

THE LUDENDORF BRIDGE



By Sgt. ED CUNNINGHAM
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REMAGEN, GERMANY—For 27 years the Ludendorff bridge connecting the picturesque riverside villages of Remagen and Erpel was known to very few people outside the wine-growing Ahr valley. It was just a country cousin to Cologne's more famous Hohenzollern bridge and the other Rhine bridges at Bonn, Dusseldorf and Coblenz.

Built in 1918 during the last weeks of the first World War, it carried train loads of wine and mineral water and occasional tourists during peace-time. Most of the visitors to the Ahr stopped briefly to look at the winding waters of the Rhine and then hurried north toward the more industrially important cities of the Rhineland.

The prestige of Ludendorf rose slightly with the outbreak of the present war when military traffic started rolling across its double-track railroad toward the defenses at the southern end of the Siegfried Line. But strategically Ludendorf was still a country cousin.

Even the Allied air forces, which made repeated attacks on the other Rhine bridges, all but ignored Ludendorf. The bridge suffered only one serious blow, an air attack which destroyed its left bank arch span. That, however, was soon repaired by German engineers.

But Ludendorf was to have its share of importance.

On March 7 the U.S. Army's Ninth Armored Division rumbled into the Rhine village of Remagen for what it thought would be the climax of its seven-day drive across 40 miles of German territory. The tankmen and armored infantrymen expected to reach the banks of the Rhine and stop for a rest while the Allied high command completed plans for the crossing of that last barrier to the heart of Germany.

The bridges spanning the Rhine at Cologne, Bonn, Coblenz had been blown by the retreating Germans. When the Ninth Armored reached Remagen it naturally looked for the blasted



Some of armored infantrymen who made the first crossing: Standing, Cpl. Mercandante, Pvt. Chiccarelli. Seated, T/Sgt. Lang, S/Sgt. Sabia, Lts. Gardner and Burrows, and, on the divan, S/Sgt. Delisio.

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But after its 10 brief days of glory, there was nothing left of the bridge at Remagen but these broken beams and a few odd planks floating lazily down the Rhine.

remains of Ludendorf bridge. Instead the three-span structure was still standing. The German engineers assigned to destroy it had apparently delayed their work too long.

Realizing the value of their find, the armored infantry rushed past the pair of fortress-like towers guarding the bridge's main spans and headed for the east bank of the Rhine. The Germans on the far bank, now equally conscious of Ludendorf's importance, set off two demolitions. One of the explosions damaged the eastern span but it failed to stop the armored infantrymen from continuing across the bridge and establishing the first Allied bridgehead on the east bank of the Rhine.

The Ludendorf bridge, overshadowed for 27 years by its more important sister spans across the Rhine, had won its place in history.

For 10 days Ludendorf basked in its 'glory' as the world's most important bridge. It was a high priority military objective now. American troops and tanks rolled across it to enlarge the bridgehead. German air and artillery, realizing men in the two towers, Sgt. Alexander Drabik of Holland, Ohio, and Pfc. Marvin Jensen of Slayton, Minn., ran down the bridge approach and on to the east bank of the Rhine. They were followed almost immediately by Samele, Delisio, Chinchar, Massie and S/Sgt. Carmine J. Sabia of Brooklyn, Pfc. Martin Reed of Assaria, Kans., and Pvt. Joseph K. Peoples of Warrenton, N.C.

Delisio and four other men went on into the railroad tunnel at the far end of the bridge to flush out any stray Jerries. They rounded up five PWs, all engineers. The second platoon, under 1st Lt. Emmett Burrows of Jersey City, N.J., went up to clean out an enemy-held house on the top of Erpeler Ley, a 600-foot basaltic cliff towering over the east bank of the bridge. It took them 15 minutes to reach the top, using shrubbery and trees to pull themselves up the steep slopes. Just as they finished cleaning out the Jerry-held building which had evidently been used as a CP, the second platoon men were tied down by artillery and mortar fire from their left flank. They suffered heavy casualties before additional support arrived that night. Mercandante, the mortarman, and Pvt. Ralph Chiccarelli of Milford, Mass., a machine gunner, had to double as aid men for the wounded. On one trip down, Mercandante worked for two hours under intense mortar fire, carrying a seriously injured soldier to the aid station set up in the tunnel.

