



3rd Volturno Crossing - Hills 590, 600 & 610

Third Crossing of the Volturno and Battle for the Hills

It was late October and the 34th Division had come a long way since it landed on the beach at Salerno in early September. By November 1, the 133rd Regt. had occupied Ciorlano and the hills overlooking this small town on the Sava River, a tributary of the Volturno River. The 100th was camped in the hills to the west overlooking the town.

The 34th Division was ordered to begin moving at midnight, November 3, toward the Volturno River for the third and final crossing in preparation for taking the hills to the north that were heavily defended and blocking the way to Cassino.

During one of the many route marches toward the Volturno River, with columns advancing on both sides of the road, a command vehicle came along and passed the men. Capt. Sakae Takahashi of Makaweli noticed Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr. in the vehicle. It had not gone too far when a German fighter plane came out of nowhere and began strafing the road. Both generals hurriedly got out of their command car and ducked into the ditch along the road with the men.

About a decade or so later, Eisenhower as President of the United States, was being honored at a reception at the Kaneohe Marine Corps Air Station. Takahashi, by then a Hawaii state senator, was present as a guest of the commanding officer of the Windward Oahu base. Going through the reception line and upon reaching the President, Takahashi jogged his memory about that little incident in Italy. Eisenhower had not forgotten. "Were you there?" he asked. "Yes sir," Takahashi replied. "Wasn't that something?" the President commented, tickled by the memory of that episode.

The 133rd Regt. was to cross the Volturno near the point where the Sava flowed into that major river. The 168th Regt. moved up though Capriati,

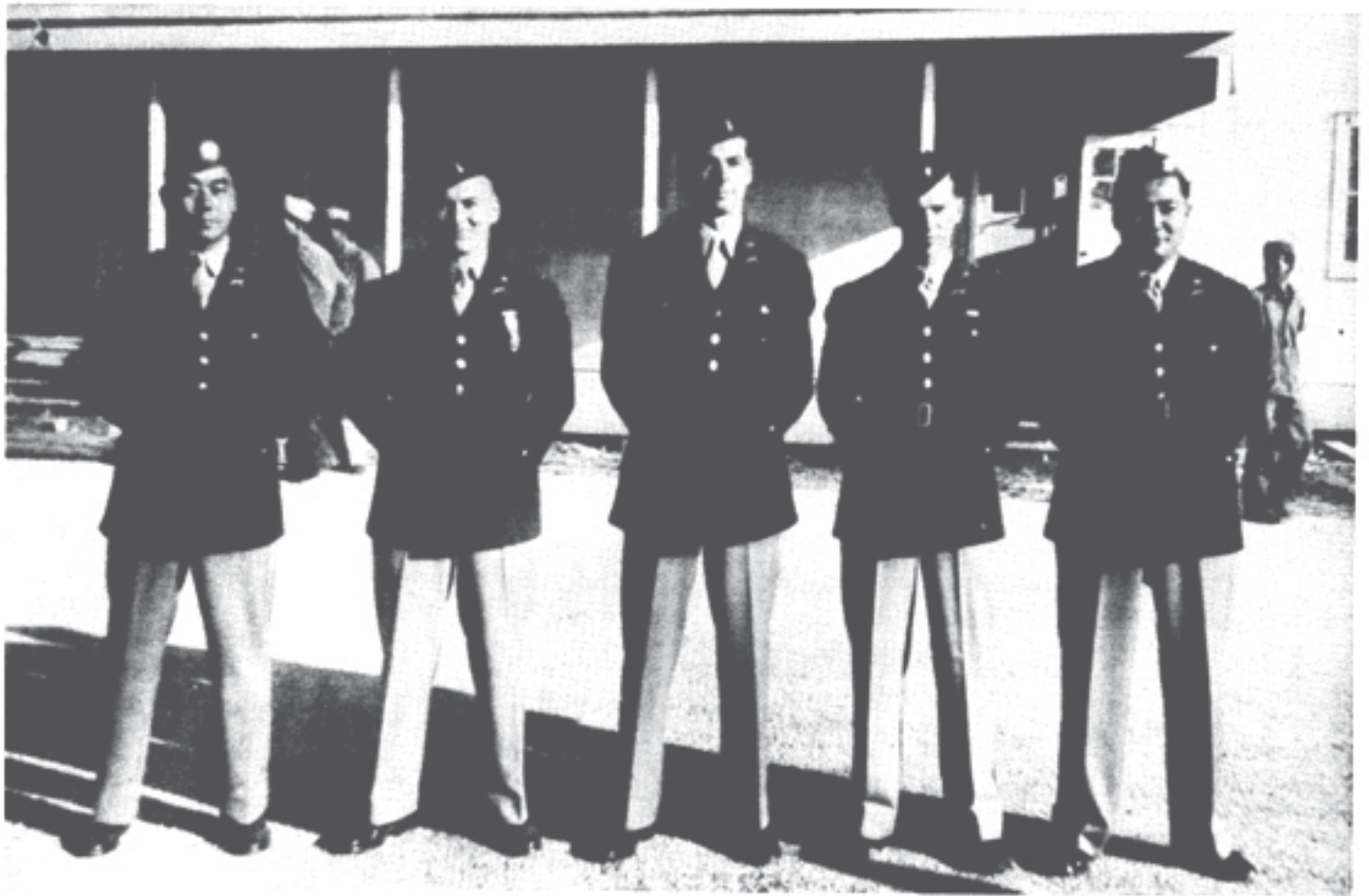
crossed the Volturno and turned north toward its next objective – Roccaravindola. On the left flank, the 179th Regt. of the 45th Division crossed downstream and was assigned the task of taking Venafrò. After crossing the Volturno, the 133rd's 3rd Bn. headed for Santa Maria Oliveto; the 1st Bn. was assigned to take Hill 550 northeast of Santa Maria Oliveto. The 100th crossed the Volturno north of the point where the Sava flows into the Volturno. It had the duty of protecting the 34th Division's left flank and the rear.

