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Rangers Come Home

AND BRING STORIES OF THEIR TOUGH
CAMPAIGNS IN AFRICA AND EUROPE.

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Yank Staff Writer



1st Sgt. David (Soupy) Campbell of Medford, Mass., climbed from Ranger assaultman (pfc) to top kick under rugged combat conditions in Sicily and Italy.

CAMP BUTNER, N. C.—Frankie was reclining on his bunk.

Another Ranger drifted over rather aimlessly, observed that liquor and women are fine American institutions and then corked Frankie smartly on the arm. The smack of fist against shoulder was sharp in the still barracks.

Frankie lay there and swore long enough to give the guy a head start. Then he casually rolled off his sack, picked up a GI shoe and hurled it the length of the room at the retreating Ranger. The shoe hit a fire extinguisher and dented it.

Frankie settled back on the bunk, grunted, smacked lazily at a fly and went to sleep. His target went down the stairs without looking back. The other Rangers in the squad room, resting or writing, didn't look up. The shoe lay where it fell and the fire extinguisher ceased reverberating.

The Rangers, those few who were left of the old 1st and 3d and 4th Battalions, were back in the States.

Most of them had been overseas two years and more, and all of them saw action enough to add up to eight solid months of continuous fighting. They went home on furlough and talked about the war, then reported in to Camp Butner and talked about it some more. Pretty soon they were weary of hacking their gums. So they answered the questions they were asked in public, and then in the barracks they swore rippling oaths at each other and wrestled and spoke gently to the dice and made themselves at home.

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1st Sgt. Vincent Egan of Staten Island, N.Y., whose Ranger outfit battled tanks with TNT from the rooftops of Gela on the first day of the Sicilian invasion.

The Rangers are an independent bunch, and it was that yearning for freedom of action that appealed to most of the men who volunteered in June 1942 in North Ireland. The Rangers offered them a rugged future, but at least a man could call his soul his own. "I joined this outfit," said T-5 Clyde Thompson of Ashland, Ky., "because they sent out a letter saying they wanted men to work in little groups that would hit and run. Well, we hit more'n we run, but I'm satisfied they kept most of their promises, and we were on our own most of the time."

The Rangers spearheaded every Allied invasion in the Mediterranean. Being shock troops got in their blood. One of them, who will remain anonymous here so that his rough-riding outfit won't ride him for it, let himself go: "There was just one thing about that kind of fighting—by damn, it gave you a thrill. We never had to ask no questions about who was out front; we just started shooting. Hell, nobody wants to get killed and I was plenty scared sometimes—but it gave you a thrill, the way we fought."

Perhaps it was because they found a certain fascination in combat that the Rangers had remarkably few cases of psychoneurosis, although, as an Irish first sergeant put it: "Sometimes, when you were under it, that Jerry artillery made you want to cry."

THE original outfit, the 1st Ranger Battalion, was activated in North Ireland on June 19, 1942, with 600 men selected from more than 2,000 soldiers who had volunteered. Their training was in Scotland, and they had more casualties there than they had on their first African landing. The British Commandos were their instructors.

"Those bastards tried to kill us, or we thought they did," said Thompson. "We maneuvered with live ammunition. There were accidents, too, that sort of went with it. They had us out in a place one time that still wasn't entirely cleared of old land mines they'd put there when invasion was expected. Two of our boys jumped a barbed-wire fence and landed right on top of a mine. We were picking them up two days later. Another guy fell off a cliff and broke practically every bone in his body."

Then, on Aug. 18, came Dieppe. While it was predominantly a Canadian show, a small party of Rangers were in on the deal. A few of them got into the fight. Others were intercepted by German E-boats and never got ashore.

But less than three months later the long series of combat operations began in which the Rangers as a whole spearheaded drive after drive across Africa through Sicily to Italy. On Nov. 8, 1942, the Rangers landed at Arzew, 30 miles east of Oran. Their mission was to seize four coastal guns overlooking the town and two others guarding the approaches to the harbor.

The attack began at 0130 when four companies landed three miles above the town and came in

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from the rear to take the French defenders by surprise. Two other companies came through the jetties, where they were met by machine-gun fire, but their element of surprise was so great that a small fort and the two remaining coastal guns were taken with a minimum of casualties.

Three hours after the initial landing, the CO—Col. William O. Darby of Fort Smith, Ark.—fired success flares and the central task force of the African invasion came ashore.

