

## Forgotten Front

The Italian Campaign in World War II is sometimes called the “Forgotten Front,” overshadowed by Operation Overlord, the June 1944 Allied invasion of France. But in May 1944, Italy was still the Allies’ major ground offensive against the Germans and Clemson alumnus James Levi Smith, Jr. was right in the thick of the fighting.

Smith was a graduate of Boy’s High School in Anderson where his father served as the county’s assistant superintendent of education. At Clemson, Smith majored in horticulture. A member of the Class of 1945, Smith’s days on campus were cut short by the War Department’s demands for more men to commit to the fight against the Axis powers. Although Clemson was well-known for commissioning Army second lieutenants, Smith and his classmates were ordered to active duty before they had a chance to complete ROTC training. As a result, the end of the 1942-43 academic year saw most of the boys on campus trading their gray cadet uniforms for military khaki. Smith soon found himself in the Army.



Smith was assigned to the 85<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the “Custer” Division, which had first been activated at Camp Custer, Michigan during the First World War. The 85<sup>th</sup>, including Smith’s 339<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, left the United States on Christmas Eve 1943 bound for Casablanca in French Morocco. Arriving a little more than a week later, the division participated in amphibious training along the North African coast. Smith’s 339<sup>th</sup> Regiment was the division’s first element to reach Italy, arriving on March 14, 1944. Two weeks later, it was committed to action on the Minturno-Castelforte front.

Eager to break through the Gustav Line of German defenses, link up with VI Corps which had landed up the coast at Anzio in January, and liberate Rome, General Mark Clark’s Fifth Army attacked toward the west-northwest on May 11. Smith’s regiment was on the American left flank, extending from the Mediterranean coast inland. In heavy fighting the following day, Smith went missing in action.

It was not until the middle of June that his family received word via War Department telegram that Smith was missing. His mother died on June 16 following “a short illness.” One is left to wonder about the impact of that telegram on Mrs. Smith’s health.

The Gustav Line was breached a few days after Smith’s sacrifice. The link up with VI Corps was soon affected and Rome was liberated on June 5. The following day, British, Canadian, and American forces landed in Normandy and the Italian campaign was all but forgotten—except by the men still fighting there and the families back home. On July 3, Smith’s father received a second telegram confirming his son’s death in combat.

James Levi Smith, Jr. died two months short of his twenty-first birthday. He was survived by his father and his sister and is buried in the Lebanon Baptist Church Cemetery in Anderson.

