

WILL THEY RETURN

**GILBERT
RIVERA**

INTRODUCTION

During and after a world conflict, there is always a great trend toward war stories. Some are good, some not so good. Many are fictional and misleading. Most are based around important persons or politicians, a Navy Task Force or an Air Corps unit.

The following pages constitute another “war” story, but it will differ from others as there is no famous person or unit involved. It is a tale of a squad of infantrymen, a total of what should be twelve men, but most times there were much less. You will read about their thoughts, fears, and devotions. It will familiarize you with the so-called “little cog in a big wheel” and show, in part, how some of the big things were carried out by the “little guys” and how they felt about it.

The title of this book was not chosen for dramatic value. It is so titled because it sums up the one thought on everyone’s mind. From the very first rumor of being shipped out, that thought kept repeating itself over and over. Everyone had to go...most did not want to go and were not ashamed to admit it. It was not uncommon for those who talked a great deal about being anxious to go to war to desert the battle lines, while the quiet and the meek remained to the very end.

This book is not being written for the purpose of being published, but to try to get things out of my system, although I know I will never be able to forget my experiences. If nothing else, I will feel a great satisfaction when the book is completed.

I am by no means a writer, so this story is in simple language and, in many places, poor grammar. But, most importantly, the contents of the following pages are factual no matter how unbelievable they may seem. Only the names of the people involved are fictitious.

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DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to all the men who saw action while serving in an infantry rifle, machine gun, or mortar squad and to their docs, the platoon aide men.

Gilbert Rivera

April, 1949

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A very special “thank you” to my wife, Alicemae. Without her encouragement, support, understanding, and the many, many months of typing and editing, this manuscript would have never reached this stage.

Another “thank you” to Harry J. DeVoto for the two realistic sketches he rendered. Unfortunately, our paths were separated before he had completed additional sketches.



CHAPTER II

BIVOUAC

Late that afternoon, trucks arrived to transport the men to their bivouac area. They were packed so tightly into the trucks that it became impossible to even turn around. Everyone had to stand up in order to get as many men as possible into each truck. About half an hour later, it started to get dark and the trucks moved ahead. As they sped through the streets of Cherbourg, now and then a native would wave at the troops but most would simply stare solemnly at the convoy. Up a long, steep, winding road the convoy traveled and soon the city was left far behind.

It was dark now and the men pulled their jacket collars up as the cold wind savagely lashed them in the open trucks. The trip took them through a town that was in complete ruins. The light from the trucks revealed the crumbled buildings with one lone wall standing here and there. In all of the town, no building boasted more than one wall still intact. Even those had gaping holes in them or the tops blown clear off. The dust raised by the vehicles, the shattered buildings in the background plus the truck lights produced a weird and terrifying effect

“Almost as good as the scenes in the movies,” said one of the men, trying not to show his horror at what he saw.

Hours and several demolished towns later, the convoy came to a halt. It was a very lonely road which the men thought to be a relief stop.

“All out! This is as far as we go!” shouted an officer as he made his way down the middle of the road.

“As far as we go!” exclaimed a disgusted soldier, “We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

The men de-trucked and lined up along side their trucks to await further orders. Some had arrived earlier and now sought their companies to guide them to the company bivouac areas. As the men crossed the road and proceeded into a field, they were cautioned to stay within the two white tape markers on either side of the path as there were mines beyond them. In the field, there were wooden bins where the duffel bags had been stacked. Men with flashlights picked out the bags and shouted out for their owners.

Arriving at the company areas, everyone became confused and the darkness did not help. Platoon sergeants shouted for their squad leaders who, in turn, shouted for their men. It was well past midnight when the order came for the men to bed down where they were and forget trying to organize squads, platoons or companies. The news came as a great surprise and relief to the tired men who had spent three hours standing on the back of a windy truck. Add to that, being up for twenty-four hours with no food, along with the excitement of being in a new land after being cooped up on the ship for ten days, it was little wonder they were all on the verge of exhaustion. Friends teamed up making beds by spreading shelter halves on the bare ground, then covering themselves with a blanket. Packs, cartridge belts or field jackets were used for pillows.

Awakening next morning, the men discovered they were in an apple orchard forty yards wide

WILL THEY RETURN

sixty yards long and surrounded by a tall hedge. This was the famous Normandy apple orchard where a month earlier raged the “Battles of the Hedgerows”. The newly arrived troops, now about starved, began picking and eating the apples. It was not long before many were getting sick. Under the guidance of the ones who knew which apples to eat, the ‘city slickers’ who knew of apples only as a fruit they bought at the store, soon learned to pick the ripe fruit rather than the green.

Each platoon was assigned to a section of the orchard where pup tents were erected and life soon became like it was in the States. Here, they were once again on bivouac, only this time they had fresh apples at their disposal.

Duffel bags were emptied so their contents could be aired out, then weapons were thoroughly cleaned and inspected. Meanwhile, the kitchen crew set up under tarpaulins and began preparing the long awaited meal.

Around nine, the men were called to chow and as they madly rushed toward the cooks, they were halted in their tracks and told to go back and get their weapons.

“What the hell for?” asked the men among themselves. “We’re at least fifty or a hundred miles from the fighting and we haven’t got any slugs anyway. What’re we supposed to do...scare somebody?”

They did not care for the food. Except for the bread and water, it was all dehydrated and tasted flat but they were hungry enough to eat it regardless. A small portion was first given to them with the promise that seconds would be dished out after everyone received their first. After everyone had received their first helping, the men asked for seconds but were refused. They washed their mess gear and returned to their tents. They noticed the cooks were throwing the extra food into a large hole used for food waste. Tempers flared. The kitchen crew offered the excuse that the men had already returned to their tents so they thought the men did not want second helpings.

Later, the company was informed that they could go to the nearby town of Montebourg about three or four miles up the road. Frenchy, Tony, Jocko, Gremlin, the Russian and Junior got together and left for town. After a nice, slow, casual walk in the warm sunshine, the group finally reached the town. The first thing they noticed was the church, the largest building in town. At the bottom of long wide stairs leading to the church, stood a nook about seven feet high and six long. Two sides were covered with bricks and the third with white tile. This side was fully exposed to the street.

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Junior. “I’ve heard these French don’t have much modesty but they wouldn’t take a leak right out in front of a church and everyone!”

As they stood wide-eyed, a native walked up to the tile wall and went about his business as if he were in a fully enclosed bathroom. When he was finished, he nonchalantly walked off. The people that had passed while he was busy paid no attention to him or vice versa, including women. The soldiers stood speechless and very embarrassed over the whole incident.

“Wonder if they’ve got one for women?” one of them asked.

The town, as a whole, had escaped the war fairly well except for a few houses at the far end. As the men walked down the center of the street, they were surrounded by children that ranged from about two to ten years of age.

“Cigarette for Papa and candy for me?” they chanted as they held out their hands.

