

# Separated by time and distance, veterans of Battle of the Bulge reconnect

By Gene Warner News Staff Reporter

## **John V. O'Connor, 89**

Hometown: Niagara Falls

Residence: Grand Island

Branch: Army

War zone: Europe

Years of service: 1943-46

Rank: Corporal

Most prominent honors: Purple Heart, European Theater of Operations Medal with three battle stars, Presidential Unit Citation

Specialty: Paratrooper

In his mind's eye, John V. O'Connor still can visualize the battle scene in Belgium seven decades ago.

His 101st Airborne Division was taking a pounding from an undetected German tank in January 1945, a month into the Battle of the Bulge that began 70 years ago Tuesday.

About a foot of snow had fallen. O'Connor, now 89, saw a tiny black square more than a mile away and quickly figured that the tank's fumes had melted the snow there.

Focusing on that dark spot, O'Connor, working as a squad leader, saw a flash of light.

"The tank commander fired his gun, and I knew it would take five or six seconds for the shells to hit us," O'Connor recalls. "I said, 'Hit the ditch. One's coming in.' It hit pretty close. But I got everyone in."

O'Connor later called for a direct airstrike on that German tank, and when that was carried out, he thought of his best Army foxhole buddy, Richard Olson, who had suffered a serious arm wound just hours earlier in an attack that killed two paratroopers.

“When the bomb knocked the tank out, I said to myself, ‘This one is for you, Richard,’ because I was ticked off that he was wounded.”

After a postwar victory parade in New York City in January 1946, O’Connor and Olson lost track of each other.

Until last month.

That’s when a Lewiston Public Library project and the O’Connor family’s desire to solve the mystery teamed up to put the two men in touch.

It started when Michelle A. Kratts, the library genealogist, asked around for a World War II veteran whom her son Brendan could interview for a library project. O’Connor agreed, and during the interview, he showed Brendan a photo of himself with Olson.

Kratts later took her research skills to the Internet, searching for Richard Olson and the 101st Airborne and finding that he was being honored in his home state of Missouri.

After O’Connor agreed that it wouldn’t be too upsetting to reopen some of his most disturbing World War II memories and images, his sister, Maureen O’Connor Weber, called Olson in Missouri, reaching his wife, Mary Lee.

Here’s how Weber, who calls her brother Jack, recalled that conversation:

“ ‘Hello, Mrs. Olson,’ ” she said. “ ‘My name is Maureen O’Connor Weber, and my brother is Jack O’Connor from the 101st Airborne.’ ”

“Would his name be John?” Mrs. Olson asked. “My husband has been looking for him for years.”

“I said, ‘Mrs. Olson, I think I’m going to cry.’ ”

“She said, ‘Don’t cry, dear.’ ”

On Nov. 15, four days after Veterans Day, the two men talked for the first time in almost 69 years. They’ve now talked about six times.

As O’Connor wrote, in a longhand note to his buddy, “I can’t believe we found each other after all these years – 69. It’s like a closed door opened for me.”

Weber, who said she has always been proud of her older brother, is grateful that this decades-old mystery has been solved, closing some of the gaps in his history of military service.

O’Connor’s daughter, Lorraine O’Connor-DeRosa, agreed with her father that renewing the friendship with Olson has opened new doors.

“I had heard most of the war stories,” she says. “But now this has led to more stories that make my brother (Daniel) and me proud.”

O’Connor was 18 when he enlisted in the Army in June 1943, after having worked for a bake shop and at Nabisco Shredded Wheat.

“I was patriotic as hell, but they were going to draft me, anyway,” he says.

O’Connor also was wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, suffering shrapnel wounds in his back and over his left eye. But he stayed on the front lines.

That prompted what had to be the scariest letter, from a congressional office to his mother, Loretta.

“It has been with regret that I have learned through the War Department that your son, Pfc. John V. O’Connor, was wounded in action in Europe,” the letter stated. He later sent his family a letter saying he was all right.

After the war, O’Connor and his wife, Evelyn, settled in the Town of Lewiston and later Grand Island. They had three children, seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, and he retired from Occidental Chemical Corp., where he worked as a pipe fitter.

O’Connor still can spin a yarn or two, although some of his tales may not be fit for a family newspaper, including stories about his giving a pack of cigarettes to the exiled king of Spain in Switzerland and once whipping Mickey Rooney in checkers.

After all these years, renewing acquaintances with his buddy Olson in person may be difficult for O’Connor, as physical limitations make it hard for him to walk more than a few yards.

“I wish I could pay you a visit, but it’s more than 20 feet to get there,” he wrote Olson.

Then he signed the letter, “Your Best Friend, John O’Connor, Fellow Paratrooper.”