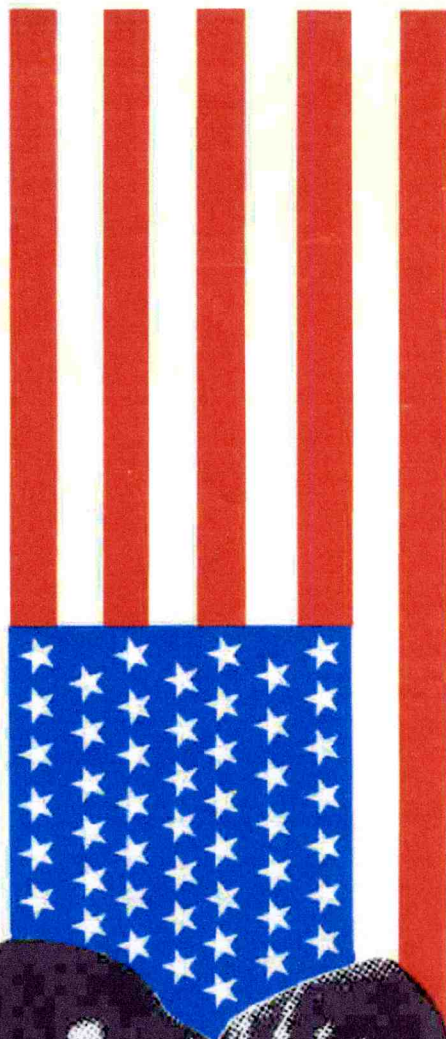


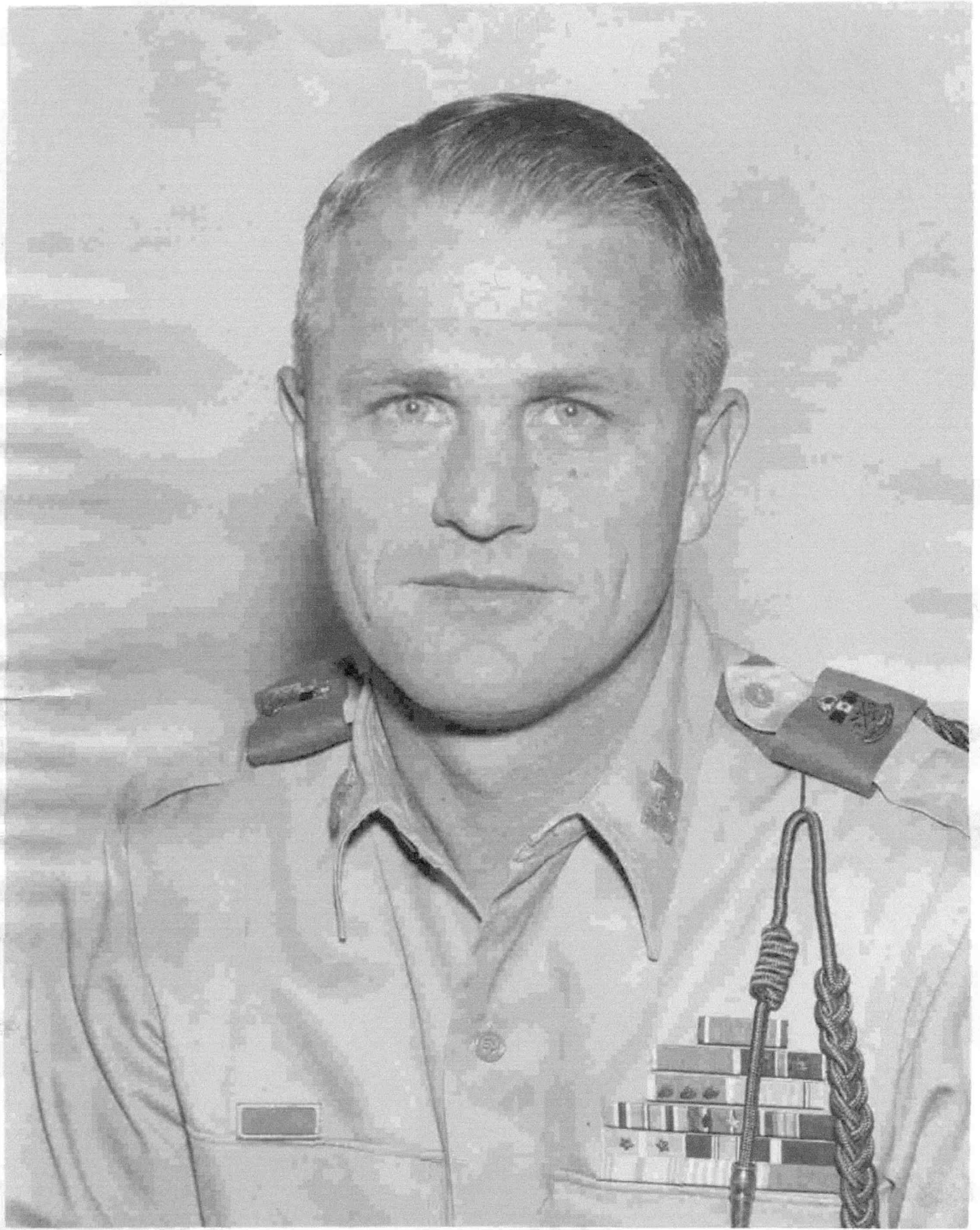
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LIBERATION

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SAINT-DIÉ





ST. DIE, THE GODMOTHER OF AMERICA
By, Orville O. Munson

As an adolescent, the most important person in my life, by far, was my mother. She proved to me you did not have to be big to be strong. She gave strength to old sayings, such as: when you measure her you put the tape around her heart; the destiny that makes us brothers requires kindness along the way; there is no alternative to honesty; and, hard work is one of life's privileges. The things my mother did were not big things but things with great desire. She believed what will be will be, but she knew it best by choice not chance. Through her I believe in destiny.

