

IX. OVERSEAS AND FRANCE

By the time we finally went overseas, to southern France, in October 1944, we were a mixture of personnel. Our hard core was most of the original cadre, almost all of whom were non-commissioned officers. Mature men, some of them regular Army, superbly trained and experienced themselves, they proved of literally inestimable value when the going got rough. Most of the rest of us, young, callow, inexperienced, and certainly far from professional, had going for us four or five months of rigorous and thorough training directed by this same cadre. Although this had been often unpleasant and usually arduous, we had good reason to be profoundly grateful for it before we were through.

Bud continued:

FORT BRAGG TO FRANCE

"September 25, 1944 postmarks on my August 31 change of address cards gave my correspondents an APO 447 number c/o Postmaster, New York, NY. The *Story of the Century* divisional history book says the movement to the New York Port of Embarkation began Sept. 24 as long lines of waiting Pullmans with prearranged seats were filled as the 100th Division band played martial strains and that the entire division arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey on Sept. 30. I remember it being a warm day and Pvt. Mike Sirokoman's success in opening the Pullman car window at our lower berth. Then he left for an all night card or craps game and I had all of a soot covered bed when we arrived at Camp Kilmer."

Sept. 29, 1944, from Somewhere on East Coast. "... From now on we have our mail censored so we are all worrying about reading what we write. Once mail is censored there isn't much to write about like we used to. I can understand how those fellows overseas feel when they write... We get passes in the next few days and they say the transportation is excellent. We are still in

quarantine now doing lots of important jobs. There is a swell mess hall here and the food is exceptionally good even if it is GI. The PX is something out of this world compared to what we have had. I am a little doubtful if I'll ever get to meet my sister (a WAAC Signal Corps corporal at Fort Monmouth, NJ) as the army doesn't let you do what you want..." "This letter was passed by U.S. Army examiner Lt. Richard A. Kerr."

"My strongest memories of our Camp Kilmer experience are the issuance of the newly designed Shoe Packs rubber winter boots and the rumors that we would land in Norway to liberate that ally because there was lots of snow and ice in Norway and special boots were needed. I don't remember whether I received size 11 1/2 AAA GI shoes at Camp Kilmer, but I do remember being issued size 11 1/2 B combat boots after the European War."

In a few days we found ourselves aboard the troop ship *SS George Washington* (once a German luxury liner, interned and then seized by us during World War I, that had taken Woodrow Wilson to France for the peace negotiations at Versailles in 1919), at the foot of 42nd Street in Manhattan. Here we stayed for a day watching, I clearly remember, commuters swarming from the ferries to the cross-town trolley cars in the morning, and reversing the process at the end of the day. On October 6 we sailed.

By some incredible stroke of fortune, our Company was designated for "police and sanitation" duty. While this meant that we spent a lot of time cleaning out toilets, picking up assorted trash, and dumping garbage overboard, it also meant that we had the run of the ship, which other troops did not. Most importantly, we had the freedom of the topmost deck, where we could get acquainted with the crew and relax in relative solitude—not to mention fresh air—and the crew's mess, which was open 24 hours a day and where was dispensed an unending stream of strong coffee and enormous sandwiches. I learned how to splice rope on that top deck, a skill that I still have, although it has never been of much use to me.

Sometime early in the trip it became known that we were slated to sail south to the latitude of about Miami, there to join a large convoy, proceed to the Straits of Gibraltar, and thence make our way to Marseilles, France. The crossing, though long, was mostly uneventful. We had an escort of destroyers and other naval vessels, and the convoy was large and probably hard to manage, but no enemy presence was met. A rather violent storm (called a hurricane in Division tradition, but I really have no memory of it) claimed our attention for a day or so, but we heard of no losses or damage.

