

THE ENGINEERS' WAR

by Ernie Pyle

Third Division's 10th Engineers at Point Calava, Sicily 1944

When the Forty-fifth Division went into reserve along the north coast of Sicily after several weeks of hard fighting, I moved on with the Third Division, which took up the ax and drove the enemy on to Messina.

It was on my very first day with the Third that we hit the most difficult and spectacular engineering job of the Sicilian campaign. You may remember Point Calava from the newspaper maps. It is a great stub of rock that sticks out into the sea,

and laid blasting charges to blow off part of the rock wall that overhung the Point Calava crater.

When all was ready, everybody went back in the tunnel to get out of the way. When the blast went off, the whole mountain shook and we quivered too—with positive belief that the tunnel was coming down. The noise there in the silent night was shocking.

Now just as this happened, a small fleet of naval craft was passing in the darkness, just offshore. The sudden blast alarmed them. They apparently thought they were being fired upon from the shore. For just as our men were returning to their work at the crater edge, there came ringing up from the dark water below, so clear it sounded like an execution order, the resounding naval command, "Prepare to return fire."

Boy, you should have seen our men scatter! They hit the ground and scampered back into the tunnel as though Stukas were diving on them. We don't know to this day exactly what happened out there, but we do know the Navy never did fire.

Around 10:30 Major General Lucian Truscott, commanding the Third Division, came up to see how the work was coming along. Bridging that hole was his main interest in life right then. He couldn't help any, of course, but somehow he couldn't bear to leave. He stood around and talked to officers, and after a while he went off a few feet to one side and sat down on the ground and lit a cigarette.

A moment later, a passing soldier saw the glow and leaned over and said, "Hey, gimme a light, will you?" The general did and the soldier never knew he had been ordering the general around.

General Truscott, like many men



of great action, had the ability to refresh himself by tiny catnaps of five or ten minutes. So instead of going back to his command post and going to bed, he stretched out there against some rocks and dozed off. One of the working engineers came past, dragging some air hose. It got tangled up in the general's feet. The tired soldier was annoyed, and he said crossly to the dark, anonymous figure on the ground, "If you're not working, get the hell out of the way."

The general got up and moved farther back without saying a word.

The men worked on and on, and every one of the company officers stayed throughout the night just to be there to make decisions when difficulties arose. But I got so sleepy I couldn't stand it, and I caught a commuting truck back to the company camp and turned in. An hour before daylight I heard them rout out a platoon that had been resting. They ate breakfast noisily, loaded into trucks, and were off just at dawn. A little later three truckloads of tired men pulled into camp, gobbled some breakfast, and fell into their blankets on the ground. The feverish attack on that vital highway obstruction had not lagged a moment during the whole night.

It wasn't long after dawn when I returned to the crater. At first glance it didn't look as though much had been accomplished, but an engineer's eye would have seen that the groundwork was all laid. They had drilled and blasted two holes far down the jagged slope. These were to hold the heavy uprights so they wouldn't slide downhill when weight was applied. The far side of the crater had been blasted out and leveled off so it formed a road across about one-third of the hole. Small ledges had been jackhammered at each end of the crater and timbers bolted into them, forming abutments of the bridge that was to come. Steel hooks had been embedded deep in the rock to hold wire cables. At the tunnel mouth lay great timbers, two feet square, and other big lengths of timber bolted together to make them long enough to span the hole.

At about 10 A.M. the huge uprights were slid down the bank, caught by a group of men clinging to the steep slope below, and their ends worked into the blasted holes. Then the uprights were brought into place by men on the banks, pulling on ropes tied to the timbers. Similar heavy beams were slowly and cautiously worked out from the bank until their



tops rested on the uprights.

A half-naked soldier, doing practically a wire-walking act, edged out over the timber and with an air-driven bit bored a long hole down through two timbers. Then he hammered a steel rod into it, tying them together. Others added more bracing, nailing the parts together with huge spikes driven in by sledge hammers. Then the engineers slung steel cable from one end of the crater to the other, wrapped it around the upright stanchions and drew it tight with a winch mounted on a truck.

