

Colalillo Humble About Medal of Honor



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but there was nobody there to see the action.”

Carlo Colalillo emigrated from Italy in the early 1920s and settled in the Town of Stuntz, just outside Hibbing. He worked in the iron mines.

As time went by, he saved enough money to bring his wife, Vittoria, and four children over, and they joined him in Hibbing. On Dec. 1, 1925, a son was born to the Colalillos, and they named him Michael.

Eventually the family grew to nine children, and Carlo moved to Duluth where he got a job at a plant that made carbon for batteries. Later, he got a better job at the Inter-Lake Iron Co. in West Duluth.

Mike Colalillo grew up on Raleigh Street, a tough neighborhood by any standards.

"We were all in trouble at one time or another. Everybody got in trouble. I suppose I did too."

The Colalillo's house was right next to the railroad tracks, and a major occupation for the boys in the neighborhood was to climb aboard the cars and throw coal to their comrades below. The coal could then be sold or used to heat the local homes.

When Mike was 16, his mother died, leaving his father with four children still at home.

"I said, 'Dad, I want to quit school.' I felt I had to help take care of the family. He didn't like it very much, but I did it anyway."

Mike got a job at the Grand Bakery on 57th Avenue West as a baker's helper. *"I did everything from cleaning the pans to putting jelly in the bismarcks."*

Not long after Michael Colalillo turned 18, he was drafted. It was 1944, and the war had been going on for several years. *"We all knew we had to go. There was nobody around anymore, so I didn't mind it that much."*

He took his physical at Ft. Snelling, and then a few days later boarded a train for Camp Fanning, Texas, for basic training.

Rank and organization: Private First Class, U.S. Army, 2nd Squad, 2nd Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 398th Infantry, 100th Infantry Division.

After basic, Colalillo went home on a furlough, and then in November reported to the 100th Division on the East Coast to join a convoy transporting troops overseas.

"I don't remember what ship I was on, I only remember that there were destroyers all around us. Lots and lots of destroyers."

It was about six months after D-Day, and the American forces had reached the German border in some places. The newly formed division landed in Marsailles, France, and bivouacked for two weeks before being sent to the front lines near Metz.

"As soon as we got to the front lines, we got into a battle. There were 10 or 12 men killed in my unit. I was scared as hell. It was the first time anybody had ever been shooting at me."

The division slowly moved east, taking small towns along the way. The tough kid from West Duluth, though he only weighed 140 lbs., soon earned a reputation in his platoon.

"I don't know why the first sergeant picked on me all the time. But whenever they had something to do he'd holler for me and Clay Landahl. They had us doing the scouting all the time."

"You always heard the advice that you shouldn't get too close to anybody on the front lines, but I never felt that way. Clay and I were best friends. I always wanted somebody to look out for me, and I could watch his back at the same time. "But whenever there was something going on, the sergeant would say, 'You and Clay get on up there.' And we would."

It all happened 57 years ago, but Colalillo remembers bits and pieces of the division's advance into Germany. He recalls being shot at from a hill by a lone German, and when they captured him they found out he was only 16 years old. He remembers stealing chickens from a farmer's yard for a rare break from the normal rations.

And there was the time the company captured a town with a cigar factory. *"Everybody was smoking cigars, it was great."*

At one point, the company was pinned down by two German machine gun nests. Colalillo and Landahl volunteered to do something about it. They snuck up behind the Germans with their rifles and shot them.

Not long afterwards, an officer took Colalillo aside and told him he was putting him up for a Silver Star for his heroism. *"I said to him, 'What the hell is a Silver Star.' He said, 'You don't know?' I didn't know anything about that stuff. I didn't care that much."*

The Battle of the Bulge was raging nearby and *"there were a lot of little scimmages going on all the time."* At one point, as he and Landahl were scouting, a shot rang out and Landahl went down. *"He said, 'Mike, I'm hit.' I said, 'Where did they get you?' He said, 'In the ass.' I said, 'Okay, I'll get you the medics.'"*

Another shot was heard, and Landahl was hit again. Colalillo hustled to find the medics, and they came back with him to the place where Landahl lay. *"The Germans didn't shoot at the medics, and they were able to get him out of there and into an ambulance."*

He later heard that Landahl lived, but he never came back to the division.

