

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

36. MARSEILLES

A shower clears the air, the wind freshens, the sky and sea are brilliant blue, highlighted by whitecaps. The fabled beautiful, turquoise Mediterranean welcomes us. The French Riviera cannot be far away!

The ship heads for a gap in distant cliffs, again at dusk. Darkness falls as we slip into a wide bowl; the port of Marseilles. Relief from the submarine threat is replaced by a new concern. As the anchor chains rattle through their hawse holes, air raid sirens echo across the harbor, and searchlight beams scan the skies. There are distant explosions and the sound of aircraft.

Until now, we had to fasten our steel helmet chin straps beneath our chins. Now we are told to secure the strap up on the back brim of the helmet. "If you fasten the strap under your chin and then fall, the helmet might break your neck!" It seems better to have it loose in case one falls in the water. For the rest of the war, I wear the strap up on the brim, the helmet loose on my head.

The ship's PA. system shrills a warning from a bosun's pipe, then bellows: "Now hear this! Now hear this! All troops will return below deck and prepare to disembark! The German radio has welcomed the 100th Division to France! - And promises us a very brief stay in France!" I wonder if they have not already missed their best shot; our sitting duck convoy was not attacked!

The ship swings at anchor as we climb, in the dark, down the cargo net ropes to landing craft, unseen below. We carry full field packs with a horseshoe shaped roll of an extra blanket secured to the pack. I wear a steel helmet, field jacket, woolen OD's and the shoe-packs. I carry a carbine, and a canteen full of water. I wonder if I could float with all this gear.

The small craft is an LST, "Landing Ship, Tank." We stand crowded together as the spray breaks over the bow. We make a great target, but the enemy planes are gone. The LST slides quietly onto a beach; the bow door drops to form a runway and we step off onto the sand.

In company formation, a column of fours, we march across the beach, through the quiet dark cobblestone streets, and up the hill to a plain overlooking the harbor. We spread out in a big field and sleep on the ground in our bedrolls.

Morning finds us setting up tents in neat rows. We visit the unscreened 6-hole latrines set up beside the road. Passing French civilians are unconcerned. A few civilians, even a few women, amble over and share our "conveniences."

T-5 Twomey, my tall dark tent mate, appears with a bottle of red wine. He offers to share it, but the taste is vile, and soon he is quite ill. He cleans up the mess and vows to be more careful.

We turn our attention to distributing and cleaning new machine guns and mortars. We open wooden boxes to find the weapons coated with cosmoline. We burn the boxes and melt the black sticky cosmoline by holding the weapons over the open fires.

One night I am "detailed" to a dock in Marseilles. We carry 155 mm shells from pallets in cargo nets to a stock pile, and from there to railroad freight cars. I drop one! It bounces on the cobblestones and falls on my toe. Painful, but no explosion! So much for "limited duty."

We open a crate of "C rations." Dock workers circle us like a pack of hungry wolves, looking for something to eat. One shakes my hand, points to himself and says: "Rooskie - Rooskie!" Very loud, he tries to make me understand.

"Russian?" I ask, a little wide-eyed. He says; "Oui, Maquis!" He opens a coat flap to show me an Army 45 hanging on an empty machine gun ammo belt! The underground, I hope, is on our side, but they are hungry, desperate, and armed. I do not wander off from our group.

Early next morning, we pack our gear and hike a few hundred yards to the waiting deuce - and - a - half trucks; hundreds of them. We load up while the drivers warm their engines. The trucks roar through their low gears, file out of the lot and turn North; engines sounding like the bombers at the Martin plant back home in Baltimore.

As far as one can see, there are trucks before and behind us. The sense of unleashed power is awesome; thoughts turn to our ship convoy (only a small one of many convoys), and to the fleets of tanks and aircraft. We are small cogs in a very big juggernaut of war.

The road snakes along the Rhone Valley, heads north, through Avignon, ancient home of the Popes. Late October leaves are splashes of bright colors and the inevitable browns, contrasting nicely with the greens of crops and meadows.

