

## **Chapter I • IRELAND • Beginning**

The entry of the United States into the war found the 34th Infantry Division already organized. Formed from the National Guard of Iowa, Minnesota, and North and South Dakota, the Division [under the command of Major General Ellard A. Walsh] was inducted into Federal service on 10 February 1941 and, after basic training at Camp Claiborne, [Louisiana,] took part in the Louisiana maneuvers. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, certain units were dispatched to key places in the southern states for security purposes, but hardly had they settled down to their first war job when they were ordered to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for the War Department had selected the 34th to be the first American Division to go to the European Theater of War in World War II. The destination was Northern Ireland.

The Commanding General, [then Major General Russell P Hartle,] with a small staff group and some elements of the Division, left for overseas almost at once to prepare for the main body. During their absence, and on practically no notice, the Division rapidly streamlined itself from a square to a triangular Division, which meant, unfortunately, that several units had to leave the Division. There was little time for regrets, though, for in three waves between 15 January 1942 and 13 May 1942 the Division shipped out, so that by the end of May the whole formation had concentrated in Ulster. The Division at once began a training program for small units which, especially as it was being executed overseas, had rather more urgency than the Louisiana maneuvers.

The country of Northern Ireland is wild and wet. Jagged hills and bare moors are dotted with peat bogs and cut by brown mountain torrents. The Division soon became accustomed to the difficulties of the cross-country movements which later were to form part of their daily existence in combat. Almost as soon as the Division had arrived in Ireland a call was made for volunteers to create the 1st Ranger Battalion, which may be said to have had its origins in the 34th Infantry Division. In order to create team spirit and cooperation with our British Allies, a number of exercises involving the services of both nations were held. Training for combat was intensified after Major General Charles W. Ryder assumed command of the Division on 12 June 1942, for the General was certain that more active duties than garrisoning a base lay ahead.

## **Chapter II • ALGIERS • Pretending**

In the early part of August [1942] confidential orders were received to move the 168th Regimental Combat Team from Ireland to Scotland in preparation for an undisclosed combat mission. While in Scotland the 168th RCT underwent rugged training for amphibious and mountain warfare. A small inkling of the type of operation which lay in the offing was obtained when volunteers were requested for No. 1 and No. 6 Commando, British units which specialize in amphibious raids and whose toughness is a byword in the Allied services. As training progressed, further orders were received from the High Command to constitute a planning group which was to move to London on an extremely secret mission. It was in London that it first became known that elements of the 34th Infantry Division had been selected to take a large part

in the first big Allied offensive of the war - the landing in North Africa. The mission was to seize the port of Algiers and to insure that it was kept open for the supply of an Allied army which, moving rapidly eastward, was to occupy Tunisia, taking Rommel's Afrika Corps in the rear.

The Allied force which General Ryder was to command was given the name "Eastern Assault Force" and was to land near Algiers at precisely the same hour when two other Allied task forces hit the beaches near Oran and Casablanca. It is not of great importance here to study the details of this gigantic operation; it is enough to say that the Eastern Assault Force arrived off Algiers at the appointed time, 0100 hours on 8 November 1942. Due to certain errors, not all of the assault infantry waves were put ashore at the right places. In the case of the 168th Infantry a delay of several hours was caused by the landing of a battalion 17 miles away from its designated beach. Nevertheless, so thorough had been the briefing of all ranks on the situation and mission that the heights overlooking Algiers were under our control less than 12 hours after the first landing craft scraped upon the beach. The 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry, had joined the expedition at almost the last minute, being given the task of landing from two [British] destroyers after they had smashed the boom guarding the entrance to the harbor. Although a gallant attempt was made to put this plan into execution the boom proved a more difficult proposition than was first thought and before the leading destroyer could bring up alongside the mole, French searchlights and guns had been alerted and severe damage was inflicted upon the two small ships. The infantry who managed to get ashore were opposed by Senegalese troops and French tanks - more than a match for the Americans who had only small arms. When our troops had fired all their ammunition their commander surrendered to prevent further bloodshed.

Meanwhile, a second American Combat Team [39th Infantry (9th Infantry Division)] and a British Brigade [11th] seized important airfields south of Algiers while the 168th Infantry had patrols in the southwestern outskirts of the city. Throughout the whole of this skirmishing, negotiations were going on between General Ryder, as the Allied representative, and General Juin, French commander.

On the morning of 9 November, a little more than 24 hours after the assault waves touched down, a conference was held in the main fort of Algiers and an armistice arranged which came into final effect on 11 November.

### **Chapter III • FIRST DAYS IN TUNISIA • Skirmishing**

Their mission in Algiers completed, elements of the Eastern Assault Force were moved to Tunisia with the First British Army. On 15 November [1942] the 175th Field Artillery Battalion was detached from the Division and left Algiers for Tunisia. The Battalion was ordered to Medjez el Bab to support a French unit already fighting the German-Italian enemy, and went into action on 17 November, repelling an infantry-tank attack. Division troops attached to No. 1 and No. 6 Commando also went into action at the same time on another part of the Tunisian front. On 24 December the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry, was attached to the 12th Air Force in Tebessa while the Anti-Tank Company, 168th Infantry, was sent to Biskra, a French desert outpost. The 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry, was ordered to Constantine on 11 January to guard lines of communication and on 29 January the remainder of the Regiment was ordered to the Gafsa-Sbeitla area for operations under command of the 1st Armored Division. It will be seen at this

time the 168th RCT was scattered into a number of small units while the rest of the Division was in an entirely different area.

On 3 January 1943 those units of the 34th which had been left behind in the British Isles landed at Oran and after a short stay in an extremely muddy assembly area just south of the port, closed in at Tlemcen, an ancient city 90 miles southwest of Oran. The 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry, moved from Algiers to rejoin the Division at Tlemcen, but to offset this the 2nd Battalion, 133rd Infantry was assigned to Allied Force Headquarters as guard troops. That portion of the Division in the Tlemcen area carried out a rigorous training program which culminated in the receipt of orders on 30 January to move to the area of Maktar, Tunisia, and to relieve elements of the 1st Infantry Division and French Troops under command of the French XIX Corps. While the majority of the 34th Infantry Division was getting ready for combat the 168th Infantry and 175th Field Artillery Battalion were already taking part in a kind of Indian warfare in Tunisia.

An over-all picture of the Division at this time is virtually impossible to draw, so scattered had the formation become. It may be mentioned, however, that the capture of Sened Station in southern Tunisia on 31 January was the first important action for elements of the 168th Infantry. The Regiment did not regather all of its component units until the first week of February when, under command of the 1st Armored Division, the 168th took up positions in the vicinity of Sidi Bou Zid near Faïd Pass. The Regiment was still in these positions when the main portion of the Division closed into Maktar and began the relief of French troops in the sector between Pichon and El Ala. The 133rd Infantry, last element of the Division to close into the Maktar area, had barely completed the relief of the French in the sector south from El Ala to the Fondouk highway, when the German breakthrough at Faïd was reported. In the face of the enemy successes south of the Division we were ordered to withdraw 30 kilometers west to a new defense line.

In the meantime the 168th Infantry, engulfed in the rush of German infantry and armor, was surrounded and cut to pieces with very heavy losses. Some of the troops managed to infiltrate through the enemy ring and make their way to Allied lines once more, but when the stragglers were brought together only about half of the Regiment remained; the others were killed or captured.

On 18 February the main part of the 34th Division, with the 18th Regimental Combat Team (1st Infantry Division) attached, was defending a gap in the mountains leading to the Sbiba-Rohia highway. The Germans moved against this line with powerful armored and infantry forces but, although German tanks succeeded in infiltrating into our positions, all enemy efforts to occupy ground were neutralized by the massed fire of our artillery. However, the German attack which had overrun the 168th Infantry had made such progress through Kasserine Pass that it threatened to envelop the southern flank of the defense line which the 34th was holding. Accordingly, on the night 22-23 February the Division was ordered to readjust its lines.

The enemy, to our surprise, did not exploit his advance and on the morning of 23 February our reconnaissance disclosed that the Germans had withdrawn.

Consequently, a mobile group consisting of a battalion of the 135th Infantry, some French tanks and the Division Reconnaissance Troop, supported by field artillery, was ordered to make a reconnaissance south from Sbiba to Sbeitla while a portion of the force proceeded to the Arab village of El Ala. Both these objectives were approximately 40 kilometers away from the starting point - which gives a good idea of the open nature of the fighting of those days.

Progress was slow. The 109th Engineer Battalion had risen magnificently to their first combat assignment when they made a 35-mile road in three days to assist our relief of the French. They now demonstrated their worth again in the large-scale mine-clearing operation necessary to permit our scouting forces to advance.

On about 25 February a considerable reorganization of Allied forces in Tunisia was completed and the 34th Infantry Division passed in command to the American II Corps. During the next few days the 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion and the 751st Tank Battalion were attached, followed after a few days by the return of the 175th Field Artillery Battalion and the 168th Infantry. The latter had had a brief period for rest and refitting after their experience at Faid Pass, and the 34th Infantry Division was exceedingly lucky to have been able to draw upon trained soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division for replacements to bring our battered Regiment up to full fighting strength.

Men who had left the Division in Scotland to fight in No. 1 and No. 6 Commando, after making a brilliant reputation in operations near Bizerte and around the notorious Green Hill and Bald Hill, also rejoined the Division at this time.

The 34th Infantry Division was once again together to settle down to learn warfare from scratch and to build themselves up to where they could count upon beating the Germans wherever they were found. Strong reconnaissance was continued to Sbeitla and eastward through barren rocky country to the pass of Kef el Ahmar.

## **Chapter IV • SBEITLA - HADJEB el AIOUN • Scouting**

On 4 March [1943] reconnaissance had reached a state where it was possible to consider a resumption of aggressive action. The Division was ordered to make a demonstration in the direction of Pichon - El Ala (the place where the Division had first entered the line and some 40-odd kilometers east of the front then held) in support of a large scale offensive which jumped off many miles to the south near Gafsa. The demonstration force consisted of the 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry, with tanks, anti-aircraft artillery, field artillery, the Reconnaissance Troop and the ex-Commando force; a portion of the 133rd Infantry guarded the route of approach and withdrawal by blocking to the southeast. The demonstration force, before it withdrew, penetrated to the outskirts of Pichon with armored reconnaissance vehicles confirming the fact that the enemy occupied this place in some strength.

Following the demonstration the main line of resistance of the Division was moved 10 kilometers to the east where it was sited to run due north and south since the re-occupation by Allied troops of the Kasserine Pass minimized any threat to our positions from the south.

By the middle of March the 34th Division line was based roughly on a north-south range of hills some 50 kilometers west of the German positions. The country in between was rocky and sandy, uninhabited except for small bands of Arabs and one or two families of European settlers who farmed some of the land in the vicinity of water holes. The mountains for the most part were steep and had vegetation only on their lower slopes - toward the top they were completely barren. In the whole of the flat land between our own lines and the Germans', cross-country movement by armor was extremely easy since the only barriers were the dried up stream beds called "oueds" which criss-crossed the countryside but were not formidable tank barriers. The only concealment came from clumps of cactus or stunted olive trees which were interspersed over the ground.

Following the success of the American drive on Gafsa in the south the 34th Infantry Division undertook the job of clearing the plain between its line and the Germans' so that an attack could be launched to seize the key town of Kairouan many miles away. Reconnaissance was pushed to Kef el Ahmar and to Sbeitla. Being inexperienced in warfare our troops were sometimes outwitted by the enemy, notably at Kef el Ahmar where on one occasion one of our rifle companies was ambushed by the Germans at heavy cost to ourselves. When Sbeitla had been reached, the reconnoitering elements turned northeastward and made good progress along the road to Hadjeb el Aioun. Many minefields and demolitions were encountered enroute and bold counter-reconnaissance operations by the Germans made this phase of our activity very exciting. Motorized elements of the Division penetrated to El Ala and then turned south toward Djebel Trozza to come out on the highway near Hadjeb el Aioun where our elements linked up again.

This was truly open warfare. There were no flanks, no front and practically no rear. One had to be prepared for enemy in every direction. The German airforce was a constant threat and considerable movements of troops took place under the cover of darkness with total black-out.

## **Chapter V • FONDOUK • Beating**

By 25 March [1943] our scouting operations had been completed and the Division received the order for its first major attack in World War II. The mission was to jump off from the river line five kilometers northeast of Hadjeb el Aioun and to advance astride a highway to capture and hold Fondouk Gap and the long ridge of mountains which ran in a semi-circle southward and then westward from the Pass. All intermediate objectives were rapidly taken. By late 27 March our troops, with the 135th Infantry on the left, the 168th Infantry on the right, and the 109th Engineer Battalion in a screening role further to the right, had reached the mountains.

The Germans held their line in strength. They had spent a considerable amount of time and effort to prepare positions in the solid rock, many of them reinforced with railroad ties and steel girders. The approaches were bare and flat, completely devoid of cover. Barbed wire and minefields on the bottom slopes of the hills greatly increased the dangers of our assault. Maneuvering was virtually impossible since the enemy could see everything that went on in the

flat land. The operation was simply a head-on assault in the face of withering fire from an opponent having ample ammunition and virtual immunity from our counter-fire. With great bravery our troops stormed the enemy position again and again, each time being halted by a wall of fire before they could even carry the first ridge line. Casualties were heavy and grew daily heavier. In their first large-scale action our troops were stunned to find themselves up against an almost impossible task.

On 1 April the Division was ordered to abandon its efforts and to withdraw to a temporary line until further plans could be made.

It must not be thought, however, that nothing had been achieved by this gallantry. The Allied High Command had desired that German troops be diverted to the center of the line, that is, the 34th Infantry Division sector. There, they would be unable to influence the large-scale American attack in the south toward Maknassy - where there were great opportunities of cutting Rommel's line of retreat. For a week following our disengagement, the Division was exposed to harassing attacks by the German airforce and artillery while our units could do little to reconnoiter the enemy's position in the face of his commanding observation.

On 4 April the Division was attached to the British IX Corps for a further operation to seize Fondouk Gap. The plan was that a British infantry brigade [128th] would seize the hills to the north. Upon the opening of Fondouk Gap a British armoured division [6th] would move along the highway to Kairouan and it was hoped to catch a large part of Rommel's forces as they continued their rapid flight northward in front of the Eighth Army. The 135th Infantry on the right and the 133rd Infantry on the left moved up under cover of darkness to a line of departure in the open ground at the foot of the mountain. Dawn had broken before the artillery preparation had lifted and our troops began the advance. Progress was very difficult and costly. The assault battalions were pinned down by machine gun and mortar fire from enemy positions so well camouflaged and so perfectly sited that it was virtually impossible to neutralize them even with artillery fire.

The British attack on the left had gone rather better and by evening the northern buttress of the Gap had been captured. On the following day a great effort was made by the 133rd Infantry which succeeded in clearing the first hill of the objective. That evening the armored division sent a company of tanks through the minefield protecting the Gap, and although the bulk of the tanks were lost, a path was cleared for the remaining units who followed in rapid succession. The Germans, threatened with the encirclement from the north, withdrew to Kairouan and the Division completed the occupation of the enemy position. A motorized infantry force immediately was sent in the wake of the armor to occupy Kairouan but this mission was taken over by British troops and the 34th Infantry Division moved to a training area in the vicinity of Maktar on 15 April.

## **Chapter VI • HILL 609 • Conquering**

Without exaggeration it may be said that the Division was transformed during the next few days. After a very grueling and somewhat discouraging introduction to heavy combat all units

passed through a rigorous week of training with special emphasis on night attacks and the cooperation between infantry and artillery in the assault behind a rolling barrage.

By 22 April [1943] the Tunisian front had shrunk to a relatively small area in the northeastern corner where the Germans were preparing a strong defense of their last link with the African continent, covering Bizerte and Tunis. II Corps was moving rapidly and secretly to take over the extreme left flank of the Allied front and, initially, the 34th Infantry Division was placed in Corps reserve.

By 24 April the American attack had progressed to a point where it was considered desirable to relieve a portion of the 1st Infantry Division. Accordingly, the 168th Infantry and later the remainder of the Division entered the line of the 1st Infantry Division's left. The sector of advance given to the 34th followed the railroad from Beja to Mateur along a river valley which also for a part of its length carried a narrow serpentine road.

The terrain of northern Tunisia was quite a change from that further south. The hills, while just as steep, had considerably more vegetation and the lower slopes were extensively cultivated. As before, though, the higher peaks were bare and jagged and often so steep that to climb them, even without weapons or opposition, was a considerable feat. In order to further the Corps plan of seizing the important communication center of Mateur, to the northeast of our sector, it was first necessary to secure the dominating terrain - Hill 609.

After stubborn fighting during which our troops showed that they had learned well how to follow an artillery barrage, the attack swung eastward into the hills which lay in the path of our advance to Hill 609. The 168th Infantry protected the left flank of the Division by seizing three high peaks on successive days while the 135th Infantry on the right proceeded to make progress at the rate of one hill a day, using the cover of night to deploy for its attack. The 133rd Infantry was used to support the 135th Infantry during this movement, for the exhausting fighting necessitated periodic reliefs of the assaulting battalions.

