

Engineers as Infantry or 'The Long Way Around'

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History records many instances of Army engineers who, from the necessities of the heat of battle, have had to assume the role of infantry soldiers. One of the most demanding of these conversions is the ordeal of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J. Riggs, Jr., and the 81st Engineer Combat Battalion in the closing months of World War II.

The men of the 81st Engineer Combat Battalion, 106th Infantry Division, awoke to heavy German shelling in the early morning hours of 16 December 1944—the start of the Ardennes counteroffensive, the Battle of the Bulge. The 106th, a division new to the war, had taken over the Schnee Eifel sector of the front from the veteran 2nd Infantry Division on 11 December. On arrival at the unit, the newcomers were told that the front was so quiet that Germans on leave often walked across it to visit friends and relatives behind American lines. This peaceful lull did not last long.

Infantry Duty

That first day, when the 81st's Commander, LTC Riggs, saw his letter companies used as infantry, he prepared the rest of the battalion for that role. Riggs, star tackle and captain of the 1940 University of Illinois football team, graduated in 1941 with a

degree in engineering. By that fall he was a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers.

On the morning of 17 December 1944, Division told Riggs that Combat Command B (CCB), 7th Armored Division, would attack east from St. Vith, Belgium, along the Schonberg Road to relieve pressure on two 106th Regiments, which were cut off in the Schnee Eifel. Riggs, named St. Vith's defense commander, was ordered to hold the road open for an expected CCB attack. Therefore, Riggs moved the task force to a ridge line astride the road about a mile east of St. Vith, where they would meet the Germans.

Riggs' force was in position by noon on 17 December, with the headquarters and service company on the left, north of the road. On the right, south of the road, were the half-strength 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, a corps unit, and remnants from the A Company. In the middle, commanding the road, was a 4-gun platoon from the 820th Tank Destroyer (TD) Battalion. His reserve was the division defense platoon—clerks, cooks, and the division band.

The Battle Begins

Almost immediately, using a daisy chain of mines and bazooka fire, A Company stopped a German tank/infantry probe. About

mid-afternoon, a stronger attack came straight down the road. Tank fire knocked out one of the division defense platoon's antitank guns, but TD fire forced the Germans to withdraw. When Riggs called for artillery, he learned there was no such support. Using an air-ground radio, he directed a single P47 plane onto the German tanks; it set one afire and forced the rest to withdraw.

Late on the 17th, some good things happened for Riggs and his small force. At dusk, the lead element of CCB arrived, B Troop, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. That night a forward observer from the 105th Self-Propelled 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion reached Riggs' command post. Now he had some artillery.

The Germans continued to probe the line through 20 December, but they did not mount any heavy attacks. The 5th Panzer Army was having trouble getting units forward over the congested roads to attack the heavier-than-expected defense east of St. Vith. Riggs walked the foxhole line several times each day, and on the 18th he led the reserve in a counterattack to restore a penetration of A Company's line.

On the 19th, LTC William H.G. Fuller, Commanding Officer, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, CCB, took command, and Riggs became his executive officer. By that time

the left of the line consisted of CCB units, while engineers were on the right, south of the road.

Enemy Breakthrough

The final German attack and breakthrough came on 21 December. Heavy shelling began about 3 p.m., and LTC Fuller left for St. Vith at 6 p.m. to check about possible withdrawal routes. He never returned, so Riggs was back in command.

At 8 p.m., four Mark VI (Tiger) and two Mark IV German tanks, with infantry, attacked straight down the road. German flares silhouetted four Sherman tanks covering the road, and enemy tank fire knocked out three of them. Two more Shermans rushed up, but similar tactics resulted in the loss of another one and the rest withdrew. The road to St. Vith was open.

When tank fire knocked out Riggs' command post, he lost all communication with the rear. Sending the headquarters personnel to CCB with the situation, he went to the forward positions.

Mortar fire knocked Riggs unconscious, and when the Germans overran the final American position they captured him. Riggs became a prisoner of war.

