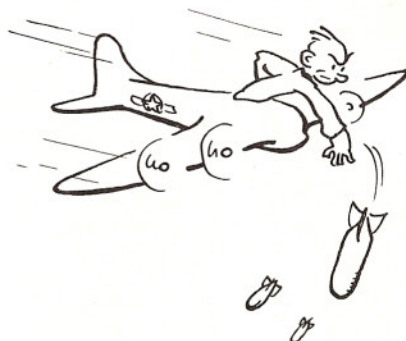


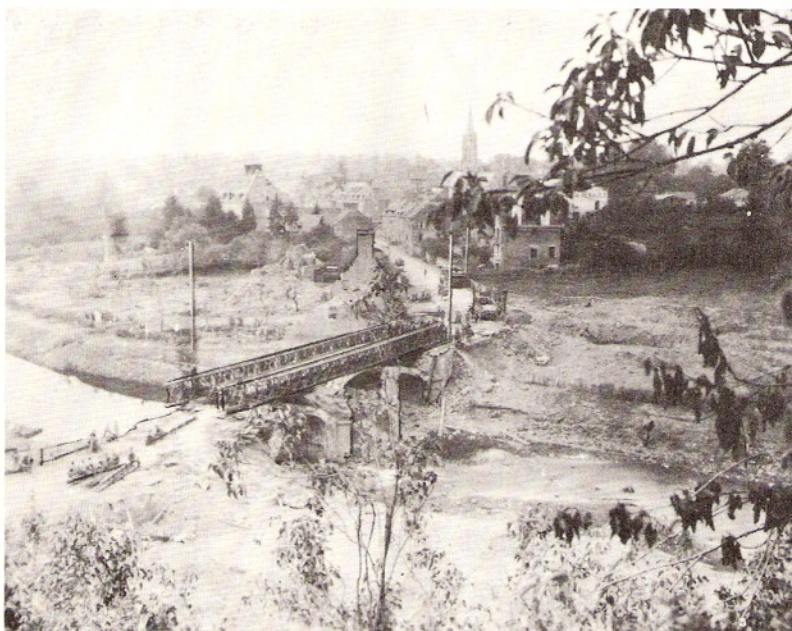
NORTHERN FRANCE  
CAMPAIGN

We didn't know what it meant, that day, as we watched three thousand airplanes drop their lethal loads beyond the Périers-St. Lo Road. It was July 25th, and a bright summer's day. We stood or sat or lay on the ground watching the wave upon wave of bombers pass over. We saw the smoke markers streaking down, we felt the hot blast of the bombs as they exploded, we saw three planes fall. It was the awe-inspiring beginning of the breakthrough - the race across Northern France, Belgium, Holland, into Germany itself. We didn't know then that there would even be a breakthrough.



We were still in support of the 30th Infantry Division. When the great bombardment ended, the Division advanced to Canisy, despite the toll that bombs which had fallen short took. There, the 2nd Armored Division passed through them. When we reached Tessy-Sur-Vire, just 11 miles south of St. Lo, we thought we'd be stuck there for a while. The 2nd Armored had been delayed temporarily, but bitter fighting ensued, and the Yanks took the town. Then we were called in.

"B" Company built a bridge over the site of the existing bridge which was damaged. It wasn't an easy job. The approaches were mined, and the mines were booby-trapped, but they were removed without mishap. At 0600 on 3 August, the first and the second platoons had put in a Bailey Bridge; at 1500 hours, traffic began to flow over it.



"B" COMPANY'S BAILEY BRIDGE AT TESSY SUR VIRE. AUGUST 1944

Company C, meanwhile, had her hands full. They put in a ford across the Vire River at another point. They, too, had to clear mines before they could reach the site. The ford was constructed with the stones that materialized when Tec/5 Porter pushed down a barn. South and east of Vire, "C" Company, also put in culverts in case the one-lane bridge in the 30th Division MSR got knocked out. Choking dust and bottomless holes made that a tough assignment. At times it seemed that the whole battalion was hauling rubble to fill in those shell holes so that the road could be made passable. It was a grueling 24 hours, but the job was done with time to spare, when time was our greatest advantage.

