

LOVE COMPANY

CAMP TOP HAT, ANTWERP, BELGIUM, AND HOME

Finally, the time had come to pack my duffel bag and head for home. It was February 1946 and the countryside was snow-covered. I boarded a train with other soldiers from my Military Government unit, and it was a slow nonstop ride from Kassel until we reached the Belgian border. There, the train had to wait until a Belgian locomotive replaced the German locomotive so that we could proceed into Belgium. This took several hours.

When we reached Brussels, the train stopped again for a few more hours, and many of us got off and wandered around the immediate area of the railroad station. It seemed that all the souvenir shops were selling "Piss Boy" statues. I had never heard the story of this little boy who had wandered into the woods and his parents thought was lost. They frantically looked everywhere for him. When they finally found him, he was safe and calmly peeing in a stream. They were so thrilled that they had a bronze statue made of him as they had found him. Thus, there is a fountain in the city of Brussels with the statue of a little boy peeing in it. Travel can be very educational.

We reboarded the train and at last, we reached Antwerp and Camp Top Hat. This was a field with army tents by the hundreds for the soldiers who were waiting to embark for the U.S. The facilities were less than luxurious. We were back to standard army quarters: army cots, pot-bellied stove, inside an eight-man army tent and army chow. I did not complain. Life was good and I was headed home.

On 3 March 1946, we boarded the S.S. Vassar Victory. She was a later model of the wartime, mass-produced cargo ships that were called "Liberty" ships. This one was outfitted as a troop ship with bunks below decks stacked two high, a sparse dining hall, kitchen, and cramped toilet facilities. The ship was docked at a pier in Antwerp and had to move through a canal to reach the open sea. Across the canal were drawbridges for vehicular traffic that had to be raised to allow our ship to pass through. The bridges rested on concrete bulkheads when they were down. As our ship passed through the canal, the pilot managed to ram the ship into one of the bulkheads, giving the starboard side a sizable dent. This concave

LOVE COMPANY

dent pushed the inside wall by a stack of bunks about two feet inward. The ship dropped anchor and waited for a report on the extent of the damage. After a prolonged delay, the ship's engineers deemed that the Vassar Victory was seaworthy and could proceed on its journey. Now, the ship could weigh anchor and move on. However, when the chain was raised, there was no anchor on the end. It was left on the bottom of the canal. This made me wonder what was going to happen next.

From that point on, however, the voyage was uneventful except that I was seasick for three days. The smell of hundreds of hard-boiled eggs in the morning killed my appetite for food. When I did eat, I ran to the rail and sent the meal to the fishes. Little by little, I managed to accustom my stomach to the roll and pitch of the ship. Thereafter, I was able to ingest a little of the forgettable food that was served.

Apparently, there was no urgency to rush home to New York, because the ship's captain told us that he was going to take a course that would pass by the Azores Islands. This was several hundred miles out of our way, but he thought that it would be a memorable experience for the returning soldiers. I remember the small island of Corvo, set in the middle of a vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, with little white houses set on the hilly terrain. It seemed like a place set apart from the rest of the world, something like an isolation ward.

On 13 March 1946, the ship docked in New York. There were no tugboats in the harbor blasting their foghorns heralding our arrival. The Red Cross girls who gave us coffee and doughnuts when we embarked for Europe were not there to welcome us back. There were no photographers or newspaper reporters waiting to report our return. Too many soldiers had already returned so that we were just another shipload of soldiers. In fact, though I did not have enough points to return with my 100th Infantry Division, I had arrived back in the States only a few weeks after they did.

We were transported to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where we had to go through the routine of being discharged from the Army. During my final physical examination I was told that I had a large perforation of the right eardrum. Otherwise, I was perfectly healthy including my feet that had survived trench foot. After several days, I reached the final interview where my service record was examined for the information to be typed on my discharge paper. That included length of service, overseas service, battles, medals, highest rank, disabilities, etc. When the perforated eardrum was mentioned as a possible reason for a disability pension, I was asked, "Can you hear?" I said, "Yes." No disability pension. But I did not care.