In elementary school in Wessington Springs, South Dakota, a favorite subject for me was history. Through history I came to appreciate the closeness that existed between two rightfully proud countries, France and the United States of America. Their mutual respect for each other goes back many years. My first enlightenment in this regard was learning about the Statue of Liberty. The fact that school children throughout France, out of the goodness of their heart gave lunch money toward the erection of the statue that they themselves may never see so it could welcome strangers from everywhere on earth into a new world named America, just blows my mind. It was just not any statue because this one is so tall it dwarfs man and it dignifies independence as it lights the way. **To know the statue was in position to welcome my gentle father from Sweden at the age of fifteen just warms my heart.**

As a young boy I heard people say, "Lafayette we are here," but I knew about the saying before I knew the complete story about Lafayette. My mother and father each had a brother that entered the service during the first world war. I remember clearly when my father's brother told about disembarking in France and the soldiers repetitiously chanted "Lafayette we are here." When I was privileged to know the full details about the support received from Lafayette personally and that of France in particular, I fell in love with the story.

For those needing a refresher course on Lafayette and France that goes back to the American Revolution (1775-1783) it suffices to say France actively and openly supported the rebellion of the American Colonist. From the beginning they supplied money and military stores. One thing the French had been told was that the hand weapons of the Colonist were more dangerous to the settlers than to the British. Thus, in France certain cities authorized their armorer to purchase muskets for the Colonist at the cost of twenty-three francs each. The muskets actually were purchased from the British royal arsenal with the French foreign minister knowing full well the entire consignment of thirty thousand would eventually end up on the high seas headed for America.

While the elite and wealthy French of advanced age furnished money and were outspoken in their support, many young men were all on fire to go crusading to America. One such person was Lafayette. He was from a family of men who seldom died old or elsewhere than on the field of battle. He was a staunch Republican who wanted to liberate the world. The very declaration of independence roused him like the call to boots and saddle. Good fortune had made Lafayette independently rich at an early age. He had married at sixteen and his bride was even younger. At the age of nineteen it is quoted that all Paris was discussing **"The young courtier with a pretty wife, a small family, and an income of fifty thousand crowns a year, who was abandoning the first two and taking with him as much of the last as he could scrape together in order to go to the assistance of the Americans."**

Relatives of Lafayette that tried to dissuade him from going to America often became staunch supporters. For example, an uncle tried to talk Lafayette out of going and ended up finding the elderly Baron de Kalb who could assist him along the way. The Baron was a military man who spoke perfect English so he could teach Lafayette the language as well as military tactics while on the way to the new world. The uncle's choice to have the Baron go along with Lafayette was enhanced by the fact the Baron already had been to New York and he knew the Colonies first hand.

In their haste to leave, Lafayette and the Baron set out in a slow and ill-supplied vessel with twelve other officers aboard. They suffered greatly from the tossing and rolling of the small vessel, from bad eating and drinking and from fear of British cruisers. They did, however, employ the immense leisure to study English and military tactics so Lafayette could qualify as a general officer. On the 54th day they landed at the mouth of a river in South Carolina. They then traveled six hundred miles through the country and arrived in Philadelphia knocking on the door of the American Congress. Lafayette offered his service calmly and seriously claiming nothing in return except the right to participate at his own expense. Congress was impressed by this proud man. On the spot they nominated him an unattached Major General without command and without pay.

Lafayette made the acquaintance of George Washington very soon after his arrival. They were mutually impressed with one another. To Lafayette, George Washington was a hero and model. Washington thought of Lafayette as that which nature had denied him -- a son. History has seldom had to tell of a more honorable connection between two men more unselfish and devoted to great principles.

When given the chance to command troops in battle, Lafayette proved worthy of the trust. Even the Baron, approximately seventy years old, fought decisively. It was during the terrible charge of the British infantry at the battle of Camden where the Baron died with sword in hand and eleven enemy bayonet thrusts in his body.

As for me, the author, it is my personal belief I was destined to be a soldier. For years I floundered a nobody going nowhere. Only the life exemplified by my mother helped to keep me afloat. Though I was going to college in 1940, the lack of funds made it impossible for me to buy books for studying. When the United States instituted the draft for military purposes, it was like a beacon of light that offered a haven as well as bold and daring adventure. Impelled by this spirit of adventure and the vocation of heroes, I joined the military. With very little experience, no influence and only four dollars in my pocket (quite unlike Lafayette), I started at the bottom.

When the Allied forces launched an amphibious attack on 15 August 1945 into Southern France, I was one of several thousand that hit the beach on D-Day. Most of the units participating in the invasion had been combat tested in Africa or Italy or both. As individuals, we were considered veterans. In my particular instance there were three purple hearts and other prestigious awards received in Italy. Our seasoned combat engineer battalion hit the beach at San Raphael, France, ahead of the infantry troops. We were trained to clear the beach of mines and obstacles and to maintain open routes to help the infantry. We were so busy working the beach I did not have the presence of mind to sound off "Lafayette I am here." When I marveled days later at still being alive, and here I was in France, it dawned on me that I was halfway home -- at least I was a Major in comparison to Lafayette being a Major General.

The opportunity for me to personally show appreciation for the generous past deeds of the French was most gratifying. As well, it was great that the fighting in Southern France during the early stages was a picnic in comparison with the blood that had flowed in Italy. Just one month after the invasion we were in the Vosges Mountains near Remiremont and Epinal. We had traveled approximately four hundred miles.

It was 21 September when forces from the southern invasion joined near Epinal with those from Normandy. At this point in the campaign the German opposition stiffened and progress in the next two months was slow and the fighting was bitter. The severity of battle can be emphasized by knowing that the 45th Infantry Division liberated Epinal on 21 September but the 3rd Infantry Division did not liberate Bruyeres until early November. The two towns are less than sixteen miles apart. Beyond Bruyeres another sixteen miles was St. Die and it was not liberated until 22 November.

