



WWII Memories of a Combat Engineer

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The Men of 100 and 1 Jobs

And the 36th Engineers Have Done Most of 'Em

Block Busting



Combat Engineers



...the 36th Engineers... the men of 100 and 1 jobs... the 36th Engineers... the men of 100 and 1 jobs... the 36th Engineers... the men of 100 and 1 jobs...



It is hard to believe that the big wigs in Washington didn't know that we were going to have a war, certainly the Fallons knew it. Probably everybody who read a paper in Philadelphia in 1941 knew it, the papers, and we had four of them, were filled with maps of American installations in the Pacific and showing distances from Japan. Just one week before it happened I told my father very strongly that the Japanese were going to attack Dutch Harbor Alaska, which all the maps showed was the closest to Japan.



By John T. Fallon II



Well, I was off by a thousand miles or so because it was Pearl Harbor, Hawaii but I remember the day and the date, the Eagles were playing the Washington Redskins. While I don't remember the score, the Eagles were expected to lose because they had been fooling around with a two quarterback system, and neither was a bona fide star. The radio program was interrupted by the announcement and I guess the world has not been the same since.

We had been assured by FDR that no American boy was going to be sent to fight in a foreign war, all the while we were sending Destroyers and munitions to England in the fight against Germany. At the time I was not too enamored of the English anyway because of my very Irish heritage and I thought it would be a good idea to get rid of the British Royalty. But America at war stirred something in me and I began thinking I should serve somehow, somewhere. At the time I was not yet eligible for the draft and I kept it to myself for a while but soon I told mother and dad that I had to join but I didn't know in what capacity.

My sister Middy wanted me to go in the Marines but I didn't like their uniforms for some reason and one day one of the papers ran a full page ad asking for volunteers to join the Engineer Amphibian Command which was forming in Cape Cod Massachusetts. It listed all the qualifications they were looking for and I had no experience with boats of any kind but they did specify that they wanted signalmen and I was very good with the semaphore flags from my experience with the Boy Scouts. So my folks signed the papers and my Draft Board gave me per-

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mission and off I went to war, or at least to Aberdeen Maryland where I got all the necessary shots and the GI haircut.

Within days though we went to Camp Edwards out on the windy Cape and I was soon learning which was my right and left foot. I was there just a week when I was told to report to the sergeant-major who told me that there was a possibility that I could get an appointment to West Point but I discouraged this because I figured that if I went to school for four years the war would be over and I wouldn't get a chance to serve. They finally came up with the idea of going to Officer Candidate School and I thought that was a good idea. After basic I was put in a temporary job guarding landing boats until the start of my OCS class.

OCS in Fort Belvoir was a big step up from basic training. There was intensive instruction and book-work, and the days passed swiftly but often strenuously. The ranks thinned out each week as they graded the candidates and by the time of graduation there were only about 25% of the men left with whom I had started. The graduation parade was very impressive and I was Company Commander of my graduating class and had a swelled head that barely could hold a helmet.

Before graduating they gave us a choice of type of unit we would prefer to be in and I chose the Engineer Amphibian Command only to learn that while I was in OCS the Navy got petulant and demanded that the Army let them run the landing boats. So my second choice was Airborne but the quota was filled so I settled for Combat Engineers. I was promptly assigned to the 49th Engineer Combat Battalion in Camp Carson Colorado. It took almost three days to get there because the trains were filled but I arrived just as they were planning to go to Louisiana for maneuvers. So, with just a few days of climbing mountains and mesas we went to what must be the largest, swampiest area in the country. It probably only lasted a month but it seemed like forever and we finally were shipped back to Carson.

I was just settling in when they got a call for Engineer Lieutenant replacements in Africa and off I went again. I stopped momentarily at Camp Reynolds in Pennsylvania and then to Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia. This was only long enough to get space on a ship and it turned out to be the Empress of Scotland which before the war had been called the Empress of Japan. The ship was full of replacements both enlisted and officer so there must have been a few losses in Africa, but at least the landings had already been made so we could land at a proper dock.

AFRICA

Casablanca was dusty and I guess it still is, but it certainly was different and I stayed there for about ten days waiting for room on a "40 and 8", the famed box cars of WWI. It took over two days to get from Casablanca to Oran because the train had to stop for mechanical reasons every 50 miles or so, and when we got to Oran, trucks waited to take us to a place

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called Canastel where we had barracks of a sort which were a big improvement over the tents of Casablanca.

Almost immediately, well, maybe ten days, they started sending me to schools, very tough schools, with up to the minute information on how to fight a war. Some schools were run by the British and some by a combination of nationalities, and in some of them we were also joined by French junior officers. Building bridges under fire is not exactly the same as building bridges in Virginia, and we were hammered at by people who had learned the hard way.

Mine school was no picnic because they used real mines, placing them and pulling them by the hour until we thought maybe we could actually do it in combat. Another school was run by British Commandos who could run across plowed fields like they were on a running track, while we struggled to get out of one muddy hole after another. We crossed rivers and ravines, now called wadis, on a single rope hanging 25 feet above a rocky bottom. We assaulted houses over and over again and were fortunate there was no one in them. All the exercises were with live ammo so it is a miracle none of us were killed. The final obstacle course was designed to make anything in combat seem easy.

Schools though were getting on my nerves, and me and a few of the other very junior officers found a great way to get into the action and finally do something. We found an "ad" on the bulletin board requesting volunteer Engineer Second Lieutenants to serve in the French Foreign Legion, as instructors to their Engineer Soldiers. This seemed like a winner and another shave-tail and I hitched a ride into Oran to the office of the American- French Liaison Office.

We went right up to the Colonel in charge and told him we wanted to sign up. When he asked for our credentials we both told him that we speak pretty good French. He just laughed and said, "That's no good, you have to speak either German or Italian, there are no French soldiers in the French Foreign Legion." Well, it was worth a try.

