

Closing to the Roer

According to tradition, the 84th Infantry Division traced its lineage to the Illinois militia company in which young Captain Abraham Lincoln served during the Black Hawk War of 1832. As a consequence, the division was known as the “Railsplitters” in honor of the sixteenth president’s erstwhile occupation. In late 1944, the Railsplitters, including Second Lieutenant William Raleigh Marsh, were holding the left flank of US forces as they attempted to drive east to Germany’s Roer River.

Marsh was a dairy science major from Camden and a member of the Class of 1943, the last cohort to complete a regular four-year course of study before the war interrupted the routine on the Clemson campus. Marsh was a high honors student and was selected for membership in the prestigious Alpha Zeta national honorary fraternity for agriculture. As a senior, he was appointed a second lieutenant in Company H, 2nd Battalion of the Cadet Brigade’s 2nd Regiment.



An honor graduate, Marsh reported for active duty following the May commencement ceremonies. He completed his officer training at Fort Benning, Georgia in April 1944 and took further training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana and Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Lieutenant Marsh shipped overseas in October 1944 and was assigned to the 334th Infantry Regiment of the 84th Infantry Division.



The division crossed the English Channel and landed on Omaha Beach during the first four days of November. It was then moved toward the front, to the vicinity of Gulpen, Netherlands. The 84th moved into position as the northernmost American division on the Allied front lines. It anchored the 12th Army Group’s left flank and tied in with British XXX Corps to its north. The division entered combat on November 18 when it was attached to XXX Corps for Operation Clipper, a British effort to pierce the vaunted Siegfried Line of defensive fortifications along the German

border. The 84th’s mission was to seize high ground east of Geilenkirchen to help open a path eastward to the Roer River.

As the Allies advanced, the disciplined Germans unleashed artillery and mortar fire that “was absolutely overwhelming with its violence, surprise, and intensity. Artillery fire, 88s and 75s from hidden tanks, and 120 mortars with apparently limitless supplies of ammunition hit us,” a division soldier recalled. “The noise, the shock, the sensation of total helplessness and bewilderment, the loss of control, the sudden loss of every familiar assumption—nothing in

civilian life or training offered an experience remotely comparable.” Historian Stephen Ambrose concluded that “Combat could only be experienced, not played at.”

In increasingly harsh weather, the Allies continued to punch their way forward through difficult terrain and against an entrenched enemy fighting on his home field. Ambrose was critical of these December battles, writing that they “did not shorten the war by one minute” and that they cost “too many good men.” One of these was Second Lieutenant Marsh who died from wounds on December 13.

William Raleigh Marsh was awarded the Bronze Star for action against the enemy and the Purple Heart. He was buried in the American Military Cemetery in Margraten, Netherlands and is memorialized in the Quaker Cemetery in Camden. He was survived by his parents, sister, and three brothers, one of whom was then serving in the Navy.



See also *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army From the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945*, by Stephen Ambrose, Simon & Schuster, 1997.