

## Crossing the Rhine River

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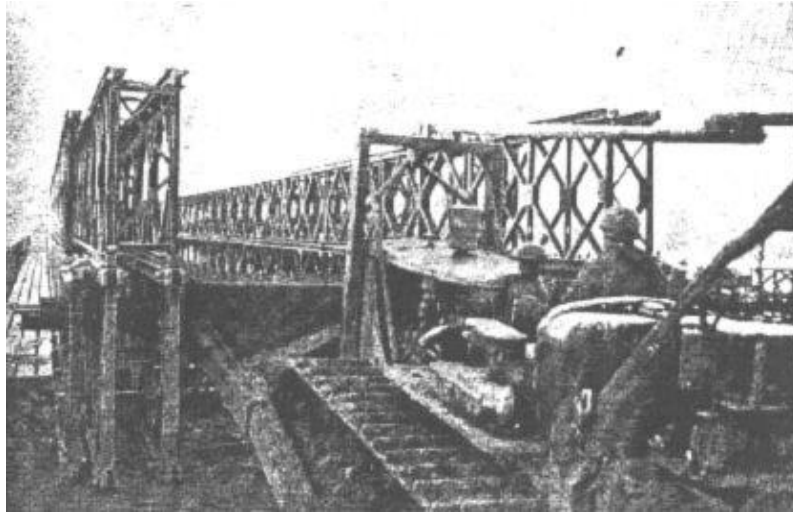
With the British Second Army under General Montgomery, we called him the Weasel; we closed in on the Rhine River. We were north of the famous Remagen Bridge that failed to collapse when the Germans tried to destroy it and the Americans captured it “intact.” We were to cross at Wesel and the Germans were waiting. A high steep dike lined the river on the west side. We had to build two miles of roads from the top of the dikes on a diagonal slant to the water over ground much too fragile to carry trucks and tanks. We no sooner poked our heads above the dike to survey the situation when an 88 shell exploded overhead. We took our first casualties before we got started. We thought we were safe in the trees behind the dike but they had that area zeroed in. Before we could dig foxholes they blasted us with tree bursts and Billy Tillman died before we could stop the bleeding; shrapnel sliced off his leg. This would not be an easy bridge.

Just before the Rhine we had passed a mile or so of German wounded, a double row of stretchers end to end on both sides of the road. Hundreds had died of their wounds and/or hypothermia. Many had crawled away from their stretchers in futile attempts to escape death. We had moved up so fast the Germans couldn't transport their wounded across the bridge before they had to destroy it to stop our advance. British artillery was already lining up behind us at the top of the dike and they took out several punishing 88s. As we approached the river we could see our enemy on the other side trying to pick us off with rifles about a thousand yards away. We watched a squad of infantrymen go across in small boats upstream of them and work their way into position to eliminate that problem. For the next two days the 88s continued to bother us from miles away. Not accurate fire but good enough to cause us casualties, destroy sections of our bridges and pulverize our road. The landscape was littered with our damaged heavy equipment the loss of which made it difficult to move heavy steel bridge sections down to the water.

During daylight hours no planes bothered us because the Army Air Force had control of the skies. But after dark fighters and bombers dove in with guns blazing and bombs dropping. Our searchlights framed them up but German pilots were not amateurs and they caused much damage to the bridges and us. When they strafed and we could see the trajectory we were forced to escape by jumping into the water and hope our buddies would pull us out. If not we went a long way down stream before reaching shore again. This was in late March and that water was still very cold. Searchlights trapped one German plane but he fooled the anti-aircraft gunners by dropping flares and the lights followed. Others risking their lives were shot down and crashed behind us.

The bridges we constructed were steel Bailey Bridges on top of pontoons. A section was assembled on the shoreline and driven by fifty horse outboard engines to the end of the completed part of the bridge. In that swift current it was difficult for the engineers to

catch the end and hang on while the current swung the new section into position where it was fastened with two-inch diameter steel pins. Getting the holes to line up while the pontoons wobbled took great strength and patience. If we missed, the soldiers became sailors until they could make shore farther down. Far too many sections failed to connect and were lost; the current made a return trip impossible. Haste made waste.



A tank crosses a Bailey Bridge