Bud said of the trip:

LETTERS SENT HOME IN OVERSEAS MOVEMENT

September & October 1944

"After my Oct. 5 letter was written we rode the Central of New Jersey railroad from Camp Kilmer to the ferry across the Hudson River where we boarded the *George Washington* transport with all of our equipment. My troop assignment card shows 40 punches out of a possible 50 and is stamped E-3 and soldier entitled to midday meal as he is performing additional duty. The additional duty was the Police and Sanitation detail for the topmost deck and the issuance

of a yellow armband that looked like the military police armband with slight alterations. Our crowded E deck hold was first below the waterline with all confined to quarters at our departure. Several of us P & S workers were topside on the senior officers' deck with a clear view of the Statue of Liberty when we headed overseas October 6 on a warm, sunny day. We saluted the Statue with our mops and brooms and became like sailors. The merchant marine crewmen were friendly and helpful and showed us the rope locker where we could hide if we wanted a return trip to the United States. Our yellow armbands enabled us to leave the crowded E-3 hold for the fresh air and overnight sleeping on the top deck when hurricanes weren't raging. A division chaplain needed the portable organ stored far forward on the lowest deck and I remember the exciting journey to the far reaches of the largest army troop ship. My sailor duty was the most pleasant of all tasks assigned to me by the U.S. Army. I only wrote one letter on our voyage."

Oct. 15, 1944 V-Mail, from Somewhere at Sea. "... Our trip has been far from uneventful. (A line inked out was probably about our hurricane experience.)... I haven't been sick a moment... right now I feel like Columbus must of before he hit land... There is plenty of food and it doesn't taste bad ... Most of the time we sleep, read old magazines, or else play cards or checkers... During the day I have a fatigue detail that keeps me busy and gives me freedom of movement... We wash in salt water..." "This letter was passed by U.S. Army Examiner Lt. Angier."

Another, more recent, recollection of the time at sea came from Dick LaFleur, of the Second Platoon. He recounted for the *Newsletter* an incident on the top deck of the *George Washington*, "officers' country," where we got to go, sometimes because of our police and sanitation duties, sometimes just because we wanted to; to wit:

"Among many escapades with Fred Drew, including our occasional disappearance from field lectures on the M-1 rifle to hitch rides at Pope Field, the delightful Atlantic cruise in October 1944 holds a special place in my memory. Distressed by the odors below decks, we arranged to spend every night except that of the Great Hurricane on the officers' deck. Many an hour was spent sitting on the benches, gazing at the stars and exchanging views philosophical, before spreading our blankets behind stacks of life rafts. At dawn, we raced from our quarters sublime and returned to reality in the form of preferential dining and the police of the decks.

"With movies and other activities for the commissioned men, we never saw another soul on the sun deck after dark, except for the night we heard what seemed to be a lonesome whistling and the approach of footsteps. The visitor walked directly toward us. Being extraordinarily polite soldiers (hadn't Sgt. Joe Diaz hand picked us to help our new Lieutenant Lahti fetch his luggage from the station and get him settled in his new quarters, and had he not told of his request for the two men on whom he could rely in action to come?)

"Well, we properly introduced ourselves as Captain So and So, and Lt. Something Else (Fred outranked me because he had been in the Air Corps). I

don't know what I sounded like but can you imagine Drew disguising his voice? Needless to say, the man we bade sit between us was our very own platoon leader. After what seemed interminable mumbled pleasantries we excused ourselves, walked gracefully to the nearest passageway, whereupon we fled to our bunks below.

"Our next encounter was at the same bucket in which we three dunked our messkits in a delightful farm field outside exotic Marseilles. It was the evening meal, and his expression was not clear in the dusk, but I believe his brief inquiry as to whether or not we enjoyed our ocean crossing had a slightly cryptic note.

"There was not any way that our habitual absence from sleeping quarters went unnoticed, and might well have been the subject of one or more casual conversations, but we were never to know for certain that we were marked culprits. As you know, when we first suffered group trauma, we were prevented from displaying our mettle for the lieutenant as he was summoned to a staff meeting under that fateful tree by Baccarat."

In November 1945, just one year after this time, Jack Pointer, our Third Platoon runner, was still in Germany, assigned to Army of Occupation duty with the Third Division in Witzenhausen, when he decided to put some of his recent memories on paper. Luckily for us, he shared them with our *Newsletter*. Here is what he had to say about our ocean crossing:

"One year ago tonight (1 November 45) the 399th Infantry Regiment was committed to action against the 'Jerries' somewhere around Rambervillers, France, if I remember right. So now I am going to try and write from memory what happened each day of combat that I went thru, altho it wasn't much compared to what some of the boys have seen who have been with the Third Div. all the way from Africa. I have been officially serving with the Third Div. Since 6 October 45, just exactly one year to the day after leaving New York for this continent of Europe.

