

Rocco J. Moretto

Co. C, 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment

First Division WWII

After straightening out the so-called "Bulge" and retaking the territories occupied by the Germans since the start of their winter offensive of December 16, 1944, the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was sent to the Roer River in the vicinity of Obermanbach and Biltstein, considered to be the gateway to the Cologne Plain and the Rhine River.

At the Roer River the regiment relieved the U.S. Second Infantry Division which had been at that location since before the Bulge started and remained there in place until we relieved them.

The reason for the move being that the First Division had been designated by the powers to be to make the river crossing.

The Germans occupied defensive positions on the high ground on one side of the Roer and we sat on the other side. Observation on both sides couldn't be better and we traded artillery and mortar fire constantly.

Additionally, we also maintained outposts along the banks of the river. This was to warn our main body of any enemy patrols attempting to cross over to our side. During the day our outposts observed and never left their foxholes. Because we were under constant observation, the outposts were supplied at night only by our patrols. Also, the broken telephone lines were repaired at night only. The constant artillery and mortar barrages played havoc with the wiring and at those times when the wiring was damaged we used #536 walkie-talkie radios for communication.

For the first few days on the Roer things were really jumping with plenty of mortar and artillery fire going back and forth and the men making themselves familiar with the company's positions and improving upon them.

Company "C" relieved our counterparts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division in place and they briefed us on the situation. They further advised us to be extra careful of mines as they had mined the whole area at the time of the German breakthrough, fearing the attackers would be soon arriving at this location.

As events developed the breakthrough was stopped in its tracks after a number of days and the Germans never got to this location, but they remained on the alert as the general situation had remained very fluid.

In any case they told us that they had hurriedly placed mines all over the area but were unable to give us any details as to their exact placement.

In addition, the minefields were not marked and overlays on the area maps were not made.

Our company commander, Capt. Donald Lister, wasn't too pleased with the above info and voiced his dissatisfaction in no uncertain terms.

Never one to sit on his hands, he personally inspected every inch of Company "C"'s positions and further ordered the Company's leadership to do the same.

Captain Lister was always such a stickler for detail and it certainly paid off as the Company sustained zero casualties to mines while we were at this location.

On the second or third day after arriving there I was observing the German side of the river looking for any sign of enemy movement.

From my vantage point in the early A.M. and just as dawn was breaking I spotted a German soldier easily identifiable wearing the distinctive German helmet. He was almost sitting on his haunches seemingly relieving himself. I said to myself "What the hell is going on! Is this guy nuts?"

Anyway, my heart skipped a few beats as I lifted my M-1 and took careful aim at the target, even remembering to hold my breath before squeezing the trigger just as we were taught in training. AS I fired, the soldier rolled over and then I lost complete sight of him.

To this day I sometimes think of the incident and I wonder if indeed he was hit and simply crawled to his foxhole. Now these many years later the mindset changes and I sort of wish it was only the often talked about "million dollar wound" for him, and frankly I wouldn't be too displeased now if I had missed him all together.

On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945, approximately 10 days to two weeks after we arrived at the Roer, we received our orders to make the crossing and under the cover of darkness an engineering unit erected a flimsy footbridge at the Roer's shortest point. As dawn broke we made the crossing with the help of the bridge and got over with dry feet.

Much to our surprise, the crossing was made without incident - a major mistake on the part of the Germans. If they had chosen to make a stand there I would hate to think about the casualties we would have taken. So thanks to the Germans for small favors.

With the crossing, the race across the Cologne Plain was on and we began to think and talk about the dreaded crossing of the Rhine River. What an obstacle that would be! We thought of it as close to being another invasion and our fears at the time were that it would be a repeat of Omaha Beach.

Fortunately, we got lucky for a change as the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division captured the Remagen Bridge before the Germans could blow it up, and the Allies were able to pour troops

and materiel across the Rhine before the bridge became unusable.

Most of Company C got across the Rhine in L.C.V.P.'s, although some of us got over in a large rubber raft. But that's another story!

