

On the Line

by Wallace Early, 397-L

Wallace A. Early, from Shelby, N.C. rose to the rank of captain, Company L, 397th Infantry. He tells his story with the assistance of Jimmy Calvert, 925-B Progeny.

And It All Started Here

I first arrived at Fort Jackson, S.C. in 1940 as one of the National Guardsmen. At the time Fort Jackson was no more than open fields. The only thing in the way of barracks were those at Trask Hill left over from WWI, where the regular Army was located. For our living quarters they had set up tents with wooden floors along the streets, with mattresses on the floor to sleep on. The only other thing there in the way of buildings were the mess hall and the latrine, also left over from WWI.

Just about a year into being there I was sent to OCS school at Fort Benning, GA., which I attended until the fall of 1942, when I was sent back to Fort Jackson. I arrived back in November, just in time to be part of the activation of the 100th. Once again there was still nothing in the way of barracks when I arrived back, just the same tents that lined the streets.

During the training while here we would spend one week on the post, followed by a week out in the field. Within twelve weeks, what had been just a group of boys from all over the United States was what we felt to be some of the best trained troops. But that's not to say that during those twelve weeks we didn't have one or two here and there that just couldn't see it the Army's way. Basically these guys were passed on to other companies in hopes it would help

Tennessee

I'm sure I, too, had the same opinion as all the other men who trained there and that was it was cold, damp, and seemed like it rained every other day, if not every day, while we were there. I'm happy to say as bad as it was, I didn't lose one soldier due to sickness but shortly after arriving at Fort Bragg, we did have a diphtheria outbreak.

Fort Bragg, N.C.

Just as we started settling in and thought we had some of the best trained troops that anyone could ask for, orders started coming down and before we knew it, over 3,000 of our men were transferred out as replacements for units already in combat. We had no say who was transferred and were just handed a list with the names.

It wasn't long after the last group of transferred men boarded the train for their new assigned units; the ASTP boys started arriving and filling in the billets. These boys were some of the smartest that America had to offer, but at the same time, they hadn't had the year's worth of training that the guys who we lost had. These boys had had only eight to thirteen weeks of basic, so we were back to square one once again.

The Front Lines

Like everyone else, I recall my first days on the front lines after relieving the 45th and our first firefight.

We had been on the front lines for a week or ten days when orders were given for my company to lead the attack.

We had made our way through a wooded area when all at once our scouts threw up their hands, halting our movement. I then made my way forward to see what was in front of us. I found an area which the Germans had cleared and laid barbed wire across. At the time Company I was in a position to my left.

No sooner had we gotten into position than the Germans hit us with tree bursts, pinning us down. To avoid taking casualties, I moved my men out on the open area away from the trees. My thinking at the time was no trees meant no tree bursts.

Before we had moved into position and started the attack, we hadn't called in artillery to soften up the Germans. It was a lesson well learned; from that time on, before attacking any German position artillery

was called to soften them up. Two days later we were once again ordered to take this same hill. This time we moved around their flank and before attacking, artillery was called in to soften the Germans up.

Shortly afterward, I was reassigned to Battalion S3.

Rimling

Like so many other men who served with the 100th, I, too, have names, places, times, and events that have stuck with me throughout my life. This is not to say that one or the other was more or less important, but I guess Rimling and the days that followed there will always come to my mind the most.

We left the Hottviller area by truck at about 9:00 on December 23, moving northwest. We were dropped off and marched the remainder of the way into the village of Rimling, arriving around midnight of the 24th.

After meeting with the officers of the 44th Infantry Division and given a rundown about where everyone was, we gave orders for our men to relieve the guys of the 44th. We watched as they moved out under the cover of darkness and disappeared into the night, making their way down the road leading west. After we checked that everyone was in their positions for the night, we set up our CP in a one-story stone house that had a basement and was located on the main street. At each end of the main street were two roads that entered it, making a Y at each end that, in time, would turn out to be a bad thing for us.

The farming village of Rimling was made up of twenty-four or so stone houses and like most of the houses in the farming villages of France, most of them had barns attached to them where they kept their livestock. The area around Rimling was for the most part flat with gentle rolling hills and had very few trees.

At the time Rimling showed little sign that the war had even passed through it with most of the civilians still living in their homes.

The house in which we set up the CP showed evidence that it was owned by a family that was well educated because it had a small library and a couple of music instruments. The family moved out as we moved in and lived in another house located in the village, but returned each day at some point to clean the house.