LOVE COMPANY

The Army took back all its GI equipment: messkit, utensils, canteen, raincoat, shelter half and tent pegs, combat boots, fatigue jacket and pants, etc. It left me with my olive drab uniform, overcoat, shoes, overseas cap, socks, underwear and personal belongings in a duffel bag. Before my uniform was returned to me, the jacket, also called a blouse, was taken to a seamstress who sewed on my PFC rank, 3 year service stripe, 3 overseas stripes, 100th Infantry Division patch on the right shoulder, 7th Army patch on the left shoulder for the Army of Occupation, and on the sleeve, a diamond emblem with an eagle which was for an honorable discharge. Included with my papers was a lapel button of the golden eagle for honorable discharge to be worn with my civilian jacket. This golden eagle was sometimes called the "ruptured duck."

A train took me to Pennsylvania Station in New York and I took the subway from there to Brooklyn. I walked five blocks from the subway station to my house and felt that it was somewhat strange that everything seemed just the same after three years. The houses, stores, and people had not been in any way affected by the war. Almost all the cars were models of the 1930s because no new models were made during the war. That seemed to add to the feeling that I had not really been away at all. As I walked along with my duffel bag on my shoulder, no one paid any particular attention to another soldier on his way home.

The 1938 Buick sedan my family had purchased from a neighbor while I was overseas was parked in front of the house. That was a change because that was the first car the family ever owned. I had telephoned my mother from Fort Dix that I was on my way home. So my arrival was not a surprise. As I walked in the door, I saw that everything was the same as when I was last there on furlough. There were no special decorations, such as a sign: "Welcome Home, Johnny!" or patriotic flags or anything at all. No party or celebration was made for my arrival. However, I received many hugs and kisses from the family. Perhaps, it was better to immediately return to normal and resume our lives and relationships as they were.

I did not say anything about my war experiences and they did not ask. I did not feel in a conversational mood and did not try to initiate any small talk. In fact, I felt dejected when I should have been happy to be back with my family. They were glad that the family had returned to the way it had been years ago. That was not my feeling because I was no longer the average teenager and I wasn't sure if I was an average young adult. I could not relate to them at all.

LOVE COMPANY

How could I tell them how many times I had been shelled by artillery and mortars, and shot at? How could I tell them how it felt to see a buddy killed or to kill another person? They could never understand living with the bare essentials of food and clothing in rain, snow, and bitter cold for weeks and months at a time in a foxhole or a dugout. In fact, they could never really know how much of life is made up of unimportant things.

The transition from army life to being a civilian again was so hard that I could not make an instant adjustment. I had left a life that I had grown accustomed to. I had become a man and had seen and done more than most people do in a lifetime. Now, I was expected to answer to my mother and father, who still thought of me as the teenager who left home three years before. This came across to me during their conversations from the first day of my return. I was told of the hardships they had suffered because of rationing. They had shortages of meat, butter, gasoline, eggs, and other things. Nevertheless, they kept busy supporting the armed forces by sending gift packages, collecting tin foil, saving metal cans, rolling bandages for the Red Cross, knitting sweaters, scarves, and gloves, and so forth. I listened and, sarcastically, thought how difficult it must have been.

Because of the Depression before the war, many people struggled to make a living. The war brought jobs for everyone. Women took jobs normally considered men's work. Some unions took advantage of the war shortages and called strikes for more pay. Some people made a lot of money in the black market selling rationed goods. I heard many people complain that the war had ended too soon. I listened and, cynically, thought, "Why did I fight so hard to end it?"

Some years later, a neighbor who had been in a concentration camp said that the United States did not do enough during the war to rescue the Jews in Nazi death camps. His complaint was that our government knew or should have known the desperate situation there and should have done more to save them. We should have sent paratroopers and infantrymen to battle through to the concentration camps. I listened and, quietly, thought, "Was it not enough that we fought and died to win the war?"

It took many years to relegate thoughts of war to the recesses of my mind. In the beginning of my civilian life, I would hear the sound of a bus or truck backfire and I would instinctively want to dive for the ground. Fortunately, I would catch myself in time so that I did not actually fall to the sidewalk, but I always reacted by flinching. In time, that faded away and my mind adjusted to sounds of civilian life.

LOVE COMPANY

LOVE COMPANY REVISITED

In 1977, 22 years after the war was over, I received a copy of the 100th Infantry Division Association News in the mail. At first, I thought, "What are these guys doing? Are they fighting the war all over again? Won't they let me forget it?"