The 100th's Cos. B and E led the advance through the mud of the south bank of the rain-swollen Volturno. Crossing the river was not much of a problem because at this point it was wide, shallow and flowing through flat country. But the water was chilly and getting wet up to the waist even in an olive drab woolen uniform was not the most comfortable way to spend the night in the cold and inhospitable Italian highlands. Once across the river, the men encountered extensive mine fields. This was an area of grain cultivation, vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees. The men had to feel their way in the dark to find the mines and neutralize them. Some of the trip wires were tied to grape vines and trees. Even to haystacks. The enemy had done an ingenious job of creating dangerous obstacles. The Germans also fired flares to detect movements at night and fired at the men. The medics were kept busy.

Lt. Kurt E. Schemel, who harbored reservations about joining the 100th when first assigned to the unit at Camp McCoy but changed his mind later, crossed the river with E Co. After a brief advance into enemy territory, he was shot and killed by



Lt. Young Oak Kim



*L-R: Sakae Takahashi, Raymond Drolet, Scott Wise
Kurt E. Schemel and Jack Mizutani*

enemy fire, becoming the first commissioned officer of the 100th to die in battle.

Schemel, of New York, was born in Berlin, Germany. During a respite on the Salerno beachhead, he was sitting under an olive tree reading his mail that had finally caught up with him. Lifting the letter he was reading over his head, he called to a fellow officer and said, "Look, I have a letter from the FBI addressed to me in Brooklyn. After many months, they have finally caught up with me." Asked if he was in any trouble, Schemel replied that the FBI wanted to question him about his youth in Germany. His parents had sent him to Germany for schooling, and there he became a member of Hitler's Youth Corps because his peers were joining the movement. Seeing war clouds forming over Europe, he returned to his adopted country and joined the U.S. Army. Being a bright lad, he was sent to Officer Candidate School at Ft. Benning where he was commissioned a second lieutenant upon graduation. At that point, he was assigned to the 100th in October, 1942 in McCoy. The respect between him and the men grew as they fought together in battle after battle. The men looked upon him as a comrade-in-arms, the Nisei officers became his buddies and the entire battalion thought of him as a good and loyal American who died fighting for his country.

