

The deadly Volturno, coiling back on itself like a snake, had to be crossed three times. The doughs tug themselves along a rope set up by daring swimmers.

ACME



Champion Hard-Luck Division

By MILTON LEHMAN

The forgotten men of the forgotten front—the Old Red Bulls of the 34th—set a combat record that few envied them.

IN the days before Pearl Harbor, when the draft began, the first citizens came to the training camps to be formed into new American divisions. There, standing before their commanders in baggy OD pants and brass-buttoned blouses, they heard much the same greeting, no matter what outfit they were joining:

“Men, always remember that you belong to the best platoon of the best company of the best regiment of the best division of the best army that ever marched on the face of the earth.”

Four years and three winter campaigns later, the tired old men of the 34th (Red Bull) Infantry Division who remembered those days gave this somewhat different greeting to the fresh replacement joining them on the battle line in Italy:

“Man, you’re now in the tireddest platoon of the most wretched company of the longest-fighting regiment of the saddest division of the United States Army. You’re in the forgotten outfit of the forgotten front, where the communiqués say there’s only patrolling and artillery, and don’t say how patrols and artillery can kill you off, and the guys around you, one by one.

“And what does the brass say? It says: ‘Those old Red Bulls, just leave them there in the mountains, give them the mountains to fight in and forget them. Leave them sitting seven miles from Bologna for six months and don’t give them a second thought.’ That’s what the brass says.

“Now you’re one of us, man, a Red Bull, and you’ll be overseas all your natural life, and all you’ll have ahead is another mess of hills and kraut guns and mine fields and wire. Around you the ground’ll be a mudhole and the skies’ll be lousy with rain and you’ll stay on and fight until you get shot and taken off in a litter or carried out in a

mattress cover. So pull up a slit trench, son, and make yourself at home.”

In this state of mind, the old men of the 34th Division looked down on the mud-swamped road they called Easy Street, looked down from their drenched holes and watched a jeep swing in from the main highway. The jeep’s wheels spun, spewed mud, then caught, slowly oozed a few feet, then stopped.

Out stepped a medium-sized soldier, wearing a circlet of five shining stars on each shoulder of his overcoat. He was Gen. George C. Marshall, the highest brass in the United States Army, the chief of staff. Now, as every dogface knows, the big brass may, on occasion, visit regimental command posts and talk over the war with the colonels, who stand at rigid attention and salute before and after.

But what the chief himself might be doing on Easy Street, the men could not make out. There were no colonels within a thousand yards. Down on the mud road were some bearded engineers, shoveling mud, a company runner slogging back to battalion headquarters, a squad of infantrymen hauling C rations up from the company dump.

“He must ‘a’ got lost,” observed a corporal.

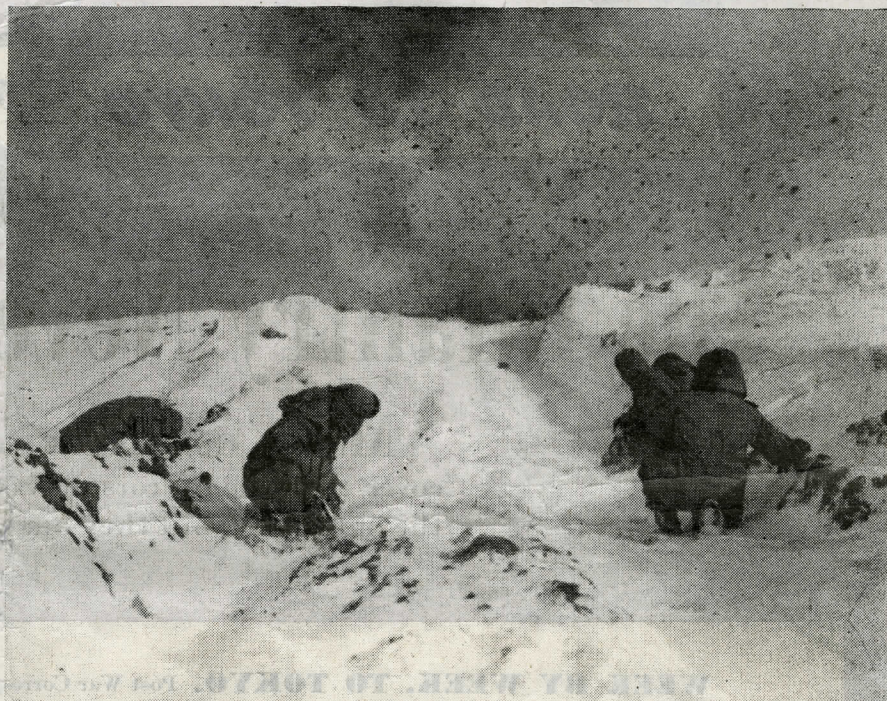
While the men listened, General Marshall began talking to them, speaking slowly and casually, like a traveling salesman at an Iowa farmhouse. He’d just come back from Yalta, he told the men as they gathered around him—from Yalta, where the even higher brass had agreed on future plans.

