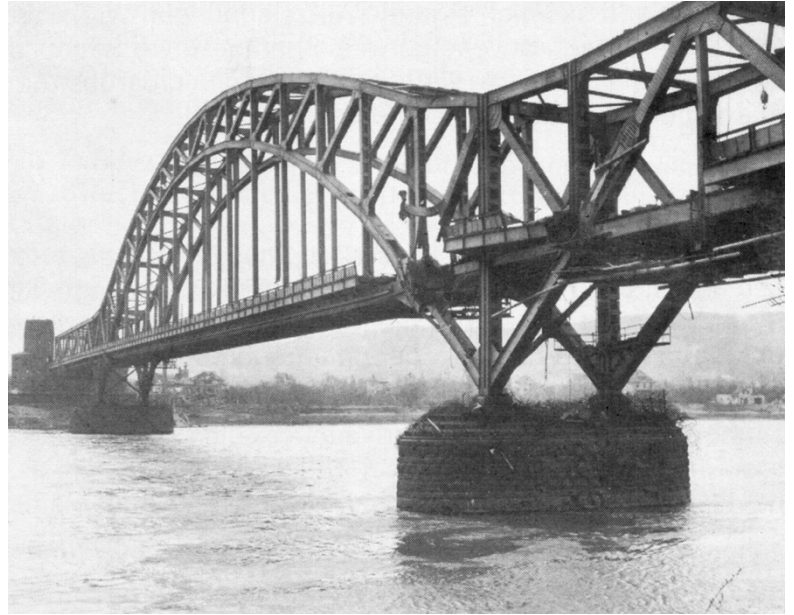


The Bridge At Remagen

The Associated Press called it a “military triumph rivalling in importance the Normandy landings.” “It” was the capture of a crossing over the Rhine River, the great natural barrier behind which Hitler’s Third Reich awaited as the western Allies bore down in the winter of 1945. Arthur Brown, Jr. was among the thousands of American troops exploiting the opportunistic bridgehead during those early days of March.

Brown was an agriculture major from Walhalla, a member of Clemson College’s Class of 1945. In June 1942, at the completion of his sophomore year, Brown enlisted in the Army. His unit, the 276th Engineer Combat Battalion, shipped overseas in November 1944. Brown’s battalion was destined to participate in one of the United States Army’s key operations of the European War, an operation that came largely as a surprise to American forces—and to the Germans.



The Ludendorff Bridge showing the catwalk damaged by German demolitions. US Army photo.

On the afternoon of March 7, 1945, a task force from General Courtney Hodges’ First Army was sent toward the village of Remagen, on the west bank of the Rhine River. The task force’s mission was to secure the town and then turn south to link up with elements from General George Patton’s Third Army. When the task force commander reached the ridge overlooking Remagen, he was stunned to see the great railroad double-track Ludendorff Bridge, still standing. At that point, only three Rhine bridges remained intact, as retreating German forces were demolishing bridges once they reached the east bank of the river. Realizing the opportunity to establish a bridgehead over the Rhine—which had not been crossed in battle since the days of Napoleon—US commanders moved boldly to exploit their opportunity.

American artillery fired white phosphorous rounds across the river to create a smoke screen while tanks fired on German bridge defenders. A small squad of Americans raced onto the western end of the bridge, attempting to cross even as the Germans were preparing to set off pre-positioned explosives to drop the span into the river below. The Germans’ first attempt to blow the bridge failed, probably because the wires connecting the electric detonator to the explosives had been severed by shell fire. A German corporal raced forward under intense fire to light a primer cord in order to set off a secondary set of demolitions. This effort resulted in a large explosion, but when the smoke cleared, both the Americans and the Germans were surprised to see that, despite damage to the bridge’s planking, support girders, and truss, the structure was still standing.

As darkness fell, Americans held the bridge with only a small force. Throughout the night of March 7-8, US commanders rushed additional units up to and over the bridge, including technicians and engineers from Brown's 276th Engineer Combat Battalion. Over the next ten days, Army engineers worked ceaselessly to repair damage inflicted on the bridge from American bombs and artillery prior to its capture, and to repair damage caused by the Germans who now mounted a furious air campaign against the span. In addition, at Hitler's order, the new V-2 rockets were redirected toward the destruction of the bridge. Eleven of these new wonder weapons were fired at the structure, the closest landing some 600 meters away. Every shell blast, bomb strike, and rocket impact, along with the constant stream of vehicles and soldiers passing over the bridge, created vibrations that slowly, invisibly weakened the span.

At about 3 p.m. on March 17, Lieutenant Colonel Clayton Rust, commander of the 276th, was standing in the center of the bridge inspecting repair efforts when he heard a "sharp rifle-like report" followed immediately by another. The bridge began to tremble and the soldiers working on it dropped their tools and raced toward the ends. It was too late. The Ludendorff Bridge collapsed into the swirling, frigid water of the Rhine. "The bridge was rotten throughout," Rust later recalled. "Many members not cut had internal fractures from our own bombing, German artillery, and from the German demolitions. . . as the vibration continued, the condition of the previously buckled top chord was aggravated to such an extent that it buckled completely under a load it was not designed to carry." Although Rust survived his plunge into the Rhine, thirty-two other engineers were killed when the bridge collapsed. Arthur Brown, Jr. died the following day from his wounds.

The bold capture of the bridge and the work of the intrepid engineers who, though under repeated enemy fire, repaired it and kept it open long enough to expand the bridgehead, materially hastened the end of the war. Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower's chief of staff, Walter Bedell Smith, said the Remagen Bridge was "worth its weight in gold."

Arthur Brown Jr. was survived by his parents, three sisters, and three brothers. Following the war, his remains came home to Walhalla where they were laid to rest in Westview Cemetery.

See also *The Bridge at Remagen*, by Ken Hechler, Ballantine Books, 1957.



Combat engineers at work on the bridge on March 17, 1945, just hours before its collapse. US Army photo.

