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# The Blue Devils

By Victor Maggi



## Dick Neuman With the Blue Devils

Rome, Italy, November, 1944

Company B, 351st Regiment, 88th Combat Div.

As I lay in my hospital bed, peaceful images of my childhood came to mind as I saw myself playing with friends along the peaceful Blue River in summertime Nebraska. As a pre-teen GI Joe, I would lead my friends and fellow combatants into many a pretend war-game, complete with muddy dirt bombs and rifles fashioned from river driftwood and scrap lumber. Our pretend casualties would leap up to happily rejoin our next skirmish or perhaps we'd just run off for a dip in the river.

This is as I recalled many a Summer-time day in 1930's Nebraska. But the loud booming of distant artillery in the

not-so-far-off distance brought me back to the present and my not-so-pretend reality. I was not in Nebraska anymore. I was now laying in a hospital bed recovering from wounds that I'd recently received in a very real and live combat. Now, cold, hard steel and lead replaced those soft, muddy dirt bombs of my reverie, and those casualties around me -- they would no longer leap up to join in the next skirmish, indeed some of them would never get up again. This was 1944 Italy and the "pretend" was over, I was now in real war and live combat.

I'd first given real thought to the war when I was in High School after hearing that a neighbor friend of ours was killed as a fighter pilot over Italy. Like many of my High School friends, I sought to enlist in military service early to see the world and get in to where the real "action" was. But my Mother refused to sign my release papers. But soon after graduating high school in 1943, I was drafted anyway and assigned to the Army Infantry.

I entered boot camp in Fannin, Texas and was assigned to company B of the 351st regiment of the 88th Combat Division. From boot camp, we sailed from the states into stormy seas on a troop transport ship toward North Africa. Most of us would spend the next six or seven days suffering from a miserable case of seasickness deep in the holds of a hot, crowded troopship. Debarking in Casablanca could not have come any sooner.

From that North African port, we traveled by truck, then by train, across some precipitous mountain passes toward Oran. As our crowded troop train rolled down into the foothills, nearing our destination, we slowed down to pass through a small town. Suddenly there was a big flash and an even more sudden stop. The drawbar on the railcar just ahead of ours broke in half. An Arab brakeman was killed instantly as he fell into the electrified rail below. An American GI was also killed and had his leg badly entangled in the wreckage under the car. We came to find out that our troop train had been intentionally sabotaged, as the drawbar had been partly sawed through and wrapped in acid-soaked rags. Had that drawbar given way at the top of one of the high passes we passed through, as was the probable intent of our saboteurs, several hundred of us GI's would have certainly been killed in the high mountain passes. As German air power was still viable in this area, our troop train needed to move along quickly, so an exasperated French military doctor pulled out his sword and severed the leg of the dead GI to free his body from the wreckage. Our first experience with the brutality of real war had started right there.

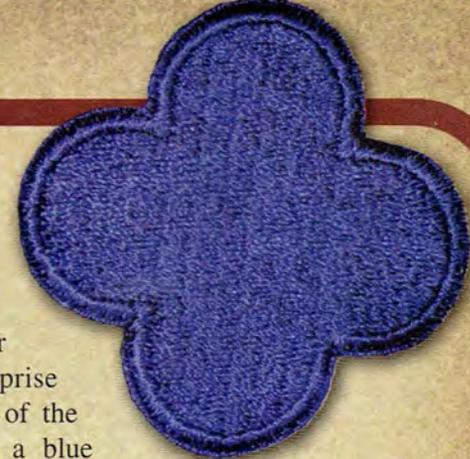
From Oran, North Africa, our unit traveled aboard an old British freighter to the war-ruined harbor of Naples, Italy.

As the 88th division was the first all-selective service unit to enter combat in WW II, the wartime media machine was well tuned-in to our

combat performance. Over the next 14 months of bitter and bloody fighting, our unit would surprise everyone. Soldiers of the 88th, signified by a blue cloverleaf patch on our uniforms, would develop a notable aggressiveness in combat. We gained a respectable reputation even among top German Commanders. Our nickname, the "Blue Devils" was likely coined from that reputation and our blue arm patch by "Axis Sally" during her frequent anti-American propaganda broadcasts out of Berlin.

