

Another View of the Battle of Rimling

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I have recently read a few descriptions of the battle for Rimling in the 100th Division newsletter written by members of the 3rd Battalion, 397th Regiment who were there and participated in the battle. I took 6 of my 10 children and 3 grandchildren to Europe in 1999. We visited Rimling and this really got my son, Robert, interested in the battle. He has since become somewhat of an expert on that battle and has pursued as much information as he can find about it. He has contacted many members of the 397th and received written accounts from many. His purpose is to obtain as much information as he can and come up with as accurate a picture as he can of the battle. So if he has not contacted you he would love to hear from you.

He said it was clear from his research that each individual there saw the battle from his own perspective or from his own "window." That each man's story was a little different based on the situation, or "window" he viewed the battle. He suggested that I write my account since, according to him, it is different from the others he has read. I have agreed to write about what I saw from my "window."

I was with the third platoon of the 397th's Anti-Tank Company when we were attached to the 3rd Battalion in Rimling, France. We moved into this position over "Skyline Drive" on 24 December 1944. Our mission was to cover the junction of Guiderkirch-Bettviller and Rimling-Hottviller roads with our 57mm antitank gun. During the time of the battle for Rimling, I was the 3rd Platoon's messenger (jeep driver, radio operator).

Our platoon command post was located in the last house on Main Street (Grand Rue) in the south end of Rimling next to the blown-out bridge. The house was owned and occupied by the Lohman family. The Lohman family consisted of grandma and grandpa, father, mother, and two children, a boy about 13 and a girl about 9.

One of my responsibilities was to make the run back to company headquarters in Petit-Rederching to pick up mail, chow, ammo, and so on.

About the third or fourth day of being in Rimling, things became so hot up on "Skyline Drive" that I decided to find an alternate route back to company headquarters. I discovered that by driving in the creekbed that ran by the barn, I could go up stream until I came opposite an apple orchard. I would then find a spot on the bank that I could put the jeep in four-wheel drive and climb up out of the creek. I would then drive through the apple orchard, which was next to the Guiderkirch-Bettviller road, until the orchard ended. Finally, I would drive onto the Guiderkirch-Bettviller road that was flat as a pancake and straight as a string for two miles into Bettviller. I used this road several times during the battle. The 3rd Platoon, 397th Anti-Tank Company was never out of food, ammo, mail, or water.

I would vary my times of departure because a German mortar was set up somewhere in front of Guiderkirch. This mortar would chase me once I came out of the orchard and on the road to Bettviller until I got out of range. I usually left during the hours of darkness to make it more difficult for them to spot me. I always made sure I brought back a little extra food for our landlords, the Lohman family.

Grandma and the boy would always be out by the back entrance of the house to see me off, rubbing their hands together gleefully, smiling and saying "Essen haul'n, Essen haul'n." I would return their smile and say "ja, ja," and take off. At the time, it sounded like "asshole." I also wondered if the boy was somehow signaling the Germans that I was leaving so that they could get their mortar ready for me, since the Germans seemed to know when I was leaving. I have since discovered that "Essen haul'n" meant food hauler and the boy was not signaling the Germans.

When all the excitement broke loose on New Year's Eve, it started at the other end of town. Lieutenant Zalewski said, "Come on 'ole boy, let's go up to Battalion and see what this is all about." We took the jeep up the street to battalion headquarters. Bullets were whizzing all around, men were running up the street, and it seemed like bedlam had cut loose. I pulled up in front of Battalion Command Post and let

Lieutenant Zalewski out. The guard on duty at the doorway of the Command Post screamed at me to “Get that god-damned Jeep off the street and away from the Command Post. It’s going to draw more fire!”

By now Lieutenant Zalewski was in Battalion Headquarters, so I swung the jeep around and tucked in between two buildings. As I got out of the jeep, I tried to get my rifle out from its rack under the dashboard. Somehow it became stuck and I couldn’t get it out. At about the same time, a German with a “burp” gun let loose at me from somewhere across the street. I dived under the Jeep and crawled up behind the front wheels. The kraut with the burp gun gave me a couple more short bursts, but his aim was high and he only hit the building above the Jeep. By this time, some of our boys evidently saw what was happening, then chased him away and the firing stopped. I was under the Jeep for only about 10 or 20 seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime to me. I finally got enough nerve up to get out from under my jeep. I retrieved my M-1 from under the dashboard and headed for the battalion headquarters. I met Lieutenant Zalewski as he was coming out. He said, “Come on ’ole boy, let’s get out of here and back to our position!”

We tore back down the street in a hail of bullets to our Command Post at the crossroads. When we arrived, our platoon was busily engaged in a heavy firefight with some Krauts that were attempting to cross the field from Guiderkirch. We were successful in holding our position and eventually drove the Krauts off.

