

Central Europe

28 March

9 May 1945

In the streets and alongside the levees of Muhlheim the assault boats were laid out in the darkness. The 315th was supporting the 358th Infantry while just downstream at Rumpenheim the 150th Engineers were making similar preparations for the 357th Infantry. As the assault hour 0330 on 28 March approached all was unusually quiet along the riverfront. Boats were carried over the dikes and silently launched into the stream. The infantrymen were loaded, paddled across and the engineers returned the boats for the second, then the third loads. Still no shot had been fired. Then, as the first light of dawn dimly illuminated the fog rising from the river there was a brief but violent firefight with a detachment of Hitler Youth OCS cadets in the village of Dornigheim. Small arms fire raked the crossing sites as Company C rapidly pushed out and completed a footbridge. Artillery fire from batteries in the Taunus Hills on the northern outskirts of Frankfurt bracketed the area but the work went on.

The 359th Infantry streamed over the footbridge and then Company C built support rafts and carried the tactical vehicles across. The corps engineers were soon at work on a heavy pontoon bridge at the Muhlheim-Dornigheim ferry site. By mid-afternoon the bridge was complete and the 6th Armored was roaring across. In less than twelve hours two regiments had been ferried over in assault boats, a third crossed on a footbridge, tactical vehicles had been rafted across and now armor was streaming over and into the heartland of Germany.

On 30 March the division advanced 25 miles, the next day 30 miles. Town after town displayed the white banner of surrender and nowhere could Nazis be found. The German civilians were all peace loving people who had always hated Hitler and his crowd and who loved the Americans passionately. There were a few road blocks but the civilians were eager to help remove them. Many of the great masonry arch bridges on the autobahns had been demolished but most could be bypassed. On and on – it was the same each day – a few skirmishes, a few roadblocks and bypasses, but mainly it was a matter of racing on into the hills of Hessen.

On 1 April one of the H & S Company reconnaissance teams was captured while reconnoitering a bridge site near Heimboldshsn the team later escaped and on 3 April bridges over the Werra River were built at Widdershausen, Dondorf and Vacha.

This area of Germany was a mining and manufacturing center and it was at Merkers in a salt mine that the 90th captured the entire German gold reserve. One hundred tons of gold bullion and millions of dollars in currencies of many nations were captured along with priceless art treasures which had been looted from the art centers of Europe. The 357th Infantry was detailed to guard the treasure while the main body of the division pushed ahead to Bad Salzungen where a large group of German diplomats were captured in a very plush hotel overlooking a crystal lake.

The bridge across the Werpa at Bad Salzungen was captured intact and the demolition charges were removed. But as the 90th pushed on a fourth bridge over the Werra was built between Immelborn and Barchfeld as the division raced on into the mountains of Thuringia amid a solid stream of liberated slave laborers.

At Zella Mehlis on 9 April the Walther small arms factories were captured. It seemed that there were enough pistols and shotguns and rifles there, in various stages of manufacture, to have completely armed several divisions and needless to say, most of the visiting Americans helped themselves from the stocks of completed weapons.

This rugged country was ideal for a determined defender. The mountainous roads could have been cratered or mined and hundreds of bridges could have been destroyed but instead only a few abatises blocked the way. The 90th moved on 10, 20 and sometimes 30 miles a day.

At Hirschberg, near the great hydroelectric reservoir, the Saale-Stau See, a bailey was built over the Saale. At Blankenstein a floating bridge was pushed across and the division rolled on.

Hof fell and elements of the division, duly accompanied by photographers and press correspondents, crossed into Czechoslovakia on 18 April 1945. The 90th had been the first to slice completely across the German nation. Turning now to the south and moving parallel to the Czech western border the division slashed on through Marktredwitz, Tirschenreuth and Neustadt where a bailey was built across Waldnabb River on the 23rd

This was near the huge Wehrmacht training center of Graffenwohr and a few of the diehards (perhaps from the school) made a last ditch stand behind abatis in which antipersonnel mines had been placed. This sudden return of mine warfare caused several engineer casualties but soon the division had slashed on through this zone.

The infantry had liberated American prisoners of war at Fuschmill and at Flossenberg a huge concentration camp was captured. Here the bodies of former inmates were stacked like cordwood awaiting transportation via a special inclined rail car down into the furnace ovens.

On 4 May the entire German 11th Panzer Division surrendered unconditionally to the 90th. Moving in their own 700 odd vehicles Germans moved in under the white banner, were disarmed and set up in their own PW cage.