"We went into a garrison and got them Frenchmen out of bed," grinned one Ranger reflectively. D-plus-two saw a Ranger company lend a hand to the 1st Division at St. Cloud; after eight hours the break-through came, paving the way to Oran.

THE Rangers, no longer needed, resumed combat training for three months. Then, on Feb. 7, 1943, they were suddenly ordered into transport planes and flown to the Tunisian front, mission unknown. They were landed at a front-line airport and three days later moved into Gafsa, which already had changed hands several times.

Sgt. Sherman Legg of Handley, W. Va., was on the point approximately 1,000 yards ahead of the Ranger advance party. He was riding a motorcycle and was armed with a tommy gun.

"It was my job to find out who was out there and where they were. It could have been Germans in front of us and it could have been Frenchies. I didn't know what to expect. Anyway, I was moving along and I saw this figure, dark like, over in the ditch, so I jumped over on him and threw my tommy gun into his back. He let out a yell and turned around. You know the first thing he said when he saw I was an American? He said: 'Cigarette, comrade?' So I knew it was all right. I knew he was a Frenchman."

Two days after entering Gafsa, the Rangers pulled what will always be their favorite action. Back in the States now they talk about it fondly, the way advertising men might discuss a beautiful sales-promotion job. This was the Sened Station raid or the "AEF raid"—so-called because those three companies were in on it. It was the kind of thing they were most schooled in.

Their mission was to destroy a fortified position. They entrucked at night and rode 18 miles to a French outpost and then marched cross country for 12 more miles. By dawn they were holed up in the saddle of a mountain overlooking an enemy position five miles northwest of Sened. All day, covered by shelter halves and natural camouflage, they watched proceedings at the outpost four miles away.

When darkness came, they moved forward. Around midnight, 600 yards away from their objective, they went into a skirmish line on a battalion front. When they were 200 yards away, the outposted enemy, sensing that something was out in front of them, opened fire. The Rangers continued forward without firing a shot. Then, within 50 yards of their objective, they assaulted. For 20 minutes they worked with bayonet and tommy gun and rifle and grenade, and then it was over. By dawn they were back at the French outpost, their starting point.

Almost every Ranger who was there has a favorite tale about the 20 minutes at Sened:

"This was the kind of stuff we loved to do—coming in under their fire which sometimes wasn't a foot and a half over our heads but knowing damn well those Ities didn't know where we were. We could watch their gun flashes when we got close enough." . . . "The Ities called us 'Black Death' after that, on account of our work was at night." . . . "I remember watching a motor pool, and this Itie ran out and tried to get away on a motorcycle. We were laying down a mortar concentration on the motor pool and this guy got the cycle started all right and was about to get out, and just then a 60-mm hit right on top of him and he just disappeared." . . . "There was some pretty rough in-fighting there."

When the Germans attacked at Kasserine Pass, threatening Gafsa from the east, U. S. forces withdrew to Feriana and from there to Derna Pass, which was threatened by a German push aimed at Tebessa, the main Allied base. For three weeks the Rangers sat at Derna waiting

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for the big drive that never came.

"Our work," said one Ranger, "was mostly knocking off stray German vehicles that either blundered into the Pass by mistake or were nosing around to find out if we were still there. There wasn't any real rough stuff. Funny thing about how those people would roam around. We hit a car one day and captured an Italian officer. He was a pilot, and said he was just out sight-seeing."

After Derna the outfit drew back for a rest and then went back into action by leading the American drive back through Feriana and into Gafsa again. There wasn't too much trouble that time either, but then came El Guettar. There they had another job they liked. Beyond El Guettar was a pass leading to Sfax that the Germans and Italians had defended. It was the Rangers' mission to clean up the defended ridges, which commanded a dominating position over the surrounding terrain.

Cpl. Robert M. Bevan of Estherville, Iowa, a sniper throughout the African campaigns, scored his longest accurate shooting there when he silenced a machine-gun nest at 1,350 yards.

"We came up on them by a circular route of about 10 miles and hit them from behind and above, working our way down to where we could use a bayonet. This set-up was Italian EM with German officers. There was some bayonet fighting.

"As a sniper I picked targets that were out of range for the riflemen, so I started working on this machine-gun nest. I was using our sniper rifle—a plain old '03 with telescopic sights. I ranged in with tracers and then put two shots right into the position. The gun was quiet for a couple of minutes, and then a crazy thing happened. Somebody threw a dirty towel over the gun, and then the crew came out and sat down."

After El Guettar the Rangers pulled back to Nemours, on the coast of Algeria. The 1st Battalion was split into three groups to cadre a re-organized 1st Battalion and the new 3d and 4th Battalions, which were formed there.