Co. B pushed ahead toward Highway 85 with Capt. Taro Suzuki and Lt. Young Oak Kim leading the column. Suddenly bullets whizzed by and the two officers hit the ground on opposite sides of the road, as did the others. The men were crouched along a low stone wall from which they engaged the enemy. They were not certain about Lt. Kim's fate, whether he had fallen into enemy hands. S/Sgt. Robert Ozaki, from Moiliili, decided to take his platoon on a bayonet charge to rescue Lt. Kim. He ordered his men to fix bayonets and gave the order to charge. The report, according to Thomas D. Murphy's book, "Ambassadors in Arms", is that most of the company joined in the charge. Lt. Kim

was found dazed but safe. This was reputed to be the first bayonet attack in the fighting in Italy.

By 2:30 a.m. November 5, B and E Cos. had crossed Highway 85 and reached the railroad running parallel to the highway. Here they dug in but were spotted. Their positions were hit by enemy planes and artillery fire. By this time, the 1st Bn. had taken Hill 550. But at daybreak, the Germans mounted a fierce bayonet charge of their own and pushed the 1st off the ridge. Col. Carley L. Marshall ordered Gillespie to take the 100th across the valley and take Hills 590, 600 and 610 to the north of the 1st Bn. so the pressure would help the 1st Bn. retake 550. Gillespie felt that a direct assault would be suicidal. So he led his troops northwest and clockwise around the town of Pozzilli, coming around on the other side of the hills. Gillespie and Capt. Alex McKenzie, E Co. commander, led the two columns cautiously by scouting first, then moving ahead.

On the way to Pozzilli, they met a man in paratrooper's uniform who claimed to be AWOL from his unit in Naples. He gave his name as Thompson and claimed that Pozzilli was empty and that there were a lot of mines sown in that area and beyond. He volunteered to lead them through the mine fields and up to the hills behind the village. By late afternoon, they were up into the foothills, but discovered that further advance was barred by mines. Under cover of darkness, E Co.'s Lt. Lewis Key and Pfc Kenso Suga led a squad to neutralize the mines. They did this by crawling and creating a safe lane, using toilet paper held down by rocks as boundary markers. This was the most visible material on hand. This narrow lane helped the men advance safely through the mine field, but in the dark there were mishaps when one strayed beyond the toilet paper markers. Capt. John A. Johnson, Jr. of Honolulu, battalion executive officer, and Capt. Taro Suzuki, B Co. commander, were among those who



sustained injuries from mines exploding in such unforgiving accidents.

In the climb toward the hills around Pozzilli, the column was strung out quite a distance. Co. D brought up the rear with its heavy weapons – machine guns and mortars. Cos. E and F, accompanied by two machine gun units of Co. D, led the way. They were more than half way to the top of the first hill when to their horror, they learned that Co. D was not following the column. It turned out that Co. D had misinterpreted a radio message down on the flat and had stopped to await further orders. The heavy weapons were absolutely essential when the Germans got sight of the lead companies and began firing.

Thompson volunteered to go back and help Co. D through the mine field. He took two riflemen with him. After an interval, the latter two returned with word that Thompson had tripped a wire and was blown to bits. However, the two riflemen were able to get to Co. D and bring them along the trail.

After what seemed like hours of hard climbing, Cos. E and F succeeded in getting to the top of Hill 600. The lead unit came across an enemy whom they shot when he started to run away. There was an exchange of heavy firing, but the two Nisei units were able to knock out three German outposts with hand grenades. The enemy did not expect an attack from the rear. The units went on to capture Hills 590 and 610 also. The successful taking of these three hills enabled the 1st Bn. to retake Hill 550.

The next day the Germans mounted a counterattack. Lt. Neill Ray, Cpl. Bert Higashi of Honolulu and Cpl. Katsushi Tanouye of Hilo, observers of D Co., directed fire on enemy positions from a high vantage point. Unfortunately, all three died under a crushing tree burst from an enemy artillery shell. These three were awarded Silver Stars posthumously. In the meantime, Lt. Kim had taken his men down into the saddle between Hills 600 and 550.

