

Eyewitness Report

Sgt. Robert F. Shelato's Nierstein Monument Dedication Speech, March 25, 2017

My part in the Rhine River crossing began four days earlier at a bridge site on the Our River, boundary line between Luxembourg and Germany. It was there we received orders to prepare for the Rhine invasion.

En route to the Rhine, we stopped at a German river (*in Hatzenport on the Moselle River*) and practiced assault boat landings. Two types of assault craft were used: paddle and power driven. We were told the paddle boats would cross the Rhine first. After the first shot was fired, our power boats would be activated.

The power boats were the most exciting. Six engineers, pretending to be infantrymen, would lie in prone position. Once the motor started, there was no turning or twisting, only a straight line to the far shore. Just before impact, the engineer pulled the motor up and fell on the other six. Their speed propelled the boat on to shore two or three boat lengths, knocking over willow trees an inch or more in diameter. Crossings were timed with a stop watch and competition made a game of the exercise. It was a thrilling experience for a 19-year old.

After two days of practice, we moved on and arrived that night at the Rhine River near Nierstein and Oppenheim. Our first job was unloading trucks carrying assault boats and pontoons. With the enemy only four-hundred yards away, it was a stealth project with no noise permitted.

Later we met with Captain Shaufy at his command post in a nearby forest. He delivered a short pep talk, saying the invasion would shorten the war and save thousands of lives. "We need volunteers for the assault boats. Will those volunteers please step forward?"

Unlike in theater plays where everyone steps forward, not a soul moved. We thought it was a suicide mission. Our thoughts were on those terrible losses on D-Day.

Showing no disappointment, the Captain said, "We will do this by lottery." I breathed a sigh of relief. I had drawn a raft building assignment. We shook hands and hugged others, never expecting to see them again. Later we were surprised to learn the crossings were highly successful with few shots fired.

Meanwhile, we were busy building rafts to ferry tanks across the river. As morning approached, small dots of flickering fire appeared on the up-river horizon. Having already been exposed to machine gun fire, I responded by jumping behind a large sycamore tree. Three German fighter planes roared over the work site spitting bullets and each dropping a bomb. Two bombs fell harmlessly into the river and the third struck a nearby raft motor but did not explode. The Captain posted an engineer on a high point with a whistle. Each time the whistle blew, we dashed into a nearby building.

After ferrying tanks, many of the returning rafts carried prisoners of war. One raft running in rough water tipped over, spilling a few dozen prisoners. Lt. Vogley saw the accident and shouted to Sgt. Crochoine, "Let's take a pontoon boat and rescue the two engineers."

As they approached the accident, several prisoners attached themselves to their boat, causing it to slip sideways. They managed to free themselves to reach one engineer, the other had already drowned. His body was recovered down-river three days later. They returned to shore with the surviving engineer and a boat loaded with prisoners, many clinging to the sides.

The invasion was more successful than anyone could imagine, and we were running a day ahead of schedule. So, we were transferred to bridge building, building three here in Nierstein and one in Oppenheim.

It had been a massive invasion. One historian estimates that 60,000 vehicles crossed the Rhine over three bridges in the first seven days.

But, the war had ended for the 249th. We were removed from active combat duty and given charge of guarding bridges at Nierstein, Oppenheim and Mainz. A few months later, the fighting ended and I was sent back to my home in Indiana.

You have honored and humbled me with your invitation to speak here today.