

## Taking the Remagen Crossing the Rhine

by Colonel Cecil R. French



On March 7, 1945 the 9th Armored Division captured a bridge across the Rhine River at Remagen. The 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion arrived at the bridgehead that afternoon with the 9th Infantry Division. I was in awe as the Ludendorf railroad bridge came into view. It seemed like a miracle of miracles... the only Rhine bridge the Germans failed to blow up. C Company of the 899thTD BN crossed on March 8 with the 47th Infantry Regiment. The battalion remained on the west bank in Remagen until March 10th. That first night was a rough one, with the battle of the Remagen bridgehead building up to a crescendo. The Germans were desperately trying to destroy the bridge. About that time we found out that a trainload of champagne was located at the Remagen railroad station. The rumor was that several boxcars of French champagne had been shipped from France into Germany, arriving in time to be confiscated by the United States Army. I got my ration... a box of twelve bottles wrapped carefully in straw. Since we did not have a basic load of 90MM rounds stored in our M-36 Tank Destroyer, I found space in the ammunition racks for several bottles of French champagne.

As "B" Company Tank Destroyers proceeded across the bridge on March 10, 1945 German artillery blew up a truck ahead of us. The one-way traffic was blocked. At high noon I looked up into the sky and saw a lone Stuka dive-bomber release a bomb angling for the bridge. I stood up in the open turret of the TD and filled my canteen cup with champagne and said, "drink up men... this is it". The bomb missed. One of the rounds of 14 Antiaircraft Battalions blew up the Stuka one hundred feet high over the bridge. I filled my canteen cup up two more times, and repeated the same toast. Two more bombs were aimed at the bridge. They missed over or under. Two more Stukas were blown up over the bridge. We crossed the

bridge that afternoon. I was glad I didn't have to drive the TD, let alone load the gun, since as the TD crew 90MM Weapons Leader I was well "loaded".

That which follows is probably one of the best-kept secrets of World War II in Europe.  
I have always liked Ike.



In July 1966, as a Lt. Colonel I discovered the real source of the champagne at the Remagen bridgehead. While on temporary duty at Ft. Riley, Kansas I traveled to Abilene to visit Eisenhower's boyhood-home and the Eisenhower Museum. While browsing in the museum I came across some of the Generals' WW II orders and memoranda. One specific memo got my attention. Under the heading of SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ALLIED FORCES EUROPE, in Rheims, Belgium March, 1945 the general stated that the letter order to the left of the memorandum was the most unique order issued during WW II. He explained that at a January, 1945 meeting of Division Commanders in Rheims, one general asked the "what if" question about the capture of a bridge across the Rhine River. The General wrote that there was a ninety nine percent chance out of one hundred that it would not happen... but in case a division did capture a bridge he said "General I will send you a trainload of French champagne". He further stated in the memo that the champagne was sent to the 9TH ARMORED DIVISION at the Remagen

bridgehead. In the letter order dated in January 1945 the General specified that the Director of Transportation, SHAFE, procure a trainload of French champagne...to be placed in boxcars on a siding in Paris to be dispatched on his (Eisenhower's) order with the highest priority to the destination given. The Ninth Infantry Division and the 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion closed at Remagen in good time to share the champagne with the 9th Armored Division and other units.

