A GLINT OF LIGHT
Tales, Stories & Inspiration

The Bridge at Remagen

A key battle in WW2

Written by Andy Owen

When Second Lieutenant Karl Timmermann woke up on the morning of 7 March 1945, he didn't know he was going to make history that day.

The day before he had been made commander of A Company of of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 9th Armored Division.

He was the latest of a string of replacements, thanks to the Germans. He was in Stadt Mechenheim, about ten miles west of Remagen on the west bank of the Rhine River.

Remarkably, he was also less than 100 miles from the place where he was born, in Frankfurt am Main. His father had been on occupation duty in Germany following the end of the previous war and had gone over the hill, met a German girl, and had a son.

After he got things straightened out with the army, Karl Timmermann's father brought his family back to Nebraska.

Now the son was back in Germany as a conquerer, and the elder Timmerman's prospects for grandchildren were dim.

Second Lieutenant Timmermann was ordered to take his company and attack toward Remagen at a rate of ten miles per hour. This was before the days of modern roads.

This was part of a military operation called Operation Lumberjack, with the goal to capture the west bank of the Rhine River and seize key German cities near the end of World War II.

The First United States Army launched the operation in March 1945 to capture strategic cities in Germany and to give the Allies a foothold along the Rhine.

The Germans had repeatedly frustrated Allied efforts to cross the Rhine. With the 21st Army Group firmly established along the Rhine, Bradley's 12th Army Group prepared to execute Operation Lumberjack.

General Omar Bradley's plan called for the U.S. First Army to attack south eastward toward the juncture of the Ahr and Rhine Rivers and then swing south to meet Patton, whose U. S. Third Army would simultaneously drive north eastward through the Eifel.

If successful, Lumberjack would capture Cologne, secure the Koblenz sector, and bring the 12th Army Group to the Rhine in the entire area north of the Moselle River.

The 12th Army Group also hoped to bag a large number of Germans.

Following Lumberjack, the Allies had planned for a pause along the Rhine while Montgomery's 21st Army Group began Operation Plunder, a large, carefully planned movement across the Rhine near Düsseldorf and the Dutch border.

Montgomery would then capture the Ruhr, the industrial heartland of Germany.

Allied Forces

During the operation, the U.S. First Army controlled the III, V, and VII Corps. III Corps had the 9th Armored Division and the 1st, 9th, and 78th Infantry Divisions attached. V Corps had attached the 2nd, 28th, 69th, and 106th Infantry Divisions attached as well as the 7th Armored Division, although the 7th was not committed to the operation and had transferred to the III Corps by March 7.

The VII Corps controlled the 3rd Armored Division and the 8th, 99th, and 104th Infantry Divisions.[3]

During Operation Lumberjack, the U.S. Army's 9th Armored Division was tasked with mopping up elements of the German Army trapped on the west bank of the Rhine and to prevent a counterattack against the Ninth Army's flank.

They were to secure the region between Mosel and the Duren-Cologne and to destroy the German army's capability to fight in that area.

The First Army was to seize the entire region west of the Rhine. After capturing Cologne, the First Army was to wheel southeast and join up with Patton's Third

Army. Patton was supposed to capture the Eifel Mountains and then the Mosel Valley, trapping the remainder of the German Seventh Army in the Eifel area.

German forces

From north to south, the attacking U.S. forces were confronted by the LXXXI (9th and 11th Panzer Divisions, and the 476th, 363rd, and 59th Infantry Divisions) and LVIII Panzer Corps (353rd and 12th Infantry Divisions, as well as the 3rd Panzergrenadier Division) of the German*Fifteenth Army*, and the LXXIV (85th and 272nd Infantry Divisions, as well as the 3rd Airborne Division), LXVII (89th and 277th Infantry Divisions), and LXVI Corps (5th Airborne Division) of the German Fifth Panzer Army.

Over 75,000 German troops were on the western banks of the bridge. Their only escape route was across the Ludendorff bridge.

Written permission was required to destroy the bridge because on 14–15 October 1944, an American bomb had struck the Mulheim Bridge in Cologne and hit the chamber containing the demolition charges, prematurely destroying the bridge.

Hitler was angered by this incident and ordered those "responsible" for the destruction of the Mulheim Bridge to be court-martialled. He also ordered that demolition explosives should not be laid in place until the very last moment, when the Allies were within 5 miles (8.0 km) of the bridge.

The bridges should only be demolished following an order in writing from the officer in charge, and only as a last resort and at the last possible moment.

