

A VETERAN'S STORY. HINSDALE MASSACHUSETTS

On January 20, 1944, one of the worst tragedies the Army suffered in World War II took place in Italy on the Rapido River near the famous Mount Cassino in an effort to gain a stronghold in the taking of Rome.

The central thrust by U.S. 36th Division commenced three hours after sunset on January 20. The lack of time to prepare meant that the approach to the river was still hazardous due to un-cleared mines and booby traps, and the highly technical business of an opposed river crossing lacked the necessary planning and rehearsal. Although a battalion of the 143rd Regiment was able to get across the Gari on the south side of San Angelo and two companies of the 141st Regiment on the north side, they were isolated for most of the time, and at no time was Allied armor able to get across the river, leaving them highly vulnerable to counterattacking tanks and self-propelled guns of General Eberhard Rodt's 15th Panzer Grenadier Division. The southern group was forced back across the river by mid-morning of January 21. Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Keyes, commanding II Corps, pressed Major General Fred L. Walker of 36th Division to renew the attack immediately. Once again the two regiments attacked but with no more success against the well dug-in 15th Panzer Grenadier Division: 143rd Regiment got the equivalent of two battalions across, but once again there was no armoured support, and they were devastated when daylight came the next day. The 141st Regiment also crossed in two battalion strength, and despite the lack of armoured support managed to advance 1 km (0.62 mi). However, with the coming of daylight, they too were cut down, and by the evening of January 22 the regiment had virtually ceased to exist; only 40 men made it back to the Allied lines. Rick Atkinson described the intense German resistance:

Artillery and Nebelwerfer drumfire methodically searched both bridgeheads, while machine guns opened on every sound... GIs inched forward, feeling for trip wires and listening to German gun crews reload... to stand or even to kneel was to die... On average, soldiers wounded on the Rapido received "definitive treatment" nine hours and forty-one minutes after they were hit, a medical study later found..."

The assault had been a costly failure, with 36th Division losing 2,100 men killed, wounded and missing in 48 hours.

On November 13, 1942, Edward J. Fassell joined the Army and reported to Fort Devens for boot camp and then on to Camp Croft Spartanburg, South Carolina for continued combat training in the 141st Regiment infantry.

Ed was the son of Frederick and Amelia Fassell of 62 Curtis Street in Hinsdale Massachusetts. At the time Ed entered the army, he was working as a plumber's helper working with Cedric Phillips in Hinsdale.



Figure 1
Edward J. Fassell

With the 141st, Ed was ammunitions bearer and assistant gunner with an 81mm mortar crew. As assistant gunner, Ed set up the gun and dropped ammunition to be fire into the guns tube. As ammunition bearer, Ed carried ammunition to be used in the gun.



Figure 2
PFC Edward J. Fassell Heavy Mortarman: Ammunitions Bearer and Assistant Gunner with an 81mm Mortar Crew.

State Side Training:

On November 25th 1940 The 141st regiment of the 36th "Texas" Division was mobilized in San Antonio Texas, and sent to Camp Bowie at Brownwood Texas, along with all other elements of the 36th division. The 36th Division underwent training. The 36th also underwent troop replenishment from the selective service to get them up to divisional strength in the U.S. Army. It was at this point that the National guard troops went from being weekend warriors to full time enlisted soldiers. In July 1941 the regiment went to Louisiana to take part in the famous Louisiana maneuvers. After the Louisiana maneuvers had concluded, the regiment was sent back to Camp Bowie in Texas to undergo more training.

On February 14th 1942 the regiment was moved to camp Balding Florida where the Regiment had their first amphibious landing and beach assault training. The Regiment went through training to learn how to swim with their equipment and how to cross rivers and streams more efficiently.

On July 6th 1942 the Regiment was sent up north to take part in the Carolina maneuvers and was told that "this would be the last dry run and after that they would be facing the enemy for real next time". The regiment was moved straight from the Carolina maneuvers to Camp Edwards Massachusetts in August 1942 for last minute training and troop replacements to get the division up to strength. At Camp Edward, Ed joined up with the 36th Texas Division.

