

Charge the Blockhouse!

by Jack Keelan, 397-I

Jack Keelan, 397/I, "marched to his own drum," said Richard Tobias, fellow member of Company I, "and I often could neither catch the rhythm or know what song was playing." "We found him funny with his sharp New Jersey, and very Irish, wit," Tob continued. "He had a clear, quick, and easy prose style. Words came naturally to him; that was the Irish in him."

Jack died this January of lung cancer. "Jack had strong attachments, and one of them was our community, our shared experience, and our memories. I don't know what song, but choirs of angels will sing. The song will be wry and funny."

"Follow me," said the lieutenant in a conspiratorial whisper and the members of the 1st Squad, 2nd Platoon, peeled off like the skin of an apple. In the darkening gloom of the thick forest, we bunched up in order to keep the man in front within view. "Spread out! Pass it on!" came back down the line. The Army likes to see the infantry soldiers with a good deal of space between each man. The reason for that, of course, is to keep casualties to a minimum should a shell explode in the vicinity. Since people tend to cling together in times of danger or when exposed to the unknown "Spread out!" is repeated many times before green troops become seasoned. This order succeeded in getting some space, maybe three or four feet, between each figure. After about fifteen minutes of stop-and-go progress through the forest, the line stopped. Two dark figures slowly emerged from an opening in the earth right in front of me. The lieutenant gestured towards Albert T. and me. "You guys take over this hole," he said.

"Let's get out of here!" said one of the earth figures to the other in a harsh whisper, "before this racket wakes Jerry up!"

As they turned to go back the way we had come I touched the speaker's shoulder. "Which way are the Germans?" I whispered. He turned, spread out the fingers of his right hand to include a 180-degree arc and said, "Out there," then hurried off to follow his fast disappearing buddy.

Albert T. and I looked after these battle-hardened veterans until they disappeared. Jesus!" I said, "Some help they are. Let's get into the hole." We had arrived at the front line. It was very quiet, but it was the front. No question about that in our minds.

The hole consisted of a bathtub sized slit trench for one soldier to lie down with a deeper firing pit at one end. The firing pit was intended to be big enough for two soldiers to stand and fire their weapons. The pile of earth taken from the hole provided a rest for the rifles and a little cover. I was reminded of the parapet built into the top of the fort wall used by the Hollywood soldiers of the French Foreign Legion to fight off hordes of attacking Arabs.

I slid into the pit, removed my gas mask and field pack and placed my rifle with the muzzle pointed in the direction indicated by the previous occupant.

Albert T. handed me his Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR), eased himself into the hole, undid his heavy ammo belt, put his pack and gas mask alongside mine, and said, "Christ! We don't have enough room in here to scratch our ass. We have got to make this hole deeper and longer!" Albert T. was 6 feet 4 inches tall. The trench would have to be dug at least 2 feet longer before he could lie down and the pit a minimum of two feet deeper for proper cover.

The infantry soldier's entrenching tool is a cleverly designed combination shovel, pick, and ax. Loosening the locking nut allowed the pointed shovel head—one of whose edges was sharpened to serve as an ax—to fold out from the handle to either 90 degrees so that the versatile tool could be used as a pick, or 180 degrees to form a small shovel and/or ax.

"You keep watch and I'll start digging," he said in my ear and started elongating the trench. I hunkered down in the hole with my eyes at ground level. "No matter how dark it is," we had been told, "the sky will always be a lighter background and can be used to silhouette someone trying to sneak up on you." It's true!

After about an hour, an exhausted Albert T. dropped alongside me in the pit. “The trench is long enough now but I’m pooped,” he rasped. “My turn,” I responded. “I’ll work on making the pit deeper.” He pushed his entrenching tool into my hand and I could feel his sweat on the handle and hear his heaving breathing. He took several long pulls on his canteen and slung his body against the parapet well out of my way. I dug as fast as I could, spurred on by the threat of attacking Germans, and it wasn’t long before I felt my clothes dampen and could hear my lungs gasping for air. “In the next hole, I’m not going to pair up with a tall bastard like you,” I muttered in Albert T.’s ear.

“Then who will protect your ass?” he responded. We were buddies.

After a couple of hours, we were satisfied that the hole was as good as we could get it. “I’m dying for a cigarette,” I said, testing him out on the idea of lighting up. He agreed that we had earned a smoke. We discussed the safest way to light up and concluded that by getting down into the deepest end of the pit and covering up with two blankets that a cigarette could be lit and smoked with no chance of the Germans spotting it. Besides, we concluded, we hadn’t heard a peep from them since arriving at our position despite the noise we had made, so they couldn’t be that alert. Taking turns, we ducked down and each smoked two cigarettes. We didn’t consider this foolhardy or dangerous. Smoking a cigarette was an absolutely necessary part of keeping your sanity. We passed our first night on the frontline in peace alternating with two hours on watch at the parapet and two hours asleep in the trench.

