

257th Engineer Combat Battalion [October 1944 – May 1945] draft 8/22

Prepared by Vincent J. Bellis, Jr., July 2016

This is a story of two soldiers. Maj. Vincent Bellis commanded a battalion of combat engineers. The other was a soldier under his command. Vincent Bellis joined the US Army in 1939 [US1941], before WWII began. He had studied civil engineering at the University of Alabama. Skill in civil engineering was sorely needed by an Army expanding in anticipation of war in Europe. Bellis was commissioned as a 2nd Lt. and sent to Camp Pendleton, Washington for officer training in 1935.

The name of the soldier under Bellis' command is unknown but he wrote an account of his service in the 257th Combat Engineer Battalion from the time of his arrival in England in November 1944 until his unit participated in the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp in May 1945. The soldier's account was sent home to the wife of a soldier in the unit and a copy is available on the internet.

The soldier's account appears to have been transcribed on a typewriter from another source, possibly handwritten. The typewritten account is presented in the form of a 'letter home' addressed to: "Heillo Darling". It is dated June 5, 1945 GERMANY. The account professes; "So much as I can possibly remember I will try and put down on paper in this letter." The 'letter' consists of 15 single spaced pages and contains details of dates and places well beyond anyone's capacity to 'remember'. The letter was posted on a military history website in 2010 by M.D. Bradley of Ypsilanti, Michigan who says that he obtained it from his grandmother. Bradley stated that he believed that the letter was written by someone in the unit other than his grandfather [Merrill Miller, Williamsport, Pa.]. Copies may have been distributed to members of the unit. This letter will be referred to as the Bradley letter.

I believe that the original author of the letter may have been an officer in the unit who was attempting to prepare a draft of a unit history. The narrative seems to be from the point of view of an ordinary soldier, not an officer; however, the writing style and vocabulary are that of someone with some writing skill. Possibly the person who transcribed the letter embellished it. This seems unlikely as the account seems to be based on 'first hand' observation by an actual participant.

The narrator must have kept, or had access to, a diary or official reports. Unit movements seem to be accurate as is the spelling of most place names (many in a foreign language). Although place names are usually accurate, at least one stands out suggesting the work of a transcriber. I had difficulty finding 'Honersheim' or 'Konersheim' on a map of Germany. When I compared the Bradley letter to dates given by my father, Vincent Bellis, Sr. [Maj. Bellis, above] it became clear that "Honersheim" was actually a phonetic rendering of Hamm-am-Rhine; Likewise, "Saralle" – Saarlbe, and "Sarreinsming" – Saareguemines. Were these spelling errors of the original author or were they introduced during the transcription? Was the original author also the transcriber?

To my knowledge, no unit history has ever been prepared for the 257th Engr. Combat BN. Despite very minor differences, accounts of Bellis (letters home) and Bradley (letter) are in agreement. Bellis gave details of daily life but was prevented by censorship from revealing his location. Bellis' descriptions are those of an officer who gave commands while those of Bradley are those of someone who had to carry them out. Bradley gives details of location that were absent in the Bellis letters. Now, for the first time, it has become possible to combine the two accounts (Bradley locations) with (Bellis events) to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the WWII history of the 257th Engr. Combat BN.

Training

Vincent Bellis rose in rank from Lieutenant to Captain between 1940 and 1944. He trained several combat engineer units while stationed at Ft. DuPont, Ft. Bragg, Camp Breckenridge, Ft. Jackson, and Camp Gordon. By the autumn of 1944, allied armies were moving across France and an end to the war seemed likely. Training was over and all troops were needed for the impending invasion of the German fatherland. Capt. Bellis was promoted to Major and made a battalion commander. He was stationed at Camp Gordon, Georgia in late October 1944 when his unit was ordered to board a train destined for embarkation at the port of New York. The train stopped for a brief time in Salisbury, NC where USO personnel distributed writing paper and food.

Embarkation for Europe

The battalion was aboard ship in New York on November 1. Ports (portholes) were closed and the ship 'blacked out'. The ship left New York on the 2nd and experienced a rough crossing. Men were tossed about in their racks and had a hard time sleeping. It was hot and stuffy below deck.

England

The ship made port at Avonmouth (Bristol) England on November 11, 1944 and at 1 a.m. the next morning the soldiers entrained for Henley-on-Thames. From there they were transported by truck to a "mud hole" called Nettlebed. Bed was a wooden crate with strips of tin serving as slats. The mattress was a burlap bag filled with straw. The soldiers had not been fed since leaving the ship. They were housed in "cold, damp corrugated iron buildings called Nissen Huts." Five days later they moved, on foot, to a former RAF camp at Howberry Park near Wallingford, Oxfordshire. Howberry Park, a former country estate, is located adjacent to the Thames River. The riverside site provided a good place to practice building bridges. The unit spent six weeks training at Wallingford before receiving orders, on Christmas Eve, to proceed to Southampton for transport to France.

Major Bellis described the Nettlebed accommodations as brick or Nissan Huts. His quarters were equipped with a bath, toilet, and stove. The unit moved to Howberry Park on November 16. They spent the next six weeks building Bailey Bridges and found time

to explore surrounding cities including Oxford, Reading, and London. Maj. Bellis divided his time between training and attending “business meetings” in Salisbury and London. Presumably these meetings were planning sessions. The allied invasion involved ever extending allied supply lines against ever shortening Nazi supply lines. The Germans mined and destroyed roads and bridges as they retreated. Engineers were needed to keep transportation routes open and material flowing efficiently to the front. Engineers could be pressed into guard duty to protect captured infrastructure (utility plants) and facilities (factories and warehouses).

