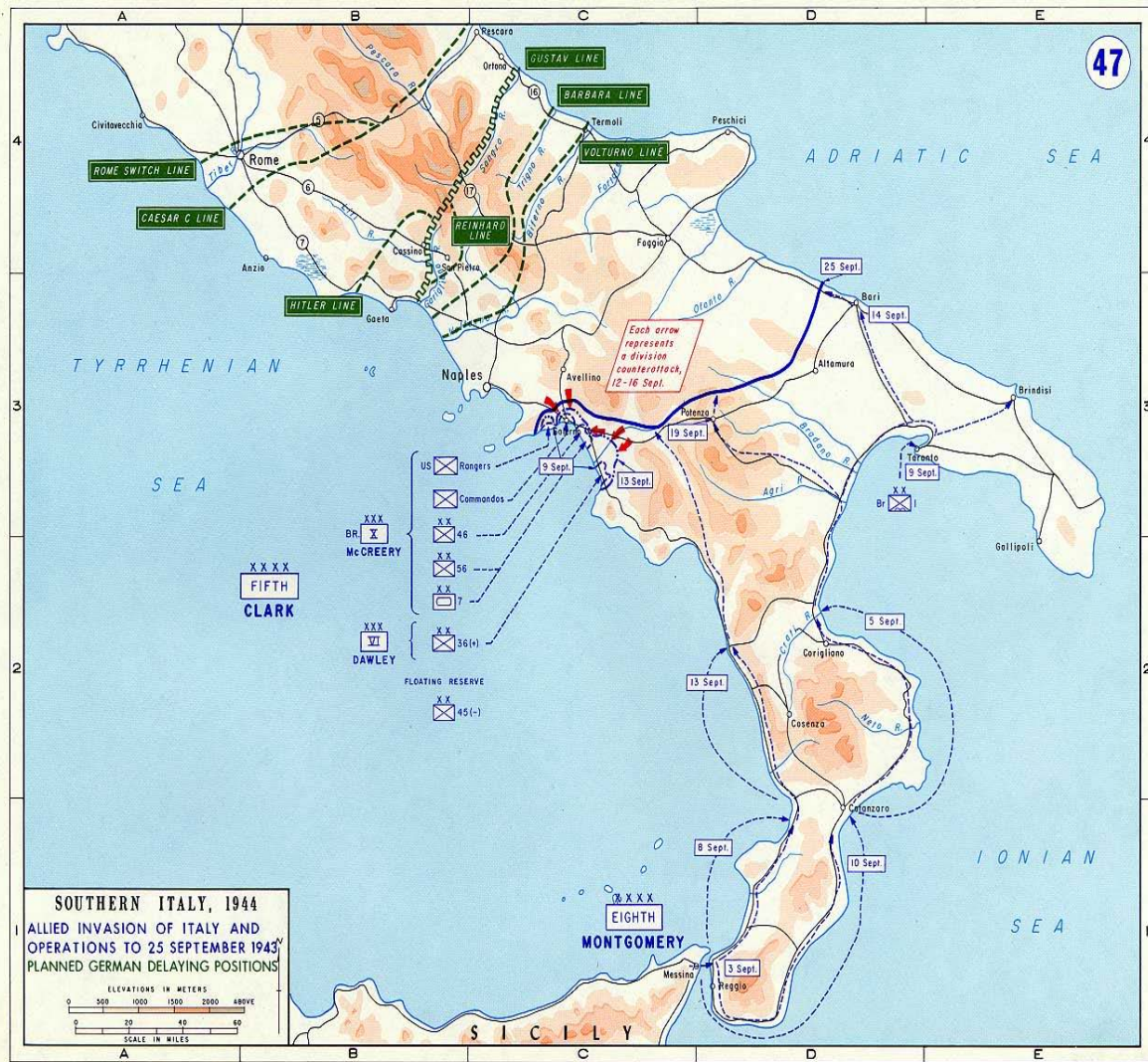


What was it like fighting in Italy?

The Germans were always fighting on the defensive behind fixed fortifications. Their leader, Field Marshall Albert Kesserling was a defensive specialist who maximized the advantages of fighting on the defensive in Italy's mountainous terrain. The Germans constructed bands of heavily fortified defensive lines across Italy to stop the allies from advancing up the Italian Peninsula. Attacking and penetrating these lines was very difficult and very bloody.



