

The 536th Engineers in 1950s Bremerhaven.

The Bremerhaven Port of Embarkation

It was a dreary, wet, and chilly November morning in 1950 when I arrived in Bremerhaven on an overnight troop train from Marburg. I learned later that the cold drizzle that was falling when I stepped off the train that morning was facetiously called “Bremerhaven sunshine,” by the American troops in the area. They called it that because when it wasn’t pouring rain, drizzle was about as good as the weather got most days.

Bremerhaven is a port city on the North Sea estuary of the Weser River. The “haven” part of the city’s name means harbor in German and implies that it is the harbor for the city of Bremen. But that isn’t so. Bremen is a separate city with its own deep-water port, about 90 miles upstream from Bremerhaven.

The Bremerhaven Port of Embarkation (BPE) was located in a U.S.-occupied enclave within the British Occupation Zone of Germany. Compared to other U.S. posts in the European Command, the BPE’s mission was unique; all American troops arriving by ship from the U.S., or returning there, were funneled through the port. Other installations in the U.S.-occupied enclave besides the port and its garrison at Bremerhaven were: Bremen Barracks, a rifle range in the Garlstedter Heide (Garlstedt Heath), a POL (Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants) Depot at Bremen-Farge, and Camp Grohn.

In command of the units within the enclave was Brig. Gen. Charles D. W. Canham. He is best known for this encounter with a German general during WWII: *Upon entrance to the German command headquarters of General Ramcke, commander of the German 2nd. Parachute Division, Col. Canham was asked for his credentials. Without hesitation Canham turned to the GI's accompanying him and said: "These are my credentials."* For Gen.Canham’s biography see: <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/cdwcanhan.htm>

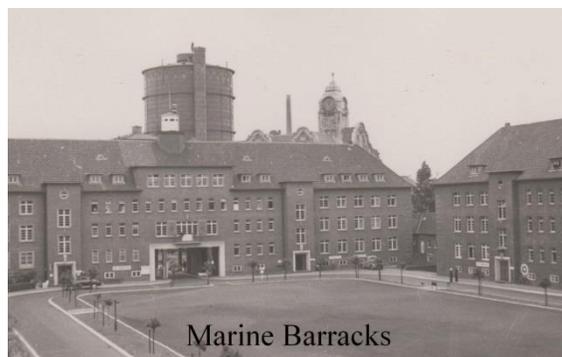
The Port Engineers

The 536th Engineer Service Battalion was responsible for maintaining the infrastructure of the port and the post of Bremerhaven plus several satellite posts in the Bremerhaven Enclave.



Although the 536th was called a battalion, it was only a Headquarters Company consisting of six officers, 93 enlisted men – and dog Bruce. I'm not in the picture, because it was taken shortly before I arrived in Bremerhaven. I did, however, know the majority of those who are shown.

We were quartered at **Marine Barracks**, a former German Navy school. The facility consisted of about a dozen three-story brick buildings. The rooms in the buildings had hardwood parquet floors. In our building, enlisted men were assigned three to a room; senior sergeants each got their own room.



The 536th's offices and workshops were located at **Lehe Barracks**. The shops, which were staffed by German workers, included all the crafts needed for maintaining the U.S. facilities in the area. Our offices occupied the top floor of a two-story building, whereas the carpenter, electrical, plumbing, paint, sheet metal and mechanical shops were housed on the ground floor.



Attached to the outside of the main building at Lehe Barracks was a large painting with a caricature of a Port Engineer. Unfortunately, color photography was still in its infancy then. The black and white photograph does not do justice to the many bright colors of the original. I do remember a few of those colors, though, such as the background of the castle having been rendered in the standard Corps of Engineers red and the helmet and the uniform in two different shades of olive drab.

Being engineers, we had an advantage over other outfits. We had the tools and equipment to fix or build almost anything. I spent some of my time in the shops making one thing or another. There was every kind of tool available I could imagine. I have always enjoyed working with tools and spending time in those shops seemed like I had gone to tool heaven.

