

# Contents

Before the Battle	
Segrate, the outskirts of Milan, autumn of 2007	1
The First Battle	
January 12-February 12, 1944	9
The Second and Third Battle	
February 15-March 24, 1944	23
Under the Abbey's Eye	37
Mōrehu	50
From New Zealand	119
Before and After the Last Battle	129
Searching for the Missing	131
Going to Meet Irka	151
Divided by an Abbey	171
Irka in the Gulag	194
The Swallows and the Abbey	220
The Last Battle	
May 11-18, 1944	245

# The First Battle

January 12-February 12, 1944

Sergeant John "Jacko" Wilkins, 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division "Texas";  
enlisted San Marcos, Texas, June 15, 1939—died Cassino,  
January 20, 1944

There's a yellow rose in Texas, that I am going to see,  
No other soldier knows her, no soldier only me.  
She cried so when I left her it like to broke my heart,  
And if I ever find her, we nevermore will part.

She's the sweetest rose of Texas this soldier ever knew,  
Her eyes are bright as diamonds, they sparkle like the dew.  
You may talk about your Dearest May, and sing of Rosa Lee,  
But the Yellow Rose of Texas is the only girl for me.  
—*Popular song*

Sergeant John “Jacko” Wilkins—and someone like him certainly did exist—was the fifth son of a family of small ranch owners from San Marcos, Texas, who had been hard hit by the Great Depression. He was just over nineteen years old when he left home. Not because he was starving, for the Wilkinses had never actually gone hungry. But memories of straitened circumstances had left a dusty, humiliating pall over his childhood. Things were improving now, but four young men were still too many to make a living off a herd of fifty longhorns, and it was right to leave it all in the hands of his oldest brother, Henry Jr. And so, when Jacko announced to the family that he wanted to enlist in the National Guard, they were proud, and approved. Glory, and above all, suffering, belonged to the past: Fort Alamo, the Civil War. His fellow townsmen who died on the Marne in 1918 were long gone; “France” was a word used to sell perfume or silk stockings that nobody bought. The nation was now large, united and fortified and “serving one’s country” often meant battling the fires rushing through the plains grass. Whether the fires were caused by drought or human greed (so often invisible and inextinguishable) was another matter. In any case you had to fight for every acre of Texas land.

His mother embraced him, and feeling herself close to tears went off to get him some dried beef and homemade jam. His father said “God bless you, son.” Henry Jr. gave him a ride to Austin in the green truck. It was 1939.

When John “Jacko” Wilkins came home for Thanksgiving, he told them he had met a girl named Sally, and after hesitating just a moment pulled out a photograph in which Sally was smiling broadly, showing a row of upper teeth that were none too straight.

A photographer from San Antonio had signed the picture down at the bottom, where you could make out a studio set of a Western landscape. Sally was wearing a little flowered dress, her legs in a pair of Texan boots. Jacko alone looked stiff and unnatural in his uniform, right in the middle like a pillar but somehow extraneous, and from this his mother deduced that the affair was serious. Unfortunately Jacko didn't make it back home for Christmas, either alone or with his fiancée, and by Thanksgiving the following year it was too late. On November 25, 1940 the entire Texas National Guard was called up as the 36<sup>th</sup> Division of the U.S. Army.

It was in the air. It had been since June, where the capital of silk and perfume fell and the Blitz hit London; it had been from the time, after the summer, when President Roosevelt got approval for the first ever draft call-up in times of peace, for men from twenty one to thirty five years old. But down in San Marcos they liked to think that their son and brother had been called up to defend Texan soil.

At Christmas time Jacko Wilkins and the 36<sup>th</sup> Division were transferred to Camp Bowie, Texas. The day they arrived, the area was hit by the worst hailstorm ever recorded in local history. Some thought it was a bad omen; but most, among them Wilkins, responded to the challenge of the elements in a spirit of military defiance. Then there were months and months of training and maneuvers up and down the country, in Louisiana and South Carolina, at Camp Blanding, Florida, and at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, not so far from where the pilgrim fathers landed. The months became years marked by furloughs, to be divided between Sally and home, with the visits to San Marcos becoming briefer and briefer once everyone had got together to celebrate their wedding.