The battle line around the Germans was being drawn tight, he went on, and “each front belongs to the circle. But you men have been in the line a long time and you’re tired,” he said. “Looking out from your foxholes, you can’t always see how you fit with men in other foxholes on other fronts.”



SIGNAL CORPS PHOTO

"... soft underbelly of Europe"? Don't tell that to the 34th.
An ambulance collects a casualty on the Volturno front.



SIGNAL CORPS PHOTO

"... it rained, and after it rained, it snowed." Pinned
down by Nebelwerfers, 133rd Regiment infantrymen dig in.

One soldier rubbed the stubble of his beard and another tried to shake the mud from his combat boots as the general told how the Russians had planned their great offensive, and then swept on to the banks of the Oder River. The men watched with tired eyes as the general told how the armies in France were punching their way up to the Rhine.

The chief then spoke of Italy; the men on Easy Street moved in closer. "This is the tough front," he was telling them, "and you're in the toughest part of it. You're here because we want you here," he said; "we planned it that way. You're tying down German divisions, keeping them from hitting Eisenhower in the west or the Russians in the east. Later, you'll attack. That's the job you're assigned," the chief told them. "And that," he added quietly, "is the job you're going to do." The general climbed back into his jeep and started down the road toward another group of Red Bull soldiers. On Easy Street the engineers went back to their shovels, the doughs picked up their ration cases and began slowly climbing the mud-swamped trail to the mountain above Bologna. The Germans were still ahead; the battle would still go on.

In Italy the 34th Division was known as a hard-luck outfit. It was the first United States division to reach Europe in World War II and it served more than 500 days in the line—longer than any other American division in the European theater. But compared to other divisions with flashier assignments, the Red Bulls appeared drab. While others made headlines by capturing big towns, the Red Bulls plodded along in the backbreaking Italian hills. They seemed to be always in combat, never in the news.

But when the war was over and the casualties were counted, the Red Bulls could chart the cost of battle: the dead—3255; the wounded—14,060; and the missing, the men not yet accounted for—3416. The wounded alone more than equaled the strength of the entire division when it embarked for Europe. The dead equaled the strength of the division's combat infantry, the front-line soldiers who spearheaded the 34th through two and one half years of battle from their first day of combat on the beaches of Algiers.

The 34th Division was a National Guard outfit. Its officers and noncoms came from the small towns and farms of Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas, where they had drilled one night a week in the armories. With the draft, they were called to Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, and assigned to train some 10,000 selectees into Red Bull soldiers. After Pearl Harbor, with the training half begun, the division was ordered overseas.

