SECTION VII

Combat Engineering: War in Europe

When the United States declared war against Germany on 11 December 1941, American planners had already agreed with their British counterparts on a war strategy: the main effort would be made first against Germany. Unable to get the British to agree to a cross-channel operation in 1942, the Americans accepted a proposal for an invasion of North Africa in November 1942—the first step in what would become the strategy of indirect approach to Europe through the Mediterranean.

Operation TORCH, the invasion of North Africa on 8 November 1942, saw the initial use of a special type of engineer unit, the amphibian engineers. Organized to move troops and equipment from ships across the beaches and inland, these special engineers would go on to play a crucial part in all European amphibious operations. Another new engineer unit, the aviation engineers, got its baptism of fire in North Africa. Structured to build airdromes close to the front for the faster and heavier planes of World War II, the aviation engineers also went on to contribute significantly in all European campaigns.

As the Mediterranean campaign continued through 1943 and into 1944, the engineers traded hot and dusty Sicily for cold and wet Italy. In both places the engineers successfully paced advances through rugged mountainous terrain made even more difficult by tenacious German withdrawal tactics. The Bailey bridge proved to be a technological wonder while the bulldozer became a true friend of the combat as well as the construction engineer.

In the Normandy invasion on D-day, 6 June 1944, engineer beach assault teams paid a heavy price in breaching Hitler's West Wall. After the breakout from the beachhead, engineers aided the fast-moving columns over the roads and across the rivers of France right up to the border with

Germany. There the Germans regrouped and held and finally counterattacked. The Ardennes counteroffensive saw the engineers used to create obstacles in the path of the German attacking forces as well as in their secondary role as infantry. The numerous combat engineer units located along the front helped to hold the line in the Battle of the Bulge until the Allied reserves could react.

As the final drive began in the spring of 1945, engineers bridged the Rhine River. They helped seize the bridge at Remagen, built several bridges in the area, and supported Third and Seventh Army crossings with bridges built under fire. On 7 May, Germany signed the act of unconditional surrender, and the European phase of World War II was over.

The first two essays describe combat engineer activities in the Mediterranean theater. The remaining essays cover combat engineering in the European theater of operations, beginning with the difficulties of OMAHA and UTAH beaches, through the dark period of the Belgium Bulge, to the successes of the Rhine River crossings.