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Newsletter of the 31st Infantry Regiment Association

Reunions

We had a GREAT time in Pittsburgh. Many thanks to Don O'Rourke for bringing it all together, to Midge O'Rourke for her gracious hospitality, to LTC Steve Townsend for his inspiring talk on Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, to the great soldiers of the 4th Battalion's Honor Guard from Ft Drum—the real stars of the evening, to the flexible staff of the Holiday Inn Select, and to the many Polar Bears who traveled from near and far to attend and make this the joyful event it was. D Co 6th Bn 31st Inf had the largest number present—12, but A and C Cos were close behind. This is the first time we've had about as many Vietnam vets present as Korean War vets and the first time members of the 2d Ranger Company from the Korean War attended—Jim Queen and all his Rangers are welcome indeed. Members voted to hold our next four reunions at:

Colorado Springs/Ft Carson, CO (Aug 2003) Coordinator: **Dean Hess**; 18028 E Berry Ave, Centennial, CO 80015, email: hdean2@email.msn.com

Tacoma/Ft Lewis, WA (Aug 2004) Coordinator: **Dave Wilson**; 18005 E 87th Ave, Puyallup, WA 98375, email: mrdpwilson@amexol.net

Columbus/Ft Benning, GA (Aug 2005) Coordinator: **Sam Wetzel**, 1425 Dartmouth Rd, Columbus, GA 31904, email: WIInt322@aol.com

Watertown/Ft Drum, NY (Aug 2006) Coordinator: **Ed Bettis**, Ed Bettis, 3728 Highland Ave, Skaneateles, NY 13152, email: bettised@hotmail.com



We'll need lots of help, so if you live near one of those cities, please contact the local reunion coordinators and volunteer—yeah, I know what they told you in Basic about volunteering but volunteer anyway. Details of the 2003 reunion will appear in our next newsletter—Pike's Peak, Air Force Academy, Ft Carson-current home of the 7th Infantry Division.

Looking Back

This is the ninth in our series on the regiment's Bataan-era history. Our July issue described the regiment's counterattack at Abucay Hacienda. As we pick up the story, the attack continues.



Advancing into an open field in front of A Company, Lieutenant Charles Litkowski, Corporal Robert H. Dickson, and Private Leonard Prusak were cut down by a burst of machinegun fire. Litkowski and Prusak were hit in the head and killed instantly, but Dickson was still alive, although barely and not for long. Private John Cierciersky, a medic, tried to help him, but was killed by the same machinegun. Perhaps five others in A Company were wounded that day as Americans and Japanese blazed away at each other across open ground. C Company's only casualty of the day was Sergeant Edgar Congdon, killed by a burst of machinegun fire. D Company, supporting the rifle companies with machinegun and mortar fire, suffered almost as many casualties as the companies they supported. PFC Robert C. Anderson (home town unknown) and PFC Melvin E. Lambrecht (Cheyenne, WY) were both killed by snipers and 7 others in the company were wounded

Throughout the fight, the 1st Battalion drifted ever farther to the left, opening a gap between itself and the 2d Battalion. K Company was sent from the 3d Battalion to plug the gap between the 1st

and 2d Battalions. The Philippine Scout 45th Infantry, starting 6000 yards farther south, came abreast of the 31st Infantry in late afternoon, forming a combined assault force of 13 rifle companies and 4 machinegun companies, backed by 5 more rifle companies and 2 machinegun companies in reserve. Sergeant Earl Walk recalls that H Company moved up the main highway toward Abucay on 1934 Dodge weapons carriers until they were stopped by mortar fire. Private Clarence Carrico was hit in the chest by a mortar fragment and was evacuated to the field hospital at Limay where he died a week later. Captain Dwight T. Hunkins ordered the vehicles hidden in a wooded area and the company proceeded on foot for about 1000 yards, reaching a well-prepared position abandoned earlier by Filipino troops. Several Filipino stragglers were incorporated into the company as ammunition bearers. Sergeant Earl Walk had his platoon set up its 2 mortars and its .50 caliber machinegun where they could best cover a sugar cane field in front of the position. Japanese small arms fire whizzed and snapped all around. When Walk fired 20 rounds at the enemy-held woodline with his two mortars, the sector became quiet for a while.

That day, four American P-40 Warhawks, operating from a concealed strip cut into the jungle near Mariveles Point on Bataan, conducted surprise raids against Japanese planes operating over the front lines. Unfortunately, they came too late to prevent another Japanese bombing raid. Corporal William Easler and Private Robert E. Ragan were relaxing in a foxhole in the shade of a huge tree. Without warning, a bomb crashed through the tree's branches, landing directly in the foxhole and blowing its occupants to eternity. Others were luckier. Sergeant Walk heard a dull thud, followed by a muffled explosion. He was bowled over backward by concussion as the ground rose to form a huge mound about ten feet in front of him. A bomb had burrowed deep into the earth before exploding. Several days later, a Japanese mortar round landed next to one of H Company's machinegun positions, setting off a hand grenade Corporal Franklin O. Warr was carrying in his gas mask container. Warr died of his extensive wounds.