This order left officers responsible for destroying bridges nervous about both the consequences if they blew up the bridge too soon and if they failed to blow it up at all.

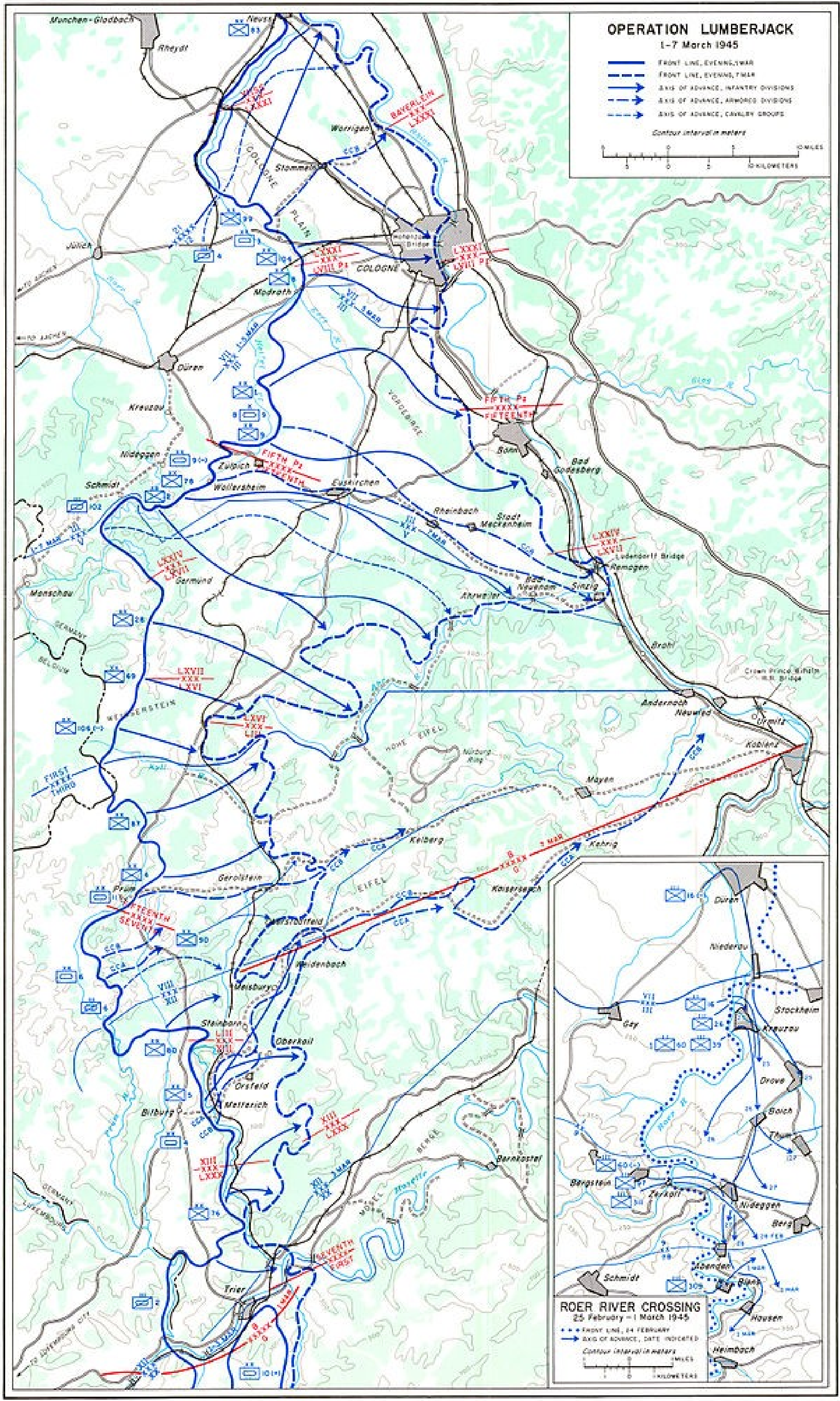
Bradley launched Lumberjack on 1 March. In the north, the First Army rapidly exploited bridgeheads over the Erft River, entering Euskirchen on 4 March and Cologne on the fifth. Cologne was in U.S. Army control by the 7th.

The First Army then pushed towards the Ahr River valley, the likely point of retreat for what was left of the German Army's LXVI and LXVII Korps.

