

# U.S. Army Europe combat engineers remember, honor their heritage at celebrated bridge

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HEIDELBERG, Germany -- A foot-long piece of railroad track from the famed Ludendorff Bridge taken as a battle souvenir by Soldiers of the [9th Combat Engineer Battalion](#) in 1945 returned here March 7 to take part in a remembrance ceremony.

As the most junior commissioned officer in today's 9th Engineer Battalion, it is 2nd Lt. Michael Sullivan's job to carry and safeguard the track. He is responsible for ensuring it is present for ceremonial events such as this year's commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the battalion's capture of the bridge that carried the first Allied forces across the Rhine as they pressed toward victory over Nazi Germany.



Sgt. 1st Class Philip Gutzler of Schweinfurt, Germany's Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 9th Engineer Battalion, and Jack Jewell, a World War II 9th Infantry Division veteran, share their combat experiences prior to ceremonies commemorating the 65th anniversary of the capture of the famed Ludendorff Bridge, in Remagen, Germany, March 7. Gutzler's grandfather, Pfc. Charles Everett Park, was a tank driver in one of the first 9th Armored Division units to cross the span after its capture.

"It is heavy, but it is a source of our pride and heritage," said Sullivan, platoon leader for the 2nd platoon of the battalion's C Company. "It symbolizes the bravery of the engineers who gave their lives that day on the bridge."

The rail, which also accompanied the battalion to Iraq during its last deployment, inspires current "Gila Battalion" engineers to "go out and perform the mission of the engineer," Sullivan said.

The contingent of 20 engineer Soldiers who volunteered to take part in the ceremony here left their home station in Schweinfurt at about 3 a.m. Sullivan said learning about the battalion's history is a regular part of its company-level

training, and on the way to Remagen they discussed the battalion's exploits on the bridge. Several of the battalion's leaders are slated to return here later this month for a staff ride designed to teach them more about that history and the engineer skills of their World War II forefathers.

After breaking through the Germans' Siegfried Line and pushing westward toward the Rhine River, Germany's last natural boundary, elements of Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division arrived at Remagen March 7, 1945.

Patrols discovered that the Ludendorff Bridge, one of the last of 14 bridges spanning the Rhine, was still intact. Engineers from the 9th Engineer Battalion's B Company cut wires leading to demolition charges placed in the bridge's structure by the Germans, preventing its destruction and allowing more than 8,000 allied Soldiers to cross the span during next 24 hours.

For the next 10 days, the Germans hit the bridge with nearly every weapon at their disposal – including newly developed jet aircraft, V-2 rockets and scuba divers. Despite heavy enemy fire, the 9th, 78th and the 99th Infantry Divisions crossed the bridge.

The attacks and heavy use did eventually take their toll. The bridge collapsed March 17, killing 28 U.S. engineers who were shoring up the structure. Still the stream of Allied troops, tanks and equipment continued unabated over pontoon bridges constructed by other engineer units.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, is reported to have said the captured bridge "was a miracle and worth its weight in gold" and would shorten the war in Europe by six months.

"It is incredible to be here at the 65th anniversary of the crossing," Sullivan said. "This is a chance to see where our battalion's history happened in one of the key battles of World War II (that) led to the victory in Europe."

Since the day they helped capture the bridge, the engineers have been an indispensable part of the bridge and its history, said Kurt Kleemann, spokesman for the Remagen Bridge Peace Museum.

More than 200 members of the Remagen community, World War II 9th Infantry Division and Belgian army veterans and German Soldiers joined the 9th Engineers for the World War II commemoration and a celebration of the museum's 35th anniversary, he said.

Keynote speakers included Hans Peter Kürten, former Remagen mayor and museum founder, and Herbert Georgi, the town's current mayor. Heinz Schwarz talked about the bridge's capture from his perspective as a teenager living in Remagen in 1945.

The last speaker, Ekkehard Strobel, told the audience about his father, Maj. Herbert Strobel, one of the bridge's defenders. Strobel and four other German officers were executed for treason at the direct order of Adolf Hitler, for allowing the allies to take the bridge.

The 9th Engineers have been part of the commemorations at the bridge since their arrival in Germany in 1959, Kleeman said. The unit has conducted unit events such as NCO induction ceremonies at the bridge, he added.

While their participation in commemorative events is their most visible role here, the engineers also strengthen the bonds between Germany and the United States, Kleeman said.

"In our part of Germany there are not so many American Soldiers," he said. "There could be more contact between Germans and Americans so we know more about each other."

"We would like to build 10 times the relationship we have now with the city of Remagen," said Sgt. 1st Class Philip Gutzler of the 9th's Headquarters and Headquarters Company.

U.S.-German partnership was only half the reason Gutzler's participation in the ceremony was special. He said his other reason was personal.

"My grandfather crossed here," he said. "(The bridge) has always been something I wanted to visit."

Gutzler said his grandfather, Pfc. Charles Everett Park, a 9th Armored Division tank driver, was injured shortly after crossing the bridge.

Before the ceremony, Gutzler talked with Jack Jewell, one of several 9th Infantry Division World War II veterans attending the event, about his experiences in combat. The sergeant said he came away convinced that today's 9th Engineers are proudly carrying on in the tradition of their forefathers.

"Pure guts. That's what got them through," Gutzler said.

"They left a footprint here that will last forever," he added. "That is what we can do with our deployments: we can leave things better than we found them."