Fortunately we soon got orders to move. But not, it turned out, to the front—no, we were sent to a replacement depot in Italy as the war kept moving on. I was wondering why they didn't send me up if they needed help so badly. And then when they did send the orders down, I must confess I was surprised because I was getting accustomed to this school routine. It developed that I was going to join the **36th Engineer Combat Regiment** at Anzio. It was the middle of February 1944 and I

was at last going to war. Two other Lieutenants were going with me to the Regiment and we were jeeped to Naples where an LST was loading others for the short ride to Nero's favorite summer resort. It was just an overnight trip and as we docked a German air raid was in progress but fortunately they were not aiming at the port but at the anchored ships in the harbor.

ITALY

Regimental Headquarters was very unimpressive; several dugouts with timber and shelter halves over them and a few small signs, S-2, S-3, radio, etcetera and the Commander, Colonel Thomas Stanley was sitting on pile of sandbags. He was apparently very busy pointing out things on a map to someone and looked up when we were introduced. He shook hands and directed us to "G", "H" and "I" Company and said only that the fighting was constant, the shelling was very heavy and the only advice he gave us was to be the last ones to jump in a hole when the shelling started.

"G" and "I" Company Lieutenants were able to go directly to their Company CP and then to their platoons because they had some kind of cover that allowed very judicious movement in the daytime. My particular platoon was dug in just in back of a small crest in a rise and could be approached only at night.

So, I spent the day in the Company CP meeting Captain Gillespie, a Lieutenant Hollander and a handful of radio operators and medics. This gave me time to learn a little about the Regiment, about the tough fighting at Salerno and the losses from the mines in Naples. I also got to see some aerial photos of the front and they were very unimpressive. Our front was on the south side of the Moletta River, which in reality was just a small creek. The Germans had a higher wooded area and there were some target areas marked out for when it became necessary to call for artillery support. And we had fine support, a British artillery battalion was supporting us because we were at that time an Infantry Regiment for the British 56th Infantry Division. We also had a squadron of British Sherman tanks which were dug in and firing artillery missions.

So, that night a guide lead me to my position and I got to shake hands with someone who was my platoon sergeant.

"Getting into a dark foxhole with weapons and equipment isn't easy but I managed to get settled in and started looking out into a black night lit only by tracer lines and an occasional "Very" pistol flare. The shelling wasn't bad at that time but from time to time a mine exploded along the front some place and since I was new at this business they all seemed right in front of me. Daylight didn't clear things up too much because I couldn't stand up but I could crawl around and meet my platoon, they were already veterans and I was learning fast."

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On my left I could see the small building which was used by "G" Company. I was told that they had reinforced the first floor with timbers and were firing from openings in the basement. It was about a hundred yards away and on my right side there was a long hedgerow running down to the Moletta. A .50 caliber Machine Gun was dug in there and covered not only the hedgerow but also had good grazing fire over our front. Right near the .50 was our 57MM Anti-Tank gun. We were not expecting tanks from our front so the 57 was used mainly to blast away at very obvious German dugouts. We knew that it was effective because some of the fellows checked out the sights after Anzio. We got regular doses of German Nebelwerfer rounds that we called "screaming mimis". They are 150 MM and are usually fired as a barrage of five or six after they think they have zeroed you in. They never got either of our machine guns or the 57 but they sure tried.

Nights were patrol time for both sides and often the opposing patrols would surprise one another and cause a lot of firing and confusion. We lost a few prisoners to the Germans and we got a few of theirs. One of the most impressive sights was watching the air raids every night over the port. We had hundreds of Anti-Aircraft guns and lights and they would make the sky look like the 4th of July every night. Rarely though did they seem to hit any German planes or at least none of them came down while we were watching. Since we were the extreme left of the front, one of our companies was actually covering the beach and one night they captured several Italians coming off a small boat with explosives. From time to time we could see disabled planes ditching near our lines because there were a lot of Navy ships out there to rescue them.

The Regiment was in that front line position without relief for 45 days in a row which is much more than is usually expected of an Infantry Regiment, and although it seemed as though it would go on forever, we finally heard that we were going to be relieved.

The British 56th Infantry Division was being relieved by the British 5th Infantry Division and we were alerted to make a very quiet withdrawal. The Britishers who relieved our Company

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were probably very inexperienced or very careless because they made a lot of noise moving into our positions. I hustled our men out as fast as I could, and in back of the lines we found some trucks waiting to take us into Anzio.

"H" Company was stationed in three houses which must have been very beautiful before the war. They had all been hit by artillery or aerial bombs but were still very substantial. Since they were about a mile from the port itself, we were spared some of the shelling and bombing that the port took, but not all. We got about fifteen replacements in "H" Company and still did not have what should be our normal personnel.

The Regiment had lost over 250 casualties during that period on the line and we lost some every day from shellfire even back in Anzio. Our job was to blend them (replacements) in with the more experienced men, and we spent a lot of time training them but because we knew we were going to serve more time as Infantry, since we spent all of our training on patrolling, weapons, and general combat readiness.

We did have some time for relaxation, and one night a couple of us played poker by the light of a kerosene lamp with the shutters tightly drawn. The regular nightly air raid seemed more intense than ever when a bomb struck outside our building and shrapnel flew through the shutters. Colonel Gibbons was sitting next to me and he was hit hard enough to knock him off his chair. He was hit right in the chest and we did what we could, but he died very soon.

The next day we got a new Battalion Commander, a very good fellow from "D" Company, Captain Joe Lombard. He was hastily made a Major and took over very quickly and efficiently. We were interrupted one night when the new Battalion Commander told us to load up and go to the front again. Apparently in moving troops around, a gap had appeared between the 3rd Infantry Division and the 45th. We rushed up and dug in, but fortunately the Germans didn't take advantage of it and soon we went back to training.