On the next day the division turned again into Czechoslovakia to open the Regen pass through the mountains, to allow the 4th Armored to rush through, then motorize and make a dash for Prague. Vast forests lined the roads and the winter's snow still capped the places along the route through Zwiesel to Suscice as the division pushed through the Sudetenland. A few trees had been felled across the road, a few mines had been scattered on top of the paving and near Ludwigsthal. A bridge over a swift mountain stream had been demolished. The gap was quickly spanned with a bailey and the advance continued only to be halted suddenly on the morning of 7 May. A message of historic importance was being relayed to all units! The German high command had signed an unconditional surrender.

With the battalion CP and H & S Company at Mestys Zelezna Ruda, and the lettered companies with their respective combat team regiments still deeper in liberated Czechoslovakia, the combat history of the 315th Engineer Battalion ended – a history which began on the beaches of Normandy and wound through one thousand miles of hedgerows, craters, mines and road blocks and rubble, across eleven major rivers and countless minor streams – the 315th Engineers had cleared the routes half way across Europe and stood triumphantly at last facing the Russians on the liberated soil of Bohemia.

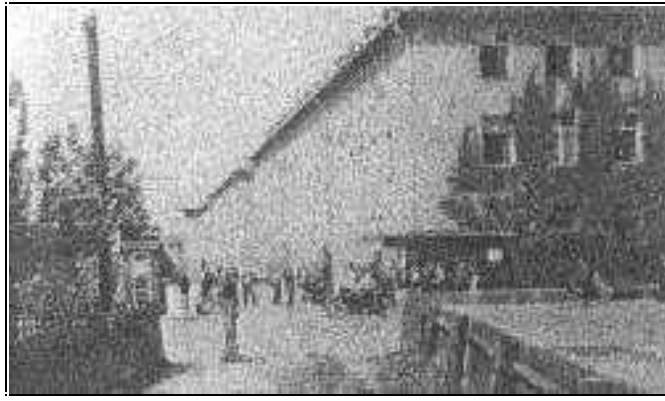


Figure 9-1

CONCLUSION

There is little to add to the story of the 315th Engineer Battalion. On 9 May, the official "V-E Day", the entire battalion assembled in Zwiesel then on the 14th it moved back to Weiden where it was to renovate the Metzerkaserne.

The next day the first contingent of "high-point" men left for the US and home. Thus began the slow, then rapid, disintegration of the battalion under the redeployment plan.

Russians, (liberated PW's) had moved from the Weiden cage into the barracks of the Kaserne and now the cage was filled with the fallen Wehrmacht – after much haggling and many delays the Russians were moved out and the 315th fell to the task of completely renovating this German military post. Using German PW laborers the brick buildings were scrubbed from top to bottom. Tons of rubbish, loot and trash were hauled to the dump and burned. Hundreds of window panes were replaced, roof tiles installed and then the inside walls were completely repainted. Utilities were repaired, new furniture was brought in and elaborate company kitchens were arranged in the basements of the barracks. A fine motor park was paved with brick and a complete theater installation was constructed in an armory-type building. The Kaserne was rapidly becoming a first-class garrison post.

In June the major work was completed and the 315th together with division headquarters, the Reconnaissance Troop and the Signal Company moved into the Kaserne – the finest installation that the battalion occupied during its three and a half year history.

There were routine road repairs in the division zone and there were construction projects at the Weiden and Flossenberg PW cages but most of the work was taken over by civilians and PW's under engineer guard and supervision. At the Kaserne, PW's and civilians took over many of the housekeeping duties for the troops.

There were retreat parades in the quadrangle, award presentation ceremonies, calisthenics at reveille and considerable unauthorized fraternizing "after fours".

For one special ceremony, the battalion, at "present arms" lined the street into town while General Patton rode into the Kaserne to review the troops and deliver a victory message.

But this garrison life was not to last long. In late June the trickle of redeployment became a stream and in July and August it became a torrent. All of the "old men" of the 315th were transferred to units scheduled for early return to the states and "low point" men from all over the third army area arrived to take their places.

Within a few months there was almost a complete turn-over in personnel and although the 315th remained in Weiden until November, its history to those who knew it best, ended in August and September 1945.

With other units of the 90th the battalion was shipped to the states and deactivated in December 1945, and in 1947 a completely new version of the engineer battalion was activated as a reserve unit in San Antonio, Texas.

No written history can possibly describe the invincible spirit of the men who fought and labored in the ranks of the T-O Engineer Battalion. This brief history may have described some of their deeds, it

may help its members to recall other gallant actions, but no words can possibly give sufficient honor to those men who served under the red and white shield which bears the inscription – "Fabricamos"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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M/Sgt. Carl J. Reames, 4401st ASU, performed the major portion of the typing throughout the volume.

F. G.

Russellville, Arkansas

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