

Mike Colalillo, Division's Last MOH Recipient, Passes

Medal of Honor recipient Mike Colalillo, a rifleman with Company C, 398th Infantry Regiment, passed away on December 30, 2011 in Duluth, Minnesota. Mike was the last surviving Medal of Honor recipient from the 100th Infantry Division.

In a news interview after leaving the Army, Mike said, "I never wanted to kill anybody, and I never had any particular yen to be a hero. Heroes are a dime a dozen in my book." On April 7, 1945, however, his actions cemented his place in history.

According to the Medal of Honor citation:

He was pinned down with other members of his company during an attack against strong enemy positions in the vicinity of Untergriesheim, Germany. Heavy artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire made any move hazardous when he stood up, shouted to the company to follow, and ran forward in the wake of a supporting tank, firing his machine pistol. Inspired by his example, his comrades advanced in the face of savage enemy fire. When his weapon was struck by shrapnel and rendered useless, he climbed to the deck of a friendly tank, manned an exposed machine gun on the turret of the vehicle, and, while bullets rattled about him, fired at an enemy emplacement with such devastating accuracy that he killed or wounded at least 10 hostile soldiers and destroyed their machine gun. Maintaining his extremely dangerous post as the tank forged ahead, he blasted 3 more positions, destroyed another machine-gun emplacement and silenced all resistance in his area, killing at least 3 and wounding an undetermined number of riflemen as they fled. His machine gun eventually jammed; so he secured a sub-machine gun from the tank crew to continue his attack on foot. When our armored forces exhausted their ammunition and the order to withdraw was given, he remained behind to help a seriously wounded comrade over several hundred yards of open terrain rocked by an intense enemy artillery and mortar barrage. By his intrepidity and inspiring courage Pfc. Colalillo gave tremendous impetus to his company's attack, killed or wounded 25 of the enemy in bitter fighting, and assisted a wounded soldier in reaching the American lines at great risk of his own life.

In an interview in 2008 for the Association newsletter, Colalillo recalled that "the good Lord was with me" during that battle. "I could see our guys getting shot. . . . I could see the muzzle flashes of the Germans shooting at us, and I aimed at them."

A few days later, Colalillo said, he was ordered back to division headquarters under military police escort. He thought he was in trouble. Told at headquarters that he was nominated for the Medal of Honor, Colalillo said he responded: "What the hell's a Medal of Honor? They had to explain to me what it meant."

Mike received the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor for bravery, from President Harry Truman on December 18, 1945.

He recalled that when he received the medal, Truman said to him, "I'm proud of you. I [would] rather have this than be president."

After his discharge, Colalillo worked as a coal dump laborer until an on-the-job accident left his left arm paralyzed. He later became a longshoreman in Duluth, retiring in 1987 after 19 years as a foreman.

Michael Colalillo Medal of Honor Park in Duluth is named for him. It includes a flag and memorial plaque that honors other WWII veterans.