General Truscott had just assumed command of the 6th Corps and started making changes immediately. He ordered that every front line company designate a combat platoon to do the patrolling and outposting for the company, with the newer men in static positions on the line, until they could get blooded. This meant that I was selected along with the other two Lieutenants who had joined the Regiment with me to do the patrolling for our companies. Fortunately the orders included a provision that the patrol platoon leader could choose the non-coms he preferred. This naming of a combat or patrol

platoon just intensified the training and we worked on night patrols, snipers, and mine removal.

We had been getting nice warm C-rations with real bread and occasionally real meat and even eggs, and after the foxholes this was easy living. Then one day the word came down that I was to select two non-coms and report to the First Special Service Force on the right flank of the beachhead on the Mussolini Canal.

The First Special Service Force (FSSF), a combination Canadian-American Force was an elite group initially organized to knock out Germany's Heavy Water capabilities, but was now being used as regular Infantry, and apparently belaboring the Germans in front of them. Our orders were to report as riflemen and join in their patrols to learn the paths and wadis and minefields because the 36th was soon to replace them. I was assigned to one company and my two non-coms were assigned to adjoining companies and we went out every night on patrol. We darkened our faces at twilight and went out and usually didn't get back until dawn after ambushing German patrols and shooting up their emplacements.

One night was especially wild when we went on a patrol up a big ditch we called Ace Wadi, and we were moving steadily when a German machine gun opened up in front of us but he was firing off to the side. As we watched, we heard to our left rear a big explosion as a German patrol blew up a house they thought we were using as a lookout but we were not. Our patrol immediately clobbered the machine gunner in front of us and then opened up on the Germans returning from their mission. They didn't know what hit them. We didn't have a single casualty that evening.

The next day I found out that one of my men who was on a different patrol had shot and killed a FSSF sergeant. His company commander told me though that it was not my man's fault because his sergeant had returned from posting his men down a road which he knew was a killing zone. These things happened a great many times and it is one of the awful things about war.

We soon got to know the territory, and within a few more days my regiment came up and relieved the FSSF. "H" company was on the left of the Regimental front and two of our platoons were stationed right on the Mussolini Canal. They were well dug in and had minefields in front of them. My platoon being the combat platoon had a favored position in a house in back of the canal where we could move around freely during the day because we were going to be out front every night.

We soon settled into a routine. On the back of the house in which we stayed there was a big white wall and one of my men drew a map of the front we were facing. There were two roads of importance, a "dogleg" road ran on our left from about 50 feet in front of the canal, and a road ran to the right joining another road parallel to the "dogleg". Both roads ran out over open fields with a few farm houses and all drained by large and small wadis. They both ran into the road from Cisterna to Borgo Piavi and this was the German Main Line of Resistance. So each

day we would gather in back of the house and go over our routes for the evening. Usually we would put out an outpost on each of the two roads, and usually at a different place every night. The patrol would go out on either road depending upon whether we were trying to locate their machine guns or to grab a prisoner from one of their outposts.

Usually when just a small reconnaissance patrol was needed, I took two riflemen with me and I remember their last names, one was Private Rosenberg and the other was Private Williams. Both were about 18 years old but very good riflemen and very dependable. Williams being of American Indian heritage was always called "chief", even by me. They went on at least a dozen patrols with me and we worked together very well. Usually though, most of the platoon patrols were of about a squad in size, often with a Browning Automatic Rifle but rarely with a machine gun.

One day with Rosenberg and Williams we went right down the middle of the "dogleg" road in the middle of the day, figuring correctly as it turned out, that the Germans would think anyone would be crazy to do that. We got out quite a ways and came to the bridge over Ace Wadi and it was covered with mines. We disarmed them all and started up again but almost immediately Williams grabbed my arm and pointed out two Germans about 150 feet to our left.

I whispered to them to pick out one German each but don't shoot unless you hear me in trouble. I went just a bit further and on the left side of the road was a German with a radio who started reaching for his rifle. I emptied a half a clip from my tommy gun in his gut. Rosenberg and Williams also fired as soon as they heard my shots, and hit each of the two outposts. We then began what could be called a rapid withdrawal, boy did we run. We were followed all the way back by mortars and machine gun fire. We stopped every fifty yards or so to fire back at them to keep their heads down a bit. I reported to the Battalion Commander and he said that the Regimental Commander wanted to know why I didn't grab the radio and I told him quite honestly that I was running too fast.

Once in a while I took a night off but on most nights I was out on some patrol or other. I was very fortunate in having great Sergeants, Billy Belcher, Russell LaFontaine, and Peter Haley, all southern country boys who were I am sure about the best in the United States Army. They controlled their men, they

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led their men by example, and they never questioned an order. Usually one or the other would be manning the outposts while the other was patrolling. We certainly worked together well.

One day I was told to prepare for a “Time on Target” shoot that night on Borgo Piavi. All I had to do was to go with my two riflemen to the closest we could get to the town and settle down with a radio. They fired three rounds and I corrected them each time until it appeared they were on target. All the big guns of the beachhead were timed to go off at one time mostly with air bursts over the town. What a racket it was and it lasted only five minutes but it made a wreck of the town. We could see the German ambulances running back and forth and it kept them busy so we had no trouble getting back to our lines.

By this time the 5th Army had been building up the force at Anzio that the Germans could not resist, but it was hoped that they would move out before a big breakout was needed. One day I was called to Regimental Headquarters and the Colonel and S-2 told me that they had captured the Germans “Very” pistol signals and the password, so I was to go out that night with a small patrol and send the Germans fake signals to make them get out. So, I took my trusty riflemen, Rosenberg and Williams, and went out to the German outpost line. The Colonel told me that all of our outposts had been called back because they were hoping for something big and didn’t want any small fight to ruin it.

We went out and found a couple of furrows to lie in and I watched my trusty Bulova watch. At a certain hour I fired one red and one green. This was the signal that the Americans were moving out—hah. Then in two minutes I was to signal two white, which as supposed to mean that all German troops were to start withdrawal—hah. Then two minutes later I had to fire two red flares to tell the German artillery to fire on their old positions—hah.

