

By DAVE BERRY, Retired Editor of the Tyler Morning Telegraph

Gen. George S. Patton called them “my best bridge builders,” and 70 years later they are still at it. The 300th Engineer Combat Battalion once numbered around 625 men recruited from small towns and cities across Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana. Saturday, as the aging engineers met in Tyler for their annual reunion, they could muster only six – with hopes a seventh would join them later in the evening.

The 300th has met annually for 50 years, usually in Dallas. A few years ago, the reunion shifted to Tyler, hosted by Chuck Bice, who lives at the Watkins-Logan Veterans Home, where he shares a lodge with Homer Garrett, a fellow engineer and long-time friend. Both are 92. This weekend, the two were joined by William Lakey, Kenneth “Cowboy” Morris, Bill Byers and Roy Welch. Byers, of Oklahoma City, has attended every reunion for 25 years; Welch was enjoying his first. They hoped Don Richter, the Co. B clerk with his great memory, would join them in the evening. [Don did later join the reunion.] The men have an uncommon bond that brings them back year after year. They laugh, joke, banter and share memories of youthful hijinks. They salute those lost in the war and to old age. They bring family members, who share, compare and learn. Some of those sons, daughters and grandchildren continue to attend even after their loved one has departed. As Bice would say, “It’s something you can’t really explain. You just have to be there.”

The 300th Combat Engineers left England after D-Day to come ashore on Utah Beach. Four companies – A, B, C and Headquarters – would support infantry and armored divisions pouring ashore on the Normandy Coast. Demolition experts would demolish obstacles, clear minefields and destroy bridges that might be used in a counterattack. Construction crews would build roads, throw spans across rivers, establish water stations, lay minefields and create their own deadly obstacles. The battalion would arrive in three waves aboard LSTs (Landing Ship, Tank), large ships capable of unloading tanks, trucks and heavy cargo directly onto the beach. The first wave, on LST 87 carrying Bice and Company C, arrived at Utah beach and moved inland June 16, 1943, clearing minefields in front of the 101st Airborne. On June 19, the second echelon of 194 men, a third of the battalion, was nearing Utah Beach on LST 523. Most of Garrett’s Company A was lined up below deck in the mess line enjoying the mid-day meal. Garrett had an uneasy feeling and went topside to get some air. At 1:15 p.m., LST 523 was moving slowly a mile offshore when a German mine exploded beneath it, splitting the ship in two. Ninety-five engineers, nearly half those onboard, died in the blast. Another 117 sailors, most of the Navy crew, were also killed. Garrett, blown into the sea, was critically injured. He would spend 10 months in a hospital in England and never rejoin his unit. His war was over. Welch was severely injured, but he would recover and rejoin Company B. Many of the rest were stunned or wounded. A final LST brought the remaining third of the battalion to France, where survivors of LST 523 joined them. Soon, the battalion began the difficult task of retaking Europe. Their first bridge, built under fire at Carentan, was named after battalion commander Maj. John Tucker, killed by a German tank as it was built. The Tucker Bridge is still in use today, a pedestrian bridge in that small town of 6,000. Advancing across France, Belgium and Germany, the battalion built many bridges.

In their drive across Europe, they kept pace with the assault troops, helped them through minefields, moved them across streams, opened routes for their supplies, filled their canteens and fought alongside them when necessary. In the process, they lost friends, helped breach enemy lines, witnessed the liberation of Paris and struggled in the freezing cold during the Battle of the Bulge. “We were the best bridge builders in the Army,” Bice announced proudly, quoting Generals Eisenhower and Patton to make his point. He laughs about his encounter with Patton on the unit’s final bridge over the fast-flowing Isar River in Germany. As Bice tells it, the engineers were putting final touches on the bridge, tanks were lined up to cross and Bice’s truck was parked mid-way across, where he and his men worked to finish. A jeep carrying four generals pulled up and “that little smart aleck George Patton jumped out.” He hollered for me to get my truck out of the way, Bice said. But before the fiery general could storm onto the bridge, Gen. Omar Bradley motioned him back, saying, “Now, George, they have a job to do. Let them do it.”

Bill Byers has a slightly different spin on the Patton story. “I was in demolition. We destroyed bridges... and anything else that needed blowing. But most of the time, we were building them,” he said. “We built a bridge in southeast Germany. Patton crossed it and said ‘damned good bridge.’” A week later, with Germany’s surrender, the engineers began returning home. Their bridge-building was done. With the finality of a bulldozer filling a ditch, many buried their memories, pushing their stories under as they attempted to return their lives to some form of normalcy. Quietly, politely, they declined to talk about what they had seen. Even their families – wives, sons and daughters – didn’t know.

When the men of the 300th started bringing family members to their annual reunions, they may not have realized they were building bridges, spanning the silence, linking generations, allowing wives, sons, daughters and grandchildren to join them in their memories and understand “what dad went through.” Jan Ross and her husband Brad Peters have attended reunions since 2007. Jan’s father Donald Ross, who worked in water purification, died in 1983 without mentioning his service. It was a gap in her family experience she was determined to fill. With the help of 300th veterans, she learned of her father’s contribution to the war... but she and her husband have accomplished much more. You might say the two Massachusetts residents adopted this group of characters and cut-ups. Each year, they search out more stories and coax more memories from the men who served with her father. They have taped stories of sadness and silliness and collected hundreds of photos shared by veterans and family members.

Official reports on the sinking of LST 523, morning reports from all elements of the battalion and a timeline of the unit’s movements augment the personal stories and photos, making it an amazing website, one of the best I’ve explored. The stories that were once hidden away and finally told in smaller and smaller circles, are now available to all and for all time. By sharing their memories and telling their stories, Chuck, Homer, Cowboy, Tomas, Billy, Roy, Don and all the others who have passed on helped Jan and Brad build another bridge – a digital span linking the past with future generations.

Damned good bridge.