



The Story of Cowboy Mestas

By Gerald S. Root

STAFF Sergeant Cleo M. Peek stretched out a fat leg on the bed.

"Yes," he said, "I can tell you all about the 'unknown hero.'"

My talk with Peek took place in a strange setting for the infantryman in Italy—a room in a resort hotel. It was during a brief respite from front-line duty, in peaceful Montecatini in the flat-lands west of Florence.

He was referring to a paragraph in the official story of Mount Battaglia, published three months before in the *Rome Stars and Stripes* and in newspapers in the States.

The paragraph said:

"One unknown hero stood on the crest of the hill, in full view of a charging group of fanatical Germans, and fired his Browning automatic

rifle from the hip in order to get a better field of fire down the slope. With the fire of the heavy rifle, he killed 24 of the advancing Jerries."

The information in this paragraph came from a weary, disheveled platoon leader who had seen the action. In the heat of the ensuing close-quarter battle, when Germans temporarily overran the regiment's forward positions, the lieutenant's attention was diverted and he was unable to say whether the BAR-man had lived, died or been captured, or to give an inkling as to his identity.

Further inquiries at the time also proved fruitless. The memories of the survivors were jammed with pictures of the many terrible events on Mount Battaglia. Many were under care in field hospitals.

After publication of the story, the "unknown hero" grew to be a legend in the 350th Infantry. At breaks and in chow lines, the talk of yarn-swapping infantrymen would in-

variably turn to the nameless figure. New men heard the tale, and old-timers speculated endlessly about his identity.

It meant a great deal to the men of the regiment, for on Mount Battaglia they had faced and won not only their toughest fight, but one of the fiercest close-quarter battles of the entire war. In a week-long series of counterattacks from Sept. 27 to Oct. 2, 1944, in the fog, gloom and mire of an advanced position on an Appennine peak in midwinter, they had held back the most determined assaults of remnants of five picked German divisions. They had fought and suffered there; they had lost many comrades.

Controversies over the identity of the "unknown hero" generally ended at stalemate. From the description, it could easily have been one of many. It might not have been a regularly assigned BAR-man, as those on that peak were firing any

weapon at hand to hold off the enemy.

The first authentic lead came from Private First Class L. C. Burnett of Floral, Ark. The "unknown hero," he told me, was Private First Class Felix B. Mestas, Jr., better known as "Cowboy," and he brought in Peek to prove it. Peek, he said, was the BAR-man's assistant during that battle.

"Just let me tell you the story, the way it happened, once and for all, and then let me forget it," Peek said.

He began by speaking of the arduous two-day march which brought Company "G" to the hill through the heavy, sticky mud and rains of the Appennines. In selecting a spot to dig in, he related, the team chose a commanding but lonely position 150 yards down the forward slope of Mount Battaglia.

Cowboy and Peek dug back into the slope below a solid jutting rock, chipping away the stone itself with their picks to form an entrenchment. For camouflage, they tossed on bits of dry grass and weeds. From here, their automatic weapon was offered a superb field of fire.

Scarcely had the BAR-men completed their entrenchment when the Wehrmacht made its first assault. As the Germans crept slowly up the hill under cover of the dim light, Mestas stood bolt upright in the position and fired from the hip.

Cowboy was a strong, well-built man of about 180 pounds. Although the BAR weighs approximately 21 pounds with loaded clip, he handled it with ease.

The first surreptitious attack was driven back, but the haggard pair had no time to relax. They spent the entire night awake and alert, awaiting the next assault by Nazi paratroopers armed with automatic weapons.

No one reached their position with rations, cigarets or ammo. The team was completely on its own from the time they set up in position until the Germans overran the forward entrenchments on the third day.

Drenched and mud-covered, Cowboy and Peek had three boxes of K-rations between them when they arrived on Mount Battaglia. They shared one on that first sleepless night. They ate the second the next day. The third was never eaten.

Rain which fell almost constantly brought the water ankle deep in their emplacement. They bailed it out with their steel helmets. When they had drunk all the water from their canteens, they used the rain water in their entrenchment.

Peek was carrying 19 clips, each with 20 .30-caliber cartridges, when they arrived. In order to conserve

the ammo, Cowboy fired only half a clip at a time.

In the gray dawn, the Germans appeared again under a heavy blanket of fog. Three times that day the ghostly figures attacked. Each time the attacks were thrown back, and the slope was littered with corpses in gray-green uniforms.

By the morning of Sept. 29, the fog, rain, mud and close-quarter fighting were miserable routine. But as dawn arrived, making enemy figures barely more visible than at night, the Jerries attacked once more.

In each attack, Cowboy had stood upright and let the enemy have it. With his excellent field of fire, he had played a major part in holding off the onslaughts.

As this morning attack wore on, Cowboy used all but one clip of his BAR ammo. Peek placed his M-1 rifle rounds in BAR clips, but the rapid-talking weapon jammed.

While Cowboy was putting his weapon back in working shape, Peek covered with his rifle. Mud clogged the gas chamber and working parts of the semi-automatic Garand, and he operated it single-fire, thrusting a round into the chamber each time he pulled the trigger.

Carefully rationing their four grenades, the pair rolled stones down the steep precipice at oncoming Germans. This served the purpose for the moment, as the figures ducked, never knowing which might be live grenades.