Some of the other facilities that were maintained by the 536th, in addition to the various enlisted men's barracks, were the off-post housing for U.S. military personnel, a hotel for transient military personnel and their dependents, and a hospital. Again, because we were engineers, we had the advantage of access to the live steam available at the hospital's power plant. It came in handy for blasting Cosmoline off the metal parts of new rifles that they were coated with for rust protection.



For making repairs on-site, we had several well-equipped maintenance trucks. These trucks were being purchased from German manufacturers and, because I spoke German, I was sent on several TDY's to pick up new trucks at factories in Southern Germany.

On the highways from Southern Germany to Bremerhaven in the north, many of the highway bridges that had been blown up before the end of the war by the retreating Germans were still being rebuilt. That made for some exciting driving at times.

There was one particular place where a bridge spanning an entire valley was still out. The only way to get to the other side was to drive down a gravel road on a steep incline, then at the bottom of the valley cross a river on a rickety temporary bridge, and finally creep back up to level ground on the far side. Before starting the descent, however, a large sign alerted drivers to the danger ahead and admonished them not to forget to shift into the lowest gear. The warning sign was very explicit about the perils – it had a large skull and cross bones painted on it above the words: “YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!” (The picture at right was taken from the bottom of the valley looking up at a new bridge under construction.)



Our company's heavy equipment section was well stocked with bulldozers, road graders, mobile cranes, electrical generators, 2½ ton regular and dump trucks, ¾ ton trucks and jeeps.

At times the heavy equipment was used for work on public service projects as a goodwill gesture toward the German community. One such project called for some minor grading work to level off some rough spots in the soccer field of a local *Fussball* club. It looked simple enough. The word was: “Just send ‘Swede’ Anderson out there with a road grader and he'll have it nice and smooth in no time.” But when our surveyors took some measurements, they discovered that one end of the soccer field was more than nine feet higher than the other. Playing soccer on that field would have been like playing pool on a table that's tilted. Before the project was over, our heavy equipment section had most of its bulldozers and other earth-moving equipment out on that field. They shoved a lot of dirt around and it turned into quite a job.

But our unit was not only responsible for all the usual engineering functions at an Army post; we also took care of the facilities and equipment in the American section of the Port of Bremerhaven. The latter included a Packing and Crating Section for the preparation of household goods and cars being shipped back to the U.S. There was also a large POL Depot at Farge that was manned and operated by our unit.

The 536th also had several fire stations in the city and at some of the satellite posts, with the largest one located at the POL Depot. Sgt. Kaluhiokalani, Kalani for short, was the fire chief.

In the harbor, three fire boats protected American supply and troop ships while docked. As a special precaution, hoses were strung from the fire boats and stretched out on the decks of ammunition ships and the “whiskey ship” when in port. The whiskey ship made regular runs to Bremerhaven, bringing the booze for keeping all the U.S. military clubs in Germany well stocked.

During bivouacs, it was our job to set up a water purification plant and provide electricity from portable generators.



Return of the Icebreaker USCGC Westwind

In 1945, under the terms of the Lend Lease Program for U.S. Allies during WW II, the U.S. Coast Guard turned the Westwind and some other ships over to the Soviet Navy. When the war had ended, the U.S. reclaimed and demanded the return of the ship.

After a considerable delay, the Soviets finally towed the Westwind to the Port of Bremerhaven in December of 1951. Through hard use and lack of maintenance, the ship had become a useless hulk that could no longer move under its own power. Additionally, anything useful that could possibly be removed from the ship had been stripped off.

Because of the Cold War tension, the Soviet crew was not allowed to set foot on solid ground in Bremerhaven; instead, the crew boarded a Soviet ship tied up on the other side of the icebreaker. That ship soon headed out to sea and back to the Soviet Union.