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of the Rhine. The men cleared the nearby village of Erpel and the roads leading to the bridge. At the same time Mott, Reynolds and Dorland worked under intense sniper fire from the upstream east bank to cut every demolition wire they could find.

At 1630, with the bridge safe for heavy traffic and a company bridgehead firmly established on the pay-off side of the Rhine, Brig. Gen. William H. Hoge of Lexington, Mo., commander of Combat Command B which swept through Remagen to grab the war's most unexpected prize, gave the orders for reinforcements, attacked it daily. Maybe such belated attention was too much for Ludendorf. Anyway, on the afternoon of March 17 the bridge suddenly crumbled and its three spans dropped into the Rhine. But Ludendorf, while meeting the same fate as the other bridges of the Rhine, had won a place in history that the more important bridges could never attain.

LUDENDORF'S 10 days of fame began at 1550 on March 7. 1st Lt. Karl Timmermann of West Point, Neb., was telling his men of Able Company of the 27th Armored Infantry Regiment that he had just received orders to cross the bridge. The Germans were scheduled to blow it at 1600, according to a PW.

The lieutenant had barely finished his announcement when an explosion shook the east span of the structure. Timmermann hollered: "As you were!" Then, seeing the three spans still standing, he repeated the order of attack and shouted, "Let's go!"

The first platoon, led by T/Sgt. Mike Chinchar of Rochelle Park, N.J., started across, followed by the third and second platoons, in that order. With them went three armored engineers, a lieutenant and two sergeants, to cut the demolition wires so the Germans would not set off further charges.

Running and ducking like halfbacks on a broken field gallop to avoid the machine-gun and sniper fire, A Company reached the towers on the far side of the bridge.

"The bullets didn't worry us half as much as the bridge," T-5 Gaccarino Mercandante, a mortarman from Brooklyn, explained later. "We expected the Heinies to blow the bridge right out from under us at any minute so we didn't waste any time getting to the other side. It didn't matter how many Germans might be there; we just wanted to get off that bridge fast. And if there's anybody who thinks he can't doubletime 400 yards, he's got marbles in his head."

Rushing up the winding stairs of the right tower, T/Sgt. Joseph Delisio of New York City, the third platoon leader, broke in on a Jerry machine-gun nest on the second floor, expecting a fight with the two-man crew who had been spraying the advancing Americans. Instead he found the two Jerries meekly waiting to be captured. Mike Chinchar, aided by S/Sgt. Anthony L. Samele of the Bronx, and Pfc. Artus Massie of Patterson's Creek, W. Va., got the same result in the left tower. The



Sgt. Alexander Drabik is credited as the first Yank to set foot on the east bank of Rhine at Remagen.

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Jack Jorden of Dallas, Tex., looks over one of the jet ME-109s shot down by the American ack-ack.

lone German manning the machine gun there surrendered immediately. They sent him back across the bridge with a PW guard and threw his machine gun into the Rhine.

Meanwhile, the three armored engineers had cut all the wires on the west and center spans of the bridge which prevented electricity getting through to set off the caps on the 40-pound charges the Jerries had planted on the bridge's crossbeams under the decking. Then they made a dash for the far side to cut the main cable which controlled the entire demolition set-up. When they found it, it was too heavy to cut with their small pliers. But Sgt. Eugene Dorland of Manhattan, Kans., solved that problem by riddling the cable with three well-aimed shots from his carbine. Then he went back to hunting other demolitions along with his platoon leader, 1st Lt. Hugh Mott of Nashville, Tenn., and S/Sgt. John Reynolds of Lincolnton, N.C., the other two engineers.

