


## The combat stories of **HAROLD STEENBERGEN**



**Dates of Service:** May 11, 1944-1946  
**Branch of Service:** Army  
**Unit:** 409<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 85<sup>th</sup> Division  
**Locations:** Italy  
**Battle/Campaigns:** Po River Valley

Harold Steenbergen recalls the time he spent during intense combat in Italy, the freezing conditions, and the close calls he encountered with mortar and machine gun fire.

These stories were compiled by an interviewer, who prefers to remain anonymous, and goes by the nickname 'Kilroy Was Here.' These stories are posted through a partnership between 'Kilroy Was Here' and the Witness to War Foundation. Permission to use any of these materials must be granted by 'Kilroy Was Here,' which can be obtained through the Witness to War Foundation.



I received my draft notice on my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was the 4<sup>th</sup> of May, and was given seven days to report to Attenbury, Indiana. After finishing my basic training I found myself heading overseas on the USS Monticello along with over 5,900 other boys. The 14-day trip overseas was anything but a pleasure for me, as I was very seasick all the way over, and I bet I lost 20 pounds by the time it was over with. I was one of the happiest boys you ever wanted to see when we docked in Naples, Italy and couldn't wait to get my feet back onto dry land. From the docks, we were trucked some eight to ten miles inland to a small valley where a large tent city was set. I had never in my life seen so many tents in one place at one time. Each of the tents became the home for six to eight guys.

During our stay here in this tent city a heavy rain started falling, and it wasn't long before most of the tents were flooded with mud. As always, it wasn't long before they came around looking for so called truck driver volunteers. We spent the following day hauling gravel to line the tent floors, and it was my job to spread the gravel.

It wasn't long afterwards that we were mustered and told that if our name was called out, we were to return to our tent and pack our gear to move out. That day they called out some 200 names, one of them being mine. We returned to Naples where we loaded onto a LCI for our trip north to Leghorn Harbor.



The harbor had been a port the Germans had used, but now it was lined with sunken ships of all sizes that our planes had bombed. With all of the docks damaged from the bombings, we landed on the beach. After getting ashore, we were quickly loaded into the back of trucks and moved inland. As night fell, our convoy continually made its way down the small winding mountain roads with all the trucks running without lights. About half way into our trip, a low flying German fighter came roaming over, firing as he made his way down the convoy. I remember sitting there in the back of the truck scared to death as I watched the guns from his plane firing, and the tracers making their way down the line of trucks with a number of them hitting close to my truck. During the whole 20 minutes that this went on, our convoy never stopped to allow us to take cover. By morning we came to a stop at this Red Cross Camp and as we unloaded, we were greeted with coffee and donuts. Once again our home became eight man tents in some turnip patch. I knew we were near the front lines now because of the rumble coming from the artillery and each time I heard it, I wondered what was ahead of me.

The following day was December the 14<sup>th</sup> and once again they called out the names of 15 to 20 of us, and we were told to grab our gear. From here, we marched up the steep slopes of the mountain to the front lines. As we made our way up, I became hungry and ate the



rations I was given. It wasn't until we got to this one spot that I realized how close we were to the front lines. Here, one man at a time would have to run across the snow and ice as we made our way to a safe spot. As you ran, you would hear the sound from a German sniper's rifle as he fired at you. Luckily, we all made it across without being hit.

From there we made our way on up to where we were placed into two foot deep holes with some of the older guys. We called these holes, which had sand bags around them, singers, and I was placed with one of the machine gun crews. As we sat there I asked the sergeant where the chow line was. He asked if I had brought some with me, and I told him that I had become hungry as we made our way here and eaten what I had. After he had explained I was to have saved some, he left and returned shortly later and handed me enough to get me through the night. Some days later, they weren't able to get food up to us. All of our rations, ammo and other supplies came up on the backs of mules.

From our holes that overlooked the Po River Valley, we watched the German troops. By mid-December the Germans turned loose on us every morning with their artillery and machine gun fire. From then on, each morning you knew to get as low as you could in your hole because you knew it was coming. During the day, for the most part, it was quiet but as night fell, our artillery would shell them and we would



join in with our machine guns.

The nights were long and bitter cold with sub zero temperatures and each of us only had a short wool blanket, which didn't cover our feet. At night you would have to wake up and rub your feet to get the circulation going. It was the only way to keep from having frostbite. I saw guys in my squad being carted off with their feet black from frostbite.

We were up there on that mountainside for so long that I lost track of time and didn't even know what day it was. The only reason I knew it was Christmas was because the Germans didn't fire on us that morning. The only other morning we had a break from the morning shelling was due to our artillery gunner using white phosphorus on the German positions. As the shelling stopped, you could hear the Germans screaming.