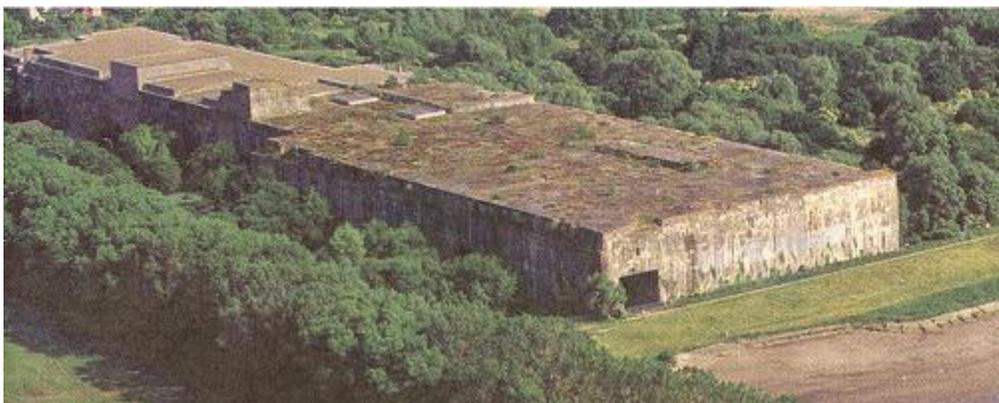
While the soviet crew was in port, though, a twenty-four hour cordon of sentries was placed around the quay where the icebreaker and the Soviet vessel had been tied up. My good friend Sgt. Krell was put in charge of the guard detail for several tours of duty.

Unfortunately, the picture of the Westwind is not of good quality because the day when I took it, we had another one of those dreary, heavily overcast days of “Bremerhaven sunshine.”

The U-Boat Bunker

It was one of those rare days in the northern Germany when there was not a cloud in the sky. Instead of the perpetual damp chill, the sun shone brightly and it was actually pleasantly warm for a change. So my friend Sgt. Gene Krell and I decided to spend a day at the beach. We drove upstream along the Weser River from Bremerhaven to the town of Farge near Bremen where we found a nice sandy beach. Looming nearby was this huge structure – a former U-boat bunker. We were close enough to be almost in its shadow.

The bunker had been built during the WWII as an air raid shelter for housing a complete ship yard for building U-boats (submarines). The whole complex is one monolithic block of reinforced concrete weighing about two million tons. It is more than a third of a mile in length, 82 feet high, with a 33-foot-thick roof. The bunker is so large it can be seen from space. After the war, all proposals to level it were discarded as being too costly. Another proposal called for burying it under a mountain of rubble and creating a park on the property. There was plenty of rubble available nearby in the bombed-out city of Bremen. But transporting the rubble by river barge to the bunker site would have been prohibitively expensive. No practical solution for getting rid of the U-boat bunker has been found in over 70 years. It is nearly indestructible and probably will still be standing a few millennia from now. On a visit to Germany in 1998, I was able to get inside the bunker as part of a guided tour. It looked as solid as ever.



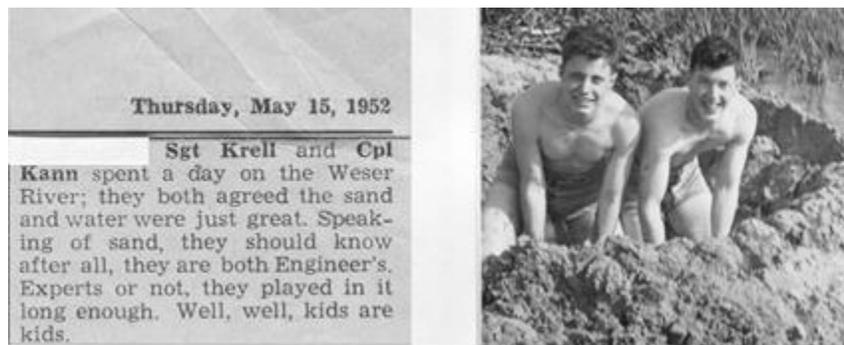
The cavernous interior of the bunker was designed to shelter a production line that could accommodate up to 12 submarines at various stages of assembly. The plan was to bring prefabricated sections of submarines by barge to the facility for final assembly and tests.

