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"Elite Assault:" The 85th Infantry Division in Italy, 1944-1945

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“ELITE ASSAULT:” THE 85TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN ITALY, 1944-1945

by

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B.A. December 2011, University of Mary Washington

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ABSTRACT

“ELITE ASSAULT:” THE 85TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN ITALY, 1944-1945

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This thesis fills a major gap in the historiography of the Second World War by emphasizing the role of drafted divisions in the United States Army. Specifically, this thesis examines the 85th Infantry Division from its formation in May 1942 to its disbanding in August 1945. This thesis challenges the age-old assumption that conscripted soldiers were inferior to volunteer forces. By the 1940s, the United States retained a long-standing prejudice against drafted troops dating back to the poorly-executed drafts of the American Civil War, with many citizens arguing that volunteers were better soldiers. The 85th Division stands in direct contradiction to this. Gathered from across the country, its members received intensive training from devoted officers, ensuring their survival and success. Once overseas, training adapted to the tasks at hand, ensuring the men of the 85th would be prepared for the changing circumstances of combat. These men were thrown against elite troops of the German Army and the Luftwaffe’s vaunted Fallschirmjagers, earning the respect of their enemies. Drawing on personal accounts and a late war Army psychoanalytical survey, this thesis charts the mindset of the average 85th Division draftee, comparing him to his fellow soldiers in Italy and highlighting the unit’s high performance and above-average tolerance for combat. And while the public clearly favored stories of the liberation of France, direct comparison with European Theater troops further highlights the skill and combat record of the oft-maligned draftee divisions, as represented by

their initial example. Simply by doing their job and doing it well, the United States Army 85th Infantry Division shattered the myth of the inferiority of drafted combat troops.

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This work is dedicated to the countless men and women who served in the Armed Forces during World War II, and to my Friend, Corporal Michael A. Dudash (FMF PAC Lineman and Iwo Jima Veteran), who passed away before the final version of this thesis was completed. Semper Fi, Mr. Dudash.

“Be not afraid of greatness. Some are borne great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

- William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Act II, Scene 5.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the Second World War, the United States Army fielded sixty-six regular infantry divisions, forty-seven of which saw action in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.¹ Unlike modern infantry divisions, the ranks of these combat units were not uniformly filled with volunteers. In order to expedite the creation of a fighting force capable of tackling a two-front war, the United States resorted to a manpower draft. This indiscriminate selection process, pulling from all ages and walks of life, produced fifty-five draftee divisions “of all types,” thirty-eight of which were infantry divisions containing a total of approximately 570,000 officers and men.² This surge in manpower forced America’s citizens to do something they had failed to do for the past eighty years: come to terms with the draft.

There exists an almost ingrained bias against the concept of American conscripted forces in the public mind. Doubts regarding the viability of drafted men in general have been around long before Daniel Webster stood in the United States House of Representatives on December 9, 1814 and declared, “A military force cannot be raised in this manner [conscription] but by means of military force.”³ Since the earliest days of the United States, the volunteer soldier has been held aloft as the “greatest” and “most heroic

¹ Shelby L. Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II* (Fulton, MD: Presidio Press, 1984), 10.
Ibid., 75-187.

² John Sloan Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1986), ix.
Lloyd E. Lee, ed., *World War II in Asia and the Pacific and the War’s Aftermath, with General Themes: A Handbook of Literature and Research* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 230-231.
Charles Reginald Shrader, ed., *Reference Guide to United States Military History: 1919-1945* (New York: Sachem Publishing Associates, Inc., 1994), 9.

³ Robert Debs Heinl, Junior, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1966), 66.

soldier the world has ever known,” and nothing but distain followed for those pressed into military service for their nation.⁴ The Democratic National Platform of 1900 proudly stated that, “This republic has no place for a vast military service and conscription,” and respected military historian B. H. Liddell Hart later declared that the system of conscription “has always tended to foster quantity at the expense of quality,” and is “the cancer of civilization.”⁵ Dismal performances in the Civil War and the specter of Vietnam have permanently colored the American perception of drafted units in a poor light, unfairly casting a shadow over the capabilities of drafted forces in World War II when they were properly utilized.⁶ And while this miasma has persisted over modern histories of the war, with historians such as Stephen Ambrose often ignoring the draftee and lauding the volunteer, the Army at the time was able to recognize and acknowledge the strength of their drafted forces, albeit in a manner too subdued to lift the pall in the public’s eye.⁷

The Second World War resulted in a dramatic change in the military’s perception of drafted soldiers. This work is a study of the Army’s first all-draftee division created for service in World War II, the 85th Infantry Division. Examining the psychology of the soldiers and the myriad array of constant training exercises designed to adapt the men to

⁴ John A. Logan, *The Volunteer Soldier of America*, (New York: R. S. Peale and Company, 1887), xv-xviii.

St. Clair A. Mulholland, *The American Volunteer: The Most Heroic Soldier the World Has Ever Known*, (Philadelphia: Town Printing Company, 1909), 3-4.

⁵ Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, 67.

⁶ Doug Bandow, “The Volunteer Military: Better than the Draft (Cato Foreign Policy Briefing No. 6: January 8, 1991),” Cato Institute, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb-006.html> (accessed January 31, 2016.)

John G. Zinn, *The Mutinous Regiment: The Thirty-Third New Jersey in the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2005), 15

⁷ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne From Normandy to Hitler’s Eagle’s Nest* (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2001), 15-17.

combat scenarios, this work seeks to explain how the men of the 85th defied all expectations and became an elite assault division in the oft-forgotten Mediterranean Theater of Operations, with little to no recognition outside the armed services.⁸ The men of the 85th, who came together from thirteen different states and from hundreds of different occupations, not only fought well, they out-performed many of the volunteer units in their theater, won the respect of their German opponents, and dealt with the stresses of combat to a much higher degree than their fellow Italian Theater servicemen, all in the face of diminished recognition due to their deployment on the “forgotten front” of the war.⁹

America’s perceptions regarding the deficiencies of drafted units were largely cemented during the American Civil War through the oftentimes disastrous performance of Union units formed by the infamous March 3, 1863, Enrollment Act.¹⁰ The four resultant drafts of 1863 and 1864 pulled the names of 776,829 men between the ages of twenty and forty-five for military service, yet only 46,347 drafted men and 73,607 paid substitutes served, with an unbelievable 161,244 draft dodgers refusing to show for examination.¹¹ Another 86,724 northerners bought their way out of the draft by paying the \$300.00 “commutation” fee to keep themselves out of the line of fire.¹² As a result,

⁸ Chief Warrant Officer E. J. Kahn, Junior and Technical Sergeant Henry McLemore, *Fighting Divisions* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1945), 108.

⁹ Francis Trevelyan Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition* (Philadelphia: Universal Book and Bible House, 1945), 962.

¹⁰ Peter Levine, “Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865,” *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 4 (March 1981): 816.

Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union: War Becomes Revolution 1862-1863* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 463-464.

¹¹ Levine, “Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865,” 816-819.

¹² *Ibid.*

drafted men in the Civil War were often poor members of the working class and individuals of sometimes dubious quality, including bounty-seeking substitutes.¹³ A majority of these men served as individual replacements for veteran units, but the War Department did organize several regiments wholly out of drafted individuals.¹⁴ The performance of these all-draftee regiments on the field ranged from underwhelming to abysmal. The 33rd New Jersey, for instance, earned the nickname “The Mutinous Regiment” due to its 244 desertions from among the 902 original members.¹⁵ These desertions occurred before the 33rd had left its home state, and armed guards were needed to keep the men from leaving their camp of instruction.¹⁶

A half century after this disastrous foray into conscript warfare, the United States resurrected the draft system in the form of the Selective Service Act of 1917. Established on May 18 as an effort to create a “National Army” through an initial draft of twenty-one to thirty-year-old citizens, the act executed three drawings, with the second and third conscriptions widening the age range to include all male citizens from age eighteen to forty-five.¹⁷ Unlike the Civil War’s drafts, the Selective Service Act implemented the use of local draft boards intended to present the draft as a community’s patriotic effort

¹³ Tyler Anbinder, “Which Poor Man’s Fight? Immigrants and the Federal Conscription of 1863,” *Civil War History* 52, no. 4 (December 2006): 347.

Timothy J. Perri, “The Economics of US Civil War Conscription,” *American Law and Economics Review* 10, no.2 (Fall 2008): 432-433.

¹⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Leonard L. Lerwill, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1954), 104.

¹⁵ Zinn, *The Mutinous Regiment: The Thirty-Third New Jersey in the Civil War*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 149-150.

“World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, M1509,” National Archives and Records Administration, <http://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww1/draft-registration/> (accessed July 18, 2015).

rather than a government mandate.¹⁸ This First World War iteration of the draft was more successful than its Civil War predecessor, with 4,648 locally formed boards registering some 24,000,000 Americans.¹⁹ The most important alteration to the draft system, however, was the act's elimination of the much maligned practice of hiring substitutes.²⁰ This removed the contentious loophole that allowed the rich to escape service while the poor bore the brunt of the casualties, forming a more homogeneous military that put 2.7 million drafted men into service with an estimated loss of only 337,000 draft dodgers, half of whom were caught and later inducted.²¹ Further, the development of the "Conscientious Objector" classification for those whose personal or religious belief prevented them from taking up arms showed the Selective Service Act's more discriminating approach.²²

While this act resulted in a better crop of individuals than its Civil War predecessor, the use of draftees by the Army in the First World War contained serious flaws in terms of execution. The Army trained whole divisions of draftees stateside, but then cannibalized those divisions and disseminated their personnel when they deployed overseas.²³ For instance, the 81st "Wildcats" Division, which was trained to fight as a

¹⁸ Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 149-151.
 "World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, M1509."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Office of the Provost Marshal General, *Selective Service Regulations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 224.

²¹ Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 163-165.

²² Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 163-164.
 Mitchell Yockelson, "They Answered the Call: Military Service in the United States Army During World War I, 1917-1919," National Archives Prologue Magazine, <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/fall/military-service-in-world-war-one.html> (accessed August 2, 2015).

unit, but became a mobile replacement depot upon its arrival in France.²⁴ Even the World War I incarnation of the 85th Division suffered from the Army's policy of training a drafted division stateside only to break it up after sending it to Europe. Trained together at Camp Custer, Michigan, the original 85th lost the 339th Infantry Regiment and several supporting units to the Archangel expedition in Russia upon arrival in England.²⁵ Every other regiment was sent behind the lines in France, where they formed a "Depot Division" to support and replace men lost by other divisions in the trenches.²⁶

By the time Congress produced the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, Army philosophy had changed again, and the scenario that allowed for the 85th Division to become elite troops fell into place. The draft now had a counterpart in the form of the Army Ground Forces' new divisional training programs, described by historian John Sloan Brown as "a conscious effort at team building, designed to enhance morale, cohesion, discipline, and leadership."²⁷ The War Department implemented this change during the fiscal year of 1941 to increase the effectiveness of the new General

²³ Charles B. MacDonald, *American Military History* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), 399.

Ibid., 403-404.

North Carolina State Archives, "81st Division 'Wildcats'," North Carolina Office of Archives and History, <http://exhibits.archives.ncdcr.gov/wwi/OldNorthState/81stdivision.htm> (accessed August 12, 2015).

Richard W. Steward, ed., *American Military History: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2010), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ E. M. Halliday, *The Ignorant Armies* (New York: Award Books, 1964), 50-52.

²⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines* (Italy: Information and Education Section MTOUSA, 1945), 1.

Paul L. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1949), 2-3.

²⁷ John Sloan Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 26.

Headquarters' mobilization efforts.²⁸ Now, the U.S. Army actively encouraged *Esprit de Corps* among draftees, and kept their divisions together when they went overseas.²⁹ Still, the draft system of the Second World War contained a few flaws. For instance, the lottery selection did not provide an even demographic. Inevitably in some towns, older, married residents were selected while younger, single men remained at home. Derided in the United States Senate as breaking up homes while there were still “unmarried men who shun work... found in pool rooms, barrel houses, and on the highways and byways,” this unintentional drafting of husbands and fathers angered the draft's detractors.³⁰ Private Victor V. Evangelista, a rifleman in the 85th Division's 337th Infantry Regiment who fell into this category, upon hearing that an old friend with several children had to leave his business unwillingly to join the armed forces, wrote that, “It's really a damned shame that they have to take married men with two or three children when there are so many back there that don't have any children at all.”³¹ But this was a minor flaw when compared to the previous incarnations of American military conscription. By the end of the war, some 9,837,610 men had been drafted, with only 373,000 attempted draft

²⁸ General of the Army George Catlett Marshall, *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939 – 30 June 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), 23.

²⁹ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 34-38.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 13-18.
Ibid., 144.

³⁰ Oregon State Archives Online Exhibits, “Sending Them off to War: Pre-Induction Information Programs,” Oregon State Archives, <http://arcweb.sos.state.or.us/pages/exhibits/ww2/services/induct.htm#notes> (accessed January 2, 2016).

³¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 16, 1945, Wartime Correspondence Collection of Private Victor V. Evangelista, January 1, 1945 to January 28, 1946. Author's Collection.

dodgers.³² As a system, the Selective Service Act of 1940 worked remarkably well in channeling men into the right assignments.

The 85th Infantry Division was the United States Army's first attempt at creating an all-draftee division utilizing the new system. Men were selected at random from all across the country before being sent to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, for the start of two years of training.³³ At their camp and at later assignments, the men learned a variety of combat techniques. They studied and executed pre-war style maneuvers, and learned both desert fighting and amphibious assault tactics, none of which prepared them for the unique mountain fighting scenarios they experienced in the Italian Theater.³⁴ But in spite of this, the division fought splendidly. In Italy, the division's accomplishments were largely ignored by the American public even though the men were subjected to brutal fighting that forced them to deal with psychological fatigue on a near daily basis. It is counter-intuitive to assume that a division of drafted men trained in the wrong form of warfare would fight well in rough terrain against a determined foe, but the 85th Division proved to be an exceptional fighting outfit. This is an important attribute, for not only was the 85th reflective of the average draftee division in terms of formation and basic

³² John Whiteclay Chambers, *Draftees or Volunteers: A Documentary History of the Debate over Military Conscription in the United States, 1787-1973* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1975), 352.

"Induction Statistics," Selective Service System, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/Induction-Statistics> (accessed July 25, 2015).

³³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 8-9.
Ibid., 41-42.

³⁴ Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition*, 962.

Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Camp Shelby to Louisiana Maneuver Area, March 30, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Louisiana Maneuver Area to Desert Training Center, June 8, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 47-49.

training, but it showcased just how successful a draftee unit could be in the field, even in harsh conditions. The 85th fought through three campaigns in Italy with such skill and daring that their German opponents dubbed them an “elite assault division.”³⁵ Lieutenant General Mark Clark, the theater commander, came to view them as his elite mountain troops, and the Army bestowed awards and commendations on the 85th at a rate nearly double that of other units serving in Italy.³⁶

Direct examinations of the 85th Division and how its men performed under fire are virtually nonexistent, but the historiography of the subject can still be traced when looking at works on soldiers in the Mediterranean Theater. Unsurprisingly, the earliest and most direct work tracing the history and experiences of the “Custer Division,” as the 85th was known due to its First World War training base, was the official divisional history, compiled in 1949 by a former 85th Division officer, Captain Paul L. Schultz.³⁷ His work was published by the Infantry Journal Press as *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*.³⁸ Unfortunately, being a draftee unit that fought on the “forgotten front”

³⁵ “Lieutenant General John Breitling Coulter, Class of 1911,” Texas Military Institute, <http://tmi-sa.com/school/?q=about/corps/coulter> (accessed May 16, 2015).

Kahn and McLemore, *Fighting Divisions*, 108.

³⁶ 85th Support Command, “History Overview: The Custer Legacy,” United States Army Reserve, <http://www.usar.army.mil/ourstory/commands/85SC/History/Pages/History-Overview-.aspx> (accessed May 18, 2015).

United States Army, “85th Infantry Division,” U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/forcestruc/cbtchron/cc/085id.htm> (accessed August 1, 2015).

United States Army, “88th Infantry Division.”

United States Army. “91st Infantry Division.”

³⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, Frontispiece.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

meant that the 85th lacked recognition in both public and scholarly mindset, and this book was ignored by academics for close to four decades.³⁹

The first scholarly work to offer an in-depth analysis of the draftee saga during World War II did not appear until 1986, with the publication of John Sloan Brown's *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*. Brown analyzed a sister all-draftee unit, the 88th, which was activated on July 15, 1942, and entered combat on March 4, 1944.⁴⁰ The 88th had the distinction of being the first draftee division to take to the field, and Brown offered a solid analysis of its formation, struggles, and combat performance, in addition to examining the draftee training process as a whole. Using research gathered from various military archives and additional information provided by surviving officers of the division to craft his analysis, Brown described his work on the 88th as, "their story, measured against standards appropriate to scholarly appraisal and heavily weighted with archival and external evidence... this study might be subtitled 'How We Created a Division Out of Raw Draftees and Led Them to Victory Over the Most Highly Touted Army of Modern Times.'"⁴¹ Furthermore, Brown touts the final battles leading to the capture of Rome conducted by the 88th and 85th Divisions as "vindication[s] of the draftee and the draftee division," using the success of OPERATION: DIADEM as the ultimate evidence that "small cadres of professionals [officers and NCOs] had, in fact, been able to mold masses of American conscripts into proficient, modern fighting organizations."⁴² Unfortunately, Brown's study does not

³⁹ Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition*, 962.

⁴⁰ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 13. Ibid., 84.

⁴¹ Ibid., x-xii.

cover the story in detail after the fall of Rome, offering only brief glimpses into the operations of mid-1944 through 1945, but there is at least some analysis of the plights and pitfalls of the 88th Division Draftees post OPERATION: OVERLORD.

Aside from these two works, publications have largely been limited to studies of battles and campaigns of the Mediterranean Theater. A sampling of such works, produced by the Army's Center of Military History, include concise battle studies, such as Charles B. MacDonald and Sidney T. Mathews' 1993 work *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, and much broader campaign analyses, published as part of the "U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II" series, with the relevant works of *Rome-Arno*, *North Apennines 1944-1945*, and *Po Valley 1945* being published in 1994, 1996, and 1996, respectively.⁴³ While informative on the planning and execution of specific engagements, they lack analysis on the experience of the individual soldier, and are in essence educational tools for teaching tactics. Modern historiography has only recently begun to shift focus to the forgotten Italian Campaigns of 1944 and 1945.

As it stands, only two works of note have been recently published on the late-war Italian campaigns that examine the war's effect on individuals and larger unit experiences. Thomas R. Brooks' *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, published in 2001, created a comprehensive account of the post-Rome liberation Italian Front, as seen from the Allied perspective.⁴⁴ While not focused on individual units, the

⁴² Ibid.,140.

⁴³ Clayton D. Laurie, *Rome-Arno: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1994).

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, "Po Valley 1945," U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/po/72-33.htm> (accessed June 23, 2015).

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, "North Apennines 1944-1945," U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/nap/72-34.htm> (accessed June 23, 2015).

work represented a significant step forward from the “U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II” series in that it examined the late Mediterranean Theater as a whole. Similarly, James Holland’s 2008 work, *Italy’s Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, covered the fighting in Italy from the view of all involved parties, including the Axis, Allies, and civilians caught in between.⁴⁵ This work is now seven years old, however, yet remains the most recent piece even tangentially involving the story of the Custer Men. Despite this slow increase in scholarship, it is quite clear that there is a substantial gap in the historiography of the late Mediterranean Theater, especially emphasizing the American draftee experience, which this work seeks to fill.

This analysis of the 85th Division’s experience is organized around the chronology of their wartime service, from their roots through to final deactivation. The formation and training of the draftees is covered first, tracing the men’s backgrounds, stateside experiences, and overseas training duties all the way up to their introduction into combat on the Italian mainland. This is followed by a two-part examination of their combat experiences in Rome-Arno, North Apennines, and Po Valley campaigns, covering their initial reactions to combat, the evolving battlefields, and the experiences of the replacements. Chapter III examines the first half of the draftee’s overseas service, from spring 1944 through to the winter of 1945. Chapter IV continues this narrative through the spring of 1945 and the end of the Mediterranean Theater’s combat operations. Sources utilized include surviving original documents from the 85th Division held at the National Archives, period military publications, psychological papers, and most

⁴⁴ Thomas R. Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2001), Back Cover.

⁴⁵ James Holland, *Italy’s Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2008), Note on the Text.

importantly, accounts from average soldiers within the division, to include wartime correspondence and later interviews. The statistical data within Chapters III and IV draws heavily from an Army Psychoanalytical Survey, Survey 177, which involved interviews with 85th Division personnel during the final stages of the war in Italy. Finally, this thesis offers a comparative analysis of the 85th Division's combat record against other Italian and European Theater units, offering definitive proof that in terms of combat performance and combat fatigue, the Custer Division performed above average. This challenges the long-standing belief that drafted men fought poorly, or were not worthy of note over in the Italian "sideshow."

CHAPTER II

THE MEN OF THE 85TH INFANTRY DIVISION

The Drafted Masses

On April 17, 1942, 158 officers and a mix of 1,190 Regular Army non-commissioned officers and recently drafted enlisted men reported to the Camp Shelby Army Training Base in Mississippi to form the first wave of the newly resurrected 85th Infantry Division.¹ In just one month's time, the War Department accomplished an incredible feat of mobilization, building the 85th up from a skeleton crew to a full strength fighting division. By the time of the unit's formal activation on May 15, 1942, the division's numbers had risen to 581 officers and 1,270 enlisted personnel, and by May 31, the numbers had reached a total of 634 officers and 13,062 other ranks.² As time passed, more soldiers streamed in, such that the division eventually contained almost 15,000 personnel when it finally deployed overseas.³ Their experience represented a highly successful experiment in creating an effective all-draftee combat division from scratch, adding a new chapter into the pedigree of the resurgent 85th.

The speedy mobilization of the Second World War's 85th was aided by the fact that all of its core units had existed on paper decades before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The original 85th Infantry Division came into existence upon America's entry into the First World War. Created by the War Department on August 25, 1917, as one of the high-numbered divisions of the new National Army, the 85th Division was part of the

¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 8.

² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³ Charles Reginald Shrader, ed., *Reference Guide to United States Military History: 1919-1945*, 9.

effort to expand the United States Military prior to entering combat operations on the Western Front.⁴ Because its formation and initial training took place at Camp Custer, Michigan, the soldiers referred to themselves as the “Custer Men” and created a distinctive circular red-lettered patch displaying the abbreviation “C D,” (short for “Custer Division”) which the division carried into World War II.⁵ The division never fought as a cohesive unit during its 1918 deployment overseas, but its separate infantry, artillery, and support regiments served with distinction across several Western Front battlefields.⁶ In addition, the division’s 339th Infantry Regiment, 310th Engineers’ First Battalion, 337th Ambulance Company, and 337th Field Hospital served as the main American force in the oft-forgotten Archangel Expedition in northern Russia.⁷ These members of the 85th Division had the distinction of being some of the last American servicemen engaged in combat during the First World War, fighting against Bolshevik forces along Archangel’s Railroad Front until their withdrawal on June 28, 1919.⁸ As such, the 339th Infantry Regiment was granted the honor of having the Russian Language motto, “Штык Решать,” (“The Bayonet Decides”) inscribed on its Distinctive Unit Insignia as a permanent reminder of this unique military heritage.⁹ Shortly after the last division members arrived back in the United States in August 1919, the rapidly shrinking

⁴ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 1.

⁵ Captain Paul L. Schultz, *Welcome to the 85th Division* (Italy: Division Information and Education Office, 1945), 13.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 2.

⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 1-2.

⁷ Halliday, *The Ignorant Armies*, 50-52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 254-255.

⁹ The Institute of Heraldry, “339th Regiment,” Office of the Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Army, <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/HeraldryMulti.aspx?CategoryId=4161&grp=2&menu=Uniformed%20Services> (accessed May 20, 2015).

United States Army reached a point in its force reduction efforts where it decided that the 85th Division did not need to remain on the active rolls.¹⁰ Consequently, the division and its components were deactivated, becoming a “paper unit” until future conflicts might call for a full-fledged division.¹¹

When the American Naval Base at Pearl Harbor was attacked by the Empire of Japan on the morning of December 7, 1941, and when Japan’s ally, Nazi Germany, declared war on the United States just four days later, the now beleaguered War Department reactivated units it had shelved twenty years prior.¹² Thus, the War Department dusted off the dormant title of the 85th Division and elected to fill it with the first wave of men called up in the 1942 draft. Brought into the Army by the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 and its 1942 amendment, the newly selected members of the 85th were drawn from a pool consisting of “every male citizen of the United States, and every male alien residing in the United States who has declared his intention of becoming a citizen” between the ages of “eighteen and sixty-five,” with an age cap of forty-five for those issued combat assignments.¹³ As per the Selective Service Act of 1940, locally organized and operated draft boards selected men to serve for “such time as

¹⁰ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition*, 948.

¹³United States Congress, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, as Amended* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 2-L.

United States Senate, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940*, 76th Cong., 3rd sess., 1940. S. Doc. 4164, 885.

may be necessary in the interests of national defense,” which, in plain terms, translated into the duration of the war.¹⁴

The early war draft selections of 1940 through 1942 that created the 85th Division were complex and immense undertakings. Local draft boards were issued quotas from the War Department, prompting the issuance of documents to those registered for the draft.¹⁵ Men in the area controlled by the board were then issued a series of highly detailed questionnaires and sent to designated points for physicals that would determine their service classification if their number was called up.¹⁶ These forms were designed to give the military as much insight into an individual as possible so as to ensure they were put to the best use if they were called up. The thirty-four part Selective Service Occupational Questionnaire, for example, was the second document required to be filled out, sporting questions regarding demographics and specifics on employment and skills.¹⁷ Respondents were required to be sent back the questionnaire to the board within ten days of its first issuance.¹⁸ Once received, the information was then passed by the local institution to the Bureau of Census and Department of Labor, where it was catalogued for the service branches to reference if a man was drafted and ready for assignment.¹⁹ Even a person’s personal hobbies were considered important to the draft boards, with twenty-

¹⁴ United States Congress, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, as Amended*, 2-L.

