

The History of the 86th Infantry “BLACK HAWK” Division in World War II

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The title of my paper is "The History of the 86th Infantry division "BLACK HAWKS" during World War II." By way of background, the 86th Infantry Division was created in 1917 and nicknamed the "Black Hawk Division" after Sauk Chief Black Hawk. He was a chief and warrior who lived in what is now the Midwestern United States. Although he had inherited a sacred bundle from his father, he was not a hereditary civil chief. Chief Black Hawk earned his status as a war chief by his actions—leading raiding and war parties as a young man. He later led a band of Sauk warriors during the Black Hawk War of 1832.

During the period between World War I and World War II, the Division was reconstituted as a Reserve Division and assigned to the State of Illinois in 1921. In 1926, Frederic McLaughlin, who was a commander with the 333rd Machine Gun Battalion of the 86th Infantry Division during World War I, was granted a franchise by the National Hockey League, which he named the Chicago Blackhawks after his wartime unit.

The 86th Infantry Division was ordered in active duty on December 15, 1942 at Camp Howze, Texas with only 129 officers and 240 non-commissioned troops. That number rapidly increased with the arrival of new enlistees. As the new troops were added, a system of block training was utilized for instructing the new men in the basic principles of military life. By March 1, 1943, the Division reached full strength and began basic training. As the training progressed, leaders began to emerge and were awarded with stripes they proudly sewed on their sleeves. In the final states of basic the men crawled the infiltration course, ran the close combat course and the combat in cities course. Morale was high.

In November 1943, with unit training completed, the 86th was ordered to the Louisiana Maneuver Area to participate in the vast 3rd Army Winter Maneuvers. The Louisiana Maneuver Area was a 40 by 90-mile sparse area inhabited mainly by ticks and chiggers. The land was comprised mostly of bayous and pine trees. Adverse weather was a constant and for weeks up weeks, the men slept in foxholes that were always seeping water. Christmas Day 1943 was remembered as the most miserable of the entire maneuver with an icy coat covering the trees and entire landscape.

The maneuvers ended on January 20, 1944 and the Division transferred to a new duty station—Camp Livingston, Louisiana, located just north of Alexander. The Camp offered many recreational facilities that Camp Howze did not have.

The Division commenced a new phase of training in February 1944 and most everyone thought the Blackhawks would soon be sent overseas. All privates, some non-coms and officers were transferred to an overseas replacement depot. This mass depletion of the Division was disheartening, however in April the replacements began pouring in by the hundreds. Many had been jerked from college campuses and others were former Air Cadets that had been released due to a reduction in the need for airmen. These replacements gave the Division an unusually high quality solder and provided the backbone of the Division that was to enter combat less than a year later.

On May 8, 1944, the reconstructed Division began training that lasted until the end of July when the Division was again deployed to the Louisiana Maneuver Area to complete Combat Team Exercises and Battalion Firing Tests. On September 8, 1944, they departed for California via troop trains to Camp Cooke, California, arriving six days later on September 14th. The purpose of the move was to undergo extensive amphibious training. The Division was then transferred to Camp San Luis Obispo for the training.

Amphibious training was a welcome experience to the men. The opportunity to learn a new phase of fighting was approached with sincere interest because it represented a departure from the routine training carried on since the Division's activation. Training was completed in early December and most assumed that the Division would be shipped to the Pacific Theatre. It was not to be!

Orders soon arrived ordering the Division to clear Camp San Luis Obispo by February 2, 1945—destination unknown. They loaded onto troop trains on February 2nd and arrived eight days later at Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts. Their stay there was short-lived as they departed Camp Standish on February 19th on troop trains to Boston where the Division was loaded on troop ships bound for Europe. The casualties that resulted during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 caused concern to Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower and convinced General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, to divert both the 8th and 97th infantries from the Pacific to the European Theatre.

On March 2, 1945, the transport ships pulled into the harbor of LeHarve, France and started disembarking. Two days later, they trucked to an assembly area known as Camp Old Gold. While at Camp Old Gold the Division was completely combat equipped and some replacements brought the Division up to full strength. On March 22, 1945, the Division was alerted and proceeded at once to join the 15th Army, which had not yet committed to combat, in the northern sector of the front.

The Division boarded troop trains and proceeded through France into Belgium and then Holland at Maastricht. At Maastricht the Division was switched eastward and proceeded to Aachen, Germany, where the troops were unloaded in the bombed out Aachen depot. From Aachen there were taken to the front in huge personnel trucks to the outskirts of Cologne.

Outside Cologne the 86th was assigned to billets to the rear of the 86th Infantry Division which was then on the line facing the Rhine River. The billets occupied by the Black Hawks were within artillery range of the Germans so the Black Hawks were submitted to some enemy activity even though they had not been committed to action as yet. For the next few days the men of the 86th unpacked their combat equipment and stored their personal equipment. The days outside Cologne, except for infrequent artillery fire, were rather quiet days however this would not last for long.

On March 27, the Black Hawk Division began to relieve the 86th Infantry Division which had been on the line for 28 days. The Division was assigned to XXII Corps of the 15th Army and occupied a 26-mile sector of the Western Front from Worringen on the north along the Rhine

River including the huge industrial city of Cologne, south to Bonn. The Division mission was to be a holding action with extensive reconnaissance patrolling.

As the 86th went into action, Major General Melasky set up his Division Command Post at Weiden, a suburb of Cologne just a few miles to the rear of the Cologne plain. From this site he directed the 86th Division during its entire stay on the Rhine sector of the front.

