

## Operation Raincoat

Reporting on the war in Italy in the late autumn of 1943, columnist Ernie Pyle wrote, “The land and the weather were both against us.” It was cold, it seemed to rain all the time, and each indistinguishable day seemed shorter and darker than the one before. Fifth Army commander General Mark Clark was determined to liberate Rome, making it the first of the Axis capitals to fall. But the Germans were between his army and the eternal city—and the rugged terrain of the Apennine Mountains surrounding the Mignano Gap favored the defenders. Clearing the Germans from the Gap would allow Fifth Army to reach Cassino, the Liri Valley, and the highway to Rome. To root out the Germans, Fifth Army would first have to seize Monte La Difensa, also known as Hill 960, one of the peaks dominating the Gap. Operation Raincoat was planned to do just that.



John Edmond Gandy, Jr. was born in Society Hill in Darlington County in 1913. His father was an engineer and the family soon moved to Niagara Falls, New York where John grew up. Mindful of his Southern roots and motivated by a desire to help farmers, John returned to South Carolina to study agronomy at Clemson College.

A member of the Class of 1938, “Mahatma” as he was nicknamed, played company-level softball and was a member of Kappa Alpha Sigma, an organization composed of upperclassmen and faculty members in the agriculture department. A senior private assigned to Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Gandy did not participate in advanced ROTC.

Following graduation, Gandy took a position with the US Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service in Rock Hill. He married the former Lucy Hedden of Walhalla and was noted for his sense of humor. With America’s entry into World War II, Gandy reported for military service in late 1942. A year later, Gandy was in Italy, assigned to the 135<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

Operation Raincoat envisioned a daring assault of Monte La Difensa by the American-Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Special Service Force. A diversionary attack by the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was intended to fix enemy troops in place and allow the Special Service Force to accomplish its mission before German reinforcements could move to the peak. Raincoat commenced on December 3 following the most intense artillery shelling of the Italian campaign to date. The 1<sup>st</sup> Special Service Force captured Monte La Difensa, but the 34<sup>th</sup> Infantry’s diversionary attack was less successful. According to historian Rick Atkinson, the division’s attack gained barely 300 yards a day at a cost of one casualty for every two yards.

On December 9, the final day of the attack, Sergeant Gandy was at his company command post on Monte Patano, when it received a direct hit from a German mortar round. Gandy’s

reconnaissance team was killed instantly and he was wounded in the abdomen, hip, and ankle. Gandy was conscious and conversant as he was carried to the aid station at the bottom of the mountain, but he later died from his wounds.

The Italian campaign was a long, hard fight over harsh terrain against a coldly competent enemy. Clark's plans, wrote Atkinson, "tended to impale [themselves] on Italian pinnacles." The Liri Valley and the highway to Rome wouldn't be reached until May. Rome was liberated on June 4—and overshadowed almost immediately by the D-Day landings in France.

Sergeant John Edmond Gandy, Jr. was awarded the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents, his wife, and his sister. He was buried in the Sicily-Rome American Military Cemetery. He is also memorialized at Forest Lawn Memorial Cemetery in Anderson.



See also *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944* by Rick Atkinson, 2007.