

When New Year's Noise Meant Death

by Richard J. Maloy, 397-K

Ed. note: Written by Richard J. Maloy in 1965 who was working as a journalist-editor on the Washington Post on the 20th anniversary of the German attack against our Division. He was a rifleman at Rimling in Co. K, 397th.

A bitter wind knifed across the snow-covered fields and crept into the foxholes dug along a French road within sight of the German border on that New Year's Eve 20 years ago. The snow crunched under my combat boots as I moved from one hole to the next, delivering my nightly message to the infantrymen huddled down inside the icy excavations. "The password tonight is Baloney," I said.

I remember the message I delivered during the waning minutes of daylight on that New Year's Eve, even though it happened in 1944. I have almost total recall about everything else that happened that night. It was a night to remember.

My company, which was part of the 100th Infantry Division, in the U.S. Seventh Army, had taken positions around the town of Rimling in Alsace-Lorraine just before Christmas.

Although it had been quiet during our stay in the snowy foxholes around Rimling, we had received almost daily intelligence warnings about German troop movements opposite us. There had been another intelligence warning that afternoon, and I transmitted the alert to the riflemen as I made my rounds with the all-important password.

When I completed my rounds of the foxholes, I returned to the platoon headquarters. It was a foxhole dug atop a slight knoll just behind the row of riflemen. It was a big hole and there were four of us: the platoon sergeant, the medical corpsman, another rifleman and myself.

Shortly before midnight, and the beginning of the year 1945, we thought we heard movement outside the hole. The sergeant tried to raise company headquarters on the phone to call for an artillery flare, while the other rifleman and I peered over the lip of the foxhole and into the darkness.

At the stroke of midnight, there was a sudden clatter, shadowy movements in the field 100 yards in front of the rifle squads' foxholes, guttural shouts and a spatter of small arms fire. Then, from somewhere just in front of our foxhole, came the stutter of a German burp gun and almost immediately something hit my steel helmet and sent it spinning off my head and down to the bottom of the foxhole. I emptied a clip from my M-1 in the direction of the burp gun, then bent to retrieve my helmet. It had a neat round hole in the front, and a jagged gash into the rear, indicating a German bullet had gone completely through the helmet just a fraction of an inch from the top of my head.

The sergeant was still busy with the phone, so I turned to show the helmet to my companion who was still peering into the field, half in and half out of the foxhole. When I touched his shoulder, he fell sideways and I discovered he was dead. The machine pistol burst which had wrenched off my helmet had caught him squarely in the head.

By that time, the sound of small arms fire outside our hole increased. Shouts and yells came from the field below, which was filled with running German soldiers clad in white camouflage parkas. They had launched a full scale attack, without benefit of the usual artillery preparation. Almost at once, the foxholes of the rifle squads in front of us were overrun.

The sergeant and I fired at the shadowy figures we could see, but soon we discovered that there were German troops behind us—and realized we were surrounded.

The next hours were a nightmare of firing and reloading, of wondering how long we could hold out, of knowing the rest of the platoon had been captured or killed, and of wondering how much of the New Year we would live to see.

We were still there as the first light of dawn started seeping across the dark sky. But we had only three clips of ammunition left, and stealthy sounds outside our hole indicated the enemy was still present. Then, from the direction of Rimling, came the unmistakable sound of tanks.

There was an agony of waiting. Were they rescuing U.S. tanks? Or were they German Panzers?

The roaring tank motors drew closer, but we didn't dare raise our heads to discover who they belonged to.

"Hey, anybody still here," came a shout from the tank commander in wonderful, unmistakable American.

"Yes, there are three of us here," we shouted back.

The tank commander was cautious. There were enemy all around and he was taking no chances. "What's the password?" he asked.

"Baloney," we yelled deliriously. "Baloney, Baloney, Baloney," we kept yelling as we climbed out of the foxhole and ran toward the tanks on the first day of the New Year.

Reprinted from the Washington Post, Editorial Page, Page A12, Friday, January 1, 1965.

Holiday 1998 Association Newsletter