At 4 PM on January 19, the 2d and 3d Battalions of the 31st Infantry and 1st and 2d Battalions of the 45th Infantry renewed their advance but by 7 PM, units had become separated in the dense jungle growth. The 2d Battalion 31st Infantry, advancing with F, G, and E Companies abreast, had to cross a steep ravine to reach its objective. They were supported by a few rounds of artillery from the Philippine 41st Division, but had no other protective fire as they entered the gap. The men climbed hand over hand down slippery vines, crossed a knee-deep creek, and ascended the opposite slope in the same manner. As they climbed, they could hear Japanese leaders shouting commands above them. In the tangled underbrush, men became separated from their units and confusion reigned.

On the ridge, the 2d Battalion hit what turned out to be the main body of an enemy regiment moving in the opposite direction. In the ensuing action, Private Elmer C. Duffy was hit by a burst of machinegun fire while walking point for F Company. He was probably already dead but no one could be sure. Disregarding his own safety, PFC Elmer P. Buehrig dashed forward to aid Duffy and was hit in the face by a burst from the same gun. For his selfless sacrifice, Buehrig was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Private "Red" Dyer charged into the field firing his BAR from the waist. Hit in the arm and chest as he charged out alone, Dyer continued firing until he collapsed. Miraculously, he was still alive and was later transported to a field hospital where he recovered from his wounds. Seven others from F Company were wounded before sundown. When a Japanese machinegun halted E Company's advance, PFC James H. Cody and Private Albert F. Tresch volunteered to silence it. Crawling forward with BARs and hand grenades, the duo not only destroyed the Japanese machinegun and killed its crew, but they also put a second Japanese gun out of action. Their deed earned them both the Silver Star.

Some of the regiment's hand grenades turned out to be unmarked practice grenades and few of the others detonated, costing men their lives. PFC Ron Wangberg responded to a Japanese machinegun's fire on B Company by crawling forward in the darkness and throwing grenades at the gun. His first grenade exploded, but missed. Wangberg crawled still closer and threw another grenade, this time a dud. The Japanese gun crew heard him moving toward them and killed him with a sustained burst of fire. For his valiant effort, Wangberg was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Private Dale L. Snyder, a machinegunner with D Company, joined another man in volunteering to attack the same Japanese gun. Crossing 100 yards of open cane field under constant fire, he and his partner reached a point where they could engage the enemy gun with grenades. Miraculously, Snyder succeeded where Wangberg had died trying. The gun was destroyed. For his bravery, Snyder received the Silver Star. When word of the bad grenades reached the company supply sergeants, Sergeant Mike Gilewitch found that some had only a little powder in them and others had none at all.

Major O'Donovan, the 2d Battalion's Executive Officer, reached G Company in the ravine late in the afternoon. He ordered, "Attack at once," but saying it was easier than doing it. Before nightfall, two of the company's platoons had scaled a dry waterfall and reached the top. The remaining platoon did not reach the top until after dark. As it arrived, it engaged a group of Japanese, but both sides became disoriented in the dark tangle of jungle vegetation. His own men accidentally killed Corporal Stanley P. Nogacek as he returned from a reconnaissance.

The combination of guns, fear, and darkness were to prove tragic again. Uncertain of F Company's progress in front of him, Lieutenant Robert Magee placed an attached machinegun platoon from H Company at ten-foot intervals along a trail and warned his men to be on the lookout for infiltrators. He sent Corporal Hugh Piper ahead to find F Company. Long after dark, the machinegun platoon's point man heard a slight rustling noise on the trail. He jumped up and began firing wildly at a ghostly figure trying to move stealthily in his direction. Hit by the sentry's first burst, Corporal Piper screamed weakly, "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" It was too late. Piper fell dead, hit six times.

As the platoon gathered to see what had happened, Japanese 47mm knee mortars opened up from a short distance away. One shell, luckily a dud, hit the rim of Private Bill Garleb's helmet, slamming his face into the dirt and breaking his glasses. Lieutenant Magee ordered his men to pull back, holding each other's pistol belts as they followed the trail down a precipitous ravine. Magee and Staff Sergeant Williams led, followed by the sobbing soldier who had killed Piper, then Private Garleb, Private Charles A. Henderson, and the rest of the platoon. As Japanese artillery opened up on the



platoon's former position, Garleb realized Henderson was no longer behind him. Reaching a stream, the four men in front were unable to find the path up the opposite bank in the darkness and hid under a ledge to await daylight as the crescendo of fire intensified.

