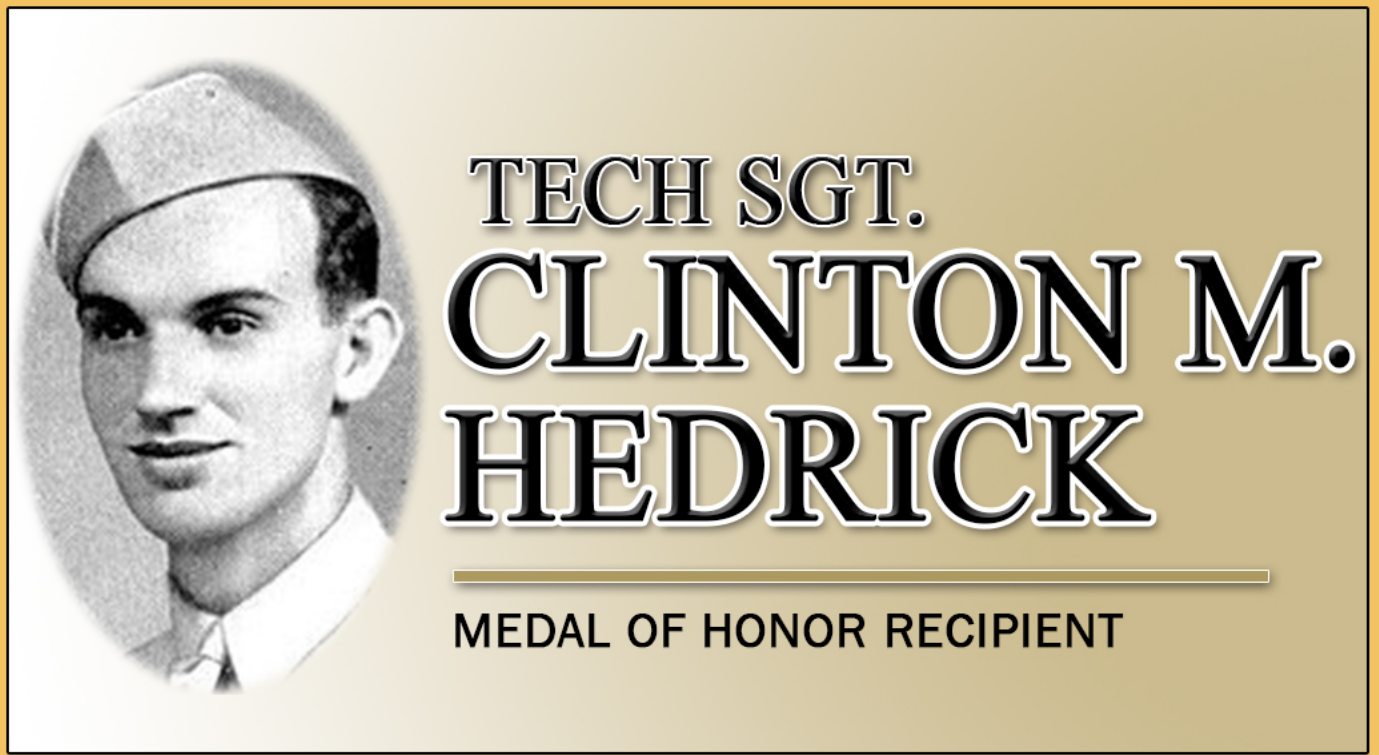


This Month in NCO History: March 27, 1945 — Storming the Castle at Lembeck

By Command Sgt. Maj. Jessie C. Harris Jr. - 39th Transportation Battalion

March 23, 2016



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Technical Sgt. Clinton M. Hedrick knew firsthand that victories in war sometimes came at a high cost. He learned that during one of the most iconic battles of World War II and rode that lesson to the nation's highest military honor.

For most of the conflict, Hedrick fought with the 550th Infantry Airborne Division. In December 1944, the division was part of the Allied contingent that resisted a massive enemy force during the Battle of the Bulge, the German offensive in the Ardennes region in Belgium, France and Luxembourg on the war's Western Front that killed 19,000 Americans. The casualties inflicted on Hedrick's unit were so heavy that the 550th Infantry Airborne Division was disbanded, its Soldiers were parceled out to other infantry units for the remainder of the war.

Hedrick joined I Company, 194th Glider Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division where he was promoted to technical sergeant, E-7. Two months after the Battle of the Bulge, the 17th AD joined the British 6th Airborne Division for Operation Varsity — the last full-scale airborne operation of the war. The two divisions supported amphibious assaults on the Rhine River as the Allies looked to gain a foothold on the North German Plain for an advance to Berlin and other northern cities.

Operation Varsity was the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment's first glider landing. Its objective was to land north of Wesel, Germany, in a large flat area, where the Issel River and the Issel Canal merged, and seize the crossing over the Rhine River to protect the rest of the division's right flank.

By the evening of March 24, 1945, the 194th overran the German positions, destroying 42 artillery pieces and 10 tanks. More than 1,000 enemy soldiers were captured. By March 26, the Allies massed enough forces on the German side of the Rhine to begin an eastward advance, which the 194th began the following day. Hedrick's I Company was assigned as the assault platoon for an advance on the town of Lembeck, about 20 miles east of Wesel.

As the unit approached, it was met by intense automatic weapons fire three times from strongly defended positions. Each time, Hedrick charged through the fire, shooting his Browning Automatic Rifle from the hip, according to his Medal of Honor citation. His courageous action so galvanized his men that they quickly overran the enemy positions in rapid succession. When six German soldiers attempted a surprise flanking movement, Hedrick quickly turned and killed the entire party with a burst of fire.

The Americans' advance continued into the following day. Eventually, they forced the enemy to withdraw across a moat into Lembeck Castle. According to the citation, Hedrick disregarded his safety and plunged across the drawbridge alone in pursuit. A German soldier, with hands upraised, declared the garrison wished to surrender. Hendrick entered the castle yard with four of his men to accept the capitulation. The group moved through a sally port, and was met by fire from a German self-propelled gun. Hedrick was mortally wounded, but he managed to fire at the enemy gun, allowing his comrades to retreat. Hedrick died while being evacuated after the castle was taken. His great personal courage and heroic leadership contributed in large measure to the speedy capture of Lembeck and provided an inspiring example to his fellow Soldiers.

Hedrick was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on Oct. 19, 1945. His body was returned to the United States after the war. He was originally interred at the Cherry Grove Cemetery in Cherry Grove, West Virginia. His body was moved to North Fork Memorial Cemetery in Riverton, West Virginia, on Memorial Day 1991. A grand monument, which showcases his selfless actions during the war was erected at the site.

Hedrick was born May 1, 1918, in Cherry Grove. He enlisted in the Army in September 1940. His name graces the football stadium at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and a tree in the Medal of Honor Grove at Freedoms Foundation in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. In 2011, the West Virginia legislature named a section of U.S. Route 33 the Sergeant Clinton M. Hedrick and World War II Veterans Memorial Highway.

— *Compiled by Pablo Villa*