

Marion 'Mode' Maras Remembers

'Last Days' of WWII Became Last Line of Defense

By John Fannin

In late 1944, Ronald resident Marion (Mode) Maras and the 75th division artillery proceeded towards mop-up action in the European front during World War II. The war was thought to be nearing an end. "Eisenhower said the war would be over by November," Maras recalled.

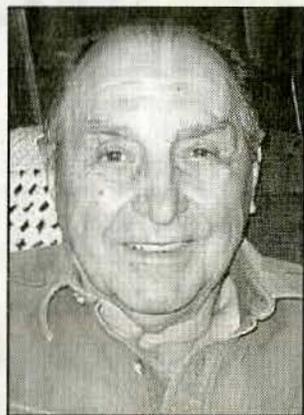
Little did Maras and his fellow soldiers know that their mop-up in what was thought to be the war's last days would propel them into a last line of defense known as the Battle of the Bulge.

The biggest land battle of World War II, the Battle of the Bulge involved one million men in the heavily forested Ardennes region of eastern Belgium and northern Luxembourg from Dec. 16, 1944 to Jan. 25, 1945.

Of that number, 600,000 were Americans, including Maras and the 75th.

It was Europe's coldest December in 40 years, but the battle was about to heat up in the Ardennes. "Guys could hear equipment moving behind enemy lines," Maras said.

Indeed the Germans were massing equipment and men to make one final push. What resulted was a counter-offensive which the Germans began Dec. 16 on a broad front, or bulge, in the Ardennes with the goal of reaching the Belgium port city of Antwerp.



Mode Maras

"They threw everything into that attack," Maras said of the enemy's desperate effort, "they knew if it didn't succeed the war would be over."

If the Germans could reach and



Mode Maras, circa 1944

hold Antwerp it would effectively split the American and Allied troops and, at the very least, prolong the war long enough for them to attempt negotiations for a favorable peace.

While the Germans massed for a final push, America and its allies' confidence was at an all time high. Just six months earlier in June 1944, D-Day was successfully launched and conviction steadily grew that the war was all but over.

By the time Maras and the 75th arrived in the Ardennes Region on Dec. 24, fighting was fierce. In the first days of the battle American and Allied forces had already suffered severe casualties.

He explained that the Battle of the Bulge did not see a "Christmas truce", rather fighting continued unabated throughout Christmas Day. In fact, the German army even massed a major attack on the holiday.

The battle raged unrelenting throughout the last week of 1944. "One time we had gone a couple of days without sleeping," Maras said. "Guys were so tired they couldn't carry any more ammunition to the front so the cooks brought some up."

The darkest days for Maras and the 75th came on Dec. 28. In the early hours that day the command was received to destroy all weaponry and retreat. Just 30 minutes later, Maras recalled, the command switched dramatically to hold the line at all cost.

"We all thought that was it. We were the last line of defense," Maras said somberly. "They weren't taking prisoners and we weren't taking prisoners. If their infantry broke through against us we didn't have a chance."

On Dec. 28 alone, the 75th artillery fired more than 4,000 rounds of cannon fire. "They were within 600 yards of us," Maras said.

He gave high praise to the 75th infantry for their sacrifice and heroism. "We had it easy compared to the infantry," Maras observed, "They were amazing."

The 75th held the line until reinforcements arrived on the scene. The worst was over and in the first weeks of Jan. 1945 the threat gradually subsided. A little more than three months later Allied European victory was secured with V-E Day on May 5, 1945.

The U.S. and its allies were not prepared for a major battle in Dec. 1944 or for the cold which dropped temperatures to as low as five degrees. "The cold was as much an enemy as the Germans," Maras said "about half our casualties were from frozen feet."

Casualties suffered at the Battle of the Bulge were devastating. The U.S. alone suffered 81,000, including 19,000 killed.

In retrospect, it's amazing that Maras and so many of the 75th survived. They, too, were not prepared for a major battle in Dec. 1944. "Our division was not trained to fight," said Maras, "we were sent there for a policing action to keep order."

Thankfully, they not only kept order but also kept the Allies' last line of defense intact to ensure an end to the war in Europe just three months later.



Operation Enduring Freedom

Memorial Scholarship Established

Last month, the nation's largest veterans organization announced the creation of a memorial scholarship for children of members of America's Armed Forces who died while on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001.

"We know that meeting the cost of a college education can be difficult for the average household. But, it is a major financial burden for one-parent families," said Richard J. Santos, national commander of the 2.8 million-member American Legion. "The brave Americans who sacrifice their lives in the battle against terrorism are heroes. We have an obligation to help their children reap the benefits of higher education as they become the future leaders of our nation."

Children of active duty military personnel and federalized Guard and Reserve personnel, killed on active duty on or after Sept. 11, 2001, will be eligible.

Funds for the program will come from donations and bequests from a variety of sources. Awards will be based on financial need, leadership, schol-

arship and citizenship. Disbursement of the funds will begin in 2003. Thereafter, the scholarships will be awarded annually.

"As Abraham Lincoln said, '...let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan,'" Santos said. "The American Legion is proud to continue that legacy."

The American Legion Sept. 11 Memorial Scholarship was established by the Legion's board of directors, meeting in October at national headquarters in Indianapolis.

Anthrax Comparison

Although the threat of Anthrax should not be ignored, there is also little reason for panic as is reflected in the following yearly mortality statistics:

Car accidents:	41,611
Common flu:	20,000
Murders:	15,517
Airline crashes:	120
<i>(Average over 19 years)</i>	
Lightning strike:	90
Anthrax:	4

Veterans Fair at Wenatchee

The Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) will be holding a Veterans Information and Assistance Fair from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 17 at the Veterans Hall, 215 Okanogan Ave. in Wenatchee.

Veterans and their families are encouraged to come by and receive information and assistance on a variety of benefits related to veterans issues including service-connected disability, vocational rehabilitation, VA healthcare enrollment, survivor and burial benefits.

The fair is part of an effort to bring services directly to the more than 649,000 veterans in Washington state.

WDVA's program manager, Richard Stewart, believes the Information and Assistance Fairs give veterans a better opportunity to file compensation and pension claims, and provide access to the professional group of advocates at the Federal Veterans Affairs offices in Seattle.

"The emphasis is on local service officers helping the local veterans," said Stewart. "People from local veterans service organizations will be on hand, as well as a VA homeless representative to answer questions and provide veterans and their families the direction and support they may need."

The Veterans Information and Assistance Fairs will be held in the communities where assistance can be provided to the largest number of veterans.

For additional information, please call 1-800-562-2308 or Lonnie James at 509-457-2736.

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