

World War II Memoires

My Experiences In The Service

In October of 1942 I received my notice for induction into the U.S. Army and on January 7, 1943, with suitcase packed with the bare essentials I was to assemble at the railroad station in Carnegie, Pa., to board a military train, destination Fort Mead, Md. My father accompanied me to the station and after bidding farewell I boarded the train in the early evening and since the train was going past my house I was hoping to wave goodbye to my Mother, brother John and sister Helen. But as fate dictated, Carnegie decided to have a blackout (all lights out) so I was unable to wave goodbye to them. We traveled all night (trying to sleep sitting up) and arriving at Fort Mead, Md. early the next day. We were given physical exams and the necessary shots for diseases. We were issued uniforms, fatigues and other essential clothing and equipment. We were there a few days then orders were given to pack up and get ready to board another military train for destination unknown. While traveling on the train we were treated royally. We ate good meals, prepared by chefs and served by waiters in the dining car. We also slept in beds with clean white sheets.

When I awoke it was already daylight and we were slowly making our way into a large military reservation. The post was called Camp Croft located in the vicinity of Greenville and Spartanburg, South Carolina. This would be my new home for the next 13 weeks of intensive combat training. We were housed in two-storied wooden buildings. The routine each day would be pretty much the same. In bed at 10:00 P.M., up at 5:00 A.M., wash, shave, fix the bed, get dressed, fall out, police the area, line up for inspection. Hearing our tough Sergeant shouting orders and commands kept us in step and trying to keep straight lines. The first week was like a three ring circus with everyone going in different directions not knowing your left foot from the right foot and going left instead of right, forward instead of backward. After a few weeks, drilling every day, we finally began to look pretty decent and were able to march in precision every Saturday as all the brass looked on.

As the weeks went by we became more involved in learning to fire rifles, mortars, machine guns, lobbing hand grenades and hand to hand combat with bayonets attached to our rifles. Guns would be taken apart and put back together again, both in daylight and in the dark of night. There were days when we would go out to the firing range for target practice with the M-1 rifle or the Browning automatic machine gun. Other days we would go out with 60mm and 80 mm mortars and lob shells at enemy machine gun nests, or tanks. Some days we would run and crawl, with full backpack, gun, ammo, through barbed wire with live fire and if your butt was too high off the ground you just might attract some bullets or shrapnel from exploding shells all around you. There were many casualties during these exercises and the Medics also learned from real live experiences. On the rifle firing range I was able to hit the bullseye, rapid fire, with the Browning Automatic machine gun, 297 out of a possible 300. Since I was the only one to accomplish that feat I was awarded a special Sharpshooters Medal at a special ceremony at the Saturday parade grounds.

There were all night 25 mile marches, throughout the South Carolina countryside. We were given compasses and walkie talkies and we would engage in simulated combat with another group. All of this training proved to be valuable later in North Africa, Sicily and Italy for it hardened us to be prepared for the real thing. As the weeks went by the training became more intense and after 13 weeks they figured that we were ready and in condition to face combat. We were ordered to pack up and boarding the train again we were off to destination unknown. We were never told, before hand, where we were going, for this was top secret for security reasons. We boarded the train with full barracks bag, full backpack, rifle and all necessary equipment. The train ride was a lot different from the ride going down. We didn't have all the comfort of a bed to sleep in or eating in the dining car as we were going down. I was trying to sleep sitting up all night. We finally arrived at our destination and to my surprise we were in Pennsylvania at a replacement camp about fifty miles North of Pittsburgh, called Camp Shenango, outside Sharon, Pa. This was a temporary camp out in a huge muddy field for replacements to be sent to different parts of the world where our troops are fighting.

Upon arrival at Camp Shenango we were housed in large pyramidal tents with six men per tent. This was in late April and the field was muddy from the spring rains, damp and full of activity. Each day a train load of G.I's would be coming in from training camps while others would be leaving for unknown destinations. We were given orders to stay in camp because we

could get orders to move out at anytime, day or night. And if we left camp, for any reason, we would be court marshaled and put in jail. Well since I was close to home and close to Cleveland, where my sister Mary lived. She was able to pay me a visit and spend a day together. The next day I still didn't get my orders to move out, and since it was the weekend I decided to go home to Carnegie to visit and spend the weekend at home with my family because I knew that if I didn't make it home this time I probably wouldn't be home for the duration of the war. God knows how long that would be.

I hitched a ride from a good Samaritan who drove me all the way to Carnegie. These were the days when civilians were kind enough to give rides to G.I's. At that time I had brothers Steve, Metro and Pete already in the service. Mom and Dad proudly displayed a flag with four stars, signifying four men in the service, in the front window. Before the war ended the flag would have five stars when brother John entered the service.

It was on Sunday of that weekend, after attending the Divine Liturgy at Saints Peter and Paul Ukrainian Catholic Church, that I met my sweetheart and future wife Alice.

After the Liturgy I was about to leave when I was approached by Alice and she asked me if I would like to join her group to go on a hike. Well after spending 13 weeks hiking hundreds of miles all over South Carolina I respectfully declined her offer. I declined the offer and that was the last time I would see her until I returned home after serving three years of overseas duty to meet her again in church.

I hitch hiked a ride back to Camp Shenango that Sunday afternoon and, thank God no one knew that I was gone.

