

Crossing of the Roer

WWII Drive for the Rhine

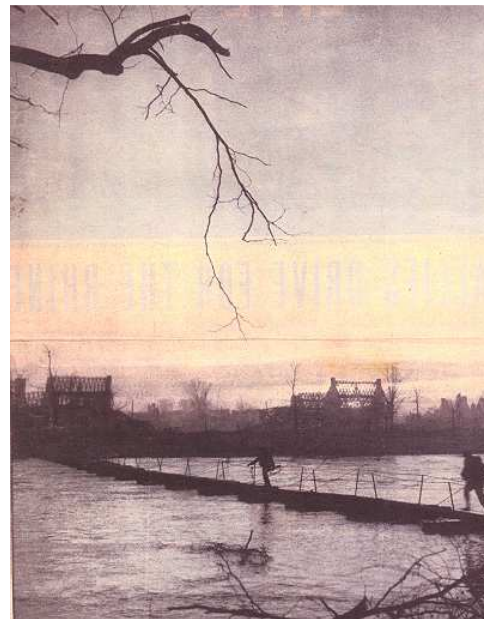
Since December 1944 the U. S. First and Ninth Armies had been building up strength behind the swollen little Roer River. On Feb. 23 they let go with a stunning night barrage. The Germans at the river were quickly overpowered. Beyond the river the rigid framework of their Rhineland defense began to break down. A week after the first gun had been fired at the Roer, the Ninth had arrived at the Rhine opposite Dusseldorf. The men of the Ninth exchanged shots with the Germans on the other side.

Lieut. General William H. Simpson, commander of the Ninth, had been waiting for this drive to the Rhine. If the river was to be crossed by his army, the smooth crossing of the Roer was a battle rehearsal. For weeks the muddy little stream had been an obsession with the men of the Ninth. They prepared and planned to cross it early in February, in coordination with drives by the Canadians and General Patton's Third Army. But on the eve of the crossing the Germans opened the gates in the big earth dams of the upper Roer, partly flooding the cabbage land of the lower valley. General Simpson was forced to postpone the crossing while his engineers calculated when it would be possible.

The engineers, watching the flood diminish, told the general the crossing could be made on Feb. 23. The Ninth began to get ready again. The men and tanks and portable sections of pontoon bridges moved up to the river. At 2:45 A.M. the barrage began and a smokescreen drifted over river to cover the crossing.

As the morning sun shines through the open roof of a house in Julich, Ninth Army infantrymen dash across Roer under German mortar and machine-gun fire.

The U. S. Breakthrough Begins with the Crossing of the Roer: The Ninth Army's crossing of the Roer was a short, violent struggle against the Germans and the river. Forty-five minutes after the night barrage had begun, assault boats and amphibious tractors started across in a great wave. In some of the boats were combat engineers, ferrying cables to moor their pontoon bridges in midstream. It was an excruciating few hours for the engineers. The flood had lessened but the current was still swift and strong. Runaway boats and pontoons careened downstream crashing into the bridges as they were being built. As the work went on the Germans kept up a blind but deadly machine-gun and mortar barrage through the smokescreen. But in spite of difficulties there were two footbridges across the Roer in the morning. Later the engineers put in bigger bridges for trucks and tanks.



[Click on image to see larger view](#)



Click on image to see larger view

On another Roer footbridge lies the body of an American soldier who was hit by German mortar-shell fragments when he was only 50 feet from east bank.

The hardest crossing on the Ninth Army front was made by the veteran 29th Division of Julich, which appears on the far side of the river on the opposite page.

The wreckage along the Roer at Julich was reminiscent of Normandy. All of Julich except the ancient moated citadel was taken by afternoon, freeing the 29th to join the power drive across the Cologne plain. But even after the entry into Julich, the crossing of the Roer were places of danger. The Germans still had the river under observation and shelled it heavily. The little bridge above and the dead soldier on it were principals in a grisly little drama which is unfolded on the following pages.

Life Photographer George Silk Records Grim Little Incident of U. S. Combat Engineers at One of the Roer Pontoon Bridges.