Riggs' Odyssey

Over the next 12 days, Riggs walked 110 miles to a rail center in the German rear, losing 40 pounds off his 6-foot, 4-inch frame. With a deepening desire to know what had happened to his battalion, Riggs tried to escape during an air raid but did not succeed.

Next he was shipped by train to Stalag 4, near Berlin, but when he failed to respond under interrogation, the Germans beat him and shipped him east to a prison camp near Pozan, Poland.

Escaping from that camp after 28 days, Riggs made contact with members of the Polish underground. They hid him until he was turned over to a Soviet Army tank unit as the Russians advanced to the west. He traveled with the Russians for about two weeks and was with them when they captured Warsaw.

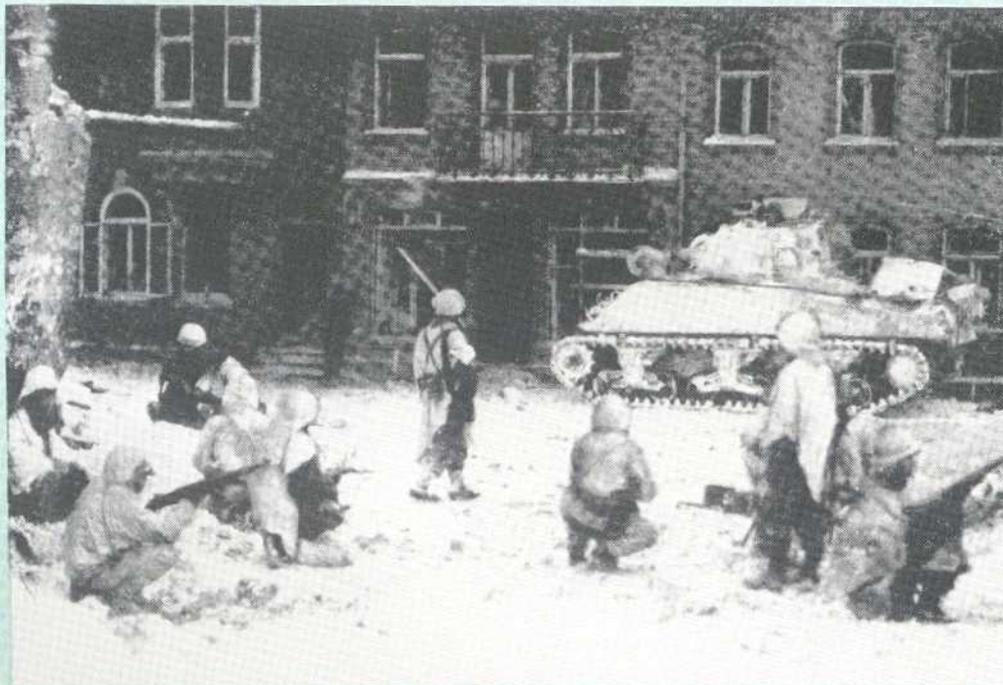
From Warsaw Riggs took a 750-mile, 5-day train ride to Odessa. Next he got a ride on an English freighter to Port Said. There, the Red Cross put him aboard a troop ship for Naples, where he finally came back under U.S. Army control.

When the Army wanted to send Riggs back to the United States for medical leave, he objected. Riggs convinced them he needed to be with his battalion, which was still fighting at the front. Finally, in Rennes, France, on 16 April 1945, after being away almost four months, LTC Thomas J. Riggs, Jr., again took command of the 81st Engineer Combat Battalion.

Suggested Reading:

-Dupuy, R. Ernest, *St. Vith: Lion in the Way*, 1949, Infantry Journal Press.

-Beck, Alfred M, Et Al., *U.S. Army in World War II, The Corps of Engineers, the War Against Germany*, 1988, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.



U.S. First Army troops seek German snipers outside a building in St. Vith, Belgium. While Sherman tanks, like the one pictured, were no match for German Tiger tanks, American forces succeeded in overcoming enemy resistance (U.S. Army Signal Corps photo).