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# A History of El Paso's Company E in World War II

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A HISTORY OF EL PASO'S COMPANY E IN WORLD WAR II

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A HISTORY OF EL PASO'S COMPANY E IN WORLD WAR II

by

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THESIS

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

During World War II, the composition of the United States military encompassed many diverse ethnicities that included Asian, Hispanic, African, and Native-Americans. It is projected that of the 15,440, 000 Americans that served in the war, at least 500,000 were Hispanics, most of them of Mexican ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising that most of these Hispanic soldiers were of Mexican descent considering that in the late 1930s the Mexican-American population in the United States was estimated at 2,690,000.<sup>2</sup> Mexican-Americans took part in many of the bloody battles that extended from the islands of the Pacific, to the sands of North Africa, and the frigid winters of Western Europe. Indeed, Mexican-Americans served proudly and honorably in the Second World War; yet, it seems that for some reason their contributions have been mostly left out of American history books and even films.

One of the most recent examples of this was in 2007 when renowned filmmaker Ken Burns released his fifteen hour long series on World War II titled *The War* on PBS. Burns' exclusion of Hispanics in the original version caused an outrage, especially within the Mexican-American community. Burns stated that his series was not "looking at itemizing all contributions of ethnic groups" because it was never meant to be a complete story of World War II. The series, however, managed to include material on the discrimination of African-Americans in the military and the internment of Japanese-Americans. Burns ultimately went back and added a

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000), 3; Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States in World War II* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2008), 330; *Hispanics in America's Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense of Equal Opportunity and Safety Policy, 1982), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Raul Morin, *Among the Valiant: Mexican-Americans in World War II and Korea* (Alhambra, California: Borden Publishing Company, 1966), 16.

total of thirty minutes of footage at the end of three of the seven part segments.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that this omission of Mexican-Americans continues is an added dishonor to these men and women that served in the U.S. military during this war. Much has been documented on African-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and to some point even Native-Americans. In the course of the Second World War, the U.S. Army assigned African-Americans and Japanese-Americans into segregated units. The 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team and the 100<sup>th</sup> Battalion were two highly decorated units made up of Japanese-Americans that fought in the war. While African-Americans served mostly in supportive roles, they also had a few detachments that participated in combat. Two of these units were the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion and the 614<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer battalion, both of which had excellent combat records.<sup>4</sup> Why then would Mexican-Americans be left out of the histories when so many participated in the war? On the whole, there may be no clear explanation that could answer this puzzling question.

For the most part, Hispanics in the U.S. military were not segregated into separate units, but there was, at least, one known exception. It is this particular story of a National Guard unit from El Paso, Texas designated as Company E that has received minimal attention by historians. This unit was unlike any other unit of the National Guard in that it consisted only of Mexican-Americans. According to the Texas National Guard, the purpose behind their creation in 1923 was “to educate, train and Americanize, and to create a better understanding among the Spanish-

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Strauss, “Burns Adds Hispanics in ‘War’ Series,” *USA Today*, May 11, 2007, 3D; Lynn Elber, “Ken Burns Alters WWII Film,” *The Post-Standard*, July 13, 2007, E-3, <http://access.newspaperarchive.com/lib.utep.edu/> (accessed 9/22/10); Alessandra Stanley, “So Proudly We Hailed,” *New York Times*, September 21, 2007, E-1, E-20.

<sup>4</sup> Takaki, 162; Booker, 334.

American youth of El Paso.”<sup>5</sup> In the history of the National Guard, this was the only time an experiment such as this was attempted with respect to Mexican-Americans. Considering the amount of racism that existed in Texas towards anyone who was non-white this was indeed an unbelievable event.

Besides helping to break many stereotypes, the men of Company E would earn great respect as National Guardsmen and would later be some of the first American troops to land in Nazi occupied Europe. As monumental as these men were to Mexican-American history and to the history of El Paso, their story, like most accounts of Mexican-American contributions in World War II, has been largely ignored.

Although a few historians have discussed Company E, there are no comprehensive histories of the unit. One of the first historians to discuss Company E was Emily Tessier Zillich, who mentioned the unit in her 1958 Master’s Thesis “History of the National Guard in El Paso.”<sup>6</sup> Zillich offered detailed information concerning the formation of the unit and specifically mentioned that it was created because El Paso held a large Mexican population. Zillich followed through by then discussing Company E’s accomplishments in the 1930s. Lastly, Zillich quotes a military report that documented what happened to some of the members of Company E during the Allied invasion of Italy.

Zillich’s thesis, while informative and notable for mentioning the uniqueness of Company E, is an incomplete story of the unit. Zillich makes the mistake of saying that Company E participated in an attack in which only four men survived. This statement, as the study will show,

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<sup>5</sup> Texas National Guard, *Historical and Pictorial Review; National Guard of the State of Texas 1940*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Army and Navy Publishing Company, 1940 ), 59.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Tessier Zillich, “History of the National Guard in El Paso,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1958). Microfilm.

is false. While Company E did participate in this specific attack, there were more than four survivors. Zillich's focus was more on the National Guard than it was on Company E and it does not have the analysis of a Mexican-American history themed text. In the end, Zillich's thesis serves as a good history of the El Paso National Guard, but would not suffice as a comprehensive history of Company E.

One of the later texts to discuss Company E was a 1963 book by Raul Morin titled *Among The Valiant: Mexican-Americans in World War II and Korea*. As a World War II veteran himself, Morin grew tired of seeing how fellow Mexican-American veterans were still being discriminated against. Moreover, he felt that their accomplishments were being ignored from the history books and that the American people needed to know; thus, Morin dedicated his book to the Mexican-Americans that served in these two wars. Thirteen of Morin's seventeen chapters concentrate on specific individuals who did something extraordinary in a particular theater of war such as the Pacific, North Africa, Europe, and finally Korea. Some of these men earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, while others received medals such as the Distinguished Service Cross, the Silver Star, and the Bronze Star.

In his chapter of the Mediterranean campaign, Morin focuses almost entirely on Company E. He gives a very brief history of the company with regard to origins in El Paso and their journey from the U.S. to North Africa and finally Italy following their federalization. Morin also addresses a few exploits of Lt. Gabriel L. Navarrete and the fiasco that erupted when Company E along with other units of the division were ordered to cross the Rapido River in Italy. The rest of the chapter is divided into two sections with the first centering on Mexican-Americans who

served with distinction in the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Secondly, Morin remarks on a few Mexican-Americans that served prominently in the battles of Anzio and Monte Cassino in Italy.

Although Zillich provided more detailed background material on Company E's origins, Morin was able to provide new information in his book. In the end, Morin could be considered as one of the first to attempt to write a history that credits Mexican-American military contributions in World War II. Still, while Morin's book was enlightening, his account of Company E had at least two known errors. First, Morin mistakenly discusses the exploits of a Sergeant named Manuel S. Gonzales who he presumed was in Company E. Gonzales was indeed in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division but was not with Company E. It was Private Manuel C. Gonzales that served with the company and participated in the invasion of Salerno where he was killed in action. Morin makes his second mistake by declaring that Company E was formed into a distinct Mexican-American unit in 1941, which, as this thesis will show, is incorrect.

In 1982, the U.S. Department of Defense published a book titled *Hispanics in America's Defense*. Much like Morin's work, this text was written as a contribution not just to Mexican-Americans, but to all Americans of Hispanic ethnicity that served with distinction in the U.S. armed forces. The text clearly admits in its introduction that was not meant to be a complete history of Hispanics in the military, but only intended to provide a short summary of their contributions. Although at first glance the text appears to be similar to Morin's, it is not. This text covers a longer time period going as far back as the American Revolution and leads up to the 1980s. It even includes background information on the Spanish conquest of North, Central, and South American territories. The text lists every known Hispanic-American who has received the Congressional Medal of Honor beginning with Philip Bazaar of Chile and John Ortega of Spain

who both fought for the Union during the American Civil War. The text goes on to show the thirty-four other Hispanics that won this medal in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Finally, the text goes on to list the seven ships in the U.S. Navy that were named after Hispanics along with all of the generals and admirals who have served in the U.S. military.

In the section discussing World War II, the text highlights Company E's participation in the invasion of Salerno which is cited from Robert Wagner's *The Texas Army: A History of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division in the Italian Campaign*.<sup>7</sup> While Wagner's text is also impressive, he does not bother to specifically remark about the uniqueness of Company E. Wagner's text was focused more on the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and so like Zillich, Company E was not his main emphasis. By and large, *Hispanics in America's Defense* is an impressive book and valuable addition to the history of Hispanics in the U.S. military, especially with its section on Hispanics who fought in World War I, which is a field of study that even today is almost nonexistent.

The most recent historians to make a reference to Company E in their narratives were Rodolfo F. Acuna's *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* in 2007 and Manuel G. Gonzales' *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* from 2009.<sup>8</sup> While both authors vary in the amount of detail they go into in each of their books, they share a similarity in terms of the subject matter and timeline used to explain this history. For example, Gonzales and Acuna both begin with background information dealing with a brief history of Spain and the Native-Americans that inhabited Mexico before the arrival of Europeans. Their story then flows through different topics including the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico War, Mexican

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<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Wagner, *The Texas Army: A History of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division in the Italian Campaign* (Austin, Texas: State House Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Rodolfo Acuña. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007); Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

immigration into the U.S. in the 1900s, World War II, the Chicano Movement of the 1960's and other issues leading up to the present day.

When discussing Company E both authors cite Raul Morín, however, this is where the similarities end between the two books. Gonzales mistakenly refers to Company E in his book as Company Z which is incorrect. Moreover, Gonzales' discussion of Company E is just four sentences, which is even shorter than Acuna's which was four paragraphs. In general, both historians failed to mention any new information regarding Company E and like *Hispanics in America's Defense* these two texts were not intended to be complete histories but simply meant to briefly cover certain issues involving the history of Mexican-Americans in the U.S.

Two of the most recent historians to publish works dealing with Mexican-Americans in World War II are Richard Griswold Del Castillo and Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. Del Castillo collaborated with Richard Steele in *World War II and Mexican-American Civil Rights*.<sup>9</sup> As the title of the book suggests, its focus is entirely on Mexican-Americans on the home front. The book has no mention of Company E and the only time that Mexican-Americans are mentioned in combat roles are in an appendix page where both authors cite Raul Morín.

Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez has edited and collaborated on three major works dealing with Mexican-Americans in the Second World War. *Mexican-Americans and World War II* and *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*.<sup>10</sup> Like Del Castillo's work, these two books focus on home front issues and not the military

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Griswold Del Castillo, *World War II and Mexican-American Civil Rights* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, ed., *Mexican-Americans and World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005); Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez and Emilio Zamora, ed., *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

contributions of Mexican-Americans. However, one book by Rivas-Rodriguez that is quite exceptional to this field is *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the World War II Generation*.<sup>11</sup> The book is divided into three sections, the military, the home front, and the post-war era. The military section of this book contains brief introductions and stories not only of Mexican-American men in the armed forces, but women as well. This is something that has yet to have been done by any other historian. However, as remarkable a text as this is, it only contained one person from Company E, Abner Carrasco from San Pedro, California.

Overall, there has not been a historical text that has properly explained the history of Company E. The hope is that the following thesis will accomplish what previous historians have failed to do and that is to tell an accurate and comprehensive story of Company E. This study will discuss the company's origins along with their heroic experiences throughout World War II and after. In addition to their story, this study will begin by explaining the factors that contributed to Company E's formation which includes the following: El Paso's growing Mexican population in the early 1900s, the city's uniqueness in having a peaceful coexistence with this population, and Mexican and Mexican-American participation in World War I.

To complete this study various secondary sources were used including those of Raul Morin, Emily T. Zillich, Robert Wagner, and *Hispanics in America's Defense*. However, it was primary sources that provided a base for this study and helped fill many gaps that existed in the history of Company E. These primary sources included newspapers such as the El Paso Herald-Post and the El Paso Times. Another source was a 1983 film titled The Men of Company E. The

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<sup>11</sup> Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, et al., *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos and Latinas of the World War II Generation* (Austin, Texas: U.S. Latino and Latina WWII Oral History Project, 2006).

thirty minute film showed interviews of Company E members Gabriel L. Navarrete, Jose Montoya, Alex Carrillo, Manuel Rivera, and Santiago Jaramillo. In addition, the Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission in Austin, Texas provided a large collection of military documents on microfilm from the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. The documents included battle reports, award and casualty lists from the division's participation in World War II. Lastly, an interview of Mr. Ricardo Palacios, Jr. who served with Company E during World War II. Mr. Palacios was born in El Paso, Texas in 1922 and joined the Texas National Guard in 1939 at the age of seventeen. He was one of the youngest members to have joined Company E and would attain the rank of Sergeant before his discharge on September 17, 1945.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ricardo Palacios, Jr., interview by Jorge Rodriguez, El Paso, Texas, February 12, 2010; *El Paso Herald-Post*, March 25, 1966, B-1.

## Chapter 2

### EL PASO

Explaining the uniqueness of El Paso would not be complete without discussing the history of the city first. El Paso originally began as a Spanish settlement in the mid-1600s. It became an American border town on the far tip of West Texas after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 2, 1848, which ended hostilities between Mexico and the United States. One of the clauses of the treaty acknowledged that the Rio Grande now would be the dividing line between Texas and Mexico.<sup>13</sup>

At the onset of the California Gold Rush in 1849, El Paso served as a rest stop for numerous travelers heading west and generating considerable revenue for the town. As it was, there was already peaceful coexistence between the Anglo and Mexican populations living in El Paso, but the economic prosperity only served to maintain it further. Although the gold rush would end, this special relationship of peaceful coexistence would not.<sup>14</sup>

El Paso's population would continue to remain relatively small until the introduction of the railroads in the 1880s opened the door for extensive economic growth. According to historian Mario T. García, this turned El Paso from a town of 736 residents to “a significant railroad, smelting, ranching, and commercial center with both national and international importance in that it linked the south-western region with the rest of the United States as well as with Mexico.”<sup>15</sup> El Paso's quick growth between 1880 and 1920 left a vacuum for unskilled labor

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<sup>13</sup> Wilbert H. Timmons, *El Paso: A Borderlands History* (El Paso, Texas: Texas Western Press, 1990), 15, 98, 100.

<sup>14</sup> Timmons, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 2, 3, 31, 13.

that desperately needed to be filled and was done so by countless Mexican immigrants looking for work and an overall better life. El Paso's location on the border was of great importance as it became "the largest port of entry ...and main terminal for Mexican immigrants."<sup>16</sup>

The overall impact of this great economic expansion in El Paso was a vast growth in the city's population over the next forty years. In 1890, the population rose to 10,388 out of which only 2,115 were of Mexican descent. By 1900 the population was at 15,906 which then almost tripled to 39,279 in 1910.<sup>17</sup> By 1920 El Paso's population had risen to 77,560 of which 39,571 of these residents were of Mexican descent. Historians on El Paso emphasize that census reports tended to be inaccurate at times since Mexicans, citizens and immigrants, were sometimes not counted. Therefore, El Paso's actual population in 1920 was estimated at nearing almost 100,000.<sup>18</sup>

Another reason why the Mexican population increased significantly up to 1920 was because of the Mexican Revolution.<sup>19</sup> The chaos caused by the conflict forced Mexicans of all classes to seek refuge in the U.S. The most critical years of the revolution occurred in the mid-1910s, which had the conflict occurring heavily in the northern and central states of Mexico causing a flood of immigrants to enter the U.S. through El Paso. During one particular week in June 1916, "immigration officials admitted 4,850 Mexicans in the city."<sup>20</sup> Overall, Mexicans

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<sup>16</sup> García, 2, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Oscar J. Martinez, *The Chicanos of El Paso: An Assessment of Progress* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1980), 6.

<sup>18</sup> García, 31; Martinez, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *The Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920's* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 242.

<sup>20</sup> García, 40, 44.

living in El Paso became the majority since they now made up over half the city's entire population. El Paso "represented not only one of the first major urban concentrations of Mexican immigrants in the United States, but more significantly the only metropolitan area in the Southwest with a Mexican majority."<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, despite how many Mexican immigrants made El Paso their new home they were very reluctant to be "Americanized." The term Americanization was used "to describe the progressive programs to persuade immigrants to adopt the ways of their new homeland."<sup>22</sup> Although the Progressive Movement began dwindling after 1917, its ideals, such as of Americanizing immigrants, still strongly lingered.<sup>23</sup> García stated that one good reason why Mexican immigrants were so difficult to Americanize was that, at the time, Mexicans in El Paso "had only a limited interest in American society: to get a job, make money, and return to Mexico."<sup>24</sup> Most Mexican immigrants had no intention of staying permanently in the U.S. due to Mexico's proximity. Additionally, because of the belief that they would soon return to their native soil Mexican immigrants "felt no strong motivation to discard their cultural traditions."<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that attempts to persuade Mexican immigrants into adopting so-called American traditions and values were overlooked.

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<sup>21</sup> García, 235.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, *Progressivism* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1983), 100.

<sup>23</sup> Link and McCormick, 100.

<sup>24</sup> García, 106.

<sup>25</sup> García, 234, 231.

Progressives believed that educating the children of immigrants was the best way to Americanize them.<sup>26</sup> Schools could serve “as a form of social control over Mexican aliens, especially children, and helped direct their loyalties to the United States and to American principles.”<sup>27</sup> However, some had more in mind than just wanting to turn Mexican children into patriotic Americans. Those benefiting from the cheap labor that Mexican immigrants provided felt that it could make their children “loyal disciplined future employees.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, besides teaching the Mexican children how to be loyal Americans they were also to be taught skills for manual labor.<sup>29</sup> School administrators in El Paso simply went along with the idea. Nevertheless, the Mexicans of El Paso resisted Americanization in spite of all the attempts to convert them.

An example of this resistance was expressed in a 1923 article in the El Paso Times titled “Americanization Work.” The article was submitted and written by M.J. Garrett who was the chief director of the Americanization efforts in El Paso. This work involved giving classes three days out of the week that taught “aliens” English and instructed them in how to apply for citizenship. Garret specified that there were two particular groups within the Mexican immigrant population that were proving very difficult in Americanizing. First, the older population of Mexican immigrants seemed to have no desire in taking these classes. Garret assumed that they “were hard to convince” because Mexican immigrants believed that their overall “status” in the

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<sup>26</sup> Link and McCormick, 100; Manuel Bernado Ramirez, “El Pasoans: Life and Society in Mexican El Paso, 1920-1945” (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 2000), 94.

<sup>27</sup> García, 121.

<sup>28</sup> García, 110.

<sup>29</sup> García, 113, 116.

U.S. could not be improved. Second, the younger generation of Mexican immigrants apparently only had “a desire to earn more money.”<sup>30</sup> This was the same problem that the Mexican schools in El Paso had noticed early on. The children of Mexican immigrants would usually only attend school for about four years and then leave to find work in order to support their families.<sup>31</sup> Garrett’s frustration towards Mexican immigrants was expressed when he declared that “the question sometimes arises whether America is not doing too much for the individual alien and requiring too little of him.” He went on to claim that European immigrants tended to show more willingness to become Americans than Mexican immigrants ever did.<sup>32</sup>

Around this same time, the Mexican population of El Paso played a big role in the prohibition election of January 1918. During the election, prohibition forces (drys) complained that anti-prohibition forces (wets) were going to use the great Mexican population of El Paso to win. The “drys” noticed that numerous Mexicans who had voted in previous elections did not register or enter the draft when it began for World War I. Moreover, the “drys” observed that with the activation of the draft the number of Mexicans claiming American citizenship for voting purposes had dropped significantly.<sup>33</sup> Overall, for the countless Mexican immigrants trying to improve their lives and believing their stay in the U.S. was temporary, fighting in a war was the last thing on their minds. But the fact that many did not register for the draft and refused to be Americanized only increased the hostility towards Mexicans in El Paso. Historian Lynn Dumenil stated that American nativists had a “fear about unassimilated immigrants in their midst [which]

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<sup>30</sup> *El Paso Times*, November 20, 1923, 3.

