VOYAGE TO EUROPE

At mealtime, each unit took its turn going down to the dining room, which still had some of the fine wood paneling and ceiling fixtures of the passenger liner that she was before she became a troop ship. The wide elegant stairway led to a chow line where we filled our mess kits with inelegant army food and our canteen cups with tepid coffee. The most unappetizing meal for me was breakfast and the nauseating smell of hard-boiled eggs. Fortunately, we did not have that every morning.

One day, I was assigned to serve on the chow line, and my offering was rutabagas. As I stood there with serving spoon in hand ready to slop a helping into the oncoming line of mess kits, I was asked, "What is that?" "Rutabagas," I replied. The reaction was usually a wrinkled nose and a "No, thanks." This happened with every other soldier, who invariably withdrew his mess kit and walked on. While other pots on the chow line were being emptied and refilled, I still had more than half of my first pot of rutabagas. Then along came a soldier who asked, "Are those sweet potatoes?" Well, they did look like sweet potatoes and, since I wanted to get rid of them, I lied and said, "Yeah! Sweet potatoes!" From then on, every mess kit was filled with "sweet potatoes." Shortly afterward, I was roundly cursed by numerous diners who hated rutabagas. However, one soldier came back to tell me that he loved rutabagas and wanted seconds. He scolded me for lying, but as a soldier, I had a mission to get rid of the rutabagas.

Every day, we had to bathe and wash in salt water with sudsless soap and shave in the same way. The toilets and the shower stalls were very small, so that it was in and out very quickly. I never felt clean after a salt water shower. My body, my hair, and my face felt clammy like I had just been swimming in the ocean at Coney Island. With so many soldiers on board who had to shower, shave and use the facilities, not a moment was wasted in the latrines.

During the first few days of the voyage, I lost almost all my money, about $10, playing seven-card stud poker. That was the most popular game. The loss did not matter because there was no place to spend the money and the Army took care of all my simple needs. I often wondered what the winners did with the hundreds of dollars they won.

To pass the leisure time during the rest of the voyage, Redbird and I started playing bridge as partners. The cards were dealt out on an Army blanket spread out on the deck. We were a good team and won most of the time. There was always a crowd of hecklers around because Redbird kept everyone laughing. We would forget for a while that we were not on a pleasure cruise.

It was awesome to look out over the vastness of the ocean and the sky during the day. The gray seas, so deep, reached from horizon to horizon under cool blue skies that hid behind pillows of floating white clouds. In comparison, we were so small and insignificant – this whole convoy of hundreds of ships that was such a powerful military force on its way to war.

Nights on deck were beautiful as we looked out on the ocean. The cool, brisk, October sea air was refreshing. There were no lights on any ship, and the blackness of the night amplified the lights of heaven. The moonlight glistened on the white-capped rolling sea. Wavelets spoke to us at a conversational pitch. As the ship cut through the water smoothly, the engines hummed below and the world seemed to be at peace all around us.

Suddenly, after several days at sea, a tremendous North Atlantic storm overtook us during the night. We were buffeted with torrents of rain and mountainous waves that swept over the entire ship. Where we once were looking down at the water, we now saw huge waves twenty feet above us as this great ship was driven down into a valley of the sea. The bow dove into a wall of foam and pitched up through the far side to be pounded again by another and another furious avalanche of water. The ship pitched and rolled helplessly in submission to the power of the storm, and she shuddered each time the propeller tilted out of the water. The vast array of ships in the convoy seemed to be converted into scattered pieces of flotsam tossed about among the waves. In L Company, we stayed awake on A deck, in the soaking rain and waves, hanging onto the railings, amazed by the fury of the storm.

When dawn came and calm returned, we were told that the storm was one of the worst the crew had ever seen. During the night, our ship miraculously avoided a collision with another ship that was nearby. Yet the storm seriously damaged our steering mechanism. While repairs were being made, the ship's engines were idled and she drifted as Navy ships patrolled the sea around her. The damaged rudder controls were repaired in a short time, and it was then onward, eastward, to our destination.

All was now back in order and calm again on board ship until we neared land. The gun crews for the 20mm anti-aircraft guns were on constant alert and prepared for the possibility of an air attack. Around the convoy, the Navy escort ships were very busy patrolling for any sign of enemy U-boats. We were almost unconcerned that anything unexpected was going to happen. The seas had been mostly cleared of German pocket battleships and submarines that had sunk hundreds of ships in the previous two years. The Allied navies had won the battle of the Atlantic in the recent past and sinkings had become very rare.

ARRIVAL IN FRANCE

On 15 August 1944, the U.S. Seventh Army, commanded by General Alexander Patch, invaded Southern France. It was made up of the 3rd, 36th and 45th Infantry Divisions which had been through the campaigns of Naples-Foggia, Anzio and Rome-Arno. In addition, the 45th Infantry Division had been in the campaign of Sicily, while the 3rd Infantry Division had also been in the campaigns of Algeria-French Morocco, Tunisia and Sicily. These veteran divisions overcame the German defenses in the south and fought their way inland to Baccarat and the foot of the Vosges Mountains. The mission of the 100th Infantry Division was to be the first division to join with them on the U.S. Seventh Army front.