The battles in the Vosges Mountains speaks highly of the German defenses. The specific battles from Epinal and Remiremont through Bruyeres and on to St. Die were some of the bloodiest for the southern forces in France during WW II. At one point the temporary cemetery near Epinal contained the remains of over twelve thousand Americans. There were four hundred more listed as missing in action.

The town of St. Die, France, is situated in a small beautiful horse-shoe shaped valley. The area is drained by the Meurthe River that flows to the northwest. That portion of the river that passes through St. Die is over one hundred feet wide and it is contained both right and left by man-made retainer walls of eight to ten feet. The river unevenly divides the town with about eighty percent of the town's commercial and residential districts northeast of the river.

Prior to WWII the population of St. Die was fifteen thousand. The town is located on the eastern border of France in Alsace-Lorraine a region twice seized and occupied by Germany; once in 1871 and again in 1940. St. Die is thirty-one miles from Strasbourg, Germany, and just fifteen miles from the German border. Because of the close proximity of St. Die to the border of Germany, the people of the town had no opportunity for an organized resistance when the Nazi Army made that lightning advance of their initial campaign into France. **Thus, under years of stunned silence St. Die had to survive under Nazi rule.**

From the day of the invasion of Southern France until after the liberation of the town of St. Die, I was the Operations Officer (S-3) of the 48th Corps Combat Engineer Battalion. As corps engineer troops we assisted the infantry and armored divisions within the corps with their forward movement primarily through the elimination of obstacles and the building of bridges. In fact, the 48th Engineers constructed six thousand seven hundred ninety feet of bridge during the war. Over eighty percent of our bridges were built under very trying combat conditions. Many of the bridges were constructed under the cover of darkness and the builder often could not see his hands in front of his face. Bridges were often built right under the noses of the troops defending the obstacle so silence was imperative. There was little or no protection for the builder because no bridge was ever built from a foxhole. When fired on under combat conditions the engineer could not take immediate cover or hit the ground when several men are required to carry a five hundred pound panel or a three hundred pound transom.

While fighting in the Vosges Mountains the 48th Engineer Battalion once supported, at the very

same time, three seasoned and famous Infantry Divisions, the 3rd, 36th and 45th. The Corps Engineer had directed that the bridges needed by Corps would be built by the 48th. Thus, in the Vosges area over twenty bridges were built by the 48th to support attack units. A small extract from a commendation our Battalion Commander received from the Division Engineer of the 36th Infantry Division is as follows:

“It is my wish to commend you and the officers and men of your battalion for the outstanding manner you performed your duties while you were working in conjunction with the 36th Infantry Division during the month of November. -----”

On 17 November, as we were about to break out of the Vosges Mountains, the 48th Engineer Bn was alerted to the possibility of two bridges being needed to support the continued attack. Both bridges were tentatively planned to cross the Meurthe River. One bridge was to cross a few miles north of the town of St. Die and the other was to cross inside the town. The contemplated plan by VI Corps was bold and ambitious. It called for four Infantry Divisions and one Armored Division to attack a defense line of minefields and prepared fields of machinegun, rifle, and mortar and artillery fire. These fields of fire overlooked the rather formidable river. The newly arrived 103rd Infantry Division and the veteran 45th with the weight of added armor from the 14th Armored Division were to plunge through St. Die. The drive was intended to extend to Strasbourg, Germany.

Company B of the 48th Engineer Battalion was assigned the task of building the bridge for the units in the flanking maneuver of St. Die. Captain Al Kincer from 225 N. Mason, Bowie, Texas, commanded the engineer company. Kincer was a very confident, caring and competent officer. He was loved by his men and respected by his peers and superiors. Construction of the contemplated bridge needed inside St. Die was assigned to Company A. The commander was Captain William Snyder, 127 Smith Street, Spartanburg, South Carolina. Snyder learned about the fixed bridge called ‘The Bailey’ for the very first time while he was a platoon leader serving in Africa. After becoming a company commander he fine tuned and honed the method of bailey construction with his men through Italy and France to a point no company could match their skill, speed or daring regardless of the circumstances or combat conditions. The Captain was a cocky, reliable and methodical individual who was a trusted leader.

In the buildup in preparation for the liberation of St. Die, the news from VI Corps was not good. We were told the town was burning from within. Tenacious enemy resistance was holding Traintrux, a small village very close to St. Die. Inclement weather was helping the Germans. To dislodge the Germans and minimize American military casualties, Traintrux had to be bombed. The Americans for anyone who might wish to use one dropped safe conduct leaflets throughout the area.

American troops did not completely occupy Traintrux until 17 November. By this time there was much more burning in St. Die with over one thousand structures destroyed. Other small towns and villages south of St. Die were also burning; Gerardmer, Sauley, St. Leonard, Anould, Gerbepal and Corieux. It seemed the Germans were preparing to defend their homeland by simply using a scorched earth policy.

When resistance at Traintrux was broken, there was good reason to believe the next main effort by the Germans would be to defend the northeast bank of the Meurthe River. It was that same evening,

17 November, when the retreating Germans systematically destroyed the four bridges that crossed the Meurthe River in St. Die. That same evening a small patrol of Free French working independently of Seventh Army actually entered the town west of the river. The few inhabitants that had remained on the west bank of the river warned the Free French that the Germans were actively patrolling the west bank with vengeance.

On the 18th of November a company of American troops supposedly stopped short of entering St. Die. The Germans defending the town were not through and they returned to the west bank in strength, lit more fires and killed ten young men from the resistance force. Intelligence sources learned the majority of the main force defending the area were actually housed at Robache located at the northeast corner of the outskirts of St. Die.

