

## Baptism of Fire

Thomas E. Plante, a lieutenant who was later killed in action, took out a patrol to “feel out” the enemy strength approaching St. Remy, a small village to our immediate front. There was a firefight and Estil Crittenden was the first 100th Division man captured. The patrol returned intact, except for the lone captive. Two days later, on 4 November, we received the order to attack. We were to advance about 1,000 yards through a heavily wooded area and then across open ground into St. Remy. We moved out with my squad on the left flank, and had not advanced very far into the woods before we were pinned down by automatic fire from German machine guns. That was a scary moment in my life. Being inexperienced in fire fighting, the whole company was pinned down.



Moment of Truth

In the meantime, the German machine gunners were withdrawing. They were there just to slow down our advance. We finally got up enough nerve to move cautiously ahead. Then, two or three mortar shells dropped in our area. If I'd had false teeth, I probably would have

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swallowed or lost them. We knew then that they had us zeroed in and that we had to move forward. We cleared the woods and built up a base of fire on the slope leading into St. Remy. We were handicapped by the open ground, but assaulted the town anyway.



We called them screaming meemies

Occasional sniper fire from the church steeple, burp gunners, and machine gunners opened up, but we drove the enemy to the high ground outside the town of St. Remy. As the dark clouds were covering the town, we cleared the houses one at a time, going inside and searching each one while several men covered us from the outside. I spread my men out into the houses with orders for half the men to stay awake the entire night. We received many artillery and mortar shells all night long to keep us awake. We gathered some hay from the barns to sleep on and cover up with during the cold night. They were not Beautyrest mattresses, but it was better than nothing. It sure beat sleeping in a damp foxhole and at least we were dry. There were many artillery shell holes in the spaces between the houses where my lieutenant wanted us to dig in. Fortunately no one was wounded during the night.

We had been issued K-rations to last for one day before this attack and most of the men did not want to carry the extra weight so they had thrown them away. I carried mine

and much of what was thrown away in my ammunition bag. It was a good thing that I did because it was late the next day before food was sent up to us. I fed my whole squad for two meals with what I had. Then the battalion S-4 (supply) got the chow truck up to us and we had a hot meal.

One of the men in our company, John Bolin, found his father's initials carved in a house in St. Remy dating from World War I. He had been with an infantry outfit that also took this town in that war.

The next day our company moved up a little further in the woods and relieved a company of some other outfit. The squad leader took me around to all of their foxholes; they were all filled with water. He told me that my hole-to-be was much better than the others. I didn't look inside the L-shaped foxhole covered with leaves and dirt at that time.

After I had set up the defense area for my men, I went to get in my hole. Sergeant Beatty, my assistant squad leader, was standing around in disgust. Our hole had about a foot of water in it. As darkness began to fall over the area, nearly frozen rain began to pour down. I told Sergeant Beatty to go ahead and get in first and I would follow later. When I did try to squirm into the tight hole, Sergeant Beatty gasped loudly, "get out George, before I drown in this damn hole." It was about filled up with both of us halfway in it. The rain poured down and then artillery began falling. Sergeant Beatty stayed in the hole and I sat up beside a tree all night throughout the intermittent artillery and pouring rain. I thought dawn would never break.

All of us were nearly frozen from the cold rain and then morning arrived, bringing hope of survival from this bitter mess. We had been issued some tins of canned heat and never had I seen 12 men crowd around two little cans of heat before. It looked ridiculous, but at least, the men felt a little warmer. There was an abandoned house about 50

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yards out in the open field. Two or three of the men went to it and built a fire in the fireplace. Then the smoke from the chimney began to draw artillery fire. At least some of the wet clothes were dried before the house had to be evacuated.

The boots we wore were called "Shoepacs" and had felt pads inside on which we walked. The lower part of the boot was made of rubber. This made our feet perspire and, once those pads were wet, they were causing many cases of "trench foot" and the feet were then always cold. This also caused frostbite. My lieutenant sent several messages by his runner to stop the men from going into the house. In desperation, he told the runner that I was to shoot the next man to go in the house. My answer was that the lieutenant would have to shoot me as my turn was next. We didn't care about the danger because we were deathly cold. Good tactics dictates that an infantry unit cannot have fires as it always draws enemy fire.

We were very happy late that afternoon because we were relieved by the 3rd Division. Our battalion took over positions occupied by the 45th Division in battle-torn Pajaille. There was much talk about the 398th Regiment arriving to relieve us, but we were now seasoned enough troops not to believe in any rumors. It did make us feel better, however.