Not long before he shipped out of New York on April 2, 1943, Jacko wrote to his family:

I am proud and happy to have gotten to know the whole of the United States. I've seen the ocean, I've seen palms and pines, I've spent my days with fellows who talk in a way I find strange and hard to understand, just as how I talk must seem to them. I've gotten used to the fact that many

of them are black folk. This country is so huge you can't imagine; I don't think there's anything in the world like it. We are so strong and so much in the right that we will soon be home with victory in our pockets. Don't worry about me, just know I am doing my duty and that I'm doing it with all my heart.

Crossing the Atlantic, Jacko was seasick many times, he even vomited bile. When they got to Arzew in Algeria where they would train up for the European landing, many of his fellow soldiers collapsed in the heat and were ill with diarrhea, but Wilkins held out, swallowed dust, wet his chapped lips with saliva. In Rabat, Morocco, they promoted him. Jacko had known how to shoot from the time he was a kid, he had even finished off a few sick animals, but his talent with a pistol had manifested itself in the National Guard, when he had hit a rattlesnake on the head at his first try. A good shot, a soldier capable of endurance and discipline, a positive personality with a real patriotic commitment to the mission. America had forged a gigantic force of war, but in that huge, dirty-green river anyone who could occupy a place of command was valuable.

Big news: I've been promoted. Haven't even seen a Kraut yet and I'm already sergeant. "Try to live up to it, kid," said Major Stratford, but I took that as a compliment. We went into town to celebrate, to a place where they do belly dancing. There's one woman for every twenty men over here, veiled head to foot, and usually you can just see their eyes and sometimes some tattooed designs above them. Tribal customs, they told us. Be careful of the men, don't fool around, they said. But I mean, I feel for the boys. There they were, in front of these dancers naked from the bottom of their brassieres down to their belly buttons, moving their hips and bellies in an unbelievably provocative way, and our fellows were going crazy. We'd been drinking, too, obviously. The boys were going up and putting their dollars in the bra tops or down the girls' pants: that's how you do it here. Then they wanted me to come along to the cathouse, but I said no.

I'm sorry, I shouldn't tell you these things. It's just to say that I think about you, and that I missed you a lot that evening. You can't imagine the nostalgia and the feelings of loneliness that get to you sometimes. Like at night lying on your cot, when you're completely wiped out with fatigue but can't get to sleep right away. You wouldn't believe the world we've fallen into here: poor, old, dirty, people who yell at you in this incomprehensible ugly language, children who buzz around you like flies begging, dust, the sun beating down. At this point I just hope they ship us off soon to fight the real war so I can stop thinking all these foul thoughts. I love you Sally, that's all I wanted to say.

The Moroccan summer, though, never seemed to end. By August, Jacko was no longer able to pretend not to see his men, one by one, go off with the local boys, usually the same ones, Faid, Cherif, Mohammed, while he kept them at a distance, giving them too many cigarettes for a few handfuls of ripe dates. He held upset, furious conversations with the photo of Sally from San Antonio. "Sally, they're trying to make us into good soldiers here," he told her, "and they're making us into faggots," and sometimes he jerked off desperately until he fell asleep.

They finally drew closer to war on September 9, 1943. The sea was so flat, the night so peaceful, that when the voice of General Eisenhower came over the loudspeakers to announce that the Italians had surrendered, the soldiers began to dance like couples on a cruise ship. There was no trace of the enemy on the beach at Paestum where they landed before dawn, but as they advanced and the sky began to grow paler, they saw the enemy's bloodless presence: barbed wire on the dunes, mines, then some fighter-bombers, fire from tanks hidden and lying in wait, German mortars and machine guns pitched on the town's medieval towers. His eyes burning with smoke, Jacko saw in passing the ancient temple to the Greek god of the sea that had spat them out there, not even surprised that it was still there, intact. In the end they took Paestum, tired and giddy from the fighting. Those of them who came back to these parts again—several months later, or half a century on—would feel the same wonder before the Temple of Poseidon, the place

that marked that moment when, unawares, the status of veteran was forever written on them. Just then, however, Sergeant Wilkins could do nothing but run and look straight ahead, not seeing the fallen, ignoring the shudder he felt when his boot struck one of them, the obscene slackness of a human corpse. He signaled to his men, loaded and fired.