From available maps, and knowing the attack positions of VI Corps, it was obvious the most important road that crossed the Meurthe River in support of the effort to capture Strasbourg would be the road that passed through St. Die. To be positioned well in our support and to avoid the contemplated heavy traffic of an eventual armored thrust, an advance echelon of the 48th Engineer Battalion moved to a relatively protected location behind a hill southeast of St. Die.

Since it was possible the bridge that might be needed to cross the Meurthe River inside of St. Die would have to be built at night, and since speed of construction always is imperative, I considered it extremely important that some military engineer get a daylight look at the potential crossing. It would help to know how much bridge would be needed and there was a need to know the condition of the abutments. We had to concern ourselves with how to get our bridge trucks to the river and a turn around for our trucks close to the near shore of the blown bridge. If possible, we needed to know if land mines or hidden explosives were present.

On 19 November VI Corps Headquarters denied the 48th Engineer Battalion permission to send an engineer reconnaissance team into St. Die. They reasoned an infantry division would be attacking St. Die momentarily. On this same day the Germans captured seven Free French that crossed the river inside of St. Die. Two other French civilians were killed when they ventured too close to the west bank of the river. The French resistance on the west bank within the town were flexing their muscles as well and they rounded up fifteen collaborators and ten women that had fraternized with German troops. As was customary in France, the resistance fighters shaved the heads of the women that were fraternizing. That same evening of the 19th the Americans bombed Robache. We believed the bombing of Robache was an indication the liberation of St. Die was forthcoming before daylight 20 November. I never was privileged to know why the attack on St. Die never materialized as we expected and it wasn't until that evening when the 48th Engineer Battalion learned the 103rd Infantry Division was crossing the Meurthe River north and west of St. Die instead of hitting the town straight on.

History tells us the 100th Infantry Division crossed the Meurthe River north of St. Die on the 18th of November and headed directly for the village of Raon-l'Etape. On 20 November the 3rd Infantry Division crossed nearby in the area of Clairefontaine and St. Michel. Their bridgehead was very large. Units of the 103rd Infantry Division, that were earmarked to hit St. Die head on, chose to cross the Meurthe River during the evening of 20 November using the area already opened by the 3rd Infantry. After crossing the river it was the intent of the 103rd Infantry to swing right and enter St. Die from the

northwest. The flanking movement of the 103rd Infantry met more resistance than expected. In fact, the final thrust for Strasbourg by VI Corps in the area of St. Die was beginning to look like a potential prolonged journey. Seventh Army was so concerned they even changed the order of the day to read so XV Corps would also have Strasbourg as their final objective.

Many years after the war a source from Epinal, France, made available to me a diary. The diary covered the month of November 1944 and it had been maintained by someone who survived the liberation of St. Die from within. A copy of the diary and the translation are made a part of this story.

A translation of the diary entry for 20 November reads; "The Allies are passing over the Meurthe north of St. Die. The small hill at St. Roch is literally plowed by mortar shells."

The entry in the diary for 21 November reads: "American sentry at the blown bridge as soon as the morning comes. Mortar shells firing. Two hundred men from Senones are taken by the Germans."

The American the diary refers to as being within St. Die as soon as the morning comes on 21 November was me. The many uncertainties, delays, explosions and raging fires had tried my patience. Thus, very early in the morning my jeep driver was directed to head for St. Die. My driver was Edward F. Naylor. He was a very likeable and well disciplined soldier who had entered the service from Rd 3, New Castle, Pennsylvania. A history of the 48th Engineer Battalion, entitled "We the 48th", page 206, states that Sgt. Fred A. Fialkowski went along for the ride. Fred was a member of the battalion intelligence section. He was from 7035 South Emerald Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Our battalion headquarters was stationed 2 kilometers southeast of St. Die. Fialkowski, Naylor and I left the bivouac area and headed west skirting the southern edge of town before finding the main road that entered St. Die from the southwest. I stopped the jeep short of entering the town. We were near a railroad track that actually crossed the road that entered St. Die. There was a barrier in place that would stop vehicle traffic when a train was crossing the road. Naylor and Fialkowski were told to remain near the barrier until I got back.

I started my walk into St. Die along a street that ran east and west. It was called Rue de la Bolle. It ended up more-or-less parallel to the Meurthe River as it worked its way into the heart of that portion of the town that was south of the river. I estimated the distance from the railroad track to the blown bridge I wanted to reconnoiter to be about one mile. At the beginning of my walk the homes along the street were sitting back away from the street. I stayed close to the buildings that lined the street on the left. I hadn't counted on there not being any open space between the buildings but soon there was no open space between the buildings. It was a solid construction of two and three story buildings that served as homes or businesses that reached out to the sidewalk. The solid construction of buildings on both sides of the street now restricted any chance I was going to have of escaping if I encountered any type of enemy fire. Even burnt out homes and businesses would have given me a fighting chance but none of these buildings were damaged or destroyed. The doors to the buildings were of heavy material. Each

window was covered with a metal grate. St. Die was like a ghost town. Not even a dog greeted me.

As I went from block to block in the light of day the silence was beginning to wear. The lack of certainties was making their presence known. With each step there was a definite amount of excitement building within me. However, I do not ever remember thinking, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Since I did not know the exact location of the blown bridge, my main concern was wondering where it would be best for me to turn left and head for the river. I knew I had walked about a mile when the wearing silence was broken. Voices were coming from one of the buildings I was about to pass. It was approximately in the center of a city block. My inner juices were churning wildly as I instinctively stopped and hugged the building. The voices continued and I listened more carefully. Finally, guessing the voices to be French I gambled high-stakes and walked to the door of a heavily boarded shop and knocked. The knock was closely followed with my saying, "Americano." In my excitement it was Italian that came out, but it was a rather quiet Americano as if to say if you are German I hope you did not hear me. The response from within was dead silence. The sudden silence gave assurance the knock was heard. It took even more courage to knock and call out once again, but I did. After another heart stopping delay the inner lock on the door was heard being released. A second later the door cracked open and there stood a young woman. She was possibly twenty-five years old. **After all these many years it is very difficult to remember all the details. The most reasonable synthesis has been worked out and beyond conflicting versions the most valid facts are as follows.**

The lady that opened the door was rather attractive. After a quick glance, she seemed to be looking beyond me as if to determine if there were others. When she spoke, there was excitement in her voice. I guessed she was inviting me to come inside as quickly as possible. I could not help but see that she was a distinguishable lady in that she had two gold lower cuspid teeth. They were very noticeable when she spoke.

