

Major Milton Landry, 141st Infantry Regiment, US 36th Infantry Division

Our thanks to Ray Wells for permission to include this excerpt from his 1991 interview with Milton Landry, commander of 2nd Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment.

A few days later we were relieved and ordered to the rear near Sant Angelo where we received replacements of Officers and enlisted men, but still not enough to bring us back to full strength. Captain Chapin reported back to the Battalion from the hospital. He had gone AWOL to be with his beloved 'E' Company troops. I was certainly glad to get him back. He was my most experienced Company Commander and I needed him badly. A few days later we were back to San Vittori, our mission to take and hold the river line until other troops could be readied to cross the river. We sent patrols across the river almost every night. Lt. Naverette from 'E' Company led several patrols across the river to find out about the German units and how strongly they were dug in. Every one of these patrols reported that the enemy was dug in and planned to stay in their positions and had more troops on their side of the river than we had on ours.

So now begins the battle to cross the Rapido, a battle that should not have happened, at least in the way we had to accomplish the crossing. The bridges and boats and replacements that had been promised us never arrived until almost dark and in some cases after dark. Some of the replacements never found their Companies and died without ever knowing one person in their Company.

On the 21st I was ordered to move the 2nd Battalion across the river. I asked about replacement troops because our manpower was getting pretty low. I was told we would have plenty of replacements before dark and also that boats and bridges were on their way. That sounded pretty good, but at the same time I was thinking of the reports of our patrols who had been across the river on several occasions and reported that it was almost impossible to dislodge the heavily armed German troops.

It was about a half hour after dark when we finally got started. We followed the white tapes that the Combat Engineers had laid down where they had cleared the mines, but the German artillery had shelled the area and the blast had either moved the tapes or cut them. We would find ourselves out in the middle of a mine field where a great number of the men had their legs blown off. We, of course as I expected, received the boats and bridges after dark and what was even worse, we received the replacements after dark. These were young men, many just out of basic training. It's hard to imagine the thoughts that went through these young people's minds, (many were no more than boys), to be placed in this kind of situation, completely pitch dark, shells bursting, bullets flying and then to be told that his Company was E, F, G, or H and to find the Company and report in.

Many of these bewildered men died or were seriously wounded without ever knowing anyone in their company or even seeing their Squad Lead. The smoke from burning brush and haystacks and the noise of the artillery added to the confusion. When I found one of these men and would ask his name and unit, he would answer, but added, "I can't find anyone in my Company", so we would try to point him in the right direction.

We finally got one bridge across but didn't know at the time, that this was the horseshoe bend of the river and we were receiving fire—it seemed from three sides at the same time. When the

troops got across the river we ran into barbed wire. Barbed wire strands had been placed layer after layer; when one strand was cut, two more would take its place. 'E' Company had penetrated the furthest and that's where I found Captain Chapin, the Commander, lying on his stomach cutting barbed wire, with machine gun fire just above his body.

I made several trips back and forth from where I had established my forward Command Post on the riverbank to Captain Chapin's position and on one trip I had to dive under a burst of machine gun fire. When I hit the ground, it felt like a large rock had hit my left breast. After returning to the river bank command post, a medic said, "Major, you must have been hit", and I asked why he thought that and he said that just as I hit the ground a shell burst beside me; so I said, "Well, take a look." Sure enough he found a hole in my combat jacket above my heart and looking further he found a hole in my undershirt and a hole in my chest. I had a lifetime Parker pen set in my pocket and the piece of shrapnel had cut the pen in two and the clip off the pencil. When I was finally operated on a few days later, the doctor had to cut a six inch groove in my chest to follow the path of the shrapnel and found it on my right side. The pen and pencil set had turned the shrapnel and saved my life. So I guess it was, as the guarantee said, lifetime. I was wounded several times that day on different occasions. As you can imagine, I did not return the pen and pencil to the company for a replacement. How could I? I owed my very life to them.

I kept going back and forth between my Command Post and the forward Companies and at about 11 AM I received a call from General Wilbur telling me to prepare my Battalion to move forward because the Germans would be pulling back. I told him that under the present conditions there wasn't anything that I could do to force them to withdraw and asked what information he had that made him think this would happen. I was then informed that a successful landing had been made at Anzio, which would cause a withdrawal. I respectfully requested he inform the Germans so they could oblige us because with all the fire we were getting, they must not have been properly informed. As history recorded, the Germans stayed in their well-prepared positions and it took about fifteen full divisions to finally dislodge them, and then only after great loss of life on both sides.

