

Colonel Thomas J. Riggs

*Commander
81st Engineer (C) Battalion
Stalag IV-B (4-B) and Escaped*

Retired Col. Thomas J. Riggs dies at 82
'hero' led battalion in Battle of the Bulge
by Maria Miro Johnson - Journal Staff Writer



Thomas J. Riggs, Jr., 82, a World War II battalion commander who was captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, then escaped and struck out on a desperate odyssey to rejoin his unit, died yesterday at Rhode Island Hospital after a week in the intensive-care unit, suffering from pneumonia and heart failure.

After the war, Mr. Riggs served as a military attaché in Mexico, then made a name for himself as a business executive in different cities across the country. He came to Rhode Island in 1960 as a vice president of Textron, Inc., a position he held until 1971. He later became president and chief executive officer of Lawson-Hemphill Inc., a manufacturer of textile machinery in Central Falls.

But it was his experiences as a military officer and as a college athlete that were the highlights of his life, his family said yesterday.

Mr. Riggs was born in Huntington, W. Va., a son of Thomas and Beulah Riggs. He attended the U. S. Naval Academy in 1935 and 1936 and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1941 with a degree in metallurgic engineering.

He was captain of the Illinois football team and the Blue team in the 1941 Blue-Gray game, a competition between college all-stars from the country's North and South.

He joined the Army as an officer in 1942. His leadership and heroism would earn him the Silver Star, the Purple Heart and, from both Belgium and France, the Croix de Guerre. His unit, the 81st Combat Engineer Battalion of the 106th Infantry Division, was given a Presidential Unit Citation for its "extraordinary heroism, gallantry and determination."

A Saturday Evening Post article about the 106th Division said Mr. Riggs, a lieutenant colonel, was "the outstanding hero of the division," in the eyes of his men.

He was 28 and in charge of 350 men, some of them quite "green," when he was ordered to block a prime road into the Belgian town of St. Vith, which the Germans were pounding with tanks and infantry.

Though less than ideally equipped - the six guns of his tank destroyer battalion were so new, they lacked aiming sights - he and his men held the enemy back for five days. "He

stalked the line boldly," wrote Journal columnist John Hanlon in a 1985 retrospective, "so his troops could see he was still there, encouraging scared soldiers to hold on."

Hanlon noted that even British General Bernard Montgomery, who rarely praised Americans, admired the work of the 106th: "By Jove, they stuck it out, those chaps."

Ultimately, though, the division was overwhelmed. A mortar fragment grazed Riggs's head, knocking him out. When he regained consciousness, German soldiers were standing over him.

He was marched to an assembly point and grouped with 40 other Americans, none from his unit, then marched 12 days more toward Berlin. Now and then, the Germans would stop near a village to forage for food, and would throw crusts from their sandwiches to the prisoners.

Worse than the indignity of being forced to grovel for food, Mr. Riggs hated being separated from his men. "I guess that was the lowest I ever felt in my stupid life," he told Hanlon. "I felt I had not done the job I was given to do, and that hurt."

The prisoners were taken by rail to a prison camp - [Stalag 4](#) - outside Berlin. Then, perhaps as punishment for revealing nothing more than his name and serial number, he was sent off alone to a camp in Poland.

On his 28th day in that camp, he went to the latrine and noticed the usual guard was not there. In that instant, he decided to escape. He walked to a deserted mess hall and climbed atop a walk-in ice chest that was about eight feet tall, and tucked himself snugly against the wall.

He heard his name being shouted at roll call, and when there was no reply, "the search was on," he told Hanlon. "Four or five times patrols came through the mess hall. One of them even had dogs with them, barking like hell. Each time, the guards opened the ice chest and looked in. But nobody checked on top."

When darkness fell and no guards were near, Mr. Riggs threw himself through a double barricade of barbed wire and, having heard that the Russians had taken Warsaw, tried to make his way on foot.

