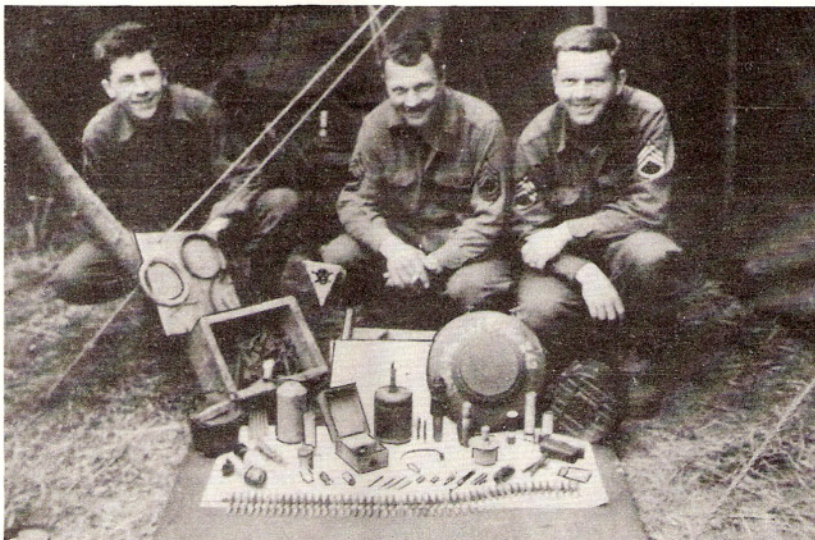


NORMANDY
CAMPAIGN

We pitched our tents in, near, or under the hedgerows, and operated in support of the XIX Corps then under the leadership of Major General Corlett. We did road maintenance and mine clearance, and operated gravel pits. The Luftwaffe paid us visits nightly, and sometimes during the day, but our Air Corps ruled the skies and we were thankful. It's a very unpleasant feeling, having bombs dropping on you from out of the skies. When they strafed, it was even more horrifying. We were easily convinced that our foxholes should be nice and deep.

We were young and eager then, full of push and vinegar. Every bit of German equipment we found we turned in to the S-2, Captain Kasten. He had so much useless stuff around him that he resembled a German salvage dump at times. We didn't find anything of great importance those first few weeks; the krauts were not leaving that kind of stuff around just then.



BRIQUEVILLE, FRANCE. JULY 1944
Tec/5 Deavers, T/Sgt Aidt, and S/Sgt Wilson of the S-2 S-3 Section, with collection of German mines, grenades, booby traps, machine gun belt, etc.

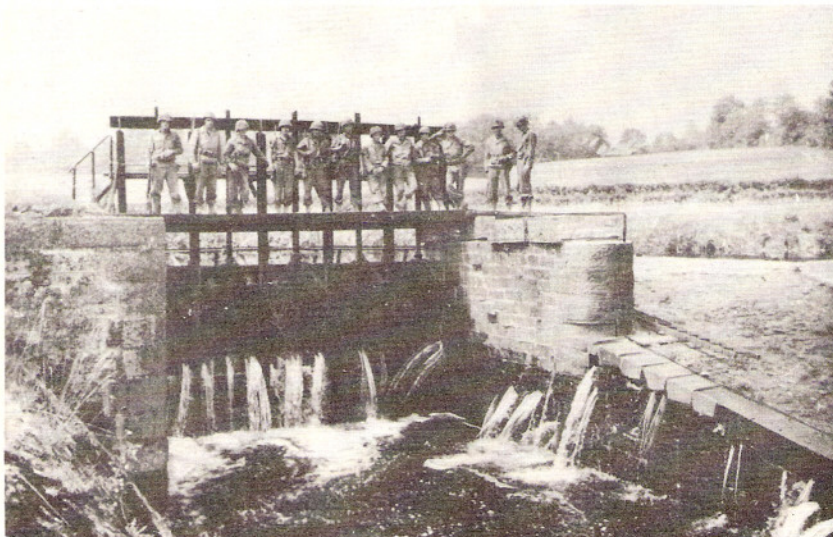
At first, the people of Normandy seemed hostile, and we got rumors of G I's being poisoned with food given them by the civilians, so we didn't try to strike up friendships. Then the children started with their requests, "Cigarette pour Poppa?" and "Avez-vous de chocolat, de bon-bons?" The effects of the German anti-allied propaganda were soon overcome.

