

Why Old Soldiers Never Die



Six veteran platoon sergeants who have experienced some of the toughest fighting in Italy tell about mistakes that most of our replacements make when they go into combat for the first time.

By Sgt. BURTT EVANS

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WITH THE FIFTH ARMY IN ITALY—The infantrymen of a rifle platoon crouch miserably behind an embankment, getting scant protection from the morning rain that beats down endlessly upon the bleak Italian countryside. The platoon sergeant, a stocky, weather-beaten young Texan with a handle-bar mustache and deep-set eyes, strides up purposefully.

"Well, we're attacking," he announces, in a tone that is not without challenge.

The new men, replacements, fumble as they fasten hand grenades to their ammunition belts, their eyes grown big and their helmets dripping.

The old men curse the rain.

The platoon moves out.

Nine hours later—one knoll, two pillboxes, five machine-gun nests and 30 dead Germans closer to Rome—the platoon sergeant crawls and slithers from cover to cover, checking his outposts and reorganizing his gun positions for the night.

Counting noses, he notes something that never fails to interest him, although it has long since ceased to surprise him: the old soldiers, with one wounded exception, are all present; the new replacements, on the other hand, have suffered nearly 50 percent casualties or missing.

"Old soldiers never die," the experienced infantrymen say. "The same old men always come back. Luck stays with them."

But is it luck? Or instinct? Or experience?

To get the answer, YANK went to the men of the 36th (Texas) Division, the tough Infantry outfit that has borne much of the bitter brunt of the Italian fight ever since it first waded in under withering fire at Salerno. As everyone from the company commander to the sorriest yardbird will admit, the platoon sergeant is usually the key man in any line action. So YANK had a get-together in a field tent one afternoon with six battle-tested platoon sergeants, two from each of the division's regiments.

Six more combat-wise soldiers could hardly have been chosen. Nearly every one had the Purple Heart; one had been wounded four times. Several had Silver Stars; one had the Distinguished Service Cross. None of the sergeants knew any of the others, but each had an instant respect for the others' experience and abilities. These were "whole" men, physically and mentally—men who had survived the most trying ordeals that war could offer and who had emerged with unshaken confidence in the ability of the intelligent foot soldier to take care of himself.

Six veteran platoon sergeants



These battle-roughened platoon sergeants of the 36th (Texas) Division, who talk about war in this story, stride down a street somewhere in Italy. From the left: S/Sgt. Ed M. Taylor, T/Sgt. Harry R. Moore, T/Sgt. William C. Weber, T/Sgt. James Arnold and T/Sgt. David H. Haliburton

Priding themselves on being soldiers, in the finest sense of the word, they were natural, surprisingly articulate, unassuming leaders with the rough edges somehow worn off by what they had undergone. ("The loud, tough guys in the States turn out to be the weak sisters over here," one said.) Their impromptu discussion offers the American soldier some front-line pointers that may save his life.

THE first mistake recruits make under fire," began T/Sgt. Harry R. Moore, rifle platoon sergeant from Fort Worth, Tex., "is that they freeze and bunch up. They drop to the ground and just lie there; won't even fire back. I had one man just lie there while a German came right up and shot him. He still wouldn't fire back."

"That's right," said T/Sgt. William C. Weber of St. Marys, Pa., another rifle platoon sergeant. "When a machine gun opens up, the new men squat right where they are. The same way when flares drop and bombs 'baroom' down at night. The old man dives for cover. He doesn't stay out where he's exposed."

"They're scared of tracers, too," put in T/Sgt. David H. Haliburton of Ballinger, Tex., rifle platoon leader. "Me, I like to see tracers."

"Jerry fires lots of tracers," said Bill Weber. "He has a trick with tracers. Jerry has one gun shootin' tracers up high. Then he has other guns shootin' grazing fire."

"At the Rapido some replacements couldn't tell the difference between our fire and Jerry's," commented Moore. "And they were scared of Jerry's machine pistol. It's not accurate at all. If it doesn't get you in the first minute, don't worry about it. Its first four to six shots are the only ones that count."

"That goes for the T on the shovel, too," said Taylor. "I've sawed mine off short. Of course, you don't need a shovel. The pick is the most valuable tool we've got."

Everyone agreed to that.

"There's a trick to this digging," said Haliburton. "None of the new men dig deep enough or quick enough. Incidentally, we don't have foxholes any more—we have fighting holes. They're six feet deep, and the step goes down to four feet."

"I've seen a lot of men die because they didn't dig their holes deep enough," said Taylor. "Most of them were crushed in tank attacks. Ninety-five percent of the men in my company are alive today because they dug down the full six feet."

FOR the first time S/Sgt. Manuel S. (Ugly) Gonzales of Fort Davis, Tex., spoke up. At Salerno Gonzales, the most popular and quietest man in his outfit, single-handedly knocked out four German machine guns, one mortar and one German 88-mm gun, going through machine-gun fire that came so close it set fire to his pack. He's been recommended for the Congressional Medal.

"Two of our men were killed in their foxholes," Ugly Gonzales said. "You know we usually have two men to a hole on an outpost, one on guard and one asleep. Well, for some reason I can't figure out, Americans like to sleep with a blanket or a pack over their heads. Why one was sleeping instead of being on guard I don't know, but when we checked up in the morning, we found their bodies bayoneted right through the blankets. They never knew what got them."

"Some of the boys just don't have common sense," said Weber. "They seem to expect the Army to think for them. When you're under fire, you've got to think six ways from Sunday."

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In action, Sgt. Weber carries raincoat, rifle, rifle belt, pick, one K ration, canteen, ammunition, grenades.

