

# Ringside Seat at Rimling

by Mel McKee, 397-G

*A staff sergeant with Company G, 397th Infantry Regiment, Mel relates his own Rimling experience here.*

For over 40 years after the war, I never related any war experiences to anyone. Then there was a phone call from Bill Paschal. We had been close buddies in the war. On a drive through Oklahoma he passed this little town where I was raised and recognized it as my hometown. He stopped and found someone who remembered my family and knew where my mother lived. Through her, he got my phone number in Houston and drove there to renew the old friendship. For the first time I could talk about it. Recently, after continued insistence by family, neighbors and friends, and even my doctor, to write about some of those experiences, I finally caved in. The most memorable were the seven days on a hill outside of Rimling. Just recently, Bill Paschal told me he had been in contact with Rufus Dalton, who was doing research for another article on Rimling, and I sent him some material. He encouraged me to write this article myself. So, here it is, a companion article to Rufus Dalton's article (see Holiday 2008 issue) as the action in both took place on the same battlefield and the maps can be used for both.

I have read the many articles regarding the battle of Rimling over the years, and I have learned a lot about where the different units were positioned and their reaction to the German assault. At the time, I was just cold and miserable and didn't know exactly where I was. In more recent years, I have been able to learn more about the "big picture" and feel that I can add something that would be of interest to those involved in that battle.

I was a staff sergeant in the 3rd Platoon of Company G. After the Germans started their Operation *NORDWIND* early on January 1, 1945, with an assault against our Rimling defenses being manned by the 3rd Battalion; Company G was moved from a reserve status and sent up to the left flank of the battalion's defenses. This was because the 44th Division, on our left flank, had been driven back by the Germans so that this left flank was extremely vulnerable.

This is confirmed by an article written by Lieutenant William H. Ferguson, Historical Officer, 7th Army, who wrote, "The battalion commander also informed Lieutenant Harris that Company G, plus one platoon of Company F, were to take positions to the left and rear of Company K, to strengthen the position held by elements of Company I and the two tanks."

Two platoons of Company G, plus one platoon of Company F moved up into position on the ridge south of Le Schlitzen. (Also per Lieutenant Ferguson's article.) The ridge he is referring to is actually Le Schlossberg, Hill 375. The 1st and 2nd Platoons were moved into this position. The 3rd Platoon, the one I was in, moved up to a hill called Kappellenhubel. This is where my story begins.

On January 2, just before midnight, our 3rd Platoon left its reserve position south of Guising and hiked about three miles north, in light snow, to set up an observation post in front of the enemy lines, just over the crest of a long ridge (Kappellenhubel). We dug in, about twenty of us. We had been issued full-sized picks and shovels to dig into the frozen ground.

By first light, we each had a two foot-or-so-diameter hole deep enough to provide a comfortable firing position. When daylight arrived, we could see the German foxholes lined up on the opposite ridge about eight hundred yards away. This ridge was Le Schlossberg from which the Germans had driven the 2nd Platoon of Company G during the night and took over their foxholes (re: Regiment of the Century, page 127). We could also see a handful of GIs, reportedly with the 44th Division, across the valley to our left. By nightfall they were gone. These were the last Americans we would see for the next five days. We were totally isolated and alone.

Of course, we got the customary greeting, a barrage of 88s the length of our line. No damage, however. On the first morning, a German directly across from me got out of his foxhole, jumped up and down, waved his arms, trying to get warm. He then unbuttoned his overcoat, dropped his pants, and squatted. He

was human after all! The thought struck me that it would be nice to have a truce with him so we could exist peacefully on those cold, barren hills.

A quiet day followed except for an occasional 88. Just before dark, as I was finishing setting up the night watch schedule, an 88 zipped by my head and exploded some forty feet behind me. I dived for a partial foxhole only about eight inches deep; from some previous time.

A second shell hit the little parapet in front about eighteen inches from my head. It knocked me out for some time. When I came to, I hurt all over. My eyes were bloodshot, lips swollen and purple, and my stomach was turning inside out. Apparently a concussion, but there was not a scratch. The frozen dirt had deflected the shrapnel.

The next morning after I had been knocked silly by that 88, that German opposite me represented all that was evil in the German army. When he repeated his routine the next morning, I waited for him to squat and squeezed a shot over his head. Of course, I missed but it was close. He sat down in it and went scrambling for his hole with his pant legs around his ankles; the only time I ever enjoyed a miss.

The next day, I was still so obsessed with getting revenge that, before daylight, I walked down the hill about one hundred yards to a mound that appeared a dozer had started for a gun emplacement. I got off another miss at the German. The next day, I tried again, but he wouldn't come out of his hole. As I was strolling back up the hill, I heard the unmistakable sound of machine gun MG38 incoming rounds hitting right behind me. Those suckers had set it up in an adjacent hole and I didn't see it. I had a previous one-on-one encounter with one of those things and knew the sound well. I won that one, but fully expected to lose this time. As I zigzagged up the hill, the bullets just kept hitting at my feet and behind, all the way to my hole. I guess I was saved by the extreme range that cut down on the accuracy.