<sup>31</sup> García, 113.

<sup>32</sup> *El Paso Times*, November 20, 1923, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *El Paso Times*, January, 8, 1918, 2.

was increased by World War I's hysteria over disloyal hyphenates."<sup>34</sup> This hostility was vented towards Mexicans in El Paso, but also to different immigrant groups in the U.S.

While El Paso did have its fair share of discrimination against those of Mexican ethnicity, there was actually little or no violence ever used against them. Historian Shawn Lay stated "those who had lived in the Southwest for a number of years realized the feasibility and necessity of peaceful racial coexistence...[and] that harmonious race relations were essential to the region's biculturally based economy."<sup>35</sup> The only major racial violence to occur was the Salt War of 1877 which, in fact, did not even take place in El Paso but in the towns of Ysleta and San Elizario. This was one incident and could not compare with the number of murders and lynchings of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. These acts of violence were common in areas of West, South, Central, and East Texas.<sup>36</sup> It was in these four areas of Texas that simply accusing a Mexican man or woman of murder, theft, or any other crime could easily lead to their death sentence. According to Neil Foley, "Central Texas was cotton country and its people were primarily transplanted Southerners who had brought with them their particular history of interaction across the color line."<sup>37</sup> Much of the violence took place after 1865, due to what

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<sup>34</sup> Dumenil, 242.

<sup>35</sup> Shawn Lay, "Revolution, War, and the Ku Klux Klan in El Paso: A Study in Intolerance on the Border" (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1984), 68.

<sup>36</sup> García, 13; Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 88, 90.

<sup>37</sup> Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 12.

historian Arnolde De Leon described as white paranoia of the colored races which included Mexicans, Native Americans, and recently freed slaves.<sup>38</sup>

A great example that showed the strength of this relationship was with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Beginning in Houston in 1920, the Klan quickly expanded with branches emerging in almost one hundred towns and cities. It was estimated that by 1922 Texas had one of the largest Klan memberships numbering over 200,000. Arriving in El Paso in the summer of 1921, the Klan slowly managed to find local residents that were willing to become members including Protestant clergy, police officers, and a few city officials. From 1921 to 1922, the Klan was at the peak of its power having at one point 2,000 members. At the same time, the Klan never attained the dominance and frightening reputation in El Paso that it had in other regions of Texas. As stated before, local politicians, businessmen, and the city in general benefited from the cheap labor provided by the local Mexican population. Certainly, they were not going to do anything to risk this economic prosperity. More importantly and as indicated by Lay, “it was precisely because the Pass [El Paso] was heavily Hispanic and Roman Catholic, that residents, including a majority of Protestants, rejected the KKK.”<sup>39</sup> By and large, the white residents of El Paso showed that they were willing to protect the local Mexican population, even if it was for economic purposes. This was something that, at the time, could not be said by other Texas cities. As much as the role of El Paso’s uniqueness might have played in the creation of Company E, the following chapter will show that there were other factors occurring outside of El Paso that also contributed.

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<sup>38</sup> De León, 87.

<sup>39</sup> Lay, 101, 102, 103, 202, 223, 281.

## Chapter 3

### WORLD WAR I & MARCELINO SERNA

Despite attempts to remain neutral, the U.S. entered the First World War on April 6, 1917, for two reasons.<sup>40</sup> First, in the previous month German submarines had sunk four American merchant ships. Secondly, in January 1917, a message was sent from the German foreign secretary, Alfred Zimmerman, to the German minister in Mexico. Although the message was supposed to be secret it was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence. A copy was then sent to U.S. intelligence, which “verified its authenticity.”<sup>41</sup> The message was referred to as the Zimmerman Telegram and President Woodrow Wilson permitted the release of the message to the American public which specified that the German ambassador was to “make Mexico a proposal of alliance on the following basis: make war together, make peace together, generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to re-conquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona”<sup>42</sup>

The U.S.’ entry into the war brought at least two known changes in regards to Mexican-Americans. First, historian Arnolde De Leon asserts that the war caused a change in how some Anglo political and military officials in Texas viewed Mexican-Americans. During World War I, “as war-related manpower shortages deepened, federal, state, and local authorities called upon all elements of the Texas-Mexican community to join in” and assist in the war effort. This included Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants. The amount of effort being put into recruiting

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<sup>40</sup> Byron Farwell, *Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (Norton and Company: New York, 1999), 35, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer D. Keene, *World War I* (Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut, 2006), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Keene, 10.

their help was enough to convince many Texas-Mexicans that they were no longer looked at as some “inferior race,” but as genuine Americans. In Texas, at least, Mexican-Americans saw this as a great opportunity to prove their patriotism. This was a great change since Mexicans, both native and foreign born, were characterized as being unable to assimilate to Texas and American society in general.<sup>43</sup> Although it is known that Mexican-Americans served in the war, it is unclear as to how many participated. Still, the number of Texas-Mexicans that served must have been significant enough for the Texas government to notice since, De Leon claims, “following the war, [the] government no longer looked upon them as stepchildren.”<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, for those Mexican-Americans that served in World War I, their experience evoked a change in how they saw themselves. As mentioned before, most Mexicans residing in the U.S. vehemently opposed Americanization believing that their stay in the U.S. was temporary. However, many World War I veterans of Mexican ethnicity returned with a different outlook about their identity. They now saw the U.S. not as a temporary home, but as their permanent one. Serving in the U.S. military caused them to no longer see themselves as just Mexicans, but as Mexican-Americans. These veterans were more concerned with “acquiring U.S. citizenship and becoming Mexican American than they were with maintaining the Mexican culture.”<sup>45</sup> This ideology brought back by these veterans spread throughout the 1920s and “contributed to a growing sense that Mexican-Americans were citizens and equals.”<sup>46</sup> This

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<sup>43</sup>Arnoldo De León. *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History* (Harlan Davidson, Inc. Wheeling, Illinois, 1993), 84; Foley, 22, 53.

<sup>44</sup> De León, 85, 91, 92.

<sup>45</sup> Acuña, 149.

<sup>46</sup> Acuña, 150.

forced many Mexicans living in the U.S. to come to the understanding that they would never be returning to Mexico as they always believed. With Texas having the largest population of ethnic Mexicans, it was here that this new identity spread the most, especially among the youth.<sup>47</sup>

While the number of ethnic Mexicans that served in World War I is unknown, there is one record of a Mexican national serving with distinction, Marcelino Serna, a Mexican immigrant who served honorably as a private in the United States Army.<sup>48</sup> Serna was born in 1896 in the state of Chihuahua, and like countless Mexican immigrants before him, came to the U.S. searching for work and a better life.<sup>49</sup> In 1916, Serna immigrated to the U.S. living in El Paso for a brief time before finding work with the railroads in Kansas. One year later, Serna moved to Colorado where he found work picking sugar beets. The work was arduous and required one to constantly crouch down in order to pick the sugar beets.<sup>50</sup>

Serna's time as a laborer, however, would be short lived since he volunteered for the Army in 1917 soon after the U.S. entered the war. Although he had registered for the draft in Colorado, Serna was held by federal authorities in Denver due to a mix up with the local draft board. For several days Serna waited for his draft classification, but it never came. Discouraged, Serna told federal authorities that he wanted to volunteer for the army instead.<sup>51</sup> While not yet a U.S. citizen, the "Selective Service regulations allowed draft boards to conscript immigrants from

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<sup>47</sup> Acuña, 150; Morin, 16; De Leon, 99, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A.

<sup>49</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 20, 2009, 1; *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A.

<sup>50</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 11, 1970, B-1; *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>51</sup> *El Paso Times*, February 3, 1973, 1-B; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

nonenemy nations who had completed the necessary paperwork, but were still in the 5-year waiting period.”<sup>52</sup> Serna was processed at Fort Morgan in Colorado where he completed all of the necessary paperwork before he could officially serve in the U.S. Army. Upon being processed and receiving his uniform, Serna was transferred to Camp Funston, Kansas where he was assigned to Company B, 335<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 89<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>53</sup> During training in Kansas, Serna was regarded as an excellent marksman and was selected to be the company scout.<sup>54</sup> After training for almost a month, Serna along with thousands of other American soldiers, were sent to the grisly battlefields of Europe.<sup>55</sup>

Serna’s earliest act of bravery came during his first battle at St. Mihiel, France in July 1918. During one particular engagement, Serna’s “unit was pinned under heavy German machine gun fire.”<sup>56</sup> After thirteen of his friends were cut down, Serna realized that something needed to be done before the rest of the company suffered the same fate. He took it upon himself to act by asking the company commander permission to search for and destroy the machine gun nests that were slaying his comrades.<sup>57</sup> Amazingly, as Serna charged one of the machine gun nests he felt two bullets hit his helmet that luckily failed to wound him. In spite of the continuous heavy fire, Serna successfully managed to get within close distance of the bunker.<sup>58</sup> In an

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<sup>52</sup> Keene, 106.

<sup>53</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 11, 1970, B-1.

<sup>54</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 11, 1970, B-1; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>55</sup> *El Paso Times*, May 4, 2009, 8A.

<sup>56</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>57</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>58</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A.

interview done in 1978, Serna stated, “I crawled to about 50 feet and began throwing hand grenades at the pit.”<sup>59</sup> The blasts from the grenades instantly killed of the six German soldiers inside and was followed by the surrender of eight other Germans that Serna took prisoner.<sup>60</sup>

Serna’s second act of courage also occurred while in the St. Mihiel sector on September 12, 1918. While on patrol duty, Serna spotted a German sniper walking along a trench. The sniper had was unaware that he was being watched by Serna. While the sniper was over 300 yards away, Serna’s skill as a marksman came into play. Serna took aim and fired at the sniper, but only wounded him. The sniper, who turned out to be an equally skilled marksman, shot back at Serna “grazing him slightly on the head” and giving him enough time to escape.<sup>61</sup> Serna, however, tracked down the wounded German by following his blood trail which led to a trench containing several German soldiers. Serna began firing and throwing grenades into the trench killing sixteen Germans. The unexpected, happened when suddenly twenty-four Germans came out of the trench and surrendered to Serna who marched them a mile and a half back to American lines.<sup>62</sup>

For his brave actions during that engagement, Serna was given the Distinguished Service Cross later that month.<sup>63</sup> Presenting Serna with the medal was none other than the commanding

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<sup>59</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>60</sup> *El Paso Times*, September 13, 2009, 9A; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B.

<sup>61</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 7, 1919, 2; *El Paso Times*, September 24, 1978, 11-B; *Hispanics in America’s Defense*, 35, 36.

<sup>62</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 7, 1919, 2; *Hispanics in America’s Defense*, 35, 36.

<sup>63</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 20, 2009, 1A.

general of U.S. forces in Europe, General John J. Pershing.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Pershing who had been assigned in 1916 to lead to the Punitive Expedition into Mexico to capture Pancho Villa was now placing a medal on an American soldier of Mexican descent.<sup>65</sup> Serna's award citation stated that "PVT. Serna displayed exceptional coolness and courage in single-handedly charging and capturing 24 Germans."<sup>66</sup> Serna also received the Victory Medal and two Purple Hearts.<sup>67</sup> In addition, to the U.S. medals he earned, Serna was also given medals from foreign countries, such as the British Medal of Honor, the French Croix de Guerre, and the Italian Cross of Merit.<sup>68</sup>

However, the one medal that many argue Serna deserved and was eligible for was the highest decoration that can be given in the U.S. military which is the Medal of Honor.<sup>69</sup> Initially, Serna recalled being told that he was denied the Medal of Honor because he was only at the rank of private.<sup>70</sup> Serna's supporters, however, argue that he was rejected because he was of Mexican ethnicity.<sup>71</sup> Despite not receiving the Medal of Honor, Serna went on to serve in the U.S. Army until his discharge in 1919. Afterwards, Serna moved to El Paso where he proudly became a U.S. citizen in 1924.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, Marcelino Serna's brave actions in World War I proved that

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<sup>64</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 20, 2009, 1A; Richard O'Connor, *Black Jack Pershing* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), 147.

<sup>65</sup> O'Connor, 117.

<sup>66</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 20, 2009, 1A.

<sup>67</sup> *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> *El Paso Times*, May 4, 2009, 8A; *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 36.

<sup>69</sup> *El Paso Times*, September, 13, 2009, 1A.

<sup>70</sup> *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 20, 2009, 1A.

<sup>72</sup> *El Paso Times*, September, 13, 2009, 9A.

Mexicans, whether immigrant or citizen, could fight and were not the draft dodging cowards they had been labeled.

In addition, World War I saw the first time that the U.S. Army segregated soldiers of Mexican ethnicity, but not for any factor having to do with race. The reason behind this segregation had to do more with the language barrier and it was done on a large scale with other ethnic groups. A significant problem had arose in the U.S. military during the war, especially in the army, in that there were countless draftees who, like Serna, were immigrants with little or no knowledge in the English language. Unlike Serna, however, thousands of these soldiers could not complete their training because of their insufficiency in English. In the early months of 1918, in what was called the “Camp Gordon Plan,” several military camps were chosen to specifically train non-English speaking soldiers in their native language.<sup>73</sup> The “Camp Gordon Plan” came about only after other camps had successful experiments grouping together soldiers who spoke the same language with others who were bilingual. One such experiment occurred in the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which received numerous draftees from New York City. These draftees were from various nationalities and “had only elementary English skills.”<sup>74</sup> At first, officers found it nearly impossible to train these men since they could not understand the orders being given to them. To help solve the problem one of the companies in the division organized themselves according to their language. The result was that “when an English command was given, each corporal could quickly translate it to their squad in time for the men to perform the required

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<sup>73</sup> *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 35.

<sup>74</sup> Keene, 110.

maneuver.”<sup>75</sup> The bilingual troops not only translated orders but often tutored their non-English speaking comrades.<sup>76</sup>

The success of these non-official training programs convinced the War Department to test this method on a large scale in Camp Gordon, Georgia. Soon after seeing its success there, the War Department authorized the creation of thirty-five camps that followed the same training methods that had worked so well in Camp Gordon.<sup>77</sup> Considering the large Mexican population in the Southwest, the majority of “Hispanic draftees” were sent to train at Camp Cody, which was near Deming, New Mexico. As helpful as the Camp Gordon Plan appeared, it had its drawbacks in that the “training took too long and few saw combat as a result.”<sup>78</sup> The military realized that something better needed to be done if another major war were to erupt.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, El Paso had a vastly growing Mexican population that resisted being Americanized. Thus, an idea came even before the U.S. entered World War I, when supporters of Americanization felt that military service for immigrants provided a great tool to “Americanize the unwashed masses...and implant or reinforce the middle –class virtues of personal hygiene, efficiency, chastity, sobriety, and patriotism.”<sup>79</sup> One of the earliest efforts to do this was started by the U.S. Navy in 1913. Details are scarce as to how the navy did this, but it is known that immigrant recruits were given an education in different subjects including history,

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<sup>75</sup> Keene, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Nancy Gentile Ford. *Americans All! Foreign Born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 71; Keene, 111.

<sup>77</sup>Ford, 75, 76; Keene, 111.

<sup>78</sup> *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 35.

<sup>79</sup> Farwell, 61.

geography, and mathematics. In addition, they were also taught reading and writing skills. In the end, all of these events combined may have played significant roles in influencing the Texas National Guard to create a unit in El Paso that consisted only of Mexican-Americans. This was not only because the growing Mexican-American population provided a great future source of military manpower, but it may have also offered a way to reach out to that particular community and Americanize it. The chance to attempt such an experiment would come soon after the end of World War I.

## Chapter 4

### THE COMPANY E EXPERIMENT

On October 15, 1923, Colonel P.A. Wetherred, chief of staff of the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and Colonel Will Jackson, commander of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, announced that a new infantry company of the Texas National Guard was to be formed in El Paso. This resolution came after Wetherred decided that Company E of San Angelo would be changed from an infantry company to a cavalry unit. Furthermore, adding a third infantry company to the two National Guard companies in El Paso would make them into a complete battalion. Wetherred, however, decided and specified that the new Company E would consist only of Mexican-Americans.<sup>80</sup>

To help in the overall recruiting process of the new company Major Hugh M. Shannon, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment placed Lt. Harley D. Hughes in charge of the organizational process. Hughes probably knew that he would need help reaching out to the Mexican community in El Paso; therefore, he acquired the assistance of First Sergeant Saul O. Paredes who not only was Mexican-American, but grew up in El Paso.<sup>81</sup> State authorities gave Hughes and Paredes a fixed time limit to obtain the quota needed to complete the new company. It is possible that some members of the Texas state government did not want or did not believe that the quota would be met to complete this new company of strictly Mexican-American

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<sup>80</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 15, 1923, 1; Texas National Guard, 59.

<sup>81</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 3-4, 1923, 1; Texas National Guard, 59.

personnel. On November 3, Hughes and Paredes succeeded in their task and finished their recruitment drive on well before their time limit expired.<sup>82</sup>

On November 21, 1923, the Texas state and federal government formally accepted Company E as part of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Texas National Guard's 36<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>83</sup> Immediately after its organization Hughes was promoted to Captain and served in Company E along with Paredes as its First Sergeant.<sup>84</sup> Company E's other first commanding officers were First Lieutenant Charles L. Ballard and Second Lieutenant James E. Powell.<sup>85</sup> Their induction and federalization ceremony involved an inspection that was held that night at the National Guard armory in what is now downtown El Paso. The inspection was done by military officers representing the federal and state governments. Representing the state was Captain Joseph Johnson of the Adjutant General's department in Austin and representing the federal government was Major Berkeley Merchant of the 8<sup>th</sup> cavalry.<sup>86</sup>

On June 10, 1937, the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry, Major Hugh M. Shannon announced that he was retiring after fifteen years of service in the National Guard. Replacing Shannon was Major P.M. Hart of San Antonio. According to historian Emily T. Zillich, rumors soon began that not only worried the men of Company E, but also the citizens of El Paso. One rumor was that Major Hart was going to dissolve the National Guard units of El Paso and move them to other parts of Texas. The purpose behind this was that certain high

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<sup>82</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November, 3-4, 1923, 1.

<sup>83</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November, 21, 1923, 1; Blumenson, 1.

<sup>84</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November, 21, 1923, 1; Texas National Guard, 59.

<sup>85</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November, 21, 1923, 1; Zillich, 80.

<sup>86</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November, 21, 1923, 1.

ranking members of the Texas National Guard did not like the fact that Company E was made up entirely of Mexican-Americans and were looking forward in permanently disbanding the company. It is uncertain whether there was any truth to these rumors, but what was certain was that many El Pasoans were not pleased at what might happen if Major Hart took command. What happened next was incredible and holds to the uniqueness of El Paso. Zillich declared that due to “the effort of the newspaper editors, other prominent El Paso citizens, and the military affairs committee of the Chamber of Commerce, the transfer did not take place.”<sup>87</sup> To avoid any further problems, the Texas National Guard also decided to replace Major Hart with Major Douglas N. Lawley as the new commanding officer. Not only was the future of Company E secured, but also that of the National Guard in El Paso.<sup>88</sup>

The spectacle around this incident would soon be overshadowed by events taking place in Europe and Asia. Imperial Japan had started a campaign of expansion in when it invaded Manchuria 1931 and then Northern China in 1937. On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, forcing Britain and France, which had vowed to defend Poland, to declare war on Germany. On May 10, 1940, German forces invaded Belgium, Holland, and France. Within days Holland surrendered and Belgium held on until May 25. Paris fell into German hands on June 14 and two days later French forces asked for an armistice which took effect on June 25. Britain was the only non-neutral country in Western Europe that stood unoccupied by the Germans.<sup>89</sup> On July 14, 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt mobilized National Guard units

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<sup>87</sup> Zillich, 84; *El Paso Herald-Post*, June 10, 1937, 9.

<sup>88</sup> Zillich, 84.