The first American doughboy to land in Europe in this war was a Red Bull, lean-faced Pfc. Milburn H. Henke, of Hutchinson, Minnesota. He marched

down the gangplank of a British troopship into Belfast, Northern Ireland, leading his division ashore on January 26, 1942. On the dock he posed in his flat 1918 helmet, his gas mask, overcoat, canvas leggings and M-1 rifle. Photographers took his picture and reporters told the world that once again the Yanks had come.

Eight months later, the British Isles were an armed camp. Together with other American divisions, the Red Bulls had crammed themselves with battle facts by day and learned about fish and chips and British pubs by night. Then, in October, they packed their barracks bags, rolled their field packs and formed in columns of twos. A few days later they sailed south.

With Algiers their objective, the Red Bulls swarmed onto the African beaches in the early morning of November 8, 1942. It was hardly an expert landing. One Red Bull regiment found itself seventeen miles from the assigned beach, and very wet, to boot.

"All we could see was sand," said Cpl. Harry Ewing, of Des Moines. "The Navy landed some crates behind us and someone hollered, 'Haul up the ammo and let's get going!' Only there wasn't any ammo in the crates—just a carload of mosquito nets and a chaplain's organ."

Later, after the French surrender, the men could joke about the landing. But it was still no joke to remember how the first man with the Red Bull patch fell—the hum of the bullet, the flat smack as it hit, the shocked look, the sudden tenseness and the limp falling forward in the moonlit sand.

It was the tangerine season in Algeria, but the Red Bulls had little time for sampling tangerines. There was plenty of red wine in the taverns and red-lipped girls speaking French on the boulevards, but before the Red Bulls could learn "Comment allez-vous?" it was time to push on to Tunisia.

In the nightmare country of Tunisia, cracked open by deep ravines and ridged by barren hills, the 34th was broken up, their battalions and regiments ordered into hastily formed combat commands and rushed to the front. Not until the campaign was nearly over did the Red Bulls fight under their own divisional command.

At Christmas, the Red Bulls were scattered over the long Tunisian battleground. On the northern sector were the 34th artillerymen, sparring with the Germans on the rain-drenched front near Medjez-el-Bab, celebrating Noël with a cold C ration of meat and beans and vegetable hash. Farther south, one battalion of infantry spent Christmas Eve digging slit trenches near

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SIGNAL CORPS PHOTO

"The stalemate before Bologna continued all winter." In
the uphill fight, the 34th faced the toughest Nazi units.

CHAMPION HARD-LUCK DIVISION

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the supply base of Tebessa. They made good use of them during a midnight strafing by German Stukas. At dawn, looking out on the desert, they saw a caravan of Arabs going by, beating their sad-eyed burros, and wished one another a merry Christmas. "I guess the burros made us feel better," said a mortar corporal. "Nothing ever looked sadder than an African burro."

Then, in February, at Faid Pass and Kasserine, the Red Bull battalions met defeat for the first time. The Germans were striking for Tebessa, the supply base, just as two years later they would strike at Liège, in Belgium, attempting to split the western front. The Germans smashed at mountain-buttressed Kasserine Gap, where they threatened to unhinge the entire Allied line. At Faid, they engulfed the Red Bulls in a rush of infantry and armor.

Defeat was a sobering experience, which neither the Red Bulls nor Americans at home were spiritually prepared to accept. On the battlefield that night, farmers and mechanics from Iowa and Minnesota lay dead in the desert. Those who lived, trapped behind the German lines, were marched off to the German prisoner camps.

The Red Bulls read in the columns of homeside papers that American troops were too green to combat seasoned German veterans, that Americans lacked hate, didn't know why they were fighting, and now faced only defeat, disaster and death.

But the men wearing the division's red-and-black patch again formed ranks, took even greener recruits into their companies and went back into battle. From both flanks of the shattered front, other divisions were rushed into action. The Allied Air Force threw in desperate all-out assaults on the krauts. The enemy drive was stopped.