THEN, on July 9, 1943, the 1st and 4th landed at Gela and the 3d at Licata in Sicily. From then on, the war got progressively tougher for the Rangers.

The Gela landings were made at night, and searchlights picked up the incoming landing craft when they were still a mile out. There were pillboxes and land mines ashore, but by 1000 hours the town itself was in Ranger hands. At 1100 the fun began.

It was then that "we thought we'd have to grab the lifeboats." With only the two battalions of Rangers in Gela, Italian tanks came barreling into town, blasting. "We fought them from the rooftops by dropping TNT and sticky bombs on them. We had a 37-mm that shuttled to its targets, going from one corner to another, taking potshots at them as they came in from different directions. Our bazookas were firing point-blank."

1st Sgt. David (Soupy) Campbell of Medford, Mass., and 1st Sgt. Vincent Egan of Staten Island, N. Y., both had some hard fighting and some laughs to remember. "We were using bazookas then, and I'll never forget the trouble one guy had with one," grinned Soupy. "He was firing from inside a house, and this tank was right up on him; so he hauled down on the thing point-blank—and missed. I don't see how he did. And the backfire off the thing! The guy did more damage to the wall behind him than he did to the tank in front.

"I remember another thing there. We had this young kid with us who hadn't been in the outfit so long, and he was really dying to get into a fight. So he was coming along a wall and when he turned a corner he ran smack into a Jerry. The kid was so shocked he didn't know what to do. So the Jerry shot him, right through the chest. One of our guys across the street got the Jerry, but it was too late to help the kid."

"We finally got rid of the Ities," said Egan, "but the next day came worse trouble—or it might have been. We looked out and saw 18 big

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(image added)

The First Ranger Battalion in Algeria.

Tigers (PzKW VIs) coming in. Between fire from our cruisers offshore and fire from a chemical outfit's new 4.2 mortars, 12 of the Jerry tanks were knocked out and the others quit. It was the first time those 4.2 mortars were in action, and they did damn well."

It was on that first day at Gela that Sherman Legg had his troubles, too. He had parked his motorcycle in an alleyway and was leaning against the opposite wall, just waiting for developments. Developments arrived in the form of a shell that blew his motor upside down and blew Legg back through the alley, through an open door and into a building. He was knocked out. After a while he came to, went back to his motor and found it would still run.

"I got on the thing, and this guy across the street stuck his head out. I thought he looked sort of funny. 'Hey, Legg, he yelled, ain't you hurt?' I asked him what did he think. He said he didn't think I was hurt, he thought I was dead. He'd seen me standing there, and then the shell hit and he didn't see me any more."

Earlier that same morning Legg accomplished in actual fact what has been done very rarely anywhere except in the movies. He shot down a Messerschmitt-110 with a BAR.

"I was on the beach right near a wall when this bastard came over strafing. He scared me silly. I ducked behind the wall, and he came back. I let fly at him and missed, but I found out why I missed. So the next time he came in, I put the gun on the wall and held it there and he flew right into my fire. I could see the bullets rake him. He went along a little farther, and then I saw flames coming out around the gas tanks where I'd hit. He crashed into the sea."

THE Rangers spearheaded the way across the Plain of Gela toward Butera, a 4,000-foot citadel "that looked like a castle sitting up there." One Ranger company cleared it.