Once inside the building, several Frenchmen converged from adjoining rooms and a stairway to the second floor. When they were satisfied that they were confronting an American soldier, they began shaking my hand, pummeling my back and hugging me all at the same time. The one person who appeared to be the leader spoke very little English but he kept pointing to himself and others, repeatedly saying FFI -- FFI. By pure dumb luck I had stumbled upon a contingent of Free French that consisted of two women and six or seven men. No one can understand the feeling of security that swept over me at this time. Being in the midst of enthused friends adds such warmth and meaningful confidence.

The French eagerly volunteered information. Fortunately for me two of the FFI spoke some English so it was easy to explain my true concern was to reconnoiter the site of the main blown bridge. Though I had my rank and insignia on, there was no reason to believe I told them that I was an engineer.

The FFI stated that many German Troops were stationed in the burned out buildings all along the northern bank of the river. They stressed that over ninety percent of the town north of the river was completely destroyed. In comparison only a few of the buildings south of the river had been destroyed and most of them were located along the riverbank. They stated that with typical efficiency the ruthless Germans did conduct well-manned patrols south of the river that could be predicted time-wise with a great deal of accuracy. I was told the German patrol crossed the Meurthe by using a partially destroyed

pedestrian bridge about three hundred feet east of the destroyed main vehicular bridge. That portion of the footbridge that was partially destroyed rested in the water some eight to ten feet below ground level. The Germans were using a wooden ladder to get from ground level to that portion of the bridge in the river. Only one ladder was used. This was important information gained by the FFI because when they saw the ladder on the far shore of the river they knew with considerable certainty the Germans at that particular time were not patrolling south of the river.

I learned later on that the town of St. Die had three thousand three hundred thirty-nine existing structures when the Germans moved in for the occupation. When the town was finally liberated only one hundred forty-five of the original structures had not been damaged. One thousand three hundred fifty nine structures were completely destroyed either by dynamiting or deliberate burning at the hands of the Germans. Forty industries and four hundred businesses were hit extremely hard -- many completely destroyed. Among the destroyed were seven schools, two orphanages, two colleges, a home for old folks, train station, hospital, city hall, museum, library and cathedral. All of the chamber of commerce and civil and business administration buildings were destroyed, as well as all the historical locations.

The human cost for St. Die under the German regime was heavy as well. Six hundred twenty local soldiers were captured during the initial German thrust, one hundred sixty-four individuals were deported as political prisoners, thirty-four civilians were executed, twenty-eight became victims of the bombing, two hundred forty-nine were lost to a special work force, and just before liberation nine hundred forty-three inhabitants were deported to Mannheim, Germany. They were part of a labor force that ended up being housed in concentration camps. Most of the deportees mysteriously disappeared and never returned.

When I insisted on a reconnaissance of the blown bridge, the Free French emphasized it was going to be difficult to get to the blow during daylight hours. Although that portion of the town south of the river had been considerably depopulated, the Germans knew many French civilians remained. To set an example of what to expect the Germans had killed ten Frenchmen who got too close to the blown bridge. The French soon learned to stay inside as much as possible or to expect a warning shot when their movement outside was objectionable. The FFI had learned the hard way through casualties to abide by the warning shot. To them an uneasy truce had resulted but they learned it was essential to heed the warning shot because the next shot would be better aimed.

In their desire to help me the FFI insisted my best chance was to don civilian clothing. As they were directing me how best to get to the river and the main blown bridge, civilian clothes miraculously appeared. To make the trip civilian clothes were put over my uniform and, of course, my helmet was removed. I left the building through a back door and I walked through at least one burnt out structure before breaking into the clear with the river about two hundred feet away. The bridge site was considerably to my right and there was a promenade park between me and the final objective.

The French had forgotten to tell me there was a concrete wall less than three feet high all along

the bank of the river. It gave me a feeling of being partially protected. It was that small false security blanket one often needs to keep going. While walking perpendicular to the river, I saw for the first time many completely burnt out buildings. I visualized every building could have German troops or French collaborators. Seeing beyond the potential enemy was the destruction which was total devastation and from that standpoint I was hurting. There was little satisfaction in knowing that in some small way something was being done to make right a terrible wrong.

While strolling toward the river it was important to leave the impression that I was a Frenchman on an aimless walk. I once even purposely stopped and untied one my shoes so I would have to retie it. Near the river without hesitation I turned right and sauntered in the direction of the blown bridge. Initially, while moving parallel to the river, I had to force myself to look straight ahead because there was definitely a desire to glance across the river. When I forced myself to remember why I was there, I noticed the river was contained by vertical concrete and rock walls that were eight to ten feet high. It was obvious the recent intermittent rain was affecting the flow and quantity of water because there was some brush moving down the river and the river water covered the entire span. Before I could thoroughly see the blow I realized the main access to the promenade park and the park itself allowed for a perfect turn-around for the bridge trucks and even a parking area, if needed. My walk confirmed what the French had already told me and that was that there was no evidence of land mines south of the river. When I was able to see the blow without any hindrances it was obvious that only a center portion of the bridge had been dropped. At each end of the destroyed bridge were solid rock arched spans. The supports, in my estimation, would easily hold a bailey bridge and its potential heavy loads. The use of the supports would cut down on the required length of the bailey bridge and simplify the construction. In the final analysis there did not seem to be any problem areas and it appeared no more than one hundred fifty feet of bridge would be needed.