Not being satisfied with peace and quiet, as we later learned the high command is never satisfied when the frontline is quiet, the brass decided that a patrol should be sent out to stir things up a bit. The 1st Squad of the 2nd Rifle Platoon was selected to conduct the first patrol of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment.

Our platoon leader, an eager second lieutenant who I suspect volunteered his platoon in the expectation that he would lead this first patrol, thereby garnishing honor and glory for himself, sat us down and instructed the squad on our objective. “This is a probing action,” he began, “Headquarters wants to find out where the Germans are dug in and to test the strength of their position,” he explained.

To me, this meant finding out if Jerry was paying attention to business and if he were willing to disclose the location of his machine guns by firing at a good target like a couple of scouts caught up on his barbed wire.

“If a prisoner could be taken,” he went on, “it would be the first one taken by the regiment,” making it sound like we would all get a medal if we did indeed come back with a German in tow.

“Fat chance of that,” I thought, “we will be lucky if we all manage to find our way back to where we started, much less dragging a Jerry along with us.”

“The patrol will use a diamond formation,” he went on and designated Ziggy, a wiry little guy from Brooklyn, as first scout, and me as the second scout. The scouts lead the formation with the first scout out in front and the second scout back far enough to just keep the first in sight. The Army’s thinking is that in the worst scenario, the first and second scouts would be chewed up allowing the rest of the patrol to withdraw safely. I could feel the knot in my gut begin to tighten.

“I want you soldiers to know that it is a great honor to be members of the battalion’s first combat patrol. I am truly sorry that I was not appointed to lead you,” he said and I think he really meant it. “You push off in two hours,” the shavetail concluded trying to sound like a football coach giving his team a pep talk.

I was glad to learn that our lieutenant was not going to lead the patrol himself. He was so eager for action that he scared me. I could easily picture him trying to take a German machine-gun nest with a frontal assault. Little did I know that in a few days he would have the opportunity to do just that.

The 1st Squad consisted entirely of ASTP students from the greater New York metropolitan area. We were intelligent and in good physical shape and armed with the best infantry rifle in the world. Each of us had a bandoleer of extra ammunition and two fragmentation grenades hanging on his belt. The squad included a portable rocket launcher. This was universally referred to as a “bazooka,” so named because it looked like the unique instrument invented and played by Bob Burns, a country-western musician, who referred to his creation as a bazooka. Six armor-piercing missiles for this fearsome weapon were carried by supporting riflemen. In addition, a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) provided rapid-fire capability.

The squad had impressive firepower and we were confident with the untried self-assurance of youth. None of us were woodsmen, however, or even ex-boy scouts. Bunches of trees, we knew, grew in parks and that was about it. The prospect of stumbling through the dense forest until we bumped into Jerry's barbed wire didn't stir patriotic thoughts on my head. The problem of finding our way back through the underbrush and trees to our own line without getting lost loomed large in my mind and displaced the threat posed by angry Germans. I hoped, without one good reason to do so, that our sergeant knew how to use a compass.

Ziggy and I put our heads together and exchanged views on the capability of our patrol leader to get us safely back through the thick forest to where we started. "That dumb bastard couldn't find his way back from the men's room," Ziggy spat. This evaluation was congruent with mine. "What the hell are we gonna do?" he asked desperately. "If he gets confused in these woods, it is you and me, the scouts, who will stumble around like lost sheep following his signals until either the Germans gun us down or we scare some machine gunner from the 1st Battalion and he does the job! This is serious shit!" he concluded.

"Hey! I got an idea," I exclaimed, "Remember the story of Hansel and Gretel, the two kids who found their way back through the woods by dropping pieces of bread to make a trail to follow?"

"Drop bread in the woods for a couple of miles!" repeated Ziggy sarcastically, "Where are we going to find that much bread? Hell! We couldn't carry it all. Got any more brilliant ideas?"

"I wasn't thinking bread," I countered. "I was thinking toilet paper. A quarter of a sheet stuck on a branch or bush would be easy to see and follow on the way back. It can't miss. And we won't need more than one roll."

"You got it!" yelled a relieved Ziggy slapping me on the shoulder. "I'll round up enough to get to the moon." He darted off to scrounge the precious commodity. In almost no time we had a pile of non-skid and were tearing it into quarter sheet pieces. We agreed that I should be the trail marker because as first scout, Ziggy would be totally consumed with the task of seeing Jerry before he saw us. I stuffed my field jacket pockets full with the ready-to-use pieces. Grimm's fairy tale was being put to practical use beyond anything even he could dream up.