By 29 April the Roman ruins lying about 1000 yards west of Hill 609 had been secured and on the following day there began the brilliant encirclement of the hill, during which one battalion of the 133rd Infantry began movement to the north and east while a battalion of the 135th Infantry seized Hill 531.

This feature had originally been included in the sector of the 1st Infantry Division who captured it but were later repulsed by a vicious German counterattack. For the protection of our own force it was necessary that we secure the hill whether it was included in our own sector or not. Accordingly, one battalion of the 135th Infantry stormed it and thereby enabled a further battalion to pass through its position to the southeast of the major bastion of Hill 609. Known to the Arabs as Djebel Tahent, this was an enormous mass of rock, its lower slopes covered with vegetation and lined with a number of crude rock walls twisting along the slopes. Direct approach from the west was extremely difficult since the face of the mountain rose almost sheer. On the eastern face, however, an easier approach was possible and it was decided therefore that the way to assault the position was from the German side. The enemy defending the hill came from a German airforce regiment called "Regiment Barenthin" after its original commander.

These troops were deeply imbued with Nazi doctrine and were boldly and courageously led. They were on a par with the present-day [1945] German paratroops. Right at the top of Hill 609 these troops had prepared a citadel blasted out of the rock. Only one way up was known, and this was a goat trail which led in from the northeast.

By 1 May the Division had placed four battalions in a circle around the mountain and, supported by a tank company of the 1st Armored Division and by the heaviest artillery fire we could muster, the assault was begun. The bravery and discipline shown at Fondouk were now reinforced by the wisdom taught during the training period at Maktar and the infantry made encouraging progress. Finally there was nothing left of the enemy position except the stronghold at the very top. The Germans here were trapped, but so long as they remained in occupation of their positions they could bring down very heavy artillery fire on us, directed from the splendid observation post which Hill 609 formed. Using a screen of artillery shells very skillfully the infantry closed to hand grenade and bayonet range. Darkness had fallen and fighting of the most bitter kind took place in conditions where only excellent control and leadership prevented friend from killing friend. Toward morning one platoon succeeded in forcing its way up the goat trail, which the Germans had believed was not a feasible means of approaching their positions, and took the stubborn men of the "Barentin" Regiment by surprise from the rear. Temporarily stunned, the enemy was quickly overcome and Hill 609 was ours. Immediately a battalion was placed in occupation of it and our artillery forward observers accompanying the foremost infantry elements soon were directing fire upon the rapidly retreating enemy causing great havoc.

During this action the 34th Division found itself. After knowing bewilderment, bitterness, and hard experience, the 34th now had one of the most outstanding achievements of the Tunisian campaign to its own credit. In his official report to the War Department, General Omar Bradley, commanding II Corps, stated in regard to the fighting at Hill 609, "A strong enemy was repulsed. Fighting all day was intense and bloody. The enemy was engaged with bayonet and grenade, and there were many cases of outstanding bravery."

During 2 and 3 May the Germans withdrew rapidly to Mateur and II Corps changed its dispositions, 1st Infantry Division crossing over to the left so that the 34th now became the right flank division.

## **Chapter VII • EDDEKHILA • Exploiting**

On 4 May [1943] the 34th assembled in low hills west of the highway leading to Chouigui Pass. The mission was to advance along the semi-circular hills which formed the south boundary of the Oued Tine Valley to seize a mountain pass which carried the road eastward to the important junction of Chouigui. The Division's objective was the Pass itself and our advance was to be paralleled by an attack of the 1st Infantry Division to take the hills to the north. The 34th Division's plan was to leave the 135th Infantry in occupation of Hill 609 and its eastern satellites until the success of our attack was assured. The assault was to be conducted by the 168th Infantry who, in order to avoid being caught under enemy observation in the flat ground (as had occurred at Fondouk), were ordered to advance across difficult but less dangerous territory in the hills at the southern edge of the valley, taking the little village of Eddekhila, about half way to the objective, and then turning northward to the Pass itself. Any attempt by the enemy to strike

the advance of the 168th Infantry from the southern flank was to be blocked off by the 133rd Infantry who, upon order, were to peel off to the south and form a screen behind which the 168th Infantry could continue their advance. The plan worked very successfully. The German position had considerably deteriorated, since the entire Allied offensive was making excellent progress and the Germans must have realized that their days in Africa were numbered. However, this type of mountain warfare is a slow business and it took three days before the 168th was in a position facing north about two kilometers south of the Chouigui. The Germans continued to resist but on 8 May they made a sudden withdrawal and our troops occupied the Pass without opposition. The road running through the gully from Eddekhila had been heavily mined and a day of hard work by the engineers was needed to open up the highway so that our artillery could pass through to the east side of the Pass and support further advances by the infantry. Immediately after the road was opened tank destroyers and motorized infantry patrols were sent out in all directions - to the important town of Tebourba some six miles southeast of Chouigui village and northward from Chouigui to Mateur. Many prisoners of war were taken but the fanatical "Barenthin" Regiment, having stopped the 1st Infantry Division, continued to resist in the hills even after opposition in the rest of our sector had stopped.

The 135th Infantry with a field artillery battalion in support was moved rapidly by truck to the east side of the hills in which the Germans were lurking and the whole area was thoroughly combed by our infantry while a screen of tank destroyers waited in the valley to gather up the Germans as they were forced out of their hiding places. During this time the 1st Armored Division, having pushed boldly to capture the key road junction of Mateur north of the 34th Division sector, had advanced northeastward and was harrying the disorganized enemy who had no safe place to which they could retreat. Bizerte was captured by the 9th Infantry Division and an armistice was signed under which all German forces north of the Mejerda River, which flowed through Tebourba, surrendered during the morning of 11 May 1943. Two days later the entire German and Italian forces in Tunisia surrendered unconditionally and the Tunisian campaign had been won.

## **Chapter VIII • TRAINING FOR EUROPE • Preparing**

The fighting in Tunisia came to an end on 13 May 1943. The Germans had suffered a major defeat. Many of the finest Allied troops had been required to beat them yet the war was so exacting that there was little time for self-congratulation. Almost at once, preparations were begun for the conquest of Sicily, and the 34th Division received the vital, if not very exciting, job of helping the invading troops to make a smooth departure from Africa.

The 34th were the "housekeepers" for Sicily. Several provisional truck companies were organized using vehicles, drivers and mechanics from the Field Artillery Battalions of the Division who, day in and day out, hauled gasoline to the airfields in an effort to slake the thirst of the bombers paving the way for the landings. The Infantry Regiments set up staging camps for the assaulting troops, furnished the cooks and KPs - yes, and dug the latrines. The task was not pleasant, but it was done.

Not all was work though. Our French Allies, whose small, poorly equipped Army had fought so magnificently at our side during the campaign, had decided upon a Victory March through the streets of Tunis. The U.S. troops who had taken part in the African fighting were represented on this occasion by the 135th Infantry Regiment who marched past in a solid mass under the palms of the Boulevard de Gallieni, to the vigorous applause of the crowd. There was no complacency in the Division however. Wise soldiers learn from their experience

The Commanding General called for a school to be held in which the lessons learned in Tunisia could be studied and broadcast throughout the 34th. All of the staff and demonstration troops came from the Division itself, and they placed great emphasis on the training of small unit leaders and on the practical way to do things. After some delays and difficulties the school opened near Tebourba in what must have been the hottest olive grove in Africa. It was a very serious school - all concerned went there to get all they could out of it, for, as the General said in his opening address, "We shall fight in Europe, and we shall find there that, in comparison, the Tunisian Campaign was just a maneuver conducted with ball ammunition." In the meantime the troops assembled into dumps much of the vast booty of war which the Germans, by their surrender, had let fall into the hands of the Allies. The 135th Infantry manned a huge prisoner of war camp near Bizerte, capable of handling 10,000 prisoners, which rapidly filled up as Allied victories in Sicily mounted. The 168th Infantry, not letting their pride stand in their way, did yeoman service in the Bizerte docks discharging ships.

After Sicily - the European mainland. A stiff job, in which only good troops with good training would survive. At the end of July 1943, the 34th Division handed its housekeeper's apron to other units and boarded its trucks and the decrepit French "40 & 8's" for the long and dusty ride to Oran. Assigned to Fifth Army, the 34th went with a will through the tough, efficient program of the Invasion Training Center, with its realistic street fighting, its obstacle courses, its live artillery barrages, its "ball ammunition". You get out of training only as much as you put into it - and [British] General Alexander said that he had never seen troops "go at it" with such spirit. As so often happens, not all the troops were able to complete the course, for time was passing - D-Day loomed ever closer.

It was during this training program, too, that an important addition was made to the infantry strength of the Division. The 34th had been selected by the War Department to demonstrate to the world that U.S. citizens of Japanese descent could fight alongside other Americans in full confidence and efficiency. The 100th Infantry Battalion, composed almost exclusively of these American "Nisei" mainly from Hawaii, was assigned to fill the place of the 2nd Bn 133rd Infantry Regiment (which remained at Algiers as the guard for Allied Force Headquarters). As our story is told, we shall see how nobly this experiment succeeded, for the Hawaiians' reputation is now a legend, not only in the 133rd Infantry, but throughout the World.

## **Chapter IX • SALERNO - BENEVENTO • Hurrying**

The 34th Infantry Division was in Army reserve for the Salerno operation. No one knew, when the operation was started, exactly how it would go - everyone was tensed, alert for anything, plans were as flexible as possible. To begin with, the 151st Field Artillery Battalion was

detached from the Division, and landed under command of the 36th Infantry Division on the Salerno beaches on D-Day - 9 September 1943. At once the Battalion was in the thick of it. German tanks and infantry slashed savagely at the beachhead, trying to drive it back into the sea. The 105mm howitzers were dragged off their landing craft and rushed up the sandy slope to the very perimeter of the beach. Firing at maximum rate over open sights the 151st Field Artillery decisively smashed the enemy Panzers who drew off but to come again and again. One battery was overrun by tanks. The gunners coolly withdrew, deployed as infantry with their '03 rifles, counter-attacked and recaptured their guns. At a time when the entire Salerno enterprise was threatened with costly failure, the men of the 151st Field Artillery Battalion stuck it out and won. The Chief of Staff of the 36th Infantry Division said, "The beachhead would have been destroyed if it had not been for the early arrival of the 151st Battalion thirty minutes before the first counter-attack." For eight days the Battalion shot it out with the Germans and fired more rounds than during the entire Tunisian campaign.

The news of this performance filtered back to the Division poised at the port of embarkation. So this was Europe!

The 135th and 168th Regimental Combat Teams set sail from Oran for Naples, but at once it became clear that the great port would not be taken in time to be used for their convoy. It was still not even certain that the beachhead would be held. Word was flashed to the 133rd Regimental Combat Team, still at Oran, to load their ships - for combat. In less than forty-eight hours, working day and night, the 133rd RCT waterproofed all its vehicles, stored its equipment not needed for fighting, stripped for action - ready, if necessary, to make an assault landing to restore the beachhead.

Travelling fast, the 133rd's ships arrived off Salerno a few hours after the 135th and 168th Combat Teams. These latter troops, since they had been ordered to load for landing in a port, found it a slow business to transfer themselves, their baggage, their weapons, vehicles and stores to landing craft and "ducks" for the choppy passage to the beach. On the other hand, the 133rd, loaded and equipped for the task, smoothly disembarked everything in twelve hours and formed upon land - ready to go. They did not have long to wait.

The situation on shore was roughly this: the German Command, realizing that its attempts to contain and then to smash the bridgehead had failed, had decided to relinquish its hold on the southern portion of the perimeter and to swing back to the north, while retaining the high ground north of Salerno as a hinge. It would then be possible to form a single front from one side of Italy to the other. It was necessary to prevent the Germans from organizing their defense at their leisure. Higher headquarters therefore directed the 34th Division to form a task force consisting of the 133rd Infantry, 151st Field Artillery Battalion, and attached anti-aircraft, engineer, medical and reconnaissance troops, together with the necessary staff, and to push on as swiftly as possible to block off the enemy route of reinforcement between Benevento, sixty miles to the north, and the battle area. Once the highway leading south from this town was cut we could take the initiative and push on rapidly across the Calore River and take the fight to the enemy.

Accordingly this task force passed through the 45th Infantry Division on 28 September 1943 at S. Angelo di Lombardi and, pressing up Highway 7, made their first contact with the enemy

along the Calore River near the town of Montemarrano. The German troops consisted of armored infantry, self-propelled guns, and engineers in half-tracks from the 26th Panzer Division - a very efficient organization whose armored counter-attacks against the beachhead had proved so nearly fatal.

It was not the Germans' intention at this time to fritter away resources by fighting pitched battles at frequent intervals. Instead, their engineers, covered by the infantry, demolished every bridge and prepared road blocks at awkward points so that our advance could not possibly be as rapid as would have been desired. Furthermore, in order to discourage any undue boldness on our part, each U-curve and ledge in this serpentine highway was covered by fire from high-velocity weapons and small arms, necessitating wide out-flanking movements into the hills alongside the road. Great endurance was required of our troops since speed was absolutely essential.

By 29 September our troops had occupied the heights west of Chiusano and it was in taking this objective that the 100th Infantry Battalion first met the enemy. As the advance pressed on to the northwest, Montemiletto was captured and by the evening of 1 October advance elements of the 133rd Infantry reached the outskirts of Benevento. The next day the town itself was occupied and a bridgehead was secured across the Calore River without too much difficulty since, due to the speed of our advance, the German engineers had not had time to demolish the bridge very thoroughly. While there was a great gash in the masonry, the structure was still firm enough for our foot troops to cross, and when a truck-load of German engineers with a truck-load of explosives came back that night they were surprised by our infantry and were forced to beat a hasty retreat before they could even start work.

It would be difficult to overestimate the endurance and the aggressiveness of troops who, in spite of continuous rain and in the face of delays caused by stout enemy resistance, continued to press on and finally forced the enemy out of a vital road junction and river crossing, making an advance of 40 miles in rugged country in five days.

While the 133rd Infantry Task Force was scoring the first of the Division's great successes in Europe, the 135th and 168th RCTs devoted themselves to training in the use of close-combat anti-tank weapons and in preparing themselves for the fierce fighting to come. At each successive assembly area which was occupied in the wake of the rapid drive to Benevento, not a moment was lost, for in spite of the vigorous training in [Africa], the ferocity of the combat in Italy had made a deep and startling impression on those who had tasted it. Those for whom the experience had yet to come wisely devoted all their energies to learning the lessons of other soldiers' experience.

With Benevento in our hands, the barrier of the Calore River crossed, this sector was handed over to the 45th Infantry Division, while the 34th assembled 30 kilometers to the west, preparatory to relieving elements of the 3rd Infantry Division along the Volturno River.

## **Chapter X • VOLTURNO • Spanning**

The [Volturno River] formed the first large obstacle which the Germans had decided to defend since the breakout from the beachhead. In the 34th Division sector, which was nearly 15 kilometers wide, the stream was swift and in some places deep enough to cover a man's head, with steep banks overgrown with shrubbery. Immediately upon taking over the sector very active patrolling was begun in order to discover the best places to cross, the easiest bridge sites, and the location of enemy defenses. Patrols of a few men crossed the stream repeatedly to feel out the German positions; careful study was made of aerial photographs, and intelligence officers, by noting the direction of German tracer fire, were able to draw a quite complete and accurate picture of the German fire plan. While this was going on supplies of bridging equipment, artillery ammunition, and fuel were brought up in convoy after convoy. Surprise, if we could achieve it, would be decisive. Therefore all traffic near the river had to be squeezed into the hours of darkness, and so large were the movements that only superb traffic control prevented jams that might well have given away our whole plan. The direction and density of the traffic was so well worked-out and so faultlessly coordinated by the Division MPs that the operation is, even today, constantly cited as a model of good practice. By evening 12 October [1943], like a tightly coiled spring, the Division was ready to snap into action. As a result of the careful preparations the crossing was made rapidly and achieved great surprise. Preceded by an accurate artillery preparation the initial objective consisting of the high ground on the northern bank was reached, and the work of getting across supporting heavy weapons and supplies began. The Germans used their artillery and mortars vigorously to try to prevent our engineers from constructing the bridges and ferries necessary to support the combat troops. Yet, in spite of intense shelling which repeatedly punctured the inflated rubber pontoons, a treadway bridge was in operation on the day following the initial crossing. The infantry had advanced and had captured, in the face of heavy machine-gun fire, the series of hills less than 2000 yards north of the stream, and as soon as the supply line across the river was in service the advance began resolutely to take the town of Caiazzo, thus cutting the lateral highway which the Germans had been using to bring reserves to the threatened sector. Pushing rapidly north, across country in which there were very few and difficult roads, where cover was hard to obtain, and in the face of very strong opposition from infantry and armor, our troops reached Alvignano, eight miles north of the river, by 17 October.

The enemy during this phase consisted of the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, a unit which included in its ranks many seasoned veterans from the Russian front. In those days the Germans had ample equipment of excellent quality including a number of Mark IV tanks; however, such had been the pressure which our troops had put upon them that prisoners confessed that their ranks were seriously depleted and their troops short of food and sleep due to the remorseless hammering of our artillery which continued by day and night. Alvignano was occupied without resistance and pushing on, the village of Dragoni was taken by assault on 19 October by the 168th Infantry.