¹⁵ Lieutenant John R. Craft, *Army Selectee’s Handbook* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1943), 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Selective Service System, *D.S.S. Form 311 – Occupational Questionnaire – Selective Service*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), 1-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Craft, *Army Selectee’s Handbook*, 14.
Selective Service System, *D.S.S. Form 311*, 1-4.

seven pastimes ranging from astronomy and bird training to woodworking and theater being deemed as having “military significance.”²⁰ Once a registrant completed all the paperwork and examinations, he was issued his “Notice of Classification.”²¹ Boards encouraged those who were registered and classified as 1A (available for immediate military service) to exercise and ensure their peak physical fitness, as a means of preparation for service should their number be called.²² Once selected, new draftees were dispatched by their boards to induction stations for “physical examination, fingerprinting, and induction,” with the possibility of a seven day furlough “to arrange their personal affairs” before being dispatched to a reception center for final processing into the military.²³ From these points, the Army distributed the men to their new assignments, such as the 85th Infantry Division.

According to the official divisional history, the drafted men who formed the second incarnation of the Custer Division came into the Army from fifteen different states and over a hundred different pre-war professions.²⁴ A sampling of thirty enlisted men from the 337th Infantry Regiment who reported for duty prior to the unit’s departure across the Atlantic demonstrated a wide range of demographics, data which presents an introspective view of the average members of the 85th Division during the Second World War. Even within this relatively small sample, the enlistment records indicate that these

²⁰ Craft, *Army Selectee’s Handbook*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²² “Classifications,” Selective Service System, <https://www.sss.gov/Classifications> (accessed January 30, 2016).

Craft, *Army Selectee’s Handbook*, 15-16.

²³ Craft, *Army Selectee’s Handbook*, 19.

²⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

draftees came from a total of thirteen different states on both sides of the Mississippi River.²⁵ More specifically, six of the selectees were from the state of Pennsylvania, five from New York, four from Virginia, three from both Michigan and New Jersey, two from Indiana, and one each from Connecticut, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Texas, Missouri, and Oregon.²⁶ The men were overwhelmingly single, with only five married men and two divorced men compared to twenty-three unattached bachelors.²⁷ Of the twenty-three unmarried draftees, three were listed as having dependents, as did both of the divorcees.²⁸ The number of married men with children is unknown, as the dependent status of draftees with spouses was not documented.²⁹ The average age of the draftees in this sample was twenty-three, but a few of the draftees were actually in their thirties.³⁰ Given that the average age of an Army service member during the Second World War was twenty-six

²⁵ H.L. Sorenson, *General Order No. 28* (Italy: Headquarters 337th Infantry Regiment, 1945). Robert W. Vandenberg, *Company E 337th Infantry Regiment Order No. 7* (Italy: Company E 337th Infantry Regiment, 1944).

War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 31405964," National Archives and Records Administration, <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/record-detail.jsp?dt=893&mtch=1&tf=F&q=31405964&bc=sl,fd&rpp=10&pg=1&rid=6580075> (accessed May 11, 2015).

War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 32178896," "32196353," "32335147," "32563458," "33046241," "33200141," "33230644," "33313376," "33444013," "33616702," "33636382," "33680537," "33832741," "33871835," "34283205," "35097354," "35461524," "35680662," "35897714," "36402745," "36412374," "36456555," "37624587," "38556583," "39341756," "42011724," "42015088," "42040684," "42041844."

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

and roughly two out of every nine were married, these statistics mark the men of the 85th as being typical of those in Army units.³¹

The draftees' level of education had an even more diverse spread than age or marital status. Twelve of the examined draftees had only completed grammar school, three had finished a single year of high school, five had finished two years of high school, seven had finished four years of high school, two had completed one year of college, and a single draftee had finished his second year of college before being called up.³² And just as the 1949 divisional history suggested, pre-war occupation was extremely diverse. Seven draftees did not have employment before the Army.³³ The most commonly listed profession was "farm hand" at three selectees, followed by "driver" and "stock clerk" at two men apiece.³⁴ The remaining sixteen infantrymen in the sampling held a range of pre-war positions of all types, including gas station attendant, clerk, checker, knitter, packer, smelter, shoemaker, construction worker, actor, lumberman, machinist, machine oiler, farmer, plumber, foreman, and, most interesting of all, an ammunition

³¹ Melinda L. Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 46.

War Department, "Display Partial Records: Married," National Archives and Records Administration, https://aad.archives.gov/aad/display-partial-records.jsp?s=3360&dt=893&tf=F&bc=%2Cs1%2Cfd&q=married&btnSearch=Search&as_alq=&as_anq=&as_epq=&as_woq= (accessed December 19, 2015).

³² Sorenson, *General Order No. 28*.

Vandenberg, *Company E 337th Infantry Regiment Order No. 7*.

War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 31405964," "32178896," "32196353," "32335147," "32563458," "33046241," "33200141," "33230644," "33313376," "33444013," "33616702," "33636382," "33680537," "33832741," "33871835," "34283205," "35097354," "35461524," "35680662," "35897714," "36402745," "36412374," "36456555," "37624587," "38556583," "39341756," "42011724," "42015088," "42040684," "42041844."

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

manufacturing worker.³⁵ One man, thirty-seven year old Swedish-borne Carl O. Tauberman, was not even a full citizen at the time of his drafting.³⁶

Of course, the Army was not about to thrust this collection of civilians into the infantry without trained military support. The veteran non-commissioned officers of the 85th Division were “old hand” members of the United States Army. Building off the “cadre division concept,” the Custer Division received a staff from pre-war units so the draftees could be “trained by an existing cadre which is already trained in the art of war.”³⁷ In the case of the 85th Division, the War Department selected the 2nd Infantry Division, based out of Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, to serve as the progenitor division.³⁸ The 2nd had an interwar history of being the “test bed” unit of the Army’s three peacetime divisions, so its members were some of the first to undergo restructuring into the new three regiment strong “triangular division” concept and experimented early attempts at combined arms warfare.³⁹ As such, the vast majority of the original corporals and sergeants were career soldiers drawn from Fort Sam Houston, and were well-versed in the Army’s latest version of warfare.⁴⁰ According to divisional records, several of the cadre had also seen overseas service, be it in the Philippines or

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ War Department, “Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 36412374.”

³⁷ Colonel David R. Durr, *The Cadre Division Concept: The 106th Infantry Division Revisited* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1992), 1.

³⁸ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, Endpapers.
U.S. Army Second Infantry Division (Combined), “Our History,” United States Army, <http://www.2id.korea.army.mil/about/history.asp> (accessed September 30, 2015).

³⁹ U.S. Army Second Infantry Division (Combined), “Our History”.

⁴⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.
Veterans History Project, “Interview with Donald Morrison [02/26/2003],” Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.10330/transcript?ID=sr0001> (May 11, 2015).

elsewhere, prior to their assignment at Camp Shelby.⁴¹ Each member of the cadre was selected with a “specific and carefully considered role” in mind, with both parent and new division operating under the belief that the NCO cadre would be the sole determinate as to if the draftee division had reached a state of readiness.⁴²

Some units treated the cadre selection process as “housekeeping” to clean their division out of any underperformers or malcontents, an act that resulted in crippled divisions, but the 85th received a compliment of levelheaded NCOs from a stern disciplinarian, Major General John Clifford Hodges Lee, resulting in a solid foundation for the new division.⁴³ A prime example of one of these original non-commissioned officers was Ira Talbot Slaughter of Menard, Texas.⁴⁴ A pre-war farmer with four years of high school, Slaughter enlisted in the Army in November 1940 and was sent to Dodd Field in Texas for basic training.⁴⁵ Upon completion of his training, Slaughter was assigned to the 15th Field Artillery Battalion out of Fort Sam Houston before he and several other members of his unit were selected and sent to the Artillery Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.⁴⁶ The attack on Pearl Harbor convinced Slaughter and his fellow candidates that they were going to be one of the first units to

⁴¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

⁴² Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 18.

⁴³ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 18.
Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 78.
Ibid., Endpapers.

⁴⁴ War Department, “Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 38025185.”

⁴⁵ Veterans History Project, “Ira Talbot Slaughter Interview (Video),” Library of Congress, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.32817/mv0001001.stream> (accessed May 11, 2015).

War Department, “Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 38025185.”

⁴⁶ Veterans History Project, “Ira Talbot Slaughter Interview (Video).”

“get into it,” but instead the soldiers were sent back to Fort Sam Houston and broken down into cadres for the 85th Infantry Division.⁴⁷ Slaughter arrived at Camp Shelby on April 17, 1942, to serve as an NCO in the 85th Division’s new 328th Field Artillery Battalion.⁴⁸ While Slaughter, who would eventually attain the rank of Staff Sergeant in the 328th, was not one of the cadre members with overseas experience, his pre-war Army training and experience at Officer Candidate School made him an excellent choice to help guide civilian draftees in the ways of the Armed Services.⁴⁹ Men like Sergeant Slaughter were crucial in preparing the Division for combat and leading it in its early days. The NCOs spent weeks training and preparing prior to the arrival of their assigned draftees, making them well versed in the tasks required of both them and their men.⁵⁰ Competent instructors were especially important for those men assigned specialized tasks, such as those dealing with electronics, communications, vehicles, and munitions.⁵¹ Encouraged by their NCO instructors to “work hard and faithfully” on learning their tasks, these specialists would often be commended for the “speed and efficiency” with which they could carry out their tasks in combat scenarios, thanks in no small part to their cadre.⁵² To quote John Sloan Brown on the traditional “old division of labor,” the NCOs were

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 39.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

⁵¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 19-20.

⁵² Ibid., 20.

responsible “for detailed supervision, discipline, health, and welfare” of the men, thus freeing the officers to engage in “general supervision and tactical direction.”⁵³

The officers of the 85th Division, just like the NCOs, were experienced Regular Army soldiers. When the War Department ordered the 85th Division reformed in May 1942, it assigned command to Major General Wade H. Haislip, who led the unit until February 21, 1943.⁵⁴ Haislip did his best to ensure that the men under his command had a reasonably smooth transition to Army life. His friendly and approachable attitude was known and respected, so much so that General Haislip sometimes went to the train station to greet newly arriving enlisted men in person.⁵⁵ Eventually the War Department promoted Haislip to command the newly activated XV Corps, so after taking their first steps toward becoming proper soldiers, the men of the 85th experienced a change of command.⁵⁶ For the rest of their training, Major General John B. Coulter commanded the Custer Division.⁵⁷ Coulter, who had been the Division’s second-in-command prior to Haislip’s promotion possessed an array of military experience.⁵⁸ He served in the Punitive Expedition of 1916 and commanded a pioneer infantry battalion during World War I.⁵⁹ He spent most of the interwar years in the cavalry branch, attending the

⁵³ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 22.

⁵⁴ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2.

⁵⁵ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

⁵⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Lieutenant General John Breitling Coulter, Class of 1911.”

Command and General Staff College, Cavalry School, and both the Army and Navy War Colleges, making him well versed in military tactics and training doctrine.⁶⁰

While the division benefited from the leadership of Haislip and Coulter, however, the junior officers were the ones who interacted with the draftees on a day-to-day basis. Beneath the level of the headquarters staff, the division contained 781 field grade and company grade officers, “most of [whom] had served all over the country and some in the Philippines and other foreign posts.”⁶¹ These men were instrumental in controlling the instruction of the draftees and guiding them in combat scenarios. Like the NCO cadre, the officers were drawn from pre-war Regular Army troops, and as officers, they possessed a higher level of instruction in the specialized fields in which they would be leading their newly assigned enlisted personnel. One such officer was Captain Donald A. Morrison, Jr., of the 329th Field Artillery Battalion.⁶² Morrison had graduated from Perdue University’s Reserve Officer Training Corps program in 1938, and had been an active reserve officer for two and a half years before the attack on Pearl Harbor.⁶³ In the first three months following the attack, he attended Fort Sill’s Communications School before being assigned as one of the 85th Division’s original contingent of junior officers at Camp Shelby.⁶⁴ Morrison was twenty-five years old upon his arrival at the camp, and

⁶⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.
Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *U.S. Leadership in Wartime: Clashes, Controversy, and Compromise* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO LLC, 2009), 706.

⁶¹ Charles Reginald Shrader, ed., *Reference Guide to United States Military History: 1919-1945* (New York: Sachem Publishing Associates, Inc., 1994), 9.

⁶² Veterans History Project, “Interview with Donald Morrison [02/26/2003].”

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

was married with children.⁶⁵ Like many of his fellow officers, Morrison was older than the enlisted personnel under his command, and his completion of college meant that he was better educated than most. Morrison's NCO cadre consisted of ten former 2nd Infantry Division sergeants and corporals from Fort Sam Houston, and he utilized this core of pre-war soldiers to ensure his draftees learned how to become an effective artillery communications section.⁶⁶ A man who cared deeply about his unit, Captain Morrison was proud to shepherd his new soldiers from around the country. In his words, "They were great people, they were all fine."⁶⁷ Other officers, most notably Colonel Paul J. Vevia, commander of the 339th Infantry Regiment, were considered harsh during training, but their desires to see the men demonstrate "impeccable workmanship" and their efforts to acclimate men to all factors of combat, such as being separated from their loved ones and engaging in constant blackout conditions may have contributed to the division's success in future combat actions.⁶⁸ The combination of understanding, helpful, and harsh officers formed a crucial component in ensuring that an all-selectee division like the 85th would go into combat with good morale and properly ingrained knowledge. In order to transform that knowledge into martial skill, however, the 15,000 men of the 85th first needed to train.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 20-21.

Stateside Training

Training for the draftees began at Camp Shelby even before construction of the Mississippi base was fully completed. For the first several weeks of their military experience, the new soldiers lived in “the largest tent city in the country,” with soldiers quartered in some of the 360,000-acre camp’s 14,000 tents, most of which were pyramid tents designed to house six to eight men.⁶⁹ Eventually, conditions improved with the construction of simple wood structures known as “hutments,” but creature comforts were few.⁷⁰ Each draftee was issued wool uniforms, leather boots, mess kit, canvas web gear, canteen, and the newer M1 pattern two-part helmet, and most received the US Army’s revolutionary self-loading M1 Garand rifle as their primary firearm.⁷¹

Once properly outfitted, June 1942 marked the beginning of the 85th Division’s Official Mobilization Training Program.⁷² This thirteen-week program involved long hours of drill and marching, building the men up physically and hammering home a routine that provided them with valuable skills and reflexes necessary for combat situations.⁷³ According to the divisional history, the average routine at Camp Shelby began with an early dawn roll call, followed by a grueling half hour of calisthenics beginning at 8:00 AM.⁷⁴ The soldiers spent the remainder of the day on a variety of

⁶⁹ “Camp Shelby – Big Tent City,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, August 10, 1941, Graphic Section. War Department, *FM 20-15: Tents and Tent Pitching* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 26.

⁷⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 10-11.

⁷¹ David Cole, *Survey of U.S. Army Uniforms, Weapons and Accouterments* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2007), 81-91.

⁷² Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2.

⁷³ Colonel Sterling A. Wood, *History of the 313th Infantry Regiment in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1947), 22.

drills, weapon familiarization, obstacle courses, training exercises, and marches ranging in length from six to twenty-five miles, all done in open, humid fields.⁷⁵ Weapon familiarization received a high degree of focus, as divisional planners wanted the soldiers to be well versed on the entire spectrum of American firearms before entering combat, so if a situation arose where they were required to utilize a weapon outside their normally issued model, they would already be proficient in its use and care.⁷⁶ Specialized training and large scale exercises followed this Mobilization Training Program. The division devoted the remainder of 1942 to more specialized Unit Training Programs before moving onto the third stage of military education in January 1943.

That third phase was known as Combat Team Training, created by the Army in response to the evolving fighting of the Second World War.⁷⁷ Such training was designed, in the words of the later divisional publication *Minturno to the Appennines*, “as the next step in developing the coordination of all the elements of the Division in preparation for combat.”⁷⁸ This training essentially mimicked the triangular formation of the division, but on a smaller, combined arms scale. In essence, the Combat Team Training united an infantry regiment, a field artillery battalion, and an engineer company into a military entity capable of supporting itself.⁷⁹ The infantry comprised the bulk of the Regimental Combat Team’s attack strength, with the artillery acting as preparatory

⁷⁴Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 11-12.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁷⁷ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ John J. McGrath, *The Brigade: A History of Its Organization and Employment in the US Army* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 54-56.

and as-needed fire support. Meanwhile, the engineers were to clear or otherwise resolve obstacles encountered on the battlefield, thus preserving the infantry's momentum.

Captain Morrison's 329th Field Artillery Battalion, for example, was paired with the 338th Infantry Regiment to serve as the fire support for its Combat Team.⁸⁰

This Regimental Combat Team training scored and rated the teams in various "competitive" tests, which caused the draftees to develop a sense of pride in their unit. An example of this can be found in the case of the First Battalion, 337th Infantry Regiment, which insisted on retaking their March 1943 Battalion Firing Exercise and Combat Firing Tests to improve their score.⁸¹ The Department of the Army initially established these tests in February 1943, but discovered that the unfamiliar and often unclear testing parameters resulted in units making "flagrant mistakes" and registering "a low percentage of hits."⁸² The First Battalion took the test before these problems were identified and successfully corrected on April 28, 1943.⁸³ By taking the test a second time, the men of the 337th received a result that more accurately depicted their skills, with their first attempt functioning as an intermediate testing scenario. The March 29 to April 1 exercise focused on the men's ability to take cover, entrench under fire, scout, attack,

⁸⁰ Veterans History Project, "Interview with Donald Morrison [02/26/2003]."

⁸¹ March 15, 1943 Letter from Headquarters XV Corps to Commanding General 85th Infantry Division, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

⁸² William R. Keast, Robert R. Palmer, and Bell I. Wiley, *The Army Ground Forces: The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991), 450.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

defend, and counterattack.⁸⁴ Under the eyes of Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur K. Miller of the 154th Infantry Regiment and his twenty-seven Training Exercise Referees, the 377th received the sought-after “Satisfactory” rating, earning 1,537 out of a possible 2,000 points for their performance.⁸⁵ In the eyes of the Army, the men had reached combat readiness, and Colonel Miller specifically praised the battalion staff for its “general performance and coordination,” a key feature of a combined arms team.⁸⁶

This effort at integrating different types of units with each other efficiently required exercises beyond what could be provided at Camp Shelby, so the 85th Division branched out from its birthplace and exposed the draftees to “Maneuvers.” Made famous by the Army’s pre-war Louisiana Maneuvers of 1941, these “Maneuvers” were large scale “war games,” which put soldiers and their units into a large, but safe, combat scenarios. According to Staff Sergeant Slaughter, his Regimental Combat Team, comprised of the 339th Infantry Regiment, his own 328th Field Artillery Battalion, and a company of the 310th Engineers, engaged in three Mississippi Maneuvers and one Louisiana Maneuver as part of the division’s training.⁸⁷ Regular Army referees based out of Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, followed the units through their war games, which

⁸⁴ First Battalion 337th Infantry Regiment Infantry Battalion Combat Firing Test Grading Sheets, April 2, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

⁸⁵ First Battalion 337th Infantry Regiment Infantry Battalion Combat Firing Test Results Sheet, April 2, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

⁸⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur K. Miller, Evaluation Form for First Battalion, 337th Infantry, April 2, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

⁸⁷ Veterans History Project, “Ira Talbot Slaughter Interview (Video).”

included mock battles against fellow American divisions and rapid river crossings, and rated the men on their ability to handle the tasks quickly and efficiently.⁸⁸

These “in the field” exercises, with their introduction of opposing forces and more realistic fighting conditions, marked the point in their military service where the draftees of the 85th Division first began to get an inkling of what combat might be like.⁸⁹ The Army firmly believed in the value of this training, so the 85th began a long series of maneuvers, drills, and exercises. From April 7 until June 15, 1943, the division’s schedule was devoted to running large scale operations day and night, until both the Army and the draftees felt satisfied with their ability to function in a basic combat scenario.⁹⁰ Initial introduction to the Maneuver area consisted of “flag battles,” where the soldiers spent weeks assaulting and defending positions held by “enemies” who were nothing more than red flags positioned by referees to simulate opponents.⁹¹ Later on, divisions were pitted against each other to act as foes, so the first large scale “enemies” encountered by the selectees were actually the American 93rd Division and the 100th

⁸⁸Memorandum from Headquarters XV Corps Office of the Artillery Officer to Chief of Staff XV Corps, April 10, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 27-31.

⁸⁹ Keast, Palmer, and Wiley, *The Army Ground Forces*, 387-388.
Ibid., 448-450.

⁹⁰ Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Camp Shelby to Louisiana Maneuver Area, March 30, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Louisiana Maneuver Area to Desert Training Center, June 8, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

⁹¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 30.

Infantry Battalion.⁹² Aside from the occasional squabble over which platoon or company arrived first, therefore “winning” small scale encounters, the 85th Division was noted to have performed well, earning direct praise in regards to “discipline, alertness, interest, and appearance as well as concealment of men and vehicles” from Lieutenant General Ben Lear, the Acting Commander, Army Ground Forces upon his inspection of the unit.⁹³ In terms of scoring for their overall performance, the 85th Division was granted the grade of “Very Satisfactory” by the Maneuver’s overall commander Major General Haislip, the division’s former commander.⁹⁴ According to Haislip, the division kept with the Maneuver’s goal of solving field problems “slowly, properly, and correctly.”⁹⁵

These Maneuvers were by no means a rubber stamp. Units had to work hard to receive good marks. In comparison to the 85th, the National Guard-based 100th Infantry Battalion received a rating of “Excellent,” while the 93rd Division was deemed “Unsatisfactory” in their attempts at the same course problems.⁹⁶ Despite being a much smaller scale operation than the pre-war Louisiana Maneuvers, the core methods of evaluation and goals remained similar to the earlier unit tests. The only change came

⁹² Memorandum from Headquarters XV Corps Office of the Artillery Officer to Chief of Staff XV Corps, April 10, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 30.

⁹³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 31.

⁹⁴ Ulysses Lee, *United States Army in World War II Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 492.

⁹⁵ Ulysses Lee, *United States Army in World War II Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2001), 492.

⁹⁶ Robert Asahina, *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans Won a War at Home and Abroad, The Story of the 100th Battalion/442nd Regimental Combat Team in World War II* (New York: Gotham Books, 2006), 29-30.

Lee, *United States Army in World War II Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops*, 492.

when the Army increased the size of the opposition forces to mimic what the soldiers were likely to encounter across the Atlantic. The time spent engaging in refereed “battles” with another division while being supplemented by a variety of auxiliary units gave the draftees a solid foundation of what combat might entail. The final Maneuver problem of crossing the high volume Sabine River that ran through the western edge of the training area while under fire enhanced their training even further by allowing the troops to experience a complex combat situation that would come up time and again for the Army in almost every Theater of Operations.⁹⁷ As the summer of 1943 began, however, orders arrived stating that the men of the 85th were ready for the next progression of combat training, desert warfare.

The desert centric warfare of the still-ongoing North African Campaign dictated the advanced training of infantry personnel destined to cross the Atlantic. Officially established under the supervision of Major General George S. Patton, Jr. on April 1, 1942, the Desert Training Center encompassed a sprawling 17,800-square-mile expanse that spanned the California-Arizona border and contained thirteen divisional camp “tent cities,” three major airfields, and a hundred-acre general hospital complex.⁹⁸ The 85th spent its four-month tenure at two of these massive temporary encampments, operating

⁹⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 31.

⁹⁸ George W. Howard, “The Desert Training Center / California-Arizona Maneuver Area,” *The Journal of Arizona History* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 274-276.

Ibid., 281.

Ibid., 291.

The California State Military Museum, “Banning General Hospital (Naval Convalescent Hospital, Banning),” California State Military Department, <http://californiamilitaryhistory.org/BanningGH.html> (accessed May 18, 2015).

out of the tent city at Camp Pilot Knob from June 15 to August 1, before transferring to Camp Coxcomb, where it remained until October 10, 1943.⁹⁹

The facilities and combat courses at the Desert Training Center were designed to mimic the terrain and problems faced by soldiers in North Africa and give the divisions a chance to work in maneuvers at the corps level with air support.¹⁰⁰ Command would assign the independent camps to function together as “allied” units for specific training scenarios and simulations, giving the units experience in corps-level actions.¹⁰¹

Conditions at the Desert Training Center were nothing short of miserable. The 85th Division arrived in the beginning of summer, when temperatures were known to reach 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade during daylight hours, and a constant coat of gritty white dust clung to everything and everyone.¹⁰² As the summer progressed, the draftees were ordered to take an “enforced siesta” for two hours each day beginning at noon, causing the men to disappear into their encampment’s 3,000 tents and lie on water soaked cots in an attempt to avoid heat exhaustion.¹⁰³

In addition, the combat scenarios added live ammunition to increase the realism of the training experience. The hallmark of this practice was the Army’s newly

⁹⁹ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, October 10, 1943, Wartime Correspondence Collection of PFC Johnny Almond, September 11, 1943 to September 24, 1945. Author’s Collection.

Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Louisiana Maneuver Area to Desert Training Center, June 8, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Howard, “The Desert Training Center / California-Arizona Maneuver Area,” 273.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Howard, “The Desert Training Center / California-Arizona Maneuver Area,” 274. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 33.

