

c. Success: The 88th Infantry Division

The misfortunes of the American divisions who fought in the American Army's first battles, and that of the 90th Division in Normandy, were not repeated in all. Some U.S. divisions fought ably from the start, and got better as the war progressed. Colonel Trevor Dupuy in his historical analyses has compared the battle performance of specific German, British, and American divisions, and identified the U.S. 88th Infantry Division as among the most effective in any theater on either side. Dupuy found that the 88th Division's combat ability was surpassed, in the sample he examined, only by four elite German divisions, and that it was markedly superior to other Allied divisions--Dupuy marks the performance of the 88th Division 43 percent better than the average of other U.S. divisions he has analyzed, and he notes that, analytically, that meant, compared with the average, it was *twice as effective* in battle (1.43²).¹¹⁹

The 88th Division was activated in July 1942, from the Organized Reserve, like the 90th. However, the 88th Division was shipped overseas after just 16 months of training, 3 months earlier than any of the other divisions activated in 1942, and 8 months earlier than the 90th. In fact, only one other division moved through stateside training faster than the

¹¹⁷ English, J. A., *A Perspective on Infantry*, New York: Praeger, 1981, pp. 181-186.

¹¹⁸ Canadian Army training memoranda, cited in *ibid*.

¹¹⁹ Dupuy, T.N., *Understanding War*, New York: Paragon House, 1987, pp. 114-121, 234-235.

88th Division, and that was the 34th Infantry Division, shipped from the AGF 11 months after its activation, but moved to Northern Ireland for an additional 5 months of training there before the invasion of North Africa. The 88th Division passed its AGF training tests handily, participated in the Louisiana Maneuvers of June-August 1943, eliciting high praise from the umpires, and departed for Italy in November 1943, becoming the first of the all-draftee divisions to go to war. In 1949, General Marshall recalled the arrival of the 88th Division overseas as "the great psychological turning point in the building of a battle-worthy army."¹²⁰ By 1 March 1944 the Division was in combat south of Rome, on the bitterly contested Gustav Line. The best accolade for McNair's training system came from soldiers of the 88th quoted as saying, of their first battles: "This is no worse than maneuvers."¹²¹

In May and June 1944 the 88th Division took part in Operation DIADEM, the attack on Rome, and was among the first Allied forces into the Italian capital--a remarkable performance for an inexperienced division. The War Diary of the German Tenth Army referred to the 88th as "shock troops," and when the 88th went into line, the Germans shifted their reserves, anticipating that its presence heralded the main attack. From the very beginning, that division appeared to be battle-worthy, and seemed to improve steadily each day it was in combat. Why?

Col. Dupuy attributes the 88th Division's performance mainly to the leadership of its commander, Major General John E. Sloan, an Annapolis graduate (class of 1910) (Fig. II-16). AGF screening had eliminated Sloan from consideration for a division command because of his age, but McNair granted him a waiver on the recommendation of his deputy, then-Brigadier General Mark Clark, who knew Sloan as a particularly effective instructor at Leavenworth in the 1930s. Sloan was remembered by his troops in the 88th as something of a martinet during the AGF MTP, a stickler for smart salutes and proper uniform even in the field, and a demanding task master during tactical training. Veterans of the division's combat in Italy, asked in later years about Sloan, remarked on his personal presence in the front lines, his courage, his aggressiveness, and his strict discipline. Col. Dupuy's study led him to cite also Sloan's attention to detail, his inspirational talks and messages to his troops, his friendly gestures to establish and maintain rapport with

¹²⁰ Fisher, E.F., *From Cassino to the Alps*, ed., Matloff, M., United States Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Washington, DC: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1977, p. 23.

¹²¹ *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, op. cit., p. 455.

subordinates, his grasp of the "big picture" and his ability to communicate same to his units, his insistence that subordinates receive everything they needed to perform their mission, his high standards for performance on any mission, and his quickness to relieve any subordinate who could not or would not do his job. Sloan made his soldiers confident of their division. Dupuy also points out that Sloan never ceased to train them:¹²²

During lulls in battle, and during rest periods, the division trained. One reason why his division ranked right up with the best of the German divisions was that Sloan carried out rear-area training programs and demanded standards of performance very similar to those characteristics of the Germans, while showing similar interest in, and concern for his men. He also demanded of his officers a professionalism comparable to that of the Germans. Replacements were soon imbued with the spirit of the division. When the division was out on the line, Sloan insisted upon smart salutes and buttoned buttons, and got them from proud soldiers.



