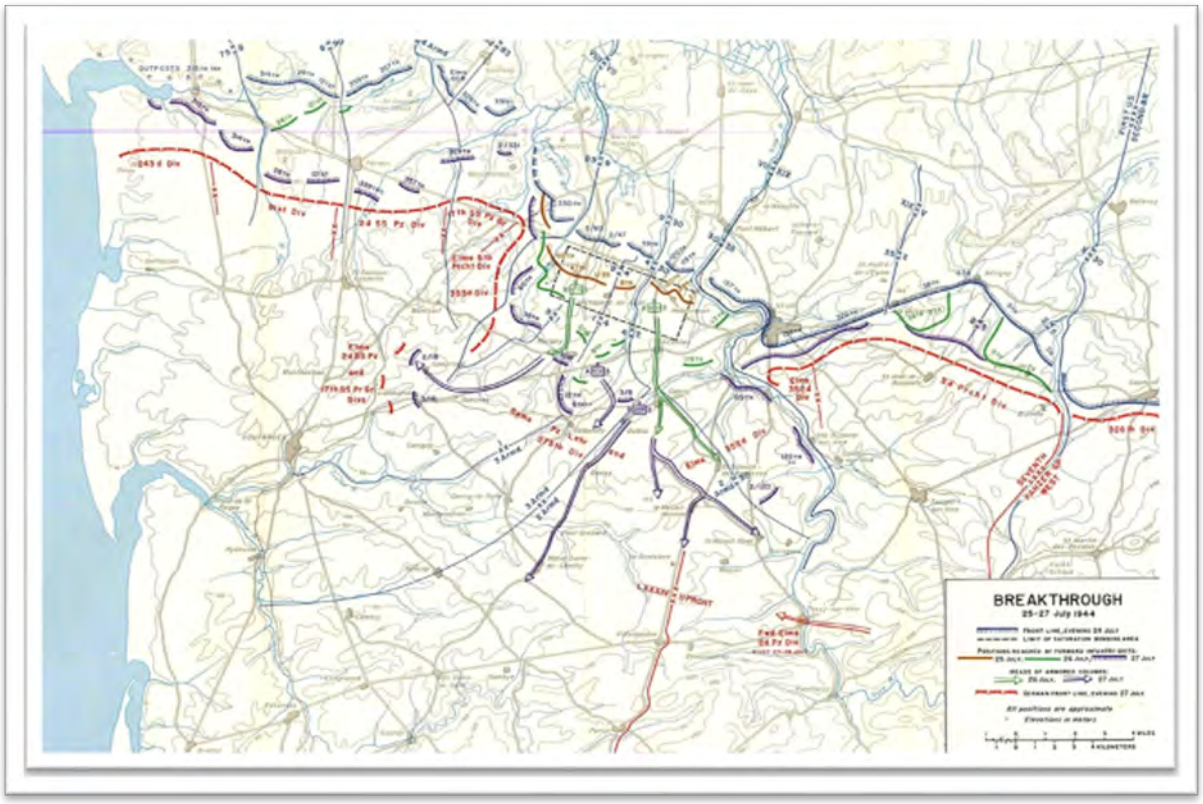
The 254th was released from its infantry duties on July 28, 1944, and returned – "sadder, wiser, dog-tired" in the words of one battalion report – to a bivouac site in Cerisy-la-Forêt and to its primary role as combat engineers.

Operation Cobra was a hard-won success, allowing American forces to break the lines that had pinned them into Normandy and the Cotentin, decisively smashing through the opposition. The risky decision to lead the attack with armor on the second day made all the difference, and German commanders watching American tanks roll over and through their positions could barely believe the depths of the disaster unfolding before them. Many of their troops, though, unable to ignore what they saw, decided the war was lost. One German soldier told his comrades, "The enemy is superior in men and material. We are simply being sent to our deaths with insufficient weapons. No airplanes, not enough ammunition for the artillery. For me, the war is over."

American infantry advances in Operation Cobra

Captured German soldiers in Operation Cobra

A few weeks later, the British Commonwealth forces also broke out of their Norman beachheads and inflicted heavy casualties on the German armies when they trapped them near the town of Falaise. Thereafter, "the German ability to resist in France was negligible," Eisenhower said, and "our armies swept east and north in an unimpeded advance which brought them to the German frontier and the defenses of the Siegfried Line."



Operation Cobra.
The area held by the 254th is on the right, along the angles with Bérigny as their vertex.
Their position is most likely the space between the two green lines,
which show the advances of the 23rd and the 9th Infantry Regiments on the 26th of July.

At the Siegfried Line, the 254th would be among the first U.S. units on German soil. And there, the engineers would again prove their ability and spill their blood in action against the enemy. But, before that, they had to race through France and into Paris and take their place among the first Allied troops to enter that city.

8.

August 1944

France

After Operation Cobra and the Commonwealth victory at Falaise, "the German armies in Normandy were broken as an effective fighting force, and our way across France was opened," General Eisenhower recalled. Allied "forces swept across the north of France and through Belgium without a check by any major delaying action until they stood upon the frontiers of Germany," he said.

And so, for the men of the 254th, August was mostly a time of swift movement in close support of advancing infantry. It started slowly, but by the end of the month, American troops were moving so quickly that the engineers could only sweep the roads on which they traveled for mines and repair the most important bridges and the worst craters and holes before moving on to their next destination. In that month, they covered over 260 miles, traveling more than 100 miles on one day alone, as they sped into Paris. In comparison, at the end of July, after eight weeks in France, your father's unit was barely 30 miles from its starting point on Omaha Beach.

The engineers of the Snortin' Bull retained their humor through all of this. One of them wrote:

> The days were hot with battle, the nights were cold and tense,
> Our way was blocked with minefields and bombed and tangled fence.
> But somehow, we came through the mess, and started into France,
> Infantry and cavalry, with each we took our chance.
> We found a lot of calvados to help us on our way,
> And cider by the barrels, we found it every day.
> We saw what used to be St. Lô and crossed the River Vire,
> While the Jerries still in Paris were crying in their beer.

In the early days of August, the 254th built five bridges across the Vire the 35th Infantry Division used to cross from Normandy and the Cotentin into the interior of France. The men also removed rubble, debris, and wrecked vehicles from the roads in their operational area, and repaired those roads as needed. They swept for mines on the roads and on their shoulders and, if there was enough time, in adjacent ditches and hedges as well. In these days, C Company also operated a gravel pit and painted hundreds of warning signs, some reading "Danger – Mines," and others "Mines Cleared to Hedges." In addition, they guarded and sorted through two large caches of maps the Germans had left behind as they retreated to the east.

By August 20, the battalion, supporting the 90th Infantry Regiment, was beginning to move rapidly to the east, towards Paris.

As the Allies closed in on Paris, the commander of the German troops there, General von Choltitz, knew holding the city was impossible, and he attempted to negotiate a truce to allow his men to withdraw. But the negotiations failed, and the city began to burn with open defiance. As one man there remembered those days, "Paris babbled the first words of forgotten liberty." He recalled that "newspapers no larger than a leaflet began to appear, [and] flags were made out of scraps of cloth." A new radio station began broadcasting, and every time it played the *Marseillaise*, radios were turned up, windows were opened, and the forbidden song could be heard throughout the city. Von Choltitz and his troops took defensive positions in hotels and public buildings and turned them into makeshift fortresses, but the General – to his credit – refused orders to destroy the bridges, historical landmarks, and notable buildings of the city.

After four years of German occupation, those were "strange, indecisive days," one man, then living in the city, recalled. "The Germans held Paris only by little islands," he said, while "the Parisian rediscovered in his deepest memory the solidarity of the barricades, a heroic banter, a smell of gunpowder and sweat." The Resistance took to the streets and fought in the open and from behind barricades. They used the tunnels of the Metro to avoid the German tanks stalking through the city and menacing key intersections and public spaces. As Eisenhower said, "a strange, skirmishing battle was fought" throughout the French capitol.

French Resistance in the streets of Paris, August 1944

On the 24th of August, the Americans reached the outskirts of Paris, with troops at Melun to the southeast of the city and at Mantes-Gassicourt to the northwest. Allied forces were also in Versailles. As part of this build-up of strength, the engineers were directed to move more than

100 miles, from Sées to Chevreuse, in one day so that, by nightfall, they would be less than 15 miles from the historical boundary of Paris.

That same evening, troops of the French 2nd Armored Division – with a hand-full of half-tracks and jeeps and three Sherman tanks – slipped into Paris, guided through its back streets by a Parisian on an old motorcycle. This division had fought with the Allies across North Africa, played a notable part in the victory over Rommel and his *Afrika Corps*, and nothing would keep them out of Paris. By 9:30 pm, they were in the plaza of the city hall, the *Place de l'Hôtel de Ville*, surrounded by leaders of the Resistance and a crowd of men and women and children who lived nearby. Within minutes, the news of the arrival of French soldiers began to spread, and soon the bells of *Notre Dame* and other churches began to ring. People crowded into the streets, and many yelled "They're here!"

French Troops in Paris; August 1944

The next day, General von Choltitz surrendered the city to General Phillipe Leclerc, the commander of the 2nd French Armored. As General Eisenhower said, "For these men to accept in Paris the surrender of the enemy, under whose dominion their country had lain for so long, was a fitting triumph." It was also recognition of their efforts and sacrifices in the war against the horrific forces that had devasted Europe.

On that same day, the 254th was assigned to support the 2nd French Armored, and, over the next week, the men of C Company removed roadblocks and repaired the damages of war in the French capitol. During this time, the engineers also examined bridges throughout Paris to identify those the Germans had prepared for destruction with explosive charges and to remove the charges where possible. They also reported on each bridge's condition and load bearing capacity, identified damaged or destroyed bridges, and provided an estimate of materials

needed to repair them. Some of the battalion's men were asked to do a similar examination of the airfields in the area, reporting on their location and condition, along with the length of all runways and their type of surface.

On the 25th, elements of the French Resistance contacted C Company and asked for a supply of fuel. The request passed up the chain to the 1121st Group command, and in what may have been an early indication of the supply shortages that would trouble and hinder the American advance in the coming weeks, the answer was "no." Later in the week, C Company was ordered to prepare a particular road through Paris for two-way traffic. There is no indication of what the company did to accomplish this, but similar orders back in Normandy had led to the demolition of various obstructions, including houses and, at least once, an ancient church. War is history, but it often destroys the historic in its path.

In the last week of August, German resistance in France buckled and collapsed, and the first weeks of September would see the western Allies race into Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands, liberating vast areas that had spent more than four dark years under Hitler's heel. Canadian and British forces dashed northward "in a great sweeping drive" parallel to the Channel coast, reaching Antwerp in four days and crossing the Dutch border on September 12th, General Eisenhower recalled. At the same time, American armies sprinted to the east, towards Germany, advancing through northeastern France, southeastern Belgium, and Luxembourg. As General Eisenhower summarized, "In less than 2 weeks … the First Army had crossed the Seine in force, swept across France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and brought the war to the threshold of Germany."

Your father and his fellow engineers were part of this advance and would soon find themselves on the front lines again as infantry. Not in France, though, but in Germany.

9.

September 1944
Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Siegfried Line Campaign

The disintegration of the German forces in France and Belgium and their hasty withdrawal to the east put the Allied invasion of Europe months ahead of schedule. By early September, Allied troops had reached a line in Belgium, Luxembourg, and eastern France the invasion plans had not expected would be achieved until May of 1945. This unexpected success raised hopes for a quick end to the war and gave the Allies numerous tactical opportunities, but the swift advance also threatened to break U.S. and British supply lines.

General Eisenhower explained, "The chief difficulty in the drive eastward arose not so much from the armed opposition encountered as from the problems of supply. Already at the beginning of August, when General Patton's men were overrunning the interior of Brittany, the necessity of transporting from Cherbourg and the beaches the gasoline, ammunition, and other supplies needed to maintain the flying armored columns had imposed a severe strain upon our supply organization. Now that the spearheads were far on their way across France to the east, these difficulties were multiplied a hundredfold."

Allied plans had foreseen a slow, methodical advance, with time to rebuild French ports and its rail network, allowing massive quantities of supplies and equipment to be moved efficiently over long distances. The plans also called for strategic pauses to give the quartermaster corps time to prepare and fill supply depots close behind the advancing forces, from which the requirements of the front-line troops could be met. But a logistics structure designed to be built over 11 months simply could not be assembled in two or three weeks, and with the rapid Allied advances, those plans were thrown away.

With massive effort and ingenious improvisation, supplies continued to reach the troops through most of August but, by the end of the month, deliveries began to fall far short of needs. Without sufficient fuel to move forward, the American Third Army was idled from September first to the sixth, and, likewise, about one fourth of the U.S. First Army was out of action for several days because supplies had become so scarce. Elements of the British Second Army halted their advance for two weeks so their trucks could be used to transport provisions and necessary materials to others.

Frustratingly, the fuel and ammunition and other needed materials were already ashore. But those supplies were 300 miles or more away from the front, back in western France, on the Norman beaches and in Cherbourg. By the end of August, the armies' quartermaster corps struggled to cross this gap with a dwindling number of operational trucks, their fleets breaking apart on trips of 400 to 600 grueling miles around the clock.

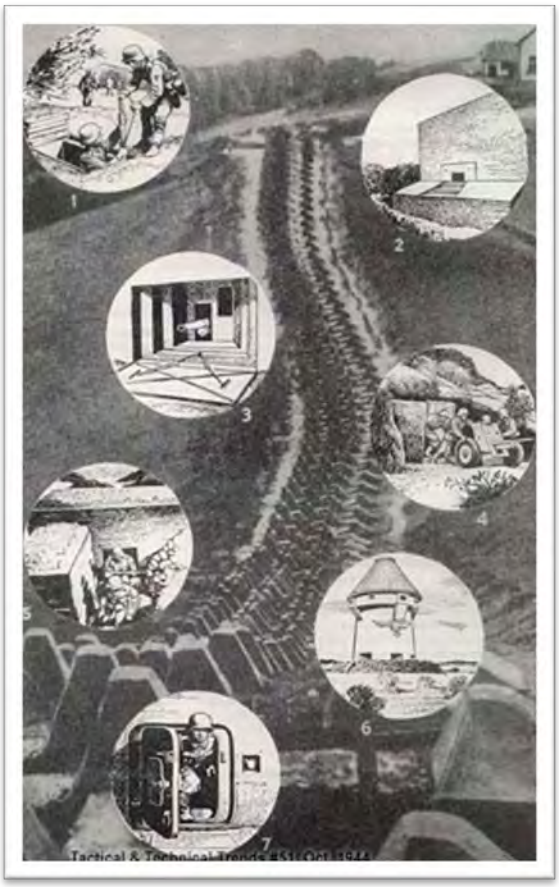
With supply lines on the edge of collapse, General Eisenhower's plans for a push into Germany across a broad front had to be delayed. Those plans intended to cripple Germany's ability to continue the war with a two-pronged sweep into Germany's industrial heartland. As originally envisioned, the main effort would be made by the British to the north of the Ardennes, aimed at the heavily industrialized Ruhr Valley. At the same time, U.S. forces would carry out a secondary drive from Metz, south of the Ardennes, threatening the industry, mines, and smelters of the Saar Basin, while preventing the Germans from concentrating their forces against the British attack in the north.

With those plans deferred, General Eisenhower had two obvious alternatives. He could end the pursuit of the Germans, holding his armies' advance until a robust supply chain could be built, or he could change objectives and use his resources to strike at deep water ports closer to the front. In the end, he opted for a mixture of both. He had British Commonwealth forces turn their attention to the ports of Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk, and Antwerp, and had the American armies stop their advance to the east. But he also made one significant concession and authorized the U.S. forces to continue their pursuit as far and as long as possible with the resources they had before halting. Eisenhower realized that, even on this limited basis, continuing to advance was a gamble, but it was one he was "prepared to take in order to take full advantage of the … disorganized state of the German armies in the west," he said.

Yet these decisions meant the Allied pursuit would eventually come to a standstill, and the Germans would thereby gain time to regroup and rebuild their forces behind the fortified barrier that ran along the western border of Germany from Holland to Switzerland. This barrier included thousands of bunkers, pillboxes, and gun emplacements of steel and concrete, many disguised as houses, barns, or other common structures, while others were sunk deep into the ground. Its most common – and most obvious – feature was the long rows of concrete "dragon's teeth" running in stripes across the German countryside. The Germans called the barrier the West Wall; to American and British soldiers it was the Siegfried Line.

"Neither a line nor a wall," the German defense was "a fortified zone some 400 miles long and 8 to 20 miles in depth" explained a U.S. Army Intelligence report in 1944. Within that area, German engineers had integrated defensive works into the natural terrain "to command a wide

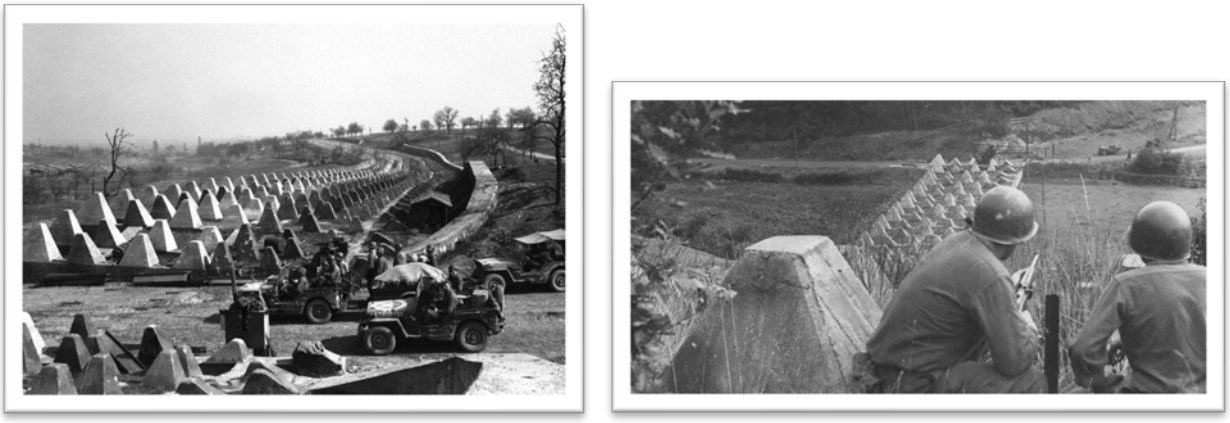
field of fire and cover the approaches to other fortifications … [all] equipped with long-range guns, howitzers, mortars, antitank guns, flame throwers, and batteries of field artillery," according to the same report. The defenses were arranged in three zones: a forward zone of "mine fields, barbed-wire entanglements, elaborate tank traps and barriers, and machine-gun nests;" a main defense zone of "fortified structures such as shelters, pillboxes, casemates, and forts, and antitank obstacles covered by antitank guns;" and then, finally, an "air wall" that included air force squadrons and antiaircraft guns in fortified positions.



U.S. Army Illustration of West Wall Elements
From "Westwall, Springboard of 1940, Assumes Defensive Role"
Tactical and Technical Trends, No. 51, October 1944

Before the war Hitler called the West Wall "the most gigantic fortification of all time" and used visits to the site as propaganda opportunities, with photographs and newsreels carefully staged to show its most imposing and menacing structures. The German press aided these efforts, and boasts of the Wall's insurmountable strength were common: "No enemy can approach this bulwark of steel and concrete unpunished. Even an attack with the strongest means will, despite the greatest sacrifice, collapse under the power of the defensive armament;" and the Wall was "ready to crush every attack in the bud and tear to pieces with its gigantic shells every

hostile lineup of troops" thrown against it. Although Allied intelligence had reason to doubt these claims, it was still accepted that the Siegfried Line would be exceedingly difficult to attack successfully, and penetration would come at a very high cost.



Dragon's Teeth of the Siegfried Line/ West Wall

Consequently, as American armies moved into Germany in September of 1944, they began to test the Wall. Elements of V Corp began crossing into enemy territory on the 11th of that month, but not in substantial strength. These efforts generally were restrained scouting missions – in some cases involving no more than a platoon – intended only to assay the strength of the German forces and defenses in front of U.S. positions.

These missions largely found the Siegfried Line to be something less than the mighty fortress of German propaganda. Four years of neglect and the massive losses of German troops in the summer had transformed it into something of a "Potemkin village," Lt. Col. Charles MacDonald wrote in "*The Siegfried Line Campaign*," the official U.S. Army history of operations in Europe on the northern flank of the Allied front from September to December of 1944. Indeed, Neil Short in "*Hitler's Siegfried Line*" concluded that, even in 1939, when its reputation helped keep the French and English from attacking Germany after the invasion of Poland, the West Wall was little more than a myth constructed from hollow boasts. According to Short, German officers acknowledged the Wall was "far from being the impregnable fortifications pictured by our propaganda." German Field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt "laughed" when he inspected portions of the Wall, and General Günther Blumentritt later admitted that "the so-called 'West Wall' was primarily a propaganda bluff."

In September of 1944, though, "the [Siegfried Line's] most glaring deficiency was lack of troops either to man the line or to counterattack effectively," MacDonald wrote. The vicious battles in the east and west in the previous months had hurt the German Army deeply, as more than 1.2 million of its soldiers had been killed or wounded or had gone missing in action from June to

August. An American intelligence summary from the beginning of September maintained the German army was "no longer a cohesive force but a number of fugitive battle groups, disorganized and even demoralized, short of equipment and arms."