I read the entire issue of four pages and put it aside. The annual reunion was to be held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania after Labor Day, and reservations had to be sent in by the middle of August. I put it out of my mind and did not consider attending the convention, but on Labor Day, I thought again about it. After discussing it with my wife, Grace, she suggested that we could drive there and look around. It was only 125 miles from home. I argued that there were probably more than 25,000 soldiers who had been in the division, and the chances of meeting anyone I knew were highly improbable. Besides that, we did not have reservations and would not be admitted to the convention. Nevertheless, out of curiosity, we drove to the hotel to see what it was like. It was a pleasant, summer day and we could easily drive home after our visit.

When we arrived at the Host Inn, we saw a banner draped across the front of the hotel with the division name and insignia on it. In the lobby, there was a bustle of activity and people that I did not recognize. Suddenly, I heard, "Hey, Khoury!" I looked around and to my surprise, I saw my old buddy, Willie (Bill) Young, at the other end of the lobby. He was at a table welcoming arrivals. I told him that we had just stopped by to see if there was anyone here from Love Company. He said, "Yes! Yes! A lot of the guys are here. There's Hound Dog, Skull, Gabe, Abe Lincoln, Al Coursey, Jimmy Adair, and Charlie Brigandi with their wives. Dan Downey, Roy Simmons, and so many others that you have to stay."

We were overwhelmed and said that we did not have a reservation. He took care of that and there was no problem. When we checked with the room clerk at the front desk, he found a room for us right in the hotel. It was a great reunion because I thought that I would never see any of the old company again. So many of them had left the company sometime before the end of the war that I had no idea what had happened to them. It felt great to see them alive and well.

LOVE COMPANY

We spent many hours recalling the events of the past: what happened to each of us after we left the company; what one remembered of a particular day; how one cheated death. The loneliness of that time was replaced by the brotherhood of veterans who had survived. I know of no one who kept a diary during combat. In my case, I did not consider it because each day might be my last. Secondly, many days were boring and with nothing to write about. Thirdly, I did not know where we were and what was happening. Finally, the idea of carrying a pencil and paper was too much additional baggage. Without the written account of my adventures, I have had to rely on resurrecting memories that have been deliberately suppressed. With the help of others, many old times have emerged from the shadows of my mind.

Since then, I have attended many reunions with my wife and made many friends of old buddies. However, the company roster is diminished each passing year and *must soon fade into oblivion. At one reunion, I was* reacquainted with Ray Uhl (Pfc. Raymond W. Uhl) who came to Love Company as a replacement 26 January 1945 and was seriously wounded at Beilstein 18 April 1945. He spoke of how the inevitable end would come to the men of the 100th Infantry Division. In anticipation of that event, he made a cask out of teak wood and hand-carved the emblem of the division and the insignia of the regiments on it. Inside, he put a special bottle of brandy to be presented to the last surviving member of the 100th Infantry Division. He hoped that this last soldier would drink it as a toast to the memory of all those who had gone before him. Ray died shortly thereafter and the gift he made is with other memorabilia wherever they are being kept.

At a reunion several years later, the subject of the bottle of brandy was mentioned at the business meeting. A member got up and asked, "Where is the bottle of brandy to be given to the last survivor of the division? I want to know because I expect to drink it!" "Not over my dead body!" yelled another voice from the audience. Whoever that old soldier will be, may he enjoy it and remember Ray Uhl and the rest of us.

Perhaps students of World War II will want to know something about the dogfaces, the nameless ones, who fought the battles in the rain, snow, and mud, night and day, for weeks and months. They got sick, wounded, and were killed thousands of miles from home for a cause they hardly understood. They were so young and will be forgotten, while the names of the generals and the campaigns will be etched in stone.

LOVE COMPANY

The May 7, 1995 edition of the New York Times Magazine was dedicated to the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. On the cover, there was a full-page photograph of a soldier taken during the war. On the index page it reads:

“On the Cover: This G.I. was identified only as Cpl. Frank Johnson of Brooklyn when he was photographed during the Battle of the Bulge. The soldier had gone to a depot after his first night of combat, the anonymous photographer reported, to get blankets and ammo for his unit. Our efforts to trace Corporal Johnson have so far been unsuccessful.”