Three nights later, resting in a culvert, he felt a tap on his shoulder and announced, "I'm an American colonel."

"With that, this guy threw his arms around me and kissed me in both cheeks." It was a member of the Polish underground, who took him to a house and fed him "potatoes and that great Polish sausage and warm milk," which he ate until he was sick.

The underground linked Mr. Riggs with a Russian colonel of an armored unit who said, "Come on, Americanski, I'll have you in Berlin in a couple of weeks and you can meet your own people."

The colonel kept his promise, though he wound up getting there, in Hanlon's words, "by foot, truck, tank, train, boat and airplane," via Odessa, Istanbul, Port Said and Naples.

When he finally met up with the American military and said he wanted to rejoin his unit, they told him no. But when Mr. Riggs warned they'd have a "basket case on their hands," they relented.

His men were astonished to see him again when he arrived at the 81st headquarters. A major came "roaring out from behind the desk and we hugged. I was a little broken up, all right, and so were the others." They celebrated into the night.

Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Riggs's family unearthed the tissue-paper telegram he sent to his father: "Dad. Am free and in Allied hands, safe and in good health."

His family recalled his Clark Gable-esque good looks, his charm, dancing ability and athletic grace, as well as his commanding presence in a room. He was "bigger than life," they said, a natural leader, and a ready volunteer when one of his clubs needed a hand.

Among the clubs he belonged to were the Hope Club, the Agawam Hunt and the U. S. Seniors Golf Association.

Among his honors: being named Man of the Year by his alma mater in 1989, the 50th anniversary of the year his college team beat Michigan in a big game. He was also named to the Young Presidents Organization, a national group of company presidents under 40, and was chairman of the Small Business Association's advisory council.

He was a delegate to the 1980 White House Conference on Small Business and served on the Rhode Island Governor's Small Business Advisory Council. Also in 1980, he was elected director and vice president of the Smaller Business Association of New England.

He leaves behind his wife, Virginia Griggs Riggs; six children, Julia Yates of Elgin, Ill., Thomas J. Riggs III of Chicago, Robin Riggs of Cambridge, Mass., Geoffrey Riggs of Los Angeles, Rory Riggs of New York City and Merry Murray Meade of Wellesley, Mass.; and two stepchildren, Barbara Powers of Providence and Dr. Hugh Barrett of Darien, Conn.; and eight grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held November 12th at noon in St. Martin Church, Orchard Avenue. Burial with full military honors will take place in Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia.

Thomas J. Riggs

AN ENGINEER'S SEVEN DAY WAR

Editor's Note:

Mr. Rigg's article is a true story which, until now, has never been told. Although it portrays only a small segment of the actions of WWII, it exemplifies the versatility and importance of engineers as part of the combined arms team.

It is a particularly timely article, in that, DA has recently redesignated engineers as combat arms.

Training, youth, and discipline are key factors in most pursuits in life; they are crucial in a military career.

My military career began in February 1941 when I graduated from the University of Illinois and received a ROTC commission, as a second lieutenant, in the Corps of Engineers. After attending a refresher course at the US Army Engineer School, I was assigned to the Engineer Replacement Training Center, Fort Belvoir, as a platoon leader in a training battalion. The following two years moved by rapidly and during this time I received a Regular Army commission, completed the Engineer Officer Advanced Course, and became a battalion commander with the rank of Major.

By 1943, I was becoming impatient with my role in training, and I began investigating the possibilities of a transfer to the Paratroopers, or the Rangers, or some combat division. My opportunity came in the spring of 1943, when I was ordered to the 81st Engineer Combat Battalion as the Executive Officer. The Battalion Commander was Lieutenant Colonel William J. Himes, who had recently returned from duty on the Alaskan Highway.

The 81st was part of the 106th Infantry Division being activated at Camp (now Fort) Jackson, S.C. Most of the enlisted men were 18 year old draftees, so the average age of the Division was under 22. With an excellent cadre of officers and noncoms, the Division was enthusiastic and receptive to tough training standards. I remember being impressed with the fact that the Chief of Staff of the Division was Colonel William C. Baker, Jr., formerly of the Corps of Engineers.

