

Army Engineer

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Salute to WWII Army Engineer Veterans

The making of a NEW documentary...

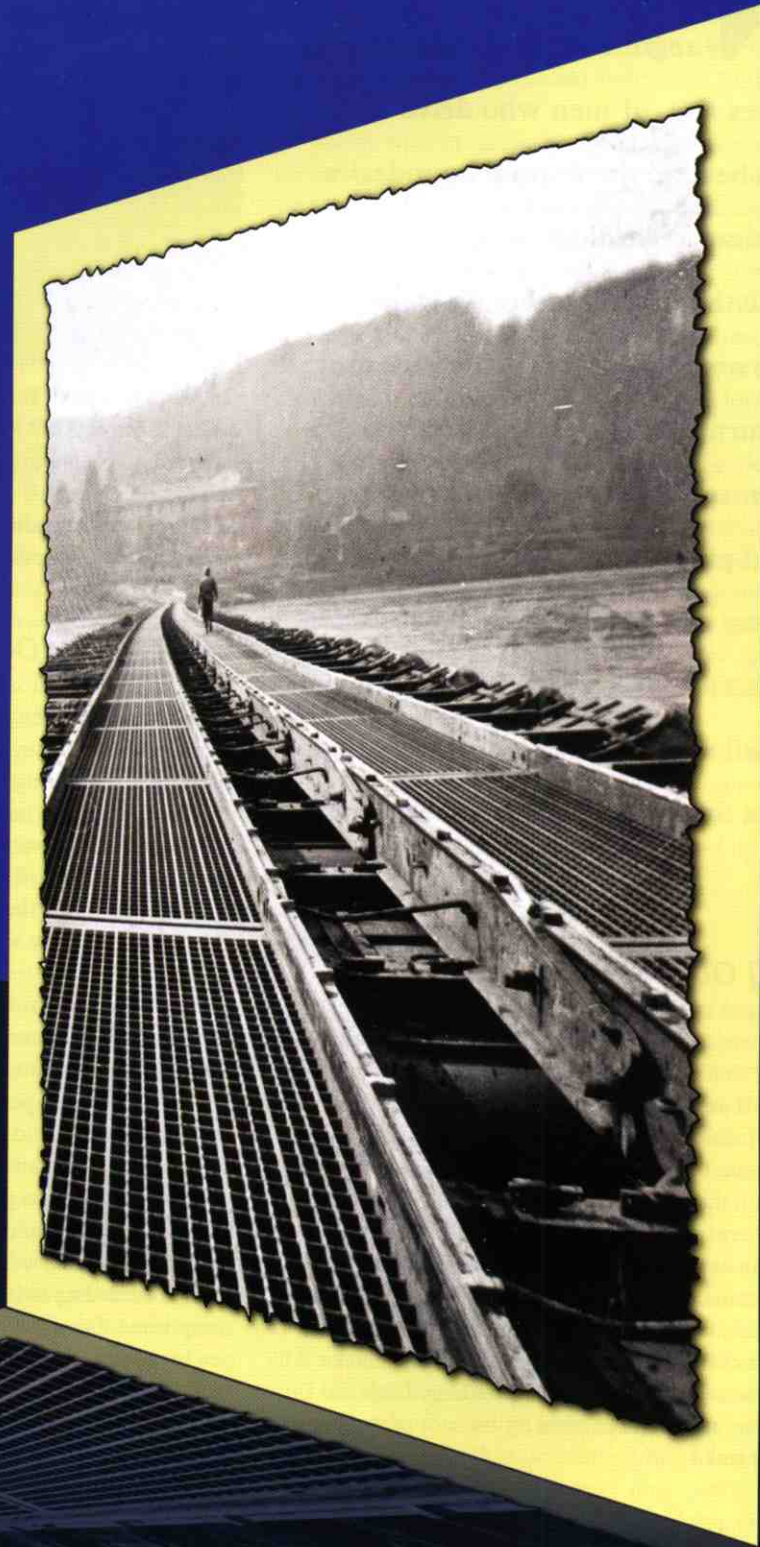


about ARMY ENGINEERS who served during

World War II

By Marion Chard

NO BRIDGE TOO FAR



No Bridge Too Far—for me it conjures images of engineer regiments with indomitable spirit and resolve, of men who drive themselves beyond the normal boundaries and limitations regardless of danger. Men who expose themselves to booby-traps, land-mines and direct enemy fire, but prevail against insurmountable odds. Men who plunge themselves into swift-flowing icy-waters, and push themselves to all extremes, but never say die. Men who sacrifice and give their best to keep the armies moving, knowing full well they'll receive little or no recognition for the tremendous efforts put forth.