They found one 500-pound TNT charge set up with time fuses near the north railing, about two-thirds the way across the bridge. It had not exploded, even though the cap went off. Across the board-covered railroad tracks was another charge which had been set off just before Able Company started across the bridge. That blast knocked out one of the main diagonal supports on the upstream side of the main arch, destroyed a section of the bridge flooring and left a six-inch sag at the damaged pier point.

"Both piers had 350-pound TNT demolitions in them which hadn't been set off," Lt. Mott said. "The Germans had enough stuff in that bridge to drop it right to the bottom of the Rhine but we were lucky. The one heavy charge that didn't explode had either a faulty cap or something was wrong with the explosive itself. Besides that, before we started across, one of the cables to the main charge had been cut in two, evidently by a million-to-one direct hit by our artillery."

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One of the most striking incidents of the first day's action on the bridge was the way German snipers opened up on their own men who had been taken prisoners. As each batch of PWs was led across the bridge, a storm of sniper fire from the surrounding hills swept its ranks. Several were killed.

THE Ludendorf bridge, literally, found it hard to stand up under its newly-acquired importance. Its demolition-weakened spans strained under the massive weight of heavy tanks and supply trucks which rumbled across it day and night. Two of its overhead supports were severed by enemy artillery fire and 23 other hits, none serious, were scored on other parts of its frame work. Hit-and-run German planes, making their first large-scale appearance on the Western Front since the Ardennes breakthrough, made almost daily attacks on it, none of which were successful. Railway guns were also fired at it but they, too, failed to land on their target. Floating mines were directed toward it, necessitating the use of a special squad of GI sharpshooters on each span to fire at any object floating down the Rhine.

Among its other claims to lasting fame the bridge was probably the best anti-aircraft-supported bridge in the world during its 10 days of glory. As soon as the bridge was captured, ack-ack crews were rushed to the crossing area to ward off enemy air attacks. The self-propelled and heavy gun units set up on the zone of action are believed to have made up the heaviest AA concentration ever assembled in such a small area.

Four JU-87s made the first attack on Ludendorf the day after its capture by the Ninth Armored. All four were shot down. From then on, the Jerries used everything they had to try to knock out the bridge and isolate the American forces east of the Rhine. They used jet-propelled ME-109s, 190s and even obsolete Stukas but none of them succeeded in hitting the bridge. Of the 381 German planes which attacked Ludendorf during its 10 days of military importance, 114 were claimed destroyed by our ack-ack units, with 33 others seriously damaged. The prize haul was a jet ME-262 which was knocked off by a 90-mm. gun crew with a pre-cut fuse.

While German air and artillery tried to put the finger on the bridge, American engineers

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worked around the clock to keep it in shape for heavy traffic. The 276th engineer battalion built a double-story, double-truss Bailey bridge on the site span on the west bank which had been leveled by American airmen and partially repaired by German engineers.

As one engineer put it, "We were just fugitives from the law of averages while we were on that bridge." They were under direct fire and frequent shell fire, varying from 50 to 250 rounds daily and including everything from 88s to 380s. Many were killed; many were seriously injured. But they didn't stop.

After a week of the heaviest duty it had ever experienced, Ludendorf was given a rest. Starting March 14, troop, truck and tank traffic was routed over ponton bridges built across the Rhine to keep pace with the expanding area of the American bridgehead. But the engineers continued their repairs, readying Ludendorf for the resumption of two-way motor traffic and, eventually, railroad traffic to haul heavy supplies to First Army forces advancing east of the Rhine.

On the afternoon of March 17, Lt. Col. Clayton A. Rust of Seattle, CO of the engineering battalion, was directing his men in their repair work on the bridge. They were making the light repairs while a railroad engineer unit worked on the heavy repairs. Col. Rust was standing in the center of the bridge when he heard what he thought was a rivet shearing off.

"It was like a rifle shot," Col. Rust said. "Then I heard another popping noise behind me. The bridge was shaking and dust was coming up through the vibrating flooring. I realized what was happening and started running toward the west bank. But it seemed like I was running up hill. Then there was a time lag and I came to under water."

