3. US Army Engineers – and the U.S. Navy

No crossing the river the size of the Rhine could be accomplished without extraordinary effort on the part of the XII Corps engineers. So special was this effort, and so successful, that the Third Army Engineer published the confidential study of the whole Rhine operation. Which was quoted in part and the first section of this chapter. The character of the crossing was like any one of the river crossings made by XII Corps, and elsewhere described, only more so. The magnitude of the task is outlined in a single paragraph the Third Army study:

"the staging of the operation by the Corps was directed by the 1135th Engineer Combat Group, and in accordance with the Corps Engineer's plan – approximately 100 storm boats and motors, 300 assault boats and motors, life belts and other pertinent items were assembled by the Corps in addition to the T/E equipment of approximately 500 boats in 100 motors. To back the operation with troops, one heavy pontoon Battalion (minus one company) was initially attached to the Corps for use in rafting operations, the remainder of the bit tie in and one other Battalion were subsequently attached. To a specially trained Engineer combat Battalion's having approximately 400 outboard motor operators, three Treadway Bridge companies, to light pontoon companies plus a light equipment platoon and seven battalions were attached as well. Still another unit, one half of Naval Unit No 2, consisting of 12 LCVP's and their crews were attached and pioneered the use of Naval craft in a salt River crossing operations."

Unique element of XII Corps' Rhine Operation was participation of the U.S. Navy. The Third Army History Team secured excellent combat interviews of the naval personnel involved, but perhaps the most entertaining version of the affair as seen by our seagoing brothers-in-arms is to be found in the "Atlantic War" volume of Commander Walter Karig's remarkable series of books on the Navy's Two-Ocean War, Battle Report. Volume 2. He tells the whole "yarn" of the inland operations of Naval Unit No 2 in the words of its "Skipper," Lt Commander William Leide, USNR, from which the part about XII Corps is excerpted:

"In early March Lt Gen Patton's forces broke through northwest of Koblenz and we were alerted. Someone decided that Lt General Patton was not to cross the Rhine at this time, so the alert was off. This was not particularly good for our morale. After five months with the Army we were ready for some naval activity. The men had done everything from loading barbed wire on railroad trains to painting over 15,000 directional signs.

"A couple of weeks later, at Third Army headquarters at Luxembourg, I was informed by Brigadier General Conklin, head of the Engineers, that we were alerted. He told me that the unit was to be loaded and leave the following afternoon through a blazing Germany which had not yet been mopped up. I was informed that the road through which we were to pass was still in German hands but would be captured by the following morning.

"On the 21st of March we were under way for Worrstadt, which was some 20 miles from Oppenheim, Germany, where the Third US Army was all set for the assault. My executive officer and I reached the offices of XII Corps and were informed that a reconnaissance of the Rhine River had yet to be made. Lt (JG) D L Spalding, USNR, and I then played cops and robbers on the riverfront selecting embarkation and debarkation points. We were then briefed and introduced to the Commanding General of the 5th US infantry division. This famous division was charged with a mission of establishing and securing a bridgehead. Imagine our consternation when we were told that the jump off time was 2200 the same night. Our boats were still enroute."
"Far Shore' was established at 0305 with Lt (JG) H S Szalach, USNR, as the far shore control officer. Ensign O Miller, USNR, was the near shore control officer and farther downstream Ensign R D Carter, USNR, took his post. Lt (jg) Spalding, my executive officer, crossed the river and directed these operations. As soon as the preponderance of the boats were launched and dawn was breaking we were heavily shelled by enemy artillery. The shelling was the inaccurate and did no damage.

"The launching of the boats was not a signal for intense activity. In fact my executive officer and I had to solicit business from the infantry Joes who were still paddling across the river. By 0700 a full-scale business was underway, contacts had been made with a traffic control officers and an endless stream of infantryman and light combat division vehicles was crossing the river.

"The turn-around was speedier than anticipated. Crews were reduced by one half and a German Hotel requisitioned so the man could be housed. A six-hour on, six-hour off watch was instituted, but the officers stayed on continuously.

"With the advent of daylight we were subjected to more artillery fire which again was very inaccurate. The vaunted German accuracy with the 88 mm was not in evidence. We were strafed four times during the day and casualties were light. The Germans were merely indulging in nuisance raids and accomplishing nothing as far as slowing down of traffic was concerned.

"Three of the LCVPs were employed in the building of bridges, laying nets and booms, and one of them pushed what is known as a heavy pontoon ferry bringing across 70 tank destroyers and tanks in less than 30 hours. The number of infantry crossed in 48 hours was in excess of 15,000 men. This does not take cognizance of the tremendous loads of prisoners and wounded which the craft were bringing from the far shore."

The Navy's part in XII Corps' crossing of the Rhine was highly thought of by XII Corps personnel, and many in the Corps headquarters who were present at the crossing during all phases of the operation were amazed to see how these capacious craft with their skilled crews expedited the build up of an unassailable bridgehead. General Patton, in addressing a letter of commendation to Commander Leide, spoke also for the men of XII Corps headquarters and units when he wrote: "Please except for yourself and pass on to the officers and men of your command the sincere appreciation and admiration of all elements of the Third U.S. Army for this superior work accomplished by your units. …"

From the foregoing recital it will be seen that until the completion of the bridges the XII Corps Rhine Crossing had all the aspects of the true amphibious assault on a hostile shore. As summed up by the the 5th Infantry Division history: "By this time (afternoon of 23 March 45) the Rhine bridgehead had taken on the appearance of Normandy transplanted into Germany with beachmaster, beachhead dumps of ammunition and supplies, DUKW’s, Weasels, and LCVP’s, pushing back and forth transporting ammunition and supplies to the assault troops pushing inland. …"

The parallel in the early phases of the attack was so close that it was seriously recommended at one time that the assault waves in the operation should be authorized a bronze arrowhead to be worn with their battle stars on the ETO Campaign ribbon. …
BRIDGING THE RHINE WAS RUGGED WORK FOR XII CORPS ENGINEERS

(1 & 2) Working backwards, from east to west bank, in order to take the advantage of sheltered water, the 150th Engineer Combat Battalion are throwing this Treadway ponton bridge across the Rhine, 23 March 45.  (3 & 4) Views of the nearly completed bridge as it appeared from the West Bank, the same day.  (5) Beside the Treadway, work was being pushed at the same time on other bridges; this is a heavy ponton being built by the 87th and 88th Engineer Heavy Ponton Battalions, and a 249th Engineer Combat Battalion.  Engineer support of the assault crossing and resulting bridgehead was charged to units of the 1134th 1135th Engineer Combat Groups, under XII Corps direction.