By the time American armies reached the Siegfried Line, none of the 48 infantry divisions the Germans could field in the west were at full strength, and some were little more than a name on a chart and a few officers in the field. In one segment of the line opposite V Corps, the Germans had – on paper – two armored divisions, but each was so depleted that what should have been a force of 30,000 men was a diminished collection of less than 15,000. (At the time, however, V Corps believed it faced less than half that number.) Many of these men had been untrained as infantry, some were wounded veterans freshly discharged from hospitals, and others were young boys and old men who, before the disastrous summer of 1944, had been ineligible for military service. These divisions had few tanks, little armor, and almost no artillery. In many other sections of the West Wall, units could occupy only a fifth of the fortified positions in their assigned positions. At least one German commander in the west warned that he simply could not “hold a defensive line” with available troops.

Even if the Siegfried Line had been manned in strength, though, many of its fortifications were in poor shape and unusable. One early American patrol found a pillbox converted into a chicken shed by a local farmer. Others found pillboxes filled with water. Moreover, “there were no mines, no barbed wire, few communications lines, and few fortress weapons,” according to MacDonald. He also wrote that, what “field fortifications” there were, “had been begun only at the last minute by well-intentioned but uncoordinated civilians.” (Later, the Americans would learn the Germans had cannibalized the Wall years before, removing its weapons, communications equipment, and interior furnishings – even metal doors in some cases – for use in the defenses along the Atlantic coast.) The one advantage neglect had brought was time for the forest to grow over and around many of the fortifications, effectively obscuring them from view.

So, in September of 1944, there were good reasons to believe the West Wall “was formidable primarily on the basis of an old, unearned reputation,” and even the German troops falling back from France and Belgium found that the Siegfried Line was not much more than “a five-year old derelict,” MacDonald wrote.

These factors – all of them true – gave American commanders confidence that their forces could quickly penetrate the West Wall and be on the banks of the Rhine within weeks. There was even talk of winning the war in Europe within months – certainly no later than Christmas of that year. According to MacDonald, at the end of September, senior officers within the U.S.

First Army (of which V Corps and the 254th were part) still believed “that, given two weeks of good weather, Allied air and ground forces could ‘bring the enemy to their knees.’”

Experience would soon puncture this confidence. With enough concrete and steel to shelter troops in well camouflaged positions, the Wall, even in its often derelict shape, could still stiffen an undermanned, ill-trained, and poorly equipped defense, especially one fighting to protect its homeland on favorable terrain. In such circumstances, uncoordinated automatic small arms fire alone can keep well-trained, battle-hardened troops from pressing forward. As one American infantry officer said later, “It doesn't much matter what training a man may have when he is placed inside such protection as was afforded by the pillboxes. Even if he merely stuck his weapons through the aperture and fired occasionally, it kept our men from moving ahead." MacDonald wrote that U.S. forces quickly learned “steel and concrete can lend backbone to a defense, even if the fortifications are outmoded and even if the defenders are old men and cripples.”

German Pillbox on the West Wall

For its part, the 254th left Paris on the 31st of August, assigned to the 8th Combat Team of the 4th Infantry Division. A week later, they were in Fumay, France, at the Belgian border, supporting the 5th Infantry Division. On September 11, still attached to the 5th Infantry, they were in Belgium, east of Bastogne, and no more than 20 miles from the German border. The speed with which American armies were moving can be seen from the fact that, in less than two weeks, the engineers traveled more than 200 miles, nearly equaling their total for the entire month of August. One engineer remembered those days as “mostly a case of a 15 miles in-the-hour convoy movement trying to keep up with the rapidly retreating enemy.”

Throughout these weeks, the engineers' chief duties were building, rebuilding, or improving bridges on the course of the advance, repairing roads, clearing obstacles, and establishing water points. For example, on the 3rd of September, your father's company was in La Fere, France, repairing a bridge and improving the roads there. With their work finished, some men were left behind to guard the bridge until regular infantry was available to take their place. This was typical at the time, but the practice soon stopped, and the battalion was ordered to retrieve all the men it had left behind. As additional evidence of the rush to move forward, they were told, "Army taking over, but don't wait for them."

The 254th also frequently acted as a provisional truck company, transporting men of the 4th and 5th Infantry Divisions, and the growing concerns about fuel are obvious in the battalion's records. The unit's daily journal often notes the amount of gasoline on hand and the number of miles the battalion could travel on that supply. On the 4th of September, when the engineers were ordered to provide 30 trucks to transport infantry, your father's company replied that its trucks were "ready," but they needed 300 gallons of gas. Five days later, the battalion was again ordered to transport infantry, but was reminded "Don't forget the gas situation and take only enough to report the trucks" with fuel "for 40 miles."

Units of the U.S. First Army, including elements of V Corps, reached the German border on the 11th of September, and began limited reconnaissance of the Siegfried Line that same day. Lt. General Courtney Hodges, in command of the First Army, did not want to attack too quickly; his troops lacked supplies, had limited reserves, and had no other forces available nearby to help break open a successful attack or save the men if one went badly. Yet, he also understood each day he delayed allowed the Germans to strengthen their positions behind the Wall. He resolved the dilemma with a compromise of his own. Although he ordered his troops to halt and barred them from launching major attacks for at least three days, he authorized V and VII Corps to conduct reconnaissance in force along the Wall to sustain momentum and keep pressure on the enemy. He did tell his commanders, though, that if they encountered substantial opposition, they were to hold in place and wait for supplies before launching the larger, coordinated attack he expected them to begin on the 14th.

V Corps was assigned a line of attack through the Eifel, a mountainous forest of beech, oak, and spruce. The Eifel and the Ardennes differ in name as the result of history, linguistics, and politics, but to anyone traveling through them, they are one dense forest, sharing sharp ridges, deep ravines, abundant streams, and a limited network of roads. Unique to the Eifel, though, is the Schnee Eifel, a rugged, volcanic escarpment, running for about 15 miles along the Our River and the Belgian border. The Germans believed this rough and craggy feature alone provided a

significant obstacle to invasion and built fewer fortifications along it than anywhere else on the West Wall.

The promise of a thinly fortified defense encouraged V Corps' commander, General Leonard Gerow, to point his 4th Infantry Division directly at the Schnee Eifel. There, it would attack across the jagged ridge, aiming to break through the West Wall near Prüm, a town about thirteen miles southeast of St. Vith, Belgium. Meanwhile, the 28th Infantry Division would advance at the southern edge of the Schnee Eifel, towards the village of Brandscheid, which lies on a high plateau behind that challenging terrain. From there, the 28th was also to drive towards Prüm, where they would connect with the 4th Infantry, and then, together, they would push on towards Koblenz and the Rhine. V Corps' third and final division, the 5th Armored, would operate further south, in Luxembourg, near the German village of Wallendorf, at the confluence of the Our and Sauer rivers. Under General Gerow's original plan, the 5th Armored would not attack, though, but would reconnoiter in force and provide a demonstration by fire. These activities were meant to disguise the fact that V Corps' main effort was taking place in the north and to hold some German troops away from that attack. This coordinated operation was to be launched on the 14th, but, repeating the terms of Hodges' compromise, Gerow authorized each divisional commander to continue scouting and testing German strength in their assigned areas before then.

Insignia of the 28th Infantry Division – The "Keystone Division."
(The Germans called them the "Bloody Bucket.")

Brigadier General Norman Cota, the commander of the 28th Infantry Division, used Gerow's authorization to scout the German positions as permission to move into Germany in force, and by nightfall of the 12th, men of the 109th and 110th Infantry regiments had penetrated unopposed to the edge of the West Wall. However, they were short on ammunition and had none of the special equipment necessary to clear pillboxes, including flame throwers and explosive charges. They also had no armor and limited artillery support. On September 13, both regiments attacked portions of the Wall, but were quickly stopped by fire from the pillboxes in front of them. Neither regiment made significant progress that day.

To the north of Cota's infantry, Major General Raymond Barton, leading the 4th Infantry Division through the Schnee Eifel, interpreted Gerow's authorization to scout in force more conservatively than General Cota had. Barton's men advanced slowly, and it wasn't until September 13th that regiments of the division – the 12th Infantry and the 22nd Infantry – crossed into Germany.

Insignia of the 4th Infantry Division – the "Ivy Division."
(The nickname was derived from the Roman numeral for 4 "I-V")

The next day, Gerow's planned large, coordinated assault began in drizzling rain, and V Corps' troops confronted far different conditions. The 28th Division faced brutal opposition and made little progress. Even though General Cota committed his reserves to the attack and the 28th displayed unwavering determination in the face of substantial casualties, the men gained no more than a small foothold in the line of pillboxes before them. Things went better in the Schnee Eifel, where Gerow's instincts proved true, and the troops of the 4th Division spent most of the day advancing in the rain against undefended pillboxes. The few manned defenses they came across were often occupied by inexperienced middle-aged men and youths, who regularly surrendered after the first shots in their direction. What little organized resistance they found, they overcame without significant trouble, and by the end of the day, both regiments had completely breached the Wall. One, the 22nd Infantry Regiment, held an opening nearly two miles wide, and some of its men were more than a mile past the last zone of German fortifications.

The weather stayed wet on September 15, and there was growing evidence that the Germans had begun reinforcing their defenses with men supported by armor and artillery. One of General Cota's attacking forces, the 109th Infantry Regiment, was compelled to give ground to a strong counterattack, and, for the next few days, they could make no headway and were gradually shredded by a Panzer division and German artillery.

Cota's other regiment, the 110th, spent most of September 15 stalled behind a substantial roadblock of concrete, steel beams, and the iron tetrahedrons the Germans seemed to scatter everywhere like giant jacks. Any attempt to advance was met with small arms fire from pillboxes on the other side of the obstacles. Late in the afternoon, engineers arrived with explosives, intending to remove the roadblock. Ten engineers, each carrying 50 pounds of TNT, crawled slowly forward. After an hour and a half, they reached the structure, placed their explosives, and activated the charges. Then they stood and "went like hell to the rear," while the roadblock disappeared in thunder, flames, and smoke. American tanks drove forward and fired directly into the pillboxes from which the Germans had been shooting, and the 110th finally sprang forward.

That night, however, the Germans counterattacked with improvised flame-throwing armor and decimated one of the 110th's rifle companies. Despite this loss, the 110th advanced rapidly the next day through a mile and a half of pillboxes and bunkers and, by evening, held the most commanding ground in the area. MacDonald wrote, "Beyond them lay only scattered West Wall fortifications. Though the penetration was narrow and pencillike, the 28th Division had for all practical purposes broken through the West Wall."

But the shortage of reinforcing troops, the lack of artillery cover, and bad weather that hampered air support, all left General Cota without the force needed to exploit and expand his men's success. Moreover, this thin crack through the German defenses had come at the cost of almost 1,500 casualties. So, on the day they finally broke through the Siegfried Line, General Gerow ordered the 28th Infantry to stop their advance.

This same exasperating result – a hard won breakthrough that couldn't be supported and had to be relinquished – ultimately repeated itself with the 4th Infantry Division in the Schnee Eifel. Beginning on the 15th, the troops there faced increasing mortar and artillery fire across many of their positions. Forward elements of the 22nd Infantry Regiment were attacked by a significant force of Germans – at least a full company or more – while other units of the regiment discovered that enemy troops had infiltrated into areas behind them over night. The pillboxes the regiment confronted on their advance were now manned, and these fortified positions slowed their progress and kept it from reaching the highways leading to the east that were its objective. Likewise, the advance of the 12th Infantry was significantly more difficult on the 15th than it had been before. Still, by the end of the day, both regiments had taken additional German territory past the eastern borders of the Siegfried Line.

With his forces having faced so little resistance on the 14th, General Barton ordered his reserve – the 8th Infantry Regiment – forward on the 15th of September, hoping to broaden the breach

his troops had cut and accelerate their advance towards the strategic city of Prüm. But this regiment hit trouble almost immediately. Destroyed bridges, stout roadblocks, bad weather, and steady opposition from German troops all slowed their progress and forced the 8th to concede it would be unable to connect with the division's other infantry regiments that day. It also reported that significant numbers of enemy troops were moving into pillboxes in their area. This news, coupled with the increased resistance Barton's other regiments had faced that day, made it clear the Germans were rapidly building their defensive capability, and that the American advance was at risk.

The next day proved the point. Overnight, the Germans had built a strong blocking position in front of the 12th regiment and were able to inflict appalling casualties on the Americans as they held them from their objectives. At the same time, the rugged terrain of the Schnee Eifel continued to delay the 8th, and they struggled to advance through dense, muddy woods on poorly mapped trails while facing increasing enemy pressure. The 22nd regiment met stiff opposition from German troops who now manned the pillboxes and other fortifications on its line of advance. The best news of the day – that one company of the 22nd had broken out of the forest and had seized high ground overlooking an important highway leading to the east – was ruined when the Germans shelled the position, wounding 35 men and killing eight. Although each regiment of the 4th Infantry Division had gained ground during the day, they were paying an increasingly steep cost for every step forward.

And then, on the next day, September 17, the 4th division's progress stopped. That day began with shelling of positions held by the 22nd Infantry Regiment, shelling at times so severe that it unnerved even veteran leaders. Some men had to be evacuated with "combat fatigue." Still, the commander of the 22nd pushed his men to move on towards Prüm. At first, they moved forward without opposition, and quickly advanced through the village of Sellerich, less than 3 miles from their objective. But things soon went horribly wrong. After one of the tank destroyers supporting the advance hit a mine as it approached Sellerich, German weapons exploded all around the regiment with a ferocious snarl. Antitank guns drove the American armor from the field, and machine guns, mortars, and artillery opened fire on the infantry. In the fighting that followed, one rifle company was cut off and completely isolated on the far side of Sellerich, with no prospect of reinforcement. The battle stormed, without break, for hours. When the guns fell silent after sundown, no more than sixty-eight men of the stranded company found their way back to U.S. lines. (At full strength, an American rifle company in 1944 usually had more than 200 men, meaning that, perhaps, more than two thirds of this company had been lost.)

Added to the losses from the day's shelling and counterattacks, the lack of useable trails and roads through much of the Schnee Eifel, the horrible weather that obliterated American advantages in air power, artillery, and armor, and the division's vulnerable flanks, the disaster at Sellerich made a strong case for halting the 4th Infantry's movement to Prüm. In addition, though the men had opened a gap of nearly six miles in the West Wall, the breach they had won at such a cost gave them no ready access to strategic roads heading east and unlocked no significant objectives short of the Rhine. Deciding the position held no advantages worth additional sacrifice, General Barton ordered them to stop. And V Corps' attack in the north came to an end.

The 254th's daily journal for these days illustrates the roll combat engineers like your father played in supporting an army on the attack.

On the 11th, the day advanced elements of V Corps breached the German border, the 254th was assigned to transport troops of the 28th Infantry, and over the next two days, your father's company, along with Company B and the Headquarters and Service Company, provided trucks for that assignment. The engineers probably moved men from assembly areas in northern Luxembourg towards St. Vith, putting these troops closer to the German border and near the jumping off points for their advance into Germany. At the end of the day on the 13th, to prepare for the coming attacks, the engineers were told to leave their trucks unloaded and ready to move.

On the 14th, the day V Corps' combined actions against the Wall began, your father's company spent its time working to ensure that the corps' armor could move quickly from its positions in Luxembourg to support the infantry attacking in Germany. Men from Company C were sent to reconnoiter the road from Ettelbruck, Luxembourg to St. Vith, Belgium (a distance of over 60 miles) to determine if it was suitable for use if the 5th Armored was needed to join a breakthrough in the Wall. Company C also was ordered to improve a bridge in Ettelbruck "as much as possible to facilitate traffic," and to prepare a ford at Diekirch, Luxembourg, and make it suitable for "continuous traffic." A squad from C Company was dispatched to remove obstructions on a road near Colmar, Luxembourg. V Corps instructed the 254th to "expedite all C Company jobs" because the 5th Armored was "on two hour alert notice to move to exploit any breakthrough," and all of C Company's missions were on routes elements of the 5th would use if they moved north into Belgium and Germany. A and B Companies were also given high priority tasks, including the repair and removal of several bridges in the area.

All this work may have been conducted several miles behind the frontlines, but the men of the 254th were still in a war zone. As they went about their assignments, they were warned of small

arms and mortar fire in some areas where they worked, artillery barrages targeting others, and the presence of German infantry in many more.

On September 15, however, the mission of the 254th changed, and they were detached from the infantry then attacking to the north and assigned to support the 5th Armored Division. This change was set in motion by events over the previous days in the southern reaches of V Corps' zone of responsibility.

Insignia of the 5th Armored Division – the "Victory" Division
(Derived from the Roman Numeral for 5 – "V" – transformed into "V" for Victory.)

On September 13, fulfilling General Gerow's original plans, Combat Command R ("CCR") of the 5th Armored conducted reconnaissance with fire and pushed into Wallendorf as a demonstration of force. When the Germans made no response to this threat, Gerow was convinced the silence meant this segment of the West Wall was largely unmanned, and he expanded the Armored's role in the coming operation. Instead of acting merely as a diversion, he ordered the 5th to use one of its three combat commands to attack Wallendorf and then, with the support of the 112th Infantry Regiment, to advance along a corridor that ran above the town, continuing through the Eifel and the West Wall for about five miles to the village of Mettendorf. From there, they were to drive another seven miles eastward to the small town of Bitburg, an important communications center within the region. The 5th's remaining two combat commands would remain in reserve, prepared to support the infantry divisions to the north if needed, or to help CCR take Bitburg.

In the days ahead, the attack at Wallendorf would come to hold serious promise for Gerow's efforts against the Siegfried Line and "developed into a genuine opportunity for a breakthrough," according to MacDonald. This attack would also see the 254th back on the front lines as infantry against the Germans. As in Operation Cobra, C Company – your father's company – would be hit the hardest and shed the most blood in the coming fight.

Wallendorf (on the right) and the Sauer River
(The Our River is the smaller stream running through the line of trees above the bridge.)

On September 14, just after noon, three companies of the 112th Infantry began fording the Our River immediately to the north of Wallendorf but were prevented from crossing by machine gun and small arms fire from pillboxes on the hill above the town. (The Americans would later learn that German home-guard troops had been deployed around the village overnight.) The soldiers shifted downstream and crossed the Sauer at a shallow ford, following a column of tanks from CCR. Met again by intense small arms fire, the American forces fought back with artillery and small arms fire of their own, and the troops and armor slowly advanced into the village. Yet the enemy stubbornly fought on, hiding in the houses and shops of Wallendorf. Combat engineers, armed with flame throwers intended for use against pillboxes and other fortifications, were brought forward and turned their weapons on any building thought to be protecting enemy soldiers. The fires they started burned much of the village and forced the Germans to withdraw. CCR and its attached infantry then continued their advance and quickly silenced the few lightly defended pillboxes they came across on their route. By nightfall the Americans held a secure position on high ground above the village. The road leading directly to Mettendorf, however, was of no use. Artillery had reduced much of it to rubble and craters, but worse, the route itself made an abrupt and steep descent into one of the Eifel's narrow valleys, rendering it impassable by tanks. While scouts searched for an alternate course, CCR and the infantry bedded down for the night in a thick, wet fog.

Wallendorf, September 1944

By morning, another path forward had been found that crossed a small creek near the village of Niedersgegen, about two miles to the north of Wallendorf. As the Americans approached the village, a few German tanks and a thin force of infantry posed a small challenge but were quickly overrun. The enemy lost two tanks, an armored halftrack, and an antitank gun in the skirmish, while one American tank was slightly damaged. After this action, the advance continued virtually unhindered, and by the end of the day CCR was through the fortifications of the Siegfried Line and approaching Mettendorf, less than ten miles from Bitburg. Although their front was not much wider than the roads they were following, the mere fact that American armor and infantry had been able to advance nearly unopposed through the West Wall and were now behind the German defenses created a massive tactical opportunity, one General Gerow intended to seize. He ordered the 5th to enlarge its attacking force, take Bitburg as quickly as possible, and then advance to the north and strike at the German defenses near Prüm.

Although the 5th Armored's own small force of combat engineers had improved the ford on the Sauer into Wallendorf with the installation of a light, treadway bridge, the call to expand the attacking force and extend their breakthrough required a more substantial crossing. To undertake this work, the 254th was attached to the 5th Armored on September 15, and, late that evening, Company A enhanced the existing treadway bridge and began building a class 40, wooden trestle bridge over the Sauer. The other companies of your father's unit were ordered to destroy pillboxes along the route of the armored movement to ensure that Germans could not infiltrate back into them behind the American advance. With this work at Wallendorf and in the West Wall, the Snortin' Bull joined the list of American units who were among the first to cross into Germany during the war.

Destroyed pillbox in the Eifel

On the 16th, CCR held in place near Mettendorf, waiting for a battery of field guns that had been blocked since the previous day by German artillery and mortar fire near Niedersgegen. The 112th infantry, however, did advance, and, although they suffered terrible casualties from heavy shelling and small arms fire, by nightfall, they were within five miles of Bitburg. Meanwhile, Company A of the 254th continued its work on the bridge at Wallendorf, and by midafternoon had made sufficient progress to allow Combat Command B of the 5th Armored to cross into Wallendorf and move on to Niedersgegen.

That same day, men of your father's company were sent to Bastogne to pick up captured German artillery shells to be used by Company C and Company B as they destroyed pillboxes and other fortifications of the Siegfried Line. Not all pillboxes the men worked to demolish were empty, and, as they went about setting charges, the engineers frequently found German soldiers, including officers, cowering inside and anxious to surrender. Company C also captured several Russians who claimed to have been forced west to build defenses for the German army. In the space of a few days, the 254th would eventually take over a hundred prisoners and destroy 43 pillboxes.