The Cologne Plain was extremely flat terrain and you could observe for miles. The area didn't offer much in cover and/or concealment for the infantry soldier so therefore all our attacks in that area were made at night only.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry attacked on a battalion front and each battalion passed through each other's front one battalion at a time. Similar tactics were used as we attacked our way out of the "Bulge". This strategy worked very well for us and gave the enemy little time to reorganize and launch counterattacks against us. However, the Germans did impede the speed of our advance at times by pushing their own civilian population, which included women and children, right into our path. While this did succeed in slowing us down, it was a pretty shoddy way to use their own people!

At approximately midnight the morning of March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945, Company C was assigned the mission of taking the town of Erp. As we advanced in the moonlight and got within a few hundred yards of Erp, we were fired upon. As per usual Captain Lister was right up there with the scouts and point squad along with Platoon Leader Lt. Leon P. Kowalski and his platoon, who had been assigned the point that night. We were stopped principally by rifle and machine gunfire. Because of the flat terrain, we could easily see the defensive setup. The riflemen and machine guns sat right out there in the open. Also out there on the line was a section of mortars, which were not dug in, that the enemy made no effort to conceal. This was one of the strange sights of WWII as far as I'm concerned and certainly not indicative of German Army know-how. In my opinion these troops were no doubt not top of the line. In addition to this forward setup there was a tank which was perhaps a hundred yards or more behind the forward group to our left front, who also joined in the firing. Further, we did not have any tank support with us because we were attacking cross-country and avoiding the roads. In that area the Germans had set up numerous roadblocks along the roads that our tanks were unable to negotiate. After the objective was taken they would be brought up to help in the defense,

etc. Anyway, when we were fired upon, we scrambled for whatever cover we could find. In that area which consisted of turnip patches, the turnips were piled up to resemble a small pyramid, approximately four feet high. The turnips afforded some degree of cover and concealment. As we ducked behind the turnips, Captain Lister wondered aloud on how best to handle the situation. He said we could call for artillery fire or we could fix bayonets and charge the enemy. I certainly thought his decision would be easy and, voiced my opinion for an artillery barrage. As usual, the old man made his own decision. He said to pass it back to the Company, fix bayonets and on his command to start shooting and charge the enemy. I could not believe my eyes when the Germans turned tail and took off in the direction of Erp as the Company charged at them. Captain Lister never failed to amaze me with his know-how and intuition and most times he was right on the money.

When we started out that night we were short of officers. Lt. Charles Whiting and our X.O. Lt. Marlin Brochette were both wounded that night, further reducing our corps of officers. Lt. Charles Haskell, who commanded the Company D 81-mm Mortar Section and acted as the Mortar Section F.O., was loaned to Company C in November 1944. At that time, he

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On January 24, 1945, the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment started to attack its way out of the so-called "Bulge." On that date, Company C's objective was the very vital Morsecheck Crossroads located in the Butgenbach/Bullingen area of Belgium. That objective was annexed by Company C at a very high cost in casualties under extremely difficult weather conditions against a solidly entrenched adversary which had every inch of that territory zeroed in with prearranged artillery and mortar concentrations.

After enduring several days of counterattacks and under constant harassment from artillery and mortar fire, the Germans began to slowly pull out of the area, choosing to make their stand elsewhere. No doubt our own artillery was causing plenty of havoc to their troops and inflicting much damage and casualties to the enemy force as we were improving our positions.

It was exactly at that time that the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry began the difficult process of retaking the territories the German

Army took from us when they started their offensive of December 16, 1944. Company C and the rest of the First Battalion started to attack its way out of the salient on an almost daily basis. Each rifle company passed through each other's front just as soon as the respective companies had accomplished their assigned missions and secured their areas the next company would continue the attack. These continuous attacks kept the enemy off balance and on their heels with little time to reorganize and launch counterattacks.