When Col. Rust regained consciousness, after having been hit on the head by falling debris, he was flat on his back under water, with a heavy beam pinning him down. He was unable to move. Just then the other end of the bridge slid into the water, releasing the beam which had him pinned down. He struggled to the surface, grabbed a three-by-twelve plank and floated downstream until he was picked up by a rescue boat. He believes he was under water less than a minute when the settling span saved him from almost certain death. But his troubles were not over. The boat upset just as it neared a ponton bridge, throwing him back into the water. Exhausted and injured, he was unable to prevent the current from carrying him under the ponton bridge. Fortunately, he was not trapped beneath it. When he came out on the other side, a soldier standing on the bridge grabbed him and hauled him to safety. After treatment for minor bruises, he returned to the bridge site to direct rescue work.

WHEN the bridge collapsed at 1505 hours, almost 10 days to the hour after its capture, scores of engineers were thrown into the water. Several were pinned beneath the wreckage and drowned. However, prompt rescue work by other engineers, together with ack-ack crew men and passing soldiers, cut the fatalities to a minimum. In all, the engineer battalion suffered about 100 casualties, most of whom had only slight injuries.

T-5 Leo E. Morgan of Sheffield, Ala., was driving an air compressor off the west span when it collapsed. He stayed in the vehicle as it slid slowly down the sagging span. It landed near shore in shallow water and Morgan was able to drive it back up the beach. T-5 Bernard V. Perozzi of Nicilaw, Calif., had a somewhat similar experience only he didn't have his own vehicle to ride down on. When the center span started sagging, most of the men tried to scramble up its slanting side to safety. But Perozzi simply grabbed a tilting vertical beam

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and hung on to it until it slipped into the water. Then he swam to safety.

The oddest story of the entire accident was the way one engineer saved 12 men of his squad simply by dropping a plank on his foot. Ten minutes before the bridge collapsed, Cpl. Dewell D. Smith of San Francisco, an assistant squad leader, broke his toe when a heavy plank he was carrying slipped from his hands and hit his foot. The squad leader, Sgt. Oda L. Sharp of Maysville, Ky., helped Smith to an aid station. With no supervision at the moment the 12 men in Smith's squad decided to screw off the bridge approach for a quick smoke. Two minutes after they left the bridge, it dropped into the Rhine.

