



Sergeant Paul Smithhisler



Sergeant Paul Smithhisler wearing his Distinguished Service Cross, French Croix de Guerre, World War One Victory Medal, and a Veteran's award.

In late October 1918, Allied units had repeatedly tried to cross the Escaut River in Belgium. Accurate German machine gun and artillery fire had blunted several assaults. After several units had failed at the river crossing, the mission was assigned to the 37th Infantry Division. The 112th Engineer Regiment put out a call for volunteers to conduct a reconnaissance of the German positions on the far bank of the river.

Sergeant Paul Smithhisler, a draftsman in Headquarters Company, volunteered. Under the cover of darkness, just before midnight on November first, Sergeant Smithhisler eased down the steep muddy bank and into the icy cold water. Private Burke, another volunteer, remained behind to assist the Sergeant up the river bank and provide cover, if necessary, upon his return.

Sergeant Smithhisler crossed the 100 foot wide, swiftly flowing river without being detected. Evading sentries and patrols, he sketched the precise location of artillery positions and machine gun nests along a 500 meter front. Stowing the drawing in a waterproof pouch, Smithhisler made his way back towards the river. The approaching dawn allowed the Germans to detect Sergeant Smithhisler as he returned to the river. The Sergeant swam quickly, but the sentries' alarm brought a hail of machine gun fire. Taking a gasp of air Sergeant Smithhisler swam the remainder of the river underwater.

Realizing the Sergeant probably possessed information extremely detrimental to their cause, the Germans called in an artillery barrage, containing both high explosive and poison gas rounds. Sergeant Smithhisler emerged from the water panting for air, just as the deadly gas arrived. Completely exhausted and feeling the effects of the gas, Smithhisler was unable to don his mask. Private Burke pulled his sergeant to safety and placed a mask on him, before succumbing to the gas himself. Though mortally wounded, Burke's actions saved the life of Sergeant Smithhisler.

Sergeant Smithhisler recovered from his wounds. On January 28, 1919 General Pershing inspected the 112th Engineers at Alencon, France. Following the inspection Sergeant Smithhisler was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and the French Croix de Guerre with Silver Star.



General Pershing presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Sergeant Paul Smithhisler, January 28, 1919.