Headquarters, 29th Infantry Division

Let's Go

29th Infantry Division

The U.S. 29th Infantry Division is a United States infantry division that has existed since World War I as part of the Army National Guard.

Nicknamed "Blue and Gray", the division's motto is "29, Let's Go!" The shoulder patch is a half-blue, half-gray Chinese taijitu; this patch was approved 14 December 1917 and was designed by Maj. James A. Ulio, later the Adjutant General of the United States Army during World War II. The uniting of the blue and grey symbolizes the fact that the division was composed of units from states that had fought on both sides of the American Civil War.

Heritage

Although the division itself only dates to its establishment during World War I, the roots of the 29th run deep into American history, with two of the three of the regiments that have traditionally belonged to the division tracing their history into colonial history.

The 175th Infantry Regiment descends from the Baltimore Independent Cadets, a unit formed in 1774 and which formed the core of the regiment from the Maryland Line that saved the fledgling American army at the Battle of Long Island on 27 August 1776. Their repeated musket volleys and bayonet charges against several times their number of British regulars covered the retreat of the Continental Army and insured its survival. Washington reportedly remarked about them, "My God, what brave men must I lose today!" In later years, it was designated the 5th Maryland (not to be confused with a Revolutionary War unit of the same designation) and became famed for its fancy dress uniforms, leading to the nickname, "The Dandy Fifth."

The 116th Infantry Regiment began as the 2nd Virginia Regiment, which in turn traced its origin back to Virginia colonial militia formed in 1760. As the Second Virginia, it was commanded during the Civil War by a General Jackson. At the First Battle of Manassas (also referred to as First Battle of Bull Run), they were the regiment that held the line under intense fire while a fellow general yelled, "There stands Jackson like a stone wall!" The phrase became the nickname of both the general and his brigade.

The 115th Infantry Regiment was a lineal descendant of the 1st Maryland Regiment, but its lineage is only officially recognized back to 1888. Regimental tradition, however, holds that the unit is descended from Cresap's Rifles, a Revolutionary War unit raised in 1774 which marched over 500 miles to Boston in 20 days. This claim is not recognized by the U.S. Army. During the Civil War, the 1st Maryland remained loyal to the Union, while the 5th Maryland joined the Confederacy and was redesignated as the Confederate 1st Maryland. The two regiments fought a fratricidal battle at Front Royal, Virginia on 23 May 1862. When the U.S. Army reorganized in to the so-called "modular" brigade combat team structure, the 115th Infantry was consolidated (merged) into the 175th Infantry and no longer exists as a separate lineage or unit.

These were the three regiments that were eventually organized into the new division that would become the 29th. There were also several horse-drawn field artillery units, each with their own traditions, that would also be included in the 29th.

World War I

In early 1917 the 8th Division was formed, a National Guard formation consisting of Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia. Several months later it was redesignated, and the 29th Infantry Division was formed on 25 August 1917 as a National Guard division from Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia and was sent to Europe in July 1918. The division trained at Camp McClellan, Alabama until departing for France on 14 June 1918. The division saw action in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and sustained a total of 5,570 casualties of which 787 were killed and 4,783 were wounded. The division returned to the United States in May 1919 and was then demobilized.

Between the Wars

Demobilization of the 29th Division did not mean that its units were dissolved. When the division returned to peacetime, the Virginia regiment and the Maryland regiment were retained in the division, and another Virginia regiment added. The division became more an abstraction than a reality; it did not gather into a division again from its return from World War I until 1935. That encampment was only the first of three during the interwar period.

World War II

The 29th Division was reactivated on 3 February 1941 and departed for the United Kingdom on 5 October 1942 where it continued training in Scotland and England from October 1942 up to June 1944 in preparation for the invasion of France.

Finally, they prepared to receive their baptism of fire by invading Europe. It was a formidable challenge. The man who was arguably Germany's greatest general, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, had been assigned to defend against the invasion. He instigated vigorous construction on beach obstacles and defenses. The Normandy surf washed over "hedgehogs", which were steel anti-tank obstacles hauled a hundred yards past the high tide line into the surf and booby-trapped with mines. Inshore of that was a belt of wooden stakes and ramps a hundred yards deep. The Germans also improvised other obstacles. Inshore, covering all the obstructions in the surf, there were Widerstandsnest ("resistance nests"), and stutzpunkt ("strongpoints"), capable of laying down interlocking fields of machine gun fire on every inch of beach. Artillery units inland were also already zeroed in on the beach.

