



Battlefield Commission Awarded for Engineer Bridge Reconnaissance

By Captain (Retired) Wallace Fiedler

On 18 February 1951, General Matthew Ridgway summoned his staff to the G3 operations tent at his frontline Eighth U.S. Army headquarters. He announced that Eighth Army would attack the Chinese Communist Forces within 60 hours in an offensive called "Operation Killer."

At the time, I was the engineer reconnaissance-section sergeant for the 10th Engineer Combat Battalion of the U.S. 3d Infantry Division in I Corps. My team conducted all of the special ground and aerial combat-engineer reconnaissance for the 3d Infantry Division. The troops in the I Corps area were getting ready to launch their assigned missions for Operation Killer. This would take us into the Iron Triangle—made up of Chorwon on the west, Kumhwa on the east, and Pyongyang as the apex of the triangle.

The problem for I Corps was that the route went through the city of Seoul, the South Korean capital, which was across the Han River. The river's high tides caused engineers major floating-bridge problems. Although there were three highway bridges in Seoul that were still intact, we suspected that they were prepared for demolition. Since there was no way to bypass them, engineers would have to bridge the gaps if they were destroyed so armored vehicles could cross.

United Nations strategic intelligence reports indicated that about 18,000 Chinese Communist 50th Army troops were in Seoul, in addition to about 19,000 troops from the North Korean 8th and 47th Infantry Divisions and 47th Mechanized Division. When I was assigned to the assistant-division-engineer section at the 3d Infantry Division advanced command post (before I became the

engineer reconnaissance-section sergeant), I attended many of the G2 intelligence and G3 operations briefings. So I was familiar with the big picture.

The 15th Regiment of the 3d Infantry Division was assigned the route that crossed the three bridges going through Seoul to the Iron Triangle area by way of



Uijongbu, Yongpyong, and Kumhwa. The 15th Regiment kept sending combat patrols across the Han River at low tide to reconnoiter the bridges, but they always were turned back by heavy enemy defense fire. Meanwhile, I was conducting special aerial reconnaissance by getting rides in the artillery spotter planes. Because of the narrow valleys between the steep hills, the pilots could not get close enough for me to see if the bridges were prepared for demolition or if the banks and road approaches were mined. The planes flying photoreconnaissance flights were not able to get good pictures either.

According to United Nations intelligence reports, the Chinese Communist

Forces and the North Korean People's Army were receiving strategic and tactical advice from the East Germans. I decided that if the East German soldiers were advising the Chinese and North Koreans about American combat tactics, there was a good chance I could reconnoiter the three bridges and get the information needed to decide if the main attack force could go through the city of Seoul or if it would have to take the more mountainous route farther east.

I had been a combat-engineer reconnaissance scout with the 297th Engineer Combat Battalion in Europe from the time of the Normandy invasion until we met the Russians at the Torgau Bridge on the Elbe River. We learned that if we could get through the German minefields, we probably could get to our objective. Therefore, I hoped and expected that the East German advisors, hoping to find out what I was looking for, would tell the Chinese and North Koreans to let me go through.

I knew that to get the information on the three bridges, I would have to cross the Han River at Seoul. But to get back, it would be better to come out at the bombed-out railroad bridge in the southwest part of the city in the U.S. Army 7th Infantry Division sector.

On 19 February, I checked the U.S. Geodetic Survey manual to see what time low tide would be for the Han River that day and had my recon scout and jeep driver get our two-man reconnaissance boat. We took off for the river below the big stone dike where I knew, from maps and aerial reconnaissance, that there was a T-junction at a main highway. When we got to the river, we inflated all of the compartments of the recon boat, which

made all of us dizzy. The three of us got into the small boat and crossed to the big stone dike. A few North Korean or Chinese soldiers shot at us as we crossed the river, but none of their bullets hit us.

I got out of the boat with a Polaroid® camera, a wire cutter, and some tags with wire ties. I didn't take a weapon. I told the driver to take the jeep and go to where the railroad bridge crossed the Han River in the U.S. 7th Infantry Division sector and wait for me to come out there. I instructed the scout to leave the boat inflated and put it in the jeep. I also told him to not go back by way of the battalion S2 section but to wait for me at the railroad bridge. That was the first time that either of them knew what I intended to do on this recon mission. I had given them separate instructions, so if one couldn't make it, the other was to continue on to the railway bridge.