At Niedersgegen, an American Sherman tank had fallen through the small bridge that crossed the creek, and, on the evening of the 16th, the engineers of the 254th were ordered to repair that bridge and improve the crossing. As the sun was setting, eight men from Company A, approaching the site in two jeeps, were surprised by a German ambush, and four of the men – two officers and two enlisted men – were wounded; two so seriously they later died of their injuries. This was the first in a series of attacks behind the 5th Armored's advance, as the Germans sought to slow or stop the American assault.

Still, the progress made in just two days and the lack of a coordinated defense from the enemy left many in the 5th Armored division believing the Germans could not "do more than delay [them] temporarily."

But General Gerow knew the men of V Corps were "operating on borrowed time and borrowed supplies," as Charles MacDonald wrote in "*The Siegfried Line Campaign*." Gerow understood his boss, General Hodges, was willing to marshal the First Army's thinning resources to allow V Corps to chase a running and demoralized enemy, but only so long as that chase did not meet substantial challenge and appeared to be able to succeed quickly. Yet V Corps' casualties were increasing rapidly on all fronts as its two infantry divisions to the north were meeting intense opposition and as German resistance to the armored drive in the south grew more obvious and became more effective. It was now clear that, as MacDonald put it, "though the V Corps obviously could have continued the advance, it would have taken some fighting to achieve it, no matter how makeshift the units with which the Germans had shored up the West Wall in the Eifel." Moreover, the American supply situation was getting worse. Indeed, Hodges had been warned it was likely that the lack of supplies would compel his forces "to slow up, even altogether halt, [their] drive into Germany … in the very near future."

And so, for these reasons, near 9 p.m. on the 16th, General Gerow ordered the 5th to call off their attack. He wanted the Armored division to consolidate its forces and "mop-up" the West Wall near Wallendorf. Although he instructed them to continue patrols in the vicinity of Bitburg to watch German activity in the area, he directed them not to attack unless he ordered them to do so.

Gerow's decision may have been well-timed for the Germans counterattacked the next morning, striking several points along the American salient. Using antiaircraft guns with deadly effect, the Germans hit the infantry positions near Bitburg in such strength that the U.S. forces were compelled to withdraw. They also attacked CCR's positions on the eastern tip of the American advance in a furious assault using tanks and infantry. It took hours of brutal fighting for the American forces to repel the attack and regain control of the area.

That same day, engineers of the 254th were sent to maintain and guard the crossing at Niedersgegen. They were also instructed to continue the demolition of pillboxes and other fortifications in the morning, but that order was rescinded shortly after noon, and it appears their primary objectives became maintaining the crossings at Wallendorf and Niedersgegen. Men from Company A who had continued to improve the bridges and approaches at

Wallendorf began to find that, each evening, at dusk, “shots would start coming in,” and they began to wonder if they “would have to run the Krauts out” of the village some morning.

On the 18th, the Germans committed additional troops to their attack and concentrated on striking at the American flanks. At Niedersgegen, the situation seemed well in hand in the morning; all enemy troops had withdrawn and, according to the battalion journal, there were “friendly troops there.” But, as the men of C Company continued working on the bridge and the ford, the Germans began shelling the area. The shelling grew more violent throughout the afternoon, and the engineers were forced to stop work by 4 p.m. Elsewhere, as proof of the increased German threat, men of the 254th drew rifle and machinegun fire as they transported materials in a quarter ton truck, and two were wounded.

Niedersgegen - Postwar Postcard

The German counterattacks continued to intensify, and September 19th saw them moving against the Armored’s leading positions. Stubborn fighting and American artillery and air support overcame the assault. Simultaneously, though, the Germans pressed against the American flanks at multiple points and began to menace the bridgehead at Wallendorf. By late morning, German artillery was falling near the village and their troops had infiltrated into the eastern edges of the village itself. At 11:15, the 254th reported that the “enemy [was] counterattacking in strength across our immediate front.”

In response to this threat, and within an hour of that report, the engineers had been activated as infantry, and thirty minutes later they were ordered to take positions overlooking the bridgehead and instructed to hold the crossing. The engineers gathered in Riesdorf, a small village to the west of Wallendorf, and with your father’s company in the lead, followed a ridge running parallel to the Sauer until they arrived at a hill overlooking the two bridges that crossed

that river: the timbered bridge Company A of the 254th had built and the smaller treadway bridge the engineers of the 5th Armored had originally installed. Reaching their objective, they dug in.

They didn't have long to wait. The Germans attacked the bridges in force with infantry backed by machine gun and mortar fire. For nearly an hour, the engineers and American artillery battled with the enemy, until, as Charles MacDonald wrote, "fire from the engineers and from antiaircraft guns west of the river drove the Germans back;" but "the bridges still were intact." Company C bore the brunt of the fighting, though, with two men killed and 12 wounded.

The hill overlooking the Sauer where the 254th fought to hold the crossing.

The Germans attacked the bridges again the next morning with heavy shelling and ground troops, but once more were pushed back by American forces, including engineers of the 254th. At the same time, although the 5th Armored had held every position attacked on the previous day, the American tanks and supporting infantry began pulling back towards the high ground above Wallendorf, returning to the point they had first occupied six days earlier. The defense of the bridgehead passed to units of the 112th Infantry Regiment and CCB, while two companies of the 254th (not specifically identified in the battalion journal) remained on site. One company was to maintain the approaches to the bridges in good condition while the other was to be prepared to destroy the bridges on order.

That night, Germans infiltrated the village and "succeeded in blowing [the] timber and [treadway] bridges," as recorded in the battalion journal. Years later, many engineers recalled they found it upsetting – if amusing – that, after they had transferred the care of the bridges to the "real" infantry, the Germans were able to destroy them. Evidently some of the men didn't

recall – or maybe never knew – their fellow engineers had orders to destroy both bridges. One who did wrote, "our outfit was concerned with keeping the enemy on the east side of the Our and blow the bridge when it became apparent that all the elements of the 5th Armored were back across the river –[all] that were going to make it back. I was a member of the demolition squad that was supposed to sneak up to the bridge in the morning under the German guns to blow it – to our surprise and relief, the Germans beat us to it."

Not content with destroying the bridges, the Germans also planted mines across the Wallendorf side of the crossing. Men of the 254th were called upon to quickly build a ford of gravel and rock across the river and remove the mines from the road running into the village. When the road was clear, a light tank crossed into Wallendorf only to be hit by a German *Panzerfaust*. Small arms fire erupted from both sides of the Sauer, targeting the village and the ford, and the engineers were pulled back to their bivouac area, away from the river.

Later in the day, when the last units of the 5th Armored withdrew from Wallendorf, V Corps' efforts to break the West Wall ended. Ironically, after the war, German generals asserted their defense would have collapsed in the face of a continued and concentrated assault, and the Allies, had they maintained their efforts, could have been on the western banks of the Rhine within weeks. But with German armies shielded by the obstacles and fortifications of the West Wall, and the Allies' ability to continue any offensive limited because they were short of resources, "the war was to resolve itself into slow, hard fighting" on relatively static lines, General Eisenhower recalled.

With the Allied push into Germany suspended, the 254th was detached from the 5th Armored and, on September 22, 1944, moved to an area near St. Vith, Belgium. There, in positions among the rear echelons of the 4th Infantry division, and through the remaining days of September, the engineers spent most of their time on road maintenance and other routine work. They also acted as provisional transportation companies again, moving units of infantry from place to place.

In October, your father's unit would move further north into Belgium, into the upper Ardennes, into an area called the *Hautes Fagnes*. With strategic and tactical considerations focusing the combatants' attention further north and further south, the engineers found themselves in an area of the front where very little seemed to happen for the longest time. But after ten mostly quiet and routine weeks, the 254th would find themselves directly in the path of the German 6th *SS Panzer* Army as it drove into the Ardennes and began what we know as the Battle of the Bulge.

10.

<u>October – December 16, 1944</u>

<u>Büllingen, Belgium</u>

Büllingen, Belgium, about 1940

On October 2, 1944, your father's battalion moved to Büllingen, a village in the northern Belgian Ardennes, set between a high plateau known as the *Hautes Fagnes* to the west and the German border to the east. The Ardennes is an area of mountains and thick conifer forests, cut through with ridges and ravines, with twisting roads crossing the abundant creeks and brooks and streams that feed into a few, large rivers, such as the Meuse and its tributaries – the Ourthe, the Ambèlve, and the Semois, for example. But it is also an area of rolling hills and is surprisingly agricultural, with irregular fields carved between unpredictably deep draws and woods. Around Büllingen, it's a crumpled land, where elevation and use can change quickly over short distances; pastures and fields fall away rapidly into draws or end abruptly against walls of thick trees.

Countryside near Büllingen

The *Hautes Fagnes* is the highest part of Belgium, reaching an elevation of nearly 700 meters (2,300 ft.) above sea-level. It is also one of the wettest regions of Belgium, with rain or snow on more than half the days of any month. Snow can fall from October to April, but the deepest snows usually come late in the winter. December and January are especially dark and wet, with short, mostly overcast days, and more precipitation than most months of the year. These two months are also cold, with high temperatures around 3°C (37°F) and normal low temperatures usually falling one or two degrees below 0°C (averaging around 28°F). Wind often rasps across the highlands, and in the valleys and forests morning mists can be thick and stubborn, lingering hours past dawn. When your father was here, there were few paved roads; most were gravel or dirt and turned into thick, heavy mud with the rain. But in that December and January – the coldest winter in more than three decades – the bitter temperatures often froze the mud and left the ground solid.

There are no large cities in the Ardennes. Even today, the largest towns in the region – Malmedy, Bastogne, Spa, Verviers – have populations of less than 20,000. Rather, the Ardennes is a collection of villages, many no more than a few houses huddled together around a crossroad. "The normal settlement in the Ardennes" when your father was there "was the small village with stone houses and very narrow, winding streets. These villages often constricted the through road to single-lane traffic. Another military feature was the lone farmstead or inn which gave its name to the crossroads at which it stood," says one Army history. In 1944, even the largest villages in the Ardennes had fewer than 4,000 inhabitants.

In the fall of that year, the line held by the American forces in the Ardennes from Monschau, Germany, in the north, to Echternach, Luxembourg, in the south, was known to those serving there – like the engineers of the 254th – as the "Ghost Front." It was the front where little happened, and little was expected to happen. "The Ardennes sector seemed no special risk, it had been quiet for weeks," General Eisenhower recalled, and "it offered - or so it seemed - no terrain attraction for the enemy, and there was no recognizable indication that enemy forces outnumbered those deployed on the friendly side of the line."

Eisenhower and General Bradley (now commanding the Twelfth United States Army Group, which included almost all U.S. forces in Europe) had considered – and had debated with their staffs – the possibility that Hitler would strike in the Ardennes but had dismissed the threat. Their reasoning, Eisenhower said, followed three primary lines: 1) the remaining German troops, heavily reliant upon new *"Volkssturm"* units, "would be no good in offensive operations," given that these units were generally made up of those who for reasons of age, physical condition, or character had been left out of previous conscription efforts and had received minimal training; 2) "winter in the Ardennes would render continuous logistic support

impossible;" and 3) "Allied strength was so great that the Germans could not push far enough to reach really vital objectives." Time would prove two of these points correct. Unfortunately, American military leaders dismissed the fighting ability of the German troops too quickly and failed to appreciate the German willingness – their need – to wager everything on one desperate attack.

With the conclusion that a German attack in the Ardennes was a remote possibility, it became the place to train, rest, re-equip, and observe the enemy. It became an area of well-organized rest centers, with hot food, hot showers, real beds, and entertainment. In the Ardennes, veteran units could lick their wounds and rebuild their strength and new troops could be exposed slowly to the hardships and realities of war – they could be bloodied gently – without being thrown immediately into the white heat of combat.

In hindsight, it's easy to understand the strategic rationale that led the Germans to gamble everything on an attack in the west, targeting the American forces in the Ardennes, and the tactical considerations that would make Büllingen and the northern Ardennes so important to that attack. But given what was known in the fall of 1944 about the strength and condition of the German forces on the other side of the front, and the conclusion that a German offensive was unlikely, those commanding the American forces in the area took the calculated – and understandable – risk of assigning the defense of significant sections of the Ardennes to divisions with no combat experience and spreading them across more space than sound military practice directed. For example, three infantry divisions of VIII Corps held the front from near Losheim, Germany to just south of Remich, Luxembourg, a straight-line distance of more than 55 miles – a distance "approximately three times that normally assigned an equivalent defending force by US service school teaching and tactical doctrine," according to one Army review. But the "nature of the ground and the length of the front" often made meeting such doctrinal requirements "impossible," the same report concluded. By way of illustration, in the hills and forests to the east of Büllingen, the 99th Infantry Division covered a front of approximately 12 straight-line miles. But on the ground, with the twists and turns of the terrain, and considering the salients and re-entrants along their front, their line may have been closer to 20 miles, and the 99th could maintain no more than a series of strongpoints, with unoccupied and undefended gaps between them. Across much of its line, the only defense the 99th could provide was regular patrols by jeep through forests otherwise empty of U.S. troops.

The village of Büllingen was near the northern end of the Ghost Front – 10 miles south of Monschau (as the crow flies) and 5 miles due east of the German border. Its location within the transportation network of the northern Ardennes and within the geography of the region gave it significant tactical importance. For one, Büllingen straddles two crossroads, both of which

connect primary roads serving the northwest Ardennes, roads that reach into Germany and run to Liège, Verviers, Spa and St. Vith. Near these roads, to the west of Büllingen, V Corps had strung its service installations, supply dumps, and depots. Liège, 33 miles northwest of Büllingen, was one of the largest American supply centers in Europe. 21 miles from the village lay Verviers, an important and densely stocked railhead.

Then too, Büllingen sits at the end of a narrow valley that winds generally northwest from Losheim, Germany, around the Lanzerath Ridge, through a narrow pass into Belgium at a village called Bucholz (which in 1944, was little more than a crossroads with an inn, a few farmhouses, and a train station), and then into the larger village of Honsfeld. There, the valley widens and straightens for the last few miles to Büllingen. Known as the "Losheim Gap," this "is no pleasant, pastoral valley but is cluttered by abrupt hills, some bare, others covered by fir trees and thick undergrowth. Most of the little villages here are found in the draws and potholes which further scoop out the main valley," an Army assessment said. The Losheim Gap had been used by the Germans as one of their primary routes into Belgium and then on to France in both 1914 and 1940.

Lastly, Büllingen lies just to the south of Elsenborn Ridge, some of the highest ground in the region. Much of V Corps' heavy artillery would be concentrated there, and Büllingen and its near neighbors, the villages of Domane Bütgenbach and Wirtzfeld all sit in the obvious avenues of attack leading to the ridge.

Whether your father or his fellow engineers thought about any of these tactical factors – or even knew of them – is hard to tell. But we do know they found Büllingen and its 2,000 residents "heavily Teutonic in speech and sentiment," suggesting they thought little of the villagers and looked upon them with suspicion. The 254th was assigned a bivouac area about one mile to the southwest of the village, in thick fir woods, spread across "broken terrain," and accessed by a single road. When they arrived at the site, the weather was cold and damp, and the men "huddled under pup tents in continuous cold rain."

And so, if their thoughts focused on any one thing, it may have been the Belgian weather. As PFC Richard Schiesl, the unit's poet, wrote:

> I don't know what Belgium means, but I can tell you this:
> For us it meant just trouble, right to the very finish.
> The rains they came, and with the rains, the lightening, and the thunder,
> And then it snowed, and when it snowed, it almost snowed us under.

Naturally the men gave a great deal of thought to warmth and protection from the elements, and, as Ed Vickstrom wrote, soon their camp was a field of "many dissimilar shelters quickly erected by comfort driven men." The battalion brass, however, thought about the artillery the Germans kept throwing their way, and, four days after the unit moved into Büllingen, they ordered all the men to dig slit trenches for their protection "near their sleeping place."

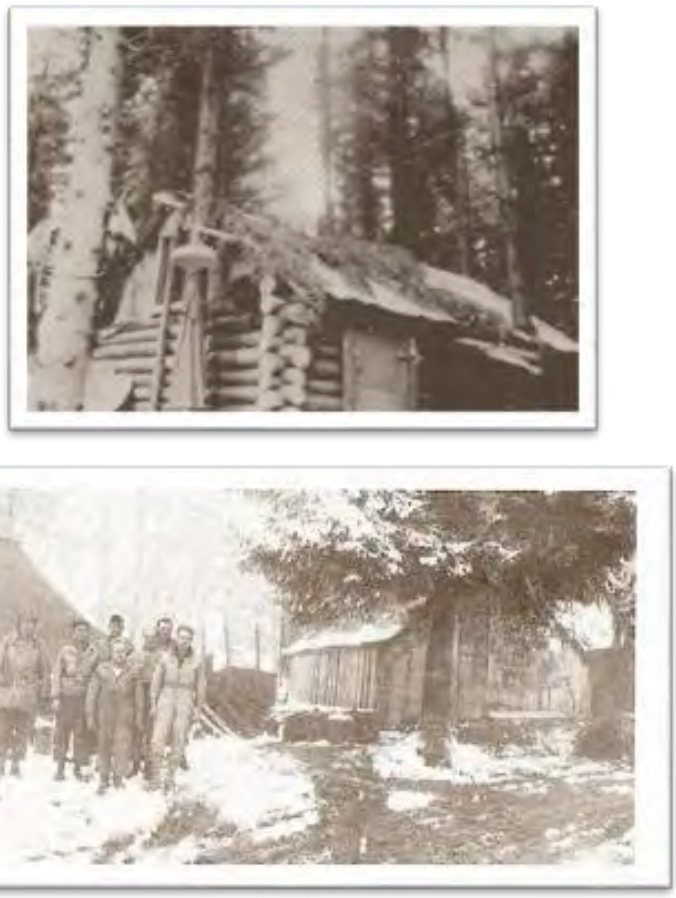
One engineer recalled that the men quickly noticed the Ardennes had "an 'at ease' atmosphere for both up front and rear area troops." There was plenty of work to be done, but without the long days and brutal deadlines that had been such a large part of their lives since their arrival in Europe. They spent their days in Büllingen improving and maintaining roads, operating water points, filling craters, digging ditches, installing culverts, and replacing and repairing bridges. It was often backbreaking and boring work. Still, the men understood its importance, for "without it, the steady stream of supplies would not be able to move up to the front," as one wrote.

Other jobs occasionally broke the monotony. In addition to the usual, unending road work, they constructed artillery emplacements for the 11th AAA (Anti-Aircraft Artillery) Group, and undertook tasks for other units, including elements of the 2nd Division artillery and a graves registration squad. One section of Company C spent several days building an air raid shelter at V Corps headquarters and one from A Company built a hut for the brass of the 1121st Engineer Combat Group. Some men of the 254th found time to help the 2nd Division's observation squadron when one of their little Piper Cubs – an L-4 Grasshopper – was stranded in the snow on one of the squadron's runways. These jobs were a welcome break; one man said they were "a little relief from the boredom of routine road maintenance."

During their time in Büllingen, men from the 254th also received additional training, some in bridging techniques, others in amphibious assaults. One group was sent to a river crossing school near Robertville, Belgium, where a small lake sat behind a dam. The engineers, almost all from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, enjoyed themselves, dashing about in little power boats and assault craft with outboard motors, ferrying soldiers across the water. One of their passengers noted that some of the engineers could "really handle a boat." No matter how much fun this training might have been, it had a serious purpose. It was training for the Rhine crossing, which, given the river's width and "the nature of its currents," General Eisenhower expected to be the "most difficult amphibious operation undertaken since the landings on the coast of Normandy." During this training, the men heard rumors and speculation about how

difficult these crossings might be and then shared this information with their fellow engineers when they returned to their camp in Büllingen.

Although "officially [they] were still patrolling and maintaining roads," the engineers' "main occupation [in] these days [was] shack building," one of them, Joseph Clements, wrote. Clements was a corporal assigned to the battalion's personnel and communications section and kept a handwritten journal, which he titled "Battalion History." Two months of this journal – November of 1944 and January of 1945 – are among the records of the 254th held by the National Archives. As Clements described the unit's eccentric collection of shacks and huts, he said "it would take a lot to find a nicer place to live – in the field."



Shelters in the 254th Camp

The men built these shacks out of wood on hand, repurposed military packing and construction waste, and materials harvested from damaged houses and other destroyed or abandoned structures in Büllingen. Ed Vickstrom remembered these days and wrote, "The damnedest collection of huts sprung up – protection from the elements being first priority, enemy action second. The rapid progression from pup tents to structural was limited only to time off duty,

cooperative effort, ingenuity, building skills, and whatever natural, domestic, or military building materials could be scrounged from wherever." A particularly impressive effort was more of a log cabin than a shack; "erected log-by-log by knowledgeable Upper Peninsula of Michigan craftsmen," it looked like something straight from the shores of Lake Superior. The engineers even found an abandoned German generator, which was repaired by the battalion's electrician, and they wired several shelters with electricity. The electrician had also scrounged a film projector along the way, and so they occasionally had movies in the evenings.

Some of the men hunted deer in the forests around the camp. There were red deer, the size of elk, that were a "sporting challenge" to bring down, one engineer said. The stags, "although tasty, were tougher than hell no matter how prepared," he continued. And so the men favored the smaller, sheep-sized, roe deer common to eastern Belgium. The meat – "tender venison steaks fried on scrap iron over open fires" – was better than that found in meals delivered by the battalion kitchens. As one man recalled, the engineers faced "days of weary, dreary winter maintenance on Ardennes MSR forest roads; C's, K's, and 10-in-ones for many monotonous meals. BUT, happiness [came] in the form of tender venison steaks from a roebuck downed by a sneaky M-1 round." He remembered the "energetic scraping and scouring [of] a rusty piece of metal to serve as an emergency frying pan over an open fire" and how the men would somehow scrounge or dig up "other supplies to round out a feast." Once, the call went out for someone who knew how to make gravy, and an engineer stepped forward and "masterfully" whipped up "a flour, water, salt and pepper mix." But then – "horrors" – he dumped the meat's "mouth watering juices" from the improvised frying pan onto the ground before anyone could stop him. "I could have killed him," the writer declared.

