

Charlie Co. Squad Takes Out Heavy MG Nest

by Willis Wahl, 397-C

I am Private First Class Willis Wahl, Company C, 397th Infantry Regiment. I was the platoon runner for Lieutenant William "Red" Dinning.

At last after 60 years, an old soldier can tell his story. It's hard to believe that eight young men could "take out" a German heavy machine-gun nest alone.

I obtained a copy of a 397th Infantry Regiment report of February 23, 1945 that shows that our battalion took out two machine-gun nests, and I can account for one of them.

At that time we were in a hold mode so that the 7th Army could straighten out their lines, bring up replacements, improve our supply lines, and also look for a possible counterattack, or so we were told.

At that time a "heavy" had been spraying our lines several times a day and at night. One afternoon at about 4:00 PM, the company commander Captain Roe's runner came to our hole and said Lieutenant Dinning was to take a combat patrol out and destroy the heavy machine gun. Now this was a big order that would be all a company team could do.

He sent me down to a position to get Sergeant Lorin Speaker, who was one of the best squad leaders. Sergeant Speaker said he thought that the firing came from a hillside at about one o'clock from his position and there was low ground to the right side. He and Lieutenant Dinning said they both thought the only chance of success would be if they could sneak up behind them as they slept and drop hand grenades. They decided on this action, which Lieutenant Dinning laid out.

All were to meet at his foxhole at 1 AM, leave their steel helmets with all their identification in them, and wear their wool caps. He was afraid a steel helmet could rub on a limb and awaken the Germans.

He also said all were to leave their M-1s and we would all carry the .30-caliber carbines. He was having them brought up.

He instructed each soldier to carry four hand grenades in case we got pinned down.

He also said he wanted me to go along because I had a good sense of direction. I knew what my duty could be if we got pinned down. He wanted to take himself, Sergeant Speaker, me, and five others.

He also selected who the three grenade droppers would be and the position each man would be in if the Germans were asleep. He told us that if they were awake, we would withdraw for another night or different plan of action.

At about 1:20, we took off and using our "stealth" training we followed the low ground for what seemed about a half hour. Suddenly the third man in the line stopped and pointed up and, sure enough, there was the top of a machine gun with a soldier sitting or standing behind it.

We all huddled and watched as Lieutenant Dinning decided that the German was sitting on the edge of the hole and indeed was asleep. We decided to go in about another hundred yards and then to sneak in the planned sequence. When we were behind the man, Dinning would motion for us to move in.

Everything was going good until we were about 20 feet from the hole and the man was still asleep. Someone in the rear must have detected us and fired two parachute supported flares which made it like mid-day. We moved fast and I heard all three grenades go off.

Two German light machine guns started cutting loose. As we reached the bottom of the hill we ran into concertina barbed wire. I saw that the fellows to my right cleared the wire and were not hit. So the machine guns apparently weren't covering the wire. I am only five feet seven inches tall and I doubted that I could jump high enough to make it, but some how I did. My toes did not catch on any of the barbed wire. Thank God we didn't have the heavy steel helmets on or were carrying the Garand M-1 rifles.

We all headed to our foxholes and stretched out to catch our breath when someone hollered that Sergeant Speaker was not back. Lieutenant Dinning sent me back to Captain Roe's foxhole to tell him that we had a man down. He immediately sent two litter bearers to look for Sergeant Speaker. He ordered

all of Company C to lay heavy fire to the top of the German position He ordered Company D heavy weapons to open up and a lot of firing took place.

When I finally got back to my foxhole, all of a sudden a flare was shot up and all the firing stopped. The word got around that Sergeant Speaker had been recovered, but we did not know his condition. I often wondered what happened to him.

The next I heard of him was two years ago. His son had written to the 100th Division Association and wanted to hear from anyone that had known his now-deceased father during his combat days. I quickly wrote his son and told him the whole story. That was the only time that I told anyone about that night and the mission we completed.

We heard later that our patrol took out all soldiers and destroyed the machine gun.

When talking to two of the three grenade droppers, they told me they had already pulled the grenade pins and when the flares went off they almost dropped the grenades too early.

I would welcome hearing from anyone who was a part of that action. Maybe they could add something that I have forgotten.

Over the years I have put in many requests for anyone that remembers me to contact me. So far I have not heard from anyone. In over 150 days of combat, I had lots of contact with the rifle squads. It seems that some would still be alive and remember our war days.

I learned that Lieutenant Dinning was awarded the Silver Star Medal and Sergeant Speaker the Purple Heart Medal and the Silver Star Medal for this patrol. Both were very good men!

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