

AT FIRST IT WAS QUIET...

Brutal fighting near Italy's Rapido River led to tremendous American casualties—and an unexpected gesture by the enemy
By Duane Schultz

Lieutenant Harold L. Bond had never seen a real German soldier before, only actors playing them in Hollywood movies and U.S. Army training films. But the ones he saw on the other side of the Rapido River near Monte Cassino, Italy, on January 24, 1944, were alive and real—and they were heading toward him.

Bond, 23, was a newly commissioned lieutenant fresh out of Officer Candidate School; a 90-day wonder, as the GIs called them. He had joined the 36th Infantry Division—known as the T-Patchers, a Texas National Guard outfit—the night before they attacked the Germans in their concrete-and-steel defenses on the far side of the Rapido in the shadow of Monte Cassino. His superiors told him that he was too new to be assigned to command a unit—he would only get in the

way—and so Bond watched and waited.

For the next three days, he saw his fellow soldiers try to cross the river three times, only to be beaten back again and again. Most of the troops never made it across, and among those that did, few returned. The ones who survived never forgot it. In 1999, more than a half century later, Private Bill Hartung of the 36th said that he “felt like I had turned into an old man overnight. I know I was never the same person again...The nightmares make it seem like it all happened yesterday.”

Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark had planned the crossing of the Rapido as a diversion aimed at tricking the Germans into thinking it was a major attack so that they would shift their troops away from Anzio, where Allied forces were to launch an amphibious assault. The men of the 36th Infantry

In early 1944 men of the 36th Infantry Division defend a position overlooking the Rapido River.

Division had been in combat for months enduring heavy casualties, and the place where Clark had chosen to cross the river was the most heavily defended section of the German line.

“Everybody who had any experience knew, this ain’t the place to cross the river,” one sergeant said. “We had the feeling we were being sacrificed, a feeling that we couldn’t win.” He was right.

When the operation was over, almost half of the 4,000 men of the 36th fighting near the Rapido were killed, wounded, or captured. The German side, in contrast, had 64 deaths and 179 wounded.

IN THE AFTERMATH of the failed crossing, Lieutenant Bond was given command of what was left of a mortar battalion, a mere 46 men out of the 200 who had gone into battle. His first assignment was to set up a forward observation post behind a nearby hedge. Sent out alone, armed only with his .45 pistol, a pair of binoculars, and a radio, he was to keep watch on the German side of the river and report any movement.

At first it was quiet. Suddenly German soldiers appeared, slowly approaching the river’s edge. “They were coming toward us,”

Bond later wrote. He watched as the enemy troops walked around casually, occasionally stooping over to examine something on the ground.

He radioed his battalion commander to report the German presence, but was puzzled when no Americans opened fire on the enemy, now in plain view. “I was astonished to see how many of them there were exposing themselves,” Bond said, “and I could not understand why no one shot at them.”

Then his phone rang, and a frantic battalion commander told him not to let anyone open fire. The Germans, he said, had offered a two-hour truce to allow the Americans to collect their wounded and dead. It was an unusual turn of events at that stage of the fighting in Italy—but there were so many American casualties on the German side of the river that the Germans apparently needed the area cleared. Even in the freezing weather, the dead bodies would soon start to smell. The Germans likely also saw propaganda potential in the offer: a German officer was seen behind the barbed wire filming the operation.

A short time later, Captain David Kaplan, a 30-year-old army doctor from Iowa, and Private Arnold Fleishman, a 20-year-old interpreter from Queens, New York, both waving Red Cross flags, rowed across the river in a leaky rubber boat. But the Germans who had been out roaming over the battlefield had disappeared.

“When we got on the other side,” Captain Kaplan said, “we saw a big plain littered with the scattered bodies of [our] dead. There wasn’t a living soul in sight, but we had a feeling we were under observation.”

About 800 yards ahead, they saw a line of barbed wire and decided to head for that. The men moved carefully, keeping to the edges of shell craters, hoping the exploding shells had already set off any mines in the vicinity. When they finally reached the wire, there were still no enemy soldiers.

“We waved the Red Cross flag in all directions and jingled the wire and suddenly a German came into view,” Kaplan recalled. He was a well-dressed officer and spoke in German to Fleishman, complimenting the private on how fluently he spoke the language.

Then he asked the question Fleishman had been dreading: where had he learned such good German? “In school,” the private answered, deliberately failing to mention that he had grown up in Germany and was one of the lucky Jews that had fled to the United States before the war. Fleishman thought it best not to reveal that.

The three men quickly reached an agreement about the terms of a truce. The Americans left for their side of the river and returned with some 75 army medics and litter bearers. To avoid any misunderstanding, the party carried large white towels on which red crosses had been painted using iodine.

