

LOVE COMPANY

FURLONGHS

During the next three months, the Army set up programs, furloughs, and recreational activities for the men in the fighting units. Paris, the French Riviera, and Geneva, Switzerland were furlough destinations. I took a two-week furlough to Nice rather than wait for an opening on the long list of soldiers who wanted to go to Paris or Geneva. The old adage of the GI was: "Take what you can get now and to hell with the future." As soldiers in uniform, we took the train to the Riviera without paying any fares. It was a pleasure to travel lightly without a lot of military gear and watch the world of civilians pass by.

When I arrived in Nice, I was billeted in the Hotel Ruhl that the U.S. Army had leased for soldiers on furlough. It was a luxury hotel on the main avenue – La Promenade des Anglais – which runs for miles along the beach. The food was delicious and the weather was perfect. It was a memorable summer vacation in a whole different world. I was on the French Riviera where the beach was world famous. However, I was surprised that there were rocks and pebbles along their shoreline. They did not have a sandy beach as we had all along our East Coast. The surf was anemic with no big waves.

At home, American girls wore one-piece swim suits made of wool at the beach that were designed for modesty and swimming. The boys, always, enjoyed looking at the girls in their bathing suits. On the Riviera, I saw bikini bathing suits for the first time on some beautiful French girls. These two-piece outfits consisted of a flimsy printed cloth that covered the breasts that was tied in the back and another cloth of the same material that covered the crotch and rear and was tied at the sides. These girls did not go near the water. They were there to soak in the sunshine, and the men and boys were there to soak in their beauty. I hardly remembered the last time I had seen a pretty girl. The sight was a terrible strain on the nerves of weary soldiers like me who had come to the Riviera to rest and recuperate from the rigors of war.

As a diversion, there were sightseeing buses to perfume factories in Grasse. I took a bus to the House of Fragonard and learned how they made those expensive French fragrances. With the Army pay I had received, I bought presents to send home to my mother and sisters. It was

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meant to assure them that I was just as normal as ever and that I had not forgotten to think of home and family. I was still the dutiful son though I could never be the same one they knew.

I also took a bus ride with other GIs to the Principality of Monaco, where we were not permitted to leave the bus. It seems that the prince did not want any rough or rowdy American soldiers spoiling the tranquility of his playground for wealthy visitors. However, we did see the Sportsman's Club and the casino at Monte Carlo from the outside as we drove by. We watched a changing of the guard by the prince's army at his palace. They were outfitted like ushers at a New York movie theater on Broadway. I thought a platoon from Love Company could have wiped out his army and taken over the place.

Without my uniform and with a large bankroll, I could have been a 21-year-old American playboy on vacation. But I was just another lonely GI who had to return to his company to rest and recuperate after two weeks.

During the war, the U.S.O. (United Service Organization) did send entertainers to boost the morale of the soldiers, but their shows were put on several miles behind the front line, of course. For a combat infantry unit to see a show, it had to be pulled off the line and then moved by truck to where the show was performed. The Army did not send any frontline infantry company to the rear to be entertained. They had another interesting show going on every day.

After the war, I saw a U.S.O. show that was presented in an open field where hundreds of GIs sat on the ground in front of a mobile stage. The entertainers wanted to please the men and did their best, although most of them were not famous and only slightly better than amateurs. Marlene Dietrich was a big attraction and very active in support of the U.S. fight against Hitler and the Nazi Regime of her homeland. Many Germans considered her a traitor. She appeared in U.S.O shows along with other stars such as Jack Benny and Bob Hope. The headliners mixed with the men and had pictures taken that could be sent home to their families. However, it was the top officers who socialized with the stars, dancers and pin-up girls, while the lowly GI was forbidden to even think about it. I found that they were quite ordinary people with all the same human imperfections. In fact, it often seemed that they were in awe of us. We were heroes to them. That was a unique experience.

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AN AMERICAN IN DIJON, FRANCE

Upon my return to L Company, I learned that many U.S. Army-sponsored programs were still available. Of the programs offered, I chose courses in French language and culture at the University of Dijon (now the University of Burgundy). With three other men from L Company, I traveled by train to Dijon. When we arrived, we found that the city was not damaged by the war. The armies of both sides passed through it during the last six years without stopping to fight each other.