"Why, the Germans were climbing out of their foxholes and retreating," said Haliburton, "and some of my new men didn't know what to do about it. They just lay there. They could have moved two feet, for a better range of fire, and knocked the whole outfit out."

"Sometimes they don't even know the man beside them or where he is," Taylor added angrily. "After we'd had one bunch of boys 12 days, they didn't even know their own squad leader. Now every man has his name taped on his helmet."

"It's important for men to train together and to know each other," said Haliburton. "If I want to take out a patrol and don't know who to take, I'd rather go alone. You've got to know your men. I don't eat first—I eat with them. There are two kinds of boys, I've found out—the ones you can pat on the back and those you have to keep after."

"I never like to take more than three men with me on reconnaissance patrol," said Gonzales. "One man can give you away if he doesn't know how to pick up his feet and walk on grass and rocks. First thing you know Jerry comes out of a ditch with that machine pistol ready to turn and shoot. He has that long baseball cap on. Man, that's when you'd better have your tommy gun on full automatic."

"That's another thing," Moore added. "Many of the new men we get have never had any night work. They're blind; a couple get lost every night. Why, I've seen boys fall off in a ditch in the dark and break their legs. They're used to flashlights. You couldn't give me a flashlight."

"THEY'RE TOO LOOSE on the men in the States," T/Sgt. James H. Arnold of Killeen, Tex., said. "Ten-minute breaks, go to town every night

—they'll never get in shape that way. And they never ought to have a dry run. They ought to fire every weapon, and there ought to be tin-can rifle ranges around every Army post where the men could practice in their spare time."

"They ought to learn to shoot from the hip in a hurry," Taylor agreed. "And we get men who are supposed to be qualified with mortars who have never fired more than two rounds. You can't sense how to fire a mortar just by mounting it. At Salerno we had two boys who had fired their mortar often and had lived with it. They could put a mortar shell anywhere they wanted to, but they were the only ones who could."

"What kind of gun emplacements do you use for heavy weapons and machine guns?" asked Haliburton.

"We use a four-foot-deep emplacement for a mortar," Arnold replied. "We've never been where we could dig one, though. We pile up rocks."

"You can dig an emplacement by blasting during a barrage," said Taylor. "We've often done that. But men ought to be trained to set up guns on all kinds of terrain."

"You know what I think?" Haliburton asked. "I think we tend to keep our machine guns up too close. The weapons platoon tries to go right up with the rifle platoons. We've had machine guns knocked out by mortars, and sometimes our machine guns get pinned down when they stay up with us. The heavy weapons should be in support, in back of us shooting over our heads. You've got to guard against the tendency of the American heavy weapons to move right up."

"That's the American's worst fault," said Moore. "He's just like a turkey. He wants to see what's on the other side of the log."

"One thing I wish you heavy-weapons men would do," commented Haliburton, the rifle platoon sergeant. "When you fire, always judge over, never short." Haliburton was deadly serious, and nobody laughed at what might have seemed a dry joke in other circumstances.

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"Our 60-mm mortars and even our 81s are usually stuck out singly," said Taylor. "They should be in a battery."

All agreed.

"One thing we haven't mentioned is the rifle grenade launcher," said Moore. "That's one of our best weapons. It will break up an attack every time."

"Hand grenades, too," put in Haliburton. "New men are always afraid of them. At Salerno some men had them taped up so tight they couldn't use them. One thing that's needed is a better place to carry grenades. If you hang them on your ammunition belt, they get in your way when you're crawling along the ground. What we do is to have pockets sewed in our combat suits for them."

"Fragmentation grenades, you mean, of course," said Weber, "or maybe white-phosphorous grenades. Concussion grenades are handy only in street fighting."

"The most valuable thing I learned in training was how to lob a grenade," said Moore. "You have to lob them correctly. You can't get any distance if you throw them like baseballs. It takes experience to knock out a pillbox at 25 yards from a prone position."

"They taught us some useless things, though," said Arnold. "For instance, we never use a rifle sling, except maybe to carry it. And we don't fasten the chin straps under our helmets for fear of concussion. And we can't be bothered with packs. What do you usually carry into action?"

"All I ever take," said Weber, "is a raincoat, a rifle and rifle belt, all the ammunition and hand grenades I can carry, a pick, one K ration and a canteen. About that canteen, incidentally, water discipline has never been stressed enough. When our whole battalion was cut off for three days at Mount Maggiore, the new men almost died of thirst. We caught some water in C-ration cans and helmets. They tried to drop rations to us by plane, but most of them fell in enemy territory. The boys got tired of staying in their holes, but I threatened to shoot the first one who stuck his head out. When we were in the mountains you'd be surprised at how many men would beg me to let them make the long, dangerous haul down and back for rations at night, just for the exercise."

"THERE are three damned important points for replacements to remember," summed up Moore. "First, dig deep fighting holes. Second, learn how to take care of yourself, particularly how to be silent on patrols. Third, know your weapons. We've had BAR men who don't know how to fix stoppages. Some guys expect to pick up a new gun from a casualty whenever they need it. They must think it's a gold mine up front. When you need a gun, it's not there. You can count on that."

"Just one more thing," said Gonzales. "Keep out of draws. Jerry always has his mortars zeroed in on them."



It is very important for replacements to know their weapons thoroughly. "We've had BAR men who don't know how to fix stoppages," says Sgt. Moore. Such ignorance can put a whole platoon in great danger."

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Recruits often make the mistake of freezing on ground under fire. Lying in the glare, they are fine targets.

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