The war moved through the winter months and into spring, and the division drove on into Germany.

7 April 1945. 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 machine gun 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.

Earlier on April 7, the company was in a staging area, and late in the afternoon, the company advanced. *"We had our orders to take a certain place, but we didn't know what kind of resistance we'd run into. We didn't get halfway to where we were going when we got pinned down completely."*

A tank unit moved through the lines toward the Germans and Colalillo jumped to his feet and shouted for his comrades to go with him. A couple joined him immediately, and then a few more. And then the whole company got up and charged after the tanks.

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.

Colalillo was dodging bullets and firing his automatic rifle when a shell hit nearby and the shrapnel hit his weapon. *"It was a good thing it hit my grease gun or it would have hit me."*

With no weapon, though, Colalillo was not happy. *"I thought, 'What the hell am I going to do?' I ran up and jumped on the tank. I still don't know how I did that. And there was that gun staring me in the face."*

Atop the tank, Colalillo inquired of the tank crew if he could use the machine gun mounted on the tank's turret. Given permission, despite his exposed position, he began firing at the German positions. *"After that, it was just boom, boom, boom."*

The tank captain assisted Colalillo in finding targets. *"The good Lord was with me. I could hear rifle shots all around me, and I could see our guys getting shot. It was terrible. I could see the muzzle flashes of the Germans shooting at us, and I aimed at them."*

Maintaining his extremely dangerous post as the tank forged ahead, he blasted three more positions, destroyed another machine gun emplacement and silenced all resistance in his area, killing at least three and wounding an undetermined number of riflemen as they fled.

The tank rolled on, occasionally firing its cannon. *"Could I feel it? I was right on top of the turret. Boy, could I feel it."*

"The tank captain would say off to the right or off to the left. I was a rifleman, but in basic they train you on all the weapons. And when guys want to take a nap on the front lines, you'd man their machine guns for a while. I knew how to use it."

At a critical juncture, the machine gun jammed, though, and great effort by Colalillo would not make it work again.

His machine gun eventually jammed; so he secured a submachine gun from the tank crew to continue his attack on foot.

"I told the guy in the tank that the machine gun had jammed. He said, 'Here, take our Thompson.' He gave me some ammo, and told me to be careful getting off the tank."

Colalillo advanced on foot, firing the Thompson as he went. The tanks, however, had run out of ammunition by this time, and were ordered to the rear. Colalillo's unit was also ordered to fall back.

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.

"I heard a voice say, 'Mike, Mike, I'm hit.' So I helped him back to our lines. We could hear other guys crying out there, but they wouldn't let us go get them. They thought maybe they were Germans trying to trick us into going out. But in the morning we did go out and picked up two guys. They were still alive."

After another day's fighting, the division captured the town and then was immediately relieved and spent three or four days behind the lines.

After the rest, the 100th Division was ordered back on the front lines. As they were getting ready to move out, Colalillo's unit was approached by a platoon runner who had two MPs with him.

They had orders to escort Colalillo back to headquarters. *"I told them I didn't do a God darn thing, and I didn't need to have any MPs take me back."*

When he was brought to headquarters, he was informed that he had been nominated by the tank captain for the Medal of Honor. Colalillo's reaction was basically the same as when he was informed about the Silver Star. *"I said, 'What the hell's a Medal of Honor?' They had to explain to me what it meant. I said, 'But what the hell did I do?' I really didn't remember all of it, but the tank guy had explained most of it to them."*

He was sent to Paris for a few days, and then on to Washington D.C. In an interview with the military brass, he was asked if he wanted to stay in the service or get out.