Figure II-16. Major General John E. Sloan

But there is more to the excellence of the 88th Division than just the division commander himself. Colonel James C. Fry took command of the 350th Infantry of the 88th Division just 1 week before *DIADEM*, the attack to Rome, was to begin, and shortly thereafter led the regiment in a 10-mile-deep penetration of German defenses.¹²³ On

¹²² Dupuy, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹²³ Fisher, E.F., Jr., *Casino to the Alps*, United States Army in World War II: The Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Washington, DC: Historical Division, Department of the Army, 1977, p. 95.

20 May 1944, Fry went forward to find out what was delaying the advance of one of his infantry battalions:¹²⁴

The fight was in an orchard that was beautifully green, with some of the trees still in bloom. Grass from knee to waist high was adequate to hide deployed infantry. It was a sunny and delightful morning, a nice day to be alive and a good day to die. . . .

Alternately running and crawling, I moved cautiously among the trees, trying to get a picture of the tactical problem. In what seemed only seconds, I was with a platoon of riflemen firing from the bank of an irrigation ditch. A young soldier quickly informed me that there was no one in front of them except the enemy. . . .

The pre-battle training of the regiment had not included team-type of instruction that required individual initiative under such conditions. Men were brave enough, but they didn't know exactly what was expected of them. Everyone hugged the ground and waited. To rise and issue orders would be equivalent to suicide.

I yelled at nearby riflemen to move forward by short rushes, and realized too late that this was no place for a regimental commander. There was little I could do from this position to influence the overall fight. I was in the front line and whether I liked it or not would have to be a platoon leader for the time being. I kept calling to men near me to keep firing at any spot where they thought the enemy might be hidden, and with the sound of the enemy rifles to guide us, we inched slowly forward. . . . Squad leaders and assistants who were trying to guide men forward were being hit.

Suddenly a medium tank came lumbering up through the orchard from the rear. This was the direct artillery support the riflemen needed so badly. It was the deciding factor in this fight. Within a few minutes, a white flag could be seen waving from our side of the enemy position and machine gun bullets stopped bouncing off the tank. I called "Cease Fire" in my best parade ground voice. Sixteen badly frightened prisoners came running down the hill with hands held high above their heads. One hundred and ten prisoners were captured before the fight finally ended.

Among those who were killed on that sunny morning were three officers and six squad leaders of that battalion of my regiment. . . . In the interval following [Rome] and subsequent campaigns we devoted the maximum available training time to developing battle team type action, so that each man would *know* what was expected of him under aimed enemy fire.

Fry trained his soldiers to know that when shot at, each man was expected immediately to join his comrades in shooting back to suppress enemy fire, and to move

¹²⁴ Fry, J.C., *Assault Battle Drill*, Harrisburg, PA: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1955, pp. 8-9. Fry (USMA, Class of June 14, 1922) assumed command of the 88th (Blue Devils) Division in 1945.

forward in teams: one team subjecting the enemy positions to maximum suppressive fire, and the other advancing, yet exposing only a minimum number of men at any one time. To do so, Fry had them practice what he called "assault battle drill." The most basic drill consisted of two men advancing to throw a grenade into an enemy position by alternating fire and movement, one covering by fire the rush of the other. Then the drills progressed to small teams alternating in fire and movement, always with live-fire, always observed and critiqued by a leader. The training would then go on to utilize similar teamwork within squad and platoon attack exercises, or within training for combat patrols.¹²⁵

"SLAM" Marshall enunciated the principle both DePuy and Fry recognized in these terms:¹²⁶

Green troops are more likely to flee the field than others only because they have not learned to think and act together. . . . With the growth of experience troops learn to apply the lessons of contact and communicating, and out of these things comes the tactical cohesion which enables a group of individuals to make the most of their united strength. . . .