Unable to resist this approach, the Americans laughingly gave the little ‘beggars’ cigarettes. Not having candy, they gave them gum. No sooner had the first group of children left when another quickly

BIVOUAC

replaced them. A public auction was being held at the town square. Lambs were being roasted over open fires and sold. Across the road, horses and other livestock were being sold or traded. Farther up the street, the soldiers entered a long wooden shack that turned out to be a bar. Unfamiliar with any of the drinks, each ordered something different so as to try different varieties. After the first mouthful, the wine and cider was spit back into the glasses and the men left.

Around four o'clock, the men were getting hungry so returned to the company area for chow. Next, mail call was shouted, much to everyone's surprise and delight. If the recipient was not there, a friend would accept and hold it for him. When all the mail was distributed, the men returned to their tents to read their letters. Junior hurriedly scrambled through his to see if there was any news about his 'new' baby. Disappointed, he temporarily laid down the mail and stared across the company area.

"Maybe in the next mail call, buddy," Tony said as he noticed the look on Junior's face.

Picking up the letters and half half-heartedly smiling, Junior once again began reading. When the excitement of receiving mail had calmed down, the men found some wood, built fires and gathered around to exchange the news from home. Jefferies huddled the platoon together to let them know that there would be guards posted in the area during the night. Two men were to patrol the area with two others to be posted at the entrance to the company bivouac. The reason for this, the sergeant explained, was that some German war prisoners had escaped from Cherbourg and were known to be in this section of the country. During the day, one man was to be at the entrance and another on the road at the end of the company area. He also warned his platoon not to go through the hedges as they were mined and booby-trapped by the Germans. Jefferies then broke the unwelcome news, starting the next morning, they were to begin training 'a la States', close order drills, hikes, lectures, map reading, day and night maneuvers and, of course, inspections.

"What the hell do we gotta do to get away from that horse shit!" said Tony dejectedly.

"What about the food?" asked Frenchy. "Aren't we gonna get any better stuff?"

"All the fresh food is goin' to the front...so they say," responded the sergeant.

"That's O.K. then," approved the Russian.

"Well, if there's no more questions, that's about it for now. Your squad leaders will let you know when you go on guard," ended Jefferies as he left the platoon to their gripes and curses.

At two that morning, Herman woke Tony and Junior for their turn to be on guard. Lighting cigarettes, they dressed and went to relieve the men at the entrance. Left to themselves, they began speculating about what they were going to do the first day they arrived home. The moon was brightly lighting up the area so they decided to stay in the shadows. Soon they heard sounds as if someone was walking on the other side of the hedge across the road.

"Cows," remarked Tony as he tried to peer through the thick hedge.

"Cows don't walk on two feet," said Junior softly. "Listen. You'll hear just two steps at a time instead of the four an animal would make."

Whatever it was, walked until it was about even with the guards when it stepped on a twig and stopped, then continued a few more yards, and stopped again as another twig loudly snapped under its weight. A birdlike whistle came from down the road. The 'thing' hurried off in that direction.

"Farmers don't let their cows roam around at night when they have a nice big barn like the one across the road," said Junior. He was tense and somewhat frightened.

WILL THEY RETURN

“What’ll we do?” asked Tony. He nervously pointed his rifle across the road and released the safety catch.

“I’m sure as hell not going over there unless I have a lot of guys with me! Just keep your eyes peeled down the road and see if anyone runs across. I’ll look up the road,” answered Junior.

Nothing more happened for the remainder of their guard tour which ended none too soon to suit them. They informed the relief guard of the excitement then they returned to their tents, lit cigarettes and discussed it all over again.

“The hell with this kind of setup,” said Junior as he blew out the match. “Tomorrow, I’m gonna get me some ammo! Big deal! The only ones with ammo are guards and there’s a bunch of ‘heinies’ around.”

“Get some for me, too, buddy,” Tony requested. They finished their cigarettes and went to sleep feeling very unsafe. Their tent was located next to the hedge and just a few feet away there was a small path through it. On the other side of the hedge was an open field a hundred yards wide and two or three times that long.

After breakfast, one of the other platoons was issued ammo and were sent to search the barn. Upon their return, Tony asked one of them if they had found anything. The man said the door was locked and they couldn’t get inside. Junior asked why they did not try the windows but the soldier just shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Tony and Junior were more determined than ever to get their own ammo.

When the evening meal was over, Jocko, Frenchy and Junior resumed the poker game started on the ship. Junior was now well ahead by about seventeen dollars, fifteen of that from Jocko. Feeling very generous, the ‘permanent’ scorekeeper and dealer let the others now have their turn at dealing. Several hands later, as Jocko began dealing, Junior stopped the game.

“Hold everything!” he demanded. “We won’t count this hand but I’ll finish this deal.”

He turned the cards face up as Jocko began laughing. Frenchy and Junior each had a pair. They would have naturally drawn three cards. Giving each the three cards, Junior wound up with two high pairs, Frenchy with three of a kind and the would-be dealer, Jocko, with a full house.

“Caught ya, didn’t I, ya little bastard!” shouted Junior triumphantly.

Jocko was too busy laughing to answer. Frenchy started laughing and finally Junior joined them. There was no ill will among them as they were the best of friends but always trying to put one over on the others. Whoever won never really expected to get paid anyway.

Three men from Jocko’s platoon came by huffing and puffing. When asked what happened, they said they had been walking on one of the deserted side roads. Passing under a large overhanging tree, they saw someone up in it and, not wanting to stop to find out who it was, took off as fast as they could. It was possible for the one in the tree to be an escaped German prisoner waiting for a lone American soldier to come walking down the road. Dropping from the tree, the German could kill the American and take his uniform. In an American uniform, the chances of detection were very slim. It was known this had happened many times before. Although the three card players laughed at their friend running, they knew they no doubt would have done the same.

Jocko’s squad leader came and told him to pack his things for the platoon was going to be detached from the company to do guard duty. They were to guard a supply depot just outside Montebourg.

BIVOUAC

Jocko was delighted at the news. Junior asked him to try to get some ammo and he would pick it up the next night. Jocko quickly asked Frenchy for a few more lessons in French.

Several days later at the end of the evening meal, mail was once again distributed. Junior hurriedly tore through his letters. The second one he read informed him that he was again a father...of another boy.

“Well? Any news yet?” asked Tony as he sat down and leaned against a tree

“Yeah,” answered Junior sheepishly. Then somewhat annoyed, “It’s a boy again.”

“How’re they doin’?”

“Fine.”

“A boy!?!” shrieked Tony when it finally dawned on him.

“Yeah,” was the simple answer.

“Y’ know,” began Tony as he dreamily looked skyward, “I can just see us docking at New York. Then on the first pass to town, you take me into the nearest bar and buy me that drink. I’m gonna enjoy that brew more than any I’ve ever had. A boy, huh?”

Junior grinned and pushed him over, “You’re gonna sweat out that drink plenty before ya get it.”

Word of the new arrival was quickly passed along and everyone came to offer their congratulations and to receive their imaginary cigars. Blackie arrived and after hearing the news, suggested that he and Junior sneak off the next day to Cherbourg to celebrate.

