

## Thunderbirds Finish First Year of Battle

### 45th Fought In Heat, Dust, Cold, In Hills, On Beach

By Bill Barrett

The men moved up out of the hot holds into the dark confusion on B deck and the cool night air brushed against their awaiting faces. The buck sergeant shifted the weight of his pack and looked back at his men who were feeling their way behind him across the dark deck to the rail. Many of these men had been with him for two years, but they looked different now.

A sailor under a helmet pushed by with a scattered "Quit the way, soldier," "Well, this was the Navy's party, this part of it. There was noise—the groan of cables as the small boats were lowered, the amplified voice from the bridge:

Data for this story was obtained from the division history compiled by Sgt. Paul Cusick.

"Boat team 11, take your stations." Someone yelling, "Bob! Where's Bob?"

The burdened non com thought of all the tactical problems and maneuvers behind him since 1940 when his National Guard company had been mobilized, and decided there had been nothing like this. His was one of the best-trained divisions going over the side-toplight—or rather this morning—but his stomach had a queer shivered feeling that wasn't caused by the rough water they had plowed through for over 12 hours.

The men crawled down the landing nets in the dark. The LCP's, loaded, snaked through the rough water to the assembly area, and there began the endless circling, the endless waiting. The men who hadn't been sick on board the transport were sick now.

#### First Enemy Fire

Then suddenly the night gashed fire and the roar of naval artillery pounded the eardrums. Tracer shells fingered their way through the dark skies and the rumble of their impact was like an echo. The barrage grew heavier and now there were fires on shore. To the right the beam of a lighthouse swept the water again and again, but there was little counter-fire from the beaches.

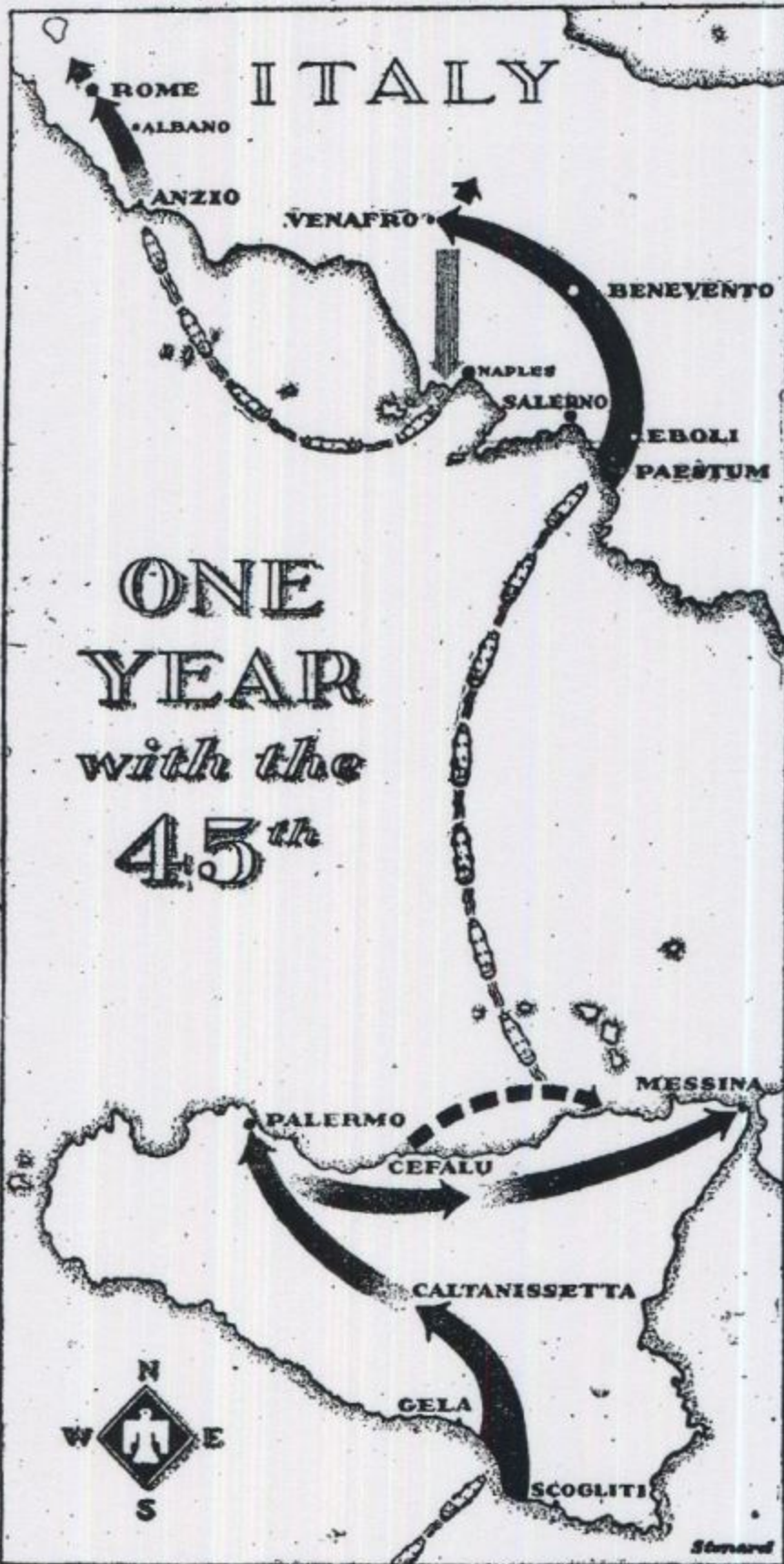
Suddenly the endless circling of the LCP's stopped. They dispersed to a huge Y and sped toward the shores of Sicily. It was the Army's party now.

