

# 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 291<sup>st</sup> 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