I remember one day how this German had me in his sights as I ran for cover. I could hear the bullets as they passed by me. As they did, I hit the ground and crawled my way to a hole and dove in. No sooner had I ducked into the hole than an artillery round hit next to the hole which caused me to be covered with dirt. I remember sitting there all day deaf from the explosion. Even today I wonder how he missed me.

After weeks of being up there, we were relieved and made our way to a camp near Monte Cassino where we were able to have some hot chow, clean clothes, and a bath. No sooner were we settled in than the Germans



launched an attack and we were sent back to the front lines. I remember Captain Booth called a meeting and said, “I want to talk to you all for a few minutes” and as he did, he started cry as he went on to say, “I may not see many of you again after tomorrow morning. It’s going be a rough one. We’re going up against a lot of firepower.” The first thing facing us was the Po Valley and then the Po River had to be crossed.

The following day we loaded in the back of the trucks and started down the road. About an hour down the road, the trucks came to a stop and as they did, we unloaded and set off into the dark of the night. The reason for the night movement was to avoid the German snipers. About an hour or so down the road, Captain Booth stopped us and told us to dig in. By now Don and I were back together and shared the same hole. We sat there the remainder of the night not saying a word; I bet you could have heard a pin drop. Later on as we sat there, we heard the words every soldier hoped he never had to hear, “Every man for himself.” At the time we didn’t realize that the Germans had withdrawn and only left a few men to guard the withdrawal. They would fire a few shots, which made us keep our heads down. It wasn’t long before the few they had left behind came down and surrendered to us.

We moved out again only to run into pockets of soldiers who would fire a number of shots to slow us down. After being pinned down for a while, you would



see a white flag pop out, and the guys in the front would take them as prisoners as they came out and pass them on back through the lines.

The villages we came to had no food but the villagers would run out to greeting us with, “Gratzi, gratzi Americana,” and offer us what they had. Mostly it was some homemade wine. The kids would also run out thanking us for running the Germans off.

I recall the night we were advised that there were land mines in the area, which was also a sign the Germans may be close. After hearing this news we dug in for the night. The next morning there were these two horses running across the field in front of us and as they made their way, the ground around them started exploding, killing the both of them. As we left that morning, I looked back out into the field where the two horses lay, only to see this old Italian man sitting on one, cutting its hip off to feed his family.

One evening we found this large barn to spend the night in. The next morning I woke to the sound of cows mooing. There must have been 200 of them being led by this Italian man. As the cows came into the barn, Don and I went straight to work milking the first one and it wasn't long before we had us some fresh milk. It also wasn't long before other guys were asking us to fill their canteens too. It was comical as Don and I stood there watching some of the city guys as they tried their best to milk a cow.



Then there was the day, while checking out this barn, that Don and I found this large pile of eggs. As we stood there looking at them, this Italian man came in and offered to sell us two eggs for fifty cents. We bought two, which we boiled in a helmet. They were some kind of good and far better than the powdered ones we had been eating.

As we moved through the small villages and towns we never saw any men, only the women and small kids with their hands out waiting for something to eat. Years later in life, I met this old Italian man who grew up in Italy during the war. He said if it hadn't been for the kindness of the GIs who came through his village and gave them some of their rations, they would have starved.

One foggy, misty day we ran into a German squad that didn't want to go down easily. Bullets were flying all through the air as they came from a large house in front of us. In no time, we found cover where we could and returned fire with everything we had. I knew we tore that house up with all the rifle and machine gun fire we were putting into it, but they wouldn't give up. Finally we had to call in a tank and as this Sherman made its way up the street and pointed its 75mm gun at the house, the Germans got the point. White flags started popping out of every window. It wasn't long until we saw six Germans come out of the house with their hands over their heads walking close together.





After they had gotten a few feet from the house they stopped and as they did, a seventh soldier darted from behind the others, firing a machine gun at us. As he did, I watched as two of our guys fall to the ground.

Needless to say, the rest of us opened up, cutting him down along with three of the others. The remaining three stood there in shock as our guns fell silenced.

By this point in time, it was early spring and the weather turned out pretty and we made it into the Po River Valley. As we made our way through the Verona area, I was stunned to see all the trenches, rifle pits, and machine gun positions the Germans had dug on the so called Adige Line. If they had stayed there, they would have killed a lot of us. From there we moved on, with ducking pot shots, being pinned down, and having Germans surrender becoming an everyday thing for us.

We weren't to fire at a church and they weren't to be using them as cover, but I guess someone forgot to tell this one group of Germans. One spring morning as we walked across this dike, I saw this postcard of a church just ahead of us and all at once bullets start whizzing past us. We quickly set up the machine gun and as we did, the Captain told us to put a few rounds up in the bell. The bullets bounced off the bell and tore through the church. It wasn't long before the Germans didn't want any more of that and out came a white flag. About 40 Germans came out along with a number of women.