

Vivid memories of Nutley resident Anthony Stefanelli**Veteran recounts his
winter of '43 to '44 experience**

[The following is a memoir of Veteran Anthony Stefanelli's experiences during World War II.]

After Christmas of 1943, the Allied Forces in Italy became bogged down in mountainous Italy below Mt. Cassino at the Volturno River. The High Command decided that a landing at Anzio, approximately 20 miles south of Rome, was the thing to do: Hoping the Germans would withdraw and allow the Americans to advance north. However, the Germans fooled us. We were allowed to land and establish a beachhead, but instead of retreating north, the Germans brought more troops south and encircled us, maintaining the high ground.

Our Regiment was operating the port of Anzio at the time and was subject to long-range artillery shelling and air strafing. On February 10, 1944, our Regiment was assigned to a British Division to operate as infantry on the north flank between the sea and the British Division.

The day we moved in, after unloading, we were assigned spots to dig-in. Ed Heckel and I were put together and told to share a foxhole. We commenced to dig. The ground was fairly soft and sandy so digging was not too difficult. We dug until darkness when the hole was about 3 feet deep. Heckel said he was tired and hoped that the hole was deep enough. He said, "Let's rest."

When I sat down, my head cleared the top of the hole, but Heckel was 6'2" tall, so he had to sit or kneel in a crouched position for his head not to protrude. At one point, Ed said, "I wish to hell I were short like you, Stef." I was one of the shortest men in the company and, for the first time, it felt good.

As darkness approached, we took turns sleeping and watching. Around midnight, I was on guard duty and I heard something approaching. I called Ed and alerted him to keep his eyes open for movement straight ahead. As I raised my head above the top of the hole to see what was coming, shadows of a herd of buffalo cattle stopped in front of us and raced back toward the German lines. Some of the cows tripped land or personnel mines and for the next week we ate fresh meat for a change.

For 45 days this hole in the ground was our home. Of course, we improvised as we went along: We made the holes deeper, eventually covered them with fallen trees, put dirt over the trees and tried to make them as shell-proof as possible. We connected holes with other trenches and also made larger room-size holes where we could gather, stretch out our legs or eat together. The temperature during this period ranged from 35 to 45 degrees. Each man had a small shovel which he used for fox holes and also for burying his toilet

waste. We carried sheets of toilet paper in our helmets. Most of our sleeping was done in a sitting position.

Our daytime movements were held to a minimum. No more than two guys were allowed to gather at one time. You went to the kitchen area, got your food and returned to your hole or sat in a wooded area, out of view, sitting on your helmet.

The Germans commanded the high ground and could observe any and all of our movements. The only deterrent to constant shelling was when our Piper Cub airplanes would fly over our lines and remain almost motionless in the air, observing enemy fire, if any, and call for counter fire. Also, the Germans did not believe in wasting ammunition. When they fired, it was to hit something; a truck, a tank, or troop movements. The Americans, on the other hand, had ammunition to spare and fired all day long just to keep the Germans underground.

We learned to stop ducking whenever a shell went by. If you heard the swish, then the shell was either to the right, left, or over your head. You never heard the shell meant for you.

During this period, I grew a mustache for the first and only time in my life because shaving was of no importance.

Anthony Stefanelli