

History of the 34th “Red Bull” Infantry Division

*By Jack K. Johnson
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The Minnesota-based 34th “Red Bull” Infantry Division is an Army National Guard division with a proud history. Its combat record in World War II is second to none and it continues to serve state and nation.

Organization and World War One

In August 1917, four months after the U.S. entered World War I, the Army combined existing National Guard units from Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas, and Nebraska to form the 34th Infantry Division. Training was conducted at Camp Cody, situated near Deming, New Mexico, on a wide sandy plain. It was named for “Buffalo Bill” Cody, the wild-west showman who had recently died. Dusty wind squalls swirled daily through the area, giving the new division its first nickname: “Sandstorm Division.” As the National Guardsmen arrived on post, enlistees from the Midwest and Southwest joined them to fill out the ranks. Many of the Guardsmen had trained together a year earlier at Camp Llano Grande, near Mercedes, Texas, patrolling the Mexican border.

Training went well, and the men waited anxiously throughout the long fall and winter of 1917-18 to leave for the war in France. Their anticipation turned to disappointment, however, when word was received in May that the 34th would become a “depot” division, destined only to supply replacement troops. Companies, batteries, and regiments that had developed esprit de corps and cohesion were broken up. Within two months, nearly all personnel were shipped out as replacements to fill openings in other commands in France. Reduced to a skeleton of cadre NCOs and officers, the 34th remained at Camp Cody just long enough for new draftees to refill its ranks. In late August, the reconstituted division finally left Camp Cody for Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then to France, but by the time it arrived overseas in October 1918, it was too late to see action. The war ended on November 11, 1918.

Between Wars

After World War One, the 34th was reorganized with National Guardsmen from Iowa, Minnesota and South Dakota. Upon federal recognition in 1924, command of the Division was given to Mathew Tinley of Iowa, who led the 34th for the next sixteen years. The 1920s and 30s were especially hard for the 34th and the National Guard generally, as it struggled to cope with slim resources and restricted troop levels. The command went briefly in 1940 to George Leach of Minneapolis and then to Minnesota's Adjutant General, Ellard Walsh, who headed the division until August 1941.

Mobilization and Preparation for World War Two

By the summer of 1940, war again raged in Europe while militarism in Japan escalated. As a precaution, Congress and President Roosevelt authorized a draft and mobilized the National Guard for a year of training. The nation-wide mobilization was completed in increments throughout the fall and winter of 1940-41. Minnesota's National Guard, which numbered 5,500 at the time, had 3,800 of its membership

in the 34th Division. Its activation began officially on February 10, 1941, followed by several months of intensive training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. The division made a good showing in the massive Louisiana Maneuvers of August and September 1941.

War came to the US when Japan abruptly attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. All enlistments were immediately extended for the duration of the war. The division was hastily moved to Fort Dix, New Jersey, and reorganized from its old fashioned "square" configuration of four infantry regiments to the new, smaller "triangularized" configuration of three regimental combat teams.

The 34th was chosen as the first division to be deployed overseas. In January, only five weeks after Pearl Harbor, the first elements of the division secretly shipped out for Belfast, Northern Ireland, aboard HMTS *Straithard*. British newspapers headlined that the first Yank had landed when Pvt. Milburn H. Henke of Hutchinson, Minnesota, stepped first off the *Straithard* gangplank.

By the end of May 1942, the entire division was assembled for rigorous training in Northern Ireland and Scotland. During this time, the elite First Ranger Battalion was formed under the command of one of the division's officers, Cpt. William Darby. Some 80 percent of the unit's volunteers were drawn from the 34th, and they soon became famous as "Darby's Rangers."

North Africa

Allied strategy called for a three-stage, three-front attack on Axis forces in Europe: the Soviet Union was already fighting Germany on an Eastern Front, while British and American forces would attack from the south by way of the continent's "soft underbelly." The third front, invasion from the west by way of France, would require massive preparation. The Southern Front, in the meantime, required that German forces first be dislodged from North Africa.

Real war began for the fledgling soldiers of the 34th on November 8, 1942, with Operation TORCH, a three-pronged series of coordinated Allied landings in French North Africa intended to cut off the escape of General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Corps after its defeat by the British at El Alamein. Elements of the 34th landed at Algiers. The operation was successful and the 34th, joining with other Allied forces, pushed eastward into Tunisia.

