

Chapter 5

The Glamour War

You might think that after you fight your way to the top of a hill, fighting downhill on the far side should be a cinch. After all, can't you see where you're going? Anyhow that's what I expected.

Wrong, and wrong! The far side of Hill 122 was a gentler slope, and you couldn't see down it because it was covered by a dense forest of trees and brambly undergrowth. It was even harder to fight through than the hedgerows, because it was solid hedge with no fields between. It was called *Le Foret de Mont Castre*, and it didn't look the least bit like the German forests: neat rows of coniferous trees with clear needle-covered ground at their feet. It was more like a jungle, or at least what I imagine a jungle is.

The infantry did press through, fighting the vegetation as well as the enemy, and right behind them came the engineer bulldozers knocking down small trees and pushing aside the underbrush to clear crude paths so that vehicles with heavy weapons, ammunition, telephone wire, food, and other necessities could get through.

I used one of these paths to drive up close and find out what was going on. It was slow and bumpy going: the dozers had leveled all the stumps to the same height, regardless of irregularities in the ground underneath. We did not break an axle or even blow a tire, but the jeep jolted badly.

As I started back, I was asked to deliver a prisoner of war back to the regimental S-2 for interrogation. Normally, prisoners were herded back in bunches, guarded by infantrymen happy to get away from the front for a few hours, but this was an officer, and they thought he might know something of value.

He didn't look like much of an officer: he was a young lieutenant in a crumpled gray uniform, he needed a shave (so did I), and his eyes were unfocused. He looked hopeless, defeated. All PsW did.

I had never guarded a prisoner before, and had little idea of what I was doing.

I solved the problem by making him sit on the hood of the jeep, while I sat in my usual seat with my pistol out of its holster and on my lap. I started out having him clasp his hands behind his head in approved PW style, but it was soon evident that if I wanted to keep him on the vehicle, I'd have to let him hold on with both hands. I'm sure he didn't have any intention of escaping anyhow: armed GIs all along the pathway were jeering at him, and he must have felt as hopeless as he looked.

I was relieved when we got on a real road, and even more so when I had turned him over to Major Boers, the regimental S-2.

Our infantry did get through the forest, and I expect it was partly because the Germans, having lost their strong position on the hilltop, were trying to make as slow and orderly a withdrawal as they could. At any rate, we did break through and continued against scattered resistance to the Seves River, where the enemy took another stand.

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A heavy storm on the English Channel had messed up the docking facilities at the beach and cut off the flow of supplies to a trickle. Artillery ammunition, a heavy, cumbersome item to handle, was in particularly short supply. We were given a daily quota for the amount we were permitted to fire, to make sure we wouldn't end up without any at all.

We never did have enough to fire all the infantry would have liked, but the crisis came there at the Seves River. During the night, the 2nd Bn, 359th, started to receive heavy fire from the far bank, which they thought was the beginning of a counter-attack. Our liaison officer, Lt Maurie Smith, called on us to fire a defensive barrage in front of them.

It was the end of the day, and we had already shot up most of our quota, so what we fired was pretty meager, compared with what they wanted. The CO of the 2nd Bn, Lt Col Donald Gorton, was so angry that it was months before he stopped talking about it, and I'm not sure he ever did forgive us.

Ironically, it wouldn't have mattered if we had gone ahead and fired, because the quota for the rest of the week never got fired at all. On the other hand, it wasn't necessary to fire it, because the Germans had no intention of attacking: they were just demonstrating to cover up a complete withdrawal.

That was Col Gorton's last battle as a Bn CO. Colonel Bacon, the new regimental commander, made him regimental executive, and he kept the job for the rest of the war. The unfortunately named Major Leonard Dull (he really wasn't) took over the battalion.

After we had crossed the river, we stopped for a few days in a position along the edges of a wooded area, waiting for something big to happen - Operation Cobra, as we found out later. But although we sat still, there was no lack of excitement. The enemy had tried to make an orderly retreat, but some soldiers got left behind in the confusion. Possibly they were deliberately left behind to fight a guerilla war. Anyhow, the first night we were there, Germans slipped through the woods and heaved grenades into some of our positions. We called on the 359th Infantry to come and clean out the woods; infantry is supposed to know how to do that sort of thing.

They sent a squad from their I&R (Intelligence and Reconnaissance) Platoon, who had a couple of jeeps drive along all the roads in the woods. They came back and reported the area free of Germans.

That night more grenades were lobbed in.

When I described our battalion reconnaissance party in the last chapter, I failed to mention Battery D of the 537th Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) Battalion. I'm ashamed to say that the omission was fairly typical.

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We were happy when we heard that we were getting an AAA Btry to protect us from air attacks, and when they came in and made a circle around us with their 40 mm Bofors AA guns and quad .50 caliber machine guns, we felt more secure.

But very early in the invasion, the allies got such clear air superiority that only rarely did any hostile aircraft come over, except "Bedcheck Charlie" who flew at night when the AAA couldn't see to shoot. So Btry D, whose telephone name was Undo Dog ["Dog" was the phonetic word for "D"], didn't have much to do. And we, not being used to having them with us, tended to forget about them when we got ready to move, and all too often we neglected to include them with our reconnaissance.

This was pretty hard on them, because positioning AAA weapons is a difficult and technical problem. Ideally, they are evenly spaced on the perimeter of a perfect circle of such size as to insure no gaps in their area of fire. So you can see how their battery commander would feel when he saw us suddenly pull out for an unknown (to him) destination where his unit would be supposed to encircle and protect us.

Eventually he learned to watch us carefully for signs of a recon party forming up, so he could phone in and ask, "Are you folks planning to displace?" And after while we got so we would remember to call him along with our own people when we prepared to move.

During the first few months, each of the four field artillery battalions in the Division had its own AAA Battery for protection, but then someone decided that the Division and Division Artillery CPs and perhaps a few other key installations needed the same protection, so we lost half our battery and kept only one firing platoon. And their telephone name changed from Undo to Mayfair. So when we called them, we would get the reply, "Mayfair First Dog." Not "Mayfair Pup."

Now to get back to our problem with grenades in the dark. The "Undo Dogs" were particularly susceptible to these sneak attacks, because each of their weapons and crews was isolated. Aside from that, they were bored, because there were no enemy aircraft to shoot at. So one of their soldiers gathered up a few friends and they started through the woods on foot, kicking the underbrush as they went. On the first day they flushed out and captured about a dozen Germans, whom they brought us to truck in to the Division PW cage. After that, they went out every day, until they had captured more than fifty in the woods the, I&R squad had certified to be free of enemy soldiers.

Long afterward, a staff officer of the 359th Infantry made the shamefaced admission, "At one point, the 915th FA Bn had actually captured more PsW than the 359th Inf Rgt." He was right, except that it was not the 915th, but D of the 537th. But, of course, we were willing to take the credit.

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We heard the bombers go over for Operation Cobra, and the distant thud of the bombs, but I didn't really understand or believe in it. War was a confused, dangerous, creeping struggle: if you advanced 500 yards, it was a good day. And the news after the first day of Cobra was confusing and not very heartening. But on the afternoon of the third day, we got the cryptic message: "Cobra has unleashed its venom. From now on advances will be reported in miles rather than yards!"

What the message turned out to mean was that the armored divisions, with all their tanks, had been committed through the hole the bombers had blasted in the enemy lines. There were only a few shell-shocked German troops left to face them, and they could advance almost as fast as the tanks would travel.

We were now ready for the glamour part of the war.

On August 1, 1944, a lot of things happened. The 90th Division was transferred from the First Army to the newly activated Third Army, under Lieutenant General Patton, where we remained until the end of the war. We also got a new division commander, Brigadier General McLain, and a new assistant division commander, Brigadier General Weaver. Under this new team, we speedily gained a confidence in our leadership - a confidence that had been sadly lacking before.

Besides that, Eric Peach, our own battalion commander, had gotten his promotion to lieutenant colonel only a few days earlier, just in time to will his gold major's leaves to Doug Myers, newly promoted as executive officer. Things were looking up.

Then, still on August 1, we got the exciting news that instead of moving west into the Brittany Peninsula as expected, we were to turn east and drive across France in the general direction of Paris. Our canteen cup was running over! And, just to prove it was all for real, we moved the battalion **52 miles!** Up to then, our longest displacement had been 10.

So far in the invasion, the Norman inhabitants, what few of them we saw at all, tended to be reserved, just short of hostile. After all, we had bombed and shot up their homeland - sometimes their homes - and still we hadn't gotten the Germans all run out. For all they knew, we never would.

But now it looked as if we could. The Germans were on the run, and as we drove through the villages, the streets were lined with cheering French, waving French and hastily improvised U.S. flags. When the column halted, girls would run out to kiss the GIs in the vehicles. When it was moving, they contented themselves by tossing flowers. I almost got knocked out of the jeep by one bouquet that caught me in the face at 20 mph.

The men were also hospitable, offering (hard) cider or calvados to anyone who could pause long enough to take it. I made the mistake of gulping a big draught of calvados right out of the bottle. Calvados is a high-proof apple brandy, but it felt like swallowing a red-hot poker, then leaving the tip of it in my stomach to cool down.

I don't remember much about the landscape, except that we were out of the hedgerows then back in again. I do remember the city of Le Mans, where I went by the beautiful gothic cathedral with lacy flying buttresses, but there was no time to stop and take a good look.

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Our command structure changed to fit the situation. When the 90th Division was operating together in a small area, the 915th FA Bn was under the command of the 90th Division Artillery (Div Arty). But now that it was spread all over the map and moving quickly, the division formed into regimental combat teams (RCTs). That meant that we, together with Company C of the 315th Engr Bn and various other small units, were placed under the command of the CO, 359th Inf Rgt and now CO of the 359th RCT, Colonel Robert Bacon.

The main striking force of the 90th Division during this time was called Task Force Weaver. It comprised the 357th RCT, very heavily reinforced, under the command of the new Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General "Wild Bill" Weaver. As his nickname suggests, he was an aggressive fighter, and fortunately, a very competent one. The other two RCTs, the 358th and 359th, came behind to mop up anything they had bypassed.

The regimental combat team arrangement, like most things, had good and bad features, especially for Eric Peach, our CO. Now he did not have to worry about Div Arty giving him a goose egg and telling him when to move. Since Col Bacon knew very little about artillery, he let Peach decide on his own when and where to move. A lot of the time we moved so fast that we didn't have time to unhook the howitzers from the trucks and go into firing position at all, but sometimes we slowed down enough to go into hasty positions with a minimum of such amenities as laying a lot of telephone wire and digging in. During the first two weeks of August, we moved a total of 212 miles and did not fire at all except on two days, and then a mere 166 rounds. [in heavy fighting, we would fire more than that in an hour!]

The drawback for Eric Peach was that Col Bacon, knowing very little about artillery, felt that, as our commander, he should always know where we were and what we were doing. And try to understand it.

I spent quite a little of my time with him, trying with limited success to explain the weird things we did. One time it took me over an hour to explain that we were not firing because nobody up forward (FOs, LnGs, or infantry company commanders) had asked us to, and unless they did, we wouldn't know where to shoot effectively, or even safely. I finally got him to call Captain Jiggs Fisk, who was commanding the little infantry task force out in front and ask him if he needed artillery fire. Jiggs assured him that it was the last thing he wanted, because he was in the middle of a delicate (and successful) maneuver.

Colonel Bacon, as I have indicated, was an unpredictable man. One time during this campaign he placed his command post (CP) several miles off to the right of his line of advance ... in an area where there had been no American troops before, on an open flank where there weren't any German troops, but might have been. The location required excessive telephone wire to reach his battalions, and in general was not a tactically sound arrangement.

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Why did he go there? There was a beautiful chateau, with soft green lawns, a formal garden, and carefully manicured box hedges ten feet high. It belonged to people Col Bacon had known, and he had nostalgic memories of having visited there before the war. The owners were not currently at home, and I don't know how they would have felt about his bringing in all those trucks and men to tear up the landscaping. Anyhow, he was there only one night before we moved on.

Meanwhile, Col Bacon was not really satisfied with me as a liaison with the artillery. What he wanted was for Lt Col Peach to be with him most of the time. He began to suggest that the 915th should have its command post right with the 359th Inf. Peach ducked and weaved, avoiding the question. He wanted his own command post close to the firing batteries, not to the infantry. But finally Colonel Bacon, in his role as commander of the regimental combat team, gave him a definite and unmistakable order. "Tonight you will locate your CP at coordinates so-and-so, with the CP of the 359th." [words approximate]

At this time we had paused in an area east of the city of Argentan, almost within range of a village named Chambois, of which we had never heard, but would hear a lot later on. We did not realize it at the time, but we were about to help complete a pincer movement to surround, cut off, and destroy the German Seventh Army, one of the key actions of WW II in Europe.

One of the things I remembered best on that day was coming up a hill and finding myself looking down the gun muzzle of a Sherman tank. I'm not sure whether it was American or French, but it had been positioned to defend against a possible attack - from the direction we were coming from. Things were a bit confused then (as they often were).

Somewhere around this time we started working with the French 2nd Armored Division. Working with allied troops is always a problem, if only because their training has been different. The Americans were trained to maintain strict camouflage discipline: No lights showing at night, stay as inconspicuous as possible in daytime. The French doctrine must have been different, because they burned lots of campfires at night. And both American and French armored vehicles were carrying gaudy panels in fluorescent colors to identify them as friendly to our own aircraft.

After we went into position in the afternoon, a platoon of French tanks moved into our A Battery's gun position, with their panels so bright you could almost hear them. Lt Wilborn, who had taken French at West Point, went out to talk them into moving elsewhere, so they wouldn't draw fire on A Battery.

He made his request as clear and polite as his limited French would allow. "Les avions," he explained, waving at the sky.

The French platoon leader shrugged. If les avions carne, he said, they would get inside the tanks. What was the big deal?

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Captain Klas considered turning the howitzers on them to get them to move, but decided not to create an international incident. They remained with A Battery, in mutually resentful togetherness.

Operating with allies is always difficult. With enemies, you at least **expect** them to be hostile.

The 359th CP which we were to join turned out to be in a fine chateau with a number of barns, stables, and other outbuildings. Plenty of roofs to put over everybody's heads.

Before we occupied it, I heard Col Peach instruct Capt Jacobs, our Communications Officer and Hq Btry Commander. "Jake, I want you to put in the most elaborate CP you know how. I want wire lines strung all over, to everyone we could possibly want to talk to. Better make that two lines, in case one should be shot out. Let's show these doughboys what a real CP looks like."

By the time we finished occupying our position, our CP had taken up far more room than Col Bacon's, and there were artillery wire trucks all over the courtyard of the chateau, their crews erecting temporary poles and stringing wire overhead, off the ground. The radio operators took their sets up into the attics to get maximum reception. The infantrymen were looking at us funny.

The fire direction center and my S-2 section set up in a huge room of the chateau which must have been the ballroom, but had a few decorative tables and chairs in it. The ceiling was about twelve feet high, with a crystal chandelier and tall windows we had a hard time covering with blankets to prevent light from escaping. I think it had a parquet hardwood floor, too.

By the time we were settled, Col Bacon was already having second thoughts. "My God, Peach, what's all this wire and stuff? Do you really need it just for a CP?"

"Well, sir, I have to have communications between the fire direction center and the firing batteries. And between the forward observers and the fire direction Center."

"Why did you bring your fire direction center, whatever that is? All I wanted was your CP."

Peach spread his hands. "But my CP is the fire direction center."

"Oh." Bacon hesitated. "All I really wanted was you and a clerk, with your operations map."

"But, sir, my operations map is the firing chart - and the fire direction center can't work without it."

Bacon went away talking to himself.

As I mentioned earlier, the German Air Force did not operate in our area in the daytime, but that night they made up for it. I don't know if their pilots could see us by the reflections of the French 2nd Armored's campfires, or if they got our location from spies

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on the ground, but their information was good, for they dropped bombs with massive bursts all around us, close enough to jar the ground. One of them knocked down a black-out blanket and shattered the window.

The flash of the next burst illuminated the room, and I saw all the FDC personnel and everybody else present on their hands and knees with their heads under the little ornamental tables and their posteriors stuck out all around. I laughed later, but right then, I was as scared as anyone.

I was never particularly frightened by artillery fire: all of us had observed and experienced it so many times that I, at least, didn't believe at a gut level that it would hurt me. Bombing was different. There was no doubt in my mind that it could and would.

Fortunately, it didn't. To the best of my recollection, nobody from either command post was wounded that night.

However, Col Bacon never suggested a joint CP again.

1. Note: The Bofors, named after their Swedish inventor, were long-barreled automatic cannon mounted on four-wheeled trailers. They made a porn-porn-porn noise when they fired their explosive shells. The quad .50s were groups of four .50 caliber machine guns mounted co-axially (parallel to one another), and firing as a unit. They were mounted on half-tracks [half-tracks are a sort of armored truck with "caterpillar" tracks where the rear wheels belong]. Both were devastating weapons against either air or ground targets . if properly aimed.

Essay Four

March Order

Shortly after VJ Day, I found myself in a hospital in Regensburg, sent ostensibly for a few clinical tests to find why my eyes hurt (they still do). The hospital wasn't fully equipped yet, so they held me until all their machinery arrived - about a month. I shared a room with an officer who had been diagnosed as a case of combat fatigue. This puzzled me, because he was a Doctor of Dental Surgery, assigned as dentist to a Field Artillery Group (the command headquarters for several FA Bns not belonging to a Division). This didn't sound like an assignment, which would bring him into many dangerous situations: his job was even safer than mine.

Finally he confided his problem to me. Every time his unit went into a new position, he would set up his dentist's chair, field drilling machine, and ancillary equipment; make up a list of appointments; and sterilize his instruments.

Then, about the time his first patient had climbed into the chair, some idiot would shout "March Order," and he would have to find a good place to stop whatever he was doing to the man's teeth and re-pack all his gear to move elsewhere. "They wouldn't let me do **my** job!" he said, with tears in his eyes.

This was a revelation to me. To an old cannon-cocker, there is no more popular command than March Order, with the possible exception of Mail Call. It even ranks ahead of Chow or Fire Mission. It means "Get ready to move, fast," and implies that we are doing so well that we must now move forward to stay within range. [Of course it would also be used if we were moving backward, but such occasions were negligible during our war.]

The maximum effective range of a 105 howitzer, the cannon used by the 915th and other WW II direct support artillery, is about 12,000 yards, perhaps a little more with a good tail wind, or about seven miles. We tried to keep our battalion at least a mile behind the infantry front line or line of departure. This, like everything else, varied with the situation.

For example, for the first attack the 90th made as a unified Division, in the Normandy beachhead, we occupied positions right on the line of departure. (There wasn't much room on the beachhead.) In fact C Battery, in moving into position, drove right by the 2nd Bn, 359th Inf, who were advancing in column along the shoulders of the road to the attack. Major Dull of the infantry yelled at Lt Smith of the artillery, "Are you sure you know where you're going?"

However usually we kept a little space between us and the advanced positions as a buffer in case the enemy should break through. This was particularly important when we were in a defensive, as opposed to an attack, situation. In a retreat, or withdrawal, there were other considerations about positions and moving, but since we were lucky enough to be moving forward or at least standing still almost all of the time in our campaigns, I will confine this discussion to advancing.

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Because of our range limitations and the necessity not to get too far forward, we generally moved about 3 to 6 miles at a bound. Since it was unwise to go on reconnaissance forward of the front lines, we couldn't make much preparation to move before the infantry had advanced to about 4 miles ahead of us. So when and how often we moved depended on what was going on with the infantry. Looking back, I suppose the norm was about a move a day, but there weren't many normal days. The longest time we were in the same position was the month we spent near Gravelotte, a few miles west of Metz. The most moves we ever made in a day were four, but it was a lo-o-o-ng day, starting at daylight and ending about midnight.

Under ideal conditions, a move could be made in two or three hours. That assumes the reconnaissance has been made, and is from the time the first firing battery has been given "March Order," until the last battery is in the new position, ready to fire. It also assumes many weary hours of prior training, so that every man knows exactly what he has to do to get ready and move.

The firing batteries, A, B, and C (Able, Baker, Charley in the phonetic alphabet of the time) were particularly the scene of frenzied activity. The split trail of each piece (howitzer) was closed and locked together, the rammer-staff clamped in its travel position on the trail, the sight removed and stowed in a jar-proof box, a canvas cover stretched over the piece and strapped down, and a dozen other things done. Meanwhile, the "prime mover," a 2 1/2 ton truck, had wheeled in, and the cannoneers hooked the howitzer onto the truck's trailer hitch, loaded onto the truck all other equipment, plus ammunition that was on the ground waiting to be fired, and climbed on themselves.

The telephone people were busy picking up the local wire, loading the switchboard, and getting ready to lay the same wire again in the new position. The gasoline fires in the kitchen ranges and underwater heaters were extinguished and ranges and heaters loaded onto the mess truck, along with any rations, utensils, and other impedimenta that were not already on the truck. [Hopefully, they were not in the middle of serving a meal at the time, but if they were, eating had a lower priority than moving.]

In order to avoid a period when we were unable to fire, we habitually moved two firing batteries, the ones farthest to the rear, and waited until they were in the new position and ready to fire before moving the third. The fire direction center (FDC) split in two, half of it going forward to get set up and ready to fire the two leading firing batteries. As soon as they were in business, they would radio back for the rest of the FDC and the third firing battery to come forward. In the mean time, if the rear FDC needed to fire more than the one battery that stayed behind, it still had communications with other battalions who could reinforce our fire.

It always seemed to Doug Myers (Bn Exec) and Don Thomson (Asst S-3), the officers who stayed with the rear FDC, that it took far too long for the forward CP to get ready. It seemed to us at the forward CP and FDC that they were altogether too impatient, and that we were hurrying as fast as humanly possible. We had to wait until the survey of the battery positions was complete, enough wire laid to enable us to talk to the FOs and

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LnOs as well as the firing batteries, the firing chart set up, and a start made on firing a registration (an esoteric but necessary procedure whose function would take too long to explain here).

The "ideal conditions" I mentioned for moving in two to three hours included clear weather, personnel and equipment relatively healthy, and good dry roads with very little other traffic on them. In the absence of any of these, it took longer.

I recall one day in late winter in the Ardennes. We had sent "A" Battery the March Order and told them to report when ready to move. In good weather, this should have taken less than ten minutes, but at this time the snow was melting and there had been some rain showers. The roads ranged from poor to non-existent.

We waited twenty minutes before radioing them to ask if they were ready yet. They weren't. We repeated the inquiry every ten minutes or so, and finally after three-quarters of an hour, I drove over to build a fire under them. What I found was four trucks, each spinning all six wheels in the slimy clay mud, trying to pull the howitzers out onto the trail, but only digging deeper ruts in the ground and slathering the displaced mud all over the grunting cannoneers who were trying to help by pushing the howitzer.

I also found Lt Van den Bark, the Battery Executive, looking angry and frustrated. He was a man with a short fuse, and he greeted me with a snarl. "Well, you got any suggestions?"

I had one, but they had thought of it already: the truck drivers had fastened their winch cables to trees in attempt to winch the trucks and howitzers out of the morass. I said, "No," and slunk away. In another half hour they reported ready to move.

I was once asked how much of our time we spent moving and setting up, how much shooting, and how much sitting around waiting for fire missions or something else to happen. I wouldn't even be able to guess how much time we spent at which, but each activity seemed to come in bunches. The one I remember most was sitting around waiting, but I'm not sure whether there was more of it, or it just seemed like more of it because it was so boring. As for shooting, there were only half a dozen days when our twelve pieces (howitzers) fired more than two thousand rounds total. Days like that kept everyone, including Service Battery's Ammunition Train, hopping. And on at least 81 days, we did not fire at all.

While we were still at Camp Barkeley, someone decreed that all the junior infantry officers would rotate at observing an artillery firing battery doing its thing in a field exercise. One infantry lieutenant described his impressions later:

It seemed to me that artillerymen were the laziest soldiers I had ever seen. They just sat around or did little piddling things until somebody hollered "Fire Mission!" Then they suddenly became the most energetic soldiers I had seen, until the fire mission was over, when they went back to doing nothing. [Sounds like a fire department, doesn't it?] I made up my mind that the only two things that could get any action out of an artilleryman were "Fire Mission" and "Chow."

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Then someone yelled "March Order," and while I was looking around to see what that meant, they started to close the trails of a howitzer on my legs, and when I jumped to get out of the way, I was almost run down by a truck wheeling in to hook up. So I guess there are three things that get action out of an artilleryman.

Moving the Infantry

Infantry, by definition, fights on foot. Traditionally, they are also expected to move to the location of the fighting on foot. They are often called on to do that, especially if the distances are short. But 25 miles is about as far as a doughboy' in full pack can be expected to march in a day, and after such a day, he really needs another day or two to rest before he is in good shape to fight.

During the "Glamour War" period, I remember the end of one long day's march - the third day of a march of 62 miles - when the infantrymen were so exhausted that they were clinging to anything with wheels - trucks, tanks, farm carts. I saw at least one hanging like a three-toed sloth to the tube of a towed Tank Destroyer gun. I hear stories about Roman legionaries making longer forced marches under even heavier packs, but I question their fighting abilities when they got there. I suspect that their enemies were so astonished at their sudden arrival that they gave up.

Recognizing infantry mobility as a problem, the War Department experimented with various solutions. As one of their experiments, the 90th Infantry Division was redesignated the 90th Motorized Division some time in late 1942 or early 1943, while we were still at Camp Barkeley, and issued enough vehicles (large 2 1/2 ton 6x6 GMC trucks with long wheel base) to permit every infantryman to ride to work during field exercises. The rest of us already had transportation.

I don't remember just how many vehicles this amounted to, but I do know that our column took up more than a hundred miles of road space - more when some trucks straggled, as they were bound to do. It was even worse when they tried to travel with 100 yards between vehicles, as our combat troops in North Africa recommended to keep from presenting a profitable target for dive bombing and strafing. A hundred yards is the length of a football field without the end zones, and there just wasn't enough road space for that in the Camp Barkeley maneuver area. Eventually the Division came up with a policy that all convoy driving would be with a "speedometer multiplier" of three. That meant that a driver was expected to multiply the number of miles per hour by three, then stay behind the vehicle ahead exactly that number of yards. Since most drivers were neither mathematicians nor infallible judges of distance, this worked only tolerably well, but was better than nothing.