When I saw the photograph, I recognized it immediately as the same one in the division book, *The Story of the Century*, on page 49. The caption in the book reads, “A tired dogface relaxes on a mountain of bed-rolls after baptism of fire.”

The New York Times later reported that they had found Frank Johnson living in Brooklyn and that he was in L Company, 399th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division. He said that he was retired and that he didn’t remember much about the war. He remembered that his company commander was Capt. Dan Downey! Frank had a very poor memory because first sergeant was Dan Downey’s highest grade.

As I followed this story, I was intrigued by how it developed into a saga that will be part of some future history book. Part of the story is true: Johnson was in Love Company, as reported, but then it takes some strange twists. Of the tens of thousands of photographs taken by the Army Signal Corps, how was this one selected for *The Story of the Century* and then how did the New York Times select the same one without seeing it in the book? Furthermore, the captions to both photographs are inaccurate. Johnson was not in the Battle of the Bulge, because our unit was on the Seventh Army Front on the southern flank and not involved in that conflict. This was not our “Baptism of Fire,” because the Battle of the Bulge took place in the middle of December 1944 and we had been in combat since 1 November 1944. Finally, Johnson was our supply clerk. He handed out our uniforms and equipment when we were in Fort Bragg. Sometimes, he was not very sympathetic when someone complained that the size of the shoes or uniform did not fit. I never found a supply clerk in the Army who was soft-hearted.

When the photograph was taken, I recall that the company was on its way to the front and we passed Johnson as he was guarding our bed-rolls. He looked at us, somewhat obliquely, because he knew that the com-

LOVE COMPANY

pany was going into combat. As supply clerk, he was excused from fighting. His job was to supply us with ammunition, equipment, and whatever we needed. Besides, he kept track of duffel bags with our personal belongings. Supply sergeants, supply clerks, kitchen crews, and office personnel were part of our infantry company, but they were not part of the fighting. Nevertheless, their work was important and they gave the soldiers in the foxholes the necessities they needed. They were the final links in the chain that extended all the way back to the factories in the United States that made the guns, bullets, grenades, sleeping bags, rations, clothing, boots, and everything else that we needed. It has been estimated that for every soldier in a foxhole, there were hundreds of people in the rear supporting him.

Ironically, like the hero in the book *The Red Badge of Courage* who never fired a shot or fought in a battle, T5 Frank Johnson will go down in history as the epitome of a fighting dogface in the Battle of the Bulge during World War II.

That is an appropriate ending for this story of Love Company.

LOVE COMPANY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like most men who have been in combat, I felt that it was best to not think about the war since it was over and should be forgotten. I thought "nobody really cares." The most difficult problem I had was remembering what had happened in those days. No infantryman, I know, ever kept a diary of his experiences for several reasons. Firstly, what was the sense of trying to write with a pencil in a notebook that you had to carry in a protected place in your clothing while you lived in the great outdoors? If you were captured, the enemy would confiscate the diary and use any information you might have written in it. Finally, the chances were very good that your combat diary would be a very short story. Besides, you had other things on your mind.

Although I started this book with clouded memories, attending reunions of the division and meeting old buddies made me want to tell of our experiences as viewed from a foxhole. How well I succeeded, I leave to the judgment of the reader. I hoped to fulfill an obligation to honor, in a small way, the men of my generation.

At a reunion several years ago, I was fortunate to meet Thomas M. Mawn, Jr. He was not in my company, but he had a deep interest in the history of World War II and the importance of the infantry in combat. We exchanged correspondence for a few years before his death. He advised and encouraged me to seek the Morning Reports of Love Company that have been a vital part of this work.

I thank my daughter, Diane, and her husband, Stephen Seyboth. She edited this book and is responsible for making this a more professional work in grammar and punctuation. She refrained from interjecting any of her ideas or rewriting any story. He scanned and edited the old photographs to bring them back to life.

I am grateful to Alexander J. Lapa for his vivid recollections of the times, people, and events that I had forgotten. With his help, my reluctant memories were reawakened. Though they are now gone, I am indebted to William H. Young and Charles Brigandi, for their wonderful fellowship and shared memories. To all the men of Love Company, I am grateful for the time we shared as comrades.

LOVE COMPANY

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John M. Khoury