North Africa:

On April 2nd 1943 the regiment sailed out of New York Harbor on the USS Brazil bound towards North Africa. While en route to North Africa the convoy had 26 U-boat encounters. On April 13th 1943 the Regiment arrived at port in Oran Algeria. While in Algeria the Regiment underwent more training and marching to prepare them for the combat that awaited them ahead.

In May 1943 while the rest of the regiment was doing more amphibious landing training, some of the men and officers of the regiment where sent on temporary duty to Tunisia. Their mission was to fight alongside another division against Rommel's Afrika Corps in order to get some real combat experience to share with the rest of the regiment.

In August 1943 the Regiment was sent to the St. Cloud and Arzew staging areas to get ready for the Invasion of Italy. In early September the regiment was loaded on to ships at the harbor in Oran and where bound for Salerno bay. On September 8th news was announced that Italy had surrendered, every one cheered and celebrated and had hoped that there would be no need for an Invasion, or that they would land on a friendly shore, but officers and NCOs' where quick to remind the men that there were still Germans in Italy as well.



Figure 3
Army Transport Ship USS Brazil



Figure 4
North Africa Landing Site. Oran Algeria.

Salerno:

On September 9th 1943 the unit took part in the Operation Avalanche, the Invasion of Italy. They landed near the ancient Greek colony of Paestum. It was their first time in combat and the Germans threw everything they had at them to try to push them back into the sea including Mark IV panzers, but the regiment held its ground, and fought the panzers off with rifles and grenades. After 12 days of bloody fighting the Germans withdrew north and the beaches in Salerno bay were secure.



Figure 5
First combat Landing Site. Salerno Italy.

San Pietro:

The next task given to the unit was to push the Germans out of a town called San Pietro, the unit first moved into the sector in early November. In order to take San Pietro the Division as a whole had to take Mt Sammucro. This mountain earned the nickname "Million Dollar Mountain" because of the large amount of casualties sustained trying to take Mt Sammucro. After taking Mt. Sammucro the Division had to clear the Mignano Gap and take Mt. Lungo. The fighting was very tough and San Pietro did not get into allied hands until December 25th.