¹⁰³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 33.

developed “Infiltration Courses” which involved instructors firing belt-fed 1919A4 Browning Light Machine Guns over the heads of crawling draftees.¹⁰⁴ This dangerous method of instruction was meant to acclimate the draftees to the sound of impossible-to-see small arms fire, and demonstrate the value of keeping one’s head down in combat.¹⁰⁵ The infiltration course left such an impression on the draftees that a full page of the 1949 divisional history was devoted to describing their initial reaction to the “well taught” lesson in modern firepower, graphically describing the heat of the sun, the weight of the gear, and the uncomfortably close clattering of .30 caliber fire from guns that seemed all too far away.¹⁰⁶ To quote Captain Paul L. Schultz,

At the sound of a whistle, Custer men, wearing steel helmets, web ammunition belts, and ODs, and carrying packs and rifles, scampered over the top of a mound-protected trench and threw themselves hard and flat of the ground. They began to crawl toward several machine guns which were firing caliber .30 bullets which passed only a few inches above their backs. The dust was at its driest and the pebbles and rocks were hard and uncomfortable and red-hot from the burning sun. Sweat poured profusely down strained and tense brows. They had often practiced crawling on the ground back at Shelby and on maneuvers. . . . Now, for the first

¹⁰⁴ Sunny Adams et al., *Military Training Lands Historic Context: Training Village, Mock Sites, and Large Scale Operations Areas* (Vicksburg, MS: Army Corps of Engineers Engineer Research and Development Center, 2010), 119-122.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-122.

¹⁰⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 34.

time, the real significance of keeping down low, of crawling flat against the ground, was fully appreciated.¹⁰⁷

Night operations became more commonplace as a combined method of escaping the deadly heat and exposing the draftees to corps level combat scenarios undertaken in darkness. The experience left quite an impression on many members of the division, including Private Johnny Almond. A recently engaged twenty-three-year-old farmer with a grammar school education from Albemarle, North Carolina, who served as a rifleman in Able Company of the 338th Infantry Regiment's First Battalion, Almond wrote home to his sister, Lara, describing his constant "work at night."¹⁰⁸ An unwilling draftee who did not wish to be in the Army and dreamed of returning to his agrarian hometown to marry his sweetheart, Almond also became one of the 85th Division's training casualties.¹⁰⁹ As is inevitable in large-scale operations involving green troops, errors and injuries occurred at the Desert Training Center. Private Almond, for example, reported home that he "did get my leg brakeing [sic], it was in bad shape" when describing an injury caused by a training accident on August 9 that landed him in Banning General Hospital until September 3.¹¹⁰ Another accident befell Staff Sergeant Newton F. Cole of the 328th Field Artillery's Battery B, who was launched out of his unit's command car when it was struck by another vehicle attempting to pass through his convoy, landing him in Banning General Hospital as well.¹¹¹ The all too common ailment of heat exposure

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Lara Efird, September 11, 1943. War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 34304058."

¹⁰⁹ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, September 18, 1943.

¹¹⁰ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Lara Efird, September 12, 1943.

was not just dangerous, but directly resulted in the deaths of at least four members of the 337th Infantry Regiment whose platoon became lost in the desert between July 24 and 25 without food or water while on a platoon leadership course.¹¹² Temperatures on those days were estimated to be between 124 to 139 degrees, and news of their deaths was reported as far away as Pennsylvania.¹¹³ Nature also killed a man when lightning struck him during one of several violent desert storms endured by the 85th Division.¹¹⁴

But regardless of their various setbacks, casualties, and fatalities, the draftees of the 85th reached the end of their training. Corps and division exercises gave way to platoon and squad-level training to ensure the draftees acquired the abilities required to function as small units in the field.¹¹⁵ Practice in combined arms reached new heights, culminating in firing exercises that involved Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighters flying low to the deck and unleashing close air support fire on targets as they passed over the heads of the selectees.¹¹⁶ A final flurry of large scale field exercises in the mountains and plains of the Training Center gave the draftees a solid grasp of how to fight in combat conditions vastly different from the muggy forests and marshlands of Louisiana.¹¹⁷ And

¹¹¹ Steve Cole, "Desert Training Center: Jeep Wreck at Yuma as told by Sgt. N. F. Cole," Steve Cole, <http://www.custermen.com/AtTheFront/DesertCamps.htm> (accessed September 30, 2015).

¹¹² "Names of Army Thirst Victims Announced," *Altoona Tribune*, Altoona, Pennsylvania, July 29, 1943.

¹¹³ "Names of Army Thirst Victims Announced."

"Summer Quits Its Fiddling Around and Gets to Work: Three Soldiers Die," *The Desert Sun*, Palm Springs, California, July 30, 1943.

¹¹⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 38.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

while the inhospitable conditions caused some soldiers like Private Almond to hate the state of California, wishing never to return, no one could deny that the months spent in the desert had been a formative experience, allowing men to participate in live fire combined operations using the latest equipment amid adverse conditions, albeit in preparation for a type of warfare the men would never see.¹¹⁸ When the last exercises had been completed, a total of sixteen months since the first draftee arrived in Mississippi, the Army finally rated the 85th Division ready for combat.¹¹⁹ Their performance on maneuvers had been widely praised, their *esprit-de-corps* was high, and their divisional artillery was even rated to be the “one of the best... in the entire Army.”¹²⁰ Despite the belief held by some of the draftees and NCOs that their proximity to the West Coast meant they were destined for the Pacific, the unit was loaded on several east-bound trains on October 9 through 12, 1943, and sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, pending deployment to North Africa.¹²¹

Fort Dix was the 85th Division’s only real exposure to garrison duty, an experience that would last for two months.¹²² Shifting from the brutal heat of America’s southwestern desert in the peak of summer to the cool breezes of late fall on the Atlantic

¹¹⁸ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Lara Efird, September 11, 1943. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 36-39.

¹¹⁹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 39-40.

¹²⁰ Lee, *United States Army in World War II Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops*, 492.

Lieutenant Colonel Wilbur K. Miller, Evaluation Form for First Battalion, 337th Infantry, April 2, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 39.

¹²¹ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, October 10, 1943. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 39-40. Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 248.

¹²² Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.

seaboard was a welcome change. Men who exhibited exceptional behavior received coveted three-day passes, visiting home or friends for the first time in almost a year and a half.¹²³ The officers kept up firing drills for the sake of proficiency, so as to prevent the draftees losing the edge they had spent so long honing.¹²⁴ The soldiers received a variety of peacetime and rear-echelon tasks to keep busy, which ranged from strenuous manual labor to lengthier, monotonous duties such as guarding sensitive areas during day or night shifts.¹²⁵ Private Johnny Almond grew fond of his cathartic assignment to Kitchen Patrol or “K. P.”¹²⁶ For him, preparing food and cleaning the mess was a much easier task compared to other available assignments in the division.¹²⁷

Garrison duty did not last for long, as the war across the Atlantic entered a new phase. At the cost of 70,000 Allied casualties, 18,221 of whom were American, the German-held port city of Tunis fell to the Allies on May 19, 1943, concluding the North African Campaign and rendering obsolete the desert combat operations training on which the 85th Division had spent so much time and effort.¹²⁸ Now the war shifted northward. On July 10, 1943, a joint Anglo-American task force invaded Sicily as part of OPERATION: HUSKY, with approximately 800,000 American servicemen going

¹²³ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, December 9, 1943.

¹²⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 41.

¹²⁵ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, November 21, 1943.
Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Rosa Efird, November 28, 1943.

¹²⁶ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, November 21, 1943.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942 – 1943* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 529.
Ibid., 536.

ashore.¹²⁹ After a month of fighting claimed 8,781 American and 12,843 British casualties, this largest of all Mediterranean islands fell on August 17, and the invasion of mainland Italy commenced on September 3 with the British landing at Calabria, followed by the American OPERATION: AVALANCHE at Salerno six days later.¹³⁰ News of these battles, along with the casualty lists and grisly stories filtered back to the increasingly wary 85th Division draftees.¹³¹ The divisional history noted how selectees became increasingly “on edge” during the final three weeks at Fort Dix.¹³² Gradually, units transferred to the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia, eventually forming an advanced detachment at Camp Patrick Henry in Warwick County, Virginia, in preparation for deployment overseas.¹³³ Soon, the advanced detachment of soldiers was sent south to the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation, and then across the Atlantic on the RMS *Empress of Scotland* as part of a December 16, 1943 convoy.¹³⁴

As fewer and fewer men remained in New Jersey, the reality that they would soon be facing the horrors of combat began to set in. Private Johnny Almond sent home a letter hinting at these fears. After cryptically stating, “I guess you know they are

¹²⁹ Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 32.

Ibid., 42.

¹³⁰ Paul Henry Collier, *World War II: The Mediterranean 1940-1945* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2010), 9.

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, “Sicily 1943,” U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/72-16/72-16.htm> (accessed May 26, 2015).

¹³¹ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944*, 35.

Ibid., 117-120.

¹³² Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 41.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

read[ing] our mail now, and we can't write any think [sic] we want to," Almond confessed to his father that he briefly broke his vow not to drink while in the service, as he and a "pal" went to the Post Exchange, or P.X., on the night of December 19 and drank until the employees told him he could not have any more.¹³⁵ Shortly after that, Almond and the remainder of his division were all moved to Camp Patrick Henry and then to the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation in three waves. The divisional staff flew to Oran, Algeria, while the 339th Infantry Regiment and its Combat Team left the United States aboard the USS *General Alexander E. Anderson* on December 24, followed by the 338th Infantry's Regimental Combat Team on December 29 aboard the USS *General William A. Mann*, and concluding with the 337th Regiment's team leaving Hampton Roads aboard the HMS *Andes* on January 1, 1944.¹³⁶ Twenty months after being informed of their enlistment in the military, the draftees were finally going to war. But the war had changed. While the Custer Men were preparing for the desert, the Allies had redirected their war efforts to the northern shores of the Mediterranean. That meant the men of the 85th were destined for training in forms of warfare markedly different from their previous courses. For them, their battleground would be in the mountains of Italy.

¹³⁵ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, December 20, 1943.

¹³⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 41-42.

War Diary of USS *General Alexander E. Anderson* (AP-111), December 1, 1943 to December 31, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 38, Box 39, Reel A768.

War Diary of USS *General William A Mann* (AP-112), December 24 to December 31, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 38, Box 39, Reel A780.

CHAPTER III

ROME TO THE PO VALLEY

Arrival in Italy

The arid country of Algiers became home to the draftees of the 85th Division during the early days of 1944 as the Army sought to prepare them for service in the burgeoning Italian Campaign. Army planners, who knew the future battlefields would be marked by mountains rather than sand, ordered General Coulter to take his selectees and establish a camp in a former prisoner of war enclosure south of Saint Denis Du Sig on the Algerian coastline, where they would begin a new training program in mountain warfare.¹ The draftees arrived at their new home on January 17, and were ordered to spend the next six weeks learning how to scale mountains and maintain unit integrity over extremely uneven terrain, devoting days to exerting and building up the back and leg muscles commonly used in mountaineering.² Some soldiers received time off to explore their first foreign theater of operations, and the non-violent nature of their surroundings left a good impression. Private Johnny Almond remarked in letters home that, “I like it just fine over here,” and he enjoyed exploring the nearby cities such as Oran for they were “not like I thought it was,” and everything was “not like be[i]n[g] at home.”³ The draftees often used their free time to write home. During the second week of the 85th’s mountain training, Private Almond gave insight into this fondness for letter writing when he stated

¹ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 3.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 46.

² Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 46.

³ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, January 13, 1944.
Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, January 23, 1944.

that he had fifteen other letters to write after finishing his correspondence to his father.⁴ Mail was a lifeline for the draftees to their old lives, and while month-long delays in receiving letters were not uncommon, each wave of correspondence was a welcome diversion from their strenuous training regimen.⁵

However, word soon filtered to the troops hinting of things to come. The slaughterhouse at the Anzio beachhead had just begun on January 22 with the launch of OPERATION: SHINGLE, a fact well known to the men of the division due to radio broadcasts picked up at Camp Saint Denis Du Sig.⁶ Optimistic reports quickly gave way to reality, and the need for more men on the Italian Peninsula led to the 85th Division's transfer on February 1 to the Algerian coastal city of Port-Aux-Poules for amphibious training under the 339th Infantry Regiment's Colonel Brookner West Brady pending deployment to mainland Italy.⁷ The men trained for night invasions, rough conditions, and in the use of Landing Craft, Infantry (LCI) and Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP) vessels.⁸ Accidents inevitably occurred, with five men of the 339th Infantry Regiment drowning during the three week training course.⁹

The pace of the war pushed the Army into deploying the 85th Division ahead of schedule, with the theater commander first treating the regiments as a macro scale version

⁴ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, January 23, 1944.

⁵ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, February 3, 1944.

⁶ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944*, 358-366.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 46-47.

⁷ Ernest F. Fisher, Jr., *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993), 54.

Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 3.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 47.

⁸ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 47-48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

of a replacement infantryman sent out to feed the needs of under-strength divisions. Prior to receiving new orders, the selectees were set to begin a large scale rotational training regimen spanning three bases across Algeria that alternated focus between mountain warfare, amphibious operations, and leadership in the field.¹⁰ Then, the Army blindsided the division by issuing marching orders for the entire 339th Infantry Regiment.¹¹ The combat units then in Italy were almost all worn out from non-stop fighting.¹² The American 88th Division was brought into the line near Minturno to relieve some of these units, but the Fifth Army required an additional regiment in order to pull more battle-weary troops off the front lines.¹³ Thus, on March 14, 1944, the men of the 339th Infantry found themselves detached and sent ashore on the coast of Italy, covering a relatively “quiet” sector until the rest of their parent division was scheduled to arrive.¹⁴ Not wishing to split up the draftees for too long, the additional planned training cycle was truncated, and deployment orders for the remaining divisional components were quickly issued. By the morning of March 27, 1944, all remaining troops from the 85th Division came ashore at the Italian city of Naples.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

¹¹ Ibid., 47-48.

¹² Jami Bryan, “The 88th Infantry Division in Italy,” The Army Historical Foundation, <https://armyhistory.org/the-88th-infantry-division-in-italy/> (accessed May 26, 2015).

¹³ Jami Bryan, “The 88th Infantry Division in Italy.” Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 157.

The Unrestrained Enemy

The ordeal of the Custer Men in the Italian Campaign became even more difficult than Army planners could have predicted due to the unrestrained German opposition, who enjoyed a high level of autonomy and freedom of action thanks to the leadership of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. A widely respected master of combined arms strategy who led the Axis forces in the Mediterranean from the time of his arrival in Rome on November 28, 1941, until a terrible car crash involving a wayward artillery piece on October 25, 1944, caused his removal, “Smiling Albert” was a forty-year veteran of the military, having served prior to World War I in the Bavarian Army’s artillery branch, followed by a posting to the German General Staff before finally being transferred to the Luftwaffe in 1933.¹⁶ Kesselring commanded the First Air Force in the 1939 Polish Campaign before leading the Second Air Force during both the 1940 Invasion of France and in the days following OPERATION: BARBAROSSA in 1941, and was promoted to Commander in Chief of the Italian Theater on November 6, 1943.¹⁷ Once in Italy, his leadership became a paradoxical balance of fanatical defense and efforts to preserve objects and edifices of Italian cultural heritage.¹⁸ Most importantly, Kesselring was an

¹⁶ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944*, 93.

Holland, *Italy’s Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 426.

Albert Kesselring, *Kesselring: A Soldier’s Record* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1954), 5-8.

Ibid., 16-19.

Ibid., 116.

¹⁷ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 27-28.

Kesselring, *Kesselring: A Soldier’s Record*, 38-45.

Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 88.

Ibid., 268.

¹⁸ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944*, 433.

Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 28.

Holland, *Italy’s Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, xliii-xlv.

Italophile, a student of history, and a brilliant defensive tactician who had already earned an impressive reputation among the Allied commands.¹⁹ Kesselring's love of the country and its history made him versed in accounts of its past invasions, a fact that made him well-equipped to pick and choose his defensive lines so as to allow his adversaries to fall upon terrain suited for the German defense.²⁰ Furthermore, Kesselring stood up for himself when faced with the meddling of Adolf Hitler, a trait that aided in the effectiveness of his men's defense of Italy.²¹ This unique defiance grudgingly earned him free reign in the Italian Theater.²² Kesselring did not allow such a carte blanche to go to waste, passing operational freedom onwards to his subordinates with orders to carry out ambush tactics against the Allies, exhortations to maintain a level of fanatical defense akin to their Japanese comrades in the East.²³ Kesselring became known for issuing simple yet brutally effective directives, most notably for the troops to conduct demolitions "with sadistic imaginativeness."²⁴

Kerstin von Lingen, *Kesselring's Last Battle: War Crimes Trials and Cold War Politics, 1945-1960* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 43-44.

Mark Zuehlke, *The Liri Valley: Canada's World War II Breakthrough to Rome* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2004), 371-372.

¹⁹ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943 – 1944*, 93.

²⁰ R. Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 14.

²¹ Following Allied gains, Kesselring personally defended his June 1944 withdrawals away from Rome to an irate Adolf Hitler during a July 3 meeting by brow beating the Fuehrer, exclaiming, "I guarantee – unless my hands are tied – to delay the Allied advance appreciably, to halt at latest in the Apennines."

Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 3.
Ibid., 30-31.

²² Ibid., 30-31.

²³ Millett and Murray, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, 299.

²⁴ Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, 579.

German soldiers in Italy became renowned for their skill with demolitions and booby traps. An example of the begrudging admiration developed by American troops for this deadly art appeared in the *Stars and Stripes*. Cartoonist Sergeant Bill Mauldin of the 45th Infantry Division, after serving in Sicily and the early mainland campaign, depicted a scene with two GIs observing a squad of German soldiers wiring charges within the wreck of a knocked out multi-turret Panzer Neubaufahrzeug, causing one to remark “Dang clever booby trap! I kinda hate to disturb ‘em...”²⁵

For the men of the 85th Division, the specific enemy combat units they faced in the field from the time of their first engagement to their last were all high-quality troops. During the course of their three campaigns, the Custer Men encountered the German 1st Parachute Division, the 4th Parachute Division, the 8th Mountain Division, the 42nd Light Infantry Division, the 44th Infantry Division, the 94th Infantry Division, and the Hermann Goering Panzer Grenadier Division, along with an assortment of ancillary units and occasional German armor.²⁶ These units were often well-rested, veteran, and in a high state of morale upon their initial engagement with the men of the 85th.²⁷ Three of the units, the two parachute divisions and the Hermann Goering Panzer Grenadier Division, were considered elite troops among the German forces in Italy, with the paratroopers in particular having garnered respect during the Battle of Monte Cassino, where their

²⁵ Bill Mauldin, *Bill Mauldin's Army* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 100.

²⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 70.

Ibid., 83.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 63.

Ibid., 103.

Ibid., 109-110.

Ibid., 135.

Ibid., 193.

Ibid., 222.

²⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 193.

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, “North Apennines 1944-1945.”

stubborn defense amid the ruins made General Sir Harold Alexander remark, “No other troops in the world but German paratroops could have stood up to such an ordeal [as the Cassino battles] and then gone on fighting with such ferocity.”²⁸ Captured German soldiers would later tell Custer Division interrogators that the “Presence of paratroopers serves to ‘buck up’ morale of entire Italian Front. As long as they remain in line other units will feel that they are not being abandoned on a forgotten front.”²⁹ As a result of these various factors, the fighting in Italy was noted for its brutal and nerve-wracking nature. When General Sir Harold Alexander reminisced on the fighting in Italy, he described Kesselring and his troops as fighting “against us hard but clean.”³⁰

Following their exposure to combat, the average 85th Division soldier, when asked his opinion on his opponents, most commonly responded that they actually did not feel much personal hate towards their enemy for carrying out operations against them, with a simple majority feeling that the German infantrymen were “pretty much like we are.”³¹ The prisoner reports found in the papers of the 85th Division’s G-2 Section indicate that German soldiers captured by the Custer Men early in their first campaign suffered from a

²⁸ Ken Ford, *Cassino 1944: Breaking the Gustav Line* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 26. Peter Caddick-Adams, *Monte Cassino: Ten Armies in Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 289.

²⁹ Annex No. 2 to G-2 Report No. 180, 85th Div IPW Report, 24 Feb 1945, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

³⁰ von Lingen, *Kesselring’s Last Battle*, 359.

³¹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 62,” National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 330, American Soldier in World War II Surveys 1942-1945 Series, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7062666?q=:*:* (accessed February 12, 2015).

poor supply situation.³² In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Rome, the 85th captured the occasional deserter, but once the Germans fell back to properly fortified positions, the story began to change.³³ Following the lead of Theater Commander Kesselring, German division and company commanders began calling for fanatical defense. An example of this combat philosophy was found by Custer Men in a captured September 8, 1944, order which read, "I am detailed to guard this position and notify platoon of all Enemy attacks. Positions will be held to the last man and the last bullet even if the Enemy breaks through on all sides as well as strong artillery and mortar fire. Only on authority of [the] Company CO will positions be abandoned."³⁴

As German casualty numbers rose, new soldiers, foreign conscripts, and transferred headquarters personnel were sent to the front line from positions farther up the Italian Peninsula, replenishing the number of riflemen across the line from American positions.³⁵ Morale among the German replacements and veterans remained high, so much so that captured Germans expressed complete faith in their comrades' ability to repulse even armored assaults, and a strong *esprit-de-corps* bolstered by the presence of

³² G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM September 12 to 1200AM September 17, 1944, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 1200AM September 16 to 1200AM September 17, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

³⁵ 1200AM October 2 to 1200AM October 3, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

elite German forces.³⁶ Even in the ending stages of the war, the rank and file of the German forces in Italy retained a strong sense of pride even in the face of surrender and captivity. Private Victor Evangelista, who visited a prisoner of war cage outside Pisa on May 4, 1945, noted, “At the time there were some two hundred thousand prisoners and they were still bringing them in. They also had about two thousand German women prisoners! Boy what a beat up lot they were. But still arrogant as hell. The dirty B-----ds! [sic]”³⁷ A German Divisional Commander, captured with forty of his men in the Po Valley by a pair of patrolling Custer Men on horseback, angrily protested a slight to his honor when the soldiers brought him to an 85th Division command post.³⁸ Much to the embarrassment of the American officers, the German General expressed his displeasure at the enlisted men who mocked his stated position and made him walk rather than summon a vehicle “to ride as due my rank.”³⁹ Encountering such German pride and arrogance was widespread among American soldiers in Italy. Combat cartoonist Bill Mauldin lampooned this surprisingly common scenario by drawing two GIs chauffeuring a monocled officer to the rear in his staff car, with one dogface remarking that, “He’s pretty sore. He says we didn’t even try to capture his cook an’ his orderly.”⁴⁰

In addition to being seen as proud and relentless, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht were also perceived to fight “dirty.” The main emphasis for this belief among Custer

³⁶ Annex No. 2 to G-2 Report No. 180, 85th Div IPW Report, 24 Feb 1945, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

³⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 4, 1945.

³⁸ Headquarters Fifth Army, *19 Days from the Apennines to the Alps: The Story of the Po Valley Campaign* (Milan, Italy: Pizzi and Pizio, 1945), 60-61.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Mauldin, *Bill Mauldin’s Army*, 301.

Division soldiers was the German affinity for mines.⁴¹ Artillery Captain Donald Morrison recalled that, “We had a lot of trouble with land mines... When we had to put the guns into the fields, the Germans would retreat and lay land mines in these fields that were ideal to put the artillery in and so... two of my men, you know -were killed particularly in advanced parties- they'd go in ahead of time and find land mines.”⁴²

References to mine fields delaying or halting advances littered operations reports and the divisional history, including accounts of enemy night raids undertaken solely to “lay mines and to set trip flares” within the 85th Division’s lines.⁴³ Most often, the 85th Division soldiers complained about the German use of “S mines,” deadly anti-personnel bounding mines also known by the nickname “Bouncing Betties.”⁴⁴ The G-2 Reports made references to mine fields and barbed wire defenses as principle factors in stalling several attacks, most notably those launched against the positions defending Monte Altuzzo on the Gothic Line in September of 1944.⁴⁵ The tenacity of the German defense was in full bloom when the 85th Infantry Division experienced its baptism of fire along the roads to Rome.

⁴¹ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 148.

⁴² Veterans History Project, “Interview with Donald Morrison [02/26/2003].”

⁴³ Alfred M. Beck, *United States Army in World War II: Technical Services, The Corps of Engineers: The War Against Germany* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 102. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 80. Ibid., 118.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM September 12 to 1200AM September 17, 1944, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

Rome-Arno

During World War II, the draftees of the 85th Division spent 260 days actively engaged in combat and participated in three major campaigns on the Italian mainland.⁴⁶ Until their involvement in the seven month long Rome-Arno Campaign, the reality of modern warfare had been an abstract concept rather than a solid experience for the soldiers of the 85th, but that was about to change, albeit in a more gradual fashion. The division arrived in March 1944, just as a lull occurred in the allied march towards Rome.⁴⁷ The commander of the Allied Armies in Italy, English General Sir Harold Alexander, paused the advance to allow his forces to recuperate from the third major attack on the ruined abbey of Monte Cassino.⁴⁸ Thus, the selectees' initial foray into combat consisted of a period of static warfare and small patrols.