<sup>89</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Son's, 1970), 206, 3, 65, 67, 77, 85, 86.

from thirteen states totaling 50,000 men. It was considered the country's first "step to a compulsory military training program that would put nearly 2,000,000 men under arms by October 1941."<sup>90</sup> Two months later in September, 1940, Imperial Japan signed the Tripartite Pact which allied it with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.<sup>91</sup> Although many in the U.S. wanted to stay out of the war, it seemed that that possibility was slowly disappearing.

While the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was still not officially mobilized, they were scheduled to have combat maneuvers in Craven, Louisiana, with other units of the U.S. Army from August 3 to the 21.<sup>92</sup> It was not until November 25, 1940, the three units of El Paso, totaling 190 men, were mobilized and inducted into federal service. Now they would shift their training from one night a week as guardsmen to eight hours a day as standard army soldiers.<sup>93</sup> Before, the company met a few hours "each Monday night for drills and technical training."<sup>94</sup> Besides meeting locally, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division held summer exercises every year which Company E and the rest of the Texas National Guard attended.<sup>95</sup> Now, however, these men would be leaving their regular civilian jobs to be full-time soldiers and begin training for actual combat. Ironically, many of the soldiers along with their families felt that the odds of the U.S. entering the war were very slim. Therefore, most of the guardsmen felt that this was just another level of training that would "do them a lot

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<sup>90</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, July 13, 1940, 1,3.

<sup>91</sup> Hart, 206.

<sup>92</sup> *El Paso Times*, July 11, 1940, 8; *El Paso Times*, July 30, 1940, 10.

<sup>93</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 25, 1940, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 23, 1940, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Edmundo Moreno, *The El Paso Citizen*, December 1992, 4.

<sup>95</sup> Moreno, 4.

of good.”<sup>96</sup> Company E was not the only El Paso unit that was part of the Texas National Guard. There was also the Headquarters Company and Company H.<sup>97</sup> Company E was designated as a rifle company while Company H was a heavy weapons unit. While Company E reported at full strength of 83 men, Company H reported only having 73 men due to the fact that “some guardsmen with dependents were discharged.”<sup>98</sup>

Two of the city’s local newspapers, The El Paso Times and the El Paso Herald-Post, reported that at least ten students from the College of Mines, now known as the University of Texas at El Paso, withdrew in order to enter the El Paso National Guard. One of these students, Antonio Provencio, was a member of Company E. The college gave a full refund of their tuition and the students were given lee-way in order to “re-enter college without penalty after serving their one year in training.”<sup>99</sup>

On the day of the induction, the men mostly tried on uniforms and had their finger prints taken. After their induction, the men were told that they would not leave El Paso for training until December 4, giving them more time to spend time with their families. However, due to an unknown delay, the units did not leave El Paso until January 2, 1941. The destination of these units was Camp Bowie which was located in central Texas.<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately, Company E would be leaving without the man who helped form them seventeen years earlier, First Sgt. Saul O. Paredes. Although it is unclear if he voluntarily retired or was forced to leave because of his age,

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<sup>96</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 25, 1940, 1.

<sup>97</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 22, 1940, 8.

<sup>98</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 25, 1940, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 23, 1940, 10.

<sup>99</sup> *El Paso Times*, November 20, 1940, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 20, 1940., 2.

<sup>100</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 25, 1940, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 2, 1941, 1.

Paredes was no longer in the National Guard after eighteen years of service. Replacing Paredes was fellow Company E member Sgt. Lorenzo M. Luna.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ricardo Palacios, Jr., interview by Jorge Rodriguez, El Paso, Texas, March 11, 2010.

## Chapter 5

### THE TRAINING

Camp Bowie was a brand new facility, built in September 1940, when “the war situation in Europe caused the U.S. Congress to determine that it was time to strengthen the defense system.” The camp was located one and a half miles from the town of Brownwood and with the addition of training grounds the entire camp totaled 123,000 acres in size. From 1940 to the end of World War II, Camp Bowie was “one of the largest training centers” in Texas and later in 1943 the War Department authorized that a section of the camp be used to house German prisoners of war.<sup>102</sup>

At Camp Bowie, the El Paso units joined the rest of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division which was made up of three infantry regiments: the 141<sup>st</sup>, 142<sup>nd</sup>, and 143<sup>rd</sup>. Each of these regiments consisted of three infantry battalions containing roughly between 900 to 1,000 men that were split into three rifle companies and one heavy weapons company. A rifle company usually numbered up to 160 men that were divided into four platoons. Each platoon then consisted of about forty men which were further split into squads of ten men each. Overall, the size of an infantry division usually summed up to a total of 15,000 men.<sup>103</sup>

Soon after their arrival at Camp Bowie, Company E was assigned a newly promoted captain by the name of John L. Chapin. Chapin had received officer training while attending Texas A&M. Between 1876 and 1963, the university served as a men’s military college and produced almost 14,000 officers that went into the U.S. Army during World War II.<sup>104</sup> In 1936,

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<sup>102</sup> “The History of Camp Bowie.” <http://www.browncountyhistory.org/historycampbowie.htm> (accessed 9/2/2010).

<sup>103</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 25, 1940, 1; Blumenson, 139.

<sup>104</sup> John J. Adams, Jr., *Keepers of the Spirit: The Corps of Cadets at Texas A&M University* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 9, 160, 209.

Chapin had earned a degree from Texas A&M in Chemical Engineering and easily could have served in the U.S. Army's Chemical Warfare unit, but chose the infantry instead. Like some of the men of Company E, Chapin had been born and raised in El Paso, Texas and was very fluent in Spanish. It is possible that this was the reason that Chapin was chosen to be Company E's new captain. Historically, white officers that were assigned to segregated African-American units tended to be from the American south. The reasoning behind this strategy was that the U.S. Army believed that because these officers were from the south they "had more interaction" and therefore, added experience in dealing with African-Americans.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps the Army felt that since Chapin grew up in El Paso and spoke Spanish, he was the best person qualified to lead a unit comprised of Mexican-Americans.

Chapin and the men of the company quickly developed a bond of friendship and loyalty that was immeasurable. Chapin became very well respected among the men of Company E "because of his skill as an officer," but more importantly because of the great lengths he would go to help his men.<sup>106</sup> As a form of friendship the men of the company had developed nicknames for each other and only saw fit that Chapin have one as well. Because of his tall stature and ability to easily tower over most of the men in Company E, Chapin was nicknamed "Daddy long legs."<sup>107</sup>

During the company's stay at Camp Bowie, Gabriel L. Navarrete and a few other members of the company experienced discrimination despite being in military uniform. Navarrete recalled

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<sup>105</sup> Booker, 19, 195.

<sup>106</sup> Dan Wever. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division in World War II: John L. Chapin. Company E, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, <http://www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org/36division/archives/memorial/chapin.htm>, (accessed 2/2/09).

<sup>107</sup> Dan Wever. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division in World War II: John L. Chapin. Company E, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, <http://www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org/36division/archives/memorial/chapin.htm>, (accessed 2/2/09).

that after being promoted to the rank of sergeant, he decided to celebrate by inviting a few friends from the company out to eat at a restaurant in Brownwood.<sup>108</sup> After sitting at a table, a waitress walked up to the group and told Navarrete “I can serve you, but I can’t serve the other guys.”<sup>109</sup> Navarrete felt that the waitress had quickly refused to serve the other members of Company E because of their darker skin complexion. When Navarrete asked the waitress why she could not serve his companions her response was “Because they are Mexicans. They’re going to have to go around back.”<sup>110</sup> Due to Navarrete’s lighter skin complexion the waitress had failed to realize that he too was of Mexican ethnicity. Yet, it was after he pointed that out to the waitress that the restaurant manager came up to Navarrete and yelled, “That’s right. You go around back too.”<sup>111</sup>

Navarrete remembered that his friends “became very angry and wanted to bust up the place.”<sup>112</sup> Navarrete, fortunately, managed to calm the men down and told them that matter needed to be handled differently. Although equally angered by the situation, Navarrete likely knew that any destruction of the restaurants’ property would not solve anything and would have led to their arrest or worse. Upon their return to Camp Bowie, the men took the matter up with Chapin, a man Navarrete and the rest of Company E knew they could count on.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, August, 14, 1981, B1; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>109</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>110</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, August, 14, 1981, B1; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>111</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, August, 14, 1981, B1.

<sup>112</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>113</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

The men arrived at Chapin's office where Navarrete explained what had happened to them. Chapin became infuriated to learn that his men had been discriminated and discussed the incident with a colonel at the base. Considering that this could happen to other Mexican-American troops stationed at Camp Bowie, the colonel probably wanted to quickly settle the matter before any more controversy erupted. Navarrete and the others that were refused service returned to the restaurant with Chapin and the colonel. Navarrete recalled that the colonel confronted the owners demanding an answer as to why they had refused to serve them. The colonel was given the same response that Navarrete received previously, "Because they're Mexicans." The colonel's reply was "No they're not. They're Americans." Ultimately, the owner ordered the colonel, Chapin, and the others to leave the restaurant. Although it appeared that the owner had won, this was not the end of the matter. The end result was that "the hamburger facility was placed off limits and the owners were later fined \$500 for refusing to serve American soldiers."<sup>114</sup>

Unfortunately, like much of Texas, the area around Camp Bowie was a hotbed of racism against anyone of Mexican ethnicity.<sup>115</sup> Ricardo Palacios, Jr., a member of Company E, recalled that a number of the restaurants in Brownwood had large signs saying "NO MEXICANS ALLOWED." Palacios further stated, "It's a heck of a feeling when you go from over here [El Paso] and that's all you see."<sup>116</sup>

As mentioned beforehand, the men of Company E saw their federalization as nothing more

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<sup>114</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>115</sup> Foley, 40.

<sup>116</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

than a continuation of their training. In addition, their stay at Camp Bowie was supposed to be only for a year or so and some of the men had already been discharged in November with others awaiting discharge in December. One of these men was Gabriel Navarrete who learned that he was to receive his discharge on December 10, 1941.<sup>117</sup> Everything changed, however, on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese navy attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The surprise attack resulted in the sinking of eleven ships, including four battleships and the destruction of 188 aircraft. Seriously crippled were four other battleships and three light cruisers.<sup>118</sup> On December 8, the Senate and the House voted to declare war on Japan which was followed three days later with the declaration of war on the U.S. by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.<sup>119</sup> Like the rest of the U.S., the men of Company E were shocked to hear of the attack. Palacios recalled that after the attack on Pearl Harbor the troops took the training seriously than they had before.<sup>120</sup>

Starting from their activation in 1940 to April 1943, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was busy training for war beginning with their preparation at Camp Bowie. Because the division was still at peace time strength, draftees were added to all the companies, including Company E, during their stay at Camp Bowie. But unlike the other companies, the 100 draftees sent to Company E were all Mexican-American, with exception of the new officer that was also added. Most of the new

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<sup>117</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>118</sup> Hart, 203, 216, 217.

<sup>119</sup> C. L. Sulzberger, *World War II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), 75.

<sup>120</sup> Ricardo Palacios, Jr., interview by Jorge Rodriguez, El Paso, Texas, March 11, 2010.

members of the company were from South Texas and tended to be in their late twenties whereas “the average age of the El Paso boys was 21 years of age.”<sup>121</sup>

It appeared, however, that many of these new draftees sent to Company E could not speak English. Palacios believed that the 36<sup>th</sup> Division commanders purposely sent these particular draftees to Company E because its members they were bilingual stating, “the reason they put them as replacements to us [was] because we could understand them and train them.” When orders were given in English the men of the Company E would translate to the new draftees in Spanish. This resembled what had been practiced almost twenty years earlier with the “Camp Gordon Plan.” Palacios believed that the military’s viewpoint was that just because these draftees couldn’t speak English, it “was no reason for them not to serve.” Regardless of the new draftees lack of English, Palacios recalled them as being very good soldiers.<sup>122</sup> Twenty-four of these draftees began taking night classes to learn English, which were being taught by fellow Company E member, Sergeant Enrique Apodaca. Despite some of the draftees’ lack of English, the men of the company made a rule among themselves that only English would be spoken while on duty.<sup>123</sup>

A training program called the “Louisiana Maneuvers” then began in which the 36<sup>th</sup> Division joined eighteen other divisions that totaled nearly 340,000 troops. These maneuvers were to be the “first major army versus army war game.” The divisions were divided into two army groups, Second and Third Army. The Third Army was to play the part of an invading force

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<sup>121</sup> Moreno, 4.

<sup>122</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>123</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 3, 1941, 16.

that Second Army had to fend off. Besides using infantry and fighting vehicles on a large scale, an estimated 1,000 aircraft from the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Army Air Corps also took part in the war games. The pilots trained in dog-fighting tactics, but also in air to ground attacks. Palacios recalled during one of these simulated air attacks that planes would drop bags of flour on ground troops as a way to imitate dropping a bomb. Furthermore, because the maneuvers stressed realism, troops had to make camp and sleep wherever they could. On one particular morning a farmwoman was startled to find some members of Company E sleeping near her land. When asked what they were doing, Palacios replied, “We don’t have nowhere else to sleep ma’am. We’re training to be soldiers [and] this is part of the maneuvers.” Upon learning this the woman was quick to offer the men a cup of coffee, which, of course, they had to refuse so as not to get in trouble.<sup>124</sup>

After the “Louisiana Maneuvers” ended the 36<sup>th</sup> Division returned back to Camp Bowie and remained there until February 1942. After spending almost fifteen months at Camp Bowie, the division was moved to Camp Blanding in Florida where they began their first set of amphibious training.<sup>125</sup> During their stay in Camp Blanding “the company lost a few of the men from El Paso when they were transferred to officers training (OCS) and some went into the Army Air Corps for cadet training.”<sup>126</sup> One of these men was Private First Class Edmundo Moreno who went on to serve in the Eight Air Force’s 490<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group stationed in

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<sup>124</sup> G. Patrick Murray, “Louisiana Maneuvers: Practice for War,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Spring 1972), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231247> (accessed 8/18/2010), 117, 118, 123; Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>125</sup> Clifford H. Peek, ed., *Five Years, Five Countries, Five Campaigns: An Account of the One-Hundred and Forty-First Infantry in World War II* (Munich: F. Bruckman KG, 1945), 10, 11; Moreno, 4.

<sup>126</sup> Moreno, 4.

England.<sup>127</sup> Moreno would become a tail gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress where he earned an Air Medal and a total of five Oak Leaf Clusters for “meritorious achievement” during the numerous bombing missions over Nazi Germany.<sup>128</sup> One of the award citations declared that Moreno “showed courage, coolness and skill while serving as a tail turret gunner.”<sup>129</sup> In another incident, First Sgt. Lorenzo M. Luna was pulled out of the military. The U.S. Army had forced him to leave because of some issue involving his age. Luna did not want to leave Company E but had no choice in the matter. Some time later the U.S. Army asked Luna to come return, but he wanted to go back “with his boys” in Company E. The problem, however, was that by this time the company had already left the U.S. with the rest of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. In the end, Luna was reactivated by the Army as a First Sgt. and sent to the Pacific Theater of War.<sup>130</sup> As was done before, any men that were lost in the company for whatever reason were quickly replaced by other Mexican-American soldiers.<sup>131</sup>

For Palacios, his stay in Camp Blanding was a much more memorable event than at Camp Bowie. As mentioned before, Camp Bowie was located near the town of Brownwood where a few members of the company were refused service at a restaurant because of their ethnicity. While in Florida, Palacios stated that they rarely ever had to wait for a bus since generous motorists would see them in uniform and ask if they needed rides to anyplace in town. The fact that they were of Mexican ethnicity did not seem to bother anyone. On one occasion a dance was

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<sup>127</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1945, 11.

<sup>128</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 25, 1944, 5.

<sup>129</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1945, 11.

<sup>130</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010; Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>131</sup> Moreno, 4.

held at a nearby town and the soldiers were invited, including the men of Company E. Palacios recalled that no problems occurred between them and the townspeople.<sup>132</sup>

By July of 1942, the division began training exercises in North and South Carolina in what was called the “Carolina Maneuvers.” The following month, the division made one of their last stops at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts.<sup>133</sup> Soon after their arrival, Company E received a surprise when they were chosen for special training. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division had received orders that at least “one company from each division [was] to take a Ranger course lasting one month. This training was given in the Ranger Camp located 10 miles south of Camp Edwards.”<sup>134</sup>

The Rangers were Special Forces units that were modeled after British Commandos. The British commandos were created on the request of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who wanted “highly trained men who were skilled in amphibious operations...to spread terror up and down the German-occupied coasts of Europe.”<sup>135</sup> Commencing in June 1940, British Commandos began engaging in hit and run raids in numerous German controlled territories ranging from Norway to North Africa. The U.S. Army soon realized the great capabilities a unit like the British Commandos could offer and soon began creating Ranger Battalions. In addition, they also realized that training regular army units in this fashion could increase their fighting potential on the battlefield.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Peek, 12.

<sup>134</sup> Moreno, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 6, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Black, 6.

It appeared that the intent of this Ranger training was to make a mentally and physically tough soldier even tougher. One part of the training that was given priority were the speed marches, which were considered the “heart of the Ranger toughening process.”<sup>137</sup> The speed marches were a daily exercise that involved that soldiers surmount obstacle courses while wearing the full weight of their combat gear. The result was that the soldiers undergoing this training “grew accustomed to walking through fatigue and pain.”<sup>138</sup> The men awakened at six in the morning to begin their training which began by completing a 1,200 yard obstacle course. While the course was only six-hundred yards the men were forced to run it twice. After having their breakfast, there was a variety of training segments that Company E participated in. Some of the more physical training included, “river and stream crossings ...cliff climbing...weapons and bayonet training, scouting and patrolling, small unit tactics, hand-to-hand combat...and first aid.”<sup>139</sup>

On occasion, animal blood was thrown at the soldiers during some of their training exercises. Although the men were never exactly told why this was done, it was believed that it would help simulate actual combat and get them accustomed to the gore of war. Whatever the reason, this was one part of the training that some members of Company E were not too fond of.<sup>140</sup> Map reading was another part of the training that was emphasized, but the men were also taught how to use the stars to find their way at night. Palacios indicated that this was done in case

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<sup>137</sup> Black, 23.

<sup>138</sup> Black, 24.

<sup>139</sup> Moreno, 4; Black, 23.

<sup>140</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

the soldiers lacked a map or compass.<sup>141</sup> The more specialized training taught the men how to find and diffuse enemy booby traps while also being able to set up their own. Moreover, the men were taught how to precisely destroy “bridges, buildings, tanks and machine gun nests.” Finally, the men would end their day almost the same way it began with an eight mile run.<sup>142</sup>

The fact that Company E was picked for Ranger training should not have come as a complete surprise to them since “it was considered the rough and tough outfit of the division.”<sup>143</sup> Almost from their inception, the “esprit-de-corps” or group morale was one of great self-confidence and loyalty. Gabriel Navarrete once noted that for the El Paso members of Company E, “not only were the men in company comrades in arms, they had known each other since childhood and their parents knew each other. It was like one big happy family.”<sup>144</sup> Three of its members were actually from one family, brothers Juan, Andres, and Antonio Saucedo.<sup>145</sup> While the men of the company might have attended different high schools they had generally grown up in the same area of El Paso.<sup>146</sup> No doubt what helped some the men was that fact that many had participated in sports while they attended high school. Even for those who did not play sports, joining Company E quickly got them into great physical shape. Alex Carrillo stated that the men became so physically conditioned that they “could outlast almost anything.”<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>142</sup> Moreno, 4.

<sup>143</sup> Moreno, 4.

<sup>144</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>145</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 29, 1944, 2; *El Paso Herald-Post*, September, 10, 1945, 1.

<sup>146</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>147</sup> *The Men of Company E*, prod. Alfredo Lugo, dir. Harry Ratner, 32 min., Mestizo Production Associates, 1983, DVD.