Men of the 254th with a red deer stag

And as October turned to November, the weather turned worse – "cold and damp and unsuitable for human living," Clements wrote. There was mist and rain and mud and then

snow, all of which created “tough work conditions for men and equipment alike,” said one engineer.

The snow started on the 8th of November, and Clements realized that “many of the men [were] seeing their first snowfall in four years,” while others were “seeing snow for the first time in their lives.” He wrote “the great white blanket began to materialize immediately after supper,” and he thought that “everyone [was] feeling great over the change in nature.” But he also felt the snow raised questions for them all, including practical ones like: “when will it stop?” and “will we be warm enough this winter?” There was also the obvious – “What will this winter be like in the field?” – with its unsaid concern for what the future held when the war turned hot again.

The snow was still falling two days later, and it had “revitalized the building program.” As temperatures dropped, Clements watched “new tents and shacks spring up around the area” while “the sound of hammers [filled] the icy air.”

If the cold inspired the men to improve their quarters, it also spoiled their meals. With the move to the Büllingen camp, the men finally had “regularly scheduled hot chow” again, yet the weather was often so cold that they had to gulp down their food before it congealed and froze in their mess kits. Still, the hot food was an improvement over the C and K rations and “10 in ones” they had eaten for so long – just not by much. Clements remarked in early November that their chow had been “a little on the off side,” and he thought “the long months of issuing K and C rations [had] taught the cooks there are easy methods of getting out a meal; they have gotten in a rut.” Fortunately, he wrote, the men began receiving Christmas packages from home “and that helps a little.”

K rations

In these months, the Germans waged psychological warfare on the troops stationed on the Ghost Front, but it failed to rattle the men or decrease their morale. A standard German tactic was dropping propaganda with some divisive or negative message into an area. The men of the

254th weren't terribly impressed by these efforts, and, as Vickstrom recalled, "the 4x6 soft paper sheets served two unintended purposes: totally ignored or picked up for wipes in the event urgent calls of nature arose away from a slit trench."

Latest news, boys!

BRITAIN GOING TO HELP?

According to persistent rumours HQ plan to concentrate behind your lines numerous British Divisions which are to take part in the big thrust towards the Rhine. Well, it is high time for Britishers to participate in real fighting.

After all is said and done, it's their war. YOUR interests lie in the Far East, not in Europe.

So far, Americans have taken all the brunt, have done all the tough fighting. Now all this is going to be different. You may take it easy now, for once British Troops will take the lead.

That is to say, if the Britishers don't change their minds. We wonder . . . . . .

German propaganda message saved as a souvenir by an engineer.

By November, your father had been promoted to sergeant and had been assigned to the Headquarters Platoon, which was responsible for the administration of the company, including the staff in charge of the company mess and the motor pool, supplies, and personnel. The platoon was led by 1st Lieutenant Adolph A. Silberman.

Fran Morin is at the left end of the first row;
Lt. Silberman is in the middle of that row

The unit's poet, PFC Schiesl, wrote of these days and about the engineers' lives in Büllingen.

SOME SNORTIN' BULL
(From Buzz Bomb Alley)

Somewhere in Belgium, there is a place
Where cognac and slang is not a disgrace,
Where sometimes we're glad and
sometimes we're blue,
And often just sick from eating Mike's stew.

….

In number one shanty – the squad's CP –
Where Joe is the password and liquor is
free,
Where worrisome Kovacs talks of his girls,
And Joe cusses the one that gave him the
whirl.

There's where the fire burns all the day,
And the blokes in the squad most often stay
To have that night session, just shootin' the
bull,
Till the joint, with dense smoke and rumors
is full.

….

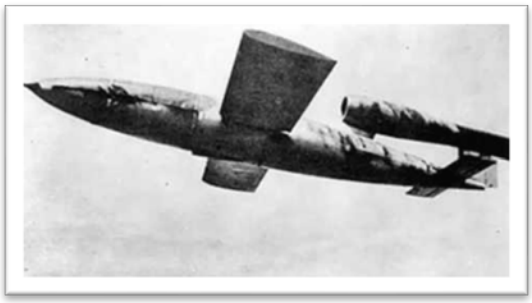
And now it's night – you stumble and fall.
You run into trees, and you holler and call.
You step in foxholes away below deck,
And clotheslines leave underwear wound
round your neck.

You reach for a light and hear a guard
shout,
"Soldier – God bless you – I'll shoot that
light out!"
So you keep on feeling and groping around
And once more you find yourself flat on the
ground.

….

The Corporal's a sleeper – he goes to bed
nights
Long before B Company turns out the lights,
To dream "we'll be home December 6th."
We hear
He's right in the day, but got the wrong
year.

Still, for all the "at ease atmosphere" of the Ghost Front, there was a war on, and incoming artillery fire was a constant reminder. Büllingen was in what was called "Buzz Bomb Alley" as it was on a line between the Germans and two of their favored targets: the port of Antwerp and the supply depots at Liège. "Buzz bomb" was the name soldiers gave to the German V-1 flying bomb, an early cruise missile with an instantly recognizable raspy, buzzing, "fluttering" sound. That sound was also an important indication of the bomb's intentions because it stopped as the V-1 neared its target and began its final dive. For most of their time in Büllingen, the engineers considered the flying bomb "more a curiosity than a threat," and enjoyed the "colorful nighttime sight" of a V-1 and its "flaming exhaust plume … surrounded by AA (anti-aircraft) tracer rounds."



German V-1 "Buzz" Bomb

By the 22nd of November, though, things had changed. Joe Clements noticed "the flying bombs are going over these days in greater numbers." He wrote, "during the first days of their increased attacks, the robots were passing overhead at the rate of one an hour. One could almost set one's watch by them. Now they rumble overhead in groups of two or three and spasmodically. They'll be coming in formation next." He also perceived other changes in these "infernal scientific thing[s]." Where they once "were speedy and loud and flew high overhead and nearly out of sight," they were now doing just "the opposite." "We don't like to hear them," he finished.

On the 23rd, Thanksgiving Day, one buzz bomb came uncomfortably close. After the last holiday meal had been finished, "a robot bomb just cleared the treetops of [the engineers' camp] and exploded a mile or so away." Another "lucky escape" Clements wrote, and another thing to be thankful for.

Thanksgiving Day itself was spent working – in "a chilling rain pouring down." Most of the men were involved in the usual, routine road work, while Company A was rebuilding a bridge that had been washed out by recent flooding. "Food occupied the thoughts of the men during the day and was the topic of detailed and appetizing discussions. Some of the companies had their main meal at noon; others in the evening when work was through. The menus varied within the battalion but generally consisted of turkey soup with rice, bread dressing, mashed potatoes, salad, carrots and peas, giblet gravy, baked turkey, apple pie, and very good coffee (for a change)," Clements reported, and then added, "Mustn't forget the cranberry sauce." And "all of this splendid meal was consumed with relish and joking remarks," he wrote. "For all of this we give thanks. We have much to be thankful for – and yet." Suggesting their worries and hardships, he repeated, "And yet."

On the 24th, Clements wrote that, as the number of buzz bombs increased and as they began appearing in groups, U.S. Army brass began to take them more seriously and ordered anti-aircraft forces to "set up along the entire line" as a defense against them. One unit was emplaced near the 254th's camp, "much to the [the engineer's] concern," Clements said.

"When the robots pass overhead, or nearby, they will be fired at by these large caliber AAA guns. We do not like this." AAA guns also made a tempting target for the V-1s.

The weather was still terrible: "It's miserable weather to be working in," Clements' journal records. The snow had stopped, but the rains had returned, and with the rain came mud. "In this drizzle of rain and mud it is almost impossible to even operate a vehicle, let alone build bridges," he wrote.

A few days later, things got worse. On the 29th, on a night "like most other nights," a V-1 – by chance or by design – dropped into the 254th's camp just after 9:00 pm. It exploded with terrible force in the trees just above the command posts of Company C and the Headquarters and Service Company, catching the men by surprise.

Describing that night, Clements said, "GIs sat around in their shacks, talking, writing letters, playing cards, digging into Xmas packages." In one shack, a group of officers sat down to their nightly poker game. In the Company C recreation tent, men were watching "Dragon Seed," a movie about a Chinese village occupied by the Japanese Imperial Army and the young woman, played by Katherine Hepburn, who leads the village to resist. Men with radios settled in to listen to the news, and the radio chimes had just confirmed it was 9:00 pm.

Clements wrote that the sound of a V-1 – a sound so loud it had to be nearby – startled the men. He said some ran out of doors to look for the bomb, others "crouched instinctively," and "a few hit the ground." Another engineer, long after the fact, remembered that the bomb was silent and came "in darkness and without warning."

Whatever way it came, the V-1 exploded with "terrifying violence" and shattered the night. Tall fir trees were thrown into the air and splintered into a spray of wood that ripped and pierced tents and tarps, and the men were showered in a deluge of flying debris. "Shacks collapsed, tents were ripped, men were thrown head over heels, confusion reigned," Clements said. A few men were blown several feet through the air by the explosion but escaped uninjured. Six men in a shack directly under the blast found themselves in a pile of rubble as the shack collapsed around them. None were seriously hurt.

Others were not so lucky. Though no one died that night, 67 men were injured, and many – at least twenty-five according to Clements – were hurt badly enough to require hospitalization. All the injured benefited from the quick action of the battalion's medical team, who rapidly had the company aid station up and running, even though it had been less than 50 yards from the blast, its canvas tent had been destroyed, and medical equipment had been scattered across

the camp by the explosion. Uninjured soldiers helped carry the wounded to the aid station for treatment, and ambulances were soon on hand to take the most seriously hurt to the nearest Army hospital.

The next morning, in the daylight, the men could see the devastation the bomb left behind. Clements described the "desolate scene" that greeted them: "trees had been snapped in two. Some had fallen on shacks crushing them beyond recognition. Cardboard, building materials, and equipment littered the area, torn, twisted and tortured tents greeted the eye. Glass was blown out of all of the shacks' windows and roofs and walls had collapsed." He also reported that, "as an added blow to our morale, the film projector was a casualty. The screen was ripped beyond repair, and the film torn in many places."

"After that frightening experience every V-1 within hearing/ sighting distance" was "closely eye-balled by poised men until [it] passed out of sight," Ed Vickstrom recalled. If one came too close, or if the engine cut out, "everyone headed for the nearest hole – interesting, sometimes funny, scrambles especially during chow," he said.

Although the engineers' experience with the V-1 left them more nervous and more careful, it didn't prepare them for what December would bring.

11.

December 16 – December 17, 1944

The Battle of the Bulge

Belgium: Büllingen, Dom Bütgenbach, and Elsenborn

The "interesting, sometimes funny, scrambles," and the "at ease atmosphere" ended all along the Ghost Front on December 16, 1944. On that day three German armies attacked on a line running from Monschau in the north to Echternach in the south – almost across the entire Ardennes. The elite 6th *SS Panzer* Army, with many of the best men and much of the best equipment Germany had at the time, attacked in the north. The 5th *Panzer* Army took the center, while the German 7th Army advanced in the south. This offensive, which the Germans called "*Wacht am Rhein,*" and "*Herbstnebel*" ("Autumn Mist"), but which has become known as the "Battle of the Bulge," was Hitler's last ruthless chance to force the western Allies out of the war and leave Germany free to concentrate its fading resources on defeating the Soviets in the east.

The German plan called for its three armies to break through the Belgian Ardennes quickly – within three days at most – secure supplies of fuel from the massive Allied stocks held near Spa, Verviers, and Liège, and then "relentlessly thrust" towards the crucial port of Antwerp. The 6th *SS Panzer* Army would take the lead, the 5th *Panzer* Army would follow just to their left, and together, the two armies would destroy whatever Allied divisions they met along the way. They would also form a wedge between the Allied forces, isolating the British Commonwealth armies, which were generally north of the line of the planned German advance, from those of the Americans, which were generally south of that line. The 7th Army would protect the left flank of the 5th *Panzer* Army and stop American forces in France from coming to the aid of those under attack in Belgium. The German commanders knew the plan was a risk – "we gamble everything," one senior general admitted – but thought it was their best hope to salvage victory from the ruins of their dark imperial dreams.

The plan had merit. If the Germans had seized or destroyed the port at Antwerp, the Allied supply position would have become "practically untenable," General Eisenhower later admitted. And, with Allied forces split and isolated, the Germans had a chance of destroying them with "attacks from Holland in the north and by [the] striking force in Belgium," Eisenhower conceded. Thus, the offensive also held great risk for the Allies. But its success depended on speed and the German ability to break through the Ardennes in force. If the

Americans could slow them down and hold the mass of the German armies to the east of the river Meuse, the German offensive would eventually fail.

And, in the end, that is what happened. Allied strength and fierce resistance stopped the main German advance far short of the Meuse, with only one unit of the 5th *Panzer* Army – the 2nd *Panzer* Division – coming within sight of the river, and only one unit of the 6th *SS Panzer* Army – *Kampfgruppe Peiper* – getting within 20 miles of this key objective. The cost of German failure, though, would be high for both sides.

The first day of the offensive, December 16, 1944, was a day of confusion as US commanders tried to make sense of the German attack. It began with a massive artillery barrage that, for 90 minutes, concentrated fire on American positions in the northern sectors of the Ardennes, in the areas the 6th *SS Panzer* was to attack. The barrage broke American telephone lines, the Germans jammed all radio frequencies known to be used by the Americans with music, and communication was lost with many front-line troops. Consequently, critical information rarely made it to headquarters in the rear, where reports from squads and platoons and companies from multiple divisions could be collected and formed into a larger picture. With limited information, US commanders could view the German offensive only through snapshots and fragments, and, for hours, most were sure it was no more than a limited, spoiling action. Moreover, because many of the reports that did get through contradicted U.S. assumptions and assessments of German capabilities, descriptions of the massive strength of the attacking forces were frequently challenged, discounted, or disbelieved as the exaggerations of frightened and inexperienced troops. Yet, as the day wore on, and as the size and power of the forces thrusting into Belgium and Luxembourg became clear – as the danger posed by the attack became unmistakable – U.S. generals began repositioning troops and committing all available resources to the struggle, frantically trying to halt the German advance.

At 10:30 pm on the 16th, the 254th was caught up in the search for every means to stop the enemy assault and directed to be prepared to move out as infantry on two-hours' notice. Lt. Colonel Jenkins was to report to the headquarters of the 99th Infantry Division for further instructions. Although he left the engineers' campsite immediately, traffic was so tangled and jammed that he didn't arrive at divisional HQ – less than 7 miles away – until 1:00 am. There he learned the Germans had broken through the American lines in the Losheim Gap and were advancing on the road to Honsfeld, just a few miles to the south-east of the 254th's bivouac site. He was assured all primary roads leading into Büllingen had been blocked by American tank destroyers or light tanks, and he was directed to have his men join them in defending the three main roads. At 2:30 am Jenkins relayed the orders he had received and instructed the units under his command to "move out immediately into defensive positions around BULLINGEN."

He spoke directly to the commanding officers of each company and gave them their specific assignments. Company A was to watch the St. Vith road to the west of the village, Company B was to position itself across the Honsfeld road just above Luchenborn to the south, and Company C was to defend the road to Hünningen and Losheimergraben to the east. Even before their officers met with Lt. Col. Jenkins, the men of the battalion were woken and told to prepare to move out. "The early morning alert roused sleeping men out of warm sacks," and "hurriedly packing up after 10 weeks of semi-idleness was easier said than done in the pitch-black woods," Ed Vickstrom recalled. Roused and packed, the engineers left for their assigned positions, and most were in place by 6:00 am on the morning of December 17. But they found no light tanks or tank destroyers on the roads they were to defend. The men of the 254th were on their own.

If the 16th was confusion, the 17th was chaos. Company B had barely dug in on the road between Honsfeld and Büllingen when they saw four flares – blue, white, red, and then white again – to their right. Within minutes, the men heard vehicles approaching and then shouts in German. Several tracked vehicles, including six half-tracks and at least one Panther tank, came into view through the faint morning light, and the engineers opened fire with everything they had – rifles, machine guns, and bazookas. The vehicles stopped and German infantry jumped from them and ran towards Company B. But thick and brutal fire from the engineers drove the Germans back, and the soldiers and the vehicles withdrew down the road. Lieutenant John Huff, commanding the 3rd platoon of Company B, recalled, "We only had time to partially dig in when we were hit by 3 tanks and infantry which we repulsed. So far as I could tell every platoon man opened up with MG, bazooka, or rifle fire. I remember Sgt. Kolb launching rifle grenades too." The engineers' barrage of fire disabled at least one of the German tanks.

The commander of the German troops who fought the engineers that morning told a similar story. *Obersturmführer* Werner Sternebeck, who commanded the leading elements of *Kampfgruppe Peiper* – the enemy force moving towards Büllingen from Honsfeld – recalled that, as they were advancing that morning, they "received fire from automatic weapons" from "west of the march route." Sternebeck said his unit "returned fire," and though he called this engagement "minor," the German commander did admit he lost one Mark IV tank in the fighting.

Kampfgruppe Peiper was the most formidable force of the German offensive, with 4,800 men and 800 vehicles, including nearly 120 tanks, and was so large it formed a column that stretched more than 15 miles and took two hours or more to pass a given point. Named after its commander, *Obersturmbannführer* (Lieutenant Colonel) Joachim Peiper, it was formed out of multiple elements, including the 1st *SS Panzer* Battalion, with five companies of tanks, most

of which were the basic *Panzer* Mark IV, but many of which were the newer and more powerful Panthers. The 501st SS Heavy *Panzer* Battalion was also part of the *Kampfgruppe*, and was equipped with King Tiger tanks, which, with their stout armor and powerful, long-range guns, were the most dangerous tanks on the western front. Peiper also had multiple companies of *Panzergrenadiers* and *Pioneers* along with battalions of artillery and flak guns.

Lt. Col. Peiper proved he was an aggressive and opportunistic leader at the Russian front, and throughout the Battle of the Bulge, he would be both. On the morning of December 17, he faced two problems: his *Kampfgruppe* was already 24 hours behind schedule, and his tanks were running short of fuel. Making matters worse, his planned line of advance to the west from Honsfeld towards the town of Stavelot, appeared to be little more than a muddy track, which would cost him more time and waste more fuel. Büllingen offered solutions to both problems: it sat on paved roads leading to his objective and held stockpiles of U.S. Army fuel. So Peiper deflected his *Kampfgruppe* away from his assigned route and ordered them to move north from Honsfeld, up the road to Büllingen.

Another veteran of Kampfgruppe Peiper, Sergeant Otto Siegmund, remembered that the men at the head of the German force were in several half-tracks followed by tanks, just as the men of Company B described. The leading elements of the Kampfgruppe – called the Spitze – were motorized and included seven tanks – five Mark IVs and two Panthers – and several SPWs, the common German armored half-track used throughout the war. These SPWs carried units of Panzer Pioneers, armed combat engineers, who were trained especially for armored assaults. Immediately behind the Spitze was the Spitzen Kompanie, which included infantry, Panzergrenadiers, some armed with heavy machine guns and mortars, and more Panzer Pioneers. These men were all on foot. Behind them came the command elements of the Kampfgruppe and a company of four Panther tanks. The bulk of the force followed. Sergeant Siegmund recalled that when they left Honsfeld, the Spitze "was formed as follows: two or three half-tracks in front, then a Panzer [Mark] IV, again another half-track, a Panther tank, another half-track, etc. When one of our half-tracks would be destroyed by a mine or shot by antitank fire, that would be cheaper than losing a tank."

Around 6:30 am, German infantry attacked Company B again, this time under covering fire from armored vehicles to their rear, but they were repelled by a savage fusillade from the engineers, which left many dead and wounded enemy soldiers scattered on the ground. A short time later, a third German attack led by tanks on the company's flank overwhelmed the Americans, and the engineers were forced to fall back. Company B's weapons sergeant, Warren L. Romain, recalled that he had a ".30 cal water-cooled MG" that morning, and "before getting set up in a flank position, bullets started cracking by us, but I don't think we were a target. Later we got

word to pull back – no information where to or anything else." Lt. Huff said, "after the third tank supported attack broke through our positions, we were told to disengage and withdraw towards Elsenborn." As he fell back, one alert Company B platoon sergeant, Donald Duquette, woke soldiers of the 2nd Infantry Division's observation squadron by pounding on their doors and yelling, "the Germans are coming." He also blew a fuel dump with several hand grenades, tossing them at the stacked barrels as he ran by.

That morning, Lt. Col. Peiper was also angry that his advance on the 16th had been slowed as the leading elements of his *Kampfgruppe* stopped whenever they encountered any defensive efforts, no matter how small or uncoordinated, and didn't move forward until the resistance had been defeated. On the 17th he told his spearhead forces – the *Spitze* and the *Spitzen Kompanie* – to drive aggressively forward and move around any opposition they might encounter. Historians David Cooke and Wayne Evans in their book "*Kampfgruppe Peiper at the Battle of the Bulge*," wrote, "Peiper was continually driving his lead elements on, leaving the clearing of American defensive positions to his main body."