While General Montgomery's desert army was breaking through the German lines from the east, the Red Bulls were brought under their own division's command. Fighting as a unit, they stormed Hill 609, a rock-studded knob marking the key defense of Tunis. Against an avalanche of machine-gun and mortar fire, the Red Bulls seized the hill and held it. Many military observers consider the taking of Hill 609 as the greatest achievement of the North African campaign.

The Soft-Underbelly Myth

The German defenses collapsed. The Red Bulls pushed stubbornly on toward Bizerte, meeting resistance all along the way. When they got there, they were greeted by the American 9th Infantry Division which had found a breach and rushed into the city. "What's been keeping you?" asked a 9th Division soldier, sitting comfortably on a curb.

During the Sicilian campaign, the Red Bulls warmed the bench. They marched and trained. They were given bathing privileges on the Mediterranean beaches and passes into town. There they learned to say "Vous êtes très gentille" and "Voulez-vous promenade avec moi?" and to ask by means of gestures, "Is it altogether necessary that your mother sit here watching us?" Then it was time to move on to Italy.

The Italian campaign was launched with high optimism. Some Allied leaders called it "the beginning of the

end," since hadn't Winston Churchill himself described Italy as "the soft underbelly of Europe"?

Before the Red Bulls reached Italy, the 5th Army assault troops on September ninth attacked Salerno and found the Germans waiting. Instead of a soft underbelly, they found a ridged backbone of endless mountains held by an unyielding enemy. When the Red Bulls docked in the shell-blasted harbor, they were no longer green. Remembering the hills of Tunisia, the old-timers were jarred by their first look at Italy. "All we could think of," said Sgt. Arnold Luedtke, of Creston, Nebraska, "were those damned mountains."

In October the Bulls were ordered to cross the Volturno River. Swift and turgid, in some places deep enough to cover a man's head, the Volturno runs down from the Apennines, coiling back and forth on itself like a snake. There is no worse combat terrain in Europe.

The Red Bulls were brought up at night to the river's steep, shrub-covered banks, quickly followed by convoys of food and ammunition, bridging equipment and gasoline. For a week, doughboys and engineers patrolled the river, wading across and coming back with reports on German gun positions.

On the night of October twelfth, artillery boomed, mortar shells screamed over the water, and the Bulls waded in. The Germans were ready. Looking across the river, Pvt. John Tracy, of Mattoon, Illinois, a recruit, watched the veterans crouching as phosphorus flares broke overhead. On the other side, he heard screaming and moaning. "Down at my feet someone was hollering, 'Look out for mines!'" said Tracy. "Then I saw him. He was lying in a pool of blood, and there were six others down near him, all of them gutted."

Across the river, the Bulls advanced. Alvignano fell, and after it Dragoni. Mud-soaked and weary, the doughs pushed on—and once more looked down on the Volturno, where it twisted back on itself. The second crossing was not much easier than the first. When it was over, the division pushed north and met the river for the third time.

After two Volturno crossings, the Red Bulls expected nothing but the worst. They were not disappointed. It was early morning, still dark, when they waded into the river, the Germans machine-gunning their assault waves, the dead tumbling into the cold, rushing current. The first troops to reach the north bank knocked out the German guns and then, by plan, formed skirmish lines and worked their way across the valley toward the mountains. They didn't get very far.

Wherever they stepped, there were mines. There were S-mines and Bouncing Betsys and wires strung up to grenades. The krauts had done a job. Beyond the mined valley were the mountains, and in the mountains were the German artillerymen, waiting for daybreak. If the Bulls stayed in the flat valley, the kraut gunners could mow them down like ducks in a shooting gallery. If they started across the valley toward the mountains, the mines would get them.

There was only one way to clear the mine field before morning, a colonel explained, only one way to move the battalion into the safety of the mountains ahead. There was no time for mine detectors. The men were to form in single file and walk across the mine field and, if the mines didn't get them, they'd be in the mountains by morning.