The CP was manned by myself, the CO, a guy from S2, the radio operator, two runners, an operations sergeant named Greene who was a boy from North Carolina who worked with the S2 officer. Sergeant Greene also kept an area map updated with our men's positions, as well as the Germans, and kept up with all the orders that were sent out.

Just outside of the village to the east a platoon of Sherman M4 tanks were set up in an area that gave them a clear field of fire.

As December 31 approached, we hadn't received any reports from HQ of any pending attack nor noticed any real signs coming from the Germans lines. The guys in the foxholes had reported hearing German tanks and vehicles moving around. The Germans were good at moving things around, making you think they had a larger number of tanks, vehicles, and troops than they really did, and so that was what we were led to believe at the time.

Just outside of the village along the road leading northwest we had set up a 57mm anti-tank gun and two bazooka crews, one on each side of the road. A couple of nights before the January 1st attack, a German tank had driven past the 57mm-gun crew and both of the two bazooka crews; none of them fired a shot at it. The tank stopped at the edge of the village as if the crew was checking things out. Then they turned around and headed back out the way they had come, once again passing right by the two bazooka crews and 57mm crew, who again didn't fire a shot. Maybe they were afraid if they had it would have given away their positions.

On December 31, it was cold and snowing. That night two officers from HQ came to the house and we had supper together. After eating we sat there playing poker until 10:30 before calling it a night and bedding down, not knowing that in less than two hours all hell was about to fall on us.

As I recall the snow had stopped earlier that day and by night the sky had cleared, with a bright moon out.

After the shelling stopped, the first large wave of German infantrymen made their way across the snow-covered open field in front of where we had three machine guns set up. As they came into view, two of the machine guns didn't fire, afraid of giving their positions away. However the third machine gun, which was manned by a boy whose last name was Outlaw, opened fire on the oncoming wave and was credited for killing a hundred Germans. While all of this was taking place, a TOT was called in.

The following days our little CP was busy twenty-four hours a day with runners and sergeants from different squads running in and out with reports.

On January 1 we also learned that the 44th had fallen back southward. Learning this news and knowing the guys out in the foxholes were catching hell from shelling and waves of attacks, I couldn't lie to them so I sent word out to be passed down as to what had happened.

For the following days the main daily order sent out was, a "hold all positions."

By day three the house had been hit so many times that we were forced to move our CP down into the basement. The house's roof had been blown away and the main living area was completely destroyed.

At night small groups of Germans were able to penetrate our lines and take up positions in a number of the houses, so early each morning patrols were sent out to check each house for them.

As these patrols went out, runners would come and mark an area map what was going on in their area.

One night a German tank came into Rimling and made its way down the main street through the lines of Companies I and L. Being dark and not able to see it, I sat there listening as it worked its way down the street, thinking "Oh, hell."

The following day I was advised the tank had come within a hundred yards of our house before stopping. After sitting there for a short time being fired on, the tank backed its way out of town.

Not far behind the CP was a church with a tall steeple that overlooked the area and was being used by our observers and spotters for the artillery and mortar squads. The mortar squads were set up in the courtyard of a house that was a few houses to our east.

After dark each evening the kitchen crew did their best to bring up chow and ammo in a jeep.

With the situations growing worse each day, a general from the French 1st Armored Division came up to the CP. He said something about making a movement from two different flanking directions but once he left, I never saw or heard of him again.

During the nights what little sleep I got was never more than a catnap while lying in a potato bin down in the basement of the house.

As prisoners were taken, they were brought to the CP, where they were briefly questioned before being sent back to HQ. The regular German soldiers were just glad the war was over for them; for the SS soldiers . . . well, their eyes said it all. After trying to determine their unit and its strength, we passed them on.

By day six it was evident that we couldn't hold Rimling and it would be just a matter of time before we would be overrun. Having two or three Jewish boys with us it was decided to burn all of their IDs so if they happened to be captured they would have a better chance of survival. It was also at this time I requested permission to fall back. I was told that there were a number of other hot spots, that I should deal with it the best I could, and that they would get back with me. After not hearing back from HQ on my request, I decided to go to HQ in person. There I advised the General the situation and as I did so, he sat there looking at me as if I was silly or crazy. That's when he decided to go to Rimling himself. Three days later word was finally sent for us to fall back.

As soon as I received permission to do so, word was passed down to all the sergeants to have the guys get their things together. We fell back as soon as it got dark.