Consistent with his commander's desire to keep the spearhead moving, Sternebeck recalled that, when he reported the engagement on the Honsfeld road, "Peiper 'whistled' us on and urged us to hasten the advance to Büllingen." Following these orders, it appears Sternebeck swung his force away from the engineers blocking the road and began to cross overland, aiming for other roads just to his east that also led into Büllingen. Such a decision would explain the time that elapsed between the first German assault on B Company's position and the later attacks. This decision would also put the leading elements of *Kampfgruppe Peiper* on or near roads that approached Büllingen from the southeast from Hünningen and into the area defended by Company C.

As Sternebeck advanced on Büllingen after his clash with B Company, he reported finding an airstrip with six small American spotter planes – the L-4 Grasshoppers of the 2nd Infantry Division's observation squadron. One of the squadron's airfields was directly south of Company C's position and adjacent to a small road that curved into Büllingen. Sternebeck said that, after he reported his discovery, Peiper told him to continue forward and leave the destruction of the planes and the airfield to the *Panzergrenadiers* of the *Spitzen Kompanie* who were following on foot close behind the *Spitze*.

By this time, multiple German forces were approaching Büllingen across a wide front. Around 6:45 am, as Company B was being attacked for the third time, the positions of the 254th to the west of the village along the St. Vith road held by Company A and the Headquarters and Service

Company were attacked by the 3rd *Fallschirmjäger* Division and what the engineers reported as a squadron of tanks.

(It's doubtful what the engineers saw were tanks. More likely, they were fully tracked, self-propelled assault guns like the Sturmgeschütz III, which was one of the most common German armored vehicles of the war and had a profile like a Panzer III. Indeed, the 3rd Fallschirmjäger "was fully armed with this critical infantry weapon," according to the U.S. Army's official history of the offensive, Hugh Cole's, "The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge.")

With the enemy attacking in overwhelming force at multiple points, the 254th was ordered to "fight a delaying action and fall back on Bütgenbach." Within minutes of receiving these instructions, Lt. Col. Jenkins issued specific assignments to each of his line companies. Generally, all were to draw back to the north and northwest, towards villages closer to Elsenborn, but Company B was to fall back along the Büllingen/ Bütgenbach road, while Company C, your father's company, was to "fight back out of town," following the railroad tracks towards Bütgenbach. Company A was directed to move towards the village of Wirtzfeld, but never received the order; they lost all communications in the attack on their position and stayed in place, fighting on the road to St. Vith until late in the afternoon.

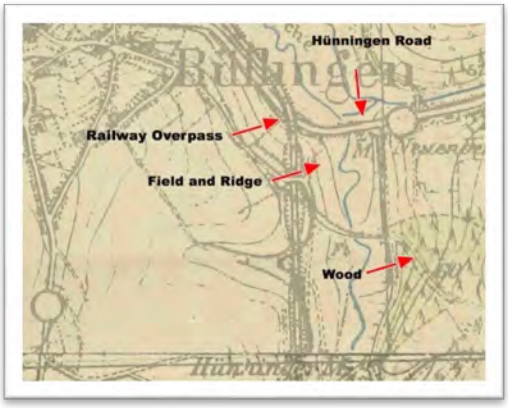
As Lt. Huff and the men from Company B pulled back from Honsfeld, they "picked up stragglers" from other units. This was a common reaction to the chaos that day. As entire companies disintegrated on the 17th, men – individually or in small groups – would join with others they stumbled across to form improvised forces, which might become merged into larger groups, or which might disintegrate again. For example, Sgt. Romain recalled that as he and some others from Company B pulled back along the Honsfeld road, they "ran into a light tank and a small AT [anti-tank] position." The men there "happily accepted" Romain's "offer to beef up the position," so the engineers set up their machine gun and fought alongside the others for a few hours.

The tank and the AT forces may have been the last survivors of a platoon of the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion that had been sent on a reconnaissance mission into Büllingen, or they may have been shards of some other unit operating in the area. It is often impossible to extract the story of one unit from the existing records, or to untangle the stories of one squad, one platoon, or even one company from all the other stories of that chaotic day. Then too, some stories – like those of your father's company and of his experiences that day – have simply disappeared and can no longer be told with certainty. Instead, the only thing that can be done

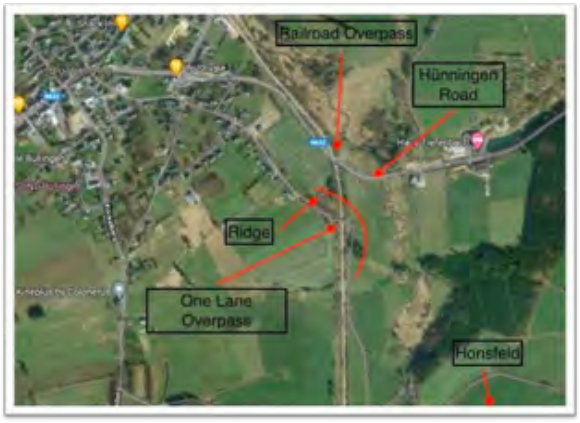
is to gather the stories of individual men – where we have them – add whatever facts we have, and try to fashion them into a larger narrative.

The 254th's records show that Company C reached the Hünningen road on the southeast side of Büllingen around 6:00 am. One engineer from C Company, Pfc Edward Ponatoski, remembered, "There was snow on the ground, and it was very cold and wet." Sergeant Roger Phillips, also of C Company, recalled that Lt. George Anderson, then leading the Company's second platoon, deployed his men in a snow-covered field on one side of the Hünningen road, just beyond a railroad overpass.

The area around Büllingen has changed surprisingly little since the war, and the Hünnigen Road, the railway overpass, and the field all remain as they appear in maps from the war years. Just as in December of 1944, a field beyond the overpass still sits at the base of a ridge that parallels the road as it leaves Büllingen and then curves away to the south, generally following the railroad tracks that run towards Losheim in Germany. Just as in 1944, there is a small wood to the south of the Hünningen Road and southeast of the field Anderson's platoon must have occupied.



US Army Map Dec. 1944



Arial view of Company C area 2023

Men from Company C's other platoons also may have taken positions in the field, while other engineers may have arranged themselves along the top of the ridge itself. At least one engineer recalled being there that day, where a single lane road passes over the railroad tracks. At that point, the hill formed by the ridge is some of the highest ground in the area and offers an unobstructed view of the road to Hünningen.

The ridge and field from the Hünnigen Road

The view from the ridge towards the Hünnigen Road

But exactly where Company C's men were and exactly what happened remains a mystery. The battalion journal for the 17th records nothing of your father's company other than their arrival on position by 6:00 am and Lt. Col. Jenkins' order about an hour later instructing them to pull back. What is certain is that the 254th's heaviest losses that day came from your father's company. 70% of the battalion's 74 casualties were men from Company C, and 80% of Company C's casualties – 41 soldiers originally classified as Missing in Action – were later confirmed to have been taken prisoner by the Germans. In total, Company C lost more than a third of its men that day.

The stories and records we have suggest that your father's company was surprised by a German force of tanks and infantry appearing on its flank, coming through a screen of trees, and

advancing towards a paved road. This force overran their positions and cut the company in half.

Based on three accounts of the day from C Company engineers, and a statement from *Obersturmführer* Sternebeck, something like the following may have occurred. After getting the order to pull back towards Bütgenbach, the men of Company C began moving towards Büllingen. Some engineers in the field along the road began walking up the face of the ridge behind them. As the Americans were leaving their positions, Sternebeck's *Spitze* of SPWs and six tanks, appeared from a small wood to the right of the ridge. Perhaps they were looking for the pavement of the Hünningen Road, or perhaps they were following a small road that ran across the southeast end of the field and appeared to lead into Büllingen. Either way, their arrival caught "some men along the road below the hill and others part way to the crest," said Pfc Robert Perry of the 2nd platoon of C Company. Most likely, the first Germans to appear were in SPWs. Just behind them would have been a few tanks, perhaps a Mark IV and a Panther. When the Germans appeared, "all hell broke loose" with "eighty eights, fifty caliber machine guns, burp guns, and what not," firing at the engineers, according to Ponatoski. The Germans "sprayed the hill with their automatic weapons," Perry recalled. Some of the engineers dropped to the ground and returned fire.

Tanks and half-tracks with German troops continued to emerge from the trees. Machine guns mounted on the SPWs started spraying fire at engineers taking cover in ditches by the road and at those on the slope. Then, Perry said, "the combined weapons of tanks and infantrymen alike were turned on the hillside where everyone was completely exposed, and our men, although being overwhelmingly out gunned, made a desperate attempt to neutralize this enemy advantage in a fire fight. Some casualties were seen inflicted upon the enemy." At least one tank was hit, perhaps by a bazooka fired by an engineer. The crew might have been killed as they jumped from the tank, or some may have survived; the memories conflict.

In hindsight, the decision to withdraw up the hill "was very costly," Ponatoski said, "because the tanks came right on up after us firing away. We lost quite a few boys. All around us, there were open fields. No cover whatsoever. We just had to stay in the open and fight it out. I lay there in the field with one of the boys and picked off as many as we could. It was hopeless, though. We were too outnumbered. My platoon commander, realizing this, gave the word to surrender." Sergeant Phillips' account agrees, and he wrote that, after a fight, it became clear

they were “outgunned, overrun, and rendered helpless,” and Lt. Anderson “reluctantly gave the order to lay down arms and give up.”

One of the engineers recalled that German forces also appeared on the top of the hill – perhaps *Panzergrenadiers* of the *Spitze Kompanie* behind Sternebeck’s spearhead following the railroad tracks – and the men on the hill’s face were trapped between them and the German forces advancing rapidly towards the slope. This put an end to the American efforts to resist, and “two men attempting to move at this time were cut down by machine pistols,” according to Perry. It was at this point, he said, that the men on the hill and in the fields were taken prisoner. Perry described the scene: “Completely surrounded by now, the remaining men were rounded up and placed under guard of five German soldiers. These guards were armed with pistols and machine pistols. One had a M-1 rifle that he had picked up. No attempt was made at searching here on the hill and men were not deprived of sidearms, sheath knives, or helmets.”

With C Company cut in half by tanks, half-tracks armed with machine guns, and advancing infantry, there was little choice for the remaining men but to give ground, fall back as they had been ordered, and make their way back into Büllingen as best as they were able.

Whatever happened to Company C that morning, the second platoon, which had been down in the field, was hit the hardest, suffering 21 casualties, including Lieutenant Anderson; your father’s platoon had the fewest casualties, with 2 men missing in action. Both the first and the third platoon had 13 men killed, wounded, or missing. The third platoon’s losses included its leader, Lieutenant John Stevenson.

Sergeant Phillips said that, after surrendering, he and others from the second platoon were marched towards Büllingen and “lined up by the RR bridge and searched.” A German soldier, “no more than 15-16 years old” helped himself to the sergeant’s watch. Then Phillips and 30 or 40 others were loaded onto a captured American truck, with a GI driver and “guards in the cab and on [the] running boards.” They didn’t get too far down the road before coming under artillery fire. The truck stopped, and “everyone jumped off seeking [the] nearest cover.” Phillips, Lieutenant Anderson, and several others found shelter in the basement of a nearby building. Anderson suggested they should wait until dark and then leave in small groups, but with the rapidly approaching sound of small arms fire, Phillips and two others “took off,” running “across back yards, an orchard, RR tracks, a creek, [and] finally to a fence” where they “laid low until dark.” That night, they headed west from Büllingen, until they found a detachment of men from the 23rd Infantry. The engineers were given M-1s and instructed to dig in. They stayed and fought with the 23rd long enough to reach Elsenborn, where they were

told that the 254th had regrouped near the village of Robertville. They were finally able to rejoin the other engineers on the 22nd of December. Others from the 254th had similar experiences, and told of being captured by the Germans, escaping, and then falling in with some other unit until they rejoined the engineers days later.

What was it like to face the German attack on December 17, 1944? A soldier fighting to the northeast of Büllingen wrote: "I was caught in the cross-fire of [a] heavy machine gun and the attackers. I gritted my teeth and waited for a lull in the firing. None came. I jumped from the hole and ran blindly toward the rear. Bullets snipped at my heels. The tank saw that we were running again and opened with renewed vigor, the big shells snapping the tops from the trees around us as if they were matchsticks, but I saw no one fall. … We plunged blindly up the hill, following a thin hedgerow that would be scant protection should the Germans elect to follow us with fire. I slipped and fell face down in the snow. I cursed my slick overshoes. I rose and fell again. I found myself not caring if the Germans did fire. Snow had gotten inside my shoes and my feet were soaked. My clothes were drenched. Perspiration covered my body, and my mouth was dry. I wanted a cigarette. I felt like we were helpless little bugs scurrying blindly about now that some man monster had lifted the log under which we had been hiding." (Charles B. MacDonald, *Company Commander*, Short Hills: Burford Books, 1999, p. 100)

On the 17th, some of the men of Company C were able to fight their way back to Domane Bütgenbach, an even smaller village just west of Büllingen, to join others from the 254th. Many of those from Company C who eventually found their way to this new position arrived in twos or threes. Around noon, two platoons of Company B reached the position after slogging their way through the woods to the south. Three mobile anti-tank guns from the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion added strength to this new defensive line and began firing at Peiper's *Kampfgruppe* now in Büllingen.

The Germans returned every round of American fire, and the fighting thundered on, in, and around Domane Bütgenbach. Yet, eventually, the sheer number of men and weapons Peiper could employ against the mauled troop of engineers and the three anti-tank guns forced the defenders to fall back. Around one in the afternoon, several light tanks joined the battle on the American side and provided sufficient cover to allow the engineers to take a new position further to the west, closer to Bütgenbach itself. But instead of following them and continuing up the Bütgenbach road, Peiper elected to push his *Kampfgruppe* to the southwest, towards St. Vith, back towards Stavelot, his objective. Had he chosen to pursue the 254th and drive into Bütgenbach, he would have been well positioned to continue to Verviers or Spa and capture their vital fuel supplies. He very well may have trapped the American 2nd and 99th Infantry

divisions. General Walter Lauer, who commanded the 99th, was relieved by Peiper's choice: "The enemy had the key to success within his hands but did not know it."

Later in the afternoon, elements of the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division arrived on the Bütgenbach road and relieved the engineers. The 254th was ordered to Camp Elsenborn to reorganize and to begin improving the defensive positions developing on the Elsenborn Ridge by constructing slit trenches, gun emplacements, and barbed wire entanglements.

Their first night at the camp was dreadful. Many of the men had had nothing to eat for nearly a day; the more "fortunate sucked on cans of frozen C-rations" on the march up from Domane Büttgenbach. The engineers were assigned to one of the buildings in the old Belgian army camp, and "holed up in an unheated military building in the night was a miserably cold knowing-from-nothing ordeal," Ed Vickstrom remembered.

But the engineers' efforts on the 17th, and those of numerous other units thrown into the defense on short notice – efforts that slowed down the German advance and then blocked it, and efforts that kept the enemy away from the supplies and stores in Verviers and Liège – were critical in winning the battle. These exertions gave American commanders the time to assemble stout defensive forces and place them in robust positions that ultimately bottled most of the German *6th SS Panzer* Army in the Northern Ardennes and denied them their objectives. Although the Battle of the Bulge is often thought of as the story of Bastogne, the battle was truly won at villages in the north, like Büllingen and Bütgenbach, where the best Germany had were stopped by American soldiers like the men of the 254th Engineers.

The "extraordinary heroism" of the engineers and their contribution to the ultimate victory of the Allied forces were recognized in a Presidential Unit Citation on April 23, 1945. This citation affirmed that the "gallant and courageous" actions of the 254th had helped in denying the Germans "three vital routes" and helped stop "the enemy from penetrating the corps' rear areas." The Presidential citation commended the men for their actions in resisting "several vicious attacks by armored infantry and tanks" while they, themselves were "armed only with small arms, machine guns, and rocket launchers." And it praised the men's "determination" and "heroism" in their fight against "a powerful enemy armored force, despite severe losses," which "enabled successful measures to be taken to secure the safety of the corps' right flank" and "contributed materially to the ultimate failure" of the German attack.

Along with a dozen or more of his fellow engineers, your father was awarded a Bronze Star for his actions that day. This medal recognizes that, in some way, your father "distinguished

himself … by heroic or meritorious achievement or service… in connection with military operations against an armed enemy." It's sad to think that exactly what he did is lost and can't be known.

Engineers of the 254th also earned 3 Silver Stars and 1 Bronze Star with an Oak Leaf Cluster for their actions on the 17th of December, while the battalion as a whole and Lt. Col. Jenkins were awarded the French *Croix de Guerre.*

12.

December 18, 1944 – December 31, 1944

The Battle of the Bulge

Northeastern Belgium

The force of the German offensive caught the Allies by surprise, and the first week – filled with German successes and American losses – was tense and uncertain. But the German drive stopped short of the Muese, and with better weather, Allied air forces could join the attack, and slowly the enemy was pushed back. General Eisenhower recalled the offensive "was not without its immediate effect upon us, but the sturdy defense by our forces followed by our rapid and continuous counterattacks brought home clearly to Germany's military leaders that this last effort had failed completely." But there would be weeks of doubt before that message became clear, and the cost would be terrible. Stopping the Germans would take 19,000 American lives and would leave 70,000 wounded or missing.

After the chaos of the 17th, it took several days for your father's unit to find each other and regroup. They then spent the next few weeks supporting the defense of Elsenborn Ridge along the north shoulder of the Bulge installing 1,000 yards of barbed concertina wire and preparing various defensive positions, including slit trenches and gun emplacements. The battalion records note these operations were "done under shell fire in record time." They also built radar emplacements for two anti-aircraft battalions. Though their direct contact with the enemy was limited in these weeks, engineers served on bazooka teams and at roadblocks, undertook anti-paratrooper patrols, and worked on demolition and mine squads.

The weather remained cold and miserable, and the unending snow and damp made their work all the harder. Their boots, not suited to such conditions, left their feet constantly cold and wet, and many men suffered trench-foot. Some had frost bite so severe that gangrene set in and required amputation of dead or dying toes. Within weeks, the battalion's losses from these conditions equaled their combat casualties of the 17th.

Winter Chow Line, Belgium 1945, Olin Dows

By Christmas the storms had cleared, and the skies were a pale blue, but temperatures had fallen, and the ground was frozen hard under a layer of icy slush. Still, the fir trees were full of snow, and when the wind blew and shook the branches, the falling flakes caught the sunlight and sparkled like the lights on Christmas trees at home. The U.S. Army delivered a Christmas dinner of turkey and cranberry sauce, along with bags and bags of delayed mail. One sod-covered dug-out had a small tree decorated with strands of tinsel - some cannibalized from wrapping paper and ribbons in the newly arrived packages and some improvised from the chaff – the strips of tinfoil dropped from airplanes to confuse enemy radar – that littered the ground. Presents from the packages were under the tree.

"But it was not really Christmas," wrote Harold Denny, a war correspondent for the *New York Times*. "One cannot be very merry shivering in a foxhole 4,000 miles from home. And the business of killing went on all day long," he continued. That morning, Denny passed "a GI crouched over a bonfire" and called out "Merry Christmas." The soldier looked up and said, "By God, it is Christmas. I'd damn near forgotten all about it."

Even President Roosevelt's message was more somber and less optimistic that Christmas than it had been the previous year. "It is not easy to say 'Merry Christmas' to you," he admitted, not "in this time of destructive war. Nor can I say 'Merry Christmas' lightly tonight to our armed forces at their battle stations all over the world." He recognized that, "in perhaps every home in the United States, sad and anxious thoughts will be continually with the millions of our loved ones who are suffering hardships and misery, who are risking their very lives." Surely the battle in the Ardennes was on his mind, and his uncertainty and apprehension could be heard as he told his countrymen, "Our enemies still fight fanatically. They still have reserves of men and military power."

Yet the president was sure "the Christmas spirit lives tonight in the bitter cold of the front lines in Europe and in the heat of the jungles and swamps of Burma and the Pacific Islands." He was also confident that "the thoughts of these men tonight will turn to us here at home around our Christmas trees, surrounded by our children and grandchildren and their Christmas stockings and gifts – just as our own thoughts go out to them." Against the nation's grief and worry, he offered some hope – "the tide of battle has turned, slowly but inexorably, against those who sought to destroy civilization" – yet tempered that hope with truth – "we cannot yet say when our victory will come." But then, with courage and faith, he concluded, "we pray that that day may come soon," and "we pray that with victory will come a new day of peace on earth in which all the nations of the earth will join together for all time. That is the spirit of Christmas."

The day itself brought good news from Europe, as General Eisenhower reported improvements along the front. He announced that the German drive had nearly been brought to a halt, with enemy forces gaining no more than one mile on the previous day, and said American counterattacks were beginning to cut into the flanks of the bulging salient that had given the battle its name. The *New York Times* called these improvements "the great gift which America's fighting men have presented to their country and to the world on this Christmas Day" – a "gift all the more precious because it has been bought with the lifeblood of many American young men and the anguish of their families."

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times.