Starting out

When I began my research into my father's (WWII) history four years ago, never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined finding my words gracing such publications as World War II and Army Engineer Magazine. Nor the opportunity and privilege of meeting hundreds of veterans and their families, and becoming the official historian not only for my father's unit, the 540th Combat Engineers, but the other engineer regiments of VI Corps.

What began as a personal, insatiable curiosity, and deep-rooted commitment to discover the story behind my father's tour of duty, led to a project of immense proportion which now includes a comprehensive web site and forum, and a several hour documentary series in the making. Little did I realize what the future held in store for me, nor of the years I'd spend in its wake.

Finding the facts

My research led me to such places as the Army Corps of Engineers' Office of History, and The National Archives

(NARA) in St. Louis and College Park, Maryland. I also perused archived newspapers, devoured magazine articles, scoured the Internet (praise be to Google), and history books, and finally, obtained priceless accounts from the men themselves.

It took several months before things began to "click" into place, but before long I was fitting the puzzle pieces back together with the assistance of the veterans. Their letters were like manna from heaven, and once those flood gates opened, there would be no stopping the wealth of info, which flowed my way.

Soon I had enough information to start a web site, and each month the stories, photos, histories and anecdotes increased exponentially. I also contacted a personal research assistant who agreed to retrieve the more than 2000 pages related to the 540th Engineer Combat Regiment, which were available through NARA in Maryland. These documents included maps, photos, after-action reports, and daily, weekly, and monthly journals compiled by the army staff offices, from 1942-1945. Shortly after my home office looked like a whirlwind on the wide-open prairie.

Putting it together

After looking through my vast collection and talking with the men from each engineer regiment, I began dreaming of writing a book, for very little documentation was available on WWII engineering units. Sadly, it appeared history had forgotten the men who secured the beachheads, built the roads and bridges, de-activated the mine fields, brought running water to thirsting divisions and bombed-out cities, fought as infantry, and risked their lives on the front lines. I decided then and there to try with all my powers to rectify this unfortunate oversight.

One of the first rules to successful writing is organization, for without it, too many precious hours are wasted hunting down related material. So I created a veteran's database, which held all their pertinent data including names, addresses, unit designations, and next of kin. Secondly I bought a huge file cabinet and began sorting through the mountains of paperwork in various piles around my desk. Each veteran was assigned a folder and then alphabetized by last name and unit. NARA documents were sorted by month and year and further divided according to battalion. Once this grueling task was accomplished, I could now concentrate all my efforts of putting pen to paper.

Those who were there

While some men were eager as five-year-olds at Baskin Robbins, others took some persuasion to share their experiences. A few felt they didn't have much to impart, "We were only doing our job ma'am", others were just darned shy, while most couldn't believe I was actually interested in



Men of the 36th Engineers work during combat to construct a float bridge during the Second World War. (Above photo courtesy of the author. Title page photo entitled "Bridge from the Berlin Side" was provided to the author by Allison Chmielewski who is the daughter of 297th Engineer Combat Battalion veteran Al Hutchings)

hearing memories which had been stored in hidden recesses for decades. "Are you sure you want to hear this"? And "I don't want to bore you Marion", were amongst the common responses. My repeated reply was always, tell me EVERYTHING, and leave no stone unturned.

Once we overcame the initial barriers, I had no problem acquiring their WWII experiences. Enthusiasm IS infectious, and the veterans and their families began calling, writing, and emailing me on an almost daily basis. The real golden moments were the rare opportunities meeting face-to-face and swamping stories for hours on end, over burgers and frosty beers at pre-arranged spots or yearly reunions.

By now the only hurdle was language, and I don't mean English! In the middle of a great yarn, the story would come to a grinding halt, while vets became red-faced and stumbled over ways to express themselves. "Ah Marion, I hesitate to tell this story because..." It took me a while to convince them that I was just "one of the guys", and soon I was getting the "real scoop".

Needless to say, the engineers were thrilled to know someone was going to record their history. As my work progressed, numerous thanks arrived by the dozens. Amongst the letters was one in particular, which melted my heart. Bill warmly stated, "...Thank you for the entries you have made on the net. I always felt that when I was gone, all would be forgotten; but it's now there for the world to see...you promised me I would never be forgotten, and you have kept your word..."