Although the 88th assisted in pushing the Germans slowly northward up the Italian peninsula, town by town, objective by objective, we paid a heavy price in casualties and deaths, as we fought a determined foe.

I personally saw men killed all around me and like everyone else who faced this horrible combat, I learned to numb my mind to it all. You had to just adjust to the fact that your number could be up any day, any hour, any minute. We also learned not to become too attached to anyone, as they too shared that same possibility.



By now, the Allied forces had progressed well north of the Gustav line, but as winter weather

Left: Dick Neuman, United States Army

Below: Dick Neuman and his company of dangerous Blue Devils pose outfitted in full combat gear.





Dick Neuman and three other Blue Devils pose in camp behind the lines. Pup tents and supplies can be seen in the background.

was now upon us, we were bogged down. We remained at a static front until the spring thaw of 1945 allowed us to push and pursue what was left of “Field Marshal Kesselrings boys” northward up the “Boot” again. However, this steady northward retreat of the enemy held one great disadvantage for us. As we began to displace an enemy, already familiar with the abandoned territory, we would constantly suffer well-placed artillery and mortar barrages, even machine gun ambushes - as the retreating Germans had us “zeroed in” much of the time, knowing just where we might tend to be sheltered or concentrated. All too often they succeeded. In addition, even after the surrender of the Italian army, there was still some local, pro-German sentiment amongst the Italians throughout the countryside. There were often “eyes” for the enemy just about everywhere we traveled. So our troop movements were never all that secret.

I can recall one occasion as an example of how vulnerable we really were in that mountainous area. I remember moving into one fairly protected area where our Company had stopped to reassemble before moving onto our next objective - Mt. Capello. Within a short time two large artillery shells were fired from the distant hills, landing a direct hit amidst our company there. We lost several men on that occasion, including all of our officers except for the Company Commander. The Germans probably already had that spot zeroed in before we'd arrived there.

Not long after that incident, as our company rested on a similar hillside, we heard the distinctive whistle of an incoming 88 (artillery shell). I can clearly remember not only hearing but feeling that artillery round land with a thud in the hillside we were on. Incredibly, the round did not burst, it was a dud; it had imbedded itself in the shallow

soil of the hillside, RIGHT BETWEEN THE KNEES of one of our guys laying on his belly on that slope. We were all shaken by the incident, but that poor guy was obviously devastated. He was a tall, long-legged guy that we nicknamed “Highpockets”. We had to send him to the field hospital to our rear to recover from his shock. He was able to rejoin our Company later on.

My own, closest call came one day when our regiment entered an exposed area and fell under an intensive mortar barrage. I jumped into a nearby slit trench as the shells fell all around me. As I was about to stand up, I heard a whistling sound and ducked back down just as a mortar round burst nearby. Shrapnel from that burst cut through my rifle stock and riddled my grenade bag like a shotgun blast. I was unharmed and should have stayed right there, but I decided to get up and look for a safer spot. This time I wasn't so lucky. Another mortar round landed behind me. One piece of shrapnel entered my shoulder and a second almost pierced my lung. A sergeant (Arthur Fontaine) nearby was also wounded. We were both quickly patched up by field medics and then had to walk to an aid station eight miles down the mountain. From there I was transferred to the main hospital in Rome.

While healing, my Mother received a Western Union telegram and I received my Purple Heart medal.

After 6 weeks, I returned to my unit following a mule supply train. Mule trains were a common sight in this campaign. My rifle and helmet were on one of those mules. As we ascended the mountain, the fog thickened and darkness was about to fall.

Just about that time a German machine gun and artillery barrage opened up and scattered us and the mules in all directions. I had to scramble around to find another helmet and weapon. ...You know, I never did see any of those dang mules again.