Nothing happened, nothing. So we then realized we were getting blasted from our own lines by a heavy machine gun fire and mortars right on top of us from our own lines.

We crawled on our bellies all the way back to our lines and a couple of guys on the canal said, “What were you guys doing out there, we had some German signaling and we really hit them.” I quickly found their Lieutenant and I’ll never forget his name, Ellsworth Moody. I used every kind of insult in the several languages I had been learning and he casually told me that he had not heard of the operation.

But it had to be over soon, and two days later I was called to Regimental Headquarters again and Colonel Stanley said that he was sure they were gone so I was to take my platoon out Dog-Leg Road as far as I could go. Now I was a bit suspicious about the order because if they (the Germans) were gone, why would I need the entire platoon. But at dawn the next day we took off.

I left one squad at the outpost line to cover us in case the Colonel was wrong and we did move out. We got past the Ace Wadi bridge and then past the place where I knocked off the

radio operator and I was feeling really good when a blast of machine gun fire cut down my two scouts.

There were two machine guns with one on each side of the road so I told Sergeant Belcher to take the left one and I will take the one on the right. We kept firing and moving in close and I could see the one I was hunting was only about 50 feet away. Then I saw something come flying over my head, and as I turned to look the potato masher grenade went off and I was blinded with blood. Actually I don’t remember much of what happened next, but they got me back to the canal and in the meantime Sergeant Belcher got one of the machine gunners and they were ordered back. We had one dead and five or 6 wounded.

I don’t remember a whole lot about the next two days, but I do know I was in a jeep and then I was on a stretcher in the Battalion Aid Station. I remember they stuck me in the arm with a needle. The next recollection was lying in a cot in the Evacuation Hospital Tent and General Mark Clark going through the ward. He pinned a Purple Heart on me and told me that the 36th Engineers were doing a first rate job.

I woke up in a hospital in Naples as I was going to the operating room and I told the doctor to save the shrapnel for a souvenir. When I woke up again, I was under clean white sheets, the first in over a year and being attended by nurses all of whom were, at least at the time, beautiful.

When the doctor came to make his rounds, I asked him for the shrapnel and he told me that they left it in there. However, he smilingly told me to cheer up because “I now had two assholes”.

One day I had a visitor from the Regiment, the Exec came and told me that I had received a Battlefield promotion to First Lieutenant. Now this was nice but I was really disappointed because my Company Commander told me that I was supposed to get a Silver Star. Later on I did hear that I had gotten a Bronze Star for the action, but by that time I was involved in a lot of other things.

I did acquire a bit of “culture” while I was recuperating, for instance I got a pass to see an opera in the Naples Opera House and one day I joined another Lieutenant and took a horse cart to the country. We found a small family restaurant and were

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treated to horse meat steaks which were at least different. I was in the hospital until August and finally was able to get back to the Regiment.

When I got there they were training to land in Southern France. They had not been idle though, after my platoon got shot up they sent an entire company out and they went through Borgo Sabatini, Littorio and met up with the 48th Engineers of the 5th Army coming north.

The Regiment then was turned North and when attached to the 36th Infantry Division, attacked and captured Velletri, a hill town of great importance, and we had quite a few casualties in doing it. The credit for the capture of the town is usually given to the 36th Infantry Division to which we were attached.

FRANCE

The nice boat ride from Naples to Southern France was uneventful unless you think that the stopover in Ajaccio, Corsica deserves mention. It was deemed necessary to be sure we were not all seasick when we made the landing. The ships actually took us to a nice beach where everyone swam in the ocean and got covered with salt water which stayed on our skins for quite a few days. We had one other event. At about two in the morning of the landing, the men reported that some one had jumped overboard. In theory there was a list of everyone on the boat but when we landed the need to get off fast eliminated any possibility of finding out who it was. Doubtless he was later reported missing in action in France.

The weather was beautiful on the 15th of August, The Feast of the Assumption, when many Catholic believers like to put their feet in the water and actually I got in up to my hips. Since I was too late getting back to my Company from the hospital to get a meaningful job, I was assigned the task of “sniper hunting” with a small squad of five men. Since the 3rd Battalion was on the extreme left of the beachhead and “H” Company right at the end, I took off with my small “army” to the west and caught up with an Infantry squad from the 3rd Division who were hung up on a minefield and trying to get around it.

While we were considering the mines, shots rang out from the point of Cap Cavalaire and one of the doughboys dropped. They went left and we went to the right and took off after the sniper. He kept firing but didn’t hit any more before we closed in. The Infantry beat us to him and clobbered him in a hurry, so we took off over the hill looking for more.

We came across two more Germans in a foxhole, but they surrendered so fast we didn’t even give a thought to shooting them. It was apparent that most of the Germans had left, so I sent the prisoners back to the beach and sat down and ate a hard chocolate bar.

The view of the bay was fantastic with a hundred ships scattered around. A couple of the Navy’s cruisers were still firing inland at some targets, but the fighting was obviously over. The Engineers put in several “moles”—big square metal boxes bolted together to make a landing pier for the LSTs. The Cargo

“Before we headed north, I had one more assignment. I was ordered to take my platoon and report to an LST unloading, and there were three trucks heavily loaded with wooden cartons. We were to deliver them to Toulon under the guidance of a Finance Officer. The cartons were all marked LUCKY STRIKE but we guessed that they were not cigarettes. The Finance Officer nervously told us that it was “invasion” money—American printed French Francs intended to pay the GIs. Everything went off without a hitch and we delivered the money to a bank that had been requisitioned by our Army.”

ships in the meantime were dropping crane loads of material to DUKWS (the floating trucks that swam right up to the dumps to be unloaded).

