

SPOTLIGHT ON THE 291ST ENGINEER COMBAT BATTALION

ORAL HISTORY SPOTLIGHT Sgt. Charles Hensel 291st Engineer Combat Battalion

Sgt. Charles Hensel of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion was interviewed by Historian Tommy Lofton at his home in Lockport, NY, on November 10, 2010.

Sgt. Charles Hensel grew up in Lockport, NY and spent much of his youth playing softball and staying active in the Boy Scouts. He was drafted by the Army in 1943 and eventually left his home in New York for Camp Swift, Texas. Upon arriving at Camp Swift, he was assigned to the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, under the command of then Lt. Col. David E. Pergrin. With the 291st Hensel underwent engineering training and the unit spent some time in Louisiana before eventually shipping out to England.

After months of hard fighting and successfully repairing roads and bridges in Normandy, the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion reached Belgium. It was there that the Germans launched Operation Wacht Am Rhein (better known as the Battle of the Bulge) against the Allied troops within the Ardennes Forest. As the Germans advanced in the direction of Col. Pergrin and his men, the 291st expanded along the American front line in order to defend or destroy the crucial bridges in the area and slow the German advance. Hensel, now a Sergeant in Company C and

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The story of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion and their vital contribution in the construction of the Ludendorff Bridge will be featured in an exhibit in the upcoming Campaigns Pavilion.

The 291st Engineer Combat Battalion was formed at Camp Swift, Texas in April of 1943. The unit began intensive training during the summer of 1943 and finally shipped overseas to

England in October of that year. Arriving in Liverpool, England, the 291st and commanding officer, David E. Pergrin, were immediately put to work constructing tent camps and building roads in order to house and move troops for the upcoming D-Day invasion.

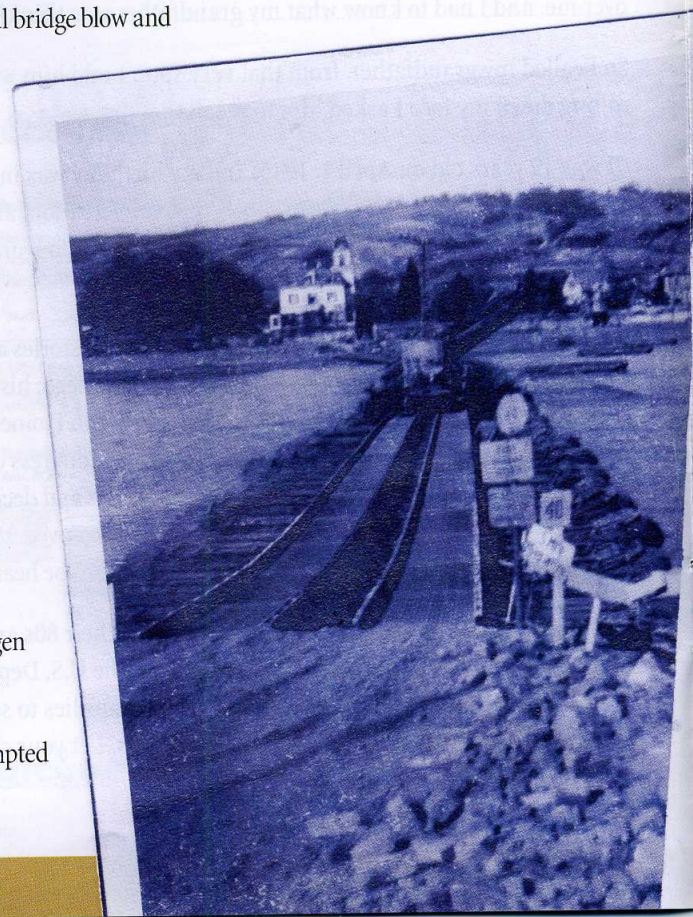
On June 23, 1944, the 291st landed in Normandy and moved inland, tasked with the job of maintaining the roads to and between Carentan. It was in Normandy that the 291st received its baptism by fire, sustaining light casualties during intermittent periods of German artillery fire. During the long summer of 1944, the 291st constructed and maintained roads through the Normandy area towards Paris.

By December 1944, the unit was occupying several small villages in the Ardennes Forest area of Belgium. The men of the 291st enjoyed Thanksgiving and prepared for a quiet Christmas. On December 16, the Germans unleashed a violent counterattack in the Ardennes Forest designed to re-capture Antwerp and cut the Allied armies in two. The American front lines were thrown into disarray as the Germans captured thousands of GIs and pressed their attack forward with relentless fury. For the first time in the war, the men of the 291st put down their building equipment and picked up their rifles and TNT.