“You’re nuts,” Junior told him. “We’ll be lucky if we can go to Montebourg.”

“We can go cross-country ‘til we reach the other side of Montebourg and the main highway. Then we hitch hike in and back,” Blackie paused for a moment then added, “Besides, we’re moving out in a week.”

“Where to?” asked Junior yet fearing the answer.

“UP!”

“Why not? Enjoy yourself while y’ can,” thought Junior as he recalled Blackie’s battalion commander’s words. Then to Blackie, “What time should we leave?”

“How about nine?” offered Blackie.

“Okay!” agreed Junior.

It was dark when Blackie decided to return to his company. Junior walked a short way up the road with him then came back to his tent and crawled in. Tony soon joined him. Junior related what Blackie had told him about moving out. They lit cigarettes and lay silently awake for a long time.

Junior wondered if he would ever see his new son and tried to visualize what it would be like on the front lines. What was it like to see your best friends fall? Could you keep going when he calls for your help? What could you do even if you stopped? You might get hit if you stopped or he might get hit again because, by stopping, you would draw more fire. Keep going! The medics could help him more than you. But he keeps calling you! He’ll think you’re deserting him when he needs you most if you don’t stop. What should you do? And what does it feel like to shoot a man? You’ve gotta do it first. It’s either him or you. But how could you? He has never done you any personal harm, yet you must shoot.

WILL THEY RETURN

You fire and he falls, do you feel good or sick to your stomach? Maybe his best friend is waiting for you to get up so he can do the same to you. You don't want get up and be shot. Doesn't his friend realize you had to do it? But you have to get up and move ahead...always move ahead.

Shortly after nine the next morning, Blackie made his appearance and the two started their trip to Cherbourg. A mile before reaching Montebourg, they turned off and went down a side road. Climbing fences and going across fields and orchards, the two of them finally reached the highway leading to the city. The first truck that came along picked them up. Every now and then, the truck stopped to gather a few more hitchhikers. One of wore a strange uniform and carried a briefcase. During the course of the trip, he claimed he was a courier for the Belgium government and was carrying important papers to be delivered to the allied command in England.

"Y' better not go around braggin' about it," warned Blackie.

The courier laughed and pointed to the American-made carbine slung over his shoulder.

"Look, buddy," Junior whispered loudly, "if someone wants that case bad enough, they'll take it and you'll be found in some ditch or alley with that gun rammed down your throat."

The courier looked suspiciously at the staring men in the truck then nervously pressed the briefcase to his bosom and placed the carbine across his lap. The men in the truck chuckled then looked out at the countryside. The messenger never uttered another word for the remainder of the trip.

Just outside Cherbourg was a high cliff now a military cemetery. From this height, the entire city and harbor could easily be seen. Someone in the truck remarked that almost an entire regiment had been wiped out in capturing this cliff. Most of the men who lay in the cemetery were from that regiment.

The truck left the men off in the center of the city and everyone scattered in different directions. Blackie and Junior walked leisurely through the street heading for no place in particular. They noticed one or two M.P.'s in doorways of some of the buildings. Needless to say, these were the houses of ill repute and the guards had been placed there to keep American personnel away. In some of the streets, lines of men were waiting to enter these houses but when the M.P.'s made an appearance, the lines suddenly disappeared.

Blackie noticed two men in what seemed to be American zoot suits. Wondering if they were Americans, the soldiers stopped them and found they were Merchant Marines. While their ship was being unloaded, they were sightseeing. Not only were they from New York City, but even came from Blackie's neighborhood. The four men toured the city together eventually finding an American Red Cross canteen. Entering, they were confronted by a long line waiting for coffee and donuts. Tickets had to be purchased at another line. Junior and the two Mariners waited while Blackie went off to get the tickets. When he returned, he did not care to wait out such a long line so took off again. In a few moments, he was back and informed the others that coffee and donuts awaited them at a nearby table. The Mariners were amazed but Junior knew that Blackie had a way of bucking long lines and getting away with it.

With the coffee finished, the four of them went up on the balcony and watched a Negro orchestra forming below. The thing that Junior dreaded arose...Blackie wanted to dance. Again, the bugler won out and the two of them put on their 'dance routine' for the few in the balcony. One of the hostesses saw them and asked them to go down on the stage and perform for everyone. Blackie, of course, was willing but Junior protested violently.

"Y' goddam jerk," Junior whispered, "don't you realize we've got no passes to be here?"

BIVOUAC

The elderly hostess went down the stairs to make arrangements with the orchestra. When she had disappeared, Junior grabbed Blackie and ran down the back stairs, then out the door, with the Mariners laughing so hard they could barely run. A few blocks away, they sat on a bench while Junior bawled out his 'dancing' partner. One of the Mariners took out some marijuana cigarettes and offered them to the soldiers. Blackie accepted them but Junior refused. After lighting them, at the first opportunity, Junior knocked the cigarette from Blackie's hand.

"Y' dropped your butt," said Junior coolly.

Blackie caught on and looked ashamed as he leaned over, picked up the cigarette, put it out and placed the butt in his pocket. Junior said he and Blackie should be getting back to their companies. They said their good-byes and after going several blocks, Junior suddenly grabbed Blackie's arm.

"Gimme those cigarettes," he said seriously.

Blackie started to grin but stopped when he realized Junior was not kidding. "I mean it," said Junior, "Gimme those butts or you go back alone."

Without a word, the bugler dug into his pocket and handed over the cigarettes.

"Okay," said Junior, "let's go back into town."

While walking back, Junior tore the cigarettes apart and emptied the contents into his hand. Suddenly, he threw his hand in the air and the wind scattered the marijuana over the street until it disappeared.

Back in the main part of town, they found an old brown three-story building that was now used as an American movie theater. The building was, at one time, an opera house complete with box seats. Blackie and Junior sat in one of the box seats and during the wait for the show to begin, they pretended to be high society. They looked into the section next to them, and whispered to each other in a tittering and gossiping manner. The men in the next section soon began doing the same thing until almost everyone in the house was carrying on like a bunch of women. Field jackets were carefully removed, slightly brushed, then placed over the backs of the chairs as if they were expensive fur coats. The kidding and laughter ceased as the house lights dimmed and the movie began.

The skies were dark when the men left the theater and since they had not eaten all day, they set out to find a restaurant. All of them were either filled or barred to soldiers so they returned to the Red Cross canteen for coffee and donuts. The next thing to do was to find transportation back to their area. They found a truck that would be leaving for Montebourg at eleven. Happy over their good fortune, they boarded the vehicle to wait. An hour seemed a long time to sit in a cold truck but they knew if they left, the truck would be sure to leave ahead of schedule. As the minutes dragged by, more soldiers climbed aboard until it was nearly filled by the time the truck left. Just before leaving, the driver went to the back of the vehicle to let the men know the route and the towns he'd be going through and if any of them were bivouacked along the road, just to yell and he'd stop. All he asked in return was that no one get sick in his truck as there were quite a few men that were tipsy.