"A" Company received the first really important assignment. They were given the job of helping to seize, repair, and operate the locks on the Vire River. The purpose was to assist the 30th Infantry Division in its initial operation. They had to cross the Vire and advance. Lt. Konecky's first platoon was given the job.

On 6 July 1944, at 1200 hours, the platoon moved into an assembly area in the vicinity of La Forest. In the early afternoon of the next day, Lt. Konecky, Sergeant Gray, Corporal Bithell, and Tec/5 Theriault went forward with the Infantry to look over the locks. They were subjected to small arms fire, artillery and mortars, and were pinned down for over two hours, but all came back. A second patrol went out a few hours later, but they too were forced to return without reaching the locks. In the evening a third patrol got through. They saw what was to be done, returned and reported their findings. The first set of locks was then seized near Airel, France. The remainder of the platoon was brought forward, the locks were repaired and put into full operation. A watch had to be maintained twenty-four hours a day, raising and lowering the gates as the military situation demanded.

At 1800 hours, 10 July, three FW 190's strafed the area around the locks. The crew on the .50 calibre Machine Guns returned the planes' fire, and had the supreme satisfaction of seeing one of the planes trailing smoke and flame. It disappeared over its own lines before it presumably crashed. Coulter, Ahlberg, King, and Quagliari, who manned the guns, felt very proud of themselves indeed.

Lt. Konecky then led a patrol consisting of S/Sgt Link, Sgt. Gray, and Sgt. Tupper, in an attempt to reach the second set of locks at La Meauffe. Heavy fighting in this sector made it impossible. It wasn't until 16 July that the patrol reached the objective and work was started soon afterward. French civilians in the neighborhood tendered the information that further upstream near Rampan, the Germans were using a submerged bridge which remained undetected by the air corps. By closing the locks, at La Meauffe, the river level was raised six feet, and the bridge was rendered useless.



LOCK GATES AND DAM NEAR LAMEAUFFE ON THE VIRE RIVER, JULY 1944

Tec/4 Jalbert, Tec/5 Osberg, Sgt Gray, Pvt Ahlberg, Tec/5 Theriault, Pvt J. Brown, Sgt Tupper, Pvt Wilson, Pfc Knight, Tec/5 Philbrick, 1st Lt. Konecky, Capt Kasten

On 21 July they reached the third set of locks at Pont Herbert. On 24 July another set of locks at Rampan was captured and put into operation. On 27 July the last locks near St. Lo, although badly damaged, were put into operation, and the platoon's job was done. Meanwhile the rest of the battalion was Infantry Reserve for the Corps, but were never committed.

Company A's first platoon had lots of tales to tell when they rejoined the rest of the battalion. They were "veterans" now. They didn't talk much about the shellings, nor did they tell how scared they were. They told us about the wounded cows which they killed and butchered, and how delicious the resulting steaks were. They told about Tec/5 Richards, who, being on guard one night, heard a sound a few yards away. He shouted, "Halt," but the rustling of the trees and bushes continued. He fired a few rounds in the general direction of the disturbance and silence reigned. The dead cow they found shot next morning also tasted very good. They said that after that the cows learned to understand English commands, but they never proved it. And they also told how happy the French girls in the neighborhood were at being liberated, and so on. But Lt. Konecky's platoon had a lot of French-speaking men in it, and we figured they must have sold the girls the idea themselves. The other men wanted to see action then.....it sounded interesting!



Around this time we started having the "gas attacks". One day a rubber processing factory was shelled, and the fumes rising from it convinced everybody that there was a gas attack in progress. The white billowing smoke, accompanied by a pungent odor, rolling across the

countryside, did look frightening. Gas masks were donned and the rumor gained momentum. After that, alarms were started without any apparent cause. Within a couple of weeks, though, the rumors ceased, and within a month or two, gas-mask containers became the favorite carry-all for toilet kits, handkerchiefs, pictures, and the like! The medical detachment had a huge chest containing equipment to be used in the event of gas casualties. It was a very heavy load, and bulky, taking up a lot of space. The medics cursed the thing, but even they hoped they would never have to use it.



The next big job we got was a tough one. Troops were pouring over Omaha and Utah Beaches, and traffic control was becoming a problem. We were in general support of the 30th Infantry Division, which at this time was holding the XIX Corps' right flank. The division had to have a new Main Supply Route, and we were to build it. There were two parts to the mission: first we had to construct one and one-half miles of new road over rough country; second, we had to improve a cart-track to make it a two-way road good enough to take heavy traffic. Technically, we had to make a Class 40 road out of a Class 6 road, and it was as big a job as it sounded.