I climbed over the big stone dike and went down to the street below, which was the highway that went along the dike, then straight up the T-junction that led to the first bridge. When I got to the bridge, I saw a lot of Russian picric-acid antitank box mines on the highway that were not dug in or covered up. I flipped open the wooden lids, took out the detonators, and threw them into the snow on the rice paddy along the highway.

After taking a picture of the bridge from the friendly side toward the enemy side, I cut a length of communication (commo) wire that we had laid during one of our previous times in Seoul, tied a rock to it, and let it down from the highest part of the bridge to get the height above the streambed. I rolled up the length of wire and tagged it as "Bridge #1." Then, I went down under the bridge to see if it had been prepared for demolition. Nothing had been done to it, and the three concrete stringers were still in good condition. I went up to the other side and took a picture from the enemy side looking across the bridge toward the friendly side.

I continued up the highway, going north through Seoul toward Uijongbu, to the next bridge, which was in the north part of the city. When I got there, I did the same as I had at the first bridge,

tagging the rolled-up commo wire as "Bridge #2." After I took a picture across the bridge from the enemy side toward the friendly side, I started back down the highway to the third bridge, which was on another highway coming in from Incheon from the west.

While I was walking through the city, I never saw a single person. But I felt as if there were thousands of eyes looking at me all the time. As I approached the third bridge, I heard three loud reports that sounded like pistol shots. I stopped dead in my tracks. I heard the reports again, and then I realized they were the sounds of someone washing clothes. (The Koreans lay their clothes on rocks near the water and hit them with wooden paddles to get out the dirt.) I walked a little farther, and there were three women by a small pool near the bridge, apparently washing clothes. None of them looked at me—even as I was measuring the bridge height above the streambed and looking under the bridge for demolitions—and I did not acknowledge them. (I am sure they were women, but when I was in Germany, the Germans often had troops dressed as women who would work in the farmyards and fields so they could observe us. But with binoculars, we usually could see their army boots at the bottom of their dresses.)

After I finished reconnoitering the third bridge, I only had to get to the railroad bridge and be picked up in the reconnaissance boat. I began to think that if I was being watched, they might decide to take me now and see what intelligence information they could get.

The railroad bridge was in sight. I felt that my recon team would be waiting for me across the river in the 7th Infantry Division sector, and I would soon be picked up. I had left the highway and was walking on the railroad tracks toward the end of the bombed-out bridge. The tide was coming in, and the Han River was already quite wide. About that time, I heard Pom! Pom! Pom! Pom! I realized I was being shot at by a Quad .50 on an M16 from our side of the river. I hit the side of the 6-foot steel I-beam of the bridge and started yelling for everyone

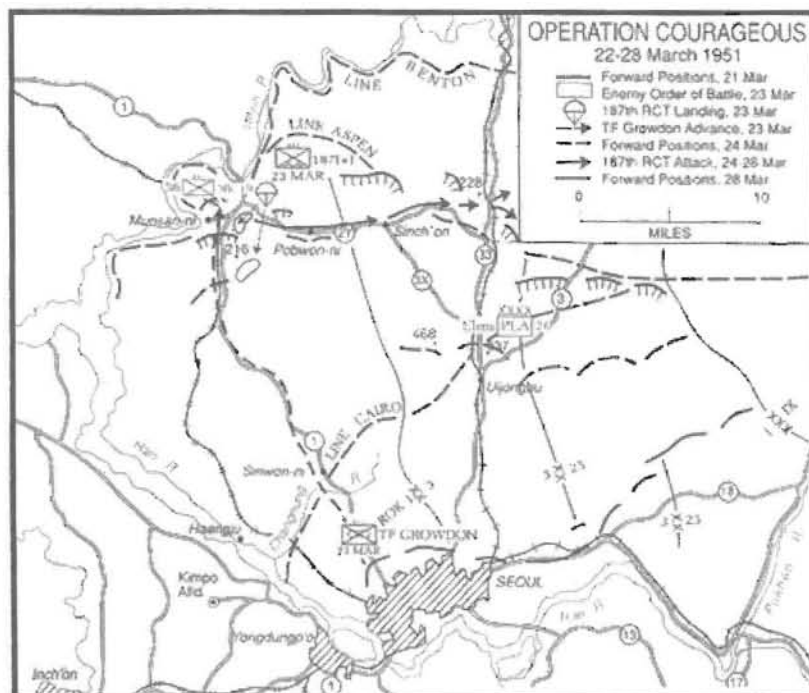
that I could imagine might possibly be there, including my driver and scout. The Quad .50 started spitting out bullets again, but they were going way over my head. Finally, someone called out and asked if I was from the 3d Division. I said I was and that they should put the recon boat into the river and come and get me.