As I have previously written, the German offensive in the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry's sector of Dom Butgenbach was stopped in its tracks on December 17<sup>th</sup> and beyond. At the time an untold number of attacks were launched by the Germans on our positions and while our defenses bent they were never broken and a stalemate ensued. All troop movements, patrols, working to improve foxholes and dugouts and the receiving of supplies came to a grinding halt during the daylight hours because we were under constant observation by the enemy. Any slight movement during daylight hours would bring down artillery barrages on our positions.

Finally, after 36 days of patrolling and probing of the enemy positions the stalemate was broken and now it was our turn to go on the offensive. During one of our attacks in the first week of February Company C was the battalion's point. The extreme weather conditions still prevailed, bitter biting cold with plenty of snow still on the ground.

As was his usual style, our company commander Captain Donald Lister was with the point squad prodding them along and moving straight up the road which, in spite of all the snow, was walkable. Due to the amount of snow accumulation in the fields on both sides of the road, Captain Lister didn't put out flank protection on either side of the road. If he had done so, it certainly would have impeded our advance and slowed us to a crawl. The snowsuits the men wore blended in well with the snow and gave us some degree of concealment.

Suddenly, at a point that was perhaps seventy-five yards from our point squad, we were fired upon with rifle and machine gunfire and we were immediately pinned down by this small force which consisted of a machine gun and about a squad of riflemen. No doubt these men were being sacrificed to give their main body time to make it back to

a point of their choosing where they could make their stand in force. Anyway, this small force kept us pinned down for quite some time. The rifle and machine gunfire were hitting right near me and the others and in fact the bullets were hitting the ground alongside my helmet and flicking snow onto my ears and face. We were pinned down so beautifully that it would have been suicide to make any kind of a move.

Suddenly on my right in my peripheral vision I saw Sergeant "Pop" Strickler followed by his squad trudging through the snow which appeared to be almost hip deep. "Pop" and his men were moving as if in slow motion with rifles at their ready as they attempted to move up and outflank the enemy strong point. I kept thinking to myself that if the Germans turned their fire on "Pop" and his squad they would be goners. For some strange and unknown reason, which occasionally happens in war, the enemy continued to focus only on us on the road. When "Pop" finally got parallel to the enemy, he and his squad opened up on them with a steady stream of rifle and B.A.R. fire which distracted the Germans and released us. We immediately opened up and charged up the road killing four or five with the rest of the enemy taking off.

As we got up to them we observed a dugout about ten yards away. As we got to the dugout we tossed a hand grenade into the entrance and quickly entered after it exploded. We found it empty except for a table with a pair of Zeiss 10X50 field glasses sitting on it. I quickly picked them up since I was the first one to enter the dugout and I still have the glasses today.

"Pop" Strickler and his squad did a tremendous job that day and I for one will always be grateful to those men. I am still in touch with Francis H. "Pop" Strickler, and on that day, "Pop" and his squad certainly saved the day for us. I last saw "Pop," his wife Hilda and his son in May 1997 in Lancaster, PA at the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry reunion. While still in good health, Pop's eyesight has started to fail him and his wife Hilda takes care of most of his letter writing.

END

Presentation to Mayor of Caumont, France  
By Colonel Warren Coffman 6/8/89

Your Honor, guests, our British cousins, wives, daughters and fellow veterans. I am Colonel Warren Coffman, United States Army, Retired.

Forty-five years ago I was a Private assigned to "C" Company 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, which we proudly refer to as the Big Red One.

On D-Day there were about 219 officers and men assigned to "C" Company. Most of the men here today landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day. Seven days later on 13 June, the 1st Division Liberated Caumont. We were so far in front of the other military units that we had to wait for the Americans on our right to catch-up and the British on our left to take Caen. We watched the bombing of Caen day and night.

Five of the Veterans here today were wounded at Caumont: John McComas, Danny Dallessandro, Alden Peckham, Russell Werme and Victor Muggger. Lt. Marlin Brockett was with the first replacements who joined "C" Company at Caumont.

On July 13th we were relieved by the 5th Infantry Division. After a short rest we went on to Saint Lo; Mortain; and on across France to Liege, Belgium; Aachen, Germany and after the Battle of the Bulge the Company ended up on VE Day in Czechoslovakia.

