

## He defused mines, lived

### Saint Clair's Bulino required courage, steely nerves

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Pfc. Michael Bulino gingerly held the trigger wire attached to a German booby trap while infantrymen crawled beneath it on their way to assault a hill near Schmidt, Germany.

Bulino's unit, the 596th Engineers, an airborne unit that fought with the Army's 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment, was trying to cross the Kall River and take the hill - which had been given the strategic designation of 400 - for an observation point. After picking their way through a thick forest, they found a minefield.

Bulino, a Saint Clair native, and Cpl. Donald O'Neal, began clearing a path through it, carefully probing with bayonets, digging up the hidden instruments of death and placing them to the side.

After helping the men through the booby trap, they waited until daybreak and began dismantling the trap.

The sunlight that enabled them to finish this task on Feb. 7, 1944, also allowed the Germans on the ridge of Hill 400 to see the advancing infantry. A firestorm of machine gun bullets and mortar shells rained down, tearing the unit apart.

In terror, the men retreated, forgetting about the minefield.

Bulino and O'Neal began to shout, trying to guide the men toward the path. It was impossible to alert them all.

Bulino and O'Neal took cover in a foxhole to wait out the firestorm, and when night fell, they resumed clearing the minefield.

The following day the infantrymen were driven back again by heavy shelling, but this time, they remembered the mines.

On the third night, Bulino and his comrade set out again to clear another path.

This time, they couldn't find the minefield and, after an hour of searching, stopped for a break. As Bulino sat down, a German flare allowed O'Neal to notice that his friend was about to lean back on a Shue mine.

They had inadvertently wandered right into the middle of the minefield they were trying to clear.

When the task was finished, O'Neal sent Bulino back to bring up the infantry. He got lost and, silhouetted by the German flares, was almost shot by his own men.

When daylight came again, the Germans started shelling and Bulino and O'Neal were sent to find G Company.

Bulino stopped a straggler retreating from the Kall River and asked if he had seen the company. The man said no and was instantly felled by a German bullet.

To this day, Bulino thinks that the soldier wouldn't have been hit if he had not stopped him and that he might have been hit instead.

The three days near Schmidt were the worst of the war for Bulino, who came down with pneumonia shortly thereafter and was in the hospital when the war in Europe ended in May 1945.

Bulino's stint in the Army began in 1943.

As a mine worker, he was safe from the draft. He was not, however, safe from loneliness.

One summer day he paid a visit to a Saint Clair pool hall, only to find it empty.

"All my buddies were gone, so I volunteered," he said.

After basic training at Camp Macall, near Fort Bragg, N.C., he volunteered for airborne duty because he thought he'd "be a hero."

Bulino became an engineer, meaning he cleared minefields, repaired roads and dug ditches. It also meant he marched right along with the infantry, carried a rifle and, when the fighting broke out, was just like any other infantryman.

The 596th Engineers may have been part of an airborne unit, but they did more walking than jumping.

They arrived in Naples, Italy, by boat and set up camp in an extinct volcano outside the city.

Orders were to remain in the camp, but when night fell, like so many others, Bulino descended to the ancient city.

It was June 1944 and "we were still at war with them," he said, so there wasn't much to do except wander the lonely streets because everyone was safely locked away at home.

Yet, from the balconies above, Bulino, a Saint Clair native, heard singing. It

would start on one, with the inhabitants of a neighboring house taking up the song in a round as the first chorus of voices faded into silence.

"I'd like to hear that again," Bulino said wistfully.

By that time, the Germans were retreating, and the Allied forces had to follow rapidly to keep them from reorganizing.

"I walked that whole boot of Italy," Bulino said. "Sometimes, as we passed a farm, they would come out and give us a jug of wine."

The fighting was fierce and Bulino's unit had gained enough experience to be of better use in France, where the Allies had opened up a third front against the Third Reich.

This time, they would have to jump into combat. They pulled back to Frascati on the outskirts of Rome for preparations. On Aug. 15, the sky over Le Muy in southern France filled with paratroopers.

Bulino said the weather was good, and since the jumpers ended up scattered all over the place, missing their drop zones, they only took light fire as they went down.

The fighting in southern France was heavy, though, and during the next three days, the German lines were thrown into chaos.

Over the ensuing months, the 517th fought its way up the Rhone Valley, boarding railroad cars for the move to Soissons, near the border with Belgium, where they arrived on Dec. 12.

"They packed us in like cattle," Bulino said.

Four days later, the Germans launched a massive assault, splitting through and creating a "bulge" in the Allied lines at the Ardennes forest, giving the conflict its name.

The Battle of the Bulge was fought in bitter cold and lasted until Jan. 28, 1945, by which time, the Germans had been forced back through Belgium. Bulino's unit made its way to Schmidt shortly after that.

When the Germans surrendered on May 8, Bulino was in the hospital. By the time his battle with pneumonia was won, he was down to 90 pounds and had jaundice.

"I looked like those guys in the concentration camps," he said.