Making a serviceable road out of the 4-1/2 mile cart-track was given to Company B. Company C was to build the new road. The jobs were fraught with difficulty. It was necessary to have a continuous flow of trucks carrying rubble for the roads' foundation. The existing roadways were bad, permitting only one-way traffic. Men had to be stationed at crucial points with radios to control the flow of traffic in both directions. To further alleviate congestion, turnabouts were constructed at intervals.

At 0100 hours on 7 July, B Company started work. With trucks from Company A, and additional equipment from the 611th Light Equipment Company, the cart-track began to take the form of a military highway. Ten miles away, in the battered towns of Isigny and Trevières, power-shovels puffed and groaned loading rubble on the dump-trucks. The trucks rolled in an endless stream to the road sites, dumped their loads, and returned for more rubble. All through the day and night, even in pitch blackout, the trucks rolled. Men's eyes reddened, and bodies grew tired, but the effort continued. Sporadic shelling by the enemy didn't make the situation any easier.

"C" Company, meanwhile, started on their road. At 0100 on 9 July, the first platoon under Lt. L. Duge, swept the site for mines, where the road was to be laid out. The carpenters of the second platoon meanwhile started making the 24' culverts necessary for adequate drainage. The third platoon under Lt. Slade arrived at the site at dawn for the first shift of road construction. First the trucks brought in the engineer paraphernalia necessary; Summerfeld matting, Hession carpet, chespalping, picks, shovels, and men.

By dark that night, good progress had been made. The carpeting was laid ahead of the forty dump trucks which spread gravel. Ditches were put in by graders from the 611th; and by 1700, the second night of operations, a 24-foot MSR was completed.

"A" Company, in the meantime, was in on the job. Two treadway bridges had been constructed by Company C's second platoon under Lt. Miller so that the gravel trucks could get through. "A" Company replaced these temporary bridges with fixed timber bridges. Lt. Del Regno's second platoon, and Lt. Bogart's third, did that job.

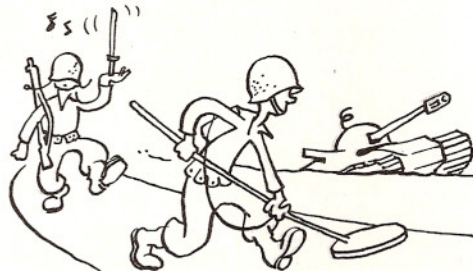
Ninety-six hours after work had started, the road was completed and declared open for two-way traffic. For six days after that, the companies kept men on duty twenty-four hours a day servicing and maintaining this MSR.

It had been a rugged job, but we had driven another nail in Hitler's coffin. We picked up a few Purple Hearts, but these were for "mere scratches" and all the men who had started the job were there to see it finished; we were still all together. There was one real freak accident. Part of the first platoon of Company C was returning from the job; just as they reached the battalion area, there was a sudden, loud explosion. The truck, enveloped in smoke and dust, brought the medics a-running. It turned out that Pvt. Robert Martin, sitting in the truck, had left his canteen cup cover, containing three hand grenades, hanging over the side of the seat. The vibration of the rough ride over the bumpy roads had eased the pin out of one of the grenades, and the thing exploded. A second grenade was set off by the blast. Damage done: two pairs of torn pants, scratches on the cans of Pvts. Joe Marusich and Martin. The boys began to doubt the potency of their grenades after that, but they also began taping the pins so that they stayed in until pulled!

We didn't have much time to step back and admire that road. There was too much to be done. The krauts had done their spring sowing early and well. Mines were everywhere. There were mines in roads, around roads, under dead cattle, and under dead doughboys. We had to clear them. There's nothing quite so nerve-wracking as mine clearance. One man walks along waving his mine-detector in the area before him....suddenly the electric impulses from the apparatus detects something metallic lying in the ground. A second man, walking in the footsteps of the first, cautiously digs his bayonet into the ground, feeling for the mine. He must be very careful not to dig too hard. The mine is then uncovered and either de-activated or removed, or else blown where it lies. There are booby traps to add to the discomfort and fear. The krauts had lots of new tricks and ways to kill, but we were careful, and we had learned our lessons well in training.

It wouldn't have been so bad if there were always mines where the detector picked up something, but there would be days when only pieces of shrapnel were found, and days when miles of sweeping was accomplished, with nothing found at all. The temptation to rush and become a little careless was always present. Then we'd hear stories of men who had rushed and we became careful again. We swept mile after mile of road, scores of fields, and myriads of twisting footpaths.

