

## MICHAEL COLALILLO

MEDAL OF HONOR RECEIPT:

### **Born**

December 1, 1925 Hibbing, Minnesota

Entered Service **World War II**

Drafted: 1944 as Private first Class, U.S. Army Company C

398<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division

Discharged

1945

### **Died**

Friday, December 30, 2011



### **Early Years:**

Let me introduce you to a special American, Mike Colalillo. The second of nine children, Mike was born on December 1, 1925 in Hibbing, Minnesota shortly after his parents emigrated from Italy. He grew up in a tough neighborhood in western Duluth, Minnesota and left Denfeld High School without graduating. It was a hard time in the Colalillo household. Mike was a young boy whose family struggled through the Great Depression and a teenager who left school in order to help support his family by working in a neighborhood bakery after the death of his mother. He was the smallest and fastest member of the Raleigh Street Kids. They were rough and tough; they made their presence known. Mike was a pretty tough guy, and he was nicknamed "Egan" after a well-known Chicago bad guy. However, this boy was a softy and always willing to share with and assist his friends.

He made many touchdowns in football and was a pretty good hockey player. Perhaps a little more exuberant than most and was often called for boarding. The referee would blow the whistle and Mike would yell, "What for?" It became quite a frequent scene and soon, every time the referee would blow the whistle and point at Mike, the whole crowd of spectators in unison, would yell. "What for?"

Because of trying times, a person either becomes strong or becomes passive. Mike, a street smart young boy, is described as having a quiet dignity, surprising shyness and a touch of greatness. His records in the service attest that Mike overcame the adversities of a poor upbringing.

### **The War Years**

Drafted in 1944, he was an eighteen years old, 5 foot 11 inch, 145 pound recruit, and was a private when he landed with the 100<sup>th</sup> Army Infantry Division at Marseille. The episode that changed the young

soldier's life took place early on the morning of April 7, 1945, in the vicinity of Untergriesheim, Germany, where German resistance to the American advance was particularly heavy. You can read about Mike's military accomplishments in his citation from the President of the United States. Keep in mind that in Mike's first battle, he ruptured an artery carrying a machine gun. After two months in a French hospital and another month in England, he returned to the front.

In his own words, let me share with you some things he said about himself.

'We were greenhorns. The more you went into the combat the more you knew then. A little bit more here and a little bit more there. Then you knew when to duck and when not to duck, and this and that. That's a long time ago'.

"We were all scared anyway, and not only the other guy, but me too. When you're young like that, sometimes your adrenaline just comes to you and you're going, boy."

"We were all pinned down, we couldn't move. If you get up we'd get shot at. We lost a lot of men there, oh God, we lost a lot of men in there."

Asked how do you think life would be different if he had not received the medal? "I have no idea, but it didn't change me. I'm still a shy guy who doesn't like to talk about himself."

Mike treats fame like perfume. It's great to be around and wonderful to smell, but he wouldn't want to swallow it.

What does Colalillo remember about that devastating day in 1945? "I don't like to remember it to tell you the truth. I was scared--very scared. The feeling I had was to shoot or they'd shoot me. It was something you had to do. I think of how your friends got killed alongside you. That comes back to you once in a while."

When asked by newspaper editor, "What did you do to earn the Congressional Medal Mike?" His answer "Oh, they've got a citation around here on it someplace"

At the white House, Mike recalled while President Harry Truman was pinning the Congressional Medal of Honor on Mike's chest, the President told Mike "I would have rather got his Medal of Honor than be the President of the United States."

One of Mike's responses to the medal was, "It was an important moment in my life. No question"

A few of his friends commented that his outward calm belied the fireball his friends say he was earlier that year on the battlefield. He certainly didn't act the part of a Yankee infantryman who had blasted 25 Germans out of his path as he and his buddies went rushing in on what he calls "a pretty big battle, I guess."

As a former military man, fellow VFW member John Marshall recognized and respected Mr. Colalillo's tremendous courage during his time serving in WW II. "I know the hell Mike would have endured. The carnage seen by soldiers is just something that can't be explained...There were multiple actions displaying real valor. I wanted to honor this man."

For Colalillo, the medal is something that became more important to him as he grew older. He's been widely recognized for this prestigious honor. Still, he doesn't take his military honor too seriously. He

says right from the beginning, his friends in West Duluth made sure that didn't happen. They said "How could a little twerp like you get the Medal of Honor?"

### **Post War**

He was discharged from an Army base in Wisconsin, returning by train to Minneapolis and then home, sharing a memorable bus ride to Duluth with his friend and fellow World War II veteran, Tom Dougherty. It was now a time of victory, a time to shed the shadow of death, a time to celebrate all the good things in life. Not long after his discharge he received the Medal of Honor. He was now 20 years old.

Mike Colalillo's decorations and awards include:

The Combat Infantryman Badge

European-African-Middle East Campaign Service Medal with Bronze Stars

Good Conduct Medal

Purple Heart

World War II Victory Medal

Overseas Service Bars

Two Bronze Stars

Silver Star

French Campaign Ribbon

Other honors he received include a Bronze sculpture of Mike Colalillo given to City Hall in 1978

Plaques in various veteran's memorials.

A street named in his honor.

Induction into the Duluth Hall of Fame.

Displays of Mike's citation and portrait hang at two museums. The Duluth Depot Veteran's Memorial Hall and The Bong Museum in Superior, Wisconsin.

'Mike Colalillo Medal of Honor scholarship Fund,' a Scholarship fund of \$25,000 was invested to present an award each year to a student from St. Louis County who is enrolled in a higher education institution. "It's great to honor one of the people who I consider to be the finest citizen in Duluth's existence. His name will be perpetuated in history from this day forward."

After returning to Duluth, Mike and Lina Nissila were married on November 16, 1945. They had two daughters and a son. They lived in the Western end of Duluth for many years.

He was employed by Interlake Iron Works Company in 1946. In 1950, Mike got his left hand caught in a conveyor belt which caused a permanent injury, making his hand nearly useless. After his injury he became a Long Shore Man, and years later retired from the Duluth Port Authority.

Mike's life was filled with many friends and family members. He died on Friday December 30, 2011 at the Ecumen Bayshore Care Center and is buried at Forest Hill Cemetery in Duluth. The church was filled with not only these friends and family but, those of us who stood in awe of an everyday neighbor, fellow worker, a gentle giant in our eyes and a man who deeply loved his country. The streets were lined with

people standing holding their hands over their hearts and flags flying as his funeral procession slowly passed. I wish that our citizens would honor all of our brave veterans in similar ways.

“Mike Colalillo’s story is one of countless stories that paint an important and very individual picture of the patriotic effort made by legions of veterans” “but, there are many more human experiences that are invaluable in portraying the whole picture of war”. “We need to preserve, protect and remember so that future generations will understand the way life was in those difficult challenging times”.

Preserve in honor the United States veterans who served in harms-way and the heroes who never made it home.

Our friend, Mike stands in the midst of all young men and woman who also had fought so gallantly.



**Submitted by Royleen Newman, Past Regent**

**Greysolon Daughters of Liberty, NSDAR**