Two days later came the counterattack, very intense, from both land and air. Hit by machine gun fire in the chest, Jacko went down during one of the charges to retake Altavilla Silentina. His boys got to ground in time, and the next day they advanced on their target and took it. During his convalescence Wilkins heard all about the city of Naples, where war and poverty seemed to have overthrown all semblance of order, and if those tales seemed a mite exaggerated, the way stories told to buck up a patient's spirits can be, he had no choice but to accept the news from the front. Two of his men had died attacking the village of San Pietro, one fell on the slopes of Monte Lungo, another had stepped on a mine along the Volturno Line. These were the days of the winter holidays, between Halloween and Christmas.

Jacko took it upon himself to write to the relatives and girlfriends of the dead, and that made him sink into a state of helpless homesickness. But it kept the boredom at bay, boredom that became dejection, boredom mixed with anxiety for the battles he couldn't take part in. He kept going over that moment in which his war had nearly ended just as it was beginning. His memories were very confused, but in the end there wasn't much to comprehend. He did understand he had been saved by being wounded, and went back and forth between feeling guilty and very grateful to God. He tried to focus on God, exhorting himself to be patient, aiming for optimism, oblivion. But then one day one of his boys from Indiana came to tell him that during his leave he'd caught syphilis from a Neapolitan prostitute in Pallonetto, she was pretty, beautiful, but—and here he started sobbing like a baby—she was a *he*, and now he was so ashamed he thought he was going to die. Sergeant Wilkins tried to make him feel better, but afterwards he found he had a raging desire to fight this damn war, win it and go home—to fight and win with his eyes firmly on their goals and on Hitler's great evil that had fostered them, never once stopping to let himself be contaminated by this old world decomposing in poverty and madness.

In January John Wilkins left his camp near the Allied headquarters in the royal palace of Caserta, traveling with a backup convoy. They were headed toward the American lines to the northeast, just over the border into the Lazio region, now that the last line of defense, Monte Trocchio, had been wiped out and overtaken. It was raining. It rained almost all the time and on the mountain roads the rain often turned into sticky sleet and then to snow. It was a lot colder than he had expected of a country called Italy, much colder than Texas, and the trucks often got beached in the mud, especially on the uphill stretches. But Jacko was in a hurry to finally reach his regiment, the 141<sup>st</sup> regiment of the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and his morale matched his physical condition, now fully restored to health. Rested, well fed, shaved, he joked aloud with his fellow soldiers. Still, something of what passed before him was being deposited at the back of those blue eyes: the villages reduced to piles of stones, the groves of olive tree stumps, the shoeless children and the ones with rags on their feet, their mothers carrying babies in their arms and large bundles of something on their heads. You couldn't figure out where these people were going, or where they came from, only that they were moving along the road with the measured tread of people who still have a long way to go.

It was cold, Italy, cold and narrow and dark, all dark: eyes, hair, faces, ragged clothes, burned out camps, low grey houses, low grey skies, winter darkness. And the bare feet of those children, the feet of children under the rain who slapped the mud with an apathetic thud, a thud Jacko couldn't help thinking he would take home with him. He might be able to leave behind the dead seen at night while they ran and fought, but not those feet that passed them as the convoy struggled to slide forward, feet that when they approached he chased away with chocolate or chewing gum or a couple of cigarettes saying *toma, amigo*. Only then, just for a moment, he surrendered to those big, dazed, serious eyes, as the offering was grabbed by a filthy hand and a pair of cracked lips muttered something like *tenk-yoo*, and the bare feet took off, sending bigger splashes of mud than before. And then everybody laughed. Each time Sergeant Wilkins looked around for someone to whom he could say that those children were worse off than the poorest campesino kids down his way, and each time he remembered he

was the only Texan on that truck. Did the others on their way toward the “Texas” Division think his Spanish sounded comical?