A few days later we were given orders to pack up and board a military train again for an unknown destination. This was another all night train ride. They probably did this because of secrecy and of spies tracking the movement of our troops. Our destination upon arrival was Camp Patrick Henry in southeastern Virginia near Norfolk. A hell hole if there ever was one. We were housed in big tents and the weather was hot and damp with mosquitoes biting everywhere you went. We were in the middle of a swamp and I think that they put us there so that we wouldn't be able to go A.W.O.L (absent without leave). They had so much security that we couldn't go to the mess hall, the P.X. or to the latrine without an armed guard.

After about a week the security was so severe that we all were ready for them to send us anywhere in order to get out of this hell hole. I guess they used this psychology on us and it really worked because we just about had all a man could take.

Again orders were given to pack up and be ready to ship out. We were issued heavy wool clothing and gear for cold weather. That evening we were driven to Hampton Roads, Va. where, at midnight, we boarded a troop ship named U.S.S. United States. This previously was a cruise ship converted to a troop ship for 5,000 troops. On board we were assigned a hammock to sleep in and my hammock was about about six rows high. There were about 12 rows and I had to climb up a ladder to get to my hammock. Unfortunately there was a quite heavy person above me. When he climbed into his hammock it would sag so that it was impossible for me to get in. And if I was already in it then it was impossible to get out until he got out. Finally I decided to go up on deck with my sleeping bag and spend the rest of the Atlantic crossing sleeping on deck. The ship carried 5,000 troops and we all took turns eating in what was once the swimming pool. We couldn't have any lights on for even a lighted cigarette could be seen by a German submarine waiting in the dark waters to fire a torpedo sinking our ship. The Germans had about two hundred subs In the Atlantic at that time and we knew that it would be a dangerous crossing. At that time the German subs were sinking scores of merchant ships bringing supplies for the military overseas. Usually troop ships are escorted by destroyers in a convoy but we had no escort. All alone we were at the mercy of a torpedo attack at any time during our crossing. We would hear over the radio, broadcasting from Berlin, that one of their submarines had sunk our ship and there were no survivors. This was all propaganda of course and the broadcast was directed towards the United States to demoralize the Americans. All the way across the Atlantic Ocean we were always aware that at any time and on any day we could be sunk by these subs because they had complete control of the sea. The Germans had an American reporter broadcasting all of this propaganda. Her name was Axis Sally and many nights later in North Africa and Italy I would hear on my walkie talkie while I lay in my fox hole late at night, her broadcasting false statements about American cities being bombed and how girl friends and wives were going out with other men.

Later I understood why our ship crossed the Atlantic Ocean alone and that was because our ship was able to zig zag and go 32 knots, much faster than the German U-boats. At this time the Germans have 212 U-boats and a further 181 on training or training trial missions.

November 8, 1942 the Allied invasion of North Africa had begun and the 34th. Division had been instrumental in the landing and the capture of the port city of Casablanca. There were 52 warships and 33,000 soldiers involved in this operation and were well on their way across Morocco and on to Algeria and the port city of Oran. On November 9th 1942, U.S. forces secured the beaches around Casablanca but there is heavy fighting with the French troops. Then on November 10th 1942, Algeria falls to the U.S. attack. On that same day the French forces in North Africa were given orders to stop fighting the Allies.

After seven days we crossed the Atlantic and came to the port city of Casablanca, Morocco, North Africa. The Americans had already taken the city from the Vichy French troops and were advancing across the Sahara Desert to Algiers, Algeria. We unloaded all of our gear and they packed us into open cattle cars. For seven days and nights we raced across the Sahara Desert to catch up with our advancing troops. The daytime temperature reached 120 degrees and the nighttime temperature dipped to freezing. While riding across the desert we would pass several villages and we would throw out to the natives our cans of C-rations. It probably made them as sick of the food as we were. In order to deceive the Germans the heavy woolen clothes that were issued in Virginia will have to be worn here in hot blistering North Africa. We finally reached Oran, Algeria where I became a member of the 34th Infantry Division. This was another replacement depot in the middle of the Sahara Desert. The 34th was thrown into action at hill 409, elevation over 1800 feet, where they suffered heavy casualties. This is where I come in to replace one of these casualties.

At this time the British army was in Egypt and advancing Westward and we were advancing Eastward in a sort of squeeze play. As the Germans were retreating they left behind much devastation and a last ditch effort on their part to bomb our troops and leave the harbors of Oran and Tunis in ruins. I have to tell you that in the Western part of North Africa we weren't fighting the Germans but mainly troops of the French Vichy (those sympathetic to the Germans). These French troops were quickly defeated and finally surrendered and the rest of the African campaign was against the Germans and Italians.

Before the French surrendered they inflicted heavy damage by preventing our troops from landing on the beaches. Algeria had been a French colony and when the Germans occupied North Africa these French sided with the Germans.

Life in the Sahara Desert was rather hectic. We not only had to contend with sand storms, sand in our food, sand in our hair, clothing, the shelling of German bombers and the strafing of the fighter planes made life miserable. On top of all that I had to contend with flies, bees and lizards crawling into my sleeping bag at night. There were times when, during a lull in the fighting, we would have a warm breakfast of eggs and toast with jelly or marmalade. The bees, mosquitos and flies were so numerous that in order to take a bite of my toast I would have to shoo away the bees with one hand and immediately take a bite. I would have to do this several times before the toast was totally eaten.