By this time, our troops were again on the Volturno River, for the stream here was flowing almost at right angles to the direction it had at the point where our first crossing was made. At the hamlet of Marguerita, northeast of Dragoni, the river was spanned by a bridge which the Germans had not yet blown. A spirited effort by the 133rd Infantry, which had relieved the 168th Infantry, to capture this bridge intact had almost succeeded, but in spite of this failure our

advance continued without pause, capturing the crossroads of Alife. Here the Division was ordered to turn northwest and advance along the ridges north of the river valley to Capriati.

Still the Volturno lay ahead of our advance. Changing direction abruptly, it now challenged us for the third time.

The problem promised to be difficult. The river at this point ran in a wide shallow bed, with many small islands of shingle and sand. The valley in which the stream flowed was from four to six miles wide and perfectly flat, with straight mountains springing up from the edge of the valley floor both on our side and on the Germans'. The lowlands were planted with olive trees and vineyards, whose long rows of wire, used for training the vines, canalized movement considerably. On the farther side, the slopes of the mountains were terraced, each step being about six feet high and buttressed with a stone wall. Very few trails existed and it was easy to see how difficult it would be to transport heavy weapons and supplies by mule or, more likely, by men, up the steep face of the mountain. The only cover for such operations was from the scrubby olive trees which grew on the terraces (their value for concealment is not great) or from one or two draws which carried off the rainwater from the hills. All these difficulties could be seen - from maps, photographs or from OPs [Observation Posts] on the ground itself. But even greater dangers were unseen and would come from the Germans. Ever since the failure of their attempt to smash the Salerno landings, the enemy High Command had decided upon the defense of a Winter Line - so strong, so well-stocked, so cunningly fitted out, that the Allies would remain stalled throughout the foul weather of a winter in the mountains. In various ways, the Allies had discovered not only that the Winter Line ran through Cassino, but that a very strong series of delaying lines began in the heights overlooking the west side of the upper Volturno valley and the town of Venafro. The knowledge that the third crossing of the Volturno would see the start of the attack on the main enemy position stimulated the Division to exert its best efforts and to neglect no precautions to make the coming operation a success.

During the last three days of October the enemy had virtually broken contact, leaving us in undisputed control of the eastern bank of the river. For the next three days the 34th Division carried out intensive reconnaissance for river crossings and to seek out the enemy defenses. Certain captured documents removed from prisoners of war helped us to plot enemy minefields, but due to the width of the river and the expanse of flat terrain dominated by enemy observation it was very difficult for patrols to go far out or to obtain detailed locations. Consequently, when the assault across the river was launched at midnight on 3 November the troops who carried it out did so well realizing that a large number of unknown dangers lay ahead of them. The enemy did not contest very strongly the crossing of the river itself. However, on the western bank, extending through the vineyards and olive groves for a depth of as much as 1500 yards, the Germans had laid one of the biggest minefields that had been encountered in Italy up to this time. If our troops did not want to get caught in the flat land during daylight it was vital to reach the foothills before dawn. There was, therefore, no time for reconnaissance or for mine clearing operations. The assault battalions formed up in single file and walked clean through the minefields, the lead man clearing the path for the column which followed him. As soon as one man was hit, the man behind him would take his place. At fearful cost the lead company cleared the field and reached the western foothills. It was one of the most outstanding examples of discipline under fire that American troops had ever given. Throughout the entire march the night

was punctuated by the flash of S-mines exploding and, alerted by the noise, the Germans sent up many flares and fired blindly into the flat ground, making even worse the difficulties of the passage. By dawn, however, our troops had established themselves in the vicinity of Pozzilli and had begun the steep climb into the mountains. Many enemy groups had been by-passed during this drive, but these were rounded up without great difficulty in the morning.

It was now possible to get more detailed information on the defenses which the Germans had built as the outpost line for their winter positions. For six weeks, the engineers of their reserve units and the Organization Todt, using conscripted Italian labor, had blasted out of solid rock shelter positions which the Germans called bunkers. Each of these positions was connected to a machine gun or mortar location so that the enemy obtained relative immunity from our artillery barrage and could nearly always man his weapons in time to take our advancing infantry under murderous fire. One hill in particular proved difficult to take. This was a craggy promontory at the top of which the Italians, with a sure instinct for a safe place, had built the town of Roccaravindola. The sides of the hill contained beautifully camouflaged machine-gun nests and individual firing positions cut into the side of the rock with overhead cover provided by railroad ties covered with earth and foliage. These positions halted the entire advance until a platoon skillfully worked its way unobserved through the town itself and came upon the German positions from the rear. Completely surprised, the Germans surrendered after a brief struggle. The way north up the highway was now open and a task force, consisting mainly of the 135th Infantry supported by tanks and tank destroyers, moved rapidly up the road to capture the town of Montaquilla, also sited on the top of a steep hill commanding the entire valley beneath.

The Germans were fully aware that this assault on their winter positions was a serious one. They did everything they could to stop it, not only by resisting our forward troops, but by desperate attempts to cut our supply line and starve out the assault. In addition, the enemy was helped by extremely bad weather. The autumn rains had begun and for days on end it poured constantly and the wind blew at gale force. Roads almost ceased to exist. The river which, when it was crossed, had been shallow, was now a raging torrent. The 109th Engineer Battalion, fully experienced in assault bridging, worked fiercely to keep roads open and the river spanned. Time and again the floods forced them to remove their pontoons lest the entire structure be swept downstream. Yet nearly always within a matter of hours the bridge was built again and supplies and ammunition rolled across the valley and up the steep trails to the infantry.

During this time of critical road conditions, traffic discipline became more than a matter of convenience and safety - it was a military necessity. The Division MPs, who had learned their job at the first Volturno crossing, brilliantly maintained their high standard. [Even] at the critical time when for three days the Division was virtually cut off from the rest of the Army by the direct route, essential traffic was kept moving over round-about roads.

The German airforce, which in Africa had been so formidable as to require constant protection against it, but which since Salerno had remained very quiet, reasserted itself and reinforced the enemy harassing attacks against our artillery positions, bridges, and critical points along the roads. The German planes had very little success, however, except on one occasion when they were able to put out of action almost a complete battery of the 185th Field Artillery Battalion's medium howitzers.

## Chapter XI • MOUNT PANTANO • Climbing

With the capture of Montaquilla and the clearing of the hill mass between that town and Filignano, a temporary halt was called to the advance. The immense exertions of the attack together with the weather made it necessary for a certain amount of refitting to be done. During this phase the 133rd Infantry, while in Corps reserve, went through a training program while the other two Regiments carried out day and night patrolling so that a continuous flow of information about the enemy was obtained. The German forces who opposed us at this time had been freshly committed for the defense of the outpost line. They consisted of the 305th Infantry Division who had relieved the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division when the pressure was being put upon them. The 305th was commanded by a general with great experience [in] mountain warfare, and his troops included a number of seasoned soldiers deriving all the advantages which defense in this terrain provides - yet our troops were able not merely to drive the enemy back, but also to inflict upon him very appreciable losses in men and material. Large quantities of ammunition and supplies had been captured in the bunker positions defending the hills, and our artillery, not content with supporting the infantry, had carried out a harassing program on the enemy supply lines, which, according to the German prisoners themselves, had often meant that they enjoyed no food or sleep for as many as four days at a time.

To underline the achievement scored by the 34th Division at this time, it must be remembered that throughout the period of assault, in constant rain, mud, wind and cold, our troops had absolutely no specialized winter equipment. Every man in the Division lived in sodden clothing with no waterproof boots, his feet so cold and wet, that trench foot was a disease almost impossible to avoid. A great effort was made to insure the supply of dry socks to the forward troops but this was not always possible.

It was not until 29 November [1943] that the offensive was resumed. The 133rd Infantry, relieved from Corps reserve, had entered the right Division sector relieving parachute infantry in the region of Colli. Our line at this time ran roughly north and south, and on the right flank of the 133rd Infantry came the 168th Infantry, while still further to the south stood the 135th Infantry. The plan was to attack to the west with the 168th Infantry making the main effort to secure the dominating mountain of M. Pantano. This hill, over 3300 feet high, consisted of a large mass of bare rock surmounted by four small "pimples" in the shape of a square. Covered routes of approach were virtually absent, and since it was impossible to dig foxholes in the solid rock, the only feasible way in which the infantry could obtain any protection was to pile boulders in front of them or to take advantage of the very few rock walls which laced the slope. The weather continued to be appalling. Low clouds and fog reduced visibility to such a point that frequently enemy positions were by-passed without either side being aware of it.

The assault was launched on a two-regiment front in the face of extremely heavy artillery and mortar fire. The enemy, in command of excellent observation, had taken advantage of the previous few days' respite to register his weapons accurately on all critical approaches. Heavy casualties to our troops were unavoidable, and the progress was slow and bitter. During the fighting the 100th Infantry Battalion, demonstrated that the small physique of its men, was more than compensated for by their courage and tenacity. The attack on M. Pantano made progress and on the morning of 30 November the 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry, had secured the "pimple"

at the southwest corner of the square. Throughout the day the enemy launched savage counter-attacks upon this Battalion, but our troops refused to budge. On the following morning dense fog delayed the resumption of the attack since the units could not see each other and control was very difficult. Shortly after noon the fog lifted and as the battalions moved forward the men were hit by severe German fire from well-camouflaged dug-in positions. Our casualties were heavy - within an hour two battalion commanders were lost. The enemy hit back again and again throughout the night and still the position was held. On 1 December a concerted attack by the 133rd and 168th Infantry Regiments was arranged (the 135th Infantry, having been squeezed out by the progress of the 168th Infantry, was now the Division reserve). After a thirty-minute artillery preparation the infantry jumped off, but the advance was extremely slow. The Germans, alert to the vital importance of M. Pantano, were determined not to let it go. Again and again our troops closed with the enemy, and the supply of hand grenades frequently gave out. On one occasion, the Germans, having launched a series of counter-attacks against the 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry, almost succeeded in overrunning one company. Their grenades exhausted, our soldiers tore down the wall, behind which they were sheltering, rock by rock, and threw them at the Germans. The enemy failed to drive us back.

[See related [The Red Bull in the Winter Line \(Art\)](#) webpage.]

Such fighting could not continue indefinitely. After the long and gruelling advance from the first Volturno crossing, culminated now by the fiercest fighting they had known, our troops were nearly exhausted. Furthermore, snow had begun to fall and our troops, still without winter clothing, suffered agonies from the cold. A man who became wounded often had to lie for hours without attention until darkness enabled medical aidmen to evacuate him, a process which took hours of difficult and dangerous climbing down the steep rock face of the hill.

The assault was broken off and the Division contented itself with active patrolling. We had succeeded in maintaining our foothold on the top of M. Pantano and held one out of the four peaks. On the night of 8-9 December, the 2nd Moroccan Division began the relief of our worn-out troops and on 12 December this was complete. After 76 successive days of contact with the enemy, the 34th Division withdrew for rest, training, and replacements to the area of S. Angelo d'Alife, which it had captured on 23 October.

The entire Division had performed outstandingly well during the period. The War Department awarded a unit citation [to] the 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry, for its performance on M. Pantano.

## **Chapter XII • SAN VITTORE - CERVARO • Clearing**

By a stroke of luck the Division had been relieved in time to spend Christmas [1943] in an area where hot food, baths and clean clothes helped to restore the fighting efficiency of the troops. A considerable number of replacements were absorbed, and training was conducted to bring back teamwork and cooperation to units in which casualties had been severe. On Christmas Eve the Division staff was notified that the 34th was to relieve the 36th Infantry Division in the S. Pietro sector within a few days. It seemed that Christmas dinner had scarcely been eaten before the first units of the Division moved to the line once more.

The situation was that the Germans were defending a chain of hills running approximately north and south across Highway 6, which led to Cassino and the Gustav Line, the main position which the Germans had decided to defend throughout the winter. The hills facing the 34th Division's positions were to be used for delaying action to gain time for the finishing touches to be placed on the Gustav Line. The ground immediately to the front of our front-line was noteworthy for two hill features: M. Porchia on the left and M. Chiaia. At the foot of the latter huddled the village of S. Vittore, to the north of which, in a series of wild and jagged peaks, rose the bulk of Mt. Sammucro. To the rear of the Germans opened the wide plain through which the highway and the railway ran westward, the two diverging to pass on either side of M. Trocchio which commanded a view for miles around. To the north of the highway, rocky terraced hills studded with olive groves gave every indication of being tough country to fight over.

In the midst of a snow storm and blinding gales the 34th Division completed the relief of the 36th Division and began patrolling along the Division front to obtain all possible information about the enemy. The 133rd Infantry formed, with the 1st [Canadian-American] Special Service Force, a group under separate command eight kilometers north of S. Pietro. Immediately to the south came the 168th Infantry and on their left the 135th Infantry. On the night of 4 January [1944] the 34th Division launched an attack designed to storm and occupy the village of S. Vittore and to capture M. Chiaia. A very heavy artillery preparation preceded the assault and by the morning of 5 January the 135th Infantry had obtained a good footing in S. Vittore, and an intense fight at close quarters was joined from house to house. The troops defending the enemy line were from the 44th Infantry Division, a predominantly Austrian formation of indifferent quality. Many prisoners of war were taken in the rush of our attack. On the right of the 135th Infantry, the 168th Infantry, in a concerted drive was helping its left neighbor to storm M. Chiaia. The Germans had defended this feature with many machine-gun positions on the forward slope while counter-attacking groups assembled on the rear slope in shelters dug out of the side of the mountain. Heavy mortar and artillery fire from positions behind the hill were laid down on our assaulting elements who made slow progress.

On 6 January, although S. Vittore was now completely occupied, the German troops on M. Chiaia continued stubbornly to resist, for the hill feature was not finally taken until the following day. During this intense battle, the 168th Infantry occupied two other hills to the north of M. Chiaia and opened the way for an attack upon the village of Cervaro, a typical collection of stone-built houses set upon the slope of steep hills. Before an attack could be launched to clear this village, a day was spent in cleaning up isolated pockets of resistance and adjusting our own dispositions preparatory to launching a coordinated assault. In the meantime, the 135th Infantry had moved out across the floor of the valley parallel with Highway 6 and were engaged in cleaning up the low rolling hills east of M. Trocchio. On 10 January the 168th Infantry resumed the attack and cleared a number of hills just west of Cervaro after vicious close-quarter fighting using grenade and bayonet. The enemy was fighting desperately for time. During the night he withdrew his forces into the town itself and moved up many machine guns, mortars, and several self-propelled guns into the ruins of buildings where the fallen masonry gave admirable cover. For two days and nights hand-to-hand fighting of the fiercest kind raged from street to street and from house to house. The enemy launched repeated counter-attacks and, for fear that his ragged units would be pierced by our thrust and the defences of the Gustav Line assaulted before he was ready, he committed the 15th Panzer Grenadier Regiment so that his weary Austrian soldiers

could disengage and retire in some order. It was immediately noted that the quality of the enemy fighting improved with the arrival of these tough troops, yet, even they could not withstand the terrific punishment which the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry gave them in the ruined shell of Cervaro. The town was in our hands and the high ground to the north cleared of the enemy by noon 12 January. For their action, the 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry, received a unit citation from the War Department.

During these few days the 135th Infantry continued its steady advance and assaulted a hill guarding M. Trocchio which the enemy tried unsuccessfully to hold with a battalion from the crack Herman Goering Division. After three days of fighting the hill was finally clear and nothing stood between us and the towering observatory of M. Trocchio. The 133rd Infantry, who on 13 January had once more come under the Division's control, had during the previous few days advanced against the most determined enemy resistance across peak after peak paralleling the advance of the other two Regiments. At dawn on 15 January an attack was launched to take M. Trocchio, an operation which proved simple since the enemy, not wishing to be caught on an isolated height at a great distance from his main line, had withdrawn and our troops promptly set up their own OPs in positions where the Germans had been directing their fire against us only a few hours before.

The Division had been conducting a steady grinding attack for fifteen days against stubborn German resistance and had finally driven the enemy back to the very ramparts of his main winter positions. Whether the Germans were ready or not they now had to defend their Gustav Line. Little contact with enemy troops was had during the next few days since he had withdrawn behind the river barrier that formed a modern counter-part to the moat which medieval soldiers used to defend their citadels.

## **Chapter XIII • CASSINO • Storming**

It will be convenient here to sketch briefly the German position which shortly was to become world renowned. To the west of M. Trocchio there opened up the broad Liri Valley along which Highway 6 and the railroad led ultimately to Rome. Running from north to south in front of the mouth of this valley ran the Rapido River which linked up with the Liri River nine kilometers south of Cassino. The town was built at the base of an imposing hill, covered with rocks and stunted shrubbery, through which twisted the narrow road leading to the famous Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino. The Rapido River had been turned in its course to flood the flatland on the east side of the town. Towering above Cassino there rose a series of craggy peaks - one in particular, Nill 593, dominating but not controlling the Abbey hill itself since a deep gorge separated the two heights. Further north the little villages of Cairo and Terelle huddled close to the hillsides connected by a steep and winding trail. Surmounting the whole picture rose the pinnacle on M. Cairo. An Italian army of ancient days had built a castle on a small sugar-loaf hill on the northwestern outskirts of Cassino from where fire could be placed on the entrances of the town. The modern Italian army had constructed barracks about five kilometers north of the castle along the Cassino-Atina road. The terrain was so suitable for prolonged resistance that the Italian War College had used it as an example of a well-chosen defense line.