LATE CITY EDITION

NEW YORK, MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1944

NAZI PUSH HALTED BY AIR AND GROUND BLOWS; 6,500 PLANES POUND FOE IN RECORD ASSAULT; AMERICANS BITE DEEP INTO SOUTHERN FLANK

RATIONING RESUMED FOR MAJOR FOODS TONIGHT AND DEC. 31

Mayor Sees End of 'Bookies'; Swope Dubious on Race Ban

La Guardia Plans to Shift Police to Fight Numbers' Racket. Commission Head Expects Gambling to Continue

PLEA FOR WAR CURB BY A WORLD GROUP; HAILS DEMOCRACY

AMERICANS MOVING UP TO HALT GERMAN OFFENSIVE

FOE'S LOSSES MOUNT

Convoy Forced to Pause as Americans Strike Back in Force

HELD FOR TWO DAYS

Western Spears Blunted by Dogged Resistance and Air Punch

Somber Shadows of War Poise Over Christmas Here

BUTCHERS DECLARE MEAT 'HOLIDAY' ON

OUR LAND PLANES HIT MANILA AGAIN

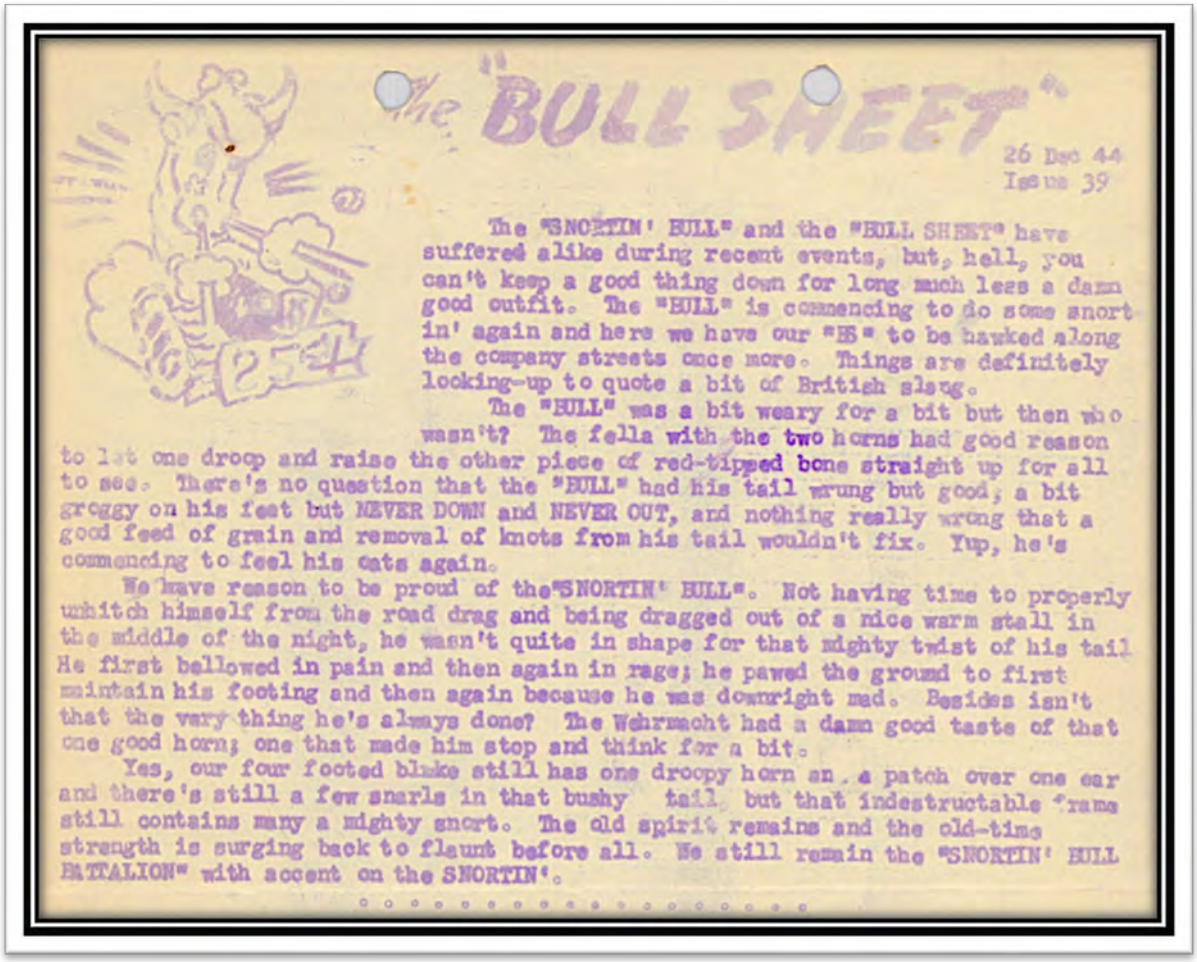
Budapest Almost Circled; Escape Gap Now 17½ Miles

PEAK U.S. BOMBINGS PACE AIR ASSAULTS

That was your father's fourth Christmas away from home, but it was his first in the field, and the first spent within the range of enemy guns. For the past six months, he had seen war's cruel face and had lived the hard life of a soldier. He and his fellow engineers had proved their skill and courage at Grandcamp and Maisey, at Isigny, Saint-Lô, and Wallendorf. Then came the Bulge. In those days near Büllingen, each man surely had experiences and thoughts unlike those he had before or after, yet no record captures what your father faced or felt on that hill in the Ardennes, in the fight at Bütgenbach, or in the weeks after.

Still, just after Christmas, one of the engineers – most likely Ed Vickstrom – wrote something that might have expressed the thoughts of all the men of the 254th. It was full of pride, resilience, determination, and even optimism. Of course, most engineers would have been reluctant to claim these emotions for themselves, and so, they were expressed indirectly through the battalion's mascot, the Snortin' Bull. The writer began by conceding the Bull had "suffered … during recent events, but hell, you can't keep a good thing down for long much less a damn good outfit." And he claimed that "things are definitely looking up." He said that, though the Bull had its "tail wrung but good," it was "NEVER DOWN and NEVER OUT, and nothing really wrong that a good feed of grain and removal of knots from his tail wouldn't fix.

Yup, he's beginning to feel his oats again." The writer then asserted, "We have reason to be proud of the SNORTIN' BULL." That unexpected twist of his tail made the Bull "bellow in pain and then again in rage; he pawed the ground to first maintain his footing and then again because he was downright mad." And once mad, the Bull gave "the Werhmacht … a damn good taste of [his] one good horn." The engineer finished by promising that the Bull, "that indestructible ram, still contains many a mighty snort. The old spirit remains, and the old-time strength is surging back to flaunt before all. We still remain the "SNORTIN' BULL BATTALION" with accent on the SNORTIN'."



"The BULL SHEET"

26 Dec 44
Issue 39

The "SNORTIN' BULL" and the "BULL SHEET" have suffered alike during recent events, but, hell, you can't keep a good thing down for long much less a damn good outfit. The "BULL" is commencing to do some snort in' again and here we have our "BS" to be hawked along the company streets once more. Things are definitely looking-up to quote a bit of British slang.

The "BULL" was a bit weary for a bit but then who wasn't? The fella with the two horns had good reason to let one droop and raise the other piece of red-tipped bone straight up for all to see. There's no question that the "BULL" had his tail wrung but good; a bit groggy on his feet but NEVER DOWN and NEVER OUT, and nothing really wrong that a good feed of grain and removal of knots from his tail wouldn't fix. Yup, he's commencing to feel his oats again.

We have reason to be proud of the "SNORTIN' BULL". Not having time to properly unhitch himself from the road drag and being dragged out of a nice warm stall in the middle of the night, he wasn't quite in shape for that mighty twist of his tail He first bellowed in pain and then again in rage; he pawed the ground to first maintain his footing and then again because he was downright mad. Besides isn't that the very thing he's always done? The Wehrmacht had a damn good taste of that one good horn; one that made him stop and think for a bit.

Yes, our four footed bluke still has one droopy horn an a patch over one ear and there's still a few snarls in that bushy tail but that indestructable frame still contains many a mighty snort. The old spirit remains and the old-time strength is surging back to flaunt before all. We still remain the "SNORTIN' BULL BATTALION" with accent on the SNORTIN'.

The *Bull Sheet*, 26 December 1944

13.

January 1945

Northeastern Belgium

The German's Ardennes offensive reached its farthest extent on the 26th of December, and then the Allies began slowly driving it back. On the 3rd of January, Adolf Hitler conceded the offensive was "no longer promising of success," and by the end of the month the combatants had battled back to the positions they had occupied before the German attack. During all of that, the engineers remained in northeastern Belgium, and many of them worked, ate, and slept at or near the front.

Joe Clements wondered if 1945 would be the year the war would end – "will this be the one" he asked in his journal – while noting that "a lot of the fellows" had been overseas for nearly 34 months. Yet there were no obvious signs that the Germans had reached their end. Indeed, another V-1 buzz bomb landed near the 254th on New Year's Day. But at least this one didn't explode; it only – slowly – burned itself out. As the weather continued to clear, Clements noted that the Luftwaffe showed "signs of life again – strafing and bombing all over the place."

In fact, the next morning, a German fighter, a Messerschmidt 109, crashed at the edge of Company A's collection of shelters. The pilot ejected, but too late, and was found dead near the wreck. Although men of the 254th were immediately sent to guard both the wrecked aircraft and the dead pilot, by the time they arrived "souvenir hunters [had] managed to strip the pilot of everything from his pistol to his boots." Alluding to the frigid temperatures of that winter, Clements concluded, "If [the pilot] hadn't been dead already, he would have frozen to death!" At noon, "Allied aircraft started moving overhead in massive formations. Here and there smoke target markers were dropped … and the skies filled with feather vapor trails as the planes maneuvered about…." Clements wrote, "We always enjoy these free circus performances by our acrobatic fighters and elephantine fortresses."

The line companies of the battalion camped in the woods and lived under combat conditions, near the highest point in Belgium. "No one seemed to care and took little notice" of this fact "until it began to snow with unceasing earnest," Clements recorded in his diary. To help them stay warm in the cold, the men in the woods were given the new Army sleeping bags – "mummy bags" they were called – and "some like them, [but] some don't." Some couldn't get used to them at all, and the nights were often "pierced with cries of 'Get me out of here – get me out!'"

The rear echelons of the 254th, though, were housed in a theater in the village of Aubel, with shops, cafés, showers, and a laundry nearby. Not only were the accommodations different, but the weather also seemed better for those in Aubel, and Clements wrote it was "surprising" for the men from the line to travel to the rear and "pass through areas of sunshine, bereft of snow, fog, and cold."

The "steady light snow and sleet" of the first days of January turned into a "fairly" heavy snow by the 8th. Through the rest of the month, the Ardennes endured unusually low temperatures and heavy snows, which at times buried the ground one to two feet deep and blew into waist high drifts.

The endless snow and sleet not only left the men cold and wet and miserable, but also left the roads "slippery and not at all safe." This meant that, throughout the month, the engineers constantly removed snow and sanded icy points over the MSR network in their area of responsibility. They filled ruts, potholes, and craters, and built up and resurfaced roads and shoulders. To get the raw materials this work required, some of the men spent their days in quarries – grueling days of digging, sorting, and hauling rocks and sand and gravel. At the same time, other engineers repaired bridges while some dug out guard posts and command posts for the infantry. A few replaced roof tiles and windowpanes at V Corps HQ that had been shattered in a buzz bomb attack.

On January 11, your father's company was moved to a castle in Goé, Belgium, about twenty miles northwest of Büllingen. They were there, Joe Clements said, "to rehabilitate, reorganize, and receive replacements." Clements recorded that the men of C Company were "overjoyed to find themselves moving into steam heated quarters, far from the frontlines and [out of] artillery range." He wrote that the new quarters held "an abundance of overstuffed furniture … and the men will not waste a moment making themselves comfortable. The 95 men who are left of the original 150 have earned their rest."

The Schloss (Castle) in Goé, Belgium (front)

The Schloss (rear)

By the 16th, the battalion brass was considering rotating the other line companies through the castle in Goé, to give them all time out of the snow and away from the front. But the other companies, having built "comfortable shacks" and "now well dug in," didn't want to move. Then, too, "the Company C boys would just as soon stay put," Clements wrote, because "they feel that for once they got a real break. They're living in a building complete with steam heat, electric lights, beds with mattresses a foot thick, tile floors, etc. The only trouble is that the water isn't running, and they have to get their water from a little stream in the backyard. Boy, it's a tough life!!"

Schloss Goé: the little stream and side view

By the end of January, with the Battle of the Bulge effectively won, General Eisenhower was determined to resume the offensive and destroy the enemy's ability to wage war – "the same purpose that had guided all our actions since early 1944." His plan for the balance of the war "envisaged the operations which would lead to Germany's collapse as falling into three phases: first, the destruction of the enemy forces west of the Rhine and closing to that river; second,

the seizure of bridgeheads over the Rhine from which to develop operations into Germany; and third, the destruction of the remaining enemy east of the Rhine and the advance into the heart of the Reich."

In more detail, the first phase would see Allied forces strike into Germany and towards the Rhine on a grand arc from the north and the south. From the Netherlands and northern Belgium, the British 21st Army Group and the U.S. Ninth Army would thrust into the German industrial heartland of the Ruhr. A few days later, elements of the U.S. First Army would attack from Aachen towards Düsseldorf, while others would advance through the mountainous forests of the Ardennes and the Eifel and on to Bonn. Simultaneously, forces of the U.S. Third Army would drive towards Koblenz along the southern edge of the Ardennes and the Eifel. Shortly thereafter, the remaining elements of the Third Army would join the U.S. Seventh Army to push forward from France through the smaller industrial belt of the German Saarland in the direction of Mainz, Mannheim, and Karlsruhe. If all these actions were successful, the western Allies would hold an unbroken line along the west bank of the Rhine from the North Sea to Bonn, with scattered bridgeheads even further south. Eisenhower also hoped that, during their advance, the Allies would have used "the space between our front and the Rhine as a 'killing ground' in which to engage the enemy either in a large decisive battle or so to maul him that when the Rhine had been reached, he would have little left with which to resist our crossings and prevent a breakthrough."

Once positioned on the Rhine, the Allied forces would have both an "economically defensible line" and a shield "behind which they could concentrate in safety," Eisenhower wrote. There, the Allied armies could gather their strength and prepare for the next phases of the war.

Once the defensive line solidified, Allied forces above Cologne would begin the second phase, jumping across the Rhine to attack the Ruhr "with its coal mines, blast furnaces, and factories," which were "the muscle with which Germany waged war," Charles MacDonald wrote in "*The Last Offensive*," the Army's official history of the final months of the war. Rejecting a frontal assault, Eisenhower planned "a great double envelopment," in which British and American troops from the north would sweep down behind the Ruhr while two American armies rushed to meet them from the south. Just as with the advance to the Rhine, Eisenhower's scheme was to diminish the German ability to continue the war by encircling "the Ruhr" and mauling and isolating "the mass of the enemy forces which were certain to concentrate in its defense."

With the Ruhr stripped from German hands and the enemy armies weakened and exhausted by the Allied advances, Eisenhower would then let his four armies loose in the final phase of the

war – a mobile dash towards the Elbe, Berlin, and points east, to join the Soviet armies there, while destroying any German forces they met on the way.

The 254th would support elements of V Corps and the U.S. First Army throughout each of these phases, but their key role would be played at the Rhine where they would bridge the river. This was the task for which they had been trained and one they had "sweated out" since their time in Newquay, Ed Vickstrom wrote. Allied plans foresaw nine assault crossings in the face of German opposition, and the rumors the men had heard back in the fall implied these crossings would be as hard and as deadly as the D-Day landings. As Eisenhower said, "the crossing of the Rhine, on the narrow frontages available, would be a tactical and engineering feat of the greatest magnitude."

But, once again, the 254th would rise to the challenge, and its skills would prove essential in meeting the Army's objectives.

14.

February – March 1945

Back Into Germany and

Bridging the Rhine

As the Allies slowly forced the Germans out of Belgium and Luxembourg and renewed their assault on the German homeland, Soviet armies in the east were making "spectacular advances," reported the February 3rd issue of "The Dozer Blade," the weekly newsletter of the 1121st Engineer Combat Group. "The Soviet Union's fast moving armies were only 35 miles from Berlin as we went to press today," the same article declared, "completing another week of successful onslaught." The Blade also told readers like your father that, in the west, American armies were taking up "the interrupted program of contacting and assaulting the Siegfried Line," and warned, "It's going to be tough going, the commentators say."

The assault on those portions of the Siegfried Line nearest to your father's unit – those near Monschau – began on January 30th, and, for the most part, proved the commentators wrong. There, American troops from the 78th Infantry Division generally moved swiftly through the enemy's pillboxes and emplacements, and by the 2nd of February, they had broken through the Line to reach the north bank of the Roer River and were poised to begin the drive to the Rhine.

But before the Allies could start towards that river in strength, they had to seize control of several dams on the Roer and its tributaries to the northeast of Monschau. As long as enemy hands held these dams, the risk remained they would release their waters and flood the ground downstream, making movement impossible and stranding any Allied forces that had crossed past them. Of particular importance was the Schwammenauel Dam, the largest and the most strategically located of them all. In "*The Last Offensive*," Charles MacDonald maintained that the capture of the Schwammenauel Dam was one of "the most vital tasks at that time on the entire western front." Taking it fell to V Corps.

General Ralph Hueber had been given command of V Corps in mid-January, and he assigned the capture of the Schwammenauel to the 78th Infantry Division. On February 3, your father's unit was attached to that division and ordered to provide "close support" in their assault on the dam. That same day, the engineers moved to Roetgen, Germany – just to the south of Monschau. There, the 254th found themselves billeted in buildings "complete with electric lights, steam heat, [and] running hot and cold water." For the first time since they had left England eight months before, one of the men wrote, the entire battalion enjoyed "the comforts of civilized life!"

From the 78th's location near Monschau, there were few feasible routes to the Schwammenauel Dam, and they soon found one essential road blocked by craters blasted in a horseshoe curve. Several men of the 254th were sent in, and the battalion's records note that, "while making a reconnaissance of the road," these men "surprised" an "eight-man German patrol" and "captured [it] intact."

There's a little more to the story, though. As they were evaluating the site, the three engineers blundered into an armed German patrol. One of the Americans, Major Albert Wynot, had a "workable knowledge" of German, and, according to the Dozer Blade, "let go a blast - of his best German." At the sound, "the Jerries, thinking they were surrounded, couldn't drop their guns fast enough." Wynot said, "It's a good thing my German paid off – we only had a pistol and two carbines!'"

Company A's men quickly built a 70 foot, double/ single Bailey bridge over one of the craters blocking the road and filled another with rock and sand. The infantry continued towards the dam, and the attack went well for the first few days. Then German resistance stiffened, and mines and other barriers also began to block the American advance. To make matters worse, Heubner and V Corps staff began to undermine the division's leaders by countermanding their orders and issuing contradictory directions, and, by February 6th, the 78th's mission was on the verge of failure. In the meantime, the engineers of your father's unit destroyed pillboxes and bunkers, swept for mines, and kept vital roads clear and open.

On the 7th of February, the attacking infantry units were augmented by reserve elements of the 78th Division and by the 82nd Airborne. The strengthened American force reached Schmidt, the village nearest to the Schwammenauel Dam, only to face unbending opposition from the enemy. Troops of the 9th Infantry Division were added to the attack on the next day, and, by nightfall, the Americans held the village.

The next morning, American forces attacked towards the dam, and after hard fighting were in sight of their objective by late afternoon. But the dam itself wasn't taken until nearly midnight, after the Germans destroyed its release valves, sending a steady flow of water to flood the Roer Valley. And so, despite the efforts of nearly three divisions of American soldiers, the Germans had accomplished what Eisenhower had hoped to prevent, and the drive to the Rhine in this sector would have to wait for the flood waters to subside.

The Commonwealth armies to the north had run into similar problems. Although their attack began promisingly on the 8th of the month, within days their progress slowed in the face of German resistance, rain, and floods. Still, there was some good news for the Dozer Blade to

report on February 10th: “North and South along the line from the Maas Estuary to the Maritime Alps, Allied troops pushed forward, toppling Germany’s vaunted Siegfried defenses.” In the east, the Soviets “continued to move closer to Berlin” and were now “only 30 miles from the German capital.”

On February 13, 1945, with the capture of the Roer dams, the 254th was detached from the 78th Infantry and moved to Kalterherberg, Germany, digging into their new quarters under a barrage of German artillery. For the rest of the month, as Allied forces waited for the flood waters to recede, the battalion supported various infantry divisions, including the 2nd, the 9th, and the 99th. Because “all roads were in critical condition due to frost heave and heavy traffic,” the battalion records reported that road maintenance throughout their areas of responsibility was their primary objective in the last weeks of the month. These efforts required large amounts of sand, gravel, and rock, and Company C began operating a quarry near Kalterherberg on February 14th and would continue at this task until the 28th. In addition to roadwork, the other sections of the battalion would also spend their time removing mines previously placed in the area by U.S. troops.

While in Kalterherberg, the engineers found a litter of nine pups, and many of the men were able to replace the dogs they had lost in the confusion and chaos of December. Also during these weeks, a new replacement entertained the men of Company C with his harmonica, and the song he played most often was “Always In My Heart,” a wartime favorite. Its lyrics included lines that probably expressed common thoughts:

> “You are always in my heart.
> And when skies above are gray,
> I remember that you care,
> and then and there
> the sun breaks through.”

The weather remained wet, and the continual rains turned the ground into a muddy, often impassable, mess. One engineer, Joe Dietrich, a private in Company C, tired of slogging through the rain and the mud, "roped himself a horse" from a nearby farm. The Dozer Blade quoted Dietrich as saying, "For a horse that doesn't understand English, he's pretty smart," and the paper noted, "Now when other soldiers are mud-bound in Jeeps, [Dietrich] rides by with a superior look.”

By the end of the month, though, the weather had improved, and the ground had dried sufficiently for the Allies to restart the push to the Rhine. The engineers were attached to the 2nd Infantry Division on the right flank of V Corps' advance, following a southeasterly line generally running from the village of Schmidt to the Ahr River. From there, they were to advance towards the Rhine itself, where the men of the 254th would be expected to bridge the river. Many were apprehensive they would do so under deadly German opposition.

Their progress towards the Ahr was swift, and the battalion's reports describe the first weeks of March as another period of "rapid movement" for the engineers. They moved so quickly they frequently only had time to perform spot maintenance at critical points along the main supply routes, sweep roads for mines, and supervise German civilians in the removal of roadblocks.

