

Mail Call

by James C. Higgins, 399-HQ Co. 1st Battalion

John Potter had been our platoon sergeant until he was hit by shrapnel while working on a pontoon bridge across the Neckar River in Heilbronn. The injury to his shoulder was serious and he had to be evacuated. I had been a squad leader until John's injury, when Lieutenant Eddy promoted me to platoon sergeant.

On April 16, 1945 a message came into our Ammunition and Pioneer Platoon that one of the line companies had encountered mines along the side of the road as they were laying telephone lines. It was our task to remove them, which we proceeded to do. Unfortunately we missed one, which to my dismay I stepped on, resulting in the amputation of my left leg below the knee. Fortunately, there was an ambulance nearby so that I was given a shot of morphine and promptly dispatched to a "Mash Unit." The Army Surgeon General and his staff were touring the area. The Surgeon General stopped to talk to me as I was lying on a litter outside the hospital tent. He wanted to know when I was injured, how long before I was seen by a medic and other questions of that nature. I remember him bending over me and patting my head reassuring me that I would be well taken care of. Soon after his departure, I was taken in to the hospital where the amputation was performed.

I knew that a telegram would be sent to my parents informing them that I had been seriously injured, so as soon as I had recovered from the surgery, I wrote a letter to them and one to my fiancée, who would later be my wife. I wanted to assure them that my injury was not all that bad.

After a few days I was evacuated by air to a hospital in Nancy, then later to a general hospital in Paris. Prior to the war, I believe the hospital had been a school, for I was one of dozens of patients in this large gymnasium-like room. The man in the bed next to me was a French lieutenant who had also lost his leg. Because of the language barrier we didn't communicate. He did, however, have an attractive visitor who was probably his wife. The night of the armistice, she came to me and said, "You must be sad that you can't celebrate tonight, so I must kiss you." I didn't know she spoke English until then and it was the first and only kiss I received in Europe.

One morning as I was lying in bed, a young soldier dressed in suntans struck up a conversation with me. I wondered why he had singled me out. Then he asked me if I would like to see an artificial limb. At which time he pulled up his trouser leg and showed me his limb. He then danced with a nurse and I could not tell by his gait that he had an artificial limb. You can imagine what that did for my morale. Up until then I had no idea what lay in store for me, but now my whole outlook changed and I couldn't wait to get started on my rehabilitation. I must give credit to the army, for they sent several amputees who had completed their rehabilitation to Europe to visit hospitalized amputees. Each soldier had volunteered and each one had a different type amputation, some with multiple amputations, both legs, an arm and a leg, etc. This was a great morale booster for the new amputees, seeing that all was not lost and that there was hope for the future.

There was still one thing that was bothering me, however. It had been over a month since my injury and although I had written several letters to my folks and fiancée I hadn't received a letter from anyone. Here I must digress for a moment. Before the war, I had a wholesale bread route out of Hornell, New York. I serviced stores south of Hornell and down into northern Pennsylvania, including a Market Basket store in Westfield, PA. Then one day I received a letter, not from anyone close to my heart, but rather from Gert Witter, the manager of the Market Basket in Westfield.

The letter from Gert was the only letter I received while hospitalized overseas. In due course I was finally air evacuated back to the states on May 20 and hospitalized at McGuire General Hospital in Richmond. Then one day in July, I hit it big at Mail Call. Dozens of letters, a radiogram, and boxes of cookies that had been reduced to dust finally caught up with me, and it is a mystery to this day how Gert Witter's letter was the only one that got through to me.

On July 10, 1945, while still on crutches my fiancée and I were married. We had a wonderful life together, had two children and seven grandchildren. Unfortunately my dear wife suffered from Alzheimer's disease from 1997 until her death on March 25, 2004, thus ending 57 years of marriage.

In retrospect, my misstep in the minefield steered me into my life's work and a rewarding career. I visited the VA Central Office in Washington and inquired about job openings. I was informed that there was soon to be a test for amputees to be assigned to regional offices throughout the VA system to work as a Contact Officer to aid and assist disabled veterans. Twenty men took the test and I was one of six that passed. After training in Washington and later at the New York Regional Office I was assigned as the prosthetic representative in the Albany, VA Regional Office. That office closed in 1952, at which time the medical department was transferred to the new VA Hospital, where I became chief of the prosthetic and sensory aids service, a position I held until my retirement in 1978.

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