On the morning of 10 November, all three battalions of our 399th Regiment marched through the dark woods to trucks that carried us across the Meurthe River through the city of Baccarat. We were all keeping our fingers crossed that we would stop there and stay for a few days, but no, we moved through Baccarat and into the woods of Bois de Hingotte on the other side of town.

My squad was sent out in front of the rest of the battalion as an outpost to keep guard for them while they were resting in bivouac. We were out about 400 yards to the front. There, along a high bank, we dug in and covered our

foxholes with logs, dirt, and leaves. No rest for the weary! We had to be awake on guard for two hours, then two hours sleep, and back on guard again. One good thing about this position was, we did have dry foxholes and were served a few good hot meals. Those meals were gotten by allowing half of the men to go back the 400 yards to where the main body of troops was being fed. When they returned the other half was allowed to go. Most of the men took time off to write some V-mails and letters back home, and some selected men that could be spared from the outpost for a while, went to Catholic and Protestant services held on this Armistice Day. Our Company L, minus my squad that was on outpost duty, took the little village of Viney.

Snow clouds were dimming out the daylight and then snow flurries began to fall quietly over the foxholes. There was not a sound to be heard, but things were not as inactive as it seemed, for there were several patrols reconnoitering the highway up ahead. The Germans, meanwhile, had retreated into the thick forest for defense of their winter line. Their foxholes were well dug in a long zigzag affair with no tops on the trenches. We pulled out the next day on a slow advance maneuver behind the 1st and 2nd Battalions. Ton after ton of our artillery and mortars were poured on this German winter line. We were in support of the two battalions ahead of us, but we were being fired upon by 88s and other fire constantly.

Our company was not under rifle fire, but our advance had been zeroed in on by enemy artillery. The enemy winter wall, located on the high ground, was a perfect setup to hold, or so the enemy thought. They had set up barbed-wire entanglements about 150 yards ahead of their cleared fields of fire.

Companies K and I continued to advance under a huge volume of artillery support. They cut the barbed wire and

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poured through two gaps in the entanglement. About that time automatic fire from German burp guns pinned the men down in a roadside defile. As soon as Company M's machine guns were set up and with Company L infiltrating forward, the Kraut's winter line was broken and they retreated with occasional short firefights back to the next hill. We overran their positions, but later fell back to their zigzag line as darkness was beginning to fall over the area. We cut down trees and bushes to make cover for sections of the trenches.

The weather was then near the zero mark with nothing save a raincoat to cover with while trying to sleep. That was truly a miserable night, not a wink of sleep for some as we nearly froze to death. At about 2 AM, an enemy shell made a direct hit on one of our holes, wounding one of the men seriously and others not quite as bad.

Our medical aid man, George Demopoulis, was one of those not hurt too badly so he patched the other GIs up as best he could and led them down the hill to the battalion aid station. We certainly hated to see any aid man get hit as they are vital to a fighting unit. He soon returned though. Everyone was on pins and needles waiting for the next barrage. They had us zeroed in and hit us again at midnight. Luckily we did not sustain any more casualties that night.

About six the next morning we were issued three K-rations each to take care of the meals for that day. We knew that this meant we were going on the attack. An old combat expression was "we're going to visit Grandma." We moved out to the east with my squad being the extreme left flank of the whole 100th Division to secure the next hill that was about 3,000 yards to our front. We moved slowly through the dense forest for about 1,000 yards until we were pinned down by enemy automatic fire. A few of us crawled up and fired BARs (Browning Automatic Rifle) at the machine-gun nest to our front.

The two Krauts in front of us could not take it any more, so they put their hands up above their steel helmets and surrendered. One of the men escorted them to the rear and we slowly continued on our advance once again. The two Germans were an outpost designed to slow us down and also to warn the main body of their forces of our attack.

We marched onward through the thick forest of sky-towering pines for about 1,000 yards, to the base of a long, high hill. We ascended the hill and halted because visibility wasn't very good and we were very cautious about being sucked into a trap. There was some confusion about what our objective was. This did not look good to me; it was too quiet, so I told my men to dig in, in case of incoming artillery. We began to dig into the hard, rocky soil and had our foxholes about a foot deep when orders came to move out in the same direction. We had only gone about 100 yards toward the top of the hill when "all hell broke loose." There were intense 88 and other artillery rounds with tree-burst fragments landing all around. There were screams of pain all around me. A man next to me had a big 88-shell fragment that hit his ankle. There was nothing holding his foot to the leg but a tendon.