By late summer of 1943, I had been ordered to establish an Engineer Combat Battalion in Camp Gordon, GA. LTC Himes insisted that I hand select the best officers from the 81st to make up my cadre. Sixty days after we had started to train the new battalion, I was ordered back to the 81st to replace LTC Himes who was moving on to command an Engineer Corps.

We continued our training at Camp Jackson in preparation for maneuvers in Tennessee during January-March of 1944. We had inserted some Ranger training in guerilla warfare which helped sharpen the individual instincts of our young group.

From Tennessee, the Division was ordered to Camp Atterbury, IN, to continue training and await deployment. Shortly after our arrival at Camp Atterbury, I was ordered to the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, KS. I returned to the Division shortly before we were ordered to the embarkation port. In my absence, the Division had supplied over 7,000 enlisted infantrymen, or 60% of its trained men, to an overseas replacement center. Fortunately, the Engineers lost only four officers and no enlisted men in this transfer. There was to be no time to adequately train the enlisted infantry replacements for the Division.

Prior to the embarkation, I was met by a fellow staff officer who informed me that I was to turn my battalion over to my Executive Officer, MAJ Marshall, and that I, as the Division Engineer Officer, was to be sent to England with the Division Commander, his staff, and three infantry regiments. In theory, we were to continue training in England and to be used as an infantry combat group. Without the service units, and particularly their artillery, neither mission was that practical. The support units followed 30 days later.

By late November, the 106th was assembled in England as a Division and by 1 December embarked for the channel crossing. A few days later, they debarked in Rouen in mud and rain and moved by unit convoys into a combat sector around St Vith, Belgium. We relieved the 2d Infantry Division which was being deployed to launch an attack through the 99th Infantry Division.

The relief of the 2d was accomplished in three days, man-for-man, and position-by-position. The two sectors occupied by the 422d and 423d Infantry Regiments, of the 106th, were astride the old Siegfried Line in the Schnee Eifel mountain range.

As the 81st relieved the 2d Engineer Combat Battalion, there was a lot of banter from these combat veterans about the "country club" atmosphere of the position due to the daily exchange of fire but no real action. From an engineer support point of view, there was the difficult task of maintaining the roads which were critical for re-supply. We inherited the fortifications, mine fields, and barbed wire which had been originally established by the 4th Infantry Division and reinforced by the 2d.

By 12 December, the 106th had taken over the sector and began to review their mission and means. The mission of the Division was to defend a salient that was over 20 miles wide and extended 8 miles into the German lines. To accomplish this, the 422d, 423d, and 424th Infantry Regiments were on line from north to south.

The 424th adjoined the 28th Infantry Division to the south. The 14th Cavalry Group, reinforced, occupied the northern five miles of the front and were tied into the 99th Infantry Division to the north. In addition, the Division had the following attached units: 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 634 AAA Battalion, and the 168th Engineer Combat Battalion. The last unit was assigned to maintain the road net in the rear of the sector.

The 81st Engineer Combat Battalion attached a company to each of the Infantry Regiments. The Battalion CP was in Heuem, about four miles east of St Vith, on the Schonberg road.

We were still reconnoitering and improving our positions, when a heavy artillery barrage hit the sector at about 0530 hours. After putting the staff on alert, I went to the Division CP in St Vith to check other reports. St Vith was being hit from what was described as railroad mounted artillery capable of firing up to 14 inch rounds.

From the G-2 section, I learned the whole front was under heavy attack by enemy infantry supported by tanks and artillery. The Division G-2's attempt to convey this information to the VIII Corps was misunderstood. VIII Corps obviously thought that as "green troops," the was exaggerating the intensity and scope nature of the attack was either not recognized or never arrived at Corps.