I was still slowly walking toward the destroyed bridge when there was this sudden and rude awakening to reality. There was no doubt about it -- a rifle shot came from one of the burnt out buildings on the far side. What the Free French had told me rang clear as a bell and I had gone as far as I could go in St. Die. Without wanting to show too much concern, I did an about face and started walking back in what I hoped was the same aimless manner as before. In silence there was this thankful feeling for a benevolent German sentry. Had there been another shot that missed, like a projectile I would have propelled my body up against the small concrete wall along the edge of the river. From there you can guess the crawl would have been rapid and there would have been lots of zigzags at full speed through any open areas.

At the quarters where the Free French were housed it was easy to sense their satisfaction for my return. They had become uneasy hearing the rifle shot. There was, however, a noticeable new excitement within the group. They quickly got to the point. They wanted weapons and ammunition so they could liberate St. Die. They had seen the death of a town and they were men of all ages burning with years of pent-up revenge. It was satisfying to find myself empathizing and wishing for the authority to say yes. From their exuberance I realized it would be great to do battle alongside men and women so dedicated. I left the town believing that many Free French were waiting in the wings to fight.

Back at the jeep it was determined I had been gone about two hours. At battalion headquarters with much fervor the trip was reported to my battalion commander, Lt. Col. Dean E. Swift. Col. Swift

was from Fort Smith, Arkansas, but he never returned home because he died before the war terminated. The Colonel stated he liked the idea of someone taking arms and ammo to the Free French but he had been assured by VI Corps the infantry was going to attack St. Die at 0645 on the following day, 22 November.

At 0645 on the 22nd of November the infantry attack on St. Die did not materialize. Colonel Swift consequently told Corps that his S-3 had gone into St. Die on the 21st and while there he contacted several Free French who believed they could liberate St. Die if they had sufficient weapons and ammunition. Corps surprisingly gave permission for one platoon of engineers to take as many weapons and ammunition as possible to the Free French.

Unknown to most American soldiers fighting in the Vosges Mountains in 1944, in the year 1507, after the splash of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, St. Die, France, had become the center for important geography entitled "Cosmographia Introductio" which was a gathering of high level civilians interested in naming a continent that had been discovered. Christopher Columbus, in those days, was well known as Columbus, while Amerigo Vespucci was known as Amerigo or Americu.

Amerigo Vespucci was born 9 March 1452 in Italy and as a man he was known for his seamanship. On four occasions he was a crew member on Spanish ships that sailed off to the new world. The group that gathered in St. Die on 1507 were well versed on this adventuresome man because of the interesting and positive stories he wrote after returning from the new continent. The final conclusion of this gathering was that this new continent should be named America after Amerigo.

After the war it was told the first building the Germans converted to rubble in their destruction of St. Die was that which stood where presses of Nicholas Lud sat on 25 April, 1507. Where the inked rollers moved across the type, the lever of the press descended to stamp AMERICA on the New World for the very first time. From this naming of the new continent in 1507, St. Die has proclaimed itself, "THE GODMOTHER OF AMERICA."

Carrying the weapons and ammo to the Free French in St. Die was given to Able Company of the 48th. There were logical reasons for selecting Able Company to carry in the weapons. The company was located nearby and it was important that the men of the company get to see where the potential Bailey bridge was to be constructed. Also, of importance was the fact that since I once was their company commander I knew the men on a first name basis. In the final analysis it was the company commander's decision that the 2nd platoon would perform the task. 1st Lt. William J. Butler, 505 Gilmartin Street, Archibald, Pennsylvania, was the platoon leader and Olen C. McKnight who entered the service from Clinton, Arkansas, was the platoon sergeant.

The biggest delay in preparing for St. Die was procuring the weapons. As much as possible I

wanted most of the larger men to carry three weapons besides his own. They had to have considerable ammunition to match. Besides hand grenades, sub-machine guns, M-1 rifles and rifle grenades, I had two light machine guns and even a bazooka. I did not take the time for a final count on the number of weapons or the number of men that was trucked to the outskirts of St. Die. My guess is that thirty-six to forty men and eighty to ninety weapons entered St. Die around eleven hundred hours on 22 November. We entered the town on foot and the men were told to keep as low a profile as possible. For most of them keeping a low profile was not difficult because they were carrying a very heavy load. Our entry was timed to follow soon after the late morning crossing of the known roving German patrol.

With so many weapons to distribute, it was rather shocking to discover the total number of Free French waiting and wanting to kick the Germans out of St. Die totaled just thirteen and one of them was this woman with the two gold front teeth. For sure, after getting consent of Corps to arm the Free French, no one was going back to them and say we had changed our mind. The thing to do was to give it a go. At that particular time there was no reason to believe this was going to be the pinnacle of satisfaction in my personal tribute to a country I admired as a child.

The Free French verified that a German roving patrol had passed through St. Die earlier that morning but at that moment they knew the patrol to be on the far side of the river -- they knew that to be a fact because the one wooden ladder they used to cross from one side to the other side of the river was on the far side of the blow. We believed we had to act quickly because we knew the German patrol intended to return soon or they would not have left the ladder in position.

My attack plan was simple. The Free French and I would cross the river under the cover fire of the 48th Engineer platoon. I would lead the attack and the river crossing would be at the dropped pedestrian bridge. Two of the Free French were to go to a nearby fire station and bring back a small ladder so we could get from ground level down to that portion of the destroyed bridge that rested in the water. We then would use the ladder left by the Germans to get back to ground level on the far side. The men of the 48th Engineers were instructed to spread out and enter various buildings all along the friendly bank. They were told to climb as high as possible so they would have the best possible observation. The engineers were to take with them all the excess weapons and ammunition. They were told that prior to the initial crossing of the river they were to lock and load all weapons in preparation to firing into the burnt out buildings on the far side. At a prescribed time they were to fire as rapid as possible and shift as quickly as they could from weapon to weapon as it emptied.