There was a stretch of road near Villieres-Fossard which had been swept previously by three other engineer units and it was reported that vehicles were still hitting mines there, a half-track being the most recent casualty. "B" Company swept it and studied the pattern as reported by mines found in previous attempts at clearance. They found three French mines and one German Tellermine still there. The shrapnel was so thick in this sector that they still couldn't pronounce it cleared with assurance, so they got a bulldozer in there and cut off several inches of road surface and swept it again, then pronounced it cleared. No more vehicles hit mines in that area.





STREET SCENE, NORTH ST. LO, BEFORE BEING CLEARED

Then came St. Lo.....

St. Lo was our big test. It was the culmination of all our training and all our experience to date. We cleared the way and opened the gates for the Allied drive to the Siegfried Line and beyond. This is how it happened:

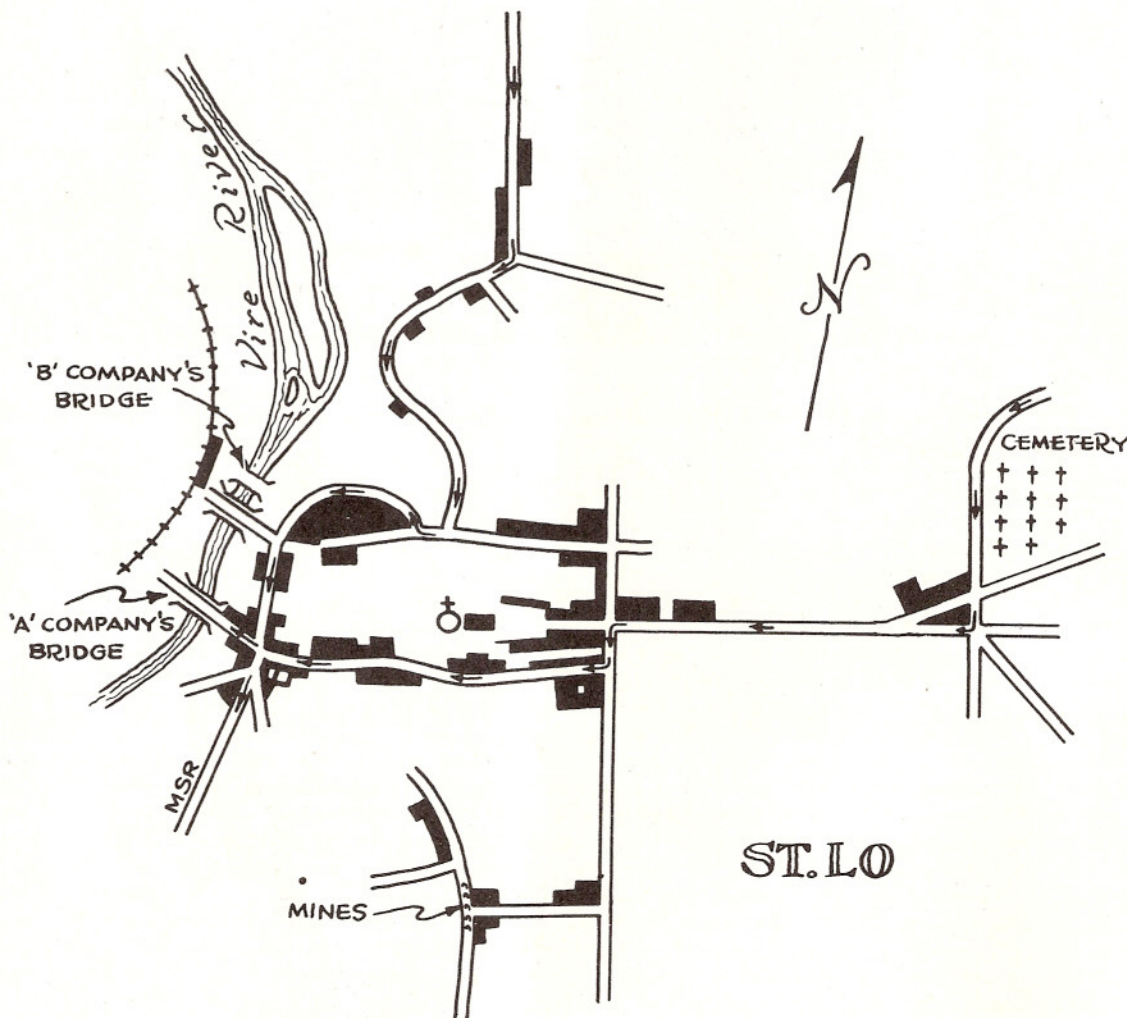
On 18 July 1944 a task force of the 29th Infantry Division took St. Lo. Lt. Col. Carter and officers from each line company, accompanied by a squad of men under Sgt. Polyfka, entered the town at dawn next day on reconnaissance. The krauts were still shelling the town and it was impossible for the bulldozers and other equipment to start work.

