

CROSSING THE RHINE

During the late summer of 1944, as U.S. troops pushed across France, U.S. Army Lieutenant General Omar Bradley began to worry. It was assumed that retreating German troops would destroy the Rhine River's bridges, and U.S. Army boats might not be able to safely get through the swift current. Bradley requested assistance from the same force that got the Army ashore just a few months before in Normandy, France: the U.S. Navy.

The Navy organized a task group to get the Army across the river. It was an unusual assignment because the U.S. Navy Sailors needed to get their landing craft hundreds of miles inland. By March 1945, columns of 70-foot trailers hauled by two-ton trucks were transporting U.S. Navy landing craft down narrow roads and through small farming villages. If a tree or house were in the way or made the path too tight, they were demolished. There was no stopping the Navy when it came to helping Army forces punch through Germany's last major line of defense.

The craft brought overland were 36-foot LCVs (landing craft, vehicle, personnel) and 50-foot LCMs (landing craft, mechanized), which were also used on the beaches of Normandy. They were on their way to the Rhine River, the physical and symbolic barrier of Germany. It is broad, swift, and hemmed in by high bluffs for much of its length.



Upon reaching the Rhine, General Bradley was proven right. The Germans had destroyed, or severely damaged, all of the bridges once crossing the river. Starting on 11 March, the Navy began ferrying the Army across using landing craft. The Army conceded that this was faster and more efficient than having troops march across a footbridge.



By the 20 March, LCVs, like at Normandy, proved to be fast and effective in their intended roles. Round trips were made in minutes, shuttling troops and vehicles back and forth across the Rhine while under enemy fire, without harm to boat or man. Beyond ferry service, river operations included: bridge construction, boom and wire laying, patrol operations, tug service, and debris removal.



It is estimated that the Navy boat units ferried more than 26,000 troops and 4,000 vehicles to the east bank of the Rhine and brought back thousands of German prisoners and wounded Allies. The U.S. Navy's involvement demonstrated the U.S. armed force's cooperation and ability to think outside the box, which they were famous for. The U.S. Navy was able to facilitate the final thrust that brought victory over Germany on V-E Day, 8 May 1945.

For more information visit www.history.navy.mil/



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