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Want Any Bridges Built? These Guys'll Build 'Em

By Sgt. VIC DALLAIRE

Staff Writer

WITH THE 7TH ARMY, Sept. 26—When an army moves along as fast as the 7th Army has through eastern France, a lot of the long-range blueprints of war must be dumped into the wastebasket. The science of logistics gives way to the gentle art of making the most of what's on hand.

Probably no other outfit in Lt. Gen. Alexander Patch's fast-moving Army knows this so well as the regiment of engineers which was charged with replacing the blown railroad bridges from Aix-en-Provence to Lyon, six big spans on the main route from the port of Marseilles to the front.

The date set for completing the job was Sept. 25. Materials were to arrive on a prefixed schedule. Everyone from the regimental commander on down figured it would be a routine job. Of course, they'd have to work around the clock, but what of it? The materials ordered on the basis of recon photos would pour in as they needed them.

But the lightning sweep of the 7th Army through the green hills and valleys of France jumbled all the careful calculations. First thing everyone knew, the front was hundreds of miles from the port of entry and the need for the railroad was greater than ever. These engineers had to work aided only by a top priority on moving such materials as arrived or could be found.

On Sept. 20, five days ahead of the Sept. 25 target, they reported the job done. The men had worked 24 hours a day building the spans and scouring the countryside for steel and timber.

The three largest bridges were at Avignon, Livron and Valence. The Avignon job meant replacing five bays, each 75 feet in length, but the 1st Battalion under Lt. Col. Thomas E. Holt, Cincinnati, did the job in record time. Maj. Harold V. Mosby, Columbus, Ohio, and his 2nd Battalion replaced a 300-foot bridge at Livron, a 140-foot span above Valence and another 170 feet in length. A Ger-

man railroad gun carriage was worked into a bridge below Aix-en-Provence while a smaller overpass span near Montelimar rounded out the half dozen.

All of the bridges are of a semi-permanent nature which means they are built to carry the heavy military loads although they may not be as pretty as permanent structures. The bridge at Capua over Italy's Volturno River, the longest military bridge in history, was built by Colonel Holt's 1st Battalion in the record time of 19 days. This was considered a semipermanent highway structure but it carried 1,000,000 vehicles in its first six months. It was also the only one to withstand spring floods which had taken out every other cross-river link with the Italian front.

Between bridge jobs, this outfit of engineers has managed to get a lot of other work done. The men cleared the harbors of Oran and Bizerte, they've built miles of roads and hundreds of buildings and have swept dozens of minefields. In the 27 months the outfit has been overseas, it has won three citations and, in Italy, the 5th Army placque for excellent service.