Throughout the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge, the 291st distinguished itself in close and vicious fighting, stopping the German advance several times at key road networks with strong defense or blowing up numerous bridges across the many rivers in the Ardennes. After witnessing another vital bridge blow and

disruption of his crucial time table, German spearhead commander, SS Obersturmbannfuhrer Jochen Peiper, is said to have pounded his fists on his tank and screamed, "The Damned Engineers!" in reference to the 291st.

By the end of January 1945, the US Army, along with the 291st, had resumed its advance into Germany. In early March, rumors began circulating that a railroad bridge in the town of Remagen was the last bridge standing across the Rhine River. On March 7, the Germans attempted



to destroy the Ludendorff Bridge ahead of the 9th Armored Division by detonation. The German emergency charge went off, but to their astonishment, the bridge remained intact.

By the evening of March 8, over 8,000 American troops crossed the Ludendorff Bridge. Although the bridge had been captured intact, it was severely damaged from the explosion and the massive volume of military traffic. The 291st was selected to build a new bridge across the Rhine River in anticipation of the Ludendorff's inevitable collapse.

On March 9, with cries of, "Rise and Shine, we're bridging the Rhine!" the 291st began construction of the longest treadway bridge ever built. They worked under constant German artillery fire and air attacks. Several times throughout the building process, work had to be stopped so that the engineers could dash for cover under the seemingly un-remitting German artillery. By the end of the first day, the 291st had suffered several casualties and had named the end of the lengthening bridge "Suicide Point."

Roughly 32 hours after construction began, the bridge was complete. At 1,032 feet, it was the longest tactical bridge built under fire, and the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion's finest hour.

By war's end, the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion had constructed 23 timber bridges, 44 Bailey bridges, 7 treadway bridges, constructed 11 bridges under fire, destroyed 6 bridges, made 7 river assault crossings, deactivated 15 bombs, cleared 7,000 mines, and taken 8,500 German prisoners. As a result of its stellar record, the unit was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

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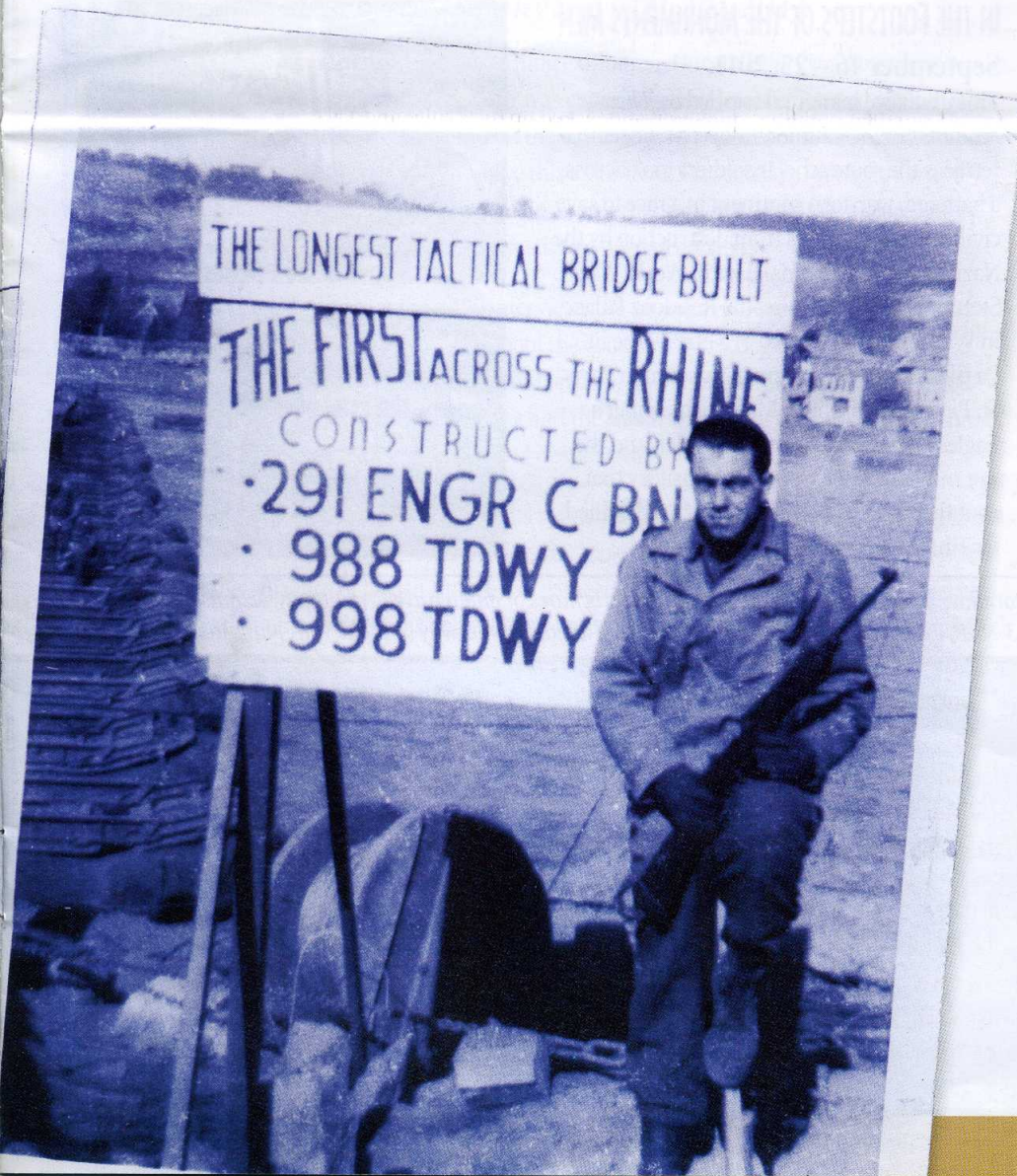
squad leader of 3rd Squad, had orders to set up a road block in front of one such crucial bridge located just outside of Stavelot, a crucial town between Trois-Ponts and Malmedy.