Blackie and Junior jumped off the truck at Montebourg, thanked the driver and started through the deserted streets. A new moon was high in the sky and brightly lit the lonely town. A stray dog was the only living thing the two saw in the ghost-like town. At the far end of town, they turned onto the road that led to their company areas.

The next few days brought little change from the usual training routines. One evening, someone picked up an apple and threw it at a friend but missed him and hit someone else. That someone picked

WILL THEY RETURN

up another apple and threw it back. It was not long before the orchard was filled with flying apples. An advantage to this type of warfare was the fact that the 'ammo' never ran out.

If the ground supplies ran out, shaking the nearest tree would produce a new supply. Company officers also participated in the battle...directing their platoons. During an 'attack', one received a direct hit right on the forehead. The apple was rotten and soft so that on impact, it splattered all over the officer's face and clothes. The enlisted men really enjoyed this and the officer went through the motions of falling and playing dead. Although it was very tempting, officers were not the only targets. Whoever came within range was a victim. Before dark, the battle was halted and the area cleaned. The 'ammo' was neatly stacked by each squad so as to be ready for the next evening.

This type of warfare ended the third night when the owner of the orchard threatened to sue. He insisted that the American government pay a certain amount of money for each fallen apple. Actually, more than three-quarters of the fruit had fallen off the trees from being overripe. Incidents like this were becoming a racket among the farmers and homeowners. During the course of the real battles, farms and homes were damaged or destroyed. Then, when the Americans finally won the area, the owners blamed the damage on the invading troops and demanded payment. If a town was to be taken, the Americans would shell it and damage was unavoidable. After it was taken, the Germans would shell the town and finish destroying it. But the owners knew that the Americans, in order to maintain a good relationship, would pay no matter who did the damage...and pay much more than what it was worth.

After the owner of the orchard left, the men quickly buried apples like crazy. The next day, there was not a single apple on the ground anywhere within the company area.

Rumors of moving out became more frequent so Junior decided to go see Blackie for further information. The 'bugler' had an elaborate house compared to the line companies. He lived in a large tent with wooden sides and floors. On the wall were calendars, family pictures and, of course, pin-ups. There was even electricity supplied by truck batteries. Four folding cots with mattresses were spaciouly arranged in the tent, which usually accommodated six. In the center was a small potbellied stove standing in a wooden frame filled with sand to prevent the floor from burning.

"Got any running water?" cracked Junior after looking the place over. "Why didn't y' tell me y' had a setup like this...I woulda come sooner to do my writing."

"You could've been here with me if y' wanted to," Blackie reminded him, "Remember when they took your corporal stripes away I wanted to teach you how to blow the bugle?"

"Im a soldier," said Junior throwing out his chest, "not a rear echelon man."

"Go ahead, wise guy, get your damn head blown off," said Blackie.

"Get off the cot, I wanta lay down," demanded Junior in order to change the subject.

"Lay on one of the others," protested Blackie not wanting to get up.

"I wanta dirty yours," replied Junior and pushed Blackie off.

"Why don't you lay on the ground a couple of weeks and see how you like it?"

"I know what it's like," answered Blackie as he sat on the edge of the cot.

"Yeah? Who told y'?" teased Junior. "How about some paper? Might as well write Alice and my mother since you've got light. Speakin' of light, do y' have any candles? Supply sergeant gave us a little hunk and expects it to last forever."

BIVOUAC

The bugler produced the paper and three long white candles. While writing, Junior asked him about the rumors of moving out. Blackie told him they would be leaving in two or three days. They were to go by train to a town called Luneville located a few miles from the front lines. That was all he knew. But one thing was certain, the division was going into combat as a unit. The division was to become part of the 7th Army by a special request of its commander, so the rumor went. The story was that the two commanders had been together in the Pacific. Hearing that the division commander had arrived in France, the army commander requested the division commander to join his forces.

Two days later, the order was given for the men to break down the tents, roll full field packs and thoroughly oil the weapons. The cooks distributed paper bags to the company. The bags contained two sandwiches. The men were warned not to eat them too soon for they would not be fed again until the next evening.

Around 1:00 A.M., the company formed and left the orchard. As A Company made its way down the road, B, C and D Companies followed and in that order. The Second and Third Battalions joined them and the regiment began its nine mile hike to the trains. The pace was slow due to the additional burden of overcoats and other equipment not ordinarily taken on marches. Every hour on the hour, the column halted for a ten minute rest period. Some of the men would not sit down for it was too difficult to get up again. During the walk, the men who carried heavier weapons, such as the BAR, which weighed twenty pounds, were helped by the others in the squad.

It took about three hours to reach a small town where they were to await the trains. Companies were lined up on one side of the road, then moved to the other side. Later, they were returned to the original side of the road. This shifting from one side of the road to the other continued until dawn and the men were getting into a bad mood. They had spent the better part of the day before in their bivouac areas, just waiting. They had marched for three hours only to have to wait another three hours for the trains. Packs nor any other part of their equipment was allowed to be removed. Their shoulders and arms were becoming numb from the tight straps of the packs. Tired, cold and disgusted, the infantrymen were cursing the army and everyone connected with it. There was no explanation for the endless waiting. If they were not to board the trains until dawn, why had they been made to be at the depot more than three hours early?

“Think I’ve figured it out,” remarked Junior as he leaned on his BAR.

Tony, Frenchy and a few others gathered around to hear the forthcoming conclusion.

“The Theater commander,” began Junior, “tells the Group commander that we’re to be ready to get on the trains at nine o’clock. The Group commander, to make sure we are ready at nine, tells the Army commander to have us ready at eight-thirty. The Army commander makes sure we’re ready by telling the Corps commander eight. The Corps commander tells the Division commander, seven-thirty. The Division commander tells the Regimental commander, seven. The Regimental commander tells the Battalion commander, six-thirty. The Battalion commander tells the Company commander, six. The Company commander tells the Platoon leader five-thirty. The Platoon leader gets us up at five. At five-thirty, he tells the Company commander we’re rarin’ to go. At six, word is passed to Battalion, at six-thirty, to Regiment. At seven, Division is notified, at seven-thirty, they tell Corps. At eight, the Army at eight-thirty, they tell the Group commander and at nine...we load up! Right on schedule. Simple, ain’t it?” finished Junior all out of breath.

With that, the listeners began laughing but admitted it all sounded very possible.

A convoy of trucks arrived and the men were once again moved to the ‘other’ side of the road to

WILL THEY RETURN

make room. The men's duffel bags were thrown out from the vehicles. Curses filled the air for the men believed they would not have to battle the bags until they reached their destination. One platoon at a time crossed the road to retrieve the bags. If nothing else, the bags made soft seats.