Now came a Chinese coolie scene as shirtless, sweating soldiers—twenty men to each of the long, spliced timbers—carried and slid their burdens out across the chasm, resting them on the two wooden spans just erected. They sagged in the middle, but still the cable beneath took most of the strain. They laid ten of the big timbers across and the bridge began to take shape. Big stringers were bolted down, heavy flooring was carried on and nailed to the stringers. Men built up the approaches with stones. The bridge was almost ready.

Around 11 A.M., jeeps had begun to line up at the far end of the tunnel. They carried reconnaissance platoons, machine gunners and boxes of ammunition. They'd been given No. 1 priority to cross the bridge. Major General Truscott arrived again and sat on a log talking with the engineering officers, waiting patiently. Around dusk of the day before, the engineers had told me they'd have jeeps across the crater by noon of the next day. It didn't seem possible at the time, but they knew whereof they spoke. But even they would have had to admit it was pure coincidence that the first jeep rolled cautiously across the bridge at high noon, to the very second.

In that first jeep were General Truscott and his driver, facing a 200-foot tumble into the sea if the bridge gave way. The engineers had insisted they send a test jeep across first. But when he saw it was ready, the general just got in and went. It wasn't done dramatically but it was a dramatic thing. It showed that the Old Man had complete faith in his engineers. I heard soldiers speak of it appreciatively for an hour.

Jeeps snaked across the rickety bridge behind the general while the engineers kept stations beneath the bridge to watch and measure the sag under each load. The bridge squeaked and bent as the jeeps crept



over. But it held, and nothing else mattered. When the vital spearhead of the division got across, traffic was halted again and the engineers were given three hours to strengthen the bridge for heavier traffic. A third heavy upright inserted in the middle of the span would do the trick.

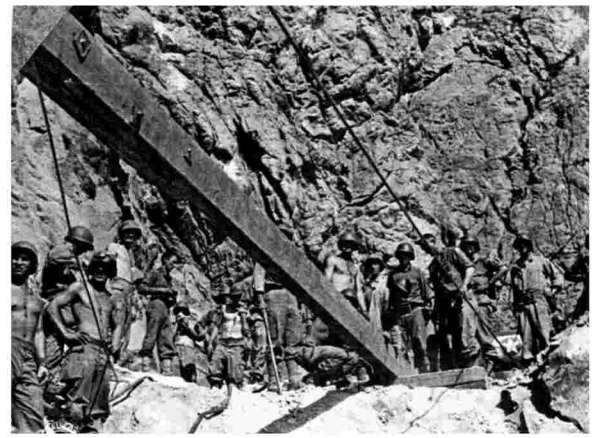
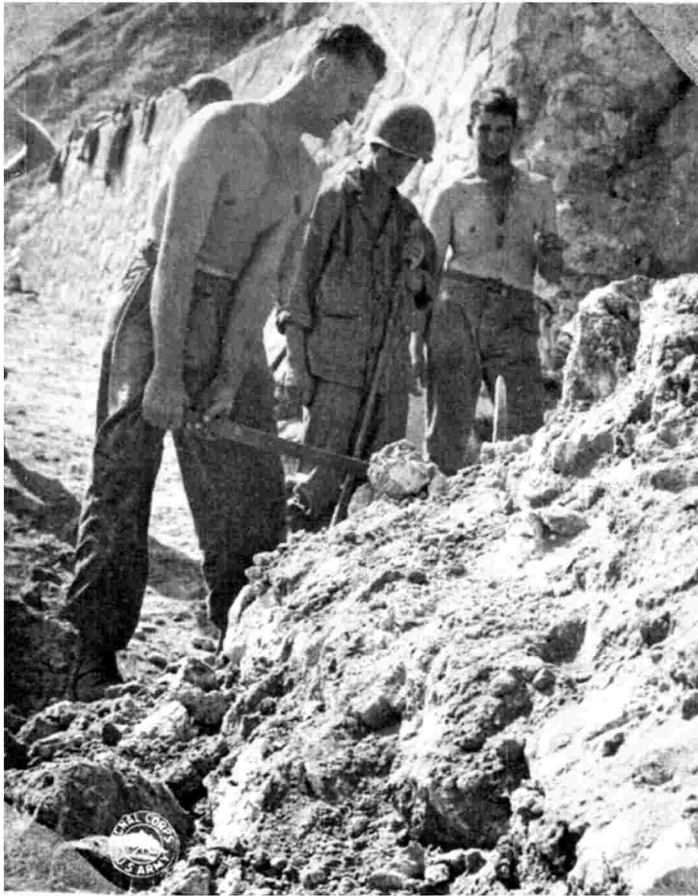
That, too, was a terrific job, but at exactly 4 P.M. the first $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck rolled across. They kept putting over heavier and heavier loads until before dark a giant bulldozer was sent across, and after that everything could follow.