Rommel had also raised an entire new division of troops to oppose the landings, the 352nd Infantry Division. Founded around a core of hardened combat veterans from the Russian Front, it was rated by the German high command as a crack division.

The American plan to tackle the Atlantic Wall was a mixed bag. Contrary to German expectations, the Americans planned to land at low tide rather than high. Although this would leave them an additional 300 yards exposure to German bullets and shells, it would land the first wave ashore short of the obstacles. These troops then were expected to blow up obstacles to insure access to the beach as the water rose.

Teamed with the U.S. 1st Infantry Division, the 116th Infantry Regiment of the 29th Division was the first assault wave to hit Omaha Beach at Normandy at 6:13 AM on D-Day, 6 June 1944. The sea was rough, and a steady riptide pulled the waves of landing crafts eastward down the beach. Only one of the companies of the 116th "Stonewall Boys" landed at his planned place. Company A landed opposite the Vierville Draw that they were supposed to storm. When the landing ramps came down on the company's four surviving vessels, German MG42 machine guns cut down the Americans even before they could disembark. It has been estimated that two-thirds of Company A was killed by enemy fire or by drowning within the first half hour. Company F also landed at its assigned location, but was fortunate enough to land behind an accidental smoke screen caused by a grass fire. Other companies washed sidewise down the beach to land in disorganized confusion. They suffered lesser casualties than A or F, but found themselves straggling into battle. They flanked and blew up German positions. Their assault gnawed at the German defenses.

Somehow, the 116th maintained its tenuous hold.

The rest of the division landed on Omaha Beach on the same day in the face of still intense enemy fire but soon secured the bluff tops and went on to occupy Isigny on 9 June. The division cut across the Elle River and advanced slowly toward St. Lo, fighting bitterly in the Normandy hedge rows. The Americans were lodged in France.

As other Americans surged ashore, the 29th spearheaded the breakout. After taking St. Lo on 18 July, the division joined in the battle for Vire, capturing that strongly held city on 7 August. Turning west, the 29th took part in the assault on Brest from 25 August to 18 September.

After a short rest, the division moved to defensive positions along the Teveren-Geilenkirchen line in Germany and maintained those positions through October. (In mid-October the 116th Infantry took part in the fighting at the Aachen Gap.) On 16 November the division began its drive to the Ruhr, blasting its way through Siersdorf, Setterich, Duerboslar, and Bettendorf, reaching the Ruhr by the end of the month.

On 8 December, heavy fighting reduced Juelich Sportplatz and the Hasenfeld Gut. From 8 December 1944 to 23 February 1945, the division held defensive positions along the Ruhr and prepared for the offensive. The attack jumped off across the Ruhr on 23 February and carried the division through Juelich, Broich, Immerath, and Titz to Mönchengladbach on 1 March. The division was out of combat in March, however in early April the 116th Infantry helped mop up in the Ruhr area and on 19 April the division pushed to the Elbe River and held defensive positions until 4 May. Meanwhile, the 175th Infantry Regiment cleared the Kloetze Forest. After VE Day, the division was on military government duty in the Bremen enclave.

The 29th Infantry Division had spent 242 days in combat during campaigns in Normandy, Northern France, the Rhineland and Central Europe, earning four Distinguished Unit Citations in the process. Two soldiers of the division were awarded the Medal of Honor. Also awarded were 44 DSCs, one DSM, 854 Silver Stars, 17 Legion of Merit, 24 Soldier's Medal and 6,308 Bronze Stars.

It was a victory with an enormous and ghastly cost. The 29th had taken 20,111 dead and wounded in battle, and 8,665 noncombat casualties. That was a casualty rate of over 204 percent for the division. Although no statistics were kept at company level, the skewing of risk toward the front-line infantrymen means the rifle companies must have suffered casualties in the vicinity of 300 percent.

The 29th Division returned to the United States on 4 January 1946 and was demobilized two weeks later.