While initially sparse in nature, the effects of battle were still present, and the men were forced to cope with the unusual experience. In a letter to his father written during this period of relative calm, Private Almond admitted that he had indeed seen "action," followed by reassurances that "it [was] not too bad at all."⁴⁹ However, Almond also admitted that his church attendance and praying had increased. With the looming threat of death, Almond emphatically stated, "I am go[ing] to Church from now on, and I am going to be good for it don't look like it [is] go[ing] to be long now."⁵⁰ Within three days

⁴⁶ "Dimas M. Camara of Fall River, Massachusetts, 2009 Obituary," Silva-Faria Funeral Homes, <http://www.silvafaria.com/home/index.cfm/obituaries/view/id/441411> (accessed May 6, 2015).

⁴⁷ Laurie, *Rome-Arno: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, 15-16. Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 157.

⁴⁸ Laurie, *Rome-Arno: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, 15-16.

⁴⁹ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 24, 1944.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of that correspondence, a building sense of fatalism drove Almond to express the belief that, “if God mean[s] for me to get kill[ed] over here I will get it and if he mean[s] for me to come back home I will come. But please don’t worry for I not [sic] worry for I know God will take care of me.”⁵¹ Religion was everywhere in Italy, epitomized by the Vatican in Rome serving as the heart of the modern Roman Catholic Church, so men had many opportunities to take solace in their faith as they awaited their turn on the front lines. A 1943 tabulation held that fifty-nine percent of the Army identified as Protestant, thirty-one percent were Catholic, two percent were Jewish, and eight percent gave other responses, but it was often found in the field that any religion would do, and Protestant soldiers would frequent Catholic masses as if they were their own.⁵²

On the divisional level, the unit pushed forward piecemeal, following a II Corps directive to relieve the 88th Infantry Division.⁵³ As General Coulter and his staff waited at their newly established headquarters near Mount Massica for orders to utilize his men as a cohesive group, he put the newly arrived units through “intensive training stressing physical conditioning, human and mule packing in rugged terrain, mine warfare... , and procedure for relief of front line units.”⁵⁴

The division’s first real taste of internationalism also began at this point, as the 5th Pack Mule Group (Italian) was attached to the unit on April 5 to act as both a supporting

⁵¹ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 27, 1944.

⁵² Michael Snape, *God and Uncle Sam: Religion and America’s Armed Forces in World War II* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2015), 256.
Ibid., 339-340.

⁵³ 85th Division, *Report of Operations, 85th Infantry Division - 1 April 1944 thru 31 July 1945* (Columbus, OH: BiblioGov, 2013), 4.

⁵⁴ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 4.

entity and as instructors of assigned “muleskinner” draftees.⁵⁵ These men were all enthusiastic volunteers and former Italian *Alpini* soldiers familiar with the countryside.⁵⁶ The exact details of the 85th’s initial encounter with such troops are unfortunately unknown, but anecdotal evidence shows that such mule pack groups got along quite well with American soldiers.⁵⁷ By mid April, the 85th Division was whole again, and the successful relief of the 88th Infantry Division enabled the II Corps staff to assign the draftees to the line’s center section on April 14, 1944.⁵⁸ The divisional G-2 reports described the sector as being relatively quiet, but marked by constant patrolling and inevitable German artillery fire.⁵⁹ In an effort to ensure that the draftees had not become rusty on the combat tactics learned back in Louisiana, the division reinstated river crossing drills, spending days practicing with soft-hulled assault boats on small Italian waterways behind the lines.⁶⁰

The situation changed in May, however, and Private Almond later described the time period as when “we had it hard.”⁶¹ By the beginning of the month, the 85th Division was fully consolidated on the left flank of the refreshed 88th Division, facing the German

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ R. Spencer Kidd, *Military Uniforms in Europe 1900-2000: Volume 2* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, Inc., 2013), 65.

⁵⁷ “U.S. 88th Infantry and 10th Mountain Divisions in Apennine Mountains of Italy near the end of World War II in Europe,” Critical Past, http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675076379_United-States-soldiers_Italian-Alpinieri-Brigade_serving-wine_troops-advancing (accessed January 5, 2016).

⁵⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 5.

⁵⁹ G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM April 13 to 1200AM April 18, 1944, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, April 1944 to June 1944, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

⁶⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 5.

⁶¹ Letter from Private Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 5, 1945.

Gustav Line along the Gulf of Gaeta.⁶² Opposite them in the Aurunci Mountains was the 14th Panzer Corps' 94th Infantry Division, the garrison of Gaeta, and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division Mobile Reserve.⁶³ The men of the 85th received the first eleven days of the month to organize and prepare for their first offensive of the war, and spent the seventeen days between May 11 and May 28 undergoing a jarring baptism of fire.⁶⁴ General Coulter, now stationed at the town of Minturno, was given free rein to plan in his sector and therefore attempted to increase the odds of his men's survival.⁶⁵ He did so by massing both the 338th and 339th Infantry Regiments into the 338th's sector, allowing both regiments to supply two battalions each along the front line rather than use the standard deployment of three battalions from a single regiment.⁶⁶

As units moved into place for the II Corps' push against the Gustav Line, artillery bombardments from concealed German emplacements became a regular occurrence, and the draftees covering the town of Tremensuoli even ended up nicknaming the main street of the town "Purple Heart Alley" after many of the men were hit by German small arms and artillery fire within twenty seconds of appearing on the street.⁶⁷ But this light bleeding of the division gave way to something much more costly. As noted in the divisional history, the men became increasingly nervous as their first offensive loomed

⁶² Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 6-7.

⁶³ Lieutenant Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War Volume II: The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1956), 398-399.

⁶⁴ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-8.

⁶⁵ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 70.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

⁶⁷ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 7.

near, and began writing home in far greater numbers than before.⁶⁸ Sometimes these letters were simple assurances of their present safety, and the occasional bout of bravado barely concealing fraying nerves.⁶⁹ A newly promoted Private First Class Johnny Almond, writing as his regiment moved into position along the Minturno Bridge across the Garigliano River, tried to assure his family by stating that he had not engaged in a firefight with the Germans yet, and “as long as they don’t shoot at me I won’t do it, but if one get[s] in my way he will be mine for that is what I am over here for and [the] more we shoot [the more] it will help to stop the war and when I shoot at them I am go[ing] to let them have it.”⁷⁰

Nine days later, at 11:00 PM on May 11, Private Almond and his fellow Custer Men launched a coordinated attack alongside the 88th Infantry Division as part of OPERATION: DIADEM, crashing into the German 94th Infantry Division in an action described by the division’s official report of operations for May as “extremely heavy fighting.”⁷¹ The attack was merely a tactical surprise for the Germans, so the draftees charged straight into preplanned artillery bombardment grids, crossing through heavy

⁶⁸ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 71.

⁶⁹ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 30, 1944.
Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 2, 1944.
Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 4, 1944.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 71.

⁷⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-7.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 8-10.
Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Lara Efird, May 2, 1944.

⁷¹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-7.
Headquarters Fifth Army, *Road to Rome: Salerno, Naples, Volturno, Cassino, Anzio, Rome* (Italy: Headquarters Fifth Army, 1944), 35-38.
Laurie, *Rome-Arno: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, 17.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 73.

weapon choke points, minefields, and up steep slopes that favored the defenders.⁷² Particularly heavy carnage marked the fighting for the area known as the “S Ridge,” a terrain feature in the 339th Infantry Regiment’s sector consisting of the interlocked Domencio Ridge and Intermediate Ridge, which dropped steeply to the Capo d’Acqua River before rising up toward the town of San Martino and its heavily defended Hill 66.⁷³ At least an entire platoon of draftees and their commanding lieutenant from the 339th’s Charlie Company died in the push to the Domenico Ridge alone, and three companies were reduced from an initial total strength of 561 to seventy-three when clearing the hills around Capo d’Acqua.⁷⁴

Each day more men fell in the advance, but the 85th Division progressed steadily, overtaking the towns of Scauri, Castellonorate, Formia, Gaeta, and Fondi as they followed the mountainous coastline towards Anzio.⁷⁵ The fighting at the town of Terracina in particular merited special mention. During that heavy engagement Lieutenant Robert T. Waugh of the 339th Infantry Regiment risked his own life amid enemy fire to neutralize threats to the draftees under his command, personally silencing six bunkers, two pillboxes, and capturing twenty five Germans, an act that motivated his entire regiment and later earned him the Medal of Honor.⁷⁶

⁷² Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 74-75.

⁷³ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-7.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 72.

⁷⁴ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-7.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 72-76.
Ibid., 82-83.

⁷⁵ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-10.

⁷⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 79-80.

Fighting continued until the bloodied draftees were pulled off the line on May 28 and granted two full days of rest and refitting.⁷⁷ Following this respite, General Coulter shifted his men further inland and ordered the 85th Division to resume its offensive on May 31.⁷⁸ The 85th Division spent another ten days on the front lines, and during the first nine days of June, it chased an increasingly disorganized Herman Goering Panzer Grenadier Division from the commune of Lariano towards the great prize of Rome.⁷⁹ The 337th Infantry Regiment distinguished itself by capturing Mount Ceraso on June 2, the same day that the 339th seized Mount Fiore.⁸⁰ One more town, Frascati, fell on June 3 and was followed by the German defensive positions atop Mount Compatri and Mount Porzio Catone before Highway Six was fully cleared to Rome, less than three miles away.⁸¹ An Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon of the 337th Infantry Regiment's Second Battalion had the distinction of being the first unit of the division to enter Rome on June 5, and the remainder of the 85th and its train of 743 freshly acquired German prisoners soon followed.⁸²

The Allied leaders in Italy had hoped the seizure of Rome would be a high point of the campaign, but it became the last major point briefly recognized by the American public before the Italian Theater was, in essence, "forgotten."⁸³ To be sure, the men of

⁷⁷ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-10.

⁷⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 6-10.
Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 157.

⁷⁹ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 39-42.

⁸⁰ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 157.

⁸¹ Fisher, *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps*, 206-207.

⁸² Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 38.

⁸³ Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition*, 962.

the 85th Division and their allied counterparts enjoyed their brief moment in the sun. Lieutenant Bob Wiggans of the 338th Infantry Regiment's Dog Company noted that, "We marched through Rome, strutting like peacocks... The Italians were wild with joy," and the divisional history described the journey through Rome as passing through a "delirious holiday" where the draftees were showered with free wine and exaltations from grateful Italians who "swarmed over jeeps, tanks and trucks, laughing and chattering in a mood of great joy."⁸⁴ But unfortunately for the ambitions of the American Fifth Army commander, Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, and more so for the tens of thousands of American servicemen in Italy, less than twenty-four hours would pass from the time that American units secured Rome to when the Normandy Invasion commenced, and the Italian Theater was instantly pushed out of the limelight.⁸⁵ Eric Sevareid, a CBS Broadcaster following the actions of the joint American-Canadian 1st Special Service Force in Italy, said that when newspapermen and radiomen heard of the Normandy Invasion, "most of us sat back, pulled out cigarettes, and dropped our half-written stories about Rome to the floor. The 'play' had suddenly been taken away from the Italian campaign."⁸⁶ Even worse, General Clark's narrow-minded focus on seizing the famous city of Rome had shifted allied strength away from the major Axis troop concentrations, an error that allowed German Field Marshal Kesselring time to withdraw his Tenth and

⁸⁴ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 15.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 106.
Ibid., 179.

⁸⁵ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 36-38.
Phil Nordyke, *All American All the Way: From Sicily to Normandy, A Combat History of the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 197-201.

⁸⁶ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 1-2.
Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 177-178.

Fourteenth Armies relatively unscathed.⁸⁷ The 85th Division emerged from Rome as soon as the congested traffic of the liberated city allowed, and it continued a fighting pursuit of these escaping units up to the banks of the Viterbo River.⁸⁸ On June 9, the draftees were relieved by the Algerian 3rd Infantry Division and moved to an assembly area south of Ostia, also known as Lido di Roma, on the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea for “training, re-equipping, relaxation and rest.”⁸⁹ By this point, the men of the 85th had spent sixty out of the past sixty-two days on the front lines, destroying the German 94th Division, taking some 2,461 prisoners, and suffering some 1,100 casualties in OPERATION: DIADEM’s assault on the Gustav Line.⁹⁰ Additional casualties occurred after that initial push at an average rate of ten soldiers a day.⁹¹ PFC Almond fell into this statistic, as he was injured twice while on the line.⁹²

From the instant any man goes into combat, either as a volunteer or through the draft, it shapes him on a fundamental level. During the Second World War, America’s infantry experienced these base changes more acutely than any other segment of the Armed Forces. As a whole, infantry divisions constituted fourteen percent of the Army’s overseas personnel, with sixty-eight percent of any given division consisting of combat

⁸⁷ Fisher, *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps*, 220-221.

⁸⁸ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 157.

⁸⁹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 11.

⁹⁰ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 40-42.
Laurie, *Rome-Arno: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II*, 19.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 110.

⁹¹ Fisher, *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps*, 240.

⁹² Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 16, 1944.
Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, June 24, 1944.

riflemen.⁹³ Infantry divisions suffered seventy percent of all American casualties, and ninety-five percent of those killed or wounded were riflemen.⁹⁴ The fighting in Italy and the Mediterranean, while marginalized in the public consciousness, constituted a decidedly brutal Theater of Operations. The average infantry company of 100 men serving in the Mediterranean saw an average of 2.4 casualties per day of combat, with one “combat day,” a twenty-four hour period in which the men were actively engaged against the enemy, equaling 7.8 calendar days.⁹⁵ Casualty figures for front line divisions tended to drop by half after fifty-three days of combat in the European Theater of Operations, whereas the meat grinder in Italy and its constant stream of wounded and killed made it so the casualty rate did not drop until a unit’s eightieth combat day.⁹⁶ On average, soldiers reached a psychological “breaking point” and began to lose effectiveness after a total of ninety combat days in the ETO, but that number was lowered to eighty-eight in the Mediterranean.⁹⁷

The heavy toll taken on the infantry units dictated the arrival of a wave of replacement troops fresh from the United States to fill the gaps in the 85th Division’s ranks. The unit was pulled back to the hunting estate Castel Porziano south of Rome near

⁹³ Lieutenant Colonel Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 239-240.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹⁵ Dr. John Wilberforce Appel and Dr. Gilbert Wheeler Beebe, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1958), 143.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁹⁷ Dr. Albert Julius Glass and Dr. Franklin D. Jones, *Psychiatry in the Army: Lessons for Community Psychiatry* (Bethesda, MD: Uniformed Services University of Health Services at the F. Edward School of Medicine, 2005), 10.

John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 335-336.

the coastline, where new replacements joined up with the veteran draftees during the period of June 15 to July 10.⁹⁸ Together, they began a new training regimen, one focused on assaulting heavily fortified positions and small unit operations.⁹⁹ The men received individual passes to visit Rome and attend USO shows.¹⁰⁰ Such venues were wildly popular, with famous figures such as Cardinal Spellman and Lily Pons entertaining troops with their performances.¹⁰¹ Freer flowing stores of cigarettes and beer also served to liven up contests held by the relaxing soldiers.¹⁰²

By this point the draftees had attained a level of camaraderie so often associated with soldiers in wartime, preferring to stay together throughout their shared experience. PFC Almond expressed this sentiment in a letter home stating that, although he visited the “nice town” of Rome while in hospital for an injury, he preferred not to be separated from his rifle company.¹⁰³ Once leery of combat, Almond now wished to be back at the front with his squad mates, declaring that, “I hope I will get to go back today for I don’t like this place [the Army Hospital] and I sure will be glad when I do get back, for I want to see the Boys.”¹⁰⁴ For many soldiers, shared trauma was a bonding experience, and those who fought in Italy were no exception to that rule.

⁹⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 12-13.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 112-113.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 111-112.

¹⁰¹ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 140.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, July 2, 1944.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

By July 17, however, Allied High Command decided the time had come for the men of the 85th to re-enter the fight, and orders arrived for the 339th Regimental Combat Team and the Divisional Reconnaissance Troops to move north of the Italian city of Volterra near the 'seam' of the American Fifth Army and British Eighth Army.¹⁰⁵ The remainder of the division returned to the front line the next day and prepared for a number of possible offensives, all of which were later executed by other units.¹⁰⁶ Taking up positions near Rosignano Marittimo, the 85th Division launched into another round of training, this time focusing on the intricacies of mountain warfare as well as river crossings, the latter of which was done with the nearby Arno River in mind.¹⁰⁷ By early August, the division moved to the west of the medieval city of San Gimignano and began reconnoitering missions across the Arno River for the 2nd New Zealand Division.¹⁰⁸ On August 13, however, orders came to relieve the New Zealanders and the nearby American 91st Division along a twenty-four-mile stretch of riverbank from the junction of the Arno and Ombrone Rivers to a position west of Castel Franco di Sotto, a maneuver completed by August 17.¹⁰⁹ Even with the return of the 339th Regimental Combat Team, this assigned line was too long for a single division to cover, especially when an August 19 directive assigned another 2,000 yards of river to the draftees.¹¹⁰ In a desperate effort

¹⁰⁵ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 113-115.

¹⁰⁷ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 43.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 112-114.

¹⁰⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 14.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 44.

¹¹⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 15-16.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 44.

to prevent any gaps from appearing in the line which might invite a German assault, General Coulter ordered the Reconnaissance Troop and the 310th Engineers to take up arms and serve as riflemen and guard the banks of the Arno.¹¹¹ The men endured ten days of intermittent shelling and stressful patrols before relief efforts were carried out by a combined force of the 6th South African Armored Division, the English 24th Guards Brigade, and elements of the American 1st Armored Division, with the last elements of the 85th successfully relieved on August 28.¹¹²

By this point, most soldiers in Italy began to realize that the American public was no longer focused on the Mediterranean. On August 15, 1944, OPERATION: DRAGON, the invasion of southern France by American, English, Canadian, and Free French forces largely culled from the Italian mainland, opened up another front in the European Theater of Operations, further intensifying the spotlight on France and its liberation.¹¹³ A good insight into this visible shift in public interest can be found in the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. Beginning in June 1944, the *Stars and Stripes* Mediterranean Edition increasingly featured articles on French battles in prominent positions across the front pages as news regarding Italy went lower on the page, with a heavy emphasis on the fighting for the port of Cherbourg even being dubbed the “New

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 117-118.

¹¹¹ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 44.

¹¹² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 14-16.

G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM August 17 to 1200AM August 28, 1944, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

¹¹³ Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944 – 1945* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 190-200.

Cassino” in reference to the bloody Italian Campaign battle.¹¹⁴ When the allies invaded southern France, a combined total of nine front page articles for the *Stars and Stripes*; its British equivalent, *Union Jack*; and the British Eighth Army’s weekly paper, *Crusader*; focused on French topics.¹¹⁵ In the words of a vexed PFC Almond writing home from the banks of the Arno River, “Well I know the people back there don’t know that a war is go[ing] on, but if they was[sic] over here they would know it and no one would have to tell them.”¹¹⁶

Despite growing realizations on their removal from the public eye, the Custer Men had little free time for thought before a new combat operation beckoned. Once the 85th Division was finally reunited as a cohesive unit following their latest brush with the enemy, the draftees received orders to depart for an assembly area south of Montespertoli, less than a dozen miles from the front lines, and prepare for further training.¹¹⁷ In the midst of these preparations, on September 9, the Department of the Army officially declared an end to the Rome-Arno Campaign.¹¹⁸ The draftees, unaware of this revelation at the higher levels of command, continued on with their training

¹¹⁴ *Stars and Stripes Mediterranean: Italy Edition*, Issues of June 22-28, 1944.
Stars and Stripes Mediterranean: Italy Edition, July 21, 1944.

¹¹⁵ “Extra! Allies Invading South France,” *Stars and Stripes Mediterranean: Italy Edition*, August 15, 1944.

“Special Invasion Edition,” *Crusader British Forces Weekly*, August 20, 1944.
 “Stop Press: Allies Make Swift Bid for Toulon,” *Union Jack*, August 15, 1944.

¹¹⁶ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, August 21, 1944.

¹¹⁷ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 16-17.

¹¹⁸ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Unit Citation and Campaign Participation Credit Register* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1961), 1.

War Department, *The Army Almanac: A Book of Facts Concerning the Army of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 451.

endeavors, awaiting the inevitable orders sending them back into the dangerous rugged terrain of German-held Italy.

North Apennines

After Rome-Arno, most 85th Infantry Division soldiers knew that the next assault would be against the German Gothic Line in the province of Pisa and the foreboding North Apennines mountain range.¹¹⁹ Not wanting his men to be mere cannon fodder in an attempt to breach a 200-mile-long string of fortified mountainous positions, General Coulter continued to press the draftees and their replacement compatriots through intensive training programs to ensure their survival.¹²⁰ Aside from a token studying of military courtesy, the draftees relentlessly practiced and drilled on mountain combat training, physical conditioning, soldierly discipline on and off the field, and, most importantly, combined arms training in infantry and armor coordination necessary for the upcoming assaults against concrete and stone fortifications scattered throughout the Italian mountainsides.¹²¹

The sector assigned to the 85th Division for its attack on the Gothic Line centered on Highway 6524 and the Il Giogo Pass.¹²² This choke point was dominated by a 3,038-foot-tall mountain, Monte Altuzzo, and its linked chain of seven hills on the east, and the slightly smaller 2,857-foot-tall Monte Monticelli to the west.¹²³ The defensive force

¹¹⁹ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 13-14.

¹²⁰ Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945*, 494-495.

¹²¹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 17.

¹²² Charles B. MacDonald and Sidney T. Mathews, *Three Battles: Arncliffe, Altuzzo, and Schmidt* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1993), 104-105.

¹²³ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 180.

consisted of members of one of Germany's vaunted Paratrooper units, the 4th Parachute Division.¹²⁴ Another foreboding mountain lay to the east of Altuzzo, the 3,050-foot-tall Monte Verruca, complete with a centuries-old stone fortress crenellating its peak.¹²⁵ The Germans dug into the forward slopes and branching ridges, creating interlocking fields of fire between log and stone bunkers and their machine gun nests.¹²⁶ High Command recognized that the draftees were in for a hard fight, so initial support in the form of heavy artillery barrages and preparatory aircraft bombardment were arranged to coincide with the advance of the Custer Men on September 13, 1944, marking the beginning of their longest campaign.¹²⁷

The brunt of the 85th Division's fight through the Gothic Line resulted in five days of brutal combat, from September 13 to September 17.¹²⁸ The 338th and 339th Infantry Regiments served as the front line forces, with the 337th acting as a reserve. Following a massive artillery bombardment by 240mm M1 "Black Dragon" Howitzers, the 338th attacked Monte Altuzzo in a two-pronged assault, with one battalion in column of companies and another arranged with two companies abreast.¹²⁹ However, both were

MacDonald and Mathews, *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, 103-104.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 49-50.

¹²⁴ MacDonald and Mathews, *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, 103-106.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 49-50.

¹²⁵ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 180.
MacDonald and Mathews, *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, 182.

¹²⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 50.

¹²⁷ 1200AM September 13 to 1200AM September 14, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

¹²⁸ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 348-349.

¹²⁹ MacDonald and Mathews, *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, 111.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 128.

bogged down by the defensive fire of the Germans. The 339th had slightly better luck in its two-pronged assault on Monte Verruca thanks to the presence of the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion, whose direct fire against three fortified bunkers allowed the units to move towards the crest of the mountain, albeit with heavy casualties.¹³⁰ A night of bombardment to soften the Germans followed, and the next day, the assault on the mountaintops recommenced. On Altuzzo, the point company got within seventy-five yards of the peak before finding itself pinned under repetitive German counterattacks.¹³¹ One of the original NCO cadre, Staff Sergeant George Dennis Keathley of Baker Company, posthumously received the Medal of Honor for leading twenty men gathered from two decimated platoons in a defense against several vicious German counterattacks, all after being mortally eviscerated by a grenade.¹³² The valiant stand of Baker Company also earned the remaining men a Presidential Unit Citation and helped to secure the tactically important mountaintop position.¹³³ Verruca also saw extremely heavy fighting and many of the draftees became caught in the crossfire of German positions on supporting ridgelines.¹³⁴ As a result, the reserve force of the 337th Infantry went into

Steve Zaloga, *US Field Artillery of World War II* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2007), 33-35.

¹³⁰ 1200AM September 13 to 1200AM September 14, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 17-19.

¹³¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 129-131.

¹³² United States Army, "World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients G-L," U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/moh/wwII-g-l.html> (accessed June 1, 2015).

¹³³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 240.

¹³⁴ Fisher, *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps*, 335. Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 55.

action alongside a relief column of the American 66th Infantry Brigade and the British 1st Division, attacking through the Signorini Mass to the right of the 339th.¹³⁵

The fighting in the mountains devolved into a slow attempt to bleed the enemy dry. Each position besieged by the 85th Division weakened the German hold, allowing the Americans to inch closer to their objectives at the mountain crests. The 337th Infantry sent forces through British lines to secure Monte Pratone in Verruca's rear, and the chance acquisition of information regarding the relief of German paratroopers by members of the Lehr Division on the night of the 16th allowed an attack to be launched that caught these new defenders off-guard, finally allowing Verruca to fall into the 85th Division's hands.¹³⁶ On September 17, the last day of the battle, the 338th finally flushed the last German defenders out of the network of hills surrounding Monte Altuzzo, at a final cost of 290 American casualties.¹³⁷ By the time their section of the Gothic Line was declared secure, the 85th Division had captured a grand total of 231 prisoners.¹³⁸

The remainder of September was marked by a rapid advance into the North Apennines mountain range, with the Regimental Combat Teams sweeping forward in a massive line, with each Combat Team abreast.¹³⁹ This assault carried forward to a line targeting the devastated Italian commune of Firenzuola, located along Highway 6524.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 137-138.

¹³⁷ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Apennines*, 60.
MacDonald and Mathews, *Three Battles: Arnaville, Altuzzo, and Schmidt*, 239.

¹³⁸ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Apennines*, 60.

¹³⁹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 19-22.