The crucial problem, however, turned out not to be how to fit them on the roads, but what to do with them after they had left the roads and unloaded the infantry. Where did you park the brutes? If you scattered them over the landscape either under cover of trees or dispersed a hundred yards apart (on account of enemy aircraft, remember?) they

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took up so much space that there was no room for the simulated warfare of the infantry. By the time we moved to the desert, it was clear that the experiment was a failure, and we had to turn in the extra trucks.

Probably the biggest benefit of the experiment, so far as our infantry was concerned, was that they learned the technique of entrucking and detrucking: that is, getting on and off. That doesn't sound like a very complex skill, but it had various facets. After hours of practice, they learned to form into groups of about thirty - I think that's how many a truck would carry - about a truck length apart, instead of all crowding in one area and milling around. And each man learned the location all the foot - and hand-holds he would need to scramble aboard without delaying the man behind him. Lieutenants with stop watches used to stand by and check the time it took a particular squad or platoon to load, and it had better not be too long, or they would get extra practice at night or on weekends.

When Major Costain first joined us at Camp Barkeley, he had seen infantry of the 43rd Division loading onto trucks and had formed an opinion about infantry's ability to entruck. So at the end of a field exercise, when he saw a fleet of trucks coming to pick up an infantry battalion a mile or so ahead, he said to himself, "I'll go back and March Order the 915th and move out ahead of them, before the road gets blocked. "

But before he could even get back to our CP in the field, here came the same trucks, laden with infantry and headed for the barracks. They were probably home by the time our last battery was on the road.

The infantry got plenty of chance to use their skills, for they did not always walk in combat. Several other means were employed when we had to move too far and too fast to march on foot.

The most satisfactory was to temporarily attach Quartermaster Truck Companies to the Division for the specific purpose of moving infantry forward. They operated like a taxi service: when the infantry got to their destination and de-trucked, quickly and in good order, they thanked the truckers and went about their business of fighting, giving no thought for parking lots. The Truck Companies drove back out of the combat zone and waited for their next job.

But truck companies were not always available, so other expedients were used. The first time I saw infantry riding on tanks [On the outside: The inside of a tank is pretty snug] was in Task Force Weaver, early in the Glamour War. After that it became common practice. Sometimes there were so many men clinging to every irregularity that offered a hand/foot hold that the tank hull and turret were nearly invisible. A tank is not nearly as luxurious as a stretch limousine, but it beats walking. Barely.

And if and when they came under fire, they jumped off and advanced under cover of the tank's fire (cannon and machine gun), protecting the tank from the approach of any enemy infantryman with a panzerfaust (a hand-held anti-tank weapon like our bazooka) or a Molotov cocktail. Infantry and tanks made a good team.

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Another source of transportation for the doughboys was our artillery ammunition trucks. The infantry would gladly have used all our trucks, in spite of the fact that they had short wheel base, suitable for carrying heavy ammunition but with less cargo space for personnel than the long wheel base trucks of the QM Truck Companies. We managed to convince them that we needed the kitchen trucks, the prime movers for the howitzers, the CP truck, and the wrecker (tow truck), but we couldn't justify keeping the Ammunition Train (Ammo Tn), especially since we didn't fire much ammunition when moving fast enough to require entrucking the infantry.

I don't remember the number of trucks involved: I think it was twelve from Service Battery, plus two from each of the firing batteries, for a total of eighteen, under Lt. Nick Nobles, the Ammo Tn Commander. On occasion they "shuttled" infantry. That means they dumped their load of ammunition somewhere, leaving a guard on it, picked up a load of infantry instead, and took them where they needed to go. Sometimes, if the distance wasn't excessive, they had to go back and pick up a second load of infantry. Anyhow, when the shuttling day was over, they had to return to the ammunition, reload it, and deliver it to the firing batteries. And sometimes they had to go back to the Ammunition Supply Point, far to the rear, and pick up another load. In short, they were doing two jobs - moonlighting.

It made a long day, with a long night tacked on. Nick Nobles was worried that his drivers would become exhausted from lack of sleep and start having accidents.

I don't know who thought of the solution, but I expect it was someone in the Ammunition Train. And it was amazingly simple: they just stopped dumping the ammunition. The infantrymen were as happy to ride on the soft pine ammunition boxes as on the hard folding benches of the truck bed. It was probably against peacetime safety regulations, but our cannoneers always rode in trucks with ammunition, and smoked cigarettes too.

Anyhow, artillery shells are very stable, specially when packed in fiber containers inside crates. A direct hit from a heavy bomb would probably detonate them, but it would kill all the passengers first anyhow. All in all, a soldier was much less likely to die from riding on an ammunition truck than from machine gun fire in an attack.

Good soldiers have always been problem solvers.

Chapter 6

The Battle of the Forward Switchboard

In my essay "Of Telephones, Wire, and Upstarts," I mentioned switchboards only in passing, so here I must expand a bit. I am sure you have seen telephone switchboards, with jacks and plugs and tiny lights that light up when someone is calling in. The field boards that we used in WW II were primitive: Instead of lights, they had little hinged doors called "drops," one for each incoming line. When the person on the end of the line rang, the drop would fall open. There was also a crank, which the operator twisted to ring the phone at the far end of a line.

Sound complicated? It is, unless you can see the actual switchboard. Just believe me when I say that the operator can connect any line tied into his board to any other line, provided both lines are intact. He can generally tell by the way the crank turns when he rings whether the line is broken, grounded, or OK. If it is not OK, he has to tell the impatient caller why he isn't getting an answer, then call the wire chief, so he can send out a trouble-shooting team.

Sometimes an operator has to take considerable heat, when the calls are coming in thick and fast. To make it harder, certain calls identified as **Flash, Priority, or Fire Mission** have to go through at once, even if it means breaking into an ongoing conversation. I don't think we ever got a Flash or a Priority call: they had to do with an enemy breakthrough that might endanger our position. But we did get lots of Fire Missions.

And there were emergencies not covered by the book. On a field exercise at Camp Berkeley, a rattlesnake suddenly reared up under the switchboard and rattled the operator - figuratively as well as literally. He was engaged in connecting Major Costain, the Bn CO, with Lt Col Daly, the Div Arty S-3. Neither of those gentlemen was patient when frustrated, and T/4 Browne*, the switchboard operator, had to make a quick decision as to whether he was more afraid of a snake than of two field grade officers. He gave priority to the snake, and abandoned his post. The two irate officers had to wait until Pvt Custer, the battalion rattlesnake hunter, came and dispatched the reptile.

Pvt Custer, nicknamed "General" in honor of his namesake of Little Big Horn fame, was a short, muscular soldier of no particular distinction except that he had the four stars of a full general tattooed on each shoulder just in case of an unexpected promotion. and that he loved to hunt snakes. He would kill three or four of them every time we went on a three-day field exercise.

And there was a time, on the Normandy beachhead, when the luckless Browne* had his switchboard positioned at the corner of a field, in a hollow dug into the hedgerow embankment. An incoming shell burst almost on top of the hedgerow above him and the concussion knocked him flat. When he recovered his breath and senses, he looked to see a mess of loose ends of wire cut or jarred out of the board. He crawled over and closed all the drops. Only one of them fell when he tested. He still had an intact line to Upstart Charley, the C Battery switchboard.

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It took some time, but eventually the wire crews who converged on the scene got everything connected again and Browne" was relieved by T/4 Amos Davis (no relation to Joe B. Davis) so that he could go to the aid station to get checked out. He was all right and back for duty the same day.

Our switchboard answered to the name of Upstart. It had lines to Universe (Div Arty), Unique (359th Infantry), and Undo Dog or Mayfair First Dog. Also to Upstart Able, Upstart Baker, and Upstart Charley, the three firing battery switchboards. Service Battery rarely rated a telephone line; they located farther back, so they could be between us and the supply points, and communicated by radio or personal contact.

[On one of the few occasion when we did run them a line, Lt Greak, the battalion motor officer, radioed for help because his phone wouldn't work. A wire crew checked the whole length of the line before they found the problem - the wire was not connected to the terminals of the telephone. "Shit, lad, " said Lt Greak, using his favorite expletive, "I'm in Service Battery. How do you expect me to know all this technical stuff?"

He did know all about maintaining vehicles, though, and he had courage. Later, when we were attacking the Siegfried Line, someone spotted a GI truck knocked out by enemy fire in from of our own front lines.

After dark, Greak took the battalion wrecker and crew out to the truck, hooked onto it, hauled it back in and fixed it so it worked again.]

But back to the switchboard. There were a lot of "local" lines: to the fire direction center (FDC), the S-2 (Upstart 2), the executive (Upstart 5), and the Communications Officer (Upstart 10, pronounced one zero) and a few others.

And then there were the lines that went forward to our representatives with the infantry. The Upstart switchboard had a line to each of the three liaison officers. The firing batteries maintained the lines to their forward observers, three per battery. That added up to a dozen long lines, each expensive in wire and manpower, all going up in the same general direction.

Then, during the first month in combat, some genius had a brainstorm. I'm not sure who it was, but Capt "Jake" Jacobs, the communications officer (ComO), recognized a good idea when he saw one, and he instituted the forward switchboard, designated Upstart Forward. He would pick a spot somewhere in the middle of our zone and as far forward as safety permitted, and established a switchboard with several lines, three or four, I believe, between it and the main one. Then all the liaison officer (LnO) and forward observer (FO) crews had only to lay wire from it to their own locations, saving a lot of time and effort for everyone.

So, for the rest of the war, if I wanted to talk to Lt Wagner, a C Battery FO, the call would be routed through Upstart Forward instead of Upstart Charley. And nothing had better happen to the Upstart Forward switchboard.

The Battle of the Forward Switchboard

On the day I went out to be a forward observer with the Engineer company - the place on Hill 122 where I found the artichokes that Joe B. Davis refused to share - Jake asked me to keep an eye out for a likely position for the forward switchboard. I found what I thought was a good one, on the edge of the hilltop, only a couple of hundred yards from my own location with the engineers. I called back to Jake and described it in glowing terms, pointing out that practically all our infantry units were now on the hill, so the lines from switchboard to FOs and LnOs would all be short: lateral more than forward.

Jake was so pleased with my solution that he renamed the switchboard in my honor. When you called, Davis the operator would answer "Moore Switch" instead of "Upstart Forward." I was justifiably proud.

That night the Germans must have expended most of their artillery ammunition firing on our elements on Hill 122. I was safe underground, in the covered slit trench the engineers had dug for me, but Moore Switch was not as well dug in. Davis the operator was not wounded, fortunately, but there were several near misses, and several of the lines going into the switchboard were cut by the fire. Early next morning Moore Switch was moved to a safer position at the foot of the hill. And re-named. The operator again answered, "Upstart Forward."

All during the Normandy campaign, most of the flow of information and fire missions came over the telephone, and both the Upstart and the Upstart Forward switchboard operators were working at top speed, routing the calls, checking to see that the call had gone through, and occasionally monitoring to make sure a line was still in use. (Sometimes a caller would just put down his phone and forget to ring off.) Operators weren't supposed to listen to the conversations, but they necessarily heard snatches of them and absorbed more by osmosis, so that sometimes Browne* and Amos Davis knew as much about the situation as I, who was paid to know.

But after the breakthrough, when the glamour war started, there wasn't time to lay all those lines to the FOs and LnO's, and we had to rely on radio during our dash across France. We still had the main switchboard and the lines to the firing battery positions and our own CP locations, but traffic on them was pretty slow.

One mid-morning, after I had just signed off from talking on the radio to a LnO, Capt. Richter, my telephone rang, and I heard the plaintive voice of Browne*, the Upstart operator. "Sir," he said, "could you tell me what's going on?"

At the end of the last chapter, designated **The Glamour War**, we were in a recently-bombed chateau, surrounded by mad Frenchmen in tanks. We did not linger there, but moved north again, and after two days of desperately heavy fighting, ended up behind a line of low hills occupied by our infantry. From those hills, our observers looked down on a wide, flat valley with open green fields punctuated here and there by patches of woods. The little village of Chambois lay in the valley, a few miles away.

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I presume it was normally a bucolic, peaceful scene, but while we were there it was definitely not peaceful. The German Seventh Army, which had tried unsuccessfully to cut us off by breaking through to the coast, was now retreating to keep from being cut off itself, and this valley was their last open escape route.

The first day there was only a trickle of traffic along the east-west roads that ran across our front, but as time went on, it became a flood, clogging the roads, then overflowing into the fields.

We fired. And fired. This was the sort of situation field artillery was meant for, the sort they talked about at the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, where observers occupied an observation post and could see where the enemy was, fire at them, and observe the effect of the fire. It was completely different from the blind groping we had done in the hedgerows.

Of course the artillery didn't do it all, by any means. Fighter-bomber aircraft strafed and bombed the columns, too, and every now and then, German units would turn off into the hills, trying to get out of the valley, and would have to be fought off by our infantry and tanks.

I suppose it was murder, though we didn't think of it that way at the time. If we thought at all, it was that any German men and equipment destroyed here could not be used to destroy us later.

The columns were pretty mixed. Tanks, trucks, VW bugs, men marching on foot, but most of all, horse-drawn artillery and supply wagons. The Germans used a lot of horses, hay being easier for them to come by than gasoline. Even their Panzer divisions had horse-drawn supply trains to bring them, among other things, gasoline and diesel fuel.

The roads became clogged with wrecked vehicles and dead horses, and a good many Germans who could travel across country - infantry and tanks - took to the fields. The gray-clad infantry tried to advance from cover to cover, running between patches of woods, and some of them got through that way. A number of the vehicles managed to run the gauntlet too, especially on the road, which passed through Chambois.

Our observers repeatedly called for fire on the village, where a few volleys at the corner of First and Main Streets (probably named the Avenue Jeanne d'Arc and Rue Victor Hugo) would have stopped traffic for a long ways. But we were forbidden to fire into Chambois: the British had troops there, we were told. Everyone who could see the town indignantly declared that if there were any Limeys in it, they must have been hiding in the cellars or wearing German uniforms, but we still couldn't get clearance to fire there.

Eventually, however, after four or five days, we were given permission to occupy Chambois, and the 2nd Bn, 359th Infantry, got the assignment, with our battalion in support. When they had taken the village, Jake had our forward switchboard moved onto the north-south road leading into Chambois, about a mile south of it. With Chambois in our hands, the gap was pretty well closed.

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Pretty well, but the closure wasn't leak-proof, for shortly after noon Upstart Forward called to say that their position was under attack.

It figured. The doughboys of the 2nd Bn had attacked right up the road, going north, but the fleeing Germans were coming from the west, and they simply sifted in behind our lines.

Anyhow, an ad hoc task force to rescue the embattled Upstart Forward created itself instantly. Capt "Rick" Richter brought his Liaison crew (idle, because the 3rd Bn, which they served, was in reserve) a wire crew from Hq Btry joined them, ready either to fight or to service the telephone lines. Joe B. Davis and I came along for the ride, and by the time we got to the scene we picked up part of Lt. Maury Smith's Liaison Team, which had been cut off from their duties with the 2nd Bn in Chambois by the same German infiltrators who had attacked the forward switchboard - or some just like them.

We dismounted perhaps a mile south of the switchboard and advanced on foot, right up the road. A row of trees lined each side of the road, and behind and among them were patches of trees and undergrowth, which we poked into from time to time as we passed. Every so often, we would see two or three gray-clad figures dart across the road ahead of us, and someone or other in our group would fire at them ineffectively.

I started to draw my pistol, but thought better of it. I couldn't hit anything with it anyhow, and if I did fire it I would have to clean it every day for three days thereafter. A lot of discarded German equipment-helmets, mess gear, blankets, weapons, clothing, and ammunition strewed the ground. I picked up a rifle. It was unfamiliar, and I probably couldn't hit anything with it either, but if I threw it away when I was finished with it, I wouldn't have to clean it.

We were a disorganized bunch. I'm not sure who was in charge: come to think about it, I was the senior officer, so I guess I was, but I didn't issue any commands, and we all worked together better than could be expected. I think if anything, we looked to Richter for leadership. He was notorious for never taking cover, and now he strode down the middle of the highway, shouting, "*Kommen Sie raus mit den Hande hoch!*" and one of his men echoed him with "Hidy, hidy, hidy, ho!" Neither call was effective: no one came out to surrender.

About the time we started our advance, Capt Jacobs, naturally worried, had called Upstart Forward to see if the line was still intact and the board operating. They were. Amos Davis, the switchboard operator, answered routinely, "Upstart Forward."

"What's going on up there, Davis?"

"Nothing much right now, sir. Things are pretty quiet."

"Who's up there with you?"

"Nobody, except these three Kraut prisoners I'm guarding."

Jake, who had himself been up there on a rescue mission earlier in the day, rang off and resumed biting his nails.

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Meanwhile, as we proceeded up the road, several rounds of tank ammunition screamed over, sounding so low that I ducked to keep them from creasing my helmet. "Just some of that armor-piercing crap," Richter said. "Nothing to worry about." He never even broke stride. The nearest he ever came to ducking was to stoop occasionally and inspect some discarded bit of German equipment to see if it was worth picking up and stuffing into the bulging front of his fatigue jacket.

I don't think any of our firing ever hit an enemy soldier: I don't think any of us wanted to, only to scare them into surrendering or leaving us and Upstart Forward alone. And until the very end, none of us was hurt either. Then some German with a machine pistol (like an American sub-machine gun) cut loose at us and wounded Private Forand [introduced in Chapter 2. He was the man in the Liaison 3 crew who wouldn't let me walk back in the dark by myself]. I stopped beside him with one of his close buddies whose name I don't remember. We cut away Forand's fatigue jacket to uncover his shoulder, where there were three neat blue holes about an inch and a half apart, not even starting to bleed yet. We put a compress and bandage on the shoulder and made him drink a quart of water from his canteen with a bunch of sulfathiazole tablets (12, I think) from his first aid kit. I was amazed at the tender compassion of his close buddy, who was also a full-time scofflaw anywhere except in combat.

Forand had one request. "Take care of my Purple Heart." [The Purple Heart is an award given to a person who has been wounded.] Apparently Forand had been wounded before, because Close Buddy said, "I will. Don't worry about it; you'll be getting another Purple Heart now."

About then infantry troops from the reserve battalion came along to link up with the troops in Chambois, and we turned over our casualty to their aid men. They also took custody of the three Germans whom Amos Davis had been guarding with one hand while he operated the switchboard with the other. The road was leak-proof now, and Upstart Forward was secure.

A couple of days later, the campaign was over. The soldiers of the German Seventh Army who had not managed to escape before we took Chambois were either dead or prisoners of war. It was safe to go sightseeing on the battlefield, and I did so.

What I saw that day will be with me forever. I had to pick my way around dead bodies - men and horses - and I am sure that, had I tried, I could have walked clear across the valley stepping only on corpses. And over everything was the sweetish stink of death. I think dead horses smell worse than dead humans, but perhaps that is only because they are bigger.

It's hard to describe my feeling: I suppose numb is as close as anything. If I had been able to think, of all those bodies as recently sentient human beings, each as important to himself as I am to me, I would have gone insane. Fortunately, I could not.

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I wandered around, looking for nothing in particular. The ground between corpses was strewn with German field equipment and personal effects, some like new, some blown apart or shredded. Here was a toothbrush, there a pouch of unfired cartridges and a spilled bundle of photographs - of children, a hausfrau, and a pair of elderly parents, plus a few amateurish snapshots of a nude girl. Farther along were a partly unraveled roll of slick toilet paper, a steel helmet, a single sock, a Bible, and one of the strange deep German mess kits, suitable for soup or stew. And, incongruously, a woman's mirrored powder compact made of tortoise shell.

Other Americans were there, looking for souvenirs or liquor. The German army apparently had a less puritanical official attitude toward alcohol than we: practically every vehicle seemed to contain an unbroken bottle or two of schnapps, cognac, gin, vodka, Calvados, or wine.

One infantry soldier approached me. "Sir, do you suppose these are any good?" He reached into the front of his fatigue jacket and pulled out a fistful of 1000 franc notes. There were obviously more; his jacket still bulged.

"They look all right to me," I said. "Where'd you get them?" "Out of that Kraut tank over there. "

I suspect he had found a German company payroll, but maybe it was only that one of the tank crew had been a lucky gambler. It so, his luck had run out.

I later found that regulations required me to see that the captured cash was turned over to the nearest army finance officer. However, I doubt if I would have tried, even if I had known. The soldier with the money carried a rifle, and he was a stranger.

Some of the bodies on the ground were almost intact, with a few bloodstains on their clothing to show where they were wounded. Others were badly mangled, bones showing white through the torn skin and flesh, intestines spilling out of their bellies. One thing they did have in common. They all looked dead. We read stories about people being left for dead on a battlefield, then getting up and walking off, but I find it unlikely. A live person, even when asleep, looks like a person. A dead one looks like a rag doll.

I did see one still living German. He was half-way out of the hull of a tank, apparently caught there when the fuel tank exploded. The fumes of diesel fuel mingled with the smell of burnt meat. There was no question of his surviving: all his skin was burned away from the visible parts of his body and the flesh of his face and shoulders was charred. But he still breathed with a harsh, labored rattle.

One of my great regrets since then has been that I did not put him out of his misery. One shot through that scorched skull would have done it, and if I had used one of the weapons lying around, I wouldn't even have had to clean my pistol. But I did not think to do it, and I suppose I could not have done it anyhow. Somehow there is a difference between mass slaughter with artillery at a great range and killing an individual only inches away.

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That evening we had a drunken party in the CP tent to celebrate our victory and to dull the sensations from the aftermath. Everyone brought in a captured bottle or two. Major Swatosh had a bottle of a dark, syrupy-looking liquid with a French label. "I don't know what this is," he said, "but it must be good stuff. A Frenchman offered me a hundred francs for it!"

Somebody who had taken high school French looked at the label. "It's motor oil," he announced.

We didn't drink it. We had plenty without it.

Vic Rizzo and the Air Section

I think it was in early 1943, when I returned to Camp Barkeley after taking the Officers' Basic Course at Fort Sill, that I found an Air Section had been added to our Division Artillery. It was destined to add a third dimension to our actions, and in combat turned out to be invaluable. It comprised nine Piper Cubs - little more than box kites with propellers - and the personnel to operate them. Most of the pilots were staff sergeants, but before long the War Department decided that only commissioned officers should pilot airplanes, and they were all made second lieutenants.

The day after I got back, each of us junior officers were taken up to practice adjusting fire from the air. I did very badly, because I had missed the orientation lecture where everyone had been told that as soon as the pilot heard the announcement "On the way!" meaning that the battery had fired, he would make a 180 degree turn and fly back across the line of fire to get a closer look. Since I didn't know that, by the time I quit looking out the left side of the plane and managed to locate the target, now on the right side, the smoke from the bursting shell had already drifted away.

Actually, the technique for adjusting fire from a plane was quite different from the elegant but mind-numbing French system used on a ground OP which I had been taught, both in ROTC and at Fort Sill, and much simpler. So much simpler, in fact, that almost all the adjustments of fire done in combat, even by ground observers, used that technique. We had all wasted a lot of time and ammunition learning World War methods.

When we and the air people had gotten used to one another, they were divided up, and each battalion was assigned its own Air Section, with two planes, two pilots, and a ground crew. I don't remember the name of one pilot: it seems to me that several different officers were assigned from time to time. The one I do remember was 2nd Lt Victor P. Rizzo, a feisty free soul who often rubbed some people the wrong way. He frequently resented the demands of the Army system when he felt his own way was better.

This did not go down well with his superiors, including our new battalion commander, Major Costain, and the Division Artillery Air Officer, Captain Salisbury. Neither of them was a pilot, a fact which may have made Rizzo believe that they lacked the background to tell a pilot what to do. However, both of them were hard-nosed West Point graduates brought up in a tradition of quick and unquestioning obedience to orders. These personality clashes led to problems, and at one period Rizzo was grounded on the vague charge of "lack of cooperation." Major Costain assigned him to one of the firing batteries intending to educate him to be an artilleryman as well as a pilot.

One of the things he was to practice was how to adjust fire from the ground. I remember him at the observation post (OP) during Service Practice. [That's when the howitzers actually fire and the officers at the OP give commands to move the fire from where it landed to where it belongs.] I was in charge that day, and we were using the French technique, which I mentioned above, rather than the simpler air observation

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method. I tried to lead Rizzo through a rather difficult problem, but it soon became apparent that he could not or would not be led. I expect that he felt, with some reason, that he already understood the method he would be using in combat, and that he didn't want to clutter up his mind with a technique he was not going to use anyhow. If that was what he felt, time proved that he was quite right, but at the time I found him irritating.

In less than a month he was back to flying, a job at which he excelled. He handled the Piper Cub beautifully, taking off and landing on almost any reasonably flat surface. This was especially important when we went to the California desert for maneuvers, where for part of the time he was our only pilot.

Since during maneuvers it was never practicable nor desirable to have him land in the middle of the battalion position, every evening before dark Rizzo had to scout around and select a place to land and set up a temporary airstrip as close behind us as he thought feasible.

There were times at which he and his crew forgot to report their location before turning off their radio for the night or to drive their jeep in to the CP and tell us where they were. Then the following morning, when Major Costain wanted to see Rizzo and give him instructions for the day, I would have to go out in my jeep and hunt for him. One might think that on the open desert anything as tall as an aircraft would be easy to spot, but the terrain was full of swells and swales, not to mention scrub vegetation, and it might take several hours to locate it and its pilot.

Finally we got a second pilot and could use our second plane. That took considerable pressure off of Rizzo. However, the second pilot, whose name I have forgotten, was not as skillful at handling a plane. One time, when we moved at night, I failed to pack my toilet kit and found myself without shaving or toothbrushing gear. Second Pilot offered to fly me back to our old position to get it, and actually bounced to a landing less than a stone's throw from our old CP. Unfortunately, though, he misjudged the width of the space where we landed, so the tip of the right wing grazed a greasewood branch and tore the fabric which covered the wing (I told you the plane was like a box kite). He assured me that it didn't matter, that it could be patched up as soon as we got back, but all during the return flight I worried for fear the rent would enlarge under the strain of flying and rip open the whole wing.