From marching drills to their marksmanship training, the men took great pride in almost everything they did. An example of this was in the long marches the company would do as National Guardsmen. Company E started their marches at the National Guard headquarters in El Paso up to what was then the city of Ysleta and back again. The roundtrip march was a total distance of twenty-two miles, which they completed in seven hours and twenty minutes. Still, to finish off the day the company competed against each other in a football game.<sup>148</sup> In an interview done in 1941, First Sgt. Lorenzo M. Luna stated that it was “the boast of the company that it has never had a man fall out on a march. The men try to carry on no matter how badly they may feel.”<sup>149</sup>

In regards to their marksmanship, Company E won the regimental championship eight years in a row earning them the title of “expert marksmen.”<sup>150</sup> Company E’s marksmanship skills helped their regiment win the Pershing Trophy twice; once in 1936 and again in 1937. The award was given by the National Guard Bureau to units who achieved excellent marksmanship in these competitions. During one national marksmanship competition, Company E defeated countless other National Guard units to earn seventh place.<sup>151</sup>

Perhaps the best marksman that Company E had was Sergeant Manuel Martinez. During the 1936 divisional competition in Palacios, Texas, Martinez won second place. While Martinez achieved several awards for other competitions he won, this victory was probably his finest.

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<sup>148</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 3, 1941, 16.

<sup>149</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 3, 1941, p.16.

<sup>150</sup> Zillich,80; *El Paso Times*, June 10, 1937, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Zillich, 80; *El Paso Times*, June 10, 1937, 3.

Presenting him with his award was Texas State Governor Miriam Ferguson.<sup>152</sup> The eighth and last competition that Company E won was in April 1941 during their stay in Camp Bowie. The company won the regimental rifle championship when “ninety per cent of the El Paso unit qualified as marksmen and 14 individuals were designated as rifle experts.”<sup>153</sup> Whether due to their intense physical training or unit pride, Company E was even said to have “excelled in training exercises.” Gabriel L. Navarrete recalled how Company E “were [sic] known throughout the division for being able to penetrate enemy defenses during war games.”<sup>154</sup>

After receiving their Ranger training, Company E rejoined their division to continue exercises in amphibious warfare. This included loading from troopships onto the smaller assault boats which were used to take the men onto the beaches to simulate an amphibious landing. During this training many of the troops believed that the assault boats would drop them off right on the beach, but usually never did. Upon leaving the assault boats the men often found themselves chest deep in water having to make their way onto the beach while wearing full combat gear.<sup>155</sup> As the training continued into January, 1943, the men still did not know when or where the U.S. Army would be sending them to fight. Little did they know that they would soon be leaving the U.S. to fight the forces of Nazi Germany.

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<sup>152</sup> Zillich, 81.

<sup>153</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 3, 1941, 16; Moreno, 4.

<sup>154</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

<sup>155</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

## Chapter 6

### NORTH AFRICA

In April 1943, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division received orders that it was finally going overseas. Its destination was North Africa where it would become part of the “newly formed Fifth Army.”<sup>156</sup> The Fifth Army was under the command of Lt. Gen. Mark W. Clark which consisted of the British 10<sup>th</sup> Corps and the American VI Corps. Each corps was made up of two divisions. The British 10<sup>th</sup> Corps had the 46<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Divisions while the 36<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Divisions made up the American VI Corps.<sup>157</sup> Despite the fact that the 45<sup>th</sup> Division started out originally as the Oklahoma National Guard, it received draftees from all over the U.S. It was not rare to find numerous Mexican-Americans in the 45<sup>th</sup> Division from Arizona, New Mexico, and even Texas.<sup>158</sup>

On April 2, 1943, the division boarded the troop transport *U.S.S. Brazil* and sailed out of Staten Island, New York on their way to North Africa.<sup>159</sup> Although there seemed to be no serious problems during the trip to North Africa, Ricardo Palacios, Jr., recalled feeling uneasy during much of the trip. At night every soldier had to be in their bunks below deck, but were allowed to go above deck during the day. To keep busy during the trip the men of Company E would listen to music, read books and reminisce about El Paso. On one particular day Palacios noticed the ship seemed to be traveling in a zigzag pattern, but was unsure as to why. Finally, a

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<sup>156</sup> Lee Carraway Smith, *A River Swift and Deadly: The 36<sup>th</sup> “Texas” Division at the Rapido River* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1997), <http://www.netlibrary.com.lib.utep.edu>, (accessed 2/2/09), 6.

<sup>157</sup> Robert L. Wagner, *The Texas Army: A History of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division in the Italian Campaign* (Austin, Texas: State House Press, 1991), 5.

<sup>158</sup> Wagner, 5; Morin, 57.

<sup>159</sup> Morin, 60; Peek, 12,13.

Navy shipman answered his curiosity by telling him that it was a precaution against German submarines that might have been in the vicinity. The zigzagging pattern would make it more difficult for the ships to sustain a direct hit from a submarine's torpedo.<sup>160</sup> The threat of submarines was real enough and orders were given out to soldiers and sailors telling them not to throw anything into the water that might give away their position. On one occasion a soldier "was fined \$15.00 for throwing an apple core over the side."<sup>161</sup> Moreover, Palacios and the rest of the soldiers staying in the lower decks were told that if the ship began taking on water for whatever reason the hatches in these lower levels would be closed in order to try and save the ship, even if it meant sacrificing the lives of the soldiers staying at the bottom levels. Whether this was an actual policy or not, Palacios made it a point to try and stay above deck as much as he could.<sup>162</sup>

The 36<sup>th</sup> Division arrived at Oran, Algeria on April 13, 1943 and continued their training for the next five months.<sup>163</sup> Besides training, Company E occasionally took part in small unit patrols, but never engaged the Germans in combat. Palacios, who lead some of these patrols, stated that they would "search a certain area, but the Germans were already gone."<sup>164</sup> By this time in the war the tides had turned against the German and Italian forces in North Africa who were now frantically attempting to escape to Sicily with as many of their troops as possible. On

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<sup>160</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>161</sup> Peek, 13.

<sup>162</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>163</sup> Peek, 13, 14; Smith, 6.

<sup>164</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

May 13, Axis troops that still remained in North Africa finally surrendered.<sup>165</sup> In their hurry to retreat, Axis troops left behind not only men but also war supplies. Some of this included German weapons and ammunition with which Company E and other units of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division practiced first hand.<sup>166</sup>

Soon discussions arose between Allied commanders about which division would participate in the invasion of Sicily. While it was proposed that the 36<sup>th</sup> Division participate in the invasion, General Dwight D. Eisenhower and other Allied commanders deemed the division too inexperienced for this mission; therefore, more experienced units were chosen and training continued for the men of Company E and the rest of the division.<sup>167</sup> Later, with the campaign in Sicily succeeding, the question then became who would participate in the invasion of Southern Italy code named “Operation Avalanche.”<sup>168</sup> While it was suggested that the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division lead the attack because of its combat experience, General Clark chose the 36<sup>th</sup> Division to spearhead the landings on the American sector of the invasion; meanwhile, two British divisions would invade further north. Being held in reserve to support of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.<sup>169</sup> Out of all the divisions making the assault on Italy the 36<sup>th</sup> was the only one that had not seen combat. The British 46<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Divisions had already experienced combat against the Germans and the 45<sup>th</sup> Division had even taken part in the invasion of

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<sup>165</sup> Hart, 430, 431.

<sup>166</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>167</sup> Martin Blumenson, *Bloody River: The Real Tragedy at the Rapido River* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 9.

<sup>168</sup> Wagner, 5.

<sup>169</sup> Hugh Pond, *Salerno* (Little, Brown and Company: Boston, 1961), 49; Wagner, 5; Blumenson, 4.

Sicily.<sup>170</sup> The men of Company E and the rest of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were about to be tested against the battle hardened German Army which had a total of eighteen divisions in Italy. Protecting southern Italy was German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring with eight divisions, three of which were Panzer (tank) divisions.

The Allies were to land in the Gulf of Salerno which was located in the Southwestern region of Italy. Allied commanders estimated that there were at least 20,000 German troops in the area.<sup>171</sup> The mission of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was to land troops a few miles north of the Italian town of Agropoli and “capture main roads and push out to contact Montgomery’s Eighth Army” which had crossed from Sicily over through the Messina Strait to the toe of Italy on September 3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>172</sup>

At the time, this was the “largest combined operation of World War II” with an estimated 450 vessels put together for the invasion.<sup>173</sup> Still, Allied commanders knew that there was no such thing as an easy and simple amphibious invasion and the plan to invade Salerno was already offering its own set of problems. First, as large as the invasion force was, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division had a limited number of amphibious landing craft to take the troops to the Salerno beaches. Allied commanders knew there was a risk their troops could be overrun if there were too few of them to make a breakthrough in the German defenses. Secondly, making matters more difficult were the

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<sup>170</sup> Wagner, 5; Morin, 57.

<sup>171</sup> Wagner, 5; Pond, 36.

<sup>172</sup>History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm,2, roll 3027; Pond, 50; Sulzberger, 172.

<sup>173</sup>Lieutenant Colonel Chester G. Starr, ed., *From Salerno to the Alps: A History of the Fifth Army 1943-1945* (Infantry Journal Press: Washington, 1948), 16; Pond, 42.

reports that the Germans had placed artillery one mile from the coast and that “an Italian-laid mine field in the Gulf of Salerno prevented convoys from approaching close to shore and would be a hazard to the landing craft.”<sup>174</sup> Allied ships wanted to stay out of range of any artillery and were ordered to stay twelve miles from the coast. This meant that it would take longer for the landing craft to reach the Italian shore, drop off the soldiers and return back to the troopships to pick up the next wave of infantry.<sup>175</sup> Overall, this meant that the “36<sup>th</sup> Division would have to go in alone; and the follow-up forces would be slow in arriving to bolster the invasion effort.”<sup>176</sup>

The last problem involved the air cover for the troops making the landings. The plan called for using fighter planes stationed in airfields in Sicily; however, because of the distance between Sicily and Salerno, fighter planes could only offer, at the most, twenty minutes of air cover. Anything more and pilots would risk running out of fuel before reaching the safety of their airfields back in Sicily.<sup>177</sup>

In general, invading Italy would help the Allies accomplish at least three things. First, it would force Germany to divert more troops to Italy that would otherwise be sent to France or Russia. This was vital since the Allies were already making plans to invade Western Europe by way of France in either the spring or summer of 1944.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, Joseph Stalin was growing frustrated because he felt that the Soviet Union was taking on the brunt of the German military. Stalin believed that opening a new front would relieve pressure from his forces.

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<sup>174</sup> Starr, 16, 13.

<sup>175</sup> Starr, 16.

<sup>176</sup> Blumenson, 4.

<sup>177</sup> Blumenson, 4.

<sup>178</sup> Pond, 24; Starr, 59.

Secondly, Italy could “provide airfields for attacks on the heart of Germany, France, and the Balkans,” since Allied bombing attacks were only being launched from England.<sup>179</sup> And thirdly, control of Italy would systematically result in “the Allies complete control of the Mediterranean.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Pond, 24, 25.

<sup>180</sup> Pond, 25.

## Chapter 7

### SALERNO

After having their final segment of training for the Salerno invasion in August 1943, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division “moved into a staging area...15 miles from the Port of Oran.”<sup>181</sup> On September 3, Company E and the rest of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry boarded the *U.S.S. O’Hara* at Oran, Algeria. Although the men of the 36<sup>th</sup> had trained for the invasion of Salerno, they had not yet been given specific details regarding the mission of each unit. This was not done until September 5, when Allied ships were out to sea and there was no possibility of these plans being discovered by the Germans. For the next three days the troops began preparing for each of their missions by constantly going over “maps, photographs, and orders” to make sure each man in each unit knew their objective. Before being briefed on the invasion plans, the journey on the convoy was a great welcome by the troops. It was a one of the few times the men were given a time to relax from both the strenuous training and the harsh conditions of the North African desert.<sup>182</sup>

The course taken by the Allied convoy “proceeded along the North African coastline to Bizerte, Tunisia, and around the extreme western tip of Sicily, heading for the Gulf of Salerno.”<sup>183</sup> On September 9, 1943, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division began the invasion of mainland Italy and the “men of E Company were among the first to hit Italian soil.”<sup>184</sup> At 2:12 a.m. Company E and

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<sup>181</sup> Peek, 14.

<sup>182</sup>History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3027.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3027; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1.

the rest of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the *U.S.S. O'Hara* began loading onto the assault boats. The attack began at 3:30 a.m. with waves of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry making the initial assault.<sup>185</sup> However, American troops were not given the support of naval artillery before the landing because it was assumed that the attack would catch the Germans by surprise. This was an ill-fated decision for the American troops in the leading waves of the invasion force. Upon landing at the beaches, they were met with a barrage of machine gun, artillery, and mortar fire.<sup>186</sup>

The first waves of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were Companies E and F which landed at 5:30 a.m. on the left flank of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Before the assault boats even reached the beach, the men could see tracer bullets from German machine guns being fired at them. They were immediately followed by the second and third waves consisting of Companies G, H, and Battalion Hq.<sup>187</sup> Upon landing the men were met by German artillery that was “churning the sand” as they ran for cover.<sup>188</sup> Forty-five minutes later, Company E had fought and pushed their way 300 yards inland from the beach. During their push the men of Company E were shocked when they were suddenly engaged by five German tanks near the beach.<sup>189</sup> The problem was that the “Allied plan did not allow for any large number of tanks to go ashore in the early stages” of the invasion.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, microfilm, 2, roll 3027; Narrative of Action, 2nd Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, September 3-21, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3039.

<sup>186</sup> Sulzberger, 172; Pond, 72.

<sup>187</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, microfilm, 2, roll 3027; Narrative of Action, 2nd Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, September 3-21, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3039; *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 10, 1945, 1.

<sup>188</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 10, 1945, 1.

<sup>189</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 6, roll 3027.

<sup>190</sup> Pond, 77.

Attempts were made to have the navy provide artillery support but the radio operators on the beach were out of range. In addition, support from Allied aircraft in Sicily was set to go into the attack until exactly 8:30 which would take some time before getting there.<sup>191</sup> In the end, without the help of tanks and artillery of their own, the men of Company E had no choice but to fight off the tank attack any way they could.<sup>192</sup> If the Germans reached the landing zones, it would threaten the success of the invasion and cut off any soldiers that were further inland.

It was at this time that several members of Company E took aggressive initiative to help repel the attack by enemy tanks. One of these men was Sergeant Enrique Ochotorena, a native of El Paso who had joined Company E prior its activation for combat duty. Although Ochotorena and his platoon were initially further behind the rest of the company, he quickly moved to engage three of the tanks, the closest being only fifty yards away. Armed only with a sub-machine gun Ochotorena saw a soldier that was armed with a bazooka. Ochotorena tried to get the soldier to go with him, but the soldier appeared to be disoriented. Ochotorena, therefore, grabbed the bazooka and began firing on the tank. The tank backed up a few yards in reverse before becoming completely immobilized from the bazooka rounds. With nowhere to go the German tank crew jumped out and surrendered, but the fight did not stop there for Ochotorena.<sup>193</sup> He and another member of Company E then rushed to find a safe position to fire on the other two tanks with the bazooka. After finding a sand dune for cover, Ochotorena,

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<sup>191</sup> Pond, 77, 78, 75.

<sup>192</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 6, roll 3027.

<sup>193</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 6, 1944, 3; History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm,6, roll 3027.

“acting as assistant gunner, accurately directed fire” destroying one tank and forcing the other to retreat.<sup>194</sup>

In another section of the beach, Sgt. Jesus M. Lucio had also helped repel the German attack by using his rifle, which also served as a grenade launcher, to fire on the enemy tanks. With no concern for his own well-being, Lucio ran over open ground to gain a better position to attack the tanks. In the end, Lucio’s efforts, combined with those of the rest of the company, forced the tanks to retreat. Lucio’s Silver Star citation stated that his “great initiative and aggressiveness throughout the action contributed largely towards causing the enemy tanks to withdraw, preventing a breakthrough in the company’s position.”<sup>195</sup>

Private Raymon G. Gutierrez was another member of Company E who distinguished himself during the invasion of Salerno. While trying to give covering fire with his automatic rifle, a German tank fired at Gutierrez with its machine guns nearly killing him. One of the rounds struck Gutierrez in his right arm and it apparently also disabled his rifle. According to his Silver Star citation, the only things Gutierrez had left to fight with were a combat knife and one hand grenade. Although somewhat defenseless, Gutierrez did not seem deterred from continuing the fight since he managed to destroy a machine gun nest with what seemed to be his only grenade. Afterward, a German soldier, who was possibly another member of the machine gun crew, attacked Gutierrez. Given that Gutierrez had extensive training in hand to hand combat, he was able fight off the German with his knife, despite being wounded.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 2, roll 2078; *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 6, 1944, 3.

<sup>195</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 3, roll 2078;

Sometime between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m., after the tank attack was repelled, Captain John L. Chapin regrouped the company to lead them further in when, again, the men were attacked by five German tanks. It was believed that these were the same tanks that had attacked the company when they landed on the beach.<sup>197</sup> This assault, however, was part of a larger German counterattack that consisted primarily of artillery and tanks all along the American sector. The counterattack was meant to annihilate American forces which had not yet established a foothold on the Italian beaches.<sup>198</sup> Seeing as they had no infantry support, the German tanks decided to fire on the troops from a distance. Much like before, the men of Company E “exposed themselves to the dangerous task of firing directly at the tanks at very close range.”<sup>199</sup> The lack of infantry hindered the German tanks in that it left them unprotected and allowed the men of Company E a better opportunity get within a close distance to attack them. A battle report indicated that Private First Class Salomon Santos, Jr., Private First Class Abner E. Carrasco, and Private Harold B. Beaver fought bravely and prevented the Germans from overrunning their sector, in spite of being ill-equipped to battle tanks. After almost an hour of fighting, Company E had successfully fought off the second tank attack that threatened the beachhead in their sector and forced the Germans to withdraw more than 500 yards further inland.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 4, roll 2078.

<sup>197</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, microfilm, 6, roll 3027; Narrative of Action, 2nd Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, September 3-21, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3039.

<sup>198</sup> Peek, 20, 21.

<sup>199</sup> Narrative of Action, 2nd Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, September 3-21, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3039.

<sup>200</sup> Narrative of Action, 2nd Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, September 3-21, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3039; History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the

Late in the first day of the invasion, Sgt. Gabriel L. Navarrete was ordered to lead a six man patrol to determine the position and strength of the German forces in the area. Navarrete and the patrol did not have to wait long before they encountered a German tank. They observed the German crew exiting their tank giving the patrol the impression that the crew was unaware of their presence. Still, the patrol hesitated in attacking with grenades until they were certain that the entire crew had exited the tank. Afterward and for unknown reasons, the patrol got inside of the German tank. It was during this time that another German tank appeared several yards away. Navarrete recalled the incident stating, “We got inside the tank but we couldn’t operate it. Everything was in German, but there was a shell in the (cannon’s) breech... We didn’t know what the hell to do. We took aim at the other tank and by trial and error, fired and knocked it out.”<sup>201</sup> As amazing as this accomplishment was, the men had no time celebrate and proceeded on with their mission.

Everything was calm until the patrol was caught out in the open by a group of Germans manning a machine gun. Without a radio to call for artillery or reinforcements, Navarrete took out a small mirror to use as a signal projector; however, before he could even use it, a round from the machine gun destroyed it nearly blowing off Navarrete’s hand in the process.<sup>202</sup> As the German fire continued, the patrol did the only thing they could to get cover, which was to form and hide behind small mounds of dirt. Navarrete stated that, unfortunately, “I wasn’t quite fast

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Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm,7, roll 3027.

<sup>201</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1, E-6; 36th Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 2078.