Stiff opposition by reinforced German troops was encountered in Tunisia. Early in the campaign, the first artillery round fired by American ground forces against German troops was leveled by PFC Joseph Pisch of B Battery, 175th Field Artillery Battalion, using a British 25 pounder on November 19, 1942, at Medjez-El-Bab, Tunisia. Many of the battles were for possession of mountain passes leading eastward, and particularly fierce fighting took place in February 1943. Engagements at Faid Pass, where an entire battalion was taken prisoner, and Fondouk Gap were costly and discouraging. A powerful German attack near Kassarine Pass inflicted heavy casualties, but Germany's failure to follow-up enabled the Allies to recover and resume their offensive.

The next Allied objective was capture of Bizerta and Tunis, crucial ports which the Germans used for bringing in reinforcements and supplies by way of Sicily. Hill 609 (Djebel Tahent), a rugged mass of twisted rock and the last heavily fortified German position in North Africa, dominated the passes leading to both of these vital ports.

The critical task of taking Hill 609 was given to the 34th Division, with support from the 1st Division. On April 23, 1943, a series of coordinated attacks began on the surrounding hills. Once taken, the assault on Hill 609 itself began. Early on April 29, the 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry, moved to the base of the hill, captured a small village, and began to tenaciously work its way up. Joined by 2nd Battalion, 168th

Infantry, and 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry, they launched an all-out attack under intense enemy fire. After two days the bastion was in American hands and the German army's defense line collapsed. It was a momentous victory and fitting payback for the division's set backs at Faid, Fondouk and Kassarine. Two weeks later, on May 15, 1943, the enemy surrendered and the battle for North Africa was over. The 135th Regiment represented the 34th Division in a colorful Allied Victory Parade in Tunis on May 20.

The now tough, combat-hardened men of the 34th were justifiably proud of what they had accomplished, but they were acutely aware of the price paid: total battle casualties of the 34th in the Tunisian Campaign numbered 4,049, of which half were missing in action.

The 34th remained as a garrison force in Northeastern Tunisia until July when it was sent to Oran for another round of training. Italy came next.

Italy

The campaign for North Africa had taken six months and many lives, but it was essential in order to invade Italy. Sicily was the stepping-stone. The 34th was assigned to set up staging camps for the assaulting Allies, who pushed the Italian and German troops out of Sicily in July and August 1943. The success of the Sicilian invasion prompted the Italian government to drop out of the war, and Italy signed an armistice on the same day that the invasion of Italy was launched from Sicily on September 3, 1943.

The 34th was designated as a reserve force for the invasion, but its 151st Field Artillery Battalion was temporarily detached to help the 36th Division establish a beachhead at Salerno. The Germans had launched a bewildering nighttime counter-attack on the beachhead just as the 151st was landing, but with sheer grit and courage, the artillerymen stopped it cold. The Chief-of-Staff for the 36th later commented: "The beachhead would have been destroyed had it not been for the early arrival of the 151st."

The 34th, now part of General Mark Clark's 5th Army, arrived at Salerno a few weeks later. From there it advanced slowly northward through mountainous terrain, freezing wet weather, and the turbulent Volturno River (crossed three times), capturing Montemilieto and Benevento in the process. The objective was to push the German army off the "Gustav Line," a formidable chain of German defensive positions that spanned the Italian peninsula above Naples.

Fighting along the route was as hard and unforgiving as ever to face an army, but the Germans were gradually pushed back as, one by one, the strategic objectives were taken: Monte Pantano, San Vittore, Monte Chiaia, Monte Trocchio, the Rapido River. Bitter hand-to-hand combat was often needed to root the enemy out of his holes in the mountains, and the men frequently fought in regions that could only be supplied by animal pack trains. Then came the long, grim assault on Monte Cassino, the most heavily fortified keystone of the Gustav Line. Taking Cassino would open a way into the Liri Valley beyond. After months of bombardment, the division attacked the town of Cassino and the network of hills surrounding it. They attempted to storm the ancient abbey itself, but the Germans defied all attempts to wrest control of it. It took the force of 20 Allied divisions to finally drive the Germans out in May.