In southern Italy multiple defensive lines blocked the Allies. They had to fight through the Volturmo, Barbara, Reinhard, Gustav, Hitler, Caesar and Rome Switch lines.

SIDEBAR

How did the 88th Division get its nickname “Blue Devils”?

In World War I the 88th division was known as the “Cloverleaf Division” because of its blue 4-leaf clover shoulder-patch emblem. However, in World War II it earned another name. German army troops who fought against the 88th Division and were captured, commented that the soldiers of the 88th were no gentlemen and fought like devils. The 88th fought so aggressively against some of the best trained and equipped units of the Wehrmacht that they were called “Blue Devils” by the Germans. Even Axis Sally referred to them as the “Blue Devils” on her radio program. And this was only after 3 months of fighting.

And what was the significance of naming the 88th Division the “Blue Devils” ? One of the most elite combat branches of the German Army was the Fallschirmjager which were German Paratroopers. They were called “Green Devils” because of their aggressive fighting spirit and their distinctive green uniforms. Since the 88th Division demonstrated that same aggressive fighting spirit and their shoulder patch emblem was blue, they were nicknamed “Blue Devils”. Therefore, when Axis Sally referred to them as the “Blue Devils” on her radio program, it was one of the highest compliments she and German Army could bestow upon the 88th Division.

The “Blue Devil” reputation did not come cheaply. The 88th “Blue Devil” division spent 344 days in combat, from February 1944 until May 1945. This 14-month period was one of the longest stretches of sustained combat for any U.S. division during the entire war.

During World War II the 88th division started with a total complement of 14,261 soldiers. During the Italian Campaign, the division’s total casualties were 11,285 during its 14 months in combat. That’s an 80% casualty rate.

The 351st was known as the “Spearhead Regiment” within the 88th Division and our casualty rate was also very high. By the end of the war in 1945, in my outfit, Company H of the 2nd Battalion of the 351st regiment we had only 5 men remaining from the original group of 156 soldiers who came over from the United States in 1943.

Tell us what the 88th Division did to attack the Gustave Line?

I arrived at Cassino in February 1944. I remember that to get to the front line we had to march through “purple heart valley”. Because the Germans held the high ground they could immediately spot any troop movement. Therefore, each soldier was told to stay at least 50 yards behind the soldier in front of him, advance in spurts and seek cover whenever not advancing. If spotted, the Germans would even fire artillery shells at only one person.

At the end of our time at Cassino, another outfit called the French Goums from the Corps Expeditionnaire Francais relieved us on the front lines. They were fierce fighters who spread terror wherever they went. When they arrived, they lit camp-fires that first night. No one could understand why they could do that when our outfit was strictly forbidden to do the same thing because of the artillery shelling. I understood the next morning when I heard loud yelling and screams coming from foxholes in the German front lines. The fires were just a diversion to get the Germans to think they were still in their camp and to let down their guard.

Normally two Germans would inhabit a foxhole. The French Goums, being excellent trackers, stalkers and knife wielders, snuck up during the night and slit the throats of only one man in a German foxhole. The next morning, as the remaining man in the foxhole woke up; he became hysterical knowing that it could have just as easily been him that had his throat slit. Many times as these fighters roamed the battlefield at night they would first lightly touch the helmet of the person they were stalking. If there was a dip in the back of the helmet then they knew it was a German helmet and their knife would do its work swiftly.

After that my battalion marched back closer to the coastline to rejoin the rest of the 88th Division and be in position for the start of the final offensive to breach the Gustav Line. That offensive started on May 11, 1944. We captured the town of Santa Maria Infante and were one of the divisions, which broke through the Gustav Line.



This statue was the only thing not destroyed in the town of Santa Maria Infante.



To drive the Germans out of Santa Maria Infante, the town had to be destroyed.



This is the most widely known terrain feature on the entire battlefield.

What happened next after you broke through the Gustave Line?

We continued our advance and broke through the Hitler Line on May 23, 1944 and kept on advancing to Rome. We also easily broke through the Caesar Line and the Rome Switch defensive lines

On June 3, 1944 I was leading a long-range reconnaissance patrol when we entered the outskirts of the city of Rome. We were on a road leading into the heart of the city when we heard German tanks coming down that road. We hid in the furrows of a near-by garden field until they passed. Without heavy weapons we withdrew rather than engage the enemy because we only had machine guns and this was only a recon patrol.

