AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

65. MILITARY GOVERNMENT

Our Military Government Detachment is number H-72 of the "2nd MG Bn." where "MG" does not stand for "Machine Gun." We operate a depot of four warehouses, an office, and a motor pool. Each warehouse is served by a railroad siding. Our staff consists of a captain, a lieutenant, five enlisted men (including me), a Dutch civilian translator, a secretary and a work force of several hundred German civilians and Displaced Persons ("DP's) of various nationalities.

The warehouses are in the city of Kassel, and they receive, store and issue foodstuffs for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, known to us as "UNRRA."

German railroads deliver loaded freight cars to the warehouse docks. Our workers unload sacks of flour, oatmeal and sugar, crates of powdered eggs, crackers and canned goods are moved from the freight cars into the warehouses. Later the foodstuffs are portioned out to the UNRRA trucks and delivered to the DP camps in the area. There is no refrigeration so there is no fresh food.

The UNRRA food is not as good as the Army's "B ration" which we received on the front and in the hospital, but it feeds the DP's who had been systematically starved in the German labor and concentration camps.

Barely 20 years old, I supervise one of the four warehouses and a staff of about 100 Germans. Fritz, the foreman, quickly earns my respect. He is some 10 years my senior, a lean, twice-wounded veteran of Rommel's Africa Korps, and an accomplished violinist. My German is only a little better than his English, but we exchange information freely.

We live in houses a few blocks from the depot. The officers have their own house. The secretary, a pretty dark haired fraulein, lives with the lieutenant. We enlisted men share a house where each man has his own room.

We eat in a warehouse dining room with space for three times our number. The food is prepared by a DP cook and served by a pretty young lady DP from Latvia. The officers get the same food and service in their own dining room.

A separate kitchen prepares food for the warehouse workers. Their noon meal usually consists of a small pail full of soup and a chunk of fresh bread. The soup usually contains some kind of meat (maybe Spam or sausage), vegetables, potatoes, barley, or pasta. It is unappetizing compared to our meals, but this lunch

is a big attraction to the local workers. Food is scarce in the demolished city.

Our motor pool has three Jeeps, a 3/4 ton Dodge weapons carrier, a flatbed German truck, and three military motor cycles; two are big “Harley Hogs;” and the 3rd is a smaller Indian Motorcycle..

The two officers share one jeep. A second jeep is assigned to the Staff Sergeant who is the detachment's noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC). Staff sergeant Lancaster is proud of "his" jeep. He has coaxed the motor pool mechanics into adding a cab, heater, radio, and electric windshield wipers.

The Corporal Friday drives the third jeep when transporting us to and from the house and depot. The rest of us share access to this jeep.

My driving experience is limited to one circuit around a pasture in a new 1939 Plymouth - six years earlier, when I was only fourteen. One night, when no one is watching, I experiment with our jeep. In the dark, I back into the narrow edge of a rail-end bumper and put a big dent in the back of the jeep next to the fuel can. (My luck holds again - missed the gas can!)

One morning the Staff Sergeant does not show up for work. Corporal and I find him in the U.S. Army hospital in Kassel. Staff is apologetic; he has smashed "his" jeep and broken his leg. The Medics say that the injury is too severe for rehabilitation in Europe, and he has already been scheduled to go home.

He begins to tell me all the things that need to be done to continue his functions, but then interrupts himself: "Go get the jeep! Hurry, before something happens to it!"

What is left of the jeep is exactly where Staff said it would be. The cab, radio, heater, wheels, gas can, tool kit, drive train and engine are all missing. We send the motor pool mechanics and a few warehouse men to lift the useless chassis onto the flatbed truck and bring it back to the depot.

Captain appoints me NCOIC with duties of the first, mess, supply, and motor pool sergeants; plus mail clerk and warehouse supervisor. Fritz has earned our trust and takes over most of my warehouse duties. Corporal takes me on a trot line of errands to the post office, the Air Force rations depot, and to the Quartermaster Fuel Depot.

