

# **Remember the Alamo!-Anzio!**

## **The Brave and Controversial Texas Army National Guard in WWII**

The Texas Army National Guard has a proud history that has not only influenced but, has come to define its military culture. It is the purpose of this essay to discuss some of those defining and controversial moments and remember the heroes that made them so. Texas has traditionally been committed to the defense of its nation and usually contributes more troops to the U.S. military than any other state. The Texas Army National Guard traces their beginnings to the fight for Texas' independence from Mexico. The spirit of the defenders of the Alamo, and the victorious men that carried the day on the grounds of San Jacinto, is alive and well in the hearts of every Texas National Guard soldier and airman. The TXARNG is a state military force in local operation but trains and fights alongside the federal Army, daubed "Big Army". They call themselves "citizen soldiers" because although they have the same training as "Big Army", they only serve one weekend out of the month, unless called into active duty.

The TXARNG has fought in every major conflict that the United States has faced; however it received its greatest distinctions when it became activated and deployed to the European theater of WWII. Some modern historians tend to forget the glory and sacrifice of the "T-patchers" and instead attack the competency and character of the command of the TXARNG as well as that of "Big Army". The TXARNG was one of the most decorated elements of the U.S. Army and unfortunately, it received some of the highest casualties of the entire war., Controversy surrounds the Anzio offensive as well as Gen. John E. Dahlquist in France, due to the high amount of casualties.

The 36th Infantry division was placed under the umbrella of the 5th Army along with various other divisions, including French forces. The responsibility of taking the Italian peninsula was given to the 5th Army with the 36th ID leading the way. The initial strategy was to take the enemy by surprise by landing 7 waves of infantry on the beaches out-side of Salerno. The evening before the attack was to take place, the Allied flotilla was spotted by German aircraft. At 0330 men from the 141st Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division boarded their landing craft and began the slow advance toward the beach.

Having lost the element of surprise, the 141 was forced to endure tremendous and accurate small arms and artillery fire. The 1st battalion took the beach and advanced some 400 yards inland to a railroad bridge. 2nd and 3rd battalion was spread out in between 1st B and the beach. Most of the advancing party was forced to withdraw north to another beach head near Paestum. The attack had landed only 3 out of the 7 intended waves, leaving the infantry outnumbered and with-out support or adequate communication. The loss of communication left the three waves without the

protection of the Navy's guns. The Germans took advantage of the situation and launched a counter attack supported by artillery from nearby 88s. The Attack came in waves of tanks supported by battle hardened German infantry.

1st Battalion was caught in the open with only shallow ditches and small trees for cover. The attack came from the exposed left flank and cut the Texas line in half, further isolating 1st battalion from the beach. The battle began to turn in favor of the Texans when their *cannon crew* braved enemy fire to salvage and assemble their only surviving "pack-howitzer". The platoon leader and gunner were both wounded during the engagement.

With the German counter attack stopped, the 141 was able to pull back and re-organize. Another attack came at dawn. The Germans attacked in full force, to drive the 141 off "Blue beach". Massed Infantry supported by five Mark IV tanks overran the Texas position multiple times, but each time they were miraculously repelled with nothing but rifles and grenades. The attacking force was so decimated that it was unable to attack the battered Texas beachhead anymore that day. The other waves that came ashore at and near Paestum met similar odds and achieved similar heroic victories. At day break the 36 ID had established a front line and was in mainland Europe to stay.

Salerno is remembered as a successful landing though it is obvious that the success at Salerno was neither due to strategic genius nor through enemy folly. The men at Salerno triumphed through courage and good platoon leadership. The example set at Salerno would be the story of the 36th throughout the duration of the war. The Nazi defenders would nearly always have more support, and a numerical advantage over the 36th. Almost every strategy that the 5th Army could come up with was countered by a tactically superior Nazi movement, yet the 36th pushed through.

The success at Salerno brought hope of a rapid advance to Rome. The 5th Army planned to launch another invasion at Anzio, just thirty miles outside of Rome. The strategy of the Anzio and later Casino offensives were to disrupt the German's Gustov Line. It was, unfortunately based on over-optimistic intelligence reports and, some argue, incompetence. The 5th Army was about to face its greatest challenge yet. Anzio is remembered as one of the most costly operations of WWII. The objectives were based on poor intelligence and the command was overloaded with too many simultaneous offensives.