It didn't. And I got further evidence of the durability of the Piper Cub later, in Great Britain, where we saw our first barrage balloons floating above anything that might be considered a target for enemy fighter-bomber aircraft. Barrage balloons were huge bags of helium tethered by heavy cables. Their purpose was to discourage hostile planes from flying low above the target for fear of getting caught on a cable and shearing off a wing, a propeller, or some other vital part. This was a very real danger to heavy, high-performance aircraft, whose inertia when flying fast would break it apart if it hit a substantial obstacle. However, one of the 90th Div Arty Piper Cubs did strike a barrage

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balloon cable right where the wing meets the fuselage. Being light, it did not break apart, but spiralled around and around the cable until the landing gear touched the ground and the pilot could stagger out, dizzy but unharmed.

Before we get into combat, perhaps I should say something about how these planes were used. They had two seats, one behind the other, and a radio behind the back seat. The pilot could control the plane from either seat: when flying alone he might occupy either seat, but the front one afforded a broader view. When he had a passenger, usually an observer, the pilot took the front seat. Since the weight of the occupants, the radio, and any weighty supplies could affect the balance of the craft, a centered crank within reach of either seat could be cranked to adjust the balance, or root. Both pilot and passenger wore earphones and had available microphones for the radio.

Both occupants wore seat belts. A seat-pack parachute with a shoulder harness was also available, but most of the time it was used only as a seat, since pilots and observers had to squirm to get a better look at the land for potential targets and the sky for enemy aircraft. Most regular flyers felt that if the plane was badly damaged or the pilot badly wounded, they were goners on the moment. Otherwise, they might bring themselves in safely or oscillate to a landing. The Cub could do that without a finger on the stick or a foot on the rudders.

Whenever I stepped up and into the rear seat of a plane, I became aware of what large feet I had. I had to be careful to keep my size 12 1/2s off the rudders and my shins away from the empty socket for the rear-seat joystick.

The interior of the plane was enclosed in canvas and plexiglass, which kept the wind out of one's eyes, except when the pilot opened the left-hand door clear down to floor level to get a better view of what was directly below us. This did not happen often, but the open door always gave me a sickening fear of height, even though I knew that my seat belt wouldn't let me fall out and that, even when closed, the door was too flimsy to check my fall if I did.

The plane and its occupants spent most of its time in the air cruising back and forth parallel with the front line and well behind it, hopefully out of range of enemy anti-aircraft fire. Their job was to try and spot enemy troops, equipment, or installations. If they saw something within range, they would request fire on it, and direct the fire until it was effective. If it was out of range, they would report it as useful information.

If the observer wanted a better look at something suspicious, the pilot could fly higher or lower, but **not** forward past the front line, where they would be sitting ducks for enemy anti-aircraft fire. There was no point in their flying over the enemy anyhow. The little planes were harmless themselves, they carried no bomb racks, no machine guns. However, they could be devastating by calling for artillery fire. Sometimes when our own fighter-bombers were operating near the front line, they would request that our little Cubs be in the air at the same time, for enemy anti-aircraft artillery was loath to fire and give their positions away to anyone who could call down artillery fire on them.

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I have said that the planes cruised parallel to the front lines, but this probably gives an over-simplified picture of routine repetitive movement. Actually there was a lot of variety in their flight pattern. Vic Rizzo describes it well:

We flew our aircraft in an unorthodox manner to confuse flak units and other ground fire. Never in a straight line if we could help it. Always gaining or losing altitude, turning or slipping left or right. Even throttling down to a strong, proper directional headwind that would move the plane BACKWARDS. Any move that would confuse enemy gunners was warranted. As noted, our altitude was never fixed. Ranging from hedgehopping after take off to the service altitude necessary to the mission. A hundred feet to check a supposedly "freed" village, two hundred, five, a thousand, infrequently higher than 1500 feet. If higher, it was either to evade flak bursts or increase their range, or both. Any move that would favor us and give us time to retaliate with our very accurate artillery. But important as any mission was just flying the thermals up front. Just thumbing our propellers at the enemy kept them from firing artillery into our troops. If they fired, we'd fire back-at once! Meanwhile we'd search for targets.

From the above, it should be clear that a pilot was plenty busy flying the aircraft, so that it was asking a lot to expect him to conduct firing on targets at the same time. So although a pilot often was called upon to do just that, it was better for him to have a passenger along as an observer. Our battalion commander at the time we entered combat, now Lt Col Costain, made me as S-2 responsible for coordinating our forward observers, assuming that that included assigning one or another of them as air observers. I did not do a very good job of it, since the rifle infantry company commanders wanted FO's at their sides and it was hard to keep up with the demand.

By mid-June, both our planes were with us: Rizzo's had come in crates a few days after D-Day and been assembled at the Div Arty airstrip. Lt George Kilmer flew the other one across the Channel. The observer shortage had become acute, but we were rescued by the arrival of a replacement officer, Lt George Peszat. He had washed out of pilot training but he still had a love affair with aircraft. Next to piloting himself, he wanted nothing better than to ride in an airplane all day, talking on the radio to call for fire or report what he saw. Both our pilots, Rizzo and Kilmer, took to him at once. Here was someone who spoke their language and understood their problems. All three got along famously.

Eric Peach commanded the battalion now, and he approved letting Peszat do virtually all the observer duty. Since normally we had only one plane in the air at a time, the other being gassed up and serviced while the pilot stretched his legs, one observer could do it all.

Vic Rizzo and the Air Section

George Peszat ended the war as the most decorated individual in the battalion. He had the Air Medal with eight Oak Leaf Clusters. An Oak Leaf Cluster is awarded in lieu of another medal of the same kind you have already received. The Air Medal was awarded to Air Corps personnel for every five combat sorties, or to artillery flying personnel for twenty-five sorties. Simple arithmetic would show that Peszat flew on at least 225 missions in combat. Pilots Rizzo and Kilmer each earned enough Oak Leaf Clusters to make a wreath, too. An impressive record, especially considering that there were many days during the fall and winter when the weather shut down visibility so far that even our doughty little Cubs could not fly.

In addition to the danger from enemy fire, our little planes were subject to an unexpected hazard - friendly fire, in fact fire from the very artillery they were directing. It is probably best described in Vic Rizzo's own words.

... An unusual flight, in that we both learned artillery shells can be followed in flight. Those "bumps" we felt were NOT air pockets - but shells on their way to target.

After noting the phenomena, I increased altitude to be above the next barrage. Days earlier, a similar, unfortunate situation caused the death of one of our pilots at Div Arty. I believe his last name was Howard.

After we landed, I worked out a chart of trajectories at different ranges, different charges, and alerted other 90th TO pilots to such imminent danger. After a week or so, it automatically resolved itself to fly low at short gun-to-target ranges and to fly high at long target range; and in between to cross our fingers.

In the following chapter I describe a confused action when a German Panzer Brigade stumbled into our Division and Division Artillery command posts. As an aftermath, several enemy Panther tanks were lost and roaming around our rear areas. George Peszat, flying with pilot George Kilmer, called for fire on one of them. Our fire direction center refused the request because it was in our own ground and the fire might endanger friendly troops. Frustrated, Kilmer flew low above the dazed tank and both Georges emptied their pistols at it. I don't believe that affected the thick armor of the Panther much.

I hope I have not given the impression that observing and conducting fire were the only duties performed by our Air Section. Those were their primary jobs, but they proved useful in other capacities too. On occasion, particularly during the Moselle crossing in

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November, they flew in much needed supplies to infantry units cut off from ground contact. These included such diverse items as ammunition, explosives, bedrolls, jeep tires, gasoline, oil, food, radio batteries, and even mail.

Later in the war, infantrymen who were to lead night patrols went for flights to get a daylight overview of the terrain and the routes they were to traverse in the dark.

All in all, these little planes did add a third dimension to ground action. They were invaluable in World War II, and I am sure they and their successors have been and will be of ever-increasing importance in combat.

Chapter 7

Champagne from a Canteen Cup

The World War II canteen was a quart-sized bottle made of some dull gray metal with a screw-on cap secured from loss by a short chain connecting cap and bottle. The canteen had high shoulders, a short narrow neck, and a concave side to fit against a human hip. The companion piece was a cup of the same metal which fitted over the base of the canteen. It would probably have held 20 ounces of liquid, had anyone been foolhardy enough to fill it to the brim. It had a hinged handle which folded neatly under the bottom of the cup, after which the cup could be fitted over the bottom of the canteen and the whole assembly stuffed into a snug fitting padded canvas case with hooks to fasten onto the eyelets of a web cartridge belt or pistol belt.

The canteen cup was the only vessel the soldier had for drinking beverages with meals or otherwise, and it was only marginally satisfactory. The handle locked into position for drinking with a sliding clip which required eternal vigilance to keep it from slipping and dumping the contents of the cup onto whatever - more often whoever - was nearby. And the metal was an excellent conductor of heat: when coffee or any other hot drink was poured into it, the rim of the cup not only became too hot to touch to one's lips, but also stayed too hot until the coffee was too cool to be palatable.

At the conclusion of a meal, each soldier took the handle to his metal mess kit (officially designated meat can) and slipped his knife, fork, and spoon over it, using the slots in their handles, plus the mess kit lid and the canteen cup. Then, having scraped out the remnants of the meal into the garbage can, he would line up to dip the whole ensemble into a GI can of hot soapy water and give it a couple of strokes with a long-handled brush. Then after another dip into clear boiling water and a few brisk shakes to dry it, all the stuff was ready to stowaway until the next meal. Anyone within half a mile could tell when supper was over by the deafening clatter of mess gear.

Officers, being privileged characters, got luxuries: a folding table to eat at, with restaurant type cutlery and enamelware plates and cups. However, if we wanted coffee between meals, we drank it out of our canteen cups, same as everyone else.

Now, on with the war! After our victory at Chambois - generally styled the Falaise Gap - we started wondering whether we would get home by Thanksgiving or might have to wait for Christmas. The U.S. Seventh Army was landing on the Mediterranean Coast of France. Germans were withdrawing everywhere. Paris had fallen: two-thirds of the French 2nd Armored Division had been rushed there so that French troops would be among the first to enter the liberated city. The French brigadier general who commanded the remaining combat command was in a profound sulk at having been left behind, and refused to obey orders from the American corps commander.

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And in a few more days we were on the road again, still waving back at the cheering French populace. We moved more than 170 miles the first day, with no enemy in sight, to the vicinity of Fontainebleau, and next day we crossed the Seine river there. We were disappointed to miss Paris, also on the Seine but several miles downstream.

And after that we made a few more long jumps forward, still with no one to contest our advance. It looked as if nothing could stop us before we got to Berlin!

But something did.

We outran our supply of gasoline. Other supplies too, but gas was the vital shortage. You can live for awhile on short food rations, and in a mobile situation like ours we weren't using much ammunition anyhow, but you can't move tanks with no gasoline, nor haul howitzers with thirsty trucks.

I didn't quite understand at first; we had been short of ammunition in Normandy, but that had simply meant we were rationed to so many rounds per howitzer per day. Actually we had more on hand, and in case of an enemy breakthrough we could have fired it and explained later. But this was different, as I soon found out. Joe B. Davis and I were in the jeep when I saw a Sherman tank on the shoulder of the road, and as we started to go around it, a man stood up in the turret and waved us to a stop.

"Sir, you got any gas? We're stranded."

As a matter of fact, there was a full five gallon can strapped to the side of the jeep. However, I looked at the tank and remembered having heard what kind of mileage one of the monsters got. My five gallons wouldn't move it more than a mile or two. And the jeep's fuel tank was pretty low, too. So I told him no, sorry, and could I call his outfit when I got to a phone and tell them where he was?

We settled for that, and I hope they eventually sent him enough gas to get home. I suppose if we were to be stranded somewhere, we could have done a lot worse. Every district in France has its own native drink. In Normandy it was Calvados (ugh), in Lorraine, Mirabelle (just as bad), and Burgundy and Bordeaux are famous for their wines. But here we were, right in the middle of Champagne country!

The bubbly stuff was everywhere, and the price was ridiculously cheap, especially for soldiers who'd had little opportunity to spend their pay. And of course there were always cigarettes for bartering.

So the air resounded with the popping of corks and the fizzing of wine as people leaped to get their canteen cups under the foaming necks of the bottles before any spilled. I may have tasted champagne before - gingerly, because it was expensive in the States - but never more than one of those little stemmed champagne glasses would hold. Here we drank it by the canteen-cupful. The metallic taste of the cups probably robbed the champagne of its delicate flavor, but the stuff did bubble and tickle our noses, and we drank it anyhow.

We tried to keep the thirst somewhat under control: somebody had to be sober enough for guard duty. But although the fire direction center was set up, no one thought we were going to be doing any shooting, not until we got mobile enough to catch up with the enemy.

Champagne from a Canteen Cup

About the third day several of us got together and mooched enough gas for a round trip in a jeep to the nearby city of Reims, with the famous cathedral where the kings of France had traditionally been crowned. [Napoleon I broke precedent by having himself crowned Emperor in the church of Notre Dame of Paris. Some say that is why he didn't last.]

I don't remember who all went: I think Doug Myers, now a major, and Capt Don Thomson were along, and Joe B. Davis and another enlisted man, a French Canadian by birth, who could act as interpreter if necessary. But when we got there, the enlisted men showed little enthusiasm for touring the cathedral, so we separated and went off in different directions, leaving the jeep unguarded in the square in front of the cathedral. This was strictly against regulations; the vehicle didn't even have a key, and anyone could have driven it away. However, the local populace still regarded us as liberators and held us in a respect bordering on awe, and we thought public opinion would keep it safe.

We three officers took off our helmets as we entered the building, and started to wander through, stretching our necks to look at the inside of the roof, soaring above us, and what we could see of the boarded-up stained glass windows. There were many nooks and side rooms branching from the main nave, and we wished we understood more about what we were looking at.

Then a graying French gentleman and a teen-age boy approached us. The boy asked in his high-school English if they might be permitted to show us around. Of course we were delighted, and said so.

And we learned about true French hospitality. They took us all around the cathedral, then drove us in their own car to the local palace where the kings had stayed when they visited Reims. There was an admission charge, which the gentleman insisted on paying, and we got to see everything, including the one-way mirrors which were used to spy on nobility of dubious loyalty.

By this time it was late afternoon, and they invited us up to their apartment for refreshments. We met Madame and exchanged compliments in pidgin French and fractured English. The boy was sent to the cellar for a bottle of champagne, and when he returned, he was sent back for a bottle of the good champagne. We admired the flavor, bouquet, and whatever else we thought was customary to admire about wine. Then we asked where we might be able to buy some of the good stuff to take back to camp with us.

Our host was suddenly alert. "Why from my brother-in-law, of course!" he said - or words to that effect. He got on the phone at once and called the Pommery et Greno champagnery, which was about to close for the night, and got his brother-in-law to stay overtime. He hustled us down and we met the brother-in-law, who asked if we would like to try a sample before we purchased. When we said yes, he carefully loosened the wire holding the cork in place, and extracted the cork.

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It popped with what I considered a properly festive noise, but he looked disgusted and threw the bottle into the trash. It seemed that good champagne is not supposed to pop loudly.

The second bottle was more restrained. We made appreciative noises and went away with a case of what Brother-in-Law said was the best, even though it was not as sweet as we Coca-Cola drinkers might have liked.

As our long-suffering host drove us back to the Cathedral, I belatedly began to worry about the jeep. If it was gone, how would we get back to the CP? Worse, how would we explain how we let it get away? How much did a jeep cost, and how long would it take to pay for it out of a captain's monthly salary?

It was still there. With all five tires. Our confidence in French public opinion was vindicated - almost. Joe B. Davis's carton of cigarettes for egg-swapping had disappeared from under the windshield cover. Well, everything else was in place, and you can't expect perfection.

We finally had gas again. We moved out, and the after-effects of the champagne, notably the dry velvety feeling in the mouth and tongue, wore off. We traveled about 120 miles in two days - still glamour war - trying to catch up with the Germans, but with very little idea of where they might be.

Obviously they were no better informed, for in the early morning hours of the third day a German Panzer (Armored) Brigade traveling at night - something they never do with enemy around - made their first contact with the 90th Division. And not with our forward infantry units, but with the Division and Division Artillery Command Posts, sitting in the woods across the road from each other in what they assumed was a well-insulated rear area.

I was not there, but I understand that as soon as the sentry at the Div Arty CP challenged the leading tank in a language clearly not German, the woods started to echo with the sounds of cannon and burp gun fire from the startled German tankers. There was a brisk firefight, involving all three of our general officers, McLain (Division Commander), Weaver (Assistant Division Commander), and Devine (Division Artillery Commander). Not to mention a lot of junior officers and enlisted men who had never expected to fire their carbines and rifles.

All I witnessed myself was two days of rumors about single German Panther tanks blundering around loose throughout the division area, trying to find and fight their way out. Not the sort of thing to encourage one to wander about in a single jeep, so I stayed at our CP all day.

I was interested in reports of the reactions of my acquaintances who were in the Div Arty CP when it was being raked with tank fire at about 2:30 a.m. Lieutenant Maina, the prissy and bureaucratic little Div Arty Adjutant, always looked as if he would fall over if anyone spoke to him sharply. But he knew what the regulations required at times

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like this, and he went about coolly collecting all the classified documents and destroying them to prevent possible capture. Captain Barnes*, the liaison officer from the 345th, strolled around with his hands in his pockets, watching the fall of tree branches broken off by the firing, and asked the S-3, Lt Col Sutton, "Say, Earl, what do you make of all this?"

On the other hand, Major Garner McNaught, the S-2, whom I had known well since Camp Barkeley and whom I had admired as a gung-ho officer, went completely off his rocker and had to be evacuated for combat fatigue. One never knows.

There were two tactical results of this strange battle: The 90th Division advance was delayed for about 48 hours, during which our battalion fired over a thousand rounds of ammunition, including seventeen rounds of propaganda shell full of leaflets urging them to surrender. However, the German Panzer Brigade was shattered and destroyed piecemeal. Its one battalion of armored infantry riding in open personnel carriers tried to escape by a road that was also the narrow main street of a village where our reserve regiment was billeted, and the doughboys picked them off by firing out of the second story windows of the houses along the street. The two tank battalions lost control and disintegrated into individual tanks wandering desperately.

We saw some famous battlefields of World War I. We had already passed Chateau Thierry; now we came to the Marne, Verdun, and the Argonne Forest. There were still ridges decorated with rusted barbed wire where trenches had been and where that war had stagnated for months and years. Now we drove through in minutes.

We saw and had time to explore portions of the French Maginot Line, a massive reinforced concrete structure with slits for observation and embrasures for firing cannon and machine guns. Beside one observation slit there was a sketch of what could be seen through it, and notations of the firing data needed to strike any feature in the sketch.

Fortunately for us, this portion of the line was built to defend against an attack from the east, and the Germans could not use it to defend from us coming from the west.

Again things looked promising from where I sat. It was autumn now, and we might not end the war in time to be home for Christmas after all, but we should at least be deep in Germany by snowfall. We were almost to the Moselle River, and beyond it was territory the Germans **claimed** as part of Germany. Not far beyond was the Rhine, and its far bank was undeniably Germany. There was another river, the Saar, between the Moselle and the Rhine, but we paid little attention to it.

I don't remember why, but Eric Peach was unable to make the reconnaissance for one move - I think he had to go to a meeting or something - and I was told to do it for him because Col Bixby, the new Div Arty commander, wanted it done without delay. I took the recon party forward with Bixby's instructions ringing in my ears: "Don't waste a lot of time looking for something elaborate. We'll be moving again in a few hours."

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So I didn't. I put the firing batteries behind a ridge of hills, safe from ground observation, but with no overhead cover. The CP was behind them, in a little woods well away from any paved road. No point in looking for a building for us if we were only going to be there a few hours, I told myself.

So we spent half of September and all of October in that position.

And while we were there, autumn rains made the rutted dirt trail to the CP nearly impassable. It turned cold. Living in pup tents was miserable, so the men built little shelters from ammunition boxes and used ingenious methods to heat them. I recall seeing one where a sort of pipe made of tin cans had been laid under the dirt floor so that a blow-torch flame could be played into the open end.

Next to the CP tent in the woods, a pyramidal tent was erected for us staff officers to sleep in. It had the luxury of a barrel stove that kept at least the center of it warm. Major Swatosh, however, built his own hut so he could safeguard his growing collection of souvenirs. He specialized in projectiles: machine gun bullets, unexploded artillery shells, and the like. I found out later that he had taken the fuze of a 20mm German anti-aircraft shell apart to see how the little bits of sensitive explosives in them operated. [For a description of a fuze, see p 25.]

Francisco Martitegui

"My God!" said First Sergeant Goss of Battery C, "how the hell am I expected to call roll?"

It was March, 1942, and the 915th FA Bn had just received its first batch of "filler" replacements. Up to then, it had consisted of a cadre of key officers and enlisted men with at least some army experience, plus a group of green lieutenants, including me, mostly six to eight weeks out of civilian life. Now came our first raw recruits, waiting with varying degrees of enthusiasm to be made into soldiers.

I looked over Sgt Goss's shoulder at the roster in his hand, and saw his problem: about one third of the surnames were Spanish. A product of the New Mexico school system, I saw that most of them were familiar names I could pronounce, so I said, "Don't worry, Sgt Goss. I'll call the roll this first time, and you can listen to me and learn how."

So we went out and started. I sailed along through Chavez and Fresquez, had no trouble with Gardina. Even Jiminez, who later turned out to have anglicized his name, recognized it when I called "He-man-ez." But then I got stuck on the next one. His first name was Francisco, which suggested that his surname was probably Spanish too, but I had never seen it before. "Martitigui?" I ventured.

The reply dripped with scorn. "Martitegui!"

I glanced at him. Tall, broad-shouldered, with light brown hair, gray eyes, and a fair complexion, he did not look like a Latin-American. And, as I later found, he wasn't. He was a native of Spain whose family had brought him over to avoid his being drafted into Franco's army. And here he was in the American army instead, speaking very little English.

I soon got to know him well. In several respects, he showed outstanding talent. Take close-order drill for example. One of the first things a recruit has to learn is to keep in step, because if he does not, he won't be able to make the necessary turns and moves without falling down or bumping into other men in the formation. The most effective way to teach men, even knot-heads with no sense of rhythm (and we had plenty) to keep in step is to give a quick series of commands which require them to make abrupt changes in direction.

"By the right flank-March! By the left flank-March! To the rear-March! To the rear-March!" If anyone is out of step going into all this, he will either correct himself or get his legs tangled and fall on his face.

Except Martitegui. He is the only human being I have ever known that could go through such a series of maneuvers and end up out of step. He was exasperating. He exasperated all the non-corns and all the officers. Even Captain Munson, the most considerate and long-suffering commander I ever knew, was exasperated.

"MARTITEGUI! Get in step!" He would bellow. And Martitegui would get in step - momentarily. Then he would make the little skip necessary to get back out of step.

Upstarts

This was symptomatic of his whole character. He was a rebel and non-conformist, a truly rugged individualist. When, after months of training with a rifle, learning the contorted positions you were supposed to get yourself into to fire, learning to aim and to set your sights to correct for windage, we went to the rifle range to actually fire, Martitegui's comment was pungent. "In Spain, we shoot at men. Here you shoot at paper targets. This is a paper war!"

At the end of the basic training cycle and right after the monthly pay day, Lieutenant Derrough, the new commander of Battery C, decided to reward his men by taking them on a recreational camping trip.

Texas was a local-option state: each county got to choose whether to permit sale of alcoholic beverages. The county which included Camp Barkeley and Abilene was dry. Lt Derrough led his battery into a neighboring county which was not. They pitched pup tents in an empty field on the edge of a small town and spent the night there. On the following day all the men not needed for "the necessary guard and fatigue duties" were permitted to go into the town for rest and recreation, with the admonition that they were to be back in camp by 5:00 p.m.

Derrough, a prudent man, took the precaution of deputizing a few non-coms of good character and sober habits as acting MP's, with orders to patrol the town and admonish or arrest any men indulging in actions "prejudicial to good order and discipline." That is, who were obviously drunk or were annoying the local civilians. Little trouble was expected: these recruits were drawing only \$21.00 a month less deductions, and even in 1942, that wasn't enough to paint the town any more than pale pink.

About mid-afternoon, two MP's found Pvt Martitegui in a local diner, forcing his apparently unwelcome attentions on a waitress. They told him to release the girl and go back to camp, but he refused to do so, speaking vehemently in two languages. Eventually they grabbed him by the arms and frog-walked him back to Lt Derrough, who put him in arrest and drew up court-martial charges against him for refusal to obey the MP's, resisting arrest, and disorderly conduct.

I wasn't on the court-martial board, but Lt Thomson, who was, was impressed and amused by Pvt Martitegui's statement in his own defense:

I was making lof to the waitress - playing weeth her teats ... The bottery commonder says we can stay out to fife o'clock. The MPs say I must come back at three o'clock. Who is the bottery cornmonder: the MP's, or the bottery commonder?

He was sentenced to three months confinement, but immediately put on probation. We were starting on field exercises during that time, and Col Pierce didn't want anybody to get out of the privations of field exercises by staying in the comfortable stockade.

We were still doing field exercises a few months later, when I assumed command of B Battery. At that time C Battery was on a special project to train another batch of recruits, and most of their already-trained men were spread out among the other batteries. I was not pleased to hear that, in addition to Phillip Yazzie, the little Navajo who could

Francisco Martitegui

hardly speak English, I was now getting the battalion's other linguistic problem child, Francisco Martitegui, who chose not to. Yazzie wasn't a real problem. He at least tried. Martitegui worked at being trying.

There were other Spanish-speaking men in the outfit, of course, but they spoke an American brand of Spanish, which he made fun of. They didn't like that, or him, and were reluctant to act as interpreters. In fact the only member of the 915th who could talk to him in his own tongue was Lt Col Pierce, who had served a hitch as assistant military attache to Spain and had also taught Spanish at West Point. And Pierce did talk to him on occasion, but it was not practical to bring in the battalion commander every time an order had to be given to a private, and Martitegui made a fetish of misunderstanding unwelcome orders.