With the Americans coming East across Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and the British coming West across Egypt and Libya the scheme was to join forces and force Rommel, (the desert fox) out of North Africa completely. On April 22, 1943 the Allies began a series of attacks on the various hill positions around Hill 609 before the town of Mateur, led by General Bradley. Hill 609 was a huge mass of sheer rock and a natural fortification which was to remain impregnable until the enemy had been swept from the many hills around it. The 135th infantry regiment, after suffering heavy casualties, took Hill 609 and that day, advancing under terrific shelling, captured the small Arab villages huddled close to the slopes of the hill. The shelling was heavy but we hung on, actually working our way up the jagged rock for one half mile, from which position we were never dislodged. The most important pass leading to the crown of the hill was a goat trail which the Germans had regarded as invulnerable. However, in a surprise move, the 135th. entered the trail from the rear. The move proved to be the determining factor in the enemy's final withdrawal.

By May 10, 1943 the last organized Axis resistance is overcome and there is no hope of evacuation and wholesale surrender begins. At the liberation of Tunis, United States troops who had taken part in the African fighting were represented by the 135th., marched past in solid mass under the palms of Boulevard Gallieni to the vigorous applause of the Tunis civilian crowd. After the Germans were forced out of North Africa the 34th Infantry Division was given a deserving rest and given the job of guarding the thousands of German and Italian prisoners in a camp outside the harbor of Tunis. The Germans still had air bases in nearby Sicily and we were under constant bombardment from the German bombers. I was on guard duty several nights, patrolling the perimeter, and it was nerve racking, with constant bombing by the German bombers and

knowing that there might be a breakout at anytime. But fortunately there were no breakouts during my watch and we survived the bombings.

The Allies were committed to re-equip French military units and employ them in combat to protect North Africa against possible Axis incursion through Spain and Spanish Morocco.

When the question of setting up the Fifth Army was being considered General Clark was very anxious to have that command instead of his title of Deputy Commander-in-Chief. The title of Army Commander was too attractive and within a month Eisenhower placed him in command of the Fifth Army, fearful that the war in the Mediterranean would be over before they had a chance to participate. Near the end of July, when the Allies were seriously looking toward the Italian mainland and beginning to consider Avalanche, Fifth Army seemed the logical headquarters to conduct the operation. A campaign on the mainland, no matter how short, would probably require from six to twelve divisions (British, American, and French) and considerable administrative and logistical overhead. Clark's American component was to be the VI corps, with the 82nd Airborne, the 1st Armored, and the 34th and 36th infantry Divisions.

The 34th Division, a National Guard unit with troops originally from North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Minnesota entered federal service in 1941 and sailed for Northern Ireland early in 1942, the First Army division to go to the European theater. It participated in the North African landings and fought through the campaign under Charles W. Ryder who had combat service in France during World War I. The 36th Division, a Texas National Guard unit inducted into federal service in 1940, was the only unit without combat experience.

The 45th Division, a National Guard unit from Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Oklahoma had sailed from the United States, combat loaded, in June 1943 and after a short training interval in North Africa had taken part in the Sicily landings and campaign.

As the war was continuing in Sicily the 34th Division was preparing to go to Sicily and eventually into Italy proper. Everyday we would board a troop ship with full battle gear and practice amphibious landings on the beaches. We would scramble down the side of the ship on rope ladders into small landing craft and head for the beach under simulated heavy fire. Once on the beach we would climb the sand dunes and storm the beaches advancing inland. This routine would continue each day until we had perfected the landings. There were times when we were given free time and a chance to go swimming in the Mediterranean Sea. One day five of us decided to go swimming. We were out about 500 yards when a rip tide got hold of us and was

taking us further and further out to sea. As we struggled to swim back to shore it seemed like we were losing the battle and weren't making any progress. I kept swimming as hard as I could and I was about to give up from exhaustion when I stopped swimming and waited for the end to come, but, by some miracle or act of God, I was washed toward shore where I felt sand beneath my feet and was able to walk to shore. Unfortunately, three of my buddies were swept out to sea and their bodies were never recovered.

The Allies invaded northwest Africa in order to help the embattled British forces in Egypt. Having secured the northern coast of Africa the Allies invaded Sicily two months later to insure the safety of the sea lanes between Gibraltar and Suez and make voyages around the African continent unnecessary. In August 1943, with Sicily taken, the Allies gained indisputable control of the southern Mediterranean; the corridor between Tunisia and Sicily became a protected avenue.

The purpose of the North African campaign was to secure the lines of communication in the Mediterranean, to divert German strength from the Soviet Union during the summer of 1943 and to force Italy out of the war and tie down the maximum number of German forces.

The amphibious exercises continued into late August. In early September 1943, just before orders were given to pack up, I was given the job of supervising about forty Arabs. The task was to load the ship with supplies for the upcoming invasion and eventually to get ready to move out to sea. These Arabs were dirty, slimy and lazy. Each day I had to push them to work. Most of the day they would always get down on their knees and bow to Mecca. We knew that we would be going either to Sicily or Italy. We boarded the ship at the port of Bizerta, Tunisia and headed toward the island of Malta where we would form a huge convoy for the invasion of Italy. We didn't know exactly where we would be landing so we sailed past Mt. Etna in Sicily, through the Strait of Messina, between Sicily and Italy, and on to the eventual landing at Salerno, Italy. The weather was perfect. The Mediterranean climate in September is at its best. Despite crowded decks and congested quarters we began to feel almost like passengers on a vacation cruise. Hardly anyone was sick, the food was good, the showers worked and there was plenty of time to sleep. What a relief after months of training, C-Rations, grime, dust, mud, scorching days and impossible cold nights. Ahead lay the beaches of Salerno. We learned about this at sea as we clustered around our platoon leaders to discuss missions and study newly issued maps.