Crossing the English Channel on Christmas Day

On December 22, Maj. Bellis reported that he was waiting for “an important call from London.” The phone call came and on Christmas Eve 1944 the unit departed for Southampton where they boarded LSTs for the channel crossing. Bradley described a “miserable Christmas on the water”. Maj. Bellis wrote to his wife that he was assigned to the Executive Officer’s Quarters on the LST. He had an excellent Christmas dinner of turkey and trimmings. His private “stateroom” was equipped with an “air foam” mattress.

Arrival in France

The LST landed men and vehicles at Cherbourg, France early in the morning of December 26. They were moved by truck several miles to the southeast to Barnesville-Carteret, a beach town on the Normandy coast. Here they were attached to the 156 Inf. Reg. (Coastal Security) to help contain 15,000 German soldiers occupying Guernsey and other channel islands. These Germans had been bypassed during the Normandy Invasion. Maj. Bellis described his CP (command post) as a shell-damaged house. His billet was in a hotel with no heat. On January 1, 1945 he celebrated the New Year by taking a bath with water heated on an oil drum stove. The men listen to German propaganda on the radio.

Journey across France

On January 6 Maj. Bellis and ten of his men and staff made a 250 mile trip to Paris. It was very cold. Bradley and the rest of the men also left Barnesville on this day. They were moved over 500 miles to the east in a long convoy, about twenty men to a truck. The men rode for four days in trucks and often slept on the ground at night. They passed through Versailles and glimpsed the distant Eiffel Tower from the outskirts of Paris. Maj. Bellis spent the night of January 8 in an old French barracks recently vacated by Germans. He continued east and on January 11 rejoined his men at a temporary location near Lunéville. Here his battalion was notified that it had been attached to the 1101 Combat Engr. Gp., XV Corp, US 7th Army headquartered 40 miles north at Morhange. Bradley commented; “When we arrived [in Lunéville] it was all they could do to keep from crying at the pain in their feet and faces.” Maj. Bellis’ men arrived with frost bite and trench foot. He arranged that sleeping bags, shoe pacs, socks, and winter clothing to be issued. A few men were hospitalized. Bellis noted that the temperature had reached minus 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

The only incident that affected the convoy during its 500-mile convoy across France on slippery, muddy, icy roads in freezing weather was when one 2 ½ ton truck with trailer rolled over and down an embankment within 2 miles of the bivouac. The vehicle carried 4 tons of explosives, but no-one was hurt.

Command Post at Morhange

On January 12 the BN moved about "three hours" (24 miles north) in open trucks from Lunéville to his Group HQ at Morhange. Here Maj. Bellis established a semi-permanent CP. Maj. Bellis attended "meetings" nearby in Nancy. Boudrey, one of his officers, visited Nancy for dinner one evening. During the remainder of January the engineers were employed in maintaining supply routes. Nearby towns included Diuse, Saarebourg, Chateau Salirs (Chateau-les-Nancy?), St. Avoird, Falquemont, Bendsdorf (?), and Gross Tanquin.

On January 14 Bellis moved his battalion into "a square of apartment houses". The houses had been bombed and strafed but the soldiers used cardboard and tarpaper to keep the weather out. "My office is the most elaborate one I've ever had. It is about 20 feet square - oil burner, large oak desk, lockers, bookcases, etc., left by Germans." "Have shoe pacs for most of the men now, are a fine thing - heavy wool socks with innerliners, am getting a field coat this week . . ." "An ordinance outfit near us let us hook up to their generator so we have lite in BN HQ." "took a sort of bath on New Years Eve and have had my clothes on most of the time since . . . val pac full of laundry . . . no water for washing, only drinking". "My French lessons are over just as I was getting along. They speak German here."

On 17 January Bellis wrote; "We are using a captured German stove and it has so dam many doors on it, we still haven't figured it out. When we want it to burn, it won't. and when we want it to bank, it burns like hell." On Jan. 19 he wrote that he had gone on an inspection trip of his battalion, previous nights wind, snow and rain had made roads muddy and telephone poles were down. He had "a high iron" installed on the front of his jeep to prevent having his head cut off by wires stretched across the road. He had time to "stop in at a decontamination and shower setup in a shed along the road, took shower in luke warm water, put on clean underwear, and thru away my dirty, feel like a new man now, even washed my head."



Fig. 1 Maj. Bellis Morhange, France, January 1945
"High Iron", rope wrapped, installed on jeep.
C.P.C 344 E USXV ...TS PANZER (?) 7A-257E HQ-?
7th Army, 15th CORP, HQ 257 Engineers

On 19 January he wrote; "Found a dead German under some boards yesterday as some of my men picked up some boards while working on a bridge, have buried two in cellar of house I live in – just returned from chow – full tummy, clean clothes and will now go over to my room, start a fire and read a bit before I go to bed."

On January 20 he described the ravaged landscape hidden under a blanket of snow as yellow brick buildings with red trim, brick walls with iron fences and gates, pine trees. The next day Bellis wrote that he was having his jeep "modernized"; splash plates for the sides, a box for maps and mess gear, wire cutter on front, etc. "I have a long trip to make today as soon as it is finished."