The U.S. Third Army met some resistance along the Siegfried Line and the Prum and Kyll Rivers. On 4 March at Bitburg, the 5th Infantry Division cut through the German lines. Taking advantage of the breach, the Fourth Armored Division struck out on a 45 miles (72 km) drive to the Rhine in less than five days. While losing only 100 casualties, they cost the Germans 5,700 killed and wounded. The Fourth Armored barely missed the chance to capture a bridge at Urmetz.

While moving towards the Ahr, the U.S. 9th Armored Division on the right flank of the First Army, had moved swiftly towards the Rhine. The closer the division got to the Rhine, the more quickly it advanced.

The speed of their movement towards the Rhine surprised the Germans. About 20 kilometres (12 mi) upstream from Bonn, they unexpectedly found the Ludendorff railroad bridge still standing. Take a look at this map from Google.



On the left is Mechenheim, where Timmerman’s A Company started at 0700. Their progress was to Fritzdorf, then to Birresdorf and then along the winding road into Remagen from the northwest.

There was trouble along the way. At Fritzdorf they encountered a German roadblock and overcame that. It was the last day for some German soldiers, but A Company got through without any casualties.

Following that, there were a number of bloodless encounters with German soldiers and civilians, as Timmermann and his tanks passed through small villages along the road.

The word got out and spread toward the east. The Americans were coming. As the German soldiers left, the civilians put white flags out their windows. The war was over for them.

About ten o’clock in the morning of March 7, several breathless German soldiers ran down the Birresdorf-Remagen road and excitedly reported to Herr and Frau Allmang, that the Americans were already in Birresdorf.

“Get into the cellar and stay in the cellar. We’re crossing the Rhine. Good luck!” They ran down the road toward Remagen.

The father of the household, Joseph Allmang, calmed his wife, daughters and grandchildren, with these words: “Don’t get worried, now. You know, when I fought in France in 1918 it took weeks to get through the main line of resistance. If they’re at Birresdorf it will take many days before they get to the Waldschlösschen. Just calm yourself.”

Before he finished speaking, the sound of Jim Burrows’ half-track was heard around the bend, and one of the Allmang girls, blonde Frau Annie Seegmuller, swept up the little grandchildren and dashed for the cellar.

Frau Allmang followed, and the rest of the family, trailed by the still sceptical head of the household, took refuge. From a window they could see the first two half-tracks rumble past.

Suddenly, Frau Allmang rose and said: “This is no way to greet our liberators.” Running upstairs, she took a tablecloth from the kitchen table and went out onto the lawn and waved it vigorously.

What happened next changed the course of the war.

Carmine Sabia squeaked along the road with his reliable half-track “Aibas.”

Sabia tried to make a little noise with his machine gun because he did not like the deadly quiet of the pinewoods through which they were passing.

He glanced up at the gaps in the trees which had been cut by machine gun and rifle fire.

Suddenly in the distance Sabia saw the crest of a mountain looming over the top of the trees. The mountain was actually across the Rhine, but Sabia did not realize this at the time.

Up ahead, a reconnaissance car halted and the occupants told Penrod and Munch that they had been fired on. The two men moved on about fifty yards beyond the recon car.

They could see that the road turned sharply toward the right. They cut through some woods on the right side of the road, working their way through the woods and back onto the road again where it turned right.

Across the road was a clearing in front of the heavy woods. Near the road was a pile of brush and as they looked closer they could see an anti-tank gun hidden there, pointing almost directly at the half-track which they had left 150 yards up the road.

They discovered that the gun was not manned. Suddenly, Penrod and Munch saw something which caused them to wave violently at the men in the column behind them.

Timmermann saw the excitement ahead as he left the Allmangs. He hopped into his jeep and raced forward. Rounding the bend in the road, he emerged from the woods and found himself confronted by a breathtaking view.

Far below, the river wound through its narrow valley, and off to his right, clearly outlined against the sky, was the prize no man dared hope for–the Ludendorff Bridge, still intact, spanning the Rhine!

In the meantime, the Germans had made considerable preparations to blow the Remagen and all other bridges over the Rhine. The Rhine was considered to be a formidable and historic barrier to invasion from the west.
The last time an invader had pierced this defence was Napoleon over 100 years before.

Then something happened.

The Germans had prepared demolition charges for the bridges and a lucky strike by an American bomb on the Mülheim bridge at Cologne had destroyed the bridge prematurely.

Thereafter, Hitler had ordered all demolition charges to be removed. No bridges were to be destroyed without a specific order.