This operation was named the "Watch on the Rhine" by the GI's of the 86th. By the end of March, the 1st and 9th armies had closed the gap behind the entire German Army Group B trapping some 350,000 German soldiers. This pincher movement resulted in the Ruhr Pocket. Besides trapping a large portion of the German Army, it also contained a major portion of Germany's war industry including steel mills, aircraft factories, coal mines, tank and truck factories, chemical plants, precision machine plants—all which kept the German Army supplied. The Germans were prepared to fight to the last to keep the Pocket from falling into Allied hands.

The Ruhr Pocket was closed on March 30 when the 3rd Armored Division and 2nd Armored Division linked up at Lippstadt. The entire German Army Group B was now enclosed in a trap opposite the Black Hawk Division. The 86th continued to hold the sector until April 4 when they were relieved by the 82nd Airborne Division.

At 1600 hours on April 5, General Melasky was notified by 15th Army that the 86th was being transferred to XVIII Airborne Corps of 1st Army and they were to leave immediately to an assembly point in the 1st Army sector. By putting every available truck into use, the Black Hawks rushed south to Bonn, crossed the Rhine via a pontoon bridge, and traversed over mountain trails to the new Division concentration area near Eibelshausen, where the Division command post was established. The 86th Division passed to XVIII Airborne Corps at 2400 hours.

The Division was ordered to attack in a general offensive beginning on April 6, 1945 in coordination between XVIII Airborne and III Corps. The mission of the attack was to close the Ruhr Pocket by driving from Eibelshausen north toward the Ruhr River. The 86th was in constant battle for the next ten days and had several casualties including those killed or missing-in-action. In a rapid advance in thick firs of the Black Forest, the Black Hawks crossed the Bigge River, cleared Attendorn and continued on to the Ruhr River where they united with the 9th Army. During this campaign the 86th captured over 33,000 German soldiers.

The 86th moved to Ansbach on April 21 and continued to advance taking Eichstatt on April 25. Two days later, on April 27, the Black Hawks were the first Allied troops to cross the Danube River at Ingolstadt. They secured the bridge over the Amper Canal and on April 30 crossed the Isar River. The Division was ordered to Wesserburg on May 1st. Leading elements reached the outskirts the next day but they were then ordered to withdraw and move east toward Salzburg.

On May 4, the 342nd Infantry Regiment Anti-Tank Company captured the small Austrian town of Mattsee and the Nazi Prime Minister of Hungary, Jeno Szollosi. The Prime Minister and his party had left Budapest when the Russian invaded Hungary, were taken to Mattsee under

Gestapo guard and were told that it was a temporary stop. The Gestapo left as the Black Hawks approached the city. Also captured were the Hungarian Crown Jewels which the Prime Minister had stolen when he left Budapest. The crown jewels also included the Holy Crown of St. Stephen which dates to the 11th century. The jewels were transferred to the US Army which held them until 1976 when they were returned to Hungary. At the end of the war, the Division was securing the left flank of XV Corps.

After a brief time of processing German prisoners, they were relieved by the 20th Armored Division on May 14, 1945 and were transported to Mannheim on the banks of the Rhine. Upon arriving the next day in Mannheim they discovered that they were to be redeployed to the Pacific Theatre.

By the end of May the Black Hawks were sent by troop trains and trucks back to LeHarve. On June 6, the Division was loaded into four troop ships and sailed for New York City where they landed June 16th to great fanfare and adulation as the Black Hawks were the first combat troops to return from the European Theatre. From there the GI's were transported to Camp Kilmer and then to several camps through the United States. They were given 30 days furlough with orders to report to their new Division home, Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, on July 22.

After furlough, the Black Hawks were to have undergone eight weeks of specialized training however that training was cut short on August 7, the day after Hiroshima. The 86th Division received orders to immediately proceed to the West coast. Twenty-seven troop trains left Camp Gruber that day. Three days later the entire Division was assembled at the San Francisco Port of Embarkation from which they embarked August 18 and 19, 1945.

Fifteen days out of San Francisco news was flashed over the PA that Japan had unconditionally surrendered to General MacArthur aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay. They finally landed at their destination—Batangas, Luzon, The Philippines—on September 11. No one knew in the Pacific command that the 86th was being deployed there! On October 15, Black Hawk Division Headquarters received orders to relieve the 38th Infantry Division in their position near Manila. The 38th was an Indiana-Kentucky National Guard unit that being shipped back to the states. The 86th Division received into their ranks all members of the 38th Division with less than 65 discharge points. At the same time, all high point men of the 86th were transferred to the 38th for shipment home.

The 86th became a training division for the Philippine Army and also to capture Japanese stragglers. The 86th "BLACK HAWK" Division was officially deactivated on December 30, 1946. While the Black Hawks were in combat for only 42 days, they marked up an enviable record:

- Black Hawks were the first Allied division to make a crossing of the Danube;
- The 86th captured 53,254 German soldiers;
- Black Hawks conquered 220 miles of enemy territory in the Ruhr Pocket, Bavaria and Austria;
- The 86th liberated over 200,000 Allied POW's;
- Black Hawks made several important river crossings with amphibious assaults;

- Served in actual combat with four different American Armies—the 1st, 3rd, 7th and 15th Armies (the only US division to accomplish this on the Western front); and
- The 86th served in three distinct phases of the European War—Watch on the Rhine, the closing of the Ruhr Pocket and the defeat of the National Redoubt and Nazi Germany.

Thank you.