Nearby was a lieutenant yelling "medic." I crawled over to him, but he was barely scratched and I told him to bandage it himself, that there were others a lot worse off than he was.

Our old faithful medic, George Demopoulos, winner of the Silver Star and Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, was able to help the ankle wound enough to save the boy's foot. If that wasn't enough, our own artillery and mortars had received the fire order and they were falling short and right on top of us. It looked as if everyone around me was hit by both barrages.

All of a sudden, the enemy appeared to be nearly on top of us. The few of us remaining that were unhurt began to

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return fire. Their gunfire was way too much for us, and I knew we couldn't hold. I instructed those not badly hurt to try and carry the critical casualties back with them while we covered them. I have no idea where the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, or the company commander were during all this. Everything seemed to be disorganized. We had certainly been suckered into a nice trap and counterattack.

At that time, a Kraut fired at one of our men. The bullet went through a large tree that the sergeant was behind and killed him. I don't know if that started the stampede or not, but a few of the men went kind of berserk and started to run back down the hill. This caused a temporary panic because most of the men followed suit. Seeing this, and knowing that it would be the end of all of us if it kept up, two other squad leaders and I began to yell at them to stop running and to build up a line about halfway down the hill. We got most of them stopped and established a line of fire at a little incline. When frightened, men will act as animals do and run or stampede if there isn't a good deal of leadership to keep them from doing so. We were able to bring all of the wounded back, but had to leave the sergeant that was killed.

After we got a machine gun and several BARs firing, the Jerries halted their advance and the near rout was stopped. The wounded, including our lieutenant, were evacuated to the rear area to hospitals. We reorganized our squads and platoons and a fresh supply of ammunition was rushed up to us. Our platoon sergeant took command of the platoon.

Darkness was descending fast—very tall, thick pines and other vegetation caused it to get dark in the Vosges Mountains quite early in the afternoon and kept it from getting light again until late in the mornings—so we began digging into the hard rocky ground. It was slow digging and we were just about exhausted from the day's fighting. Dead on your feet or not does not mean you stop digging

into old Mother Earth, however, because it could save your life. In combat Mother Earth is the infantryman's best friend.

We dug well into the night trying to be ready for an expected enemy attack the next morning, or maybe a patrol out to infiltrate our lines during the night. Two men were assigned to a hole and one always kept guard while they took turns digging. Fortunately there was no enemy activity during the night. We could also hear the enemy digging in. The next morning I was called to the company CP, which was a large, foxhole covered with logs and earth. Captain Alphonso told me I was to take a few men and go to the top of the hill where we had been pushed back from the previous day. We were to remain there as a listening post during the night.

Our battalion intelligence officer had told him that the enemy had withdrawn from the hill and that there was no one left there. I was told I didn't need to use a tactical advance because no one was supposed to be up there. I tried to tell my commanding officer that the battalion S-2 was wrong because we heard the enemy digging in during the night. It would be a trap if we went up that hill. I went back to inform my men of the news. They got their equipment together and prepared to move out. I had them spread into a skirmish line prepared for a firefight with the Krauts who I was almost positive were there. We moved very slowly and cautiously ahead using the cover and concealment of the trees and bushes until we were about 150 yards in front of our lines. I halted the men and they took cover. I was behind a fallen tree. I yelled out in German for them to come out and surrender, not knowing whether I would get an answer or not. The second time I yelled, a Jerry bullet passed right near me, and then all was silent. I hit the ground and crawled over to my assistant squad leader who seemed to think that maybe there was a

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friendly patrol up there and thought I was a German because I had spoken to them in German. I instructed my squad to hold their fire. I then proceeded to holler in German and English when all of a sudden several burp guns opened up and bullets were landing all around us.

I then kept my mouth shut because the enemy always tried to shoot the leader if they could. We did the same thing. We knew then that the shots came from the enemy and we opened fire trying to "feel out" just how many and where they were. They couldn't hear due to the intensity of rifle and machine-gun fire. I finally got them to withdraw on a straight line since it is very dangerous to do otherwise. A staggered line could cause someone to shoot into their own men if they are not very careful.