That was the situation with the Ludendorff Bridge up until 7 March.

On the 6th, Major Hans Scheller was assigned to go to Remagen and take over the defence of the bridge. His duties were to include destroying the bridge before Allied troops could capture it.

He arrived in Remagen for the first time about 11 a.m. on the morning of the 7th, about the same time American troops began to size up the prize just a few hundred yards away.

The sad situation for Major Scheller, was he was thrown into an impossible situation, and he was later to pay with his life for the fumbling of people he worked for. At the time Major Scheller arrived, the explosives for the demolition had not arrived.

When they did arrive, they were not the military grade required for the job, and the quantity was less than had been ordered. Even as the Americans drew up plans for seizing the bridge, Scheller had his men place the available explosives, and he set up arrangements for blowing the bridge.

First, well in advance, a charge had been buried in the bridge approach on the Remagen (west) side of the bridge. When the Americans were observed approaching, this charge was detonated, blowing a 30-foot hole in the ground.

It was enough to prevent tanks from getting to the bridge, but it also served as an excellent defensive position for the American soldiers preparing to assault the bridge.

The demolition plan was well-thought out. The demolition charges on the bridge were to be electrically detonated from a box located at the tunnel entrance on the east side of the bridge. The wires leading to the detonators were housed in a steel pipe to protect them from sabotage and battle damage. The electrical connection was tested every hour to make sure connectivity was secure.

The electrical firing squibs require a certain amount of current flowing through them to detonate. You test the circuit by running a much smaller level of current through the detonators. If current flows, then the circuit is secure. It’s really just an Ohm meter test, but with careful consideration to ensure the minimum amount of current flows.

All of this was done.

The Americans took up positions at the west end of the bridge about 1500 (3 p.m.

Somebody in Remagen told the Americans the plan was to blow the bridge at 1600.

This was not true. The Germans didn’t have a timetable for blowing the bridge. They made plans to blow the bridge immediately, and that time was now.

In the meantime German Captain Friesenhahn gave the order to blow the bridge.

The tunnel was packed with soldiers and civilians taking cover from the fighting. Friesenhahn ordered everybody to cover their ears and to open their mouths. Then he turned the key on the detonator box.

Nothing happened. This remains a mystery to this day. The circuit had been checked just minutes before and found to be intact.

A volunteer squad ran out onto the bridge and ignited a time delay fuse and then retreated. The explosives went off with a roar, but when the dust settled the bridge was still standing.

Under cover of smoke shells fired from the west bank Karl Timmermann and his squad worked their way across the bridge and began to secure the far side. Along the way Americans found and disabled several explosive charges. When they discovered the exposed detonator cable, they cut it with gunfire at point blank range.

Taking a look at pictures of the bridge you will see towers at each end of the bridge. These were not part of the bridge, but they had been put in place in the previous war as defensive positions.

Now at the east end of the bridge Sergeant DeLisio worked his way up one of the towers and routed the defenders holed up at the top, sending them back west across the bridge.

Alex Drabik, one of DeLisio’s assistant squad leaders, had not seen him go into the tower and started looking for his platoon leader. He asked several people on the bridge, but nobody seemed to know.

He made up his mind that there was only one thing to do.

Let's go!” he shouted. “DeLisio must be over there on the other side all alone.” Drabik took off for the east bank, weaving and wobbling. Just before he got across the bridge he jounced so much that he lost his helmet.

He did not stop to pick it up but kept running at top speed until he became the first soldier to cross the Rhine. Second Lieutenant Karl Timmermann quickly followed and became the first officer across, picking up the real glory.

When those in the tunnel got word that Americans were taking up positions on the east side of the bridge, Major Scheller left the on a bicycle to seek reinforcements from nearby German units. He left Capatain Bratge in charge.

Confusion in the German rear, ensured that no reinforcements arrived to help the defenders of the bridge. Americans quickly infiltrated over and beyond the 600-foot cliff and secured the east exit of the tunnel. They cut down a German on a motorcycle trying to get word to the German command.

Others attempts were thwarted, as well. By nightfall those in the tunnel surrendered and were herded across the bridge and into captivity.

It was not the end of the battle, which went on for three more days in the vicinity of the bridge. The Americans patched up the bridge and began to bring tanks across on the night of the 7th.

Within a week they had moved three divisions (about 16,000 men each) across the bridge. They also constructed a pontoon bridge and a treadway bridge on either side of the Remagen bridge.