Of the 219 men assigned to "C" Company on D-Day only two men went from D-Day to VE Day who were not either killed, captured or wounded. Those two men are here today, Bennie Zuskin and Rocky Moretto. Except for those two, what you see here are the walking wounded.

Also here is my old Platoon Leader, Lt. Jim Glaymore who tried to stop a German tank with his leg. He was unsuccessful.

Also here is Sgt. Jack Gray, the only man left who was with "C" Company all through the War, starting with the invasion of North Africa, then the invasion of Sicily. France was his third invasion. He has more combat time than any man left in "C" Company.

So Your Honor, on behalf of the 19 Veterans here today, and in memory of the 200 other men from Company "C" who could not be here today, we want to present to the City of Caumont a plaque so that you might remember "C" Company, 26th Infantry Regt. as the Veterans here remember Caumont. When you look at this plaque we hope you will remember John, Danny, Russell, Alden, Victor, Jim, Jack and all the other Veterans who helped to liberate Caumont. Thank you for your reception and hospitality.

MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE  
Prepared For The Battle of the Bulge History Book  
by Rocco J. Moretto

Just prior to the start of the Battle of the Bulge, "C" Co, 26th Infantry Regt. First Division was engaged in combat in the Hurtgen Forest.

In approximately 6 weeks there we had suffered tremendous casualties under extremely difficult conditions. During the 6 weeks in the Hurtgen Forest, the Company had practically turned over.

On approximately December 10th we were relieved and it was rumored that the First Division would be returning to England for a much needed rest. By then we had been in combat for 6 months starting with the Normandy Invasion on June 6th. Our ranks depleted and badly in need of all sorts of equipment, the rumor sounded good. We were pulled back to the Leige-Verviers area.

After less than a week the Germans had broken through the American defenses and my unit was immediately alerted and rushed to the breakthrough area.

"C" Company was attached to the 2nd Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regt. for the move. We traveled both on foot and by truck in a shuttle type move and our target was Dom Butgenbach. On our way we encountered many American troops who had been overrun, were disorganized and in full retreat.

Some of the troops were on foot and some in vehicles including some tanks. Some of the men related some weird accounts of what was going on. The one account which has always stuck in my mind was that Tiger tanks were being dropped by parachutes which turned out to be false and that German Paratroopers dressed in American uniforms who spoke perfect English were dropped behind the lines. This turned out to be true. This and other stories we heard made us wonder what we were headed for.

We arrived in Dom Butgenbach late at night on December 17th and immediately started to set up a defense.

The area had been occupied by an American field hospital which had very recently evacuated the area. They had departed in an awful hurry leaving behind a few tents, partially eaten food and all sorts of clothing including women's unmentionables.

Outposts were set up all along "C" Company's front with the main line of resistance approximately 75 yards behind the outposts.

At the break of dawn the following morning all hell broke loose. As far as your eye could see German tanks were coming over the rise firing their machine guns as they came.

German infantry followed the tanks on foot. After a short time the tanks over ran our outposts. They ran right over the foxholes in some cases and in other instances the enemy tank personnel motioned for the men to surrender.

Everyone as far as I could judge began to withdraw piece meal. I and some of the others finally sought refuge in the cellar of an extremely large farmhouse.

Col. Daniels Commander of the 2nd Battalion and his headquarters personnel were the occupants of this building.

Two tanks soon penetrated to about 20 yards of the building and by this time there appeared to be over a hundred soldiers in that cellar. At one point a rifle went off and someone yelled out "They're throwing hand grenades down the cellar", and boy did that start a scramble.

Col. Daniels was personally directing artillery fire over the radio. He was in communication with all sorts of artillery units including our own 33rd Field and the Divisions 5th Field with their 155's. He even was asking for corps. artillery and at one point he yelled over the radio, "Get me all the damned artillery you can get".