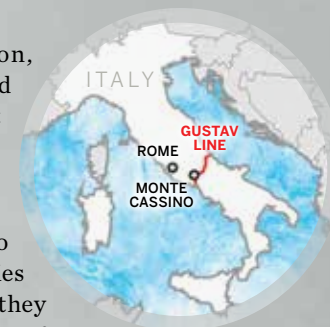
As the litter bearers retrieved their men, more Germans came out to observe from behind their barbed wire, but in keeping with the truce arrangement, neither side was armed. The Americans learned that the Germans had already taken a number of American wounded to field hospitals for treatment, but they admitted that there might be some

soldiers they had missed. In addition, the litter bearers had to deal with the dead GIs whose bodies needed to be brought near the shoreline for possible retrieval at a later time.

The Germans offered to help the Americans in their search. There was no apparent anger or hostility as the enemies worked side by side, conversing as best they could, despite the language barrier. Some of the men brought out photos of their families. A few even shook hands.

Corporal Zeb Sunday took out a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes and offered one to a German soldier, who graciously accepted it. They started a conversation. “He talked pretty good English,” Sunday recalled. “He had a brother in Brooklyn named Heinz. He seemed to be just common people like [us]. He was just doing his job.”

Some of the Germans told the Americans how much they admired their bravery in attempting to cross the river against such overwhelming odds. “Your men fought with great determination and courage,” one said. Others said they were surprised that the American officers had chosen such a strongly fortified spot on the river for the crossing. The GIs agreed that they could not have



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During a two-hour truce, the Germans allowed litter bearers and soldiers of the 36th (here a few days earlier) to collect their dead and wounded.



chosen a worse place to mount an attack.

One German officer, smartly dressed and carrying a swagger stick, approached Major Ted Andrews. He said in flawless English, "You lads certainly don't conduct river crossings like I was taught at Leavenworth." The officer had been a student at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College before the war. "He was right," Andrews noted. "I would never conduct a river crossing that way."

AMONG THE BODIES littering the battlefield, the search parties found four wounded American soldiers still alive. One was an army medic. As litter bearers lifted him off the ground and placed him onto a stretcher, he said, "Look! I have maid service. You can't beat this battlefield."

Another wounded man, a forward observer who had half his face blown off, had been

drifting in and out of consciousness for three days. He recalled how, during the battle, some American soldiers had found him but assumed he was dead. He tried to speak or move an arm or leg, but could not. He saw the litter bearers looking at him, shaking their heads and walking away. The Germans had also passed him by. But then, during the truce, the litter bearers noticed that rigor mortis, a stiffness in the muscles that occurs after death, had not set in. They brought him back across the river to safety. It would take multiple reconstructive surgeries to restore his face to near normalcy.

But the search teams missed another who was barely alive. Sergeant Charlie Rummel had been lying on the ground since the battle with both his legs shattered: "I could hear my bones cracking every time I moved. My right leg was so badly mangled I couldn't get my boot off, on account of it was pointed to the rear." Rummel had dragged himself painfully from one foxhole to the another searching the bodies of the dead for packets of sulfa to pour on his wounds, and to scrounge whatever food he could find. "I was constantly cold and wet. Every hole that I crawled into was filled with water." German soldiers later discovered Rummel and took him back to their field hospital; both of his legs had to be amputated.

By the end of the truce, the American team had brought back the four wounded men and transported 60 dead across the river for identification and burial. But there was not enough time to take them all. Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Price recalled: "A stack of 80 bodies was piled along the bank to be recovered later; these had received direct hits from mortar shells while standing in their fighting holes and had no heads, shoulders or arms. They proved difficult to identify."

Then it was time to leave and say goodbye to the enemies they had only just met. "Sergeant, you be good," said one German captain to First Sergeant Enoch Perry. "Well, I'm going to," Perry replied, "and I hope this thing can be finished up." "Me too," came the reply, "I'm ready to get out of here."

"War's a funny thing," Sergeant Sammy Petty said after the truce ended. "You get

these people fighting each other. They're going to kill each other. Then they go down and shake hands, the best of buddies. And five minutes later, you'll be trying to kill him or he'll be trying to kill you."

It didn't go just like that, though.

Lieutenant Harold Bond watched the last American soldier come back across the river carrying his white towel with the iodine-stained cross painted on it.

"The truce was officially over," the lieutenant wrote in his memoirs almost 20 years later, "but no one started firing as night came on. The whole front remained silent until it was dark. Everyone there seemed reluctant to break the short peace, when Germans had directed Americans to spots where their comrades lay.... Then, as if both sides had been told to start things up again, the big guns started shooting." ★



"The truce was finally over," a lieutenant wrote, "but no one started firing as night came on."

After the wounded had been retrieved and the truce ended, both the Germans and Americans seemed reluctant to resume fighting. Mused one sergeant: "War's a funny thing."

