

The Crossing of the Roer

Submitted by Glenn L. Pearsall

My father never had an interest in discussing the war. Like most soldiers I suspect he just wanted to forget those years and move on with his life. One of the few stories he ever shared with me had to do with the crossing of the Roer River.

Alan W. "Pete" Pearsall was drafted out of engineering college in Brooklyn, NY. Growing up on the north shore of Long Island he loved the water and his hope was to be able to serve on a PT boat in the Navy. Unfortunately early tests indicated he was colorblind. Later studies indicated that with his particular color blindness he could "see through" camouflage – a real advantage in any service, but by then he was already in Europe and a member of Company A of the 327th Combat Engineers, 102nd "Ozark" Division.

His first real combat experience was in February of 1945 in the crossing of the Roer River in Germany.

"It was at night. We had to bring some pontoon boats down to the water's edge so that we could build a bridge over the river. The boats were heavy, even with 6 guys carrying them and the path to the river's edge was down a steep and slippery bank. As we descended to the river, struggling under the weight of the boat, in the darkness I could make out three guys standing in the middle of the path. As the lead man carrying the boat I told them in some pretty strong language to get out of the way. They immediately scurried off to the side of the path. As we walked by all we could see where stars. Our corporal, who was right behind me, whispered "Pete, do you know who that was?!". I told him to shut up and keep walking. On the path blocking our trip down the bank to the Roer that night was Eisenhower, Montgomery and Bradley!"

He didn't speak much about the actual building of the pontoon bridge under enemy fire, except to say they lost some good guys and that just minutes after the bridge was secured on the other bank, another pontoon bridge upriver broke free and came sweeping down the river. It crashed into their newly constructed bridge, tore it loose and the two bridges were swept downstream in the flooded river. Frustrated and angry, and still under enemy fire, they started a second bridge. That one held. The infantry of the 102nd soon crossed over to the east bank of the river and on to Krefeld.

On 8 April 1945 Lt. Col. Anderson sent the members of the Provisional Bridge Platoon, Company A, 327th Engineer Combat Battalion a Letter of Commendation. My father kept his copy of that letter the rest of his life. He died June 25, 1999 and I, as his eldest child, read that letter at his memorial service.

My dad also shared with me that his best friend in the service, I assume also in Company A of the 327th Combat Engineers, was a fellow he called "Chick"; I never knew the fellow's full name. He also told me that just as the war was ending a sniper shot and killed his best friend; I do not know if the was "Chick" or someone else. The sniper turned out to be a Hitler Youth little older than maybe 12, and although dead, they continued to fire into his limp body in rage and disgust at what had happened.