There is no doubt in my mind that Col. Daniels almost single-handedly slowed the German advance until reinforcements slowly began to arrive and started to build on our positions.

Thanks to Col. Daniels and fortunately for us the German Infantry had taken all sorts of casualties from the artillery fire and were unable to penetrate our defenses in any number.

When Col. Daniels was advised about the two tanks which had penetrated to within 20 yards of the building, he asked to be kept advised of their movements. I would inch up the cellar stairs and when the tank crews would spot me they would turn the 88's and fire a round. But before they did, I would come flying down those cellar steps.

The situation remained that way it seemed for an eternity. Col. Daniels continued with the artillery fire and then called for fire directly on our own positions in an attempt to drive the enemy off us. He then called for volunteers to knock out the tanks with a bazooka. One young soldier somehow with help managed to get on the roof of the farmhouse and miraculously disabled one tank. It seemed like an impossible task but somehow that kid got the job done. The remaining tank stayed for awhile and then turned tail, probably realizing he was sticking out like

a sore thumb without support.

It was fortunate for us that our artillery inflicted so much damage to the German Infantry otherwise we would have surely been outflanked.

During the Bulge, 43 enemy tanks were knocked out in the 26th Infantry Regimental area.

In succeeding days the Germans attacked our positions numerous times with artillery supporting their Infantry but by then we were solidly in place and never budged an inch.

Toward the end of December the action slowed somewhat, patrols from both sides were very active in the area and we constantly probed each other's lines looking for soft spots. In addition both sides raked each other with heavy concentrations of artillery fire.

Movement during the daylight hours was kept to a bare minimum because you were under constant observation.

All troop movements, patrols, etc. only took place at night.

Finally on January 22, 1945 after being in position for 36 days the 1st battalion, 26th infantry regiment was assigned the mission to capture and hold the Morsecheck crossroads.

The crossroads was a vital piece of real estate as it was being used as a supply route and for the movement of troops and equipment into the Ardennes salient and the Siegfried Line.

The area was heavily defended by self propelled guns, tanks, artillery and mortars and an oversized company of German Infantry.

The attack was to take place on January 24 and Company "C" was relieved and taken out of the defensive line at Dom Butgenbach on January 22 and moved back to Butgenbach where we would get a good night's rest, receive equipment such as shoe packs, camouflage snow suits and a half-pound of dynamite for each man to be used for breaking up the frozen ground so that the men could more easily dig their foxholes in the shortest possible time after securing their objective.

Company "C"'s assignment was to take the crossroads. Captain Donald Lister, Co. "C" Commander immediately organized a patrol for the night of January 22 which consisted of 16 men and one officer. A radio operator carrying a SCR 300 set was also included and he would stay in touch with the main body and transmit all pertinent information as it was gathered.

The patrol was instructed to scout the area and Company "C" was assigned to attack on January 24. They would carry mostly automatic weapons and two hand grenades each.

The patrol went out at 2200 hours and after several hours returned with the following information.

The snow in some places was four feet deep. The enemy had a series of dugouts which were probably used as strong points approximately 100 yards north of the north-south road.

It was believed that these positions were occupied because there were footpaths in the snow leading to the dugouts.

Anti tank mines were observed approximately 350 yards north of the crossroads on the north south road.

This road would not be passable for vehicles until it was cleared of the mines.

Armed with the above information, Captain Lister laid out his plan of attack and at 1800 hours on January 23rd assembled his platoon leaders and key personnel to give them their respective assignments and last minute instructions.

The time of attack was set for 0300 hours January 24th.

The Company was to be awakened at 0100, would receive a hot meal and last minute instructions.

The 1st platoon was assigned the point and were to attack straight down the north south road moving as quickly as the situation would permit making as little noise as possible. It was very likely the enemy would fire all their prearranged fire missions immediately as soon as we were observed.

Upon reaching the crossroads the 1st platoon was then to swing to the east, clear out a patch of woods and take positions on the other side of the wooded area. There they would eventually tie in with the 2nd and 3rd platoons.