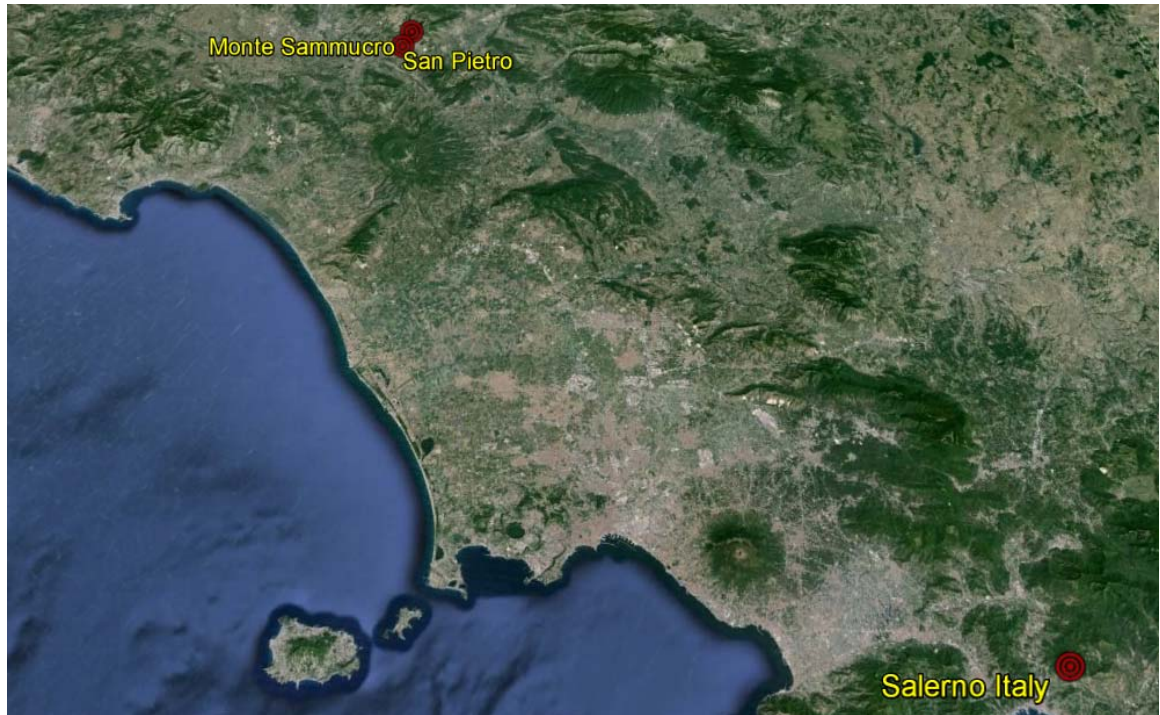


Figure 6
San Pietro and Monte Summacro.

The Rapido River:

Once the Allies had hit the Gustav line with Monte Cassino in the middle, the fighting came to a standstill. The battle to break the Gustav line became a slug fest with the allies feeding troops to the Gustav line in hopes of breaking it, something reminiscent of the Somme in World War One. The unit was tasked with crossing the Rapido River in hopes of breaking through the Gustav line and moving up Highway 6 to Rome while the same day troops landing at Anzio would be able to push through and link up with the troops moving up from the south. On January 21st the unit first tried to cross the river but where repelled due to mines and heavy artillery coming from 88's and machine gun fire. The fire was so intense that most of the boats that were going to be used to cross the river had been damaged, and were unusable. The next day a second assault was tried, this time element of the 141st made it across the river, but ounce it became clear that there was no way to establish a bridge head the attack was called off. The troops that had made it across the river during the assault tried to retreat back across the river, but for the most part were rounded up and taken prisoner by the Germans. It was with this group of soldiers that Ed became a prisoner of the 15th Panzer grenadier Division and was taken to Stalag 2b Hammerstein, Pomerania. (now the town of Czarne, Pomeranian Voivodeship, Poland) on the north side of the railway line.

The Rapido River is still a topic of debate and a sore subject with veterans of the 141st and 143rd regiments. After the failed Rapido River crossing the unit was pulled back and put on the line in the mountains facing Monte Cassino.

The scene at the Rapido River in Italy in 1944 would be forever seared in the survivors' memories. "There were bodies everywhere," said Private First Class Bill Hartung, "mostly parts, arms, legs, some decapitated, bodies with hardly any clothes left on.... And there was always that spine-chilling cry for 'medic.' But there weren't any

left.” They had all been blown up by mines or hit by German shells or swept down the raging river and drowned. Hartung’s company had begun the attack—which was to have taken them to and over the river—with more than 200 men. When it was over, only 27 came back.

Sergeant Billy Kirby talked about “boats being hit all around me and guys falling out and swimming. I never knew whether they made it or not. I had never seen so many bodies of our own guys. Just about everybody was hit. I didn’t have a single good friend who wasn’t killed or wounded.”

It was the night of January 20, and the men of the 36th Texas National Guard Division—the T-Patchers they called themselves—were trying to cross the Rapido, in the shadow of Monte Cassino. Over the next 48 hours, in what was intended as a diversionary attack, these men would be ordered to do the impossible, leading to one of the greatest tragedies the U.S. Army suffered in World War II. Of the 4,000 T-Patchers who made the attack, less than half returned. The rest were killed, captured, wounded, or missing in action. The Germans lost 64 men, with another 179 wounded. Long after the battle was lost, and even long after the war was over, the disaster at the Rapido continued to provoke anger and accusations. Diversionary attacks can often, by their very nature, be disproportionately deadly to those who carry them out. But with General Mark Clark in charge of the operation, a man whose career was dogged by controversy, questions persist: Was his order to attack worth the risk of so many lives? What alternative, if any, did he have to sending those men to be slaughtered as they tried to cross the Rapido?

Back home, Ed’s mother received a message from the US War Department that he was reported missing in action as of the 20th of January 1944 after combat action in Italy. A nightmare for any family member or friend during wartime. Especially a mother.