<sup>202</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-1, E-6;. 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944. Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 2078.

enough. I was doing that when a bullet hit the dirt in front of me. It slowed it down, but it hit me in the middle of the forehead and was sticking out about a half inch.”<sup>203</sup> The impact of the bullet on Navarrete’s head caused him to briefly lose consciousness. As he lay there motionless, the men in the patrol believed that their worst fear had come true and that Navarrete was dead. Still, the men had no choice but to hold their composure and continue fighting.<sup>204</sup>

As the battle persisted, the patrol suddenly saw another German tank headed towards them. Much like the previous battles of that day, the patrol fought without the use of any anti-tank weaponry. As the tank approached them, a member of the crew came out from the safety of the tank to fire on the patrol with his sub-machine gun. It is feasible that the German did this because they had run out of ammunition for the tank and wanted to prevent any members of the patrol from climbing onto it. Apparently, Private First Class Alfredo P. Ruiz saw this as an opportunity and ran towards the tank firing his weapon at the German crewman. The unexpected happened when “Private Ruiz approached so close to the tank that he was caught in the camouflage of brush used by the Germans and pulled for about ten yards before being able to break loose.”<sup>205</sup>

After regaining consciousness, Navarrete got up and flung a grenade that landed on the Germans manning a machine gun, killing them instantly. As delighted as the men probably were to see that Navarrete was alive, the battle was not yet over. With the situation only getting worse, the men needed to find a way out before they were overwhelmed. Somehow, Navarrete

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<sup>203</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-6.

<sup>204</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-6.

<sup>205</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 7, roll 3027.

succeeded in using an enemy tank as cover to get his patrol to the safety of a nearby stone wall. After being pinned down for the next two hours, Navarrete finally managed to lead the patrol back to American lines using some of the vegetation as cover. Following the arrival to their lines, Navarrete was sent to the field hospital to receive medical attention and later shipped to a hospital in North Africa.<sup>206</sup>

The men of Company E were not the only Mexican-Americans that day that showed their bravery. Sergeant Manuel S. Gonzales from Ft. Davis, was in the 142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. Upon landing on the beach Gonzales saw “an 88-mm canon firing point-blank into the open doors of the landing craft” that were setting down onto the beach.<sup>207</sup> Gonzales grabbed his rifle along with as many grenades as he could, and under his own initiative began heading towards the position of the 88-mm canon. The Germans manning the canon soon saw Gonzales and began firing at him. As he threw himself to the ground for cover a tracer round from the German machine gun hit his field pack causing it to catch on fire. Gonzales quickly removed his field pack and continued towards the gun emplacement. As he neared it, there was a sudden exchange of grenades being thrown between Gonzales and the Germans.<sup>208</sup> One of the German grenades happened to land near Gonzales which sent fragments of shrapnel into the left side of his torso including his arm and hand. Amazingly, the wounds were only minor and Gonzales still

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<sup>206</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 2078; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-6.

<sup>207</sup> Pond, 73, 74; *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 42.

<sup>208</sup> Morin, 62; *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 42.

managed to destroy the German gun emplacement by using all of his grenades. For his courageous actions on that day Sgt. Gonzales was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.<sup>209</sup>

Unfortunately, two members of Company E were killed helping to fight off the heavy German counterattack during the first day of the invasion. Corporal Manuel G. Gonzales of El Paso, Texas was one of the casualties. Gonzales was attempting to destroy a tank, but as he ran towards it he was shot “through the legs.”<sup>210</sup> Wounded and unable to move, Gonzales was now in the path of an oncoming German tank. Private First Class Tirso F. Carrillo rushed to help his comrade undeterred by the heavy battle going on around him; unfortunately, despite his brave attempt, the tank moved too quickly and Carrillo was unable to move Gonzales in time. Carrillo nearly became a casualty himself and barely escaped being run over by the same tank that had just killed Gonzales.<sup>211</sup> The second fatal casualty was Private First Class Juan Pruitt of Pearsall, Texas. During the German counterattack, Pruitt “placed his Browning automatic rifle on top of a stone wall and maintained a heavy volume of fire against the enemy until his position was located by a German who opened fire and killed.”<sup>212</sup>

As unfortunate as these deaths were, Company E was indeed very lucky it had not sustained higher casualties considering it was attacked twice by German tanks and artillery. On the whole, the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment had a total of sixty men killed in action; one-hundred and fifty wounded in action; and forty-two missing in action. Of these Company E only suffered two

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<sup>209</sup> Morin, 62; Pond, 74; *Hispanics in America's Defense*, 42.

<sup>210</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 6, roll 3027.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

dead and five wounded. The names of the five wounded soldiers were: Rodolfo G. Acosta, Librado A. Gonzales, Gabriel L. Navarrete, Rafael Q. Torres, and Marcelino Valadez.<sup>213</sup>

Overall, battle reports indicated that Company E “played a vital part in protecting the beachhead against repeated enemy attacks which possessed much greater fire power than that of the infantry. The aggressive action of every member of Company “E” was instrumental in keeping the enemy tanks from driving down the beach itself.”<sup>214</sup> The following men of Company E were recommended for citations on September 12<sup>th</sup> for their actions in holding and repelling the German tank attacks: 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. James M. Humphries, 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Gabriel L. Navarrete, Sgt. Librado A. Gonzales, Sgt. Carlos Irrobali, Sgt. Jesus M. Lucio, Sgt. Rafael Q. Torres, Sgt. Marcelino Valadez, Staff Sgt. Enrique Ochotorena, Cpl. Santiago V. Jaramillo, Cpl. Benito G. Dominguez, Pvt. Abner C. Carrasco, Pvt. Tirso F. Carrillo, Pvt. Juan R. Padilla, Pvt. Miguel S. Garcia, Pvt. Alfredo P. Ruiz, Pvt. Salomon Santos, Pvt. Ramon G. Gutierrez, Pvt. Harold B. Beaver, Pvt. Juan Pruitt, Pvt. Manuel C. Gonzales.<sup>215</sup>

Sgt. Robert P. Moncada would later state, “it was infantry versus tanks during the first day and we hung on by the skin of our teeth.”<sup>216</sup> Sgt. Ricardo Palacios, Jr. indicated that they were very lucky to only have encountered tanks, believing that the landings would have been more

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<sup>213</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, microfilm, 16, roll 3027; 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment Casualty List for the Month of September, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, 4, 7, roll 3027.

<sup>214</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, 7, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3027.

<sup>215</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, September 12, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>216</sup> *El Paso Times*, July 4, 1944, 2.

difficult had they run into infantry instead.<sup>217</sup> In fact, it is possible that the invasion could have been a complete catastrophe had the German tanks been supported by infantry. Ultimately, Company E the weapons they had on hand to fight off the tanks which included “rifles, machine guns, hand grenades and rifle grenades.”<sup>218</sup> Palacios recalled his thoughts when he saw the German tanks and had no anti-tank weapons to destroy them declaring that, “the only thing you can do is point your gun at the windows. May be you’d get lucky and hit ‘em. May be.”<sup>219</sup> These windows described by Palacios were actually small rectangular port holes in the tank used by the drivers to see where they were going.

The 36<sup>th</sup> Division remained on the front lines until September 21 when they were sent to a bivouac area (temporary camp) near the town of Altavilla to set up a defensive position. For the most part, the division was given time to reorganize and have a much needed and deserved rest. While inexperienced, the troops of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division had successfully pushed the Germans off the beaches and held their ground against repeated enemy tank attacks. The invasion that almost ended in disaster was saved by the bravery and determination of individual soldiers like those in Company E. The combat experience these men gained from the Salerno invasion not only made them veterans, but gave them the confidence to know that they could win battles against the profoundly experienced German Army.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>218</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 6, roll 3027.

<sup>219</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>220</sup> History of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment during the Invasion of Italy on the Gulf of Salerno, September 9 to 21, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 16, roll 3027; Blumenson, 10, 11.



## Chapter 8

### THE TOUGH PART BEGINS

As difficult as the Salerno invasion was, it would look easy when compared to what lay ahead for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and the rest of the Allies. The rocky and mountainous terrain of Italy provided the Germans with near perfect defensive positions that made flanking attacks by the Allies nearly impossible. All of the roads and passages leading north were well defended by German troops in fortified positions. In a sense, the Allies were being forced to fight the Germans in what would be costly full frontal attacks.<sup>221</sup> As the Allies were later to discover, their air power often “posed no threat to the defenders: established on and behind steep, rocky hillsides, they [Germans] had no need to maneuver and required only the barest of essentials to sustain their resistance.”<sup>222</sup> While this group of German forces held the Allies, other units farther in the rear could continue building up their defenses. This was especially in regards to their primary line of defense south of Rome called the Gustav Line.<sup>223</sup>

The Gustav Line stretched across Italy from the Tyrrhenian Sea in the West to the Adriatic Sea in the East. As the Allies would later discover, the Gustav Line ran along several rivers that added to its defenses. Beginning from the west, there was the Garigliano River that flowed from the the Liri and Gari Rivers. Finally, there was the Rapido River which flowed in front of Cassino.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Blumenson, 31.

<sup>222</sup> John Keegan, *The Second World War* (Viking: New York, 1990), 353.

<sup>223</sup> Starr, 57.

<sup>224</sup> Starr, 57; Wagner, 96.

After spending a month recovering from his head wound Sgt. Gabriel L. Navarrete was allowed to return to his unit in Italy. Navarrete recalled that upon his return to Company E “the supply sergeant had given away all my (belongings) and equipment because he thought I was dead.”<sup>225</sup> Later that day, Navarrete was ordered to report to the regimental commander of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry, Colonel Richard J. Werner. Navarrete was shocked to discover that he was given a battlefield commission as a second lieutenant. Ironically, Navarrete had applied three previous times for officer training and was rejected every time.

As momentous as this should have been for Navarrete, in reality it was anything but. Military policy dictated that by taking the commission Navarrete would more than likely be transferred “to another company, maybe another division.”<sup>226</sup> Navarrete told Werner that he had to respectfully decline the battlefield commission because he did not want to leave Company E. The company was filled with many comrades that he considered more as family than as friends given that he had known them since childhood. This, apparently, was the issue that worried some of the other officers. The question was whether or not “the men would respect Navarrete as an officer since they had been through so much together.”<sup>227</sup> In the end, Werner told Navarrete that he could accept the battlefield commission and still stay with Company E. As a second lieutenant, Navarrete was put in charge of 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon. The men of Company E, especially the El Paso members of the unit, were proud to see that one of their own received a battlefield

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<sup>225</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-6.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

commission. Above all they were delighted that Navarrete was not being transferred to another unit.<sup>228</sup>

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was ordered to move nine miles northwest of Naples where they would begin a training schedule and prepare for “Operation Tornado.”<sup>229</sup> The operation called for an amphibious landing farther up the Italian coast near the town of Gaeta. The troops trained during the rest of October for this new operation until November 2<sup>nd</sup>, when the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment left to the Naples Harbor at 2:00 p.m. where they began boarding landing craft. As confident as the men were there was no denying the extent of anxiety the troops had about making another amphibious assault.<sup>230</sup>

Between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m., after troops had finished loading onto their landing craft, an order came informing all officers and enlisted men that the landings were not to take place. In reality, the entire operation was a plan of deception created by the Fifth Army Intelligence in the hopes that the German would shift a considerable amount of their forces to Gaeta. Only a few high ranking officers were told the truth about the plan including every battalion commander and the regimental commander. Details about the plans were purposely leaked to German espionage agents and even the amphibious training was done to make the Germans believe that an actual attack was taking place. The Fifth Army Intelligence realized the plan worked when they

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<sup>228</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-6.

<sup>229</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, October 13-14, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>230</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, microfilm, 1, roll 3027; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, November, 2, 194, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

discovered that the Germans had sent one panzer division to Gaeta believing they were going to catch the Americans by surprise and annihilate the landing force.<sup>231</sup>

Company E and the rest of the 141<sup>st</sup> had to remain in their landing craft until sundown in order to keep the appearance that the invasion was still occurring. The men were not even allowed to cheer at hearing that the landings were a lie because of the fear that the Germans would catch on. After sundown all landing craft were emptied of troops and vehicles, but proceeded to meet up with nearby naval escort ships moving north to Gaeta. Once there the navy began bombarding the beaches with artillery giving the impression that an amphibious invasion was imminent. Meanwhile, the 141<sup>st</sup> was moving to a temporary camp near Giugliano.<sup>232</sup>

The month of November brought with it harsh weather conditions that no military would want. The rain was constant and, combined with the freezing temperatures, the troops had “little opportunity to dry out clothing or to have hot meals.” Dirt roads became rivers of mud causing vehicles to get bogged down. This forced the troops to carry supplies on foot to wherever it was needed, even if it meant climbing up steep hills and mountains.<sup>233</sup> An example of this occurred on November 16, when the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was sent to relieve elements of the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment a few miles from Monte Lungo. After firmly establishing themselves, orders were received specifying that at least fifty men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions were to organize

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<sup>231</sup>Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, microfilm, 1, roll 3027; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, November, 2, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>232</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 2, roll 3027.

<sup>233</sup> Blumenson, 43.

“carrying parties to bring in a sufficient supply of food and ammunition to establish a dump for the battalion in the event it was attacked and supplies could not be brought in each day.”<sup>234</sup>

Between November 17-19, the carrying parties struggled to climb up the muddy hills that had turned slippery because of the wet and cold weather. Soldiers often lost their footing and slid some distance down the hills. Making matters more difficult were the Germans who fired artillery at the carrying parties. On November 18<sup>th</sup>, Corporal Manuel R. Rivera and Private First Class Roque M.R. Gonzales were both slightly wounded during one of these artillery attacks.<sup>235</sup> Unfortunately for Rivera’s family, the War Department mistakenly sent a letter stating that he was killed in action. To correct their mistake the War Department sent a second telegram the following day to Rivera’s family stating that he was still alive and had only slight wounds.<sup>236</sup>

For the rest of November most of Company E’s missions involved reconnaissance patrols and holding a defensive position against the Germans. However, due to the constant German artillery bombardments, Company E suffered more casualties during this month alone than they did during the invasion of Salerno.<sup>237</sup> Tirso F. Carillo, Procopio Perez, Pedro T. Soto, and Ruben O. Rodriguez were all killed in action. Listed as seriously wounded in action were the following: Protacio Alaniz, Jr., Louis G. Cerda, Ricardo Gutierrez, Alfredo Lozano, Faustino R. Sotelo, Abner E. Carrasco, Juan N. Flores, Eldon C. Harlow, Miguel Martinez, and Apolonio R.

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<sup>234</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 3, 4, roll 3027.

<sup>235</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 13, roll 3027.

<sup>236</sup> *El Paso Times*, December, 4, 1943. 1. *El Paso Times*, December 5, 1943, 17.

<sup>237</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, November, 1-30, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

Moncada.<sup>238</sup> In total, the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment had suffered two-hundred and seven casualties during the month of November and the fighting was about to get much worse.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, Casualty List, November 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, 2, 3, roll 3027.

<sup>239</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, November 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 5, roll 3027.

## Chapter 9

### SAN PIETRO

By early December, Company E and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were stationed on a mountain called Monte Rotondo. Their positions were constantly subjected to artillery and mortar shelling both night and day. Adding to the misery was the fact that the weather conditions in December were becoming worse than they were in November. The daily rains caused rivers to overflow and kept roads unusable for any type of vehicles. This even made it difficult for the troops to travel on foot. Simple movements of troops and supplies became an exhausting and frustrating task for everyone. Foxholes constantly flooded forcing troops to drain them on an almost daily basis any way they could. Overall, field reports were indicating that “the weather and terrain was as formidable an obstacle as the enemy.”<sup>240</sup>

On December 14<sup>th</sup> it was revealed that Company E and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were to attack the town of San Pietro the following day at noon. The capture of San Pietro “meant that the outer temporary defenses of the [Gustav] Winter Line had been breached.”<sup>241</sup> The town was located “on the southern slopes of [Monte] Sammucro...[and] the approaches to the town were made of a series of terraces many of which were walled olive tree orchards.”<sup>242</sup> Defending each of these

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<sup>240</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, December, 3, 6, 7, 8, 1943, roll 3039; Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 1, roll 3027; Blumenson, 44.

<sup>241</sup> Wagner, 93.

<sup>242</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 9, 10, roll 3027.

terraces was a series of German machine guns placed in a manner to create interlocking fields of fire; in addition, the Germans also had artillery supporting these machine gun units.<sup>243</sup>

Assisting the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was the 143<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment which was ordered to attack the slopes of Monte Sammucro north of San Pietro. Meanwhile, the 753<sup>rd</sup> Tank Battalion was to attack from the southeast of the town. The task of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to have Company E in reserve while Companies F and G made the main attack. Only after Companies F and G took San Pietro would Company E be sent from the east to clear the town of any pockets of resistance; moreover, Company E would set up defenses on the eastern portion of the town in case of a German counter-attack.<sup>244</sup>

Company G was the first to move and immediately took heavy fire from enemy machine guns and mortars. Company F was located on the left side of Company G and also began receiving artillery fire before they even began crossing their line of departure. This forced Company F to move farther down the line from which to begin their attack. Nevertheless, both companies sustained immediate and heavy casualties during the attack including the death of Company F's commanding officer and the wounding of Company G's 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant and commanding officer. Company F tried twice to push forward but was repelled "due to the superior fire power and excellent defenses of the Germans." Both companies soon fell back to the positions they held prior to the attack. Companies F and G were ordered to hold their present positions and to reorganize as best they could and not to attack until further orders were given.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 11, 12, roll 3027.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Five hours after the first attack, Company E was ordered to join the assault alongside Company F. Due to the fact that Company G's heavy casualties had reduced it to two officers and thirty-four enlisted men, commanders ordered the remaining troops to hold their position and provide covering fire for the other two units instead. Similar to the previous attack, Companies E and F only managed to get five-hundred yards before getting halted by the heavy fire being thrown at them. Further hindering the companies from moving forward were the countless mines and booby traps the Germans had prepared for them. Again, the assaulting companies suffered heavy casualties with Company G down to just two officers and thirty-four enlisted men. Company F had three officers and sixty-five enlisted men. Company E was down to just one officer and fifty enlisted men.<sup>246</sup>

Since the daylight attacks proved to be ineffective, commanders felt that an attack at nightfall would be a better option. The night attack began at 1:00 a.m. on December 16<sup>th</sup>, but communication between the attacking troops and artillery units became severed. With no artillery support, Companies E and F attempted "to storm enemy positions with grenades, bayonets and whatever firepower could be obtained from...mortar squads still remaining with the rifle companies."<sup>247</sup> Against all odds, several men from both companies had managed to fight their way inside the walls of San Pietro and destroyed a German ammunition dump. While the U.S. troops inside San Pietro were fighting hard and even overtaking some German positions, commanders feared that they were too few in number and too exhausted to hold off a strong

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<sup>246</sup>Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, microfilm, 11, 12, roll 3027; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, December 15, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>247</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 11, roll 3027.

German counterattack; therefore, the order was given to fall back.<sup>248</sup> This was a mistake that would later cost the American troops dearly.

The companies were asked to reorganize and prepare for a fourth attack before dawn. Company E was down to forty enlisted men and one officer. Company F still had three officers but only fifty enlisted men. Company G suffered no casualties since they were only offering cover fire to the other two companies during the second and third attacks. Being held in reserve for the fourth assault was Company L which was at full strength of five officers and ninety-seven enlisted men. In the event that either Company E or F managed to push the Germans out of the town, Company L was to enter San Pietro and quell any pockets of resistance still remaining. Company G was also to remain behind but as a rear guard for the attacking units.<sup>249</sup>

The Germans used the break in the fighting to reinforce all of the weakened sections of their line, including where Companies E and F had almost established a foothold. The result was that in the fourth attack the two companies were completely overwhelmed and stopped from reaching San Pietro. The German fire power was so severe that the two companies were unable to go forward or back without the risk of being hit. Companies E and F were now stuck in exposed positions and lay two-hundred yards from the town.<sup>250</sup>

Sometime around 7:00 a.m., troops re-established radio communications with artillery units and requested smoke shells. This allowed the troops to get some cover, especially from the German snipers that were trying to pick off what was left of the two companies. At 9:40 a.m.,

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<sup>248</sup> Wagner, 85.