The next day, June 4, 1944 other outfits in the US Army were credited with the official honor of entering Rome to liberate it. At least 7 groups have been acknowledged as entering Rome on June 4th. But I know we were there first on June 3rd, 1944 with our reconnaissance patrol.

What happened after Rome was liberated?

We began advancing up the Italian Peninsula through the so-called spine of Italy, the Apennine Mountains. Mountain fighting was hard work. We always seemed to be advancing up-hill. The Germans had the advantage of looking down at us and being able to call in artillery fire anytime we moved. As we got to the top of each mountain or hill the Germans would retreat to a prepared position on the next hill. Each time they had the entire landscape already zeroed in for artillery fire.

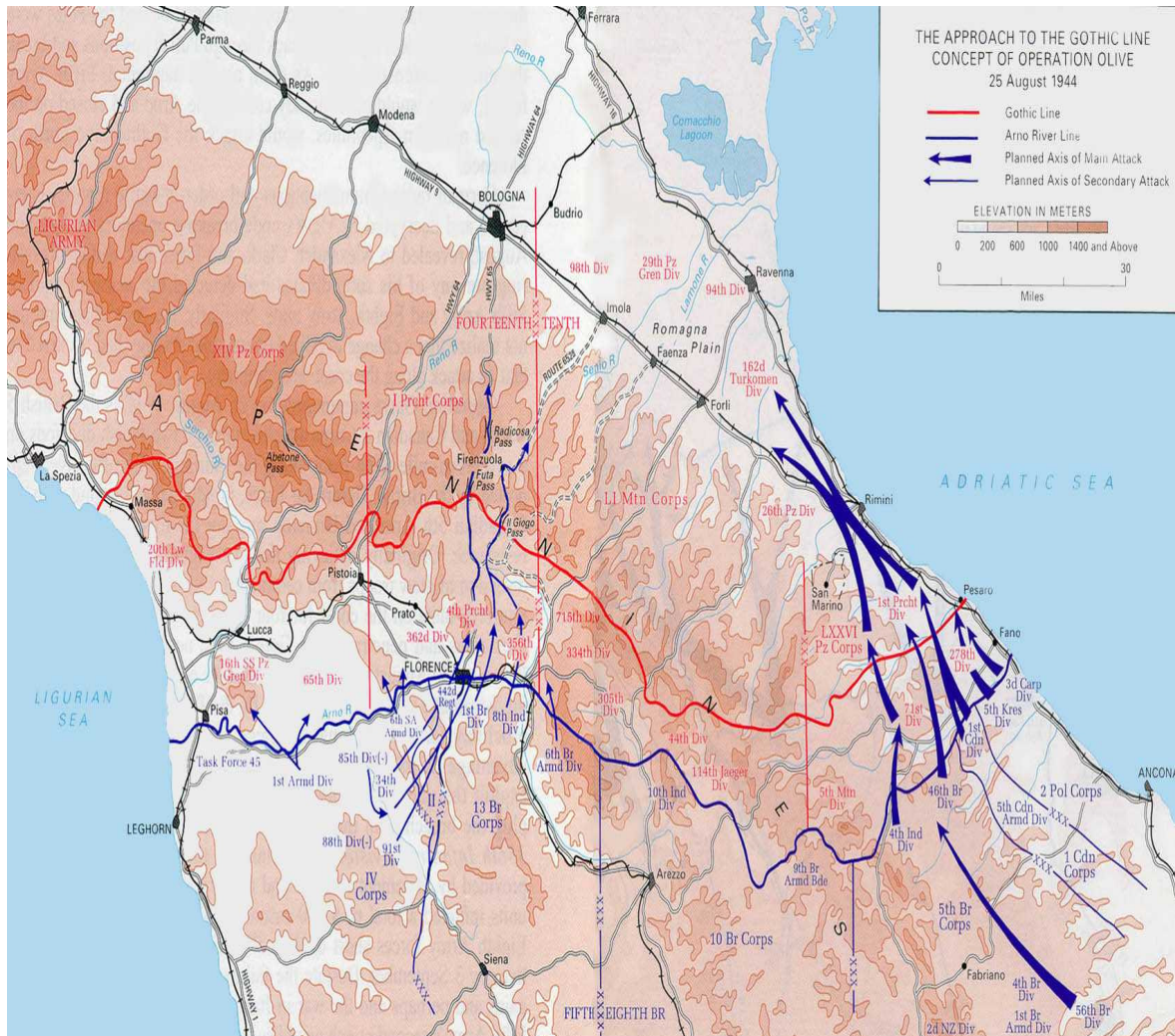
We were on patrol duty just about every night to reconnoiter the ground ahead and to scout out where the Germans had positioned their troops. It seemed that every foot of ground was contested. Knowing the terrain, the Germans would prepare ambushes every chance they could.