The afternoon sun is warm and the night is cool. Nice weather for a camping trip!

Somewhere behind our HQ truck, in a second platoon jeep, John Langley is sewing on his new sergeant's stripes. He and I will never be a team again.

37. JUNKYARD WELCOME

On each side of the road are lines of wrecked and abandoned vehicles left by the Germans who had been nearly cut-off by the Allied advance from the beaches of Normandy. In their haste to retreat, the Germans were exposed to Allied air attacks and the evidence stretches for miles; burned out trucks, tanks, commandeered civilian vehicles, even horse carts and wagons with no horses.

Every town slows our trucks, for on both sides of the road the population stands, elbow to elbow; shouting, and waving French and American flags. We hear again and again: "Viva La Americains! Welcome!" Schools empty, the children watch and wave; shout and laugh! We float in a carnival atmosphere; a once in a lifetime experience for them - and for us.

We stop by the road; the towns are five to ten miles apart, but farm houses are always in sight. "Piss Call" is embarrassing; a long line of Army trucks and jeeps with men all around them, quietly facing the vehicles.

At Lyon, we roll into a pretty little park in the middle of town. The park is quickly filled with lines of tents and mess trucks dispensing rations. The next day is a repeat; more wrecked German vehicles; miles and miles of them; and more cheering people and crowds of children. We sleep again in a city park; this time in Dijon.

We turn northeast into hill country. Fields are cultivated intensely and neighboring forest floors are bare of underbrush and fallen twigs which are used for firewood. A cold north wind is summoned by the sunset. Suddenly to our right, we get a different chill from the sight of dead horses and cattle lying in a peaceful field. We watch the scene pass in stunned silence. Gone are the cheering

crowds; we see no more people and no traffic but our own.

Somewhere ahead, the Germans are arranging their own welcome for us.

38. THE SNIPER

Every weapon is loaded, and belt pouches are packed with full clips. Riflemen and BAR men carry bandoleers of ammunition. A man with a loaded rifle rides at the back of each truck to watch for enemy aircraft. But we see no aircraft. Thank you, Lord.

Late afternoon; we hike with full field packs into a forest, a few miles up into the hills west of Baccarat. "Dig in and bed down here for the night." In the dark, I find a little clear space and dig a shallow trench through a tough mass of roots. When the trench is well started, I roll up beside it and sleep as well as I can on the lumpy, hard cold ground.

About two in the morning we are startled awake by a tremendous nearby explosion, followed quickly by several more. The sky lights up from the blasts. Our peaceful bivouac is instantly alive with the sounds of shovels and picks working again. My little trench is deep enough for me to hide well below the ground surface when we get "the word" that the explosions are from a nearby battery of our own artillery; big 155 mm guns.

At dawn we turn in our duffel bags; "You'll git 'em back in a cupla' days - we'll be here three days, anyway." We turn in our gas masks; I take the lenses from mine, we are not likely get the same masks back. We move out the next morning and I do not see my duffel bag again for 6 months.

PFC John Khoury, of Company L, writes:

"About November 1, 1944, we were sent into the line to relieve a unit of the 45th Division. We passed through their lines and took up their positions in a wooded area across a road and up a sloping hill from where the Germans were firing at us."

"From behind a tree, I fired my sniper's rifle at anything that looked like the enemy, but all I could see was forest and an occasional puff of smoke."

"When a rifle shot tore through my tree I looked up and saw a puff of smoke

above me. I fired into the smoke two or three times, but I didn't see anything because my 1903 rifle had such a kick that I lost my target area after each shot. I didn't know whether I hit him or not, but there was no more rifle fire from that spot."

"When we later moved on, Lt. Ashbrook came to me and told me that he had seen the German fall out of the tree, and I had hit him."

That afternoon, November 1, 1944, we carry our weapons and full field packs into positions occupied by the famous 45th Thunderbird Division. Originally from Texas and Oklahoma, these men tell us about combat in Sicily and Italy, and the Hell of the landings at Anzio, where they were pinned down by the Germans for weeks before being relieved.