In the brutal winter fighting of 1943-44, the Red Bull lost thousands of its infantrymen. Finally relieved in mid-February and given a month's rest, the 34th was sent into action again in March—this time to Anzio. While still fighting for Cassino, Allied commanders had decided to by-pass the Gustav Line and establish a narrow beachhead at Anzio, but powerful German attacks were preventing Allied forces from moving inland. The division's breakout finally came May 23, followed by Cisterno, Lanuvio, and the drive on Rome. Men of the 135th Regiment were among the first to enter the city on June 4, 1944, and mopped up snipers that evening in the vicinity of the Coliseum. The 133rd Regiment, in the meantime,

was taking the vital port of Civitavecchia northwest of Rome. Elsewhere, off the coast of Normandy, Allies were about to invade France. Germany was now defending itself on three fronts.

After Rome, the division continued its drive up the western shore of Italy through heavily entrenched German positions. Resistance was dogged but declining in strength as the 34th rooted Germans out of Civitavecchia, Belvedere, San Vincenzo, Cecina, Rosignano, Livorno (Leghorn), and Pisa, among others. The Arno River came next, then the Gothic Line along the Apennines, and finally a bold campaign for the Po River Valley, which contained most of Italy's war industries.

The last big offensive took place in April 1945 as the division moved further into the Po Valley. The German army's retreat became a rout as their supplies ran out, and on May 2, 1945, the remnants of the LXXV German Corps, totaling over 40,000 men, surrendered to the Red Bulls near Milan (ironically, the surrendered troops included the 34th German Division). The war in Europe came to an end a few days later, with some elements of the division on the borders of France and Switzerland.

Home and Aftermath

After rest, sightseeing, and occupation duty, the victorious division sailed from Naples in October for the USA. Its men were mustered out and the division deactivated on November 3, 1945, at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia. Of the several thousand Midwestern Guardsmen who left for Camp Claiborne on a frigid February day in 1941, and who had been among the first American troops to land in Europe, only a handful remained with the division at the end. Casualties, illness, transfers, and rotations accounted for the rest. But pride in the accomplishments of the 34th during its 46 months away from home was deeply felt by all who had ever worn the Red Bull.

"Attack, attack, attack," had become the division's slogan early in its fighting career. With that battle cry it went on to complete a record that included 517 days of front line combat in six major campaigns—more combat days than any other American division in any theatre of the war, with some elements of the division credited with 611 days. There were 21,362 casualties (3,737 killed, 14,165 wounded, 3,460 missing in action), a casualty rate considered to be the highest of any division in the Mediterranean Theater when daily per capita fighting strengths are considered. The division's men were awarded 11 Medals of Honor, 98 Distinguished Service Crosses, and 1,153 Silver Stars.

In addition to the personal awards and decorations, the division garnered three Presidential Unit Citations, 15 Unit Commendations and 525 separate division citations. The French government awarded the 34th the Croix de Guerre with Palm for gallantry in action alongside French troops. The 100th "Nisei" Infantry Battalion, composed of U.S. citizens of Japanese descent and attached to the 34th for much of the Italian Campaign, became the most highly decorated battalion in the U.S. Army.

For men of the 34th, the victory over Germany was bittersweet. Not only had the price of their victory come high, it was their unfortunate lot that once the Allies hit the beaches at Normandy, Italy became a forgotten front. Even when the division returned home to the US, it was inactivated in obscurity and its men dismissed without fanfare.

The 34th was reorganized in 1946 as a National Guard division from Iowa and Nebraska, with headquarters in Iowa. In 1963 it was broken up as a result of Guard restructuring and budget cuts. Only a command headquarters remained, but that too was eliminated in 1968, putting the division in inactive status.

Rebirth

Although it had been inactivated, the Red Bull's reputation as one of the toughest combat outfits in World War II was not forgotten. In 1990, in recognition of the division's wartime achievements, the Department of the Army decided to redesignate the Minnesota-based 47th "Viking" Infantry Division (which had no combat history) as the 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division. The switch officially took place in a ceremony at the St. Paul Armory on February 10, 1991—exactly fifty years after the division's federal activation for World War II. Thus it was that a great division was reborn and its legacy taken up by a new generation of soldiers.