A predecessor wisely chose Air Force rations which are reported to be superior to those available from a nearby infantry division or Quartermaster Depot. We justify rations for a hundred men because, officially, truck drivers and visitors often eat with us. Unofficially, our little kitchen feeds the cooks, the waitress,

translators, and the secretary.

Gasoline for our vehicles comes from a Quartermaster Depot about sixty miles or a hundred kilometers from Kassel. The mechanics hook a big trailer onto our weapons carrier and load empty 5-gallon Jerry cans into both the weapons carrier and the trailer. The trailer was designed to be pulled by a 2-1/2 ton truck, so when it is hitched to the lower weapons carrier it tilts forward like a great ugly duckling. At the Quartermaster depot, Corporal and I fill the carrier's gas tank and exchange empty cans for full ones. We drive back to the depot with 800 gallons of gasoline literally breathing down our necks. This is a nonsmoking run! At the depot, the mechanics unload and store the full cans of gasoline.

After an afternoon rain shower, three enlisted men take the three motorcycles out onto the meadow where they ride on the slippery grass. They take great delight in sliding and slipping around the field until one of them winds up sitting on the hot muffler after a spectacular slide and fall. I try one out; it is a lot more fun than riding a bicycle. So much so that I ride on out of Kassel up into the hills as dusk fades into dark.

I turn on the lights and find the cycle is equipped with three big headlights. When the cycle slows to turn back to the depot, the engine dies. The engine will not kick-start until after I turn the lights off. The cycle has more lights than the generator will carry, and I cannot see where they are connected. The trip back down the mountain is a nightmare of little patches of road glimpsed as the headlights are flicked quickly on and off. Fortunately, there is no other traffic.

Corporal does not come back to the house one night. In the morning, we ride from our house to the depot with the officers. We find Corporal in the Army Hospital where he tells us: "I dodged a bomb crater and hit a patch of black ice. That's all I remember." At the accident scene, once more we find a jeep stripped to the bare chassis. The jeep had skidded from the ice into a stack of crated aircraft engines. The impact on the bottom crate knocked the top crate off the pile and onto the hood of the jeep. A few inches back and Corporal would have been crushed by the engine, but his only injury is where the windshield frame opened a cut across his forehead. He rejoins us a few weeks later.

66. DOUBLE CLUTCH

Back at the depot, the Captain wants to see me. "Sergeant, take this package to the post office." "Yes sir! Which vehicle shall I use?" (Perhaps the officer's jeep?) "Take the weapons carrier." "Yes sir!"

I climb into the driver's seat of the 3/4 ton 4x4 Dodge weapons carrier, drop the package on the seat beside me, and examine the gear locations marked on the dash. "Hmm - 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - and R. Should be a snap." I turn on the ignition switch (no key), ease the clutch pedal down, start the engine, slip the gear into "1" and allow the clutch pedal to come back up. No problem, the truck slowly and smoothly moves forward. But now the engine revs up, almost screaming, while the truck barely moves, and regardless of what I do to the clutch, the gearshift will not come out of "first."

I want to experiment alone, out of sight. The Polish guard stares in amazement as the truck screams slowly through the gate and down the road. "First" is obviously a mud gear and it must really be low when the transfer case is shifted to low! Once stopped, the transmission releases the mud gear. I shift to second and pull away. Each time I shift from second to third and on to fourth, the transmission complains with a heart wrenching growl.

I pick up a hitchhiking soldier who observes my problem and explains the mysteries of "double clutching." After a few tries I can match the engine speed to the vehicle speed at every shift up and down through the three working gears. This weapons carrier has such a tight transmission that shifting up through the gears is much smoother with the double clutch action.

(To "double clutch - shift," one must depress the clutch, shift to neutral, let up on the clutch, race the engine by giving it a little gas, then quickly depress the clutch again, move the gear shift lever to the next gear, and then release the clutch and go again. This trick is especially useful when using the engine to slow a heavy load on a long hill where brakes can overheat and fade.)

It is a great time and place to learn to drive. There is very little traffic. I explore parts of that engineering marvel, the autobahn, which links all the major cities but goes through none. The roads are almost empty. German civilian traffic stays well clear of our Army vehicles. Roads are not all good; one must avoid bomb craters and missing bridges.