It was a few minutes past 2:45 a.m., July 10, 1943.

The 45th Infantry Division was going into combat.

The division landed along a 45 mile stretch of beach defended mainly by a series of pillboxes manned by Italian troops with German reinforcements. These enemy positions were quickly overrun.

By the middle of the afternoon we had taken the only coastal towns in our sector, Scogliti,



which fell with 100 prisoners, S. Croce Camerina, crumpled by Thunderbird artillery, and Vittoria. The enemy was dropping back to defend the airfields of Coupiso and Bisceglie.

Both Sejda were stubbornly defended. Heavy forces of German and Italian troops lay waiting at Comiso, but through the hot afternoon the 105's of two Thunderbird batteries rained shells into enemy positions and at 4:30, Comiso airfield was ours, together with 80 planes and huge stores of ammo.

The terrain and installations around Bisceglie made it easier to defend and the enemy, largely Germans from the Hermann Goering division, seized this opportunity to halt the 45th. When Bisceglie fell after a tough battle, the Jerries dropped back to the airfield.

#### Bisceglie Is Taken

The field, located on high ground, commanded the road net and not less than a reinforced battalion supported by tanks and artillery resisted desperately with everything from small arms to heavy shells. A surprise flanking attack started the fall of this enemy position and, by 6:30 a.m., July 14, the 45th had won its toughest battle to date.

Paddiefest took a ten-minute break and looked around at the devastation war can bring. For most, this was the first sight of real destruction. Bisceglie airfield yielded a great stock of booty including 80 planes and six tanks.

The initial phases of enemy resistance was broken now, and the 45th moved to the left flank of the sector. The official reports of those next few weeks are full of the word "move". To the men who marched and fought when they caught the enemy it meant heat and dust and endless miles of shuffling along.

#### Fascist HQ Falls

Up one hill, through a valley, across the Salso River, through town after town where the smell of death mingled with the fragrance of the flowers tossed by the liberated Sicilians. Heat and dust and endless marching.

Caltanissetta had been a prosperous Fascist stronghold high in the mountains before the American planes came over. It was taken by one regiment against little opposition and the rail center pelted locomotives and freight cars in good condition. But the Thunderbird paddiefest who passed through will remember it for the smell of death and the people walking about with handkerchiefs over their noses.

The enemy was surprised on the outskirts of Valletlunga and the second battalion of a Thunderbird regiment disabled or captured large numbers of tanks, scout cars and artillery pieces. Prisoners here numbered 123 German and Italian soldiers, and the regiment moved on northwest along Highway 121, capturing the largest DPS of all classes of supplies yet encountered on the island.