Since the 106th had no infantry in reserve, I was asked by the G-3 to assemble and prepare the 81st Engineers for their secondary mission as an infantry reserve. I returned to the Bn CP about 0800 hours and found that one platoon of Company A and all of Companies B and C had already been committed as infantry reserves by their regiments. This left only the Headquarters and Service Company plus the headquarters and two platoons of Company A.

CPT Harmon, Company A, was the only line company commander on hand at the Bn CP to attend a meeting, and he was called back by the 422d Regimental Combat Team to defend his Company CP in Auw. Auw was already under attack by enemy infantry in white uniforms and supported by tanks. By 1500 hours, Auw was lost to Germans, and remnants of Company A were working their way back to St Vith.

Company B, which had its headquarters in Schonberg, was ordered by the CO of the 423d Regimental Combat Team to clear the village of Blelalf. Our last contact with Company B was through Chief Warrant Officer Carmichael, Bn S-4, who was expediting delivery of ammunition to the Company. He also located a few self-propelled tank destroyer guns which eliminated some enemy strong points in the village. Carmichael returned to the Bn CP by early evening before Company B was cut off by the German advance.

Meanwhile, at the Bn CP in Heuem, phone communications were out and radio channels were jammed. Schonberg and Heuem were being shelled. Auw had fallen, and CPT Harmon had escaped with only a dozen men. Co C, in the meantime, had been committed as infantry to defend the east side of Heckhalenfeld and later to fill in a gap in the line between Heckhalenfeld and Winterspelt.

All reports continued to show a deteriorating situation for the 106th Division. The 14th Cavalry Group had fallen back in some areas west and north of St Vith so that the northern flank was wide open. It had also become clear that the Division was being hit by at least four to six divisions, including two Ranger Divisions - not the two Volksgrenadier Divisions originally identified.

Around midnight, Corps and Army were finally convinced of the true situation and were committing Combat Command B (CCB), 9th Armored Division, and CCB, 7th Armored Division. The 7th Armored would arrive at 0700 on the 17th of December and be assigned to attack through the St Vith-Schonberg road to the entrapped 422d and 423d regiments.

17 December 1944:

I returned to the Bn CP to instruct Headquarters and Service Company to clear the St Vith-Schonberg road and to evacuate the engineer heavy equipment from Schonberg to Rodt, just

west of St Vith. The remnants of Company A and Headquarters and Service Company were to

hold in Heuem.

The previous day of heavy combat action left a very confused impression on me. We had lost many men in Company A. Communications, both internal and external, were confused and growing more difficult by the hour. Rumors were growing and difficult to dispute without facts, Unit commanders were jittery. Some service units, such as Corps Artillery, were starting to move to the rear without their artillery. At the Division CP, I could sense the desperation of the Commanding General for his two regiments that were being cut-off and his relief when given the two armored CCBs. Meanwhile, the commanding officer of the 14th Cavalry Group was desperate and unable to marshal any organized resistance in his critical sector on the north flank.

I felt frustrated because most of the 81st Engineers were under other commands, and the sole function of the Headquarters and Service Company was one of re-supply where the roads were still open. Although the men of the 81st were fighting as infantry, we were not doing it as a unit.

Later, in the early morning, I returned to the Division CP in St Vith. The situation in front of St Vith was becoming more fluid. By 0830 hours, my headquarters had lost contact with Company B beyond Schonberg and were preparing to evacuate the CP at Heuem in the face of approaching enemy infantry and tanks. At 1000 hours, I was ordered by the Commanding General, Alan Jones, of the 106th, to organize a task force to defend St Vith. The 168th Engineer Combat Battalion was attached to the 81st with orders to assemble all available men from both units as well as division headquarters personnel. We were to hold St Vith for the counter attack of CCB, 7th Armored, through, our positions. After relaying these orders to the 81st and the 168th, I left for Heuem and met my staff and part of the 168th command group on a natural rise about a mile east of St Vith. They were being followed by an enemy task force of infantry and tanks which had cleared Heuem. That particular location, in addition to having a line of woods at the top of the rise to the north, had a good field of fire back down the Schonberg road for 1000 yards. To the south side of the road was a 20 feet wide fire break running parallel to the wood line on the north and leading to an opening and a farm house about 200 yards to the south.

