

## Mario Pomponio, an American Hero – Part Two

As detailed in my last column, in the few short years Mario Pomponio lived in our community he accomplished a great deal, culminating with being named valedictorian of the Fairport High School class of 1944. Shortly after graduation, he began his service to his adopted country in the U.S. Army, and was sent to Fort McClellan, Alabama. He soon penned a letter to the Fairport newspaper, stating “The Infantry wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but after the first two weeks it has sort of grown on me, even though the training is tough”. He noted that his friend Hank Battaglini claimed his Combat Engineers to be the toughest unit in the service, and said, “There are a few million men who will back me up when I say that the Infantry is second to none in toughness.” Young Mario then described his weapons training: “We’re going to get 17 weeks of training here and during that time we’ll always be on the go. This week we’re firing our M-1 rifles for the first time and it’s swell.”



After a brief Christmas furlough in Fairport, Mario Pomponio, the raw recruit, was sent overseas. On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1945, he joined Company E of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry in Wihr-En-Plaine, France, and was immediately thrust into battle. The squad was badly depleted by casualties, and only five men remained. At dawn of Mario’s second day with Company E, about sixty Germans attacked, supported by tanks and automatic gun fire. Greatly outnumbered, the skeleton crew of Americans withdrew to a position in an abandoned house behind a six foot high stone wall. The Germans rained shells and machine gun fire on the handful of Americans, but they had difficulty retaliating, as the height of the wall prevented them from taking direct aim at the enemy. The men were trapped, and their options were few.

Without saying a word to the other four men, Fairport's recent valedictorian took matters into his own hands. He charged out of the house as enemy gunfire erupted around him, and vaulted to the top of the stone wall. His one-man attack surprised the German machine gunners, who he quickly dismissed with a few accurate shots from his M-1 rifle. Tank and mortar shells exploded around him, and the other four soldiers of Company E, still in the dilapidated house, could see Pomponio's silhouette, illuminated by the burning houses behind him. Firing all the while, he sprinted toward a second machine gun nest, and again with his M-1 rifle, eliminated the threat. As gunfire continued to fill the air, Private Pomponio charged across the courtyard to an adjacent barn, and incredibly, overpowered the ten enemy soldiers inside, who became his prisoners.

In testimony a few months later, a member of Company E described Private Pomponio's actions as "singlehandedly smashing a formidable enemy counter-attack" and against overwhelming odds, "entirely eliminating the enemy force". The testimony concluded with the statement, "In the four days he was with us, he became a legend. I have never known a braver man."

**Next:** Recognition for a hero

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