

The “Lost” Battalion

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

In early November at dusk, in the chilly rain-soaked Vosges Mountain forest, as I was digging in for the night, Captain Campion sent for me—his company scout—motioned toward a nondescript soldier, ordering me to “take this man to Headquarters.” In the twilight, no rank was apparent, no name had been given. Tired and weary, I picked up the battalion line which has just been connected, handed it to the unidentified soldier and told him in no uncertain words that in spite of imminent darkness, trees, shell holes, and terrain, he must not lose this wire as it could be crossed by a German wire which could lead to one of their headquarters—as a guide, I had to maintain my bearings!

Not saying a word, he grunted understanding of my instructions and preceeded me into the darkening forest. Quietly cursing under his breath as he would fall into a water-filled shell hole or run into a tree, he doggedly held the wire for over an hour, at which time he stumbled over a tent rope—someone’s headquarters but no one was on guard! Regaining his composure and apparently recognizing a voice, he abruptly entered the tent—thankfully it was *our* 1st Battalion—not for his sake, but for theirs! In a few minutes, there was no doubt about who this previously unidentified soldier was, as I heard that command voice raising hell—it was Colonel Zehner, our battalion commander!

There were other times after this that our “Front-Line” Colonel would find Company C and ask for Private Steingrubey to guide him back to battalion, but after that first trip, there was no questions about rank, identity (red scarf and bravado), and who was going to hold the wire—me.

My last meeting with the legendary Colonel was after the war in a small town in Germany. Recognizing him and an aide approaching on a sidewalk, I called my group to attention and saluted. This show of military courtesy stopped him and his aide in their tracks. As he returned the salute, recognizing me, he smiled and said, “Steingrubey, just the person I need, Battalion moved today and I don’t know where the hell they went. I lost the Battalion again!”

PS: Colonel Zehner was, to me, an ICON. To me, a 19-year-old combat soldier, he was not only an outstanding commanding officer and the most decorated Centuryman—he was also my mentor. He informed me that anytime I ran a message from C Company, tell them at Battalion it was for the Colonel, his door would always be open. The fact is, he was seldom there, always in the field with his command, where he wanted to be. In his way, I felt he was thanking me for safely guiding him “back home” to his “Lost Battalion.” I always wanted to thank him for asking for me—it was an honor.

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