As units arrived from the 91st and 168th Engineer Combat Battalions, they were placed astride the road and a skirmish line of engineers, converted to infantry, gradually dug in with some automatic weapons. Knowing that the counter attack by CCB, 7th Armored, would be through us, I elected to place several daisy chains of mines across the road and placed 2 bazooka teams in the woods for cover. A 37mm anti-tank gun was placed with an engineer squad to cover them. This gun was lost in the first exchange of fire.

We were fortunate to have a platoon of six tank destroyer guns which were set up in the edge of the woods to the north of the road. Before the position was consolidated, we had an exchange of fire with the enemy. By about 1600 hours, the position had been consolidated and four tanks plus an estimated battalion of infantry began to advance on us from the woods about 1000 yards away. The tank destroyer platoon engaged the tanks by bore-sighting the guns which had been received in the morning. While they did not disable the enemy tanks, they did force them to retreat to the woods with their infantry. The tank destroyer platoon was then ordered to shift their position north on the leading edge of the woods for future action. They moved north and out of our sector without reporting. This was the first of several units that left our sector to join a movement to the rear. It was this kind of attitude that increased my determination to hold our position.

Later in the afternoon, the Division Air-Ground Liaison Officer made contact with the only American aircraft that we were to see. We assumed that the enemy tanks and infantry were hidden in the woods to our front and had requested a mission to be fired by the Division Artillery, but they were not able to respond. I got on the radio with the Air-Ground Liaison Officer to guide the P-47 over the woods. According to CPT Ward, CO of Headquarters and Service Company, the plane made 4 passes before sighting the tanks. He then made several strafing passes over the area and hit one tank.

At about 1700 hours, a Major Boyer arrived with the first elements of B Troop, 87th Reconnaissance Squadron, CCB, 7th Armored Division, to support our position. I did not like the idea of putting this fine mobile unit in a fixed defense position, but their heavy automatic weapons were ideal for the ample fields of fire in front of the wooded position to

the north of the road. As they moved in, Headquarters and Service Company, 81st Engineers, plus part of A Company were moved to the south of the 168th Engineer Combat Battalion to extend that flank. Some medium tanks had arrived and were ordered to hold in the defilade back of the hill crest.

Boyer reported the roads to the rear were full of retreating vehicles and the remainder of CCB, 7th Armored, would be delayed until the 18th at the earliest.

As the Headquarters and Service Co, 81st, were deploying into their new position, they were engaged at close range by an enemy tank and infantry. A daisy chain of mines disabled the tank and the infantry was driven off by small arms fire. CPT Ward requested the fire support of some American medium tanks in his area; however, they refused because of the deadly 88mm gun on the enemy tank. I suggested that he and his officers "ride" the tops of the tanks to steer them into position. He "rode" the lead tank into position and was knocked off by the first 88mm round, but he scrambled to safety. The American tanks then knocked out the enemy tank and withdrew to defilade again.

At about 1900 hours, an enemy combat patrol penetrated our lines and got within thirty yards of the CP. I gathered about four people in the CP and ran up the hill to the point of penetration, closed the gap and ordered a clean-up of the infiltrators. I found that the gap in the skirmish line had been made by men fading to the rear. From that point on, I visited our front line every hour or so, particularly at night, to let the men know that their commander was there.

Later in the evening, the Forward Observer from the Armored Field Artillery Battalion reported that his unit was in the area and wanted to provide artillery support. The unit could provide close support fire, but tree bursts would create casualties for us as well as the enemy. To combat this problem, we covered the foxholes with logs and earth with a space to roll under when an incoming mission was signaled. It worked many times for us.