Under the cover of a dark night, Hensel sent one of his men, Pvt. Bernard Goldstein, just ahead of the road block area to keep a lookout for German units moving into the area. The rest of the squad went into action setting up a "daisy chain" of landmines across the road to impede the advance of German armor.

Upon completion, Hensel decided to take another man down the road to assist Pvt. Goldstein with watching for German armor. These men had no idea that a German column of tanks was pulling up to Goldstein's position. All of a sudden "Halt!" echoed through the area as Goldstein yelled at the tank column, unsure of whether they were German or American tanks. Hensel and his man ducked down as shots rang out in all directions. They worked their way back to the squad and fell back to wait on Goldstein's return. After waiting as long as they could, Hensel decided to get his men back into friendly territory, uncertain of Goldstein's fate.

As the squad approached the bridge, Hensel remembered a group of GIs along the road stopping the truck and asking what all the commotion was about down the road. Hensel told them he didn't know, but that he was getting his men to safety. Upon pulling away, he realized that there was something odd about the GIs, that only one man talked and the rest seemed eerily quiet. Looking back, he feels quite certain that some of these men belonged to Otto Skorzeny's Panzer Brigade 150.

As the Battle of the Bulge wound to a close, Hensel and his men found themselves in Baugez at the site of the "Malmedy Massacre." Their duty was to clean the snow off of the dead GIs and police them for booby traps that the



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Germans may have left for unsuspecting soldiers. Fortunately, none were found, but Hensel did notice that, as the bodies were cleared, nearby men, waiting to pick up the dead, just tossed the frozen bodies in the back of the truck like sacks of flour. Hensel was enraged and immediately grabbed his rifle and ran to these men insisting that they treat their dead brethren with more respect. This seemed to get the point across and ensured that the dead men received more respect when being placed in the transport truck.

A few months later, Hensel and the rest of the 291st found themselves entering Germany, building bridges, repairing roads, and clearing minefields the whole way there. Upon reaching the Rhine River, the Ludendorff Bridge was in danger of collapse and it was deemed that another bridge was necessary to continue the troop flow across the Rhine. The 291st was assigned with building a pontoon bridge down river of the Ludendorff Bridge as quickly as possible. Hensel and his squad were tasked with fixing the approach to the bridge on both sides of the Rhine. After successfully completing this endeavor, Allied troops, tanks, and trucks started crossing the bridge the next morning.

To this day, Sergeant Charles Hensel is very proud of his work in the 291st and of their accomplishments across Europe during World War II. He plans to attend the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion reunion at the Museum in spring 2011.