I returned to my Command Post and just as I jumped into my hole the first round of a six-round barrage from a 170 MM Howitzer (Old Italian manufacture) exploded under me and a huge slab that hadn't fragmented and was as large as a dinner plate hit my hip, knocked the hip out of joint and made a large blister where it burned through my clothes. The next five rounds actually knocked me back to the river bank which was about 50 yards away. The aid men and a couple of others began cutting my clothes away so they could dress the wounds. The aid man told me that he thought I could walk, so I said "let's try it." The aid man helped me on my feet, but my legs were too weak to support me. The men found two boat oars and I used these for crutches. So using these makeshift crutches, I attempted to get to Captain Chapin to tell him that I was becoming very weak from loss of blood and that I would have to turn the Battalion over to him. Just before I arrived at his position or the position I last saw him, the Germans cut loose a burst of machine gun fire and before I could hit the ground, I was hit by several rounds through my legs and hips. The gunfire cut the sciatic nerve in my left leg, nicked the artery, went through my groin and finally the 9mm bullet lodged in my scrotum.

The brave medic crawled out to me under intense fire and when he attempted to turn me over, I asked him to check that I had both legs because it felt to me that one was gone. He told me that he could see both boots and they were still on my feet and attached to my legs. He then began to drag me out from under the machine gun fire to a place where there was a hint of cover and he could look me over. After a quick inspection he said, "Major, I don't believe there are enough

bandages this side of the Rapido to cover all the holes in you.” I'm going to take a moment to express my admiration for the many brave deeds that were done by these brave and heroic Aid Men. There aren't enough words to express my appreciation for what these men did for us. They have never received the recognition they deserved and I'm sure that every combat man will express this same opinion. Ray Wells who was in on the attack at San Pietro told me he saw an Aid Man who had been shot through the head and the bullet had gone right through the red-cross insignia on his helmet—this had to be an intentional shot.

I was then dragged to the river bank and couldn't be taken across the bridge because the only thing left of the bridge were the two ropes that were used as hand holds. The men tied ropes to me and pulled me across the river where a stretcher was found and I was placed on it. The two men then made their way back across the river to almost certain doom. I never heard what happened to them, if they were killed, captured, wounded or escaped unscathed. ... We must remember the troops that were unable to cross with us and those who had a mission to accomplish on their side of the river. They were under constant fire and many died including the Officers and most of the Non-Coms in my Battalion Headquarters. Names fade in my mind, but I will never forget those young men who died so bravely, their faces or the deeds they accomplished.

Coast Artillery Observers had volunteered to be litter bearers and I told them, before they took me back, to first uncover my Executive Officer, Red Lehman who was on the bottom of a pile of men who had been killed by an artillery shell. These were the officers and men of my rear battalion headquarters whose job it was prevented them from crossing the river. On top of the bodies was the forward observer and he had half his face blown off. When Red was finally uncovered he was placed on a stretcher and I told the bearers to take him back to the aid station then come back and get me. Red refused to be taken any further than the aid station until I was brought up so that we could be evacuated together. I was carried across the mine field to the rock road around the corner of Mt. Trocchio.

About that time I heard “screaming meemies” coming in and told the bearers to hit the side of the road in the ditch, because it sounded like those rockets were coming right down on top of us. The litter bearers set me down in the middle of the road and hit the ditch as they were ordered to do. ... Not being combat soldiers I guess they can be excused. The rockets hit all around me and covered me with pulverized white dust. A rock hit me in the throat and went in and damaged my voice box. This wound continues to trouble me to this day.

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January 22, 1944 was my 30th birthday. My birthday had plenty of fireworks, thanks to the obliging Germans. At least they were responsible for furnishing me with the means of a ticket for a slow ride back home. I was happy to be going home but not really pleased to go in this way and I knew that I would miss my troops and I miss them to this very day. To me they were some of the finest young men that our country ever produced and I felt very proud and fortunate that I was able to serve them as their Battalion Commander.

A few days after I had been at the 17th Evacuation Hospital, Red Lehman was well enough to get out of bed and came to see me and I must have looked worried to him so he asked what was wrong and I told him that I hadn't received a report on the condition of the Companies and men. He looked at me and said, “Major, they aren't your men any more; they are someone else's responsibility.” That is when I finally realized, it is all over.