As units of the 38th Armored Infantry began to arrive, a staff meeting was held at about midnight. The meeting included officers of the two engineer battalions, B Troop, 87th Reconnaissance Squadron, 38th Armored Infantry, the attached platoon of medium tanks, and the Armored Artillery Battalion. It was decided to move Company B, 38th Armored Infantry, into the positions occupied by the 168th Engineers. The 168th Engineers, which by now was reduced to two companies, would move into a gap on the right flank of the position in order to connect the line with a company of the 23d Armored Infantry, CCB, 9th Armored Division, to the south. This action was carefully organized and executed by digging a parallel line of foxholes behind the 168th Engineers position. The engineer platoon leaders then led the infantry forward to individually relieve the engineers so as to prevent an internal fire fight.

18 December 1944:

By 0300 hours, the position was fairly well consolidated. This finished the second day of battle testing for me. In the previous 24 hours, I had seen blood, bravery, fear, and death. It was also confirmed that the two infantry regiments, the 422d and 423d, were now completely surrounded, and we were their closest possible contact. We were still expecting a counter-attack by the 7th Armored, but they seemed to be gradually absorbed in our defense.

19 December 1944:

Early in the morning, the enemy began a series of probing attacks. About 0930 hours, they launched a company size attack and supported by a Tiger tank. The attack was directed at the clearing south of the fire break which was defended by the remaining men of Co A, 81st Engineers. The attack was repulsed and the Tiger tank was knocked out by three American medium tanks which had been placed in position behind the engineers. Lieutenant Rutledge acting company commander of Co A, 81st Engineers, directed this attack. He was wounded in front of his own position, refused first aid, and was killed trying to pursue the enemy himself. The loss hit hard, and his actions were a great inspiration to us all.

At about 1500 hours, another company size attack penetrated this same area and reached our task force CP. I heard the small arms fire and saw soldiers crouching along the roadside. I gathered the officers and men in the CP and got the soldiers crouching at roadside to launch a charge back up the hill into the break in the line. We killed 4 of the enemy and closed the gap.

At about 1600 hours, A Company, 38th Armored, arrived and was ordered to relieve B Troop, 87th Reconnaissance Squadron, which then moved to reinforce the position occupied by Co A, 81st Engineers. B Troop had lost 40 officers and men in their position.

At 1700 hours, I received verbal information that the 106th Division Headquarters had moved to Vielsam and that the 81st Engineer Task Force was being attached to the 7th Armored Division. This shift of CPs and command did not sound like the aggressive attack that we were expecting.

By 1900 hours, Lieutenant Colonel Fuller, commander of the 38th Armored Infantry, arrived with instructions from General Clarke, Commanding General of CCB, 7th Armored. Since most of the units in the position were now infantry, it had been decided that LTC Fuller should take command, and I was to be his Executive Officer. I felt a personal letdown in the change of responsibility, but I did get the first sleep that I had had since the early morning of the 16th.

20 December 1944:

During the day the 81st Engineers laid mine fields in the area in front of Co A. While we had prepared the bridges in St Vith for demolition, we did not, mine the St Vith-Schonberg road in order to keep it open for the expected counterattack through our position.

21 December 1944:

During the morning, enemy patrol activity increased. By 1500 hours, a concentrated barrage began and continued until about 1730. During the barrage, I was bailed by the Forward Observer of the 275th Armored Artillery Battalion to report that his CO wanted to talk to me. I got on the radio to hear LTC Clay reporting that he was down to his last round. I instructed him to fire his last round and to get out. The enemy barrage was taking a heavy toll. One tree burst killed a company commander from the 38th Armored Division, his supporting tank unit commander, and two other casualties. Being on the scene, I

adjusted the command of the unit and committed a provisional platoon from the 423d to this unit's sector.

At about 1800 hours, LTC Fuller announced he was placing me in charge of the position while he reported back to Headquarters, CCB, 7th Armored, to plan alternate defensive positions. He never returned and our orders stood to defend St Vith.