During the middle of the action, I had been on the radio for about 36 straight hours with Company Headquarters. Lieutenant Zalewski felt sorry for me and said that he would take over the radio so I could get some shuteye. I gave him the code, which was on a single piece of paper and flopped down on a bed. Lieutenant Zalewski always had a cigar stuck in his mouth. He was as sleepy as I was and sleep got the best of him. With the cigar in his hand, he put his head down on his arm and took a little nap. Unfortunately, the cigar came in contact with the code and burned up most of it. Now I had no way of contacting the Company Headquarters unless I radioed in the clear.

I tried to raise the Company Headquarters in the clear and they wouldn’t talk to me. They were sure the Krauts had overrun our position, captured us, and were using our radio. I had a hard time convincing Sergeant Mechlin that it was not the Krauts and was really me. I had to name the company clerk, the supply sergeant, and mail clerk in order to convince Sergeant Mechlin of who I was. A couple of days later, using my secret route through the apple orchard, I was able to get back to Company Headquarters and get a new code. I was also able to get other supplies as well including some “Essen.”

Company L occupied the house kitty-corner from the house we occupied on the same crossroads by the blown out bridge at the south end of town. On the morning of January 7 1945 (I think it was January 7), one of the boys from Company L came over and said that they had some wounded soldiers that needed to be evacuated to the battalion aid station in Bettviller. He asked Lieutenant Zalewski to use our Jeep because a mortar shell had knocked theirs out. Lieutenant Zalewski turned to me and said, “What do you think, ’ole boy?”

I said that I’d rather not have someone else drive our Jeep and would be glad to do the job for him. So I took the Company L soldier back to their Command Post to get the wounded soldiers. I ended up making three trips carrying three wounded on each trip back to the aid station in Bettviller. On each trip, the mortar in front of Guiderkirch chased me up the road until I was out of range. Twice, shrapnel hit the Jeep, but none of us were hit. I wonder if any of those men I took to the aid station made it and if any of them are still around? I never was told their names or their fate.

It was on 9 January that our company commander, Captain Cusanelli, radioed us from Petite-Rederching that Regiment was sending in three tank destroyers to help extract the battalion from Rimling. They were going to use my “secret” route from Bettviller and I was to go out on the road around 2100 and guide them into town under cover of darkness. It was really snowing when I started out and it was very dark. I could only see about three or four yards in front of me. After reaching our rendezvous point I had to wait about fifteen minutes before I heard the rumble of the tanks coming down the road. I started walking toward the rumbling sound, but had to walk some distance before I could finally make out the form of one of our infantrymen. He was walking in front of the tanks to guide them to my location. I’ll never forget the password that night. “Lapel” and the countersign was “Belt.” After we exchanged sign

and countersign, the driver of the lead tank got down on the road and we discussed how to get down through the apple orchard to the creek. We walked down together and looked the situation over. He said that he didn't think the tank could negotiate the short steep bank, but he would try.

He brought up the tank and sure enough, as he started down the bank, the 76mm gun on the turret tipped down and became stuck in the opposite bank. Try as he might, he couldn't back out or go forward and the motor was making way too much noise in its attempts. About this time Corporal Colligan heard the racket and came to investigate. After viewing the situation, he said that the engineers had cut down some trees up by the bridge, left the stumps, and had laid some 8x8 timbers on the stumps so you could cross the water. He said that he was sure the 8x8s would support the tanks. Sure enough, the tanks crossed the creek on the 8x8s, climbed the bank, and went on into town to cover the retreat out of town. Boy was my face red! I had led the tank into a perfect trap, but thanks to Corporal Colligan, the other two tanks made it and covered our rear as we pulled out of Rimling.

My wife and I returned to Rimling in 1990, but we couldn't find the farmhouse I had stayed in because of all the new construction. We made it known to some locals in the general area of the farmhouse that I was an American soldier during the war and stayed in a farmhouse nearby. An elderly gentleman, who we later came to know as Alphonse Spaet, took us back through his yard to a row of spruce trees that hid the view of an old farmhouse. That was the farmhouse. I was so excited and over come by emotion that I ran across the field towards the farmhouse shouting to my wife, "Here it is, here it is!"

There were a couple of farmhands working in a field close to the house and they came down to see what the commotion was all about. From my limited use of the German language, pantomime, and my wife's French, we let them know that I lived in that farmhouse during the Battle of Rimling.

One of the elderly farmhands let us know that he also lived in the farmhouse during the battle. I said that I was in the farmhouse on New Year's Eve of 1944-45. He said, "Me, too." I looked him directly in the eye and said "Essen haul'n. Essen haul'n." His eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. He started hollering, "ESSEN HAUL'N! ESSEN HAUL'N!" and jumped across the space that separated us and took me in a great big bear hug. He wore no shirt, short leather pants, knee-high rubber boots that were covered with cow manure and he was filthy dirty. My wife couldn't believe it when I returned his hug and tears ran down my cheeks. This was the 13-year-old boy who I had lived with 45 years ago during the battle for Rimling; I could not believe it. We found out his name was Aloys and kept in touch with him until his death.

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