That day when he got to camp, Wilkins had a glimpse of how he looked like from the outside. Like the hero of a comic book he had loved since the days of the National Guard, like Flash Gordon on another planet. The men in his platoon—besides the four dead, two others had been gravely wounded in action—were beginning to take on the appearance of the place they’d invaded, with their unshaved faces, the dark circles under their eyes, their faces marked with the signs of a poor diet and exposure to the elements, with a patina of dirt, soot and something else that hadn’t disappeared even after going on leave. He would soon look like them, it was his duty. It was also a privilege to have come from Planet America to this critical position to attack the Gustav Line, the last line of defense on their path toward Rome. That night, however, he couldn’t sleep. In three months the faces of these buddies who had been with him since the landing at Salerno had aged more years than he could say. Jacko tried to tell himself that Billy Morrison, Stanley Laughlin, Richard Gonzales and Jeff McVey had become men, as was inevitable in a war, but he could feel the hand with which he’d slapped their backs in greeting weigh on his chest, it felt alien, marked. Luckily he fell asleep before he realized that it was fear.

The morning after was very cold but sunny, and the weather reports said those conditions should hold for the next few days. After a breakfast of coffee and powdered eggs, Wilkins and his platoon were sent out to reconnoiter from Monte Trocchio. The view was excellent; the Germans were down there in the Liri Valley below, but he couldn’t take his eyes off the building on top of the mountain before him. The abbey of Monte Cassino rose out of the rock in a massive, perfect oblong, so beautiful, white and immaculate that it seemed the “mighty fortress” of that celebrated Lutheran hymn made manifest. The Germans had taken it upon themselves to protect this cradle of Western monasticism—established by St. Benedict in 529 before even the Vikings had even reached the shores of the New World—and they had declared a safety zone around it. The officer who informed them about the abbey’s strategic and cultural significance had spoken in a neutral tone, but Jacko thought he’d caught a note of annoyance in his voice. Or maybe it was he

who was feeling an entirely new hostility toward this enemy who'd taken the lives of so many boys so quickly, and was now going to such trouble to keep these stones intact.

There was no time to ponder this, however. They had to go back down the valley and prepare for the attack. The Allied offensive had begun a few days before with the French storming the mountains to the northeast and the British crossing the Garigliano River, southwest, but nothing definitive was going to happen before the Americans joined in. The onus, and the honor, of breaking the Gustav Line was going to fall to the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

They sent some patrols ahead—and those patrols came back safe and sound. At this point the sappers went out to remove mines and stretches of barbed wire, and trace the newly cleaned-up trails with white tape. On the evening of January 19 the soldiers of the 141<sup>st</sup> and 143<sup>rd</sup> Regiments got steak for dinner—one steak each, and at least in principle something like the stuff they ate back in Texas. Jacko watched as his boys, now used to tins and powdered food, chewed silently.

"Not exactly like steak from home," he said trying to sound cheerful, to Gonzales, who was sitting next to him and came from somewhere near Houston.

"No sir," said Gonzales, who put his head down and ate another bite.

"Every time you send some down, it makes you homesick, doesn't it? Isn't that right, Rick, that we'd all like to go home soon?"

"Right, sir, but I'm not sure that's going to happen, because every time they give us this stuff, the next day they send us out, and every time, there's somebody who doesn't come back."

"Hey, at least they bother to let us croak on a full stomach!"

The remark came from Jeff McVey, who was looking toward the sergeant hoping to get his agreement.

"You know what I say, Jeff? If we were eating the meat of our own animals here, we would have already sent those Krauts to the devil!"

And on that comment from Sergeant Wilkins, they finished their last supper.

They left the following day after nightfall, on orders from commander in chief General Clark. They had to reach the River Rapido, wait until the engineers built a bridge, cross the bridge to the other

side and go forward in two columns, one above and one below, to Sant'Angelo in Theodice where the enemy was dug into the ruins. The land next to the river was fertile but soft and muddy, and the Germans had built a dam to flood it so that it was impossible to get not just a tank through, but any motorized vehicle. And so it was up to them, the five thousand soldiers of the 141<sup>st</sup> and 143<sup>rd</sup> to push through the mud with their munitions on their backs: four hand grenades, 136 bullets, canteen, mess-tin, rations, and the rubber rafts and dinghies for the crossing. They advanced hunched over under the weight of the boats, silently and in single file, following the white tape that was disappearing into the mud under their boots. Had it occurred to them, or had they been Germans, they might have recalled the little boy abandoned in the woods who had marked the way back with bread crumbs. But then the birds flew down to eat them and Hansel and Gretel got lost and ended up in front of the gingerbread house. With the dark and the fog that rose from the river, they also got lost, and strayed off-track into a mine field, and one of them got blown up, and the explosion of that first mine told the Germans they were on their way and how far they had gotten.