We had to stay there until the port in Toulon was open and the French were supposed to capture it. They came in on D+2 bag and baggage, with every other truck loaded to overflowing and with a couple of resident prostitutes waving to everyone from the top of them.

Unloading was uneventful discounting the fact that some things were loaded first that should have come off first. In fact after three or four days Lt. Hollerback suggested that we drive into Cannes to see the sights. I am sure that every other August the city would be flourishing, but we had a hard time finding some wine so we went back to the nice villa on the beach.

I was sent to see if the French had made any progress in Toulon, but as I got to the outskirts I could see machine gunners firing on something, and across the street cafes were open and the French soldiers were having a bit of a drink. As it turned out, they were so slow that someone found out that Marseilles was easy-picking, so we bypassed Toulon and one of our battalions removed mines and other obstacles while we continued taking cargo over the beach. But the opening of Marseilles caused us to get orders to go catch up with the rest of the 6th Corps which was heading north.

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It was the 5th of September and we headed into our full time occupation, supporting Infantry troops. We moved fast and were soon doing bridges and roads in Vesoul and heading further north. The Germans had retreated very fast to this point, but then decided that they were going to fight. Since I

“Several of my men were hit by shrapnel and one was killed by a sniper. One day two of my men came and told me that the farmer in one of the houses in the village was sending signals to the Germans by running his window shades up and down at night. I arrested them and sent them to the French liaison and they certainly didn’t come back right away.”

was not allowed to keep a diary at the time, I had all the towns and dates mixed up in my mind until I sent to the National Archives and got copies of our Operation Orders. It reminded me of some fights I had forgotten about, and from about the 20th of September we did much more fighting as Infantry than as Engineers.

For most of the remaining war we would have as our supporting artillery the 83rd Chemical Battalion and they were ideal for our front line needs as they could accurately drop a 105MM shell right on a German foxhole if we could locate it properly.

The Regiment also had the 117th Reconnaissance Squadron which had light tanks. We had to fight to get into Docelles and one of our platoons was caught in a barrage while in trucks and lost a lot of men but the Germans pulled out soon and moved just about five miles away to some hills. We actually had a few days rest here, and then were sent to the hills just by a road junction at Prey. We were in a tiny village just south of the town and had to be wary moving around in daylight because the Germans had the high ground.

One day our Company Commander ordered our 2nd Platoon to attack up one of the hills in daylight and they had no artillery support and the two light tanks with them were useless on the hill. They took heavy losses, and the next day the Company Commander ordered them up again and Lt. Hollerback refused to go. He was a very good man, having been wounded in Italy and the Battalion Commander agreed with him and got him relieved rather than punished.

The next night the Company Commander came up with the commander of the light tanks and told me and the tank Lieutenant that we were to capture “W” Woods the next day. Since both of these commanders were very drunk at the time, the tank Lieutenant and I went back to the Task Force Commander and told him about it. He boiled over and told us we were a blocking force and we don’t want those hills. The next day the two Company Commanders were relieved of duties and sent back stateside.

It wasn’t over because we had to patrol every day. One day two of my scouts were hit and I had a very scary time getting them out of there. One of them died and the other went to the hospital. I later got a Bronze Star with a V for Valor for that and that was my 2nd Bronze Star. Several of my men were hit by shrapnel and one was killed by a sniper. One day two of my

men came and told me that the farmer in one of the houses in the village was sending signals to the Germans by running his window shades up and down at night. I arrested them and sent them to the French liaison and they certainly didn’t come back right away.

We soon got word of a big operation, The Corps was going to attack across the Meurthe River and every Engineer unit was pressed into operation for a big river crossing.

The 36th Engineers had five or six bridges to build for the different Infantry and Tank units to cross and “H” Company was assigned a very small town with a river span of about 110-120 feet, and a Bailey was to be dropped at our site before dawn. We arrived promptly a little before daybreak and all the officers went to the site to set out our work.

We had been assured that the Infantry would have cleared through this area by daylight so we were quite confident. However, as soon as we reached the side of the river a couple of machine guns and a Flakwagen, a quad 20MM, opened up on us. Our Company Commander, Captain Fives, jumped into the river and hid in back of a couple of old timbers.

I dove into a ditch and the other officers were slightly behind us and took off. I crawled out of the ditch on my belly until I got back to the rest of the men and we figured that we had lost our Company Commander, so Lieutenant Hollander took over. We decided we would have to get them out of there if a bridge was going to be built, so we looked up and down the river for boats, any kind of boats, but the Germans had removed them all.

We fired our machine guns at the possible German emplacements but they kept on blazing at us. In about a half an hour a jeep came riding up fast, it was the G-3 of the 14th Armored Division for whom we were trying to build the bridge. He was irate and wanted to know where his bridge was so I walked him up to the bridge site and the Krauts opened up on us fast.

We both jumped into the same ditch I had found before and crawled out. He got back to his jeep and screamed at somebody on his radio and told him our coordinates and then sat back in his jeep and fumed. His call paid off because within minutes two P-38s flew over and dropped four bombs on the enemy. They circled twice and each time poured heavy machine gun fire on them. It was clear so we got across the river in a hurry but it turned out that they didn’t even need this bridge because the Germans had no intention of holding the Meurthe River line.

As we crossed we saw the damage the P-38s had done to the Flakwagen. It was demolished and there were about ten former German soldiers scattered around. We finally fished Captain Fives out of the water, wet and very annoyed. We were relieved but immediately started another action.

We were sent to Rambervillers to a very wooded area and the entire Regiment was well dug in and the Germans shelled us incessantly. We patrolled every day and most nights and on one of our combat patrols we had two light tanks accompany-

ing us but one struck a mine and the other withdrew. And then one day we got a very unusual order, unusual because we had no battalion staff to plan attacks.