On July 14, 1944, while on night patrol I ran into an ambush. I was walking on a narrow road (more like a trail than a road) up the side of a mountain when tracer bullets began flying by me. At that point my reflexes took over and I instinctively dove off the trail away from the bullets and into what was a very deep ditch on the side of that trail. Just then I heard the sound of artillery right in front of me. The Germans must have had an 88-millimeter cannon aimed down that road because I could hear the unmistakable sound of an 88, a whoosh and then a loud thump when it hit. I was lucky that they started firing a machine gun with tracer bullets first that night. If they hadn't, I surely would have been killed. By the time you hear the sound of an 88mm artillery round it has already passed by you.

That jump into the ditch injured my chest. I had damaged my ribs when I jumped, so they took me to the 94th Evacuation Hospital. The doctors took X-rays, taped me up and I was able to report back to duty a few weeks later on August 16, 1944. I still have the Western Union Telegrams the army sent to my wife informing her of my injury and subsequent return to duty.

How long did it take to fight through the Gothic Line?

We first had to fight through the Arno River Line before we even got to the Gothic Line. The Gothic Line Winter Offensive began on September 10, 1944 and continued until early 1945. This was the hardest fighting of the war for our outfit because the Gothic Line was a defensive belt of fortifications that seemed to be on every mountain slope in the northern Apennine mountain range.



In northern Italy two main defense lines were constructed. The blue line was the Arno River Line and the red line was the Gothic Line. One of the small blue arrows shows where the Gothic Line was breached by the 88th Division.

We were continually on the offensive. Even in the winter I lived outside in foxholes I dug for myself whenever I could. When it rained, the foxhole would fill with water and I would use my helmet to bail water out of my “bedroom”. When it snowed I used blankets to cover myself and keep the snow out.

Sometimes I was lucky and was able to stay in buildings in a captured town.



Pictured above is the type of clothing Sergeant Kraics wore in the winter of 1944

Because we were always advancing, supplying us was a logistical nightmare. In the rough terrain the only way to supply us was by pack mules. I know the American army was fully mechanized with tanks and supplied by trucks and jeeps. Perhaps in other places they were but we got our food and ammo by pack mule on the front line most of the time. During our mountain fighting, we never saw a tank. The terrain we were in was not suitable for tank warfare.

One time, the Germans counterattacked and surrounded our battalion. We could not be supplied by jeep, pack mule or parachute airdrops. We took ammunition from our dead comrades and were forced to eat our pack mules for food. I highly recommend that if you ever get the chance to taste mule meat do not do it. It was awful. To this day I cannot eat lamb because it reminds me of mule meat. Arrrrugh! It was at this time that I was promoted via a battlefield commission from Sergeant to 2nd Lieutenant.

What happened after you broke through the Apennine Mountains?

After we broke through the Gothic Line in the Apennine Mountains we entered the Po Valley. Marching into the valley from the mountains I was amazed at the sight of what looked like hundreds of American tanks on the valley floor. I was very glad to have all this armored support to help push back the Germans. But my joy lasted only a short while. I quickly learned that the presence of tanks drew artillery fire. So I stayed as far away from them as I could.

You were decorated for bravery a number of times. Tell us what happened?