About an hour later, companies formed and began to move for the trains, half a mile away. Less than a hundred yards from the starting point, all orderly formation was gone. The men struggled over the tracks, encumbered with their loads. Many of them fell. The division commander, with a major at his side, stood on a warehouse platform solemnly watching the 'parade'. As Junior passed the platform, he stepped over some tracks and the BAR slipped from his shoulder, got tangled between his legs and down he went. More embarrassed than hurt, he quickly regained his feet and replaced his equipment over his shoulder.

The two-star general leaned over and asked, "Are you hurt, soldier?"

"No, sir," answered Junior.

"You're almost there, just around that next warehouse. Take it easy, you've plenty of time," sympathized the officer. He straightened up and shouted words of encouragement to the other men who, at the sight of their commander, tried vainly to walk in some sort of formation.

When the men finally reached the trains, their morale dipped to a new low. There were no Pullmans or even coaches. This time, it was freight cars! Much smaller than American freight cars, these were about twenty feet long, seven or eight feet wide and seven feet high. The floor was of rough lumber and full of splinters. There was a sliding door in the center and at each end, a small barred window without any glass. These cars had been used to transport German prisoners to the rear. When the doors were first opened, the odor was revolting. The floors were filthy and the stench was unbearable due to the lack of toilet facilities. Somewhere, brooms were found so the cars were thoroughly swept and aired.

Twenty men were assigned to each of the cars. Equipment and duffel bags made it very crowded. Bags were stacked in one end of the car while packs and weapons were placed along the walls. Rations and a five gallon can of water also went into each car. Darkness found the trains still in the yard. Not having slept in over thirty-six hours, the men decided to call it a day. They put overcoats on the splintery floor, and covered themselves with blankets taken from the duffel bags. In order to have a little more room, they laid in a head to foot manner. The trouble with this arrangement was if someone kicked in his sleep, the one next to him got it in the face or head. Once they were all laid down, there was not one square foot of walking space.

Daylight found the train speeding through the peaceful French countryside. Coats and blankets were folded then placed on the packs along the wall. The doors on each side of the train were opened so the passing country could be seen. There was nothing outstanding about it, just trees and rolling hills. No sign of life was to be seen, man or beast. It was the same as if they were in the States. Had they been blindfolded and placed in this area, no one could tell whether this was France or the States.

Some men remained at the doors while others preferred to have breakfast. Each squad had been issued a gas burning stove which measured about ten inches long and five in diameter. No one ever wanted to be burdened carrying the stove because of its bulkiness and weight. The stoves only weighed a few pounds but after marching ten or fifteen miles, it seemed more like a ton. Now that each man had to wait a turn to boil water in his canteen cup for coffee, the men wished they each had a stove.

Every few hours, the troop train stopped to refuel or to give the men an opportunity to relieve themselves or stretch. During the night, the train stopped to pick up rations from trucks. The men

BIVOUAC

selected to pick up the rations slept by the doors so they would not have to step all over everyone in getting out. If someone happened to be awake when the train stopped, they would volunteer to go instead of waking up the detail. The volunteers were grateful for the opportunity to get off the train and stretch their legs. At times they suffered for their 'generosity' for they would sometimes have to walk half a mile or more, depending on the location of their car and the trucks. While returning with heavy boxes, they would vow never to volunteer for anything in the army again for they always got the dirty end of the deal.

On the third day, the train entered a large city with the soldiers crowding the door for a look. The train stopped at the station with no one permitted to leave the cars, except officers, many of whom were on the ground before the train had come to a complete halt. The station was filled with French civilians going on trips. Some ran for their trains and the soldiers shouted for them to hurry and when they caught the train, the Americans cheered. The soldiers waved and whistled at the girls and everyone else in sight. A few of the natives waved back but most went about their business and ignored the soldiers. The only ones that actually paid any attention to the troop train were a few ragged looking men who made their way along the cars picking up cigarettes thrown away by the soldiers.

"Those bastards!" said one of the soldiers bitterly, "Do they think they're doing us a favor by letting us come over here and fight their war?"

The shouting and waving stopped. With increasing bitterness, the men quietly stared at the scurrying people, many of them smartly dressed and carrying tennis rackets or golf bags.

"While a lot of our guys are getting knocked off, these sons o' bitches are going out to have a good time! I wish to Christ the heinies would bomb this place flat!" commented another.

The troop train lurched then began moving slowly ahead. More of the natives now began waving and giving the 'V' for victory sign. Some of the Americans, out of habit, waved back but quickly stopped.

"They're waving now 'cause we're movin' on but the hell with them. Wouldn't wave back if my life depended on it," said a third.

As the troop train left the station, a civilian train caught up with it and the two traveled side by side for several minutes. Quickly, the Americans lit cigarettes, then slowly and casually blew the smoke toward the other train. After a few puffs, the cigarettes were thrown away. Although they weren't that plentiful, the men decided that the looks on the civilians' faces was well worth the sacrifice. After the cigarettes, gum was taken out, unwrapped, chewed for a few seconds then thrown away. The French excitedly talked to one another then pointed to the Americans who were delighted at the commotion they were causing. As the passenger train moved ahead, the soldiers grinned at them. It was more of a sneer than a grin and seemed to make the French uneasy. They looked away but glanced out of the corner of their eyes every so often.

As the troop train sped on, tension seemed to mount for each turn of the wheels brought the men closer to the fighting front. Each little town and village was more destroyed than the previous one. It seemed to be in the air, something entirely different. The mood of the men had changed. Now they were quiet and solemn. The towns appeared dead. The inhabitants, the few that were seen, walked aimlessly about as if in a daze. The Normandy peninsula had been wrecked but still did not have the dead atmosphere these little towns portrayed. These places had yet to recover from the shock. Freight cars and locomotives laid all over the tracks with gaping bomb craters around them. Clouds hid the sun which made everything all the gloomier.

WILL THEY RETURN

Come dawn the next day, the troop train arrived at Luneville with the men quickly unloading and lining up in company formations. They expected to have to wait around the depot for hours as was the usual custom. Instead, as soon as the company assembled, they boarded trucks and left. From the time they left the cars until they were on the trucks and rolling, the entire procedure took less than fifteen minutes.

It was not long before they stopped in a large patch of woods. Tents were soon set up but this time they were spread out over a much larger area than at the apple orchards. Due to the thickets and trees, only two or three tents could be seen from any location. When it grew dark, each platoon set up their own guards. During the next few days, the men prepared themselves for the front lines. All excess clothing and personal belongings were packed into the duffel bags and placed in a large tent. Ammunition was issued and weapons thoroughly inspected for any defective parts. To the relief of the men all gas masks were turned in. Full field packs were readied and the men sat down to wait. Shortly after sundown, the platoon messenger informed Junior to report to Jefferies immediately. The platoon sergeant, guide and Herman were sitting down, leaning against a large tree as Junior appeared.

“You wanted to see me?” asked Junior, suspiciously.

“Sit down,” motioned Jefferies, then taking a deep breath, “I had a talk with the top kick and lieutenant about making you a sergeant. They were all for it, said you were a good man and...”