At length everything was ready. There was no reason to believe this was going to be a walk in the park. In a daylight strike like this we needed surprise and speed to get a toe-hold on the far bank. The rapid rate of fire by the 48th Engineers was intended to frighten the Germans and give them the impression a very large force was attacking. The unknown factors for us was going to be the German willingness to stay and fight and the possibility that they had planted a large quantity of mines on the far side.

The certainty of enemy mines at this most likely crossing site was high because it was such an important part of how the Germans defended. However, to get to the far side rapidly in daylight would be impossible if it was necessary for us to stop and deal with mines and explosives first. Therefore, we could not let ourselves get preoccupied by mines even knowing the consequences could be terrible. It

boiled down to destiny and lots of hope because isn't it hope that sees invisible, feels the intangible and achieves the impossible?

When ready, the Free French and I raced to the pedestrian bridge with a small wooden ladder and the engineer platoon started to fire like crazy. The amount of fire one platoon of engineers can generate in a small area with approximately three weapons each was unbelievable. The fire was absolutely devastating as well as fantastic because best of all it was a confidence builder for we who were out in the open. The Germans guarding the crossing site must have been frightened spitless. Even if by chance the Germans were in a partial retreat along the front, this appalling fire undoubtedly helped them to believe St. Die was no longer tenable or a healthy place to remain. The return fire was practically nil.

Once I lowered myself to the deck of the blown span in the water there was very little time lost getting to the far side in preparation for climbing the ladder left by the Germans. Free French were close behind me. When I was part way up the ladder there was a sudden and very loud explosion that rocked the entire bridge. Small portions of the bridge were transformed into projectiles that flew rapidly in every direction. My initial reaction was that a very large accurate enemy mortar shell had exploded in the middle of the bridge or one of the Free French had hit a trip wire designed to detonate a placed explosive. When I looked back over my shoulder there were wounded Free French out in the water calling for help. It was very difficult for me to not go to their assistance but in combat you learn to keep going and leave the wounded to the medics. The explosion was so powerful it caused the south span of the bridge that had been standing to collapse. It put the span that had been standing into a declining position from the near shore abutment to the water of the river.

In seconds I was at ground level on the far side in a sitting position facing the engineer platoon with my backside against the foundation of a burnt out building. The relentless fire from the engineers never missed a beat. Temporarily, it was a safe place for me to be because no German in his right mind was going to come out of hiding and make an attempt to eliminate me when so many determined Americans had their weapons firing in his direction. Very soon I realized I was the only person of the attack force on the far side. Not one of the Free French had made it.

The loss of the Free French was demoralizing and devastating. When we took the time to rethink what must have happened, it was easy to know the deck of the bridge had not been wired to explode by weight or a trip wire because if it had been it would have exploded when I crossed. Knowing the familiar sounds of incoming mortars, it was easy to rule out that the bridge had been hit by a mortar shell. It was the suddenness of the bang and the flying of bridge particles that temporarily made me think of a mortar shell. Since there were no tell-tale electric detonating wires leading back to a detonator, I had to believe the explosives were in place to explode by a remote control device. The Germans were known to have and use such methods for knocking out tanks as well as bridges. It is possible the German responsible for tripping the remote control was surprised by our attack and that is why I was able to get to the far side of the blow before he could respond. Then again, if he was not surprised, he must have had excellent observation that allowed him to wait and trip the control when several were directly over the charge.

Soon after the explosion a few engineers crossed over to where I was sitting. The declining span now made it easy to get to the blown span that rested in the water. After the explosion, however, there was just enough of the blown span remaining for one person to cross at a time. On the favorable count,

it now allowed us to use both of the wooden ladders to get to ground level on the far bank. As soon as there were eight or ten engineers on the far side we continued to disregard potential mines and moved out marching and firing until it was certain no Germans were firing back. Like snow flakes in the sun the Germans had vanished. Soon the entire engineer platoon was on the far side and we kept going until all of the town's thoroughfares were posted. It is only fitting that on 22 November 1944 the Germans should leave the ruins of St. Die as fast as they probable entered at the beginning of their occupation.

It was late afternoon when the French within St. Die called out to the rest of the world, saying, **"St. Die is liberated."** As soon as possible I dispatched a message to my battalion commander stating the town was free and we could hold if the infantry did not take too long in arriving. I was standing among the ruins of St. Die in the center of Rue Thiers where Rue d'Amerique joins, and the sun was starting to fail when Company E of the 409th Regiment of the 103rd Infantry Division entered St. Die. The infantry marched down Rue Thiers in two files, one to my right and one to my left. I stood there as proud as a bug in a rug as the infantry walking by looked a bit bewildered. They seemed to be saying, "Who are you?"

Before nightfall a photographer and reporter from the army newspaper Stars and Stripes arrived to get pictures and a story on the ruins of St. Die. I have no recollection of a photographer or reporter and did not even know the paper had printed a story until many years later so I had no input on what was published. The pictures they took, and those by Army photographers later, were of individuals of the 103rd Infantry Division that temporarily stopped in St. Die, but the story written by Joseph E. Palmer of Stars and Stripes rightfully gave the 48th Engineer Corps Combat Battalion full credit for entering the town first, contacting the Free French and that the engineers posted the town until infantry troops moved in. (A copy of the article written for Stars and Stripes pertinent to St. Die and the 48th Engineers is a permanent part of this story.)

Military history gives credit to the 103rd Infantry Division for the liberation of St. Die. For certain the presence and pressure of the 103rd in the surrounding area was very instrumental in the success achieved by the Free French and the engineers, but the 103rd did not liberate St. Die. History states the 103rd entered the town without opposition. It is true they entered the town without opposition but that was correct only because they arrived after the engineers and a hand-full of Free French had forced out the few Germans who stayed behind to fight a delaying action. As certain as the dark of night no one individual within the 409th Infantry Regiment refutes what is written here. Neither they nor a large percent of the French civilians who witnessed the liberation had reason to know the first Americans to enter St. Die were Corps Combat Engineers.