The enemy was using miss



and demolitions to a greater extent now, and the engineers were kept busy. But the advance continued with greater rapidity. In the approach to Cerda, Krant sentries were actually passed before the enemy opened fire.

### Palermo Entered

At 3 p.m., July 21, Thunderbird patrols entered Palermo and the attack swung east along the Messina-Palermo coastal road.

With British forces pushing up the east coast and the 7th Army pushing along the north coast, enemy resistance stiffened to prepare an escape route through Messina. Thunderbird troops encountered heavy fighting here in the home stretch.

Demolitions increased and at one time progress was halted when a landslide covered the road. Progress was again halted when unidentified ships were sighted off the coast. Troops stood tense watch along the beaches that night until the ships were reported friendly.

Crossing of the Taro River met grim opposition and Hill 335 was counterattacked by the desperate enemy. One regiment was forced to move across country because of a poor road net in their sector. Recon troops and engineers helped in this advance and it was here that the 45th first used mules. We were to employ them again in even tougher terrain later in the year.

The Battle of Bloody Ridge, coming just before the relief of the 45th, was the 45th's toughest fight in the Sicilian campaign. The bare shelf of land commanded the coastal road, and the Thunderbird infantry that stormed it were met with machine gun, rifle and grenade fire. A battalion of infantry and a battalion of artillery held it for 24 hours and it took 1500 rounds of 450 shells to dislodge them. Bitter hand-to-hand fighting over the crest drove off the Germans. Bloody Ridge was ours.

Then, after 22 days of combat, the division was brought back to Trabia for rest and re-organization. Two weeks later a division regiment loaded on landing craft and made an amphibious landing at Falcone in an attempt to cut off the fleeing Germans. But the 3rd Division had already advanced beyond this point. No one was at all disappointed.

Part of the 1st Bn. of this regiment remained to enter Messina with the 3rd Division, and the Sicilian campaign was over. The 45th had been baptized by fire.

There were passes to Palermo. Cien, and the soldiers learned just how swiftly good wins can disappear. There were shows in all the areas—they're still talking about Babe Hope and Frances Langford—and there were native fruits and vegetables that tasted good after weeks of C-rations.

### Fifty Go Ahead

Before the convoy even reached the Gulf of Salerno, enemy planes attacked. There was one bad moment when a heavy bomb trailing smoke crashed into the convoy area, but no damage was done. At 7 p.m. of the day the 45th moved from Sicily, the announcement of the surrender of Italy was made. There was cheering, but the men knew there was hard fighting waiting for them.

Actually the division was fighting in Italy before our regiments invaded at Salerno. A force of approximately 20 men from one of the infantry outfits was dispatched ahead a day before the

force of Germans who had barricaded themselves on the island of Ventotene in the Gulf of Naples. The Thunderbird force returned successful with 75 prisoners.

The following day, the 10th, the division landed after a day of floating reserve in the gulf. Enemy air activity was heavy. German forces had been prepared for the landings and the division that landed here on D-day had sustained heavy casualties.

Two regiments attacked up Highway 8. Enemy observation from high ground covered every move we made while our artillery, depended mostly on Piper Cubs for direction. Troops met enemy fire from prepared strong points on the way to Battipaglia and tenacious Germans who hung on in Persano even after our troops had passed through machine-gunned our infantry. Heavy concentrations of tank counterattacks.

### Warehouse Smashed

Our Artillery smashed the Jerry strongpoint at the Tobacco Warehouse. Firing more rounds than they had ever fired before, these guns of the 45th literally saved the day here in the Plain of Persano. Firing direct, often with no infantry in front of them the howitzers drove the enemy back. They still speak in one-battery of the night the gunners, armed with rifles, took positions in front of their big guns while observation were fixed on the artillery pieces.

It was a week after the initial landings before the German forces began withdrawing along our front to the North. Mines and demolitions lay in their trail.

Natural defensive terrain aided a strong German resistance at Oliveto and Quagliele and we continued north only after the full weight of our superior fire power was brought to bear on these points. The advance of the 45th continued against little opposition toward the end of September, but always there were mines and blown bridges and the dreaded rains of Italy that made by-passes slick and dangerous.