<sup>249</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 12, 13, roll 3027.

<sup>250</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 13, roll 3027.

commanders finally issued the order to fall back, but due to some miscommunication the troops received the order three hours later. Even under the cover of smoke shells it took the two companies three more hours to make it back to the safety of their lines “due to the incessant enemy artillery, mortar, machine gun and sniper fire.” Still, the confusion and severity of the battle caused soldiers get cut off from their units. A good number of these troops did not make back to friendly lines until several hours later.<sup>251</sup>

The attack on San Pietro had caused the assaulting units to suffer appalling casualties. Company E was down to just twenty-seven enlisted men and no officers. Among the wounded officers were Capt. John L. Chapin and Lt. Gabriel L. Navarrete. During the fourth attack the company’s last officer was wounded. Sgt. Enrique Ochotorena then took command of the unit and led them safely back to their lines when the final assault was called off. However, Ochotorena was wounded during the last assault when another soldier near him stepped on an anti-personnel mine causing it to explode. Due to the severity of his wound Ochotorena would be in the hospital for the next four months.<sup>252</sup> Company F was reduced to two officers and thirty-four enlisted men. Company G had two officers and twenty-five enlisted men. Due to the weakened state of the units, Companies E and F were temporarily combined with Company L to form one company.<sup>253</sup> In total, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment lost three

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<sup>251</sup>Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 13, roll 3027.

<sup>252</sup> *El Paso Times*, January 12, 1944, 2; *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 6, 1944, 3.

<sup>253</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, microfilm, 13, roll 3027; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, December 16, 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

officers and thirty-two enlisted men during the attack on San Pietro. Wounded in action were seven officers and one-hundred and twenty-four enlisted men.<sup>254</sup>

It was not until after the battle that American commanders discovered the difficulty their troops faced in attacking San Pietro. A battle report indicated that “in many instances the Germans could call down their artillery and mortar fire directly on their own positions due to the fact their emplacements were so well dug in and protected from heavy shelling.”<sup>255</sup> During the attack, the troops were not supplied with any type of climbing gear, even as something as simple as ropes. This forced the troops “to stand upon one another’s shoulders to scale the terraces” while being fired upon by German mortars, artillery, and machine guns. Another obstacle faced by the troops were the numerous landmines and booby traps the Germans had prepared for them in the terraces.<sup>256</sup>

In the end, the only units that fared well were the 142<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment and the Italian forces fighting alongside them. Although the attack was said to have resulted in high casualties, the two units managed to take their objective of Monte Lungo on December 16<sup>th</sup>.<sup>257</sup> The American tanks that were supposed to help in the attack were quickly knocked out by German artillery. As it turned out, the narrow roads they used gave them no room to maneuver and were easy targets for the German gunners. The 143<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, which attacked from the north

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<sup>254</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 13, roll 3027.

<sup>255</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 9, 10, roll 3027.

<sup>256</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 13, roll 3027; *El Paso Times*, January 24, 1944, 1.

<sup>257</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 14, roll 3027.

of San Pietro was also stopped by the well prepared German defenders. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, patrols from the 36<sup>th</sup> Division finally entered San Pietro and discovered that the Germans had already left.<sup>258</sup>

Among many of the wounded from Company E was Sgt. Ricardo Palacios, Jr. While recovering in a hospital in Naples, Palacios was asked by a group of new troops if he had been at the front lines. These troops seemed very eager to know in detail about what was going on and if the fighting was hard. Palacios quickly became very annoyed from all of the questions he was being asked. He thought to himself, “What does he expect me to tell him. Let them find out for themselves.” Palacios and the other wounded knew that it would not help these soldiers to tell them about the horrible fighting that was happening at the front. As soldiers, these men were going to have to experience combat first hand one way or another.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Report of Operations in Italy, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, December 1943, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 14, 15, roll 3027.

<sup>259</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

## Chapter 10

### THE ROAD TO THE RAPIDO RIVER

With the fall of San Pietro, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division could now move on to their next objective which was Monte Cassino. This region was of crucial importance to the Allies because past Monte Cassino lay the Liri Valley which was a vital point where the Allies could make a quick and decisive breakthrough into German lines. First, the valley had something the Allies desperately needed, which was flat open ground well suited for tanks and other vehicles. Secondly, from the Liri Valley, Rome was at the most one-hundred miles away, thus, giving the Allies the “shortest route to Rome.”<sup>260</sup>

Allied commanders considered Monte Cassino the “strongest portion” of the Gustav Line while the Germans considered it “the final line of defense south of Rome.”<sup>261</sup> As it was, Monte Cassino and its neighboring mountains offered excellent high ground for the Germans to view all of the Allies’ troop movements for miles on end. Furthermore, Monte Cassino had a naturally defensive barrier flowing in front of it, the Rapido River.<sup>262</sup> The Allies’ slow push northward gave the German 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer Grenadier Division plenty of time to prepare an elaborate set of defenses. For several weeks, the Germans were busy “blasting gun pits out of solid rock, clearing both sides of the Rapido of trees and shrubbery to create fields, digging and camouflaging rifle pits, erecting forts and pillboxes, preparing antitank ditches, sowing mines, putting up wire entanglements.”<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Wagner, 96; Blumenson, 61.

<sup>261</sup> Wagner, 93; Blumenson, 54.

<sup>262</sup> Wagner, 96.

<sup>263</sup> Blumenson, 31.

Adding to the German defenses of the Rapido River was a village called San't Angelo. The village was at a perfect location because it was at the center of the Rapido River on a hill that rose almost fifty feet in height. Besides giving the Germans the ability to observe most of the river, the thick walls of the town were reinforced offering great protection to the infantry and even artillery units. Similar to the German defenses at San Pietro, bunkers were reinforced so well with concrete and steel that defenders could call artillery down on their own positions without fear of being harmed. In addition, machine gun positions were protected by barbed wire, landmines and booby traps. Finally, "machine guns were sighted in such a fashion that they possessed interlocking bands of fire."<sup>264</sup>

The Allies soon discovered that just getting to the river was an obstacle in itself. The daily "heavy rains and melting snow from the mountains had turned the rivers into torrents."<sup>265</sup> This caused rivers to overflow and flood much of the surrounding terrain. Allied vehicles attempting to drive over the flooded countryside sank ten inches deep into the mud. When the 36<sup>th</sup> Division reached their staging area of Monte Trochio, which faced the Rapido River Valley, it was described as being almost a swamp given that it was "marshy and water filled."<sup>266</sup>

The idea to make an attack across the Rapido River came on January 8, 1944 when Allied commanders approved a plan to make an amphibious assault on Anzio. Far up the coast of Italy, Anzio was about seventy-five miles away from any Allied forces which made the move very perilous. A landing at Anzio could mean a faster way to capture Rome, but for this to work

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<sup>264</sup> Blumenson, 54, 71; Wagner, 96, 100.

<sup>265</sup> Blumenson, 54.

<sup>266</sup> Blumenson, 54; Wagner, 96, 97; Matthew Parker, *Monte Cassino: The Hardest-Fought Battle of World War II* (Doubleday: New York, 2004), 68.

Allied troops needed to be within a reasonable distance in order to offer quick and decisive support for the soldiers making the landings; otherwise, the amphibious force could be isolated on the beaches and possibly wiped out before help got to them.<sup>267</sup>

General Mark W. Clark came up with the plan of having three separate attacks occur over the span of several days. The French Expeditionary Corps would cross on the upper portion of the Rapido River on January 12. The British X Corps would cross the Garigliano River at two different points on January 17. Finally, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, located in the center of the British and French forces, would “deliver the knockout punch by crossing the Rapido River near Sant’Angelo and getting into the Liri Valley.”<sup>268</sup> The hope was that the British and French forces would take the high ground to offer better support for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. Overall, Allied commanders hoped for at least two possible outcomes that could arise from an assault over the Rapido River. On the one hand, the Allied troops could establish a strong foothold at the entrance of the Liri Valley forcing the Germans to divert troops away from the Anzio landings. On the other hand, Allied commanders ultimately hoped for a complete breakthrough into the Liri Valley that would allow for “a rapid link-up with the forces in the Anzio beachhead.”<sup>269</sup> Although the plan would be an enormous success if the attack resulted in both outcomes, Allied commanders knew that that was almost unlikely.

Originally, the 142<sup>nd</sup> and the 143<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiments were picked to make the crossing of the Rapido River. The 142<sup>nd</sup>, however, was chosen to remain in reserve and replaced by the

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<sup>267</sup> Blumenson, 51.

<sup>268</sup> Blumenson, 51,53, 54.

<sup>269</sup> Blumenson, 51, 53.

141<sup>st</sup>. The 143<sup>rd</sup> would cross half a mile below the town while the 141<sup>st</sup> would cross the river above Sant' Angelo. Before any attack could occur, the 36<sup>th</sup> Division needed time to gather its strength. The division was weakened by both the high casualties sustained from the San Pietro attack and illness caused from the horrendous winter conditions that continued into January.<sup>270</sup>

By January 13, the strength of Companies E, F, and G was brought back up with the help of replacements. Company E had five officers and one-hundred and sixty enlisted men. Company F had ten officers and one-hundred and seventy-eight enlisted men. Company G had seven officers and one-hundred and forty-eight enlisted men.<sup>271</sup> Tech Sgt. Raul Caracena recalled that because of the high number of casualties suffered in the preceding campaigns, “most of our outfit [Company E] were new men.”<sup>272</sup> By this time most of the replacements coming into the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were from other states besides Texas. The casualty report for January would indicate that many of the replacements in the company were not of Mexican ethnicity and not even from Texas.<sup>273</sup> Some members of Company E would later reflect and believed that this was because Mexican-American troops were outright refusing to join the company because of its reputation of “spearheading every battle.”<sup>274</sup> While this may not have been the case, there was a very clear reason why the unit was no longer being kept Mexican-American. Vincent M. Lockhart, author of *T-Patch to Victory*, served with the 36<sup>th</sup> Division

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<sup>270</sup> Blumenson, 45, 72, 78.

<sup>271</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 13, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>272</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 18, 1946, 11.

<sup>273</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Casualty List, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January-February 1944, 14, 15, 16, 17, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3028.

<sup>274</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, October 5, 1977, B-1.

during the war, partly as the division historian, declared that it had to do with a decision made by the War Department. During the war, the War Department decided “not to replace members of the division with Texans because too many of the families were losing members. Some families lost two and three brothers at the same time.”<sup>275</sup> It is also reasonable that by this time in the war, the military the U.S. Army was not going to spend precious time trying to keep Company E entirely Mexican-American when other units and branches of the military were already successfully integrated with soldiers, sailors, marines, and even airmen of Mexican ethnicity. Therefore, with American casualties mounting in the Italian campaign it is possible that the only thing that mattered to the Army and War Department was to get as many replacements as they could for these units.

As planned, the French Expeditionary Force began their attack on January 12. Although meeting with initial success, the lack of reinforcements hindered the French forces from making a breakthrough into the Liri Valley and after four days of continuous combat the exhausted French troops could push no further.<sup>276</sup> Next, the British X Corps attacked across the Garigliano River on January 17. Like the French attack, the British met the crossings with early success, but were soon repelled by a formidable German counterattack. The British tried another attack on January 19, but it too failed. Given the circumstances, British commanders stopped their forces from making any additional attacks across the Garigliano River.<sup>277</sup> Without doubt, any more attempts to attack the Gustav Line directly should have been cancelled, but General Mark W.

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<sup>275</sup> *Valley Morning Star*, Harlingen, Texas, April 1, 1982, D7; *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 2, 1982, 4.

<sup>276</sup> Blumenson, 57; E.D. Smith, *The Battle for Cassino* (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1975), 28, 29.

<sup>277</sup> Wagner, 98.

Clark was determined to make a breakthrough somewhere. The fact of the matter was that the 36<sup>th</sup> Division was going in with odds stacked exceedingly against them.

## Chapter 11

### THE END OF COMPANY E

A few days before the 36<sup>th</sup> Division would make the crossings at the Rapido River, patrols were formed to cross the river and gather intelligence on the German defenses and, if possible, to capture any enemy prisoners. The patrols consisted of troops from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. One of these patrols was comprised of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Gabriel L. Navarrete and about sixty-two others from Company E. Their mission was different in that they were “to take and hold a point of high ground about 500 yards on the other side of the river.” As if that was not difficult enough, they were to hold this high ground until January 20 when the rest of the division would cross the Rapido River and help in the capture of San’t Angelo.<sup>278</sup>

The men soon discovered that just getting to the river was no simple task since all of the patrols first had to make their way through elaborate minefields. As Navarrete prepared to take his first step, a Staff Sergeant named Roque O. Segura stopped him insisting that he lead the patrol through the minefield instead. Besides being a long time friend, Segura felt that Navarrete was an intelligent officer and too valuable to the company to risk becoming an early casualty. Segura told Navarrete that he would be badly needed once they got across the river.<sup>279</sup> Navarrete reluctantly agreed to allow Segura to lead the patrol through the minefield. As Segura reached a safe point, the men followed and carefully traced each of his steps through the minefield. Once

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<sup>278</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1; Report of Operations, January 19, 1944, microfilm, 129, roll 3028; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 18, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 97, roll 3028.

<sup>279</sup> The Men of Company E, DVD.

across, the patrol now had the second difficult task of getting across the river in one piece both without alerting the Germans or tipping over in their rubber boats.<sup>280</sup>

The river's current was so strong that a rope needed to be tied on both sides so that the troops could carefully guide themselves across the river; otherwise, there was a great risk that the light rubber boats would easily tip over. Once at the river the men secured a rope on their side while Segura swam across the Rapido River to tie the other end of the rope to the German side and swim back. To anyone else, Segura's task would have looked outrageous, but he was considered the best swimmer in the company and proved it on that night.<sup>281</sup>

Navarrete's patrol crossed the Rapido at 9:30 p.m. on January 17. Amazingly, the Company E patrol seemed to be the only one that had successfully crossed the river up to that point. A patrol from Company L had also crossed in another section of the Rapido, but one of their two rubber boats collapsed sending the men into the icy cold water. This forced part of the patrol to go back and retrieve another rubber boat. Another portion of Company L that attempted to cross the river never got the opportunity. This group became bogged down in a minefield and were discovered by the Germans who then fired artillery down on them.<sup>282</sup>

When the Company E patrol finally reached the German side of the river, it divided into two groups. Navarrete directed Staff Sergeant Benito Dominguez to lead his squad of about twelve men forward while the rest of the patrol waited near the river bank. Navarrate also told Dominguez and his men to "make five or six gaps" in the barbed wire that lay ahead of them so

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<sup>280</sup> The Men of Company E, DVD.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 17, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 92, roll 3028.

as to allow the patrol to make their way through it. In addition, Dominguez's squad was also meant to draw the enemy's fire so that Navarrete could tell exactly how many machine gun nests the Germans had in that specific area.<sup>283</sup>

Over the next three hours, after advancing one-hundred and fifty yards into enemy lines, the squad surprised and captured two German soldiers. The squad continued to advance to an estimated eight hundred yards from the river when they were discovered by a German they attempted to capture. The German fired at the squad wounding Dominguez and alerting the rest of the Germans of their presence. Amid the firefight that erupted, "one of the prisoners attempted to escape. Maintaining his presence of mind, Sergeant Dominguez returned the fire, killing his assailant and the escaping prisoner."<sup>284</sup> As the squad came under fire, the rest of the patrol moved forward to assist in their withdrawal. Sergeant Manuel Rivera was a weapons platoon leader and organized his section of men armed with Browning light machine guns to help give covering fire and successfully managed to silence four German machine guns.<sup>285</sup> Navarrete was attempting to outflank the machine gun nests when he realized that they were about to be encircled by a sizeable German force. To make sure they were not cut off from escaping, Navarrete and Dominguez led their men back near the banks of the river.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

<sup>284</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 18, 1944, roll 3039; Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May 1944, roll 2078, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm.

<sup>285</sup> Leigh E. Smith, Jr. "El Paso's Company E Survivors Remember Rapido River Assaults." *Borderlands* 13(Spring 1995:7), EPCC Libraries, [http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13\\_el\\_paso\\_company\\_e.htm](http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13_el_paso_company_e.htm) (accessed 2/2/09); *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 16, 1944, 1.

<sup>286</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1,2.

The firefight lasted for almost twenty minutes. Although holding their ground, the Germans began shelling the area with mortars and artillery wounding many men in the patrol. One mortar landed close enough to wound both Navarrete and Rivera. The mortar attack had also destroyed four of the six rubber boats the patrol had used to cross the river. With the situation only getting worse, Dominguez, Rivera, and Navarrete began helping the severely wounded onto the two undamaged rubber boats remaining in order to cross back onto their side of the river. As the last of the wounded were placed in the boats, Rivera told Navarrete to join the other wounded men in one of the boats since his wound prevented him from swimming across the river. Rivera, who was only lightly wounded, planned to swim across the river along with others from the patrol that were still capable. After getting back to their lines. Rivera went to his company commander Captain John L. Chapin to tell him “that the patrol had failed.” Subsequently, Rivera was sent to a hospital to get medical treatment. Little did he realize that this would be the last time he would see many of his friends since his wounds prevented him from participating in the actual Rapido River crossing.<sup>287</sup> Navarrete later stated “it was a miracle to have been able to get out of their trap and make it back to our side.”<sup>288</sup>

The total number of casualties in the sixty-two man patrol was fourteen enlisted men wounded, two enlisted men missing in action and one officer wounded.<sup>289</sup> Both Dominguez and

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<sup>287</sup> Leigh E. Smith, Jr. “El Paso’s Company E Survivors Remember Rapido River Assaults.” *Borderlands* 13(Spring 1995:7), EPCC Libraries, [http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13\\_el\\_paso\\_company\\_e.htm](http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13_el_paso_company_e.htm) (accessed 2/2/09); 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 2078.

<sup>288</sup> Morin, 69.

<sup>289</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 18, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 97, roll 3028.

Rivera would receive the Silver Star for gallantry in action.<sup>290</sup> While waiting to be taken to a hospital for his wounds, Navarrete was asked by a major if he thought a battalion could cross the Rapido River successfully. Navarrete replied that not even a regiment much less a battalion could make a successful crossing. Navarrete further explained that from what he saw “the Germans had concentrated their defense at that point, [and] that it was like bumping against a brick wall.”<sup>291</sup> The major completely disregarded his story and told Navarrete that “you are talking like that because you are delirious because of the wound.”<sup>292</sup> Navarrete vented that, unlike some new recruit that had never seen combat, he had been wounded before and had led over thirty patrols up to that point; therefore, he was an experienced soldier and was not over exaggerating about the consolidated German defenses that he and the other members of the patrol saw firsthand. Navarrete, cold, wounded, and growing frustrated continued arguing with the major trying to convince him that the attack should be stopped. This only annoyed the major who threatened to court-martial Navarrete if he persisted. Navarrete recalled that the major told him, “you are suffering from bad wounds and will be excused if you go back to the station hospital and forget about this.”<sup>293</sup>

Navarrete felt there was nothing more he could do to prevent his men and the rest of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division from being sent to face a strong and well dug in German force. However, right before Navarrete departed the major’s tent, he gave him a stern warning saying “remember this,

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<sup>290</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> Division Silver Star Awards, October 1943-May 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 2078; *El Paso Herald-Post*, August 16, 1944, 1.

<sup>291</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

<sup>292</sup> *The Men of Company E*, DVD.

<sup>293</sup> Morin, 70; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, p.1, 2.

Major, if plans are not changed and you sacrifice my E Company, you are going to answer to me personally; I will be looking for you and I will be armed.”<sup>294</sup> Afterwards, Navarrete reluctantly left to a medical station where he could only hope and pray that his comrades would be safe.