When Pvt Martitegui was reported absent at reveille one morning, instead of being properly indignant, I felt relieved. Maybe he wouldn't come back. With any luck, he might not even be apprehended and brought back!

Nevertheless, I made the necessary reports to authorities and wrote a letter to his next of kin - a sister - urging her to turn him in if he showed up on her doorstep. Somewhat to my surprise, she sent a reply in excellent English, expressing concern that her brother "Frank" was missing and asking me to let her know if he came back.

And, surprisingly, he did. I was in my command car, leading my battery out to the Hankins Ranch for a field exercise, when he suddenly appeared on the shoulder of the road, holding up his thumb hitchhiker style. Being in the lead vehicle, I didn't want to stop the whole battery column so I could pick him up, so I radioed back to Lt Smith at the end of the column to get him and return him to duty with his howitzer section.

Then I got involved in the mechanics of the mock war we were fighting and forgot about Martitegui. Not much I could do about him until we returned to barracks anyhow. The day turned warm for November, somewhere in the high 70's, and I had worn my woolen underwear, so by midafternoon I was sweating and prickly. But then about dusk, a breeze sprang up out of the north. Within a half hour the wind was a gale, the temperature had dived into the 20's, and everyone was piling on all the clothes he could find. During the night, Maj Gen Terrell, the Division Commander, called off the exercise because of the weather, and we shivered our way back to Camp Barkeley first thing in the morning. I was wearing four layers of clothes and had a blanket wrapped around my legs.

But Francisco Martitegui did not fare so well. He did not have woolen underwear - claimed he had never been issued any - he had lost his field jacket and had left his overcoat somewhere while he was AWOL. He had not stopped to pick up his blankets before joining us in the field. In short, he had been out all night with nothing but a thin cotton fatigue jacket and trousers between him and a sub-freezing Texas Blue Norther.

I was appalled when I found out. "Couldn't somebody have lent him something to wear?" I asked my assembled non-coms.

Upstarts

"Well, sir," said S/Sgt Gault, my chief of detail, "I had a spare field jacket, and I thought of letting him use it, but it had my stripes on the sleeves, and I didn't want nobody to think that bastard was a Staff Sergeant."

A proper ending for this story would be that Pvt Martitegui died of exposure like the Little Match Girl or was hospitalized for galloping consumption. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, he survived the ordeal without even a head cold.

I had mixed emotions about it. If he had died, I would have had to do a lot of explaining why, as battery commander, I had not taken better care of him. On the other hand, I would have been spared the paperwork involved in getting him court-martialed for AWOL. I sighed, and prepared the court martial charges.

And eventually some other battery commander started the paperwork to get him discharged under "Section 8," as unsuitable for military service.

Which, of course, was what he had worked for all along.

Chapter 8

Gravelotte

This time we had not stopped for lack of gas. We were stopped by the German Army. Our holiday in the Champagne country had given them time to prepare and take a stand on a line anchored by a semicircle of forts protecting the city of Metz. These forts were not part of either the French Maginot Line or the German Siegfried line, but were much older than either.

The 359th Infantry, which we supported as usual, halted with their front line in a little wooded valley, which looked up a steep hill on the far side. The hill was marked on the map Fort *Jeanne d'Arc*. We couldn't see any fort: nothing showed from the outside but a few ventilator shafts, and they were carefully camouflaged. There were embrasures from which they could - and did - fire artillery at us, but they showed only when actually firing, then closed heavy steel doors. Inside, I understand, was a maze of burrows lined with reinforced concrete and steel doors so that if one burrow should be penetrated by an enemy, it could be shut off from the rest. A tough nut to crack, and we never cracked it. Never even tried.

[A mile or so to the south was another one, Fort Driant, which the 358th Infantry did attack in a long and costly action.]

We stopped so abruptly that the 359th had to commit its reserve battalion to save it from a counterattack, and then did something rare, though not unheard of. They made a combat unit out of the regimental Headquarters and Service Company, composed, as the stock phrase went, of "cooks, clerks, and jerks." I went up to see the Company Commander and bring him a Forward Observer, just in case. He looked shaken and worried. "I'm a hell of a good supply man," he said modestly, "but I don't know anything about fighting!"

Fortunately they didn't have to fight, and by the next day they were back at their regular jobs, and a good thing too. Their work was as essential to operations as that of a rifleman.

Sometime in the first few days I walked up through a loosely wooded area to the sector of the 2nd Bn, 359th Inf, in the bottom of the little valley I mentioned before. I made contact with our LnO, Captain Maurice Smith, and the Infantry Bn CO, Major Dull. The woods were thicker along the bottom of the valley, and our troops couldn't see much of the opposite slope - not even Fort Jeanne d'Arc, which all but leaned over them. Not a pleasant situation, somewhat reminiscent of the *Foret de Mont Castre*.

On my way back to where I had left Joe B. Davis and the jeep, I had to cross a clearing about the size of the Santa Fe Plaza. Just before I reached the middle, someone with a rifle started firing at me. The first round landed a little behind me. No point in turning around and going back to the cover of the trees, so I kept on ahead. Walking.

That probably saved my life. The next two rounds were in front of me, where the sniper thought I would be if I ran for it. By the time he realized that I hadn't, and adjusted for a walk, I had panicked, and was running full out, so that the next shot was behind me.

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I zigged and zagged for the nearest trees. There I flung myself on the ground in a little hollow out of sight until my heart and lungs got back to normal.

The only two times I was seriously frightened by enemy fire were in the bombing of the chateau I mentioned in "The Glamour War" and this occasion, in which I could be sure the sniper had me, personally, in mind. I felt a little bit like Nicholas in War and Peace during his first time in battle: "Why are they shooting at me? Everybody likes me!"

It was not too long after this that both Major Dull and Capt Smith were wounded. The records show that Maury Smith was only slightly wounded in action (LWA), but it must have been worse than that, for he was evacuated and never came back to us. A Major Bob Booth took over command of the 2nd Battalion, and Lt Don Wilbourn (our only West Pointer besides Costain) was assigned as Liaison Officer with him. They were both brilliant young officers, and they made a good team.

Near the south end of the 359th sector, occupied by the 3rd Bn, was the newly-deserted village of Gravelotte. It had only two streets, one running east-west and pointed straight at Fort *Jeanne d'Arc* (and occasionally raked with fire from it), and an intersecting one running north-south. The north-south one ran along a bare ridge more or less parallel to the valley I described as our front line and clearly visible from Fort *Jeanne d'Arc*.

About three-quarters of a mile north along this road and on higher ground was a large stone farmhouse named *Malmaison*. It was used as an OP by at least one Corps Artillery battalion and some other outfits, and was frequently shelled by the enemy, being an obvious place for an OP.

About half-way between it and Gravelotte was another farmhouse, not quite as elevated as *Malmaison*, where our C Battery had an OP. It was never shelled. I don't know why. Someone theorized that it belonged to a high-ranking Nazi collaborator, and maybe it did. There was no one to ask: both farmhouses were deserted except for our troops.

Anyhow, I'm glad it was never shelled, because I used to visit it from time to time, leaving the jeep in a gully behind the road, out of sight, and walking up to the farmyard, keeping the farmhouse between me and the lowering fort. A dead German lay in the cobbled courtyard, and the body stayed there all the time we were there. Someone should have notified the Graves Registration Team to come and get it some night after dark, but no one ever did. Aside from that, it was a good OP, giving a full view of the slope on the far side of the valley.

From the farmhouse to the first buildings of Gravelotte was only a couple of hundred yards (two football fields), so I tried walking down the road to get there. I was in full view of any enemy who might be looking, but no one fired at me. I guess individual soldiers wandering across the open had a low priority as targets. Anyhow, I made that walk a number of times later during our stay, and always without incident.

Gravelotte

When we first arrived in position there, a platoon of infantry was sent forward from Gravelotte to occupy a position in the bottom of the valley a quarter-mile to the east. Since we had a FO with them, I went down the road to visit them. On the map, it looked easy - right down the road. What the map did not know, was that the road was blocked by an abatis.

Most French roads of any consequence are bordered by a row of trees on either side. In peacetime they add to the beauty of the landscape, furnish shade for horses pulling wagons, and prevent erosion of the soil. In wartime they are often felled across the road as a barrier to enemy traffic - like blowing up a bridge. I suppose in the olden days the trees were chopped down by large crews using axes or cross-cut saws, but by WW II there were some very sophisticated explosives that did the job faster and more efficiently. The one that was favored was called Composition C, and if that was what was used on the Gravelotte abatis, it was very effective. When you ducked under the trunk of one tree, you ran into the thickest branches of the next. Finally I wormed and fought my way down to the platoon, and was surprised to find they were occupying a round pit maybe thirty feet across and with steeply sloping sides. I suppose the platoon leader thought it would be a good place to fire out of, keeping most of one's body below ground level, but it looked to me as if it would also be a good place to fire into, there being no convenient exit. A couple of hand grenades or a lucky hit with a mortar shell could have wiped them out. I didn't raise the question, though, assuming that an infantryman would know more about these things than I.

Wrong again! The following day a small enemy force found them and opened fire, and our platoon broke a number of records getting out of there. (I hope they found an easier exit than through the abatis.) Our FO had to abandon his radio, much to the disgust of Capt Jacobs, who knew that with that radio, which had its crystals pre-set on our battalion channels, an enemy could listen in on everything we said, or jam our channels with interference. I believe he reported the loss and got an authorization to change our channels.

Most of the six weeks we were there, things were comparatively quiet in our sector. The 357th Inf Rgt was tied up in heavy fighting at the town of Maizieres le Metz, but the 359th action was limited to patrolling and trying to catch enemy patrols. There were some minor enemy attacks, but they were mostly feints, probably to make sure we were still there.

There were casualties. I mentioned the loss of Dull and Smith, and perhaps even more disheartening was the death of one of our forward observers whom I never met.

Upstarts

As I mentioned some chapters back, one of my jobs was to assign observers to work with specific infantry units and to brief them on the situation before they went forward; however, in this static situation, there wasn't much briefing to do, and the same batteries were sending observers to the same infantry companies. So when they got a replacement lieutenant, A Battery simply sent him up the first time with an experienced FO to introduce and show him around, then sent him up on a regular rotation.

During the day he had adjusted some fire missions, including one rather close in front of their position. Sometime in the night, noises were heard near the same place, and he crawled forward to listen and locate. Then he called for fire at the same spot, neglecting to mention that he was lying only about 25 yards away. A more experienced man might not have had that much confidence in the accuracy of a 105 howitzer, which is notoriously erratic. And between the two firings the weather, which affects the way a shell moves through the air, had changed.

For whatever reason, at least one round of the volley fell short, and our observer was killed by "friendly fire." After that, our fire direction center started asking more questions before firing such close missions.

There seemed to be considerable leisure time in the S-2 business, and I did some exploring in Gravelotte. Of course there wasn't much to explore: there were fewer than a hundred buildings in town, all of them deserted except for a few American soldiers who occasionally darted out from house to house. However, there were some surprising spots of interest. The first, near the north end of town, was the museum. It was a small museum, located in a two-story building the size of a house, and it contained trophies of war.

Gravelotte, "Bloody" Gravelotte, it seemed, was famous as the scene of a great battle of the Franco-Prussian War. There were pictures: photographs, paintings, and lithographs of the battle and of personalities involved. There were articles of equipment and armament used in that war. And a lot of dust. The present war had treated the museum kindly; the building had taken little damage from the shelling except, of course, that all windows were blown out and there was some cracked glass in the display cases.

Further down the street, across the east-west road, which one dashed across because the fort sighted right along it, was the church. The steeple had been hit, and the dislodged bell had fallen straight down and lay on the floor blocking the entrance to the church proper. All the glass was broken out of the windows there, too, as I believe was true of every building in town.

But the most marvelous place of all was down at the end of the street, the last building in the village. I looked in through the broken window and beheld an astonishing sight. It was the storeroom of a glazier's shop, and it was stuffed full of rack after rack of pristine, unbroken window glass.

What a treasure trove! As soon as the war moved on so the people could return to their shattered homes, the owner of all this glass would surely be the most important man in Gravelotte!

Essay Five

Rank and Insignia

To anyone not familiar with army ranks, all this talk of lieutenants, sergeants, and T/5's must be confusing, especially since several changes have been made in the ranks of enlisted men since WW II. So let me tell you about each rank as it was at the time I was in combat in WW II. Enlisted men wore their insignia of rank, called chevrons, on each sleeve, between elbow and shoulder. [Sometimes a short master sergeant had trouble squeezing them all on-but we'll get to him later.]

We'll start at the bottom, with the rank of Private, abbreviated Pvt, nicknamed "Buck" Private [I never actually heard one called a "yard bird."] A private was so low on the totem pole that he didn't wear any rank insignia at all, just a bare sleeve. He was not addressed as "Private, " but only by his last name. If you didn't know his last name, you could call him "Soldier," or sometimes "Son," if you were an officer.

Next came a Private First Class, abbreviated PFC, who wore one stripe, or chevron, on each sleeve, between elbow and shoulder. A PFC, like a private, was addressed by his last name alone.



Private First Class

One step above the PFC was the corporal (Cpl), the lowest ranking noncommissioned officer (NCO), with two stripes. He was addressed as "Corporal" or "Corporal Jones," especially if his name was Jones.



Corporal

Typical jobs for a corporal included the gunner of a howitzer section and the chief of a telephone wire crew.

The Technician Fifth Grade (T/5) drew the same pay as a corporal, but ranked vaguely lower. He wore two chevrons with the letter T just below them, and was nicknamed "Model T Corporal." I never did figure out what to call one. Some addressed him by his last name, others called him "Corporal." The computers in the fire direction center could be T/5s.



Technician Fifth Grade

Next above the T/5 and Corporal was the Sergeant (Sgt), nicknamed "Buck" Sergeant. He wore three stripes (chevrons). One called him and all higher ranking NCOs "Sergeant" or "Sergeant Smith." Or sometimes, familiarly, "Sarge." Chiefs of howitzer sections were sergeants. So were infantry squad leaders.



Sergeant

The Sergeant also had a counterpart, the Technician Fourth Grade (T/4), who wore three chevrons and a T. He was like a T/5, only more so. Neither was necessarily a technician by trade. I didn't know what to call him, either. The board operators in the FDC were T/4s. So were switchboard operators.



Technician Fourth Grade

The next rank was Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt) with three stripes and an arc, sometimes called a "rocker." He was also addressed as "Sergeant," only with a little more respect. Battery mess sergeants were S/Sgts. So were the chief of firing battery and chief of detail in a firing battery and the chief computer in the fire direction center.



Staff Sergeant

Above him was a Technical Sergeant (Tech Sgt), not under any circumstances to be confused with a Technician of any class. He wore three chevrons and two arcs ("three up and two down"), and if you called him "Sarge," he would probably resent it. The operations sergeant in the S-2 Section was a Tech Sgt.



Technical Sergeant

At the top echelon of the enlisted ranks were the Master Sergeant (Mr Sgt) and the First Sergeant (1st Sgt). They were the same rank and drew the same pay, and they each wore three stripes and three arcs, except that the 1st Sgt had a little diamond, or lozenge, in the middle. 1st Sgt was a job, rather than a rank: he was the chief administrator of a battery or company and usually the Battery Commander's hatchet man. He was nicknamed "Top Sergeant," "Top-Kick" or "First Soldier."



First Sergeant

Mr Sgt jobs included the Sergeant Major of a battalion, the chief administrative NCO, who bossed the 1st Sgts of the batteries, and the battalion communications chief.

Mr Sgts and 1st Sgts were the terror of all enlisted men and most second lieutenants.

All sergeants who wore rockers were collectively known as "First Three Graders."



Master Sergeant

Officers wore their insignia of rank on their shoulders, near the seam where the sleeve starts, if they were wearing coats or jackets. Otherwise they wore them on the collars of their shirts or fatigues.



Second Lieutenant

Again starting at the bottom, the Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt) wore one gold bar. He was nicknamed "Second John" or "Shavetail." [In case you were wondering, "Shavetail" is a title that goes 'way back.

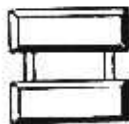
It originated with the fact that an officer's shirt was made with epaulettes, or shoulder straps, but an enlisted man's was not. If an enlisted man was promoted from the ranks, rather than buy a new wardrobe of shirts, he might cut off the tails of his old ones to make shoulder straps.] He was properly addressed as "Lieutenant" or "Lieutenant Robinson." Before WWII, 2nd Lts were addressed as "Mister." but not after about 1940.

Next grade up is the First Lieutenant (1st Lt), who wears one First lieutenant bar, exactly like a 2nd Lt, except that it is silver. I don't know why silver gets more respect than gold in the army, but it does.



First Lieutenant

A 1st Lt is starting to get up in the world, although there is an old saw, "Rank among lieutenants is like virtue among whores." He is nicknamed "First John," and is addressed the same as a 2nd Lt. Jobwise, all lieutenants were interchangeable. They held all the battery positions below battery commander, and a few staff jobs. Battery Executive Officers and Forward Observers were lieutenants.



Captain

A Captain (Capt) wears two silver bars fastened together, known as "railroad tracks." He has no particular nickname, unless he commands a battery or company, in which case he may be referred to as the "Skipper" or the "Old Man.

He is addressed as "Captain" or "Captain O'Brien," and he rates substantial respect. [There was a newspaper hawker at Camp Barkeley who never learned rank insignia, so he called all enlisted men "Sergeant" and all officers "Captain" and got along fine.]

Lieutenants and captains are called "line officers" or "company grade officers." The next three ranks coming up are called "field grade officers. "

A Major (Maj) wears a gold maple leaf with the stem pointing out, toward the shoulder seam. He has no standard nickname, and is simply addressed as "Major" or "Major Miller." A Major is usually found in a staff job. In field artillery battalions, the Executive Officer and the S-3 are majors.



Major



Lieutenant Colonel

Next comes a Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) with a maple leaf like a major's, only silver. He is nicknamed a "Light Colonel" and is addressed as "Colonel" or "Colonel Brown," just as if he were a real colonel. A Battalion Commander is a Lt Col.

The highest ranking field grade officer is a Colonel (Col), who wears a silver eagle with spread wings. He is affectionately known as a "Full," "Bird," or sometimes "Chicken" Colonel, and is addressed the same as a Lt Col. An infantry regimental commander is a Colonel. So is a Div Arty Executive Officer. An infantry regimental commander is a Colonel. So is a Div Arty Executive Officer.



Colonel

There are five grades of General Officers, all addressed as "General" or "General White." Their insignia of rank is a silver star or stars worn on the shoulder strap midway between the neck and the shoulder seam, not near the shoulder seam like other officers.



Brigadier General

The Brigadier General (Brig Gen) wears one star, and is sometimes called a "One Star." A Div Arty commander was entitled to this rank, and so is an Assistant Division Commander.

The Major General (Maj Gen) wears two stars, and is a Very Important Person. It is the rank of a Division commander.



Major General



Lieutenant General

The Lieutenant General (Lt Gen) [Oddly enough, a Lt is higher than a Maj in this case] wears three stars and may command a Corps. This was the highest rank any US officer ever attained prior to WWI. George Washington and U.S. Grant were both Lt Gen's].

A General (Gen) had better have broad shoulders, because he has to wear four stars on each of them. He is nicknamed a "Full" General. The commander of a field army may be a General.



General



General of the Army

A General of the Army (abbreviation unknown) wears five small silver stars arranged in a cluster. One is not likely to see one of them anyhow. The rank was invented in WWII because many foreign armies had the rank of "Field Marshal," which is higher than a four star general, and Eisenhower and MacArthur, who commanded allied as well as US troops, had to issue orders to some haughty field marshals.

Chapter 9

Maps and Other Problems

There was a pause in the war for the 1944 World Series. I don't remember any details of the games, played between the two St Louis teams, the Cardinals and the Browns, but I do know that everyone in the battalion with access to a telephone was listening at least part of the time. Someone in B Battery had a short-wave radio capable of picking up either the broadcast from the States or a re-broadcast, possibly from Communications Zone Headquarters in Paris. A wire from the radio fed the broadcast into the Upstart switchboard, where all telephone lines could be plugged into it. Luckily, the enemy did not choose to attack during any of the games, because it might have been hard to unhitch enough lines to get a fire mission fired. Even those of us who didn't normally follow baseball listened, and listening boosted our morale.

After the Series, we settled into a daily routine, starting about ten p.m. or, in military terms, 2200. [There is a precedent for starting the day at night: the Jewish sabbath starts at sunset Friday night.] By that time the liaison officers would have reported in from their respective infantry battalions with requests for us to prepare defensive barrages to be fired if they were needed to break up an enemy attack. Most of them were never fired; the enemy never made a serious attack, day or night, during that period, but it was well to be ready. After the defensive barrages were prepared, the S-3 and his assistant would work up a schedule of harassing and interdiction (H&I) firing to be done at odd times during the night. Interdiction fire is fired along roads or streets, generally at bridges, crossings or intersections, to keep the enemy from using them to bring up supplies or reinforcements. Harassing fire is intended to keep the enemy awake and nervous. Both harassing and interdiction fires are more effective if fired on an irregular schedule, so the enemy won't know when to be ready for them.

Of course firing them also kept our own cannoneers awake, if not nervous, so generally only one battery would fire each night, and the batteries took turns.

As soon as the schedule was made up and sent to the proper battery executive officer, everyone would go to bed, except for the FDC duty officer and one FDC enlisted man. There were five of us staff officers who rotated standing night duty: Major Swatosh, the S-3; Major Myers, the Bn Exec; Capt Thomson, the Asst S-3; me, the S-2, and Lt Ray Wright, the Survey Officer. And one of the six FDC enlisted men [see Essay One "The Fire Direction Center"] would share the duty. If a fire mission came in, these two would be enough to get started, and they could rouse more people if they were needed. And they could take care of routine business - metro messages and the like. A metro message was a whole block of numbers representing the latest weather situation. Every couple of hours another one came in, and the duty officer had to do a lot of arithmetic to determine changes to be made in the setting of the howitzers to allow for the new weather.

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The calculator had not yet been invented, so it all had to be done with pencil and paper. I'll have to admit that I never learned to add, subtract, multiply, and divide with any real assurance until I was 30 years old and had to do math in the middle of the night in a haze of drowsiness.

Night duty was usually pretty dull, and I would have trouble staying awake. Lt Col Peach, on the other hand, who could have slept all night, had trouble corking off. I would be sitting on the handle end of a five gallon water can, leaning against a tent pole, nodding, when Eric Peach would stick his head through the tent flap.

"Bob. Bob! BOB! Wake up! What's all that machine gun fire?"

I would force my eyes open and listen hard. Sure enough, barely audible above the hiss of the Coleman lantern, was a crackle of distant machine gun fire.

"Sounds like a long way off," I ventured.

"Long way off, hell! Sounds like a counter-attack! Why aren't the forward observers doing something?"

I'd get on the phone and start ringing observers. It sounded as if it were off to the right, so I started with the people with the 3rd Battalion. I got a couple of grumpy lieutenants and a sergeant on different calls. "No, sir. Everything quiet on our front. Nobody shooting here, us or them. "

"Can't you hear any firing?"

"No. Well, yes, but it's quite a ways off. I'd say maybe ten miles, at least. You know how sound travels at night, sir."

I rang off and called the duty officer at United, the 344th FA Bn CP. They supported the 358th Infantry, the regiment to the right, or south, of our own. "Hi. This is Capt Moore, at Upstart. Anything going on in your sector?"

"Not a thing. No. Why?"

"I thought maybe I heard some machine gun firing from that direction."

"I can't hear anything ... wait a minute. Yeah, I hear it now. Very faint. Must be twenty miles away, in the next division sector. Maybe the next corps. Say, you've got good ears!"

I would thank him, ring off, and go into the next tent to report my findings to Eric Peach, who would grumble and go back to bed. And by the time I had regained my state of torpor, the next metro message would come in.

In the morning at seven, the rest of the staff would get up and go eat breakfast, after which they would come and relieve me, or whoever was on night duty. Unless there was some pressing need for him, the duty officer could take the morning off to catch up on sleep.

There wasn't too much pressing need during this period, and there was time to catch up on some light housekeeping, like going through all the mass of maps I had collected to see what was there and get it organized so it could be found.

Maps and Other Problems

After gasoline, ammunition, and, of course, food, perhaps the most critical item in the supply line of our segment of WWII was maps. The infantry gave its orders for attack partially in the form of a tracing paper overlay which, laid on a map and properly positioned, would show the locations of objectives, command posts, supply points, and a lot of other valuable information. In the absence of a map, it might be possible to describe all these locations, but it would take pages of fine print to get the same amount of information, and even then it would not be as clear, and it certainly would be harder to digest.

Artillery is even more dependent on maps. A FO who can read a map well is able to find a point on the map at or near the potential target and send the location back to the FDC with a request for fire. When the firing batteries are situated on the same map, it is easy enough to measure the range and deflection (horizontal direction) to the target and shoot there. If it is a map with contour lines, which show the approximate elevation above sea level of every point on it, then corrections can be made for the difference in altitude between the guns and the target. Field Artillery can be fired without a map, but it is a tedious and chancy process.

The maps of France we got were spectacularly accurate. Napoleon Bonaparte had ordered the basic survey made about 150 years earlier, and the detail was brought up to date by use of aerial photographs. We had maps on a scale of 1 to 25,000, which means that four centimeters on the map equalled one kilometer on the ground. Or, in English measurements, one inch equalled about four tenths of a mile. Anyhow, it was easy to see and locate on the map any prominent feature on the ground, such as a road intersection, a bridge, or a schoolhouse.

Maps of Germany were not as good. Most of our German maps were much less detailed, being of smaller scale, with each kilometer represented by only one centimeter instead of four, or one inch equaling 1.6 miles. There simply wasn't room on those maps for as much detail or as precise locations.