On Friday the 21st, two squads of the second platoon of "C" Company commenced sweeping for mines. They started three miles from the city and worked into the cemetery. They uncovered sixteen of the enemy's Tellermines and they cleared the roads of the dud ammunition that lay everywhere. "C" Company's third platoon meanwhile repaired the road. The town was untenable until the V Corps advanced, then the 35th Division which had relieved the 29th, advanced and made engineer elbow room. That attack started at 1600 on the 27th. At 1800, the Bomb Disposal Squad exploded two five-hundred pound bombs that were blocking our way, then we went in. Five large bulldozers, D-7's, and two smaller ones, R-4's, attached to "C" Company's second platoon, began to push a path through the rubble that was once St. Lo. The work started at 1900. By 2300, a one-lane highway was made to the sites where "A" and "B" Companies were to build bridges. Sgt. Boland, using two D-7's, then started on the routes through town to permit the vehicles of the 35th Division to pass. By dawn he had accomplished this. Traffic from the 28th and 29th Infantry Divisions, as well as the vehicles of the 113th Cavalry Group, began to roll through the town, our bulldozers meanwhile trying to widen the roads. One D-7 dropped into a huge bomb crater and had to be lugged out with the aid of two wrecker tanks.

"B" Company in the meantime had started on their bridge over the Vire River. Captain Oberg, the Company Commander, and Lt. Gardner of the first platoon had reconnoitered the site under enemy fire. By midnight of the 27th, mine clearance and grading had been completed. The first platoon then began to construct the bridge at 0100 on the 28th. Working with the 992nd Engineer Treadway Bridge Company and their equipment, the 110-ft span was completed by 1030 the next morning.

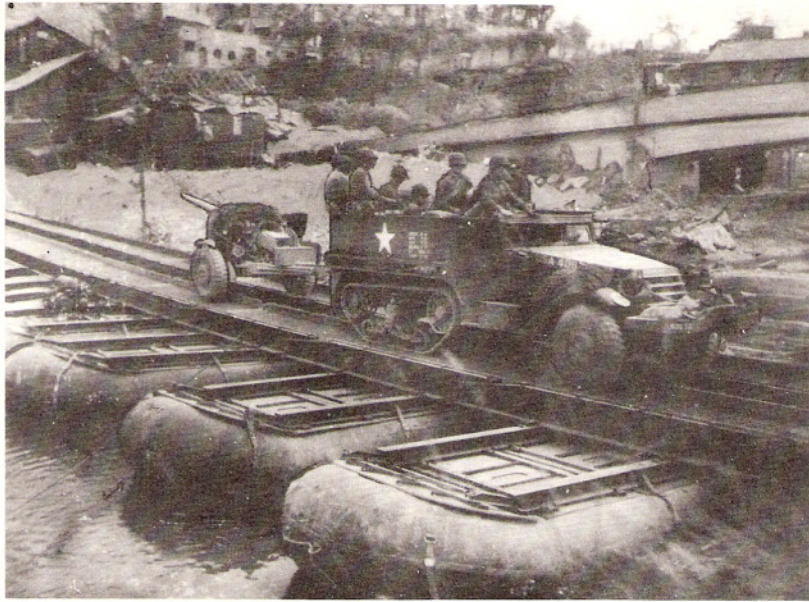
Building that bridge was no picnic. The Luftwaffe had been up in full force, and their bombs straddled the bridge site. Their flares were worse. When those fell, everyone stood stock still, and then sweated out the bombs that were sure to follow.

The third platoon provided security during the night, and in the morning took over the maintenance of the bridge and its approaches. They filled the countless bomb craters, removed the debris tossed into the existing roads, and graded them continually.