The first platoon started across the mine field, the second following closely. As the human mine detectors moved through the night, the lead men began setting off the first of the mines. The men behind them, moving forward with fear in their feet, saw the flash of mines, heard the muffled groans of the wounded and watched them fall forward, hugging shattered legs.

For some, it was too much. One Red Bull fell out of line, saying over and over again, "I can't make it!" Others fell out behind him, no matter how much the lieutenants and sergeants bellowed, "Fall in, fall in! Hold your places!"

But the thin line kept moving. At dawn, the men who had survived were beyond the mine field and entrenched in the mountains, with pockets of Germans cut off behind them. The men who had fallen out of line during the march were later called before the regimental colonel, who gave them a choice of rejoining their squads for the next battle or standing court-martial. Some elected to go back in the line.

After the mine-field march, the Red Bulls got a rest, their first in seventy-six days of continuous fighting in Italy. They were sent back to Naples, where Gen. Mark Clark had established his 5th Army rest center. In an old Fascist building, life was luxurious compared to the front. The men slept on cots equipped with sheets, pillows and pillowcases. They scraped off their beards, washed the Italian mud out of their hair and got some of the ache out of their bones.

The Price of a Hill

In the snack bar of the Red Cross club, the Red Bulls hashed over accounts of the Volturno and mine-field crossings. Sitting at the sidewalk bar, surrounded by ragged women carrying scabby-faced babies, the Bulls could feel like rich *Americanos*, bountifully passing out *caramelli* and *lire*.

On the cobblestone streets running up from Via Roma, they listened to the singsong wheedle of cognac peddlers. Although the Army newspaper Stars and Stripes printed a study of its likely effect on American stomachs, still the homemade cognac was one antidote to mine fields, mud and mountains. There were others. On the side streets, the Red Bulls saw mothers selling their daughters—"Multa buona, mia Maria"—and daughters selling their mothers and brothers selling their sisters.

During the late November rains, the Red Bulls were brought back to the front and ordered to assault Mount Pantano, a 3000-foot peak marking the outskirts of the German winter line. It looked no worse than the mountains faced by other 5th Army divisions. Also, it was off the main road to Rome and therefore should have been lightly defended. But Pantano, which made no headlines, turned into the costliest hill battle the Red Bulls ever faced.

The assault was launched by the 168th Regiment at six o'clock on a moonlit November morning. Capt. Ben Butler, of Milton, Kentucky, made a last-minute check of Company A before the jump-off. The men were tense. The rolling barrage was breaking on the mountain when the captain raised his arm and swung it forward. There was no resistance until they reached the crest, where they captured a handful of krauts. A few escaped down the hill and gave the alarm. Then, for six days and six nights, the Germans counterattacked. They hurled their first attack against the right flank of Company A,



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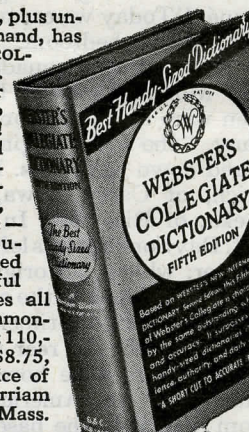
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where Sgt. Victor C. Guarneri was the only veteran left in his squad. When the first bullets cracked, the new replacements looked up at him.

The sergeant caught their look and roared, "Get the krautheads!"

All that week, fog sat on the mountain with the Red Bulls, while shells raked their positions. During the fog it rained, and after it rained, it snowed, covering the bodies of dead krauts and Red Bulls alike. After each attack, 88's and screaming *Nebelwerfers* took up the barrage. And after each barrage came the lonely cry, "Medics!"

During those days and nights, Capt. Emile Schuster, once a California country doctor, became a Red Bull legend. He refused to stay back in his aid-station dugout, tirelessly going up to the wounded on the hill. Cpl. Harry McQueen, a medic from St. Joseph, Missouri, saw the captain giving plasma during one of the worst barages, holding the bottle over the wounded man until it was shot out of his hand, then reaching into his musette bag for another. "That guy," said McQueen, "he was king of the hill."