"My company, Co. G, 399th Infantry, 100th Division, was the first company to board the Army Transport 'George Washington.' That was on Wednesday, 4 October 44 at Pier 84, I think, but I know it was at the end of 43rd Street, and I watched the 42nd Street ferry come and go all day long back and forth from 125th Street in Jersey. I used to ride that ferry when I was in NY with the NY Battalion in June 44. We were the company assigned to take care of the police of the boat, that is why we were first aboard. It turned out to be a good deal, because that gave us something to do while we were out at sea and besides that gave us three meals a day instead of the usual two that the other companies which weren't pulling detail got. Some of the fellows could see their homes from the pier but couldn't get off the boat to say good-bye to their folks at any time during our 2 day stay in the harbor while the boat was being loaded. At 0900 on Friday, 6 October 44 the big boat with 7 or 8000 men aboard backed out into the Hudson River, swung around, and headed out to sea. Everyone was ordered down below the deck, but I disobeyed orders and stayed 'top side' anyway because I wanted to see all I could of the states.

"I didn't get caught so it didn't matter, it was more or less a foggy day and at 1000 the last bit of the states was fading into the fog. The last thing that could be seen was the parachute tower on Coney Island which I had made a jump from several months previous to this time. That nite and every nite at 1900 we used to go down to the garbage room and work for an hour and throw overboard all the garbage for the day. It could not be done during the daylight hours because of the submarine danger, they could follow the garbage trail floating on the water and catch up with us and then things would not be so good. During the day we had nothing to do but sit around, go to the movies on deck, read, watch the water go by, and occasionally for the first few days a navy patrol bomber would fly over us. I was on the flag ship of the convoy, it also carried Gen. Withers A. Buress, our CG. On our right was an aircraft carrier with quite a number of new planes it was ferrying across. At nite the fellows used to sleep out on deck because the weather was so nice, all the stars were shining and everything was so quiet and nice. I used to very seldom go to bed before 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning because I liked it so well out on deck at nite. One nite about 2200 I could see red flames and the outline of one of our destroyer escorts right in the middle of them, and I thought for sure it had been hit or caught fire, but in a few minutes I saw it was only the moon rising out of the ocean in a very swift manner. Well, it was time for our nice weather to end so we had a storm. The biggest storm the ship had gone thru while being used as an army transport ship. The wind blew at the rate of 80 miles an hour and the waves on the ocean were 40 or 50 feet high, they used to come crashing over the bow when she would dip under. Lots of the fellows were sea sick and thought they were going to lose their insides, but I guess they didn't altho one fellow did get the appendicitis and got an operation. The storm only lasted for three days and then it gradually blew in a different [way] than we were going. Then one morning we woke up and saw what happens when a submarine gets after a couple of tankers and torpedoes them. They were burning and sinking as we passed. Some other boat had already come to the rescue. It was down around the Azores somewhere where it happened. One morning about 1000 some thought they saw land and everyone hauled out their field glasses and sure enough, there was the coast of North Africa and Spain. It took us all day to get to the Straights of Gibraltar and it was about evening when we passed thru them. There (were) all kinds of fish jumping out of the water, I think they were porpoise fish. The Rock sure looked nice and the cities of Tangiers and Oran were lit up and it looked like a movie. We sailed along the coast of N. Africa all the next day and enjoyed the scenery and some time during that nite we changed our course and headed for the coast of southern France. Of course, we could not go all the way thru the Mediterranean without a nice little storm, so we had one. Not so bad as the one in the Atlantic, but more choppy and it seemed a little harder on some of the fellows, I still was unfazed by it. Then came the day of Friday, 20 October 44 and the storm was blowing itself out and the sun was beginning to shine."