¹⁴⁰ Charles M. Wiltse, *United States Army in World War II: The Medical Department: Medical Service in the Mediterranean and Minor Theaters* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 425-426.

By September 21, the 85th Division had become overstretched, so the 88th Division was given control of the Custer Men's right flank to relieve the worn out troops and allow the division to maintain a proper reserve.¹⁴¹ The 337th Regimental Combat Team was then pulled back while the 338th and 339th Regimental Combat Teams launched more attacks against the retreating German defenders.¹⁴² The fighting continued for three more days, from September 21 to 24, with the 339th spending two of those days fighting up the 3,000 foot slopes of Monte Coloreta.¹⁴³ During this time, a third Custer Man completed actions that later earned him the Medal of Honor. On September 22, Lieutenant Orville Emil Bloch of Easy Company, 338th Infantry Regiment personally flanked and assaulted three buildings and five machine gun nests that had pinned down his company near the ruins of Firenzuola for over twenty-four hours.¹⁴⁴ Due to the slow vetting nature of the country's highest military award, Bloch did not receive his medal until February 10, 1945.¹⁴⁵

Needless to say, the fighting was rough and it left the men drained. PFC Almond managed to write only two terse letters during the first month of the North Apennines Campaign, hurriedly stating that he had been fighting hard on the front lines and that, "I wish I could tell you where I am but I can't. I don't know when I will get to write again."¹⁴⁶ Almond's unit had taken enough casualties at that point that the 337th was

¹⁴¹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 17.

¹⁴² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 20-21.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Apennines*, 62.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ United States Army, "World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients A-F," U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/moh/wwII-a-f.html> (accessed June 1, 2015).

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, Late September, 1944.

brought up to partially relieve them, and the division launched a six-day assault across their sector, encircling the imposing Monte Canda via an assault towards the German defenders entrenched in the stone-structured village of Sambuco.¹⁴⁷ Once the division seized these positions and the area known as Ravignana Heights, the draftees received the last two days of September to rest and refit before they were to begin an assault down the opposite face of the North Apennines Mountain Range toward the Po Valley.¹⁴⁸

The fighting grew more exhausting as the weather deteriorated. The attacks launched in October were the first noted in the official division operations reports where “adverse weather” was a strong influence on combat actions.¹⁴⁹ In the words of the divisional history, “The going was terrible; the mud and rain and cold, in addition to the enemy’s... fire, made up an abominable combination of misery. [...] The whole world, it seemed, was an endless chain of steep, muddy, trackless mountains.”¹⁵⁰

The German defenders who dug into this increasingly hostile landscape all belonged to veteran units, notably the Grenadier Lehr Brigade, the 44th Infantry Division “Reichsgrenadier-Division Hoch- und Deutschmeister,” and the 362nd Infantry Division.¹⁵¹ In the face of these forces, the draftees’ advance slowed to a crawl. Enemy resistance near the town of Guignola on October 1 and 2 was fierce enough to blunt the draftee’s attack. However, actions taken by Staff Sergeant Christos H. Karaberis of the 337th Infantry Regiment’s Love Company at this battle helped the division break through

¹⁴⁷ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 64-68.

¹⁴⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 17.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁵⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 161.

¹⁵¹ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 70.

and led him to receive the 85th's fourth and final Medal of Honor.¹⁵² Karaberis carried out a one-man assault on five interconnected machine gun positions situated along the ridgeline overlooking his unit, saving many lives.¹⁵³ Following this action, the draftees proceeded along a road running through the German defensive network in the Idice Valley, clearing numerous towns and hard points until reaching a position to assault one of their objectives, Monte Bibebe, on October 4.¹⁵⁴ After the Custer Men were able to overwhelm that position, they moved on to a more formidable summit, the 1,800 foot tall Monte Monterenzio, a natural edifice that gave the German defenders command over both the Sillaro and Idice Valleys.¹⁵⁵ The assault on this mountain and its approaches dragged on for days, with various support units joining the 337th Infantry as it tried to push toward the crest. Four days of probing attacks followed by four days of heavy fighting which included one unit being temporarily surrounded wore down the division, and the 337th in particular.¹⁵⁶ As a result, relief efforts were made on October 14, with the 339th Regimental Combat Team taking over the left flank, aided by units from the 34th Infantry Division that arrived the following day.¹⁵⁷

The division's forward movement slackened to allow the men a brief respite, but by the 19th of October, the draftees were once again in the fray, launching a series of assaults up the hills to the northwest. Some units, such as those attacking Santa Anna,

¹⁵² United States Army, "World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients A-F."

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 163-165.

¹⁵⁵ Fisher, *Mediterranean Theater of Operations: Cassino to the Alps*, 364-367.

¹⁵⁶ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 24.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 82-84.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Monte Fano, and Castelvecchio were able to push forward despite increasing losses.¹⁵⁸ The Germans desperately defended their positions, sometimes even rising from their entrenchments to launch devastating counterattacks. An example of one such action took place on the night of October 20. Advancing north of Parrocchia di Vignale towards a point known as “Hill 459” on their maps, two platoons of the 339th Infantry Regiment’s Baker Company ran into the newly arrived German 42nd Light Infantry Division, and were utterly overwhelmed by a counterattack that saw most men wounded, captured, or killed.¹⁵⁹ But the men pressed on despite such losses, securing the town of Farento on the 21st, and after heavy fighting and being repulsed several times by intense enemy fire, the draftees launched a night attack and were able to seize Monte Mezzano overlooking the all important Highway 9 by the morning of October 25.¹⁶⁰

Following an order to shift to defensive operations, November became a month of static warfare in the cold heights of the North Apennines.¹⁶¹ The draftees no longer actively assaulted the enemy, but instead hunkered down in a defensive line running from the town of Castellaro, through the Cassetta di Vignale, and out towards Pizzano.¹⁶² Once again, all three infantry regiments were placed on the line at the same time, with no reserve unit. For ten days, the 85th sent out patrols and endured sporadic enemy fire until the nightfall of November 10, which saw the arrival of the 1st British Infantry Division and the beginning of a slow, piecemeal evacuation of combat troops towards a rest area at

¹⁵⁸ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 298-299.

¹⁵⁹ Brooks, *The War North of Rome: June 1944 – May 1945*, 301.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Apennines*, 83.

¹⁶⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 24.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

the town of Gagliano.¹⁶³ Relief was fully completed on November 22, with the Custer Division's sector now controlled by the 88th Division.¹⁶⁴ By this point, the men had been in constant combat for over seventy days. Statistics compiled by army psychiatrists Dr. Albert Julius Glass and Dr. Franklin D. Jones showed that combat troops in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations began to lose effectiveness after eighty-eight total days on the line, making relief from the front lines a necessity.¹⁶⁵

Simply removing the draftees from the battlefield was not a perfect solution, however. For some, what they had seen and experienced saturated their minds with a depressing fatalism. PFC Almond, writing home from a field hospital after discovering his family had not heard from him in six weeks, pessimistically countered his father's statement that the people at home felt that the war would soon be over, flatly stating, "Well I don't see it that way, for I am on the Front Line and it has ben [sic] hard. And if that is what everyone [in America] writes, I don't know if they are trying to make me feel good or what, but it will be a long time before it is over."¹⁶⁶ Later on in the month, Almond allowed more fatalism to slip in his writing, telling his family to utilize his pay being sent home as they needed it, for "I may not get home to use it."¹⁶⁷ Almond even made an impromptu probate will a few lines later, as it was "too late" to have a proper

¹⁶³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 183.

¹⁶⁴ 1200AM November 17 to 1200AM November 18, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

1200AM November 21 to 1200AM November 22, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

¹⁶⁵ Glass and Jones, *Psychiatry in the Army: Lessons for Community Psychiatry*, 10.

¹⁶⁶ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, November 10, 1944.

¹⁶⁷ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, November 26, 1944.

one done.¹⁶⁸ Such feelings were most likely brought about by dwelling on the suffering of the previous month, where the six-week offensive against the Gothic Line had led to a staggering 5,067 casualties, 651 of whom had died.¹⁶⁹

The pessimism and combat fatigue did not go unnoticed by General Coulter, who tried to keep his men occupied and their skills sharp before the next inevitable assault on the German defenses. He arranged a training program at the Montecatini Rest Area, and after four days of well-earned rest, training recommenced in the form of six-hour courses designed to integrate yet another wave of replacements fresh from the United States and ensure that all the men were ready for the Alpine warfare that was to follow.¹⁷⁰

With winter fully underway and the mud from constant rainfall giving way to layers of snow and ice, the 85th Division's draftees were once again sent piecemeal to the front line. The movement began on December 3, and by December 9, the entire 338th Regimental Combat Team was on the field.¹⁷¹ The remainder of the division continued to train while awaiting orders rotating battalions to and from the line to keep men sharp.¹⁷² The threat of a possible German assault on the vital port of Leghorn caused the nearby IV Corps to request reinforcements, however, so the Custer Men were soon on the move again.¹⁷³ Over the course of several days, the 85th established itself as the Corps Reserve for the areas controlled by the 8th Indian Division and American 92nd Infantry

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 183.

¹⁷⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 30-32.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷² Ibid., 33.

¹⁷³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 188-189.

Division near Lucca and Pisa.¹⁷⁴ Amid these maneuvers, Christmas came, and the draftees found ways to celebrate as best they could. In their dugouts on December 25, while awaiting an expected German assault, the men feasted on a hot dinner and received gift boxes from loved ones and churches back home.¹⁷⁵ A German attack occurred on December 26, but “petered out” as though “it had been designed merely as a reconnaissance in force or...it was called off when Allied strength in the area was discovered.”¹⁷⁶ As a result, the draftees spent the final days of 1944 in relative peace, save for a single two-hour alert phase.¹⁷⁷ But while the year had officially ended, the North Apennines Campaign dragged on without any sign of a perceivable end.

The draftees began January 1945 deep in the snow covered mountains of northern Tuscany. The first seven days of January saw the men engaged in defensive and reconnaissance patrols while the 310th Engineers repaired and maintained the roadways leading towards the German positions.¹⁷⁸ By January 8, the men were once again part of II Corps, heading back towards Gagliano and the weary men of the British 1st Division.¹⁷⁹ The next evening, the draftees advanced forward and replaced their English allies on the line, finishing the relief on January 17.¹⁸⁰ Meanwhile, replacements continuously

¹⁷⁴ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 33-34.

¹⁷⁵ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, December 26, 1944.

¹⁷⁶ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 190-191.

¹⁷⁷ 1200AM December 29 to 1200AM December 30, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 190-191.

¹⁷⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 36.

¹⁷⁹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 36.
Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 479-480.

streamed in, with a wave of 431 officers and enlisted men arriving in December, followed by another 870 officers and enlisted men in January.¹⁸¹

Private Victor V. Evangelista arrived with this January contingent. A married thirty-three-year-old pre-war employee of the New York's Conservation Department from Gloversville, New York, who had a four-year-old son back home, Private Evangelista had been drafted into the Army on April 20, 1944.¹⁸² Unlike the original Custer Men who had spent two full years in the 85th Division training, Evangelista spent only eight months and thirty-six days in the Army before arriving alone at the 337th Infantry Regiment's headquarters on January 25.¹⁸³ Recounting his arrival on the front lines to his wife, Evangelista gave insight into both the situation of new replacements and how the men of the 85th were perceived by other servicemen in Italy. Evangelista was saddened by the fact that the replacement system, which sent men out to units on an "as needed" basis, had separated him from his last two of his friends from boot.¹⁸⁴ However, Evangelista was buoyed by tales of the "85th Division of the famous 5th Army," as he had

¹⁸⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 37-38.

¹⁸¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 193.

¹⁸² Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 31, 1945.

"Noel P. Evangelista Obituary," Times Argus, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/timesargus/obiuary.aspx?pid=164439954> (accessed June 23, 2015).

War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 42117080," National Archives and Records Administration, <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/record-detail.jsp?dt=893&mtch=1&tf=F&q=42117080&bc=sl,fd&rpp=10&pg=1&rid=6580075> (accessed June 20, 2015).

¹⁸³ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 15, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 25, 1945.

Veterans History Project, "Interview with Donald Morrison [02/26/2003]."

Veterans History Project, "Ira Talbot Slaughter Interview (Video)."

War Department, "Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 42117080."

¹⁸⁴ Lerwill, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army*, 422-424.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 25, 1945.

heard “quite a bit” about the Custer Division being “a crack outfit.”¹⁸⁵ His initial exposure to the NCOs and officers of the 337th Infantry’s Casual Company, a unit established to integrate new replacements, left him with the impression that they were all “pretty regular guys and things ought to go pretty smooth.”¹⁸⁶ Evangelista was filled with more optimism than his veteran comrades, and held hope that the war in Italy was coming to a close. Evangelista’s time in the 8th Replacement Depot’s 382nd Replacement Company near Leghorn had left him convinced that, “the way things are moving maybe it won’t be long before we’re all home again.”¹⁸⁷ For their part, the veterans in the 85th did their best to make the isolated replacements feel welcome and imparted as much knowledge as possible. Packed into canvas tents lined with scavenged straw and warmed with simple stoves built by the men, new replacements clung to every piece of advice offered by their veteran instructors.¹⁸⁸ Commenting on these lessons, Private Evangelista wrote, “all these Non-Coms and Officers are men who have been in the thick of things for a long time and they know what their [sic] talking about. So you can bet your life I’ll grab all the information I can that these boys are so willingly giving us.”¹⁸⁹

Trapped in a deadlock while awaiting relief by the 85th Indian Infantry Division, the Custer Men remained in a state of perpetual alert while facing off against the fortified

¹⁸⁵ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 25, 1945.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 1, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

¹⁸⁸ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 28, 1945.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

positions held by the German 1st Parachute Division.¹⁹⁰ Quarters tended to be uncomfortable, and while the extent of their condition depended on the unit, the men were often left squatting in miserable dugouts, defensive positions later referred to by Private Evangelista as “a glorified fox hole, made to sleep and eat in with the primary fact of protection from enemy fire.”¹⁹¹ The bleak days often sapped the soldiers of all traces of good will. PFC Almond spent the beginning of February in a state of reflective melancholy, writing home to ask for copies to be made of the only known photograph of his squad’s sergeant who had been killed as he and “the Boys” wanted a remembrance of the man who was “as good a Pal as any.”¹⁹² Despair often leaked into his writings, such as descriptions of his constant duties guarding the front at night because other men could not take the strain, trying to get comfortable and promising to recreate how he was living for his relatives “if I get back.”¹⁹³

Winter did not stop the division from training. Indeed, Private Evangelista noted how drill and exercises were hallmarks of the 85th Division. Upon transferring to Love Company of the 337th Infantry Regiment’s Third Battalion, he noted that while “it is quite a problem finding time to write... I am still getting some pretty good training.”¹⁹⁴ The Custer Men focused major efforts on training replacement soldiers. A counting of replacements on February 6, 1945, placed their total at 750 new men, a mere 110 soldiers

¹⁹⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 42.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 193.

¹⁹¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 26, 1945.

¹⁹² Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, February 2, 1945.
Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 22, 1945.

¹⁹³ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, February 2, 1945.

¹⁹⁴ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 2, 1945.

away from being a complete infantry battalion.¹⁹⁵ Few, if any, of the replacements had undergone any simulated combat training that resembled the mountain fighting they now faced, and the 85th sought to correct this lack of preparation as fast as possible. Private Evangelista even declared, “Believe you me honey I have learned more since I’ve been over here than I ever was taught in my basic training.”¹⁹⁶ For one-on-one tutoring, each replacement soldier was paired with a veteran Custer Man to serve as his foxhole buddy. In the case of Private Evangelista, he was partnered with “a Polish fellow from Buffalo, N.Y. ... Henry Gajewski,” a twenty-four-year-old married man with one child who had joined the Army back in November 1943.¹⁹⁷ The 85th Division had developed a system where recent replacements went on rotation to forward observation dugouts for battlefield indoctrination, a nerve-wracking but important experience.¹⁹⁸ Private Evangelista wrote about this dangerous duty, explaining that, “The only reason that they sent us [replacements] up there [to the Observation Posts] was to get us used to battle noises and to learn to tell when a shell was coming in or going out.”¹⁹⁹

This battlefield indoctrination became even more vital due to the unique combat conditions of the frigid mountain peaks. The bright white snow’s ability to silhouette even camouflaged soldiers meant that all combatants on the mountains shifted their

¹⁹⁵ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 42-43.

Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Foster, “The Infantry Organization for Combat, World War II,” 70th Infantry Division Association, http://www.trailblazersww2.org/history_infantrystructure.htm (accessed June 28, 2015).

¹⁹⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 13, 1945.

¹⁹⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 4, 1945. War Department, “Display Full Records: Army Serial Number 42027951.”

¹⁹⁸ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

fighting styles to focus on night patrols and ambush points, with the 85th Division men even experimenting with the use of War Dogs from the 38th Quartermaster War Dog Platoon to detect German movement at night.²⁰⁰ Both sides avoided all daytime movement due to the close proximity of the opposing lines, for, as Private Evangelista wrote, “even though we couldn’t see one another we were only actually a few hundred yards apart!”²⁰¹

The Stress of War

Facing determined foes and seeing decrepit human beings ruined by war was a daily part of the draftees’ existence, and it doubtlessly added to how they dealt with combat stress. The best way to compare their experience to that of the average American soldier in Italy can be found in the form of the Army’s Survey 177, a psychoanalytical questionnaire handed out to 2,536 American servicemen, including active duty, captured AWOL, and “neurotic-psychotic” personnel.²⁰² The sampled soldiers all served in northern Italy between November 1944 and April 1945, divided among all serving units.²⁰³ Consisting of 115 questions, sometimes multipart, and distributed to men primarily from the 34th, 85th, 88th, and 91st Infantry Divisions, Survey 177 was issued in three waves, with the first surveyed group of soldiers consisting of “neurotic-psychotic”

²⁰⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 46.

G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM February 7 to 1200AM February 20, 1945, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

²⁰¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

²⁰² Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177),” National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 330, American Soldier in World War II Surveys 1942-1945 Series, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7062666?q=*:* (accessed February 12, 2015).

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

cases from the North Apennines Campaign polled in November and December 1944, followed by a pool of AWOL personnel surveyed at the end of March in 1945, and a final wave of average soldiers polled in the first half of April, when these soldiers “knew about the approaching [Po Valley] offensive” and “the general expectation was that a tough fight was ahead.”²⁰⁴ The survey asked seemingly mundane questions regarding education, rank, and service length, but interspersed more hard-hitting questions on subjects such as “cracking” in battle and opinions of their German opponents.²⁰⁵ A total of 531 active and former members of the 85th Division participated in this survey, with those polled belonging to all three regiments.²⁰⁶

According to Survey 177, the 85th Division had a longer than average combat experience. Among the other 2,005 soldiers surveyed, 40.5 percent had been in the Army for two to three years and 44.7 percent had served for between six months and two years.²⁰⁷ For the 531 85th Division soldiers, a total of 48.6 percent had served for two to three years and 37.3 percent had served between six months and two years.²⁰⁸ For the

²⁰⁴ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Sample Information Section.”

²⁰⁵ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Questions 1-16a”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Questions 28-34.”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Questions 44-46.”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 62.”

²⁰⁶ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Outfit Identification.”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Sample Information Section.”

²⁰⁷ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 5.”

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

average American soldier in Italy, 49.7 percent had been overseas for a year or more, whereas 71.2 percent of 85th Division had been overseas for the same length of time.²⁰⁹

Despite the longer exposure to combat conditions, 85th Division soldiers had a much higher survivability rate. Among other divisions, only 34.9 percent of the unit's original soldiers remained by the time of the questionnaire.²¹⁰ Another 30.7 percent of these divisional personnel were replacements thrust into combat after fewer than three days with their new unit.²¹¹ The Custer Men demonstrated longer retention and survival rates. Approximately 40.7 percent of the original 85th Division complement survived to be polled.²¹² Likewise, 85th Division replacements were sent into combat sooner than their counterparts, as 36.0 percent of the remaining 85th Division men polled were replacements sent to the front line after fewer than three days, which equates to 60.6 percent of the total polled replacements for the Custer Division.²¹³ This retention of well trained veterans and smooth battlefield indoctrination of replacements was reflected in Custer Men's responses to the question, "How well do you think your training had fitted you to do your part in combat?"²¹⁴ Of the polled 85th Division soldiers, 68.5 percent responded positively and 24.1 percent answered negatively, compared to an overall

²⁰⁹ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 6."

²¹⁰ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 13."

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 13."

Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 31."

average of 57.6 positive and 34.2 percent negative responses in other divisions.²¹⁵

Furthermore, the Custer Men appeared to be better prepared mentally for combat than their fellow soldiers, as only 42.0 percent of them felt that combat was “tougher than I expected,” compared to 46.4 percent amongst their peers.²¹⁶

After a year or more of being exposed to the stress of combat, the 85th Division’s personnel had seen their fair share of death. On average, the draftees reported having been on combat duty for an average of five to six months, or approximately sixty to ninety days beyond when contemporary studies indicated they should lose effectiveness, and well past the halfway point for when the same studies believed a psychiatric disorder would emerge.²¹⁷ Shockingly, the 85th suffered an exorbitant number of friendly fire casualties. Instances of friendly fire through misdirected artillery or strafing aircraft were reported by 78.2 percent of the surveyed Custer Men, slightly higher than the 77.2 percent average reported by members of other combat units fighting in Italy.²¹⁸ Like most units, the Custer Men witnessed close friends wounded or killed in these various combat actions, with four out of every five men in the survey reporting this.²¹⁹ Private Evangelista, who had three friends from basic training killed in combat on the Italian

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 33.”

²¹⁷ Glass and Jones, *Psychiatry in the Army: Lessons for Community Psychiatry*, 10-11. Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 10.”

²¹⁸ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 24.”

²¹⁹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 27.”

Front, bluntly stated that, “we all learn over here that bullets aren’t particular about who’s body they enter.”²²⁰

Despite these slightly stronger statistics, the draftees were not immune to psychological damage. Since Survey 177 was issued late in the war, the Custer Men who participated had plenty of time to witness or experience men “cracking” on the front lines, with twenty-three of the 531 soldiers surveyed actually being men diagnosed as “neurotic-psychotic” cases.²²¹ By the time of the Army’s survey, the average 85th Division soldier reported much longer stays on the front lines than the surrounding American units, with 55.4 percent of division members stating that their last continuous assignment to the front lines lasted between three and six months, a tour of duty shared by only 7.3 percent of their fellow American servicemen.²²² And while long tours may have kept the front manned, it exposed the men to the detrimental aspects of front line service. Fear was universal in regards to combat, with 77.0 percent of the surveyed Army personnel expressing that they felt the most frightened in the moments leading up to battle.²²³ While most servicemen expressed a constant fear of being wounded, this was less frequent in the 85th, where 33.0 percent of the men experienced this fear compared to 38.6 percent among other units.²²⁴ Many soldiers believed it was only a matter of time

²²⁰ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 16, 1945.

²²¹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Outfit Identification.”

²²² Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 11.”

²²³ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 34.”

²²⁴ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 78.”

before they were hit, but only 38.0 percent of surveyed Custer Men felt this way compared to 41.3 percent of men from other units.²²⁵ Despite the longer tours on the front lines, 85th Division men reported having been wounded less often than respondents in other divisions, with 37.7 percent of Custer Men and 43.2 percent of other soldiers having been wounded in action.²²⁶ All GIs believed that there was such a thing as a “million dollar wound” that could take them off the line and to the safety of a hospital, so in the twisted world of combat, 50.5 percent of Custer Men and 48.4 percent of other polled servicemen expressed an occasional hope that they might be physically harmed so as to “be through with the fighting.”²²⁷

Italian Campaign soldiers universally feared combat. A total of 73.6 percent of Custer Men and 72.5 percent of other division soldiers believed that combat became more frightening the longer a soldier was exposed to it.²²⁸ Sometimes this increasing fear affected individual soldiers worse than others, creating people who were in danger of mentally breaking and whose outbursts harmed the morale of the unit as a whole. Such men were reportedly less common in the 85th Division, as the 64.8 percent of the surveyed members reported no overly fearful members within their companies, a full six

²²⁵ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 32.”

²²⁶ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 23.”

²²⁷ Paul Dickson, *War Slang: American Fighting Words and Phrases Since the Civil War* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2011), 281.

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 43.”

²²⁸ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 36.”

percent higher than in other units.²²⁹ In addition to fear, depression became a common factor for line infantry, with the men of the 85th fairs slightly better than their average American compatriots, as 52.2 percent of the polled Custer Men admitted that their melancholy often led to questioning if “anything is worthwhile,” a dreary outlook held by 57.9 percent of their fellow survey participants.²³⁰ Among the units fighting in Italy, one in every five front line soldiers freely admitted that fighting the war had reduced them to a state “usually in low spirits.”²³¹ Worst of all, the neurological effect of combat spread to visual symptoms, including hand tremors. Cases of bad hand trembling developed in 17.7 percent of 85th Division men and 25.4 percent of other American soldiers.²³²

Naturally, the most extreme and well-recognized of the reactions to combat stress was also the most feared, “cracking.” In every theater of operations, men reached a point at which their minds could not take any more, and they “cracked” under the strain. American psychologists largely ignored this phenomenon in previous conflicts. The Second World War was the point when this combat fatigue involved diagnosis beyond such casual labels as “shell shock” or “frayed nerves.” In their efforts to better understand how men “cracked,” the Army’s Survey 177 asked pointed questions that revealed the frequency of combat-induced psychosis. One of the most interesting and

²²⁹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 37.”

²³⁰ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 82.”

²³¹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 81.”

²³² When combined with pre-war cases exacerbated by combat, this loss of hand control affected 60.6 and 69.8 percent of 85th Division and other personnel, respectively.