"I told them I wanted to go home."

He was sent to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin to be processed out of the military. *"I was in a room with a bunch of other guys, and I just sat there like a bump on a log and they never called out my name. Finally I was the last one left in the room, and the clerk said, 'Where's this guy supposed to go?'"*

After looking at his papers, the clerk discovered he had a Medal of Honor recipient in front of him. He quickly got the colonel, and Colalillo got his own room at the camp.

The next day, he had to go through various medical tests and dental checkups, and that evening Colalillo headed for the PX for a beer. There he ran into an old friend from his neighborhood in West Duluth, Louie Shumich.

After Shumich found out that Colalillo had earned the Medal of Honor, he became his escort for the rest of the trip home. *"There was a bar on the train, and even though I was only 19 years old, they were serving us. I never had to buy a drink."*

Already well lubricated, the two got a bottle of liquor before they boarded the bus to Duluth in Minneapolis. *"Everybody on the bus was drinking, and we were passing that bottle around."*

When the bus pulled into the West Duluth station, a small group of well wishers and family were gathered to greet the new hero. Members of Shumich's family were also there. The trouble was that nobody got off the bus.

"They went up to the bus driver and told him that a couple of guys were supposed to get off at this stop. They went to the back of the bus and found us passed out. They woke us up so we could get off the bus."

Colalillo was feted by the VFW and the American Legion and other organizations for a period, and then it was time to travel to Washington D.C. to receive his medal. He was accompanied by his dad, his brother and his brother's wife, and two sisters.

"They put us up at a big hotel, and it we all had rooms. It was the best time we'd ever had. A captain was assigned to us, and he took us around to every place. Nothing was cheap, and we were at clubs and we went dancing. My dad said, 'Who's going to pay for all this,' and they told him, 'The government.'"

Colalillo went to the Pentagon and then, on December 18, 1945, he and his entourage went to the White House to receive the medal. *"There were six or seven of us, and they searched us pretty good."* Gen. Dwight Eisenhower was in attendance at the presentation.

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.

As the fifth man out of six to receive the medal that day, Colalillo patiently waited his turn, and when President Harry S Truman hung the medal over his head, the president said to him, *"I'm proud of you. I rather have this than be president."*

He remembers the look on his dad's face when he got the medal. *"He was pretty calm, but his eyes popped out when he got to shake hands with the president."*

Colalillo returned home to Duluth and a month later he was honored in a city-wide celebration in his honor that featured the governor as the main speaker. At about that time he also received the Silver Star and a Bronze Star for his earlier heroics.

He tried college for a time and played some college football, and later got a job at Inter-Lake Iron where his father worked. His father died the following year.

The hell of combat stayed with him in the coming years. *"I adjusted pretty well. I had a few nightmares, and when a car would backfire, I'd jump, but as time goes by it all fades away."*

He married Lina in 1946, and continued to work at the iron plant. They had three children. He suffered a serious injury when he got his arm caught in a conveyor at the iron plant, and he lost much of the use of the arm. When the plant closed in 1959, he was out of work.

"I was fortunate that my brother was president of the longshoremen, and he got me into the union. That's just when the seaway was opening up, and the port of Duluth was booming. I worked there for 29 years, the last 19 as foreman at the warehouse."

He retired in 1987, and that same year had a triple bypass heart surgery. The surgery has held up, but Colalillo is on a strict regimen of medications.

Did he ever get job offers along the way based on his Medal of Honor? *"Yeah, I had offers, but they were always looking for a talker, and I'm not a talker. What I should have done is stayed in the service. I would have had it made."*

He gets mail constantly from people around the country, some just to congratulate him, and others who are seeking autographs. He always writes back.

Looking back on being one of a handful who received the nation's highest honor, Colalillo is typically humble.

"I happened to be in the right place at the right time. If that officer hadn't been there to see it, it would never have happened. Others did the same thing I did, but there was nobody there to see the action."