The 5th army, with elements from the 36th ID, initially took Anzio with little difficulty. One soldier remarked: "The beach was warm and sunny. It was hard to believe that there was a war going on and we were in the middle of it." The 5th Army had no idea that the Germans had been in a fighting retreat to their Gustav line and were both ready and well prepared to stand firm against any Allied advancement. The 5th army planned to use a pincer movement by taking the

bulk of its forces through the center, while sending the British north and the 36th Infantry's 142 south.

Germany occupied the High ground above every valley from Monte Casino to Rome. German artillery easily observed allied movement and direct lethal artillery fire into the advancing infantry. The 36th lost more men trying to flank the Gustav line than in any other engagement throughout the war. On May 3rd 1944 the 142 and the 143 had infiltrated the high ground and occupied a peak 2000ft above Velletri. The price was high but the plan had worked and the race to Rome was on. Gen. Walker leading the 36th, was the first division to reach Rome but was forced to wait for the rest of the 5th army before they could enter the city. Eric Sevareid of CBS News remarked: "If Generals Alexander and Clark received the key to the City of Rome, it was Gen Walker who turned over the Key."

The Anzio campaign endured several strong counter attacks by German forces. The offensive fought hard and had lost and gained territory. When it was finally able to hold a steady line, it took nearly all 96,000 allied troops to hold it against the 135,000 Nazi troops, which consisted of Germany's most elite Paratrooper and Panzer divisions. While the operation, at a glance, may seem like it was an unnecessary and costly diversionary tactic, the brave men that fell at Anzio did not fall in vain. The Anzio offensive may have been less costly if Generals Alexander, Clark or Walker had the historian's benefit of hindsight, but while victory was costly, it was in many ways a success. The 135,000 Nazi troops that stood against the Anzio offensive were forced to remain, further bleeding the already overstretched German war machine. Another benefit to tying up the 135,000 Nazi troops at Anzio; it prevented them from strengthening the Gustav line. If the Anzio offensive had not occurred, the Gustav line would have received 135,000 troops and capturing Rome may have been twice as costly.

The Texas National Guard's 36th Infantry Division, along with the rest of the 5th Army, chased the German army out of Italy and well into France. Just before leaving Italy, the 36th Infantry division received a new commander. Major General John E. Dahlquist, a non-Texan from Minnesota. One 36 ID soldier remarked, "There are two types of Texans in the 36th, honorary and ornery!" Major General Dahlquist would not only lead the 36th into France but also into victory just nine months later. However History would not remember his virtues. In the French forest of Vosges, his name became synonymous with racism, negligence and cruelty.

The momentum of the 5th army continued into France, but the initial progress eventually slowed and became very costly. The 36th pressed through stubborn defenses toward Herpelmant to first assault the Houx valley. The 141 was ordered to march northeast in order to support the 143 by attacking the rear of the German position. Three infantry battalions stormed in force and took Herpelmant, putting the 36th half way to the Meurthe River. The previous days of seemingly pointless marching and flanking movements that had been cause for complaint throughout the

ranks, finally began to make since. One soldier commented after the battle: “Perhaps it wasn’t such a bad plan after all.”

The 36th reached the Foret Domeniale De Champ which was littered with footless German soldiers, evidence of their desperate flight toward their defensive positions. The 141 was ordered to clear the Vosges forest and take the high ground over La Housriere. The 141 fought through the German obstacles and straggling defenders and secured the highest ridge overlooking the German position in La Housriere. The remaining 2nd and 3rd battalions along with the 442 began to take their positions around the Vosges, west and northwest of Biffontaine to prepare for the eventual assault on the German forces in nearby La Housriere.

The 442 was a segregated infantry unit that consisted only of Americans of Japanese descent with the exception of Caucasian officers. It was a highly decorated and experienced unit and had borne the brunt of enemy resistance for the last 8 days. The men of the 442 were as patriotic and dedicated as the men of the 36th despite the fact that most of the soldiers in the 442’s immediate family had been arrested and placed in the infamous American concentration camps. The Camps were responsible for the unconstitutional internment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent. The 442 was the closest unit to the 1st battalion and took position between 2nd and 3rd battalion.