It soon became apparent that they were caught between opposing lines as American mortars and 75mm field guns, and Japanese artillery fired round after round into and across the ravine. The soldier who had killed Piper lost control of his bladder and sobbed, "We're going to be killed. Please God, don't let us die." Japanese assault troops had entered the ravine and were heading their way, although it was uncertain whether they had been seen. Magee put his cocked pistol against the whimpering man's forehead and whispered, "Shut your mouth. Another word and I'll blow your damned head off." Fortunately, they remained undetected as Japanese troops stumbled back into the ravine after their attack failed. With the first rays of dawn, the four found the path up the friendly side of the ravine and scrambled to safety. Major Lloyd C. Moffitt, the 2d

Battalion's Commander, greeted them, "We thought you were dead." They were soon reunited with the rest of their platoon who had made it safely across the ravine ahead of the Japanese during the night.

On January 20, the 31st and 45th Infantry Regiments renewed their attacks, but the effort was impossible to synchronize in the thick jungle terrain. Companies and sometimes platoons fought alone along narrow jungle trails and across the deep ravines segmenting the battlefield. As the 3d Battalion moved forward, M Company fired 80 rounds of its precious 81mm mortar ammunition to keep the Japanese pinned down while I and L Companies advanced across a cane field. Unfortunately, it was too little to keep the Japanese pinned down long enough for the entire battalion to get across the field.

Private Burton Ellis, a medic with I Company, was hit in both legs by a burst of machinegun fire. Corporal Marchel D. Easley tried to rescue him, but was cut down by a burst from the same gun that got Ellis. Easley was dead and no one could reach Ellis, an agonizing situation for a unit whose medics risked so much to help wounded infantrymen. After dark, a Filipino doctor and his helper came out to rescue Ellis, guided by a lantern. Ellis survived because his tight leggings kept him from bleeding to death. Moving far to the left, L Company attacked the grove from which Easley and Ellis had been shot. To scout the way, Sergeant Clifford Clegg led a patrol around the edge of the field through thicker vegetation. Spotting a four man Japanese patrol, Clegg's squad ambushed the group, killing or wounding them all. Cautiously, Clegg and his men moved away, fearful of attracting a larger group of Japanese. As time went by and the patrol did not return, Staff Sergeants John Flynn and William W. White went out to investigate. They found Clegg's squad crouched no more than 50 yards from a group of about 70 Japanese sitting in a clearing, talking and apparently ignorant of danger. There were several Japanese posted in trees, but they seemed oblivious to their duties, talking with their comrades below.

While Private Peter Chamote kept watch, Clegg brought the rest of the company forward, moving them quietly into positions where they could engage the Japanese. Some were unable to see through the thick grass and underbrush that concealed their presence, but were instructed to fire in the direction of the Japanese voices. Such conditions generally cause inexperienced soldiers to fire high, probably wasting much of the available firepower and dissipating its shock effect. On order, the entire company opened fire, scattering the Japanese who quickly responded with heavy fire of their own. Seven Americans were hit in the ensuing melee. Private John Lally, one of the company's medics, carried several men to safety under fire despite being painfully wounded himself. For repeated heroism that day, Lally was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Later, as he was helping to evacuate the wounded to the Regimental Aid Station, a mortar shell blew him into the air, blinding him from the concussion. Although still partially blind and not fully recovered from his wounds, Lally returned from the hospital several weeks later and faithfully continued his duties.

As L Company withdrew from the ambush site, Captain Thompson called for mortar fire, but there was none to send. Captain John Pray of G Company came to L Company's position in a nearby ravine and offered his help. His company had attacked the same position several days earlier and knew the terrain well. Reinforced by G Company, Captain Thompson sent a message to battalion asking for permission to attack, but no response came. At dusk, I Company was ordered to attack but made little headway in the face of intense machinegun and mortar fire. Around 9 PM, a detail from Battalion Headquarters brought up canned rations and all companies were withdrawn to the backside of a protective ridge to eat in relative safety.

All night long, Japanese voices could be heard infiltrating between the 31st and 45th Infantry Regiments. The same was true on the 45th Infantry's left flank. The uncoordinated attacks

launched on January 17 through 20 had opened gaps between adjacent regiments and the Japanese were quick to exploit them. On the morning of January 20, the 3d Battalion dug in on the forward slope of a long ridge with I Company on the right and L Company on the left. That afternoon, K Company attacked over the same ground I Company had covered the day before. After taking several casualties on its intended path, K Company drifted to the left and ended up on the 1st Battalion's right flank. As Japanese troops infiltrated between the 31st and 45th Infantry, the 1st Battalion wheeled to the left to face a threat mounting on its flank. K Company, occupying a major trail intersection west of Abucay Hacienda, became the pivotal hinge between the 1st and 3d Battalions. On the right, the Japanese attempted to cross a small, bare hill about 300 yards from L Company. A machinegun section under Sergeant Harry Neff kept the hill swept clean each time the Japanese appeared. Lieutenant Armentrout, the attached artillery forward observer, guessed the area behind the hill might be an assembly area and called for fire. Screams and groans could be heard between the whistling and crumping of 75mm shells, confirming Armentrout's suspicions. Shortly afterward, Private Julius Stewart scattered several groups of survivors, dropping several with his BAR as they tried to cross the Hacienda Road into the barrio.