Presentation

Now I needed an appropriate and catchy title, something representative of the four engineer regiments (the 36th, 39th, 540th and 1108th), so over the next few weeks I scribbled names on slips of paper and ran them by my husband. Then

one day while lying on the couch nursing the flu bug, and watching one of my favorite war movies, *A Bridge Too Far*, my husband joked, "No Bridge Too Far", and I could picture "my" engineers plodding along, mile after mile, and year-after-year through North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France and Germany. I loved it, but would "my" vets? The answer was a resounding YES!

As my work progressed, I would send tidbits to the vets for their approval; was the information accurate, did it tell the whole story, how could it be improved? I felt lucky to be able to consult them, for all too often authors do not have the luxury of having living legends to rely upon. But it also saddened me for I realized, all too soon the men of WWII would no longer be available to tell their tales. I had already lost of few of "my" boys, and the fear of losing more kept me driven to complete the task. Several times they would lovingly inquire, "Is it done yet"?

Then one day I began tossing around the idea of producing a documentary. I had watched and re-watched such inspiring series as Ken Burns' *The Civil War*, and thought, what a great tool, for it would allow me to incorporate the wonderful music of the 40's, archived film footage, even more photographs, and not only the vets written words, but their oral and video histories as well. This would also allow me to reach a much broader audience, for most people are more willing to watch a documentary than read a book.

I ran the idea by my husband, for I could always count on him for his honesty and objectivity. He supported me and said, if you think you can do it, go for it. Well that's all the motivation I needed, for I was already fueled by my own personal drive.

Challenges ahead

Had I ever taken on such a project? Had I ever produced a documentary? The plain and simple answer is no, but I'd been a computer consultant for twenty years, worked with numerous software programs, created and hosted websites, and knew I could learn what I didn't already know. I was a quick study and always loved a hearty challenge; I was ready for an adventure.

But, let's be honest; its hard work, but also the most stimulating and rewarding project too. When things come together there's no better feeling on earth, but there are times when ideas stop flowing, software crashes, you're too exhausted after running a business all day, or the myriad of life's other daily disruptions, to assail your creativity. There are days on end when I just can't stop, and you'll find me in front of my screen at four AM. Then occasions when I have to put the work on hold, and take a few "me" days, just to keep my sanity. Since I'm basically flying solo, writing, producing and editing my own documentary, I must assume various roles on demand. I find myself frequently changing "hats", within a single day; one moment hunting for hours on end for just the

right sound effects, the next for just the right musical selection to induce a specific mood. I may spend an afternoon searching my files for the exact quote from an engineer, and accompanying images to depict the invasion on the shores of North Africa.

The logistics of a project of this magnitude are mind-boggling! At every turn you may discover the need for additional software to convert archived footage from VHS tapes to DVD, or “wave” files to MP3s. Or hours may be spent looking for willing participants for interviews. Quickly you come to realize, most of your devoted time is spent outside the creative arena!

In order to create a well-balanced documentary, you need to make sure you have the right blend; still photographs, archived film footage, audio and video interviews with historians and veterans, musical selections, and other visual aids. You have to think about narration and voice-overs; whom do you hire to “play” the role of each veteran? In my case I’m lucky to have friends and relatives who are willing to donate their time and vocal cords.

Keep it legal

Please don’t forget the following key-elements; funding, record keeping and copyrights. I started an LLC, Proud Daughter Inc, in order to keep track of expenses and income (donations). Keep meticulous records; track every donation,

every expense and most importantly, do not forget to obtain permission to use copyrighted materials or to give proper acknowledgment in your credits. Hidden expenses can wipe you out in an instant, and while there are numerous sources offering free material for inclusion, others charge fees and require permission for use. Be a stickler for detail and never assume you have the right to use other published materials. When in doubt, contact the author or company, or consult a lawyer. Taking the necessary initial steps will prevent future headaches and possible legal ramifications in the future!

The objective is in sight

My goal is to produce a well-polished documentary, with the full-blessings from the engineers, by Christmas 2008, and to submit a copy to PBS for broadcast consideration. I believe I can obtain these goals for along the journey I’ve learned an important lesson from my father and his buddies; there is No Bridge Too Far! AE

The author is a past contributor to Army Engineer Magazine and is one of many family members of veterans of the Second World War who volunteer their personal time and resources to help preserve the history and traditions of those from the “greatest generation” who sacrificed so much in defense of freedom. She developed and maintains a world class web site at www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com.