While it stood, the bridge enabled the U.S. Army to deploy 25,000 troops, six Army divisions, with many tanks, artillery pieces and trucks, across the Rhine.

Then they halted all traffic on the bridge and attempted to repair it.

It was too late.

On 17 March a main bridge span collapsed into the river, killing 18 engineers on the bridge at the time. It was never rebuilt.

After the war, the railway crossing was not deemed important enough to justify rebuilding the bridge. Parts of the land used for the approaching railway lines are now used as an industrial estate on the western bank and a park on the eastern bank.

Since 1980, the surviving towers on the western bank of the Rhine have housed a museum called "Peace Museum Bridge at Remagen" containing the bridge's history and 'themes of war and peace'.

This museum was partly funded by selling rock from the two piers as paperweights. The two piers were removed from the river in the summer of 1976 as they were an obstacle to navigation.

The Allies had never figured on crossing the Rhine this early. British Field Marshal Montgomery had the first crossing planned for himself further downstream. It was called Operation Varsity and it involved an amphibious crossing with the assist of the largest airborne assault of the war.

It was carried out on 24th March, over two weeks after a sizeable American force was crossing at Remagen. Operation Varsity was immensely larger than the 9th Armored Division and was carried out at a point long identified as ideal for moving masses of troops and accomplishing important strategic objectives.

Remagen, on the other hand, was a poor place to cross the Rhine. Once across, the troops fought for days to reach the Autobahn just a few miles to the east and into country that would permit movement of sizable forces.

Even in Operation Varsity, Montgomery was upstaged by his military rival Georges S. Patton.

Patton toured the front to see what was happening.

By then, it was the 22nd and all the German exits over the Rhine in the Third Army's area had been cut off. Back at headquarters after dark, he found that a record number of prisoners had been captured during the day–some 11,000 Germans–indicating the near-collapse and demoralization of the enemy.

He was also told that elements of the 10th Armored had made contact with units of the Seventh Army, completely pocketing the German troops.
It was a fantastic situation, inducing General Gerow, now commanding the Fifteenth Army, to wire Patton: “Congratulations on surrounding three armies, one of them American.”

What are we waiting for?” Patton exclaimed.

He gave the signal to cross the Rhine as they were, without air support and artillery preparation, without airborne troops landing behind enemy lines, without even complete authority to do so.

In the immediate wake of Patton’s orders, the 5th Division reorganized for assault across the river at Oppenheim, then began crossing two battalions at 11 P.M. on the 22nd with little, if any, difficulty.

It got six battalions across by daylight with a total loss of 34 men killed or wounded.

The capture of the bridge convinced the Allied high command in Western Europe that they could envelop the German industrial area of the Ruhr as opposed to focusing primarily on General Bernard Montgomery's plan, Operation Plunder, which would bring the British 21st Army Group across the Rhine into northern Germany.

The unexpected availability of the first major crossing of the Rhine, Germany's last major natural barrier and line of defence, caused Allied high commander Dwight Eisenhower to alter his plans to end the war.

The ability to quickly establish a bridgehead on the eastern side of the Rhine and to get forces into Germany allowed the U.S. forces to envelop the German industrial area of the Ruhr.

Before it collapsed, five U.S. divisions had already used it and two adjacent tactical bridges to cross into Germany, creating a well-established bridgehead almost 40 kilometers (25 mi) long, extending from Bonn in the north almost to Koblenz in the south, and 10 to 15 kilometers (6.2 to 9.3 mi) deep.

Operation Lumberjack succeeded in clearing the Rhine north of Mosel of effective German forces. The Allies destroyed four corps of the German 15th and 7th Armies. The capture of the bridge at Remagen was an unexpected bonus that advanced the timetable for crossing the Rhine.[2] Patton and Bradley were able to move up their scheduled crossings of the Rhine.

General Albert Kesselring described the battle as the "Crime of Remagen.

It broke the front along the Rhine." Hermann Göringsaid that the capture of the bridge "made a long defense impossible." Major General Carl Wagener, Chief of staff to Field Marshall Walter Model, said that capturing the bridge signaled the end of the war for the Germans:

The capture of the Remagen bridge was a terrible shock for the German command. By this time, the German command was getting its fill of terrible shocks. The Soviets were hammering Germany from the east, and the Americans, British, Canadians and French were starting their romp into the homeland.