Is it fully appreciated that the most general cause of small failures along our combat line, which frequently promote the confusions of larger bodies of troops, is the individual failure of the American soldier to respect this simple but fundamental principle? Our aggregate tactical weakness stems largely from this failing. We have encouraged the man to think creatively as a person without stimulating him to act and speak at all times as a member of a team. The emphasis should be kept eternally on the main point: *His first duty is to join his force to the others!* Squad unity comes to full cooperation between each man and his neighbor. There is no battle strength within the company or the regiment except as it derives from this basic element within the smallest component.

Fry reports that he used his assault battle drills in September 1944, to prepare his regiment for its attack through the Santerno Valley, in the Apennines. "Our purpose was to develop individual confidence, assurance, and initiative similar to that of a smooth-working basketball or football team."¹²⁷ He wrote an account of that attack, published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1949, that was widely applauded by veterans of the war in Italy as a superb description of battle leadership. In late September the 350th Infantry regiment, advancing toward the Po Valley along the right ridge of the Santerno compartment, seized a key mountain top, Monte Battaglia, and held it against determined German counterattacks

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 32-35.

¹²⁶ Marshall, S.L.A., *Men Against Fire*, op. cit., pp. 124-127.

¹²⁷ Fry, op. cit., p. vii. Appendix, "One Week in Hell," pp. 94-112.

during a week of see-saw, small unit engagements that cost the 350th 300 dead and 500 wounded.¹²⁸

In one passage, Fry gives the benefit of doubt to a newly arrived replacement captain over the latter's hesitation under fire, and leaves him commanding a company, but under observation as a "suspected weakling." A week later, the captain deserted his company under fire.

Fry went on to command the Second Infantry Division during the Korea War, and afterwards published a book on infantry fighting technique. The foreword to this book was written by Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, himself a redoubtable infantry leader. Gavin pointed out that:¹²⁹

Since time immemorial military men have sought ways and means of imparting combat experience to young soldiers destined to enter combat. Volumes have been written on the subject, and included among them, are many training manuals. The problem, however, still remains our most challenging one, and one that we have not, so far, satisfactorily solved.

The first hours of combat are the most important in a soldier's life. If he survives those first hours, he is then a veteran and very likely will have a high probability of later survival. All too frequently a young battle leader's reaction is, "You can throw the book out the window: this is the real thing." After a little more experience and with time to think over what he has been through, the same individual usually comes around to a realization that what has been taught is essentially sound. He simply did not understand its practical application.

General Fry's book is a contribution to the solution of this problem--the problem of adaptation to first combat and how to make the most in the shortest possible time of what has been learned by others. As he points out, there are only a few things that a soldier can do when he is first shot at. He and his team-mates may as well learn what they are and learn to do them. . . . It is far better to have a reasonably good plan and close with the enemy aggressively at once. Assault Battle Drill provides this, not only for the first fight, but for those that follow as one gains in experience and learns when to deviate from the pattern as well as when to adhere. . . .

Unfortunately, despite a shift in doctrine in 1956 providing two fire teams within the rifle squad, the Army fought in Vietnam with its close combat training little improved over that of McNair's AGF during World War II, or the Army's training base during Korea. In both Asian wars, teamwork in squads, if it could be achieved at all, tended to

¹²⁸ Fisher, *Cassino to the Alps*, op. cit., pp. 348-351.

¹²⁹ Fry, op. cit., p. v.

dissipate rapidly because of casualties and rotation, and declining experience among leaders, especially noncommissioned officers. Toward the end of the Vietnam War, it was not uncommon to find rifle platoons with but a single sergeant with more than 2 years' service. Thus, it may fairly be said that, with respect to rifle squads at the arrow-points, the U.S. Army did not progress much beyond 1944-1945 until the final years of the Vietnam War. In 1973, the Army activated the Training and Doctrine Command under the command of General W.E. DePuy (Fig. II-17). Among DePuy's early directives were orders to the Army's Training Centers and Schools to add to basic individual training exercises in fire and movement remarkably like Fry's "assault battle drill," to find additional improved techniques for both offensive and defensive close combat, and to discover other ways better to train the Army for war.