One incident illustrates the pressure they were under to keep moving. On March 5, the men were moving briskly with the infantry, sweeping for mines and removing obstacles from roads. When they reached the town of Gemünd, they were required to build three bridges – a 110-foot triple/ single and two 80-foot double/ singles – in 30 hours. This wasn't easy. The entire town was heavily damaged, and the Germans had buried mines throughout the area. An S-mine exploded as the engineers approached one bridge site, and a bulldozer operated by another group of combat engineers detonated three Teller mines near men of the 254th as they worked. German rifles, machine guns, and mortars kept them from one site for a few hours, and "even after the construction commenced, enemy snipers were still shooting from high ground overlooking the town, and the men worked under intermittent small arms and mortar fire."

At one location, the men worked on the ruins of a concrete bridge the Germans had destroyed. To ensure this crossing was unusable, the Germans also buried mines in the approaches to the bridge and had left explosive charges in the structure itself – mines and charges the engineers had to remove. Reinforcing steel buried in the concrete itself made their mine detectors useless, and the men could only probe the area and the structure by hand. Believing their search had located all explosives, they rebuilt the bridge and opened it to traffic.

But a few hours later, as a medium tank was crossing, delayed charges or mines still buried in the ruined structure exploded, collapsing the new bridge. The men didn't have the time to rebuild it, but left it in its damaged condition, with only a short section of additional bridging material placed across the worst damage, like a band-aid. After completing these make-shift repairs, the engineers moved on.

The bridge constructed by the 254th in Gemünd after it collapsed.
(The remains of the concrete bridge it replaced can be seen under their Bailey bridge.)

A few days later, they were deeper into Germany, near the village of Weiler, some 40 miles to the southeast. While pausing there, Company C asked for Bailey bridge materials they could use for training the unskilled replacements they had received back in Goé. The request was approved, and, after completing the training, the men held a contest to see which platoon could construct a sixty foot, double/ single Bailey bridge the quickest. The prize was five gallons of wine. The first platoon won, finishing in 41 minutes to the second platoon's 58. Lt. Robert Brown, leader of the second platoon congratulated the winners, but said: "This is a case where the winner loses. I had a taste of that stuff before we started."

Engineers at work on a road somewhere in Germany,
March 1945

On March 19, 1945, the 254th was ordered to evaluate possible bridging sites across the Rhine close to the village of Neiderseig. A few weeks earlier, a small force from the American 9th Armored Division had discovered an intact bridge spanning the river at the nearby city of Remagen. Troops quickly dashed across, secured the bridge, and seized a foothold on the eastern side. When Eisenhower learned of the bridge's capture, he ordered General Bradley's Twelfth Army Group to "shove over at least five divisions instantly, and anything else that is necessary to make certain of our hold."

The bridge at Remagen

But Remagen was far south of the point where Eisenhower planned to make his main attack, and the bridge crossed the Rhine in an area with severe tactical disadvantages. On its eastern side, it led into the Westerwald, a region of wooded hills and furrowed terrain lacking a robust road network and thus ill-suited for the quick, armored thrusts Eisenhower wanted in the next phase of the war. For these reasons, his initial enthusiasm waned, and he quickly scaled back his instructions, limiting both the size of the bridgehead and the number of troops to be positioned within it.

General Hodges, commanding the forces holding Remagen, disagreed with Eisenhower's assessment. He believed he had stumbled into a crack in the enemy lines and sensed the Germans didn't have sufficient strength to resist any advance in force. Contrary to Eisenhower's judgement, Hodges was confident his troops could quickly break free from the Westerwald into the plains beyond, and from there, they would be well placed to drive into the German heartland. Although he respected the letter of Eisenhower's limitations, Hodges nevertheless interpreted them as narrowly as possible and had his men slowly expand the

territory they held. By the time your father's unit arrived at the Rhine, the First Army had built a bridgehead nearly twenty miles long and ten miles deep into German territory.

On March 17th, the Remagen bridge collapsed, weakened both by the Army's heavy use and the German efforts to destroy it – before and after the Americans seized it. Hodges ordered the bridge replaced; replacement that became even more urgent two days later when Eisenhower changed his mind about the size and purpose of the forces positioned there. He now believed a strike in the south offered several tactical advantages when coordinated with the massive attack planned for British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery's Commonwealth forces to the north. Eisenhower instructed Hodges to add 4 divisions to his bridgehead and to be prepared to force a breakout within days. The final timing of Hodges' advance would depend on Montgomery's efforts, which were scheduled to begin on the 23rd.

Within hours of Eisenhower's order to Hodges, the 254th was instructed to evaluate potential crossings of the Rhine. At 8:00 am the next morning, March 20, a reconnaissance party of engineers examined the river and learned they would be bridging the Rhine behind the established lodgment of the First Army. Happy to find American fighters patrolling overhead, anti-aircraft guns in "adjoining fields," and "a battalion of infantry … nearby - just in case," one of the men recalled the engineers were relieved their assignment was "contrary to what they had been braced for." Later that same day, V Corps confirmed the 254th would build a floating bridge across the Rhine from Bad Breisig on the river's west bank to Bad Hönningen on the east.

Though the work would be outside the range of German fire, the project still had its risks and complications. Building the bridge – a floating structure over 1,300 feet long and requiring a complex system of restraints to hold it in place – would be no simple task. Yet the men would have no more than three days to plan, gather materials, and construct the bridge. It had to be finished and opened for traffic within that time to allow the First Army to take its part in the grand encirclement Eisenhower now planned on the east side of the river, an attack he planned to start on the 24th – if all went well with Montgomery's crossings in the north. The Rhine itself also held its share of complications, and, when it nearly destroyed the bridge before it was completed, the engineers learned how tough the river could be.

The first day of their work, March 21, was spent planning, gathering supplies, and moving men and materials to the bridge site. Actual construction began around 8:00 am on the 22nd, and progressed quickly, though, at one point, the men were idled for two hours, waiting for materials. Then the Rhine tried to unravel their work. First, the river capsized a small boat the men were using, giving four engineers a "thorough drenching." More seriously, the river's current dislodged the steel cable holding the structure together, tugging it under the bridge

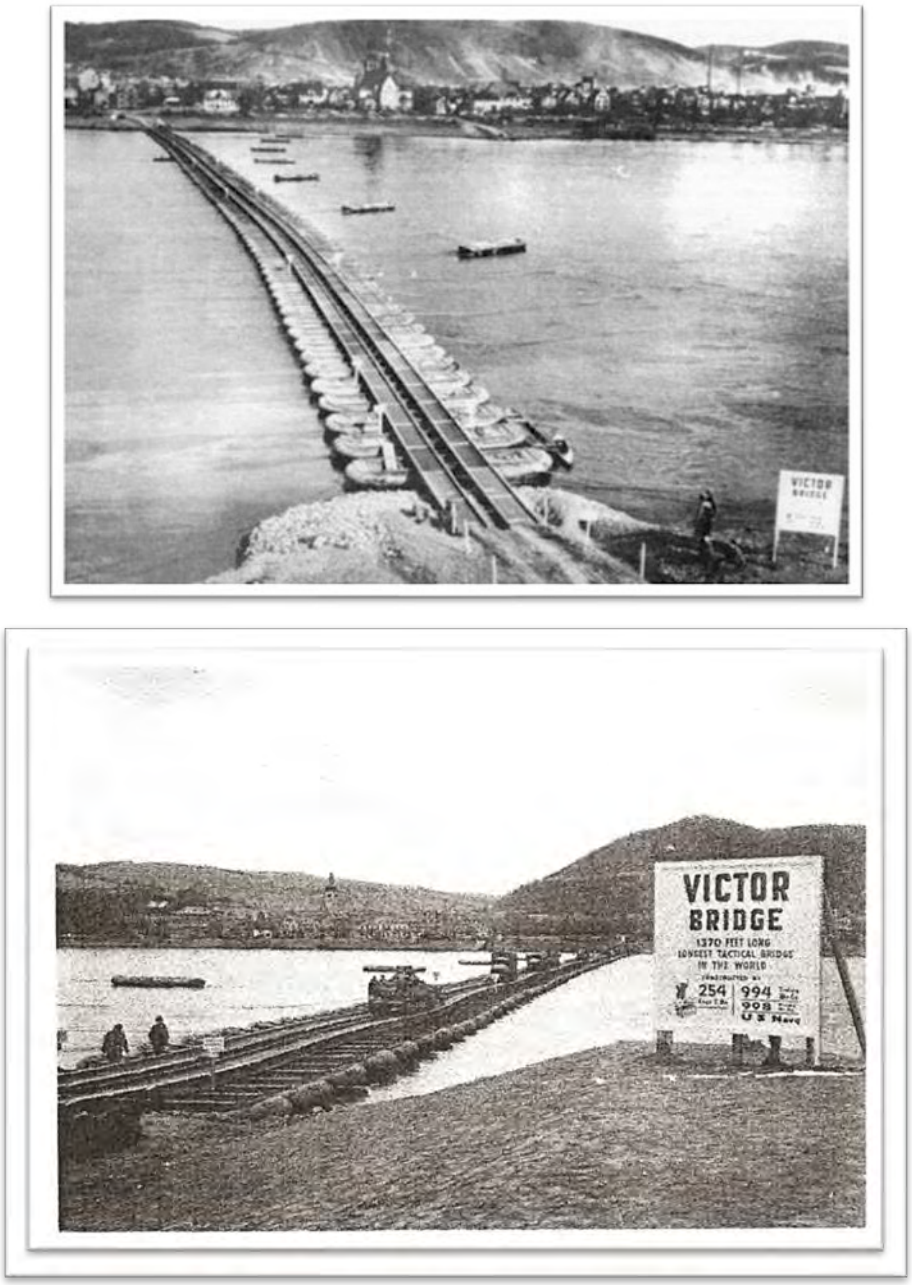
where it became tangled in the anchor lines holding many of the assembled pontoons in place. As the current continued to pull the cable farther downstream, the anchors started to pull loose, and the bridge itself began to slide out of place. Two landing craft quickly blocked the drifting structure and slowly pushed it back into position with their prows, while the engineers cut the cable, quickly reset the anchors, and then spliced the cable back together.

Despite these troubles, Companies A and B of the 254th completed the bridge on time. The first vehicles crossed at 10:00 pm on March 22, and heavy traffic was flowing across the bridge by noon the next day. The Dozer Blade of March 24, 1945, reported, "Perhaps the longest pontoon bridge of its type ever built, the new structure uses three means of restraint to prevent the current from carrying it downstream; river-bottom anchors, a shore-to-shore cable with attached lines maintaining an upstream bow to the bridge, and two LCVP's, with motors running, nosing it gently but constantly against the flow." When finished, the "Victor Bridge" was 1,370 feet in length, and "within five days of its completion, 6,378 vehicles in various convoys including many Sherman and medium tanks" had used it to cross the river, wrote Ed Vickstrom.

Men of Company A building an approach to the bridge

The men of the 254th were rightly satisfied by their work, and Vickstrom said, "Believe me it was a proudful sight, seeing vehicles crossing over averaging 2,060 units daily the first week –

especially the widely spaced 30-35 ton Sherman tanks which, oh so slowly and carefully, 'waved' across on nearly submerged pontoons."



The Victor Bridge

In the meantime, however, as the engineers were building the Victor Bridge, General Patton's Third Army crossed the Rhine near Mainz on the 22nd of March, a day before Montgomery's Commonwealth troops began their assault. To achieve surprise, Patton's troops crossed at night and without artillery preparation or airborne support. The enemy was caught completely

unprepared, and within twenty-four hours men of the Third Army held a bridgehead more than five miles deep. Thus, even before Montgomery started what was supposed to be the Allies' main effort – an operation that rivaled the D-Day invasion in the number of troops and vehicles involved, the extensive use of supporting firepower, and its elaborate planning – two U.S. Armies were already holding significant German territory on the east side of the Rhine.

British and Canadian troops crossed the Rhine in three locations north of Cologne as planned on the 23rd and made good progress. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, having watched the power the Allies brought to bear against German positions along the Rhine, told General Eisenhower, the enemy was "whipped. We've got him. He is all through." But at a time when the outcome of their massive and complex assault was still uncertain, General Bradley revealed Patton's crossing to the press and suggested that American forces were able to cross the Rhine "at practically any point." In an unmistakable reference to the immense resources backing Montgomery, Bradley pointed out that American troops had succeeded in their crossings on their own, without the support of artillery or aircraft.

With Patton moving towards Frankfurt and Montgomery's forces across the Rhine in the north, the First Army began its advance from the Remagen bridgehead. By the end of their first day, Hodges' lead forces had pushed 12 miles away from their starting point, and all three of his corps had gained significant territory with minimal casualties. On the 26th of March, their advance became "a complete breakout, shattering all opposition," with American armored divisions "roaming at will throughout the enemy's rear areas," wrote Edward N. Bedessem, in his short history of the Central Europe campaign for the U.S. Army Center of Military History. Within days, the First Army had driven at least 50 miles beyond its original position and had "captured thousands of astonished German soldiers in the process," he continued. One engineer remembered that "seeing truckload after truckload of Kraut prisoners moving to the rear" brought "a thrill of satisfaction, knowing how completely the situation on the Western Front [had] changed since December." Confirming Hodges' original suspicions about German weakness, "nowhere, it seemed," Bedessem wrote, "were the Germans prepared to resist in strength."

Supporting the First Army's advance, your father's company built a 110' double/ single Bailey bridge, (reinforced to class 40 with purpose built wooden supports) over the Weid River at Niederbreitbach, on the 26th of March. Because of the quick pace at which the First Army was moving, men of the 254th and more than forty of its trucks were transformed into a provisional transport company on the 27th. The Dozer Blade reported that these vehicles (along with others from the 1121st Group) were used to haul "much of the gasoline which powered the mighty drive" of the "First Army spearhead units." The article continued: "Going day and night,

the vehicles moved many hundred thousand gallons of fuel from depots west of the Rhine to the combat units which were making mincemeat out of the Wehrmacht's best troops." The "crews slept in shifts, one man driving while the other got 40 winks. They ate and slept in their trucks…. 'We didn't mind the grind,' was the way Pfc Charles Peterson, of Clovis, N.M., a driver for the 254 Engr C Bn, put it. 'We figured we were doing something to get this war over sooner and were glad to do it.'"

The muscular aggression displayed by Generals Hodges and Patton and their troops encouraged Eisenhower to revise his plans for the last phase of the war. Not wanting to waste their momentum and obvious strength, he decided his major drive would pierce into central Germany and that the British Commonwealth forces would no longer charge to Berlin. After all, the Soviets were closing in on the German capital, while the western Allies were still nearly 300 miles away. There simply was no reason to expend resources attempting what the Soviets would obviously accomplish long before Montgomery's troops could arrive. On the other hand, Bradley's 12th Army Group, with both the First and Third Armies, was the strongest force the western Allies had in the European Theater of Operations. That fact made it the obvious choice to power its way across Germany and link with Soviet troops advancing from the east, effectively cutting Germany in half. Moreover, the position of the 12th Army Group aimed naturally towards Leipzig and Dresden, one of the few major industrial areas left in German hands. Finally, intelligence reports claimed that the troops most fanatically loyal to Hitler were planning to gather in force in the mountains of south-eastern Germany and Austria and make a stand there, hoping to hold out long enough to bargain for a favorable peace settlement. Again, American forces in the south, in this case General Devers' 6th Army Group, were best positioned to prevent this, if possible, or confront it, if necessary.

And so, on March 28, General Eisenhower announced a new plan for what he hoped would be the last phase of the war in Europe. Once the Ruhr was taken, the U.S. Ninth Army would detach from Montgomery's 21st Army Group and revert to Bradley's command. Montgomery's forces then would protect Bradley's northern flank as the 12th Army Group drove east towards Leipzig and the Elbe River, while Devers' 6th would protect Bradley's southern shoulder. Once elements of the 12th Army Group reached the Elbe, Montgomery would move north towards Denmark and the German ports on the Baltic Sea, while Devers' 6th Army Group would advance through the Black Forest to Bavaria and the Alps, confronting any German forces concentrating there. Of the individual elements of Bradley's force, General Hodges' First Army would take the lead in the push to Leipzig and the Elbe, with two corps of the Ninth Army to its north and Patton's Third Army to its south, aiming for Austria and Czechoslovakia.

On the first day of April 1945, American forces completed the encirclement of the Ruhr, closing the trap on German Army Group B – capturing more than 300,000 soldiers – and "rendering that great industrial area useless to support what was left of the Nazi armies," Eisenhower wrote.

The Victor Bridge was an obvious element of this success and an accomplishment of which the 254th justifiably could be proud. But throughout February and March, as the First Army drove to, and then crossed, the Rhine, your father and his follow engineers performed a multitude of tasks – some big, some small – all of which helped American combat troops move forward, meet their objectives, and defeat the enemy. Every day your father and the men of the 254th did "something to get this war over" and, if Pfc Peterson is any guide, they "were glad to do it."

15.

April – August 1945

Rhineland and Central Europe

Germany, Czechoslovakia, and France

The End of the War and Return to Civilian Life

The first weeks of April were another period of rapid movement for the Allied forces in the west. To help maintain that pace, anywhere from 12 to 41 of the engineers' trucks (and the men required to operate them) were used as provisional transportation companies, hauling men and supplies throughout much of the month. The 254th was still attached to the First Army, still operated in V Corps' zone of action, and their progress into Germany was so quick that, as he left for a week's leave in the United Kingdom, Lt. Col. Jenkins, the engineers' commanding officer, joked he would probably "have to go to all the way to Vienna" to catch up to them when his leave was finished.

In those weeks, the western Allies' offensive developed mostly as Eisenhower had planned. Edward Bedessem wrote: "All the armies assigned to cross the Rhine had elements east of the river and many were making spectacular thrusts beyond the Rhine nearly every day. The enemy's capacity to resist faded at an ever-accelerating rate, and the Allied attacks were quickly becoming a general pursuit." Organized German opposition diminished so rapidly that, by April 9, General Bradley allowed his forces to begin an unrestricted advance to the east.

As it became clear the war in Europe was coming to an end, and as Allied forces held more and more German territory, the work of the 254th became more varied. Although they continued to maintain roads and clear mines, they also destroyed captured supplies of ammunition, and even guarded a winery for a day. As V Corps and the First Army moved forward, the engineers searched bypassed villages and towns for enemy troops, took charge of surrendering Germans, and transported freed Allied prisoners.

One Sunday, four engineers captured a German army hospital with all its staff and hundreds of patients. Looking for billets for the battalion, Lt. R. G. W. Brown and three men of the 254th entered a small town known as a health resort before the war. As they searched for suitable accommodations, Lt. Brown "caught a salute out of the corner of [his] eye," the Dozer Blade reported. He began to return it but stopped when he realized the man was wearing a German uniform. "Before they knew it," the Blade's story continued, Lt. Brown and his men "saw Jerries to the right, to the left, and in front of them, dozens of them. Jerries in full dress uniform were hanging out windows and peeking out of cellars." The Americans walked on, "nervously fingering their weapons," until they came to a building where they found a "bemedaled

German major and his staff." The officer, "with impressive ceremony," surrendered the entire hospital complex to Lt. Brown, including all the troops quartered there – mostly walking wounded, doctors, medics, and nurses. And then, quickly, the Germans were removed, and the engineers moved in.

As your father's unit continued to advance into Germany, they often found discarded and or abandoned German equipment and supplies. Once they found a warehouse filled with radios, enough to outfit the entire battalion. Another time, they discovered two generators capable of providing power to as many buildings and as much space as they could occupy. Somewhere along the way, the engineers also found a trove of luxury supplies, perhaps intended for German officers, and helped themselves to cigars, sardines, pickles, wine, candy, and cheese.

In one town, officers of the 245th took possession of a "palatial hotel" and put on "a little shindig." Their guests were doctors and nurses of the 45th General Hospital. The battalion's own band – the "Hungry Five" – provided the music, "continuing their series of one night stands" through the European Theater of Operations, according to the Dozer Blade.

But these weeks also had more than their share of darkness. On April 4, units of the Third Army captured a small town called Ohrdruf and discovered the first concentration camp to be seen by the western Allies. The site was shocking and grisly – a vision of the depraved hell of inhumanity unbound. In the days and weeks that followed, more camps would be found, and at one, near Nordhausen, American soldiers saw "rows upon rows of skin-covered skeletons…. Men lay as they had starved, discolored, and lying in indescribable human filth. Their striped coats and prison numbers hung to their frames as a last token or symbol of those who enslaved and killed them…." One man recalled a young girl, "I would say she was about seventeen years old. She lay there where she had fallen, gangrened and naked." After reporting these scenes, Bedessem argued the camps were "graphic evidence that the Allied cause was just, and the quick and decisive annihilation of the Third Reich a brutal necessity."

One engineer, thinking of this brutal necessity, wrote:

> I walked through a ruined German town tonight. It created a feeling all its own. The scant population seems to be mourning the dead….
>
> Everywhere there is destruction. The church is a mass of debris. The Germans were in the church tower for the last defense of the

> town. Our artillery and bombers finished them. There is the nauseating stench of dead horses and cattle.
>
> Even though it's cold tonight, you smell death.
>
> It's about nine. I see the town from a fairly high point. There is an almost black cast overhead – you feel destruction. You say to yourself – this is the ghostliest, most somber spot on the face of the earth. This is sheer silence – death. And yet, it's a sight that draws a smile from all peace loving people.