"A" Company was assigned two principle tasks in the clearing of Tessy-Sur-Vire: they had to clear all the mines on all the routes into and out of the town, and then remove the rubble and road blocks within the city limits. We learned a lot of lessons on this job. We cleared one road of mines and marked it accordingly. Then we pulled a wrecked jeep off one of the road shoulders. A vehicle passed over the spot where the jeep had been, and was blown up. The krauts had sown mines under the wreckage of the jeep where it was impossible to detect them because of the presence of so much metal. It was on the same road that we first encountered dead animals being used as road blocks. Mines, all over which were activated, were either sown beneath the carcasses, or



directly attached to them with trip wires. Our experiences here and our methods of handling them were later published in the First Army's "Battle Experiences."

Pfc's Pearson and Giglio, both truck drivers, spent an uncomfortable day ducking sniper fire here. Despite their protests, nobody would believe their hair-raising tales of near-misses, but they were vindicated the following morning, when five enemy prisoners were captured in the church steeple.

For the battalion, it was now Move, Move, Move. From 9 August until the end of September we never stayed in one bivouac for more than three days. Sometimes we moved twice in a single day. Life seemed to be a perpetual digging of foxholes, pitching of pup-tents, and riding bumpy roads; but instead of death and destruction all around us, there were the French. We had liberated them and they showed us how happy they were. They tossed apples, pears, and tomatoes to us. When we stopped, people pressed bottles of cognac, wine and cider into our hands. Girls kissed us. We felt like heroes. We were beginning to experience the joys of war too. God knows they are few and far between!



We threw the cigarettes and candy from our "K" rations out to the children and people lining the sidewalks; it was like a huge carnival - the war seemed worthwhile after all. Oh, those sweet, adorable mademoiselles.....how appreciative they were.....!

We went around the south of the Falaise Pocket. The whole German Seventh Army was above us there. Looking at the situation map in the battalion CP, we felt rather nervous. We hoped the krauts would not pull anything out of the air! The war seemed to be going too well. At this rate, we thought, we would be home by Christmas.



It had become a war of movement. The cruel slogging battles of the hedgerows in Normandy were a thing of the past. We no longer measured advances in yards, but in miles. One day we went from Vire to Gathemo, 12 miles; then next day to Mortain, 15 miles; next day to Ger, 7 miles, and so on day after day. When there was a job to be done, one company stayed behind to do it while the rest of the battalion moved forward.

At L'Onlay L'Abbaye, "A" Company stayed behind to build a Bailey Bridge. Starting at 0800 on 15 August, the second platoon began sweeping for mines from the MSR to Mortain, through Ger, France, and finally completed its job at L'Onlay L'Abbaye, a total of 35 miles. Here they pitched in and assisted the first platoon in the construction of the fifty-foot bridge.

Traffic was already passing over the rubble of the demolished bridge, so that it was necessary to build the new bridge fifty feet back from the edge of the canal so that vehicles could pass. With the aid of construction rollers the bridge was completed and rolled into place, delaying the flow of traffic for only fifteen minutes.

The following morning, the second platoon was detailed to clear the rubble from underneath the bridge. This debris was acting as a dam, and the resulting rise of water threatened to overflow the banks of the canal. While the men worked there, a pretty little French girl promenaded back and forth over the pedestrian ramp



built on the side of the bridge. Naturally, the boys looked up. Soon a vehement argument was going on as to what the girl was wearing underneath her dress. Pvt. Alfred Bucco settled the question by disconnecting the air hose from his jackhammer, and with one well-directed blow, found that the answer was - nothing!

At Ger, "C" Company had to put in a Bailey Bridge. The first platoon began to clear an approach for the by-pass when they hit a heavily concentrated anti-personnel minefield. It took blood to clear that field. Three men died, six were injured. The bridge went in before the deadline. The second platoon built the bridge under harassing fire by kraut 88's and intermittent visits by the now almost invisible Luftwaffe. The third platoon finished its clean-up job in Ger itself, then the whole company moved into the battalion concentration area.

At 0100 on 20 August, it was black as pitch, and we began our longest road march yet. The XIX Corps was being shifted one hundred and fifty miles to the east and north. By this maneuver, the Falaise Gap was closed; our First Army linked up with the Canadians, and most of the German 7th Army, without its Panzers, was trapped. The artillery then took over and proceeded to annihilate them. We moved on.