On the morning of the seventh day, the Germans withdrew. The wounded were borne down the hill on the backs of mud-caked mules, came down supported by the medics and holding one another up. The American lines had been advanced by two miles.

The Red Bull regiment had paid 200 men in casualties for each of those miles, had lost all its battalion commanders and nine of its company commanders. Yet few men ever heard of the battle. The Allied communiqué for that day's action merely noted that the Americans had taken "certain high points" and "straightened out their lines."

After Pantano, the Bulls got a short rest. Then, in their second Christmas week of battle, they were back in action at San Vittore, a shell-blasted village cupped in the mountains. After San Vittore came Cervaro. And after Cervaro, in the mud-clogged, wind-blown last weeks of January, came Cassino.

One division had already attacked Cassino and failed when the Red Bulls were ordered to assault. When they reached the outskirts, the mountainsides and banks of the Rapido River were thick with the stench of decaying mules and men. For two weeks the Red Bulls fought for this monumental defense to Rome, and were then withdrawn. Later, military observers said the Red Bull attack might have carried the town if the assault had been reinforced by another regiment. As it turned out, Cassino blocked the Allies for four months. As a classic description of the fighting, the Red Bulls still recall Lt. Harry Hodgkins' communiqué: "Today we captured two living rooms and a bedroom."

In the infantry squads after Cassino and Mount Pantano, few of the old men were still in action. In one company, "the Iowa originals" had been pared down to S/Sgts. Everall Schonbrich, of Casey, Iowa, and Stanley Steka, of Riceville. In another, only Sgt. Ray Sonksen was left, from Grundy Center, which had originally supplied twenty-two men to the company.

The other old-timers were gone. Some were in the rear with battle fatigue, others were home on rotation. Many lay in American cemeteries from Algeria to the base of Montecassino. Those who had survived the battles for Tunisia and Italy were now leaders in their companies. To them,

the green troops, sent from every state in the Union, turned for help.

Brought up at night in convoys of blacked-out trucks, the new men listened for every noise, noticed every flash. When the trucks stopped, the replacements heard a Red Bull sergeant say, "Captain, the new shipment's here. What'll we do with them?" Then, with a veteran guiding them, they marched up to their platoon positions, past the scarred trees, past a mule coming down the shell-cratered path with the bodies of dead men on its back, and into battle. The replacements soon became Red Bulls themselves, as fiercely loyal to their division as the oldest veteran.

In March, 1943, the division was shipped to Anzio, where the Allies had attempted to outflank the Cassino bottleneck, and instead were surrounded and cut off by the Germans

Later, when his company attacked, they found the dead krauts.

In the drive on Rome, the 34th got an uphill assignment, headlong up a mountain toward the small town called Lanuvio. It was typical Red Bull luck. The Eternal City, prize of Italy, fell at last on June 4, 1944. For several weeks, Rome was full of liberated spirit. The Red Bulls saw none of it.

While the rear echelon moved into the bars and hotels of Rome, the Red Bulls were rushing north. They swept through Civitavecchia, against little resistance, and raced on to Leghorn, where the Germans staged a hard fight before giving up the port. The Bulls rushed into the town. They figured they could drive to the Alps. They should have known better than to expect something good, they figure now.

In July, with the Red Bulls still in pursuit, all the other old infantry divi-

began. All along the front, artillery roared, and by midmorning other divisions were cracking through weaker sectors of the German defense. They were pouring through Lugo and Carrara, the marble city. They were sweeping over the Frigido River, past the wrecked village of Torre Iussi, on through Misiola and Casigno, and down into the green valleys.

The Red Bulls, battering the heart of the German line, took no towns the first day and none the second. Instead, they marked an anniversary. From division headquarters and with the congratulations of their commander, Maj. Gen. Charles L. Bolte, they were informed that this was their 500th day of combat, that they had set a record over all other United States divisions in action. One of the veterans, a colonel who had come overseas as a Red Bull second lieutenant, observed, "We used to complain that we always did more fighting. Now we'll brag about it!"

