

Patrol(s) to Erching

by Mil Apetz, 397-I

Milford (Mil) Apetz entered the Army in October 1943 at the age of 19. He was assigned to Fort Belvoir, VA for 17 weeks training as a combat engineer. After finishing Basic Training he was placed in a topographical school where he graduated 12 weeks later, then shipped overseas to England in July 1944 as a combat engineer and topographer. Upon arrival in England, the Army decided they needed riflemen more than topographers and Apetz was given eight weeks of additional infantry training, sent him to France, eventually joining Company I, 397th Infantry Regiment at the end of November 1944 and he was glad to “. . . finally belong to something.”

Report of Mil Apetz, Company I, 397th Infantry

I was in Second Squad, Second Platoon, 397-I. When we first arrived in Rimling on December 28, 1944, our squad was dug in on the southern outskirts of the town near the outer edge of a small orchard. We were facing rearward (south); the enemy was to the North. Company I, being seriously under strength, was being held in reserve protecting the rear. Company K was dug in on the outskirts facing north and the enemy. The day following our arrival, some of us were told we would be going on patrol with men from another squad; we would be led by Lt. Shovlowski, who had recently been commissioned after serving as our first sergeant.

Thirteen of us went out on December 29 with the assignment of finding out if the Germans were in the village of Erching, about three miles north of our lines. We found no Germans there. The people of Erching were hiding in their homes and as we searched around the village, looking for the enemy, little by little the villagers appeared and told us that the Germans had recently departed. The civilians were happy to see us and indicated we were the first American troops to arrive in Erching. As a gesture of friendship, one old gentleman gave us some apples as we departed. Quite a gift, when you consider that no doubt there was a food shortage in the village.

After returning to our lines, I got back to my foxhole and had chow as evening set in. Soon with a lot of scurrying round, we were told to get our gear together as we were going back to Erching to set up a road block. By this time it was dark.

On this visit to Erching we strung telephone communications wire. Upon arrival we were assigned positions on both sides of the road leading into town from Rimling at a “T” intersection. (The road from Rimling ran straight north through town, with an intersecting road coming in from the East in the center of the village.) Lt. Shovlowski was in a stone barn on the West side of the north-south road. Hank Budz and I were on same side in a rock pile north of the barn and across from the intersecting road that came in from the East. Some of the other guys were on the other side of the road from us with a BAR and the rest were with the lieutenant.

About 2 or 3 AM a German patrol came into the village. The BAR guys first spotted them and started firing; immediately killing and wounding several of the enemy soldiers. During the ensuing firefight, both of the BAR guys were killed by a grenade, which landed in the foxhole they occupied. Meanwhile, Hank and I moved from our exposed position to the nearby rock pile which offered some protection from enemy fire. We barely made it as a couple of grenades were tossed our way.

The firefight ended almost as abruptly as it began. The only sounds to be heard were moaning and cries for help from the enemy soldiers. One of them apparently went berserk and could be heard running from house to house banging on doors and begging to be let in. As far as we could tell no doors were opened.

As the relative quiet continued a dog started barking way up the street toward the Germany lines. Soon we realized that this was our warning and soon thereafter black shadows were seen coming our way, sneaking along the houses. One German, however, was fearlessly walking right in the center of the street. From the rock pile, I took careful aim at him; pulled the trigger and “CLICK”—the rifle refused to fire. Apparently, back in Rimling I had taken the wrong rifle as I departed for my second visit to Erching. Quickly, I picked up Budz’s rifle but by then the patrol had taken cover across the street behind some frozen manure piles, a prevalent sight in this part of rural France. Immediately, the Germans started firing and tossing grenades. They appeared to have one machine gun and at least two other automatic weapons and a *Panzerfaust*.

We were firing back and forth. Budz was shooting a Bazooka as I acted as his assistant. Between Bazooka loadings I was firing his M-1. As they would shoot we would duck and when they stopped shooting we popped up and shot at them. This went on desperately for over two hours. At one point, two Germans tried to get behind our rock pile. One was shot; the other ran away. Another soldier, seemingly on a suicide mission jumped up right in front of our rock “fort” and was immediately shot.

Meanwhile, Budz and I were getting low on ammunition. The Bazooka shells were nearly gone and I had very little ammo left for the rifle.

At about this time, Lt. Shovlowski phoned for mortar fire to aid in our situation. The first shell landed a few yards up the hill from our rock pile. Asked on our phone extension for better coordinates, I gave my best guess. The next thing—“BAM!”—right to our immediate front. And, we never heard it come in! (And, for some reason I recalled the old saying about never hearing the one that gets you!) Then, the third shell hit the German position and as more shells came in on their positions, the enemy silently withdrew.

By this time, most of the moaning had stopped indicating that many of the wounded were dead. As dawn broke, the patrol sent out from I Company to “rescue” us arrived and we withdrew.

On the road back to Rimling we pushed a baby carriage carrying the only prisoner taken—a big handsome German officer. But, seriously wounded, he subsequently died while being transported from Rimling to medical facilities farther to the rear.

Of the men on the patrol, only two were killed and one wounded. These men received Purple Hearts and the two BAR men who were killed (Max Toole and Troy Carroll) received Silver Stars. Lt. Shovlosky also received a Silver Star. All the others of us on the Erching patrol received Bronze Stars.

Erching—Additional Comments

As one of the members of the patrols to Erching, Tiges (“Frenchy”) Martin offers the following comments:

December 29th, was a clear and dry day and a bright moon that night. I certainly hope no one had to experience a firefight like the one we had. At one point in time, German “potato mashers” were coming thick and fast. Looking down, I saw one at my feet. Saying, “It belongs to him!” I grabbed the grenade and threw it back!

There were dead Germans all over the place. And, I was indeed saddened when I checked to confirm that nothing could be done for our two KIAs—Troy Carroll and Max Toole.

In the early 1990’s when I returned by auto to the Rimling area, I saw this sign “Erching” and I asked our guide to go there. The barn I remembered so very well was still there. The town had changed little from 1944—except the rock pile mentioned by Mil Apetz had been removed.

Erching Patrol

Editor

The 397-I patrol to Erching was certainly an outstanding achievement. Estimates vary, but perhaps 30 or 40 German soldiers were killed or wounded during the early morning hours of December 30, 1945. I have not read nor heard of a similar action in which so many of the enemy were killed or wounded by such a relatively small force.

Also, it is interesting to note that this penetration of some three miles directly to the north of Rimling occurred just a matter of hours before the German attack on December 31. This would cause one to believe that there may not have been much repositioning of the enemy forces prior to this fanatical New Year’s Eve assault.

April 2004 Association Newsletter