The morning assault was repelled. But, unknown to the BAR team, the squad in position on the left flank had been completely wiped out. Of Company "G," there was only a handful of survivors. Its leader, Captain Robert Roeder, had been killed the day before*

Despite their desperate situation, Cowboy kept up Peek's spirits with a cheerful attitude. He patted the stock of his BAR and grinned. With another attack due at any minute, he sat cramped in the sticky mud and "sang a little song."

Then the enemy made another assault. Peek said they could see the Germans sloshing up the hill "like wild men." Both knew the score. One might have a chance to reach some safety on the rear slope, covered by the other's fire.

"We didn't have much time," Peek related, "but we talked it over."

Cowboy would hear nothing except that his assistant make the try.

The problem of venturing up that slope of death was far from intriguing. An open 150 yards stretched to the crest. Hiccoughing German mortars, stuttering machine guns and accurate snipers' rifles were carefully zeroed in.

Cowboy rose in his favorite upright position, lifted his heavy weapon to his hip and lightly pressed the trigger. He swung the barrel casually, like a gardener spraying a bed of young petunias.

The BAR was aimed directly into the midst of the massed Germans. Cowboy was calmly firing at point-blank range. He couldn't miss. Dead and wounded fell, others sought cover.

Stiff and lame from the long hours of exposure in the cramped emplacement, Peek scrambled up the hill. A few steps away, he fell. As he did so, two Jerry machine guns covering the slope with cross-fire opened up. The slugs sung above his head. He believes that this tumble saved his life.

Peek made the ascent in faltering steps, shuffling and falling in the oozy mud. As he passed a foxhole, he shouted to the two riflemen there and they followed him as he struggled up the slope. When the trio reached the castle at the summit, they learned that they were the sole survivors of their squad.

*"To the Last Man," *Foreign Service*, November, 1946.

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

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Burnett, from a vantage point on the crest, was able to observe the BAR team below him as the fog cleared at times during the battle. He was watching Cowboy when he rose to fire that last half clip to cover Peek's escape.

"As he fired that final burst, I saw his steel helmet fall back into the entrenchment," Burnett said. "He might have been hit. I saw him stoop, or slump over, as if to pick it up. That was the last I saw of him."

"I know that Cowboy killed at least two dozen Jerries with his last clip," Peek said. "They were coming up that hill massed together. He had the best field of fire of anyone on the hill, standing as he did."

"I am sure he knocked off the biggest bag in Company 'G' on the way to Battaglia. He liked to shoot that BAR from the hip, and he knew how to handle it."

Burnett chimed in with more praise for the BAR-man.

"I have never seen a better man with a BAR. We trained together at Camp Roberts and Camp Van Dorn. We were assigned at the same time

to Company 'G' on July 11, 1944. The BAR was always his favorite weapon.

"He used that weapon from the time we hit combat in the Appennines, Aug. 19, until he was killed. I don't know how many Jerries Cowboy killed, but it was plenty. I'm sure he killed more than any one in the company."

"On our first day in the Gothic line, I saw him spray a house with lead when two squads were assigned to clear it. Four Germans were found dead inside, and 18 surrendered."

In the attack in which the BAR position was overrun, three Germans actually reached the remains of the castle-command post. Their bodies remained there—a silent tribute to the unyielding mud sloggers. Other units of the regiment which arrived that day again pushed the enemy back. They also held "Battle Mountain" during the remainder of a week of determined counterattacks, as German troops and more German troops were sent to recapture the prized position.

After the story was made public, a Silver Star was awarded for Mestas' action. The decoration went to his father, Felix Mestas, Sr., in La Veta, Colo.

Peek also received a Silver Star for his work on Mount Battaglia. When he was awarded a Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster to the decoration for his aid in knocking out a self-propelled gun by the use of a "bazooka" on October 26, 1944, he became the first soldier of the division to be thus cited twice.

As a further honor for men of the companies which suffered the greatest number of casualties in the defense of "Battle Mountain," the 350th's Second Battalion received the War Department's Distinguished Unit Citation from Lieut. Gen. Mark W. Clark.

Cowboy's foxhole for a time became his unmarked grave. Caved in by the incessant rain or the concussion of a shell, the position was filled with dirt and debris when reached by Graves Registration soldiers who had the task of clearing the regiment's dead from the mountain battlefield.

At the time, that foxhole-grave was the most advanced point on the entire Allied front in Italy. The peak was 20,000 yards beyond the

nearest friendly unit in a salient of the winter drive towards the Po Valley.

The body now presumably lies in the American military cemetery at Pietramala, with 2,300 other American soldiers. Largest in Italy, the cemetery stands on an Appennine crest 40 miles north of Florence on Route No. 65, a milestone of one of the bitterest campaigns of World War II.

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This Christmas will find more than 100,000 veterans in hospital beds. Every effort will be made to insure that not one of these hospitalized comrades is overlooked.

In Posts nearest Veterans Administration hospitals, the pre-Christmas activity is greatest. Members of these Posts will personally distribute gifts and greetings and arrange entertainment programs. Other Posts will have to make their contributions either under state V.F.W. sponsorship or by sending special delegations to their nearest hospitals. They also will see to it that disabled and needy veterans, and their dependents, in their own communities enjoy the happiest Christmas possible.