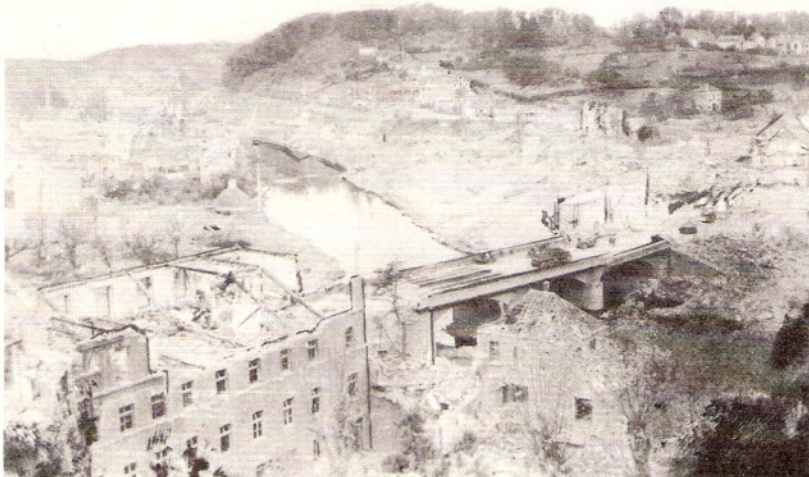


"A" Company's assignment in the clearing and opening of St. Lo consisted in the main of two tasks. They had to repair the existing bridge over the Vire River and then open up the roads through the town over the bridge, and north-east and south-west to the railroad tracks.

At 1800 hours on 27 July, the company, less the first platoon, moved into the town and started their task. Two squads from the third platoon were placed as security and captured the battalion's first prisoner. The second platoon, with the remaining squad from the third, set to work on the road, clearing rubble and removing an enemy minefield on the far side of the bridge site.



HALF-TRACK CROSSING BRIDGE BUILT BY "B" COMPANY IN ST. LO. JULY 1944



"A" COMPANY'S BRIDGE-REPAIR BY THE USE OF TREADWAYS IN ST. LO. JULY 1944

The krauts had not done too thorough a job in the demolition of the bridge. There was a 30-ft crater in the middle of the structure situated near the center pile. It was decided that 36 feet of Treadway would bridge the gap. It was necessary to construct a rectangular "I"-Beam cradle to support the treadways. The beams were pulled out of the rubble of a ruined house.

It was impossible to get the air compressor truck through the rubble-filled streets, so the men had to dig the beams in with picks. Nine picks were worn out in the process, and there were lots of blisters. At 0600 the next morning, the bridge trucks arrived at the site. In just one hour, the treads were laid, welded to the steel cradle, and two-way traffic rolled.

Here, too, bombs had straddled the bridge and here too, flares immobilized everyone for almost an hour; but the job was completed with time to spare. The next day the treadways were replaced with a Bailey Bridge. This was the Battalion's first Bailey.

Then all the companies pitched in, widening the streets of the town, maintaining the roads, and insuring the flow of two-way traffic. We had been pretty lucky in St. Lo proper; we had suffered no casualties in the town itself, but we had suffered some in getting into the town.

The Allies' drive to the east was now in full swing. The armies spread their tentacles over the plains of France, capturing whole Corps of trapped krauts in their relentless onslaught. We didn't get much rest.....we had to get going too!



It was in the trucks and in the nightly bivouacs that we talked over St. Lo. We didn't talk much about the military and tactical angles; we left that to the colonels and generals. We laughed about Ed Crone, who with his bulldozer buried about a hundred dead cattle killed in the battles around the Vire River. Those dead cattle stank to high heaven, but Crone always went back for seconds on chow. We talked about Madeleine, who was loved by the whole battalion. We talked about the Calvados and casks of whisky and brandy we quaffed. We talked about the men who were no longer with us.

That was St. Lo, and the end of our first campaign.

HEADQUARTERS XIX CORPS
APO 270, U.S. ARMY

31 July 1944.

SUBJECT: Commendation.

TO : Commanding Officer, 295th Engineer Combat Battalion,
APO 230, U.S. Army.

(Thru: C.O., 1115th Engineer Combat Group, APO 230, U.S.Army.)

It is my desire to commend highly the officers and men of the 295th Engineer Combat Battalion for the manner in which they carried out the difficult task of opening and clearing the streets of mines, debris, rubble, and bomb craters in ST LO, and bridging the VIRE RIVER. The speed with which this task was accomplished allowed highly critical traffic to pass. The enthusiasm, energy and judgment displayed by the officers and men of this organization reflects great credit on the Corps of Engineers.

/s/ Charles H. Corlett
/t/ CHARLES H. CORLETT
Major General, U.S. Army
Commanding