

Mt. Mestas



Lorry Oulette



Felix B. Mestas, Jr., La Veta, Colo., whose exploits on Mount Battaglia became a legend in the 350th infantry. Photo courtesy Denver Post.

The Hero behind the Mountain

September, 1944. The Appenine mountains in Italy were misted over with the first of winter's chill, as members of Company G of the 350th Infantry struggled up the muddy slopes of Monte Battaglia.

Company G was about to face its bloodiest confrontation of World War II. There would be only three survivors and they would live because of one soldier's sacrifice.

Private First Class Felix B. Mestas, Jr., from La Veta, Colorado, entered the armed forces in 1942. From that day, until his death two years later, he was on active duty, beginning with the campaign in North Africa and ending on an Italian ridge on September 29th. He was 23 years old.

On Mt. Battaglia Company G was losing its hold against the advancing German line. Staff Sergeant Cleo Peek and PFC Mestas had dug into the side of the mountain, chipping away at the stone to form a trench. For two days the pair battered away at the Nazi paratrooper assault, nearly exhausting their supply of ammunition. There was only one meal of K-rations left between them. On the third day, September 29th, with still no sign of reinforcements or supplies, the men knew they would have to attempt retreat. Peek scrambled back up the mountain, followed by two riflemen of the Company, and as the three reached the summit they saw that Mestas remained in the trench. He was standing, firing at point blank range at the overrunning Germans, holding his Browning automatic rifle at the hip, his own special stance in shooting which had earned him the nickname "Cowboy."

Mestas killed 26 enemy soldiers before he fell. He had successfully covered the escape of his comrades. At the time, his fox-hole grave was the most advanced point on the entire allied front in Italy.

The Mestas story traveled quickly, capturing the interest and imagination of media and public, especially so after a statement made by Peek who said:

"The Cowboy was never scared. Just before I left, he was singing a song."

Soon after, *The Rocky Mountain News* headlined, "He fought standing up; he died singing." *The Denver Post* exclaimed in bold print, "Killed 26 charging Nazis while covering the withdrawal of buddy." Publications such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Stars and Stripes* and *Pan American News* featured Southern Colorado's newest hero as well.

Five months after his death, in February of 1945, Felix B. Mestas, Jr. was awarded the

country's third highest combat award, the Silver Star, accepted by his father. Five years later, Mt. Baldy, the 11,654 foot peak north of Highway 160 just west of La Veta, was renamed Mt. Mestas in memorial to the 63 Huerfano County citizens who gave their lives during World War II.

A monument of Colorado rose granite from Mt. Mestas was erected at the base of the mountain in 1952. At the memorial's dedication, General George V. Keyser added the closing lines to the Felix Mestas story: "It is a tribute to the American people that such men as Felix Mestas spring from all modes of life to perform deeds that live eternally."

Editor's note: We thank Mrs. Grayce Konieczny, sister of Felix Mestas, Jr., for allowing us the use of Mestas family records for this article.