Our Army and the German civilians are busy fixing the roads. The four lane autobahn frequently narrows to one or two lanes and crosses a Bailey Bridge erected - or furnished by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The "Stars and Stripes" (our newspaper) reports that a number of soldiers have been killed when their trucks ran off of empty bridge spans.

67. WAR AND PEACE

A 10-day leave to Switzerland starts in the first week of December. We change trains in Mulhouse, France, and walk through the smoke blackened, dusty, bombed out train terminal; - no roof or windows. Moroccan Troops hold up fistfuls of "occupation" Francs and Marks. They want to buy our cigarettes or candy with money that has no value, printed by the French with plates provided by the United States.

A few minutes later I leave the dirty beat up French railroad car and pass through the Swiss customs at Basel. Now in a neat, prosperous railroad station, I am astonished to find a candy machine with no ration requirement! Swiss trains leave exactly on time; the cars are well maintained, clean, neat and comfortable. Roads have no bomb craters and buildings stand undamaged as some of them have for centuries.

What a contrast! War and peace, Mulhouse and Basel!

Sgt. Elliot from Co. M shares a few meals and some explorations as the tour takes us by train through a long tunnel. We leave a blinding snow storm and come out in green pastures. We spend a few luxurious days in Lugano, where the weather is warm, even in December. Our hosts are friendly, but the people seem to stay clear of us. A cable car takes us to the top of nearby Monte Bre, and we admire the beauty of Lake Lugano.

In the hotel lobby, I join a group of people from all over, including several other GIs; and refugees from Germany and Eastern Europe. We meet a lady who claims to be a Countess from Italy. She seems to be "holding court," dropping names and trying to impress everyone. We are not impressed.

We stop overnight in Lucerne on the way back to Germany. I find a watchmaker in a jewelry store and say: "Ich mochte ein starker uhr." I hope that means "I want a really strong watch that won't break easily." I try to make the point that I do not want a self-winding watch because they break too easily.

The clerk is all charm, and sells me a nice looking, water resistant watch. It keeps good time, and I wind it faithfully, every night for three years, when it stops.

My Chemistry Professor, a Jesuit Priest, offers to look at it. He takes the

back off, cleans it, and it works! He shows me the works, and I ask "What is that little moving part?" He says "That is the pendulum that winds the watch." The watch runs, without being wound, for another ten years. I have never wound a watch since that day.

68. TEMPTATIONS

An interpreter from another unit bums a ride in my truck and I tell him what happened to our two Jeeps. His English, no doubt corrupted by the GIs, sounds like this: "Ya need a fawking jeep? Gawdam! I'll git yew a fawking jeep."

Next day he wheels a jeep up to our gate; "Here's ya fawking jeep. No PROBLEM!" Captain says "We can't afford to be caught with a hot jeep!" So we send the guy away - with "his" jeep. No need to call the MPs, he is long gone.

A load of cooking stoves needs to be picked up at a supply depot. Captain borrows a 2-1/2 ton truck and sends me off in it to get the stoves. I never drove one of these trucks before. Riding empty, the truck bounces as if it has no springs. After we load 7 tons of cast iron stoves, the truck settles down and rides like a limousine.

(Truck driving experience comes in handy 17 years later when I use it to wangle a job performing the engineering tests on the XM-561, the Army's prototype amphibious 1-3/4 truck known as the "Gamma Goat.")

One of the Pfc.'s takes me on a double date in the nearby town of Melsingen. His date, Hilda, is a sophisticated Lithuanian girl who is staying with a German family. He says he needs someone to keep Hilda's roommate out of the way.

My date's name is Jutte, pronounced, she tells me, as "You-tah." She is a little beauty with blue eyes, red hair, and a naturally ruddy complexion. I learn that she is just my age, and already has a degree in chemistry. I tell her, as well as I can, of my own interest in chemistry, and about the paint lab in Baltimore. We set about improving my German and her English.