The tired men began to pack their tools into trucks. Engineer officers who hadn't slept for thirty-six hours went back to their olive orchard to clean up. They had built a jerry bridge, a comical bridge, a proud bridge, but above all the kind of bridge that wins wars. And they had built it in one night and half a day. The general was mighty pleased.

I don't know what it is that impels some men, either in peace or in wartime, to extend themselves beyond all expectation, or what holds other men back to do just as little as possi-

ble. In any group of soldiers you'll find both kinds. The work of combat engineers usually comes in spurts, and it is so vital when it does come that the percentage of fast workers is probably higher than in most other branches. I've never seen men work any harder than the engineers I was with. On the Point Calava road crater job there were two men I couldn't take my eyes off. They worked like demons. Both were corporals and had little to gain by their extraordinary labors, except maybe some slight future promotion. And I doubt that's what drove them. Such men must be impelled by the natures they're born with—by pride in their job, by that mystic spark which forces some men to give all they've got, all the time.

Those two men were Gordon Uttech, of Merrill, Wisconsin, and Alvin Tolliver, of Alamosa, Colorado. Both were air-compressor operators and rock drillers. Uttech worked all night, and when the night shift was relieved for breakfast, he refused to go. He worked on throughout the day without sleep and in the final hours of the job he went down under the frail bridge to check the sag and



passed over it.

Tolliver, too, worked without ceasing, never resting, never even stopping to wipe off the sweat that made his stripped body look as though it were coated with olive oil. I never saw him stop once throughout the day. He seemed to work without instruction from anybody, knowing what jobs to do and doing them alone. He wrestled the great chattering jackhammers into the rock. He spread and rewound his air hose. He changed drills. He regulated his compressor. He drove eye-hooks into the rock, chopped down big planks to fit the rocky ledge he'd created. Always he worked as though the outcome of the war depended on him alone.

I couldn't help being proud of those men, who gave more than was asked.

Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Bingham, commander of the 10th Engineers, who bridged the Point Calava crater, was a Regular Army man and therefore his home was wherever he was, but his wife lived in St. Paul, at 1480 Fairmount Avenue, so he called that home. We usually picture Regular Army officers as cut in a harsh and rigid cast, but that has not been my experience. I've found them to be as human as anybody else and the closer I got to the front the finer

they seemed to be. Colonel Bingham, for instance, was the kind of man who was so liked and respected by his subordinates that they took me aside to ask that I give him credit. He worked all night along with the rest, and he never got cross or raised his voice.

The commander of the company was Lieutenant Edwin Swift, of Rocky Ford, Colorado. In civil life he was a geophysicist, and just before the war he spent two years in Venezuela with Standard Oil. He hadn't discovered oil in Sicily, but some German-blown holes he filled were almost deep enough to hit oil.

Lieutenant Robert Springmeyer was from Provo, Utah. He was an engineer by profession and a recent father. When he got the parental news, he somehow managed to buy a box of cigars, but he ran out of recipients when the box was about half gone. So thereafter, when a hard day's work was done, he would go back to base, shave, take a helmet bath, put on clean clothes, sit down against a tree and light a big gift cigar in his own honor.

Lieutenant Gilmore Reid came from 846 North Hamilton, Indianapolis. His dad ran the Purity Cone & Chip Company, which made potato chips. Young Reid was an artist and also a railroad hobbyist. He studied

railroads with the same verve that some people show in collecting stamps. He once did a painting of a freight train at a small midwestern station, and when he got word overseas that it had been printed in color in a railroad magazine he felt he'd practically reached the zenith of his heart's desire.