But there wasn't any time to celebrate, not in that neighborhood. One platoon, led by Lt. Leo Goldberg, of the Bronx, after twenty-four hours of fighting and three bloody assaults, was still taking its first objective—a German outpost in a shattered church above a shell-pitted cemetery.

A few days later, the German defense wall caved. Bologna fell, and this time the Red Bulls were the first into town. Except for its outskirts, Bologna was undamaged and its people lined the streets to greet the liberators. Beyond the city, the Red Bulls saw the Po Valley, the long-promised flatland at the end of the Apennines, the end to all mountains. Looking at it for the first time, one of the Red Bulls said, "Coming out of those mountains into the flat, it gets me."

But another Red Bull—one of the originals—said, "It makes me sick to my stomach seeing that damned valley. All the good men who are gone because of it."

Then it was over; the German armies collapsed. In the great haul of prisoners, the 34th alone captured 40,000 and, with ironic justice, discovered in its prisoner bag the complete divisional staff, regimental command and last infantry remnants of the German 34th Infantry Division.

Near Milan, the prize industrial city of Italy, the Red Bulls moved into a rest area and set up camp. They waited for orders. They kept their beards shaved and shoes polished and watched the Army close in with garrison regulations. They counted discharge points for their months of Army service, for their medals and decorations, for their battle stars in Africa and Italy, for their children back home.

Then orders came and the veterans of the 34th with enough points for discharge were transferred to other divisions bound for home. Newer men, without enough points, were assigned to the Red Bulls. The battle-hardened face of the oldest division in Italy had been lifted.

But even the new men of the 34th, sweating out their final orders home from Italy, have fallen heir to the luck of the old Red Bulls. The latest report from Headquarters, Mediterranean Theater, schedules the Red Bull division to leave for the States sometime in December. Unless orders are changed, it is now likely that the 34th, the first American division to reach Europe in World War II, will be the last American division to leave Italy for home.



for four months. When the 34th docked at the small, blasted harbor of Anzio, the worst days of the beachhead battle were over. The 3rd Division, which had landed on D day and staved off the heaviest of enemy attacks, was exhausted. The Red Bulls, not feeling too lively themselves, relieved them.

Until the Allied breakout from Anzio and the drive on Rome, the 34th patrolled its sector, thickened the mine fields in no man's land and listened with horror to the sound of the Anzio Express, the giant railway gun the krauts fired down on them in the flatland.

By then, most of the Red Bulls were veterans at patrolling, but they were still awed by Pvt. Edwin Lemke, a 34th Division original from Webster City, Iowa. A slight, twenty-five-year-old farm boy, trained on bird hunting back in the Iowa woods, Lemke spent his days at Anzio studying the terrain for likely German dugouts. At night he took his captured German Luger and carbine, and went hunting alone. Next morning he reported in, "I got three in that dugout" or "You'll find four in that house down the road."

sions in Italy were called out of the line and sent back to Naples—the 36th, from Texas, which had fought beside the 34th since the Salerno landing; the 3rd Division, which had crossed the Volturno River with them; the 45th Division, from Oklahoma, which had flanked them at Anzio. With these old divisions named for the invasion of Southern France, the 34th, the last of the veterans, went on with the battle for Italy.

But the race was over. Facing the Gothic Line, the last great system of German defenses in Italy, even the new Red Bulls were tired. For the third time, the division was meeting winter, its worst enemy. In sodden slit trenches, the weary men sat out the dreadful weeks of rain and snow.

The stalemate before Bologna continued all winter and well into the spring. On other sectors of the forgotten front, new American divisions were making local attacks to keep the krauts on edge. But the Red Bulls, facing tougher German defenses, were ordered to hold and wait.

The Red Bulls were still waiting that April morning when the final offensive