The convoys moved along in parallel lines, the ships several hundred yards apart. All around, as far as you could see in the clear sunlight, there were ships and more ships. There were

LST's, LCT's and so many ships that we had a good feeling of security. Barrage balloons floated above some of the vessels to guard against low flying enemy planes. The Allies couldn't decide exactly where to land. The first was the Rome area, but an invasion there would be a gamble because there would be no land air support. The second was the Naples area but this would also be impossible because of strong defenses with gun batteries on the flanking islands off Ischia and Capri. Third was the Salerno area. Looking at the terrain in detail to decide where to land, the planners narrowed the choice to the beaches fronting the Gulf of Gaeta, Naples and Salerno. The first two were rejected due to the many obstacles. The twenty mile stretch of Salerno beach was chosen because of the excellent sea approaches which would permit ships to come close to the land. Fighter craft based in Sicily would be able to cover the assault landings. The operation would be called AVALANCHE.

General Mark Clark was in charge of the Fifth U.S. Army, part of AVALANCHE and second in command under General Eisenhower. The component of AVALANCHE was to be the VI Corps, with the 82nd Airborne, the 1st. Armored and the 34th. and 36th. Infantry Divisions.

The 34th. Division was a national guard unit with troops originally from North Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota. I was attached to the 135th. Infantry Battalion. On September 9, 1943 we were told to get on deck and climb down a rope ladder to awaiting landing craft. Landing ships and landing craft used in the landings consisted of LCT's (LANDING CRAFT TANK), LCM's (LANDING CRAFT MECHANIZED), DUKW's (2 1/2 TON AMPHIBIOUS TRUCKS), LCVP's (LANDING CRAFT, VEHICLE and PERSONNEL), LCA's (LANDING CRAFT ASSAULT), and LCP's (LANDING CRAFT PERSONNEL).

Approaching Salerno, the convoys reached their destination near the Salerno beaches after dark on September 8, 1943. Before midnight, a call to general quarters sounded and landing craft moved into position for their descent into the water. Ammo and weapons were collected and placed inside the landing craft. Landing nets and ropes were lowered and we clambered from the transport into the landing boats with the usual orderly confusion. We wore wool clothing and each man carried a full canteen of water, a 60 lb. backpack, a rifle, a bandolier of bullets strapped across each shoulder, a cartridge belt and hand grenades. We were a walking time bomb. We also carried toilet articles, a mess kit, two chocolate bars known as D-rations and one boxed K-ration meal. Also included in the backpack was a blanket roll and one suit of fatigues. The sea was pretty choppy and it was difficult getting into the small craft as it was bobbing up

and down with each wave. The boats pulled away from the transports and headed for the rendezvous area three or four miles off shore. It took almost three or four hours to get all the assault craft, troops and their equipment to the rendezvous area. As the L.C.M's were loaded we circled around the mother boat until all the small craft were loaded. About 3:00 a.m. the boats headed toward the Salerno beaches. There was much confusion and the troops met much more resistance here than in North Africa. Not all the units hit their assigned beaches on schedule and enemy fire prevented an inland advance in an orderly manner as prescribed by the plans. We soon found that nothing goes according to plan.

From the heights that loomed over the beaches, and Monte Soprano in particular, came flashes and sounds of enemy fire. Flares of all colors illuminated the sky while the crisscrossing of tracers of machine guns flashed over the beaches. The Germans had loaded heavy long range artillery onto railroad cars. They were able to fire from twenty miles inland, well protected from our ships' gun fire. The gun was called Big Bertha, mounted on railroad tracks, and they were hitting us with unrelenting accuracy. Landing craft struck by enemy fire burned near shore and equipment and bodies floated in the water. Survivors swam for shore as their boats sunk beneath them. As we were approaching Salerno we were attacked, strafed and bombed by German bombers and Stuka fighter planes. As my small craft was heading toward the beach we got stuck on a sandbar and became grounded about a hundred yards from shore. We sat there helplessly while the strafing and bombing continued around us. We stayed there until high tide finally released us and we were able to continue landing on the beach. Once on shore there was mass confusion until different groups were able to assemble as one unit and move cautiously inland. We would drive forward only to be driven back as the Germans counterattacked, driving us back almost to the sea. But, with the heavy barrage from our destroyers firing continuously, we were able to hold our ground and advance forward to higher ground.

The landing forces were from General Mark Clark's Fifth Army.

