

Dear Lillian: A Memorable New Year's

by Henry Pouch, 397-K

I was with Company K until the end of the war. During the last week of the fighting, I sustained a march fracture on a bone in my left foot. I walked 100 miles in three days on a broken foot and when my ankle was as large as my thigh, the first sergeant agreed that I should go back to the medics. After six weeks in a walking cast, I was returned to the company, but did not get any further than the regimental personnel office. I became the company clerk for Company K. I attended the Fourth of July Presidential Unit Citation ceremony as a spectator. One night, I was CQ at the regimental personnel office, I had to be awake all night and I had a typewriter available, so I wrote the following letter:

9 July 1945

Dear Lillian

Summer is here in Germany, with all of its beauty, the long hard winter is just like a memory of a bad dream. To tell the truth, I never expected to be here, now, alive.

Last Wednesday, the fourth, we were presented with the Presidential Citation for our stand at Rimling, France, our never-to-be-forgotten New Year's celebration.

It was New Year's Eve. A bright, cold moon shone down upon the toy-like town of Rimling and the surrounding hills. In the town—and in the foxholes on the hills—the men of the Third Battalion were hardly aware that a new year was beginning.

Most of them slept. Somehow, living in a foxhole was not conducive to blowing horns and throwing parties; they'd wait until they became civilians for that. Those who were on guard kept a watchful, lonely vigil in the night.

They had been keeping that vigil for a week now—since Christmas, to be correct. The Jerries were getting ready for something but nobody knew what—or where. Probably not here; it was too calm, too peaceful in the rolling hills around this little toy town. No, not here.

I was pulling guard at the company CP that night; just that very afternoon I had come down from my foxhole on the hill to do some hair cutting at the company CP and since there was more to be done the next day, I was staying at the CP for the night. [A note of explanation: We had not had our haircut since landing in Southern France at the end of August. In early October I wrote and asked my sister, Lillian, if she could get me a hand-operated hair clipper. On the morning of New Year's Eve, 1944–45, I received a package from Lillian that contained the very prized hair clippers and when the company commander heard that "POUCH HAS A PAIR OF HAIR CLIPPERS IN HIS FOXHOLE," he sent the new replacement who had just arrived to take my place in the hole while I was drafted for haircutting detail at the company CP in the village.] It was also my chance to get warmed up near the small stove—such a luxury—that we had in the CP.

I pulled the first four hours of guard that night and then I stood and talked with Jack, the fellow who relieved me, for a little longer than an hour. The clock ticked on, the bright moon shown on the newly fallen snow and we talked quietly of home and friends, postwar plans. The clock ticked on. It was 0005, 1 Jan 1945.

Suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, there were Nazis charging up the hill toward our positions. A guard saw them and a shot rang out, reverberating through the night air like a banshee's wail. There were more shots, sporadic at first and then like a dozen motorboats starting up at once. "Attack in King Company sector!" "Redoubt post calling company CP—we can't shoot them all, they keep right on coming . . ." and then there was silence . . . the wire was cut. The Jerries had overrun the first platoon sector. We called for artillery and after what seemed like an eternity—though it was only a few seconds, perhaps a minute or two—the cry, "On the way!" German bodies flew into the air as the earth quaked with the explosions. More explosions and then the screams of proud SS troopers lying wounded, "Kamerad! Karerad!"

There was still a firefight going on up the hill. The first platoon CP—through surrounded, with one of the four men manning the position killed—was still holding out. Tanks were called for and when two of them finally arrived at the company CP, they proceeded up the road to where the first platoon had been. They went forward with machine guns blazing and returned shortly with five men walking along side, the survivors of the first platoon. The GIs from my foxhole were missing in action. The man who took my place in our foxhole was dead.

Not all of the Jerries had been killed or driven back, some had infiltrated into the town and sniper fire whistled its song of death in the streets of Rimling.

When the attack started, I went up with three other survivors of the first platoon to a house on the very edge of town, just several hundred yards behind where the first platoon line had been. We had our artillery zeroed in, mortar set up, and if the Jerries did come our way, we were prepared to give them a big HELLO!

Up to this time, the battalion positions had not received much artillery fire, but then it came. The Jerries threw everything in the book, and I think that they threw the book at us, too. There was not a house in Rimling that was not hit at least several times. Early the next morning, a shell made a direct hit on the company CP, killing three men and wounding

six others. Again I had escaped injury or death. During the day, the Jerries moved their tanks into position where they could place direct fire against our lines and the town.

The men could not leave their foxholes. It was impossible to take rations, ammo, or water to the men. They ate snow to quench their thirst. Food? What's that?

On the afternoon of the second day, a platoon of Company I came to fill the gap in our lines and I went to a foxhole in our third platoon area. There were three of us in the hole then. We were finally able to get a little sleep. I had been awake, wide awake, for all of 72 hours and my eyes were beginning to play tricks on me. The row of bushes became a German patrol trying to creep up on us, the "orchard" came to life, and the "trees" made faces at me.

The little corner of ground being held by the Battalion was about the easternmost piece of land in the entire sector. Other armies, other divisions, other regiments, battalions, and companies reeled back with the main counteroffensive, but 3d Battalion held fast.