Tech Sgt. Antonio D. Saucedo detailed that before the attack a member of Navarrete’s patrol told him that the German defenses were “too strong and that an attack probably would fail.” It seemed that some of the officers did not believe what the patrol saw and even accused one member of being “shell-shocked.”<sup>295</sup> Sgt. Ricardo Palacios, Jr. also indicated that the night before the attack a meeting was held among the sergeants and officers to discuss details about the upcoming assault. Palacios recalled that meeting saying “you could tell everyone was pretty uptight after the reconnaissance had failed.”<sup>296</sup> By this time, news had spread around the camp concerning the aftermath of the patrols and Navarrete would later discover that he was not the only one trying to stop the attack from proceeding. The majority of the company commanders who knew Navarrete acknowledged him as a skilled and competent officer; thus, he was not the type to lie about what he reported on the German defenses. Many of these company commanders tried to prevent the crossing by reasoning with the battalion commander that the attack was a suicide mission. The battalion commanders’ response was that he was just following the orders given to him by the regimental commander. When the regimental commander was confronted, he responded with the same justification that was given by the battalion commander, that these were orders given to him from a higher rank. In the end, the company commanders realized that the

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<sup>294</sup> Morin, 70.

<sup>295</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

<sup>296</sup> Leigh E. Smith, Jr. “El Paso’s Company E Survivors Remember Rapido River Assaults.” *Borderlands* 13(Spring 1995:7), EPCC Libraries, [http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13\\_el\\_paso\\_company\\_e.htm](http://dnn.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/13_el_paso_company_e.htm) (accessed 2/2/09).

situation was out of their hands and that there was nothing they could do. Plans for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division to attack were still going ahead as scheduled for January 20.<sup>297</sup>

The report from Navarrete's patrol revealed that the width of the river was estimated at somewhere between thirty and fifty feet and that the depth of the river was over six feet with a current of twenty miles per hour. No one but an accomplished swimmer would be able to make it across safely without drowning. Lastly, the report specified that the banks of the river were a steep six feet on each side.<sup>298</sup> Once across the river, each soldier would be responsible for digging a "fighting hole" before the onset of daylight. All of the troops making the assault were given extra ammunition and four grenades for the attack. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 19<sup>th</sup> Engineer Regiment were attached to the 36<sup>th</sup> Division and assigned to help in the assault. The idea was that the troops attacking on January 20 would cross in assault boats; meanwhile engineers would build support bridges to get supplies and more troops on the other side in the following days of the attack.<sup>299</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment was the first to begin crossing the Rapido River at 8:30 p.m. on January 20. As daylight came, the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion quickly realized the vulnerability of their positions when the Germans unleashed a barrage of artillery, mortars, rockets, machine gun and rifle fire. One soldier of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion indicated that "if anyone

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<sup>297</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 2.

<sup>298</sup> Report on Company E Patrol, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3028.

<sup>299</sup> Report of Operations, January 19, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 130, roll 3028.

stuck their head up or revealed themselves they immediately drew fire.”<sup>300</sup> All they could do was hold on until they were reinforced.

At around 9:40 p.m. of January 21, Captain Chapin led Company E across the river while under intense enemy fire from artillery, mortars, and machine guns.<sup>301</sup> The enemy fire was very intense but also seemed to be coming from several directions. It was only inevitable that men were going to get wounded or killed during the crossing. Company E Tech Sergeant Antonio D. Saucedo did not even manage to cross the river because a piece of an exploding artillery shell wounded him in the leg. Saucedo said that considering the severity of the enemy fire he thought of “himself lucky to have come within 50 yards of the river. Many didn’t.”<sup>302</sup> The task of crossing during this time was even more difficult weapons platoon in Company E because of the heavy weight of their equipment and the ammunition needed to fire the weapons.<sup>303</sup>

The company managed to get five-hundred yards from the river when they were stopped by large entanglements of barbed wire. Considering what had happened to Navarrete’s patrol a few nights earlier, the troops knew that it was vital for them to get through the barb wire as fast as possible. During this time, Sgt. Roque O. Segura, Pfc. Rudolph M. Treviño, and Pfc. Julio De Hoyas were sent by Chapin to go and “destroy the enemy machine gun nest” that was firing at

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<sup>300</sup> Parker, 110; Situation Overlay, January 21-23, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, microfilm, roll 3028.

<sup>301</sup> Periodic Report, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 20-21, 1944, microfilm, 104, roll 3028; 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 21, 1944, 147, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, microfilm, roll 3028.

<sup>302</sup> El Paso Herald-Post, July 25, 1944, 1.

<sup>303</sup> Smith, 55.

them.<sup>304</sup> Using the cover of darkness, the three men closed in on the machine gun crew without being seen and killed them with the use of grenades. Afterward, Segura, Treviño, and De Hoyas were making their way back to their lines when they were suddenly fired upon. Both Segura and De Hoyas were hit, but it appeared to Treviño that De Hoyas had a more severe wound since he was on the ground bleeding from his head and neck. Treviño said, “I rushed to him and could see where the rifle shot glazed the back of his neck and went up and made a hole in the top of his helmet.”<sup>305</sup> Since Segura was still on his feet, Treviño believed he had only been lightly wounded.

Unfortunately, during the heat of battle and while attending to De Hoyas, Treviño lost sight of Segura and was unsure what had happened to him. Originally believing that Segura was possibly captured, Treviño did not realize that his friend had died. When Treviño and De Hoyas finally rejoined their unit, they discovered that the company was still bogged down trying to make their way through the barbed wire. As bad as things were, the situation was about to get much worse. As daylight approached on the morning of January 22, the American troops no longer had the cover of darkness on their side and the Germans would be able to get a better view of the battlefield. Trevino remembered that Chapin ordered the men to dig foxholes and soon after the young captain’s voice fell silent.<sup>306</sup> The man that had done so much for Company E whenever they faced obstacles, such as discrimination, was killed by German machine gun

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<sup>304</sup> Smith, 53.

<sup>305</sup> Smith, 53, 54.

<sup>306</sup>Smith, 54.

fire. Staff Sergeant Robert Moncada would later state, “we lost the best commander that a company ever had.”<sup>307</sup>

At 11:10 a.m., regimental headquarters of the 141<sup>st</sup> sent out orders that all troops on the German side of the river were to dig in and hold their ground. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Richard M. Manton who was leading Company E’s weapons platoon remembered getting on a radio and asking for permission to retreat soon after crossing the river, but was denied. The enemy fire was so great that it barely gave Manton’s men the chance to operate their weapons. After Manton’s platoon ran out of ammunition for their weapons, he again tried getting permission to retreat. There is no doubt that Manton must have been in disbelief when he was denied for a second time and told to hold his ground. Manton’s men were now pinned down and defenseless against the German onslaught.<sup>308</sup> Around the same time the 143<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment was withdrawn from the attack it was conducting farther down the Rapido River. This only allowed the Germans to put the full weight of their forces on the attacking units of the 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. By 4:45 p.m. the Germans launched a fierce counterattack so great it caused the 36<sup>th</sup> Division to falsely believe that enemy troops had landed on their side of the river.<sup>309</sup> The result of the German counterattack was that “all bridges and boats were destroyed, the men could neither escape nor be reinforced, and communications irretrievably broke down.”<sup>310</sup> In the end, 36<sup>th</sup> Division

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<sup>307</sup> *El Paso Times*, July 4, 1944, 2.

<sup>308</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. January 22, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 157, 158, roll 3028; Smith, 55.

<sup>309</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. January 22, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 157, 158, roll 3028; Parker, 114.

<sup>310</sup> Parker, 114.

commanders realized their men were sent into a death trap and could only listen helplessly to the battle taking place on the other side of the river.

During this counterattack, Treviño indicated that a lieutenant recently added to the company ordered the men to cease fire. The lieutenant even went so far as removing “his white long johns, then wrapped the sleeves around his carbine rifle and waved it in the air as he shouted his orders to cease fire.”<sup>311</sup> Treviño and Tech Sergeant Eduardo Romo said that some of the men were angered with that order and wanted to continue fighting. Yet, perhaps it was a good thing that they did not for as quickly as the men put down their weapons German soldiers were already upon them; furthermore, most of the men had run out of ammunition. One German soldier forced Treviño out of his foxhole by holding a bayonet to his throat and yelling “zip-zip.” Although this caused some momentary confusion for Treviño, he quickly realized that the German meant he would shoot him if he did not get out of his foxhole.<sup>312</sup> At 7:00 p.m. regimental headquarters of the 141<sup>st</sup> received a message that the German counterattack had “practically wiped out” their battalions and those that remained that were not killed or captured had crossed back to the American side of the river.<sup>313</sup>

While many men in the assaulting units became prisoners, a few managed to evade capture. Two of these men were Company E Sergeants Santiago Jaramillo and Alex Carrillo who stated that “We would rather die than be captured by the Germans.”<sup>314</sup> Jaramillo stated that the

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<sup>311</sup> Smith, 54.

<sup>312</sup> Smith, 54, 55.

<sup>313</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Journal, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment. January 22, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, 157, 158, roll 3028.

<sup>314</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1944, 1.

fighting was fierce and that the company was trying to hold on as long as it could, but as the fighting neared its end, he could hear German troops yelling “Give up, give up!” Jaramillo was in his foxhole when he saw several Germans taking what was left of Company E prisoner. Just as he was about to be taken prisoner himself, the German soldier guarding Jaramillo was hit in the shoulder by a bullet causing him to drop his sub-machine gun. Although Jaramillo did not know where the shot had come from he realized that this was the only chance he would have of escaping. Both men quickly dove for the weapon, but luckily, Jaramillo reached it first and managed to kill the German soldier.<sup>315</sup>

Although initially fearing that the “firing might bring other Germans over,” none ever came. More than likely, hearing the sound of one of their own weapons caused them to believe that a fellow German soldier was firing his weapon. Moreover, a thick fog prevented them from seeing what had actually occurred. Although the fog had caused many problems for the 36<sup>th</sup> Division trying to cross the Rapido River, in the end, Jaramillo stated “that fog saved a lot of our necks.” Jaramillo managed to link up with fellow Company E members Alex Carrillo and Morris Crain.<sup>316</sup>

The three men hid in a crater made from an artillery shell that, for some reason, was never searched by the Germans. When night fall came, the three men tried on two separate occasions to cross the river but were stopped by German “small arms fire.” It was not until later that morning that they made a third attempt to cross the river. The men knew that it was only a matter of time before the Germans would capture or kill them; therefore, this third attempt to

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<sup>315</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1944, 1.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

cross the river would have to be their last. The men removed any and all equipment that could slow them down in the river which included their winter clothing and even their boots. Jaramillo stated “we waded as far as we could and then swam as fast as we could when the German bullets began splashing around. When we got to the other side, we kept running until we were behind safe cover.”<sup>317</sup> According to Jaramillo’s family, he learned to swim in the Franklin Canal in his hometown of El Paso, Texas. Swimming was the one thing Jaramillo loved to do so much that he occasionally skipped school to go swim. No doubt his love of swimming as a youth saved his life and gave him the ability to swim across a river where so many others had perished.<sup>318</sup> Jaramillo and the others deemed themselves very fortunate to have survived the crossing considering the number of others that were killed in the process. The men then ran two and a half miles back to their lines barefoot, soaked, and freezing. Upon reaching their lines medics quickly “worked on their half frozen feet to restore circulation.”<sup>319</sup>

While at the hospital, Navarrete began noticing the huge number of wounded pouring in. All of them had the 36<sup>th</sup> Division’s T-Patch insignia on their arms. Navarrete desperately tried to find any soldier that could tell him something about what happened to his men. He finally found a member of Company E that told Navarrete that Cpt. John L. Chapin and Sgt. Roque O. Segura had been killed. Filled with rage and bent on vengeance, Navarrete said this was “the time when I just couldn’t take it anymore.”<sup>320</sup> Navarrete left the hospital and stole a jeep to get to the battalion headquarters to look for the major he had warned earlier. Admitting that he no longer

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<sup>317</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1944, 1.

<sup>318</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 26, 1944, 2.

<sup>319</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 25, 1944, 1.

<sup>320</sup> The Men of Company E, DVD.

cared about the consequences for his actions, Navarrete stated “the thing I wanted was to challenge him to a duel. Right then and there. Either him or me and that’s it.”<sup>321</sup>

As he made his way to battalion headquarters he was stopped by a colonel. It appeared that by this time word had spread about Navarrete’s intentions and the general of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, Walton Walker, sent out a message to his officers to find and stop Navarrete before it was too late. After arriving at his headquarters, Walker and Navarrete had a long discussion in which he “told Navarrete he could understand how he felt, but he could not condone a junior officer challenging a superior officer. Navarrete was also told that the major had been transferred out of the division. Navarrete obeyed the general’s order and was promoted to captain and put in command of E Company.”<sup>322</sup> Although Navarrete was later recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor, it was canceled due the incident that occurred with the major.<sup>323</sup>

Overall, approximately 770 men of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were captured and an estimated 1,330 were either dead or wounded. Navarrete would later mention that “the Germans could have driven right through our lines, all the way to Naples, if they had known how few of us were left.”<sup>324</sup> When the company held a roll call on January 23, only twenty-seven enlisted men were present. All of the officers were either dead, wounded, or captured.<sup>325</sup> While the 36<sup>th</sup> Division would regroup and fight on until the end of the war in 1945, the same could not be said of

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<sup>321</sup> The Men of Company E, DVD.

<sup>322</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-7.

<sup>323</sup> The Men of Company E, DVD.

<sup>324</sup> Parker, 115; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 2.

<sup>325</sup> Journal, HQ., 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 23, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

Company E. After the battle Companies E and G were temporarily combined to form one single company due to their depleted state. For the month of February the two companies were mainly held in reserve and given small tasks to perform. This included establishing defensive positions and running patrols between other units of the division. Between February 20 and 26, Company E and other units of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were finally given replacements.<sup>326</sup> Historian Lee Carraway Smith stated that the battle of the Rapido River brought “the end of E Company’s distinction of being the Hispanic company. With almost every man in the company either killed, wounded, or captured, the company had been deprived of its ethnic distinction as well as its well-established reputation as a company of fierce and determined fighters.”<sup>327</sup>

Navarrete stated in a 1946 interview that the areas of the Rapido River used by the 36<sup>th</sup> Division to cross were also chosen by the Germans “as the logical place for an attempt to cross and had zeroed their sights in advance. Our side used smoke screens in the crossing but the Germans didn’t have to see to be able to mow men down.”<sup>328</sup> Tech Sgt. Antonio D. Saucedo would later state that although the soft muddy ground hindered the troops, it “probably saved many lives. If the ground had been hard the heavy artillery would have caused more casualties.” The mud caused the German artillery shells to sink further into the ground before detonating and absorbing much of the explosion.<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>326</sup>Narrative of Action, Company E, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, February 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3040.

<sup>327</sup> Smith, 56.

<sup>328</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 2.

<sup>329</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

The consequences of the attack were staggering; what was worse was that considering the great loss of life nothing was accomplished. Ultimately, with no possibility of a link-up, Allied soldiers landing at Anzio would face a hard fought battle to hold the beachhead from overwhelming German forces. It was reported that because the attack was considered such a great failure and embarrassment that high ranking officials in the U.S. Army tried to make sure that the truth about the battle was never revealed. Historian Raul Morin affirmed that “no names or identification of the units who participated are mentioned in combat history publications of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army. There are no specific mentioning’s of any one company in the 36<sup>th</sup> Division’s *5 Years-5 Countries-5 Campaigns*, which has the historical accounts of the 141<sup>st</sup> Regiment in Italy during W.W. II.”<sup>330</sup>

On January 25, American and German forces agreed to a truce so that the bodies of the dead could be collected. Sergeant Jesus M. Lucio and others from Company E discovered the body of Captain John L. Chapin. Lucio stated “we found Captain Chapin in his foxhole with his phone in one hand and his carbine in the other.”<sup>331</sup> Both Chapin and Staff Sergeant Roque O. Segura were awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action. At a special ceremony held in Ft. Bliss, Texas, Segura’s mother, Mrs. G. B. Segura, was given the award meant for her son by post commander Colonel John K. Brown.<sup>332</sup>

Navarrete remained as Captain of Company E only for a few months. Around June 1944 Navarrete was relieved of his command and sent back to the U.S. where he was given a two

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<sup>330</sup> Morin, 73.

<sup>331</sup> Parker, 115; *El Paso Herald-Post*, July 19, 1944, 1.

<sup>332</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 17, 1944, 7.

week furlough to visit his family in El Paso. Navarrete was then re-assigned as a training instructor at a military post in California training new recruits for combat overseas. He would return to El Paso in August 1945 after the war ended.<sup>333</sup> After being wounded at the Rapido River, Tech Sgt. Antonio D. Saucedo spent nineteen days in the hospital before rejoining Company E. In July 1944, Saucedo was sent back to the U.S. after spending a total of eighteen months overseas. That same month five other members of the company were also sent back to the U.S. Private First Class Celestino Solis; Sergeants Joe Briones and Rodolfo Acosta; and Staff Sergeants Carlos C. Campos and Robert P. Moncada were given time off and apparently re-assigned to other duties in the U.S.<sup>334</sup> By late 1944 Staff Sergeant Enrique Ochotorena was also sent back to the U.S.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-8.

<sup>334</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, July 25, 1944, 1; *El Paso Times*, July 4, 1944, 2.

<sup>335</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 6, 1944, 3.

## Chapter 12

### LIFE AS A PRISONER OF WAR

Under normal circumstances, January 21 should have been a day of celebration for Sgt. Ricardo Palacios, Jr., since it was his twenty-second birthday. Instead, he would always remember that this was the day when he crossed the Rapido River and saw many of his fellow troops either killed or wounded. Palacios indicated that of the fifty men he had led across the river, only two were left at the time of his capture.<sup>336</sup> The official casualty list showed that Company E had eighty-two enlisted men and three officers registered as missing in action, presumably captured.<sup>337</sup> Among those taken prisoner at the Rapido River were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Richard M. Manton, Tech Sgt. Raul Caracena, Tech Sgt. Eduardo Romo, Pfc. Juan Saucedo, and Sgt. Palacios.<sup>338</sup> Caracena was in his foxhole when an artillery shell exploded near him and knocked him unconscious. The power of the blast had managed to lob a large amount of soil on top of Caracena burying him alive. Luckily, he was saved by his comrades but, awoke to discover that he was a prisoner of war.<sup>339</sup> From Italy, the prisoners traveled by foot and by train to prisoner of war camps in Germany. Palacios remembered what happened to him before his first interrogation by the Germans. Recognizing that Palacios was of some Hispanic ethnicity, German troops

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<sup>336</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>337</sup> Casualty List, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January-February, 1944, microfilm, 1, 14, 15, 16, 17, roll 3028; Journal, HQ., 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, January 23, 1944, Lorenzo de Zavala State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, microfilm, roll 3039.