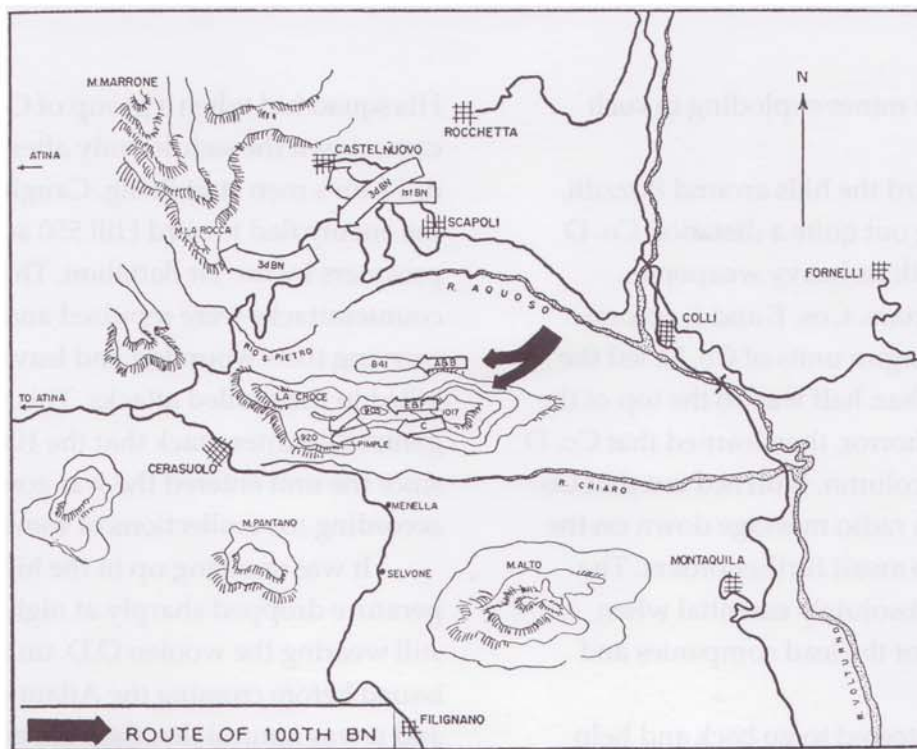
His squad hid when a group of German soldiers came down the saddle; only after they passed did Kim's men start firing. Caught in this trap, the enemy fled toward Hill 550 and were taken prisoners by the 1st Battalion. Three enemy counterattacks were repulsed and they withdrew, carrying their wounded and leaving behind many killed in their failed attacks. This was the first organized counterattack that the 100th encountered since the unit entered the war zone in Salerno, according to recollections of some of the men.

It was snowing up in the hills and the temperature dropped sharply at night. The men were still wearing the woolen O.D. uniforms which were issued before crossing the Atlantic. They were cold and it was natural that they grumbled about the slowness of the supply pipeline. There was another problem. The Japanese-American soldiers were shorter in stature than the average GI and the supply units found it difficult to find the right sizes for them. There was talk that winter clothing had arrived because some had spotted the rear echelon men wearing them.

The winter clothing that finally reached the 100th consisted of long johns and winterized trousers and jackets with heavy lining plus special shoes and overshoes. Many of the men, unaccustomed to overshoes, just threw them away. Besides the winter clothing, the men who were up in the hills, had to be supplied with food, water and especially ammunition. Mortar shells were absolutely essential in the fighting on the rugged hills. Getting the supplies up the mountain trails proved very difficult. A substantial portion of such difficulty was overcome by the hard work of the supply section of HQ Co., under the leadership of Lt. George H. Grandstaff of Azusa, California.

