

# Robert Flick

*81st Combat Engineers/C  
106th Infantry Division*

December 17, 2004 - Memories still haunt Battle of the Bulge vets

SALTSBURG--Those who survived the biggest, and one of the most desperate, battles in the history of the U.S. Army still carry marks left by the deadly clash of Allied and Axis forces along the borders of Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Six decades after the Battle of the Bulge--the final Nazi counter-offensive, lasting from Dec. 16, 1944 to Jan. 25, 1945--Salzburg's Robert Flick hasn't forgotten how the leader of his combat engineer unit was maimed.

"My commanding officer was James Wells of Detroit," the 80-year-old Army veteran noted. "He got a foot blown off when he stepped on a 'shoe mine.' "

Rather than killing Allied troops outright, he said, Nazi strategists preferred to wound them seriously enough to tie up valuable resources behind the lines.

Said Flick, whose tasks included setting explosive charges to target enemy structures, "The Germans were very intelligent. They knew it took 15 people to take care of every wounded man.

"Their anti-personnel mines were made with wood and plastic, which was relatively new then--so you couldn't detect them with a metal detector."

He explained, "There were just enough explosives so that it would take a foot or hand off. It was just enough to put you in the hospital."

Held in reserve, Flick's unit--the [81st Combat Engineers of the 106th Infantry Division](#), didn't cross the channel until four months after D-Day. He recalled, "We went up the Seine River and unloaded near Paris and did some marching. Then they put us on trucks to take us into northern France."

Flick said "We were in some minor skirmishes" and helped surround a pocket of Germans near Rennes, France. "They were deloused, cleaned up, fed and put on trucks," Flick said of the captives.

But his unit still was considered "green" when the Battle of the Bulge caught it and the rest of the American Army by surprise.

At the time, the heavily forested Ardennes was not seen as particularly ripe for a major clash, with German activity seemingly limited to lobbing shells at opposing Allies.

Flick's unit was posted near the small towns of Winterspelt and Hackhalenfeld.

"These little towns each consisted of a church, 10 to 15 houses, a bar, a cemetery, and that was it," Flick said. "We were about five to 10 miles away from the Siegfried Line," Germany's defensive position along its western border.

"We were relieving a veteran division, the Second," Flick added. "They said, 'Fellas, there's nothing to worry about but a short round,' " referring to an enemy projectile which fell short of its goal--hitting a forward unit, such as Flick's, instead.

In the early hours of Dec. 16, Flick and others in his company were wakened by the sound of explosions and debris falling on the roof of the barn where they were sleeping.

He recalled, "Somebody said, 'That's outgoing mail,' " suggesting it was the sound of American artillery dropping shells on the nearby German lines.

But, Flick pointed out to his buddies, "With outgoing mail, you don't have debris falling on the roof."

They knew they were under attack when "The sergeant came in and said, 'Ga-ther up your equipment, go down the road and dig in.' "

As Flick moved out, "That was the last I ever saw of my personal equipment.

"I had just gotten a Christmas present from home: a beautiful leather shaving kit. I never got the chance to see what was inside it."

Soon, he and his companions were more worried about close shaves from enemy fire.

Early in the battle, Flick noted, "The German tanks broke through our lines, and eventually the infantry did, too. They penetrated 25 miles into Belgium."

In his unit, as with most others, "There was mass confusion. An order came down to destroy your equipment; it was every man for himself."

Flick decided to keep his gun. But, he got separated from his outfit, and, "All of a sudden, I was isolated."

He came upon a fellow G.I., who advised him to make for a nearby truck--the best shot at getting away from the Germans.

Flick recalled, "I came within sight of the truck and I could hear shells coming from an 88 mm German artillery gun."

As he sprinted for the vehicle, "Three shells hit within 30 yards in front of me and to either side." The impact "kicked dirt in my face and knocked me down."

But, "None of them went off," or he believes he would not have survived. "Can you believe the luck? Maybe the shells were low on ammunition."

He was vaguely aware of other G.I.s dragging him to the truck and placing him in the back. But, very soon, luck ran out for everyone.

Flick recounted, "We ran into a pocket of Germans. Their confusion was every bit as much as ours." Still, "They captured us."

For Flick, the situation now was reversed from Rennes. But he avoided the trip to a POW camp.

He, the other truck passengers and additional American captives were herded into an area along an open road. But, while the mass of prisoners was still disorganized and milling about, Flick said, "I decided to make a break for it"--figuring it was his only chance.

"It was a spur of the moment thing," he said.

Although there were guards posted, "It was at night."

Edging away from the center of the crowd, he said, "I ran to the side of the road and hid behind some bushes. Nobody noticed me."

During the next four days, "I did a lot of hiding," occasionally scrounging food from passing American units.

Eventually, he was taken in by a Belgian family--including Alfred and Eva Matey and their daughters, Aimee, 18, and Gisele, 12.

Flick noted, "They hid me for several days. These people were starving to death, but they shared what food they had with me. I tried to get them food from other outfits moving by."

Finally, Flick learned from some of the passing soldiers where the remains of his division had gone, and he rejoined the ranks.

According to Flick, his unit's commander, [Col. Thomas Riggs](#), pulled off an even more ambitious escape:

"He was captured and sent to Germany. But he escaped and worked his way back...to France. He joined our outfit again once we had got inside Germany."

By the end of January, when the battle was winding down, Flick's division "had lost two regiments and part of a third. I had 13 men in my squad and I cannot account for four or five of them--if they were captured, wounded or killed. To this day, I do not know."

He pointed out, "The engineers were doing lots of different things in different places."

Flick said bad weather temporarily grounded planes during the battle and limited shipments of supplies to the front.

The weather broke in time for the G.I.s to enjoy a turkey dinner at Christmas. Until then, Flick and his fellow soldiers existed mostly on crackers, chewing gum, cheese and the occasional bouillon cube for making broth in their K-rations.

Tank crews feasted on C-rations, which included jelly and Vienna sausages.

Flick noted he and others sometimes traded their C-2 explosives for C-rations.

He explained, "C-2 was an explosive that looked like a pound of butter.

"The ground was frozen so hard, the tank crews used the C-2 to blow a hole when they were ordered to dig their tanks in and use them as artillery."

Overcoming any squeamishness about what otherwise might seem a ghoulish practice, front-line soldiers commandeered needed gear from the dead--friend or foe.

Boots were the first to give out and always prized.

So Flick was quick to grab galoshes from a dead paratrooper.

"He had been killed evidently while he was still in the air because his gun was never fired," Flick said.

He also traded his M-1 rifle for the dead paratrooper's carbine.

"It didn't have the killing power of an M-1, but it could shoot more shells and it didn't weigh as much," he noted.

But the galoshes were "the most prized possession," he said.

"When I went to sleep at night in my bedroll, the galoshes went with me," to prevent someone from slipping them off his feet while he slumbered.

"The toughest thing in any war is personal hygiene," Flick said. He recalled, "From Dec. 16 until mid-March, I went without a bath."

Finally, the logistics were right for bringing in portable showers.

"We had one minute to soap and one minute to rinse," Flick said, noting, "We took off all our clothes, and they poured gasoline on them and burned them right on the spot."

He can't recall where he lost his galoshes. But, by then, the winter weather had broken and he didn't really miss them.

Flick noted he was wounded by the bullet of a fellow G.I. who was "horsing around" with his firearm: "I almost lost two fingers."



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