On January 23 he sent one officer and six enlisted men to Paris on a 48-hour leave. On 24 January he noted; "Have quite a setup now. We have our own electric lite plant, bank, shop, barber shop, P-X, telephone exchange, radio station, fire pumping equipment, maintenance shops, welding and blacksmiths shops, shower unit with pumps, alarm system. I feel like a mayor."

On January 27 Bellis stopped work at noon, took a bath, and accompanied (Capt.?) Beaudry to Nancy for dinner and drinks. Got back at midnight. It was a long drive in a open jeep, the temperature in the teens. ". . . some officers complained because I had all sides and curtains removed from vehicles, so I took the top off mine, and now they don't dare come see me – afraid I'll make them do it too. Pretty smart aren't I, or perhaps dumb. [Bellis ordered that vehicle coverings be removed so that occupants would have a better warning of strafing aircraft.]

On February 2 one of Maj. Bellis' recon jeeps was strafed by three German planes. Two officers had been in a jeep with a driver. They had not seen the plane because the jeep top was up. The two officers 'bailed out' as the plane began its dive. The driver just kept going but was not hit.

"The snow has melted and water in running everywhere." "The war offers a person a lot they could never get any other way, but it also, at least for those at the front takes a lot away that I doubt that a man can ever regain. I hope I don't stay that long."

February 4. "They call the short haircut the Bellis haircut now. Seems to be getting grayer all the time. More nicknames I've just learned about. Me, the knife, Collins the fork, Lt. Hatch the lip, and Lt. Morris the brow, sounds like a bunch of gangsters." "issued the European ribbon to all men the other day, Personally I think that they are a bunch of nonsense, but they are good for morale. Understand we are authorized to wear a battle clasp on it."

February 7 "I have some detached troops and one of the company cmdrs. came in to get some help. When the day comes I don't have to do other peoples worrying for them I'll be happy. Dam it, why can't people use their own good judgment, common sense, and initiative? Yes, I hear that song "I Walk Alone" and like it too. That's what I do."

He was depressed also by seeing refugees pulling worldly goods in wagons and never seeing anyone but soldiers. He notes that he gets “tired sometimes” and “eats out officers”. He wants to “take a day off soon and rest up”. “Only four things I insist on in the battalion and have it checked by officers and NCOs. Hair cut short, shave each day, no mustaches, and clean socks and feet washed each day.”

The Morhange CP was located about 25 miles southeast of Metz, France. Metz may have been a major supply location as Bellis wrote on February 12 that he would soon “be going there in a few days to get things I need”. It is likely that plans for the impending Rhine River Crossings were being developed in Metz.

Bradley wrote that the on February 20 the battalion moved to Saaralbe (outskirts of Saareguemines and closer to the border with Germany). They had never actually been to the front but had been strafed at a rock quarry that they operated. He stated that his biggest memory of this place was the 20 consecutive days he spent up to his knees in mud digging ditches. “When the 15th of March came along we found that we had been attached to the 6th Armored Division for direct Engineer Support. They welcomed the chance to participate in the fighting as a respite from their labor building roads and digging ditches. Three days later, on March 18, they entered Saareguemines on the German border. “It was here that we received our first glimpse of Germany. We were patrolling the roads, blowing up mines and removing obstacles . . . “ “We watched the 6th Armored move by on its way to the breakthrough of the Seigfried (sic) Line.”

Maj. Bellis wrote on the 21st that he had set up his BN HQ in a set of Officers Quarters that had been taken from the French in 1939. It had most recently served as a German HQ. “Evidently they (Germans) didn’t want to give it up either as there is a row of eight graves next to our latrine . . . one 17 years old and one was 18.”

Bradley’s unit went forward with the 6th Armored. Their job was to ‘keep the road open, but the 6th met little opposition and went through Germany “like a dose of salts”. The engineers never caught up with the armored division and so were returned to the 1101 Engr. Gp. During the return trip, “We could see the artillery behind us shelling a town just ahead. We were fortunate that there weren’t more casualties among us, but “B” Company suffered a terrible blow up near Kaiserslautern, when two jet propelled planes and two Messerschmitts bombed and strafed their convoy killing four men and wounding eight others.” They entered Germany at a place Bradley called Ppffenhofen (Frauenburg?). The first large town was Zweibrucken. They entered Zweibrucken, only 16 miles northeast of Saareguemines, just four hours after the 6th had taken it. . . . it was still burning and the smell of charred buildings and roasted flesh was still discernible in the dust and smoke laden air.” “. . . the sight along the road where we were parked, of hundreds of the once mighty German Wehrmacht, ingloriously being marched to the Prisoner of War Stockade. They passed in seemingly endless streams for a couple of hours . . .” “This rime we passed through Homburg, through which we had to clear a patch with our bull dozers because of the rubble strewn through the streets.” “The next town we came to was Landstuhl. Every house had a white flag.”

“From here we went to the town of Kaiserslautern . . . roads leading from it were so cluttered up with German equipment and dead German Soldiers that we had to backtrack and go around another way.” “That night we stayed in (the schoolhouse) in a little town called Olsbrucken.” “The following day we . . . tried once more to catch up with the elusive 6th and the even more elusive German Army.” “We spent the night in Kersheim-Bolanden in a railway station.” “The next day they rejoined their battalion at Offstein. While in Offstein they first experienced a visit from ‘bed-check-Charlie.’ Men dug their first (fox) holes since Camp Gordon.