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 88.”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 94.”

telling facets was the maximum continuous length of time that soldiers believed they could endure the strains of combat. Army psychologists held a consensus that a grand total of eighty-eight combat days constituted the total amount of combat exposure a man in the Mediterranean could take before his efficiency dropped and his risk of cracking increased, with a ninety-five percentile chance that he could become a psychological casualty by combat day 260.²³³ When asked questions about their mental endurance, the opinions of the 85th soldiers revealed that they had a higher than average perceived tolerance of combat, with 53.7 percent of men expressing the belief that they could last on the line for fourteen to sixty days without pause, and a majority of those responses actually indicated that the average 85th Division man believed he could last for thirty to sixty continuous days on the line.²³⁴ By comparison, 51.0 percent of other polled soldiers felt that the breaking point for continuous line service was between seven and twenty-nine days.²³⁵ A surprising majority of Custer Men even held the belief that continuous combat time was not the reason for cracking, with 30.5 percent arguing that it was actually a combination of mental strain, fear, and over-thinking situations that caused a soldier to snap.²³⁶ Only 16.4 percent of the Custer Men believed that too much combat

²³³ This theory factored in time off the line occurring between at least some of those combat days. Appel and Beebe, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II*, 140-142.

Glass and Jones, *Psychiatry in the Army: Lessons for Community Psychiatry*, 10-11.

²³⁴ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 9."

²³⁵ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 9."

²³⁶ Information and Education Division, War Department, "Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 46."

was the root cause of a psychological breakdown.²³⁷ In comparison, 20.5 percent of other soldiers believed that cracking was a result of mental strain, fear, or over-thinking and 20.0 percent held that it was a result of too much combat.²³⁸

Witnessing a man crack was a common experience, with four out of every five men serving in Italy admitting to seeing someone suffer such a breakdown on the front line, often resulting in witnesses getting “nervous, jittery, feel like cracking up or taking off,” or even cracking themselves as a result.²³⁹ Among the surveyed soldiers who expressed solid opinions on the matter, most felt that those who cracked tried as hard as possible to stay on the line, a belief shared by 82.4 percent of 85th Division responders and 84.2 percent of other servicemen.²⁴⁰ Custer Men, however, were much more cynical when expressing a solid opinion as to whether or not a man could “help it” if he cracked or not, with 77.0 percent of their definitive answers expressing the belief that most men could not prevent cracking “if they really wanted to,” compared to 97.7 percent of definitive responses among other units.²⁴¹ Custer Men were also slightly more cynical and callous in regards to those who fled the front lines. Whereas 46.6 percent of other Italian Theater soldiers expressed the feelings that such men “couldn’t help” their actions and only 22.9 percent responded unsympathetically regarding AWOL cases, sympathetic

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 28.”

Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 29.”

²⁴⁰ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 30.”

²⁴¹ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 44.”

85th Division responses dropped slightly to 44.8 percent, and 29.7 percent lacked sympathy for AWOL combat veterans.²⁴² The draftees were largely agreed, however, that if a man did crack, medical treatment was the appropriate response, with this opinion being shared by 85.1 percent of 85th Division men, compared to 82.9 percent of others.²⁴³ Unfortunately, such medical treatment in the Mediterranean “antedated the establishment of a strong psychiatric service,” resulting in only 18.0 percent of combat stress cases in Italy being able to return to the front lines.²⁴⁴

Taken together, such data highlights some of the internal traits of the 85th Division personnel proving that this unit of draftees rightfully held an elite status. Heavily trained and rapidly exposed to combat as a means of battlefield indoctrination, the average Custer Man built up a tolerance to continuous front line service that was, in some cases, twice that of surrounding units. Custer Men often spent much longer on the firing line than their fellow Americans. Fear affected the draftees as it did others elsewhere in Italy, but the more crippling and dangerous threat of depression was better controlled than in their compatriot divisions. Soldiers of the 85th more often believed they could manage combat stress better than men in their comrade divisions, and held a higher dislike for those that fled their duty on the front lines. This self-policing of combat stress doubtlessly helped the unit function with a high degree of efficiency in the later stages of the Second World War, as psychological studies of the time discovered

²⁴² Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 49.”

²⁴³ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 45.”

²⁴⁴ Appel and Beebe, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II*, 146.

that losses due to combat stress remained constant in the Mediterranean as final victory approached, compared to a heavy decline in European Theater cases following the Battle of the Bulge.²⁴⁵

This inner resolve may have aided in the higher retention of original unit members surviving in the 85th, as studies determined that a mere 2.2 percent of combat personnel in Italy were of the original units sent overseas, well below the 20.5 percent of original unit survivors commonly found in ETO divisions.²⁴⁶ Despite the “meat grinder” nature of the war in Italy, the soldiers stayed with their unit through all hazards. With a return rate to the Italian front lines of sixty-three percent in regards to men physically wounded and eighty-three percent those taken ill, an increase of twenty-three and twenty-five percent respectively when compared to the ETO, the men of the 85th strove to return even after heavy injury or debilitating sickness, attracted by a desire to help their “Buddies” and “Pals” still hanging on at the Italian front.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 144.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 144.

²⁴⁷ Appel and Beebe, *Variation in Psychological Tolerance to Ground Combat in World War II*, 146.

Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, June 24, 1944.

Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, July 2, 1944.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 233.

Table 1. Survey Data

Survey 177 was the Italian Theater's Psychoneurotic Survey issued as part of Dr. Samuel A. Stouffer's "American Soldier in WWII" study for the War Department. 2,536 men were polled between December 1944 and April 1945, after most had been through the North Apennines Campaign and were preparing for the Po Valley offensive.

85th Division Personnel Surveyed: 531 Non-85th Division Personnel Surveyed: 2,005

Question	85 th ID	Non-85 th
Q5: Been in the Army Six Months to Two Years	37.3%	44.7%
Q5: Been in the Army Two Years to Three Years	48.6%	40.5%
Q6: Been Overseas for a Year or More	71.2%	49.7%
Q9: Think can last 7-13 Days on Front and still be Effective	11.9%	21.4%
Q9: Think can last 14-29 Days on Front and still be Effective	25.6%	29.6%
Q9: Think can last 30-60 Days on Front and still be Effective	28.1%	11.5%
Q11: On Front Lines Continuously Three to Six Months	55.4%	7.3%
Q13: With Present Division before Combat less than Three Days	36.0%	30.7%
Q13: Came overseas with Present Division	40.7%	34.9%
Q23: Personally Wounded in Action	37.7%	43.2%
Q24: Witnessed or suffered Artillery/Aircraft Friendly Fire	78.2%	77.2%
Q27: Witnessed Close Friend Wounded/Killed	82.3%	86.9%
Q30: Men who Crack try their hardest to stay on the Line	82.4%	84.2%
Q31: Training prepared Soldier for Combat	68.5%	57.6%
Q31: Training did not prepare Soldier for Combat	24.1%	34.2%
Q32: Feel only a matter of time before being hit	38.0%	41.3%
Q33: Combat Tougher than Expected	42.0%	46.4%
Q35: Every battle is worth the cost in lives	14.3%	12.7%
Q36: Combat becomes more Frightening over time	73.6%	72.5%
Q37: Equal level of fear within Company	64.8%	58.8%
Q43: Occasional hope of wounding to be done with fighting	50.5%	48.4%
Q44: Even if they really wanted to, men can't prevent Cracking	77.0%	97.7%
Q45: Men who Crack need Medical Treatment	85.1%	82.9%
Q46: Men Crack due to Mental Strain/Fear/Over-thinking	30.5%	20.5%
Q46: Men Crack due to Too Much Combat	16.4%	20.0%
Q49: AWOL Combat Veterans couldn't help it	44.8%	46.6%
Q49: No sympathy for AWOL Combat Veterans	29.7%	22.9%
Q62: Don't Feel much Personal Hate towards German Soldiers	31.6%	31.0%
Q62: Must fight Germans, but they are much like "us"	37.1%	38.5%
Q62: Have a great deal of Hate for German Soldiers	26.9%	24.9%
Q78: Large and Constant Fear of being Wounded in Combat	33.0%	38.6%
Q82: Question if "anything is worthwhile"	52.2%	57.9%
Q83: Never/Once in a great while feel war not worth fighting	53.2%	50.4%
Q83: Always/Often feel war not worth fighting	14.4%	16.1%
Q88: Had Occasional Bad Hand Trembling before Enlistment	42.9%	44.4%
Q94: Have had Bad Hand Trembling since Combat	60.6%	69.8%

CHAPTER IV
THE LAST DAYS
Spring 1945

The arrival of spring brought a new wave of challenges for the draftees and their fellow compatriots serving in the Italian mountains. Snow quickly gave way to rain and, in the words of Private Evangelista, “but God, we sure have got the mud.”¹ This change in battlefield conditions led to new waves of casualties, with men suffering from ailments such as trench foot, pneumonia, and rheumatism.² At the same time, the Germans increased their attacks with indiscriminate, indirect fire weapons.³ A particularly brutal example of the random lethality of this tactic occurred on February 20, when a 120mm round from a German Granatwerfer 42 sailed over the front lines and scored a direct hit on the First Battalion, 337th Infantry Regiment’s Command Post, killing the battalion commander along with four members of his staff and leaving a dozen men wounded.⁴ The randomized loss of life from such weapons and the removal of men from the line due to sickness helped harden the replacements. Like many of his fellow soldiers, Private Evangelista soon became emotionally detached. After his foxhole buddy was sent to a field hospital, he wrote his wife, “That’s the trouble here, you make buddies then something comes up and you have to start all over again. I am beginning to think it’s a

¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 11, 1945.

² Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 224.

³ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 43-44.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 194.

good idea not to make to [sic] close a buddy.”⁵ Private Evangelista undertook his assigned tasks alongside his company’s veterans, but the men alternately fell into bouts of melancholy, thinking that no one would be able to recognize their own children if they returned home, then rising up in cheer as veterans passed on tricks of how to make front line positions comfortable or cook Army rations in a way to make them more edible.⁶ Above all, his experiences built up an opinion that diminished civilian problems back in the States. Contemptuous of civilian belly-aching, he wrote that, “if the people [back home] could see what it takes to operate an Army successfully, I am sure that each and every one back home wouldn’t let any one squak [sic].”⁷

The first days of March were spent much like February. The Operations Report described these days as being filled with active defense actions, “well planned raids” mixed with active patrolling of the front lines, and daylight patrols of divisional rear areas to guard against infiltration efforts.⁸ The latter actions tended to bring the draftees into contact with the local families rather than the enemy. Summarizing the operations to his wife, Private Evangelista stated that the routine involved the men checking “any house that we thought might have some Vino to sell” and talking with the families as best as they could with the language barrier.⁹ Contact with Italians could easily trigger pangs of homesickness, and some of the draftees became nostalgic. Photographs became a cherished, if mercurial escape. Private Evangelista offered a window into his tumultuous

⁵ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 18, 1945.

⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 22, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 23, 1945.

⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 25, 1945,.

⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 47.

⁹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 3, 1945.

emotions, stating, “Gosh honey it’s a great feeling to have when a person gets lonesome, all he has to do is reach in his pocket [for family photographs] and in a matter of seconds, he’s right back home with those he loves.”¹⁰ Then, he declared he needed a subject change to avoid getting too depressed.¹¹

But good news soon arrived in the form of fresh troops. On March 10, the Indian 10th Infantry Division (Reinforced) began relieving the Custer Division.¹² The draftees streamed off the lines and back to the assembly area at Gagliano, with the last division members arriving on March 13.¹³ Once off the line, the men began a routine of “vigorous training,” paired with a rotational system which sent the divisional personnel by unit to the nearby Tuscan town of Montecatini for brief periods of well-deserved rest and relaxation.¹⁴ As a member of the 337th Infantry’s Third Battalion, Private Evangelista’s pass came on the 15th of the month, happily declaring, “We are back for a rest and boy it feels good.”¹⁵ Heading to town with his two veteran foxhole buddies, a thirty-six-year-old Oregon slot and music machine operator named Vern Clifford and a twenty-nine-year-old Kentucky farmer named Cordell, Evangelista was able to meet up with several friends from the replacement depot as well.¹⁶ The group took in the available sights,

¹⁰ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 6, 1945.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 47-51.

¹³ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 48-51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 47-51.

¹⁵ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 15, 1945.

¹⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 10, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 15, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 16, 1945.

including several “pretty good floor shows” such as a “little girl...about seven or eight” who could “sing (in English) and tap dance,” with “all the makings of a great dancer,” along with a cinema playing comedies like Harold Peary’s 1944 film *Gildersleeve’s Ghost*, with their accommodations being in a damaged Red Cross building which Evangelista felt that “from the looks of it at one time it sure must have been a nice place.”¹⁷

Food was readily available for GIs with surplus cash, and while Evangelista expressed a dislike of the fact that “These people over here don’t have anything but that dam brown flour minus the salt and it tastes like hell,” the lure of fresh food was strong with the men of his unit and, “Boy we sure ate like a starved bunch.”¹⁸ PFC Almond’s rifle company, part of the 338th Infantry Regiment’s First Battalion, received passes on a later rotation, and he noted on March 24 in a letter home that he had just “ben [sic] on a four day pass and I had a good time, and I did[n’t] write any while I was on the pass.”¹⁹ Camaraderie was a large part of this rare time off, with squad mates spending their days together and sharing everything from cameras, flashlights, gloves, and candy to promises of post-war jobs.²⁰ Private Evangelista wrote home that, “I get just as much out of it

¹⁷ “Gildersleeve’s Ghost (1944),” Internet Movie Database http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036864/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1 (accessed June 19, 2015).

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 10, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 15, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 16, 1945.

¹⁸ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 11, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 30, 1945.

¹⁹ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, March 24, 1945.

²⁰ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 14, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 15, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 16, 1945.

Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 17, 1945.

[candy from home] just watching those guys really enjoy[ing] them as I do eating them myself.”²¹

Civilians

In addition to the Germans, the 85th Infantry Division also had contact with unwitting participants in the Mediterranean Theater, Italian civilians. Italian noncombatants littered the battlefields and rear-echelon areas of both sides. Custer Men viewed these people with a mix of skepticism and sympathy. Sometimes they earned the ire of Americans for having previously served as the labor force for German defenses.²² Other civilians became good intelligence sources, with partisans passing along reports and former laborers giving details on the emplacements they had helped to build.²³

In general, the disposition and living conditions of Italians varied depending on the proximity of the war to their homes. Sometimes, the Italians saw very little devastation. Behind the German lines in the northern Italian city of Arvinto where the 44th Infantry Division’s 132nd Grenadier Regiment was stationed, Austrian Private First Class Kurt Wunderlich described the untouched nature of the civilian lifestyle.²⁴ In spite of the occasional strafing run on German transports, everything was like “picture postcards,” with German soldiers helping civilians with daily tasks like cutting grass on

²¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 14, 1945.

²² 1200AM September 13 to 1200AM September 14, 1944 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

²³ G-2 Reports for the Time Period of 1200AM September 11 to 1200AM September 18, 1944, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

²⁴ Letter from PFC Kurt Wunderlich to The Wunderlich Family, March 10, 1944, Wartime Correspondence Collection of PFC Kurt Wunderlich (Wehrmacht), March 10, 1944 to December 10, 1944. Author’s Collection.

their farms in exchange for wine, blackout regulations “badly enforced, but... hardly necessary,” and the people quite happy with their state of being.²⁵ After the homes of these northern Italians were overrun by American advances in the spring of 1945, Private Evangelista noted that the same civilians described by PFC Wunderlich were all, “very cordial but not chummy as yet. They just don’t know how to take us as yet.”²⁶ What surprised him the most was “the fact that up here [in the Po Valley] they are much cleaner and really look more like us Americans than most of the Italians further south.”²⁷

When describing the southern Italian civilians who had seen their land decimated by the war, both PFC Almond and Private Evangelista expressed different opinions. Almond, still not sure if adding details would get him in trouble with the censors even after the order was lifted, simply described the Italians in the mountainous warzone as “not so nice to us, but we get along.”²⁸ Evangelista was more verbose in describing the civilians encountered by the 85th Division. Writing passionately in an almost two page long account, Evangelista described “kids and women eating out of garbage pails and begging for food” as “an every day [sic] occurrence [sic] ever since I’ve been here in Italy,” documenting the effects of the four-year food shortage and the sight of people begging daily at the company’s chow line.²⁹ Declaring that people back in the United

²⁵ Letter from PFC Kurt Wunderlich to The Wunderlich Family, March 10, 1944.
 Letter from PFC Kurt Wunderlich to The Wunderlich Family, May 5, 1944.
 Letter from PFC Kurt Wunderlich to The Wunderlich Family, May 10, 1944.
 Letter from PFC Kurt Wunderlich to The Wunderlich Family, October 14, 1944.

²⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 13, 1945.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 22, 1945.

²⁹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 16 (Misdated “Wed. 17, May”), 1945.

States “have no idea what these people over here have been and are still going through,” Evangelista ended his description of the average civilians in the combat zones by saying that, “They sure are to be pityed [sic] and spared of any more suffering as quick as possible.”³⁰ Soldiers of the 85th Division and its sister units often commented on the poverty. They described the average Southern Italian as being dressed in “little more than rags.”³¹ The children looked “grimmed and ageing,” and were so desperate for food that eating a mere 500 calories worth a day was considered doing “well.”³² Scavenging for food and supplies became an everyday activity for Italians, and in the war-torn south, prostitution skyrocketed as one of the only reliable ways to earn money for basic necessities.³³ Civilians even turned against each other during their times of hardship. Italian partisans carried out overzealous reprisal actions against suspected Fascist sympathizers in the north, resulting in the deaths of some 15,000 to 30,000 of their fellow civilians alone.³⁴ Anti-partisan actions and reprisal executions by mainly SS units, such as the execution of 335 Italian men on March 24, 1944, in retaliation for the bombing of an SS police regiment in Via Rasella, further cut into the civilian population.³⁵ By the end of the war, a total of 149,496 male and female civilians had been killed as a result of the fighting.³⁶ Such deplorable conditions and violence often deeply affected Allied

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 242.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 243.

³⁴ Ibid., 528.

³⁵ Ibid., xlii-xlv.

³⁶ Lanfranco Maroi, ed., *Morti E Dispersi Per Cause Belliche Negli Anni 1940-45* (Rome: Istituto Centrale Di Statistica, 1957), 24.

soldiers in Italy, with images of child prostitutes tearing at their hearts and the sight of slaughtered civilians haunting them long after the fighting was over.³⁷ As such, the people of Italy themselves could either represent a temporary escape from the war or a constant dark reminder of its cost.

Preparing for the End

With spring well underway and German activity waning, the soldiers of the 85th Division generally grew eager for peace, and as good news arrived from other parts of the world, so too did the men's optimism. While in hospital with several of his squad mates recovering from severe cases of scabies, Private Evangelista avidly listened to the radio, soaking up more information and declaring that, "The news [regarding the war] is sure encouraging and I am hoping it continues so."³⁸ A few more days of positive news reports buoyed his spirits even further, making him declare, "Gosh Honey the news sure is good and I hope it won't be to [sic] long befor [sic] these damn Krauts realize that their end has arrived."³⁹ Relatives of the men at home even began to speculate about how soon the draftees would be transferred over to the Pacific.⁴⁰ PFC Almond tried to keep the subject of fighting on another front out of his letters until much later, while Private Evangelista explained the common outlook as that, "whether our outfit goes to China,

³⁷ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 241.
Ibid., 308.
Ibid., 435-436.

³⁸ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 20, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 24, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 30, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, April 16, 1945.

³⁹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 30, 1945.

⁴⁰ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 25, 1945.

after this ball game [fighting in Italy] is finished is as much a question to us honey as it is to all of you folks back home. We just don't know and we probably won't until it actually does or does not happen."⁴¹

Theoretical transfers aside, the men of the 85th continued training at Cascine Nuovo and Gagliano.⁴² Their rear echelon posting and more frequent passes allowed the draftees more chances to interact with the local populace. After observing the men of his division in hospital and on leave, Private Evangelista noticed how well many veterans had become in speaking the Italian language, writing, "It's really surprising to note how many of us fellows use Italian, in answering one another's questions or salutations. Good gosh if we don't get out of here pretty soon we'll all have to go to school to pick up our English again."⁴³ Some of this linguistic skill may have been overestimated by the infantrymen, but the men did accrue a basic understanding of the language with the help of their army-issued phrase books and guides, with some men reaching conversational levels of Italian. General Coulter shrewdly deployed his more proficient Italian-speaking men to sectors in advance of the division's arrival to work with local authorities regarding efforts to protect the civilian population.⁴⁴

The last four days of the North Apennines Campaign were spent reorganizing the Custer Division behind the lines. Unknown to the average infantrymen, General Coulter had received orders to make his division "drop out of sight – disappear completely" in

⁴¹ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 15, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 25, 1945.

⁴² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 55-56.

⁴³ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 30, 1945.

⁴⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 115.

preparation for the coming spring offensive.⁴⁵ By April 2, the main Division Command Post was moved to the vicinity of Lignano, and by the 4th, the entire Custer Division was “hiding out” in the woods and farms, scattered in company-sized units throughout the area of Lucca, Lignano, and Buti.⁴⁶ And while the men did admire the idyllic countryside of “cultivated fields and neighboring patches of woodland... like a mammoth patch quilt” and many wished out loud that, “I could spend the rest of the war right here,” one last bloody offensive awaited the draftees on the slopes of the Po Valley.⁴⁷

Fighting Without Recognition

One further point must be made about the 85th Division’s opinion of fighting in a “forgotten” theater of the war.⁴⁸ Once news of the Normandy invasion reached the Home Front, the Italian Theater practically ceased to exist in the media and public eye. This diminished public acknowledgement of their suffering greatly annoyed the soldiers in Italy. *Stars and Stripes: Mediterranean* comic artist Bill Mauldin summed up some of this opinion in a cartoon published in June 1944, in which an annoyed Italian Theater soldier griped to his foxhole buddy reading a paper about the Invasion of France, “Th’ hell this ain’t th’ most important hole in th’ world. I’m in it.”⁴⁹ Staff Sergeant Ira Talbot Slaughter of the 85th Division’s 328th Field Artillery spoke for many when he recounted

⁴⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, April 2, 1945. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 197.

⁴⁸ Miller, *History of World War II: Armed Services Memorial Edition*, 962.

⁴⁹ Mauldin, *Bill Mauldin’s Army*, 169.

that, “On the 24th of December, when they was having the Battle of the Bulge over in... Germany, well we had a small Battle of the Bulge over on our side.”⁵⁰ Sergeant Slaughter’s “small Battle of the Bulge” referred to the large scale attack against the vital port of Leghorn, the heroic defense of which was ignored in the media due to it taking place outside Western Europe.⁵¹ One out of every ten men serving in Italy even admitted that the war in the Mediterranean had made them more cynical, bitter, and distrustful.⁵² In fact, few Italian Theater veterans believed that the war was worth the human cost. Only 14.3 percent of 85th Division men and 12.7 percent of other servicemen expressed the belief that every victory was worth the sacrifice.⁵³ Total despair was a little less common in the 85th, with 53.2 percent of 85th Division soldiers and 50.4 percent servicemen from other units stating that they “never” or only “once in a great while” felt “that this was is not worth fighting.”⁵⁴ One of the most well known examples of such cynicism came from a cartoon by Bill Mauldin. Created on November 8, 1944, and depicting a ragged collection of German prisoners marching along with an equally ragged American guard on a muddy road in the rain, the Pulitzer Prize winning cartoon was sardonically captioned with the Stateside News Item, “Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary

⁵⁰ Veterans History Project, “Ira Talbot Slaughter Interview (Video).”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 76.”

⁵³ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 35.”

⁵⁴ Information and Education Division, War Department, “Psychoneurotic Study (AMS-177), Question 83.”

prisoners.”⁵⁵ In his wartime book *Up Front*, Mauldin noted the general animosity toward the flowery language of hometown newspapers, and how “many papers burn soldiers up by printing the news just as it comes to them,” often times resulting in small, misleading mentions about Italy becoming a quiet front as more ‘reportable’ battles took place in the ETO.⁵⁶ Putting it more bluntly, Mauldin went on to add that in terms of personal correspondence, “A lot of people aren’t smart when they write to a soldier. They... worry or anger him in a hundred different ways which directly affect his efficiency and morale.”⁵⁷

Anecdotal evidence from the 85th Division supports the claim that soldiers in the Italian Campaign felt forgotten by those back in the United States. An irritated PFC Johnny Almond, writing after public focus had shifted to France for over two months, remarked that, “I know the people back there don’t know that a war is go[ing] on, but if they was [sic] over here they would know it and ... no one would have to tell them.”⁵⁸ An unusually annoyed Private Evangelista expressed similar sentiments in a slightly more verbose manner, remarking to his wife that, “Honestly honey the people [in the United States] have no idea what the people over here have been and are still going through,” following up later with the declaration that, “I am praying to the good Lord that I may be spared the hardships of another battle front.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁸ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, August 21, 1944.

⁵⁹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 16, 1945.

Shortly after Evangelista penned this letter describing the hardships and years of shortages, he received a complaint from home about rationing, which elicited a sardonic remark from Evangelista that, “things are sure getting rough when they [civilians at home] can’t buy soap or meat in [Washington] D.C.”⁶⁰ Another equally snarky and irritated letter chided, “So they have lifted the ban on clubs, theaters and eating places again. Boy that didn’t last long. What’s the matter honey, did some of the big wigs get hurt to [sic] much?”⁶¹ Interestingly, Evangelista even felt the need to express his concerns that the American public’s forgetfulness regarding the Pacific Theater after Germany’s 1945 surrender as well, writing “hell it’s only half of the job,” and he wished that “the people back home will only remember that this is only half over and keep on plugging.”⁶²

Naturally, such alienation from the home front strained family ties. Many of the draftees in the 85th were married, and many had young children back in the United States. Separation from loved ones with the high likelihood of injury or death while apart was often a deep source of stress to combat infantrymen. Unmarried and married men alike could both dread the possible arrival of a “Dear John” letter informing them that their loved one had left them for another, or receiving word that a family member had died while the soldier was overseas.⁶³ PFC Almond and his relationship with Mae Rose

⁶⁰ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 16, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 18, 1945.