American losses on the approach were fairly heavy because they would adhere more strictly than the British to Clark's order that there was to be no supporting bombardment . . . a major mistake. There were major German air attacks on the landings and the Germans maintain pressure on the Salerno beachhead. But Allied air support and Naval gun support prevented any significant successes on their part. The battle continues and the most critical moments on shore for the Americans occurred during two German attacks. But antitank weapons and Naval gun

fire had arrived in time and diminished the threat. The bazookas turned out to be a great defensive weapon accounting for at least seven tanks. Late in the afternoon of Sept. 9, 1943 it was reported that enemy units were moving North from the toe of Italy toward Salerno. There was concern that the Fifth Army might be driven back into the sea. General Clark thought of alerting his troops to the need of destroying equipment and supplies piled high on the beaches in the event of a German breakthrough. The Allies were under constant pressure and the Germans were claiming another Dunkirk. The German General Vietinghoff not only wanted to drive the Allies from the beaches but prevent their escape. Germans push us back to within a mile of the sea and the reason we were pushed back was because the British General Montgomery was jealous that the upstart Americans were advancing and gaining ground so he purposely held his troops back so that we would be pushed back into the sea and then he would come upon the scene, come to the rescue, and claim glory for having saved us. There were times when it seemed that the American and British generals were playing games as to who would get to a certain place first, not considering the countless lives lost and placed in jeopardy, all in the name of glory. The Germans overran several American positions and more than 500 officers and men were lost, most of them captured. General Clark arranged to evacuate his headquarters on ten minutes notice and take a P.T. boat to another location. Meanwhile enemy glider bombs damaged American and British cruisers and two hospital ships.

Due to the heavy enemy bombing the harbor of Salerno was closed for two weeks.

The Fifth Army found itself at the edge of defeat on the evening of September 13, 1943. Montgomery coming up from the South stopped his advance to give his troops two days of rest. This did nothing to ease the critical situation at the Salerno beachhead. With American strikes and Naval gunfire the beach was secured and there would be no retreat. But reinforcements were badly needed and American paratroopers were to drop far behind the German front. Their purpose to harass lines of communication and disrupt movement of reinforcements from the North. Some forty planes took-off carrying 600 men. Jumping around midnight the troops in eleven of the planes came to earth ten miles from the drop zone. Those in twelve other planes landed between eight and twenty-five miles away and two planes were still unaccounted for a month later. Only fifteen planes placed troops within four or five miles of the target. Broken terrain made it impossible to consolidate, and most of the equipment was lost or entangled in the

treetops. Eventually 400 men trickled back to our line but the effort had little or no effect on the battle of the Salerno beachhead.

With Allied pressure increasing, the German General Vietinghoff, withdrew his forces on the night of September 18, 1943 and the battle of Salerno was finally over. It had been, for a while, a very serious situation.

The British forces, who were coming up from the South and were to assist the Americans at Salerno, finally met. But the arrival of the British Eighth Army had no particular significance to the outcome of the battle. The troops at Salerno had fought it out all alone, and they had won. General Mark Clark believed that Montgomery could have done more to help the Fifth Army. There was friction between Clark and Montgomery over the fact that in the British press release it was stated that Montgomery's army was dashing up the Italian boot in order to rescue the American Fifth Army. Later they recanted the statement and stated that there was doubt whether they influenced matters to any great extent. General Alexander saw that the battle of Salerno was won long before the British Eighth Army arrived. The American losses totaled 3,000 men, British around 5,500. Enemy casualties totaled about 3,500 men. During the German air strikes it was known that the Germans were using women to pilot their planes. This was later confirmed by the downed planes.

With the British forces advancing from the South, we were able to head toward the mountains and liberate Naples on the way. By October 1, 1943 the Fifth Army entered Naples. The 34th. Division bypassed Naples and begins to advance its main forces once again. By October 6, 1943 the Fifth Army advances slowly, due to the mountainous terrain, mud, land mines and the constant shelling by the Germans, who had the advantage of being in command of the higher terrain for unlimited observation. The Fifth Army drives on to the Volturno River where the Germans plan to make a stand. My 135th infantry went into action when it received orders to cross the Volturno River. The Volturno was the first large scale obstacle which the Germans had decided to defend since the breakout of the Salerno beachhead. Since the Germans had blown up all the bridges spanning the river we were ordered to cross the river, which was swift and swollen from the heavy autumn rains. We were to lead the assault in the first three crossings of the Volturno that the regiment was to make over the winding river. About one hundred 105 guns and 155 howitzers opened fire on Oct.13. A short time later we slid down the muddy banks of the Volturno, some to wade through the water, others to paddle across in assault

boats. The artillery covered the crossing points with high explosives and smoke. The swift current swept assault boats out of the crossing lines. Men wading in shoulder-deep water lost radios and mine detectors. Enemy machine gun fire from the flat fields close to the river bank and from the olive groves on the hill slopes added to the hazard. It took almost five hours for our assault battalion to get completely across the river. The Americans moved rapidly and less than an hour after the initial crossings we were sending prisoners to the rear. Despite the quick crossing by the 34th, the operation almost came to a halt because all good bridging sites in the division zone remained under German observation. Having cleared a substantial bridgehead almost four miles deep, the 34th. was ready to take up pursuit operations. The division had lost 130 men during the crossing on the first day. The Volturno River meanders in large loops through olive groves. The autumn rains had swelled the river and turned the valley into deep mud. Enemy resistance was not as great as that of Mother Nature with rain-rain-rain and mud half way up my leg and over my boots. The 135th was to force crossing over a fifteen mile stretch of the river. The Volturno River was from 150 to 220 feet in width and five or more feet in depth but made swift by the relentless rains. One of our Lieutenants led the platoon by swimming across the swiftly-flowing river with a guide rope and secured the end to a tree or a boulder. This enabled the balance of the battalion to cross hand over hand amid the German sniper fire, the constant shelling and land mines. Three times the Volturno River lay in the path of the 135th. infantry and it had to be crossed in the same manner each time. During the first crossing, as in the remaining two, all observation was with the Germans. The Germans had the entire line stretched with interlocking machine gun fire and had artillery zeroed in on the likely sites for bridge construction or troop crossings. Also, pillboxes and bunkers were located in positions with great fields of fire. The 135th. jumped off their attack behind a smoke screen with the protecting fire of big guns and howitzers. During the entire operation of the three crossings most of the supplies were carried on backs at night. Trips varied from 1000 yards to four miles and most of it was through mountainous terrain. Many times it was possible to eat only one cold meal in 24 hours and that would be at night, huddled in a hay stack, or a bombed out building. Disease, as well as the enemy, had been taking a toll on the regiment. During this phase of the crossing hundreds were evacuated because of illness. The regiment was up against the shrewd German offenses in all their many days of combat in North Africa and Italy. The Germans had been laying mine fields in one sector for over two months and as we approached the opposite river bank we would always