Engineers from the 7th Division came over with a motorboat to pick me up. No one had believed my driver and scout when they said I'd be coming out on the railroad bridge, and no one had told the Philippine soldiers on the M16 Quad .50 that someone friendly was supposed to be coming down the railroad tracks from inside the city.

It was late in the afternoon, and we still had to get back to the 10th Engineer Combat Battalion S2 intelligence section to turn in the information I had gathered. As we drove into the headquarters area, Captain Stanfield, the battalion S2, saw us arrive and wanted to know where we had been. At the same time, Colonel Gross came by and wanted to know what had happened to us. When I showed them the pictures I had taken of the bridges and the rolls of tagged wire, Colonel Gross said, "You've got to show them to the general right now!" (Major General Robert [Shorty] Soule was the 3d Division commander.)

We went to the 3d Division advanced command post, which was in a nearby school building. In the G2 intelligence room, I explained the pictures I had taken of the bridges and related them to the bridges on a large city map of Seoul. They asked questions about the road and street conditions and if I had seen any enemy troops, weapons, or materiel. The 3d Division G2 officer (a lieutenant colonel) told the general that he didn't believe I had actually been across the river and in the city of Seoul, even though I had the pictures of the bridges and the rolls of wire that measured the height of the bridge decks above the streambed.

Major General Soule asked Colonel Gross what he was going to do for this recon sergeant for getting this information. Colonel Gross told him that they planned to have me promoted to master



sergeant when it was time for me to rotate back to the States. "Master sergeant, hell!" General Soule retorted, "After this campaign, I want him to appear before the Battlefield Commission Board." Colonel Gross said to me, "That is a general's order, Fiedler, and you better obey it." I told them I would be there if I lived through the campaign, because I figured my mother would rather get a dead lieutenant shipped back home than a dead sergeant! (I really thought most of us would never rotate back to the States alive anyway.)

After leaving the 3d Division advanced command post, I went back to our battalion S2 tent to make out my report of the bridge reconnaissance; albeit unauthorized, it was the reason for the recommendation for my battlefield commission award.

On the morning of 21 February 1951, Operation Killer was launched. The plan was to go around the city of Seoul, with the attacking forces converging north of the city on the highway to Uijongbu. There, a line was established to prepare for the next attack north across the 38th parallel.

The attack for the Iron Triangle and the territory north, designated Operation Ripper, began on 7 March in the U.S. 25th Infantry Division sector. Although the

Chinese Communist Forces and the North Korean People's Army put up some resistance, the real enemy was the early rains and warmer weather. It melted the ice and snow and made it necessary for engineers in particular to do lots of road and bridgework.

On 15 March, General Ridgway received word that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the terms "Operation Killer" and "Operation Ripper" in state-side magazines and newspapers. The general said that he didn't understand why it was objectionable to acknowledge the fact that war was concerned with killing the enemy. However, he combined the two operations, and they continued under the name "Operation Courageous."

By 27 March 1951, all of the attacking United Nations troops were north of the 38th Parallel. South Korea had been cleared of Chinese Communist and North Korean troops for the second time. By 1 April, the combat phases of Operations Killer, Ripper, and Courageous ended. After the big push and all the battles it entailed, when we captured the towns of Chorwon, Kumhwa, and Pyonggang (the Iron Triangle) and Pyongyang (the abandoned capital of North Korea), we finally slowed down to routine combat-engineer assignments.

The Battlefield Commission Board convened at 3d Division rear headquarters in Seoul, Korea, on 22 June 1951. There, a cleaned-up group of troops in new fatigue uniforms was brought together to appear before the board. We certainly did not look like the "combat warriors" we were several months before. That evening there was a celebration banquet for us, and we were awarded our shiny second lieutenant or warrant officer bars. The next day, we were all flown to Tokyo, Japan, for 10 days of rest and recreation.



When Captain Fiedler returned to Korea, he became leader of the 1st Platoon, C Company, 10th Engineer Combat Battalion. From there, he went to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, to become commander of C Company, 199th Engineer Combat Battalion. Later, the entire Engineer Combat Group was sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, to renovate large areas of the post for reopening. There, Captain Fiedler was the battalion S3 of the 199th Engineer Combat Battalion. He eventually retired at the Pentagon as a captain in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with a combination of more than 22 years active duty and more than 12 years active U.S. Army Reserve.