

# Baptism of Fire for a Rifle Platoon Scout

by William D. Paschal, 397-G

I was one of those men who arrived at the 100th Infantry Division in the spring of 1944 by way of the defunct ASTP and trained with it until we were put on troop trains in October for the trip to New York and Marseilles; and then on up to the front near Baccarat, France. I was a Private 1st Class with Company G, 397th Infantry Regiment.

Our regiment officially took over our sector of the front on November 7, 1944 when our regimental commander, Colonel William A. Ellis, assumed command, relieving the 179th Infantry. Of course, I wasn't aware of all this formality. I was just trying to stay warm and dry in my new home. We had actually taken over the foxholes of the unit we were relieving on November 7, according to the *Regiment of the Century*, and we were acclimatizing to the cold and wet, and the dark nights on alert.

Apparently our unit stayed there, in these miserable conditions, until November 12, as the "Operations of the 397th Infantry Regiment" says for that day, "2nd Bn. attacked at 0900. Company F on left, Co. G on right and Co. E in reserve. Both battalions encountered small arms fire [and] throughout the afternoon and experienced heavy artillery fire."

If I remember correctly, we were so miserable in those foxholes we were glad to get out of them and go after those guys who were causing the problem. But, before the day was out we were faced with the harsh reality that life wasn't to get any better. Here is my story as best I can recollect it. The second week of November 1944 brought a new dimension to our life in the slit foxholes and the rains of the Vosges Mountains. I was about to embark on the first of a series of the longest and most lonely walks of my life. As a first scout for the Third Platoon Company G, 397th, I had enthusiastically done the problems of the piney woods of Ft. Bragg, and had done the live-fire bit of charging victoriously up Gaddy's Mountain several times. I had participated in the liberation of New York City during the fifth War Loan Drive. Marching at attention behind the horse-mounted units of the NYC Police Department was all a part of the required duty. I have not yet received the combat ribbons for those theaters of actions; however, our first assault was at hand.

Our squad would be one of the lead squads of our platoon. I stepped carefully to the edge of the tree line and scanned the ridge to my front. I knew that somewhere in that area were soldiers who would fire back. I wondered how I would react. As I looked back at the squad some of the faces seemed a little pale. I realized that in the next minute I would be entering the cleared spaces all by my lonesome. I was the point. I knelt behind the last tree and looked to my left. I saw the Company F scout approach the tree line also. At that moment, a shot rang out and the Company F scout dropped to the ground. As a reflex I jumped to my feet and charged across the small cleared space to the tree line of the ridge ahead. To my relief, the entire squad followed me, then the platoon and the company. M-1 rifles began their deep barks and I knew that the war had begun for us. I then did three big steps diagonally to the right and flopped to the ground. I did this several more times changing direction each time. No shots had been fired at me as yet and I began to feel a little foolish. Just as I reached the base of the rising ridge, sharp pops began to whip past my ears. At that point, acting on previous instructions, the entire assault platoons began firing suppressive or grazing fire up the ridge. I began to find likely targets—round humps that looked like helmets. Some of these later turned out to be boulders. I fired into suspicious looking mounds on the up slope. I still had not seen a live enemy to my front. Suddenly a gray-green clad figure was seen running to the rear of the enemy lines. Corporal Howe whipped his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The figure dropped. The incoming fire petered out and we reached the top of the ridge without seeing more German figures. Second Scout Brown and I roamed laterally to scan the deserted foxholes for stragglers or ambushers. We noted some of the equipment, the placement of the holes, and the numbers of holes. No real action yet. As we paused to catch our breath, the real war began. The whoosh and screams of incoming mortars brought reality to us. This was a real war—not a maneuver problem.

After our assault on the front line on November 12, our units maneuvered around a lot near Raon l'Etape and had some firefights. We did see Germans staying in their holes to resist and we did learn that

the German mortar fire was deadly accurate. When taking the crest of a ridge of our daily objective, we learned very quickly not to linger more than a minute or two. The whoosh and scream of incoming shells tore up the ground and we had casualties even after we falsely thought the action for the day was over. As scouts, Brown and I looked at the marvelous fox palaces prepared by German Penal Battalions for the front line grunts to use as their next fall back positions. We never hopped into these lovely places nor did we disturb any of the equipment such as their feared burp guns or K98 Mauser Rifles that might be left. They looked enticing but we feared a deadly trip wire to a booby trap was attached. A week after my first assault I began to fancy myself as a little bit of a seasoned veteran. The rains did not give us much respite and the GI raincoat saved us from being dripping wet as we tried to sleep at night. The heavily wooded ridges of the Vosges Mountains often had a clear space at the bottom of the ridge, which gave us an open area of thirty to one hundred yards wide with no cover. Occasionally there were a few sparse trees that our advancing troops could squeeze behind for a second or two. The Germans had good observers and at almost the minute that we left our front line holes to begin an assault, the mortars would start to rain in on us.

