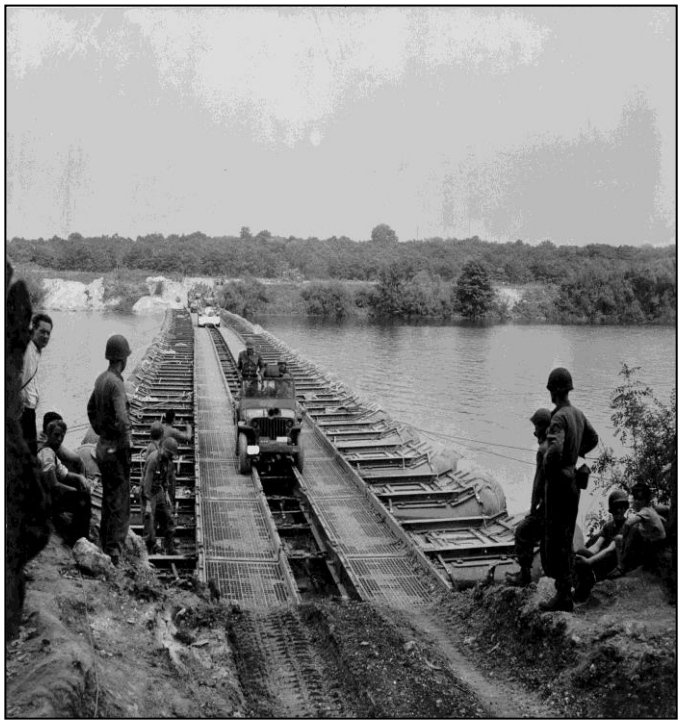
Pontoons Across the River
A Little Pontoon History

It is ironic that the pontoons used by outfitters on the Colorado River were actually developed on the Colorado River as part of the World War II effort. The Germans had devised floating bridges a decade earlier and used them to considerable advantage in combat. To develop portable bridges the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers opened the Yuma Test Branch below Laguna Dam on the Colorado River in late 1942.

The Yuma, Arizona location, 15 miles northeast of Yuma, was considered the most desirable spot in the country for the testing of portable combat bridges because there was an abundance of swift flowing water that engineers could control. The encampment was just below Imperial Dam. It used the sluicing gates to the Gila Wasteway to control flows into the canal where the boats were set up to test and refine the Army's portable bridges, that were to be used for landing on beaches and for river crossings in the invasion of Europe.



Lt Gen George S. Patton, commanding the 3rd US Army, crosses the Seine River on a Pontoon Bridge.

Full time testing of the U.S. pontoon bridges began in January 1943. The first demonstration took place in May and by September final drawings and specifications were approved and contracts negotiated for the Steel Treadway Bridge, M-2. Transportation equipment for bridges was tested in the desert and in the dunes west of Yuma. Under conditions of extreme urgency these units provided critical assistance for the tests that resulted in improved capacities for the light and heavy pontoon bridges and the development of the pontoons that were used successfully in the European and Pacific Theaters of World War II.

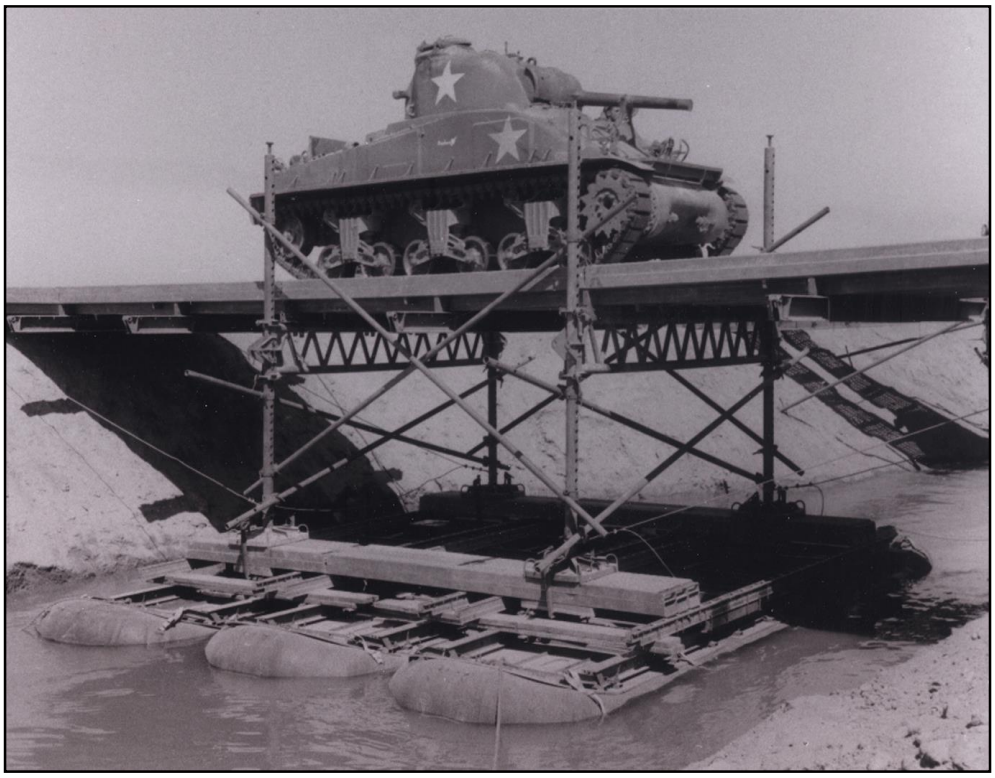
As Army personnel were moved to the European around the globe a shortage of testing personnel became apparent. At that time Italian prisoners of war, the Italian Service Unit, began operated the testing projects. Engineer battalions continued to train at the site until mid-1944. By mid-1945 an entirely new floating bridge, the Floating Bridge M-4, was developed with a redesigned deck and pontoon system.

Section of Army Treadway bridge being pushed into place by LCVP on Rhine River near Remagen Bridge

After the Italian prisoners were shipped home, the Yuma Test Branch continued until 1946. The old concrete pads and a monument are still there. The site continued to be used after the war and permanent structures were erected in what is now the headquarters area of the Yuma proving ground. The test branch was closed in 1949 and reopened in 1951 as the Yuma Proving Ground.

And so the Pontoons that took armies across the river and eventually down the river were designed, ironically, on the Colorado River.

Pontoon testing at Yuma (Note inflatable bridge in background)



Above: Sherman M-4 Tank crossing a unique pontoon bridge at Yuma Testing Ground.
Below: Treadway pontoon in transit in European Theater of WWII.

References:

1.) Historical Engineering Record, Yuma Proving Ground (HAER No. AZ-5, pages 21, 22); National Park Service, Report by William Brenner, 1984, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Robie S. Lange, 1985:
2.) Allen Haden, Aquatic Ecologist; Natural Channel Design, Inc.; 206 S. Elden St. Flagstaff, AZ 86001;
3.) Photos Courtesy of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers;
4.) Italian Prisoners Leave Legacy in the Desert Southwest, by Chuck Wullenjohn;
5.) Yuma Proving Ground History, US Army COE;