One of my duties as S-2 was to obtain and distribute the maps the battalion needed. I picked them up from the Div Arty S-2, who drew them from the Engineer Battalion. When I got them back to our CP, I had to sort them out and collate them into stacks, one for each of the people who needed them. That meant about fifty stacks of map sheets about 20 x 30 inches in size, of heavy, high quality paper.

One to twenty-five thousand was a great scale for artillery, but it took a lot of sheets of map to cover a comparatively small area on the ground. And we were issued maps covering a bigger area than that we actually fought over, because no one knew exactly where we might go, and changes of direction were fairly common. So we got quite a few map sheets we didn't really need, and I kept them rather than overburden people like FOs, who had no good place to store maps and would have trouble locating the right one if they had too many to sort out.

Fortunately we had picked up an abandoned German army truck and repainted it OD with white stars to identify it as American now, and I kept excess maps in it. The truck was loaded almost to its full capacity with nothing but maps. Some of them were pretty ridiculous, being of areas already passed over. And some were of areas like

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southern Belgium and Luxembourg, which had not only already been passed over, but were many miles north of anywhere we would be likely to go. Pretty crummy maps, too. The scale was 1 to 25,000, same as the French ones, but the printing was fuzzy, the locations vague, and the contour lines haphazard.

I was about half way through the job when the blow fell. All German vehicles had to be turned in. The division had so many by now that it took up too much road space, and the G-3's march schedules were completely upset. We would have to get along with the vehicles the Army authorized us. That meant Lt Troxell would not have his VW bug any more, and I wouldn't have a truck for my maps. Where should all those maps go? The CP truck was always full of FDC equipment when we moved.

I picked up the phone and asked for Universe 2. When Capt Saegert, the new Div Arty S-2, answered, I said, "Say, Jesse, I've got a few maps I don't need. When can I turn them in?"

"Forget it. I've got maps of my own I can't use. " "Can't you turn them in to engineer supply?"

"I already thought of that. They won't take them either. They say the Third Army map supply is bulging at the seams. "

"But I have more maps than we can transport. What the hell am I supposed to do with 'em?"

"That's your problem."

I communed with myself and came up with no satisfactory solution. Maps seemed to be a drug on the market. I sought advice from my friends. Don Thomson suggested burning them - that was what you did with classified documents, and these were papers that might be of use to the enemy.

I thought that over. There were a couple of tons of tightly packed sheets of a kind of paper that burns poorly. The weather was damp. It would probably take a week or more to burn them all, one sheet at a time, for I was sure that they would not burn in reams. And the fire would have to burn day and night, a beacon to any German artillery or aircraft looking for something to shoot at. No good. A few sheets might be rolled up and used in the barrel stove in lieu of firewood, but not many.

Capt Jacobs came up with the solution. "Why don't you bury 'em? I have a couple of disciplinary cases that need some extra duty, and they could each dig you a hole six by six by six, slide in the maps, and cover 'em up."

It was wasteful, and it went against the grain. But what else was there? And so there are several thousand dollars worth of maps entombed in a little grove somewhere in Lorraine. They have been there fifty years, and from what I hear about the biodegradability of paper in the absence of oxygen, it may be centuries - even millennia before they turn completely to mulch. It is interesting to guess what some archaeologist digging into them in the thirty-fifth century might make of these strange artifacts. Would he think he had discovered the equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Maps and Other Problems

I don't remember where I had been - possibly on another tour of Gravelotte - when I returned to find the CP buzzing with excitement. Major Swatosh had been wounded and evacuated.

"What happened?" I asked our doctor, Lt Davis. "Where was he?"

"He was right here. Remember his saying he'd disassembled the fuze on an AA shell? Well, he was cleaning out his shack, and he picked up the little booster to throw it away. It went off in his hand. "

"My God! What did it do to him?"

"Ends of three fingers. I doubt if he'll ever play the piano."

Several days of anxiety ensued. The job of S-3, who ran the fire direction center, was now open. It was a tempting goal for any ambitious officer, because although a FA Bn had ten slots for captains, there were only two for majors, and whoever was assigned to be S-3 would be in a position for promotion, with more prestige. Not to mention more pay.

As battalion commander, Lt Col Peach had several options. One was to give the job to the senior captain: me. I was qualified for the job: I had worked next door to the FDC for many months, knew the procedures and the personnel thoroughly, and had been night duty officer in it all that time.

On the other hand, was I the best qualified captain available? Among the ten captains he had, there were other possibilities.

John Klas was junior to me, having been promoted to 1st Lt at the same time I made captain. However, he had been S-3 a year earlier, when Major Bob Hughes was in command of the battalion, and had lost the position only after Costain and Swatosh arrived and upset the status quo. "Bear Tracks" Klas was a splendid officer, forceful, imaginative, and popular. He now commanded A Battery, where he was thoroughly reliable and might be hard to replace.

Don Thomson, the Assistant S-3, was undoubtedly the best qualified of all. Everyone knew he was the brains of the FDC. On the other hand, he was quite junior, and he had stepped on a few toes. Besides, he would still be there, a competent associate, even if someone else got the job.

And there was a wild card. Major Bob Hughes, who had been wounded in Normandy, had returned to duty with the division. Since there was no vacancy for him when he arrived, he had been assigned as coordinator of all the 90th Division anti-tank defenses. That was quite a job, since a lot of units had anti-tank weapons, ranging from bazookas carried by individual infantrymen to 90mm Tank Destroyer guns mounted on tracked vehicles, which were practically tanks themselves. However, it was not a position recognized in the Table of Organization, so it had no future. Now that we did have a vacancy for a major, he might be reassigned to us.

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But that would have made for an awkward situation. He had commanded us once, and had been the heir apparent after that. To return now as S-3 would be a comedown. And since he had been senior to Eric Peach as a major, and especially since he was highly popular with everyone who had served under him, his presence might cause divided loyalties.

These were the problems that Lt Col Peach must have been wrestling with during the several days in which nothing was said on the subject. By anyone. At least not in my hearing.

I began to be nervous. Of course we could worry along with only one officer in the FDC during this period of little action, but it would not be feasible when we began to move again and we would have to split into a forward and rear FDC. Besides, I wanted the job, and I was tired of living in suspense. I had already been passed over once - I was senior to Doug Myers when he was made Exec and promoted to major - and if it was to happen again I wanted to find out.

We did not get Major Hughes, but we did get a new-or second hand-captain. Arlo Knowles had been wounded while serving as liaison officer in the 344th FA Bn. Now he was well, but there was no vacancy in the 344th, so he came to us instead. Lt Col Peach had come from the 344th too, so I expect they knew each other. All our liaison officer slots were filled, so Knowles hung around the CP, waiting for assignment. Maybe he was as nervous as I was.

At last I became desperate. I didn't feel I could confront Peach, demanding to know my fate, but I did approach Major Myers.

"Doug, has Eric said anything about a new S-3?" "No, not to me. Why?"

"Well, I'd kind of like to know. And if he gives Don Thomson the job, he'll need an assistant."

Myers looked at me. "Oh, I don't think Eric would do that. But you're right; he should be doing something. I'll talk to him." And the next day, Lt Col Peach called me over. "Bob, I want you to take Captain Knowles under your wing and teach him how to be an S-2. I'll be needing you as S-3."

Operations Sergeant Johnson

When I first knew him, T/5 John Johnson drove Col Pierce's Command Car. Actually, I don't suppose I really knew him then - there didn't appear to be much to know. He was a man of medium height, medium build, medium coloration, and indeterminate age. He was calm, diffident, and conscientious. Altogether, a person who would not stand out in a crowd. Besides, when I was near him I was also near Col Pierce, who, as battalion commander, held most of my attention.

The job of chauffeuring the battalion commander carried considerable prestige, but that was its only plus. A command car demanded a lot from its driver. It was huge on the outside, cramped on the inside. Steering it took a weight-lifter's muscles. Its springs were too stiff to ease the jouncing along the rutted trails and open prairie of the Camp Berkeley maneuver area. The spare tire was located on the left side, blocking the driver's door, its top at armpit height, so that the driver had to climb over it to get in or out. If the canvas top of the car was up, he had to be a contortionist.

Perhaps the first time I noticed Johnson was when he did the contortionist act to get out and put up the side curtains to protect the radio from a driving rain. When he got them in place, he came around to the passenger door, water dripping from his helmet and soaking the shoulders of his field jacket. "Excuse me," he said to Col Pierce, "I have to get in on this side." His tone was respectful, but he neglected to say "Sir." I noticed the omission, but the colonel did not correct him, so neither did I.

Much of the space between the front and back seats of the command car was occupied by an enormous two-way radio, nicknamed the "shin-cracker special," for what it did to the radio operator who sat behind it. The set emitted garbled messages from time to time, and between messages, it made a steady staticky noise which proved it was still operating, but pretty much drowned out any attempts at conversation inside the car. Fortunately, Col Pierce had a clear, penetrating tenor voice, so he could make his instructions audible. Anyone else who tried to speak to Johnson had to raise his voice to a scream every time Johnson said, "Beg pardon?"

Command cars were manufactured by Dodge Motors. I don't know who designed them, but he was often mentioned. Obscenely. Capt Jacobs said whoever it was should be run over by them. All of them. I disagreed. I thought being required to spend the rest of his life riding in one would be ample punishment.

Johnson never complained, though. He just set his jaw and held tight to the steering wheel, both to make the effort to turn it and to keep himself from bouncing through the roof.

Anyone who drove for Col Pierce had to give up any ambition to sleep during field exercises or maneuvers, which was mostly when he used his command car. Col Pierce spent all day and all night driving around conferring with some people and checking on others. I suppose Johnson must have dozed behind the wheel occasionally when the colonel left the car to confer or check, but he never got caught at it.

And he never complained about that, either. As a matter of fact, I never heard him complain but once, and I'll tell you about that later. And he never remembered to say, "Sir."

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Col Pierce said the best way to pitch a pup tent was not to use the poles, which only got in the way, but to tie the guy ropes overhead, to a tree branch. So Johnson conscientiously pitched his little tent that way, and probably slept in it if he ever got a chance. Col Pierce, a small man, never used a tent himself. He slept curled up on the front seat of the command car.

There was one more minor hazard to riding with Col Pierce. He had heard about the layer principle for dressing warmly, and since he felt the cold even more than the rest of us, he would start out a field exercise on a winter morning dressed in layers: on top of his basic woolen undershirt and wool flannel shirt, he wore, starting from the inside, a sleeveless sweater, a light field jacket, a suede leather jacket, a heavy field jacket, and an overcoat. If he had not been a slight man, he could never have stuffed himself into the command car. When the sun got well up, he would find his garments burdensome, so he would remove the overcoat, the heavy field jacket, the suede leather jacket, the light field jacket, and the sleeveless sweater. Placing the sweater on the seat beside him, he would then re-don the light field jacket, the suede leather jacket, the heavy field jacket, and the overcoat. During these operations, Johnson learned to hold his right elbow high to avoid being slapped across the face by a loose sleeve.

As the day wore on, Col Pierce continued this process, next removing the light field jacket and replacing the rest, and so on, working from the inside out, until mid-afternoon, when finally he took off the overcoat and added it to the stack of outer garments on the front seat between him and T/5 Johnson. By this time it was high enough so they could not see each other. However, as the sun grew lower, the temperature dropped, and the colonel would resume first the overcoat, then the heavy field jacket, et cetera.

One day when some busybody was going through records to find men who were reasonably intelligent but not smart enough to be shipped off to officer candidate school (OCS), he saw Johnson's name. OCS required an AGCT score of 110 or higher. Johnson's was 108. He was worth a tryout with the fire direction center (FDC).

Although Col Pierce was the kind of man for whom the term "officer and a gentleman" was coined, I think you will understand why T/5 Johnson might have been willing to stop driving for him in favor of a job with more future. So he was soon sitting with a graphical firing table in his hands, computing firing commands for the batteries. He showed a natural aptitude for it, particularly since he never got excited and lost his presence of mind. He went on to master the jobs of horizontal control operator and vertical control operator too. And almost before you could say, "Complementary angle of site," he had become the Chief Computer and was wearing the stripes of a Staff Sergeant. Even in his new-found eminence, he still remained low-key, conscientious, and diffident. And unflappable in his loyalty to Col Pierce.

Operations Sergeant Johnson

I think it was about the time we left Camp Barkeley and went to the Desert Maneuver Area that a vacancy came up for the job of Operations Sergeant, which called for the rank of Technical Sergeant. In garrison, that is when we were not in combat or simulated combat ["simulated" is militarese for "play like"]. The Operations Sergeant was a sort of man Friday for both the S-2 and S-3. He took care of our map supply, issuing maps when they were needed and ordering more when they got short. He did a little rough drafting when it was required, typed stencils for training schedules, ran them off on the mimeograph machine, and delivered them to the message center for distribution.

S/Sgt Johnson got the job. He was familiar with what the S-3 and S-2 sections did, and what he didn't know he picked up readily. As usual, he was conscientious, and if he wasn't a loud-mouthed leader, why, he didn't have anybody to lead anyhow.

Col Pierce had left us for better things by that time, and Tech Sgt Johnson's stint as a driver was almost forgotten. I sometimes wished I could teach him to say "Sir," but that was one thing he seemed incapable of learning. Not that he was rude or insubordinate, but "sir" was a word he could never remember.

But when we started maneuvers, sometimes called "war games," on the vast stretches of desert, the operations sergeant became the S-2's right-hand man, and was supposed to maintain the Situation Map, a map covered with clear acetate on which one marked with grease pencil the locations of units, front lines, command posts, and other data. Information about the enemy was marked in red, that about the good guys in blue. Since friendly forces were more forthcoming with their data than the enemy, there was always more blue than red.

During much of the maneuver, I tended to be gone from the CP, trying to find our air section, checking on LnOs and FOs, and running errands to the 359th Infantry CP and other headquarters. For long periods, Tech Sgt Johnson was left alone with the Situation Map - and his thoughts.

Often when I returned, I would find that he had scribbled notes on information that had come in during my absence, but that he had not posted on the map. I assumed that this was because he hadn't had time, so I would have him read off the notes to me while I marked the map accordingly. Later I would see him gazing at the map with his notes in his hand and a mildly puzzled expression on his face, but I was busy and didn't pay much attention.

When the first maneuver was over and we had returned to our tent camp at Granite Mountain, Johnson sought me out. "Captain Moore, I want to be busted. "

I shook my head to clear it. "You mean reduced to the grade of private?" That was something battery commanders could do to punish a man for an offense or for being inefficient. Or, if he were that kind of battery commander, for getting on his nerves.

"Oh, no, not all the way! Just to Staff Sergeant. I want to be chief computer again."

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I frowned. This was the first time he had made any kind of complaint, and I still didn't understand what he was trying to tell me. "You don't like working for me?"

"Well, it's not you. I like you fine. But when I was chief computer, I knew what I was doing, and now I don't."

I looked at his earnest face. He wasn't joking: for that matter, he wasn't the joking type. "Why Sergeant Johnson," I said, "I thought you were doing fine!"

"Well, that's when you are around. But you're gone so much of the time, and I don't know how to make all those marks on the map, and the officers are too busy to show me."

And then I finally saw what the problem was. The symbols one drew on the map were standard ones, uniform throughout the army. I had known all of them so long that I had forgotten there was a time when I had to learn them. And no one, especially me, had thought to make sure that our operations sergeant knew about them.

"Sergeant Johnson, let's not be too hasty. We both can spare some time this week and next. We'll have a little school, just you and me, and learn about those marks on the map. After that, if you still want to be busted, we can talk about it again."

We had the school. I tutored him a couple of hours a day, explaining that a rectangular box indicated a unit, that if it had a dot in the middle, it was an artillery unit, a diagonal line from corner to corner meant a cavalry unit, and two diagonals crossing in the middle meant infantry.

Then I stopped and asked, "Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"You mean 'Yes, sir.'" "Oh. Yeah, I guess I do."

I went on and told him that one short vertical line sticking up on top of the box indicated a company or battery, two lines a battalion, and three a regiment. And so on. I marveled at how much there was to know.

I also marveled at how quickly he picked it all up. He was such a fast learner that for a while I pushed my luck and tried again to teach him to say "Sir," but to no avail. So I gave up on that. As long as he understood my orders and obeyed them cheerfully and promptly, I had better quit while I was ahead.

No more was ever said about his reverting to the FDC. Now that he knew how to make the marks on the map, his self-confidence improved every day in the field, and by the time we landed in Normandy, he was as competent at keeping a situation map as I was. And considerably faster.

I'm not sure he could visualize what was going on on the ground from looking at the map and the symbols, but even I had trouble doing that. Trouble despite the fact that I could and did go out and look at the ground and the people on it, secure in knowing that he was home with the map and things were being taken care of.

As they always were.

If only he could have learned to say "Sir"!

Chapter 10

Something About Commanders

Don Thomson always said that the 90th Division was at its peak in the next campaign when we crossed the Moselle River and helped take Metz. The soldiers were "blooded" and had learned not only how to win battles, but also to be confident in their ability to do so. In the assault troops - infantry, engineers, tankers, and tank destroyers - the incompetent commanders had been weeded out, wounded, or killed, and replaced by ones who were at worst competent and at best brilliant. On the other hand, of the new generation of good commanders only a few had been lost.

However, during October and early November, the Division did lose all three of its generals, each of them kicked upstairs into a more important job. The division commander, Major General McLain, left to command a corps and later to become the only national guard officer to achieve the rank of lieutenant general during WWII. The assistant division commander, Brigadier General "Wild Bill" Weaver, was sent to command a division, as was the division artillery commander, Brigadier General Devine.

Our new Division commander, a bull-necked brigadier named James Van Fleet, had a hard act to follow: Maj Gen McLain had commanded us from the breakout at St. Lo and all the time we were charging across France. He "gave the Division back its soul." But now that McLain was leaving us for a bigger job, there came the question: could Van Fleet fill McLain's shoes? He had a good record, having landed in Normandy as a Colonel, earned the rank of Brigadier General, and was now deemed worthy to be assigned to a Major General's job. And in the next action he proved that he was truly up to the job of succeeding McLain.

Colonel, later Brigadier General, Tully replaced Weaver. He kept a much lower profile than his predecessor, and I had no direct contact with him at all, but I gather that he was competent, if not brilliant.

As for the artillery, we were less fortunate. We probably never had fully appreciated our leadership. Brigadier General Devine, despite his small size and low-key style, looked and acted exactly as a general should look and act. His executive officer, John Daly, a highly competent artilleryman with a sardonic wit, had been with us from the very beginning, and might have had been considered to replace him. But Daly was killed in action on a trip up to the front lines just at the beginning of the Falaise Gap operation. Ironically, it happened the same day his promotion from lieutenant colonel to colonel came through.

So to replace Devine, we got Colonel Earnest A. Bixby, a pudgy, red-faced, unpleasant man, full of sound and fury. He lost no time in making himself unpopular with his subordinates. Like Devine, he came from an armored division, and he never got over the idea that towed howitzers like ours should get ready to move as quickly as the cannon he was used to, self-propelled 105s which had merely to be started up and shifted into gear. Nor could he understand that a unit like ours which relied primarily on telephone communications took longer to get its wire laid than an armored unit took to switch on its

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radios. Bixby was only satisfied when we were actually firing. At any other time, he felt we should be preparing to move. Faster. I think he intended to either inspire or intimidate us into doing better, but all he succeeded in doing was making us nervous.

Reports on his private life, though irrelevant to his duties, did nothing to increase his popularity. He made no effort to hide the fact that he had a mistress in England, and he worked hard at getting leaves to go back and visit her. I heard later, after the war, that his wife shot him when he returned home. Not fatally, however. I served under him twice after that.

And then one day a stocky lieutenant colonel drove into our CP and introduced himself to Eric Peach and us staff officers as John Theimer, newly assigned as Div Arty Executive Officer (second in command). He had been transferred from a FA Group, he said. He was pleasant and affable, and we were favorably impressed.

It just so happened that a captain, a liaison officer from one of the battalions in his former group, was there at the time. Theimer spoke to him by name, and I was even more impressed. After the colonel left to visit another battalion, I commented to the captain, "He seems like a nice person." The captain looked at me and said nothing at all.

It didn't take long to find out why. We soon got used to Bixby and could guess what he wanted even before he opened his mouth to roar at us. But Theimer was completely unpredictable. The only thing one could be sure of was that he wasn't going to like whatever he saw or thought he saw .

Once our Bn CO, Lt Col Peach, saw fit to locate one of our batteries outside our assigned goose egg and into that assigned to the 345th FA Bn. He had often done this before ["Hill 122" P 44], and no one had complained. But Theimer noticed it and screamed as if a serious crime had been committed.

A few minutes later I saw Lt Col Frank Norris, who as CO of the 345th would be considered the victim of the crime, and told him what had happened. He snorted. "Doesn't he know about command liaison?" he asked rhetorically. [Command liaison means two commanders talking to each other.] "If I didn't want your battery in my goose egg, I'd have told Eric Peach myself!"

Theimer didn't like my situation map, either. The situation map is a map of the area fastened to a board and covered with clear acetate. Locations of interest are marked on it with grease pencil, using conventional military symbols for front lines, command posts, etc. And two conventional colors are used: red for enemy information, blue for friendly. However, I had long since found out - on desert maneuvers, as I recall - that blue does not show up well against the background of a map, especially under artificial light. So I was doing the friendly installations in black, which does. Since there were only two colors in use, and since either I or Sgt Johnson was always there to explain, there didn't seem to be a problem - until Theimer saw my map. I tried to explain the break with

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tradition, but he was having none of it. Blue was blue, and black wasn't. I had better erase all that black stuff and replace it with blue, or else.

I had Sgt Johnson get out a rag saturated in lighter fluid and dab off the black a little at a time, replacing each symbol with blue. And for weeks thereafter I kept it that way, despite complaints from people who came in to look at it and couldn't see the blue. Then, noting that Theimer had never returned to check, I went back to the black.

Major Jesse Saegert, the Div Arty S-2, told me later that Col Theimer - yes, he got promoted - used to come into his lair almost every morning to look at his situation map and ask stupid questions. "What makes with the river?" and "Where are the mines?" were his standard ones.

At first Saegert tried to answer as best he could, but eventually he suspected that Theimer wasn't listening to him, but was gazing into space in some other direction. To test this theory, he began to throw out some provocative remarks. "There are at least a hundred thousand German troops in this forest," he would start out, pointing to a patch of woods about the size of the plaza at Taos. When that drew no response, he would continue, "A million Tiger tanks have been seen in this village." Theimer would grunt and wander off to harass someone else who was trying to get his work done.

Lt Col Earl Sutton, the Div Arty S-3, summed it up nicely. "Theimer is nuts. Bixby may be crazy, but Theimer is just plain nuts."

The last time I saw John Theimer, at the Presidio of San Francisco, he was wearing the two stars of a major general. And I never met anyone who had served under him that would disagree with Sutton's characterization.

Fortunately we had Lt Col Eric Peach as a battalion commander, and he stood between us and the Div Arty crew, taking the heat for us. He was exactly the kind of calm, generally low-key leader we needed as a commander in combat, and our previous ones who had trained us were exactly what we needed to get us ready.

Our first commander back at Camp Barkeley, Lt Col E. R. Pierce, had been a model for most of us: firm, dignified, knowledgeable, and filled with noblesse oblige. And apparently tireless. On field exercises when I was a battery commander, I got an average of three hours sleep a night, and the last person I saw before I turned in and the first I saw when I woke up was Col Pierce.

Following him, after a brief period with Major Bob Hughes as commander, was Lt Col James Costain, who was even more knowledgeable and a great deal more demanding. He expected every man - and particularly every officer - to perform at a super-human level. Few of us met his expectations, but we at least tried, for we feared his tongue-lashings. It seems to me that there were only three of us that he spared from being chewed out: Major Swatosh, the S-3; Lt Wright, the survey officer; and me. He did not pick on Ray Wright because he did perform at a super-human level and seemed incapable of making a mistake. I think he left me alone because when I made a mistake I tried to catch it before he did and took the wind out of his sails. I have no idea why Swatosh escaped.

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So by the time Eric Peach took command, we had learned pride in our capacity to do our jobs, individually and as members of teams, with little supervision and less prodding. He had an outfit that operated well, and he was smart enough to stand back and watch us do it. Not that we didn't still have a lot to learn about combat, but by the time we reached Gravelotte, we were used to it.

The 359th Infantry Regiment got a new commander too. Col Bacon, the one who wanted to have our CP with his, was transferred to the 95th Division, where I understand he did well. He was replaced by a Lt Col Raymond Bell, whom Van Fleet brought with him. "Fireball" Pond, the commander of the 1st Bn, had known Bell before - probably Bell was an ROTC instructor when Pond was a college student. At any rate, I noticed that Pond, who was now a Lt Col himself, spoke very deferentially to the newcomer.

Bell soon won the respect of almost everyone except his second-in-command, Lt Col Don Gorton. Gorton thought that Bell made too many trips back to higher headquarters. "Politicking," he called it. What I noticed was that when Gorton was left in command, the regiment always slowed to a standstill, and that when Bell returned, it immediately forged ahead.

Sometime in late October, we got to see a couple of other commanders. All the officers in the Division down through the rank of captain attended a meeting in a big hall, which I think must have been the auditorium of a school building in an abandoned village. The speaker of the day was General George S. Patton, commander of Third Army, a man of enormous reputation. And with him on the stage was Lt Gen Walker, commander of the XX Corps, to which the 90th Division was currently assigned.

I was anxious to hear and see Patton. I had been gone somewhere when he came and spoke to the division in England before the invasion, but I gathered he had made a poor impression then. Some people thought a general officer should be able to speak three words without one of them being an obscenity. In addition, he was then notorious for having slapped a soldier who was hospitalized for combat fatigue.

But that was ancient history. What we remembered now was that while we had been in Gen Bradley's First Army we were hopelessly and helplessly bogged down in the hedgerows of Normandy, and that as soon as we were switched into Patton's Third Army we had suddenly become unstoppable. I kept an open mind, but I was ready to like him.

Patton was a big, imposing man - looked like George C. Scott - with a shiny helmet bearing three silver stars [or four, but I don't think he had been promoted to full General yet], and he wore a wide leather belt with two pistols in their holsters. But his voice almost ruined the effect: it was weak, high-pitched, and strained.