"C" COMPANY'S BAILEY BRIDGE AT GER, FRANCE. AUGUST 1944

It is quite impossible for six hundred men to get up at 0100, roll their tents and blankets, eat breakfast, load onto a hundred vehicles, line up, and start off on convoy, all in pitch darkness. Nobody, however, knew that this was impossible, so we went ahead and did it anyway! We travelled 60 miles before dawn broke. No dawn ever looked more beautiful.



DAWN OVER NORMANDY

The drivers had to feel the vehicles ahead - they couldn't see them. The convoy crawled and bumped, trucks leaped out of the night going in the opposite direction, and nobody was quite certain just where the Germans were.

Only the Armor had gone through before us, so that to the overjoyed population we met, we were still new. They waved and threw kisses and food at us, and our sleepless night was soon forgotten. We completed that 150-mile trip in 14 hours.

We stayed in La Loupe one day, then moved to Louisvilliers, 15 miles further on. We stayed there one day too, and so it went, on and on. When we ran out of gas we stopped and when our gas was replenished we moved again until we once more ran out of the precious liquid. It was a grind, but we liked it. The people were friendly, and we could say "Bonjour" which was all that was necessary for the development of temporary friendship - or love, if you wanted to go that far.

We would have liked to have been in Paris when she was liberated. According to the radio there were big doings in that town! But we were at the Seine River at Mezières, where there was a big bridge to be built. "A" and "C" Companies got this job, while the rest of the battalion was in bivouac in a wood near Breval.

The bridge site was the scene of a former German ferry. "A" Company got there first. They built a mine-boom about five hundred yards upstream from where the bridge was going to be. The krauts had conceived the natty idea of floating mines down the river to demolish the bridges put in by our army engineers. The mine-boom was so constructed as to detonate any mines of this nature before they reached the bridge. Lt. Del Regno's second platoon did that job in just four hours. Lt. Konecky's first platoon meanwhile held the far shore in case the krauts took it into their heads to return. Nobody could quite understand why they had beat such a hasty retreat. They just seemed to go hell bent for leather to their Siegfried Line and let the rest of Europe go.

The 992nd Treadway Bridge Company brought up their equipment, and by dawn on 29 August, "C" Company had started work. Eating breakfast in the middle of the night was becoming a habit.



There were actually two bridges to be built. The river at the site was split by an island, 300 yards wide. The two resulting channels were 384 feet and 324 feet wide respectively. This was to be our biggest bridge yet.

We started out with one strike on us. Heavy rains had made the bridge approaches into quagmires. Rubble had to be hauled and dumped along the road so that the heavy equipment could get to the bridge site. Then we constructed rafts to carry the heavy D-7 bulldozers to the island and far shore. Work was going on at the two approaches and in the center at the same time. By 1430 that day, enough floats were assembled to span the entire 708 foot gap. The first bridge was completed by 1400, by the third platoon under Lt. Slade. Then the first and second platoons cut the road across the island, trucks from all companies meanwhile hauled rubble so that a fifteen-foot road was completed on the island by 1800. The third platoon meanwhile put in the second bridge.

On the far shore, Company A's second platoon removed a large old tree which stood squarely in the center of where the road was to be. The farmer on the far shore was very unhappy. His big shady tree was gone, part of his fence went, and even a few feet of his back garden became a road. It took him a few hours to recover his equanimity, then with a shrug of his shoulders,

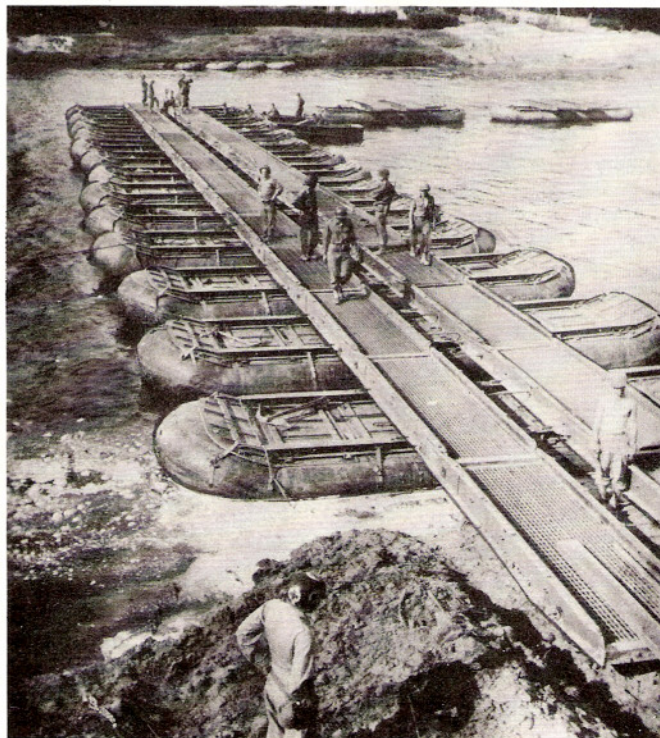
he said, "C'est la guerre", and dragged out the cognac to give refreshment to the men who had wreaked havoc on his property.