Despite the capture of the four hills, progress was slow: the enemy was well entrenched on still higher ground, and the increasingly longer supply line caused more problems. On November 15, the 100th was pulled back to Santa Maria Oliveto for an





Colli to Hills 841 & 920



Care packages from home, December 1943

Readily identifiable, L-R, top: Bill Kato, Michael Tokunaga, Robert Toma, Jitsuru Yoshida, Toshio Kikuta, Ben Morimoto, Seichi Tengan, Richard Yoshizaki, Kneeling at left are Susumu Fukuyoshi and possibly Seiji Kimura. Kenneth Harada is holding the parcel while Isamu Tomita peeps over Harada's shoulder.

eight-day rest. It was a well deserved respite, and the men had a chance to clean up, don clean, warm clothing and enjoy some hot meals. During such rest periods, the men prepared their island-style dishes by "borrowing" some chicken and any green vegetable, tomatoes, onions and garlic they could find.

So far, the 100th had lost three officers and 75 enlisted men who were killed in action or died of wounds. There were 239 other wounded. A memorial service was held for the dead by Chaplain Israel Yost, the Pennsylvania Dutch Lutheran priest who was assigned to the 100th during training in North Africa.

Cos. E and F were disbanded at this point when the men were assigned as replacements for the regular companies. Thus the unit was restructured into a normal battalion. However, they were still not up to full strength, indicating the severity of the 100th's casualties. Col. Carley Marshall, the new commanding officer of the 133rd Regt., inspected the 100th at Santa Maria Oliveto. He was well known for his meticulously waxed spiked mustache. Nicknamed "Fondouk" after he won the DSC at Fondouk Pass in Tunisia, Marshall's idol was Confederate cavalry Gen. "Jeb" Stuart of Civil War fame.

On the 23rd of November, the 133rd began moving up the Volturno River valley toward Colli. From Colli, the regiment moved northwest to Scapoli in the foothills of the last series of mountains that guarded the eastern approaches to Cassino. Two days later, Thanksgiving Day, the regiment began moving up into the hills to relieve the 504th Parachute Infantry. Two days after Thanksgiving, the 100th received a Thanksgiving dinner of cold turkey and stuffing with sliced bread. No one touched the stuffing and a few ate the turkey, which caused some upset stomachs the next day. Most ate only the bread.

The 100th was commended at that time by

Gen. Ryder of the 34th Division and Gen. Lucas of the VI Corps, for its valor in the battle for Hill 600.

For the campaign ahead, the 3rd Bn. was assigned to take Castelnuovo; the 1st, Mt. Rocco; and the 100th, La Croce hill. To reach La Croce, the 100th had to take Hills 1017, 841, 905 and 920. As for the terrain, Hills 1017, 905 and La Croce ran east-west in a line, with Hill 841 north of 1017 and Hill 920 south of La Croce. This campaign required the same tough fighting the 100th had engaged in earlier for Hill 600. Groups would fight their way to the top of a hill only to be driven back by the devastating fire of the well-entrenched Germans. The 100th just couldn't get heavy weapons support due to the difficulty of the terrain, but the enemy had had plenty of time to prepare their positions with engineering precision.

There were many heroic actions by the 100th during the fierce battles for La Croce. The one cited in the book, "Dogfaces Who Smiled Through Tears" by Homer R. Ankrum, tells of the one-man charge of Pvt Shizuya Hayashi of Co. A, a native of Honolulu, during a flank assault on Hill 841. He charged alone through enemy grenade and machine gun fire, firing his automatic rifle from his hip and knocked out a German gun nest. He killed nine, two of them as they were fleeing. After his platoon advanced 200 yards from that point, an enemy anti-aircraft gun shell landed near his unit and wounded several. Again Hayashi, unhurt, charged that gun emplacement and killed nine more and took four prisoners. The rest of the enemy withdrew. He was awarded the DSC for his courage and superb marksmanship.

The well-concealed Germans just would not be knocked out of their fortifications; on December 12, French troops arrived to relieve the 34th Division. The 133rd Regt. retired to an area near Alife for 19 days of rest. During this period Maj. Caspar Clough replaced Maj. Gillespie as commander of the 100th. Gillespie, long suffering from ulcers, found his condition deteriorating and finally had to be hospitalized.