To hold the ground meant everything. There was nothing behind the Battalion. If the Germans broke through, it would have become the southern arm of a huge pincer movement to join with the wedge in the north and threaten large portions of two American armies.

The battalion commander, Colonel Esbitt, knew that the men in their foxholes, unable to move for long days and nights, hungry and sleepy from relentless attacks, could not hold much longer.

"HOLD" he told them.

"We can't," they answered. "Their tanks are firing directly into our holes."

"HOLD," said the Colonel.

"It's impossible," they said. "The men have not slept. They have not eaten. They suffer from trenchfoot. They suffer from exposure." "No one can maintain this position," they said. "Our lines are too thin." "We have lost too many men." "We will break soon."

"HOLD," said the Colonel.

. . . AND THEY HELD.

Such was the story of Rimling. At the time, we never imagined that we would be gathered in the large public square in Goppingen Germany on the fourth of July to be decorated by the commanding general of the Sixth Corps, but now the deed is only a memory. Many of the men that were with us then have marched their last mile and gone on to await the final roll call. They sleep beneath a white cross in a foreign land.

It was a feeling that I can't explain, that came over me as I stood there and listened as Major General William Morris, commander of Sixth Corps, prepared to present the Distinguished Unit Citation to Company K [and all of 3rd Battalion].

The official citation read:

BATTLE HONORS—CITATION OF UNIT

27 June 1945

By direction of the President, under the provisions of Section IV, Circular Number 333, War Department, 1943 and with the approval of the Army Commander, the following named organization is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action:

The 3d BATTALION, 397th INFANTRY REGIMENT, is cited for outstanding and exceptional accomplishment in combat during the period 1 January 1945 to 5 January 1945 in the Bitche sector, rear Rimling, France. The 100th Division was assigned the task of defending against an expected enemy attack in force, which had as its objective the capture of the Saverne Pass, a vital terrain feature in the Seventh Army front.

The 3d Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment, occupied a defensive position on the left flank of the Division. Suddenly, at midnight on New Years Eve, the enemy [17th SS Pz Gren. Div.] launched a fanatical attack, the main effort of which encompassed the 3d Battalion and units on its left. The unit on the left of the 3d Battalion was driven back during the course of the day some five thousand yards. Because of the width of the front, reserves were not available to fill the gap. A platoon of the left company [my platoon] was overrun by the enemy tank-infantry assault, and the enemy infiltrated in force into Rimling, behind the lines of the battalion.

Notwithstanding the exposed and tactically disadvantageous position in which the battalion found itself, it succeeded in restoring its lines, capturing or killing the infiltrating enemy. For five days, the battalion in this exposed position was subject to repeated attacks from the front, flank, and rear by enemy tanks and infantry, accompanied by mortar and artillery fire. Repeated attacks by troops of this division and the division on the left to establish the line and make contact with the left flank of the 3d Battalion failed. The 3d Battalion, nearly surrounded, still held on, despite heavy losses and a disadvantageous tactical situation, which warranted withdrawal.

However, in so doing, it inflicted such heavy losses upon the enemy and impressed him so much with the will of our troops to hold on, that further offensive action on this part of the front by the enemy was discontinued.

The action of this battalion, therefore, played a decisive role in thwarting the enemy from attaining his vital objective of Saverne Pass and enabled the division to hold its position without a serious change in dispositions. The extraordinary heroism and determination, *esprit-de-corp*, and effective fighting displayed by this unit in successfully accomplishing this unusual and rugged task was an inspiration to other troops in the sector, and reflected the greatest credit upon the forces of the United States.

BY COMMAND OF BRIGADIER GENERAL MURPHY:

J. O. KILGORE

Colonel GSC

Chief of Staff

We actually held our positions for ten days. They could not get to us with food or water. We ate snow. The Germans had Tiger tanks with their 88mm cannons. We were in our foxholes with the rocket "BAZUKAS." If you hit the front of the tank, the rocket would just bounce off. If we got the side of the tank where the tank treads were driven, the shell might penetrate the tank and ricochet inside chopping the occupants into shredded bodies. We got two of theirs and then the rest of the tanks would not come any closer to us than 300 feet. If we got up out of our holes, they were firing at us with 50-caliber machine guns. If they hit you in the head, the effect was the same as hitting a pumpkin with a sledge hammer.

At the end of ten days, we had a very heavy overnight blizzard. The snowflakes were the size of birds. You could not see your hand at arms' length. There we were, 30 of us, left out of a company of 200.

At 2 A.M., the 30 of us got up and walked right past the Germans on the road. They did not see us because of the heavy snow fall. We walked a distance of twelve miles through snow knee deep. Since that time I have never had a BAD DAY.

The glory of war . . . I didn't want any part of it, but having no choice in the matter, I did my best and that was true of my comrades, too. They talked of home, school, postwar plans . . . didn't want any part of it but having no choice, they did their very best. Some day, Lord grant that it may be soon, we will go back to work out our dreams that were interrupted; and then having a choice in the matter, how can we do anything but our best? It is very late and I've much to do.

GOODNIGHT

Henry

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