On February 21 and 23 Maj. Bellis wrote that 160 bags of mail had arrived. He had been complaining in his almost daily letters that he had not gotten mail from home. Christmas packages were included. “You packed the things I liked, olives, nuts, etc. was glad of the crackers – we don’t get them over here . . . Oh Yes, that cheese, too, FINE.”

24 February: “Radio is working tonite but all I can get is a German propaganda station. Actually it is OK, better than our Army station. They play more popular music and it is comical to hear the stories they tell of their victories.” Bellis has a shower unit built in a trailer. “I have had two showers so far this year and can’t see why I should not take another. “ “I sometimes wonder if we smell. I don’t notice it (much).”

February 27: “I’ll be spending our wedding anniversary in Nancy, probably sleeping.” “Had a man killed yesterday thru an officers carelessness . . . “

March 1: “Am going out on a minefield job this P.M. to see how they are coming.” “One company had a bridge . . . I’m sending them a letter of commendation.” This must have been in Saareguemines because he mentions taking some ‘jugs’ from a ceramics factory and that he is sending his son a letter ‘from Germany’. His letters during this time mention many ‘souvenirs’ that he is sending back to his family in Penn Yan, NY.

March 9: “Was up the way where one of my companies was putting in a bridge. Built it blackout and came back blackout and I’d gladly given a month of my life no to have had to do it. The artillery flashes lit things up once in a awhile but that only blinded us more. They were using what is called “Monty’s Moonlight” . . . shoot aircraft searchlights up against the low clouds . . . light is reflected down and lights up the country for the infantry.” “German civilians . . . would shoot us in the back if they thought they could get away with it.” “Was up the way this morning to a town about Penn Yan size just vacated. In fact mortar fire was still coming in. I walked around and looked. Drug stores, clothing stores, people’s homes and all as they had left them.” “Am going to look at a gravel pit that I think I’ll open this P.M. Roads go to hell fast in this kind of weather, want to be prepared.”

March 10: “Am afraid the time after the war is over before we come home or go to the Pacific will be the time with the long count. Am making plans now to keep my men busy with schools, etc. Am going to teach them anything they want from grade school English to welding and photography.”

March 11: "Had another rough bridge to build last nite and went up to watch the company work . . . the front was pretty. Flares, tracer bullets, shell bursts and searchlights. Looked like Forth of July celebrations they used to have at the fairgrounds." "According to 'Stars and Stripes' a lot of troops will go directly to Pacific Theater from here."

March 13: "Lost my colored troops, thank goodness. Had had two companies of them for about three months. Caused me more trouble than I could get work out of them. Used them on roads in rear areas. Now have 150 Frenchmen (civilians) . . . aren't a hell of a lot better . . . have to monkey around with payrolls, like W.P.A." "Took an extended trip into Germany other day looking over the situation, when mortar shells started falling in ditches just as we passed. I decided we had better return. Jerry was in the hills on both sides and was laying in on our jeep."

March 19: "I'll tell you about the judge in Morhange some day. You'll laugh."

March 21: "My trailer is on top of a hill overlooking a valley with two towns in it, both burning. We just took them . . . prisoners coming in great numbers . . . poor looking lot . . . Do you remember Lt. Rust at DuPont? He was on the bridge that went down over the Rhine (Ludendorf?). We are extremely busy." Maj. Bellis then describes burning towns that they allow to continue burning; "We don't give a damn if it all burns." German soldiers want to surrender; "Three wanted me to take them prisoner but we were too busy and sent them to the rear alone." "My battalion fared well. At least they drank free beer and again I was too busy and didn't get any. I did pick up my carbine as my pistol is to dam inaccurate for good work. The hills are beautiful and turning green."

March 22: ". . . am waiting for my staff and cmdrs. to gather, have a meeting and go to bed. Have been on the move since early this morning. . . . the Rhine is a beautiful river. Hope I get a chance to put a bridge across it shortly – tomorrow we will rest up and reorganize."

March 24: "The last few towns we have come thru were not defended and are in good shape. An old assignment from 1940-1944¹ will come in very handy in the next few days and I will have accomplished something that has been done only once before in the history of the world and that during war." Bellis says that German soldiers are surrendering in large numbers; "The Battalion has been bothered by them, finally we just pointed to the rear and sent them back alone."

¹ [Bellis had built pontoon bridges during Army maneuvers in 1940-43.]

On March 23 the German Army withdrew back east of the Rhine River and destroyed the Rhine River bridges.

