"Elite Assault:" The 85th Infantry Division in Italy, 1944-1945

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Abstract
This thesis fills a major gap in the historiography of the Second World War by emphasizing the role of drafted divisions in the United States Army. Specifically, this thesis examines the 85th Infantry Division from its formation in May 1942 to its disbanding in August 1945. This thesis challenges the age-old assumption that conscripted soldiers were inferior to volunteer forces. By the 1940s, the United States retained a long-standing prejudice against drafted troops dating back to the poorly-executed drafts of the American Civil War, with many citizens arguing that volunteers were better soldiers. The 85th Division stands in direct contradiction to this. Gathered from across the country, its members received intensive training from devoted officers, ensuring their survival and success. Once overseas, training adapted to the tasks at hand, ensuring the men of the 85th would be prepared for the changing circumstances of combat. These men were thrown against elite troops of the German Army and the Luftwaffe's vaunted Fallschirmjägers, earning the respect of their enemies. Drawing on personal accounts and a late war Army psychoanalytical survey, this thesis charts the mindset of the average 85th Division draftee, comparing him to his fellow soldiers in Italy and highlighting the unit's high performance and above-average tolerance for combat. And while the public clearly favored stories of the liberation of France, direct comparison with European Theater troops further highlights the skill and combat record of the oft-maligned draftee divisions, as represented by their initial example. Simply by doing their job and doing it well, the United States Army 85th Infantry Division shattered the myth of the inferiority of drafted combat troops.

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