By this time, the Blue Devils had moved northward crossing the Po Valley and were headed for Balzano and Brenner Pass. The Germans now had their back against the wall of the Italian Alps. Several enemy supply lines and potential escape routes were cut off. Now, entire German divisions were surrendering to the Allied forces.

My 351st regiment still had to press on as there was still a determined enemy willing to fight on. At one point, our regiment pushed on so far, so fast, that we moved beyond the range of our radio contact from the rear. We then engaged a crack division of German paratroopers still determined to stand their ground. In spite of rumors of a cease-fire, a vicious firefight ensued. When word finally reached us from the rear that a cease-fire was indeed in place, we found out that we had been fighting for five hours past an official cease-fire agreement.

Tragically, 5 of our men had been killed and 5 badly wounded during that time. When the shooting finally stopped, we were all too stunned to celebrate. I'll never forget that hollow feeling and how futile it all seemed to us now. All the suffering and killing seemed so needless now. But the necessity to carry on was so undeniable just a few hours before.

The Italian campaign in this, so called, "soft underbelly" of Europe was now over. The 88th had left 15,000 dead and wounded men to that effort but in the event, it managed to keep several German fighting divisions pre-occupied and unable to assist in the Normandy Invasion.

Most of the Blue Devils of the 88th division were now put in charge of policing some 300,000 German POW's held in Italy and Yugoslavia.

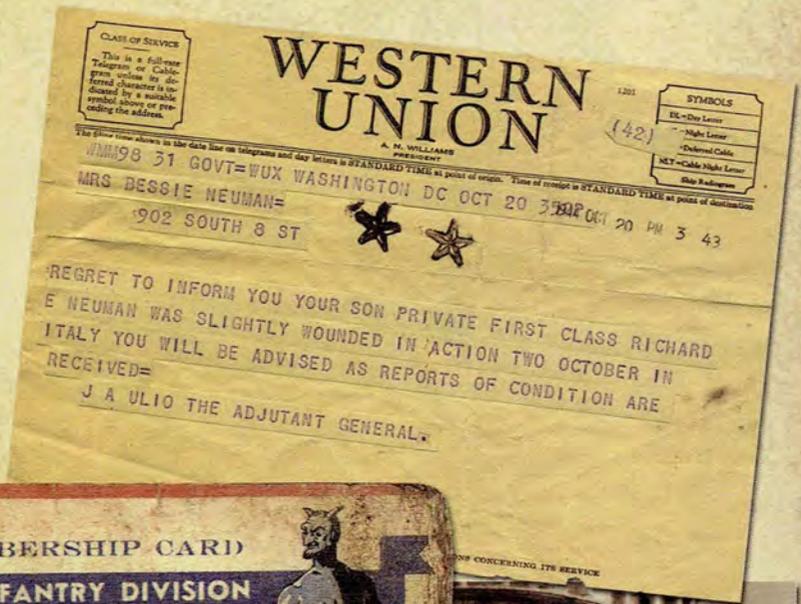
Even after receiving several battle stars and combat campaign experiences, most surviving members of the 88th still lacked enough points for a military discharge. The plan was to send most of us home for a rest, followed by some retraining and then redeployment into the Pacific fighting.

It was to our great relief, as we were flying home, that we learned of Japan's surrender.

I spent the remainder of my service time as a prison guard for German POWs in Alma, Nebraska. After receiving my honorable discharge in November of 1945, I remained in Nebraska, married and raised four children while working as a Stationary Engineer for the Northern National Gas Co.

Having experienced the horrors of combat, it is difficult to put into words what the experience is really like. Combat is something that has to be experienced first hand to be believed and that is why there seems to be that sense of brotherhood among those men or women whom have survived it.

And ya' know, I don't think that a just and loving God need waste the effort creating a place called HELL anywhere else, as long as we persist in bringing about the experience called WAR right here on earth.



Top: Western Union telegram sent to Dick's mother to inform her of her son's injury.

Above: Dick Neuman's membership card to the "Blue Devil Association"

Right: Catching a coach ride in Italy