



At the Remagen Bridge 70 Years Later

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Photographs courtesy of Gero Koller (GK)
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The 325-meter Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen was the only Rhine River Bridge in March 1945. The German Wehrmacht tried to keep it intact as long as possible to get the remaining troops across the river. The planned destruction failed and the US 9th Armored Division would capture the bridge on the 07 March 1945, ending WWII in Europe months earlier than Eisenhower and others had thought possible. US Signal Corp 02786.

On a Sunday afternoon in 2014, I was in the Ahrweiler area (south of the former German capital city of Bonn) where I bought some World War II collectibles from a friend. He recommended that I visit the famous Remagen Bridge site over the Rhine River (or what is left of it) and its museum. It was only a few kilometers from his home, so I decided to visit this famous historic place.

The Rhine River has dug its way through massive rock formations over millions of years. The town of Remagen is located down in the river valley with steep hills on both sides. The river flows in large curves through the valley and passes by the city of Remagen on a short straight stretch.

The Ludendorff Bridge, as it was named, was located at the southern end of the town and was built in WWI as one of three similar bridges for the military. The intention was to build a direct railroad supply line to the western front. On the eastern side the Ludendorff Bridge railroad lines enter a tunnel

by a steep hill at the village of Erpel. The tracks led directly to the German heartland and its industry. However when the bridge was finished in 1918, it was too late to be of any value to the WWI German Army as the war ended a few weeks later.

On my way through Remagen, I finally found the remains of the bridge in the southern outskirts of the town. There are not many road-signs and the bridge today is surrounded by a post war housing project, so it took me a while to locate it.

I arrived just before sunset and was impressed by the sheer dimensions of the bridge and its location. The river reflected the evening sun like liquid gold, and the bridge towers, with their dark stone, added a rough contrast to the setting. It's hard to explain how it feels to stand on the remains of this legendary bridge abutment and to comprehend how fierce the battle for the Ludendorff Bridge was in 1945. So I decided then to return on March 7, 2015 for the 70th anniversary.



The bridge towers, on the opposite side of the Remagen River, at the village of Erpel. They are not in use today and are under repair to preserve them for future generations. (GK)

Although there were virtually no advance announcements for this event, when I arrived I found a large group of spectators in place – under perfect weather conditions with a blue sky and about 15° C. Approximately 200 meters from the bridge, at the Rheinhalle, the official ceremony was underway, with the usual politicians in place and about 200 guests who had received official invitations. In addition to those representatives there were members of the German Bundeswehr and the US Army, as well as several veterans' associations. WWII veterans from the USA, Belgium and Germany were also present for the commemoration.

Among the attending veterans was Paul Schumacher, of the US 9th Infantry Division, who represented the American veterans. Also present was Dr. Andrew B. Denison – an expert on transatlantic relationships. He was one of the speakers at the Rheinhalle and he conducted an interview with Paul Schumacher. This was one of those rare times to hear directly from a veteran who was actually there and witnessed the battle.



The remains of the Remagen Bridge towers, on the western side, are today home of the Remagen Peace Museum. Organized by the former mayor of the city, it presents the full story of this bridge that in 1969 became a Hollywood blockbuster movie, starring George Segal and Robert Vaughn. (JS)

Some WWII MV owners also made it to the event. They were mostly members of the USMVC Club from the nearby Koblenz region. There was the usual gang of jeeps, four very nice GMC CCKW trucks, and my old friends Sonja and Alexander with their Dodge WC51, as the only Dodge representatives.

They all had a very nice day touring the riverbanks in the pleasant spring weather, taking photographs in front of the bridge tower and being interviewed for TV along with veterans, such as former Wehrmacht soldier, Robert Willscheid, in front of the GMC trucks. Willscheid was a 16-year-old member of an AA gun crew on one of the bridge towers. He was captured by American troops on this day 70 years ago and transported to a POW camp in a GMC truck.

At 1130 h the commemoration at the bridge started with a speech and flower presentation from representatives of the City of Remagen, the German Bundeswehr, the US Army and veterans associations. A lot of media representatives were present and the commemoration was later shown on prime time TV news. About 300 guests and spectators filled the area between the bridge and the riverbanks. Among them were many elderly people from Remagen, as well as some WWII history enthusiasts.



Under intense fire, 325 meters can become a great distance. Lt. Karl H. Timmermann was the first American officer to make it across the bridge on 07 March 1945. (JS)



The tunnel entrance, at the Erpel village on the east side of the river, is used today as a theater. In 1945 the tunnel provided shelter for hundreds of civilians from the village. (JS)



This is as far as you can drive up the bridge ramp on the Remagen side in a WWII vehicle. While it's not legal, it's a perfect setting for a photograph of such a historic place. In March 1945, the US Army used a portable steel bridge to close the gap between this point and the bridge, because part of the ramp had been blown away during the heavy battle. (GK)