He started out, "I don't know just why I came to see you gentlemen. I happened to be in the area, and I thought you might be hurt if I didn't drop over. I came because I wanted to tell another outfit what to do. But I don't have to tell the 90th Infantry Division what to do. You sons-of-bitches know what to do!"

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There was wild applause. He had struck the right note; from now on we were on his side. And having said he didn't have to tell us what to do, he proceeded to tell us what to do.

"I don't want you to die for your country; I want you to make that other son-of-a-bitch - the one in the gray uniform - die for his country

"The average rifleman who goes into a battle fires four rounds. Sometimes he gets excited and fires eight. Now, he starts out carrying a full cartridge belt and a couple of bandoliers of extra ammunition - maybe a hundred rounds in all. That isn't issued to him to throwaway because it gets too heavy to carry: that's issued to him to shoot!

"Now you go back and tell your men that General Patton wants each one of them to fire at least 50 rounds next time he goes into an action!

"They'll tell you they don't see anything to fire at. Of course they don't! The damned Jerries aren't stupid enough to stand up so you can shoot at 'em. You tell those men to think where they would be if they were a Kraut and shoot there. And tell 'em to fire low. You've all heard bullets whistle by over your head. They don't bother anybody. But when one ricochets off the ground with that nasty screech - that puts the fear of God into a man and keeps his head down. And a man with his head down can't fire back at you "

There was more, but those are the parts I remember. Maybe I lost track of the rest because I was thinking about what he had just said. It seemed to make sense, but I didn't really believe anyone would remember to do it in the excitement of combat.

As often happened, I was mistaken. Some liaison officer - I think it was Bill Bechtold me later about something that happened the morning after our first troops crossed the Moselle: "A squad [12 men] was sent into a little patch of trees. I would have thought from the amount of firing came out of those woods that it was a battalion [800-1,000 men]. And you know, they flushed out 50 Germans!"

A commander **can** make a difference.

Essay six

Time on Target

I mentioned in Essay One, "*The Fire Direction Center*", that the FDC was the American addition to the art of gunnery, enabling a battalion to **mass**, or concentrate, the fire of all three batteries on one target. It also made it possible to call for fire from all the other battalions within range of the target and available by telephone. The Corps Artillery FDC sometimes fired what was called a "Serenade." [the Corps was the next headquarters higher than the Division, and it usually had quite a few - not a fixed number like a Division Artillery - of artillery battalions. Their specialty was firing at enemy artillery, called "counter-battery" fire, but they often reinforced our fire also.]

A Serenade consisted of a number of battalions - typically all within range - firing at the same target at more or less the same time. It was supposed to be devastating to any enemy in the target area, and I am sure it was.

A further refinement of the principle of mass fire was "Time on Target" (TOT) fire. It was regulated so that not only did everyone fire together at the same target, but it is also timed so that **every** round from **every** battery arrives at the target at the same second! The TOT was assumed to be even more devastating to the enemy because there was no warning so that he could take cover before too late. Actually, howitzer shells travel at less than the speed of sound, so one can hear shells coming in before they arrive and burst, but not for more than a second or two.

The TOT was made possible by use of the field artilleryman's friend, the little book of firing tables, which includes a column that shows to the nearest second the time of flight of a projectile fired at each possible elevation and with each possible charge.

The procedure ran more or less like this: The S-3 of the battalion originating the TOT would call the FDC of each battalion he wanted to involve. "Upstart, get me Urban Fire Direction ... Hello, Urban FDC? This is Upstart 3. Fire Mission! Coordinates 572-468, enemy chow line, request battalion one volley, TOT at my command, report when ready to fire." He turns the crank on the field phone to ring off. "Upstart, now get me Umber Fire Direction ... " etc.

When each unit called back to report "Ready to Fire" the S-3 would say "Stand by," and tell the switchboard operator to hook them all into a conference call. Then, when all battalions, including his own, had reported he would stand with a telephone in one hand and a stop-watch in the other and say into the former: "TOT in one minute from **now!** Fifty-five seconds ... fifty seconds ... forty-five seconds ... forty seconds .. Charley, fire! .. thirty five seconds .. Able, fire! Baker, fire! thirty seconds ... twenty five seconds ... twenty seconds ... fifteen seconds ... ten seconds, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, **Now!** Time on Target."

Meanwhile, the S-3 of each of the other battalions involved would be listening with his own stop watch and a list of the times of flight for each of his batteries, and would give the command to fire to the appropriate battery when it was the right number of seconds before Time on Target.

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The whole operation was done under considerable stress, for everything had to work precisely to have the desired effect.

One day I remember setting up a big TOT, when right in the middle I was conscious of an audience. Brigadier General Bixby himself had sidled into the tent and was watching my every move intently. But he didn't say anything, didn't even fidget. Finally I had finished the initial calls and was waiting, with a phone in each hand, for the other battalions to report ready to fire. In the brief moment of slacked tension, I inquired, "Anybody got a cigarette?" It was a silly thing to say; I didn't have a hand free to hold a cigarette anyhow.

"Well, Jesus Christ!" General Bixby exclaimed. He put two cigarettes in his mouth and lit them both, then squeezed over to where I was and stuck one of them into my mouth. I was flushed and flustered, but I managed to mutter a meaningless thanks and finish up the TOT with smoke in my eyes.

My interpretation was that he meant to make me look cheap for thinking of anything so frivolous as a cigarette at such a time. But Don Thomson saw it differently. "He was trying to say that you were the guy carrying the ball, and that everyone else should do everything possible to help you."

Essay Seven

The Helmet, Steel, M-1

The WWII American helmet came in two parts, the helmet liner and the steel shell. The liner was made of some hard composition and painted OD (olive drab) the nondescript greenish brown of most army issue clothing and equipment. I suspect it was the ancestor of the hard hat worn by construction workers. It did not rest directly on the cranium, but was suspended on an adjustable sweatband which fitted around the head and a harness which rested on top of the skull, leaving a space between scalp and helmet through which the breezes blew. This was a great comfort in the summer heat, but a hazard to health in the winter. Eventually a wool knit cap was issued to be worn under the liner to prevent frostbite of the scalp. It was essentially a skull cap with a very short bill, too trifling to be of any use except to indicate where the front was.


The helmet liner was often worn by itself, and made a very comfortable lightweight headgear, protecting the head from rain and sun alike. I ran into one problem: during our time on the California desert, I found my hair unbearable in the 130° heat, so I went to the battery barber and asked him to run the clippers right over the top, leaving me bald. After making me repeat the instructions several times to make sure I really meant it, he complied. As soon as the bristles had grown out 1/16", the helmet harness started chafing my scalp, and the itch and irritation went on for a month. I didn't think until years later that I could have worn my wool knit cap to cushion it - and died of heat exhaustion.

In combat, and even maneuvers, we added the steel shell, a thin layer of metal, also painted OD, but with a rough pebble-dash outer surface. Its addition made the helmet heavy enough to strain the neck of anyone who, like me, wore a size 14 collar. The shell fitted over the liner snugly enough to prevent any worry about their falling apart, but was readily removable for use as a bucket for washing and shaving. We were cautioned not to heat water in it, because exposing it to fire would take the temper out of the steel and weaken it, so that it would be less bullet-proof.

Each section of the helmet had a chin strap to hold it on in a high wind. The one on the liner was of light leather, and could be worn stretched over the front of the helmet when the wind was not blowing. The steel shell had a heavier cotton webbing strap, a suitable handle when using it as a bucket. When you wore it, however, the strap was secured around the back of the helmet. We were explicitly forbidden to wear it under the chin. If the concussion of a bursting shell was strong enough to knock it off, it was also strong enough to break your neck if the helmet were secured by a chin strap. Not using the strap meant that if you hit the dirt quickly, the helmet might arrive later than you did, and either bounce on your head or fall off entirely and have to be retrieved, but that beat having your neck broken.

During training everyone was taught that if you were captured, you might give the enemy interrogator your name, rank, and serial number, but nothing else. Particularly, you were not to mention the unit to which you belonged, because that information would help the enemy figure out what all they were facing.

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Consequently, I was surprised to hear that before we crossed the channel and went into combat; every man was not only to sew a divisional patch (ours was the TO design like this ) on the shoulder of every outer garment, but also to have it painted on the front of the steel helmet. In addition, all officers were to have their rank insignia painted or soldered on below the divisional insignia. And just in case you couldn't see the front of the helmet, each officer had to have a vertical white stripe an inch wide and four high painted on the back. [Sometimes called an "aiming stake"] Non-commissioned officers (corporals and sergeants) had a similar stripe, only horizontal.

I felt like a walking billboard.

Before embarking for the invasion, most of us put small camouflage nets over our helmets, securing them in place by tucking the edges in between liner and shell. They blurred, but did not conceal, all the painted decorations. Some infantrymen went further and garnished the nets with sprigs of vegetation, in hopes it would make them blend into the background.

I thought that our helmets carried all the messages that could be expected of them, but I was wrong. About a week into combat, there arose the sort of misunderstanding that happens until people get acquainted with their jobs and each other. Some junior infantry commanders were being grilled as to why they weren't advancing faster, and why they weren't using all the resources available to help. "Why didn't you call for artillery fire?"

"Well, sir, I thought of it, but I looked around, and there wasn't an artillery FO anywhere. No artillerymen at all."

But further investigation showed that an artillery FO **had** been there, ready and willing to fire if anyone had asked him. No one had noticed him in the confusion.

So every artilleryman in the Corps had a two inch square patch of red, the official artillery color, painted on each side of the helmet, over the ears.


The only helmet even more conspicuous than ours was worn by General Patton. A general is authorized to design his own uniform, so Patton had the nice dull pebbledash finish of his headgear sanded off smooth, then painted with many coats of high gloss varnish and buffed until it shone like a mirror. With the addition of the stars showing his rank, it was an impressive sight, especially since he was over six feet tall and never stooped or took cover.

As army commander, he liked to visit the front-line troops to inspire them by his personal courage.

They hated that. He made such a shining target that every enemy weapon within range would start firing at where he had been. By the time they got the range, Patton would have left for somewhere else, but the front-line troops had to stay and absorb the fire that he had drawn.

The Helmet, Steel, M-1

The helmets we wore were as comfortable as anything that heavy can be. Unlike German soldiers, whose first action when captured was to discard theirs in favor of a gray field cap, even when still in danger zones, I never knew an American soldier in combat who wanted to give his up.

Captain Jacobs lost his while landing in Normandy, when the truck he was on capsized. He made it to the beach, which was still under occasional fire, and he said he had never felt so naked in his life. He picked up one which had belonged to a battle casualty, and put it on eagerly, even though it was painted with the ivy leaf insignia of the 4th Division instead of the  of the 90th. Nor did he particularly care that it was a private's helmet, with neither rank insignia nor white stripe on the back. It protected his head.

He never got around to having it repainted until Doug Myers was promoted to major. Doug gave Jake his old one with the captain's bars on it, and had the ivy leaf one repainted: 90th insignia, major's leaf, aiming stake, red squares, and all. So far as I know, he wore it until the end of the war.

Chapter 11

Our Finest Hour

Crossing a river when the enemy occupies the far bank is a ticklish operation. It is generally done in three phases. In the first, the advance infantry elements paddle across the river in boats furnished by the engineers and debark on the opposite side. All the space they occupy on the far bank is called a **bridgehead**.

In the second, they move forward, attacking any enemy they find to drive them back far enough to get the crossing site out of range of enemy artillery. This is called "expanding the bridgehead" and is important because the engineers now have to construct a bridge across the river, and being shelled by artillery while doing it tends to make them nervous at best and to kill them at worst. Artillery fire can also destroy sections of the bridge about as fast as they can be assembled.

The third phase comes after the bridge is constructed, so that heavier traffic such as tanks, artillery, and supply vehicles can get across to support the infantry elements. Until completion of the bridge or bridges, all supplies and supporting equipment have to be ferried across on boats and rafts.

It is absolutely essential that the first phase, the crossing in boats, be accomplished before the enemy realizes what is going on. Infantry soldiers huddled into boats are pretty helpless if someone with a machine gun starts firing at them in midstream. Even if the bullets only sink the boat without wounding anyone, a boatload of men laden with packs, rifles, ammunition, et al, will have a rough time swimming to shore.

Consequently, the initial crossing is almost always made at night, with a minimum of noise and lights. And the preparations for the crossing must be something between inconspicuous and invisible, so that the enemy will not be expecting you.

I had a few weeks to break into my new duties with the fire direction center. They weren't really onerous right then; in fact the main problem was to avoid firing too much, because ammunition was rationed again. We were told it was being stockpiled for some big operation. We did have "Highchief," the 949th FA Bn (155 mm howitzers) from Corps Artillery assigned to **reinforce** our fire. That meant they had to shoot when we asked them to, and so they carried part of the load. However their ammunition was rationed too, and neither of us fired nearly as much as we might have liked. Nonetheless, there were some other possibilities we exploited.

A battery of 76.2 artillery guns made in Russia, of all places, had been captured from the Germans, along with an enormous supply of ammunition. Unfortunately the sighting systems on these guns had been sabotaged, and none of our American ordnance experts was able to fix them. That meant their fire could not be shifted from one target to another without getting weird and unpredictable results, nor could all four guns be made to fire at the same target without carefully adjusting each individual gun by trial and error. All we could do with the damned things was to zero in each gun, one at a time, on a target, then leave it pointed there, so we could fire the whole battery at the same time when

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we got ready. It was possible to achieve surprise as to the time we would fire, but certainly not the **place**.

We had better luck with the platoon of tanks from the 712th Tank Battalion and Company C of the 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Ray Wright, our survey officer, went to their locations and showed them how to "lay parallel" and how to point their guns in accordance with orders from our fire direction center. They could fire much faster than we could, they seemed to enjoy doing it, and they had ample ammunition. However, they were limited because their shells traveled so fast and in such a flat trajectory that they had trouble clearing hills to land in the valleys behind.

There was a change in my lifestyle: now I spent all my time at the CP. No more excuse to go up and check on FOs and LnOs, no expeditions to the museum at Gravelotte. I had lost my jeep and Joe B. Davis, who were now at the beck and call of Capt. Arlo Knowles, the new S-2.

I had one means of escape. The books all said that the S-3 should go on reconnaissance with the Bn CO, riding in the same vehicle to advise him. So if we ever got around to moving again, I might get a change of scene.

And then, at long last, we were ordered to reconnoiter for a move! It had been so long that I was afraid we might have forgotten how. But I located my field glasses and map case and got ready to climb into the back seat of Eric Peach's jeep.

But it was not to be. We were limited in the number of vehicles that could go, four per battalion, I think. That meant weeding out everyone not absolutely essential me, for instance. It also meant that all three firing battery commanders were jammed into one jeep, so that each of them had to do most of his reconnaissance on foot. There was substantial grumbling, but the orders were specific and all too clear.

The reason for these painful restrictions was that the whole 90th Division was slipping sideways, into the *Foret de Cattenom*, an area which had not been occupied before, only patrolled now and then by armored cavalry to make sure the Germans were not infiltrating into it from across the Moselle River. The move must be secret and unobtrusive, so the enemy would not realize anything was going on until too late. For this was the position from which the river crossing would be launched.

To make it even harder, the position was to be occupied at night, in blackout. A night occupation requires a number of men who are familiar with the position to act as guides, so trucks hauling howitzers won't go careening off in the wrong direction. Or - horrible thought- the kitchen truck won't get lost.

Anyhow, I stayed behind in a frenzy of curiosity and studied the map. Across the river from the forest where we were going were the villages of Malling and Petite Hettange, and behind them the ground sloped upward to the town of Kerling, near the crest of the first hill. What the map did **not** show was that the ground between the edge of the forest and our bank of the river was a soggy marsh.

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Our battalion succeeded in making the move secretly, helped by the weather, which was cloudy and rainy with poor visibility. I was happy to find that Col Peach had found a house with a roof for our CP. After six weeks in a tent in raw autumn weather, it felt good to be dry and comparatively warm.

Fortunately for me, I was not involved in the infantry's crossing by boat before daylight on November 9. However, we heard about it. The continuous rain was a mixed curse: Not only did it soak the doughboys in the boats, but it also made the river rise so that it was twice as wide, the current twice as fast, and the bank twice as muddy as usual. There was trouble getting the boats across the soggy flat to the river, and even more getting across the swollen, racing water, then getting oriented and organized on the far bank. On the other hand, the rain also muffled sounds and blurred observation, so our troops managed to surprise the enemy despite all the delays and difficulties. And although exhausted from the crossing, they fought well enough to capture Malling, Petite Hettange, and Kerling and to end the day at the crest of the slope east of the Moselle.

With, I might add, a lot of help from us. As soon as our infantry was across and had made contact with the enemy, surprise was gone, and our battalion could - and did - fire most of the time. Ammunition was no longer rationed, and we still had Highchief, plus Urban (our sister battalion, the 343rd), the 10th Armored Div Arty, and the 5th Armored FA Group, all reinforcing our fires. In addition, there were perhaps a dozen more battalions within range, which we could call upon when we needed them.

Provided, of course, that the telephone lines were all working. They were, most of the time, on our side of the river. But until a bridge was put in successfully, there was no way to lay wire to the infantry on the other side, and we had to rely on radio for communication, including fire missions, from our FOs and LnOs.

But by and large, the crossing was as successful as could be expected, and that night I made out a schedule of harassing and interdiction (H&I) fires for the night, went upstairs and crawled into my sleeping bag. Don Thomson was the duty officer.

I woke up early, about 6:30, with a feeling that something was wrong. It was still dark outside, but I realized that artillery was firing, and had been firing for some time. I pulled on my shoes without tightening or tying the laces and flapped down the stairs. When I arrived, I found Capt Thomson trying to fire our own battalion and call for fire from half a dozen others at the same time. I stepped in and took part of the load off him, but both of us continued to be fully employed for several hours. Doug Myers wanted to relieve us one at a time so we could have some breakfast, but there really was no time to explain what was going on so that he could take over. Someone did bring a stock-pot of coffee up from the kitchen truck and filled cups for us, but it got cold before we could find a free hand to hold the cups.

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What had happened was that the Germans had counterattacked about 3:00 a.m., retaken Kerling, and were threatening to drive the whole 359th Infantry back into the flooded river. Don Thomson always claimed that the action was practically over by the time I arrived, but it seemed to me that there was still plenty going on up to noon, when things slacked off enough so the FDC personnel could get dinner in shifts.

"Why in hell didn't you send somebody to wake me?" I asked Thomson when there was a chance to get a word in edgewise.

"Didn't have time!"

It was that evening when somebody - T/4 Devlin, I think - pointed out that tomorrow would be Armistice Day. [Now called Veteran's Day, the 11th of November then celebrated the armistice that ended WW I, and it was the custom to observe a minute of silence at 11:00 a. m., the hour it took effect.] "Will we have a minute of silence?" he asked.

"I suppose we will," I said, "although at a time like this, it seems pretty silly to be celebrating last war's armistice. It sure didn't last long!"

However, I was wrong again. The next day, though not as frantic as this one, was plenty busy, and it was noon before I noticed that we had been firing up a storm all through the mystic hour of eleven. But by midnight, things seemed to have stabilized a little in the bridgehead area, although most of Kerling was still in German hands. A bridge had been completed and was ready for at least partial use. The 359th Rgt Forward CP (Unique Forward) crossed the river and set up in the village of Petite Hettange where it could be close to the fighting battalions. Somehow a telephone cable had been laid across the bottom of the river, so there was now one line to Unique Forward. Maybe the bridgehead was safe now, and we could look forward to breaking through the enemy defenses.

Not yet.

Just before daylight, the Germans launched a counterattack that made the first one look like a dress rehearsal. With infantry and tanks, they drove forward out of Kerling in all directions, but primarily down the road toward Petite Hettange, where they eventually got within the length of a football field from the village and the regimental CP. *War From the Ground Up*, the latest history of the 90th Division, says on pp 296-297 that one of our battery commanders was acting as liaison at the Unique Forward CP and that he relayed fire missions back to us on the one telephone line. I must have known about this at the time, but I have completely forgotten about it. I don't even remember which battery commander it was, but any of them - John Klas, Bob Wilson, or Lew Fauble - could have handled it.

All I remember is standing beside the map/firing chart with a field telephone in each hand. T/4 Harris stuck a pin in the map to indicate the location of each fire mission, and he was supposed to take it out at the end of the mission, but I suspect that in the confusion and time press some got left in. Anyhow, the chart looked like a porcupine by mid-morning.

Our Finest Hour

I was vaguely aware that the FDC had become a spectacle, like an operating room theater. Around the edges of the room were all the battalion staff and several liaison officers from other battalions, plus Eric Peach and the CO of Highchief. Not to mention General Bixby and Col Theimer from Div Arty. I would have had stage fright if there had been time.

Then I felt someone beside me, and Col Theimer's voice said, "Where are you firing now, Captain?"

I said, "Fire!" into one telephone and, "On the way!" into the other and started to figure out some kind of answer for the question. Maybe to gesture at the pins in the chart and say, "Right there"?

But just then Bixby tapped Theimer on the shoulder. "Colonel Theimer, I want you to go back to our CP. I don't think we both should be gone at a time like this."

I didn't like Gen Bixby, but right then I would have kissed him, except that there wasn't time, and I still had a telephone in each hand.

That was a record day of firing. We shot up so much ammunition that we had to borrow from our sister battalions, United and Urban. The 915th fired 3,555 rounds, and if you count what the Cannon Company expended, it added up to 4,502. To put that in perspective, our next highest day, fired at Chambois, was 2,400 rounds.

Highchief Six (the commander of the 949th FA Bn) came in with a broad smile. After all those weeks of ammunition shortage, his battalion had fired 900 rounds. That was a lot for a 155mm battalion, which has a much slower rate of fire and much heavier shells than ours. "One of our ammunition handlers keeled over from fatigue with a shell in his arms," he reported, and added, "Morale has never been so high!"

Thus ended our heaviest day of firing. A successful day, too. We had done our part in breaking up the last desperate counter-attack in the German effort to save Fortress Metz from recapture. Two days later they had fallen back far enough for the 915th to cross the river, and on our heels came the 10th Armored Division to pass through the 90th and exploit the breakthrough. And only eleven days after the initial crossing of the Moselle River, elements of the 90th Division, coming from the north, met troops of the 5th Division, coming from the south, to complete the encirclement of Metz. It was our greatest campaign. In spite of the hostile weather, the raging river, and the desperate Germans, we had taken the fortified city of Metz for the first time in history!

[Note: Nine years later, when I was stationed at Metz, one of the main streets, the one our caserne was located on, was named *Rue de La Vingteme Corps Americain*, after the XX Corps, of which the 90th and 5th Divisions were parts, along with the 95th and the 10th Armored.]

Meanwhile, however, our battalion underwent another traumatic experience, which I'll discuss in Chapter 12.

Essay Eight

Ammunition

At the conclusion of every fire mission, the S-3 had a standard litany: "Cease firing, end of mission; report number of rounds fired." The executive officer of each firing battery that had taken part in the mission made a quick check and reported how much and what kind of ammunition had been expended, and the S-3 tallied it in a kind of running inventory, so that he would know how much to requisition for the following day.

Late in the afternoon the ammunition train commander, Lt Nick Nobles, would come to pick up the requisition and prepare to make his nightly trek back to the Ammunition Supply Point (ASP) to load the ammunition and deliver it to the firing batteries by daybreak.

He had eighteen trucks with ammunition trailers at his disposal, and I suppose he took only as many as he needed to carry the number of rounds he was to pick up. Each truck had a driver and a small crew of ammunition handlers, selected for muscle rather than intellect.

Theoretically, each truck was supposed to carry only two and a half tons of weight, and its trailer another ton and a half. In practice it turned out that the truck was impossible to handle with a loaded trailer, but that it worked quite well with the truck itself heavily overloaded, so the ammo handlers would load four tons on the truck and use the trailers to store their bedrolls. I doubt if they bothered to haul the trailers back to the ASP.

We learn by training and experience. In Texas, all our truck drivers had been carefully trained to drive in convoy with a minimum distance between vehicles of "twice your speedometer reading in yards," and to travel at no more than 25 mph. Experience in combat said otherwise. Nick Nobles' instructions to his well-trained and experienced drivers was, "Put your bumper under the tailgate of the truck ahead and go like hell!"

That admonition seemed to work, even though each nightly trip took the little convoy to an ASP behind the Light Line, where they could use headlights, then back into the combat zone, where they could use only blackout lights. On the way back, they had to halt at the Light Line long enough to adjust their eyes to the dark.

What did they carry? Well, they carried all kinds of ammunition, but since we cannon-cockers hardly ever had occasion to fire our carbines and pistols and only infrequently our anti-aircraft machine guns, most of their load was 105mm howitzer rounds, each round in a cylindrical black fiber case, two cases to a wooden crate, which was about all one brawny man could lift.

I'm not sure of the exact figures, but I believe the four tons that a truck would carry did not amount to more than about 120 rounds, including the packing. At that rate, the whole train could carry only about 2,100 rounds in one load, and since it was often a thirty mile or so round trip to the ASP, hauling ammunition in times of maximum firing was expensive in time, manpower, and gasoline. We tried to use ammunition economically.

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We fired several different kinds of shell. At least 98% were high explosive (HE), consisting of an explosive charge of TNT or equivalent inside a steel shell about 1/2 inch thick which ruptures into several hundred jagged fragments that spray out, mostly to the sides, for about thirty feet. These fragments were sometimes miscalled shrapnel, but shrapnel was a quite different kind of ammunition not used since World War I. Shell fragments can cause severe wounds or death to anyone nearby.

Not always, though. I once attended a demonstration of mass fire on the Ft. Sill range, in which they fired a five-battalion T.O.T. on a little patch of woods. The commentator was saying, "Look at that awesome concentration of fire power! Not a living thing could survive that hellish violence!" when a small herd of deer came trotting out of the "hellish violence."