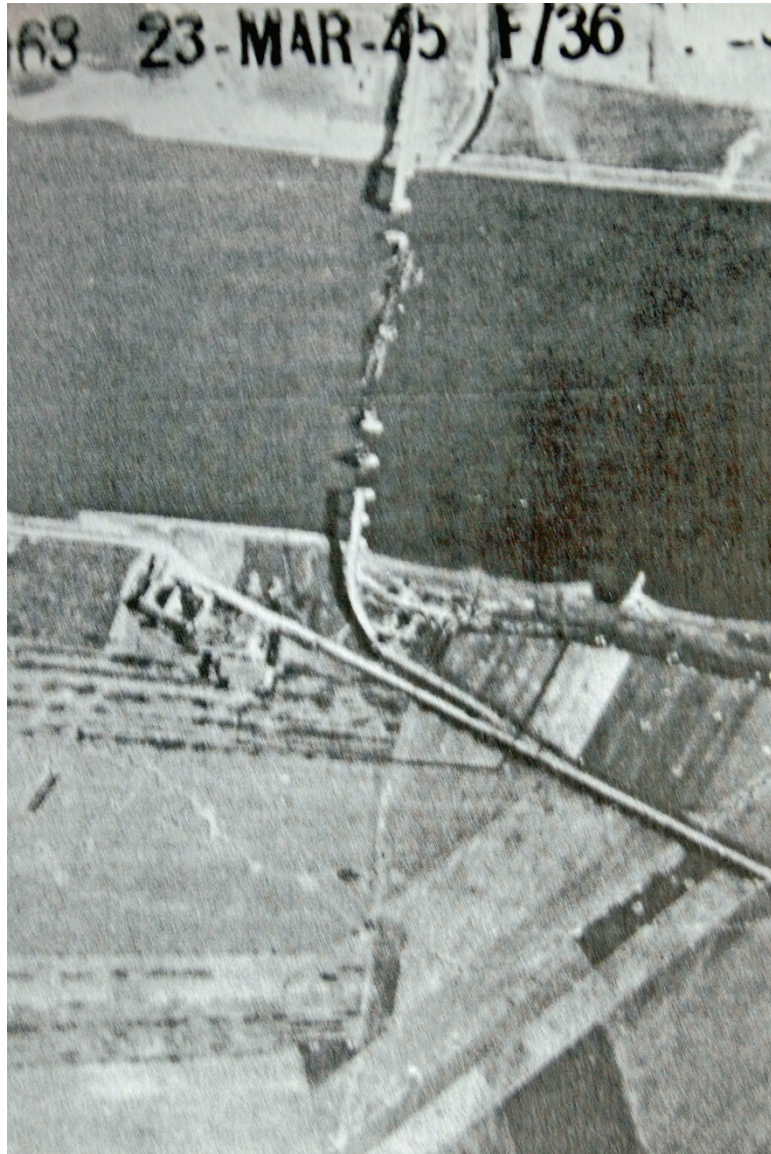


Fig. 2 Rhine River bridge at Gernsheim bombed by retreating Germans.

Bridge across the Rhine River Bradley Perspective

On the 24th we moved again, this time to Honzerheim (Hamm-am-Rhine?). That night a rumor circulated that the company was to participate in construction of a bridge across the Rhine river. The next night the rumor was confirmed. The company would help

build an M-2 Heavy Treadway bridge, something that they had never done before. The 1019th Engineer Treadway Bridge Company had hauled the bridge and equipment around from river to river. Stories circulated among the men. They had heard about other bridges built under combat and the many casualties that were sustained. This night they now waited on the west side of the Rhine to start building a bridge. They watched enemy planes being shot down by Ack Ack fire. The Germans dropped flares in an attempt to intercept their convoy and find American artillery positions set up to soften the other side of the river. This artillery bombardment was intended to make it easier for the 45th Inf. who would establish the beachhead. The sky was so full of flares and artillery that one could have read a newspaper. "After the fireworks died down we entered the town of Eich". Just as they entered Eich an "88 (Old Screaming Meemie) shell exploded about 50 yards away. Everyone jumped from the trucks to seek shelter. When, after several minutes, no more shells landed, they set up a bivouac. "We hadn't been there long when they called us back to the bridge assembly area to learn how to put the bridge up. Grumbling and sleepy eyed, we loaded on the trucks and drove back to the bridge company." "There we parked the trucks and broke up into crews." As the crews approached the bridge site they experienced 50-Cal. Bullets, exploding shells, and shrapnel. "We were so scared that we didn't give a damn anymore". They went up to where the bridge company was and quickly "learned all there was to know about the bridge." German planes attacked at least twice more. They later learned that five of their pontoons had been rendered useless by bullet holes. After completing last minute bridge training, they returned to their bivouac (Eich?). When dawn came they watched as P-47s strafed and bombed the "town across the river" (Gernsheim). Then they watched the infantry come marching down the road in single file.

"It wasn't long after this that we also got our orders to prepare to move up to the bridge site. Taking only our weapons and gas masks . . ." "As we arrived at the river we turned up it North, along a high levee, along which we had T-70s the famous tank destroyer, deployed being used like artillery, firing point blank into the town across the river." "We started construction on the bridge about 10:00 A.M. on the morning of the 26th of March, and under cover of the most beautiful air protection, of about 24 P-47s, and completed its construction by 6:00 A.M. the following morning." "We had set a record of length of bridge built and time taken to construct, and no one had been hurt." "We marched back to our bivouac outwardly exultant . . ." "Without wasting any time we loaded up on our trucks again, and pulled back into Honzerheim (Hamm-am-Rhine) for a well deserved rest." "The total length of our bridge was 1164 Ft. . . ." "Once rested, we moved across the Rhine and set up a CP in . . . Birkenbeck, about 30 mi. south of Darmstadt. Here we spent Easter (Sunday, April 1, 1944). The 4th of April we moved to Dieburg.