We passed the Pillars of Hercules, through the Strait of Gibraltar, along the North African coast, and then sailed northeast to Marseilles, arriving on 20 October 1944. As stated in the Morning Report of 21 October 1944:

Debarked fr Marseilles, France 2345 20 Oct 44 and proceeded by foot to NATOUSA Delta Base Section Staging Area No.1 Arrived 0330 21 Oct 44.

Most of the men of Love Company would have stated it a little differently: It was midnight (2345 is 11:45 p.m.) and it was raining steadily. Overhead, an airplane could be heard. It was reported to be an enemy plane that had come to attack us. Also, Axis Sally was broadcasting greetings to the 100th Infantry Division and predicting that Major General Withers A. Burress and his men would be destroyed by the mighty forces of the Third Reich. Since I did not have a radio and I did not particularly notice any aerial attack at that time, I only mention this because everyone seemed to repeat the same story.

However, I do remember going over the side of the ship at the same time as two or three other soldiers carrying full field pack, rifle, and steel helmet, and then descending slowly step by step down the cargo netting into a landing ship. I thought we looked like a stream of rats abandoning the troop ship. When she was finally loaded up with soldiers, the landing ship cast off from the U.S.A.T. George Washington and the Navy helmsman ferried us to the nearby beach. The front of the craft came down as a ramp and we waded through a few inches of water and entered France.

Fortunately for us, the enemy had been routed during the U.S. Seventh Army invasion and our arrival was a walk on the shore.

We hiked up from the beach along cobblestone streets with stone walls on either side in the dark early morning hours. The "Staging Area" we arrived at, after three and a half hours of hiking 10 miles in the rain, was a mud-soaked farmer's field in Aix-en-Provence, where we were to pitch pup tents. I was so tired because of the hour, 0330 (3:30 a.m.), that I just lay down in the mud, with my head in my helmet on my field pack and my raincoat over my face. I slept for a couple of hours. The rain did not disturb my deep and restful sleep, but I was thoroughly soaked.

During the next few days, the company set up pup tents, showers, field kitchen and dug latrines. We had hot meals, cleaned ourselves, checked our weapons and equipment, and prepared for the move to the front. The toilet facilities consisted of a wooden box latrine, which was an eight-seater – four holes cut out back-to-back – mounted over a trench slightly smaller in size that was lined with lime. This was used by the enlisted men when nature called. It was better than a slit trench or a cat-hole that an infantryman would use in the field.

Since the latrine was situated in front of the camp about 10 yards from the road, we could look out over the countryside and watch the people passing by as we sat there. On occasion, it happened that a passerby would use the latrine while soldiers were there. It was "Bonjour," "Hello." When a young French girl came along, it was a little embarrassing when she joined the group by taking a seat, but she seemed to enjoy the visit. Incidentally, the officers had their own latrine, which was much smaller and surrounded by a khaki privacy curtain for "gentlemen."

One-day passes were issued to those who wanted to visit nearby Marseilles. This port city was filled with soldiers of every sort. There were Frenchmen, French Colonial Ghurkas, Senegalese from Africa and Americans. Except for the French soldiers, I never saw any of the colonials outside of Marseilles. We heard stories of GIs being robbed and even murdered in the city for their combat boots. However, I never saw a single incident or ran into any difficulties there.

The cafes were busy selling beer and wine, and some had music and girls who would dance or keep you company. At one place, I was having a beer at a table with some buddies and observing the scene when I noticed a young French girl sit down at a table on the other side of the room. She lifted the back of her skirt before she sat down so that she would not sit on it and wrinkle it. At that moment, the brilliant whiteness

of her gluteus maximus (rump) hit me in the eye. She was not wearing underwear!

I marveled at this strange world as I made my way to the toilet to relieve the pressure of the last glass of beer. As I opened the only door marked "WC," I was surprised to find a woman squatting there and looking up at me. I said "Pardon," closed the door, and waited outside. A few minutes later, she gave me a smile as she exited. I then went in to find a Turkish toilet, which was a hole in the floor with positions for my feet so that I could stand or squat to relieve myself, as necessary. This was a marvelous world of wonders for me.

My squad leader was Sgt. John D. Baud, who was a few years older than most of the men in the company. He was not a bellowing, overbearing sergeant, but rather a soft-spoken workman who was well liked and who spoke with a slight French accent. He was originally from Marseilles, and on the day he had his pass, he went to visit his family there. They, unfortunately, did not know that he would be knocking on their door, and they were not at home. Unfortunately, that was the only chance he had to call on them, because just one pass was issued to each soldier while we were there. He was deeply disappointed.

In about a week, all preparations had been completed, and the day had come to move out. Personal items were packed away in our duffel bags and left with the supply sergeant. I left my Kodak box camera, the silver identification bracelet my mother had given me, a wristwatch, and my Army-issued eyeglasses in my bag. Others left musical instruments, such as guitars and harmonicas, along with their personal belongings.

