

Reconnaissance Patrol

The November 1942 Allied invasion of French North Africa placed its German and Italian occupiers in a bind. General Montgomery's British Eighth Army was ascendant in the east, and now Eisenhower's expeditionary force was strengthening in the west. Axis forces, though caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, were not yet defeated however, as they were led by the legendary Desert Fox, General Erwin Rommel.

Clayton Lawrence Herrington of Waynesboro, Georgia, was an architecture major in Clemson's Class of 1941. He was assigned to Company M, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Regiment of the Cadet Brigade, where he served as a second lieutenant. Upon graduation in June 1941, Herrington was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army and immediately ordered to active duty.

Less than a year after graduation, Herrington was ordered overseas in April 1942 to join the 34th Infantry Division, the first American division deployed to the European Theater of Operations. The division, nicknamed the Red Bulls, was formed from Iowa and Minnesota National Guard units that had been federalized in February 1941. Under War Department supervision, the division expanded, reequipped, and saw a large percentage of its officers replaced with more energetic leaders. Herrington was one of these.

The quick shipment of the 34th Infantry Division to Northern Ireland after the attack on Pearl Harbor was intended to demonstrate American commitment to the "Germany First" strategy agreed upon by British and American leaders. While the move was symbolic to an extent, it had the side effect of excluding the 34th from the large scale maneuvers in Louisiana and the Carolinas that provided its sister divisions with valuable large formation exercises and training. As a result, the division's own history noted that it "was not prepared for combat service."

Nonetheless, when Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt agreed to assault North Africa, the 34th's positioning in Northern Ireland meant that it was immediately available for commitment. The division, with Herrington assigned to F Company, 2nd Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment, landed in Algiers as part of Operation TORCH's Eastern Task Force on November 8, 1942.

Over the following months, the Allies gradually expanded their presence in North Africa and by February 1943 occupied a winter defense line running north to south through central Tunisia. The southern portion of this line was manned by the US II Corps, to include Herrington's 34th Infantry Division. Highway 13 ran from the southeast—Axis territory—toward the northwest and Allied lines. To control this highway and the critical Faïd



Pass through Tunisia's Eastern Dorsal range, II Corps commander Lloyd Fredendall directed that elements of his 1st Armored Division occupy and strengthen two key hill tops: Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira. Herrington's 2nd Battalion/168th Infantry Regiment was detached from the 34th and attached to Lieutenant Colonel John Waters task force on Lessouda. Despite occupying defensive positions, Fredendall ordered that the enemy should be harassed at every opportunity, including at night. He also charged his subordinate commanders to conduct frequent reconnaissance patrols to ascertain enemy strength and intentions.

Fredendall's subordinate commanders, notably Waters's division commander Orlando Ward, voiced concerns over the disposition of forces at Lassouda and Ksaira. The units were too far forward to be defended in the event of a major German attack and were also too far apart to offer each other mutual support. Aggravating the tactical issue was the quality of replacement soldiers received by Herrington's 2nd Battalion. One hundred twenty-five new men had recently joined the unit, most of them without even rudimentary marksmanship training.

On the night of February 11-12, First Lieutenant Herrington was ordered to lead a reconnaissance patrol. Under cover of darkness, Herrington's patrol passed through friendly lines on the east slope of Djebel Lassouda and proceeded into no-man's land and beyond. During the night, Herrington's patrol was attacked by German forces somewhere along Highway 13 and he was mortally wounded. The aggressive response to American patrols led some officers to believe that the Germans were preparing to attack.

On February 13, General Eisenhower toured Allied positions in II Corps' sector. Apprised of misgivings about the disposition of American forces, the Supreme Commander committed to looking into the matter the following day upon return to his own headquarters.

Before Eisenhower could make good on his pledge, Rommel attacked. At 0630 on February 14, more than one hundred tanks were unleashed along with supporting infantry and artillery, smashing through Faid Pass, isolating and destroying the Allied positions at Djebel Lassouda and Djebel Ksaira. The Germans would drive all the way to the distant Kasserine Pass, far to the west, bloodying the green American troops and embarrassing their commanders. It was Rommel's first engagement against the US Army—and his last battlefield victory of the war.

First Lieutenant Herrington was survived by his wife, Mary and his foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. A. O. Butts. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

