The Bridge

When young people in my grandchildren's generation talk about extracurricular activities in college, their discussions usually focus on things like sports or music or some extension of their academic interests. My primary "after-school" activity in college followed a considerably different path. You see, when I matriculated as a freshman at Iowa State College (now University), I was a 24-year-old veteran of the Korean War. I was married and had a child on the way. These attributes, by themselves, did not make me any different from a lot of other ex-GIs that were entering college in the fall of 1954. What made me a bit unique was the fact that I was the only entering ISC freshman that had his own office on the campus.

For the first two years after I graduated from high school, I worked in the family business. When the Korean War started in 1950, I joined the Army and was selected to attend Officers Candidate School. A year later, I received my commission as an infantry 2nd lieutenant. Nine months after that, I was sent to Korea to join the fighting and returned from overseas just before the war ended. When they released me from active duty, I was reassigned as an active reservist back in my home state of Iowa.

For the next year, now married and once more working in the family business, I remained active in an Army Reserve unit in a nearby town. However, it became clear during that year that I no longer fit into the business, so I made plans to attend college under the GI Bill at Iowa State. As I was visiting the college in preparation to moving to Ames, I checked with the officer-in-charge of the local Army Reserve office to see what units were available for me to join by transfer. He looked over my records and then made a most unexpected proposal. He said, "We have two units in Ames. One is the headquarters of an artillery battalion and the other is a company of combat engineers. The commander of the engineer company just transferred out. I see you have some command experience. What do you think about taking command of that company?"

I don't recall now how long it took for me to give him an answer, but I ultimately agreed and the assignment was quickly approved up through channels. Now I was commander of Company C, 328th Engineer Battalion. A couple of notable perks came with the assignment. First, I would be receiving $10.00 per month administrative pay, over and above the pay I received for attending drills. That may not seem like very much these days, but you have to remember that tuition in those days was $50.00 per quarter—and married student housing on the campus was $20.00 per month. The other perk was a place on campus to hang my hat—a desk in the Reserve office (in a temporary classroom building just a few steps behind the main administration building) with a key to the door.

It probably would be reasonable to ask if I might not have been biting off a bit more that I could chew. I hadn't been in a civilian classroom in six years and I was registered for a full class load, including algebra, chemistry and that old freshman standby—English composition. Yet, I don't recall having been particularly concerned myself—although algebra was a bit of a problem till about half way through the first quarter—and I finished that first year with honors. In fact, having that office in the middle of the campus was a notable benefit to my academic endeavors.

In addition to my administrative responsibilities as commander of C-328, I was required to attend one two-hour evening drill session each week and to go with the rest of the division to summer camp for two weeks every year. Facilities in Ames for drill sessions were limited to the classrooms in the building in which our offices were located, so the drills were mostly lectures. Although I made every effort to see that these lectures were always well-prepared and well-presented by the assigned instructors, essential field training for the men in my company had to

wait till they were at summer camp. Then, in my second year at Iowa State, two things happened to change all of that. First, drill schedules for reserve units were modified to allow a single weekend drill per month in place of the regular weekly drills. Second, I discovered (I don't remember how) that the Agriculture Division of the college had an experimental farm (the Beef Nutrition Farm) with a portion of its property isolated by a creek that had no crossing. They needed a bridge. Combat engineers build bridges. We would build one for them.

I was not an engineer, and although I had been taking some extension courses from the Army Engineer School in Maryland, I didn't know the first thing about how to build a bridge. But that wasn't my job. My job was to see that a bridge got built—and that my men learned some valuable lessons in the process. My company executive office was an engineer, and a very good one. He would design the bridge and supervise its construction. I would see that he got everything he needed to do the job and that he was plagued as little as possible by distracting issues. Together, we reconnoitered the site, picked a location for the bridge and did the necessary measurements. Then he designed a sixty-foot, timber-trestle bridge to span the creek at that location.

The project, when it finally received approval both from college and military officialdom, was carried out over two weekends in the spring of 1956. At that time, the company roster listed just short of forty officers and enlisted men. The college provided us a D-2 bulldozer, a tractor with a front loader and rough-cut planks to deck the bridge—plus hand tools and whatever hardware was necessary to hold things together. The primary timbers for the trestles and stringers would be cut and dressed from among the many native trees (primarily hickory) on the farm property.

The creek we intended to span with the bridge was not a perpetually flowing stream. It could flow forcefully with water when there was regular rain or when the snow melted in the early spring, or it could dry up and exist as

a winding ribbon of intermittent mud puddles. Fortunately, it was in the latter state when we attacked it that Saturday morning, and the building site we had selected was mostly between the puddles. The photo above shows the site before construction began.

The first requirement for the project was a lot of tree trunks. One crew notched trees to mark them for harvesting, others cut them down with chain saws and others trimmed off the branches so that the trunks could be transported to the site where they would be cut and dressed for their specific uses.

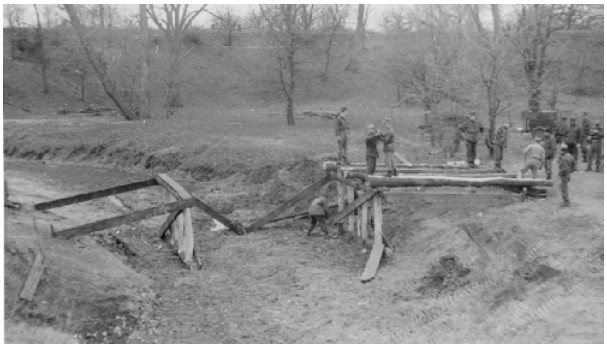
The photo on the right shows one crew building trestles while another crew prepares the locations in the streambed where the trestles will be placed. Below can be seen the crews finishing the placement of the first trestle in the streambed.

At the end of the weekend, the main span support beams were in place and decking

the job for a weekend drill the following month, the south approach remained to be built, the decking had to be completed across

A trestle bridge is probably the simplest one that can be constructed to span the kind of distance we needed to cross this creek—and to support the weight of a fully loaded truck. A trestle is defined as a "braced framework" and it is used as a support. Our bridge would employ two of them, one in the streambed on each side of the main course of the creek.

By mid-morning the next day, the second trestle had been placed and the crews were beginning to set the stringers that would support the approach from the north.



of the north approach had begun (left).

When the company came back to finish

the bridge and the bridge curbs and treads had to be put in place. All of that was finished easily by the end of the drill period. Then, with a job well done, a bunch of proud reservists assembled on the deck of the bridge to have them and their handiwork immortalized on film.

I couldn't have been more pleased with their efforts. We had built a really good bridge and the men of Company C had been through a kind of training experience that was unique among reserve units at that time.

Of course, the question everyone wants to ask when I tell this story is whether the bridge might still be there. In fact, I do know the answer. It washed out with the spring rains the following year. The farm manager seemed a bit disappointed when he told me that, but I wasn't disappointed at all. Our bridge wasn't built to resist floods. It was built to allow heavy truck traffic across a terrain obstacle in support of an immediate tactical mission. That would have been our assignment in a combat situation—and that was what we were training to do.

So, there you have a brief description of one of my extracurricular activities as an undergraduate student at Iowa State College in Ames.

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