The backbone of any Army company is the first sergeant. The 10th Engineers had a beaut. His name was, of all things, Adelard Levesque. He pronounced it "Levek" but the soldiers called him "Pop." He was forty-two years old, but didn't begin to look it. Of all the thousands of men I've met in the Army, he comes the nearest to being the fictional version of the tough, competent, old-line first sergeant. Levesque was in the last war as a mere boy. He fought in France and stayed on with the Army of Occupation in Germany until 1921. He wasn't a Regular Army man. Between wars he spent twenty years out in the big world, raising a family, making a living, and seeing and doing things. He had been a West Coast iron worker and practically anything else you can mention. He had four sons in the Army and, if I remember correctly, one daughter in the Navy.

The sergeant called Marvsville.

California, his home. He was a ruggedly handsome fellow with a black mustache and clothes that were always neat, even when dirty. His energy never ran down. He talked loud, and continuously; he cursed fluently, and he ordered everybody around, including officers.

At first my mouth hung open in amazement but gradually I began to catch the spirit of Levesque. He wasn't smart-alecky or fresh. He was just a natural-born center of any stage, a leader, and one of those gifted, practical men who could do anything under the sun, and usually did it better than the next fellow. To top it all off he spoke perfect French and was picking up Italian like a snowball. One of his commanders told me, "He talks too much and too big, but he can back up every word he says. I sure hope we never lose him."

I asked the enlisted men about him, since they were the ones his tongue fell on most heavily. One man said, "Hell, I don't know what this company would do without him. Sure he talks all the time, but we don't pay any attention. Listen at him beatin' his gums now. He musta got out on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Actually, the sergeant wasn't so ferocious. He was widely informed, and his grammar was excellent. He could discuss politics as well as bulldozers and was alert to every little thing that went on. One day on a mountain road he stopped our jeep and asked the driver some questions. As he walked back to his own jeep, he turned and ordered my driver, "Go get those maps. Send a bulldozer back up here. Bring five gallons of gas, and get your spare tire fixed. Goddammit, why don't you take care of your vehicle?"

"Spare tire?" the driver asked.

"Yes, goddammit," the sergeant roared. "It's flat."

He had discovered it merely by the slight pressure of his hand as he leaned against it while talking to us. Everything he did was like that.

During the last half hour of work on the Point Calava bridge, I saw as fine a drama as ever I paid \$8.80 a seat for in New York: The bridge was almost finished. The climax of twenty-four hours of frenzied work had come. The job was done. Only one man could do the final touches of bracing and balancing. That man was sitting on the end of a beam far out over the chasm, a hammer in his hand, his legs wrapped around the beam as though he were riding a bronco.



The squirrel out there on the beam was, of course, Sergeant Levesque. He wore his steel helmet and his pack harness. He never took it off, no matter what the weather or what he was doing. His face was dirty and grave and sweating. He was in complete charge of all he surveyed. On the opposite bank of the crater, two huge soldier audiences stood watching that noisily profane craftsman play out his role.

Their preoccupation was a tribute to his skill. I've never seen a more intent audience. It included all ranks, from privates to generals.

"Gimme some slack. Gimme some slack, goddammit," the sergeant yelled to the winch man on the bank. "That's enough—hold it. Throw me a sledge. Where the hell's a spike, goddammit? Hasn't anybody got a

spike?

"How does that look from the bank now, colonel? She about level? Okay, slack away. Watch that air hose. Let her clear down. Hey, you under there, watch yourself, goddammit."

Sergeant Levesque drove the final spike deeply with his sledge. He looked around at his work and found it finished.

With an air of completion, he clambered to his feet and walked the narrow beam back to safety. You could almost sense the curtain going down, and I know everybody in the crowd had to stifle an impulse to cheer.

If somebody writes another *What Price Glory?* after this war I know who should play the leading role. Who? Why, Sergeant Levesque, goddammit, who do you suppose?