lose many men because of the heavy mine fields the Germans laid. In order to get around the minefields as we advanced, the 135th drove sheep and goats ahead to locate safe routes. The formidable German defenses were aided by the river, swollen by recent rains, and the surrounding roadless hillsides. The combination of bad weather, inadequate roads and German demolitions meant that until the ground hardened in the spring, Allied advances must hinge around three or four major roads. Crossing the Volturno River presented a problem because the Germans blew up all the bridges before retreating. The only way for us to get across the river would be to go hand over hand by a rope straddling the river. This was a tedious and dangerous situation. We crossed the river in columns, some of the men in assault boats. Others like me waded through the icy waters holding rifles over our heads with one hand while clinging to the guide ropes with the other hand. The Germans were in command of the higher ground and they had us in their gun sites as we tried to cross the river. Those of us who made it across the river ran into minefields. With each step mines were detonated and all you could hear is screaming G.I.'s and shouts for Medics. As the bodies were being blown up in front of me I was able to avoid where the mines were by going around or over fallen bodies and continue to move forward. Casualties were very high with legs and arms blown off, and as the shrapnel shot up into the faces it caused blindness and facial disfiguring. The Germans had land mines that, when stepped upon or tripped, would jump up into the air and explode with shrapnel hitting every part of your body, causing blindness, severe wounds and even death. As we moved forward we would cross the Volturno River at least three times as we moved North. The battle on the Volturno River goes on and the battle has moved North, but the Germans are dug in and are still defending every inch expertly.

In the Fifth Army sector the Germans begin a fighting withdrawal to the Barbara Line. The 34th attacked the town of Dragoni and, after heavy bombing and hand to hand combat, sent the Germans fleeing. In the latter part of October, the 45th Division takes Piedmonte while on our left, the 3rd Division and the 34th advance on either side of the Volturno River. A few days later the advance moves at a slow pace and the 34th captures the town of Saint Angelo again after stubborn resistance and heavy losses. The 135th Infantry was to take high ground and penetrated four miles. The operation lost about 130 men during the crossing. The fighting before Monte Casino would take place in desolate mountains, creased by narrow valleys and deep gorges, on brush covered heights, bald slopes, and high table lands, along unpaved roads and mule tracks

hugging mountain ledges. Late autumn weather would add fog and mud to the difficulties of the terrain. The 135th had captured the village of Rurano on the morning of Oct.15,1943 and met stiff resistance but were able to advance to Dragoni. The 135th again forded the swift Volturno River moving during the hours of darkness to avoid enemy fire. Hampered by swampy ground, German artillery fire, and land mine fields the regiment moved four miles. The Germans introduced their newest weapon, the Nebelwerfer rockets (called Screaming Meemies), because they made a screaming noise when launched. The 34th Division had suffered more than 350 casualties in that particular week. When halted by larger forces, usually defending an obstruction, for example, a demolished bridge, the regiment kept one

battalion on the axis of advance to maintain contact and protect deployment of artillery. Meanwhile the other battalions took to the hills to outflank the enemy positions. Mules would become necessary due to the trackless mountains and they were hard to come by because the mules had to be shipped from the states. I remember leading a pack of mules, loaded down with mortars, machine guns, and ammo, climbing up this steep mountain trail not much wider than about six feet. The slightest slip would send the mules and G.I.'s tumbling down the mountain side. We did this many times because the Germans thought that we wouldn't be able to accomplish outflanking them around the mountain.

The first week in November begins major attacks by the Fifth Army against the German Reinhard Line. The attacks make little progress but are continued with no decisive success as both sides organize attacks and counter attacks. The 34th Division was again ready to cross the Volturno River wading the swift icy waters. The advance was deadly due to the trip wires seemingly attached to every grape vine, fruit tree and haystack. The 34th Division struggled over a series of scrub-covered hills, clearing routes through mined areas by drawing sheep and goats ahead of the troops. Heavy casualties were incurred while engaging in extensive patrols in addition to the constant exposure to rain and cold. The attacks make little progress but are continued with no decisive success as both sides organize attacks and counterattacks. It seemed like when we would take one mountain there would be another one even steeper and higher. The climb would be so difficult that mules were called up to carry our mortars,machine guns and supplies. This climb would be under heavy German shelling and rain, with ankle deep mud, made it very difficult to make much progress. We were a haggard bunch of soldiers but we were moving rapidly, taking one mountain after another and after four months of continuous combat,

living like animals with no warm or clean clothes, wet socks and shoes, we had a surprise visit from our leader General Mark Clark.