The Germans opened up heavy fire with mortars and grenades, they fired from bunkers well-prepared for their arrival, they were down in their trenches, they were everywhere, on high and underground. John Wilkins saw Billy Morrison go down but he couldn't stop to figure out whether it had been a mine or something shot from the other side of the river, because now he had to duck a Nebelwerfer rocket, a so-called Screaming Mimi, with that girl's nickname to exorcise the terrible howl. Billy Morrison was also screaming, and therefore he was still breathing. Good. They advanced on the run, crouched over, tripping and slipping on the chill, wet earth, falling, getting up again, crawling, slithering. One after another they lost their battered rafts, they lost man after man as they stopped, trying to reply to the enemy fire, without the Germans ever stopping or weakening on any side. They reached the river right where the bank jutted out over the water, it wasn't easy to jump into their rafts already half deflated by all the bullet holes from all those German machine guns that were now tearing up the waves. Some of the rafts capsized and soldiers began to drown in that river that in fact

was called the Gari but which was cold and swollen and rapid—to be inscribed forever in American memory as the Rapido.

Richard Gonzales died of a shrapnel wound in the neck that tore open his shoulder; his head, mouth open, fell back off the edge of the raft as it tipped under the weight of his dead body. Stanley Laughlin ended up in the river; he tried to swim but couldn't with all that equipment on him. Sergeant Wilkins yelled at him to grab on, then watched him borne away by the current as he threw off his backpack and gun and swam for his life. Sergeant Wilkins had other things to think about, other commands to bark out to the boys in the rafts. Sergeant Wilkins was the first to set foot on the other side and aim his weapon toward that dark minefield while Jeff McVey held the boat steady on all fours. Sergeant Wilkins was hit in the chest and collapsed backward, falling into the water. He disappeared in the Rapido the night of January 20, 1944.

The soldiers who hadn't yet crossed and the few who managed to swim back to the other side, now blocked with heaps of bodies to wade through or hide behind, were reassigned to other units. A second attack was ordered on January 22. When this failed too, pretty much in the same way, the Germans agreed to a truce to let them collect the bodies. The body of John "Jacko" Wilkins was never found. Between the dead, the wounded and the missing, the casualties amounted to 1681. That was the official figure announced by General Clark, that *goddam Yankee* who in order to land the rest of his Fifth Army at Anzio simultaneously, had sent those boys from Texas to take a fall, and it didn't matter that there weren't many Texans left in the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. It was as if they were all there on the damned Rapido River, as if the f-ing Gustav Line had sucked up the f-ing Mason-Dixon line and they had all ended up in the South, those boys from Illinois, Maine and New Jersey, all of them Southerners to butcher, while in the North, where victory was taken for granted, there was no one at all but their goddam f-ing Commander in Chief. Private Jeff McVey, ever since he had crawled back to the starting line, baptized in that freezing, red water, had started to revile him in those terms, instinctively broadening his Texan accent. He was the only one who'd been left alive, and would survive the rest of his other battles in Italy always aching to make Clark pay.

Let it therefore be recorded that the men of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division Veterans Association, meeting in Brownwood, Texas, intend to present a petition to the Congress of the United States to open an investigation of the Rapido disaster and to undertake all necessary measures to correct a military structure that permits an inexperienced and inept officer in high command (such as General Mark W. Clark) to destroy this country's young lives, and to stop soldiers from being sacrificed in this pointless way in the future.

Exactly two years later on January 20, 1946, McVey was among the veterans who signed that petition. Sharing mesquite-grilled steak with them, Jeff thought about Wilkins and the other boys dead at the river, cherishing in his anger and sense of betrayal, the hope that perhaps this meal consumed in their memory might strengthen the case against that damned Yankee Mark Wayne Clark.

But the Congress of the United States absolved the general.