It is written and acknowledged the 409th Infantry Regiment of the 103rd Infantry Division, in the area surrounding St. Die, set a duty standard in Infantry combat not easily approached. Their undaunted true courage and devotion to duty was exceptional. As that which pertains to St. Die, the following is found on page 52, "The 409th Infantry in World War II";

"Designated as Task Force Hanes the armor and attached infantry moved out of La Hollande. At 0730 hours on 22 November, command of remaining units of the 2nd Battalion reverted to Capt. Earl Roth of Akron, Ohio, battalion executive officer. Capt. Roth was ordered to move the foot troops into Marzelay. Upon moving into

the village at 1530 hours, E Company under the command of Capt. John Stevenson, of Quoque, New York, was called on to clear St. Die of all the enemy north of the Meurthe River. E Company spent the night clearing the city, and on the following morning, Thanksgiving Day, returned to Marzelay by motor."

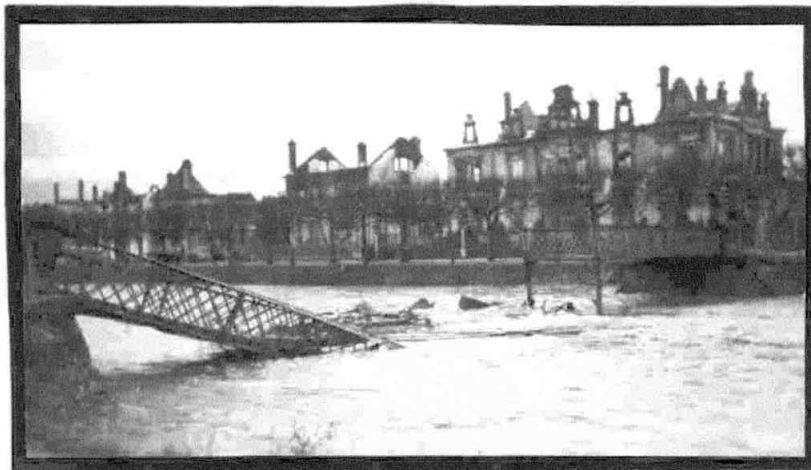
Platoon Sergeant Olen McKnight and Pvt. Harvey A. Nelson, Rice Lake, Wisconsin, of the 48th Engineers were the first to make contact with the infantry as they entered St. Die. Sgt. McKnight wasted no time informing the infantry unit commander that the town was liberated and posted. When asked, McKnight told the infantry commander where he might find the town mayor. The Mayor of St. Die, Claude et Duval, was living in an undamaged three story home in the southern portion of the town when St. Die was liberated. Capt. William Snyder, commander of Able Company of the 48th Engineers, was the first American to make contact with the town mayor. Snyder's main concern for being in St. Die at that time was to finalize plans for the eventual construction of the bailey bridge across the Meurthe River. While the town was being liberated, Snyder contacted the Mayor and the Mayor offered his home to Snyder as a company command post.

As soon as the corps engineer platoon was no longer needed to post the town, they reverted back to their company and under the black of night they helped build one hundred forty feet of bridge in the very heart of St. Die. The bridge was completed and ready for corps traffic at midnight. The construction time for the bridge was slightly more than three hours. The very same engineer platoon that liberated St. Die (with the help of thirteen Free French) on the 22nd of November, who helped to build one hundred forty feet of bridge that night, started checking and clearing mines from the ruins of St. Die at daybreak on 23 November.

The book, "We the 48th" states the Engineer Battalion had three casualties at St. Die. Two enlisted men were seriously wounded and one officer was killed. Pvt. Bernard L. Freagon, Cadott, Wisconsin and PFC John M. Woodcox, 128 Church Street, Detroit, Michigan, were the enlisted men that were wounded. 1st Lt. William A. Smith, Modesto, California, was the officer killed. Lt. Smith's death on 22 November was caused by an enemy mine. Smith was killed while serving in the capacity as my liaison officer. He was buried, and still remains, in a military cemetery (Epinal, France) just a hand-full of miles from where he was killed. As the Executive Officer of the Battalion, Major Joseph E. Foley, 5913 North Leithgow Street, Philadelphia, PA, remembered Lt. Smith as a tall, very cheerful and good looking blond who came from a very loving family. Foley particularly remembered "Smitty" showing him an eight to ten page letter he received from his sister. Practically every page had a small watercolor that highlighted the contents of that page. Foley believed the watercolor drawings were of professional quality. He remembered the lieutenant was understandably proud of the letter and his sister.

How many of the Free French were wounded or killed when the deck of the blown bridge exploded, and what happened to them afterwards, has always been a deep concern of mine. After crossing the Meurthe River, I never saw any of them again. It is not that I have not tried to make contact because I have. However, it is only fair to remember that the ones I encountered in the town on 21 and 22 November 1944 were not necessarily from the town of St. Die. They were red blooded young French men and women receiving local encouragement who secretively banded together from a large area under trying conditions for the purpose of wanting to help the allied cause.

Playing a part in the liberation of St. Die makes all the participants worthy to be proud. In my particular case, however, I was luckier than most. I had self named myself a nobody going nowhere. I had believed at one time that my destiny was to be a soldier. In St. Die alone my soldiering was fulfilled in such a meaningful way that even in fantasy I could not have dreamed better than to have the opportunity to help liberate the known Godmother of America. Thus, employing an early lesson learned from my mother, which was, "Destiny makes us brothers and it requires kindness along the way," it is my privilege to say, THANK YOU, ST. DIE.



The pedestrian bridge that was used in the crossing of the Meuthe River. Initially, the bridge had three spans with only the center span down in the water. The near shore span collapsed when the span in the water exploded. The town that was dynamited and burned by the Germans can be seen on the far side.