Before we left Marseilles, it would have been funny if I had met Twist there, because the 14th Armored Division was in our convoy and it had also landed on 20 October 1944. He would have yelled, "Hey, Khoury! I thought you were in the Army Air Corps!"

TRUCK CONVOY TO THE FRONT

The Morning Report of 29 October 1944*: Departed Delta Base Section Staging Area at 0730 Traveled by motor convoy approximately 142 miles Arrived at Valence France at 1700.*

Love Company arose early in the morning to strike our pup tents, gather all our equipment and pack it up before moving out. We had a hot meal before we mounted our assigned truck. This Army truck was called a two and a half ton truck, a deuce and a half truck and a six by six because its six wheels had power to drive the truck. We took seats on the benches along each side of the back of the truck. The canvas top was off on that mild autumn day and the countryside was spread out before us. The hand signal was passed back from the convoy commander to move out and the trucks started to roll.

Along the way, we passed through villages where small cheering crowds came out to greet us waving French and American flags. Some people offered bottles of wine but they never reached the back of the trucks. We did get a few freshly picked apples. It felt good to have such a welcome, but you would have to be a fool not to know that you were on your way to the front lines.

There was some joking, some speculation, and some reminiscing, amid the talk in the back of our truck, but the mood was tempered by the sober reality of the moment. In the group was Pfc. John J. Hudec, also known as "Spider." He was one of the many former air cadets who now were in an infantry company. From the day we arrived in Fort Bragg, we were required to remove our Air Corps patch and sew on the 100th Division shoulder patch. He never took off his Army Air Corps shoulder patch and wore it everywhere. Former airmen would tell him that he would get in trouble, but he scoffed at them and said that the commander of the Air Corps, General Henry "Hap" Arnold, is calling us back. Spider said the same thing repeatedly, during infantry basic training, on the ship in the middle of the Atlantic, and when we landed in France, "General Arnold is calling us back!" Now, in this truck convoy to the front, we asked him, "Spider, what have you heard from General Arnold?" He replied, "Don't worry! General Arnold is calling us back." We all thought, "He'd better

hurry up." Some of us managed somber smiles but no one felt like laughing now.

The convoy stopped periodically so that the soldiers could relieve themselves in wooded areas along the roadside and dig cat holes when necessary. We had hot meals along the way because the cooks hustled to prepare hot meals for the convoy. We slept overnight near the trucks in sleeping bags, taking turns at guard duty.

The Morning Report of 30 October 1944: *Departed Valence France at 0830 Traveled by motor convoy approximately 190 miles Arrived Dijon France 1950.*

The day was similar to the previous one. There were no signs of war or destruction, just people and villages along the Rhone Valley in autumn. Our convoy was the only motorized traffic on the road. There was no fuel for civilian cars or trucks. They relied on horse power.

The Morning Report of 31 October 1944: *Departed Dijon Fr area at 0630 Traveled by motor convoy approximately 124 miles arrived at Fremifontaine France at 1800.*

On that day, we saw the wreckage of war. We passed American and German tanks and trucks, disabled and burned out along the side of the road. Walls and chimneys were all that remained of bombed or burned-out houses and churches. Furnishings from their insides littered the area around these hulks. Civilians and farm animals wandered aimlessly and in a daze among the ruins.

There was the distant rumbling of artillery fire ahead of us. Few civilians were visible anywhere on the road ahead of us. We drove past the grim and chilling sight of dozens of dead GIs laid out side by side near the road. They were inside white cloth body bags with bloody marks on the outside. As I looked at them, I recognized the white tie strings of the cotton mattress covers we used on our beds back in the barracks. In our duffel bags, each of us had to pack a cotton mattress cover with our overseas gear. I wondered, at the time, why we needed the cotton mattress covers because we did not bring any mattresses with us. Now I knew. We had brought our own shrouds with us! The Army had thought of everything!

When we arrived at our destination, the artillery fire grew louder and the flashes of light lit the sky. We dismounted the trucks and moved up on foot toward a wooded area. We reached the edge of the woods and the company commander assigned an area for each platoon. The order to "dig in" was given. We formed groups of three to dig foxholes that were about six feet square and about three or four feet deep.

We proceeded to gouge out the soil with our little entrenching tool. This special instrument, which was a combination shovel and pick, is carried only by infantrymen. It had an 18-inch handle and a blade about 8 inches wide and 8 inches long with an obtusely pointed edge. In the straight position it served as spade or shovel. When the blade was turned and locked in a 90-degree position it could be swung like a small pick. We dug our foxholes in a short time, especially when we saw the flashes of cannon fire in the evening sky, followed by the boom of the muzzles and the whistle of the shells as they trailed off into the distance. I could not tell whose artillery was firing or how close the shells were landing. The reality of where we were burst in upon us very quickly. As the intensity of the cannon fire increased, we burrowed even more rapidly into our foxholes. It felt a little safer sitting in a hole and relaxing with a cigarette. Some food in the form of K rations also helped make the situation better. Nevertheless, sleep came fitfully that night. We were somewhere in France and we wondered what would happen next. Thoughts about our families and friends back home also came to mind.