We made our landfall at Gibraltar, and, after a short stop at Oran, for which I never learned the reason, reached journey's end at, indeed, Marseilles. On October 20

we stepped onto foreign soil, and for most of us it was the first time. The harbor was so choked with the recent wartime wreckage of shipping that the *George Washington* could not reach a dock, so we were unloaded into landing barges designed for combat landings on beaches. From there we were carried to a rain-soaked, very muddy, plain at St. Antoine, just outside the city, where we set up a tent camp and went to work cleaning cosmoline off brand new weapons which had accompanied us in crates on our boat trip. Almost immediately after our arrival, we were disconcerted to hear that "Axis Sally," broadcasting on the radio from Germany, had "welcomed" us to the ETO. So much for wartime security. Here it was that I first had a chance to try out my high school and college French, and, to my astonishment, found that I could actually communicate a little with the few local people we met. I thus became the Third Squad very unofficial interpreter.

Bud Stimes' recollection:

"The convoy reached Marseilles on October 20. Company G unloaded the next day after finishing their police and sanitation details. We unloaded on landing craft that moved through the cluttered harbor. Then trucks took us through the narrow streets to the Delta Base Staging Area which was quickly named the Marseilles Mud Hole. Dick La Fleur and I pitched our tent on a fence row for our first night on the continent. Any plowman knows that fence rows are higher and drier than plowed fields."

October 23, 1944, from Somewhere in France. "We are now in cold, muddy France, but I have seen the sun a few times... We call this puddle we're on home. Today our mail service caught up to us... Yesterday I was on a loading detail (on the docks) in a city (Marseilles) and when we came back the whole outfit moved. Imagine our roaming strange fields in quest for our tents at 9 o'clock at night. Luckily we found our tents, but someone has one of my blankets and raincoat... Our squad leader didn't even deliver us our rations this morning. Don't worry about me because I have mastered the art of opening tin cans and the prospects are better every day. (The case of U.S. Army corned beef from Argentina on the Marseilles dock lasted until we reached the Vosges Mts.) This noon we took a powder and did our second piece of bartering. Cigarettes for some straw to sleep upon. They threw in a quart of wine to seal the bargain. French wine tastes more like vinegar than what the poetry books say. My pals all had a taste and the French farmer was happy. It is an old fashioned country but I like the people and now we are on some farmer's field. It is just like the field back of the woods... I am writing this by candlelight and in a dinky tent. Things could be better... I guess it will be a long time before we get hot showers and beds to use. Life in a tent is crowded, but I am getting used to it. I thought the transport was bad enough, but we would all be glad to be back on it. We are living in a field at the edge of a large city. The farms are small, but people get along. What amazes me is all the charcoal burning cars. I also can see a railroad and those small boxcars amuse me also. I am tenting with my old buddy Richard La Fleur and we get along swell ... for my Christmas something to eat would be super and a hunting knife if possible. It is time to turn in as we have to conserve our candle as well as get up early tomorrow..."

“This letter was passed by U.S. Army examiner Lt. Richard E. Lahti.”

Jack Pointer continued his account:

“Land Ho! And we headed for the beautiful port of Marseille [*sic*], France, a place I had studied about quite a bit in my geography book in the grades. When the anchor dropped at 1400 that sunny afternoon, the saying went around something to the effect ‘I knew they would drop that thing, it has been hanging out all the way.’

“The harbor was full of sunken boats and our boat was too big to go all the way to a pier, so we stopped in the middle of the harbor and loaded on LCI boats to take us to shore. Of course, we were first on the boat so naturally we should be the first off the boat, but that was not the case—we were the last off the boat, which was the next day. The nite of 20 October 44 we had our first air raid. The city blacked out immediately and so did the boat. The anti-aircraft guns on the shore cut loose but it didn’t amount to much. I think it was just a little bit of German reconnaissance, anyway that nite on the radio, Berlin Sally welcomed the 100th to the port of Marseille and ours was supposed to be a secret voyage. The next day we said good-bye to ‘Pop’, the fellow who fed us after our short bit of garbage detail each nite and all the rest of the crew we had gotten to know. I had to help the colonel down the rope net—he only stepped on my face and mashed my nose a little more than it previously had been in high school, he was a Colonel, so I couldn’t say much and he didn’t attempt to. It was raining like the dickens and never thought I had seen so much mud, but I was due to see a lot more thru this ‘Sunny France.’ We hiked about 10 miles to our bivouac area where we pitched our pup tents and stayed for 6 days while we got our vehicles and stuff together. The field was nothing but a mud hole and how us fresh from the States boys disliked that. There I ate my first K rations. Boy, they were wonderful, I thought, and we swiped some extra ones when I helped work on the docks for a day at Marseille, the chocolate was very tasty. Howard Hall and I slept together in our pup tent and had it pretty good with a little Coleman burner to keep us warm. 6 days without a bath was getting pretty bad and there was no place to take one except in my pup tent, so one day I got buck naked and took a bath in my helmet which was the last one I got until December sometime altho I did get several unofficial baths by falling in creeks and getting rained on and miscellaneous other ways.”

