

Engineers on the Line

by Samuel W. Pinnell, 325-Engineers

Samuel W. Pinnell with the 325th Engineers, kept a diary during combat. He said, "I started this diary shortly after graduating from West Point on June 1, 1943 and kept it fairly regularly, as circumstances permitted until March 1952 when I was alerted to go to Korea after graduation from the US Army Command and General Staff College."

January 4, 1944

Enchenberg, France

I built my first forty-ton bridge just outside of Puberg, about six hundred yards west of the crossroads north of the town. Here at the crossroads I also saw a freakish and tragic accident. One of our Cub liaison planes circling just over our heads was hit and almost completely destroyed in a collision with one of our won artillery shells. Two wheels, the motor and pieces of the bodies of the pilot and observer fell in a field about three hundred yards northeast of the crossroads.

From Puberg my platoon went to Meisenthal and unable to find a place to put the company in that town on to Schiresthal, just up the road. However, we didn't even get settled there before we were yanked out of the place. I went ahead and found a place to stay in St. Louis les Bitche.

Lieutenant Walls was to lead the remainder of the company in to St. Louis, but got lost and the whole outfit got the hell shelled out of them in Goetzenbruck. Fussi and Sergeant Kopko were slightly injured by shrapnel.

Automatic weapons tracers were flying overhead in St. Louis and Jerry was still laying in artillery and mortar fire. The house we were in was quite conspicuous, very large and sited almost on tip of the highest mountain in town and so next morning we moved farther down into the village.

West of Lemberg we cleared out two groups of mines, one a controlled minefield with trip wires leading into holes of the north side. We pulled the wires and the resulting black plume of smoke brought down a hail of Jerry mortar fire upon us. However, one GI had been blown to bits in the minefield and we had to take it out, mortars or no mortars.

In the little town of Reyersviller, southwest of Bitche, I had my men start sweeping a road through town while I went ahead to question the civilians. The mine detectors picked up nothing. I found ten Topf or glass mines and the location of two fields of S-mines (Bouncing Betty).

We worked our way all the way through town and down to the town of Siersthal, to the west. One overhead trestle had been dropped on the highway and from it we removed five more Topf mines and twenty-four 3 kg charges.

Remembering our last experience when detonating mines, we piled all the stuff in an open field away from any troops, lit the fuse to set it off and lit out for Reyersviller.

In mid-December we began our attacks on Forts Freudenberg and Schiesseck, keypoints of the Maginot Line on the northeast running ridge overlooking the town of Bitche, or Bitsch, as the Jerries named it.

We had a helluva job there. The forts were constructed of reinforced concrete from four to twelve feet thick. They contained a total of twelve mutually supporting and underground connected pillboxes and were complete with compartments running up to 140 feet deep running water, electricity, disappearing turrets, machine guns, automatic rifles, anti-tank guns, 75-, 88-, 135- and 170-mm artillery pieces. In addition to the firepower of the individual soldiers, the forts could all fire on each other. The only way to knock them out was to get up to them somehow, place a charge of TNT against the door or embrasure and detonate it.

American artillery fire had not proved very efficient. (We had eight artillery battalions supporting our infantry battalion.) Something like twenty-three direct hits were scored on Number 7, a disappearing turret job, with 240-mm shells and the damn thing still worked. (Our aerial bombardment and the 240's

were of enormous assistance, nevertheless. Without the large holes they dug, we could never have survived as we crawled up with our charges!)

We placed 1,600 pounds of TNT in the entrance tunnel for Number 10 in an attempt to blow it down but it didn't bother it at all—just blew down some of the lining of the tunnel wall.

Number 2 was giving us a lot of trouble and so I made my way up to take a look at it. To do so I had to crawl right on the crest of the ridge through barbed wire entanglements, get up on top of Number 6, and then check visually for possible weak or blind spots in #2. No vegetation grew in the area—it was all cleared by the French for fields of fire—but somehow I made my way up, got on top of the turret on #6 and had a good look-see.

I wondered why I wasn't being fired upon because if it had been laundry day, I could have seen Jerry hanging out his clothes in Bitche. The town was spread out just below me like a map.

Well, I didn't have to wonder long. After I oriented myself, I called Sergeant Simpson up to orient him and then had him call his scouts up. To minimize the size of the target we were offering I started crawling away to take cover in another hole.

No sooner had I begun that than the 88's began pouring in the most concentrated barrage I've ever experienced, see, or heard of in my life. There was a constant roar of bangs! As the shells exploded and steady stream of fragments whistling overhead. I speak the truth when I say I never expected to live through it. Fifty shells landed within twenty-five feet of me. I was sprayed with dirt and rocks numerous times and two pieces of hot steel whizzed into the hole with me and buried themselves in the dirt just above my head. (The problem the German gunners were having, I later figured out, was that they were far below shooting up at me on the ridge. A very small change in the gun's elevation made an enormous change in where the shell landed on the slope where I was in a shell hole.)