Bridge across the Rhine River

Maj. Bellis Perspective

March 27: I built a bridge across the Rhine river. I was up there a few days before looking the situation over, crawling around on my belly and hiding behind trees on our side. The enemy had emplacements all along the far shore about 1200 feet away. I even saw a little white dog they had for a pet. Now 48 hours later I am back in my trailer, happy but tired as hell. My men all came back today, too. We left most of our stuff in the rear and went up streamlined as I didn't want to be bothered with a lot of excess equipment. We did it in record time. Would have finished in nine hours including approaches if we had not been delayed for 6 hours by lack of some equipment that had failed to get thru. I spent the night before with my S-2 and S-3 at an advance C.P. in a small town on the near shore bank [Hamm-am-Rhine, VJB Jr. July 2016]. We had plenty of activity. My troops were in a field a short distance back and the enemy air activity was heavy. My troops were strafed and bombed but we had good air protection and shot down 5 Jerry planes. I was up all nite checking plans and checking the men. Didn't have to worry about their digging in. Had a hell of a time finding anyone after the first bomb. They dug so deep that some of them even went below the water level and had water in their holes and slept in it during the nite and loved it. I established my C.P. in the mayors house and moved him out. Not many shells landed in the town as Jerry was firing over it to get to our troops and ours were firing across the river but it sure was noisy. My old friends, the 2nd Chemical Mortar Battalion were using 4.2 mortars to help clear the far bank. I had my troops in readiness behind a dyke protecting them from mortar and small arms fire 'till I got the word to start construction. It finally came, and I told my D-7 dozer operator to drive it over the dyke and start the approach. As he had no protection, I couldn't send him unless I exposed myself so I stood up on top of the dyke to see if any fire would be drawn on us. I'm telling you the truth that was about the worst 5 minutes I've ever spent. None came, so I brought the men up from cover and they worked like hell. I was extremely proud of them. Also proud that this battalion was picked for the job, was due to the fact that I have four years with pontoons¹ so it all ended up O.K. Even if I am no longer with them (pontoons), all that time was not spent for naught. Just got in awhile ago and am preparing to move during the nite. We keep well forward and now that we have Jerry on the run keeps us moving and little chance to rest.

¹ [Prior to this time, Maj. Bellis had building Bailey Bridges across France and Germany. His prior experience with pontoon bridges was used to cooperate with the M-2 Treadway Company in building the bridge at Hamm-am-Rhine.]

WAR II LETTERS FROM V.J. BELLIS, SR. TO BARBARA BELLIS



Fig. 3 M-2 Treadway Bridge across Rhine River at Hamm-am-Rhine, March 26, 1945

Bridge across the Rhine River

Barbara Jahn Perspective

When dawn came on March 26 Bradley, on the west bank of the Rhine, watched as P-47s strafed and bombed the “town across the river”. During this bombardment Barbara Jahn, age 19, sheltered in the basement of her home in Gernsheim. “Ein paar Soldaten schanzten sich entlang der Bahnstrecke ein, die übrigen verteilen sich in Gernsheim. Wir alle sind im Keller versammelt. Zwei Nachbarsfamilien, meine Mutter, meine Schwester und ich. Lina, das Polenmädchen, das in der Landwirtschaft unseres Onkels beschäftigt war, ist noch oben im Zimmer. Dorthin hatten wir sie seit einigen Tagen versteckt, damit sie nicht auch weggebracht wurde.”



Fig. 4 Gernsheim after the bombardment of March 26, 1945.

In Gernsheim many houses were damaged by artillery fire and others burned including the town's two main churches and city hall. Sixteen citizens, from the age of three to age 68, lost their lives

March 27 (Bellis, in Hamm-am-Rhine) "Think every time I see someone killed how useless it is for Germany to fight on and makes me madder at the S.O.B.s. I am senior officer in this town. The burgermaster came to see me last night to get a permit to have a midwife come in nite if a baby were born to an expectant mother. I had doc check to see if she was pregnant, and signed it. Now he wants to know if his volunteer firemen can go out if a fire occurs at nite. Last nite a house burned and they were afraid to go out on account of our orders they can only leave their houses between 0800 morning and 2000. . . . They seem nice and human but I think of the dirty way they have treated other countries and our men and makes me feel to hell with them. Can't hurt an expectant mother or baby yet tho, not that hard". . ."after the job I've just completed I'm ready now (to come home). It was an extremely important job and if I do say so, well executed. Feel now I can say I've done my part."

"Yesterday I went into an old factory that the Germans had used as an Engineer dump figuring to put a guard on it. Didn't figure anyone was around so left my carbine in my jeep. Opened the door into the office and there were seven German soldiers. I grabbed for my pistol which I had in my shoulder holster under my field jacket and got my hand

in between inner liner and jacket instead of on pistol. However when they saw me go for it they all jumped for a wall and all lined up with their hands over their heads and I finally got my pistol out, broke their rifle stocks and sent them on their way to the P.W. enclosure. After we bypass a pocket of them they snipe at us till their ammunition is gone then throw away their guns and turn themselves in. One infantry officer told me they shoot them if they turn in without a rifle and ammunition as that means they have shot it all up." . . . "We are pushing them fast now, looks like end may be coming soon to organized resistance." . . . "Figure river crossing job has paid my way over now."

March 29 (Bellis- Aschaffensburg?) "My trailer was finished last night. I am installed in it and quite comfortable. We moved and it is now parked on the lawn of a courthouse in a little town. It's on a hill and I look out the window down the main drag" has had a radio installed in his jeep and has a radio operator. He can now keep in contact with his CP and with his companies.