We were welcomed by the staff of the university and assigned rooms in the dormitory. The bed had an antique iron frame and the desk had seen many years of service. The university and the buildings were quite old, but they gave an aura of serious learning. Every program was in French, and they were not simplified or made easy to accommodate us. As a result, much of the material in the course was lost on those of us who did not know the language well enough to understand the lectures completely. We had paperback textbooks to help us. Nevertheless, we did absorb some of it and, if given more time, we might have even passed a test. Fortunately, no tests were given. As a result, the students and the faculty enjoyed the classes.

While we were at Dijon, the civilians treated us warmly. We told them in our best French that we were students at the university and studying about France. They regarded us as honored heroes and bought us drinks at the cafes. On one occasion, we were invited to join a group of three couples at their table, where we were toasted with wine. There was music and dancing and the men surprised us by suggesting that we dance with their wives or girlfriends. That was very hospitable of them and we, of course, enjoyed the opportunity to hold a girl in our arms. It was a very delightful evening.

We were also invited to join in a family dinner the following evening where we were treated like guests of honor. The apartment was large and well furnished and we were seated in the dining room around a large table. The food and wine were excellent, but I was not expert enough to fully appreciate it. I wondered if our host had mistakenly thought that we were high-ranking American officers. We were not used to such cordiality and warmth. The man of the house who had invited us was Maurice Levy,

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who gave me his card. It stated that he was the Chairman of the Board of the Chamber of Commerce of Dijon. We had been feted by an important citizen of the city on that memorable evening.

One weekend, two of us took a free train ride to see the sights in the larger city of Lyon, which was not far away. At the U.S. Army service club, we obtained maps of the city and learned that there was a public swimming pool nearby. On this summer day we decided to visit it. We did not have swim suits, but for a few francs we paid the admission and rented heavy woolen swimming trunks. I went to a dressing stall to change and when I put on the trunks, I found that they were cut like a jock strap with the rear end covered. I could not pull them up much beyond my hair line, and I had to be careful not to let them fall down because they had no elastic band or belt. I felt brave walking out of the dressing room with almost nothing on, but I soon found that all the men at the pool wore the same tiny trunks. When I dove into the pool, I had the terrible feeling that the trunks had slipped off, but I managed to pull them up in time.

I came out of the pool, went to my towel and dried myself. Nearby, I noticed a pretty French girl in a sexy bikini sitting with an older woman. She was looking at me. I smiled and she smiled. Then she asked me if I knew the time. I had my wrist watch in my shoe, so I took it out and replied in my best French. This led to more conversation and introductions. Her name was Natalie LeBeau and she was with her mother. There was more conversation about the war, future plans and so forth. We talked about places in Lyon where there was entertainment. Before I had to leave, we had made a date to go to a local cabaret that night. I met them there at about 10 p.m. and the place was just filling up with patrons. There was a small orchestra and a female singer who sang sad songs of love. The messages were: "Never trust your heart," "Love never lasts," "Be happy today because tomorrow love will be gone." Everyone, especially the women, became teary-eyed after each song.

It seemed that the sadder the song the more they loved it. To complement the evening, we had a bottle of vin mousseux, which is a sparkling white wine that substitutes for the more expensive champagne. By midnight, the evening was over and the patrons were leaving the cabaret. It was a very pleasant evening because I understood that it was the French custom to have the girl's mother along for the first date. In addition, I had a chance to immerse myself in the French language and French culture. It was an extracurricular assignment I undertook to enhance my studies at the university.

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I made a date to see Natalie again the next weekend. Everything went considerably better on the second date because her mother allowed her to go alone with me. She was intelligent, interesting, and very pretty. This helped me in my studies. At times, she seemed sad, very serious and quiet, but many people felt that way after the war. There was much sadness and tragedy that six years of war inflicted on individual lives. She told me that her family had come to France when the Bolsheviks took over Russia during the revolution in 1917. Life had been difficult for them because they had lost everything in the revolution. After seeing Natalie several more times, I thought that I was madly in love with her. Although I knew very little about her, that did not seem to matter, so I asked her to marry me. Why not? Other GIs were getting married to French girls and when you are lonely, it seems like a good idea. After talking to her family, she accepted.