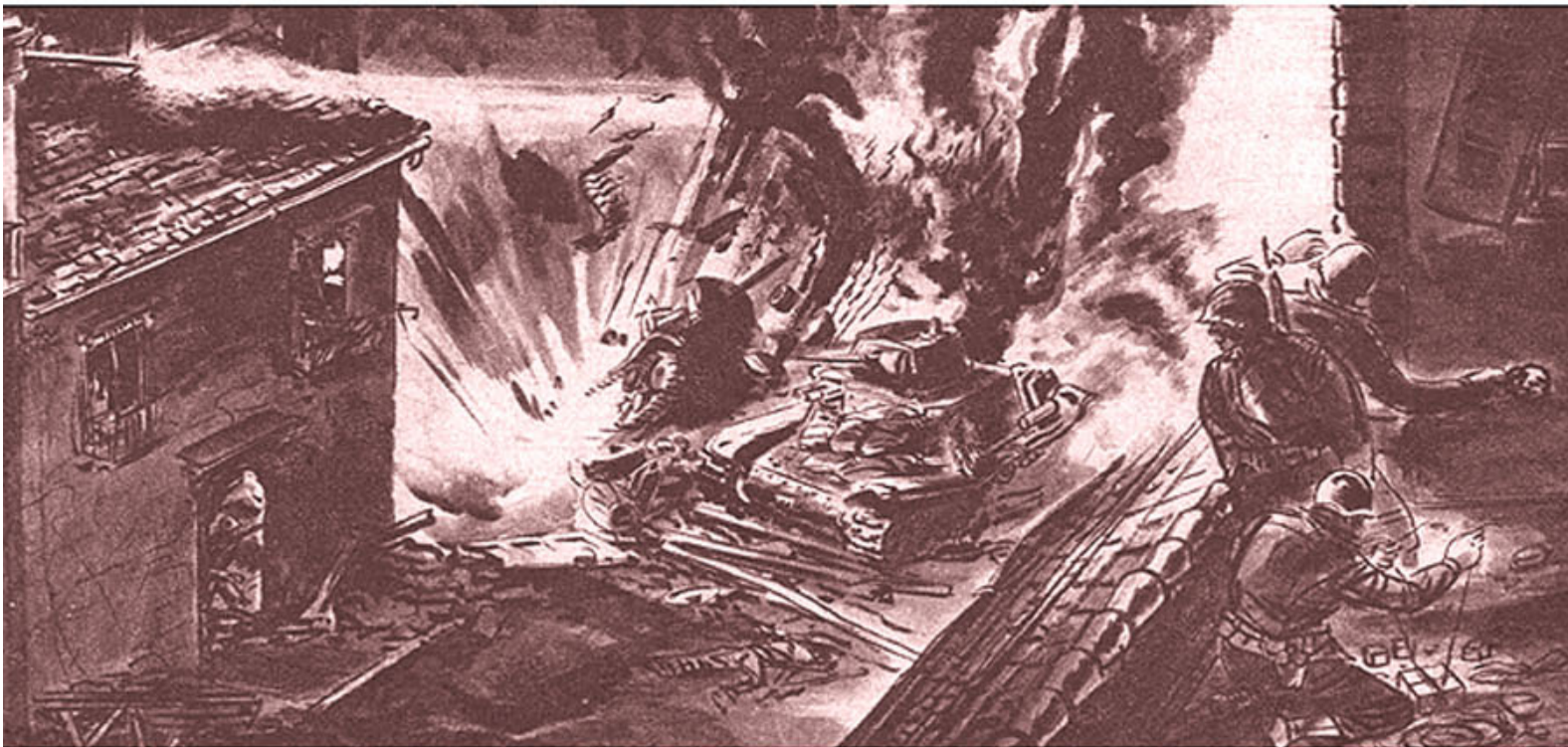
T/Sgt. Francis P. Padrucco of Miami, Fla., then a buck sergeant acting as platoon sergeant, had 20 men who were part of the outfit that went straight up the long road leading to the citadel itself. It was a brash maneuver, coming flush up the obvious approach, at 2300 hours.

"We got to a bend in the road and a machine gunner opened up on us at a range of about 20 feet. He wounded my lieutenant and the radio operator. But our scout, with a tommy gun, let go with a whole drum of ammo; he got seven.

"The platoon killed about 15 and took 60 or 70 prisoners. We got a bunch of A-T guns by surprise, and some flame-thrower people. The whole thing took about 20 minutes.

"Here again it was German officers and Italian personnel. This time some German, farther back, was giving orders to two Italian officers, a colonel and a lieutenant. The Italians wanted to surrender, and the German told them to keep fighting. We told them to give up or we'd kill them. The German told them if they made a move to surrender, he'd kill them.

"Poor devils. They got killed. We chased the Jerry, but he got away."

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"The tanks came into Gela blasting. We fought them from the rooftops with TNT and sticky bombs and a 37-mm gun that ran from one corner of the roof to another, taking potshots. Our bazookas fired point-blank."

Paddy, for his work that night after his officer was out of action, got the Silver Star. The Rangers moved by different routes to the northeast side of Sicily. When the campaign ended, they pulled back for training and replacements.

ON Sept. 9, they landed in Italy. The landings were above Salerno, and the 4th fanned out in opposite directions toward Salerno to the east and Sorrento to the west. The 1st followed and drove to the high ground overlooking the Plain of Naples. The 3d fought at Chiunzi Pass. The Rangers held the left hinge of the beachhead against every German attempt to close in and knock U. S. forces back into the sea. For 22 days they had nothing but counterattacks. It was rough work, but the Salerno sector was rough work for everybody.