Late in the afternoon the Germans mounted a powerful surprise attack on 1st battalion in a classic pincer movement that completely cut off 1st battalion from her sister battalions. 1st battalion held the peak against all attacks but began to run out of ammunition. Although the German forces that surrounded 1st battalion were not at the peak, they still occupied high ground and had ample supplies.

1st battalion quickly became “The Lost Battalion.” The 275 man force, that held a perimeter that spread some 350 yards, would have to hold until relieved. Word got out that the counter attack had completely severed the 1st battalion from the main army and left them surrounded and utterly besieged. Gen. Dahlquist sprang into action and ordered the closest infantry units to break through and rescue their brothers. The 442 advanced along with 2nd and 3rd battalion. The German defense was strong and they repulsed every effort the 36th made to break through. Hours turned into days, the “Lost Battalion” was running out of time.

Multiple attempts were made to re-supply the 1st battalion via air drop however nearly all drops overshot the Texans and re-supplied the Germans instead. An ambitious artillery officer tried loading shells with supplies and lobbing them into the 1st battalions position but the results were ineffective at best. Finally a successful airdrop brought the 1st their much needed food and munitions and they continued to hold-out against all advancement. After days of bitter fighting, trying to break through the German lines to free the “Lost Battalion”, General Dahlquist himself drove to the lines to personally lead his men in an attack to break through. During the attack

General Dahlquist's aid, Captain Wells Lewis, was killed by enemy fire.

The final attack broke the German hold on the Vosges and lifted the siege of the "Lost Battalion". The men of the 442 were first to break through. One Nisei recalled his first contact with a battle weary soldier of the 141. Private First Class Matt Sakumoto was the first to make contact, being greeted excitedly by Sgt. Eddie Guy of the 141st. All that PFC Sakumoto could think of was to ask Guy if he needed any cigarettes.

The 36th would never forget their Japanese brothers. There was one example of a bar, the owner of which had refused to serve a member of the 442, It did not go well for the owner once the men from the 141 heard about it. The 442 was the most decorated unit of the war; out of the total fourteen-thousand men to serve as part of the 442 Regimented Combat Team 9,486 of them received Purple Hearts, 21 earned the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the Unit as a whole was awarded an unprecedented 8 Presidential Unit Citations.[xii]

The 36th Infantry Division continued through France, battled hard and stormed gloriously through the breach that the 1st battalion had made in the "Dragon's Teeth". The 1st battalion of the 141 was lost no more. The 36th fought on and secured the west bank of the Rhine. The Germans had been pushed back so fast that they failed to spike their artillery which the 5th army put to good use bombarding the German forces, with their own 88s. The 36th had thought that they'd seen it all until they came across the Nazi concentration camps. The 36 Infantry liberated the emaciated survivors and stayed on the heels of the SS troops that had garrisoned the death camps.

While fighting closer and closer into the heart of the Fatherland, German resistance became more and more fanatical but there would be no more days as bloody as they had been at Anzio, Vosges or the Siegfried Line near Neider Otterbach. Gen. Dahlquist remained in command until the 36th forced the Surrender of Hermann Goring and his Corps G. Gen. Dahlquist, who was fluent in German, was the first person to question Gen. Goring. After the war Gen. Dahlquist was re-assigned, state side to the 1st Infantry. Gen. Dahlquist retired in 1956 after a long and rewarding career in the U.S. Army. He died and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in 1975.

The 36th Infantry Division remained in Austria and aided the occupational forces until it was recalled and later re-organized along with the rest of the military under the Truman administration. The 36th endured 400 days of continuous combat and received countless honors and awards, including 14 Congressional Medals of Honor. The Texas Army National Guard's 36ID continues to live up to the reputation of its predecessors. The Battle Cry of the 36th was and still is "Remember the Alamo" but The Second World War added a second Battle Cry, "Anzio!"

The 36 ID's performance under the command of Major Generals Walker and Dahlquist is nothing short of extraordinary. So how does one respond to arguments that insult the competency of their leadership? To address this question let's assume you were in command of the 36th ID and you had been given an objective and you took that objective but lost 2200 of your men in the process. How would you respond if you were told you that your command was at fault because, a competent commander would have made use of a safer strategy or better intelligence. One response would be to refer to the old adage: "No great plan or preparation ever survives first contact with the enemy."

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