Thick minefields and rows of barbed wire had been laid in the marshes and on the gently rising ground at the base of the mountains to prevent the passage of tanks or foot troops. A chain of bunker positions, stronger than any encountered before, had been built, some reinforced with concrete, some with railroad ties from the ruined station at Cassino, but all of them dug and blasted out from the rock of the Cassino hills. Not content with natural fortifications the enemy had installed portable steel pillboxes, half-buried in the ground, each containing a machine gun. Every man and every weapon had shelter from artillery fire. In support of their infantry positions, emplacements were prepared for self-propelled guns which could mount the trails on the northwest side of a hill without being observed by us, fire a few rounds, and disappear. A large concentration of gun positions had been constructed close to the hills behind Cassino and close to Highway 6 where they had good protection from our counter-battery fire. Enemy artillery was further reinforced by a number of Nebelwerfers whose eerie noise earned them the name of "screaming meemies".

To attempt an assault upon such a series of fortifications was a most hazardous undertaking, and originally it was decided to force the Rapido River and advance straight up the Liri Valley, bypassing Cassino and turning the Gustav Line. After a series of attempts by the 36th Infantry Division to cross the Rapido south of Cassino had been thrown back with much bloodshed, the 34th Division was ordered to cross the Rapido north of Cassino, to carry by storm the hills overlooking the town and breakthrough to Highway 6, isolating the town and the Abbey. Our attack began during the period of 24-25 January [1944]. Three days previously an Allied amphibious force had successfully established a beachhead at Anzio.

The 133rd Infantry, advancing with three Battalions abreast, approached the river north of the barracks and immediately ran into extensive minefields covered by elaborate interlocking machine-gun fire. The Regiment continued the agonizing job of forcing paths through the minefields in the marshy land and several times succeeded in getting elements across to the western bank. Each time the tremendous volume of enemy fire obliged them to withdraw, but the enemy in his resistance had betrayed a weak point in his line. On 26 January the 133rd Infantry gave place to the 168th Infantry who, with the 756th Tank Battalion in support, prepared an attempt to storm to the farther side. In the face of mines, barbed wire, and the most intense fire, the Regiment succeeded in established a bridgehead and in pushing to the base of the hills one or two kilometers further on. It was impossible, so soft was the ground, for the tanks to cross but four of them, bogged down, continued to fire in support of the infantry and greatly assisted them in their advance. Engineer troops worked like Trojans to prepare firm crossings, but these were not in operation until the afternoon of 29 January when the bulk of the Tank Battalion crossed in support of the infantry attack. Before midnight, two small hills had been attacked and taken, and the enemy dugouts and bunkers were mopped up.

The 133rd Infantry moved across in the left of the Division sector. During the next few days very successful infantry-tank operations cleared our right flank, occupied Cairo and captured over 250 prisoners, including an entire battalion headquarters. By this time the 168th Infantry had formed a definite salient into the German line. The enemy command grew anxious and brought in heavy reinforcements from the Adriatic coast consisting of the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division and the 1st Parachute Division. The 135th Infantry passed through the 168th Infantry and pushed on up the hill, trying to reach Highway 6 and isolate the Abbey. On 1 February the

133rd Infantry drove west from its positions toward Cassino clearing the barracks. The next morning the Regiment with tank support began the attack from the north on the town of Cassino itself, meeting very fierce resistance. The enemy had installed anti-tank guns at critical intersections, and had made of the stone-built houses strong points for his machine guns and riflemen. A diversionary attack by elements of the 133rd Infantry from the east was turned back. The enemy refused to be stampeded into a withdrawal.

Throughout this entire period, it must be borne in mind, every box of rations, every can of water, every round of ammunition which the infantry used had to be brought up across terrain which was under direct observation from hills still in enemy hands. The Germans, fully aware of this, laid down accurate and continuous fire upon all critical points and especially on the river crossings. Traffic control by the Division Military Police reduced congestion, but within a few days the stench of decaying mule carcasses, the litter of overturned vehicles, abandoned shell-cases and disabled tanks made a scene of modern war which will not be forgotten by any who saw it. On the mountains the battle remained stubborn and progress was slow. Casualties to both sides were very heavy, especially because the fanatical German paratroopers launched frenzied counter-attacks in an attempt to drive us back to the valley. Our ranks became thinner and the problems of evacuating casualties down the treacherous mountain trails and across the shell-swept approaches to the position were very serious. Volunteers came from the service and rear units of the Division to help out.

By the end of 12 February a platoon had succeeded in reaching the outer walls of the Abbey, and capturing prisoners from a cave on Monastery Hill. It was impossible for the platoon to remain, however, and they withdrew. The Germans throughout the operation took full advantage of the fact that the Allies had undertaken not to fire at the Abbey in view of its importance to the world as a religious institution. The relative immunity which the enemy obtained for his observation can hardly be overestimated.

On 13 February the 135th Infantry in the face of withering fire assaulted and captured Hill 593 which overlooked the Abbey but which was separated from it by a deep gorge. The enemy reacted viciously. Five furious counter-attacks were sent in against our positions in less than twenty-four hours. Once our troops were forced to withdraw, but immediately they reformed and took the hill again. In conjunction with this operation other elements of the Regiment and of the 168th Infantry managed to reach the northern slopes of Monastery Hill itself, before they had to withdraw. Castle Hill, far below Hill 593, remained a constant threat to our troops, and made movement in daylight very hazardous. Several times large concentrations of artillery fire were laid down upon it, and attempts to storm it were made by the 133rd Infantry without success.

The latter Regiment had, during the entire time, been carrying on what was almost a separate battle in the cellars, the dining rooms, the kitchens of Cassino. So close was the contact that when the mortars and the machine pistols stopped momentarily at night, the troops in one room of a house could hear the Germans talking in another room. Nevertheless, by 12 February the key strong-point which the Germans had created in the jail was taken and one-half of the town was in our hands. Infantry attacks on each city block were assisted by tanks who knocked holes in the walls of the houses through which the infantry could climb or throw grenades. Enemy mortars and self-propelled guns a few streets away kept up a heavy counter-fire. Our field artillery and

dive bombers attempted to smother them with massed fire but the piles of rubble only increased the protection for the Germans. The town and castle of Cassino crumbled into stinking ruins.

The 34th Division, when it had made its first assault on the Gustav Line, was already tired and under-strength from its brilliant series of advances which crushed-in the ring of delaying positions from S. Vittore to Cassino. By now, after three weeks of constant fire, repeated attacks and counter-attacks, often seemingly endless nights on the bare rock of the mountain with no protection against the furies of the rain, wind, and snow, after intolerable hardships, our troops had reached the limits of human endurance. Their numbers were so reduced that every time a man was carried off the hill by aidmen a gap was left in our lines. In spite of the most devoted support which our artillery and tanks could give to the infantry, very little useful help could reach the men in the foxholes whose chief weapons in this fighting were the hand grenade, the tommy gun, and the bayonet.

The 34th Division had made a serious dent in the Gustav Line. It was now time for fresh troops to take up the fight at the point our troops had reached.

On 14 February elements of the British 4th Indian Division took over positions held by the 135th and 168th Infantry Regiments on Hill 593 and on the other hills overlooking Cassino. Some of our men had stuck it out so long and had suffered so much that they had to be lifted bodily out of their holes. The sadly depleted Regiments went to S. Angelo d'Alife for rest.

The 133rd Infantry remained in the town of Cassino for a few more days grimly registering its gains of a room here, half a house there, still opposed by the toughest enemy resistance. They had the unforgettable experience of seeing the Abbey blotted out by hundreds of American bombers on the day after the 34th Division relinquished command of the sector.

The battle of Cassino was a failure. The Division had failed to take its objectives. The German paratroopers had succeeded in blocking the best efforts of our troops to advance. Yet for those who were there and who knew the difficulties of the assault, the tremendous strength of the German fortifications - to those men, Cassino was the outstanding achievement in the Division's history.

It is too early [written in late 1944] to even attempt a final judgement on what the 34th did. But it is a matter of record that the troops who relieved us, in spite of the most rigorous air support, lost some of the ground which our troops gave to them. It is a matter of record that successive attacks by troops several times as numerous as we also failed to capture the fortress.

It is history that when the Allied attack finally achieved its goal no less than five divisions were required to finish the task which the 34th had so gallantly begun and so nearly completed. [The ruins of the Abbey were entered at 10:30 a.m. on 18 May by the II Polish Corps.]

## **Chapter XIV • ANZIO • Waiting**

At S. Angelo d'Alife little could be done during the first few days out of the line except to rest and recover the strength which had been expended so freely on the Cassino hills. Within a few

days the Division was directed to move to a new area at S. Giorgio near Benevento, where the Division first went into action in Italy. At this place some progress was made to fill the decimated ranks of the infantry since the 2nd Battalion, 133rd Infantry, released from its guard duty at Allied Force Headquarters, rejoined the Division, fresh and at full strength.

On 11 March the Division was ordered to prepare to move by sea to the Anzio Beachhead, by now a legendary place where hard-pressed Allied troops had just succeeded in holding off determined enemy counter-offensives.

The 34th was still understrength. A bare few days before embarkation, which began 17 March, large numbers of replacements were received, creating a problem for the three Regiments who were faced with the possibility of heavy action before efficient teamwork could be built up. Between 17 and 25 March, 2 LSTs made a journey each night from Naples to the tiny harbor of Anzio. The 168th Infantry, marching straight off the transports, closed in an assembly area in the right sector of the beachhead, and immediately began relief of elements of the 3rd Infantry Division. The 135th Infantry followed suit a few days later while the 133rd Infantry remained in Division reserve.

The beachhead at Anzio was a place unique in the experience of the 34th Division. A small piece of flat land measuring less than ten miles at its widest point and no more than eight miles deep, heavily cultivated and criss-crossed with canals and drainage ditches - these few square miles were so congested with troops and equipment that at times it seemed impossible to find a vacant place to dig a hole or pitch a pup tent. For this reason the bulk of the Division's transportation was left behind at Naples where it was used to bring up supplies from the ports and dumps to the forward areas of the southern front in preparation for the gigantic Spring offensive which was even then in an advanced stage of planning.

At Anzio the 34th learned a new type of warfare. They learned that the enemy, from the hills overlooking the beachhead, could see everything that went on in our sector during the daylight. They learned to dig into the sides of the ditches and stream beds and to remain under cover during the day, coming out at night to stretch their legs and to keep watch against the ever-present possibility of a German attack. The infantry learned the routine of manning defensive positions, posting guards, making patrols, and being relieved. The artillery perfected the shattering technique of coordinated artillery fire in which the shells of hundreds of guns arrived on their target at the same instant. The Signal Company operated its scores of miles of telephone wires, learned to lay its lines away from the most likely objectives of German artillery fire, to dig in all their switchboards, and to provide for alternative channels of communication. The engineers learned the difficulty of laying barbed wire entanglements and minefields at night, under cover of infantry patrols. The entire Division shared the same life in damp and dismal holes, under a constant hammering from German artillery and aircraft.

When the Division arrived at the beachhead, the enemy had just failed in two concerted attempts to drive the Allies into the sea, and no one could be sure that they would not try a third time. On the front of the 34th Division, the enemy units consisted of the 362nd Infantry Division, a recently-formed organization who were not outstandingly good, but who maintained a high standard of alertness in their defense. After a time it became apparent that the Germans had

abandoned the offensive, and the 34th conducted a series of well-coordinated raids to secure information on enemy units, on their tactics and their defensive positions. Never before had the agencies used to collect information about the Germans worked so well together. Aerial photographs, interpreted at headquarters only a few hours after they had been taken, were used to pinpoint enemy weapon positions. Prisoners taken by the infantry were carefully questioned for facts about enemy tactics, supply, and other matters. The artillery staffs built up a complete picture of the opposing gun lay-out, and after almost two months of hard work our knowledge of the enemy opposite us was complete and accurate almost to the last detail. During this period, also, our own troops had been relieved by turns, and as each unit passed into reserve, it went to a training school where veterans could pass on the benefit of their experience to the large numbers of fresh replacements. At no time did the Division delude itself with the idea that the current defensive phase was anything but temporary. No one, especially as the beachhead became more and more crowded with the steady influx of troops and supplies, had any desire to remain a sitting target for the Germans any longer than was necessary. All day and all night the German artillery shot harassing fires at our dumps, our forward positions, and our supply lines. It was difficult for them to miss - so congested was the area. At night their artillery program was stepped up to take advantage of the fact that the traffic on the roads increased since we could only move supplies at night.

On 11 May, when the main attack on the southern front jumped off, everyone on the beachhead was tense. All in the Division knew that if this drive succeeded the time when the beachhead would have a land link with the remainder of the Army was not far distant. The planning staffs had worked hard to prepare for the breakout from the beachhead. The troops had trained and rehearsed their part in detail. No longer were we to be on the defensive. Instead, if all went well, the Allied beachhead force would play a crucial part in the encirclement of the right wing of the German troops as they fell back up the boot of Italy in the face of the drive from the south.

## **Chapter XV • THE BREAKOUT - ROME - CIVITAVECCHIA • Chasing**

At 0630 hours on the morning of 23 May [1944] the great sortie from the beachhead smashed into action. The mission of the 34th Division was to hold the perimeter and allow the assaulting elements of the 1st Armored Division on the left, the 3rd Infantry Division in the center, and the 1st Special Service Force on the right to pass through them and to pierce the German defense line. However, the 135th Infantry was attached to the 1st Armored Division for this operation, while the 133rd Infantry stood by to support the Special Service Force. Preceded by a fifteen-minute artillery preparation, fiercer than anything seen before, the Americans hit the unfortunate 362nd Infantry Division such a blow that it reeled back in confusion. Within a few hours the enemy's forward positions were over-run and hundreds of prisoners of war were on their way to our PW cages. On the left, the 135th Infantry with the Armored Division had made excellent progress and had crossed the railway embankment which formed a major feature of the German defense line. On the right, the 133rd Infantry rushed to the sector of the Special Service Force, whose initial attack to cut Highway 7 had been thrown back, and restored the situation by an assault in the face of severe opposition from infantry and tanks to cut the highway and the railway southeast of the key road junction of Cisterna. While resistance in this town continued

for some time from the cellars and ruined buildings, the success of the breakout was evident. The 362nd Infantry Division within three days had been virtually annihilated as an organized fighting force. The 34th Infantry Division reformed and prepared to exploit this triumph.

The 168th Infantry moved to the west, the 133rd Infantry, returning from its foray, moved up to the left of the 168th, and both Regiments formed up for a concerted push to the northwest. On 25 May the 135th Infantry, relieved of attachment to the Armored Division after a magnificent performance, moved into 34th Division reserve. At dawn on 26 May our troops made rapid progress which continued until late on 27 May when stiff enemy resistance was met along a line approximately 1000 yards short of the railroad between Lanuvio and Velletri. It had long been known that the Germans had prepared a strong defense line in this area. Bunkers and mortar positions had been dug into the north face of the railway embankment while machine gun and rifle emplacements were hastily completed by the retreating German troops as they occupied their defenses. Further, the village of Villa Crocetta had been turned into a fortress containing over a battalion of infantry, reinforced with tanks and self-propelled guns.

The Germans in the face of our fierce attack succeeded in maintaining their positions. We committed the 135th Infantry from reserve to the left flank of the Division. Even the 109th Engineer Battalion was sent into the line as infantry. Nothing was held back. Rome was the goal - all or nothing. Finally on 2 June, with the town of Velletri captured and his line in danger of encirclement, the enemy suddenly gave way. His units, patched-up remnants of the troops who had borne the shock of the breakout from the beachhead, had fought surprisingly well. The German High Command had used every effort to bolster them with replacements from the butchers, bakers, tinkers, and tailors of rear area units.

By the morning of 3 June the enemy was in full retreat. The 100th Infantry Battalion made a very determined attack to clear a road block on Highway 7 which led to Rome. A motorized task force with infantry, tanks, tank destroyers, engineers, field artillery, and reconnaissance troops, was constituted and ordered to press on north with all speed to seize crossings of the Tiber River southwest of Rome. The Germans had honored their undertaking, to consider Rome an open city, but all the Tiber River bridges between Rome and the sea were destroyed. Our Engineers worked fast to make crossings, and within a day the entire Division had passed to the northern bank. The Germans conducted their retreat very skillfully. They lost no time in evacuating their heavy equipment, which by day and night marches, fell back, protected by a screen of motorized infantry, self-propelled guns, and engineers. In spite of the terrific toll taken by our air forces in their bombing and strafing attacks along the highways, the Germans were able to evacuate much of their materiel, and seriously impeded our advance by means of their well-executed demolitions and roadblocks.