We had brought 250 pounds of TNT with us made up in satchel charges. When I called for volunteers to go forward and place the charges, two men T/4 Johnson and Pfc Quinn crawled up. (My medic, T/4 Pearlman also volunteered—he usually could be counted on to volunteer for a dangerous mission. One hilarious moment occurred when I peeked over at Pearlman and noticed that he was piling little pebbles or stones on the lip of his hole. “Pearlman,” I asked, “What the hell are you doing?” “Just making this hole a little bit deeper, Lieutenant” was his response!) Mean while, every move Johnson and Quinn made brought down another barrage, and I had to call them back. I didn't want them to sacrifice themselves.

I passed back word for the men to withdraw one at a time. When I had satisfied myself that they all got out, I crawled away myself. I got snagged in the barbed wire and Jerry threw a few shells at me, but somehow I made it. It was incredible to me that no one was hurt. Lying in that hole, I was certain that I was going to die.

Coming back to the pillboxes again, we tried another plan. Artillery was going to smoke Bitche, and other points that might observe us, a liaison plane was to circle overhead to spot any artillery which might shoot at us while we were going to make another attempt to blow #2. Quinn and Callaghan volunteered to go back up and start filling sandbags so that we wouldn't have to spend time doing that while a whole squad was exposed.

I don't know why everyone insisted on demolishing #2. No fire had been received from it for twenty-four hours and a POW picked up that morning told us that all the Jerries had left it during the night.

As soon as the liaison plane got up, I loaded seven men on my jeep and took off down the trail to #11, which was now a battalion forward Command Post. There I gave the men time to get to #6 and then radioed for smoke.

Well, one round of smoke landed and then someone got jittery about a possible counterattack by the Germans and called the whole thing off—without telling me anything about a change in plans.

And, at this time we received a message that our own troops had entered #2 and were even now inside. Quinn and Callaghan were with them.

I had no contact with the squad that had gone up to do the demolition job and the only way I could stop them was to go up and yell to them. I didn't even have to do that, however, because in a minute they all came tearing down the side of the ridge. They hadn't been shelled but had encountered a hail of rifle, burp

gun (Schmeisser machine pistol) and machine-gun fire. How they got out of that with no casualties is another mystery.

We spent another day or so blowing down stairs, blowing embrasures and ventilators and so forth and then covered the turrets with a tank dozer. We also brought up a welder and welded shut all the doors we could get to. Major O'Neal won a lot of respect by his courage under fire. But he also got the tank dozer stuck on top of #10 and had to burn it. \$70,000 up in smoke!

About this time von Runstedt began his big offensive in the north against the American First Army. This was the Battle of the Bulge, or the Ardennes attack. Third Army on our left flank wheeled to the north to strike the attackers in the flank. Seventh Army had to pull back and spread out to cover what had been the front assigned to both armies. So many troops and supporting elements were pulled out of our line that we had to stop any attempt to go forward. We had to attempt to hang on to what we had with the few troops we had left. I know one eighty-man company that took over a battalion sector. Such was taking place all along the line.

We, the engineers, immediately began to lay mine fields, prepare road craters, bridges, and abates for demolition. I even laid mines for two nights in Jerry territory, putting in 642 antitank mines. I used my jeep and trailer to haul mines along a road with Jerry on the right side and our troops on the left. Ticklish! This was during the nights of December 24 and 25, 1944.

Today is July 27, 1986, more than forty years after my diary entries but the experiences of typing this copy has evoked a thousand memories. Reviewing what I recorded of our attack against the Bitche Maginot fortifications, each incident brings forth a rush of recollections and thoughts about what happened during that two week period. I am surprised, really, at how little I recorded at the time. One incident a correspondent in Germany wrote to me about (he was in one of the bunkers we were attacking) is still vivid in my memory, but unrecorded in my notes: One day I was in the bunker that had been taken over for use as a Battalion Forward Command Post. An American soldier, disheveled and very excited, weaponless, came flying into the CP. He asked the battalion commander to permit him to guide an American military doctor to a bunker where he had left some of his comrades. They had somehow gotten into the moat of the bunker, but couldn't get out because of fire from the Germans above in the bunker. The Germans, however, could not depress the muzzles of their weapons enough to hit the American GIs. There was one American medic in the group and I believe several American wounded. The Germans also had their wounded in the bunker. They offered to let one GI get out provided he promised to bring back a doctor to treat the wounded of both sides. The battalion commander not only refused to send a doctor but also refused to permit the messenger to return to the bunker, for obvious reasons.

I have not yet transcribed my notes about events which transpired after Christmas 1944. I'll say this: The New Year started off with a real bang for me and my platoon. We were isolated cut off from friendly troops, under fire, scared stiff about paratroop attacks, hungry, cold, and fearful that someone in the little town that we were in was signaling with church bells to the Germans.

And then in March 1945, we attacked again the Bitche forts. This time we again penetrated the line—and kept going, crossing the Rhine at Manheim that month.

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