The 2nd platoon led by Lt. Leon P. Kowalski, was instructed to follow the 1st platoon and continue down the road after the 1st had swung to the east and clean out a house just east of the crossroads. At that location they were to tie in with the 1st platoon on the east and Company B on the west.

The 3rd platoon would be held in reserve and would not be committed until the situation required it.

If all went according to plan they would tie in with the 1st on the east and bend around to the north thereby protecting "C" Company's flank and rear.

The weapons platoon led by Lt. Marlin Brockette were to quickly set up their mortars in battery 300 yards north east of the crossroads and be available to fire missions in support of the rifle platoons.

Capt. Lister also attached one section of heavy machine guns to the 1st platoon and 1 section of light machine guns to the 2nd platoon. Four tanks were assigned to the Company and would be available to give support after the objective was secured and the mines were cleared.

In addition one anti-tank gun would be available and could be called on to assist.

Additionally our 33rd field artillery had a liaison officer at 1st battalion headquarters so we could fire missions through him.

At 0200 hours after breakfast and last minute orders the men of Company "C" started out from Butgenbach and marched the approximate three miles to the line of departure at Dom Butgenbach and prior to our arrival at Dom Butgenbach the Company took a ten minute break.

At 0300 we started out in what was the coldest weather that I'd ever experienced in my whole lifetime. It was so cold the snowsuits were frozen stiff and crackled as you moved.

The 1st platoon led by Lt. Brooks sent out the point consisting of one squad and a second squad out as flank protection.

The snowsuits blended in perfectly with the snow as they moved down the road and no opposition was met till the 1st platoon swung to the east.

At that point they were met with fire from two machine guns and about a squad of riflemen.

We very quickly gained fire superiority killing four of the enemy and six were taken prisoner.

They were quickly disarmed and passed back to the rear.

The 2nd Platoon in the meantime ran into enemy around the house and after a brief fire fight two were killed and five more were captured.

Additional Germans were caught in their dugouts and surrendered without firing a shot.

As a matter of fact they were in dugouts they had heated with cans of sterno and even had taken their boots off for more comfort.

They probably never expected an attack under such horribly cold conditions.

It was a text book attack. Everything broke right and just as dawn was beginning to break Company "C" was sitting right on

its objective.

The men quickly started to dig in using the TNT to help break up the frozen ground.

Everything was going beautifully but the TNT threw up heavy black smoke in the explosion areas. The enemy observing this quickly began to rake our positions with heavy concentrations of fire and we began to sustain heavy casualties.

Lt. Kowalski, platoon leader, 2nd Platoon was painfully injured from the dynamite blast and limped his way back to the Medics. He was patched up and later returned to the battle.

At 1600 hours the Germans launched a counter attack in Battalion force after a 20 minute barrage of artillery fire. The 2nd platoon was taking the brunt of the counter attack. When Lt. Kowalski returned from the medics he discovered that most of the platoon was gone. Platoon Sgt. Bob Wright had been killed, Clayton Goode, the platoon guide, had taken over and he and Lt. Kowalski began directing artillery fire. One of the two machine guns was still operable but the ammunition boxes had taken a hit by artillery. Only the gunner from the original two machine guns and their crews remained and he was hand feeding the ammo from a broken machine gun belt and he almost singly handedly held off the Germans. Our artillery and mortars took care of the rest catching the Germans out in the open.

In the meantime reinforcements were being sent to the 2nd Platoon and they were able to plug the gap and the day was saved.

A second counter attack was expected but fortunately it never came. The Germans were also sustaining heavy casualties.

The rest of the first Battalion had also taken their objectives and after a few days we were able to attack our way out of the salient and were on our way to reducing the so called Bulge. After a few weeks of almost daily attacks our lines were restored to what they were originally. While things got a little easier we still had that horrible weather to contend with.

The 26th Infantry Regiment had been previously cited by the government of Belgium with the Belgium Fouragere for the Battle of Mons and we received the 2nd award of the Belgium Fouragere for the part we played in the Battle of the Bulge.