### Bonavento Reduced

There was more rain in the days that followed, much more rain. The Krauts continued to harass our movements with artillery fire across roads and extensive mine-laying and demolitions. Our greatest enemy during these early days of October, however, was the cold rain that slowed traffic to a crawl and made miserable the life of the line soldier.

There were mines along the road to Bonavento, and the road was shelled by enemy guns to the North. But the large mountain town, capital city of a province, fell. What was left of it, that is, Allied planes had reduced the rail center to a pile of rubble, and Thunderbirds saw here the greatest devastation since Battipaglia. Progress was impeded until our engineers could clear the streets for traffic.

Crawling through short-lived enemy resistance at Ponte, the 45th met stubborn defenses in Campolattaro, where the Jerries counterattacked twice with infantry and tanks in an attempt to hold control of Highway 87 leading to the North. But again the enemy's efforts were fruitless, and again he fled northward leaving the customary trail of mines and blown bridges.

At Guardisi the enemy made his strongest stand since Salerno. There was rain to slow our mo-

vements. The natural defenses and the excellent observation of the Germans aided the slow-down in our advance. A single machine gun or mortar concealed high in the rocky face of a mountain could pin down great numbers of our men and it was dark before the battalion assault which began at daylight finally surrounded the town.

### River is Crossed

We moved on Cerreto and Tolese, and here, too, the enemy resisted with small counterattacks that were broken up by our artillery. Small determined groups were left in the wake of the German withdrawal toward Piedmonte and with machine guns, mortars and artillery they hampered the Thunderbird advance.

Contact with the enemy continued. There was increased use of automatic weapons along the defensive line on the Terno River, and the screaming ceaseless whined overhead in increased numbers. When this line collapsed, the Krauts moved back to the high ground around Paicchio in an attempt to stop our crossing. Under a heavy artillery barrage, Thunderbird dogfaces crossed the river and again the enemy fell back.

Piedmonte fell with San Felice and Castello d'Alfid.

Then, on October 21, the division went into corps reserve, the first opportunity it had for rest since the start of the Italian campaign. A total of 40 days had passed since the division had landed fighting.

This marked the longest period that an entire American division had been in the line without relief.

The rest was a short one, but it enabled the men to put on clean clothes for a change and there was vino to drink.

There were show-downs, shortages reports, ordnance inspections. On the last day of October, the Thunderbird had licked his wounds and was ready to move again.

This time we moved across the Volturno. On November 2, under cover of darkness, patrols crossed the river near Pressanico. Complete companies followed across and the drive up the Venafro valley was on.

Co. K entered the hills mountain town at about 12:45 p.m. on November 4th, meeting little opposition as the enemy fled to prepared positions high in the Apennines. Early in the month, Pozzilli and Santo Lempiano fell to 45th dogfaces and now the attack led into the mountains where the German positions were prepared months in advance. The papers called this Hitler's Winter Line. The infantryman used a term more descriptive but less printable.

### Toughest Months

The months of November and December were the toughest to date in the combat history of the 45th. Three weeks of intermittent rainfall became on November 2, a continuous down-pour. From November 20 there were just three days that were dry—and these days were spoiled by rain during the night. Motor movement bogged down or by-passes that became impassable; motor pools and bivouac areas turned into mud holes varying in depth of from four to 14 inches. Sudden wind and cold storms tore down tents and wadded equipment. In December this rain turned to snow and sleet and

our observation was further limited.

We began to learn then that we actually knew nothing of mountain warfare despite the heights we had captured in Sicily and southern Italy. Huge boulders, rock ledges, caves, reverse slopes, towering peaks—all these factors contributed to the enemy's defense and he had made the most of them.

Progress was necessarily slow. There were no routes other than those interdicted by German guns. It was necessary for our troops to go in under fire, ferret out the opposition and often this opposition holding up an advance consisted of only a few well placed men.

Soldiers were digging deeper here than at any time since coming overseas. Enemy artillery had increased. With deadly accuracy it dropped daily into Venafro and Pozzilli; for the first time the division CP was shelled and our supply roads lay under the observation of the Krauts high in the mountains.