“What the hell are you guys tryin’ to pull?” stormed Junior. He jumped to his feet. “You guys wouldn’t give me back my stripes in the States. You did everything y’ could to keep them from me...even when I took that test and came out with a lot higher mark than you did and you were a platoon sergeant. I needed the stripes in the states for the money. What the hell good does the money do me now?” He moved closer and in a quiet tone, continued, “We’re not playing with flags anymore. There’s no umpire to tell you when you’ve made a mistake. From now on, when you make a mistake, someone gets hurt or killed. I’ve never been in combat or have the slightest idea what it’s like, and I’ll be damned if I’ll lead anyone into it under those conditions. If I would’ve had the stripes all along, it would’ve been my job but I’m just a private and I intend to stay that way. You guys got the stripes, though, and it’s all yours.”

“There’s not a guy in the company that wouldn’t follow you anywhere. You know they all like you and trust your judgment,” Jefferies tried to explain. “They don’t think any more of us than you do but that’s all behind now. What’s the good of having a bunch of guys that don’t have any faith in you?”

“You started worrying about that a little late, didn’t you?” asked Junior coldly. “All you gotta do is use a little common sense and think of the other guy first instead of yourself.”

“You’ve gotta take the stripes, Junior. The guys want you to,” the sergeant insisted. “Think of them.”

“I did think of them once and lost my stripes...remember?”

“That was different. You always said you’d rather have friends than stripes. Well, now you can have one because of the other.”

“Since when did they start giving out stripes ‘cause you’re well liked? Let’s cut out the horse shit about being liked and trusted and all the rest of this crap. I came over here as a BAR man and I intend to stay that way,” Junior told them. He had taken about all he could tolerate and wanted to end this meeting.

“You can stay with the BAR and Tony and Frenchy. We want to give you the stripes so you can give

BIVOUAC

us a hand or take over if anything happens. In fact, you can have all the BAR's in the platoon under your control. You can set them up as you see fit." Seeing that Junior still was not swayed, Jefferies finished with, "The order for your promotion has gone in to the regiment and you'll take them whether you like it or not. That's an order."

"Can I go now?" asked Junior. He realized further arguing was futile.

"Okay," replied the sergeant, then smiling, "You won't be sorry. Remember, you can always send the extra money home."

Junior started to say something but changed his mind and walked off.

"What's up?" asked Tony suspiciously.

"They wanta make me sergeant," answered Junior as he sat down.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Tony angrily sitting up. "And you're gonna take 'em! You talked so much about the 'battle plans' we made and how we were gonna stick together all the way through but as soon as they waved some stripes in your puss, you forget all about us and think only of yourself. I thought you were different from the rest but I guess it's true...once a non-com, always a non-com. Well, you're crazier than hell if y' think I'm gonna hump that BAR into action and get picked off right off the bat. That's why ya probably took the stripes, to get rid of that BAR!"

"He's blowin' off steam and don't mean what he's saying," thought Junior, "he'll get over it in a little while and I'll explain the whole thing then."

Frenchy just sat there, looking at one and then the other but he never said a word. He seemed puzzled and rather hurt. He wished Junior would say something in his defense instead of just sitting there in silence.

At midnight, the battalion formed and began its seven mile hike. They later reached a patch of woods where they remained for the day. The next night, they were once again on the road. As the battalion marched closer to the front lines, the sounds of artillery guns became more distinct. Each gun displayed a brilliant flash as each shell was sent on its way. The second day while bivouacked in some scattered woods, the men got their first glimpse of aerial warfare.

Four American planes and one English plane were chasing a lone German. Suddenly, the German plane started turning in a wide circle. One at a time, the Allied planes broke formation and followed the German single file. The infantrymen could not believe their eyes...the planes seemed to be playing "Follow the Leader". Once again, the German plane suddenly turned, this time a sharp turn cutting the circle in half then opened fire on the last Allied plane now in front of him. Shells ripped into the fuselage, the motor stopped dead and the plane started a long, whining., twisting dive toward the earth. A few hundred feet above the ground, the crippled American plane pulled out of its death dive and slowly glided behind the distant hills. In the skies, the chase continued but the Allied planes, apparently having learned their lesson, remained in formation then they, too, disappeared over the hills.

"What the hell kind of pilots have we got to fall for a stunt like that?" asked a disgusted foot soldier.

"Probably new at it," offered another. A shot rang out and before the echo was gone, men were singing, "Oh, medics! Oh, medics! Here's another one for you. Remember, it was an 'accident'."

The reason for this carrying on was that someone had shot himself in the hand or foot 'accidentally' while cleaning his weapon. This had been occurring every time the battalion rested from the night

WILL THEY RETURN

marches. The closer they got to the front lines, the more the ‘accidents’. The wounds were never serious, always in the hand or foot, just enough to have to be sent to the rear. These men lost their self-respect and their friends’ friendship. They fooled no one and received no sympathy. When these men rejoined the company, no one wanted them around for it was felt they could not be relied upon in case of need.

The third night of the march, as the battalion made its way along the edge of some woods, a brilliant flash followed by an explosion was seen and heard on their left about fifty yards away. Some of the foot soldiers dived for the ground, some just crouched while some just stood there stunned. They all laughed nervously when they realized it was an artillery battery starting to fire a mission. A few hundred yards farther, they turned into the woods to settle down and await the dawn. Some tried to dig slit trenches for safety measures but soon gave up for they could not see what they were doing. Before too long, most had fallen asleep on the cold, damp ground.

When the skies grew lighter, the men were awakened and told to dig in for they were to remain in the area until the following day. Lazily, they began digging but then the artillery behind them opened up. The rate of dirt being dug increased tremendously.

“If we can reach them, they sure as hell can reach us,” someone remarked as he dug all the faster.

“This is a hell of a place to stick us,” Junior told Tony.

“If those heinies try to knock out those guns, they’ll plaster these woods and us, too.”

Since they had left Luneville, Tony had cooled off and Junior had the chance to explain the circumstances of his forthcoming promotion. Their friendship was mended putting their relationship back to normal.

Late in the after noon, squad leaders gathered their men to inform them of what was to take place the next day. The entire division, with the exception of the first battalion, would be going on line to replace another division. The First Battalion was to be the only reserve available to the rest of the division. Their mission was to prepare defense positions behind the front lines. In the event the line troops had to withdraw they would have positions prepared. It meant plenty of digging and walking for the First Battalion but they were satisfied...they would still be in the rear.

Early next morning, the battalion left the woods and made their way to within two miles of the front lines. On a hill, in an open stretch of ground overlooking a town, A Company deployed and began digging. On the right, half a mile or so away, was a heavily wooded area forming a semicircle and winding up behind the town. The front line was among these trees. Fifty yards to the right of the Second Platoon, which was the right flank of A Company and the Battalion, stood a thin row of trees a hundred yards long, pointing toward the town. On the other side of these trees, the terrain was open until it reached the woods. Two hundred yards to the left of the Second Platoon, there was a road leading to the town. The remainder of the battalion was located on the other side of this road.