The leadership of the festering Third Reich was typical. There were billboards put up throughout Germany proclaiming “Wheels Must Roll for Victory.” Cynical Germans were noting that “Heads Must Roll for Victory.”

The Nazi leadership’s response to failure or even a hint of “defeatism” was the bullet or the noose. For the failure at Remagen, scapegoats were needed. Adolf Hitler chose General Hübner for the job.

Major Scheller was an obvious choice. Also Captain Bratge was pulled in, even though he was now safely a captive of the Americans. Doomed also were a Lieutenant Peters plus Majors Herbert Strobel and August Kraft.

After summary “trials,” which consisted of solely of the defendants standing before a seated panel that included Hübner and listening to insults being hurled at them, each of the four unlucky were led into the woods and serviced with a gunshot to the back of the neck.

All of this on the orders of people who, themselves had but a few days left to live. Field Marshal Walter Model, who set up the trials under Hitler’s orders, shot himself in the head in a forest on 21 April.

Hitler serviced himself in the same manner in his bunker beneath Berlin nine days later.

Remagen drew scarce German resources from other critical battles, including Varsity.

When Ken Hechler interviewed German brass in the summer following the end of the European war, most ranked the loss at Remagen up with the invasion at Normandy.

Karl Timmermann obtained the DSC, the highest American military award below the Congressional Medal of Honor.

"For extraordinary heroism in action against the enemy on 7 March, in Germany. Upon reaching the Ludendorff railroad bridge across the Rhine river, Second Lieutenant Timmermann, aware that the bridge had been prepared for demolition, and in the face of heavy machine gun, small arms, and direct 20 mm gun fire, began a hazardous trip across the span.

Although artillery shells and two explosions rocked the bridge, he continued his advance. Upon reaching the bridge towers on the far side he cleared them of snipers and demolition crews. Still braving intense machine gun and shell fire, he reached the eastern side of the river where he eliminated hostile snipers and gun crews from along the river bank and on the face of bluff overlooking the river.

By his outstanding heroism and unflinching valor, Second Lieutenant Timmermann contributed materially to the establishment of the first bridgehead across the Rhine river".

Others fighting at Remagen received comparable medals, including a number with the Silver Star.

Timmermann survived the war, but within six years he was dead of cancer, having re-enlisted as a sergeant and serving briefly in the Korean conflict.

The bridge was never rebuilt. The town of Remagen never wanted the bridge in the first place. It spoiled the beauty of the river, which is what tourists came to see.

If you go to Remagen today, you will see the towers remaining, but you need to take a ferry to get to Remagen from the railway station on the east side.

The confidential efficiency report on General **Hübner** remarked, significantly, that he had "an unhealthy ambition which influences the effectiveness of his thinking." In spite of, or perhaps because of, this trait, **Hübner** rose fast in the German Army.

As a regimental commander, he not only had a good battle record but endeared himself to the high Nazis by making a number of recommendations on how the armed forces in the field could be infused with more of the Nazi spirit.

Hitler personally had seen some of his reports, and had brought him to Berlin once before to help develop a corps of National Socialist "guidance officers."

Hübner also gave Nazi propaganda lectures at various headquarters; one of the lectures was described by a high-ranking German staff officer as "an oily and cunning threat against all officers who furthered ideas that were not 100 percent consistent with the official party line."

Hubner received his divisional command on the Oder front in January, 1945, and shortly thereafter, Hitler visited him at some length in the field.

This was an unusual honor for Hübner, for Hitler rarely left his headquarters after being injured on July 20, 1944, in the bombing attempt on his life.

The two men hit it off beautifully. **Hübner** said in later years that he immediately "succumbed to the demoniac power of this man. I was an absolute follower of Hitler.

I had complete confidence in him and believed that he was Germany's saviour." For his part, Hitler found an army man who considered Nazi loyalty the most important factor in military strategy.

So, Hitler did not have to look far when he sought a man who would exact swift penalties for the Remagen debacle.

Their reverses at Avranches, Utah Beach and in the Ardennes they could understand and even accept with no feeling that the results were other than the mathematically inevitable. But toward Remagen they had the demoralized view of men who feel lost because fate has mocked them and black magic fights on the other side.

When the first Rhine bridge was lost, the Hitler Army reeled and its combat leaders became gutted of hope. This was the real significance of the Remagen episode, which was not a battle in any real sense but rather a military accident.

Until Remagen occurred there was always another barrier behind which this fraying army could dream of collecting itself and holding until some terms could be made.

Thereafter, the dream died.