At the far end of the assembly line are provisions for a dry dock deep enough to allow submerging a completed submarine for conducting leak checks. Then, after final tests, blast proof doors in the front of the dry dock were to be opened and the submarine floated out into the Weser River and hence to make its way downstream to the North Sea. (The short channel to the river has been filled in and all that remains of the exit is the upper part seen as the square opening in the picture.) Eventual production rates were set to reach 14 submarines per month. The war ended, though, before the facility could be completed and become operational.

The construction of the bunker was a huge undertaking. The incomplete structure alone consumed the equivalent of 4.4 million bags of cement and 27000 tons of steel. The daily work force at the construction site numbered between 10,000 and 12,000; the majority of which were slave laborers (concentration camp inmates, prisoners of war and foreign civilians who had been rounded up and shipped to Germany). It is estimated that between 4000 and 5000 of the slave laborers died during the two-year construction period. They died of disease, starvation, or being worked or beaten to death; or they were summarily shot for some minor offense. Perverse calculations by the German project management pegged the average life span, euphemistically called *Verweildauer* (dwell time), of a slave laborer as nine months.

During the war, the Allies closely monitored the progress of the bunker's construction for two years. During that period they held off bombing it until construction was nearing completion because the gigantic project was tying up valuable German resources. When the bombing finally began, it was discovered that the bunker could withstand almost all attempts to destroy it. One month before war's end, the Royal Air Force scored direct hits with two so-called Grand Slam bombs, each weighing 10 tons. Although the bombs hit in a part of the roof where the concrete had not yet been poured to the full thickness of 32 feet (it was "only" 15 feet thick at the impact sites), the roof was not penetrated. However, because all the construction equipment and supplies on the outside of the bunker had been destroyed during the continual air raids, work came to a halt and never resumed.

The beach is still there; it's at the bottom right of the picture. Gene and I had a great time that day when we played in the sand by the Weser River. After we got back to the barracks, someone tipped off our post's newspaper about our day in the sun. The next issue of "The Port Reporter" featured this little tidbit



The picture is from my own collection. Sgt. Gene Krell is on the right. We didn't know it then, but four years later in 1956, across an ocean and on another continent, my friend Gene would be best man at my wedding.

The Cold War Heats Up

By 1951 the Cold War was heating up. On the Korean peninsula, the United Nations' "Police Action," as it was euphemistically called, had turned into a full-fledged war for the United States. The Chinese Communists had attacked across the Yalu River and American airmen were dogfighting MiG 15s flown by Soviet and Chinese pilots.

The Soviet Union being a staunch ally of the North Koreans and with an overwhelming contingent of its troops stationed less than 200 miles away in East Germany, life for the U.S. Army's troops in West Germany changed dramatically. The easy times were over. An Army major up on the stage of our post's theater held an orientation meeting where he prophetically announced: "The honeymoon in Germany is over!"

It was generally assumed that should the Soviet Union attack with its armored divisions pouring through the Fulda Gap into West Germany, their advance at best could not be halted until they

reached the Rhine River. That meant that initially most of West Germany would be lost. In response to that possibility, training was increased and a major part of the U.S. Forces in Germany was redeployed to the west side of the Rhine River.

The 536th moves out

In the fall of 1951, the 536th Engineer Service Battalion was one of the outfits affected by the redeployment of forces. Our unit was divided into two parts. Roughly one half of the officers and enlisted men moved to a brand-new post at Kaiserslautern on the west side of the Rhine River.

On the morning of their departure, as the convoy of heavily laden trucks rumbled toward the main gate, the post's band played for their sendoff. Those of us who were left behind in Bremerhaven watched with mixed feelings. Not only were we parting company with many friends and acquaintances, but our "536th Engr. Sv. Bn." designation also went with them. Although engineering duties at the post and the port remained the same for the rest of us, we were assigned the nondescript label "Det.A 7802 BPE."