As part of getting ready for a patrol, each soldier's personal belongings were placed in his blanket roll. Going on patrol to try and capture prisoners for interrogation had the high probability that Jerry could turn the tables and the taker could be taken prisoner. The Army's standard instruction in this circumstance was, "Give your name, rank, and serial number only." To preclude giving the enemy any valuable miscellaneous information, it was standard operating procedure (SOP) for soldiers going on a patrol to empty their pockets. As can be imagined, this practice further helped to torque up the nervous system.

We started off in broad daylight at about 1000 (Army time is always on the basis of a 24-hour clock). Our line of foxholes was soon lost from sight as the thick forest closed in behind us. I took no chances and stuck markers so that the distance between them gave a clear line-of-sight to the next piece of toilet paper. After about a half-hour of slow but steady progress, Ziggy stopped, hit the ground, and motioned for me to come up to where he was lying under some bushes. When I flopped down beside him he pointed ahead and said, "This is as far as we go!"

"How come?" I asked.

"Because they got a frigging fort right there in front of us!" he hissed.

I looked expecting to see stone walls and turrets. "I don't see a thing. Where's the fort?" I wanted to know.

"God damn it, Keelan, clean off your frigging glasses! Just to the left of that big tree about fifty yards in front of us there is a low wall about 25 feet long. See the openings for shooting out?" he asked his voice rising.

I looked again at where he had directed and this time I saw it. It was so cleverly camouflaged that it blended in exactly with the terrain. No doubt about it. It was a blockhouse! "Holy shit! I see it! Christ, Ziggy, if you hadn't spotted it we would have walked right up to it! They would have shot us like targets in a boardwalk shooting gallery. I'll go back and tell the sergeant that we have to turn around." "Hurry up," said Ziggy, "before they see me!"

Keeping low, I ran back to the squad leader and reported the size and location of the enemy fortification. He insisted on seeing it for himself and followed me back to Ziggy's place of concealment. He, too, had trouble seeing the fort at first, but after Ziggy gave detailed instructions it must have leaped out of the woods at him because he saw it with a startled jerk. "Jesus," he muttered, "There it is! What a camouflage job!" We lay there for three or four minutes studying the fort. Ziggy broke the silence by saying, "Let's get the hell out of here before they see us!"

"We are going to take it!" the young sergeant said in a determined whisper, half to himself. "We are going to take it like Grant took Richmond" he repeated excitedly. Turning to me he ordered, "Go back and get the rest of the guys. Tell them to keep low and quiet and to gather around that big Christmas tree over there." Gesturing towards what would pass for an evergreen of some sort, he gave me a push on the shoulder intended to lend speed to my mission. As I turned on my stomach, I locked eyes with Ziggy. He mouthed the words "Holy shit."

I ran back to where the rest of the patrol lay hidden in the undergrowth. In fact I almost didn't see them and would have kept right on going if Albert T. hadn't jumped up and recklessly called out, "Keelan! Where are you going?" As I stopped my race to the rear I caught sight of several soldiers getting up and turning to join me in my flight. Using arm and hand signals I motioned for everyone to gather around me. The Army had thought of everything even for soundless motions to convey almost any message. To my astonishment they soon all stood in a group looking at me. The signal worked!

Breathlessly and in short sentences I related the frightening intentions of the sergeant: "The Germans built a fort up there and the sergeant is going to get us to capture it! Follow me and for Christ's sake be quiet or you will get us all killed!" This last admonition had its intended effect and without a word, we moved up to the Christmas tree and squatted down around our waiting noncom. In the distance, I could see Ziggy lying on the slight hump that hid us from the fort.

Our sergeant had utilized the interval to make a small model of the fort and the surrounding terrain. "Now pay attention," he began. Pointing to a rectangle of small sticks he said, "This is Jerry's blockhouse. It is about 50 yards in front of that little hill Ziggy is lying on. This is Ziggy's location right here," he said marking an X on the ground. We all looked up at Ziggy still motionless on the sloping ground. "The Germans inside haven't made a sound or seen us," he continued, "I think that they are all asleep. What is going to wake them up is the first armor-piercing bazooka rocket blasting through the center of their fort front wall followed by two more, one on each end. Then we will open up with everything we have from positions in a semicircle on our left flank." He scratched a curved line from Ziggy's X extending around the side of the blockhouse. "As soon as the third rocket goes off we will charge the blockhouse with fixed bayonets screaming like banshees! Any Jerries left inside will either give up or run like hell in the other direction. If any of them do retreat, Keelan and two guys will be waiting for them over here," he indicated a spot on the right flank, "and either capture them or shoot them down." He looked up proudly. "Any questions?" he asked.

My mouth and throat were too dry and too tight to manage even a croak. Everyone else must have felt the same way. Quiet was our only response as we slowly realized what we were about to get involved in. I could only think, "A screaming bayonet charge for Christ's sake!" And a picture of a World War I battlefield came to mind with a chattering machine gun mowing down a line of screaming bayonet chargers. "Holy shit! We are in for it!"