⁶¹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 28, 1945.

⁶² Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 19, 1945.

⁶³ Paul Dickson, *War Slang: American Fighting Words and Phrases Since the Civil War* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2011), 147.
Ibid., 306.
Mauldin, *Up Front*, 24.

Burris, for example, experienced the strains of war. Almond did his best to write to her “twice a week” and he shared their post-war plans to get married as soon as he left the Army, but he became agitated in January 1945 when he learned of rumors that his fiancée now had a boyfriend, claiming that, “it won’t hurt me for I can stand it” and demanding that “I have to hear more than that.”⁶⁴ Finally, Almond learned from Mae that she did not wish to get married unless he owned a home for them to live in.⁶⁵ At least in this particular case the worst did not come to pass, as Almond married his sweetheart on December 1, 1945, but many troops were not so lucky.⁶⁶ According to the Red Cross, the American Seventh Army, which saw service in Italy and Europe, averaged five “Dear John” letters a day, and for every 100 new soldier marriages, thirty-one married couples became separated or divorced.⁶⁷ Interacting with some of the soldiers who were abandoned by their loved ones while serving overseas, Italian Theater Red Cross field director Ted Andreas stated that such men lost their “spirit,” and when encountering the body of a man who had just informed him of his wife seeking a divorce, he stated that, “I could never make up my mind whether he had deliberately walked in front of death or not.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 30, 1944.
 Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, January 5, 1945.
 Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 15, 1945.

⁶⁵ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, June 7, 1945.

⁶⁶ “Mae Rose Burris Almond Jolly,” Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=40374175> (accessed July 12, 2015).

North Carolina Marriages, 1759-1979, “Mae Rose Burris,” FamilySearch, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:F8CP-C2R> (accessed November 22, 2015).

⁶⁷ Kenneth D. Rose, *Myth and the Greatest Generation: A Social History of Americans in World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 109.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

An additional form of separation stress fell upon those soldiers who had small children growing up while they were overseas. Sergeant Bill Mauldin pointed out in *Up Front* that a steady stream of information about growing children back home benefitted men on the front lines, stating that, “Like many others, I’ve been able to follow my kid’s progress from the day he was born until now he is able to walk and talk a little, and although I have never seen him I know him very well.”⁶⁹ Like his fellow servicemen, Mauldin loved to receive photos of his son in the mail, which he remarked made “all the difference in the world.”⁷⁰ He even drew a comic on the subject for the *Mediterranean Stars and Stripes* depicting a battered GI grabbing everyone around him and making them compliment a newly arrived photograph of his five-day-old son.⁷¹ Private Evangelista, whose son Noel was born on Christmas Eve in 1940, was quite verbose on the subject of familial separation.⁷² Any time he received photos from his wife or small drawings from his son, he stored them in a “special little folder” that he kept on his person, and any mention of a childhood milestone made him wistful.⁷³ Sometimes his thoughts of home were nostalgic. When he shared a beer with his squad mates, it invited memories of similar gatherings with his wife and friends.⁷⁴ Similarly, descriptions of his son at Valentines’ Day prompted him to remark that, “it’s all these little things that we

⁶⁹ Mauldin, *Up Front*, 24-25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷² “Noel P. Evangelista Obituary,” *Times Argus*, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/timesargus/obiuary.aspx?pid=164439954> (accessed June 23, 2015).

⁷³ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 27, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 6, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 8, 1945.

⁷⁴ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 27, 1945.

will have to make up some way or another after this ball game finishes.”⁷⁵ But more commonly, thoughts of his family back home carrying on without him made Evangelista “think I’ll go nuts” and drop heavily into melancholy and lose focus.⁷⁶ Lamenting the fact that he had “planned so many nice things to do” with his young son before the Army forced him to be “thousands of miles away and wondering how long it will be that way,” thoughts on the situation forced Evangelista to think rapidly of something else, as the subject often left him “having a hard time seeing what I am writing and it’s [sic] hard swallowing,” and lamenting the fact that, “it seems so unfair... something like this has to happen to throw a wrench in our happiness.”⁷⁷ At the very least, he was spared from the great tragedy of dying on the front without ever seeing his family again. Such a misfortune befell a close friend, resulting in the sorrowful remark that, “[Lieutenant] Dick [Hanfts] was a swell kid and is surely going to be missed by a great many friends. I feel awfully sorry for his wife and child, it sure will be tough to take. As I understand it Dick never did get to see his baby.”⁷⁸ Such personal struggles and perceived neglect were in many ways dangerous threats to a soldier’s focus, possibly bad enough to get themselves or others killed. In spite of these non-battlefield hazards, the men of the 85th soldiered on.

⁷⁵ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 25, 1945.

⁷⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 10, 1945.

⁷⁷ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 11, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 17, 1945.

⁷⁸ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, March 8, 1945.

Po Valley

The final battlefield of the Custer Division lay at the northernmost reaches of Italy, in the fertile Po Valley. Nestled in between the North Apennines mountains and the Italian Alps, this was the last bastion of Axis resistance, crisscrossed by three defensive lines backing up to the Austrian mountain passes.⁷⁹ This idyllic landscape provided the backdrop for the twenty-eight day “Po Valley Campaign,” where nineteen days of heavy fighting would mark the last combat operation in the Italian Theater.⁸⁰ Twenty-four German and five fascist Italian divisions still held the defensive line along the Po River.⁸¹ The 85th Division found itself facing components of Lieutenant General Joachim von Lemelson’s Fourteenth Army, consisting of the eight divisions from the LI Mountain Corps and XVI Panzer Corps.⁸² Aiding the draftees in the Fifth Army sector were ten division strength units from the United States, Brazil, Italy, and South Africa, setting the stage for a titanic engagement.⁸³ Officially, the Custer Men were designated as the reserve force for OPERATION: CRAFTSMAN, the assault on the Po Valley.⁸⁴ To preserve the element of surprise, the men hunkered down in concealed positions as they awaited orders to attack.⁸⁵ The American 92nd Division struck first, launching a

⁷⁹ The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, “Po Valley 1945,” U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/brochures/po/72-33.htm> (accessed June 23, 2015).

⁸⁰ Headquarters Fifteenth Army Group, *Finito! The Po Valley Campaign* (Italy: Headquarters Fifteenth Army Group, 1945), 10-13.

⁸¹ William Fowler, *The Secret War in Italy: Operation Herring and No 1 Italian SAS* (Shepperton, England: Ian Allan Publishing, 2010), 118.

The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, “Po Valley 1945.”

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, “Po Valley 1945.”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

diversionary attack on the city of Massa to draw German focus on April 5, followed by the British Eighth Army advancing east of Bologna four days later to sever enemy communications.⁸⁶

First in the field were artillerymen of the 85th Division's 329th Field Artillery participating in the opening barrages supporting the 92nd Division's push, with the remainder of the divisional field pieces joining in the massive barrages of April 14 to clear the way for the American 10th Mountain Division.⁸⁷ On April 16, Fifth Army Headquarters decided to throw the 85th into the fray. The 338th Regimental Combat Team was ordered to advance behind the 1st Armored Division to an area designated as "Africa," and on the 17th the rest of the division followed with orders to relieve the 1st Armored and 10th Mountain units in a section west of the Reno River along the stretch of Highway 64 north of Vergato.⁸⁸ Initial attacks by the previous American units had left the Germans facing the Custer Men off balance and in retreat. News of the early success quickly filtered back to wounded troops in the unit hospitals, where a recovering Private Evangelista expressed cautious optimism, writing "God, if this thing would only come to an end soon. The news is good and the boy's are doing a great job, if only those dam [sic] Krauts would open thier [sic] eyes they could see the writing on the wall, but they'll probably fight to the last man the dirty so and so's."⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Headquarters Fifth Army, *19 Days from the Apennines to the Alps: The Story of the Po Valley Campaign* (Milan, Italy: Pizzi and Pizio, 1945), 29-35.

⁸⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 204-205.

⁸⁸ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 59.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 207-208.

⁸⁹ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, April 17, 1945.

Now actively engaged, the Custer Men launched a massive two-prong assault down into the Po Valley. The 338th Regimental Combat Team split and took the towns of Luminasio and Lama with little opposition save for minefields and a few “enemy stragglers” who were disoriented from the artillery fire.⁹⁰ On the division’s left flank, the 337th Infantry Regiment encountered varied levels of resistance. It took its initial target, Monte Luminasio, “without a shot being fired,” followed in short order by Monte Bonsara.⁹¹

But after these early gains, the fighting became intense. The regiment’s attack on the Lagune-Monte Grolla Ridge encountered fierce resistance that stalled the advance.⁹² To rectify this, the Fifth Army dispatched the 337th toward the town of Rasiglio.⁹³ Determined resistance from German troops stationed in the town of La Collina threatened the flank of this advance as well, and resulted in more heavy fighting against increasingly desperate Germans.⁹⁴ Despite the enemy’s best efforts, the Allied forces reached the valley floor, and on April 21 and 22, a disorganized German rout tumbled back towards the far banks of the Po River. In a feat of luck, the lead elements of the 85th reached the outskirts of Camposanto on the 22nd before German engineers had a chance to destroy the town’s stone bridge across the Panaro River.⁹⁵ In a violent pitched battle which saw the Germans throw everything they had at the 85th, to include mortars, lowered anti-aircraft

⁹⁰ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 208-209.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹⁴ 1200AM April 17 to 1200AM April 18, 1945 G-2 Report, 85th Division, Reports and Journals, July 1944 to June 1945, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Record Group 492, Box 3002.

⁹⁵ Headquarters Fifteenth Army Group, *Finito! The Po Valley Campaign*, 51.

gunfire, self-propelled guns, and even a pair of Tiger Tanks, the draftees pushed forward and secured a solid foothold on the northern riverbank, with the invaluable stone bridge intact.⁹⁶ By nightfall on the 23rd, the 85th was along the banks of the Po, its rear area filled with German prisoners.⁹⁷ General Coulter, realizing that by crossing the river he would be in the German rear, ordered his draftees to procure seventy M2 Assault Boats, and cross the Po.⁹⁸ Each boat carried ten to fifteen Custer Men and their equipment in an uncontested assault across the Po's fast moving current, and by the 25th, the division was fully across the massive river and on the heels of a routed enemy.⁹⁹

Everyone knew the war in Italy was ending, and even PFC Almond, who was always paranoid about being docked by the censor and cynical about the end of fighting, uncharacteristically announced his exact location to his family, proclaiming, "We are in Po Valley and we are doing good and I hope it will stay that way."¹⁰⁰ By the 26th, the battle-damaged city of Verona was taken without resistance, and an advance was made across the paper tiger of the German Adige Line the next day.¹⁰¹ The remainder of the month saw the division patrolling the area around Verona, taking in the steady stream of Germans heading to the American lines.¹⁰² To many men, it appeared that peace in Italy

⁹⁶Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 214-216.

⁹⁷ Headquarters Fifteenth Army Group, *Finito! The Po Valley Campaign*, 52-53.

⁹⁸ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 218-220.

⁹⁹ Gordon L. Rottman, *World War II River Assault Tactics* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2013), 15-16.

Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 218-220.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, April 23, 1945.

¹⁰¹ Holland, *Italy's Sorrow: A Year of War, 1944 – 1945*, 525.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 221-223.

¹⁰² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 61.

existed in all but name, causing Private Evangelista to write on the 30th that, “Well sweet this sure is a big day for us boys in this theater of the world conflict. Now that Italy has been liberated and the Jerry forces have been wiped to their knee, it shouldn’t be to [sic] long before the rest of the dam [sic] Krauts further north will find themselves in the same predicament. We sure are pulling like hell for those boys up there [in Germany].”¹⁰³

Unknown to the average infantrymen, the acting commander of German forces in Italy, SS General Karl Friedrich Otto Wolff, had actually been involved in surrender negotiations with members of the Fifth Army as early as March 14.¹⁰⁴ Although delayed by various problems and a change of command to General Heinrich Gottfried Otto Richard Von Vietinghoff, on May 2 word spread amongst the men that the Germans in the Italian Theater had unconditionally surrendered.¹⁰⁵ General Coulter, unwilling to allow for the possibility of diehard troops escaping to Austria and continuing the fight, ordered the Custer Men through the German lines to take control of the Brenner Pass on the Alpine Border.¹⁰⁶ The division reached the pass on May 4, and celebrated the arrival of the 103^d Infantry Division as it arrived through the pass on the Austrian side.¹⁰⁷ When “Victory in Europe” was declared on May 8, the draftees of the 85th had seen 260 days of combat, served in three campaigns, earned five Presidential Unit Citations, suffered 1,736 deaths and 6,314 casualties, and saw the awarding of four Medals of

¹⁰³ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, April 30, 1945.

¹⁰⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 197-198.

¹⁰⁵ Headquarters Fifth Army, *19 Days*, 83-88.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 14, 1945.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 198-200.

¹⁰⁶ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 64.

¹⁰⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 230.

Honor, 545 Silver Stars, and 4,988 Bronze Stars to divisional members.¹⁰⁸ The Army classified the division as Category IV, and the infamous “Eighty Five Points” rule began application in June to see which Custer Men would be sent home or transferred to another unit.¹⁰⁹ Some men, like the seventy-two-point PFC Almond, sought transfers to other units.¹¹⁰ In Almond’s case, he secured ‘safer’ position with a field artillery battery, anticipating future combat service in the Pacific.¹¹¹ Others who broke the eighty-five point barrier were gathered and transferred to other divisions bound for the United States, their service completed.¹¹² On August 16, the remaining members of the 85th Division learned that they were not to be sent to the Pacific after all, instead boarding the USS *West Point* in the Bay of Naples to finally leave the Italian Peninsula and return home.¹¹³ Nine days later, the men landed in Hampton, Virginia, and when the stroke of midnight sounded on August 26, 1945, the men of the 85th Infantry Division bid the Army and each other farewell, their duty finished.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156-157.

War Department, *The Army Almanac: A Book of Facts Concerning the Army of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 557.

¹⁰⁹ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 67.

Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, June 7, 1945.

¹¹⁰ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 15, 1945.

¹¹¹ Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, May 15, 1945.

Letter from PFC Johnny Almond to Grady B. Almond, July 9, 1945.

¹¹² Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 232-233.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

¹¹⁴ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Despite bearing the often pejorative status of “draftee division,” the 85th Infantry Division, along with the all-draftee 88th “Blue Devils” Division, was held up by the Germans in Italy as the Americans’ elite fighting forces, and Mark Clark viewed the 85th specifically as his elite mountain troops, a status made even more unusual by its initial training for desert warfare.¹ The success of the Custer Division in combat and the tenacity of the men in weathering the mental strains of combat flew in the face of the common and long standing assumption held throughout the United States that conscripted or drafted units were doomed to mediocrity from the moment of their inception, an idea summed up in the old eighteenth-century adage that, “one volunteer is worth ten pressed men.”²

Even amid the dramatic improvement in the quality of drafted units in general during the Second World War, the 85th and its combat record stood out. General George C. Marshall, the Army’s Chief of Staff, specifically cited the Custer Division’s high combat performance as a sign of the success of the Army’s training program.³ In his words, “these two new divisions [the 85th and 88th] fought as veteran units in their first combat assignment, overcoming extremely heavy resistance. This was the first confirmation from the battlefield of the soundness of our division activation and training

¹ 85th Support Command, “History Overview: The Custer Legacy,” United States Army Reserve, <http://www.usar.army.mil/ourstory/commands/85SC/History/Pages/History-Overview-.aspx> (accessed May 18, 2015).

Kahn and McLemore, *Fighting Divisions*, 108.

² Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, 66.

³ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 33.

program.”⁴ The 85th Division was also unique for its “accidental” well roundedness, training in no fewer than four types of warfare before reaching combat.⁵ The average division in World War II received two main forms of training: standardized maneuvers in the United States and theater-specific training for combat deployment. However, the ever changing nature of the early war and the timing of the 85th’s inception resulted in the Custer Men landing on the shores of Italy with skills in standard stateside maneuvers, desert warfare, amphibious landings, and mountain warfare, led by a commander dead-set on making sure his men would survive the war by preparing for every possible scenario while in theater.⁶

To understand the 85th Division’s exceptionalism, it is helpful to examine it alongside units with similar service records. Luckily, two such units exist. Both the 88th and 91st Infantry Divisions fought in the exact same trio of campaigns as the 85th.⁷ The three units shared similar exposure levels to combat, with the 88th serving for 307 days, the 91st for 271, and the 85th for 260.⁸ Despite possessing the lowest combat time of the

⁴ General of the Army George Catlett Marshall, *Biennial Reports of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army to the Secretary of War 1 July 1939 – 30 June 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996), 127.

⁵ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 27-28
Ibid., 33-34.
Ibid., 46-49.

⁶ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 47-48.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2-3.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, ix.
Ibid., 18-20.
Ibid., 87-88.
Ibid., 126.

⁷ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.
Ibid., 160.
Ibid., 165.

⁸ Michael Griffin, “PFC Frederick G. Dubbins,” Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=56363311> (accessed July 12, 2015).

three divisions, the Custer Men were the most heavily decorated, as both the 88th and 91st received three Distinguished Unit Citations each and had two Medal of Honor winners apiece, whereas the 85th was awarded five Distinguished Unit Citations and had four members receive the Medal of Honor.⁹ Divisional casualty rates stood at 1,561 killed and 6,314 wounded for the 85th, 2,298 killed and 9,225 wounded for the 88th, and 1,400 killed and 6,748 wounded for the 91st.¹⁰ Thus, the Custer Men and the Blue Devils shared a KIA to WIA ratio of 1:4, with the 91st maintaining a slightly higher ratio of 1:4.8.¹¹ The 88th Division received the most limelight press due to it being the first draftee division to engage in combat, but this fame faded once news of the Normandy landings hit the press, leaving all three divisions largely forgotten.¹² Only the official awards and commendations remained to mollify returning veterans. In short, serving in Italy during these three campaigns offered infantry units a challenge unlike anything elsewhere in World War II.

The only infantry division to finish the war in Italy that surpassed the 85th in terms of combat time and awards was the battered 34th, a National Guard unit with 500 days of combat time from Tunisia to the Po Valley, resulting in three Distinguished Unit

United States Army, "88th Infantry Division."

United States Veteran's Affairs, "William G. Livesay," Find a Grave, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSmpid=47796772&GRid=3031092> (accessed July 12, 2015).

⁹ United States Army, "85th Infantry Division."

United States Army, "88th Infantry Division."

United States Army, "91st Infantry Division."

¹⁰ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.

Ibid., 160.

Ibid., 165.

¹¹ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.

Ibid., 160.

Ibid., 165.

¹² Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 1-2.

Citations, nine Medals of Honor, 2,866 members killed, and 11,545 members wounded.¹³ Compared to the units fighting in European Theater of Operations, only nine of the forty-four infantry divisions in the ETO had a served in combat longer than 85th, and of those, two had also served in North Africa and Italy prior landing in France.¹⁴ Examining the forty-four ETO divisions as a whole, the average number of divisional combat days was 167.7 with a combined battle casualty average of 8,570, some ninety-two days fewer and 695 fewer losses than the 85th.¹⁵ Taking out of the equation the veteran units who served in both Italy and mainland Europe, the averages for infantry divisions serving only in Western Europe was 157.3 combat days and 7,914 casualties, or 103 fewer combat days than the Custer Division and an average of thirty-nine fewer casualties.¹⁶ Of course, casualties and awards never fell into neatly divided patterns, but an examination of raw

¹³Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 115-116.

United States Army, "34th Infantry Division," U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/html/forcestruc/cbtchron/cc/034id.htm> (accessed August 1, 2015).

¹⁴ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, 236.

Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 75-77.

Ibid., 90-92.

¹⁵ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, 236.

¹⁶ The divisions that served in both theaters were 1st, 3rd, 9th, 36th, and 45th. For a more direct comparison, the two closest ETO divisions to the 85th in terms of combat time were the 8th Infantry Division and 35th Infantry Division, who served 266 and 264 days on the front lines, respectively. The 8th participating in a total of four campaigns that saw it earn five Distinguished Unit Citations, have two members win the Medal of Honor, and suffer a casualty total of 13,458 men, whilst the 35th received credit for five campaigns, earning six Distinguished Unit Citations, two Medals of Honor, and losing 15,406 men as casualties. Averaging everything by campaign, this data then equates to the 8th suffering 3,364.5 casualties and earning 1.25 Citations per campaign whilst garnering a Medal of Honor every other campaign, while a similar breakdown for the 35th averaged 3,081.2 casualties, 1.2 Citations, and a Medal of Honor once every three campaigns. Placing the 85th's war record through the same process, the resultant information is that the Custer Men averaged 2,625 casualties, 1.67 Citations and at least one Medal of Honor per campaign.

Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, 236.

Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156.

Ibid., 596.

United States Army, "8th Infantry Division."

United States Army, "35th Infantry Division."

United States Army, "85th Infantry Division."

statistics suggests that the 85th outperformed its closest combat timed ETO counterparts at a minimum rate of 456 casualties per engagement while earning at least twice the number of the country's highest military award per campaign. In all, eleven infantry divisions, the pre-war vintage National Guard 44th and Regular Army 75th, 76th, 78th, 84th, 87th, 99th, 100th, 103rd, 104th, and 106th, saw action in three campaigns in the European Theater of Operations.¹⁷ The average combat time between them was 139 days, four months shorter than the 85th Division, a fact that when partnered with their average casualty total of 5,800 allows for the determination that the divisions fighting in Europe had a loss rate of 41.7 infantrymen per combat day compared to 30.3 Custer Men per combat day.¹⁸ There were a total of ten Medals of Honor spread out among just seven of the infantry divisions for an average of less than one apiece, and the cumulative total number of Distinguished Unit Citations awarded to these ten divisions averaged three apiece.¹⁹ The division most perfectly matching this average, the 87th Infantry Division, saw 134 days in combat, suffered 5,555 casualties for an average of 41.5 per day, received two Distinguished Unit Citations, and had one member posthumously receive the Medal of Honor.²⁰ This unit was more representative of what the public tended to

¹⁷ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 131.
 Ibid., 141-145.
 Ibid., 155.
 Ibid., 159.
 Ibid., 175-176.
 Ibid., 180-183.

¹⁸ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, 236.
 Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 156-158.

¹⁹ United States Army, "44th Infantry Division," "75th Infantry Division," "76th Infantry Division," "78th Infantry Division," "84th Infantry Division," "87th Infantry Division," "99th Infantry Division," "100th Infantry Division," "103^d Infantry Division," "104th Infantry Division," "106th Infantry Division."

²⁰ Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, 236.
 Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, 159-160.

associate with the American Army overseas during World War II, an average mix of volunteers and some younger draftees, who relied on stateside training received through participation in one Tennessee Maneuver and a period of generalized “divisional training” in South Carolina, training for just a month in England before going to France.²¹ Serving as part of General George S. Patton, Jr.’s Third Army during the push to rescue Bastogne before crossing the Rhine to participate in the race through Germany, the battles in which the 87th was involved were better known to the American public than the concurrent campaigns in Italy, despite the lower combat performance figures.²²

As all this evidence shows, the men of the 85th operated at a level above and beyond what was expected of them, and they even operated above some of their peers in Italy as well. While facing an impressive collection of high-tier German opponents who were often manning heavily fortified positions, the Custer Men managed to fight longer, win more commendations, and suffer a lower casualty ratio than the units fighting in the ETO so often focused on by the American public.

An improved draftee selection process and a continuous, obsessive training regimen ensured that the 85th went into combat better prepared than the “pressed men” of the country’s two previous major wars, a fact recognized by not only the Regular Army

United States Army, “World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients M-S,” U.S. Army Center of Military History, <http://www.history.army.mil/moh/wwII-m-s.html> (accessed August 1, 2015).

²¹ Stars and Stripes, *Stalwart and Strong: The Story of the 87th Infantry Division* (Paris: Orientation Branch, Information and Education Division, 1945), 4-15.

²² Stars and Stripes, *Stalwart and Strong: The Story of the 87th Infantry Division*, 1-6.

General in charge of their corps, but by the Chief of Staff as well.²³ Both of these points explain the groundwork for the 85th's successes.

The drafts of the 1940s were a far cry from their predecessors in the American Civil War, and a vast improvement over their First World War equivalent. At the time, most Americans still associated conscription with the memory of the disastrously executed Enrollment Act of 1863 almost eight decades after its implementation. Rife with loopholes, the Enrollment Act helped cement the popular belief of the inferiority of drafted troops through the practices of “commutation” and the hiring of often unscrupulous substitutes.²⁴ Those rich enough to purchase their way out of the Army did so *en masse*, with 86,724 paying the \$300.00 fee and another 73,607 hiring replacements, while 161,244 individuals of lesser means refused to appear for examination with the possibility of discharge.²⁵ In the end, only 5.97 percent of the 776,829 men initially called to service actually served, with the need for armed guards at their training sites and the abysmal performance of their units in the field permanently marring American perception of drafted units.²⁶

The Selective Service Act of 1917 was a marked improvement over the old Enrollment Act, but the results were still far from perfect. The commutation and

²³ 85th Support Command, “History Overview: The Custer Legacy,” United States Army Reserve, <http://www.usar.army.mil/ourstory/commands/85SC/History/Pages/History-Overview-.aspx> (accessed May 18, 2015).

Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 33.
Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, 66.