On one of the few occasions when our CP was shelled during combat, only one man, Corporal Henry Zirngibl of the Medical Detachment, was wounded. He was using the straddle-trench latrine at the time, and did not care to dive into the obvious place of safety. He only got a tiny shell fragment in one eye, but it was enough to destroy the eye, and he had to be evacuated. Everyone was sorry except Lt Rodman, the battery censor, who had to read all the letters written by men in the Headquarters Battery and the Medical Detachment with scissors in hand to cut out any reference to our location or other information which might be of value to the enemy. Zirngibl had been the member of a small but fervent religious sect, and he wrote letters of 15 to 20 pages to all his fellow-members. To add insult to injury, he also enclosed equally long letters he had received from other devotees, and they had to be censored too.

If a shell bursts on impact, at ground level, much of the fragmentation effect is driven directly into the ground, and if an enemy soldier is below the surface, as in a foxhole, or if he is lying down with a swell of ground or other barrier between him and the burst, he is relatively safe. This is one of several reasons for "hitting the dirt." Consequently, the ingenious people who design artillery shells were constantly searching for ways to make the shell burst above ground, but not so far above that the fragments will lose their punch coming down. Thirty feet or less was the optimum. If your target was in a wooded area, the shells would often burst when they hit the foliage, well above ground level. But one couldn't trust the enemy to be in a wooded area, so other methods had to be used.

The fuze, located at the nose of the shell, is what makes it explode. There were several types of fuze, each with its own use. The one most often used was the **Quick-Delay** fuze. A cannoneer with a screwdriver could adjust it to explode either **Quick**, that is instantaneously on landing, or **Delay**, a small fraction of a second later. The Delay setting was intended to be used against fortifications, so that the shell would penetrate before bursting, and so do more damage to the structure.

Ammunition

A 105 shell is too small to damage anything substantial, so we did not use Fuze Delay for that purpose very often. However, someone at the Field Artillery School at Ft Sill, Oklahoma, noticed that if a shell was fired so that it landed nearly parallel to the ground, it would skip, or **ricochet**, and that if it were Fuze Delay, it would explode at the top of the ricochet, above ground. We tried it for awhile, but according to our observers, we got a low percentage of ricochets and a high percentage of rounds that dug into the ground before exploding and lost almost all of the fragmentation effect. I have since decided that the rocky soil of the Ft Sill range was responsible for the results they got.

Another solution was the **Time Fuze**. It could be set to burst a certain number of seconds after the shell was fired, and by looking up the time of flight in the firing tables, one should be able to determine how to make it burst precisely thirty feet above the target. However, artillery being an inexact science, it was not precise, and Time Fuze could not be used close to our own troops, lest the burst occur too soon, before it got to the enemy.

It was in the middle of the war - toward the end of the Ardennes Campaign, I think that we started to get HE ammunition with a **Proximity Fuze** (Pozit, for short). This little gem contained a radar set that told the shell when it was close enough to the target to explode. It should have been the ultimate solution to the problem of getting maximum effect from fragmentation, but it too had glitches. The first ones were too sensitive, and could be set off by obstacles less substantial than the ground: light aircraft, for instance, or even raindrops. Once we got a plaintive call in the middle of the night from another artillery unit which had located between us and our target. There was a heavy fog, and apparently it was solid enough to set off Pozit Fuzes. Spent fragments from far overhead had made a sieve out of their CP tent.

We learned not to fire with Proximity Fuse except in dry weather, and when our observation planes were not in the air.

All in all, we fired a vast number of HE shells. The normal **Will Adjust** fire mission was divided into two phases, fire for adjustment and fire for effect. The fire for adjustment allowed an observer to move the location where the shells landed onto the area where he thought it was needed. For it we generally fired only one or two howitzers, to save ammunition. The adjustment might take up to a dozen rounds. After the adjustment, all twelve of the battalion's howitzers, plus six of the Cannon Company's would usually fire (except for any howitzers that might be temporarily out of action being cleaned and serviced). We fired in volleys (all howitzers at once), typically two or three volleys, or thirty-six to fifty-four rounds altogether. If the target seemed important enough, we could always call on other battalions to join in the fire for effect.

One day near the end of the war, our infantry ran into unexpected resistance from a village near the German-Czech border. Surprisingly, we later found, it was defended by a few dozen fanatical *Hitler Jugend* - the equivalent of a troop of Boy Scouts - led by three or four adult SS men. I later saw one of the boys who had been captured, and he looked not

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much older than my son Bill, who was eight at the time. I suppose the lad was actually about twelve. But although they were small, when one of them fired a rifle or panzerfaust it was just as lethal as if it had been used by a giant.

Gen Bixby, the Div Arty commander, had come to observe the fire-fight, and a sniper from inside the town cut loose with his rifle and came uncomfortably close to hitting him. Bixby, for all his fearsome facade, was never noted for personal courage under fire. He retreated to his jeep and drove to the relative safety of our CP.

Just as he arrived, a request for fire came in over the radio. The FO wanted to blast the edge of the village, where the boys were shooting machine guns and rifles from the houses. A routine fire mission.

I called for battalion three volleys to be fired for effect and was proceeding with the fire for adjustment when the general interrupted. "Make that five volleys!"

Five volleys (60 rounds without the Cannon Company, which was off on another mission) seemed excessive, but it was not unheard of, so I changed the command. and when we fired for effect we gave the target a real pounding. I was about to order, "Cease firing, end of mission; report number of rounds fired," when the radio said, "Repeat fire for effect. "

Coming from an observer, this was a request, not a command, and it was a fairly common one. The people up front always want more artillery fire. And it was getting late: The Ammunition Train Commander, Lt Nick Nobles, would soon report in, and I wanted to have the requisition for ammunition ready when he arrived. It would have to be updated now: we had already fired half a truckload on this one mission.

I was about to say no, meaning let the infantry try again and call for a new mission after you find out if they really need more, when I was interrupted.

"Do it!" said Bixby. "Repeat fire for effect.

We fired another half truckload of high explosive. When the radio again said, "Repeat fire for effect," I began to worry about our ammunition supply. How much did we have at the battery positions? But Bixby fixed me with his eye and nodded.

We repeated fire for effect six more times. Somewhere in the procedure the general's attention wandered enough to let me give the computers covert orders to reduce it to three volleys and eventually to two. Bixby left, whistling, and I was able to get a count on the number of rounds fired and calculate our ammunition situation. The total expenditure for the day wasn't a record, but the total for a single mission was.

Nick Nobles arrived just as I had completed the count and was making out the requisition. "It'll be a big run tonight," I told him.

"Yeah. I've been listening on the radio. All I could hear was, 'Repeat fire for effect; **screw Nobles!** Repeat fire for effect; **screw Nobles!** Repeat. '"

Ammunition

Next to HE shell, the most commonly used ammunition was **White Phosphorus** (WP). WP shells contained enough explosive to rupture the shell case and spray out a load of burning phosphorus, which created a cloud of dense white smoke and also set fire to anything combustible: wooden buildings, gas tanks on vehicles, and the like. Tanks were supposed to be particularly vulnerable to WP shells which landed near them.

Then there was **Smoke** shell, which was fired with a time fuze. Unlike HE and WP, Smoke was not designed to cause injury or destruction. The shell was constructed with an internal charge only strong enough to knock off the nose cone and kick out three canisters which broke open in the air and released huge clouds of smoke, dense but harmless. It was primarily intended for smoke screens, so the enemy could not see what was going on, but it had other uses also.

The basic color of smoke was white, but it also came in a few bright colors: red, green, yellow, and violet. The colored smoke was sometimes used to mark our own front lines for friendly aircraft, so they would not strafe or bomb the wrong people.

[Note: On the first day of Operation Cobra, when we broke out in Normandy, this method was used, but disastrously, because the wind blew the smoke back past our own forward positions, and the error was compounded when each successive wave used the drifting smoke from the bombs of the wave before as a marker.]

Sometimes when an observer had trouble seeing where the first round of an adjustment had landed, we would fire a round of smoke high in the air, where he could hardly miss it.

And one day in the Normandy hedgerows, I called Lt Wagner, FO from C Battery, on the radio and asked where he was. He said, "Wait," several times, and it was obvious he was having trouble finding himself on the map. Finally he said, "Fire one round of red smoke at Concentration 392. "

Obviously he needed to identify one point on the map so that he could get oriented, so I asked the FDC to fire the red smoke. A few minutes later came the choked message, "Cease firing! I am at Concentration 392."

Much later, somewhere in either northern France or the Rhineland, The 358th Infantry was making an **Approach March** (a march made when you are not in contact with the enemy, but may run into him at any time). They had been gone for several hours without checking in on the radio, and Division Headquarters was frantic to know where they were and how they were progressing. They put the squeeze on the 344th FA Bn, who supported the 358th, to find out, but their S-2 couldn't raise any of their LnOs or FOs on the radio.

Finally, in desperation, they picked a road junction they were sure was well ahead of the infantry and started firing one round of smoke at every minute. Half an hour later, they got an indignant message: "Find out who's firing that stupid smoke and make them stop. It's holding up the whole regiment. "

A variation of the Smoke shell was the **Propaganda** shell. It was created by unscrewing the nose of an ordinary smoke shell, removing the smoke canisters, and stuffing it with tightly folded leaflets. When the shell goes off, about sixty feet above the

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ground, hundreds of leaflets flutter down over a half-mile area. We fired quite a lot of them during the latter part of the war. They were printed in German, and tended to tell what a soft life prisoners led in American PW enclosures and how hopeless the German cause was. The most effective was the "safe-conduct" pass, printed in both German and English, entitling the bearer to be secure from unnecessary roughness if he surrendered.

We knew that propaganda leaflets were successful, because (1) German troops were strictly forbidden to read them, under severe penalty and (2) almost every captured German soldier had one of the safe-conduct passes hidden in his boot or his undershirt.

A couple of days before VE Day the division was halted in place just inside the border of Czechoslovakia. The 915th was near a delightful little village where the inhabitants were so glad to see us that they had a street dance every night we were there.

Don Thomson and I thought that something spectacular should be done to celebrate VE Day. The populace had hauled out a lot of previously concealed Czech flags, and they were red, white, and blue, the same colors as the American (not to mention the French and Luxembourger).

Don suggested that we fire a salvo of smoke in the national colors at high noon on VE Day.

"We don't have any blue smoke," I protested.

"But we have violet. Nobody's going to quibble about a little thing like that."

"OK," I said. "You're probably right. But we'll have to find an unpopulated area, so people won't think we're shooting at them."

We selected a forested hill not far from the village and in clear sight, where everyone could watch. A howitzer from each battery would fire one round: A Battery red, B white, C violet.

We were trying to keep our plan a surprise, but at this point we had to let the battery executives in on the secret, so they would each have a crew ready to fire when the time came. But then came the first glitch. A Battery was out of red smoke.

"You can't be," I said. "My records clearly show you have one round of red smoke, and one is all we need."

"We fired it by mistake last week, Major. Somebody took it for a propaganda shell. I didn't notice until it was already loaded, and - " "Why the hell didn't you report it then?"

"Well, sir, I was afraid you'd make me unload it. And you know how that is." I did. Unloading required pounding on the front, or fuze, end of the shell to dislodge it from the tube of the howitzer - a ticklish business, to be avoided at almost any cost.

"We still have the propaganda shell, he he suggested. "You want us to fire it instead?"

Ammunition

I told him what he could do with the propaganda shell and looked at my records again. They did not show any red smoke in either B or C Battery. However, my records had been wrong once: maybe they were wrong again.

But they weren't. There wasn't a round of red smoke in the entire battalion. Or the Cannon Company.

I was ready to give up the project, but Don was already on the phone to Urban, the 343rd. They did have red smoke on hand, and were willing to spare us a round, because they didn't expect to use it again. "Send a jeep over, and we'll give it to the driver." A pause. "What do you want it for?"

Thomson gave a guarded reply, as brief as he could make it without actually lying.

"Jeez," said Urban 3. "I'd like to see that. I don't think the Old Man [Lt Col Reimers] would let us do that."

"Oh," said Don Thomson, "We haven't told Col Hughes. Keeping it as a surprise." "Hmm. Maybe I'll come over and watch. What time did you say?"

On the morning of VE Day I noticed the local villagers talking, pointing up at the target hill, and laughing excitedly. Apparently our secret was not so well-kept but that it had leaked to the civilians, and they were looking forward to the fireworks.

A few minutes before noon, we had the battery executives on the telephone line and were sending the firing data down to them when Lt Col Hughes, the battalion commander, strolled in. We looked up, startled.

Apparently so was he. "What the hell is going on here? You aren't planning to fire something now!"

"Well, sir, not really. Just a little harmless smoke to celebrate-

"Bullshit! We're in a Cease Fire. Don't you know what a Cease Fire means?" "I didn't think three rounds of smoke would-"

"Well, it's time somebody around here thought! What if some Czech peasant got hit on the head with a canister?"

"But- "

"What do you want to do, start World War III?" "No sir."

At this point the A Battery Computer announced, "Number one is loaded with red smoke."

Hughes swung around to face him. "Tell' em to unload!" And that is how we avoided World War **III**.

Chapter 12

Between the Rivers

One of the things about an enemy army is that although they are in the same line of work as our own, their policies, prejudices, and techniques differ from ours. [This is also true of an allied army, but that's another story.]

As an example, consider their mess gear. The primary item in a German mess kit was a sort of metal bowl as deep as an American canteen cup, obviously intended to hold soup, or an occasional stew. The American "meat can" was broad and flat, more like a plate, with sides maybe an inch high, suitable only for solid food, like meat, potatoes, and a vegetable, or now and then some stew, called "slum gullion" by the troops, who mainly detested it. Dessert could be served on the lid to the meat can. If anyone had tried feeding American troops on soup, there might have been a riot, but I don't know, because I never saw it attempted. C- and K-rations were bad enough.

Or take a different kind of for-instance. Somewhere in France, a local peasant came to us with a complaint that one of our men had raped his wife, a sixtyish woman with a graying moustache. He said it wouldn't have been so bad if she had been young and charming, but she was too old for such foolishness.

A brief investigation showed that she really had been ravished, and that she could identify her assailant. His battery commander wrote up charges and referred him to a general court martial; I don't know the outcome, because we had to move on before the trial was completed.

The peasant's comment, as translated, "If a German soldier, had done it, his commander would have invited us to see him executed the next morning. "

In addition to our different eating habits and judicial procedures, German and American tactics varied substantially. We were taught to fight for the "high ground" whence we could see farther and either attack down hill or defend against an enemy attacking up hill. The Germans seemed to be more interested in fighting for villages and other areas with buildings. This made some sense, because most roads ran through villages, and if you occupied the villages you controlled the road net.

But there was an even more cogent reason, as we had already found out in the cold autumn rains during our six-week stay in the Gravelotte area, where we shivered in our tents. There were houses in villages, and houses are warmer and drier than tents. So by this stage of the war, we Americans had started to adopt the German strategy of fighting for living accommodations. We even had a name for it: The Battle for the Billets.

Unfortunately, there was no practical way to fire a howitzer from inside a building, so the cannoneers were condemned to work out in the weather. Even so, the battery commanders started to look for positions near a building so that the men could be brought inside in shifts to warm up and even to sleep if they weren't too far from their howitzers.

Although the cannoneers had to stay outside, there was no reason why white collar workers like the FDC should. They were much more efficient when their fingers weren't numb from cold and their vision was not obscured by fog from their own breath. And - let's face it - no one really enjoys being uncomfortable.

Including our battalion commander, Lt Col Peach. He mentioned it at dinner one day as we sat at the folding table where the officers ate. We had the luxury of a canvas fly overhead, but the wind whipped heavy drops of rain into our plates and faces. "You know," he said, "I'm getting too old for field duty in weather like this. I saw the other day that combat soldiers over forty could apply to be returned to the States, and I'm forty-one. I may just do that. "

"You're kidding," I said.

"Don't be too sure. I'm thinking about it. "

After the Metz operation was complete, we slogged our way through the slush toward our next destination on the Saar River. Habitable buildings were scarce, so when on one move Lt Col Peach found us a farmhouse for a CP, everyone was pleased. Almost everyone. The wire crews were less happy, because, unlike most CPs, this one was quite a distance from the firing batteries. Even more unusual was the fact that it was more than a mile farther forward than the firing batteries, so that they fired over our heads. However, a house was a house, and this one was comfortable, as well as the only one reasonably available.

We were there for two nights. Our own 359th Infantry was in reserve, out of contact with the enemy, so we were reinforcing the fires of another artillery battalion, the 343rd (Urban). Their infantry was making slow progress, and our own might be committed at any time, so we had to be ready to move in any direction to support them, as soon as we knew where they were going.

About 9:30 the morning of the second day we were surprised but not pleased at the sight of Col Theimer, the Div Arty executive (or executioner) entering our CP. Eric Peach rose out of his folding canvas chair to greet him.

"Well, Peach, have you finished your reconnaissance?"

"You mean for a move, sir? Well, no. I've been waiting to find out more about the situation. "

"Waiting? You mean you're expecting to find out sitting here on your duff? Come with me, and I'll show you the situation!"

At the time I was relieved when they went off together. Looking back, I know I should have recognized disaster looming.

When Peach came back, about 10:30, he sent out word for the battery commanders to report at 12:30 to go on reconnaissance for a new position. He set the time so they could eat first: he didn't approve of working on an empty stomach. Besides, I think he hoped to hear more about a possible change in our mission, which might alter our plans.

But before the calls could be completed, Theimer returned. He spoke sharply and angrily about the need for haste. A red-face Lt Col Peach changed the time from 12:30 to **at once**, and we actually got going a little after eleven o'clock, missing our dinner after all. I went along and helped in an unsuccessful search for a house or even a barn for our command post.

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Finally Lt Col Peach spoke to Capt Jacobs, who was communications officer as well as Headquarters Battery Commander: "Jake, when they finish this move, the firing batteries won't really be any farther from our present CP than they are now. Do you suppose we could just leave the CP where it is, and lay wire to the batteries from there?"

Jake looked thoughtful. "Yes, sir, if we start early picking up some of our old lines."

And so it was decided. I wasn't sure I liked this plan, but the only alternative, setting up in a tent, wasn't very appealing either. Besides, nobody asked for my opinion. I later wished that I had volunteered it, but I don't suppose it would have done any good.

I half-expected to see Col Theimer waiting for us when we got back from our reconnaissance, but he wasn't. However, about one o'clock General Bixby dropped in to see if we had moved yet. We had not: in fact we were getting ready to fire a preparation for an attack by the 357th Infantry. And after that, we waited for word that the 343rd had finished the move they were making. Since we were still reinforcing their fire, it didn't make sense for us both to be on the road, unable to fire, at the same time.

We were notified about 2:30 that the 343rd was in their new position, and our C Battery started to move at once, to be followed by A and B at half hour intervals.

Just before three o'clock, Bixby made another quick visit, looking so grim that Peach had second thoughts about leaving the CP where it was. He and Capt Jacobs started out to make a quick reconnaissance for a new location.

Too late. By the time they returned, they found Bixby was back again and waiting for them with blood in his eye. He had made the obvious assumption that since the command post had not moved, the battalion had not moved either.

Eric Peach started to explain, but before he could get farther than, "Sir, my firing batteries - " Bixby cut him off. The general was in no mood for explanations.

"Peach, I've put up with all the foot-dragging I can take! You are relieved of command. Turn the battalion over to your senior officer and report to my headquarters at once." He glared around at the rest of us, as if deciding whether to arrest us as accessories, then turned and stalked back to his vehicle.

We all stood there in shock. I had tears in my eyes. Eric Peach was a florid man, but his face was pale in the waning sunlight. "Well," he said, "Doug, have Sgt Gilliland make you up a general order assuming command. You know what to do after that as well as I do." He looked around at the rest of us, Don Thomson, Jake Jacobs, Arlo Knowles, me, and all the enlisted men from the Fire Direction Center and the S -2 Section. Everybody except the journal clerk, Isadore Levine, who was in the hospital.

"I'll probably be seeing you again, but if I don't, it's been great working with you all." He choked up a little as he spoke, and turned away hastily to go.

Doug Myers was the first to recover, proving that he was the right man for his job. The first thing he did, of course, was to get the command post on the road to the new position, but as soon as we arrived, before he even got around to making his assumption of command official, he put the rest of the officers present to work writing up a report of what had happened that day and the exact time of each event. Right away, while it was still fresh in our minds. Maybe we could still save Col Peach, or at least his reputation.

Sounds easy, but it wasn't. Although our memories of what happened were at least similar, there was little agreement about the times, and after we had argued for awhile, each of us became less and less sure about anything.

Besides, by that time we already had a new battalion CO. Major Bob T. Hughes arrived at five p.m. and assumed command. Doug Myers' tenure was brief - less than two hours.

The following day, when we received Bixby and Theimer's version, in the form of a bill of particulars to prove Peach's misdeeds, we knew that it was full of errors, but we would have trouble proving it. It was our memory against theirs, and everybody knew who would get the benefit of the doubt.

I think I was the one who remembered the battalion journal, in which PFC Levine entered every event of importance and its time to the nearest minute. That would solve our problems!

But PFC Levine was in the hospital. The headquarters clerk had been pressed into service as a substitute, but he had not been trained for his new duties. The journal during the time he kept it was too sketchy and jumbled to prove anything.

Eric Peach came back to pick up the rest of his gear and to clean up a few administrative matters. He didn't say anything about being over forty or requesting transfer back to the U.S. As a matter of fact, he said he expected to be transferred to Corps Artillery and possibly given another battalion to command.

Hughes went over to Peach and I heard him say, "You know, Eric, I'm not the least bit interested in taking this job under the circumstances."

And Peach said, "Thanks, Bob, but there's no reason for you to feel that way about it. And I wish you all the luck in the world."

It was inevitable. The situation had been tense ever since Bixby assumed command of Div Arty, for he was a commander who wanted to be able to say "Jump!" and have everyone jump without stopping to ask silly questions like "How far, sir?" Peach was not a jumper. He wanted to take his time and not be rushed.

Things could have been a lot worse. The arrival of Bob Hughes was a sort of homecoming: he had been with the battalion from its activation at Camp Barkeley until he was wounded in Normandy, and had actually commanded it for a few months between Col Pierce and Maj Costain. If he had been on duty when Costain was killed, he surely would have taken command then.

Major Bob T. Hughes (Bob was really his name: he had legally changed it from Robert) was a short, wiry Oklahoman whose weather-beaten, pug-nosed face generally wore a smile. His chronically sunny disposition made it a pleasure to work for him, once

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he was convinced that he didn't have to take care of every detail himself, that after he announced a policy decision his staff and battery commanders could and did operate on automatic pilot.

He made a few minor changes in policy. A battalion commander was entitled to ride in a high, oversized, clumsy vehicle called a command car, but Eric Peach had preferred a jeep, which is handier. Bob Hughes, who stood at five feet five including his bristly sandy-red hair, preferred the more imposing command car. And Peach had wanted Service Battery to stay up close to the rest of the battalion where he could keep an eye on them. Now Capt I. W. Smith of Svc Btry got what he wanted: the right to locate his battery half-way between the battalion and the supply points ten to twenty miles behind, where they had to go after ammunition, rations, etc.

Hughes did have one weakness. He was an incurable optimist, and he tended to hear the good news and turn deaf when the bad came in. I took to following him around to meetings and things so someone in the battalion would know what was really going on, as well as the Bob Hughes version.

There **was** some good news. Colonel Theimer was transferred - kicked upstairs - and now commanded an artillery group of several battalions. We were too happy for ourselves to waste any sympathy on the group. Lt Col Sutton, the Div Arty S-3, became the new executive. [He was promoted over the heads of two battalion commanders who were senior to him. One, Reimers of the 343rd, was crushed and resentful; the other, Norris of the 345th, was pleased and proud. Sutton had been his protege.]

And we did see Eric Peach again. He dropped in on us a month or so later to tell us that he now commanded a battalion of heavy artillery - 8" howitzers. He called them "mobile earthquakes," and they were not expected to move rapidly. He had found his niche!

In 1946, at Camp Hood, Texas, I found myself once more under the command of Bixby, now a colonel again. At a cocktail party he came up to me with a drink in his hand and several on his breath, put his arm over my shoulders, and said, "Moore, I bet you thought I was an old son-of-a-bitch when I relieved your battalion commander."

Having had less to drink than he, I managed to avoid saying, "Yes, sir," without lying outright. I think I muttered something about personality clashes and tried to move to a less sensitive subject. He spent some time justifying himself, then asked me if I remembered "that God-damned Theimer." Of course I did - could I ever forget? He went on, "That worthless son-of-a-bitch took ten years off my life!"

I was astonished but delighted to hear that he shared the opinion of all right-thinking artillerymen who knew Theimer, and was emboldened to say, "However, sir, you did one thing that none of us in the 915th will ever forgive you for."

He looked surprised, but not angry. "What was that?" So I told him. And in the next chapter, I'll tell you, too.

Essay Nine

The Cannon Company

At the beginning of WW II, an infantry regiment contained three infantry battalions. Each battalion contained three rifle companies and one heavy weapons company. The heaviest of the heavy weapons was an 81mm mortar, which had a fairly short range (something less than two miles, I believe), but fired a shell which burst with some authority. However, it was smaller than the artillery's 105mm shell.

Then it occurred to someone that the infantry regiment should have some kind of cannon with a bigger shell, so they wouldn't have to depend on the vagaries of a direct support artillery battalion. Consequently, the War Department decreed that each infantry regiment should have a "Cannon Company" with three platoons of two cannon each, so that if a battalion had to operate independently, it could be assigned one platoon, and have a third of the company's fire power.

The weapon chosen to arm the Cannon Company was a sawed-off version of the 105 howitzer we used. It fired exactly the same ammunition we did, but had a barrel at least a yard shorter. That made it lighter in weight, so it could be pulled by a smaller truck and manhandled into position more easily. It also meant that it had a mile or so less range.

When the 357th, 358th, and 359th Inf Regts first got their new armament, they were not quite sure what to do with it, so they appealed to Div Arty for help in training the newly organized companies in gunnery, "cannoneers hop," and other necessary techniques. I recall Lt John Klas teaching cannoneers and platoon executives how to lay the guns parallel and how to use the sights and level the elevation bubbles. We also transferred some of our personnel to help get things started.