<sup>338</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010; Smith, 54, 55; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

<sup>339</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 18, 1946, 11.

asked him if he understood English. If not, they were willing to get an interrogator that was fluent in Spanish. Palacios informed his captors that he could speak English and Spanish.<sup>340</sup>

One of the most terrifying moments for Palacios came when he was taken to see a German officer. Palacios remembered that the officer seemed aggravated and stated “he looked at me with red eyes as if he was gonna get a gun and shoot me.”<sup>341</sup> The officer began yelling at Palacios “Americana hund!” but Palacios had no idea what the officer was saying. Afterward, he was taken and made to stand with two other American prisoners. Only a few feet in front of them were two German soldiers and their sergeant setting up a machine gun. More American prisoners were then brought out as if to be witnesses to what was about to take place. Palacios and the others realized they were about to be executed and then they heard the order for the Germans to fire the machinegun. Much to their surprise and delight, the whole event was nothing more than a joke. The Germans had fired the machine gun over the heads of Palacios and the other two American prisoners. However, when the firing began the soldier standing next to Palacios fell to the ground. When Palacios checked on the man on him and saw no wounds, he realized the man had fainted from the sheer fright of the incident.<sup>342</sup>

Palacios and many of the others never remained at one specific camp for long and recalled being at a total of five P.O.W. camps. More often than not, the prisoners were forced to travel on foot, knee deep in snow, without being given food or water while German troops would ride on horseback. Palacios stated that if a prisoner wanted water they would get a little bit of snow and

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<sup>340</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010; Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>341</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>342</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

place it in their mouth. As tired as the men would get in these long marches they kept each other moving because German guards threatened to shoot any prisoner that refused to move.<sup>343</sup> During one of their winter travels to another camp, Palacios almost lost one of his good friends Raul Caracena. Having had no food or water, Caracena was on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion and told Palacios, “I’m gonna stay here. I don’t care if they shoot me.” Palacios having already lost enough of his friends did not want to lose anymore. He picked up Caracena and helped carry him to the next camp.<sup>344</sup>

At the camps, Palacios indicated that officers and non-commissioned officers such as sergeants, like himself, were held with high respect among the German guards and were never used for hard labor. They were kept at the prison camps while prisoners at the rank of privates were used as a labor force on farms. Privates used this to their advantage by sneaking in food such as chicken eggs and vegetables that they had stolen while working on German farms. Considering that the prisoners were only fed once a day, officers and non-commissioned were clearly at a disadvantage. To feed the prisoners the German guards used horse drawn wagons to take large barrels filled with cooked vegetables to the camp. Prisoners would form a line and were given one cup sized portion with one slice of bread.<sup>345</sup>

The prisoners were also used to clear debris and rubble left over from the aftermath of Allied bombing raids over German cities. Palacios indicated that he along with other prisoners at the camp could hear the rumble of the bombs hitting nearby cities. Sometimes the prisoners

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<sup>343</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>344</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>345</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

would see the Allied bomber formations which, at first, worried them because they felt that they would be mistaken for a German military camp and accidentally bombed. Among the prisoners were members of the U.S. Army Air Corps who calmed their nerves by letting them know that the pilots knew what targets to hit and which ones to bypass.<sup>346</sup>

In at least one of the camps where Palacios was held prisoner, he remembered there were an estimated two-hundred other American prisoners. Their sleeping quarters consisted of several bunk beds stacked in threes. The prisoners only received one blanket and no pillows. Every morning the German guards held a roll call to make sure none of the prisoners had escaped. On one morning Palacios did not make the roll call because he had contracted pneumonia. One of the prisoners that spoke German informed the German guards that Palacios was ill and could not move.<sup>347</sup>

A German guard with his dog then entered the barracks, but not before setting his dog loose. Palacios was thankful he was sleeping on the very top bunk because the dog could not reach him. When the guard realized that Palacios was, in fact, ill he left with his dog only to come back later to escort Palacios to another barrack. Palacios soon realized that it was a medical barrack and he was there to be treated. Later that same day a German guard escorted a captive from the Russian prisoner camp that was adjacent to the American camp. As it turned out, the Russian prisoner was a doctor who treated Palacios some sort of medication. Palacios was unsure what exactly the pills were but it helped him recover. Besides medication, a German guard would come by everyday to bring Palacios his daily ration of food. After spending a week

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<sup>346</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>347</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

recovering at the medical barracks, Palacios was finally taken back to join his comrades who were very glad to see that he was still alive and well.<sup>348</sup>

Although the American, Russian, and Polish prisoners were in the same camp, they were separated according to nationality. The abuse taken by the Russian prisoners from the German guards could be easily seen by the Americans. When asked to compare the treatment of American prisoners to Russian and Polish prisoners, his response was “you can’t compare. I saw some of those Russians being treated pretty bad.”<sup>349</sup> One event that Palacios vividly remembered was during the winter when Russian prisoners were brought out and forced to crawl in deep snow while German guards would walk by and strike them.<sup>350</sup>

As the war was drawing to a close, so was the time that these men would spend as prisoners. On the morning of April 22, 1945, a Russian reconnaissance unit was seen near the camp. By this time, however, Palacios indicated that the German guards knew that Russian forces were closing in and had decided to abandon camp. This allowed Palacios and four others to ransack the office building where information was kept on the prisoners. The men managed to retrieve their records and that of the comrades. Only a few days after the Russian reconnaissance unit was seen the Russian army liberated the camp. The men were ecstatic believing that their freedom was now guaranteed. However, the situation quickly turned into one of fear when the American prisoners attempted to leave and were abruptly forced at gun point by Russian troops to go back into the camp. Palacios and possibly some of the other American prisoners believed

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<sup>348</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010; Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>349</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>350</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

they were going to be sent to Russia to be used as slave labor. It was then that Palacios, Eduardo Romo, and Juan Padilla decided they would rather escape than risk becoming slaves to the Russians. However, Palacios stated that when he told the other members of Company E that he was planning on escaping, “they didn’t like the idea because they were afraid I was gonna get killed.”<sup>351</sup>

Eduardo Romo was the only other member of Company E that decided to escape with Palacios. Juan Padilla, on the other hand, was part of another U.S. Army division and had been captured during the Allied landings at Anzio.<sup>352</sup> After several days of planning Romo, Palacios, and Padilla decided they would escape on May 6. Their plan did not involve any elaborate strategies, but just a straightforward act of communication. The three men walked up to a Russian guard and made an effort to convince him that they were Americans and that they wanted to leave. While the guard could not speak English he apparently understood what they were trying to tell him and merely motioned in a way to let them know that he was going to let them leave without reporting it. The three men quickly jumped the barbed wire fence onto the other side; unfortunately, another Russian guard saw what was occurring and began firing at them. Palacios later said that it was a “good thing” they chose to escape at dusk because it allowed for better cover to escape.<sup>353</sup>

After walking for about three days trying to get to American line, Palacios, Romo, and Padilla ran into a convoy of American trucks. A soldier in the convoy asked them if they were

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<sup>351</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010; Personal document of Ricardo Palacios, Jr. titled “Dates to Remember;” Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>352</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>353</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010; Personal document of Ricardo Palacios, Jr. titled “Dates to Remember.”

Americans, to which they happily replied that they were indeed. The soldier asked them what they were doing and they began telling him of their ordeal. The soldier informed the three that the trucks were meant to go and pick up American prisoners that the Russians had liberated from German prisoner of war camps.<sup>354</sup> It was not until later that the three men found out that the reason the Russians desired to keep them in the camp was so that they could be returned back to their respective nations later.<sup>355</sup>

Palacios and the others were taken back to American lines and as they got off the trucks saw a large number of Germans surrendering. As they passed by a pile of German weapons standing almost five feet high, an American soldier turned to them and told them to get whatever guns they wanted. Considering they had not eaten since their escape, Palacios replied to the soldier that he wanted food instead. The men were given a shower and new clothing which was followed by a health inspection. Palacios acknowledged that he originally weighed one-hundred and forty pounds before being captured but after spending fifteen months as a prisoner of war was down to ninety-eight pounds. Before long, Palacios was given twelve days of leave in London, England and was then sent back to the U.S. where he was given his discharge on September 17, 1945.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Palacios interview, March 11, 2010.

<sup>355</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>356</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010; El Paso Herald-Post, March 25, 1966, B-1; Personal document of Ricardo Palacios, Jr. titled "Dates to Remember."

## Chapter 13

### AFTER THE WAR

As the war ended, millions of American men were now being sent back to the U.S. to return to their civilian lives. While the adjustment would take time these men were happy just to be back home. The horrors seen by the men of Company E and the 36<sup>th</sup> Division during the battle of the Rapido River were memories that would never leave them. As Ricardo Palacios Jr. recalled during an interview, “That’s something unforgettable. Sometimes you have those nightmares and you feel like somebody’s gonna kill you or you’re killing somebody. It’s awful. It never goes away.” To this day, Palacios considers himself very lucky to have survived the war. One of the things he believes contributed to his survival were the prayers his mother read and taught him. He still reads these prayers that he learned from his mother.<sup>357</sup>

For many of these veterans the anger still remained for the man they held responsible for sending them to cross the Rapido River, specifically General Mark Clark who commanded the 5<sup>th</sup> Army in Italy. When the 36<sup>th</sup> Division held its first annual reunion in Brownwood, Texas in January 1946, the veterans of the Rapido crossing demanded that a Congressional investigation take place.<sup>358</sup> The other issue that had angered these veterans so much was when President Harry Truman wanted to promote Clark to the rank of five-star general. Many of these veterans felt that Clark did not deserve the promotion since his incompetence led to the great loss of life and devastation of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division. By this time Clark was commanding an occupying force in

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<sup>357</sup> Palacios interview, February 12, 2010.

<sup>358</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1.

Austria and seemed unbothered by what the 36<sup>th</sup> Division Association wanted to do.<sup>359</sup>

Eventually, the investigation was to be held by the War Department and not Congress since it was understood that a military court would have a better understanding of military operations than a civilian court. The veterans even had the backing of a Corpus Christi Representative John E. Lyle. It appeared that Lyle besides being a native Texas had also served in the war and thus connected with these men of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>360</sup> It was at this time that the truth behind what happened at the battle began to surface. Navarrete was asked by 36<sup>th</sup> Division veterans to appear at the hearing that was taking place at the Pentagon. Navarrete revealed that he had been given strict orders to keep secret what had transpired at the Rapido River. Unfortunately for the veterans, the War Department defended Clark's action stating that the "Rapido crossing was necessary to the success of the Anzio landing in Italy."<sup>361</sup> Not only was Clark still given his promotion to the rank of major general, but also given the Navy's Distinguished Service Medal for "exceptionally meritorious services" during the Italian campaign. Still, to many of the veterans the fact that the truth of the battle was brought to light held some sense of consolation.<sup>362</sup>

The results of the investigation probably did not come as a complete surprise to the veterans considering that from the beginning of the investigation it seemed that many in the government and military did not want the investigation to occur. The Chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee was quoted as saying to the press that even General Dwight D.

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<sup>359</sup> Morin, 73; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 26, 1946, 3; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 21, 1946, 2.

<sup>360</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1946, 1, 2.

<sup>361</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, February 12, 1946, 1.

<sup>362</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, February 3, 1946, 1; *Albuquerque Journal*, July 26, 1981, E-8; Park, 115; Morin, 74.

Eisenhower and other high ranking officers in the U.S. Army were against the investigation. Overall, it appeared that if this investigation did place Clark responsible for the disaster then it would automatically result in an endless list to investigate other blunders that occurred in the war.<sup>363</sup>

Later in 1946, a Veterans of Foreign Wars Post was created in El Paso. The post was named after two El Pasoans that were killed in action in the European campaign. The first was Felix McDonald who had served in World War I and decided to serve again despite having a waiver that prevented him from being drafted. McDonald lost his life during the invasion of Normandy. The second name on the post was that of Roque O. Segura who was killed during the Rapido River battle. Gabriel L. Navarrete would serve as the first official commander of the Segura-McDonald VFW Post.<sup>364</sup>

In September 3, 1948, a monument was dedicated to those soldiers killed during World War II who were from Bowie High School. During the war, a large number of students left Bowie to help in the war effort. Specifically in 1943, the school's enrollment had dropped from 1,400 students to 760. Much of the male students left school to join the military while the female student body also left to find work. The monument had the names of forty young men that were killed in the war. One of these names was Company E member Roque O. Segura. Among the five-hundred people in attendance were the former members of Company E, some of whom "comprised the color guard."<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 26, 1946, 3; January 28, 1946, 1; January 19, 1946, 2.

<sup>364</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 29, 1971, C-1.

<sup>365</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, September 4, 1948, 2.; *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 6, 1944, 1.

Most of these men would go on to live quiet lives trying to forget the horrors they saw in combat. Gabriel L. Navarrete was one whose good deeds would keep him in the public eye for years to come after the war. In August 1953, Navarrete was named the new El Paso County Veterans Service Officer where he managed to countless veterans and their families that were in dire conditions because the Veterans Administration had rejected their benefits cases. Navarrete would carefully and thoroughly examine these and eventually re-send them to the Veterans Administration. The cases that were handled by Navarrete were rarely ever rejected twice. Because of this reputation many veterans and their dependents referred to Navarrete as a “special guardian angel.” Being a veteran himself, Navarrete declared “I feel that the man who has placed his life on the line for his belief in his country deserves every benefit appropriated to him.” In 1961 alone he helped veterans and their dependents living in El Paso county receive benefits that totaled to \$1,371,222, which was a new county record. By 1968, the amount of money going to veterans and/or their dependents had risen to \$4,500,000. This was said to have helped the El Paso economy since it “reduced the number of those on welfare,” especially widows and their families.<sup>366</sup>

In October 1982, a California based film crew arrived in El Paso to interview a handful of the members of Company E. The film crew worked for Mestizo Production Associates and co-producer Alfredo Lugo declared that “Mestizo was formed solely for doing more programs on Hispanics and try to erase the negative images of them on television.” Lugo had heard a few stories about Gabriel L. Navarrete, but could find nothing about him or the Company E when tried researching them in several history books. After contacting Navarrete, Lugo and director

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<sup>366</sup>*El Paso Herald-Post*, August 31, 1953, 1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, April 26, 1962, B-1; *El Paso Herald-Post*, March 5, 1968, B-1.

Harry Ratner decided to come to El Paso and film a documentary about the group as a way to give them recognition. The documentary was backed by the League of United Latin American Citizens and was funded using a \$6,000 grant given to them by the Budweiser Corporation.<sup>367</sup>

In 1998, a new high school was being built near Ft. Bliss and the board of trustees from the El Paso Independent School District decided that the school should be named after someone in El Paso. The trustees also decided that this person had to have served in the military and “who had done something special.” With the help of the President of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division Association, Ray Wells, Dan Wever, who was on the board of trustees and school naming committee, began his search for a possible nominee. Wever began tracking down members of Company E to ask their opinion on who the school should be named after with the only rule being that it had to be after someone that was already dead. All the men from Company that Wever interviewed had the same response, Captain John L. Chapin.<sup>368</sup> It is possible that some citizens of El Paso were confused as to why Chapin was chosen and not Gabriel L. Navarrete. The fact was that many did not understand the relationship and history the men of Company E had with Chapin.

In 2008, a memorial was built in El Paso, Texas dedicated to the men of Company E. The memorial was an eight foot tall and fourteen foot wide bronze relief that had two illustrations. On one side the men of Company E were depicted trying to cross the Rapido River while under fire. The other side showed a list of names of all of the members of the company that were from El Paso. The site chosen for the memorial was in South El Paso at the Chelio Acosta Recreation Center. Many considered this the perfect place for the memorial since most of the El Paso

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<sup>367</sup> *El Paso Times*, October 31, 1982, 26-A.

<sup>368</sup> Dan Wever. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division in World War II: John L. Chapin. Company E, 141<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, <http://www.texasmilitaryforcesmuseum.org/36division/archives/memorial/chapin.htm>, (accessed 2/2/09).

members came from this part of the city. Before the memorial was built the only thing that stood near the recreation center was a small sign dedicating the park to Company E.<sup>369</sup> The only unfortunate thing was that by this time most of the members of the company that had survived the war had now passed away and were unable to see the monument dedicated to them. Nonetheless, the memorial was a tribute that had been a long time coming and bestowed an honor to these men that they rightfully deserved.

In 2009, rumors began that land was being set aside in Northeast El Paso in order to make room for the construction of a new school. The same group of individuals that had advocated for the memorial to be built believed this was their chance to have a school named after Gabriel L. Navarrete. It is unknown if their efforts will be successful, but one can only wait and see what the future holds.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> *El Paso Times*, June 5, 2008, 1.

<sup>370</sup> Personal Documents of Javier Diaz.

## Chapter 14

### CONCLUSION

The Texas National Guard started Company E in 1923 with the intentions to Americanize the Mexican population of El Paso; however, by the time Second World War began much had changed within the Mexican populations of the U.S. They no longer saw themselves as Mexicans, but as Mexican-Americans and their participation in the war only helped to solidify this attitude. As a World War II veteran, Morin declared, “Most of us were more than glad to be given the opportunity to serve in the war. We knew there was something great about this country that was worth fighting for.”<sup>371</sup> In effect, one can argue that Morin’s statement was a sentiment that was felt among the many minorities that contributed to the war and not just Mexican-Americans. Many scholars argue that it is because of this sentiment that the end of the war is considered the initial starting point of the Civil Rights Movement. Fighting in the defense of the U.S. gave many minority groups, including Mexican-Americans, the feeling that they were now officially equals in American society. As American veterans, they were no longer going to accept discrimination as they once did. One of the first of these movements was the American G.I. Forum. Started in 1948 by Hector P. Garza and Mexican-American veterans, the organization was formed to challenge the Veterans Administration which had denied numerous Mexican-Americans their military benefits.<sup>372</sup>

The end of World War II also brought changes to the units of the El Paso National Guard. In order to make room for the anti-aircraft units of the National Guard, Company E and

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<sup>371</sup> Morin, 24.

<sup>372</sup> Del Castillo, 101; Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1993), 399.

Company H were transferred to other parts of Texas in 1946. Company E was assigned to be the new National Guard unit of Corpus Christi.<sup>373</sup> After the war, no other attempts were ever made by the Texas National Guard to create a unit similar to Company E. It seemed that there was no longer a need to do so since so many Mexican-Americans had served honorably in integrated units in all branches of the military. Thus, Company E will always be known in history as the first and only distinctly Mexican-American unit to have served in the U.S. Army and military in general.

The exceptionality of Company E could only be matched by the uniqueness of the city that was chosen for their formation. El Paso's peaceful coexistence with its large Mexican and Mexican-American population proved it to be the ideal location for the Texas National Guard's experiment. No other city in Texas offered the conditions that would have allowed for such a trial to take place in the 1920s. Indeed, El Paso did care for its residents that were serving overseas regardless if they were of Mexican ethnicity or not. That fact that the city's two local newspapers constantly attempted to print current information on the whereabouts and conditions of Company E showed just how important they were to El Paso. Moreover, the "Camp Gordon Plan" laid the foundation for the strategy that was used by the Texas National Guard in forming Company E. Specifically, by having them in a distinct unit of their own, the odds were that they would be easier to train and Americanize as well. Lastly, one cannot forget Marcelino Serna and others of Mexican ethnicity who served in World War I. Although small in number when compared to the other minorities that served, their actions were enough to cause a major change not just in how they were looked upon by others, but how they identified themselves.

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<sup>373</sup> *El Paso Herald-Post*, November 7, 1946, 15.

Recently, there has been more focus on Mexican-Americans on the home front during World War II, especially with the assistance of distinct individuals such as Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez. However, the field of study pertaining to Mexican-American military contributions is still very much limited and more work is needed to be done. The hope is that it is not too late to find these exceptional veterans and acquire their stories so that future generations will know of their great accomplishments.

Overall, this study was inspired by the fact that there has never been a comprehensive history of Company E. In a time when World War II veterans are quickly vanishing, this was a story that needed to be chronicled so that the memory of Company E would not be forgotten. Their uniqueness and contributions in the war are an important part of the history of El Paso, but also to Mexican-American history in general. The only regrettable part of this research was that other members of Company E could not be interviewed. At the time this study was made, only Mr. Ricardo Palacios, Jr. was available for an interview. All of the other members of the unit had either passed away or were in ill health. Although it is unfortunate to consider that within the next two years there may no longer be any more members of Company E left, this study will have narrated their experiences so that it will not be neglected from history.

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## CURRICULUM VITA

Jorge Rodriguez was born in El Paso, Texas. The second son to Cesar H. Rodriguez, Sr. and Magdalena Rodriguez-Zamora. He graduated from Burges High School, El Paso, Texas, in the spring of 2001. He entered the University of Texas at El Paso in the fall of 2001 where he completed his bachelor's degree in History in the spring of 2006. In the fall of 2006, he once again entered the University of Texas at El Paso to pursue his Master of Arts degree in History.

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