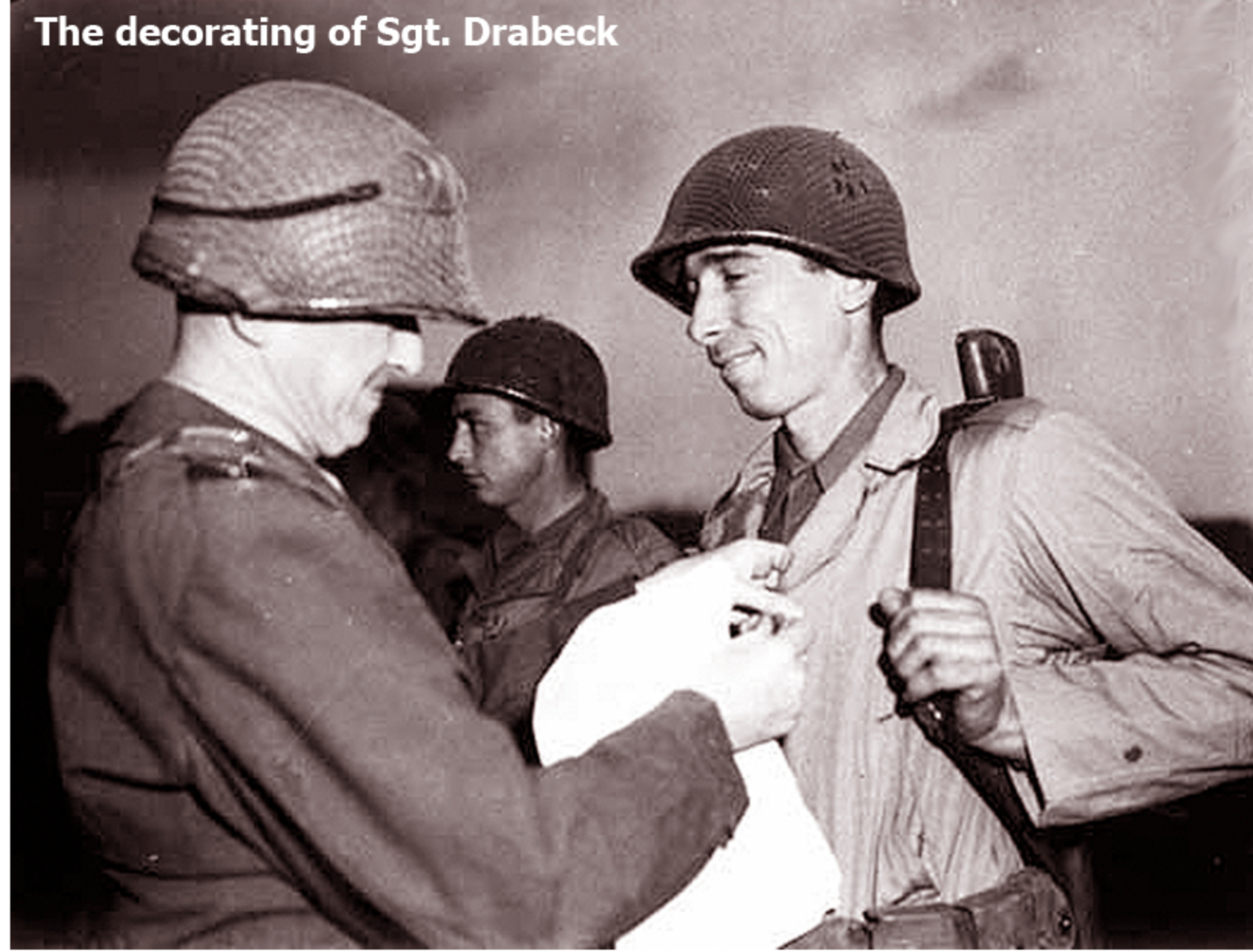
No official explanation of the collapse of the Ludendorf bridge has yet been issued. However, some engineers believe that it was a combination of the damage done by the German demolition on the day it was captured, plus the gradual weakening caused by the vibrations and the weight of the traffic it carried.

The German blast, although it failed to destroy the bridge, did knock out one of the upstream trusses. That threw the weight of all the heavy traffic and the deadload on the still intact downstream trusses, except for a small amount carried by the already buckled top cord of the damaged truss. Oddly enough, that little bit, which merely served to support the fourth corner and maintain the bridge's balance, was the sole difference between the span standing or falling into the Rhine during its 10 days of use. Vibrations, resulting from concussion caused by near hits by enemy bombers and the firing of our own artillery, caused the previously buckled top cord to snap completely under its load. This theory is supported by the fact that the bridge toppled on its upstream side when it collapsed.

Although four German engineering officers have been executed by the Nazis for their failure to destroy the bridge, it seems now that they may have been the victims and we the beneficiaries of a rare stroke of luck. The several hundred pounds of dynamite removed from the bridge was enough to destroy it, according to our engineers. It is possible that the lucky hit by our artillery, which severed the cable to one of the main charges, may have been a deciding factor since it cut off the electrical current which would have set off other demolitions. That, coupled with the fact that the damaged bridge withstood heavy traffic during the critical early days of our Rhine bridgehead, indicates that luck was on our side.

But all the Monday morning quarterbacking on the cause and effect of our unexpected crossing of the Rhine can't dim the importance of the village bridge at Remagen. During its 10 days of military importance, the Ludendorf bridge made up for a life-time of playing second fiddle to other bridges across the Rhine. It may not rate many lines in German history books, but the Ninth Armored Division and other units which crossed the Rhine on its weakened spans will never forget Ludendorf.

The decorating of Sgt. Drabeck



(image added)