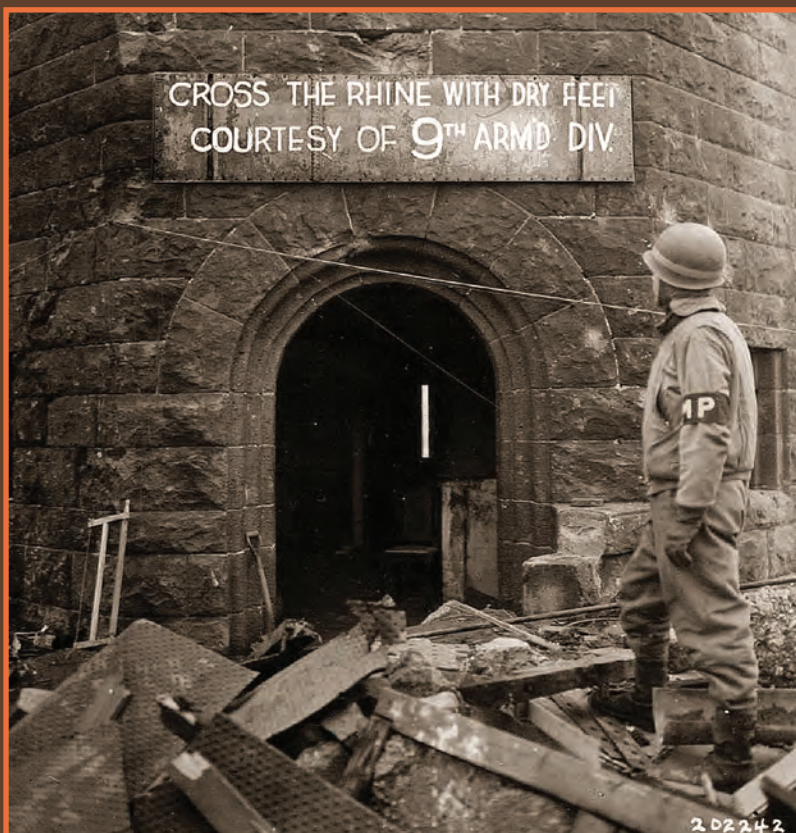
The view across the Rhine River to the east side, near the village of Erpel and the tunnel entrance. (GK)

I was fortunate to meet a representative from the US Army. He told me that he had served in five previous conflicts. We were both standing in front of the bridge location and started some small talk. I told him about our hobby of collecting and preserving WWII MVs and he asked me about my intentions in doing so. I said "just to keep the memory of WWII alive and to remind future generations that freedom is not for free. That we live today in a free and democratic Europe is not always self-evident. It's because millions had fought against the Nazi dictatorship on the Allied side." The army officer was nodding but said that "we should not glorify war" while doing so. He saw combat, sweat, blood and tears, realities that we should all keep in mind.

We were standing there thinking - the German WWII MV owner, and the American army officer, both born after WWII. We were watching the river and the remains of the Remagen Bridge abutment on the opposite side of the Rhine. In front of us, some thirty meters away, was veteran Paul Schumacher, standing directly at the water's edge, seventy years after he had first been there. He was looking at the river and the remains of the bridge. What was he thinking at that moment?



Until the mid 1970s, the two bridge pillars existed in the river but had to be removed for safety reasons. The material from them is sold today in the museum, along with a certificate. It's a good way to cover some of the operating costs of the Peace Museum. (GK)



An American MP in front of the entrance to one of the four Bridge towers, with the US 9th AD sign stating: 'Cross the Rhine With Dry Feet Courtesy Of 9th Armd. Div.' The rubble in front shows how fierce the battle was. (US Army Signal Corps)

THE WONDER OF REMAGEN

The wonder of Remagen, that took place on the 7th of March 1945, made it possible for American troops to cross the Rhine River with dry feet, courtesy of the 9th American Armored Division. The historic sign displayed on one of the bridge towers attests to that fact.

During the first day, more than 8,000 soldiers crossed the river and quickly built up an enlarged bridgehead on the opposite side. In the following ten days, about eighteen additional regiments crossed the river on the damaged bridge, starting on their final push into the German heartland.

The wonder of Remagen ended dramatically on the 17th of March 1945 when, during ongoing repairs to the 325-meter bridge, it finally collapsed, killing twenty-eight American Army Engineers.

It is a matter of fact that access to the German heartland via the Ludendorff Bridge ended WWII, in Europe, months earlier than Eisenhower and others had thought possible. The lives of thousands were saved on both sides.

Today, even after 70 years, The wonder of Remagen is firmly embedded in the hearts and minds of both German and American veterans, and hundreds of other interested people from all over Europe and the USA. They are finding their way to this commemoration and celebrate it together in peace to keep the memory of those days in 1945 alive.

So, from my point of view is this not the second wonder of Remagen? I'm glad that I was able to be part of it.



Seventy years later, the Battle at Remagen, that captured the Ludendorff Bridge, is not forgotten. Thousands of visitors from Europe and the USA visit the Peace Museum every year. Paul Schumacher, a returning American combat veteran of that battle was photographed in front of the commemorative plaque last March. The Wonder of Remagen, that ended WWII in Europe much earlier than anticipated saved so many lives. (JS)

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