The Germans called for mortar fire support and it started dropping near us as we got close to our lines. Luckily we did not suffer any casualties. The mortar fire was soon lifted and I reported to Captain Alphonso some very accurate information about the troops occupying the hill in front of us.

I returned to my foxhole about the time word was sent up to send half my men back to the CP to get chow. The set up on chow was this: the food was prepared and cooked in a rear area well back out of artillery range. All the company's kitchens were there under battalion control and they usually were not too far away from the regimental service company which issued the rations to the different mess sergeants, one from each company in the regiment.

After the food was cooked by each individual company kitchen, the prepared meals were placed into large air-tight containers, called Marmite cans, which kept the food and coffee hot. It was then placed on a jeep trailer and driven up to each company's area. If the company's four platoons were fairly close together, they would set up one area for the entire company to eat. A portion of the men would

come to the chow trailer at a time. If the platoons were spread out quite a bit, a second breakdown of meals was done and then each platoon was sent to their chow. In our present place all platoons were close together and we were sent back to a central area to be fed. These hot meals might not taste so good to a civilian back in the good old USA, but they were heaven for us in place of the K- or C-rations. Soon after chow, the platoon runner from the company CP arrived with word for me to report to the captain.

The commanding officer (commonly referred to as "the old man" behind his back) told me once again that the battalion S-2 had gotten word that the Krauts had pulled off the hill. Captain Alphonso wanted me to take a patrol to reconnoiter the hill and report the information back to him. I knew that the S-2 was all fouled up again, but I had to obey my CO's wishes. I couldn't figure out why he had to pick on me. Patrols are very dangerous and one is lucky to return without having casualties. Patrols are necessary, however, and someone has to take them. I returned to my squad area and gave them the orders. They were not happy over the situation at all. "Why do they pick on us?" They asked. This time I told them to go as light as possible. We only took our bandoliers, grenades, and rifles; no cartridge belts. Once again we spread out into a skirmish line to reconnoiter the hill. This time I gave orders to begin firing on anything they saw up there.

We had cleared through battalion headquarters and were told there were to be no friendly patrols to our front. We walked stooped over in a crouch to be as small a target to the enemy as possible. I expected to have a firefight with the enemy this time. We advanced to the spot where we had spotted the Krauts the last time we'd been there. This time the BAR man spotted them. He immediately hit the ground and opened fire on the enemy. They returned fire with intense automatic fire. I don't know how many of the

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Germans in a company-sized unit were issued burp guns, but it seemed as if nearly every one of them had one. They poured it on so heavily that we were forced to once again make a very hasty withdrawal. The American Army never retreats; it just advances in a rearward direction. Each man armed with the M1 rifle fired a clip of eight rounds very quickly, reloaded, and moved back a little further, all in a split second.

Once more it was difficult to get them to move at the right time. I don't know if they were scared to move out of their tracks or just confused by the bullets whizzing by them. We finally made it back to good cover in our foxholes. As soon as I could, I went around to see if there were any casualties. There were none, that is, from the Jerry rifle fire.

One of my best boys (Bob Hamer) had passed out from exhaustion with his finger right on the trigger of his grease gun which was pointing at his foxhole buddy Mike Rodriguez. This was a short lightweight submachine gun; just a touch on the trigger usually fires away a burst of rounds. It was just luck that it did not go off.

This time the Jerries did not call for mortar fire on us. I returned to the company CP to report on the patrol. I believe that the second patrol satisfied the captain that there were enemy troops on the hill to our front. At night, in the Vosges Mountains, we were given orders to shoot at anything that moved. None of us could get out of our holes after dark for anything, therefore. We had to do this because Jerry patrols had been notorious for sneaking through our areas and coming up from behind, speaking English, then stabbing men in the back. Germans were also very prompt about the times of day they would lay in a little 88 or mortar fire as everyday at the same time they thought we would be out of our holes for chow, or just before it became dark, or just after daybreak, they would

trouble us for a morale factor. It was very worrisome and caused some of the men to build portable latrines in their holes.

Nights in the Vosges Mountains were long and black. There was either freezing rain or snow flurries along with nearly zero weather. Most of the nights were so dark that one could barely see a foot in front of him. Such was the situation this night. We had eaten chow and were beginning the long procedure of two hours on guard, then two hours sleep, and then back on guard again. Everyone was scared to move as they stood or sat on the side of their holes for fear that a Jerry patrol was on top of them and would shoot point blank at them.