About 2200 hours, an enemy attack was launched up the Schonberg-St Vith road straight into our position. The enemy force consisted of six Tiger tanks and supported by about a battalion of infantry. Our temporary daisy chains of mines and bazookas were ineffective against their massive attack. We committed four and then a total of six American medium tanks to this point blank contest. It was really no contest. The German tanks lobbed parachute flares to the rear of the American tanks and fired their 88s directly at the silhouetted American tanks. In three successive shots, they disabled three of the American tanks, and the other three vanished in the direction of St Vith.

Our position was now split, and I ordered my staff to fall back to St Vith. I picked my way to our front positions and learned that, subsequent to the frontal assault, we had lost contacts with units to the north and the south of the original skirmish line of 17 December. Through the forward artillery observer radio, I reported to the 7th Armored Division that our position had been penetrated, and we had lost contact with our flanks. I was ordered to organize an attack on St Vith and to work our way back to Vielsam.

22 December 1944:

It was now close to daybreak. I issued instructions to assemble in a nearby park that overlooked St Vith. By dawn, every incoming road to St Vith was filled with enemy traffic. We scouted a line of vehicles abandoned by the 9th Armored at the base of the hill below our position and recovered some "grease guns" (45 caliber sub-machine guns) and ammo. With only two officers and thirty or forty men completely fatigued, an attack appeared hopeless, so we made terrain maps and split into 5 or 6 man patrols. All of this group were subsequently captured.

As a prisoner-of-war, I was marched with a 20-man group for 140 miles in 10 days to a rail head in Germany. I lost about 50 pounds and witnessed the death by starvation by at least three of the group. In Poland, I escaped after 28 days of imprisonment and was picked up by the Polish Underground. A rendezvous was arranged with the Russian Army who evacuated me from Warsaw through Odessa on the Black Sea, through Istanbul to US Army Control in Port Said, Egypt. I was then moved to Naples for shipment home.

I was terribly disturbed and distressed over the terrible losses taken by the 106th and the 81st Combat Engineers and our failure to hold our defensive sector. It was difficult to believe that the units on our flank had fallen back on the night of 21 December without notifying us. I had been so localized in that position in front of St Vith that I did not perceive the magnitude of the total action and the strategic importance of denying the road net at St Vith to the enemy.

I began this report with a view on the importance of training, youth and discipline. I feel that the infantry training of the 81st Combat Engineer Battalion enabled it to be committed effectively as a ready reserve. We took pride in weapons training and special training such as the Ranger program. Most of the officers in the 81st Engineers were qualified as experts

in every weapon authorized the unit. The high degree of discipline was the result of programs involving weapons, explosives, and physical fitness.

In our totally professional and volunteer army, combat proficiency should continue to be encouraged for engineer units. I know from experience that engineer soldiers will have to fight for survival in many engineer support circumstances.

Mr. Thomas J. Riggs completed his tour of active duty in November 1947 and retired from the Army Reserve as a colonel. For 13 years, Mr. Riggs was Group Vice President for Textron, Inc., based in Providence, R. I. In October 1972 he became Executive Vice President of Operations and a Director of Katy Industries, Inc. of Elgin, TL and Boston, MA. Mr. Riggs is currently President and Chief Executive Officer of Lawson-Hemphill, Inc. of Central Falls, R. I.

This article appeared in the Fall 1975 issue of "THE ENGINEER", a quarterly publication of the United States Army Engineer School, Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

At that time, the Commandant of the school was Major General James A. Johnson. General Johnson, in 1944, was a Private in the 106th Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury. Pvt. Johnson left Camp Atterbury to attend West Point.

Submitted by Gus Agostini, 81st Eng/A



Page last revised
James D. West
www.IndianaMilitary.org

Deceased: 5 Nov 1998 (aged 62), Burial Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Arlington County, Virginia, USA