**KASSERINE PASS A BAPTISM OF FIRE FOR U.S. ARMY IN WORLD WAR II**

AP News Archive  **Feb. 6, 1993** 11:54 AM ET

By ROBERT DVORCHAK AP National Writer

Kermit Carlson, a Minnesota farmboy, was a radioman attached to the 19th Combat Engineers defending the Kasserine Pass - a barren corridor he had never heard of until the Germans wanted it. Of the 1,200 men in the battalion on Feb. 18, 1943, only 125 remained the next day. The rest were killed, wounded, captured or scattered, as a battle- hardened war machine gave the untested U.S. Army a bloody baptism.

''We were young and dumb. Really green,'' said Carlson, 75, of Hanley Falls, Minn. ''It was nobody's fault really. We were outnumbered, outmaneuvered and outsmarted. We learned the hard way. It was a living hell.''

The battles in and around the Kasserine Pass between Feb. 14 and Feb. 22, 1943, were the first clashes between the Americans and the Germans. It was a disastrous debut.

Of the 30,000 Americans engaged under II Corps, nearly one of four were casualties - an estimated 300 were killed, 3,000 wounded and 3,000 missing or captured. The Army also lost 183 tanks, 104 half-tracks, 208 artillery pieces and 512 trucks and jeeps. .

The Germans had better guns and training. The 88mm guns on their new Mark VI tanks could fire while out of range of the 75mm U.S. Sherman tanks. In one suicidal bid to stop the Panzers, only four of 50 tanks of a battalion of the 1st Armored Regiment survived a battle.

Messerschmidts and Stuka dive bombers had perfected air-ground support, and the German infantry had a terrible new weapon called a nebelwerfer - multiple launched rockets. Their commanders were Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox of the Afrika Korps, and Gen. Juergen von Arnim.

The American 37mm gun, by contrast, was so ineffective it was called the ''paint scratcher'' and was removed from the U.S. arsenal. And so, eventually, were some officers.

On Valentine’s Day, February 14th, 1943, Germans struck first and aimed a blow at a thin American line. The Germans reached Kasserine on Feb. 18 and captured it a day later when the defenses of the 19th Combat Engineers crumbled before artillery, mortar, tank and machine-gun fire.

Among the units thrown into the Kasserine breach was the 1st Infantry Division - the Big Red One. And among them was Steve Franklin Phillips Jr., a shavetail second lieutenant fresh from the ROTC program at Clemson University. As green as he was, the 22-year-old Phillips was placed in charge of a heavy weapons platoon in the 26th Infantry Regiment dug in along a dry creek bed in the early hours of Feb. 19. ''We were brazenly ejected from our position. It was a debacle, a baptism in blood,'' said Phillips, who later rose to the rank of colonel and fought in three wars.

For him, it was a case of losing a battle but winning a war.

''We weren't the only Army that had to learn from its first battles. We never forgot what they did to us at Kasserine Pass. We proved ourselves not too much later. We got even with them,'' Phillips said.

''Kasserine was a b\*\*\*, but it didn't break our morale. We never thought the Germans were better than we were. We took a pounding but we reorganized. We thought we were going to get them and we did get them. We always thought we were going to win,'' Gembel said.

After a daylong duel on Feb. 22, the German advance fizzled. On the same day at Tebessa, jittery Americans settled down and blocked German columns. The Germans started going back through Kasserine that night. Having failed to break through, Rommel withdrew on Feb. 23 and consolidated his positions east of Kasserine to face new threats from the British in the east.

U.S. II Corps commander Maj. Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall was fired and sent back to a training center in the United States by Eisenhower. Ike replaced him with a brash, hard-charging cavalryman - George S. Patton. Under Patton, the Americans licked their wounds and welcomed the new guns, tanks and planes streaming across the Atlantic. Patton was on the offensive by March 16, telling his division commanders: ''If we are not victorious, let no one come back alive.'' By May 13, the last remnants of Germans and Italians surrendered in Tunisia or were gone from Africa. The American Army that was blooded at Kasserine Pass learned to fight and coordinate attacks with its British and French allies.

It grew into the military machine that later fought in Sicily, Italy, Normandy and the drive across France into Germany.

War correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote that Kasserine, painful and difficult as it had been, was a rite of passage.

''Our predicament was damned humiliating. We lost a great deal of equipment, many American lives and valuable time and territory - to say nothing of face,'' Pyle wrote.

''We Americans were so smug with our cockiness. We somehow felt that just because we were Americans we could whip our weight in wildcats,'' he said. ''Without the war of Tunisia, we would have been ill-prepared to go on into the bigger wars ahead. We really learn such things only by doing.''