Building an Obstacle Course at Garlstedt Heide (Garlstedter Heath)

As part of the increased emphasis on training, we were called on to construct an obstacle course at the rifle range at Garlstedt near Bremen. The course consisted of a set of obstacles for training soldiers in overcoming natural and man-made barriers they might encounter in combat.

With all the heavy equipment at our disposal, it took us only a few weeks to erect all the obstacles. Everything went smoothly, except for one accident. Corporal Hoops was standing behind one of the two-and-a-half ton trucks when its driver started backing up. There were no backup beepers on trucks then to warn Hoops and he got knocked down. The truck's rear tandem wheels passed over his chest. But miraculously he came away with only some bad bruises. The area where we were working was covered with heather and the ground consisted of a sandy loam. He escaped serious injury because the weight of the truck pushed him into the soft ground. It probably helped too that Hoops was one of those big and tough farm boys from the Dakotas.

While constructing the obstacles we, the builders, had to clamber all over them before they were properly braced and stabilized. It was just part of the job. That's me in those pictures.

What's funny, though, is that after all the obstacles had been completed, our unit, just like the rest of the troops stationed in the Bremerhaven area, had to formally qualify on the course. Climbing up and down the obstacles wasn't much of a challenge for our guys though – we'd done it all before while building them.



There also was an infiltration course at the rifle range and, with the increased emphasis on training, all soldiers in the BPE had to qualify on it too. The infiltration course covered an area about half the size of a football field. The troops had to start at the far end and crawl on their bellies toward a set of three water-cooled 30 caliber machine guns spraying the course with live ammunition. To make sure that the bullets would not hit the soldiers down on the ground, each machine gun had a stick under its barrel to limit the fire to not less than 30 inches above the course.

Sprinkled throughout the infiltration course were mud and water-filled craters wired with explosives. To keep soldiers from accidentally getting into the craters, their perimeters were fenced off with chicken wire. The charges in the craters were set off by remote control at random intervals from an observation tower, but in particular whenever someone got near a crater. The noise and the dirt that came flying out of the holes when one of those charges went off encouraged everybody not to linger and to get through the course as fast as possible.

Stretched across the width of the course, about a foot off the ground, were strands of barbed wire. To get under the barbed wire we had to take off our packs and shove them ahead; then, lying on our backs and cradling our rifles, we'd slip under the wires.

The only way to get through the course was to keep moving forward. Well, there was one other way, but standing up and walking out just wasn't an option. That someone would panic and stand up was the only real danger the course held.

In the 1970s, the Lucius D. Clay Kaserne was built in the Garlstedt area. It would be the home of the U.S. 2nd Armored Division for some time.

We were also spending more time in the field, either at the rifle range or on overnight bivouacs in the local Bürgerpark. When out in the field, another electrician and I had to set up a generator for lights in our general's tent. After we got everything working, we'd top off the gas tank and crawl into our pup tent for the night. But between two and three o'clock in the morning the generator usually ran out of gas. There wasn't any danger that we wouldn't wake up, though. The generator's engine made a terrible racket while it was running and we always pitched our tent near it. So when the engine stopped, the sudden silence immediately woke us up. We then quickly refilled the tank and we'd have the light on again in no time.

There was one time when we drew a generator with a bad governor. It would run okay for a while and then suddenly slow down. Of course, when that happened all the lights dimmed. So we attached a wire to the carburetor linkage and strung it into our tent. Again, we'd wake up instantly when the generator slowed down and the noise level changed, but a couple of yanks on the wire got the thing back up to normal speed.

The Farge POL Depot

In August of 1952, I and several others were transferred to Det. E 7802 BPE, POL Depot at Farge, near Bremen. The depot was a former German Navy fuel storage facility. Huge underground tanks lay hidden in a densely wooded area. The tops of the tanks had been covered with thick layers of concrete for protection against Allied air raids.



The POL Depot's HQ is shown on the left and the shipping area on the right.

