

IOWA HISTORY

by Cheryl Mullenbach



(Photo Library of Congress)
Soldiers at Camp Claiborne, LA, 1942

The Iron Man Battalion

Yank Magazine, a military weekly news magazine published during World War II, ran a lengthy spread on the 34th Division in March 1945. Men from all over the United States comprised the 34th, but at one time it had been densely populated with young men from Iowa. The writer of the article titled “Iron Man Battalion” focused much of his attention on the Iowans who remained in Italy.

The 34th Division was originally made up of men from National Guard outfits in Iowa, Minnesota, and Dakota. They were called to active duty in February 1941—almost a full year before the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and America’s entry in the war. They trained at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana.

On January 26, 1942—about 6 weeks after Pearl Harbor—the men arrived in Ireland for more training with British troops, who had already been at war for over two years. They were the first American soldiers to set foot in the European theater. And they were proud of it. That date became a badge of honor for them. They were known as the “January 26 men.”

The Irish welcomed them with open arms. In a ceremonial reviewing of the American troops the Irish people came out to watch as bands played familiar march tunes. As the soldiers marched through the Irish countryside a little Irish dog attached himself to some of the Iowa soldiers. They named him “Hawkeye” in honor of their state.

By March 1945 when the men of the 34th Division were interviewed by *Yank Magazine*, they had seen plenty of action—in Europe and North Africa. “The old-timers” of the division, as

the writer called them, had “sweated it out longer than any other infantry men in Europe.” They had been overseas for 3 years with 350 days spent in the front lines. It had been relentless, with very few respites for rest and recreation.

The war had taken a toll on the 34th. The entire division suffered casualties over those three years. The men from Iowa featured by *Yank* were a small group that remained of the original Iowans. Some had returned to the United States with injuries; many had been killed in action. Most of the men featured in the article had earned Purple Hearts. All were proud to be part of the “iron man battalion.”

There was S/Sgt. Max Shepherd from Waterloo, whose dad—Maj. Lloyd H. Shepherd—had been the battalion commander until his transfer back to the States. S/Sgt. Everall Schonbrich of Casey and Jerry Snoble from Hazelton were part of the battalion. Snoble had served in the rifle platoon and was wounded in Tunisia. S/Sgt. Stanley Setka from Riceville was an anti-tank squad leader. Pvt. Ralph Loy, another Waterloo native, had managed to rejoin his old Iowa group after spending time with another battalion. T-5 Raymond E. Sonksen of Grundy Center was the only man left of the 22 Grundy Center men who had trained at Camp Claiborne back in 1941.

A few weeks after the magazine feature story, the men were sent home to Iowa to enjoy a few weeks of furlough. A reporter from the *Waterloo Courier* interviewed six from Waterloo. When she asked them which of the many battles they’d fought was the toughest, one answered for the group, “All combat is the same, it’s rough going wherever you are.” They also talked about Hawkeye, the Irish dog they had adopted. Sadly, he had been a casualty of the war too—run over by a truck.

When the reporter asked the men how they felt when they got their first glimpse of the United States after their long journey from the battlefields of Europe and Africa, one soldier summed it up: “I was so happy I knelt down and kissed the soil of the good old U.S.”

Sources

“Iron Man Battalion,” *Yank, The Army Weekly*, March 9, 1945.

http://www.oldmagazinearticles.com/WW2_US_34th_Infantry_Division_pdf

“Iron Man Battalion,” http://iagenweb.org/wwii/WWII_News/04Feb1945Wloo.html From *Waterloo Daily Courier*, February 4, 1945.

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