When we lined up for inspection he had the nerve to reprimand us for not having our shoes shined and our clothes clean and pressed. He was always miles behind our lines where he had a nice place to sleep, warm meals prepared for him every day and didn't have to sleep in fox holes in rain and mud. We were the pawns on his big chess board where he could move us anywhere he wanted.

About this time Alexander calls off the Fifth Army's attacks because we are tired and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Casualties have been heavy and the stubborn German defense, backed by the rugged terrain and shocking weather, shows no sign of cracking. There is growing air and ground activity in the Fifth Army's sector as diversionary attacks and other moves are made in preparation for the resumption of the offense.

In order to advance further there must be patrols sent out each night in order to find out exactly where the enemy is located and hopefully to capture some German prisoners for interrogation. This particular night I was volunteered, by my sergeant, to go out on patrol. I was one of ten and we started towards the enemy lines. It was pitch black, and we penetrated well into their lines and we could hear them talking among themselves. We moved as silently as possible without running into their guards. Having established their position we headed back to our lines, however we were able to capture a couple of Germans and bring them back for interrogation. Their days would be spent in some prison camp in the U.S. while we had to continue fighting, not knowing when the next bullet or shell would hit us. Upon returning with these prisoners there was always the thought of shooting them for all the trouble they caused us but level headed thinking prevailed as they were brought back to our line. On another daylight patrol we were going up to the top of this mountain and as we rounded a turn we were ambushed. They were shooting everything at us and the platoon suffered heavy casualties. Our platoon sergeant, unfortunately, was hit with a 20mm shell in the stomach and with his guts splattered all over the place, he died instantly in front of me.

The fighting was always fierce during the winter month of December. The days and nights were bitter cold with snow and mud. I was always cold and my shoes, socks, and clothing were always wet. I would keep an extra pair of socks inside my shirt where my body heat would keep them dry. My feet were always wet and cold with numbness and no feeling.

While advancing we would be so exhausted that finding an abandoned house or hay stack would be a welcomed place to keep dry and possibly catch a few winks of sleep. This wasn't always the smartest thing to do because the Germans would booby trap or mine these buildings and haystacks and they knew that we would use the buildings and haystacks for shelter. When you are cold and tired you disregard all the dangers and a swift death would be welcomed.

There were times when there was a lull in the fighting. I was able to pitch my tent to get dry and keep warm and, with a small candle burning, in a can I was able to keep warm. It's amazing how much heat that little candle can give off. The comfort of the tent didn't last very long because the snow fall was so great that the tent would collapse on top of me. The fighting in the Fifth Army's sector would continue for several days but there would be no decisive gains for either side and the Allied momentum is slowed down.

Around the middle of December the new phase of the Fifth Army's attacks began with a drive toward San Pietro with heavy fighting and the Germans are driven out. Violent German counterattacks all along the Fifth Army's front, and the Fifth Army is battling wearily and almost fruitlessly against the German defenses. The Germans are using a new piece of artillery. This consists of a battery of about ten or twenty tubes connected together and firing one after another. The noise would sound like loud screams. We would call them the Screaming Meemies.

We would always know when they would be coming towards us because of the screaming sound they made. With all these shells coming at us, all at once, there was no place to take cover or to hide. We would listen to the boom of their guns and would wait and listen. If we could hear the sound of the shells going overhead then we knew it would be safe. But if we heard the boom of their guns and not the sound then we knew that they would hit us shortly and all hell would break loose with many casualties. All we could do was lie down on the ground, with your head down and pray that you wouldn't get blown apart or riddled with shrapnel. If we were in a woods or forest the shells would burst in the trees and there would be a shower of jagged shrapnel raining down upon us, causing many casualties.

Early in January, 1944 the 34th. Division completed the capture of Cervarno and pushes forward to Cassino. Crossing the Rapido River became another challenge similar to the Volturno River operation. The German defenses of the Rapido Valley, is the formidable Cassino position, are taken and the Fifth Army has closed up to the Gustav Line all along its front. Despite the heavy fighting of the past weeks it must continue to attack to play its part in drawing off German

reserves before the Anzio operation. Fruitless attacks by the 34th. Division on the Gustav Line continues. Around Cassino the 34th. makes a final unsuccessful attempt to move forward the last few hundred yards to the Cassino monastery from the North. The main line of resistance in the belt of defenses called the Gustav line was on the far side of the Rapido River. Starting early in November the field of fortifications along the west bank of the Garigliano, Gari and Rapido Rivers were designated the "final line" of defense south of Rome. The line was rooted in the high ground backing the Garigliano in the Sant Ambrogio area, on the steep and barren slopes of Monte Cassino. Among the jumbled mountain peaks near the source of the Rapido River, the Germans had blasted and dug weapon pits, built concrete bunkers and steel-turreted machine gun emplacements, strung bands of barbed wires and planted mine fields, making lavish use of box mines. Box mines were difficult to detect because it had almost no metallic parts to block the few natural advantages of advance. They had sighted mortars on reverse slopes and placed automatic weapons to cover the forward slopes. In the town of Cassino they had strengthened the walls of stone buildings with sand bags to protect the weapons crews.

The heights above Cassino gave the Germans well-nigh perfect observation of the approaching Allied forces. Symbolizing the strength of the Gustav Line was the Benedictine Abbey on the top of Monte Cassino, which looked to the South with hypnotic gaze, all seeing, like the eyes in a painting that follow the spectator whenever he moves. To the Allied soldiers on the plain below the glistening white abbey on the peak watched them with German eyes from which there was no concealment.

While occupying one of the mountains before Monte Cassino we were strafed and bombed by air and ground. I remember while I was on top of this mountain we were so high up that when the German planes came around the mountain I could see the pilots in the cockpit of their planes. I could have easily shot at any one of them but I didn't because if I had fired he would have seen me and coming around again he would have strafed and bombed us to bits. We were bogged down on top of this mountain and each day, wave after wave of our bombers would drop tons of bombs on the approaches of Monte Cassino with little success because the Germans had dug their big guns and tanks into the hillside with only their muzzles sticking out of the hillside. The bombing went on for a whole month and meanwhile we were under constant bombardment day and night. Nerves were shattered with many soldiers suffering from shell shock and I for one almost fell into that category. Casualties were heavy and replacements were coming in every day.

I remember one replacement arrived and we were being bombarded quite heavily. He dug his foxhole next to mine and it wasn't too long when I heard a shot and as I looked over he was so afraid and panicky that he took the easy way out by shooting himself in the leg. His war was over and he would be shipped back to the states and probably get a purple heart for being wounded in action. The mountain was so high we could see for many miles in every direction. We had a forward artillery observer calling back distances to the artillery battalion and at times he would call distances too short and the artillery would fire shells onto our position resulting in many unnecessary casualties. One day one of our shells fell into my foxhole and luckily I had gone to the lister water bag to fill my canteen with water. If I had been in my foxhole I would have been blown to pieces.

The Germans were shelling us constantly and because we were so high up on the mountain their shells barely made it over the top and the shells would explode hitting the trees and causing the shrapnel to rain down upon us, resulting in wounds over exposed parts of our bodies. There is no way to protect yourself under these circumstances. It was during one of these bombings that, while lying in my foxhole while shrapnel was raining down all around us, I felt something hit my right foot. I looked back to see what had happened and noticed that my boot had been cut open and blood was oozing out of my heel. I didn't feel any pain because my feet were numb due to the weeks and months of wet and cold weather. I lay there until after the bombing had ceased and called for a Medic. He applied sulfur powder and applied a bandage. He told me that it was impossible to carry anyone down the mountain because in the first place the trail was too steep and the Germans had their guns zeroed on us all the way down. Being carried down on a stretcher was too dangerous. I would have to make my way down on my own. I hobbled and slid my way down the mountain, all the time being heavily bombed. All the way down there were piles of bodies piled six feet high, the result of the continuous bombings. They would have to lie there until the dead squad was able to come up to remove them. On the way down I noticed a group of French soldiers sitting around a huge bonfire and it was soon evident that the reason we were being so heavily shelled was because that bonfire presented a target for the German artillery. I see now why the French lost the war in Europe. They weren't very good fighters. Slipping and sliding down the mountain I went past piles of dead soldiers and the Medics no way to bring them down from the mountain due to the constant bombings. After a few hours I was able to reach the base of the mountain where an ambulance was waiting to take the wounded back to a

hospital behind the lines. The Medic no sooner made me comfortable in the ambulance when the Germans rained down a barrage of bombs and we had to scramble out of the ambulance and try to find cover. But there was no where to take cover so we all hit the dirt and lay there while shells were exploding all around. The clanging of shrapnel rained down upon us hitting every part of my body. The shrapnel, chunks of steel, were landing all around me but luckily the shrapnel bounced off my backpack and body harmlessly. When the bombing ceased we got into the ambulance again and arrived safely at the base hospital behind the lines. The base hospital consisted of a bunch of tents in a muddy field. I was made comfortable with a nice warm cot and finally some hot prepared food, something I hadn't seen in many months. The next day we were driven to the Naples airport where a hospital plane was waiting. I was carried by stretcher to the plane along with other wounded soldiers. We were secured, still on our stretchers, and flown to a huge main hospital in Oran, Algeria, North Africa. While flying to the hospital I felt somewhat guilty because I had a minor injury compared to others who had lost their arms or legs, and still others who were blinded by land mines. This was a very difficult moment for me and this guilt feeling bothers me even to this day. At the base hospital I was given excellent care, warm place to eat, sleep and warm weather. It was like I had awakened and found myself in heaven. My stay in the hospital was about two months and they figured that I was healthy enough to be shipped back to my division. I got orders to pack up and be ready to move out. I boarded a somewhat smaller ship than the troop ship I boarded when we shipped off for Italy the first time. We were at sea a few days in rough waters and the waves tossed the ship so badly that most of us were sea sick, hanging over the side of the ship throwing up. We finally landed in the port of Naples and from there I was taken to a replacement depot outside of Naples in a little town of Bagnoli. I had the impression that I would return to my division but after a few days they decided to keep me behind and transferred me to the 605 Ordnance Battalion near Naples. I was placed in a pyramidal tent with three other soldiers. I had the upper bunk and my job was to work in the machine shop, since I'd had some training in the machine shop, in what used to be a Fiat assembly plant. We made replacement parts and made repairs for our Jeeps, trucks, tanks and other vehicles brought back from the front lines. We had three meals a day and worked an 8 hour shift each day with weekends free.

My days on the front were over and I was able to visit historic places in Southern Italy.