The Russian and Gremlin approached Junior, “Jefferies told us that you’d tell us where to set up our guns.

“ME!” asked the surprised Junior.

“Sure, knew they’d use ya for something like this. After all, you’re the best BAR man in the regiment, aren’t ya?”

“Go to hell,” responded Junior. He was surprised at Jefferies keeping his promise.

BIVOUAC

It was early afternoon when the men heard a strange, shrill, whistling sound coming their way. At first they peered at the skies trying to see what it was then suddenly dived into their newly dug holes as a German shell exploded. Six more shells quickly followed but all landed two hundred yards to the left in the open field. Only three of the shells exploded, the other four were duds. Several minutes later, the men gathered in small groups...but not too far from their own holes...in moral support of this first shelling.

“What crummy shots,” joked the Russian.

“They’re just warming up...give ‘em time,” said the Gremlin.

Junior decided to walk over to the trucks hidden in the long patch of woods to the right of his position. He discovered them to be kitchen trucks and that one of the cooks was a friend of his.

“How about some water?” asked Junior after greetings were over.

“What’sa matter with your kitchen, won’t they give y’ any?” the cook asked. He opened a five gallon container of water.

“Those bastards are a mile back. We gotta walk back there to eat ‘cause they won’t come up here,” Junior told him.

“If I had enough, I’d feed your platoon but I’m kinda short,” offered the cook.

“I didn’t come here to mooch a meal, just some water,”

“I could feed you. Always got enough for one more,” said cook.

“Forget it, will ya,” Junior insisted.

“Tell ya what,” the cook said after a few moment thought, “I’ll put on some extra coffee and maybe I can squeeze out an extra loaf of bread and some jam.”

The artillery cook was one of the ‘outsiders’, men who had not been in E Company at one time, but went to most dances with Junior and Blackie. Junior had known him for over two years but did not know he was a cook until this incident occurred. Cooks like him were very rare. Most of them griped about having to feed their own men, let alone even thinking of feeding someone they did not have to feed.

After sundown, the platoon prepared to go eat. They went by squads. It was a mile walk before they found the mess sergeant, cook and the jeep driver behind a small hill. The jeep pulled a trailer containing the food. The food was quickly thrown into the mess gear and the cook asked the men to hurry. The kitchen crew offered the excuse that they did not want to be so close after dark for the noise from the truck would draw artillery fire. A roar of laughter went up from the riflemen and they bluntly asked the cooks if they were scared. Someone sarcastically told the cooks that trucks were going in and out of the town, three miles ahead. Upon returning, they told the rest of the men about the ‘nervous’ condition the cooks were in. Remembering how the cooks had dumped the food while they were in the apple orchard, the remaining squads took all the time they possibly could in getting to and from the jeep. It was well after dark before the entire company had been fed.

Just before darkness fell, the men huddled in groups of three or four to ‘chew the fat’ and have the last evening smoke. Again they were interrupted by the shrill warning of approaching enemy shells. There were few duds this time. The barrage started at the left flank of the company and ‘walked’ toward the right. It reached within fifty yards from the Second Platoon, suddenly stopped, then began again,

WILL THEY RETURN

hitting the thin row of trees in front of Junior's position. Peeking over the top of his hole, he noticed smoke rising a few yards from the artillery kitchen truck. When the barrage stopped, Junior, with Tony at his heels, ran for the truck. They found the kitchen crew frightened but unhurt. The shell had landed a few yards from the truck causing a few nicks but nothing serious.

"What's the matter...worried about your coffee?" grinned the artillery cook.

"Goodnight and go to hell," answered Junior.

"Those heinies are improving their aim and that ain't good!" Frenchy half kidded after the BAR team returned to their positions.

Junior had been in deep thought, "Y' know, those heinies must have an observer in that town ahead. They sure as hell can't see us from their lines on account of those woods all around so the town must be the answer. Next time, they'll drop 'em right in the holes."

"Cheerful guy, ain't he?" Tony remarked.

"Yeah," said Frenchy.

When darkness covered the countryside, each squad appointed one man to guard its individual area. Every two hours, the guard was relieved. About two or three in the morning, two rifle shots were heard coming from the mortar section of the Weapons Platoon. Herman ran from one position to the other until he reached Junior's. He informed the BAR team that one of the guards in the mortar section had seen two men walking through their area. Upon being challenged for the password, the two ran away. Shouting an unheeded warning, the guard then fired at the running figures. Everyone in the company was alerted and one man in each hole was to remain on guard. The two unknown men might have been escaped prisoners or a patrol that had infiltrated through the lines. The remainder of the night was quiet and uneventful. Come dawn, the First Battalion formed on the road then with a single column of men on each side of the road, headed for the town. A wrecker slowly made its way toward the men. It was towing a demolished truck that had hit a mine. Behind the truck there followed a medic jeep pulling a trailer with two still forms on its floor.

"Oh, no. NO!," cried Junior half aloud and dropping out of formation to stare at the trailer. He recognized one of the dead as one of the so-called 'outsiders'.

He kept staring at his friend's open eyes until Jim, who had also stepped out of formation, spoke to him. "We'd better move on, Junior," he said softly, "the companies are already gone by."

"Yeah, sure," Junior replied still in a daze.

As the two started after their company, Jim put his arm around Junior and understandingly told him. "Y'might as well get used to it, kid, you're gonna see a lot of us that way."

"Yeah, I know. Guess it's 'cause the first dead American I saw was a friend of mine," replied Junior. Shaking his head slightly, "Y' know, he always said they'd never get him 'cause he was a truck driver and in the rear." He paused to take a last look at the trailer. "Just goes to show. C'mon, Sarge, get the lead out."

Jim had been the mess sergeant but had tired of catering to the 'big five', the first and platoon sergeants, so was put in the Second Platoon as squad leader. The men all liked Jim and helped him along since he'd forgotten much of the field work while working in the kitchen. Jim was from New York City and had also been in the National Guard before the war. Originally from I Company, he transferred to A Company at the same time as Junior. Jim was married but had no children.

BIVOUAC

Five hundred yards from the town, the battalion left the road and set up tents in the open field on both sides of the road. Slit trenches were quickly dug in the event there was more shelling. A slit trench is about a foot and a half or two deep and just wide enough to permit turning over. The length depends on the height of the man. Some men paired up and dug a trench big enough for both then set up the tent above it.

The small observation planes used by the artillery were flying slowly over the lines. Suddenly, they dived between the trees. Moments later, two fast fighter planes came towards the battalion. They were at treetop height and coming very fast.

“P-51’s,” observed one of the men. “You can tell by the square wing tips.”

The words had no sooner left his lips when little streaks of flames came from the wings of the planes.

“P-51’s, hell. They’re German Messerschmitts!” replied another as he dived into his trench.

An alert machine gunner from D Company had set up his gun on a jeep for just such an occasion.. He immediately opened fire on the planes. Junior picked up his BAR and tumbled into Tony’s trench.

“Get the hell outta here. This is my hole,” Tony said, pushing him to one side.