In total, I received the Bronze Star and 3 Oak Leaf Clusters. Rather than awarding the same medal over and over again the Army adds Oak Leaf Clusters. Each oak leaf represents another medal for bravery. For my actions at Santa Maria Infante a Bronze Star was awarded to me. But the next award of an Oak Leaf Cluster was the one I was most proud of. My mission was to provide covering fire for the Po River crossing near the town of Ostiglia. But let me tell you what happened in the words of Brigadier General J.C. Fry from his citation awarding me another bronze star;

“During the crossing of the Po River, our (2nd) battalion came under heavy 20 mm (cannon) and machine gun fire from the enemy. Lieutenant Kraics was instructed to move his platoon forward, place his guns in position and bring fire on the enemy position on the opposite bank of the river. Lieutenant Kraics without regard for his own safety led his platoon, in the face of heavy fire to an exposed position on the bank. The speed with which effective fire was brought on the enemy position and fine display of leadership on the part of Lieutenant Kraics was a credit and inspiration to his platoon.”

This effort was captured on film and published in a magazine.



This was the picture that appeared in Yank Magazine. 2nd Lieutenant Kraics appears in the foreground and his platoon of four 30 caliber machine guns is lined up on his left hand side. Only one gun is shown.

What happened after crossing the Po River?

Once we were past the Po River we raced to the Alpine mountain border with Germany. By May 4, 1945 we were able to link-up with other American Infantry Divisions at the Brenner Pass. At that point all fighting ceased and the war on the Italian Front was over. On June 29, 1945 I was given a battlefield commission from 2nd to 1st Lieutenant for my contribution in assisting the amphibious crossing of the Po River. After that I transferred to another outfit which was scheduled to be one of the first units being shipped back to the United States. I had more than enough points to qualify to go home.

I was discharged from the Enlisted Reserve Corps (drafted army) and the next day I re-enlisted into the Regular United States Army and was assigned to the 100th Chemical Mortar Battalion (CMB). The 100th CMB was a specialized unit. Their ultimate mission was to stop a breakthrough if the Germans used outlawed mustard or nerve gasses. Most people do not know that the Allies had huge stockpiles of mustard, phosgene and nerve gasses. These stockpiles were used as a deterrent to prevent Germany from using its own stockpile of these weapons. The strategy worked because neither side used gas during the war.

During the summer I was guarding prisoners of war at a camp near Brescia, Italy. We used to patrol the camp perimeter by jeep.



*1st Lieutenant Kraics patrolling prisoner of war camp perimeter near Brescia.
Notice barbed wire perimeter behind the woman in the background.*

However, they replaced our jeeps with horses. While on horseback I ran into a low hanging telephone line, fell off my horse and badly fractured my wrist.

I remained in Italy waiting until a ship was available to take me home. This allowed me enough time to do some sightseeing in northern Italy.



Sightseeing at San Marco Square in Venice, Italy. From left to right is Jim Maxwell, Snake Russell, Frederick Kraics, Bill Labay and a soldier in white pants who just joined us when the picture was taken.



1st Lieutenant Kraics sightseeing at Lake Maggiore in Italy near the Swiss border

I returned to the United States on October 12, 1945 aboard a liberty ship which was converted to carry troops instead of cargo. I sailed from Naples, Italy to Boston, Massachusetts and then traveled by railroad to Fort Dix, New Jersey. On October 17, 1945 I was discharged from the Regular US Army at Fort Dix. I then traveled by train to Ronkonkoma, NY and a huge welcoming home party.

Because of my badly fractured wrist I received an army pension of \$2 a month after the war. Eventually two bones in my wrist died and I had to have them surgically removed after the war.

What decorations were you awarded while in the Army?

I was awarded the following medals & citations during my service in World War II;

The Bronze Star with 3 Oak Leaf Clusters
National Battlefield Commissioned Officer Medal of Valor
European American Middle Eastern Campaign Ribbon with 4 Battle Stars
Combat Infantryman Badge
Rifleman's Badge for an Enlisted Man
Rifleman's Badge for an Officer
Marksmanship Medal for Rifle
Marksmanship Medal for Machine Gun
Good Conduct Medal
Presidential Unit Citation for the Battle of Mount Capello
French Croix de Guerre

Were you going to be drafted into the army again for the Korean War?

Yes. I received notice to report for active duty in the Korean War. However, since I was receiving a monthly pension from the army I was exempted from serving in that war.

How do you feel now about being a "Blue Devil Machine Gunner"?

It was an honor and privilege to serve my country during the Second World War. My service in Italy was one of the highlights of my life. I came away from that experience with a deep appreciation of the sacrifice America must make to preserve it's freedom.

I also got to add Italian to the three languages I already knew which were English, Hungarian and German.