C'EST LA GUERRE!



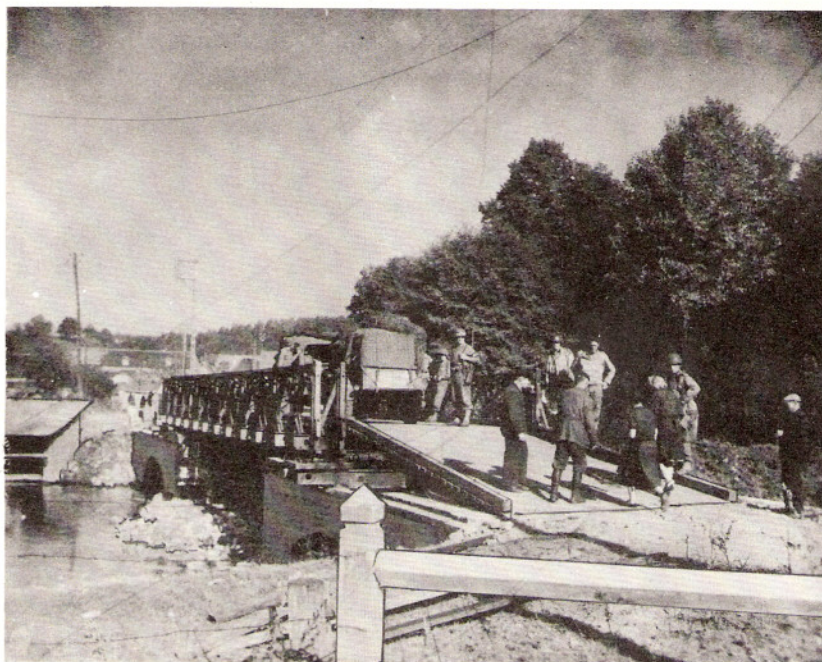
By 2200 that night the bridges were finished. We were all rather tired, but very proud of ourselves. For weeks afterwards engineer outfits were writing to the "Stars and Stripes" telling how they had built the biggest bridge across the Seine. One outfit said that they had built biggest, and they had Dinah Shore there to inspire them. Phooey. All we had at our bridge was Lt. Col. Carter, who wasn't exactly there for inspiration. Our bridge was bigger than any of their's!!!

Finishing the bridges wasn't the end of the job. The rain started to fall and the river rose two and a half feet, threatening the abutments. Extra equipment stood by, trestles were installed around the abutments, and we awaited eventualities. But the bridge held, and the 82nd Engineers took over the job of maintenance. The battalion got together again near Noailles.



BRIDGING THE SEINE AT MEZIERES, FRANCE. AUGUST 1944

On September First, we went into support of the 79th Division. It was the beginning of another race for us. In one day we moved 65 miles to Don-pierre, and the next day we went another 65 miles to Sameon on the Belgian border. Prisoners were picked up all along the route. While on security patrol, Sgt. McGinley and Lt. Duge of Company C had a scrap with three kraut paratroopers. "C" Company came out on top. S/Sgt. Barriault, whose job is looking after the chow for Company C, got his combat experience guarding the jeep while the fight went on.