²⁴ Anbinder, “Which Poor Man’s Fight? Immigrants and the Federal Conscription of 1863,” 347.
Levine, “Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865,” 816-819.
Perri, “The Economics of US Civil War Conscription,” 432-433.

²⁵ Levine, “Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865,” 816-819.

²⁶ Levine, “Draft Evasion in the North during the Civil War, 1863-1865,” 816-819.
Zinn, *The Mutinous Regiment: The Thirty-Third New Jersey in the Civil War*, 15.

substitution loopholes no longer existed and local draft boards encouraged feelings social justice and patriotism.²⁷ Only 0.62 percent of those called up dodged the draft, a clear indication that the system had improved its ability to harness manpower.²⁸ The Army did not know how to properly use these troops, however. Policy required that draftees trained together as a division stateside, but the Army then broke their units apart overseas to fill gaps in units already at the front, negating any semblance of unit cohesion and camaraderie for the men and making them less effective.²⁹ As such, these draftees never had a chance to truly prove themselves as a complete unit. During the Civil War, few of them reached the fighting, and during World War I, they were not deployed to the front in large units.

The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which gave rise to the 85th Division of World War II, showed the improvements to the system. Local draft boards selected members of the community between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, with no consideration for wealth and every consideration for conscientious objection.³⁰ Participation was extremely high, with only 3.65 percent of the men called to serve dodging the draft, and 9,837,610 individuals successfully drafted.³¹ But the most crucial

²⁷ Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 149-151. Office of the Provost Marshal General, *Selective Service Regulations*, 224. "World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, M1509."

²⁸ Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, 163-165.

²⁹ MacDonald, *American Military History*, 399. Ibid., 403-404. Steward, ed., *American Military History: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2008*, 15.

³⁰ United States Congress, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, as Amended*, 2-L. United States Senate, *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940*, 885.

³¹ Chambers, *Draftees or Volunteers*, 352. "Induction Statistics," Selective Service System.

change of all was the Army's decision to utilize draftees in the Second World War as full divisions, and that laid the foundation for the 85th Division's success.

Significantly, the Army abolished "depot divisions" and rather kept drafted units together from basic training through to combat.³² This meant that the bonds formed while stateside were not shattered overseas. The importance of this unit cohesion cannot be overstated, as *esprit-de-corps* was (and still is) vital for unit morale and functionality. Training formed another important factor to the 85th Division's success. According to the divisional history, "no other division received a more intensive and progressive training for combat."³³ This statement is profoundly accurate. The Army's new divisional training programs, including large scale in-the-field exercises, were leaps and bounds beyond the pre-war Maneuvers. They incorporated lessons gained overseas into stateside training programs, giving draftees valuable experience before their first combat encounter.³⁴ In the words of General Marshall, these in-depth training programs allowed the division and its Regimental Combat Teams to perform "as veteran units" in their first combat action.³⁵ The stateside training in the use of Regimental Combat Teams created a familiarity with the concept of combined arms operations, another hallmark of the Custer Division's success.³⁶ Credit for the 85th Divisions' success should not be placed solely at the feet of the Army's training program, however. It must be noted that some the more

³² Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 34-38.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 13-18.
Ibid., 144.

³³ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, ix.

³⁴ Marshall, *Biennial Reports*, 127.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 2.

specialized programs became obsolete or irrelevant by the time the troops reached the front lines. The Custer Men provided a perfect example of this, with their specialized desert warfare training taking place at the close of the North African theater.³⁷

Credit must be given to General Coulter, the divisional commander, and his loyal cadre of officers and NCOs. General Coulter had personal combat experience in the Punitive Expedition and the First World War, which combined well with his interwar General Staff and War College assignments to make him an ideal instructor for the draftees.³⁸ Relying on the initial cadre of veteran men from the army's "experimental" 2nd Infantry Division to act as guides and instructors, Coulter made sure to keep his men up-to-date while in Italy, spending every moment off the line honing the skills needed for the next battle.³⁹ This was a key facet of the 85th's success. Whenever the next objective or obstacle was known, be it a river crossing under fire or assaulting mountainous fortifications, General Coulter made sure to find similar terrain behind the lines for his men to train.⁴⁰ For instance, during the 85th's brief time off the line in November 1944, rather than let his weary men rest and refit, General Coulter ordered training on

³⁷ Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942 – 1943*, 529.
Ibid., 536.

Order to Transfer 85th Division Headquarters from Louisiana Maneuver Area to Desert Training Center, June 8, 1943, 85th Division, XV Corps Records, 1943, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 338, Box 18, Folder 353.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 36.

³⁸ "Lieutenant General John Breitling Coulter, Class of 1911."
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.
Tucker, ed., *U.S. Leadership in Wartime: Clashes, Controversy, and Compromise*, 706.

³⁹ Stanton, *Order of Battle U.S. Army, World War II*, Endpapers.
U.S. Army Second Infantry Division (Combined), "Our History."

⁴⁰ 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 5.
Ibid., 17.
Headquarters 85th Division, *Minturno to the Appennines*, 43.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 112-114.

“coordination of artillery and infantry and on a comprehensive program of establishing methods of reporting and charting enemy mortar action and of countering and neutralizing this fire.”⁴¹ Probably, the 85th Division soldiers had some resentment for having their free time taken from them, but they could agree that the training proved essential. The Germans had begun using indirect fire as their main method of attack in the North Apennines Mountains, and therefore the 85th needed to specialize in countering this tactic.⁴² Coulter’s plans kept the men of the 85th prepped and ready for the challenges immediately facing them, allowing them to march on a position not only with the knowledge gained from previous experience, but with customized tactics recently studied in their rear echelon areas.

Coulter’s training orders helped not only his original Custer Men, but the later replacements as well. The groundwork, of course, was laid by the division’s original cadre of pre-war officers and NCOs assigned to Camp Shelby back in May 1942.⁴³ These men worked with the draftees and often used tough but fair discipline to ensure their integration into the Army was as effective as possible, and they developed bonds with their men that caused many to risk their own lives to ensure the safety of others.⁴⁴ In the words of the post-war *Noncom’s Guide*, the NCO was the one who “deals directly with the troops, practicing the most difficult kind of persona leadership... A major share

⁴¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 185.

⁴² 85th Division, *Report of Operations*, 43-44.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

⁴³ Durr, *The Cadre Division Concept: The 106th Infantry Division Revisited*, 1.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

⁴⁴ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 20-21.
Ibid., 79-80.
United States Army, “World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients A-F.”

of every soldier's training is under his direction... the noncom exerts a tremendous influence upon the efficiency of a modern army."⁴⁵ Such a statement is applicable to the NCOs of the 85th, who utilized their weeks of preparatory training to guide their charges through the various aspects of military life.⁴⁶ Those enlisted men assigned specialized tasks were mentored by their NCO instructors to take pride in their work and operate with the highest degree of "speed and efficiency," using positive reinforcement to encourage the draftees to willingly become experts in their fields.⁴⁷ Once in combat, they led by example and showed their dedication to their draftees through extraordinary acts of heroism, such as Sergeant Christos Karaberis' actions in silencing machine gun nests targeting his unit near Guigniola in 1944.⁴⁸ Staff Sergeant George Keathley paid the ultimate price for his devotion to ensuring the safety of his men while mortally wounded on Mount Altuzzo, saving the battered remains of three rifle platoons through both his leadership and the men's faith in their NCO.⁴⁹ This concern for the survivability of their fellow Custer Men appears to have bled off into the enlisted personnel as well, as seen through the unusually high level of care and training bestowed by veterans on replacement soldiers later in the war.

The replacements of the 85th appear to have been treated differently by their veteran compatriots than was standard in World War II. It is common knowledge that

⁴⁵ Military Service Publishing, *The Noncom's Guide* (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Company, 1950), ix.

⁴⁶ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 39.
Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 9.

⁴⁷ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 19-20.

⁴⁸ United States Army, "World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients A-F."

⁴⁹ United States Army, "World War II, Medal of Honor, Recipients G-L."

veterans often hated getting close to replacements, because they worried that untrained replacements would die quickly.⁵⁰ Thus, in many divisions, replacements became something akin to a second-class soldier in comparison to the veterans. The men of the 85th approached the issue differently. When replacements arrived, they were placed in a Casual Company and given thorough instruction by veteran members on the type of combat they were about to face and the reasoning behind it, making them as informed and prepared as possible.⁵¹ Coulter and his men developed a comprehensive three-day introductory program for the larger waves of replacements, while the smaller clusters of men were instructed by members of their new units.⁵² As stated by late war replacement Victor V. Evangelista, “all these Non-Coms and Officers are men who have been in the thick of things for a long time and they know what their [sic] talking about. So you can bet your life I’ll grab all the information I can that these boys are so willingly giving us.”⁵³ He later followed this statement with the further endorsement, “Believe you me honey I have learned more since I’ve been over here than I ever was taught in my basic training.”⁵⁴ Veterans were paired with replacements to serve as “foxhole buddies” for individual training and support, and trips to the forward observation posts provided a level of battlefield indoctrination that helped rapidly acclimate replacements to the

⁵⁰ Brown, *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II*, 158.

William Guarnere, Edward Heffron, and Robyn Post, *Brothers in Battle, Best of Friends: Two WWII Paratroopers from the Original Band of Brothers Tell Their Story* (New York: Berkley Publishing, 2007), 87-88.

⁵¹ Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 181.

⁵² Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 28, 1945. Schultz, *The 85th Infantry Division in World War II*, 181.

⁵³ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 28, 1945.

⁵⁴ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 13, 1945.

situation at hand.⁵⁵ Such dedication to training these green infantrymen was uncommon elsewhere, and the 85th Division's devotion to their new members was quite unique. One possible explanation is that the veteran draftees realized that, like them, the replacements were forced to be in the army through conscription, and were just trying to survive.⁵⁶ They had families who awaited their return, and such soft-heartedness may have influenced the perception of replacement soldiers.

All of these factors aided the Custer Division in facing the stress of combat, allowing it to perform better in the field than their fellow American divisions in Italy in all measurable categories.⁵⁷ Without their shared status as draftees and the camaraderie forged by two years of service together before combat, they may not have functioned well during their first encounter with the enemy. Without their constant and extensive training, they might have been unprepared for the situations that faced them. Without their need to maintain a high standard among their replacements, the unit may have degraded in effectiveness over time. Everything fell in place for the men of the 85th Infantry Division. Without a doubt, they proved that a drafted unit could go toe-to-toe with elite troops and triumph, rightfully earning their designation as an "elite assault division."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, February 4, 1945.
Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, May 12, 1945.

⁵⁶ Letter from Private Victor V. Evangelista to Irene Evangelista, January 25, 1945.

⁵⁷ The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II, "Po Valley 1945."

⁵⁸ Kahn and McLemore, *Fighting Divisions*, 108.

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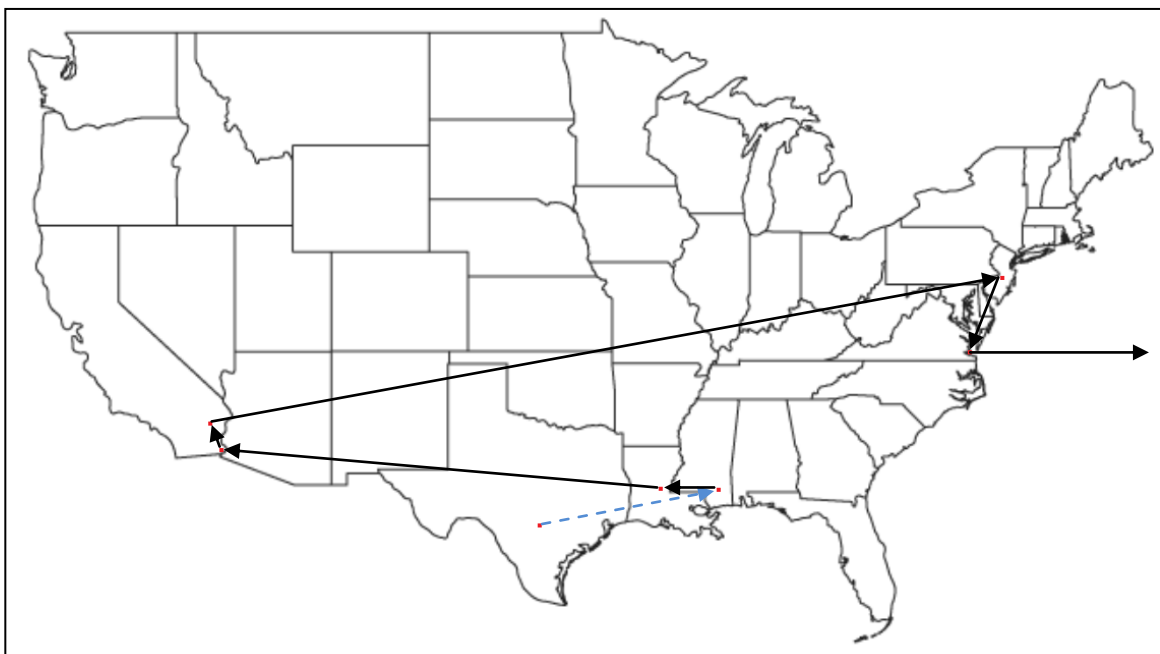
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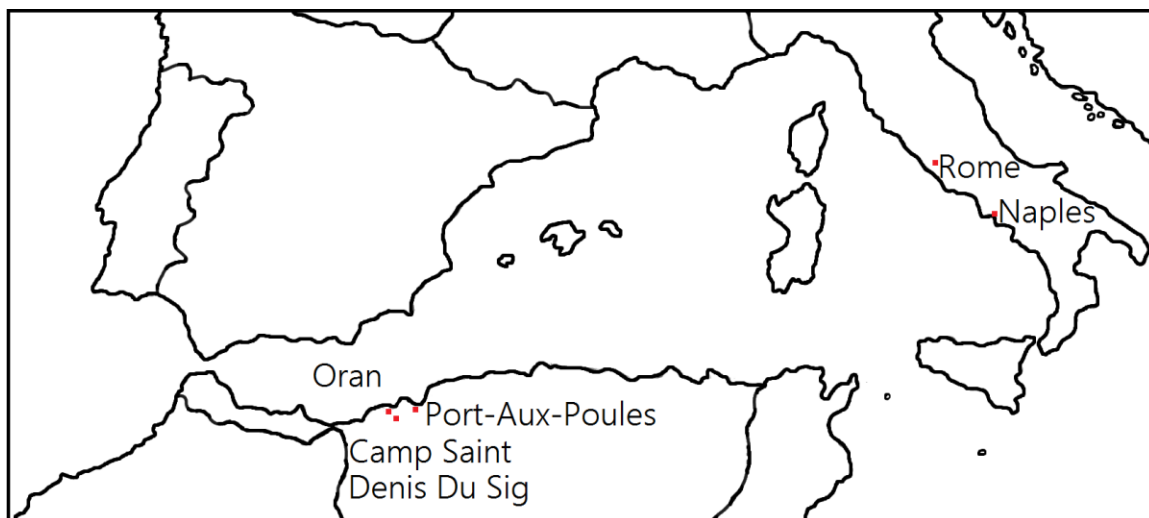
APPENDIX A**MAPS****Map 1. Stateside Training**

This map depicts the route of the 85th Division's stateside training. The dashed line shows the route of the officer and NCO cadre from Fort Sam Houston, Texas, to Camp Shelby, Mississippi. From there, the solid lines trace the draftees' route from Camp Shelby to the Louisiana Maneuver Area near Camp Beauregard, Louisiana, out to the Desert Training Center's Camp Pilot Knob and Camp Coxcomb in California. The line then moves east to Fort Dix, New Jersey, then down to Camp Patrick Henry and the Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation before heading out into the Atlantic towards North Africa.



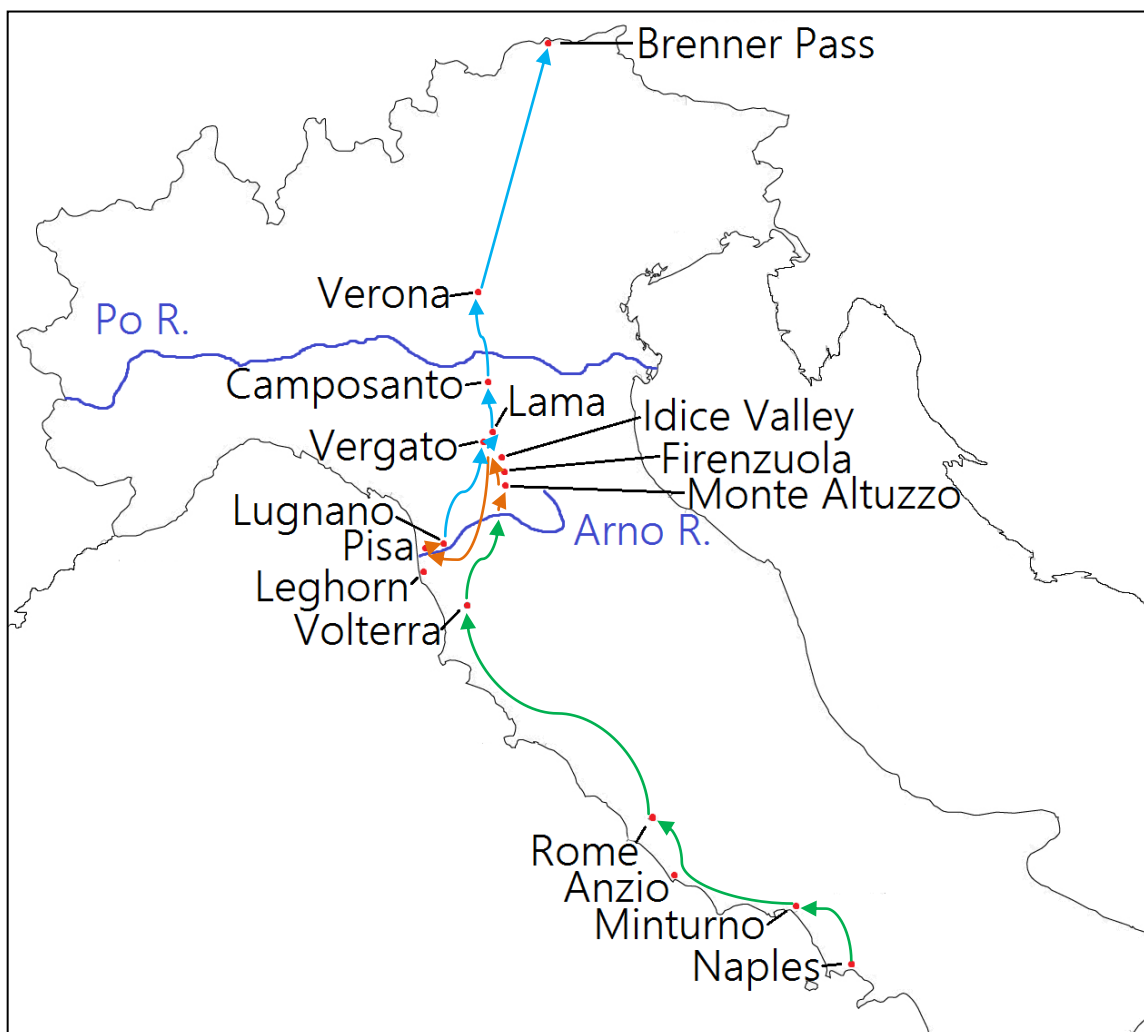
Map 2. North Africa to Naples

This map shows the locations of the 85th Division's North African training sites, and their initial landing point at Naples in relation to the city of Rome. The initial landing port of Oran, Algeria is to the northeast of the division's "base" at Camp Saint Denis Du Sig, while their amphibious training site and port of embarkation for Italy, Port-Aux-Poules, is northeast of both sites. The mountains near these three locations marked the 85th's first exposure to mountain warfare, albeit in the context of training.



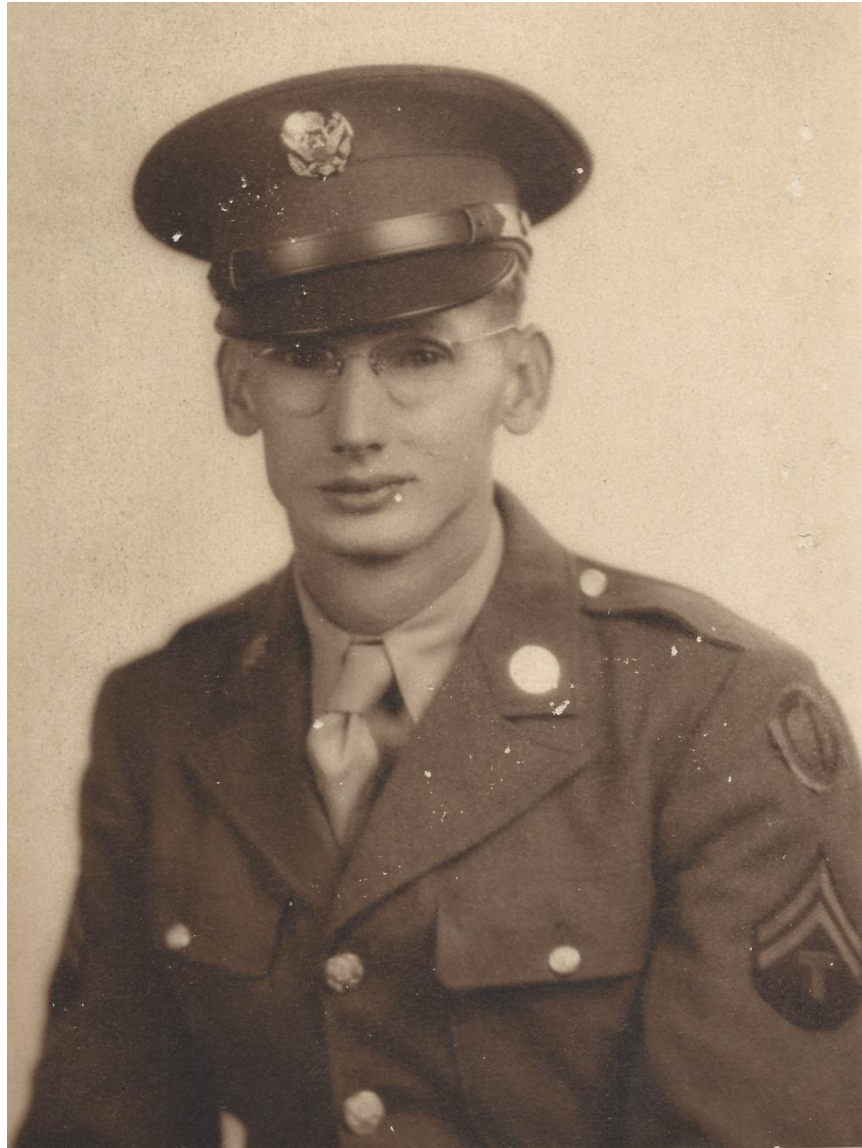
Map 3. The War in Italy

This map illustrates the combat route of the 85th Division from the Bay of Naples to the Brenner Pass. Places of note are marked, and the three separate campaigns are denoted by different colored routes. Rome-Arno is depicted by the green arrows linking key sites, the North Apennines is traced with the orange arrows, and the Po Valley is marked in blue. These lines are not exact, but rather trace the major chronology points mentioned in Chapters Three and Four.



APPENDIX B
PHOTOGRAPHS

Photograph 1. “Custer Division” Draftee



This is a photograph of an unidentified 85th Division Technician Fifth Grade (“Tech Corporal”) from the Pittsburgh or Youngstown, Pennsylvania, region in his Class ‘A’ Dress Uniform, Circa 1942. The Divisional “C D” patch is visible on his left shoulder, and the faint sabers on his collar disk mark him as a member of the unit’s 85th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop (Mechanized). Author’s Collection.

Photograph 2. The Desert Training Center

This is a view of the average terrain surrounding the Desert Training Center, and one of the “Tent City” camps that housed troops such as the 85th Division can be seen behind the pyramidal tent in the foreground. Unfortunately for the sake of the 85th’s training, the distant San Jacinto Mountains visible on the left side were not utilized for mountain warfare training. This particular image was taken by then-Private Joseph P. Kremsner of the 3rd Armored Division, stationed at the Desert Training Center from July 26 to November 8, 1942. Author’s Collection.

Photograph 3. Bay of Naples

This image, taken from the American destroyer USS *Wainwright* by crewmember Alexander Zsalako in October 1943, shows the Bay of Naples in central Italy. It was at this point that the draftees of the 85th first stepped foot on Italian soil from troop ships like the one on the right, and the dominating heights of Mount Vesuvius gave them a taste of what was to come for the next year. Author's Collection.

Photograph 4. The Po Valley

This image, taken by an unidentified Sergeant in the Fifth Army's 15th Evacuation Hospital, shows the Po River in 1945. A far cry from the treacherous mountain peaks of the Apennines, the Po Valley had a great deal of flat farmland that would not look out of place in Belgium and France, save for the Alps in the far distance. Author's Collection.

Photograph 5. The Mountains of Northern Italy

Taken by the same photographer as Photograph 5, this picture shows the Alpine foothills near the American Rest Camp at Stretta, Italy, in 1945. Both the Alpine foothills and North Apennine mountains bear similarities in terms of scale and denseness, meaning that if combat had continued, a repeat of the long and bloody North Apennines campaign would have taken place. The size of the Alpine mountains themselves impressed the soldiers fighting in the Po, and many were grateful that the Germans stopped fighting prior to taking up defensive positions amid their imposing peaks. Private Evangelista, writing home after seeing the Alps up close on June 10, 1945, stated, "Boy I am sure glad Jerry decided to quit when he did, or we would still be fighting yet." Author's Collection.