The 1st Armored Division and the 34th Division were given the mission of an all-out pursuit of the enemy north and northwest of Rome. During this time the 135th Infantry was re-attached to the 1st Armored Division, and was pursuing the Germans north of Rome to the Viterbo airfields. The 34th Division, advancing day and night at top speed, relieving the lead battalion from time to time so as to maintain the freshness of the troops and the vigor of the pursuit, reached the town of Civitavecchia during the morning of 7 June.

During this advance the work of the service troops was absolutely outstanding. The 34th Signal Company, whose unobtrusive efficiency had almost come to be taken for granted, now excelled [in] all its efforts by tirelessly linking the Division units by telephone and by maintaining radio contact. During the operation a few hours prior to capturing Civitavecchia the Division advanced forty-one miles, and telephone communication was continuously maintained between the Division headquarters and Corps headquarters far to the rear, as well as to the leading elements of the Division. To maintain the speed of the pursuit only those vehicles that were necessary for the job could be permitted to move on the roads. The 34th Military Police [Platoon] were given the task of controlling traffic to this end, and they rose to the occasion. The [34th] Quartermaster Company, hauling rations and gasoline from dumps far to the rear, enabled all troops to push on with the confidence that their supplies would always be maintained.

With the capture of the port of Civitavecchia there was every indication that the German rearguards were rapidly being overtaken, for just south of the town our troops were pressed to a ridge just in time to see an important bridge along Highway 1 being blown up by the Germans.

The chase was nearing a climax. The 133rd Infantry passed through the 168th Infantry, who had taken the port, and moved to a line of hills a few hundred yards south of the town of Tarquinia. Here the Germans had decided to attempt a stand for the first time since they relinquished their hold on Lanuvio. The troops they had chosen for this job consisted of the 40th Jaeger Regiment from the 20th German Airforce Field Division. This formation had been brought down from Denmark, passing the Normandy invasion front which had been opened only a few days before, and was rushed to Italy in an attempt to help prevent the much disorganized German Armies from being overrun. The engagement with this fresh Regiment was joined shortly after noon on 7 June. The day was warm, visibility was excellent. Our troops looking down from one ridge could see the Germans fully in the open busily digging foxholes and machine gun positions. The enemy, apparently not expecting such a vigorous chase, had not placed a strong screen of outposts to the south of their proposed line. They were wide-open. In one terrific punch the 133rd Infantry completely smashed the entire German Regiment. Within a few hours the enemy had been scattered and were retreating northward in great confusion. Prisoners from practically every company in the Regiment had been taken, and the way north was once more open. However, during the night of 8-9 June, the 361st RCT, part of the newly-arrived 91st Infantry Division, relieved the 133rd Infantry and continued the advance under the command of the 36th Infantry Division.

The 34th Infantry Division reassembled in the vicinity of Civitavecchia and, when pressing supply needs necessitated our evacuation of the port, the Division moved on 12 June to the vicinity of Tarquinia for rest and training.

## **Chapter XVI • CECINA • Scattering**

The Division spent two enjoyable weeks out of the line. The weather was fine and bivouac areas were selected on the sides of gently sloping hills overlooking the Mediterranean coast and the busy airfields and docks which, thanks to the rapidity of our troops' advance, were already in operation. For once, fatigue was not the most critical factor in influencing the withdrawal of the 34th from the line. A certain number of replacements had to be assimilated to replace losses

incurred at Lanuvio, but even more important was the job of closing together all the units which, during the hectic days of the chase, had become scattered. The 135th Infantry was relieved of its attachment to the 1st Armored Division and rejoined the 34th in the Tarquinia area.

A very important change in the composition of the Division took place at this time. So successful had been the experimental attachment of a unit of Japanese-Americans to a first-class fighting formation that the War Department had decided to attach an entire Regimental Combat Team of Nisei to the 34th Division, thus increasing its organic strength to four full combat teams. The 442nd Regiment, together with artillery [522nd Field Artillery Battalion], medical troops [442nd Medical Detachment], and engineers [232nd Combat Engineer Company], began the shaking-down process which always come whenever one joins a new unit. The 100th Infantry Battalion, by now battle-wise combat troops, though retaining their separate identity, were assigned to the 442nd Infantry.

On 24 June the Division began the long dusty movements by truck from Tarquinia to the front, which by then had moved many miles to the north - so far north indeed, that it was a hard job to find an assembly area close enough to the front to make a relief possible before the pursuing troops had gone too far forward again.

On 26 June the 133rd Infantry and 442nd Infantry, the latter in their first combat assignment, passed through elements of the 36th Infantry Division just north of Piombino, and almost at once ran into an enemy delaying line which was based on the line of hills running from Suvereto to the sea. The 442nd Infantry was committed to attack Suvereto from the south. In a brilliantly executed move the 100th Infantry Battalion, by-passing the town to the east, overran an enemy battalion command post, captured a great deal of German equipment, and captured and killed a large number of enemy troops. In recognition of this outstanding performance the 100th Infantry Battalion was awarded a unit citation by the War Department.

While this action of the 100th Battalion was being supported by the rest of the 442nd Combat Team, who moved methodically through the hills to clear Belvedere, the 133rd Infantry's advance along Highway 1, parallel to the coast, approached gradually nearer to the defile at S. Vincenzo where the road and railway run almost along the seashore. Due to the high bluffs which push out from the main mountain mass on the right of the highway, any movement which seeks to leave the road is contained within a very narrow space. The enemy took advantage of his chance and deployed a force just south of S. Vincenzo which required our troops a whole day to clear. The Division's right flank during this time was being protected by the 168th Infantry who found the going extremely difficult due to the virtual absence of roads in its mountainous sector.

The fighting in the next few days was of a very localized nature. Lateral communications were difficult and the Regiments, after being assigned the directions in which they were to make their attacks, completed their missions more or less upon their own initiative. Castagneto was cleared by the 133rd Infantry after an advance along the highway and thorough the hills to the right of it, causing the enemy very severe losses. The 442nd Infantry reached the Bolgheri River while the 168th Infantry cleared Monteverdi, during which an enemy group of battalion strength was hacked to pieces by the massed fire of all arms.

On 29 June the 135th Infantry passed through the 442nd Infantry and the Division maintained a steady northward advance along a twenty-kilometer front. After several sharp clashes the Cecina River was reached on 30 June. At this time the 168th Infantry on the right found the going through exceptionally difficult terrain too slow for effective pursuit to be carried out.

Accordingly, the troops were moved in trucks around the rear of the Division and re-entered the line preparatory to advancing north across the Cecina River to seize the town of Riparbella. The Cecina River was not a formidable barrier, consisting of a shallow stream running in a wide bed with many scattered banks of shale. A valuable enemy field order taken off a German prisoner disclosed that the enemy had retired to the north of the Cecina River and was going to delay our crossing for as long as possible. The German units consisted of the 16th SS Reconnaissance Battalion on the coast, while further inland was deployed the 19th German Airforce Field Division which had under its control a number of Turkoman troops from the 162nd Infantry Division (which had been very severely handled during the advances of the preceding few weeks). The enemy command had become so alarmed at the way in which their units were being scattered and confused by our thrust, that they had instituted a system of straggler patrols in their rear areas to seize any unfortunate German who did not seem to be doing anything, placed him, with others in the same situation, into small groups who were then committed to action.

The crossing of the Cecina River was made along a front of almost twenty kilometers, and everywhere succeeded except in the extreme coastal zone where the SS troops defending the town of Cecina (on the south bank) put up a most stubborn resistance. The 133rd Infantry, in cooperation with the 135th Infantry on its right, made a pincers attack upon the enemy, who were decisively beaten. This was one of the sharpest actions in the history of the 133rd Infantry and also one of the most successful, for the enemy left many dead and prisoners and much equipment in our hands.

The country through which the advance now had to move was very difficult. A series of jagged mountains separated by deep gorges and covered with forests and underbrush made communications very difficult and the supply of food and ammunition a matter of great exertion. The 135th Infantry, pinching out the 133rd Infantry, was now the left flank of the Division, while the 442nd Infantry held the center, leaving the 168th Infantry on the right.

By 3 July a steady progress had resulted in the capture of Riparbella on the right while elements of the 135th Infantry entered Rosignano during the early evening. In this village the Germans put up a very stubborn resistance. The terrain in the area was such that it was not possible to flank the town since any attempt to do so would have exposed the encircling unit to fire from the town itself. There was nothing for it but to engage once again in the bitter house to house fighting with which the Division had become all-too-familiar during its earlier days in Italy.

On the coast little possibility existed for speed since the road at this point ran along a ledge hewn out of the mountainside where it fell in a steep slope down to the sea. All that could be done was to block Highway 1 to prevent enemy units from harassing our left flank. The 168th Infantry on the right was, during this time, surrounding and annihilating whole companies who allowed themselves to become cut off during the defense of isolated hilltops.

## Chapter XVII • LEGHORN • Slugging

By 6 July [1944] Rosignano was cleared leaving so many enemy dead that the town was quarantined to prevent epidemics, and the 168th Infantry had closed in on Castellina, a little town in the mountains about ten kilometers further north up the twisting, narrow road from Riparbella. To the west of this town the 442nd Infantry had occupied a ridgeline covering the lateral trail connecting Rosignano with Castellina. The obstinate fighting of these past few days had seen the enemy extend the front of the 16th SS Division gradually to the east, committing the 35th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment at the side of the 16th SS Reconnaissance Battalion, defenders of Cecina. To the east of the SS troops the 19th German Airforce Field division was in a bad way, so much so that the enemy command rushed the crack 26th Panzer Grenadier Division from the central Italian front to oppose the 34th Division and to prevent a break-through by us, which would immediately menace the port of Leghorn [Livorno] and greatly simplify our advance to the Arno River valley. On our side, too, we had received reinforcements since the 363rd Regimental Combat Team, of the 91st Infantry Division, together with tanks and tank destroyers, had been sent in on the right flank of the Division as a task force known as Brigade Ramey, after its commander. Thus the 34th Division at this time had command of no less than five Regimental Combat Teams plus other attached troops, and the Division sector was as much as thirty kilometers wide.

During the morning of 7 July the Division received a temporary setback on its extreme right flank where the newly arrived troops of the 26th Panzer Grenadier Division counter-attacked elements of the 363rd Infantry and drove them from a hill. On the same afternoon the 133rd Infantry, from reserve, closed up behind the 168th Infantry, preparatory to relieving this Regiment and entering the line of the left of the 363rd Infantry. Our intention was to make our main drive in the right Division sector and to push forward as hard as possible due north to seize the dominating ground overlooking the Arno Valley, and by-pass the town of Leghorn since it would be relatively easy for the Germans to defend this port in the extremely rugged country to the south of it.

During 8 July the advance continued against weakening opposition in our right sector although the 135th and 442nd Infantry Regiments on the left met isolated enemy strongholds which required considerable time to reduce. The next few days were tough and strenuous and took the form of an out-and-out slugging match between two stubborn enemy divisions and the 34th. Our troops experienced almost as much trouble in overcoming the difficulties of poor communication as they did from direct German opposition. The roads, never in very good shape, were not designed for the heavy traffic we were obliged to put over them and, furthermore, the German engineers had demolished every bridge and culvert, had caused land-slides at points where the trails ran along shelves cut into sides of hills, and had blown craters in the road at awkward hairpin bends. Much toil and much time was involved in clearing the way for our supplies to move to the forward elements.

On 12 July the 363rd Infantry came under control of its parent Division which had taken over a sector on the right of the 34th, so that on 14 July our drive was resumed with the main effort on the east and all four Regiments committed in the line. In our desire to put a maximum punch behind our right-hand Regiments a certain weakness had been accepted on the left, but this was

considerably offset by the fire of anti-aircraft guns whose commander volunteered his services in support of our attack. In the face of many local counter-attacks our progress was necessarily slow, and in order to try to prevent undue fatigue on the assaulting elements frequent relief of the battalions in the line were made.

By 17 July our troops had emerged into less hilly country and it was possible to use more armored vehicles, in support of the infantry and for flank protection. We were now within striking distance of Leghorn. Higher headquarters directed us to exert all our efforts for the capture of this place rather than pursue our original intention of first seizing control of the Arno Valley. Accordingly, the Division sent every available support to the attack of the 135th Infantry, who were slugging it out with SS troops in stubborn fighting among the hills southeast of the objective. During the night 18-19 July the 363rd Infantry was again attached to the Division and it was to this Regiment that went the honor of being the first American troops to enter the city. They did so after a rapid infantry-tank thrust, arriving at the northeastern outskirts of Leghorn during the early morning hours of 19 July. The 135th Infantry, with a determined spurt, arrived in the southeastern suburbs shortly afterward.

In order to safeguard the prize of this great seaport it was essential to drive back German elements south of the Arno River and to prevent enemy raiding parties from trying to penetrate to the city. Strong patrols were at once pushed forward to the river line, but very few enemy were encountered and it was evident that the Germans had withdrawn the bulk of their force to the northern bank, leaving only outposts and patrols within the big loops which the Arno made in the flat land east of Pisa.

The 34th Division temporarily set up defensive positions along the southern bank and kept close watch on the enemy posts opposite them, including the city of Pisa itself, where enemy weapons could frequently be seen shooting at us. We were unable to take adequate retaliatory action for fear of destroying some of the priceless treasures of this ancient town.

At this time it was not known whether our halt would be short, so plans and reconnaissance were made to cross the Arno in the event we were ordered to do so. After a few days of patrolling, the 34th Division was relieved while our infantry went back to the resort town of Castiglioncello and other villages south of Leghorn for a period of rest. Certain advisers were left behind for a short time until the new men [of Task Force 45] had settled in. The artillery rejoined the Division a little later when it was seen that their fire power for the repulse of a possible enemy attack south of the river was no longer needed.

During the static period just prior to the Division's relief, Major General Charles W. Ryder, who had led the 34th since Ireland, left the Division for a higher command [IX Corps] in another theater [Pacific]. He was succeeded on 21 July by Major General Charles L. Bolte. Under General Bolte's direction the 34th proceeded to train for future operations and to enjoy the [unusual] experience of several weeks on end out of the fighting line, during which it could enjoy the facilities offered by the Mediterranean resort coast in summer.

The war in Italy paused. With the invasion of Southern France many of the units which had fought alongside the Division left for new battlefields. The 34th remained in Italy, waiting until

it should be called up to take part in the assault of the strongest German positions yet encountered - the Gothic Line along the Apennines.

## **Chapter XVIII • ROSIGNANO SOLVAY • Training**

Without question the fighting for Leghorn was a tough proposition, and the complete victory achieved by the Division against Nazi SS Troops was a fitting end to another phase of the campaign. For such had been the rapidity of the Allied advance from the Garigliano, from the Anzio beachhead, past Rome, past Civitavecchia, Cecina, and now Leghorn, to the southern fringes of Pisa, that our supply lines were over-strained and our troops tired. The Arno River, winding down the lovely plain of Tuscany, marked as definitely as a line on a staff map, a suitable point at which to break off active fighting for a spell, to make new plans, to bring up supplies, and to train for future operations. The Division was relieved by an Anti-Aircraft [Artillery] Brigade, and went for a summer vacation along the Mediterranean sea-shore south of Leghorn. This was unexpected good fortune, and the tired troops took full advantage of it. For a full week at the outset they overhauled their equipment, put on clean clothes, went swimming, or just lay around letting the Mediterranean sunshine put back into them some of the energy which they had so generously expended in the rough wooded hills between the Cecina River and the Arno.

Soon it became necessary to think of grimmer events to come and to digest and profit from the lessons and mistakes which had come to light during the recent slugging. Heavy casualties and the large number of replacements who had only recently joined their units meant that the standard of teamwork between the infantry, the artillery, and armored forces was inevitably lower than usual. The men just did not know each other. So co-ordination and team-play were especially stressed during working time, and for this we were very lucky to have attached to us even during the training period the 757th (Medium) Tank Battalion which was to enter combat with the Division in the near future. By dint of hard training, careful planning, and willing spirit the weeks passed in profitable achievement and a high-degree of self-confidence was obtained throughout the command. After the day's work was done, there was always the resort coast of the Mediterranean, the ample facilities of the Red Cross, and the fabulous beauties of Rome, of Siena, and of Florence.

Nor did the Division's fame go unnoticed by the exalted. Mr. Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain, inspected a representative detachment drawn from the major units of the 34th on 19 August [1944] and said in part,

"The 34th United States Infantry Division has the record of the longest period of action of any American troops in this war and participated in Africa, Salerno, Cassino Heights, Anzio beachhead and glorious capture of Rome and movement north thereof. We are now at a phase of this campaign where our enemy can be and will be given a thorough thrashing. The combined efforts of the Fifth and Eighth Armies in assaulting the common enemy has resulted in a greater friendship, more binding than ever before for the United Nations. The former glorious achievements of the Fifth Army and the Eighth Army must be continued and we will have further glorious adventures. The campaign, with the action of Allied troops in Normandy and

Southern France, will administer a thorough thrashing to Hitler. We must destroy them so that no other man or nation will again impose such oppression upon the nations for hundreds of years. I pay tribute to officers and men of the 34th United States Infantry Division for their glorious contribution in this great effort."