On one occasion, our squad was running in the reserve position and I ran past one of my friends from the leading squad of the day. Stuart Blydenburgh was lying on the ground trying desperately with one arm to get his first aid bandage and sulfa from the back of his ammo belt. The other arm was flopping around uselessly as he had been hit hard by mortars. [Despite this scene being etched in my mind I cannot remember which arm.] I joined him in his call of "Medic, Medic" and ran on. During an assault, the infantry grunt has one duty only—that is to advance. I thought Stu was a goner due to blood loss. In 1990, I saw his name as a dues paying member of the 100th Division Association. I called him and expressed my great relief on his survival. Blydenburgh said it took almost an hour before a medic arrived. Another GI in the advancing reserve company had stopped and wound his bandage around the upper arm and inserted a small stick to twist so Stu could keep intense pressure on the shattered wound. Stu made it to the Aid Station O.K. but in a day or two, the blackened arm was amputated in a rear hospital. He went to College on the GI Bill and was the retired Sanitary Engineer of Westerville, Ohio when I called him on the phone in 1990.

After the fall of Raon l' Etape, we continued our almost daily assaults on ridges to the south and east of that area. As usual, we started down the forward slope of our own positions to approach the enemy ridge before us.

At the edge of the tree line, I hesitated behind a large tree to gaze at the open space that intervened before starting up the next slope. It was about 30 feet wide with a small 8-inch diameter lone tree standing in the middle of the space. I sucked up my guts and made a dash for the shelter of the small tree. As I hit the ground behind the tree, the world turned orange then black. Two centuries (seconds) later, I opened my eyes and realized where I was and what I was doing at that particular moment. As I looked to one side, I noted with horror that the ground was littered with red splotches. Blood, Blood, my Blood!!

I must have been hit by a mortar shell that hit the tree at the same time I landed behind it. I gingerly flexed my legs and feet. No pain and they seemed o.k. I flexed my arms and noted both hands moved. I leapt to my feet and dashed the remaining 15 feet to the shelter of the tree line ahead of me. As I stood up my army pack fell backward off my shoulders and some of my belongings spilled out. As I hit the ground, a body fell on top of me and the voice of one of the squad members informed me that Sarge had sent him out to drag me, the wounded scout back. Between the curses, I informed him that I was not wounded. The mortar shell had ripped and cut the pack straps across my shoulders and it fell backward, hanging only by the snaps at the rear of my ammo belt. I took a quick glance at the red splotches and realized it was paper. Overseas each GI is issued some blank V-mail stationery for writing home. It has a red border. The shell had scattered my unused V-mail supply over the landscape.

After our swift march to St. Blaise, we headed toward Rothbach during the first week of December. During this operation, we had been blessed and baptized by the friendly flak wagons of the Germans. When those things roar at you, trees and branches are cut down and fall over you as you crouch for cover. The resistance seemed to stiffen and we no longer got a free pass to the top of the ridge. The best free pass I ever had to the top of a ridge was a gift. On an assault I had noted several German helmets at a

much closer range than ever before. I opened fire. The return fire popped far over my head and did not seem accurate at all. Shortly six figures in ragged gray green overcoats rose out of the ground and with their hands up ran straight down the slope towards me. I held my fire and motioned them to stop. Somebody in the Platoon rear took charge of them and escorted them away. I learned later that they were Ukrainian Russians, former prisoners of the Germans who had been offered a chance to fight on the German side rather than go to prison camp. Thanks, Russians!

During those assaults on the enemy ridges, I had a number of chances to connect with German troops via my trusty M-1. I have never been comfortable recalling the details of firing at and hitting another human being. Suffice it to say that as an expert shot, I made it to the objective and to the end of the day so far, unscathed. One of the innocuous scenes comes to mind. At a close range of about 20 yards, I had fired at and put out of action a German figure in the mist ahead of me. As I progressed up the slope, I drew near to this soldier who was a very young kid probably only 18 or 19 years of age. I saw the wounded right shoulder and noted his look of panic as I ran toward him. His rifle was still clutched in his useless right hand. As I paused just three feet from his position, his face seemed to go white and he closed his eyes. I knew that he felt that I had come to finish him off. Instead I reached down and pulled his bolt-action rifle from his hand and tossed it into the brush several yards away. The following infantry troops would fire at any enemy holding a weapon. My reason for doing this was to spare him from further incoming rounds. I have always hoped that he survived the war.

As we progressed onward, our squad nearly became pinned by a group of five Jerries firing from behind a group of large rocks. I directed my rifle fire toward this group and the rest of the squad followed suit. To my relief, the Germans all ducked down their heads. We had continued to advance by dropping to the ground and crawling. At 50 feet away from them, I looked around to see if any of the squad was ready to do the rush. They had all stopped crawling and continued to fire over the rocks. Since it looked like I was the closest GI, I felt that we had to resolve this one way or the other. I began to crawl toward the rocks while the rest of the guys kept up an intermittent firing rate. I was somewhat concerned as occasionally a round would hit the face of the rocks sending fragments of rock flying around and I thought this could damage me as well. As I reached the rock face and began to stand up the firing ceased. I leapt up on the rocks and saw five Germans lying face down. One looked up and began to raise his Burp gun so I brought my bayonet down on his arm drawing blood. At that, the Jerries stood up with their hands raised. I backed off the rocks and walked backwards down the slope while beckoning the prisoners with my forefinger. As I reached the midst of our squad, the sight must have appeared funny. I was the shortest guy in the squad, walking backwards down the slope, using one finger and my lowered rifle to entice the enemy to follow. To my disgust, the rest of the guys lying on the ground began to laugh and chortle at that sight. This kind of ticked me off. After we relieved them of grenades, Sergeant Ostrowski told Seymour (a Squad member) and me to take them back to Company HQ. Seymour walked around the prisoners shaking his bayoneted rifle at their genitals while growling "*Ich Bin Juden.*" They became very docile. Company HQ would not take the prisoners and ordered us to deliver them to Battalion HQ. We located that with some difficulty and it was two hours before we managed to jog back up the slope to rejoin the squad. The firefight was over by that time and some of our friends (?) had the gall to ask us if we had enjoyed our trip to the Riviera.

On previous occasions on any assault, I had moved close enough to the enemy holes to throw a grenade. The first time this happened, two or three Germans were firing at our squad from behind large slabs of rock. We could fire over the rocks but could not get a target in our peep sights. I was down hill and about 50 feet away so I believed I could toss a grenade over the rocks. At the time, I was wearing the heavy winter undershirt, woolen shirt, field jacket, a pack with straps over my shoulder, and one bandoleer of ammo. I got the grenade from the pack straps, pulled the pin, raised the front half of my torso off the ground, drew my arm back and gave a mighty heave. Too late, I realized the terrain sloped upward a whole lot. The grenade hit the face of the rocks and began to tumble down the slope. I hollered "grenade" and everybody dug their fingernails into the ground and ate dirt. The grenade exploded on the slope above us and all of the shrapnel went harmlessly (?) overhead. We had to rush the rocks en masse and terminate the defenders.

A few days later the same terrain and situation faced us. The Germans were behind a magnificent mound of earth and were giving us fits. As I lay behind a comfortable tree, once again I believed I could solve this situation. I remembered the lesson from my previous throw. I retrieved the grenade from my straps, pulled the pin, reared back and threw with all my might. The grenade flew over the mound of earth, hit a tree and tumbled down the slope, missing the Germans and came towards our position. Once again, I shouted "grenade." Fate intervened and it exploded on the slope above us and no one was hurt. We advanced up the mountainside and gained our objective. When the firing died away and we could relax a bit, one of the larger guys from the rear of the squad came up to me and said, "Sarge sent me to pick up all of your remaining grenades." That did not even hurt my feelings.

The lovely French rains kept us from dehydrating. Our raincoats became our standard garment for most days. Our Thanksgiving dinner was brought up by the cooks who ladled big scoops of mashed potatoes, cranberries and turkey out of marmite cans. It rained while we were in the chow line and that memorable meal was a mess kit holding a red sea of cold potatoes, cranberries and turkey. We dashed for the shelter of towering pine trees and thought it was delicious. The guys who had griped about the efforts of our cooks back at Ft. Bragg had now been living solely on K rations. Some of them even began to reminisce fondly about the meals back stateside. The cooks were redeemed.

George Koerner was probably the best toothbrusher in our platoon. Each morning he would step to the side of our slit trench area to vigorously brush his pearly whites. One morning he reentered our area, toothbrush in his mouth, and toothpaste on his lips, two German rifles on one shoulder, while herding two German soldiers ahead of him. The Germans had unwittingly walked into George's line of sight while he was brushing his teeth. One of the German speakers in the platoon told the Germans they were lucky to be alive. The toothbrush was a deadly weapon.

They didn't smile. We had now entered into December and approached the city of Mouterhouse. As we ran and fired down an outlying street, we were met with a blast of burp-gun fire from an office type building across the street of an intersection. As I looked around the corner, German bullets popped by and some hit the stones above my head. Chips and fragments flew past and I would withdraw my head. At this, one of the guys from the back of the squad came up behind me and said "Sarge says to get a fast man across that street and put grenades through the windows." At that, he handed me two grenades. I managed to stuff my head through my sling to carry my rifle, gripped the grenades, one in each hand and pulled the pins. I took what I thought was my last living breath on this earth and bolted out. To my amazement, the entire squad followed while firing over and around my head. I love advancing surrounded by a friendly wall of lead. The window was shot out by that time and I dumped the grenades in and slid on the pavement for the next doorway. The rest of the guys went in and silenced the occupants. This was the end of the first week of December, I believe. We went into a series of back and forth movements, seemingly digging in and then moving out. Our squad wags called it "musical foxholes."

On December 17 we appeared to be heading north instead of east toward Germany. Our squad was ordered to patrol to find the location of the enemy first line of defense. The country was more open and the walking was easier than in the mountains we had left behind. There were quite a few trees however, and I liked that. As always, I would walk a few steps, and kneel behind a tree to observe the terrain ahead. We always looked for manmade humps in the ground, evidences of humans such as trees cut down to make a field of fire, or any thing that from the enemy viewpoint gave a favorable defensive position.

After about an hour of slow careful walking, I kept advancing more and more slowly. Kids from Kansas grow up hunting rabbits, pheasants, etc. and I believe some of those old habits kept me alert. I approached a fallen tree intending to make a kneeling stop behind it to survey the terrain ahead. As I approached to within ten feet, I heard voices, German voices of someone chatting with another voice. I flipped my right hand behind me as a signal and the squad hit the dirt. (I carry my rifle in my left hand) I froze and the voices continued their chatter. I stepped a few steps to my left and saw two Jerry infantry grunts in a foxhole. I leveled my rifle at the head of the older one and stamped my foot to get their attention. When they looked in my direction, I was about thirty feet from them. Once again, I beckoned with the forefinger of my right hand. The older one dropped his rifle and climbed out of the hole. The younger soldier obediently climbed out and followed while still carrying his precious rifle. As they

entered the squad area, Clarence McKenzie brought his M-1 Barrel down on the kid's rifle barrel and arm. I heard a ringing thud and a crack. I believe the German suffered a fracture.

So far, we had been stealthy and had not aroused the German line as we turned to trot away, However, our movement caught their attention and all hell broke loose. McKenzie and I ran at the head of the group while pushing the prisoners along at a fast running pace. We fought a leapfrog fighting retreat while the Jerries ran after us trying to turn the tables on us. This lasted for about twenty minutes and for a distance of several hundred yards. Evidently, the Germans thought they were getting too close to the American lines and suddenly broke off the pursuit. We reached our company area and turned our catch over to the Brass. Sergeant Ostrowski briefed them on our patrol, the compass reading and distance of our enemy contact. We started toward our previous slit trenches in the line when we were called back to Company CP. We were told that since we had completed only one leg of our patrol we were to go back, make a traverse, gather more information and report back. With heavy hearts and feet, we started out again.

