

109th Engineer Battalion suffered its only fatality during Korean War



Float Bridge

On this date in 1952 the 109th Engineer Battalion was serving along the Rhine River near Mannheim, Germany. The Battalion had been activated on September 3, 1950 for federal service during the Korean War. Engineer bridge resources were needed in Germany as the Soviets were considered a threat to Europe during this period of the "Cold War". For that reason, the 109th Engineer Battalion, which had units in Rapid City, Lead, Hot Springs, and Sturgis, was sent to Germany.

In addition to the fixed bridges assigned the unit, the engineers controlled nine float bridges across the Rhine River. These bridges were entirely different than any they had used before. Each of the nine float bridges were split in the center and anchored on each side of the Rhine. Using huge Brockway Trucks on both sides of the Rhine, they would swing each bridge half to the center of the river. When the ends met, pins were inserted to hold the bridge half's together making a complete bridge. On Sundays the local authorities closed the river to boat traffic for a few hours, so the 109th soldiers could be performance tested on their mission of get the bridges operational.

It was on one of these Sundays in 1952 that the 109th Engineer Battalion suffered its only fatality. In the process of swinging the bridge halves together a cable snapped and thrust Corporal Herman Higgins, a member of Company B, Hot Springs, into the river. The force ripped off his life jacket. The swift flowing river quickly carried the unconscious Higgins out of sight. Crews searched up and down the Rhine River in Germany for two weeks, to no avail. His body was eventually recovered by a civilian.

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