Fig. 5 Maj. Bellis in his 'office'.

March 31 (Bellis) "The Chaplain tells me tomorrow is Easter Sunday." "We will be moving on up the way tonite." "I lost the best officer and two of the best NCs I had yesterday." Their vehicle had hit a mine and was blown up. "I had to go into a town the other nite to take over. No traps around. And they are organized for a revolt. I had the mayor brought to me at the town hall and told him I'd hold him personally responsible for anything that happened. Broke the stocks out of all arms that I collected in the town and left. These civilians are bad. The can and will cause a lot of trouble if we don't control them." "Did I tell you my first trip cross the Rhine was in a Penn Yan boat?"

April 2 (Bellis): We were on the move again and pulled into a bivouac here . . . big open woods . . . weather cold and wet.

April 3 (Bellis): We are making plans to move on up tonite but don't think I'll start out 'till early in the morning. Don't like to put my trucks on the road at nite blackout unless necessary as there are a lot of mines lying around and the dam civilians and infiltrated soldiers like to lay them out on the road at nite. They also toss hand grenades out of upstairs windows into open vehicles going thru towns. Houses are built right up to the streets. I always watch the open windows for movement and my carbine ready. A lot of stuff is done by kids 8-14 years that they trained to work in area after we pass thru."

April 4 (Bradley): In Dieburg. Here they removed road blocks, mine fields and filled road craters.

April 5 (Bradley): "On 5th April we moved up to Bad Orb the site of one of the infamous German Prison Lagers, or Concentration Camps. Here quite a few of our boys had just been liberated by our armored division. In the morning (6th) they built a bridge at Motgers near Bad Bruckenau, about 150 mi. east of Frankfurt. This took three days . . . one of the finest fixed bridges built by an engineer outfit. Their squad was left at this location with little supervision. They 'latched on to some Benedictine" and proceeded to "get a bit mellow". One morning they joined a convoy headed for "Saal, a fair sized town about 250 mi. south-west of Erfurt." During the trip to Saal the convoy got lost and ran into a roadblock that had not been cleared. They believed that they must have gotten ahead of the armor and infantry. Much of the trip had been in cold weather and snow could be seen in the tops of mountains.

April 6 (Bellis): "Bivouaced in woods with raining intermittently and dripping from trees rest of time."

April 8 (Bellis): "weather warmed up a bit today, but in this high altitude it gets cold at nite. . . . Capt. Bessire is my S-3 now. My last one, Capt. Coote was killed along with M/Sgt Meyer and T/Sgt Ward badly wounded about two weeks ago. On a recon they hit a mine and blew them and vehicle to hell.. Lost Lt. Barrs, wounded about the same

time . . . men getting letters stating that Lowell Thomas told of us building the bridge across the Rhine.” . . . “I’ll tell you a funny story the nite we built the bridge over the Rhine. I had my forward C.P. in a town on the river bank [Hamm-am-Rhine?] and had my battalion and two bridge companies back about two miles in an open field [Eich?], brought them up under cover of darkness, plane activity of enemy heavy and I have always had to raise hell to get them to dig slit trenches before, but they were strafed a bit on way in and as they got off the trucks each one had a shovel and started digging. About time they were finished a bomb landed in the middle of them and they grabbed shovels and started digging deeper. I was looking around for Co. Cmdrs. About 3:00 in the morning and it would make you laugh. Some men were as deep as five feet, in fact down to where water was in the bottom and they didn’t mind a bit.”

April 11(Bellis): Bivouacked in a green meadow with trout stream. They used dynamite to “fish and break the monotony”. He had an “honest to goodness” shower “yesterday” in a captured S.S. barracks. Censorship has been lifted. He can now state that “resistance in Aschaffensburg was fanatical.” “I had three dozers and men in there clearing rubble out of the streets to let our units get in.”

April 12 (Bellis): They are resting in a beautiful valley . . . put up a volley ball court and men playing baseball and football . . . captured a Champaign cellar, each man issued one bottle. They were waiting for Bed Check Charlie. The previous night he had strafed onto the bank on the other side of the stream. Bellis won’t let his gunners fire at Bed Check for fear of making his position known.” ‘B’ Co. got hell shot out of it several weeks ago while on the road. Its my best company.” “I feel satisfied with having done my job anytime that I was sent back. Don’t want to leave the BN, tho as there is no one to take command. Collins can’t do it.

April ? (Bradley) In Saal. “It was here in Saal that “Bed-Check”, gave us our biggest scare. A convoy was moving along the M.S.R. about 11:30 that night and Jerry was out looking for something like that. And these Joes driving the trucks in the convoy being in a hurry had their lights on. ‘Bed-Check’ came swooping across our bivouac, and started strafing them . . .”

April ? (Bradley): Our next move was to Rattlesdorf about 10 miles north of Bamberg . . Bamberg had been taken the night before and was still burning. They had passed through Coburg where there had been “quite a bit of fighting” . . . “in these German towns, hardly one building was tenantable. . .”

April ? (Bradley): “It was here that we learned that we had been attached to the 45th Division for work and Security, that is guard important Military installations.”

