After being wounded in Italy, Daniel guards prisoners stateside

By MILFORD "RED" DANIEL
Sgt., 36th Division, 5th Army,
Company C, 141st Infantry

I enlisted in the Army at the age of 17. After basic training in 1943, I was sent to Oran, North Africa, where we underwent another three weeks training before being sent to the Salerno, Italy Invasion as replacements for the second wave attack. As we neared Salerno, I could hear something hitting the deck of our ship and was told it was machine gun fire. Under heavy fire, we pushed northward from the beach at Salerno toward Naples. Conditions were bad. It was cold and wet and I developed trench feet and had to be hospitalized in Naples for about three weeks.

When I rejoined my outfit, we were headed toward Anzio and on to what has come to be called the "Bloody Rapido River" battle (Jan. 20-21, 1944). When we were briefed, we were told that the area had been shelled for three or four days before we were to cross the river and they were pretty well sure the Germans had been pushed back and there would be no mortar fire or shelling as we crossed the river. (The Rapido River is only 15 yards wide, but is a swift running, mountain fed gorge with steep banks.) While we were dug in waiting for further orders, we were cold and wet in a fox hole and me and another soldier saw a building and decided to go there to get in the dry. When we got there we saw two other guys who probably had the same idea. But they were dead, so we headed back to the fox hole.

Figure 1 Milford (Red) Daniel in World War II

They gave us a chocolate bar in case we ran out of rations. It was hard chocolate that you couldn't bite you had to scrape it and eat it for nourishment. But I didn't get that far. In pitch darkness, we were under a fierce attack I heard a wounded soldier holler for help. He was in the river. I managed to locate him in the darkness and pulled him out of the water and onto the river bank. We started across the river in a rubber boat, me and four more guys, and I set the boat down on a land mine, seriously wounding me and the others were dead. I don't know if they died from a grenade or rifle fire or what killed them. That was about 12 o'clock at night. It was awful hearing soldiers screaming for help. I'll never forget it. The next morning we could look around and see soldiers laying everywhere . . . dead soldiers. So, I crawled and got in a bomb crater and stayed there about, I don't know, two days, I guess, before the medics got me out. All the while shelling was going on all around me. From there they sent me to a field hospital and back to the hospital in Florence, Italy, and the doctor I saw was from Memphis, TN.

I was told I couldn't go back on the front line and they were putting me in "limited service". I was sent to Mussolini's Race Track near Naples to await being shipped back to the States. I found out later that they ceased fire to pick up the dead and wounded. They called it a truce. During this two-day period (Jan. 20-21, 1944), 155 soldiers were killed, 1052 were wounded, 921 were missing for a total of 2,128.

Since I was on "limited service", I was sent to Miami, Florida. I could have got out on a medical discharge, but chose not to. While there, we were asked if anyone wanted to be stationed in Tennessee, and I said yes. So, in a few days they shipped me to Memphis, Tennessee, where my job was guarding (200-250) German prisoners of war. These prisoners worked the cotton gins there in Memphis. From Memphis, we took the prisoners by troop train to Billings, Montana, where they dug sugar beets. We made camp in an old CCC camp. These prisoners were no different than us. They were just doing what they had to do before they were captured.

Figure 2 Milford (Red) Daniel poses with his medals at Museum of Scott County in June 2004

From Billings I went to Arizona and soon thereafter in 1946 was discharged. What we experienced, you never forget and don't get over. Just talking about it today makes it seem like it only happened yesterday and it's been 60 years.

(A book has been written about the "Bloody Rapido River", A River Swift and Deadly by Lee Carraway Smith and an internet search also provides a good account of the battle.)