While the PFC and the DP vanish into a bedroom, Jutte reads aloud;

children's stories and poems in German. I never thought this harsh language could sound so lovely. PFC and I return several times to visit the girls. While he is making love, I wonder if I am falling in love.

In February, 1946 the Captain tells me that I will soon be due to go back to the States for my discharge. He says: "If you will sign up for six more months here, we will see that you get a rocker to go with those three stripes." I am already saving my entire $105 per month salary; a raise to staff sergeant and six more months of savings sounds very tempting. And what will happen if I keep going back to see Jutte? I write home about the offer, but not about Jutte.

69. HOMECOMING

Dad replies to my letter: "This GI Bill is really great. Just what you need. But if you wait six more months, Congress may find how expensive it is going to be, and cancel it. You better get it while you can."

I show Dad's message to the Captain. It makes sense to both of us. By the first week of March, I am at "Camp Top Hat" near Brussels, Belgium.

Camp Top Hat is a grid of faded OD tents sticking out of snow covered fields. The tents are heated by little coal stoves and there are cots in each tent for about ten men. Our tent is blessed by Cpl. Fitzgerald, an ex-coal miner who loves to get the fire going - well before we have to get up.

We go through the usual processing and board a ship bound for New York. The Vasser Victory ship is smaller than the George Washington (our troopship to Marseilles) but the weather is better, the trip is faster; the distance is less and there is no slow convoy.

For more than a year I enjoyed escape from KP. Now this ship is full of sergeants and most of us pull one day of KP. My luck holds to the end, I get to sweep out parts of the ship after all the other troops are ashore in New York. No matter, we all wind up at the same time, at Camp Kilmer with no passes or leave.

A few days later I am discharged at Ft. Meade. During the final processing we are offered an opportunity to stay in the "reserves." It sounds pretty good to me, until a man next to me says; "I saw the last lot that signed up. They were standing there with their right hands up just like we did when we first got into this mess." I do not sign up.

We are handed our discharges in a simple ceremony. A captain scans my discharge, shakes my hand and says; "Your country is proud of you, Sergeant Hancock!" To this day, I remain proud that I could do it.

I take a bus from Ft. Meade to Baltimore and a taxi home. Dad runs down the porch steps to greet me and Mom waits for a hug on the porch. She checks behind my ears and says "I see you have been washing properly." A week later she bakes a cake for my twenty-first birthday.

70. RECUPERATION

The sacrifices of those who died in the Armed Forces are well documented, and periodically recognized in the Veteran's and Memorial Day Ceremonies. Most of us find daily events that trigger memories of fallen comrades. For me, there is apple pie and Al Bowman; - any mention of Missouri and Bob Howell; - "Annie Laurie" or “My Gal Sal” evoke a moolit night with Ashkin, Engles, and Sgt. Burns with his guitar; - among others. We each carry a little secret list.

Less often recognized is the tremendous suffering endured by each wounded soldier. (Some of us were lucky. While healing, my two wounds and skin graft donor sites produced less pain than a bad toothache and, for the rest of my life, only an occasional ache and varicose vein near the scars.)

Each individual fought his own way to recovery. PFC Brunson MacLeroy elected to have his damaged knee locked into a rigid straight position; he preferred to stand and walk rather than sit for the rest of his life. When last heard from, he was a lawyer, retired from Convair, in Ft. Worth. First Lt. Scott Witt left his crutches by the college gym door while he hopped and staggered around playing basketball. He became an executive in the timber industry. These men learned to walk again - the hard way.

Again, Ralph Reeves writes:

"I was taken to a big multi-building hospital outside of Rheims where I was

put in a ward for major skin grafts. I recall a Russian pilot in the next room (private rooms yet) who had his whole face burned off. He was a mess. My big flesh wound didn't bother me and I never once felt pain from the three holes in my chest. One gaped open and another had meat hanging out and took a long, long time to heal. The big deal was my right leg and foot. The foot pain was excruciating and was just that, 100% of the time for many weeks, and gradually diminished to where I could even tolerate the weight of a bed sheet on it."