April 17? (Bradley): In Rattlesdorf. “We left Rattlesdorf on a cold morning at 5:30 A.M. and arrived at a little town called Lauf, on the 17th April.” This must have been within the outskirts of Nurnburg since that city was being heavily shelled by artillery. Overhead planes were bombing and strafing the city. The attack had begun about two hours

earlier. They were in Lauf only a short time when they made contact with the 179th Inf. Div. They moved to a position about a mile and a half from [north] the city and waited while their officers attempted to find the infantry CP so that they could set up a liaison. They had been on a road leading directly into the city center from the north. Now they were ordered to a town west of the city (Rothenbach). This was flat land and a good place from which artillery fire could be directed on Nurnburg. The Americans occupied the remains of houses while the German residents sheltered in the basements.

April 18? (Bradley): They were assigned to the 3rd. Battalion, 179th Inf. forward CP. This was in Mogeldorf, a suburb of Nurnburg. Three tanks came into the CP to repair a 90mm canon and asked for hand grenades. The engineers gave them all they had and then fashioned substitutes from half pound blocks of TNT, nails, and set with a short fuse. They moved up 1000 yds. Into Mogeldorf.

“. . .the Major came over looking for me and told me we had finally gotten our orders.” They were turned over to a Lt. in the C.I.C. section and posted at the Nurnburg Post Office which was on fire. They (one squad of 7 men?) were left to protect the Post Office. They felt abandoned and believed themselves to be within 50 yds. of the front line. In the morning they discovered that they were the only men left in the town. They eventually established contact with a platoon CP and returned to duty.

Bradley describes the final taking of Nurnburg including the “impressive ceremony that we saw when they “blow the large Swastika . . . and replace it with the American Flag.”

April 18 (Bellis): Near or in Nurnburg. “We are in what could be called a waiting period right now. We are attacking a city of 400,000 and are bivouacked a couple of miles out of town. The artillery behind us is throwing everything its got – sounds like freight trains going over our heads. I can look out my window of my trailer right now and see our planes bombing and strafing the hell out of the town. It is on fire and I don’t see how it is holding out. We in turn get bombed and strafed, don’t have to tell the men to dig slit trenches any more. We hit them quite often. At six this morning the artillery put a T. & T. on the target that woke me up and as I woke up an ME 109 went over my trailer just over the tree tops. When I saw the markings, needless to say I was out in my trench without a cig I usually smoke before I get out of bed. My men take it good now, they are becoming soldiers. Weather is good, makes it better for our war effort. My men are happy, we have captured a lot of stuff. They drink Champaign like water now, have good hams, cheese (wish I had some milk) cigars, cigs, candy, etc. One company gave me a 1941 Cadillac sedan but I didn’t want it and left it. Have a fire engine horn on fender of my jeep. When it lets go civilians take for the ditch. Got lost about midnight a few nites ago, got to where we had to either run over dead Germans in road or pull them out of the ditch so stopped at a German house in town, pulled my pistol and took over. My driver, radio operator and me. We had some funny things happen. Till tell you when I get back. Going to chow.” . . .

“Looks like war may be coming to an end. I hope to go home, feel like a bit of rest, the nerve tension is bad when it lasts 24 hr. out of every day. . . . enemy putting in some 88s now, landed two just across the road.”

April 23 (Bellis): Had been in Nurnburg. City now in rubble. Released 15,000 prisoners: English, American, Poles, Russians, foul conditions. They found a flock of sheep when the tanks knocked the fence down. They dragged them into the enclosure, slit their throats and started cooking them. The sleep under boards or canvass, no latrines, lice and typhus, filthy. Few casualties. Kill ratio 1:7. They capture luxury foods, tobacco, German pistol.

April 24 (Bellis): Referring to a box being sent home: “There is a piece of bronze in the box that came from the large swastika on top of the big stadium shown in Nurnburg. We blew it off with dynamite – was 30 feet in diameter and weighed 15 tons.” “Another interruption, send out all assault boats for a crossing, never a dull moment . . .”

April 28 (Bellis): “I am no longer with the 257th. The Army Engineer called me in, told me I had done a good job, etc. and I am going to rest camp for officers back in France.” “It will take two days to reach the rest camp. I have my jeep and driver with me.” “The Army Engineer said to stay as long as I want and then he will find a good place for me.”

Major Bellis

[Maj. Bellis' letters continue from the rest camp in the French alps. The war in Europe ended on May 8, about the time Maj. Bellis reached the rest camp. His letters from late May and early June are dated Grenoble, France. I believe that Maj. Bellis spent a few weeks on Gen. Eisenhower's staff in Paris, arranging for the disposition of military supplies, personnel, and equipment. He returned home in the summer, of autumn, of 1945.]

'Bradley'

[I do not know who the person was who wrote the account of the 257th ECB. The letter that is referred to as 'Bradley' in this narrative was the grandfather of Michael Bradley who contributed it to the Engineers website. Pvt. 1st Class (First name?) Bradley was a utility repair specialist and qualified as a sharpshooter, he was awarded two bronze stars. Whoever 'Bradley' was, he apparently participated in the liberation of the Dachau Concentration Camp with the 45th Inf. Div. His first hand observations are significant in light of the controversy surrounding this event (massacre of German SS troops).

PS

Bradley- The Battalion established 21 CPs, built 12 bridges, incl. largest. Had 10 men killed, 1 MIA, 19 wounded.



Distances in Miles
1:60,000

