

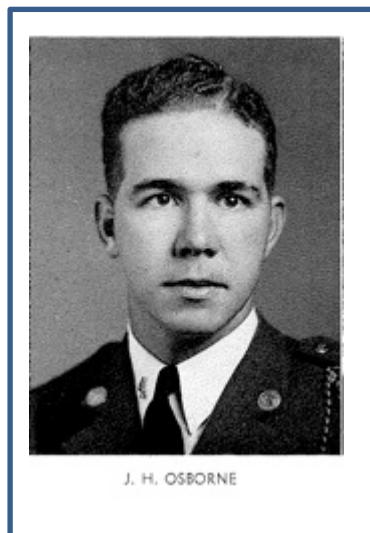
Too Much With Too Little

Ours was the bitterness that characterized the winter fighting in Italy. An attempt to accomplish too much had been attempted with too little. Assistance had not arrived too late — it had not arrived at all. Our men had illuminated with heroic sacrifice the traditional honor of their arms

*141st Infantry Regiment
Texas Military Forces Museum*

The Gari River, located south of Cassino between the Italian cities of Rome and Naples, isn't one of Europe's storied rivers like the Seine, the Danube or the Rhine, but for two days in the miserable cold of January 1944, it was the scene of great courage and sacrifice. The 141st Infantry Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division was at the center of the battle, the echoes of which would reach all the way to Capitol Hill. Among the regiment's officers was John Henry Osborne of Hardeeville.

"Jack" Osborne entered Clemson in 1937 and majored in civil engineering. During his years at Clemson, Osborne was a member of ASCE and served as president of the Newman Club. Outstanding in drill, he was selected as a member of the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior platoons composed of the best drilled cadets from each class. A member of Pershing Rifles, he was a marksman on the firing range and attended ROTC summer training at Fort McClellan, Alabama.



Jack Osborne was assigned to the 141st Infantry Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division. A regiment of the Texas National Guard, the 141st traced its history back to the days of the Texas Republic. The division landed in North Africa in April 1943 and saw its first combat action in September as part of the Allied landings around Salerno, Italy.

November found the division and its 141st Regiment engaged with German defenders along the fortified Bernhardt Line. As fall gave way to winter, the weather turned miserable. Freezing rain, sleet and snow turned the ground into muck and forced supplies to be ferried forward by mule train or on the backs of the soldiers themselves. And then there were the Germans to contend with. The Germans held the high ground, including Monte Cassino.

With Prussian precision, the defenders had cut down trees to clear interlocking fields of fire and had registered artillery targets for quick action.

When orders for a forced crossing of the Gari River came down from Fifth Army headquarters in January, both the 36th Infantry Division commander and the commander of II Corps objected. Although the river was only about 50 feet wide, its banks were steep and its five mile per hour current made crossing by rubber boat perilous. While combat engineer units made valiant efforts to construct foot bridges over the river, the artillery, mortar and machine gun fire from German positions was overwhelming. The single foot bridge finally put in place had to be abandoned by the attackers due to the intensity of enemy fire.

After two days of heroic effort and unrelenting slaughter, the attack was called off. Elements of two battalions which had gained the far bank under horrendous fire, could not be rescued and were left to the mercies of the enemy. The forty-eight hour Battle of the Rapido River, as the fight came to be known, reduced platoons to squads, companies to platoons and destroyed the fighting effectiveness of the 141st Regiment.

On February 10, Jack Osborne died from wounds he had suffered during an artillery cross fire.

Two years later, on March 18, 1946, the Military Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, called to order hearings on the Rapido River crossing. The hearings were prompted by the angry veterans of the 36th Infantry Division who felt their sacrifices had been the result of “a murderous blunder.” The veterans, backed by the Texas Legislature, charged Fifth Army commander Mark Clark with ordering an attack which he knew was doomed to fail—and with “horrendous losses.”

Testimony was heard from many veterans, including General Frederick Walker, commander of the 36th Infantry Division, General Geoffrey Keyes, commander of II Corps. According to historian Clayton Laurie, General Clark was not required to testify and “never referred to the Rapido River disaster in any public utterances after the war or in his memoirs.” The Congressional committee eventually accepted that “the attempt to cross the Rapido was a legitimate if difficult operation.” The failed operation left as its legacy nearly 1,000 casualties from the 141st Regiment alone, including Jack Osborne.

John Henry Osborne was survived by his mother Elize, who by then had moved to Clemson, and his brother Ed, an officer candidate training at Fort Knox. He is buried at the Beaufort National Cemetery.