## **Chapter XIX • GOTHIC LINE • Considering**

While the 34th was in training it must not be thought that either the Allies or the enemy were relaxing and idly awaiting the next move. On the contrary, most vigorous preparations were being made on both sides to continue the struggle - an encounter which, for us, [poised] itself at the penetration of the entire Apennine Mountains. The campaign in Italy had, by now, become merely a part, albeit an important part, in the gigantic struggle which was in full fury throughout the length and breadth of the European continent. Magnificent Divisions, which had so gallantly and loyally fought alongside the 34th for almost a year in the grueling Italian campaign, had set sail for southern France and were, even at that moment, adding brilliant chapters to their record of fame in an astonishing drive from the beaches of the Riviera up the Rhone Valley toward Germany. The Normandy beachhead had bulged and spread by virtue of its own weight and power, engulfing the stricken German forces in a surging tide of strength and speed. On the eastern front, vengeful Russians, seeing the light of victory not many miles ahead, crashed through entire German armies, annihilating and scattering them.

But what of Italy? The Eighth Army, whose exploits throughout the Italian campaign would be hard to match, was on the move again, this time attacking with intense fury on a narrow front with the avowed objective of turning the entire Apennine defenses, by penetrating through the narrow plain which lay between the mountains and the sea north of Rimini, and thus of flooding into the Po Valley behind the Germans.

By the end of August [1944] the battle there was in full swing; much progress had been made and the Germans were growing anxious. After so many years of war, even the tough, smooth-running German war machine was going short of raw material - that is, of men. Two first-class divisions were removed from Italy to be replaced by a couple of inferior formations; other fine troops whom they could ill afford to spare from the active fighting lines were dispatched rapidly from the Eighth Army front to the Franco-Italian border, there to stand watch ceaselessly lest victorious Allied troops from France should spill over the Alps and sweep across the Po Valley in the German Army's rear. The Fifth Army, though quiet now, lay along the Arno River and no one knew when it would spring into action. Yet in spite of this threat, the Germans were forced to remove units from the sector north of Florence and to rush them as soon as they could to the Rimini gap where the Eighth Army was continuing its expert butchering. If the Germans could plug this one small leak in an otherwise water-tight defense system protecting the Po Valley, who could say how long the war in Italy might last? To make sure that nothing was left undone to hasten the victory in the peninsula, the Fifth Army prepared itself to assault the German defensive line frontally, to cross the Apennines and to enter the Po Valley where great possibility for exploitation existed. Even had we to conduct the enterprise against an enemy recently installed in the mountains, it would still have been fraught with risk and hardship; but the Allies knew and had known for many months that the toughest part of the Italian campaign would only have begun when Florence fell.

As far back as the initial Allied landings on the toe of Italy and at Salerno, the enemy high command had believed that the defense of the entire peninsula in the face of Allied air and amphibious superiority was not feasible. Searching for the most economical defense line by whose retention the maximum share of Italy's wealth could be assured to them, the Germans decided to base their main line of fortifications on the southern crest of the Apennine Mountains chain, north of the Arno River, where a kink in the backbone of Italy placed the forbidding heights in a barrier from the western coast right across the boot almost to Rimini, now under assault of the Eighth Army. This belt of defenses the Germans had named the "Gothic Line".

From the start it was conceived as a long-term project. Even in January 1944 constant aerial reconnaissance had discerned the preparations for permanent concrete defenses, field works, and the beginning of one of the most elaborate anti-tank ditches in the theater. Although the successful German resistance along the Gustav Line at Cassino had diverted the enemy's attention from the Gothic Line to positions south of Rome, the defeat which the Germans had suffered in the fighting from May onward had refocused their attention to their original defensive choice. Reports from many sources testified to the feverish activity in the Apennines and by August the project was very nearly complete. The line itself was three to four miles deep and consisted of field-type bunkers revetted with logs, rails, and railroad ties, "text-book" concrete emplacements for anti-tank guns, tank turrets with high-velocity guns dug into the rock so that only 12 inches of the cupola appeared above the surface, enormous minefields sown wherever movement appeared feasible, anti-tank ditches wide and deep enough to accommodate a double-decker bus, their sides strongly reinforced with pine saplings, and the whole undertaking protected by thick bands of barbed wire and anti-personnel mines actuated by trip wires. Some of the most cunning positions known were anti-tank and machine-gun emplacements dug into the face of a cliff in such a manner that only a small embrasure could be seen from the Allied side. Access to this artificial cave was gained by means of a trap door in the surface of the road above, down a vertical shaft leading to the firing chamber.

Through this formidable network of defenses two main routes existed in this sector north of Florence. One was the main highway (No. 65) connecting Bologna to Florence; the second was a parallel road [S 325] connecting Bologna with Prato, running by way of Vernio. Both of these highways ran through easily defensible mountain passes, the most famous of which was the Futa Pass of Highway 65. The Germans had prepared demolitions on all bridges along these roads, and at awkward hairpin turns they had laid 500 pound charges at intervals of a few hundred yards which, on being detonated, would blow the road off the face of the earth.

The penetration by frontal assault of long-prepared defenses, adequately garrisoned, is one of the most costly projects known to warfare, and while everybody realized that the operation, if successful, would virtually end the war in Italy, it was in no mood of lighthearted optimism, but rather one of grim determination, that the 34th Division began preparations to play its part in the attack on this famous position.

It was practically impossible to count upon surprise to help us to secure an initial advantage, which in some degree might compensate for the handicap which any attacker must bear in reducing a fortress. A number of troop movements designed to deceive the enemy about the point of our main effort were carried out, and various cover measures were put out to harass the

enemy's intelligence service. Nevertheless, it was well known that the enemy in his positions overlooking Florence was keeping a close watch, not so much on our movements in the rear areas, as upon the frontline troops facing him.

## **Chapter XX • FLORENCE - MONZUNO • Assaulting**

On 9 September [1944] the Division entered the line on the left of the II Corps sector, relieving British troops north of Florence. The mission was to advance alone and to the east of the Vernio-Bologna road, screening the Corps left flank and assisting the 91st Infantry Division on our right in their major task of capturing the Futa Pass and piercing the Gothic Line. On the left of the 34th, the 6th South African Armored Division was to advance and occupy ground as it was vacated by the enemy and was to screen our left, but the plan did not call for the South Africans to take part in the all-out attack. In general, the Gothic Line seemed likely to be rather less formidable in the 34th's sector than it was in the Futa Pass area. There was no antitank ditch, fewer concrete pillboxes and sunken tank turrets; probably more important still, the caliber of the troops of the 334th Infantry Division, who opposed us in the left half of our sector, was not nearly so high as that of the tough soldiers of the 4th Parachute Division who defended the Futa Pass and the right half of the 34th's zone. On the other hand, the terrain was extremely rugged in the path of our advance, and the road not of the most primitive type. The German High Command had expressly warned its lower units not to rely merely on difficult country to act as a defense against Allied attacks. French and American troops had taught the enemy this lesson in the offensive of the previous May. In spite of the good counsel, the enemy seemed to have left a slight gap in his defenses about half way between the Vernio road and Highway 65, at the place where the mountains were most steep and jagged. The 34th noted this for future reference.

For several days prior to their relief by our troops, British units had been advancing rapidly, against negligible resistance, from the northern outskirts of Florence toward the foothills of the Apennines. The Germans, feeling the pinch in manpower, had clearly decided not to become involved in heavy fighting before they had retired into the protection of their defensive line. The enemy units, falling back methodically from phase-line to phase-line, kept watch on our movements and harassed us liberally with self-propelled and long-range artillery.

The countryside just north of Florence is rich and heavily cultivated. In fine, warm weather the 34th forged ahead rapidly, with reconnaissance pushed well forward and both flanks screened by mechanized cavalry from the 91st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and the 34th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop. By 11 September, the 168th Infantry on the right of the Division sector had cleared the towns of Cavallina and Barberino, while the 133rd Infantry on the left was well up alongside them. Enemy resistance remained very light, but demolitions, a few minefields, and harassing artillery fire slowed our progress a little. It was not until 13 September that the enemy outpost line was reached, by which time the 135th Infantry, having passed through the 168th, was the right flank regiment of the Division. The next few days saw stiff fighting as the enemy was driven out of his positions. Although the Germans had not built a continuous chain of fortifications at this point, all key hill features were well organized, and determined groups of enemy with automatic weapons infiltrated at night back to places from which they had been driven in daylight. In the face of many small counterattacks the 34th Division penetrated the enemy outpost line by 15 September and began the development of the road to Bologna, to the

north and east in an arc which took advantage of every feature of the terrain. Although the main watershed of the Apennines was several kilometers further to the north, the mountain range was broken up by tongues of high ground, bare, rocky, and jagged, which ran south, splitting the area into many valleys, each dominated on both sides by hills. In order not to be caught under direct observed fire in the low ground, our advance had to be made laboriously over the ridge lines, where the best approaches were barely passable for mules, and where soldiers' backs formed the only means of getting forward supplies.

Our penetration of the outpost line had placed us very near the main defenses near Vernio and here the Germans fought savagely to prevent our further progress. Further to the east, our advance was more rapid, for the enemy had more room at his back before occupying his long-prepared bunkers. But here also were the first signs of a German weakness. It had already been noted that a narrow gap in the fortifications existed in some extremely difficult hills which the enemy may have thought strong enough to stop us, even unsupported by troops. It had since become clear from enemy prisoners of war and captured documents that the boundary between the 334th Infantry Division and the 4th Parachute Division also fell at this point. The German army group commander had issued warnings to his troops not to neglect the defense of unit boundaries, yet in spite of his foresight it began to look as though the enemy had committed the double error of exaggerating the defensive strength of difficult country undefended by troops and of failing to protect a divisional boundary.

Accordingly the 135th Infantry pushed due north leaving the threat to its flank to be taken care of by the 133rd Infantry which was heavily engaged with the 334th Division northeast of Vernio. The Germans had evidently decided that the only way in which they could obtain any immunity from the heavy concentrations of American artillery fire was by resorting to continual hand-to-hand combat since they realized we would then have to lift our fire to avoid casualties to our own troops. The repeated counterattacks which the enemy launched were therefore supported not only by the normal methods of artillery and mortar fire but also by the most lavish use of hand grenades seen since Cassino. One counterattack in particular, involving merely a platoon of enemy, was made with the support of about 200 men who, from a nearby hill, threw a veritable barrage of several hundred grenades just in advance of their own soldiers. It was evident that the commander of the 334th Division was very concerned with preventing our reaching the Vernio road and was devoting most of his strength to that sector. Inevitably, a gap opened up between his division and the parachute division. By 19 September the 135th Infantry, after a morning of heavy fighting during which only slight advances were achieved, jumped off again at dusk and before midnight had succeeded in placing two companies onto the tops of hills between the two enemy divisions. Meanwhile, the German counterattacks on the left flank against the 133rd Infantry continued to be very severe, centering alone the dominating feature of Hill 810, which changed hands several times. After one particularly heavy counterattack the Germans managed to regain possession of the hill for a complete day, but the effort cost them dear; under unceasing American artillery fire on their positions and on their lines of supply, their position became untenable. The temporary success may have encouraged the rest of the Germans for the time being, for they fought with great determination. But the strain was beginning to tell - enemy units were broken up and shifted about to provide reinforcements for the critical sectors, even engineers being committed as infantry.

By 19 September the Germans' exhaustion had forced them to abandon further local counterattacks and to content themselves with resisting passively along a line which included only the northern part of their defense belt. In the gap between the 334th and 4th Parachute Divisions, our initial infiltration was detected, and although the enemy was unable to do much to strengthen his position there, he used his observation from neighboring heights to bring down mortar fire and artillery concentrations on any injudicious movement of ours.

Our pressure achieved its objective two days later. After shattering days and nights of constant mortar and artillery fire, the enemy on Hill 810, disorganized and completely cut off from his battle group headquarters, made an organized surrender. The remainder of the Gothic Line in our sector was completely overrun and the enemy, still nervous about the boundary with the 4th Parachute Division, began to retreat from ridge-line to ridge-line. Local enemy defensive actions remained stubborn, but it was evident that the central organization was lacking, due primarily to the very effective interdiction of enemy communication and supply lines by the Division Artillery, supported by the British 10th AGRA {Army Group Royal Artillery}. During the entire Gothic Line battle, enemy artillery fire had been heavy, indeed. For many months he had been saving his ammunition for the show-down. Still, on 23 September German howitzer fire fell off abruptly while self-propelled fire greatly increased in proportion, indicative of a policy which the Germans invariably followed when they were withdrawing their field batteries to new positions. The 34th Division pressed its advance on the next day, with air observation confirming the fact that the Germans were withdrawing steadily. Our troops intensified their pressure along the craggy difficult ridges.

During the day and night of 24 September the little village of Montepiano, on the road 7 kilometers north of Vernio, was subjected to one of the heaviest German artillery concentrations of the entire campaign, when a total of over a thousand heavy shells fell within its narrow confines. The intensity of the fire may have been due in part to the enemy's wish to use up all the ammunition he could not carry away, but it seems probable that the Germans were completely deceived about the direction of our main attack. For, while it may have appeared to him simpler for us to follow the Vernio road, it turned out to be much quicker and safer to accept the difficulties of the terrain and to continue to advance northward along the ridge lines. On the same day the disorganized enemy battle groups that were conducting the delaying action were stabilized by a fresh battalion from the 362nd Infantry Division, which it took the remainder of the day to neutralize. We maintained a steady advance in the hills and along the trails, opposed by opportunist resistance from hastily chosen hill features supported by artillery fire of all types.

Up till now the weather had definitely been favorable to the attackers, but on the evening of 27 September rain clouds gathered and there was every indication of a break. Enemy movements and small concentrations throughout daylight on 26 and 27 September had been picked up by air OPs, and on the evening of 27 September the enemy laid a smoke screen across our entire front. Throughout the next 24 hours it poured constantly, reducing visibility to nil and so affecting road communication that our troops came almost to a standstill. German artillery increased in intensity and it became a certainty that a considerable reshuffling of German forces was underway. The engineers, who already were overworked in making by-passes on the few trails that were possible for motor transportation and in maintaining the crumbling road surfaces, now found an even greater burden thrust suddenly upon them. Roads and trails became quagmires of

greasy mud as the rain and dust were churned up by the passing vehicles. Flash floods washed out fords and strained make-shift bridges. Movement even by foot troops over steep surfaces made slippery by the down-pour was a slow and difficult business. The enemy, under cover of the natural screen, broke contact completely and disappeared into the fog. The weather cleared on the morning of 29 September, but close infantry contact was not regained until 30 September, by which time the enemy, by dint of immense exertions, had again completely organized and stabilized his defenses.

The exhausted 334th Infantry Division was completely relieved by the fresh, well-equipped 16th SS Division, a formation which had suffered defeat at the hands of the 34th in the fighting for Leghorn but which had been completely refitted and rested in a quiet sector of the line since the Arno phase-line was reached. The new-comers, in addition to digging in machine guns and mortars, had laid a large minefield in front of their positions across practically the entire sector, and a reconnaissance battalion was brought into the line to help fill the gap between the SS men and the parachutists on their eastern flank. Notwithstanding the fresh enemy troops and our own fatigue, the 34th Division resumed its slow but steady progress, driving the Germans from hill to hill in the face of heavy enemy artillery fire and well-handled machine gun and mortar defenses.

By 4 October our attack had reached the lateral secondary road connecting Highway 65 at Loiano with the village of Monzuno. Much of the 34th's supplies had to be bounced along tracks by jeep or mule since there was almost a complete absence of motorable roads in the sector. On each occasion that a temporary change in direction of attack of one of the regiments took place, a completely new main supply route had to be found, since there were no connecting trails between the various regiments' roads. On no less than three occasions, dumps and service installations were shifted to new MRSs serving the bulk of the Division. The Vernio-Bologna road (which was fairly suitable to heavy traffic even in wet weather) provided hazards of a different kind, for the successful advance of the 34th Division had placed them ahead of the other units in the Corps, and had resulted in our left flank being opened for a considerable length to direct enemy observation and fire. Supplies and ammunition for a complete regimental combat team were infiltrated by truck along this exposed route although enemy artillery interdiction was heavy and accurate. Our own Division Artillery, reinforced by the British 10th AGRA, did good work in neutralizing many enemy batteries, but the fact that the British guns were obliged by their weight and lack of maneuverability to remain in the valley only a few yards from the road meant that the Germans were able to retaliate with counter-battery and interdiction fire at one and the same time.