### Mule Co. Serves

Enemy air action increased and so did patrolling on both sides. But the months of November and December were mainly marked by one prolonged artillery duel.

The paddlefoot got combat suits for the bad weather. Thunderbird morale remained high, but it soared at the slightest improvement in living conditions. Jokes about the newly formed mule company were the chief gags of the day, but the muleteers said the animals were doing a fine, brave job and everyone knew it.

The men in rest talked of Alibonno Basins and the strange, weird things that happened up there when the sun was down and both sides had patrols out. The rest area was usually the muddy slope of some hill, but some of the men went to the rest camp in Naples.

### Christmas Passes

For most of the 45th, it was a white Christmas, but that's about all that can be said for the day. The division passed for a moment in its endless assault on the next mountains to pray in the snow. Almost everyone had turkey and almost everyone assured his best buddy that they'd both be home for Christmas next year.

On New Year's Eve a paddlefoot stopped thinking of his wife and Aluid Lang Syne for a moment and realized that he and the rest of the 45th had been in Italy for 113 days with 105 days on the line. The other seven days, he remembered, were spent in corps reserve, but during that week a Thunderbird regiment and half of another were in the line, holding and patrolling.

It was a Happy New Year, after all, because on the 9th of January the 45th was relieved and sent back to rest areas below Piedmonte. There was the unprecedented luxury here of pyramidal tents to live in, and there were the usual rest area chores of cleaning and inspection and re-equipping. There was training, too, and the usual gripes: "And they call this a REST area!"

Like in January the 45th division again boarded ships. On January 29th forward elements landed in the Anzio area, a move that was completed January 31.

Opposition to beachhead operations was so small that one official in Anzio hazarded the guess that the war was over and we didn't know about it. Actually,

the Germans, who had been caught completely off balance here, were busy organizing their defenses and on February 7, their attitude changed in one of offense.

They attacked each day after that, fought stubbornly against our operations in the factory area and finally, on February 16 launched a drive that was to clear the Anzio area of all Allied troops by February 18. That the enemy missed is due chiefly to the heroic stand of the Thunderbird division.

### Battalion is Cited

The Krauts attacked out of the heavily bombed and shelled factories and came down the Albano-Anzio road in an attempt to split the beachhead forces. Covering a front of about 4 kilometers, the 45th withstood an attack of no less than eight battalions, supported by 80 Mark VI and 20 Mark IV tanks and reinforced by elements of seven divisions. The artillery that preceded the drive was the most intense German barrage of the Italian campaign, with 14 medium, 12 light and four heavy artillery battalions at the disposal of the German commander.

In the face of all this, the division gave way about seven square miles. Our casualties were heavy, but the enemy's loss was terrific.

The second battalion of one regiment has been cited by Fifth Army for its stand here in "The Battle of the Cayx."

The securing and holding of the Anzio beachhead will be recorded as one of the most dramatic episodes of this war. No writers before had there been baseball games under the enemy's very nose, horse races and front-line entertainment so close that the enemy could hear the applause. There were crystal sets to help while away the endless nights of shelling, and the only sure-fire conversational topic was the "Anzio Express."

On May 23 at 6:30 a.m. determined paddlefoot stood up in their holes and started boldly across the flat-top terrain they had been staring at for over four months. A heavy barrage had preceded this biggest of all jump-offs, and now as they advanced, some tanks, some foot, the enemy was engaging with mortars and machine guns and artillery.

Still they came on. One infantryman commented later that it was "just like in the movies," while a German captain captured in the initial phases of the attack assured one and all that he'd never seen anything like it—and this man had been in Russia.

Up the Anzio-Albano road the attack rolled. On May 26, the battered perimeter of the German ring willed on the right and Fifth Army forces rolling up from Terracina united with a combat engineer unit and the place the world called Anzio was a beachhead no longer.

### And Rome is Ours

After Valeri fell, the enemy defenses crumbled rapidly. From here on to Rome it was just a walk for the most part, a long walk. The feet of the infantry had grown soft and tender through four months of trench warfare, and when the 45th rolled to a stop in a rest area outside Rome, there were many, many aching legs.

What the final pages of the division's history will hold is a question unanswered now. But the story will be brave and noble, honorable and eternal. The great stories never die.