We had brought one day's worth of K-rations. Each of the next six days we got a phone call advising that the infiltrated enemy behind us prevented delivery of more rations. With no food the cold was really settling in, but we were able to further improve our foxholes, tunneling out at the bottom to make a place to lie down. It was the safest hole I ever had. A tank could have run over it without damage.

On the afternoon of January 8, our sixth day in this position, German infantry started pouring out from a tree-covered rise, about a mile to our left front; the only trees in sight. (I feel sure that this was Moronville Farm). Our platoon leader called our CP that there were about two hundred enemy heading our way. They called back to advise that they had no artillery that could reach them.

Within about twenty minutes there were an estimated four hundred infantry joined by five tanks. Their direction was going to bypass us about eight hundred yards to our left. When we updated the CP on the current situation, it got their attention.

Shortly, we were told that a battery of 155s attached to the corps had been found; that they should be able to reach the target. We were patched through to the artillery unit. We didn't have a spotter with us so our platoon leader had to call in firing instructions. After a couple rounds of smoke, they were on target and firing for effect, four rounds at a time. The shells were coming in over our heads and landing with precision where we directed. Like the song, "The Battle of New Orleans," there weren't near as many as there were a while ago, but they just kept coming.

Then two of our tank destroyers appeared behind to our left. I had never seen one before, but knew what they were. They sneaked up behind our ridge until their 90 mm guns just peeked over.

The one nearest us fired first. The lead tank spun around ninety degrees and stopped. Apparently his left track had been knocked off. The second shot finished him. The other TD fired and the second tank was dead. The other three spun around and started back up the hill at full throttle. Wham! The third one was stopped, then the fourth. The last one disappeared from our view, but not from the TDs. They put one in its ammunition storage and it blew to pieces. When the tanks turned tail, the infantry followed, but couldn't keep up.

The artillery kept pouring it on. When the last of them were nearing the trees, the artillery unit advised that they were at maximum range and could do no more. It was quiet, but not for long. Two P47s zoomed in and each delivered two bombs onto the hill, 500 pounders, I think. We could feel them from where we were.

At dusk two German trucks, with Red Cross banners draped over them, came out of the woods and started picking up the wounded. It didn't take long to get a load. This continued well into the night with headlights on.

Although this attacking force was not annihilated by the devastating bombardment of the 155 "longtoms" and the accurate fire of the TDs, it was too crippled to be a factor in the continuation of this battle. I am pretty sure this all occurred on January 8, after the Germans had launched their two-pronged attack against Rimling and the defending companies around Rimling. (Re: Regiment of the Century, pages 179-80).

Rufus Dalton and I have discussed how this task force might relate to the battle for Rimling, and we are guessing that the Germans had assumed our defenders in Rimling were defeated or at least contained, and that this force was attacking to follow up their advantage by encircling Guising and further exposing the left flank of the Division.

Just before dark that night we finally got rations; two D-bars each. We downed that rock hard stuff in a hurry. During the night, it hit. I was really sick. My still queasy stomach couldn't handle the chocolate; miserable night with diarrhea. Couldn't get out of the sleeping bag, parka, and so on, in time. I was a mess. Early morning we discovered that our phone line had been cut. Since I felt I was going to die anyway, I decided to follow the line back to Guising and repair it on the way, enemy or no enemy. About halfway, I came upon a jeep with two guys repairing the line; had a free ride the rest of the way to an aid station. There, I snuggled up to a wood stove; it felt so good. The first external heat since my short stay at an aid station back in November. Not for long, though. The pain in my feet was unbearable. A doctor was summoned; he cut off my pacs and muttered, "Frostbite. Soldier, your war is over." Within an hour I was helped onto a 6 by 6 for a ride to a hospital. I got the next to last seat on the truck loaded with bandaged GIs. A bloodied German POW was loaded next to me. How I detested that evil being. He and his ilk were responsible for me hurting like this. For the first time since arriving at the front, I was without my dear friend and constant companion; my M1. Like a good soldier, in the rain and the mud, in the snow and the cold, it never asked why. It just obeyed. I recall the truck departing, but must have passed out en route. There is no memory of arriving at the hospital. In fact, my next memory was of waking up, pajama clad, in a bed with white sheets. How did I get here? How did I get cleaned up? Ultimately I found out that I had been there for several days. Don't remember if it was three, four, or five. This was the beginning of nearly eight months of hospitalization. I was discharged from the hospital and the army on August 31.

Since the war, I have had no contact with anyone from my platoon. I would hope that any of those who read this article would contact the Newsletter or me. This goes for the two TD crews also. It was a day you will never forget. You guys were good.

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