Our Battalion staff consisted of a CO an Exec, a Doctor and a couple of radio men. But the order was given and we had to try. I was alerted one night by a runner who came into my dugout and the first thing he said was, “How the hell did you get to be an officer?” He was my bunkmate from basic training and in later years a good friend at our veteran reunions. Anyway, he told me to follow “G” Company in a long column of Platoons over a very steep hill to capture Ste. Barbe in the valley below. This meant that we were strung out over the entire mountain following a footpath.

Within 15 minutes or so, I knew we were headed in the wrong direction. My Boy Scout training taught me how to read a compass and we were off several points but there was no way to communicate with the head of the column—we had no radios. So we trudged along and then a runner came back to me and said Colonel Lombard wants the tanks sent up. This was interesting because I knew nothing about any tanks and besides they couldn’t get through the thick woods on a three foot wide path. But we pushed on and as I reached the top I saw the CO talking to a couple of other officers looking down at the town far down in the valley. I suggested a patrol to see how strongly it was held and they sent one and it came back and said the town was empty.

So down we went and found that, as I expected, we were in the wrong village by about three kilometers. So we hastened to Ste. Barbe and again found it empty. From then on company-size attacks were the order of the day.

The combat didn’t let up but it was always in a different place as we moved forward slowly but surely. One day our Regiment replaced the French 1st Armored Division on the extreme left flank, not only of the Corps, the Army and even the Army Group, we were next to Patton’s 3rd Army and I have since read that Patton and Patch, our Army Commander, wanted to cross the Rhine at this time because there was no strong German force there. If this had happened there would have been no German counterattack in December, but Eisenhower wanted Field Marshall Montgomery to have the honor of being first across the Rhine.

My platoon was sent to a small farming village in the middle of a very thick woods to relieve a French Company. We had to leave our trucks and leg it for almost a mile to get in there and I was met by a French Captain who was almost in tears.

It had been terrible and he had a lot of losses and he hoped I had a doctor. I pointed out my short, cross-eyed aid man and he almost fainted but I reassured him all would be fine.

We replaced them and set up our machine guns and settled down under a lot of heavy artillery from the Germans. The first night there were a few small patrols that tested us but we were well armed and blasted away at them. In fact we blasted away at anything that moved including, as it turned out, several cows. I stayed in a small house where the farmer

and his wife were down in the potato cellar almost all the time. He was a very friendly fellow and every morning about 5 AM he would lift the trap door and bring up a bottle and four glasses so we could have a drop of “schnapps” to start the day. It was vile stuff but it did the trick and we got through the week there just fine. We had no casualties at all and went back to the Company in Baccarat.

About this time the Regiment was being relieved of all Infantry duty and spent more time on bridges and roads. However, on November 11th, Armistice Day of all days, “H” company was sent to the front again because some newly arrived Division, I think it was the 103rd, had moved too far. So we filled that space for another week and we picked up a few prisoners and had just two or three men slightly wounded in that time. But by then it seemed we had enough Infantry to go all the way, so we spent our time improving roads and putting in bridges. Early December was cold and wet but we did not have much snow, so we worked in the mud.

One day I was ordered to take my platoon to a small town near Colmar and remove a “Treadway” float bridge because the French had retreated and we didn’t want the Germans to get it. We hustled down and got into town as a big artillery bombardment was hitting us. I found the French CO and asked him to have a runner lead us to the bridge site to get the Treadway. As soon as we reached it I saw the problem. Across the canal was an elevated road, a levee over the swampy land, and on it I saw four burned out French Sherman tanks. Apparently the Germans knocked them off one by one and the German artillery had sunk the Treadway. Every ponton was full of holes and the entire thing was under the water so this was no job for us, it was a salvage job.

One night Colonel Lombard came into our cozy tent and told us that we had to put in a Bailey Bridge at Mertzwiller at 5 AM the next day to get tanks across a river because the 103rd Division Infantry was held up by some German Panther tanks. We had coffee at about 3AM and trucks took us to about a kilometer from the bridge site. The German heard the trucks of course and shelled us unmercifully as we marched to the bridge site where the Bailey parts had already been dropped.

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As we got within about a hundred yards from the bridge, I got hit in the left back. It bled quite a bit so I hiked back and a jeep took me to the aid station. I am proud to say that the company got the bridge in on time, but in the meantime I was in the hospital again. They took me all the way back to Besancon and I thought I had it made, with two Purple Hearts they would surely send me home. As it turned out that was a bad guess. I got stitched up and was enjoying clean sheets and beautiful nurses for about two weeks when a team of Officers came through the wards and told all the walking wounded that they were going back to their units because the Germans had counter attacked.

They arranged an old passenger train to take us closer to the front and it was crammed to the top. Fortunately there was another Lieutenant from the 36th there and after two days we had enough and we jumped off the train and hitched a ride to the nearest personnel depot. They immediately arranged to have a jeep take us to our companies, and as I joined "H" Company once again I found out that they were having turkey which they had missed on Christmas.

As we lined up for chow I was filled in with all they had done while I was gone. It was all Engineer work because our Infantry was relentlessly moving forward. While in line a messenger came speeding up and our CO announced that we had to immediately drop everything, pick up our weapons and move out. I did manage to grab a turkey leg and put it in my pocket where I discovered it a couple of days later.

We went right into the line relieving the 179th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Division. All the Infantry had to thin the lines because several Divisions were sent North to counter the German breakthrough.

We were in Germany proper near a town of Bobenthal and we dug in and waited. We did get a couple of very small patrols looking us over but nothing important and we found that we were going to have to withdraw to shorter lines as we were too thin to hold the line very long.

So in just two or maybe three days we were ordered to withdraw. My orders were to cover the Company area until 0500 and then to pull back to where there were supposed to be

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trucks to take us to the next line which was the Maginot Line. My orders were to blow the only bridge on the way back so I had all the demolitions ready and I saw a GI Tank Destroyer on the enemy side of the bridge. I told the crew that I was going to blow the bridge but they insisted that they were told to stay there. Since neither of us had a radio to call for advice I warned them, and then blew the bridge. I have often wondered what happened to them.

