

A Young Man of the Highest Caliber

Robert Bankston Williams of Charlotte, North Carolina attended Clemson College for only his freshman year, enrolling in the general sciences curriculum in 1942. By that fall, the cadets' eyes were already focused on far-away places that many had never heard of just a few months earlier; places like Guadalcanal and New Guinea. As the school year progressed, Williams and his classmates would have learned of additional exotic locales, places with unpronounceable names like Kasserine and El Guettar. American troops by the spring of 1943 were battling the enemy from sweltering Pacific jungles to the arid deserts of North Africa.



On campus, Clemson president Robert F. Poole encouraged the cadets to remain in school, reminding them that the country would need well-educated young men to lead its armed forces through the long struggle ahead. Many cadets, impatient as only young men can be, rather than waiting on their country's call volunteered for service when the school year ended.

By that winter, the Allies had chased the Germans from North Africa, conquered Sicily and invaded Italy. Robert Williams was a medical corps sergeant assigned to the 30th Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division. The division was engaged in bitter fighting, slogging northward along Italy's mountainous terrain until it reached the vicinity of Monte Cassino. It was then withdrawn from the line and sent to a rest area. Allied commanders had big plans for the division.



3rd Infantry Division Shoulder

Facing a well-entrenched enemy, Fifth Army commander Mark Clark attempted an end-run by launching amphibious landings at Anzio and Nettuno, on the west coast of Italy on January 22 and 23, 1944. The invasion threw 36,000 Allied soldiers ashore to the rear of the German lines. The plan was for Allied troops in the south to link up with the Anzio invaders and open the way for the liberation of Rome. The landings achieved tactical surprise and the Allies quickly built up a beachhead some fifteen miles deep. But Clark's subordinates failed to exploit their early successes and the Germans counterattacked swiftly and effectively.

What had begun as a daring stroke quickly bogged down into a series of bloody offensives and counter-offensives. From high ground to the east of Anzio, German artillery could range the entire beachhead. Allied soldiers waited out the shellings in trenches and dugouts reminiscent of the First World War. For medics like Sergeant Williams, the battles were especially perilous as the medics often were forced to treat wounded men still exposed to enemy observation and fire. The 30th Infantry Regiment would lose seven hundred men killed in the fighting. No doubt Sergeant Williams and his fellow medics kept that number from being even more costly.

Unfortunately, the medics' Red Cross brassards were no protection from the dangers of the battlefield. Williams was wounded on February 29, 1944 and died a few days later in Naples.

In its obituary, the *Herald Journal* called Williams "a young man of the highest caliber." Sergeant Robert Bankston Williams was awarded the Purple Heart and buried among his comrades at the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery.