

# PFC Steingrubey's Three-Day War

by Harry Steingrubey, 399-C

As a rifle scout for Company C, 399th Infantry, my normal duty consisted of “one man” missions running messages between company and battalion, or bringing replacements up to the front. My boyhood experiences in the wooded hills of Southern Illinois, walking to school, trapping and hunting, well qualified me for this position. Although not as front-line as the riflemen, it was just a step behind and sometimes put me in more unwitnessed jeopardy.

Such was the case on November 15 in the “Battle of the Baccarat Woods” when the 399th Infantry captured Hills 409-431 straddling the highway leading south to Raon L’Etape on the Meurthe.

First Battalion line companies, under Colonel Zehner, were encountering heavy resistance from elements of the German 708th *Volksgrenadier* Division, the best unit facing our VI Corps. C Company, under Captain Campion, had broken through the German line and was pinned down on point. Contact with A Company on the right flank was lost. The condition was at a critical point. C Company was in danger of being cut off and the early Vosges twilight was settling in. Captain Campion had to know who was on his right flank. He sent me on a one-man patrol to find out.

The war had caught up with me earlier in the day—I had killed for the first time as the captain and I, his shadow, engaged the enemy at close range. Keeping up with the hyperactive Campion was a task in itself.

I passed in front of our 3rd Platoon and headed for the road. BARman Bauer, well-hidden behind a tree, yelled, “I almost shot you—where the hell you going?” “Cover me,” I said, “while I cross the road to the other side—have to find A Company.” “It might be A Company”, Bauer replied, “but they’re not American. I just shot one!”

Crossing the road and proceeding up the wooded hill, I stopped intermittently and called out, “Able Company” (I was certain they had passed through the area or I would not have shouted). No reply. An eerie quiet now permeated the darkening wet forest—a stark contrast from the battle noise earlier in the day.

As I passed German encampment sites with equipment packed ready to move and saw no enemy. I became convinced that A Company had routed the Germans by surprise and must be on the other side of the hill. Slinging my carbine confidently over my shoulder, I picked up my pace, crested the hill, heard voices at the bottom of the hill and hurried to make contact.

Suddenly I realized the voices were German and not English. I slowly came to a stop and froze. I was surrounded by the enemy who were so preoccupied with breaking camp they didn’t notice me!

Doing an about-face, I slowly started the longest walk in my life back up the hill, expecting at any moment to be recognized and shot. Topping the hill, I ran down and re-crossed the road and crept through the 3rd Platoon unnoticed to find Campion, who was showing signs of nervous exhaustion, and reported my findings.

It was comforting getting back to the front, but it didn’t last long. Campion told me my story was good military novel material and sent me back with two officers to confirm my report!

Daylight was quickly disappearing. My displeasure with the captain’s disbelief and new orders was apparent. I told the officers to remove all signs of their rank and to follow me. We quickly crossed the road and took a course following the road downhill from about 20 yards into the cover of the woods. At about 500 yards, a forest road broke through a seven-foot embankment onto the highway. I saw two German officers (apparently of high rank) approaching from the right. Without turning, I signaled for the other two members of the patrol to take cover as I positioned myself behind a shrub. My plan was to take them prisoner.

As they reached a point directly in front of me, above and to their left, I stepped into view, carbine ready, and in a loud German voice said, “Halt—surrender.” With a rear echelon wonderment, the senior German officer with sidearm on the right turned to his comrade and asked, “Wass ist loss—Hierst der das, Heinrich?” Moving to the very edge of the embankment and motioning to the other members of my patrol to come forward and back me up. I repeated in German, ‘I said Halt—I’m American—surrender!’ This

brought immediate reaction. The officer nearest me answered by bringing a firing “burp gun,” slung on a strap over his shoulder, diagonally up and across my space. This assault took less than three seconds. As he was loading another clip, I shot and killed him.

The senior officer in the meantime had run onto the highway and was using me for target practice with his sidearm as he would run, load, stop, turn and fire. I shouted for him to surrender one more time, but it fell on deaf ears. I unloaded my carbine clip as he ran—now at perhaps 100 yards. He fell. Dead? I know not.

Activity had increased at the bottom of the hill—they had heard the firing. As I turned to take the rest of the trio, who had not fired a shot, back to the company, they were nowhere to be found. I never solved that riddle—or how a burp gun fired at point-blank range missed. Thankful to be alive, I returned to my company.

My adrenaline still high, I volunteered to guide the 1st Platoon off their precarious point to safer ground. Crawling on the ground, we formed a human chain—hand to ankle.

I returned to battalion with Colonel Zehner that night on top of a tank with a wounded soldier. Hearing of my first patrol, he asked that I return and pinpoint the location of troops from the German 708th I had encountered. Corps artillery was called that night for a box barrage of the area, which we learned later was extremely successful. Zehner thanked me, promised a medal and gave me billets for the night. (First good meal and sleep I had had since our division hit the front.) Never did get the medal.

The next day was just another day for an infantryman—back to the front with Zehner and staff, joined my company and fought with the 3rd Platoon under Lieutenant Shields, our finest, for the capture of the hill mass. Tete dis Reclos, which was one heck of a battle and another story. I was not mentally prepared to rejoin Captain Campion and headquarters at this point. Again, I returned to battalion that night. I don’t remember why.

My war, for all practical purposes, came to an end the following day while returning to the company. Getting on the wrong (enemy) side of a hill, I was apparently sighted by a German observer who, thinking I was with a unit and not alone, called for a heavy artillery barrage. Without warning, the shells rained in. I dived behind a large granite outcropping. My last memory before blacking out was a screaming shell exploding as it hit the base of the sheltering boulder—it had my name on it! Time passed. I regained consciousness and was numb, disoriented and in a state of shock, vaguely seeing everything in the bombardment area leveled—trees, rocks, me. My guardian angel was still with me.

My aptitude and training as a scout would now have to save me. I don’t remember how I found the company or when, but do know I couldn’t talk coherently and was exiled by Captain Campion to the 3rd Platoon. He thought I had been “gold bricking” at battalion for the last two days! Never did tell him otherwise.

From the time I was shelled, through our capture of Bitche in March (when I was hospitalized with yellow jaundice), I have no continuity of events in my memory for that period—and still don’t. Probably suffered a concussion. Another casualty was Captain Campion. Shortly after the incidents I have written of, he was transferred to Service Company due to emotional stress.

**Footnote:** I did not realize the significance of my action and how it affected the overall success of my unit until I read the Stegmaier/Gurley publication of *The 100th Most Decorated, Elery Zehner* in the February ‘91 edition of the *100th Infantry Division Association News*.

To protect some officers, this story was never told before.

Holiday 1999 Association Newsletter