

Pat Morrissey at Battle of the Bulge

by
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Sitting in Patrick and Beth Morrissey's living room with its panoramic view of Keating Valley and the Wallowa Mountains, it was difficult to start an interview of Morrissey's World War II experiences. So, initially we talked about his 50 years of ranching in Keating Valley.

A week before, I learned Morrissey had served in World War II when discussing the movie "Saving Private Ryan" with his stepdaughter, Betty Goodenough. She said Morrissey had been in the Battle of the Bulge as a 19-year-old green combat soldier and at the end of the war he was one of just three men remaining of the original complement of 220 in his company.

Morrissey was drafted in the spring of 1943, just after he turned 18 years old and still in his senior year of high school in Seattle. He obtained a deferral until graduation, then went directly into basic training in Texas. After basic he was sent to Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge by the Army to study engineering.

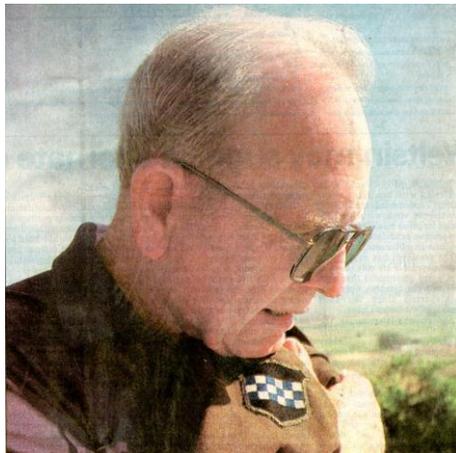


Photo by John Collins, Baker City Herald

Pat Morrissey Holding His WWII Jacket

But after the Allied invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944, replacement troops were needed on the front lines more than engineers. So Morrissey and the other 20,000 students in the Army Specialized Training Program suddenly found themselves back in infantry units.

After a short period of training, Private First Class Morrissey shipped out with the 99th Infantry Division for Europe in September 1944. It was a division with no combat experience.

In late October Morrissey's company was bobbing around in a landing craft in the English Channel. After three days of waiting in line with hundreds of other craft, the men waded ashore on the same beaches where Allied troops had suffered devastating casualties on D-Day. Even though liberation had come several months earlier, the French citizens still cheered as the trucks, headed for the front on the Belgian-German border, rolled through France.

The soldiers of the 99th Division dug in on a two-mile section of the front on the border between Belgium and Germany. Due to trees and the distance between foxholes, they could not see or hear the men in neighboring foxholes. For 30 days in zero-degree temperatures, Morrissey's home, which he shared with another soldier, was a six-foot cubicle in the ground with a log roof topped with dirt.

Feet were kept warm with four pairs of socks and a little heat supplied by a gasoline fire in a C-ration can. Soot turned the underground dwellers' faces black.

Just a few hundred yards away, old men and boys manned the concrete bunkers of the WWII German Siegfried Line. U.S. troops lobbed mortars at the bunkers but could do little damage unless a round went down a smoke stack. The Germans, in turn, shelled the Americans, and at night sent out patrols camouflaged in white which easily slipped past the widely-spaced American positions.

In mid-December, Morrissey's company began hearing the clanking of tanks and observed new campfires in the forest opposite them. These activities were reported to superiors, but they seemed unconcerned.

Then at two o'clock one morning, without warning from high command of an impending German counter offensive, an all-out artillery barrage rained down exploding shells on the green troops. The barrage was followed by tanks and seasoned German troops which advanced on the thin American line. Morrissey's platoon sprinted from its foxholes to fighting positions on the top of a bluff which German tanks and troops bypassed due to its steepness.

Morrissey and his battalion suddenly found themselves about ten miles behind enemy lines. For four days they hunkered down in a defensive position while waiting for orders from a command in disarray.

On the fourth day, orders were received to move out under cover of darkness. When nightfall came, a thousand troops started an all-night trek holding hands in the darkness. Mistaking the movement for Germans, skittish American troops on the line called in artillery. When they heard incoming shells, the hapless soldiers hit the ground, then picked themselves up and kept moving. "If you lost someone's hand who was killed, you found someone else's," Morrissey said.

Eventually the troops made their identities known and crossed into friendly territory. But by then the ranks of Morrissey's company had been decimated by the combined effects

of German and friendly fire. Out of the 220 men, only 22 were left, including just one of the company's six officers. The rest were either wounded, killed, or captured.

Reinforced with fresh troops, a new company was formed in about thirty days under the command of the remaining lieutenant, who promoted 19-year-old Morrissey to supply sergeant. Morrissey credits his new position with helping keep him alive during the rest of the war.

Still not out of harm's way, Morrissey crossed the Rhine River over the Remagen Bridge just after its capture by the Americans. Troops and vehicles streamed across the bridge while the Germans were trying to knock it out with artillery fire and air strikes. Morrissey remembers running over the bridge past dead soldiers wondering, "Am I going to make it?"

By the time fighting stopped in the spring of 1945, Morrissey's company, which continued suffering many casualties, had fought its way across Germany and crossed the Danube into Austria. By then only three of the 220 men of the original company remained: a lieutenant, a platoon sergeant, and Morrissey.

Instead of becoming a chemical engineer after discharge from the Army in 1946, Morrissey obtained a degree in animal science from Washington State University in Pullman. Then he joined his stepfather, Robert Steward, in running the cattle ranch on the north side of Keating Valley. The ranch was acquired by Steward shortly after his own discharge from the Army Air Corps in 1945.

As their herd of purebred Hereford cattle grew, they acquired more and more land in the valley. Not content with their excellent herd of Herefords, they added Limousin cattle in 1969, ultimately building that herd into the fourth largest Limousin herd in the United States.

Today, 73-year-old Morrissey and his wife, Beth, have retired from the cattle business and sold all the land, except for 27 acres and the house with a view of the valley and mountains.

Morrissey said, "The movie 'Saving Private Ryan,' really hit me hard. When you've been there...I had forgotten. It all came back like a ton of bricks." The scene in the movie that was for him the most realistic was the fighting in the village at the end of the film. He said his company went through many villages, each with its church steeple, which tanks routinely would reduce to rubble. "It was almost guaranteed that there'd be a German up there," Morrissey remembered.