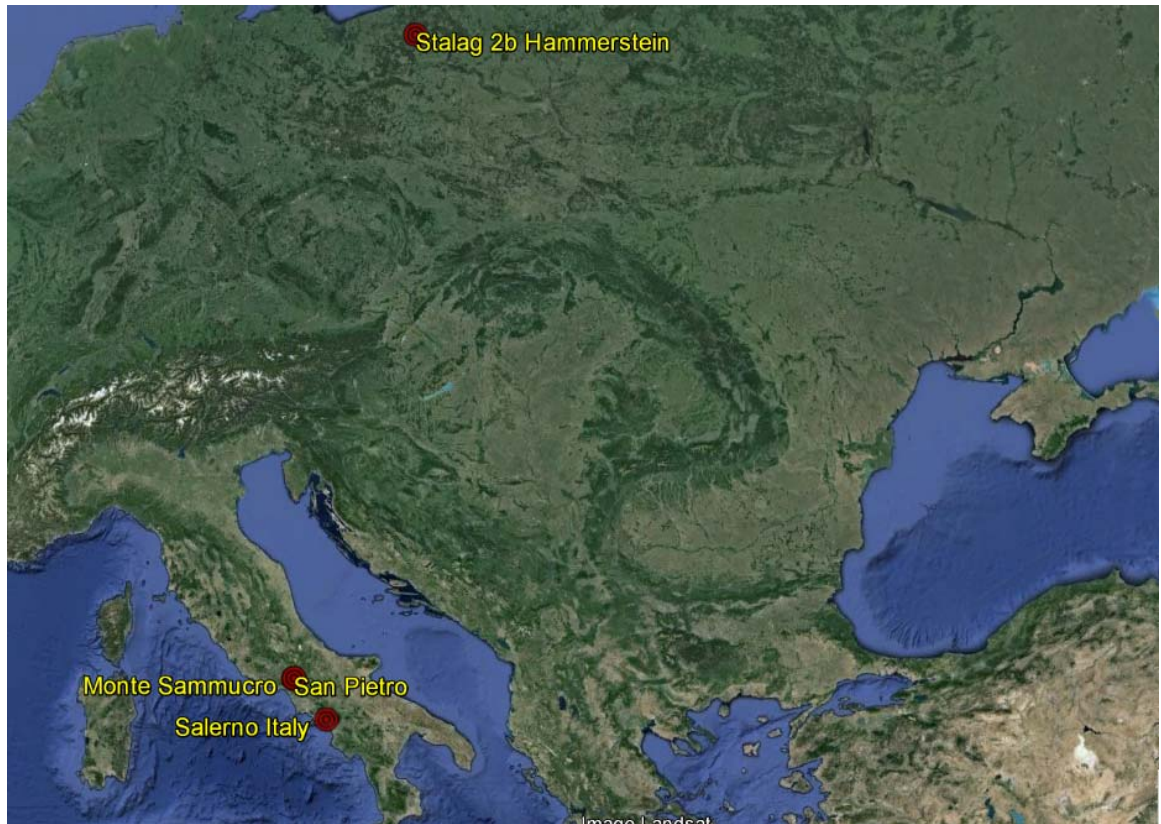


Figure 7
Stalag 2b in Relation to other landmarks.1`



Figure 8
Rapido River Crossing North of Sant Angelo



*Figure 9
Overview of 36th Division 141st Regiment movement.*

Ed spent 15 months in Stalag 2b and was liberated back to Fort Dix, New Jersey. He was honorably discharged October 26, 1945 and returned home to Hinsdale where he married and raised a fine family in Hinsdale in his family home at 62 Curtis Street. The house his Father and mother raised him.

I thought I would add that during his time in the service, Ed and his aunt Eva wrote to each other faithfully. In many of his letters his only concern was for his dog Jack. He was reminding Eva that Jack needs to be run regularly or Jake would lose his ability to hunt. I'm guessing that's what kept Ed determined to get home. To hunt with Jack.

By Peter White. Ed's next door neighbor for the last years of his life.