

## Chapter Four

# To Berlin! The River Wars

*(March 1945–April 1945)*



**D**URING MARCH AND APRIL 1945 the Allies raced towards Berlin as Hitler's once great armies surrendered by the millions. However, the final defeat of Germany necessitated the crossing of a series of heavily defended rivers, most notably the Ruhr and Rhine Rivers running through the heart of Germany's industrial valleys. On the other side of the rivers lay a devastated Germany—surrendering German soldiers; Jews and other victims of Nazi genocide; emaciated Russian and East European slave laborers; and homeless civilians and children. Once beautiful cities were reduced to rubble. The photographs and letters in this chapter document the human and material costs of the most destructive war in history.

The period from March 1945 through the end of April 1945 were some of the busiest and most dangerous days for the 348th Engineering Combat Battalion. Again, the photographs reveal what Roland found significant and meaningful to his war experience. They document the battalion's instrumental role in building temporary bridges

across the Ruhr, Sieg, and Rhine Rivers allowing Allied forces to push into the heart of Germany. The photographs from this period reveal the precarious nature of these bridges and the often dangerous conditions under which they were built. In one revealing photograph Roland provides a soldier's eye-view across a pontoon bridge spanning the Ruhr River. From this photograph we get a sense of how dangerous it must have been to build and then cross this bridge under enemy fire. Roland also provides photographs of himself on a bulldozer and of crews repairing damaged roads as the U.S. Army moved east.

The photographs in this chapter also document the tragedy of war and Roland's perception of the human and material costs of war. He takes a number of interesting photographs of abandoned or captured German equipment and weapons. These photos represent two sides of the Allied victory: pride in defeating the German enemy, but also an awesome sense of having fought and beaten one of the world's most sophisticated and dangerous war machines. The photograph of a com-