Eventually they became proficient, although we professional artillerists were inclined to feel patronizing about the idea that infantrymen could compete with us at our own game.

After that we tended to forget about the Cannon Company, except that we ran into them from time to time on maneuvers and field exercises and kept on friendly terms.

Then came D-Day and the ensuing weeks of hedgerow warfare. I have mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3 of my narrative some of the problems artillery faced at that time: lack of observation, problems with communications, and my own difficulties in keeping track of our forward elements so we wouldn't fire at them.

Apparently the 359th Cannon Company had the same problems. In spades, because they didn't have enough personnel to do all the things our battalion staff did. We had been in combat about three weeks when the captain commanding the Cannon Company came to our CP looking haggard. He poured out his troubles to our new commander, Major Eric Peach. "Major, I don't know what to do. My observers can't find a place where they can see what to shoot at. "

"I know the problem." Peach waved him to a seat on a standing five gallon water can.

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"And one time when one of them thought he had a target and called for fire, it turned out those were our own troops, and I nearly got court-martialed for shooting at 'em. So now I'm afraid to fire at all, because I can't be sure when it's safe!"

"Tsk, tsk. I know it ain't easy."

The captain probably appreciated the sympathy, but he wanted more. "Sir, I don't feel that I'm doing my job, and I don't know how to get it done. I was wondering if you had any suggestions. "

Peach looked up at the branches of the hedgerow tree they sat under and thought for a moment. "Hmm. You have six guns, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's half as many as I have. How are you fixed for ammunition?"

"Got plenty of it. I tell you, aside from registration, we haven't done hardly any firing. "

"Wow!" said Peach, definitely interested. "We're limited to ten rounds per gun per day."

"Is that so? I hadn't heard anything about us being rationed. Maybe it doesn't apply to infantry units."

"Well, Captain, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll send me two good men to stay with my fire direction center and learn to be computers, and lay me two telephone lines from your position, I'll treat you as if you were one of my batteries, and promise you plenty of chance to shoot. "

The Captain brightened. "Consider it done, Major! And thanks for letting me be part of your team."

"Glad to have you aboard, Captain. And maybe we could figure out a way to share your ammunition. . . ."

And so, until almost the end of the war, I except for a few special operations, the 915th FA Bn had four firing batteries instead of three, and 18 howitzers instead of 12. There was one minor problem: we stuck a pin in the firing chart for each battery position, patriotically coded red for A Battery, white for B, and blue for C. T/4 Devlin, the horizontal control operator, solved the difficulty by finding a shamrock-green pin, sticking it in, and penciling in beside it the letters "Cn."

Note 1. Either just before or just after the end of WW II, the Cannon Company's howitzers were replaced with an entirely different weapon, a 4.2" mortar. It threw a shell about the same size as a 105, but aside from that it was completely different, so our joint operations were no longer possible.

Chapter 13

Our Bloody Nose

Bob Hughes spent the day after he assumed command proving that he was no foot-dragger. We displaced the battalion three times, for a total of sixteen miles.

And we still had time to do some firing. Just before dusk, we were pulling into position when Bill Beck spied a German column moving on the road ahead of the 1st Battalion, 359th Infantry, and called for fire on it. Our fire was so effective that Beck named the mission a "Miniature Chambois." Fifty Germans were captured and as many killed or wounded, together with destruction or capture of a number of wagons, trucks, half-tracks, and tanks.

We were elated. And the following day we were even more elated when the 90th Division, coming from north of Metz, linked up with the 5th, coming from the south. The fortress city of Metz was cut off and freed from German occupation! The city and its surrounding area of Lorraine had frequently changed hands at the end of a war, but never before because the winner had actually captured it.

The 90th Division, filled with pride over our part in crossing the Moselle and taking Metz, went on to the west bank of the next major river, the Saar. The weather continued like most early winter weather in central Europe - nasty - and the river was nearly as high as the Moselle had been. And this was territory even the French would admit was Germany, territory the Germans could be expected to defend with tooth and toenail.

Nevertheless, the 357th and 358th regiments started an assault crossing in the pre-dawn hours of December 6. Our regiment, the 359th, was not involved in the initial crossings, being held in reserve, with the additional responsibility of protecting the division's open left flank, where there was a gap between the Third and First Armies. So our battalion took a position well off to the left of the sector, across the river from the town of Merzig, a couple of miles north of Dillingen, the first objective of the Division.

Our CP was in a thoroughly German village named Oberesch, to distinguish it from nearby Niederesch. [About a third of the villages in Germany have names starting with "Ober," which means upper. There is always a companion village with the same ending, but starting with "Nieder," which means lower or "Unter, which means under. And occasionally there is a third, "Mitter. "]

After we crossed the Moselle, we no longer saw the cheering crowds of civilians as we had in the "glamour war." This was partly because the weather wasn't conducive to outdoor demonstrations, but mainly because the civilians here were of mixed loyalties. Most of them were bi-lingual, a survival characteristic in an area that changed hands almost every war. [When I was stationed in Metz after the war, my secretary, Genevieve Schwartz, told me that, as a high school student in Metz during the German occupation, she was threatened with expulsion for speaking French on the campus.]

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By the time we reached Oberesch, practically everyone was an ardent German, and they looked at us pretty glumly. Most of the villagers left town when we entered, but there were a few hardy goose-herds who continued tending their flocks on the outskirts all the time we were there.

Reinforcing the glum attitude of the German population was our own regulation, which strictly prohibited fraternization with enemy nationals. That meant that when folks beside the road glowered at us, we were supposed to glower back. And in particular, it forbade relations with members of the opposite sex. This stretched the meaning of the word "fraternization," because the impulses the rule intended to control were **not** brotherly.

Since we were in a lull, I got to savor my promotion to major, dated December 5. As I remember, Bob Hughes's promotion to Lt Col came through at the same time [with blinding speed], so that he passed on his gold leaves to me and had to buy silver ones for himself. Someone else - I believe it was Don Wilborn, LnO 2 - was promoted to captain and inherited my silver "railroad tracks."

We had our fire direction center in a house in Oberesch. For several days I kept smelling a vaguely familiar odor. I wondered about it, but was not curious enough to investigate. When someone finally did, it turned out to be alcohol. Some enterprising GIs had discovered a still in the cellar and had put it into operation turning garbage from the battery kitchen into *schnapps*. Capt Jacobs put a stop to it before I found out what the stuff tasted like. Probably I was lucky.

Things did not go well with the crossing of the Saar. The main problem was the pillboxes of the Siegfried Line, which started only a short distance from the far bank. Each of these was a concrete fortress, and they were carefully positioned so that to approach one, you had to cross the fields of fire from at least two others. And if you succeeded in taking one, you had to either blow it up or guard it, or the Germans would come back at night to re-occupy it.

And although there were footbridges erected from time to time, a bridge capable of supporting vehicles, from supply trucks to tanks, was never completed. All supplies had to be ferried across. After a few futile days, the division commander decided that the two regiments already across the river couldn't get the job done without help, and ordered the 359th to go to their aid. Naturally, as soon as we heard this, Bob Hughes assembled the recon party, ready to find a position where we could support them by fire. He was as eager as Peach had been cautious.

But then came the order from Div Arty. We were not to be in our standard role-direct support of the 359th Infantry - which I described at length in the Foreword to this book [pp i-v]. Instead of us, a 105mm FA Bn, which had been temporarily attached to the 90th Division was assigned to that mission. We were to stay where we were, on the left

Our Bloody Nose

flank of the division, which was only relatively open now. A regiment of armored cavalry was out there, a big help, even though it was not a unit suitable for extended resistance to attack. It was supported by Col Theimer's artillery group. And now by us.

When we were convinced that we had not heard wrong, we were flabbergasted. When we got over being flabbergasted, we were outraged. Supporting the 359th was **our** job; we were as intimate with them as a husband with a wife. We understood each other as well as any units from different branches of the service can understand each other. Our observers knew their company commanders by their first names. Our liaison officers had been constant companions of their battalion commanders.

Bob Hughes went to the Div Arty CP and protested until Bixby offered to relieve him unless he shut up and obeyed orders. I don't know how Col Bell, CO of the 359th Inf, felt about it, but I expect he had other problems on his mind.

I do know that the commander of the FA Bn that took over our job was as aghast as we were. He and his S-3 came over to visit us and ask what a direct support battalion was supposed to do.

As we tried to condense what we had learned in two years of training and five months of combat into a half-hour briefing, their faces got longer and longer. Their Table of Organization was different from ours: they had only one liaison officer, not three, as we did, and he had experience only at "liaising" with other artillery units. They also had fewer forward observers, and those they had had never worked closely with infantry either.

Obviously they needed help, and we did what we could. We lent them our liaison officers and most of our forward observers. That meant that the infantry would be in contact with someone they knew and trusted.

Regrettably, the relationship between our representatives and their adoptive artillery battalion was less fortunate. They did not know each other, had never worked together, and came from different backgrounds. There were misunderstandings resulting in delayed fire missions or even failure to fire them at all. The infantry was unhappy, our LnOs and FOs were frustrated at being helplessly in the middle. We got complaints second hand, but there was not much we could do about them. And the 359th Infantry didn't quit bitching about it for months.

When I got through telling this sad story to Colonel Bixby at Camp Hood after the war, he leaned back and looked at me quizzically. "Did it ever occur to you," he asked, "that I might have wanted a battalion I could trust out on our open flank?"

"I don't know why us," I said. "Colonel Theimer's Group was there."

Bixby's eyes twinkled. "Well, maybe **the Group** was all right."

[Note: Colonel Bixby eventually became a brigadier general (one star) again, and retired at that rank. Theimer, on the other hand, was wearing the two stars of a major general when I last saw him. And I never met anyone who could explain why.]

Upstarts

I believe it was in Oberesch that Sad Sack fell from grace. Sad Sack was a cute puppy who joined the 915th on the beach in Normandy, having debarked from an LST. The pup originally belonged to one of the liaison parties, but it soon turned out to be impractical to take a dog up near the front lines, so they would leave Sad Sack with the Headquarters Battery kitchen. Inevitably the puppy became mascot to the whole battery. and stayed with us throughout the war, eating whatever the troops ate and enduring caresses or kicks from anyone around. The adult Sad Sack turned out to be a strain of purest mongrel, of medium coloration and size.

One day Capt Jacobs commented, "I used to think Sad Sack was a smart dog, but now I know he's a dumb dog."

"What makes you think so, Jake?"

"Yesterday he attacked a goose. The goose beat hell out of him. So today what does he do? He takes on **two** geese. That Sad Sack in a **dumb** dog. "

Dumb or not, it was Sad Sack who brought disgrace to the battery by "fraternizing" with a German Shepherd. The affair was not even clandestine - half the battery watched and cheered them on. Nor was there any official action, except that Sad Sack's name was changed to the more appropriate one of "Lady," and members of the battery started bickering about who would get the pups.

Sometime that fall the troops had been issued combat boots to replace the high shoes and canvas leggings they started out with. These new boots had to be seen to be believed. The bottom part, up to the ankles, was leather with the rough, or flesh, side out. In wet weather it would soak up water thirstily and keep the feet damp unless it was saturated with a thick grease called dubbing. The top part of the boot, reaching half-way to the knee, was of right-side-out leather, and could be adjusted to the size of a man's leg by means of a couple of straps with buckles.

I don't know whether it could be blamed on the boots or just the weather, but there was an epidemic of trench foot, primarily among the infantry. I suppose trench foot is a mild form of frostbite; at least the maladies are related. It results from wearing cold, damp footwear for long periods of time without moving the feet enough to maintain the circulation. The feet turn numb from lack of blood, and in the worst cases, gangrene sets in and requires the amputation of toes.

A month or so later, high command got sufficiently alarmed to make a stringent campaign against trench foot. A clean pair of socks was issued each day to every man, no matter where he was, with instructions to warm and dry the ones he took off by carrying them inside his undershirt, next to the skin. More important, each man was paired off with a buddy, whose duty it was to massage his feet several times a day-and vice versa. If your buddy got trench foot, you could be court-martialed for neglect of duty.

Our Bloody Nose

Meanwhile, since we were removed from the fighting, things around the FDC were pretty dull. We had a couple of ground observation posts, but they weren't high enough or close enough to see much on the far side of the river - at least nothing to shoot at. We got at least one intelligence report telling where a German army field kitchen fed its troops at midnight to avoid being seen. We fired TOTs there at midnight several times, but I don't know whether they had any effect. I expect that **if** the report was true, the kitchen at least moved somewhere else.

Most of our observation, consequently most of our fire missions, came from our little air section, which kept a plane in the air whenever visibility was good enough. Since our only communication with them was by radio, we moved a radio operator into the FDC. He was a T/4 named Amico, and he hailed from Brooklyn, NY, as anyone could tell from his accent. The radio itself was some distance away, on high ground, but Amico was connected with it by telephone. In order that he not have to sit listening to the static all the time, he had an associate at the set who would flip a switch and ring the phone when there was an incoming message. When Amico wanted to send a message himself, he would say "Transmit" into the phone. The other operator would flip the switch again and Amico could speak directly over the radio.

One day when things were exceptionally quiet, we all were having a kind of wandering discussion of nothing in particular. Someone said something about small countries, and I delivered the confident statement that the smallest independent country in the world was Monaco, with an area of only sixty square miles.

Amico spoke up from his seat in the corner. "No, sir. It's six-tenths of a square mile."

That brought me up short. Amico had never impressed me as either studious or well-informed. "Oh, no," I said. "I may have the decimal point off by one digit, and it's only six square miles, but it can't be any smaller than that. "

Amico reached into the pocket of his field jacket and pulled out a tattered copy of what he called the *Woild Almanac*. Thumbing through it expertly (expositly?), he pointed to the place on the page. "See, sir? Six-tenths of a square mile. "

"Wow!" I said. "You're right. I'm impressed. Do you know everything in that book?"

"Not everything," he admitted modestly, "but I know the population of Greater London, and of each borough in the city of New York." And he proceeded to prove it.

"Gosh," I said. "How did you get to know so much?"

"Well, sir, in the pool hall on Toity-Toid street, where I used to hang around, we made bets about things like that. You get pretty sharp!"

I made a note not to make any bets with Amico.

Upstarts

On another dull day, a report came in from a ground observer that he thought he saw something moving somewhere between the villages of Merzig, directly across the river from us, and Merchingen, a mile or so further north, but he couldn't see well enough to tell what it was. I looked at the firing chart map. It showed a road between the two towns.

I turned to Amico. "Call the plane and tell them to look for traffic on the road between Merzig and Merchingen."

He took up the phone, rang it, and said, "Transmit. Fox Love Item 8, this is Fox Love Item 3. Look for traffic on the road between Moitzig and -" Here he released the thumb switch on the phone and gave me a stricken look. "Aw, hell, sir."

"Go on," I prompted. "Between Merzig and Merchingen."

"Transmit. Look for traffic on the road between Moitzig and Moichingen."

George Pezat, the observer in the plane, did not understand. Or maybe he only pretended not to. "This is Fox Love Item 8. Say again all after 'Look for traffic. ., Amico, blushing profusely, tried to catch my eye, but I was looking away, watching Col Hughes, who had just come in and was now doubled over with laughter.

Finally, after several repetitions of "Moitzig and Moichingen," the observer acknowledged the message and reported that the only traffic on that road was a farmer pushing a cart, which seemed to be loaded with turnips, and did I want to shoot at it?

Slow as things were, it was a temptation, but I said no and closed the episode.

Come to think about it, I expect any native speaker of German would have found my own Pronunciation of Merzig and Merchingen just as "absoid" as Amico's.

Even the efforts of the 359th Infantry were not enough to let the division punch through the Siegfried Line. I have always thought that one of the reasons was that the Regimental Commander, Col Bell, never took his command group and went across the Saar River himself. He had crossed the Moselle on the opening day of that campaign, and his presence had been most important, especially during the massive counterattacks. I don't know why he didn't do the same here - possibly he was ordered not to - but his absence was felt.

It could not have been because he was afraid: in fact he did go across by ferry or footbridge every night to visit his battalions. However, I can't help believing that had he been constantly present while the fighting was going on, things might not have been better, but they would at least have been different.

And then we got the report that Lt Col "Fireball" Pond, CO of the 1st Bn, 359th Infantry, had been wounded and evacuated. Bill Beck, our liaison officer, took it hard, especially a month later, when we heard that Pond had died. As I told in an earlier chapter, they had started out together. Fortunately for Beck, he was well acquainted with the second-in-command, Major "Jiggs" Fisk, who took over the battalion and proved a capable and popular commander.

Our Bloody Nose

Other bad news came from outside the division. Away up north of us, in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium and Luxembourg, the Germans had launched a huge counter-offensive, and although details were scarce, things were not going well for our side. All in all, even Bob T. Hughes was having trouble staying sunny and sanguine.

And then, during three days of the winter solstice - literally as well as symbolically the darkest days of the year - the 90th Infantry Division retreated to the west bank of the Saar. It was done by order of higher headquarters, and it was a good tactical decision, but the withdrawal was a disheartening sequel to our glorious victory at the Moselle.

I suppose it should have helped when we heard that the two weeks the division held that bridgehead was a new record for the length of time any bridgehead across a major river had been held without benefit of a bridge.

Like being told that observations of your wife's terminal illness had advanced medical science immeasurably.

Sergeant Rogers

In March 1942 the wind blew at Camp Barkeley, Texas. Not all the time, but most of the time. For perhaps a week the wind would blow steadily out of the north day and night, rattling the tents we slept in, bringing all the dust from Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and both Dakotas, and depositing it between our teeth and on our pillows, which by morning would be a light dun color except for a white spot in the middle where a head had lain. Then the wind would stop, and there would be a deafening quiet for several hours, before it started to blow from the south, bringing back all the same dust with it.

Part of my job as Executive Officer of Battery C, 915th FA Bn, was to conduct gun drill, designated in the field manuals as **Service of the Piece**, but familiarly called **Cannoneers Hop**. This meant that I was expected to stand out in the gale for hours at a time, shouting long strings of commands loudly enough to be heard by the crews of four howitzers spaced about 25 feet apart.

My voice was never very strong, but I did my best and managed somehow, at the expense of cracked hoarseness and a chronic sore throat. I eventually got over both after I was kicked upstairs into a staff job, and Lt. John Klas took over as Battery Exec. John, nicknamed "Bear Tracks" by the men, had a voice clearly audible to anyone within a mile, and other battery execs some distance away would rest their own tonsils by telling their cannoneers to follow Lt. Klas's commands.

Sergeant Neuman Rogers, the chief of section for the number 3 howitzer, had a problem similar to mine. He too shouted into the wind to make the crew of his gun hear. Some of his men were slow to learn, and he thought that if they failed to understand, saying it louder and more fiercely would be more effective than making a clearer explanation. And it seemed to work; at least his men were eager to jump to do whatever they thought he wanted.

Sergeant Rogers was about twenty-five, with sandy red hair and face to match, and his voice never got over that strained, hoarse sound it got in the spring winds of West Texas. He called himself "the dumbest man in the battery," and although he wasn't quite, he was a long way from being the smartest. So he made up for lack of intellect by sheer energy and drive. I don't know if his men worked for him because they respected him, feared him, or simply got worn down by his intensity. Or maybe he had charisma, whatever that is. Anyhow, work they did, and he had a good section.

Once while I was still Btry Exec, the cannoneers were cleaning the howitzers when I overheard (at his volume, how could I help it?) Sgt Rogers misinform his men about the name of a part of the piece. The Army is very fussy about using exact nomenclature, so I had to rectify his error.

In leadership training I had been taught never to correct a man in front of his own subordinates, lest he lose face with them, so I called Rogers off to one side and told him in as confidential a tone as the wind would permit, "Sergeant, the breechblock of a 105 howitzer is **not** an eccentric screw type. That's the kind on a French 75 gun. The 105 has a horizontal sliding wedge breechblock. Can you say that?"

Upstarts

"Yessir. Hor'zontal slidin' wedge."

"Good. Now go and straighten out your men before they get the wrong name fixed in their minds."

"Yessir." Sgt Rogers saluted, returned to the piece, gathered his crew around the breech of the howitzer, and said at the top of his lungs: "Now, gentlemen [pronounced gemmuns], I jus' got done tellin' you this is an eccentric screw type breechblock, which the lieutenant says it ain't, but is a hor'zontal slidin' wedge. And from now on I don't want to hear none of you some bitches callin' it nothin' else!"

And they didn't.

Sgt. Rogers' mode of address may have charmed his subordinates, but it was not always suitable in other company. He tried it on an MP [military policeman] who stopped him in downtown Abilene for having liquor on his breath and a necktie at half-mast, and ended up with a delinquency report [DR] which came through channels and ended up on the desk of his battery commander, Capt Merton Munson.

Many battery commanders would have taken away his stripes and busted him to private, but Munson was a humane man. Furthermore, he knew that good sergeants were hard to come by, and at the moment he had no one who could adequately replace Rogers as chief of the third section. So the captain roundly rebuked him, warned him not to let it happen again, and restricted him to camp for two weeks. Sgt Rogers was duly grateful and worked hard to become Capt Munson's most loyal subordinate.

However, when his period of restriction was over, Sgt Rogers went to town to celebrate his freedom, and had a few drinks to aid the celebration. [Abilene was a "dry" town, but bootleggers were to be found.] Anyhow, he eventually realized that it was now 1:15 a.m., and that curfew had been at 11:00 p.m. The sidewalks were figuratively rolled up, and he saw no cruising taxicabs to take him back to Camp Barkeley. He certainly had no intention of calling on an MP for help - in fact he had been ducking them all night. So he stumbled through a residential area, wondering if he could walk back to camp before daylight. Then he saw a lighted window.

Ah, he thought, there's someone still up. Maybe if I knock on their door, they'll let me use their phone to call a cab.

Inside the house was a young mother who was awake to give her baby his two-o'clock feeding. It was not her house: houses were hard to find in wartime Abilene, so she was staying at her sister's home until she and her husband could find a place of their own.

When she heard a rap on the door, she turned on the porch light and saw a man in uniform outside. Since her brother-in-law was in the army, she assumed the soldier was looking for him, and she called, "Oh, Merton! There's someone here to see you." And that is why, when a bleary-eyed Captain Merton Munson came to the door in his robe and slippers, he found Sergeant Rogers standing there, more drunk than alive.

Sergeant Rogers

I don't know exactly how Rogers ducked the bullet this time. I think Munson had a soft spot for the man. Anyhow, he again kept his rank, but it was months before he was allowed to use his Class A Pass again.

By that time I was no longer in C Battery, and neither was Merton Munson. He and I were brought up to the battalion staff, where he was promoted to major and I to captain. But we were not far from C Battery, and we did not completely lose track of Sgt Rogers. For one thing, we frequently saw the new officers of C Battery at meals, and sometimes discussed problems and solutions.

I also walked through the battery area occasionally as I inspected the mess halls of all five batteries. Mess halls were an interesting study. The C Battery kitchen was usually in the worst shape. That was certainly not because its mess sergeant was lazy: I would frequently come in to find him in a dirty white cook's uniform, on his knees scrubbing out the bottom of the ice box, with all the KPs standing around admiring his work.

The B Battery kitchen was quite the opposite. The mess sergeant would be standing in the middle of the kitchen in his dress uniform with his hands in his pockets, and all the KPs would be scurrying around making the equipment gleam.

Any former battery commander will tell you that at least fifty percent of the temperamental problems in a battery of 120 men will be found among the half dozen cooks. In the Headquarters Battery kitchen, for example, there was constant conflict between John Koutroulis* and Henry Zieskiewicz (everyone called him "Hank"). They took turns being mess sergeant and first cook, and neither was willing to take orders from the other.

The problem was exacerbated by a change in the table of organization which raised the mess sergeant's rank from that of "Buck" Sergeant (3 stripes) to that of Staff Sergeant (three stripes and a rocker) with more prestige and more pay. From then on, the conflict became open war.

Another provision of the same change was that one, and only one, of the howitzer section chiefs in each firing battery would be promoted from Buck Sergeant to Staff Sergeant and given the title of Chief of Firing Battery, although his actual duties remained about the same as those of any other chief of section.

The two senior chiefs of section in C Battery were Sgt Rogers and a Sgt Peterson. Both ran good gun crews and were in constant competition in matters of speed and accuracy. As I recall, Peterson's tended to be more precisely accurate but Rogers's was a shade faster. Peterson was a neater soldier, and he had no black marks on his disciplinary record. He got the job.

All hell broke loose. Until then the four sections had gotten along well together and competition had been good-humored. But now the third section became uncooperative, almost mutinous. Conversations between S/Sgt Peterson and Sgt Rogers were acrimonious and eventually took place only through intermediaries.

Upstarts

The new battery commander saw that something had to be done, and he did it. The Staff Sergeant who was Chief of Detail left to go to Officer Candidate School (OCS), and there was a vacancy. Sgt Rogers was made Chief of Detail and promoted. From then on, he and Peterson were friends - and equals - again.

Rogers had no particular qualifications for his new job, which was generally considered more intellectual than his old one. He was in charge of communications, telephone and radio, and of the instrument section which handled optical and surveying type equipment. But he took hold with his usual vigor and kept his men up to high standards even if he did not always understand what they were supposed to be doing.

And he did learn. On field exercises, his battery always was the first to get its wire laid, and although he laid it tight and neck high, it always seemed to work.

Time went on. Major Munson changed jobs again, this time to become Commanding Officer (CO) of the 344th, our next door FA Bn, which he commanded with distinction until wounded in combat in the Gravelotte area.

One day he was a guest in our battalion officers' mess when he overheard the then CO of our C Battery say, "I don't know what to do with the man. I hate to bust him, but he's always in some kind of a scrape, and he makes trouble with the other NCOs." (non-commissioned officers-corporals and all kinds of sergeants)

"Who's that?" asked Munson.

"Sergeant Rogers, sir."

"Transfer him to my battalion. I have a spot for him."

I was curious. "What kind of spot, sir?"

"One of my batteries needs a good strong mess sergeant to straighten out the prima donnas in the kitchen."

"Good God!" I said. "Does Rogers know anything about cooking?"

"I doubt if he could boil water without scorching it. But I'll bet he can make the cooks do it!"

And, I understand, he did.