One afternoon during this time a friend and I walked and hitchhiked to the nearby town of Aix-en-Provence. Here we went into a tiny restaurant on the central square and had—along with profuse apologies for shortcomings from the proprietress—a lovely, simple meal that I still remember with great pleasure. It was a thick potato soup, fresh white bread (a real rarity then), and fresh grapes. That was all there was to it. I don’t believe there was even butter for the bread, but it was perfect, and the beginning, I think, for a love of France that I still have.

While we were in Marseilles we had other opportunities to move around the area, both for limited recreation opportunities and work details on the docks, unloading our

supplies. Which category is involved in the following anecdote I am not sure, but here is my transcription for the *Newsletter* of a story given me verbally recently by one of the participants. I called it:

SHORT STORY

In the tale that follows, “the names have been changed to protect the innocent,” as they used to say on the old “Dragnet” radio and television shows. Just how that worked, or who is innocent, we don’t know, but here’s the story.

Back in the Fall of 1944 a certain infantry company found itself just outside Marseilles in France, making final preparations prior to entering combat. At one point, two Second Lieutenants, leaders of the –nd and –rd platoons, L---i and C---r by name, decided that some R & R at one of Marseilles’ bistros was called for. While seated at the bar testing the quality of quite a lot of the local cognac, they were approached by a high–ranking and experienced looking non–com who inquired of them if they had any use for a Jeep. “Certainly,” came the prompt reply, “how might this be accomplished?” For they had had to hitch hike into town, and the prospect of their own wheels for the return trip was a bright one. In return for the treat of a few cognacs, the sergeant directed them to a nearby dock where, even as they spoke, many Jeeps were being unloaded from a ship. “Simply get in line with the others,” our lieutenants were told, “and when your turn comes, get in the Jeep and drive away. When you get to the guard at the entrance to the dock, just ask him which way the last vehicle in your convoy went and go in that direction.”

It all seemed logical enough to our heroes, so off they went to the dock and got in line. When their turn came, they mounted a brand–new Jeep, with chalk marks where unit insignia went, and commenced to drive off. For some reason, Lieutenant L---i, who was driving, discovered that the horn didn’t work. While Lieutenant C----r shook in his boots with fear that they would be discovered and prosecuted for grand theft auto, Lieutenant L---i indignantly called this defect to the attention of the officer supervising the unloading. A loose wire was discovered, and quickly fixed, and our heroes were off. As instructed, they asked which direction the convoy had gone, and sped off in that direction.

Upon returning to the Company, they informed the Captain of their new acquisition. He commended them for their alertness and expeditious conduct and promptly assigned a driver to the new vehicle. A few days later the Jeep, still covered with its shipping chalk marks, was pressed into service as the Company joined the rest of the Division in a long drive up the Rhone River valley to their combat area. Not long after that, however, word came down from Battalion headquarters that it had been discovered that the Company had an unauthorized Jeep that must be returned from whence it came. Sadly, this was accomplished, but no embarrassing questions were asked, and our enterprising shavetails never heard any more from the episode. In the Company’s first taste of combat a day or so later, both were wounded. Happily, however, both survived and, we hope, are reading this account along with you. To our knowledge, neither has ever had any further larceny on his record.

I was curious about and interested in this new environment, but we weren't there as sightseers. That was brought home to us with a jolt one day when we were issued live ammunition and hand grenades, the first we'd seen away from the firing range in training camp. No, we weren't tourists, we were infantry, and for my part, I was suddenly afraid. Fear is the one emotion that I lived with continually from then on whenever I was in combat or it seemed imminent.

Back to Bud:

"The 399th Infantry Combat Team left on 2 1/2 ton trucks for the 7th Army front on the morning of Oct. 29, 1944."

X. COMBAT – FIRST BLOOD