We occupied positions in the Maginot Line but not in the old fortifications. We started getting German patrols but not in any great number and we stayed there until January 13th when we relieved the 275th Infantry at a better, shorter line in the High Vosges.

The German High Command, knowing that our ranks were thin because of the movement of so many Divisions to the north, started what they called Operation Nordwind.

It is hard to know where they got all the troops but we soon found out that we were fighting the German 6th Mountain Division which had been in Norway. These were younger men and in better condition than many we had encountered.

They hit us day and night but they never broke our line, and we captured several of them but we did not take any losses. One loss later meant a great deal to me, because I always have blamed myself for it.

Day after day I had been taking a combat patrol to link up with "I" Company which was higher on the mountain and we never had a fight. Since it got to be routine, I decided to send Sgt LaFontaine while I went to the Company CP for further instructions. His patrol was only gone ten minutes when a large enemy patrol jumped them and my great sergeant was killed and a couple of others wounded. We were then sent to relieve the 274th Infantry on a different front but just as snowy and cold as the other.

The snow was hip deep and trudging through it with packs and ammo was very tiring. We had to cross about two hundred yards of exposed area and had to move fast and we struggled. One of our older men puffed up to me and said, "Slow down, Lieutenant, I can't make it, my daughter is as old as you." Well he was exaggerating a little, but he made it through and we have been regular pen pals since the war.

But it was tough and Sergeant Belcher, a hard rock tough genius of a Sergeant started crying and pulled out a pistol to shoot himself. With a couple of others I restrained him and managed to get him to a jeep and sent him back with another man to the aid station. They gave him a warm tent to sleep in for two nights and some warm food and he came back as good as ever.

We had been fighting continuously since New Year's Day and finally on February 8th we were pulled out of the line and sent back to refit. We were being reorganized as an Engineer Group. The difference is that the Group is more flexible and has units assigned to it according to the situation and not fixed at three battalions. We were then designated the 2828th Engineer Combat Battalion but until the end of the war not a single man

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ever used that designation. We kept telling people that we are in the 3rd Battalion of the 36th Engineer Regiment, that "2828" had a kind of a "rear area" sound to it.

So now we were a separate Battalion but still reporting to the Group and we started in on engineer work. This lasted until the end of February when we got orders to go back to supporting the Infantry Divisions. There was still a strong German force determined that we should not get to the Rhine and we served as Infantry again but just for two more weeks.

The Rhine could easily have been crossed then, but the orders from the top remained that Montgomery was going to make the big assault across the Rhine. The story of Remagen is well known, but when Patton heard that Montgomery was going to cross in a couple of days he crossed the River with glee beating Montgomery by two days.

In, the meantime we were given some rest with nothing to do but meaningless jobs, but also clearing up some German minefields. We sat in our bivouac and watched large landing craft being slowly maneuvered up small roads with the intention of using them to force a crossing similar to a beach landing. Fortunately they were never used.

On March 31st we crossed the Rhine like tourists on a bridge some other Engineer unit had built. We actually crossed at Mannheim, but our mission was not to head east but south where there was allegedly a German Redoubt in the Alps. Now we had to get out the German phrase books.

GERMANY

On April 1st, April Fool's Day, we crossed the Rhine on a big ponton bridge to Mannheim, Germany. The first thing we had to do was to get out of the city and head south and find billets. All the time we were in France I was the billeting officer for the company because I was the only one who spoke French. Now that we were in Germany I was still the billeting officer even though I knew only a few words of German. We soon found that most of the Germans we had business with spoke either French or English, or both, so we got settled in quickly. Almost immediately I found I was getting a six-day pass to Paris, so I located my "pinks and greens" and polished my boots.

Another Lieutenant was going along with me, and we were driving in my jeep with my jeep driver, Casey Edwards who also had a pass. We had a very leisurely ride to Paris stopping at Chateau Thierry, one of the battlefields of the 1st World War, and saw the trenches still there but getting filled in as time passed.

The Officer's Hotel in Paris was the Grande Hotel de Louvre which is just around the corner from the Rue de Rivoli and the Louvre Palace. There was a mess at the hotel, so went out looking for something better. I felt comparatively "rich" because I had two months pay, almost \$240, in French Francs.

On the Boulevard de La Paix I bought my mother a Seahorse pin but I don't think she ever realized the significance of it to me (and the 36th). I also went to Le Grande Magasin de Printemps, a beautiful store, and bought two classy, Frenchie baby bibs for my sister who was expecting her second child. I went to the Folies Bergere, The Moulin Rouge, Le Bal Taborin and did more sightseeing. But my time on pass was soon over, and we had to go back to our unit.

We were very busy crossing rivers and streams because the Germans kept slowing us down the best they could. Noticeably though, there were fewer mines. Another Battalion came across a ball bearing factory in an underground mine and we found a complete aircraft factory in excellent shape dug into the side of a mountain. One of my Sergeants, Burl Smith, was a miner from West Virginia and was very cautious about mines, so when we went down to check it out, he told me he would rather not go down and I understood his problem and kept him outside.

About the middle of the month the Germans were backing up very fast and we had to rush to get to the bridges before they blew them. Some we saved and some we did not. We arrived at one big bridge, I think it was over the Iller River, and found out that we were just minutes too late.

Two big spans had been dropped down about 30 feet and on one of the spans was the body of a young woman with a shopping bag. The Germans knew we were close they blew it anyway with her on it. I can not forget the sight. If we had been a few minutes earlier we could have saved the bridge, and the lady and if we had been a few minutes later she might have gotten off the bridge. War is hell! But we were moving fast with

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lights on at night and one of our big problems was the large number of German soldiers who wanted to surrender. They came in trucks, many still carrying their weapons, and for the most part we just waved them to the rear to let some rear area guy have the thrill of capturing an enemy.