They landed in Southern France only a few weeks before we arrived at Marseilles. We ask questions, listen, and learn from these gaunt tired men. They talk - and we learn - for several hours before they leave.

My regiment, the 399th, relieves the 179th Regiment; the unit from which Bill Mauldin launched his famous GI Joe cartoons.

Mike Company, the last company of the 399th Regiment; the last company in the whole damn 100th Division, is the first company of the Division in combat.

A few days later we move again, and our new command post is a tent with an unwelcome neighbor. Two of us are detailed to "Bury that dead German over there!"

It is clear from his position and the planking in the tree overhead that he was posted in the tree as a sniper. We wonder how many of our guys he hit before they found him. We inspect the dead soldier cautiously for he might be booby trapped.

He is well built, maybe 6 feet tall, with staring blue eyes and light brown hair; the Aryan, defending his native land. A few days earlier he was fighting in occupied France. Today we bury him in "liberated France."

His cartridge belt, first aid kit and boots are heavy black leather. Our belts and aid kits are made of webbing; by comparison, ours look cheap. His gray jacket is buttoned close at the collar, similar to those of WW I. I recall my Father's gratitude when his fireman's uniform was restyled to an open collar jacket.

The sniper is clean; a sure sign that he has not been sleeping in foxholes. The wound that killed him is hidden by his uniform. In the nearby trees, we find a

50-foot length of loose telephone wire; we tie it to his belt, and pull from behind a tree to roll him over. There are no booby traps. I cut a button from his jacket for my friend in the paint factory. We dig out a natural hollow, roll him in and cover him with a little dirt and a pile of rocks. (I never went back to the paint factory, and eventually lost the button.)

39. LESSONS LEARNED

Ralph Reeves continues (again):

"That very first day my section relieved a mortar team of the 45th Division. Believe me, I gave their big dugouts and their tools more than a cursory glance. In training, all I knew were foxholes, and a couple of those were hard work enough. Nothing prepared me for the shock here."

"I knew these were real experienced pros from way back. Here was a TWO MAN HOLE big enough to slither into and sleep in; all covered with logs and dirt. I figured 'WOW! What's this? Is that what I'm supposed to do?' I thought of that little shovel, (the entrenching tool) hanging on my belt; then I saw the great big tools of real warriors."

"They had what construction laborers use; number 2 Round Point D Handle man-sized shovels. And full size picks. And a logger's big two man cross cut saw. 'Wow, again!'"

"I have wondered why the Army issued toy tools, hardly fit for a dinky back yard garden, to anyone expected to dig massive dugouts such as I was seeing. I liberated some 45th Division tools, rationalizing that (their owners) were going for rest and relaxation anyway."

"That same day I decided to clean my pistol. I sat on a chunk of wood in an area with dead leaves and a little snow all around and stripped the weapon completely. In training one is taught never to strip the weapon too far. Let ordnance do that."

"Well, I broke the rule, and the first thing you know, BLIP! went the firing pin into the leaves and snow. I couldn't find the damn thing readily; so I sat back and mused; 'Some shit! First day on the front and I'm defenseless because I broke the rules and lost the damn firing pin! Is this real or am I dreaming?' I was horribly embarrassed more than anything else. There was no way I was going to say; 'Sergeant, help, I lost my firing pin!' Instead, I examined every inch around me, every twig and leaf and bit of snow, and after an hour and a half, found it! I never again removed the firing pin during the balance of my European visit."

Back at Company HQ, I am looking at similar dugouts, but larger. The headquarters dugout is big enough for half a dozen men to meet, standing up. I am teamed with another runner in a smaller dugout nearby.

We question our 45th Division counterparts: "Do you prefer a carbine or the rifle?" "The carbine gives you 15 quick shots; but when you need to reach out, use a rifle. I was trading shots with a Kraut hiding behind a little tree. He'd pop out quick enough to get off a round, and my carbine would nick the edge of the tree as he disappeared. If I'd been using a rifle with an armor piercing round, I could have shot through the tree when I first spotted him and he would not have had a shot at me."