"A" COMPANY'S BRIDGE AT BONNERVILLE, FRANCE. AUGUST 1944

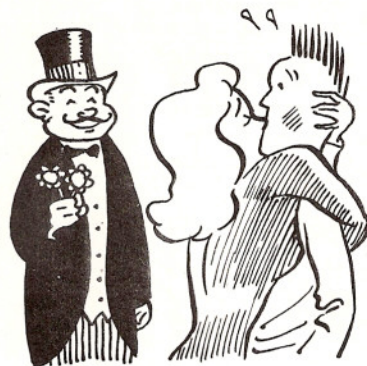
The medics will long remember the motor march to Sameon. Their 1-1/2 ton personnel-carrier was the last truck in the convoy, except for the heavy equipment following immediately behind them. In the middle of the black night the vehicle following the medics bumped into them. They stopped to inspect the damage. It was slight, but when they got started again, they took a wrong turn and lost the convoy. They came into Cambrai at about 0300, and it was deathly quiet. Captain Swirsky, the medical officer, took off in the parts truck to find the right route while Captain Freedman, the dental officer, held the remainder of the vehicles in the town. The only sign of life was a Frenchman who lumbered up out of the darkness to offer "Des filles et beaucoup champagne" to whoever wanted it. Nobody wanted it just then; they were too preoccupied wondering where the krauts were. Captain Swirsky returned an hour later and the little convoy took off in the general direction of Sameon.

From the back of the truck, S/Sgt Salganac, Tec/3 Costello, and Tec/5 Fling peered into the darkness around them and prayed. There they were, unarmed, and leading a convoy of heavy equipment into territory that was not only strange, but perhaps not yet liberated! Captain Swirsky and Captain Freedman climbed the signposts at every intersection, shined their shaded flashlights on the signs and prayed that there were no snipers in the vicinity. Everybody scanned the roadside for signs of a recently passing American Army. They looked for used "K" Ration boxes or cigarette butts or recently laid telephone wires. They looked up at the windows for a sign of the French tri-color.... but there was nary a sign.

It was 0430 when the jittery section crept into Sameon. Tec/4 Weiner and Tec/5 Condeluci, who had taken turns driving the truck, were well-nigh exhausted. They knew when they had arrived because a "C" Company guard leaped onto the running board, shoved a rifle into Captain Freedman's ribs, and asked for the password.



There was some reward for the exploit. At 0700 the last of the vehicles had been camouflaged, when into the field came the mayor of Sameon and his two daughters, followed by a sizeable crowd. The girls presented the dentist with large bouquets and kissed him, while the mayor made a speech. (It was just that Captain Freedman happened to be the first officer of the American Army that the mayor spied, so he got the credit for liberating the town...) The radio that morning announced that the krauts had made a counterattack into CAMBRAI!



The main body of the convoy had had its adventures, too. At a town called Rosy, Major Munch, the S-3, radioed back that the lead vehicles of the battalion had passed through a column of Germans. Flares up forward indicated that the Germans were perhaps attempting to assemble some strength in the area. The convoy was alerted to the possibility of ambush along the route. Within a half hour, a column of 30 to 40 krauts, moving parallel to the road, was observed about fifty yards away. All they wanted was to give up, but we were too busy going places to bother, so we passed them without firing a shot or saying a word. We got helpful advice from the FFI on this trip. They told us where the usable bridges were, and the best routes to follow. They did a swell job for the swiftly-advancing Allied army.

A new Corps order then placed us in support of the 30th Division. All possible haste was to be made to the east, but everybody was out of gas. The 113th Cavalry Group and the Second Armored Division had the highest priorities on the supply available so that we had to stay put for awhile. We welcomed the breathing spell. We guarded the critical bridges in the area, got caught up on vehicle maintenance, and washed our clothes.



"A" COMPANY'S BRIDGE AT HOUGAERDE, BELGIUM. SEPTEMBER 1944

"A" Company caught up with us here. They had replaced two Treadway Bridges with Baileys over the Somme River near Fulliers for the 79th Division. The two bridges were necessary because here too, there was an island in the middle of the river. They did the whole job in just five hours. The first platoon built the first fifty-foot span, while the second put up the other ninety foot span. Both were unorthodox according to the book, but they filled the requirements, and got the doughs across.

The most difficult task was the removal of the existing Treadway Bridges which were no longer needed, now that the Baileys were in. The second and third platoons did that job on a particularly dark night. The boys did not remember much about those bridges, because there was so much cognac and so many girls available in the vicinity.

This was the end of our second campaign. We could now wear two battle stars on our ETO ribbon. Our battle casualties numbered sixteen.