Encouraged by what he interpreted as our silent assent, the sergeant spat out the orders to put his plan into action: "Keelan, take Cookie and Johnson down and around to the right flank. The rest of you guys take positions along the left flank about 15 feet apart. I'll set up the bazooka right where Ziggy is now. Remember! Start laying down fire after the third bazooka round. I'll start yelling to start the charge. Fix bayonets now. Move out!"

The army does instill obedience to orders in the common soldier. I promptly slid my bayonet over the muzzle of my rifle and pushed it down until the mechanism locked with a reassuring metallic click. The M-1 now had a dangerous look it didn't have before. I felt braver than before. "OK, follow me," I said to Cookie and Johnson who were both standing as if mesmerized, "and for Christ's sake fix your bayonets!" I moved off in a crouch through the woods about a hundred yards to the right, then swung to the left in

accordance with the sergeant's instructions. I looked back to see Cookie on one knee close behind me with Johnson right behind him. Both had fixed their bayonets, which gave them a new and threatening look. I had been running the sergeant's plan through my mind and was starting to believe that it would work. "Hell, if I were a Jerry quietly sitting in a nice, warm blockhouse in the middle of the woods and all of a sudden a rocket blew up in the middle of it and there were bullets coming in from two directions and guys running at me with bayonets and screaming, I'd run like hell," I concluded.

Having reached what I thought was our position, I positioned Cookie and Johnson in the underbrush with the instruction that if the Germans came running in our direction, I would stand up and order them to halt and put their hands up. If they didn't then we would just have to shoot them. "How will they understand what you are yelling?" Cookie asked. I pondered that for a moment. "I speak some German," I said. "Don't worry. They'll get the idea real fast, wouldn't you?" I replied at the same time knowing that Cookie had a good point.

The whoosh of the first bazooka launch was followed by the sharp explosion of the rocket as it smashed into the trees fifty feet behind the blockhouse. The first shot had been too high! "God damn," I thought, we shoulda had more practice!" The second rocket tore into the ground in front of the blockhouse with a deafening roar. "There goes our surprise," I thought. The third rocket hit the blockhouse dead center. The explosion was muffled because it went off inside the thick-walled structure. Debris was thrown up into the trees and in all directions. The blockhouse disappeared in a black eruption of material and smoke. Immediately, the crack of rifle fire and the steady heavy cough of Albert T.'s BAR informed us that the attack plan was proceeding on schedule. "Get ready," I yelled to Cookie and Johnson and we waited to surprise any retreating Germans. The wild shouting of our attacking comrades signaled the start of the bayonet assault on the blockhouse survivors. We waited tensely without fingers curled around the triggers of our rifles.

The quiet that followed the charge was ominous. No screams of wounded Germans, no shouted orders for stunned survivors to put up their hands. We cautiously stood up and could see the rest of our patrol standing around the pile of rubble that marked the spot occupied by the blockhouse. It was a strange scene. Some were kicking the loose pieces others were sticking their bayonets into the ground. We ran up expecting to see body parts and pieces of field gray uniform scattered about.

The sergeant was standing dejectedly looking at what remained of a large woodpile. There were many precisely cut pieces of timber covering the ground. The shape of the stack was still discernable. It was about five feet high, about three feet deep and 30 feet long. The wood had been cut, stacked neatly and left in the forest to season. The regular shape of the pile was fixed at each end by heavy wood stakes driven into the ground. The seasoning process had given the woodpile a color that perfectly matched the fall hues of the underbrush and trees.

Ziggy and I had come upon it head on and the sharp-eyed first scout had picked up the regular shape of the wall formed by the ends of the logs. Irregularities in the diameter of the pieces created spaces that we interpreted to be openings for rifles and machine guns. We had never seen or even envisioned neatly cut cords of firewood sitting unmolested in the middle of a forest. Actually we had never seen such a dense growth of trees stretching for miles and miles. Ziggy saw what he was told to look for, a German defense line, a fort. I looked and saw what Ziggy told me he saw, a camouflaged blockhouse. The sergeant looked and saw what we told him we saw in our path, the top of a deftly hidden and dangerous bastion. He staffed his vision with bored careless German soldiers who could be surprised and taken prisoner by brave American soldiers under the command of a courageous leader. Ziggy and I looked at the scattered logs and the rest of our patrol milling around. We didn't say a word. The sergeant gave a final kick to the evidence of the power of a bazooka. "A frigging woodpile!" he shouted looking at Ziggy and me, "You frigging guys got me to charge a frigging woodpile!"

"We won't tell anybody if you don't," retorted Ziggy. "Right, Keelan?"

"Not me," I agreed.