I wrote home to tell them that I was engaged to a French girl, Natalie, and included her picture in the letter. My mother wrote back a letter of congratulations and said she was going to look for an engagement ring to send me.

In the meantime, Natalie asked about my home and family. What kind of house did we live in? How many members were in the family? Were we wealthy? Did we have servants? I did not want to give a wrong impression and replied that we were among the middle class, the bourgeoisie. We were not wealthy but not poor. The conversation troubled me because I did not know what she thought a marriage to an American would be like for her.

Shortly thereafter, the courses at the university ended and we had to leave for our Army units. I had many questions to ask Natalie about our relationship and I know she had questions, too. They had to be abruptly left unanswered. That is the usual situation in the Army – here today and gone tomorrow.

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THE LONG WAY BACK TO THE DIVISION

Our stay in Dijon ended after eight weeks, and we received orders to return to our units. Our orders read: "The following enlisted men are to report immediately upon arrival to the Commanding General of the 100th Infantry Division. etc." Each of us received a copy of the order with our name listed on it.

Since no date of arrival or mode of transportation was indicated on the orders, we had to decide the best route to take for the return trip to the division, which was headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany. That was north-east of Dijon, France. One soldier in our group had relatives he wanted to visit in Bordeaux, so he decided to go to the west coast of France en route to Stuttgart. The remaining three of us decided that the best route back to our units was by way of Paris.

I do not think the 100th Infantry Division ever had any units within 100 miles of the City of Lights. It seemed appropriate to go there, just once, to further our studies of French language and culture on our way back to the division. With our traveling orders in hand, we took a train to Paris with our duffel bags. When we arrived, we were immediately directed to a kind of hotel for American soldiers. Everyone was very gracious to us and we had whatever we needed. We saw the famous tourist sights – the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, Les Invalides, the Arc de Triomphe, the Folies Bergere, the boulevards, sidewalk cafes – and had a very good time. After three days, with money and time running out, we took another train back to the division. I don't know when the soldier who went to Bordeaux returned to the division because I never saw him again.

Upon my return, I thought it would be a good idea to have a discussion with a chaplain about the usual procedures for getting married to a French girl. At Battalion Headquarters, I spoke to the chaplain who said that I had to get permission from my company commander, and the army intelligence unit had to investigate the girl and her family before they could immigrate to the United States. This would take some time, and then there would be the waiting period before the marriage could finally be held. He said that, generally, there were few, if any, problems with these formalities.

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All of this made me hesitant, because I began to wonder whether I really wanted to get married. I was just 21 and realized that I had not finished my college education. I did not know what I was going to do to a living. What would it be like to return to civilian life and start a family? There were not many good jobs available before the war. Some lawyers became shoe salesmen. Some college graduates worked as letter carriers in the post office. The U.S. Government had programs such as the Works Project Administration to create jobs. I would be one of millions of veterans returning at the same time to start again. It might not be easy.

The chaplain did not try to dissuade me or encourage me. His position was neutral and I had to decide for myself. However, he had been with many soldiers who had seen combat and knew of the effect it had on their lives. I was one of them. I hungered for real affection and thirsted for normalcy. It was easy to succumb to the warmth and softness of a woman. The difficult decision to go ahead with the process was left to me, and I decided to give it serious thought.

We then started to talk about the war that had just ended. I found the chaplain was a "regular guy" who was easy to talk to. The discussion came around to our experiences in the 100th Infantry Division and about New Year's Eve 1945. He said that at the time of the German "Nordwind" offensive, SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces) knew of the coming attack. In response, they decided to allow the forces on our front to withstand the attack as well as we were able. We would not receive any reinforcements, because Allied armies in the North had first priority after the Battle of the Bulge. If we could not hold back the Germans, Eisenhower and the top generals were committed to let the Seventh Army on the southern front collapse. I was astounded to hear this. That was why we did not get any replacements for so long! That was why we had so few men to hold such a long stretch of our front! The chaplain knew this and had said a special prayer for us. It must have helped because we were able to withstand the assault on the 100th Division front.