

## Silver Star

For Fifth Army commander Mark Clark, the glory would be in the capture of Rome. To get to Rome, one had to control the Liri Valley. To control the Liri Valley, one had to seize the dominating high ground at Monte Cassino. By February 1944, the Allies had been fighting their way north along the Italian peninsula against both the Germans and the weather. The 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was in the thick of the battle for Monte Cassino and so was Frank Keith Fendley.

Fendley was a hometown boy from Clemson and a member of the interrupted Class of 1946. He was an engineering major and was assigned to Company M-2, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of the Cadet Brigade. At the end of their freshman year, the boys in the Class of '46 were scattered to military posts far and wide, sucked into the massive personnel machine feeding soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines into the exploding ranks of the US military.



"Lighting" war is forgotten when terrain is as rough as Pvt. Frank K. Fendley, a freshman last year majoring in electrical engineering from Clemson, found in the Venafro sector in Italy. The picture shows how an American 81 mm. mortar battalion, with Pvt. Fendley in the forefront (and inset), was finding that the sure-footed mule is the only dependable means of toting supplies to the firing line.

*Fendley and "comrade" pictured in the February 24, 1944 edition of The Tiger.*

After completing his basic and advanced training, Fendley shipped out to the Mediterranean theater where he was assigned to Company B, 135<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The 34<sup>th</sup> was a National Guard division originally composed of troops from Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas. Federalized in February 1941, it was fighting in Italy by the time Fendley joined its ranks.

January 1944 found the 34<sup>th</sup>'s 135<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment slogging through nasty winter weather in the rugged mountains of Italy about halfway between Salerno and Rome. The terrain was so rocky and treacherous, particularly in snow and ice, that US troops resorted to beasts of burden to carry weapons and supplies to forward positions. On January 20, Private Fendley was promoted to corporal. On the final day of the month, in action near the key terrain of Monte Cassino, Fendley displayed conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the Germans. His conduct in battle led to his promotion to sergeant and would later result in the award of the Silver Star.

The battle for Monte Cassino was vicious, with both sides suffering staggering casualties. In one two-acre field, survivors counted ninety bodies. During the first two weeks of February, Fendley's 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division made three attempts to capture the hilltop and break through to the Liri Valley. Each attempt failed and each was costly. The division's rifle companies, the front line soldiers enduring the worst of the fighting, suffered 65% casualties. Existing on snow melt and canned rations, the 34<sup>th</sup>'s soldiers were exhausted and weather-beaten and were pulled off the line on February 11 through 13. Fendley was hospitalized with a "severe wound" during the campaign. It eventually took five Allied divisions to capture Monte Cassino.

After a period of hospitalization, Fendley returned to his unit. The 34<sup>th</sup> landed at the Anzio beachhead on March 25 and maintained defensive positions there until the offensive of May 23. Leading the breakout, the 34<sup>th</sup> captured Cisterna and swung northwest to capture Rome. After a short rest, the division proceeded to liberate Livorno. Fendley confided in a letter to his mother that he expected soon to be relieved for special training for troops preparing for the occupation of Germany. He was not. Staff Sergeant Fendley was killed in action on September 18, 1944. He was twenty years old.

Frank Keith Fendley was survived by his parents. In addition to the Silver Star, he was awarded the Purple Heart. After the war, his body was returned to Clemson where he lies buried in the Old Stone Church Cemetery.



*The Tiger* photo courtesy of Special Collections, Cooper Library.  
See also *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, by Rick Atkinson, 2007.