"For years it felt like some big dude was sitting on that foot, and I wear oversize shoes. Part of the foot is super sensitive and always there is an electrical tingling there. I limp a lot, especially when tired or when the leg gets weak without special practice exercise. I drew a 100% disability for several years before it was reduced to 30% and then raised to 40% where it is now."

"It was a month before I could crawl out of bed. When you swing your feet on the floor after all that time in bed, the blood gushing down to the toes is an enormous pain in itself. Anyway, what took my mind off of me was the nurses. There were plenty around. Never in my life before or since have I seen anyone work so long and so hard so many hours of the day and seven days a week. And they remained cheerful and solicitous at all times. I was aware of this every day. They were superb, such that my admiration and respect for these Army Nurses was and is enormous. Wish I could have known mine personally."

"I became pretty swift on crutches and got transferred to Cherbourg where we were all carried onto the ship, the George Washington, the same ship we went overseas on, but now converted to a hospital ship. It was sheer luxury by comparison. The berths or bunks were only one high instead of four (or five) and there was lots of deck space and no storms that trip. I walked around most of the trip without crutches. A heavy limp and much pain, as always for several years, but on my own."

"When we arrived at some dock there was a big crowd of civilians, music, etc.; a big welcome event that was nice. Then some dude said: 'You've got to be carried off.' I figured, 'Boy this is some strange routine!' So I walk back to my sack and flop, not there, but on a litter and some guys carry me off the ship and to an ambulance, all the while surrounded by nice ladies. I wanted to get up and maybe kiss a couple but didn't. They drove us to Halloran General Hospital and here POWs carried us up two or three flights of stairs to our ward and beds. Then I got up; it was good to be walking around again, but all that litter stuff seemed strange."

"From there it was transfer to Nichols General Hospital in Louisville where I remained a few months before my Army discharge. That place was very nice. For one thing, each ward had a private kitchen where you could go fix anything

between meals or all night."

"I started learning to type in an Occupational Therapy room where I had my own private tutor. For leg work I shot baskets on the basketball court. I really became expert at baskets, but not typing."

"We had a great weekend thing going that became a cause of embarrassment on the day I was discharged. There were free two-day bus excursions to Lexington about one hour away, that were arranged by some organization like the USO, but better. We arrive at some lobby like place full of women. Each guy paired off with his choice and had a date for the whole two days (if they got along). I got along fine with mine; we dated three or four weekends in a row. You could go dining, night clubbing, see the sights; and every damn thing was FREE! Even the country clubs! We hospital cases could not spend a dime, and the women had the cars. A very good deal."

"Then one day I was mustered out. I was walking down the corridor headed for a bus ride home, with all my possessions under my arm, when who should I spy walking towards me but my girl friend with her parents in tow to meet me. I wanted to hide, crawl in a crack in the floor, disappear, anything but be caught leaving without so much as a fare thee well. We chatted and finally I had to say it -- 'Sorry folks, I - uhhh, - hmmm, - have a bus to catch.' All of us were mortified and I couldn't leave fast enough to suit me."

"On the same day that I was discharged from the Army, a clerk said 'Sign here.' and it was a power of attorney for the VFW to get me some compensation. Limping and hurting was one thing, but the records must have made me out to be a basket case for I soon got a 100% disability. That lasted a couple of years while I went to Washington State University in St. Louis. It was reduced to 30% and the VFW went to work again (unsolicited) and got it back to 40% where it is now."

John Aughey writes:

"I was not wounded, but spent about a week in a field hospital with "service conjunctivitis." I was blind, and had to be lead around until recovery. I think it was caused by dirt falling from foxhole roofs, and running into branches of trees in the pitch black nights of the forest.

(Sgt. Aughey kept a picture of 34 men of the first platoon taken in

Fayetteville NC before going over seas. He listed their names along with another 28 who passed through the platoon as replacements. Of these 62 men, 37 were wounded, 4 were killed, and 2 were captured by the Germans. Others left due to various illnesses. Aughey was one of four who were commissioned as second lieutenants.)

Yellow jaundice and trench foot took several men out of action. However, almost every machine gunner and many of the mortar men were wounded. For each man killed in action, about 8 or 10 men were wounded.