

Ray Wells and Milton Landry, 'H Company', 2nd Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment

Ray Wells was a squad leader in 'H Company', 2nd Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment. The following is an excerpt from his 1991 interview with Milton Landry, Commander of 2nd Battalion, 141st Infantry Regiment, recalling the battle of San Pietro in December 1943.

Ray Wells writes "...a great many men were killed or wounded during the attack on San Pietro due to land mines, sniper fire, artillery and even bombs from German dive bombers. The Battalion attacked at 8:00 hours and at 11:00 hours Major Landry informed Regiment that the Battalion had lost so many men that it was difficult to make any headway and asked for further orders. He was told that the Army Commanding General Order was to continue the attack as long as there was one man able to hold and fire his rifle. The attack continued."

The orders to continue the attack came from 5th Army Headquarters and meant that we were on a suicide mission. The 2nd Battalion continued the attack until about midnight. 'L Company' from the 3rd Battalion 141st, under Lt. Epperson's command, reinforced us about that time. The Artillery Liaison Officer and the Sergeant Radio Operator had both been killed so Lt. Epperson took over the radio and kept in contact with the rear echelon. About daylight we reached our objective. Lt. Epperson, who was in position against a rock wall, was attempting to call the artillery to have smoke laid down on our position because we found ourselves in plain sight of the enemy who were located in houses and dugouts on all sides of us. I was lying on the ground in a position so that I could tell Lt. Epperson what information I wanted him to relay to the artillery. I was in a position with my hands under my helmet so that I could move my head back and forth. I couldn't raise my head too far because when I did a sniper would take a pot shot at me. So when I did move my head back and forth my face would scrape the ground and in doing this I uncovered a metal plate which turned out to be a Coast and Geodetic Survey metal stake. This meant that we should have had access to the best maps in the world, but instead we were using road maps purchased from a store in Naples and very small scale maps where one small mark represented about 150 to 200 yards. (I believe the survey had been made around 1917. Ray Wells)

The terrain facing San Pietro was terraced almost the complete distance from Mt. Rotondo to the town itself and most of the terraces had a wire fence on top and near the edge. In almost every case the enemy had installed a booby trap of some kind including the dreaded Bouncing Betty. We had to figure a way to eliminate this hazard and we came up with an almost foolproof plan. Two of the larger men would lift me up so I could take hold of the wire and when I gave the signal they would drop me so that I could pull the wire down with me, explode the booby trap and at the same time be protected by the wall. If my superiors knew that the Battalion Commander was risking his life in his way I am sure that I would have been reprimanded, but it did speed our advance considerably. It worked, so when they did hear of it, my Commander conveniently ignored it. When the booby traps exploded the enemy would open up with their automatic weapons and we would then attempt to locate their position.

In many cases there would seem to be a black rock in the wall but it was actually a hole, and behind the hole a machine gun or a sniper. This position would be covered with railroad ties and dirt and was very difficult to locate. Weeks before the attack, as these positions were being prepared, aerial photographs had been taken which appeared to our Intelligence people to be anti-aircraft positions. A man could be placed in the dugout with some water and cheese,

which was issued in a tube like toothpaste, bread and ammunition and he could stay in that position for days without being relieved. Until someone discovered that it wasn't a black hole in the wall, the machine gunner or sniper could fire until our troops came up to his position, then withdraw back into the dugout and commence firing again when we passed him by. After we discovered this, the position would be eliminated with a bazooka or grenade. We received many casualties from these positions alone.

After we finally arrived into position we called for smoke to be laid down and not getting any, I ordered the radio operator to call in the clear and to inform them of our position and to aim exactly at that point. We were soon receiving smoke but it was the wrong kind and coming from the wrong direction. It was phosphorus so I called to inform the rear echelon that the Germans were firing phosphorus but was told that it was impossible because the Germans didn't have any. As it turned out when we later captured their ammo dump, they did have plenty of 4.2 canisters of phosphorus shells, all with U.S. markings. The Russians had been supplied with the phosphorus shells and the Germans had captured them and in turn had used them on us.

Later a German sniper hit the antenna of the radio; the bullet then hit Lt. Epperson's helmet, entered the helmet and came out the other side. Lt. Epperson never received a scratch but you couldn't put a piece of tissue paper between the bullet and his forehead.

Just shortly before noon we received orders to withdraw. Out of the battalion and one rifle company our strength was only about 40, including myself, three or four officers and thirty-six enlisted men. In returning to the rear we were under continuous enemy fire so we had to crawl and use whatever cover we could find. While crawling back to Mt. Rotondo I could see my old O. P. where Captain Lehman, my Executive Officer, was. All the trees looked as if a large mower had been used on the side of the hill. There were many 88 shells stuck in sand bags which had not exploded. We received more casualties as we were returning to the rear which was about 200 yards away. After returning to my O.P. it then hit me—all those young healthy brave men dead, some blown to bits never to be identified. What a terrible and dreadful feeling came over me. I know I did my best to keep them safe and out of harms way the best way I knew how and get the job done at the same time. We did have casualties and I was their Commander and that is when I could no longer hold those feelings inside me. I sat down and cried. They were my boys and I loved each and every one of these splendid American men.

The next day the enemy had pulled out and we were ordered to go forward even farther than the position we attained on the previous day. We took a position around the San Pietro cemetery, dug in and were ready for our next assignment. While we were at this position the enemy would lay a few rounds of shells in the cemetery and then fire for effect on the top of the mountain just above us and to our left. Every night we would send a patrol to the road junction of number 69 and Highway 6 to clear the mines the enemy had placed there. Before daylight the Germans would send a patrol to replant the mines. These patrols would run into each other and a fire fight would develop. We would then receive more casualties. Our ranks were becoming mighty thin. Only a few of us were left.

Orders came down from Regiment for me to be at Regimental Headquarters when the Division G-3 could be there. I requested that an order be published appointing Captain Henry E. Lahman who was my Battalion Executive Officer as Battalion Commander in my absence. When I reported to Regiment I was asked why I wanted this order published and I told them that since my Battalion was in contact with the enemy I did not want to be accused of leaving my Command when the Battalion was in contact with enemy troops and that I did not want to leave

the frontlines under those conditions. The G-3 said we couldn't be in contact with the enemy since the 2nd Battalion was in Division Reserve. I informed this very knowledgeable officer that as far as I could determine my Battalion were the only troops in contact with the enemy. I was politely informed that I was mistaken and that my Battalion was in such and such a position and that I could not possibly be in contact with the Germans. The G-3 wanted to know if I was sure about the situation and I informed this learned gentleman that we were being shelled every morning and requested that I be shown the overlay map which would show where we were located. The overlay map did show where the G-3 said we were, but I noticed it had been placed upside down on the large map indicating that we were on top of the mountain. Now they suddenly found that we were indeed the only unit in contact with the enemy and the only unit between the Division and San Vittore. The situation would have been pretty bad for Division Headquarters if the Germans had known about this foul up.