We went through the beautiful towns of Ober-Ammergau, Garmisch and as we neared Mittenwald we came to a labor camp. It was not big and had only about five or six barracks, but the guards had run and the poor ghastly looking prisoners were getting out and some had already died on the road. A call to our Battalion told us to keep them in the camp and the medics would get some soup and vitamins to them as soon as possible.

We went through Mittenwald, the last German town before Austria, and at about the time we were in Seefeld, or maybe when we were in Innsbruck, the orders came to stop, it was all over. We stayed in Seefeld in the various tourist hotels and the Officers were in the Gasthaus zum Linde.

Directly across the street was another tourist hotel and it had been converted into a German Army Hospital. We went over to see them and gave them all the cigarettes and goodies we could find. Our only mission was to maintain the road between Mittenwald and Seefeld and it was in very good shape so we really did nothing constructive. The Regiment had some chores but we had a German Engineer Battalion at our disposal so they did all the work.

After a couple of weeks we were ordered back to Mittenwald because Seefeld, Austria was not an enemy state so "H" Company moved into a caserne, a German military barracks, just a bit higher on the mountain and it was beautiful.

The barracks were constructed in the early 19th Century but were modernized for recent use. We had four large barracks, a headquarters, and a fine mess hall. One of my men was a sign painter in civilian life and I had him paint our shield and a lot of our "seahorses" all over it. The other officers kept leaving for stateside one by one so I was soon the last one of the war time crew.

I got two new Second Lieutenants right out of OCS and for the most part I just sat in the office and read Stars and Stripes. We found out that Mittenwald was the center of the Violin making in Germany and I found a Violin maker, named Johannes Schwartz who carved me a chess set using the local

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"Officers had been getting a liquor ration during the war and every month we got a "brown and a white" liquor. The brown was either a scotch, rye, bourbon or even Irish and the white was either a gin or a vodka. Fortunately my two new Lieutenants did not drink so I confiscated their rations as well. One day three jeeps drove up with a lot of British Officers and asked if they could join us for lunch so invited them in and offered them a bit of scotch in whatever glasses I had available and they were soon very jovial. After lunch as they were leaving I said, "Stop in anytime", to the guy I thought was a Major and as the last man went out, he said that the Major was actually a Major General. Anyway, he liked my scotch."

peasant costumes for the pieces. It is a beautiful thing and one of my most prized possessions.

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One day I was told I was going to get 80 men in my company, and the following day another 80 all replacing the old timers going home. This is mind boggling for a change in a company roster, but fortunately on the first day I had an experienced First Sergeant.

I sat down with him and found enough cooks and jeep drivers to get us through and we had almost no problems. The next day went smoothly and the following day a Captain came in and told me he was relieving me. I was going to a new assignment, I was going to stay in the Starnburg Castle, the last home of mad King Ludwig, and I was going to be the coordinator of railroad bridge reconstruction in Southern Bavaria.

I now had an office in Munich in the Reichsbahndirektionamt and another in Augsburg. I was supposed to go to each place twice a week to approve the plans of the German Railroad Engineers. They were beautiful plans, almost artwork, and I initialed them all dutifully and hurried back to Starnburg Castle where two pretty young ladies were staying with their mother the Countess. I should have known it couldn't last.

One day I was walking with another Lieutenant window shopping in a little German town, when a couple of MPs drove up all in a lather. They told me that they saw my Seahorse

shoulder patch and told me that there was a deranged, drunken GI wearing that shoulder patch who threatened to kill any one who came near him.

So, I jumped in the jeep and they drove me to an alcove and there up at the end waving a carbine was my old rifleman "chief" Williams. I said, "Hello Chief, what's new"? He stopped weaving around and said, "Oh, it's you Lieutenant, I won't shoot you". I said, "You are damn right, now give me the carbine."

He was not only drunk, he was worn out and as I walked him out I told the MP that this was a great soldier, one of the best, and I don't want anything to happen to him. The MP said, "Nah, Lieutenant we get them all the time and we just let them sleep it off and send them back to their units."

Going Home

Well that was it, I got orders to report to some Engineer outfit I never heard of for a trip home and packed up to go. The CO asked if anyone could speak French so I spoke up and he told me to go ahead of them to France to Camp Lucky Strike outside of Rheims and make sure our equipment was in order.

So, I took off and decided to go to Paris instead and spent a couple of more days there without any papers at all, just by brazening it out. When I got back to the camp finally, the CO was irate and told me that I would be the Officer of the Guard in town. I went dutifully to the MP headquarters and the duty Sergeant told me that I would have 2 GIs, 2 Polish Soldiers, and 2 French Soldiers and we were to keep the military out of this big building.

As I went in and introduced myself to the Madam she told me that there had been some problems and they were only allowing the French civilians to use their facilities. It was a beautiful place, with a lighted pool with goldfish and there was music coming from some place.

She told me that before the war it was the place where all the champagne buyers from all over the world came to meet nice young ladies. The ladies were young and nice, in evening dresses, and the madam ordered a bottle of champagne for me and sent one to each door for the guards. It was a tough assignment but I handled it.

The CO never talked to me again and we went to Marseilles to get on the USS Sea Robin to go home. We stayed up all night to see the Statue of Liberty at about five thirty in the morning and as we went up the Hudson people waved flags from the rooftops. All the ships in the harbor blasted a salute and we were home.

The cheering was over and I went from Camp Shanks to Indian town Gap to get my separation papers. I enlisted in the Reserves and in a few weeks or months I got notice of my promotion to Captain. I almost joined the Pennsylvania National Guard but stayed in the Reserves until they called me up for Korea. I was checked by several medics but all decided I was a has been.

This article was slightly edited from the original for clarity. The author's original version was titled "World War II as Seen by John T. Fallon II". Special thanks to Marion Chard for helping to gather materials and to prepare the initial manuscript for publication here..

A brief photographic record of some of the WWII memories of John T. Fallon II. (Photos courtesy of the author)