The night was so still that one could hear a pin drop when all at once a big burst of fire from about 35 yards was heard. There was never such a mad scramble for weapons. The men who were on guard quickly returned fire while their buddy in the foxhole was finding his best friend "old Betsy," the M1 rifle. Several grenades were thrown by our guys and we heard two or three of the Krauts hollering in pain. It was so dark that we couldn't see anything except the muzzle flashes of their rifles.

There seemed to be a little confusion going on among them and their rifle fire seemed to be getting farther and farther away, bringing silence once again. We had beaten back their night attack. Most of us were afraid to go to sleep for at least two hours after that.

With morning I expected to see several wounded and dead Krauts to our immediate front, but they had carried them back with them. Germans did not usually patrol or attack at night unless they were high on something like schnapps or cognac. I believed they were at that time because they whooped and hollered all during the fight. They didn't seem to have much nerve unless they were "tipsy."

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Snow began to fall early in the morning and the sky looked as if it could last all day. About 9 AM the next day, when light had finally penetrated through the skyscraping pine trees of the dismal forest, I again got word to report to the company CP. I shuddered to think that it might be another patrol.

How long could I last doing this? Three patrols in two days. This was going through my mind as I was on my way to the CP. My commanding officer told me the fateful news—another patrol. We were to make a combat patrol and, if possible, take the hill. We wanted to feel the enemy out in preparation for an attack on the following day. We were sent to find out how large a force it would take to capture the hill, if my patrol could not do so. I returned to the platoon CP to tell my platoon sergeant about the patrol and to get his permission to select some men other than from my squad to go with me on this one.

I picked Sergeant DiBattista, a big stocky man, to be my assistant. We then selected 13 good men for the patrol and loaded up with grenades and two bandoliers of ammunition. I gave the men our mission and withdrawal (if necessary) plans. We moved out in a spread skirmish line with Sergeant DiBattista on the left flank and me on the right. We moved very slowly but steadily up the hill, keeping as low as possible. It was so cold that the fingers could not do something as simple as button one's pants. It was still snowing, but it had slowed a little and visibility was much better. We advanced about 200 yards when one of the men spotted a Kraut well camouflaged in the snow. They had let us get right to them so they could cut us off, surround and ambush us, or they might not have seen us first after all. I had begun to think they had pulled out the night before, until we spotted one of them in a foxhole.

We opened up with everything we had. Out of the 15 of us, there were 8 BARs and that is firepower in any man's

army. We were within grenade distance of them, but we had to be careful throwing them so we didn't hit one of the many trees to our front, making the pineapple fall short. We got several grenades up to their lines, but I don't know how effective they were. The enemy must have thought that with all of our firepower we were more than just a few men. They very quickly called for mortar support. I couldn't quite figure what was going on among them, but it looked as if they were going to pull a flanking movement on us in order to cut us off.

I crawled over to Sergeant DiBattista and we decided that we couldn't take the hill and that we better pull back now rather than take a chance of being cut off by their maneuver. One by one we began to withdraw down the hill. We would walk very fast backwards firing a clip of ammo while doing so, then crouched to quickly reload. They must have called off the flanking movement, but we did not stay around long enough to find out.

Sergeant DiBattista was hit with a fragment from an 88 shell, but he managed to make it back on his own. No one else was hurt, but one of the shells made a direct hit on the foxhole of Company K's executive officer, killing him instantly. There were two other casualties among the men in Company L, but none too serious.

I returned to Captain Alphonso's CP. I was convinced that to take the hill, at least a company of men would be needed, preceded by intense artillery and mortar preparation. The Germans had too many automatic weapons for a patrol to capture the bloody hilltop. I was congratulated for my futile effort and returned to my squad area.

Late that afternoon, out of the bushes walked a Jerry with his hands on his head. He was wounded in the arm and kept saying "*Alles kaput, alles kaput*" (All is lost or finished). We also were sick of this area and the prisoner was probably disgusted with the war. The men noticed that he

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was wearing American boots and they were angered enough to make him remove them. He was marched bare-foot back to our battalion CP for interrogation. The boots probably had belonged to one of the men killed on the hill the day before.

Happy news! We were relieved that day. It was a real pleasure to turn our foxholes over to the replacement troops and we gave them information and habits of the enemy. We received two new men in my squad just before moving out.

The entire 399th Infantry Regiment pulled out and marched in a column of twos, one on each side of a trail to another patch of woods which was out of range of enemy fire.