"How about the grease gun?" "It will pull up into the air if you fire more than two shots together. The Tommy gun is better. We traded rifles to the tankers for Tommy guns." (Both the little "grease gun" and the Thompson submachine gun fire 45 caliber ammo; the same as used in our pistols. Both are new to us.)

The mortar platoon sets its "tubes" where the 45th Division mortars were; the first shots by Mike Company are from a mortar. The "399th in Action" credits PFC Hartmut Arntz with sighting the mortar into which Walter Meliere drops the first round; if so, it is also the first shot fired by the 100th Division (this distinction is also claimed by at least one other mortar squad and by the 925th Field Artillery which arrived later. Arntz and Meliere are both dead a few months later.)

Next to the first section of mortars, a chemical company is busy blasting away at the village of St. Die with their 4.2 inch mortars. When PFC Reeves asks about the fuss, a chemical company soldier replies; "We fired a bunch of gas shells by mistake, and now we are trying to cover it up with other explosives and white phosphorous."

Reeves continues:

"Everyone advanced to take St. Die. We toted our mortars way ahead somewhere (I never did see a village), mounted them and fired a few rounds. Suddenly, I think it was Sgt. Winkles yelled 'Let's move out!' Lt. Flaum must have been the forward observer; he may have said 'Move over,' 'Move Back,' or move some other direction, but I'm sure he didn't say 'Move forward!' which is what the Sergeant understood him to say. So we moved forward, and were crossing a barren corn field when the Sergeant said 'Stop!' Something's wrong."

"There we were standing stupidly in this bald spot for all the world to see. It was dusk and I figured we sure as hell won't spend the night here, but a good soldier should do his best to protect himself. So with my freshly liberated #2 round point D handle shovel, I dug furiously, not to camp out, but for the mortar and crew. It wasn't five minutes later and I had a hole six feet across and four feet deep."

"That would have been a half a day's work for many a construction worker. So the Sergeant says 'Move out!' and a few yards later he says 'We gotta shoot!' We mounted the mortar in this bare ass field and looked toward all the small arms shooting going on directly in front of us in a clump of woods. I said 'Sergeant, what do we shoot at?' I was thinking of aiming stakes and markers that the gunner is supposed to use while hidden behind a hill, but Winkles stood close to me, points, and said 'Aim at those tracers coming out of the woods!'"

"A machine gun was firing tracers, and I aimed directly through the mortar sight to the base of the fire. I'm sure I must have mumbled 'For Christ's sake, this isn't in the training manual either!' All the shooting stopped finally and we advanced to the rear this time, to spend the night in some farm house."

"I flaked out in one of those peculiar looking hay wagons in the barn part of the house. A bunch of us were on there. It was dark and we could see little if anything. I remember my arm landing on some guy's face next to me; he didn't grumble or move. Next morning I found my sleeping companion was a dead German soldier! I figured, 'Wow! So starts another day of combat! So far it has been interesting beyond measure. Is this the sort of shit we do every day?'"

"I wonder if any other mortar gunner ever knocked out a machine gun by sighting directly at it. After the first couple of days it seemed that we were learning some great stuff they should be teaching the new recruits back in the States."

Hidden by the dark, my carbine rests before me on a fallen tree trunk; there is a round in the chamber, 14 more in the clip, and the barrel points down the path approaching the HQ dugout behind me. It is a far different game than watching a dam at Ft. Bragg.

A sound, - and then another; signals that someone approaches. I quietly ease the carbine's safety off. A shadow of a figure is not 10 feet away when I hiss the first half of the password. The noise stops; the carbine is aimed at the dark outline of a man and my finger is tightening on the trigger when I hear: "Uh, uh - Ah cain't remember the password!"

I recognize the voice of the L Company commander, Captain Alphonso. "Pass, Sir!" I whisper the password to him; he gets no salute, but he is safe for a little longer in the dark.