The Germans had found the Monzuno road extremely useful and opposed our approach with great bitterness. Finally, as the enemy tired and as a threat of American break-through several miles to the east diverted the enemy's attention, the opposition to the 34th crumbled and our troops entered the town of Monzuno against weakening resistance, although the enemy threw a great weight of artillery fire into the town after we had occupied it. As we moved ahead it appeared that the 34th Division had scored a definite tactical success. Fatigued though we were, the enemy disorganization was so great as to make it likely that one further concerted push would see a complete penetration of the German force. In particular, across the river which paralleled the Vernio road northward to Bologna, a single rampart known as M. Sole, the dominating feature of the area, was thought to be held only lightly, according to patrols which

had worked up toward it. The hill was in the sector of the division of our left, but if we could capture it, not only would the enemy's observation and interdiction of the Vernio road be reduced virtually to nothing, but the way would be open to exploitation with mobile forces of this, one of the two major routes of access to Bologna and the plain beyond. But the bigger plan envisioned a break-through to the east of Highway 65, and in order to maintain the momentum of the Corps offensive at this point, higher headquarters ordered infantry of the 1st Armored Division to relieve the 34th of their mission on the Corps left flank, freeing the 34th for commitment several thousand yards further east alongside the shattered ruins of Loiano where they took over the sector of the 85th Division on 14 October.

## **Chapter XXI • BELMONTE • Dragging**

The 85th [Infantry Division] had done a notable job in whittling down the enemy division which opposed them, and in scoring clean-cut advances against the stiffening opposition. As the 34th found to its cost, these advantages were made only by virtue of high determination and resource, for the pitiless rain had made communications so poor as to provide a major threat to the success of the offensive. The road net, though bad in our former sector, was virtually non-existent in the new one. Flash floods, colloidal mud, land-slides, poor drainage all contributed to the worries of the engineers. Truck-load after truck-load of rock was spread over the trails, only to sink into the apparently bottomless sea of mud. Bridges were washed out, forcing the infantry to use cableways, rafts, and mules - not merely for bringing up water cans, ammunition, and ration boxes, but also for the much more delicate work of evacuating the wounded. In the emergency, all kinds of troops, from clerks to general prisoners, were organized into work details to reinforce the engineers. The offensive, it must be admitted, had lost its momentum and was now grinding and shuddering forward, held back as much by its own drag as by the enemy's opposition. Indeed, the German situation was very poor. On one freak afternoon when the weather happened to clear, ground and air OPs of the artillery obtained direct observation on enemy field batteries, and our gunners proceeded to execute one of the most successful missions they had had in Italy. Firing almost without pause they placed heavy and accurate concentrations upon nearly every enemy battery and caused great destruction. The sharp drop in enemy artillery activity which followed was the direct result of this fine shooting. The Germans were definitely worried by our persistency, and on 19 October [1944] they began to commit the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, hurriedly brought over from the Eighth Army front.

In very heavy rain, the infantry of the 34th, supported by their teammates in the artillery, slogged forward over bare craggy hills and through swollen mountain torrents, taking successive objectives in the face of stiff resistance. Castel di Zena fell on 21 October, and the whole American front struggled on in appalling mud although by now casualties had greatly lowered our fighting efficiency.

On 22 October yet another factor was introduced, when the [Fifth] Army Commander [LtGen Mark Clark] decided it was not possible to achieve the original goal of seizing Bologna and breaking out into the Po Valley. That task was more difficult and required more time and troops than was at first anticipated, and by the end of October theater reserves of ammunition, particularly for mortars and field artillery, had shrunk to such a low level as to make it dangerous

to expend more in the prosecution of the attack. The order was given to halt the offensive and to dig in, in the best defensive situation locally available, pending a resumption of the attack at some later time. However, the 34th Division received permission to maintain its drive until the key terrain of M. Belmonte had been secured. This apparently minor feature was nevertheless essential to the occupation of a sound defensive line, since it gave observation southward and northward to whomever held it. So vital was it that, although the Germans had just committed a division to reinforce their line, they now ordered up Kesselring's own bodyguard - a battalion of five hundred good troops - to man part of the sector opposite the 34th Division. Thirty-six hours of heavy infantry and artillery fighting followed before the hill was taken by the 133rd Infantry and a defensive line was selected. At once mines and wire were laid in hasty field works pending the arrival of supplies for the construction of a more elaborate defense.

## **Chapter XXII • YEAR'S END • Defending**

Thus the great Gothic Line offensive ended - without fanfare, without being planned by the army, almost without being noticed by the world. And thus, also, insidiously, began the phase of the Italian Campaign which became known to those who were in it as the Apennine Winter. It is well here to run over in our minds, just as the soldiers of the Division did, what had been achieved and what had been lost as a result of the weeks of strain, suffering, and depletion since the first day of September [1944] when they began to climb the hills north of Florence. First, and without question, the Gothic Line, the intended bastion for northern Italy, had been destroyed. All that was now left were the deserted pillboxes, the twisted guns, the bedraggled wire of the conquered defenses. Secondly, the Apennine Mountains, which were the real protection of the Po Valley, had been climbed and the peaks left many kilometers in our rear. While the chain had not been completely pierced, the 34th Division was now facing down-hill and for the first time in many a month looked upon the enemy from higher hills than he possessed. Thirdly, a strong, well-rested enemy force had been routed, depleted, and was, at the time when the fighting died down, so exhausted as to be capable of only very limited operations. All that represented a clear-cut gain; but what was the cost? We had suffered heavy losses; no less than 107% of rifle company officers had in two months become casualties. We had become disorganized and tired so that concerted action, where each element supported the others, became daily more difficult to accomplish. We had run out of artillery and mortar ammunition, so that in default of heavy weapons' support any further advances by our weary foot soldiers would have had to be made at the cost of much heavier losses than we had suffered already. Let it be frankly said that our success was not complete. The energy and blood so freely expended would have to flow again in order to force a way through the last few kilometers of mountains which alone separated us from the rich valley of the Po. But before we could even begin to make further efforts, we needed, above all, rest.

It was the beginning of November, winter was almost upon us, our defenses were flimsy, our resources slim. The 34th Division had to buckle down to a program of extensive preparations calling for the greatest initiative and skill in improvisation before it could, with reasonable safety, relax and recover some of its strength. During the long autumn nights, in dank fog and heavy rain, carrying parties stumbled along hill trails carrying barbed wire, mines, and sandbags to improve the hasty defenses. Soon we had a barrier between us and the Germans which gave

protection from surprise attack and permitted us to devote more time to protect troops from the weather. In the Apennines, small stone-built farmers' cottages are scattered sparsely in the hills; every effort was made to use these as shelters and as supply bases. Straining the overworked American ingenuity, the infantry devised dugouts, hewed caves, piled sandbags, and arrived somehow at rough dwellings where men could obtain shelter from the wind and cold, and protection from enemy fire, and a place to warm coffee or to light a pipe. Up on the mountain peaks haggard soldiers looked through their glasses and could discern the shining city of Bologna dimly through the fall haze. And they could also see little groups of Germans digging, carrying, and laboring in much the same way as our soldiers, to gain some place to live in during the coming weeks. Gradually, as the days went by without major action on either side, a routine of life became established as the cold hand of winter pressed more heavily upon the mountains. The troops in the frontline were thinned out so that as many as possible could be brought back for a rest, bath, and clean clothes. Patrols became the chief activity of the infantrymen, and as time passed and the Germans became more and more firmly seated in their positions, the risks to each scouting party grew. As if fretting at the ammunition restrictions imposed upon them, the artillery and mortars growled a little, popped out a few shells, and returned to stony silence. The rain grew colder and turned to sleet, the mud grew deeper and thicker, the wounded lay longer and suffered more. The winter was going to be rough.

When the Gothic Line offensive was called off, it had originally been hoped that the delay in resuming the attack would be comparatively short - a matter of four or five weeks. Plans to go on with the drive were therefore kept going and a target date of 8 December was originally set. This was later postponed until the weather cleared sufficiently to make it reasonably certain that we should have two consecutive days of good flying weather, for it was necessary to offset the shortage of artillery ammunition by maximum use of air bombardment. A new provisional date of 18 December was fixed, but this again was cancelled due to bad weather; it was lucky that it was, for the least citizen of Loiano apparently knew all about it several days in advance. The Germans would have been waiting for us.

As the troops in Italy then waited for further orders, news came from Belgium of a German counter-offensive in strength that had apparently taken the troops there at a weak point and was making headway. Almost immediately, reports came from the Tyrhennian seacoast that German troops were massing for a possible drive down the Serchio Valley with the apparent objective of cutting the supply lines of the Fifth Army and of destroying our main base at Leghorn. Almost hourly these rumors grew in number, although at no time did it seem that there was more than doubtful evidence in their support. Nevertheless, the protection of Leghorn was deemed to be so vital that the very highest authority directed that Allied dispositions be at once changed to concentrate sufficient troops on the west flank of the Fifth Army to prevent such a possibility from being realized by the Germans. Since the main weight of the Fifth Army had up till now been concentrated astride Highway 65, in view of the resumption of the attack upon Bologna, the new directive forced the complete abandonment of our offensive plans. Two full Allied Divisions were hurriedly dispatched to reinforce the western coastal sector, while the 135th Combat Team, together with the medium tank battalion then supporting the 34th Division, were also sent to prepare defenses in that area. On 26 December an attack by an estimated two battalions of Germans was launched down the Serchio Valley and gained a few kilometers before it was stopped. In view of the radical change which had been made in the deployment of Allied

forces, further plans for the offensive were dropped, and the Allies had to postpone their all-out attack until the coming of Spring brought good weather.

Just before the new year, the 34th Division was relieved in the line and went back to the vicinity of Pietramala and the Radicosa Pass for a little rest and training. As a training vehicle it had to choose and begin the construction of a belt of defenses, whose task it would have been to prevent any remotely possible German thrust from cutting the lateral highway between Highway 65 and the east, pending the organization of a counter-attack force to restore the original line. By now it had snowed heavily, and the hardships of digging in the frozen, rocky ground and of working instruments in the vicious wind made this so-called rest period almost as much strain as service in the line, for Radicosa Pass was practically at the summit of the Apennines.

## **Chapter XXIII • NEW YEAR • Patrolling**

On 12 January [1945] the Division was ordered back to the front, to the sector east of Highway 85 and took up once again its task of patrolling and watching. Our knowledge of the enemy in the sector was meager in the extreme, for no identification had been obtained for some time. The only clue gained was that of four German corpses which had been identified as coming from the 305th Infantry Division. It was comparatively easy for the enemy to preserve the secret of his identity, for not only was the snow a foot deep everywhere, increasing in drifts to armpit level, but in addition there was a bright moon which made it possible for German sentries and observers to detect our every movement. Even where accidents of the ground gave our patrols concealment, noise of boots on the frozen surface of the snow gave away our approach long before we were within range to accomplish anything useful. The terrain favored the Germans, for the long tongues of land which lay between the little stream valleys feeding the Po River were ribbed with sheer bluffs, the steep side facing us, while the German side sloped gradually northward so as to give the effect of teeth on a rasp - making movement easy from north to south but difficult in the opposite direction. It followed that infantry work in these conditions was practicable only at certain points which were as well known to the enemy as to ourselves. By dogged perseverance and at the cost of disproportionately heavy casualties we finally were able to confirm the location of the 305th Infantry Division, which had been moved from the Eighth Army sector about a month previously, relieving the weary former occupants. It would be difficult to exaggerate the deadliness of the kind on warfare that went on at this time. There was nothing spectacular in it, and possibly from the over-all point of view each little operation was of small account. Nevertheless, the fact that each approach to the German positions was covered by previously registered mortar concentrations and machine-gun defensive fires; the alertness of the enemy; the fact that we were carrying the fight to him all the time, allowing him to choose his own moment for bringing down fire; the excellent visibility in the crisp chill of the winter's night - all these factors combined to make this period one of the most difficult and wearing of any that the 34th Division had known. Moreover, our sector was of crucial importance. As part of their winter war of nerves, designed to prevent us from getting firmly set in our defenses, the Germans had for the past few weeks been making small raids on critical hill features. Occasionally they succeeded in capturing a prominent point which they at once put to use as an advanced observatory to harass and make miserable the already grim life of the forward areas. The enemy had his eye on M. Belmonte, which, had he been able to get it, would have given him a

wonderful vantage point against us. It would also, in conjunction with the by-then-famous Gorgognano Church hill, have made a tremendously strong bastion to hold against the time when the Allies attacked again. Belmonte remained ours only at the price of unceasing alertness and sudden, bitter encounters.

In the face of a practically blank wall of ignorance about the enemy, and the ever-present necessity of obtaining data about them in case they should try to spring a surprise upon us, we made a limited raid involving two battalions on the afternoon of 6 February, centering upon the steep bluff and the rocky outcrop at Pizzano. Broad daylight was chosen for this operation in order to take advantage of surprise, since it was known that the Germans, like ourselves, used to sleep during the day while they kept vigilant watch at night. With necessarily limited artillery support, our troops were stopped cold within the first few hundred yards. The enemy, holed up in the rocks and caves, were quite safe from all kinds of fire except direct head-on shooting with high-velocity weapons, and his excellent observation prevented us from moving up anti-tank guns or tank destroyers for this purpose. Only one way to drive out the Germans seemed possible - hand-to-hand fighting with bayonet and grenade. This game was not worth the candle, and we resumed our former defensive attitude. The Infantry Regiments were relieved shortly afterward and spent nearly a month in a training area at Calenzano preparing themselves for offensive operations. It was a strong policy of the Division that the current preoccupation with defense in all its forms should not lead to an attitude of stolidness, still less defeatism, among the troops, for it was clear to all who were able to take the larger view that the winter phase was merely transitory, and with the melting of the snow, it would give [way] to active offensive operations once more.

It must be stated that in mountain warfare of this type, especially where communications are poor and equipment not specialized, road conditions are of paramount importance. Because of this, every effort had been made in the preceding months to restrict transportation to a minimum without prejudicing the conduct of operations. Thus, tank and tank destroyers which had been emplaced many weeks previously remained in their positions, only the crew being relieved from time to time. Field artillery battalions exchanged pieces with other units to avoid destroying the fragile road surface which was only maintained at the cost of exhaustion on the part of thousands of engineers and civilian laborers. There was another reason for keeping down the amount of traffic. The rough roads of the autumn months had taken a heavy toll in wear and tear on trucks, and the maintenance service was greatly overworked, hampered by the short supply of spare parts. Road accidents during the icy conditions which followed meant that our non-battle casualties were more numerous than those who fell in action. At Calenzano maintenance and repair was stressed as much as the physical training of the troops.

The 34th Division returned to the line, this time on and west of Highway 65, during the first week of March, taking over positions in front of those insignificant but highly dangerous places - Ca Valla, Monterumici, and Zula. We did not know very well the enemy troops who opposed us, but it was certain that the eastern half of our sector was held by the 65th Infantry Division, and that a newly organized and good-quality formation, the 8th Mountain Division, confronted us on the western side. So once more, as melting snows raised the level of water in the streams and turned ice into mud on the roads, the 34th Division resumed the deadly, nightly job of probing and patrolling under conditions where an alert but passive enemy had things mostly his own way.

However, by this stage, the Division Staff had been advised that the information obtained was not merely for the preparation of our defense, but would be used for the much more serious job of planning the resumption of the Allied offensive. Information obtained by the patrols, carefully stored and checked, became the basis upon which the troops who did eventually attack could plan ahead and, by using their knowledge, minimize their own losses. In order that it shall not be said that the enemy was at this stage already agreeable to give in, let it be admitted that on three successive nights between 15 and 19 March the German mountain troops scored clear-cut successes over our infantry in a series of patrol encounters in the valley and among the caves at Ca Valla, when our patrols were ambushed and captured by the Germans at no cost to themselves.

A few days later in the sector further east, an attack with less than a battalion of the 168th Infantry took place with the object of penetrating to the crescent-shaped ridge of Monterumici, to test the enemy defenses and the state of their alertness. As had been the case at Pizzano, daylight was again chosen for the assault, this time shortly after dawn. Our attacking forces very nearly reached the rim of the escarpment, having very thoroughly silenced the first German mortar barrage by means of our own effective counter-mortar organization. However, the Germans rapidly shifted their weapons to alternate sites and after a silence of half an hour laid down heavy mortar fire on all draws in the area leading to their positions. Fortunately, we had chosen to use the ridge lines for our approach and casualties were light. It was deemed prudent to withdraw under cover of smoke and artillery fire, lest our troops be caught in the German barrage when the enemy became alive to the situation.

The season had now changed from winter to early spring and as each day passed, the time approached for the beginning of the Allied offensive which was destined not merely to complete the operation which had dragged to a halt nearly six months previously, but was to destroy the German forces in all Italy. During the long months, and aided by the restriction upon traffic, the engineers had diligently labored on the roads and trails, in places creating entirely new highways, until the surfaces were hard and smooth enough to take the immense burden of vehicles which would be imposed upon them by the coming operation. Successive convoys arriving in the base ports had discharged their loads of supplies and ammunition, to be laboriously hauled to dumps in the immediate rear of the front, eliminating decisively the shortage which had been the primary cause of our failure in the preceding fall.

During the early part of April the Division Staff received the word to begin plans for the attack, and the complicated series of reliefs began which were to culminate with the 34th taking over command of the sector east of Highway 65 where it was to launch its part of the offensive a little later on.