After WWII the depot was taken over by the U.S. Army and the tanks were filled with millions of gallons of gasoline and other fuel for supplying U.S. Forces in Germany. Fuel shipments from the depot left by rail or truck and replenishment arrived from the U.S. by tankers tying up at a dock on the Weser River below. From there the liquid cargo was pumped through a pipeline up the hill to the tanks in the POL Depot. In 1948/49 the majority of the fuel for the Berlin Airlift came from the Farge depot. The city of Berlin was then located deep within the former Soviet Zone of Occupation. The airlift was the Allies' answer to the Soviets' blockade of all surface traffic to and from the Allied-occupied sections of the city.

In February of 1953 a record flood hit the Netherlands. It was a flood with devastating results because over 60% of the Netherlands lies below sea level (the word "Netherlands" means low country). While some of the ground in the Netherlands is reclaimed former swamp land that was drained, a good part of the country consists of land that was wrestled from the North Sea. This was done by constructing dikes ever farther out into the sea. Then, once a new area had been partitioned off, the power of windmills was used to pump out the sea water. Most travelers who arrive at Amsterdam by air probably aren't aware that the runways at Schiphol airport are over twenty feet below sea level.

In 1953, through a combination of extra high spring tides and gale-force winds, the North Sea smashed through the dikes and our POL Depot became a beehive of activity. Rail shipments of fuel in support of the flood fighting efforts left the depot around the clock. Also, a contingent of U.S. soldiers stationed in Germany was dispatched with boats to the flooded area to assist with the rescue of stranded residents. After the flood waters receded, the authorities determined that over 1800 people had lost their lives.

Camp Grohn

Solid fuel, mainly anthracite coal, for military facilities and housing units in the Bremen area was stockpiled at and distributed from Camp Grohn. Coal at that time was a valuable black market commodity. After a major theft ring had recently been discovered, precautions were taken to prevent any further thefts. That meant, starting with the unloading of coal shipments from barges at the Vegesack Harbor until deliveries by trucks to the users, we had to closely watch all loads.

Whenever a truck had been fully loaded, white chalk was sprinkled over the top of the load to make sure no coal got “lost” during transport.

Spending time at the harbor had its rewards, though. There was a little *Gasthaus* down at the waterfront that served a great ham sandwich.



In 1952 Camp Grohn also became the home of the 307th Replacement Group. That function earlier had been performed by the 7720 Eucom Replacement Depot in Marburg where I had enlisted in 1950. As a European enlistee I had gone through basic training at Marburg. By coincidence, one day I ran into one of my former drill sergeants from Marburg at Camp Grohn.

End of my Tour of Duty

As I was getting close to the end of my three-year enlistment, I received orders in May 1953 to report June 13 to the Staging Area in Bremerhaven “...for processing and movement by U.S. Government surface vessel to the United States and the Camp Kilmer, N.J., Separation Center for release from military service.”

I had turned my 1941 Chivy in for shipment to the U.S., before reporting to the staging Area. The rules about personal vehicles at that time was that having a car shipped from the U.S. to Germany was only authorized for officers and “first three graders.” However, so as not to create a glut of abandoned American cars in Germany, the transport in the reverse direction was authorized for all grades.

After a brief stay in the Transients Barracks at the staging Area, it was but a short ride on a shuttle train to Columbus Quay for embarkation on the USNS General Callan. Although the railroad cars of the shuttle train were somewhat primitive, they were actually well suited for transporting GIs carrying bulging duffel bags and suitcases for the few-minutes ride to the quay.



Headed for the Staging Area



Staging Area with Transients Barracks



Shuttle Train Car



Shuttle Train



An American Going Home



Casting Off



Getting Under Way



USNS General R.E. Callan

I was honorably discharged at Kilmer, N.J., July 2, 1953.

Some Additional Pictures



Football game at Phillips Field, behind Lehe Barracks. We could watch from the second floor of the 532nd Engineers' offices.



The 4th Infantry Division debarking in Bremerhaven