This time I veered to the left so we would not come to the same point opposite the German lines. Once again, as I reached a distance of 1500 yards out, I proceeded more and more slowly. I came down a small incline and stopped behind the only tree in the immediate neighborhood. There was a small clear space ahead of me and experience told me this was a defended area. I glanced back and scout Brown shook his head from side to side in a negative signal. I looked back to Sarge's position and did not receive a halt sign. He looked stoically ahead as he had been chewed out for not completing a bona fide patrol. I turned, lowered my head, leapt forward and dashed across the clear space ahead hoping to gain the shelter of some small trees.

As I dropped my head, the sharp pop of a bullet went past my helmet. I heard a simultaneous thud. I knew that Brown had been hit. I looked back and saw him lying face down in the dirt. I ran back, dropped to the ground and placed his right arm over my shoulder. It was inert and lifeless. At the same instant, I heard another very loud nearby pop of a passing bullet. Something almost turned me over. I discovered later in the day that I had two bullet holes in the seat of my pants. The bullet did not have my name on it. At that moment, all hell broke loose again. Sadly, I had to drop Brown's arm and retreat.

Later every man in the squad stated to me that going out again on patrol in that immediate area was a suicide mission. Sarge gave the order to shoot our way back to safety. We regretfully left our wounded or dead buddy behind.

Once again, we did the leapfrog retreat. Many of the squad members were firing more slowly and it was evident they needed to conserve ammo. This lasted for another twenty minutes or so and once again the Germans withdrew, feeling correctly that they were getting too close to the American lines. Once again, we reported in and for the first and only time I heard Sarge raise his voice. Our attack started in just a few minutes and we had barely enough time to re-supply ourselves with ammo. Our assigned field of attack was in the original spot of our first early contact with the German lines. I later asked the men of our first squad if they encountered the body of a dead GI. They did not. As we started up the slope of the German defensive positions, we encountered very heavy fire from burp guns again. This time Sarge signaled a halt and our .30-cal. machine gun was brought forward to spray a troublesome Jerry position. This forced two coal bucket helmets to disappear into their defensive hole. During this, I had crawled close to this position off to one side. A handkerchief was waved out of the hole and the machine gun stopped. I called out to the hole occupants to "*Kamerad.*" Two white-faced grunts climbed out and I escorted them back to within our lines. Ostrowski just motioned to me to take them back to CP as the firefight was engaged and everybody was busy advancing and firing. I took the Jerries back to our starting point and turned them in to the Brass. As I began to return to the action, the firing seemed to fade away and then stopped. We had taken our objective and I had missed the good parts.

On Christmas Day 1944, the squad Sergeant Ostrowski and our platoon guide Frank Crittendon came to me as I was cleaning my M-1 following some action. The conversation brought up the situation that we were almost out of medics as the Germans had been shooting them. They mentioned that they were looking for volunteers. I sensed that this conversation had one purpose only—I placed the bolt back into my M-1 and said "O.K., I will volunteer." I had never really liked pulling the trigger on the shape of a human form outlined in my peep sight anyway. To this day, I still don't know whether I was "promoted,"

volunteered, or ordered to serve in the Medics. The squad members stood up and shook my hand as I prepared to leave the area. They also offered the usual front line humor. I heard remarks like “Goldbricker, 4-F at heart, chickens out when the going gets rough.” Back at Battalion Aid Station, I learned with pleasure that I would be given a sleeping bag to use. Such luxury!!! I was shown the difference between a large bandage and a small bandage. I was shown how to dust sulfa power into a wound site and how to administer a shot of morphine. It was emphasized that it was important to draw the letter “M” on the head of the patient if he had been given morphine. The bottle of iodine was the ink for this procedure. I also had to give up my beloved M-1 rifle. I felt naked when I turned it in and did not carry it around. I was issued two panniers full of bandages, paregoric sulfa tablets, sulfa power and morphine to carry instead. I ended up with a different helmet that had the white target circle and Red Cross on it plus the Red Cross armband to designate me as an unarmed soldier.

After a few days of easy living, I was temporarily assigned to Company F, which was in reserve.

That brings to an end my story of being a scout for Company G. For continuation of my story as medic, please refer to the Holiday 2008 issue of the newsletter, where Rufus Dalton used my story in his article “The Cruel Fate of Company E’s Second Platoon at Rimling.”

*[Editor’s note: Bill Paschal was a recipient of the Silver Star, three Bronze Stars and the Purple Heart]*

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