## **Chapter XXIV • BOLOGNA • Smashing**

The zone of operations selected for the 34th Division took the units back once more to the familiar terrain of M. Belmonte and the Gorgognano Church hill. Between us and the Po Valley lay a belt of field defenses in three strips making a total depth of three to five miles. The Germans had not been idle during the winter, and had replaced the lack of concrete and steel by an abundance of alternate and reserve positions. The plan called for the seizure of the first line of

enemy defenses on Gorgognano Church hill and the Sevizzano ridge, the exploitation northwards and westwards of initial success, and finally, the broadening of the Division sector west to include Highway 65 and possibly the city of Bologna. Throughout the winter, available training time had been employed to stress the importance of training in mine-clearing operations by the infantry. In order to further reduce the danger from German minefields, the 109th Engineers, operating in conjunction with the 133rd Infantry, carried out extensive clearing and marking operations for seven successive nights prior to the jump-off so that when the 168th Infantry (which was to be the assaulting element) closed into the forward areas they found that clear paths existed through the mine fields almost up to the German outpost line. Allied formations to the east and west having jumped off successfully several days before our own attack, the 34th began its assault at 0300 hours on 16 April [1945] following a terrific artillery and air preparation. It was a day doubly to be remembered for it was also the 500th day on which the Division had command of a sector in contact with the enemy - a record by then unapproached by any other American Division in the Theater. Almost at once the assaulting companies of the 168th Infantry ran into the heaviest kind of infantry weapons fire. To start with, little artillery was received, thanks to the excellent counter-battery work of our artillery and aircraft during the preceding hours. Progress towards the Sevizzano ridge and towards the rubble of the Gorgognano Church and its nearby cemetery was slow, and calls for artillery neutralizing fire against enemy mortar and machine-gun positions were constant. By noon on the second day of the attack our troops had secured a foothold in the ruins of the Gorgognano Church, but the enemy continued to resist stubbornly from the graveyard hardly a hundred yards away. German artillery, by then having recovered from the first shock of our attack, placed heavy and accurate fire on our advancing elements, on one occasion laying down a concentration of 150 rounds of [150 mm] fire on the churchyard alone. Our own guns were in action almost without pause, crunching down upon the German positions in a ceaseless drumming fire which ground up the earth and all things on it into unrecognizable shambles. Urged on vigorously, our troops maintained heavy pressure until, by the evening of 18 April, the Germans showed signs of weakening under this terrific punishment. Leaving large numbers of unburied dead on the battlefield, the enemy attempted to withdraw from Sevizzano ridge and from the Gorgognano Church hill to a previously prepared second line of defense 1000 yards further north, but, by the timely commitment and rapid advance of a reserve battalion, a great portion of this force was overtaken and captured. The left-hand neighbors of the 34th, the 91st Infantry Division, had in the meantime been meeting similar rugged opposition but had gallantly succeeded in reaching the base of the key hill of M. Arnigo, which they captured by assault on the evening of 18 April. At once the 133rd Infantry relieved the 91st Division troops on this feature and, as it took up positions on the west of the 168th Infantry, both Regiments drove northward with undiminished vigor.

By this time the enemy had committed all of his immediate reserves and, having no other forces to throw in, began to show increasing signs of raggedness, exhaustion, and low fighting spirit. On the east of our sector the engagements were sporadic, although further to the west isolated enemy groups defended with great tenacity certain hill features until, after hours of intense fighting our advancing troops overcame them.

On 20 April, only four days after the attack began, through one of the strongest and best prepared lines the Germans had constructed, the 34th Division, in its sector, was in a position to push rapidly in the north leaving scattered stragglers to be cleaned up later. During the early

afternoon of 20 April our troops, spurred on by the news that the 34th Division had at the last moment been given the mission of entering Bologna, exerted every ounce of energy to cover the remaining dozen kilometers which separated them from the city which had lain within their view for six dreary months. Bologna was entered by troops of the 133rd Infantry - the first American troops in the city - during the small hours of 21 April. Rapturous civilians joined with the Partisans who had risen in revolt against the German garrison to welcome our troops [and those of the II Polish Corps coming in from the southeast].

Upon occupying the city, the 34th Division began the task of garrisoning the place, maintaining order, and gathering in its units which had become rather scattered as a result of the final chase. A battalion of infantry assisted counter-intelligence personnel in conducting a clean-up hunt in the city for Fascists and Nazis. After spending 36 hours in the great prize, the Division was relieved of its long attachment to II Corps and placed under command of IV Corps for operations designed to clean the enemy out of northwestern Italy.

## **Chapter XXV • HIGHWAY 9 • Slashing**

The situation had by this time become so bad for the enemy that it was known that his communications were failing him and units were very disorganized. An exception existed of a group of divisions which had escaped the main Allied attack but which were now retreating northeastward from their mountain defenses near the west coast of Italy and were evidently intending to cross the River Po and to escape into Austria before our troops could contact them. Speed, therefore, was one of the most important considerations in our movements. The 133rd Infantry moved rapidly by truck to the city of Modena, situated on the broad straight highway leading northwest from Bologna to the Po River and northwestern Italy.

Italian cities renowned in history were located at intervals along this, the Via Emilia, but the wily Germans, foreseeing that an eventual Allied attack might be launched along it, had constructed permanent defenses screening each successive town on the southeast side. These fortifications included solidly built pillboxes of concrete and brick, revetted anti-tank ditches, and large-scale prepared demolitions. To offset these precautionary measures, our troops could count upon assistance from the Partisans who, having been instructed to rise in rebellion against their German oppressors, were ready to prevent the Germans from carrying out a "scorched earth" policy.

The 133rd Infantry, relieving elements of the 1st Armored Division just west of Modena, moved rapidly along Highway 9 until they established contact with the defense force at Rubiera. After a brief fight the town was taken, and prisoners disclosed that the enemy units who were streaming northward from the Apennines came from a large assortment of combat and service units all hopelessly jumbled, and certain only of the necessity for retreating fast toward their homeland.

On 24 April our troops had advanced further up Highway 9 to the outskirts of Reggio where an enemy garrison of several hundred men, drawn from a local infantry weapons training school, put up a shrewd defense of the city, falling back slowly from the airfield into the town itself. By

the afternoon a few American tanks had arrived on the scene and these, together with a bold encircling movement from the south by the 34th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, resulted in an immediate collapse and the town was captured the same evening. To keep the pursuit fresh, the 168th Infantry now took up the chase. Throughout the night they pushed on to Parma, being slightly delayed by demolished bridges which the Germans had had time to destroy as they fell back.

By this time certain information had enabled us to gain a clearer picture of what we were up against. An enemy force, consisting on the 232nd Infantry Division, the 148th Infantry Division, and the Italia Infantry Division, together with other Republican Fascist troops and a German armored infantry regiment, were falling back to the north in several columns along the roads leading from the Apennines [at right angles] to Highway 9 and the River Po. Parma was on the line of their retreat. After a fight on the outskirts of the city, the 168th Infantry, together with Partisan brigades within the town and from the surrounding countryside, captured Parma during the evening of 25 April. The Germans, although handicapped by poor communications, realized that our rapid advance up Highway 9 was cutting deeply into the flank of their retreat, and indeed threatening to cut them off altogether. The leading German elements forced the pace as the 34th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, together with tanks, skirted Parma to the south, while the 133rd Infantry cleaned out by-passed German groups to the north.

Now the 135th Infantry, arriving in high spirits, passed through the 168th Infantry and, dashing in trucks along Highway 9, found that the Germans had failed to destroy an important bridges. Fidenza fell the same day. They advanced at full speed to the Nure River, which they reached by morning on 26 April. After a brisk fire fight, the enemy withdrew from the river to positions inside the town of Piacenza on the same afternoon. It was now evident that the 34th Division had achieved a great breakthrough and had cut clean across the retreating columns of three enemy divisions, so that one of them, the 232nd Infantry Division, was isolated between Highway 9 and the Po River, while the other two had not yet even crossed the main road. However, the situation of the 34th itself meant that with its own resources it had to face both south and north along a distance of about 90 kilometers and was constantly open to the risk of a concerted attack to surround it by means of a double attack of the enemy divisions which had been split. The Divisional plan was to block to the south with limited motorized patrols and road posts, while the 133rd and 135th Infantry Regiments concentrated on the complete elimination of the 232nd Infantry Division in the shortest possible time.

Fighting between the River Po and Highway 9 was vicious and sometimes confused. As the enemy was compressed into a small pocket in a loop of the river, he desperately tried to force a way out by charging down a road toward Piacenza with a column of infantry and some self-propelled guns. This force succeeded in surrounding a battalion of the 135th Infantry but, quite undaunted, the battalion fought on through the night until, by daybreak, all the enemy had either surrendered or been killed. During the same night, further to the east, a battalion of enemy troops advancing along a straight stretch of road became intermingled with two march units from the 133rd Infantry so that elements of our troops found themselves at either end of the German column. As dawn broke of 27 April the Americans, being the first to realize what the situation was, immediately brought 57 millimeter anti-tank guns, machine guns, rifles, grenades, and any

other available weapons into action. Firing at maximum rate over open sights, the 57s enfiladed the German columns from one end to the other.

After about forty minutes of the most bloody fighting the German column was completely wiped out, with heavy casualties to the enemy and much equipment lost. As the day wore on, the single German commander left alive, a colonel commanding a regiment of the 232nd Infantry Division, realized that his position was hopeless and, by the evening of 27 April surrendered his remaining officers and all enlisted personnel to the American troops.

During this fighting the enemy garrison in Piacenza, which included some Italian SS troops, abandoned its duty of holding open the crossing of the River Po within the city and completely melted away.

Throughout the two-day period from 26 to 28 April, while the 34th Division was annihilating the enemy to the north of it, the situation was extremely tense to the south of Highway 9. Rain and low clouds on 26 April prevented observation from AOPs [light aircraft] on the progress of the enemy retreat out of the Apennines toward us. All we knew was that it was a numerically strong enemy force getting nearer and nearer. As the weather improved during the afternoon of 27 April long columns of troops, including artillery and half-tracks, were seen only a few miles away from our weak road blocks. Partisans reported that they had harassed the enemy columns constantly, during their journey through the mountain roads but, according to prisoners, they still consisted of between 6,000 and 8,000 Germans and Italians. The first element to contact our troops was the armored infantry regiment which made a half-hearted attempt to force its way past our road block to enter the town of Parma, which, it will be recalled, was at that time a good 35 miles to the *rear* of our most advanced elements. Failing to enter the city and having suffered casualties, the enemy columns turned aside and moved northwestward into some high ground south of the highway, where contact was lost. To meet a possible attack by this enemy force, the only resources which we could spare consisted of the 168th Infantry Regiment, the 34th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop, a company from the 894th Tank Destroyers, and five light tanks, all spread out for a distance of 45 miles. Yet so vigorous were the parrying blows which were struck at the enemy spearheads as they tried to probe northward, that the Germans and Italians did not have the heart to attempt to cross Highway 9. The initiative remained throughout with the 34th.

On 29 April the Division was ordered to withdraw from the scene of its triumph in the Highway 9 area and to move in one day 145 miles - down to Modena, thence northward across the Po, and then westward again to a village near Cremona where it was originally intended to commit the Division in a sweeping movement to clear the Germans out of northwest Italy. It was left to the Brazilian Expeditionary Force to accept the surrender of the shaken German-Italian forces south of Highway 9 the day after the 34th left the sector.

No sooner had the leading Regiment deployed in the Cremona area, where it succeeded in rounding up several hundred Germans, including the Commanding General of the famous 90th Light Division, when the Division's orders were changed, and a further move of 80 miles was executed to close the Division into an area between Brescia and Bergamo. Thus by dint of skillful planning and use of all available transportation (and also by the old-fashioned method of traveling light), the Division had moved a total of over 330 miles in nine days [roughly the

straight-line distance from Anzio to Bologna over the preceding thirteen months], enabling the High Command to count upon the readiness of the Division for combat far in advance of what the enemy believed feasible. In the new zone, several thousand prisoners, many of them captured by Partisans, were rounded up. It was here that the first unmistakable signs of the impending German collapse were seen, as complete convoys of German vehicles loaded with Germans and driven by Germans careened down the highway towards the prisoner of war cages, guarded by only a handful of American soldiers.

In praising the fighting troops - above all the tired, footsore infantrymen - for their work in this, the last, maddest chase of Germans in the Italian campaign, let us not forget the achievements of the service troops. Aptly named, they, in the closing stages, made it possible to exploit to the full the terrible collapse of the German armies.

Consider the 34th Signal Company, which hauled, and then laid, wire day and night for hundreds of miles, tying-in the various units to a central directing point; the radiomen who welded into a flexible whole, what would otherwise have been a disjointed and aimless group of small forces. Remember the Division Military Police whose job, already complicated by the unprecedented distances and complications of a road net several hundred miles long, was made doubly difficult by the hordes of German PWs who flocked to the cages, at the end even in their own transport

Think of the Quartermaster, the Medics, The Ordnance, the truck drivers of all units, who for days on end had no rest, and little food; who kept their vehicles going although grossly and deliberately overloaded; who were the physical agents making possible the achievement of the mission beginning, "The Division will move ...".

Perhaps also the staffs at all echelons may not go unnoticed, for the achievements of the 34th Division did not happen by mere accident.

## **Chapter XXVI • BRESCIA - IVREA • Triumphant**

But now the climax pressed imminently upon us. All the enemy forces in Italy had been destroyed or scattered - except one. The elimination of this final group was to be the last battle task of the 34th in World War II. It will be recalled that before the Gothic Line offensive began, the Allied successes in Southern France had obliged the German command in Italy to dispatch a force to the Franco-Italian Alps, there to keep watch against a possible Allied eruption into the plains of northwest Italy. Throughout the long winter the Germans maintained their vigil, built elaborate defenses facing toward France, and strove to keep their lines of communication free from interference by the Partisans. The composition of the enemy force had changed from time to time, but by the spring [of 1945] had solidified into a compact group under command of the LXXV Corps which, besides various auxiliary units, included two full divisions. One was the 5th Mountain Division, a crack unit of hand-picked soldiers admirably suited for Alpine campaigning, who met us first near Mount Pantano and north of Cassino. The other, by the fortune of war, was our enemy counterpart, the 34th German Infantry Division, which had come to Italy in the summer of 1944 to rest and piece itself together after defeat at the hands of the Russians. It was an old division, by German standards, one of those formed during the first

expansion of the Nazi Army by Hitler in 1935. It had fought in France, and on several fronts in Russia, gaining a fine reputation. Now, as Germany's homeland was at the point of being overrun, her armies defeated, and her leaders disgraced, the 34th awaited what the 34th would do.

The LXXV Corps, it must be remembered, was not a beaten force. Its troops, though doubtless gloomy at the state of the war, had confidence in themselves and pride in their past performance. Its supplies were adequate, though transportation was lacking. All told, the Corps Commander, General Schlemmer, had a well-organized force of about 40,000 with which to operate during Germany's last days. When the front south of Bologna collapsed and the Po was spanned, General Schlemmer began gradually to withdraw from his Alpine fastnesses [eastward] and northward toward Turin, possibly hoping eventually to reach the Austrian border and to form part of the last-ditch defense in the "National Redoubt" of the German Alps. Throughout his retirement he defended himself skillfully against the French forces pursuing him from the west and, in return for his promise not to destroy Turin and other Italian towns, he gained immunity from Partisan attacks as he moved out across the valley floor toward the north. But the German progress, limited to the plodding of the draft horses, was slow, and the enemy columns could not shake off the vigilant rings of Partisans who surrounded them and shepherded them on their way. By 30 April, the spearheads of the U.S. 1st Armored Division had reached the Swiss frontier and the escape of the LXXV Corps was cut off.

It remained but to find the Germans and either force them to battle or to surrender. The 34th, and its old comrades [all the way back to Northern Ireland] of the 1st Armored, were given the job. Moving westward from Bergamo as fast as possible, the 34th crossed the Ticino River without resistance and pressed on to the area of Ivrea, a little village close to the Alpine foothills and about thirty miles northwest of Turin. There on 2 May we waited.

It will be recalled that the Italian Marshal Graziani, commanding the Ligurian Army, had by this time already capitulated. The extent of the Marshal's authority over German troops was uncertain, but obviously the enemy everywhere was cracking. Secret envoys to General Schlemmer during the preceding few days had learned that, although he agreed that his position was hopeless, and that surrender in the circumstances was neither unreasonable nor dishonorable, he - General Schlemmer - had given his personal oath to Hitler not to give in. The enemy commander considered himself bound by that undertaking so long as his FŸhrer remained alive. Nothing could shake this almost oriental concern with "face", but early on 2 May came the report from Berlin that Hitler had perished in the ruins of his capital. A few hours later, General Schlemmer sent his Chief of Staff through our lines to the CP [Command Post] of the 135th Infantry Regiment to announce his willingness to sign an unconditional surrender. Thus it fell on the 34th to accept this overture, one in a long series of similar acts up and down the battered continent.

Forty thousand Germans, including our opposite number, were thus, in the nick of time, spared the brief bloody clash which could only have ended in their destruction; for, with full air support and cooperation with the 1st Armored Division already arranged, our attack was imminent.

The war for us was over. The German surrender in the rest of Italy and then all over Italy followed within a matter of days.

The war sagged, without much excitement. to an end.

But the 34th didn't mind. It was not a bad end.