1 On the east bank of the Roer, engineers edge toward a little picket of Germans left behind by the main advance. The Germans were sniping at the engineers on the bridge.



2 Some of the Germans walk out holding their handkerchiefs as white flags. The others, still undecided about surrendering, were killed when they fired a few halfhearted shots at the engineers.



3 Two engineers herd the prisoners back to the bridge. Just after LIFE's George Silk made this picture, one of the prisoners pulled a live grenade out of his pocket and tossed it to the ground.



4 Dazed men stagger after explosion. The German who threw grenade lies dead (center). Two men at the left, one on the ground, are badly wounded. Silk was hit in leg.



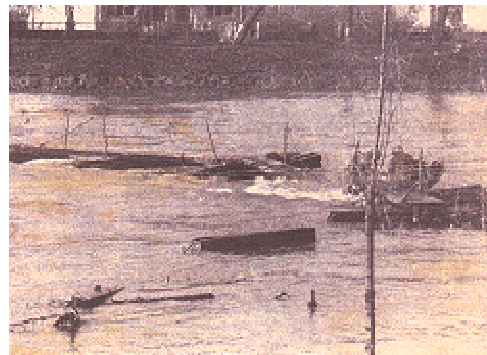
5 Walking across the bridge under guard, one of the prisoners hesitates as he picks his way over the body of the dead American shown in the picture on the proceeding page.



6 Stretcher-bearers bringing back one of the men wounded in the grenade explosion step carefully over the body.



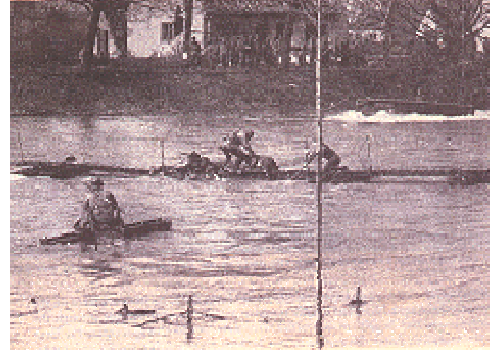
7 Cut by a mortar shell, the bridge swings downstream. Stretcher-bearers with another wounded man stand helplessly over the body on the bridge. Man in middle stands stunned by accident.



8 A splash of foam by the bridge marks where one of the men has dived in to help the stretcher-bearers, who are trying to keep the wounded man from falling into the river.



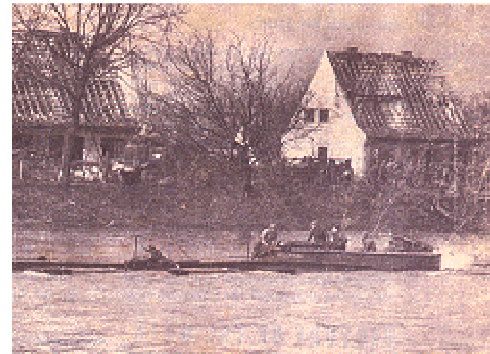
- 9** A pontoon capsizes when the fourth man climbs on to help the stretcher-bearers and the wounded man. On the west bank in the background other men look on transfixed.



- 10** As the bridge rights itself, one of the stretcher-bearers pulls wounded man out of the water. The other floats downstream on a pontoon broken loose. the dead man still lies on the bridge.



- 11** Motorboat comes up and the man who had been floating away on pontoon climbs in at right. Man who had dived in and had been hanging on to bridge, now climbs out of water in center.



- 12** Everyone is taken aboard except the dead man. Bigger bridges had been built upstream, so little bridge was left swinging with dead man for the rest of day.

[Note: The preceding article/photographs ran in "LIFE" magazine on March 12, 1945 Vol. 18 No. 11., pp. 25-29. The photographer was George Silk who recorded this small portion of the overall battle. The images depicted in this article were unique in the fact that for first times they depicted American dead -- which up to this point was never done. The issue was moral back home.]

[Source: WWII Stories http://carol_fus.tripod.com/army_roer_crossing.html Apr 2012 ++]