Into the 21st Century

When the 47th Division became the 34th through renaming, everything else remained the same. Shortly thereafter, however, the division began a process of organizational makeover and change that has continued to the present day. As part of an Army-wide restructuring of its divisions that began in 2005, the 34th has been converted into a set of modular, flexibly aligned, combat and support brigade teams. Under the new system, the division's composition continually changes to accomplish large-scale Army objectives or more specific training and operational needs.

In recent years, global and domestic mission requirements have forced America's armed services to become much more interdependent. The impact on the National Guard has been profound. Adoption of a "Total Force" policy in the late 1970s, dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991—which ended the Cold War and prompted a significant downsizing of the full-time Regular Army—and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks contributed to the impact. But national policy shifts and financial considerations (part-time National Guard forces can be maintained at significantly less cost than full-time forces) have also played an important role, multiplying the nation's reliance on its National Guard and reserves. Beginning with the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, the Guard has become wholly engaged in U.S. global peacekeeping, conflict in the Middle East, national defense, and homeland security. Unlike earlier generations of Guardsmen, today's Red Bull citizen-soldiers expect to be mobilized and deployed on a regular basis.

Globally, since 9/11, units of the 34th have deployed for such purposes as multi-national peacekeeping, base or convoy security, or combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bosnia, Kosovo, Egypt, Honduras, and central Europe. Eighteen Minnesota soldiers from the 34th have given their lives in these operations. One such deployment is particularly noteworthy: In January 2007, President Bush ordered 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq, and extended the tour of most Army troops already there, to shore up that nation's defenses. It became known as the "surge," causing the Minnesota-based First Brigade Combat Team—which was then in Iraq—to have its 12-month deployment extended to 16 months. Altogether, the brigade was deployed for 22 months, and it became one of the largest and longest single unit deployments for the National Guard since the Korean War.

Domestically, the 34th has been a ready and reliable force for homeland security missions. In addition, when needed for state missions requiring military-level support, such as disaster relief or civil disturbances, the 34th swiftly supplied its trained manpower and equipment.

As of 2015, units were located in eight states and included 23,000 soldiers. The division's headquarters in Rosemount, Minnesota, oversees training and operations for three large Minnesota-based units: 1st Armor Brigade Combat Team, 34th Combat Aviation Brigade, and 347th Regional Support Group (formerly 34th Division Support Command). Division headquarters also provides training and operational guidance to its non-Minnesota elements, including the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (Iowa), 32nd Brigade Combat Team (Wisconsin), 116th Heavy Brigade Combat Team (Idaho), 115th Fires Brigade (Wyoming), 141st Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (North Dakota), 157th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (Wisconsin), 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (South Dakota), 1-112th Security and Support Battalion (North Dakota), 1-183rd Aviation Battalion (Idaho), and the 1-189th Aviation Battalion (Montana).



The Red Bull

The Red Bull shoulder insignia of the 34th Division was designed by Marvin Cone of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, who drew it for a contest while training with the division at Camp Cody, New Mexico, in 1917. A steer skull overlaid on the shape of a Mexican water flask (an "olla") recalled the division's desert home not far from the Mexican border. During World War Two, German soldiers in Italy referred to American soldiers who wore the familiar patch as "Red Devils" or "Red Bulls." The latter name stuck, and the division adopted it officially, replacing its World War One nickname of "Sandstorm Division."



Distinctive Unit Insignia

The division's DUI (Coat of Arms) is described by the Army's Institute of Heraldry as "consisting of two gold fasces crossed diagonally and superimposed by a black olla bearing a gold fleur-de-lis debruised by a red bovine skull." The blue scrolls at top and bottom are inscribed with the division's motto, "Attack, Attack, Attack." Symbolically, blue reflects infantry. The olla and skull are taken from the shoulder insignia, dating to World War I. The fasces represent service in Italy during World War II. The gold fleur-de-lis alludes to excellence and the division's French Croix de Guerre for service in World War II. The motto was adopted in 1943.

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