T-4 Frankie Ziola of South Amboy, N. J.—the man who throws shoes—was one of four cooks in his outfit at Chiunzi Pass who volunteered for duty as litter-bearers. He spent 18 days bringing out the wounded and was awarded the Silver Star when the fight was over.

"They asked for volunteers for that detail, so we volunteered. I got me an Italian as a helper, and the two of us would go up and pull the guys out when they got hit and take them back to Battalion Aid. I didn't know anything about medicine or first aid or anything, but I damn sure learned. Funny thing about those Rangers when they were wounded. Almost every time the first thing they wanted was a cigarette."

Finally, with enemy counterattacks broken, the Rangers spearheaded the way into the Valley of Naples and relieving forces went on into Naples itself. The Rangers pulled back again to train. Their hardest fighting was still ahead.

On Nov. 1, the Fifth Army encountered strong opposition at Venafro, about 40 miles above Naples. On Nov. 3 the Rangers began a 35-day fight that was to open the way to the valley leading to Cassino. That day they crossed the winding Volturno River with the mission of infiltrating six miles behind enemy lines and taking the heights commanding the road to San Pietro.

They marched all night, passing enemy outposts, and at dawn were still undetected. They attacked, seized the enemy positions and held them for two days. Then, with their supplies gone, they came back through the enemy again to Sesto Campano. Then they moved toward Venafro. When they were through, the Rangers had advanced the lines by 12 miles.

T/Sgt. Robert O. Johnson of Shinnston, W. Va., a battalion communications sergeant, was wounded at Venafro when a shell blasted him down as he and his lieutenant were carrying a wounded man to shelter. It was in that sector that communication maintenance became a matter of survival.

"I had 22 men in my section," said Johnson, "and before we were through there, the battalion communications was being handled by only the lieutenant, a maintenance man and myself. The other 19 were knocked out by either mortar or artillery fire. I almost got it good there. I had to go two miles up Venafro Mountain checking telephones, and the whole way I had mortar fire right in my hip pocket."

After Venafro the Rangers were pulled out for a little more than a month and on Jan. 22 they went into Anzio.

"We were 66 days on the beach at Anzio," said Egan. "It was rough. We attacked a red farm on

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the left flank at Carroceto. Finally there were only four men left, and they took the place."

Sherman Legg, still on his motor, had another close one there: "I was going along without paying much attention where I was, and I came over the brow of this hill and a machine gun let loose on me. I guess the Jerries were excited because I don't see how they missed. Anyway I threw the motor over on the ground, spun it and started the hell out of there. I was afraid even to duck, because I might duck right into a bullet. I'm glad they were lousy gunners, or I wouldn't be here. As it was, I made sure not to take any more wrong roads around there."

Soupy Campbell likes to talk about the Ranger mortar concentrations at Anzio. "There was one time we saw this German come out of his fox-hole for a minute, so we gave him concentration No. 3 (we had everything zeroed in). He must have had some ammo in that hole because the next thing we saw of that Jerry he was about 20 feet in the air, turning end over end."



Soupy grinned. "We had things to laugh at even at Anzio. There was that machine gunner on our flank who'd clear his gun every morning just about dawn. He always did it to start the day off right. 'Shave 'n' a haircut—two bits,' he'd play on that thing."

Then, on Jan. 29, disaster struck. The 1st and 3d Battalions were to attack and take the town of Cisterna, while the 4th was to support their assault. But something went wrong: the Germans had reinforced their positions and when the Rangers struck at dawn, they hit a force that overwhelmed them. Two battalions went into Cisterna; 26 Rangers came out.

Sgt. Milton Lehman, *Stars and Stripes* correspondent, wrote the story as it was reconstructed for him by survivors:

"When the sun came up, the Rangers were surrounded. Between sunrise and 0700 hours, when radio silence was broken, the Rangers knew that the battle was lost. Sunrise doomed them and marked the beginning of the hopeless, heroic fight. . . . The sand was running out in the hour glass. The Rangers knew it and the

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Germans knew it. Slowly and bitterly the last orders were given by the company commanders . . . the tall, bespectacled, thin-faced West Pointer telling his men to go. 'I hate to do this, the captain said, 'but it's too late now. That direction is south. Take out, and God bless you.' "

The 4th Battalion, also stopped but not decimated, fought on after Cisterna and, with the few survivors of the 1st and 3d, came back to the States as a unit. They have friends among the newer Ranger outfits now in France.

But the Old Rangers are out of action.

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