As the First Army and V Corps approached Leipzig, enemy opposition stiffened. The Germans "turned [their] thick defense belt of antiaircraft guns against the American ground troops with devastating effects," the Army's short history of these weeks reported. But the action barely slowed the advance, and, with night attacks and flanking maneuvers, U.S. forces destroyed or bypassed the guns, and Leipzig fell on April 20th. After that, according to Charles MacDonald's "*The Last Campaign*," the war took on an increasing "aura of unreality – not really war, yet not quite peace."

It was becoming clear to all involved – even to the Germans themselves – that the war in Europe was almost over. As Allied forces continued marching forward, they found "many towns flew white flags of surrender to spare themselves the otherwise inevitable destruction suffered by those that resisted, while German troops surrendered by the tens of thousands, sometimes as entire units," MacDonald wrote.

White flags of surrender in a German town.

In the last weeks of April, more and more of the engineers' time was spent investigating the state of the German railroad system. They scrutinized track, bridges, and switches, and inventoried rolling stock. They even spent the last two weeks of April repairing track and yards and then running their own railroad: the "Snortin' Bull Express."

The railway began when the engineers joined two sections of relatively undamaged line between Kölleda and Naumberg, but they quickly extended both ends, until the line reached from Mühlhausen to Leipzig and covered some 135 miles. Company A took the lead on joining the first sections and adding the extensions, which required them to fill several bomb and shell craters and to lay nearly 2,000 feet of new track. Company B repaired the yards at each end of the line, while your father's company was responsible for filling craters and repairing track along the existing rights-of-way. To help with this work, Company C used German citizens and prisoners-of-war – "pee-wees" as they called them – guarded by a detachment of Polish soldiers. Together, the engineers also cleared the tracks of a badly damaged engine and several unusable cars.

Once in operation, the "Express" made one or two runs each day, carrying fuel, rations, and other supplies to Leipzig in the east, while returning west with German POWs and Allied POWs recently freed from German prison camps. German civilians who had worked for the German railroad, the *Deutsche Bahn*, were found to operate the system – though a 254th officer, Albert S. Wynot, often operated the engine. Once the repairs were finished and everything was running smoothly and efficiently the 254th was ordered to relinquish its railroad and sent forward again with V Corps, both now attached to George Patton's Third Army.

The Snortin' Bull Express with German POWs

But while your father's unit ran the "Express," it carried more than 900,000 gallons of gasoline and 70,000 gallons of oil. It also transported more than 13,000 German prisoners of war and 2,000 Allied soldiers released from German POW camps.

American forces joined the Soviets near Torgau, Germany, on the 25th, effectively cutting the country in two. And, with Berlin surrounded by Russian armies, Adolf Hitler killed himself on April 30th.

At the beginning of May, V Corps and the 254th were attached to the Third Army as it raced towards Czechoslovakia. Most of the engineers' time was spent maintaining main supply routes by removing roadblocks, wrecked vehicles, and debris from those MSRs, filling craters, and widening and reinforcing bridges. The war itself had become almost surreal; a Marx Brothers' farce of men who no longer cared for nationalistic dreams of conquest and wanted to surrender but whose personal pride compelled them to fire a shot or two in the process. Every town repeated the same script: a short burst of small arms fire, an indifferent *Panzerfaust* across a road, and a stray round of artillery fire in a nearby field, all followed by the hurried and relieved surrender of all German troops in the area.

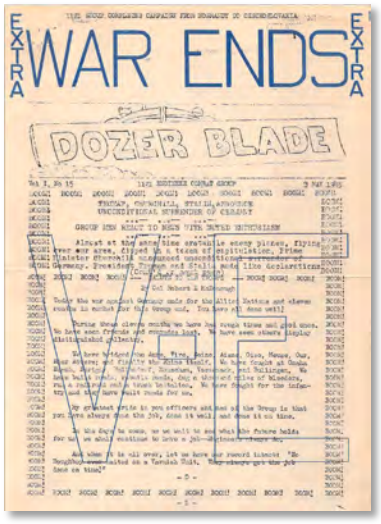
On May 6 – now out of Germany and somewhere in Czechoslovakia not far from Pilsen – the men of the First Army found themselves in a "land of frenzy and delight" – "a riotous land of colorful flags and cheering citizenry," MacDonald wrote. "It was Paris all over again, on a lesser scale and with different flags, but with the same jubilant faces, the same delirium of liberation."

Czech civilians cheer American troops

Your father's unit ended that day just outside Pilsen, occupying the Czech city with Russian troops and units of the Polish resistance. Ed Vickstrom said the "only good thing about sharing Pilsen with the Russians was all the liberated champagne" they had on hand "to celebrate, when the 'end of the war' rumors finally became fact."

Vickstrom also recalled that, by their arrival in Pilsen, the engineers knew "the war was history but for the formal announcement." Perhaps colored by the years that had passed, he remembered "the ever alert Snortin' Bullers quickly got 'er in gear doing their own preliminary observances of the long-awaited declaration." These "celebrations were fueled by the impressive inventory of liberated enemy liquor." Many of the men were happy to find "Pilsner Style beer in large wooden kegs. These vessels were refreshingly chilled through underground tunnel storage under the brewery's war flattened buildings." The men celebrated in small groups, "while lubricating their pipes with liquid menus of personal preference." Vickstrom remembered his group "alternated white champagne with pink while boisterously competing for best cork shots towards an open 3rd floor window. It was for a brief time a carefree, loosely disciplined atmosphere. Regardless of rank, who at the time gave a damn? Blowing off pent-up steam was a hard-earned reward for battle-hardened veterans."

With Hitler's suicide, leadership of the Third Reich passed to Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz. When his original cease fire terms were rejected, Dönitz agreed to a complete and unconditional surrender on all fronts, and the necessary documents were signed on May 7. The war in Europe officially ended the next day.


EXTRA WAR ENDS EXTRA

DOZER BLADE

VE Extra Edition of the Dozer Blade

The Dozer Blade said, "Like the report of a V-bomb, [the] response of troops in the 1121st … to today's news was, to put it mildly, terrific. They howled, whistled, laughed, embraced, jumped, sang, wept and some, completely overcome, simply did nothing at all."

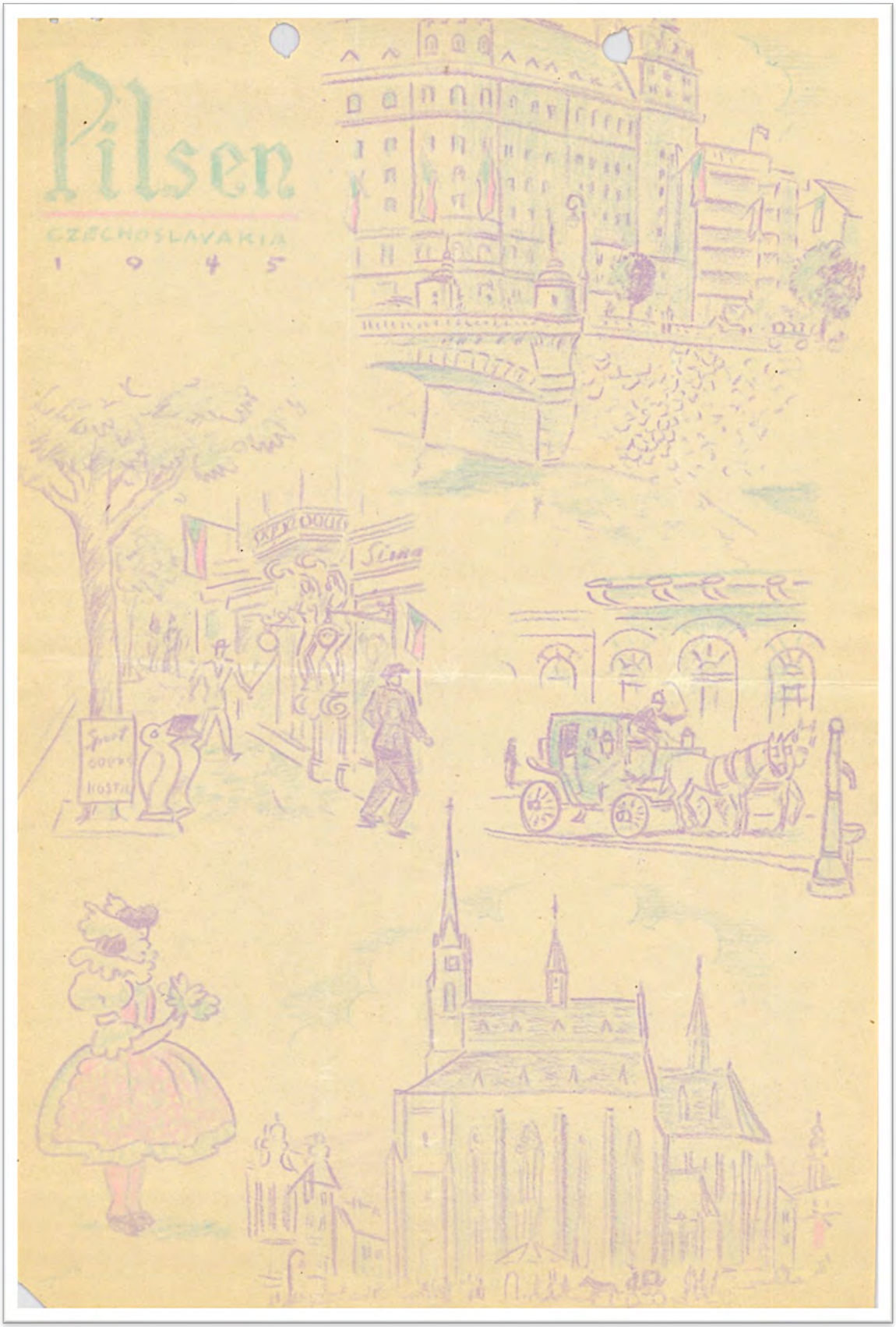
Lt. Col. Loren Jenkins, who commanded the 254th from Newquay to Pilsen, said, "It's just the completion of another job." He also knew he and his men were "ready to take on the next job – of going back [home]!" and asked the same question that most of his engineers were probably asking that day, "when do we start?"

One man in your father's unit – again, most likely Ed Vickstrom – contemplated the end of the war and wrote:

> If anyone cares for figures, here they are: This is the 269th week of the war and the 178th week of US participation. Today – THE DAY – is the 337th day of the Allied invasion. Today is the result of the training and fighting of all our men for the past months and years. A day we have had to work for. Only, now that it has come it seems strangely like just another day. We feel no differently, we act no differently, we are still the same as yesterday – [but] our thoughts – our thoughts are more free to roam, and sure as all hell they are roaming."

Two figures were left out of this summary: 28 and 6. During its days and weeks on the European continent, the Snortin' Bull built 28 bridges, ranging in length from 15 to 1,370 feet, but with an average length of just under 100 feet. Of those 28 bridges, 6 were later destroyed by enemy action. The Germans demolished all three bridges the engineers had a hand in building during their time near Wallendorf, and two more disappeared during the Battle of the Bulge. The sixth bridge to meet this end was the ill-fated Bailey bridge at Gemünd. None of the engineers thought 28 was likely to be the highest number of bridges claimed by any one unit, but many suspected no other could match those 6 bridges destroyed by the Germans, and they thought that had to be some kind of a record.

From the end of the war to the 22nd of May, the engineers cleared bomb debris, restored utilities, and repaired streets and watermains throughout Pilsen, while the unit's artist captured their days in Pilsen in drawings.


Pilsen
CZECHOSLAVAKIA
1945

During their time in Czechoslovakia, men of the 254th supervised German "pee-wees" who did most of the heavy work. At the time, one of the engineers wrote, it is "quite a deal … the boys say to stand around watching someone else take over the Engineer's monopoly on the dirty and heavy work and to be able to make eyes at the pretty girls when they tire of watching the shovels fly. A good deal, all right."

Still, according to an article in the war-time *Bull Sheet*, there were "unusual angles" to the job that kept the men "on their toes." It didn't take long to learn that "it would require more watching to keep the Czech civilians off the German soldiers' backs than it would to keep the shovels moving." As one man said, "The oddest turn of fate is that just a week and a half ago we were fighting the Germans. Now we're protecting them."

And then there was the common – and puzzling – situation of checking out "a hundred Pee Wees in the morning," only to discover there were 104 to be checked in at night – "Where the extras are coming from is still an unsolved mystery," one of the men wrote.

After their weeks in Czechoslovakia, the 254th was ordered back to France, where the engineers were put to work at Camps Miami, St. Louis, and San Antonio, three of the 17 camps named for U.S. cities being built near Reims. The Army used these camps to house soldiers no longer on active duty while preparing them for new assignments or for discharge and return to the States.

The Army created a point system to determine who would be retained and who would be eligible for discharge. The system awarded points for time in service, time overseas, each official campaign in which the soldier had served, medals earned and awarded, and for each child the soldier had. In the spring and summer of 1945, to qualify for discharge and a trip home, a soldier needed 85 or more points. There were complaints, and many thought the system was unfair as applied to them, but the Army stuck with it, and "high-point" veterans quickly began going home.

At the end of the war and thinking of home, the engineers' poet wrote:

> We're back in France, the war is done, we heave a hearty sigh,
> The U.S.A. is close at hand, we'll get there by and by.
> But what is this? Some points we miss, while counting up our score?
> It's C.B.I. for certain, 'cause we just got 84."

("C.B.I." referred to the "China, Burma, India" theater, the Army's designation for China and Southeast Asia.)

Soldiers with enough points were transferred to one of the seven "cigarette camps" – Lucky Strike, Pall Mall, Old Gold, Phillip Morris, and so on – near the ports of Le Havre, Marseilles, and Antwerp, and then assigned to a transport returning to the U.S.

Your father, with more than four years in the service and more than three years overseas, participation in five campaigns, and with both a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star, had more than enough points to qualify for discharge. He left Europe on June 28th, arrived back in the U.S. on the 12th of July, and was discharged from Fort Sheridan, Illinois (which was just north of Chicago) on August 15, 1945.

Of the war's end, Lt. Col. Charles MacDonald wrote, "few if any who fought in it could have entertained any doubts as to the right of their cause – they had seen at Buchenwald, Belsen, Dachau, and at a dozen other places, including little Ohrdruf, what awful tyranny man can practice on his fellow man. To erase those cruel monuments to evil was reason enough for it all…"

Maybe your father and some of his fellow engineers felt that way, too. Yet, Col. Robert McDonough, commanding the 1121st Engineer Combat Group, may have captured something closer to his men's thoughts. On the day the war ended, he told his men, "You have all done well!" He acknowledged they had shared "rough times and good ones" and had "seen friends and comrades lost." He summarized their accomplishments:

> We have bridged the Aure, Vire, Seine, Aisne, Oise, Muese, Our, [and] Roer Rivers; and finally, the Rhine itself. We have fought at Omaha Beach, Bérigny, Wallendorf, Monschau, Vossenack, and Büllingen. We have built roads, rebuilt roads, dug a thousand miles of bleeders, run a railroad and a truck battalion. We have fought for the infantry, and they have built roads for us.

He concluded by saying: "My greatest pride in you officers and men of the Group is that you have always done the job, done it well and done it on time." With its natural modesty and the lack of pretension that seemed so common among those men, that may have better expressed the engineers' sentiments. It certainly was the highest praise possible for men who started the war with the determination "to do our job, and do it right."

Afterword

About fifteen years after the war, your father and many others formed a battalion association to reconnect with the men who had served in the 254th and its predecessors, the 112th and the 107th – men with whom they had shared Camp Livingston and Fort Dix, Moneymore, Enniskillen, and the Assault Training Complex. Men who had seen Isigny and Bérigny, Wallendorf and Büllingen, the Rhine and Pilsen. From 1940 to 1945, several thousand men passed through the ranks of the 254th in its various forms. But out of those thousands, fewer than 250 served with the unit from Camp Livingston all the way to Pilsen. Your father was one of those few.

The association organized reunions and resurrected the "*Bull Sheet*," and your father served as the association's treasurer for seven years and attended every reunion for ten. The reunions and the *Bull Sheet* gave the engineers an opportunity to remember, to come up to date with each other's lives, and to tell the old stories. They also allowed the men to note the passing of friends and comrades and of those who might have been only a face or a name. No one could have known them all.

In later years, the *Bull Sheet*'s annual list of engineers for whom "Taps" had played grew longer, while its lists of the men who attended the reunions grew shorter. The tone of the *Bull Sheet* often became more reflective, and it became more insistent on capturing the stories that were slipping away. The men had seen the veterans of World War I pass into memory and knew that they – the veterans of World War II — were, in Ed Vickstrom's words, "approaching the same sorrowful status." In an issue of the *Bull Sheet* from 1997 – 52 years after the war ended – Vickstrom quoted another veteran who wrote, "we'll soon be washed over the edge of history. What we were and what we did, at our best, and what happened around us, is slipping out of knowledge. That's a pity. Please, young people, listen to us before we leave."

Your father's generation is now almost completely gone. I have tried to capture what he and the men of the 254th did and what happened around them in the years of the war. From these stories, you can glimpse who they were at their best: resilient, committed, and brave. Serious men who knew they would be lost if they stopped laughing. Men given an extremely hard job but determined to "do it right."

I hope I have listened well and have done them justice.

A note on the sources.

My primary sources were the battalion records of the 254th and its predecessors for the years 1940 to 1945. These records were obtained by the 107th Engineer Association from the National Archives, and the association was kind enough to provide me with digital copies of them all. The records are not complete, but they are still an extensive trove of information and detail.

Edward C. Vickstrom's work to collect, preserve, and write the individual stories of the 254th and its predecessors was essential to this project. For nearly 40 years, Vickstrom was the secretary and newsletter editor of the 107th Engineer Association and the primary voice of its newsletter, the *Bull Sheet*. I relied heavily on this publication, especially editions 16, 29 through 40, 43, 45, 46, 47, and 49. Quotes attributed to anyone serving in the 254th were most likely to have come from one of these. Vickstrom was also the force behind the wartime version of the *Bull Sheet*, which was the 254th's newsletter for much of the time the engineers spent in Belgium, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. The surviving issues of this publication were also quite useful. Vickstrom prepared three maps recording the unit's movements in Ireland, England, and on the European continent. These were helpful in placing the 254th when their location could not be determined from the official reports. He also kept copies of various documents from the war years, which were especially useful for insight into the unit's Camp Livingston, Büllingen, Rhine, and Pilsen periods. His maps and archives were included in the materials I received from the unit association. Without his labor and lifelong dedication to the Snortin' Bull this work would be far poorer.

Don Morin provided me with the few stories his father told about his time in the service.

Joseph H. Clement's diary of November 1944 and January 1945 were an invaluable part of the materials held by the National Archives. His remembrances in "*War Experiences from the Hearts of America's Heros,"* published by the Hub City Memorial Chapter 690 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, also provided a few details of the engineers' experiences during their time in Europe.

I consulted a variety of secondary sources, including several official U.S. Army histories of the war. Of these, the *Report by the Supreme Commander to the Combined Chiefs of Staff on the Operations in Europe of the Allied Expeditionary Force* by then General Eisenhower was most valuable. Volumes dedicated to specific battles or operations were also useful, including *Omaha Beachhead, Utah Beach to Cherbourg, Breakout and* Pursuit, and *The Ardennes: Battle*

of the Bulge. Edward N. Bedessem's short history of the Central Europe campaign for the U.S. Army Center of Military History (simply called *"Central Europe"*) offered a good summary of the last months of the war in Europe.

I'd be remiss if I failed to mention Lt. Col. Charles B. MacDonald's *The Siegfried Line Campaign* and *The Last Campaign* separately and specially. Both were extremely helpful. *The Siegfried Line Campaign* provided insight into, and details of, the course of the war in Europe in August and September of 1944 and of V Corps' campaign to breach the West Wall. *The Last Campaign* was vital in piecing together the larger story behind the First Army's advance to the Rhine, the construction of the Victor Bridge, and the U.S. drive across Germany and into Czechoslovakia. What's more, MacDonald's work was (and is) an inspirational example of how good (military) history can be.

Antony Beevor's *The Second World War* and *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* both helped place the actions and activities of the 254th in context. His *D-Day* especially added color and detail to the actions and the events that happened around the engineers in Normandy in June and July of 1944.

For the 254th's experience in and around Wallendorf, Neil Short's book, *Hitler's Siegfried Line*, provided helpful background material, while Vic Hillery's *Paths of Armor: The Fifth Armored Division in World War II* supplied many details of that division's drive through the West Wall from Wallendorf towards Bitburg from September 11 to 19, 1944.

Kampfgruppe Peiper at the Battle of the Bulge: The German Race for the Meuse, by David Cooke and Wayne Evans supplied insight into the events of December 17, 1944, in and around Büllingen. *Company Commander* by Charles MacDonald remains one of the best infantry memoirs of the war in Europe and was crucial in providing an honest glimpse of one man's experience in the Battle of the Bulge just north of Büllingen and near Elsenborn Ridge. John Toland's *Battle: The Story of the Bulge* also provided background and context regarding the German Ardennes' Offensive.

As to the war itself, both *The Third Reich At War* by Robert Evans and *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-1945,* by Sir Ian Kershaw provided valuable context.

Several books not focused on the war were also helpful, especially in understanding the American response to Hitler's aggression in Europe in the years before Pearl Harbor. Of these, Jon Meacham's *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, and Robert Caro's *The Years of Lyndon Johnson, Means of Ascent* were the most useful. Other sources,

such as Frank Freidel's article, "*FDR vs. Hitler: American Foreign Policy, 1933-1941*" in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the transcript of President Roosevelt's radio address of May 27, 1941, were also useful on these points.

Lastly, the archives of *The New York Times* were invaluable in providing contemporaneous accounts and views of wartime events and circumstances.