“Thought y’ might be lonely,” returned Junior.

The planes made a sharp turn, then dived toward the battalion. This time, the men were ready and filled the air with bullets. Tracers from a machine gun could be seen tearing into the fuselage of the nearest plane and smoke poured from its engine. Passing over the troops, the planes climbed the skies directly into the sun. Blinded by the brilliant sun, the battalion had to cease firing. The planes never returned but shots could be heard in the rear areas as everyone took a shot at the planes.

Next day, A Company left the tents and moved to within two hundred yards of the town to prepare more positions. The remainder of the battalion built up on the other side of the road. A large, dead, bloated sheep lay in front of the Third Platoon area. The emanating odor caused a few upset stomachs so it was soon buried under a huge pile of dirt.

Sometime after noon, the screaming German shells began to fall in the area. As Junior sat in his hole, he took out a package of synthetic lemonade and began mixing the refreshment. Actually, he did not want the drink but it gave him something to do to keep his mind off the shelling. There would be casualties this time for the range was just right and plenty of shells were landing. As the explosions came closer to his position, he stirred the lemonade faster and faster. A shell came in his direction getting louder and louder until it seemed as if it would land in his lap. It seemed like hours before the shell landed.

He quickly thought of his family and said aloud, “I was thinking about all of you at the very end. Goodbye.”

The shell landed next to his position. His ears rang as he was bounced about the walls of the hole, like an empty bottle in the ocean. He looked upward in time to see a black object coming down on him.

“Shrapnel!” he thought and covered his face. The ‘shrapnel’ turned out to be dirt, which showered him with large chunks, one making a direct hit into the canteen cup. He laughed with relief at seeing the lemonade spilled all over his lap. He ceased laughing as horror overtook him.

WILL THEY RETURN

“Tony!” he shouted. Tony had been digging ten yards to the right. “That shell landed in his hole!” Again he shouted, “Tony! Tony! Tony!”

The explosions drowned out his voice so he got on his knees to peer over the edge of the hole and continued shouting. Receiving no answer nor seeing any signs of Tony, he leaped out of the hole and began running for Tony’s position. Within five or six strides, he saw Tony running toward him. Seeing each other still in one piece, they grinned with relief then returned to the safety of their holes. The seemingly endless barrage finally ceased. The men jumped from their positions and quickly ran to the next positions to see if anyone was injured. Calls for the medics were heard coming from the Third and Weapons Platoons, on the right.

“Why the hell didn’t ya answer me, y’ little bastard?” asked Tony. “Thought sure as hell that shell landed on you.”

“I thought it got you!” returned Junior. “And next time, stay in your hole! You nuts?? Running around like that while being shelled.”

“What were you doing out?” grinned Tony.

An hour before sundown, the battalion returned to their tents. Ration boxes were opened and distributed, ten men to each box. Consequently, the rations were called “ten-in-one”.

“Wonder what happened to the cooks?” queried the Russian between mouthfuls.

“Whatsa matter...you gone nuts??” laughed Gremlin. “They wouldn’t come to us when we were two miles back. Think they’ll ever feed us now that we’re only a mile from the lines?”

Mail was brought up and the men quickly read their letters before it became dark. By a strange coincidence, Tony, Junior and one other in the platoon received almost identical letters. The letters jokingly warned the soldiers not to go around kissing all the girls when they liberated a town for loved ones back home would see them in the newsreels at the local theaters. These particular letters arrived at a bad time, catching the men in ill humor due to the casualties suffered earlier in the day. Another time, the men would have thought the letters amusing but, at this moment, they felt bitterness.

“Oh, I guess y’ really can’t blame them,” said Junior crumbling the letter in his fist. “The ones really at fault are the people who write the scripts for those pictures. ‘The Liberators get welcomed’ that’s what they say as jeeps and truck loads of guys are seen happily waving their rifles while the town people bring them flowers and wine. Then, the girls swarm all over them...huggin’ and kissin’ these ---guys. We’ve seen those reels ourselves. But have y’ ever noticed how those guys look? They’re clean-shaven and not a spot of dirt on their clothes. Now, look at us...we’re filthy, all covered with dirt and mud up to our ass. We haven’t shaved or washed in two weeks and we’re not even on line! Think what those guys in those woods look like! Those bastards in the newsreels are rear echelon troops who didn’t do a damn thing in takin’ the town. The guys that really took the town are probably ten or fifteen miles away still chasing heinies. The only ones to welcome them when they reached the town were German, things thrown at them were bullets, grenades and 88’s, not flowers. And the only thing they hugged was the ground, to keep from being killed. You can bet your ass there weren’t any French people in the streets cheerin’ and wavin’.” He paused. “Personally, I don’t give a damn who gets his picture taken or gets the glory. The thing that gets me is some joker telling Alice I’m havin’ a good time ‘cause he’s seen what it’s like over here...in the newsreels. See what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered rubbing his chin, “but if stuff like that keeps gettin’ pounded into their heads, they might start believin’ it. Then trouble starts.”

BIVOUAC

“Yeah,” commented Junior, “and then to add insult to injury, I’ve yet to see a half-way good lookin’ dame in this country. Anyway, I’m goin’ to write Alice and set her straight on this newsreel shit.”

While the battalion was engaged in preparing positions, mine detecting crews from the engineers were busy clearing the road behind the woods. They complained that their work was hindered by snipers and requested the protection of the infantry. A squad of riflemen from the company was sent to locate the snipers. Shells began falling in the area, one of the riflemen scratched his nose in some shrubs. When the shelling stopped two of the men had been hit. They were taken to the aid station along with the one who had scratched his nose which he claimed had been hit by shrapnel. He returned with a piece of tape on his nose.

The following day, prior to going to finish the positions, the company was formed. The company commander stepped forward and told the men he had the honor of presenting one of them with the Purple Heart, the medal presented for wounds inflicted by the enemy. Calling the company to attention, the captain called out the name of a member of the company. A tall young soldier stepped forth, slightly grinning and across his nose was a piece of tape. Although they stood stiffly at attention, the men’s eyes expressed anger and disgust for everyone knew about the taped nose. Quickly, the commander presented the award and dismissed the men. As he walked away with a fellow officer, he was slowly shaking his head.

The following evening, the supply sergeant pulled his jeep up at the company area. In the trailer were heavy ski socks and a new type of boot. The boots were made of leather except for the part that covered the foot and that was rubber. Due to rubber getting so cold, woolen socks had to be worn. The drawback to these boots was that although the rubber kept the water out, it also caused the feet to sweat and get wet just the same. The boots were clumsy to walk in since they fit loosely about the foot. All in all, they were a little more comfortable than the regular high top shoes but did not support the ankles as well.

“You can’t have everything,” clowned Junior walking around. He looked at Tony and Frenchy struggling with the laces and began a tirade against the army. “Y’ know how they decided on these boots?”

“How?” asked Frenchy for he knew he could not stop Junior now that he was winding up.

“Well, some shoe manufacturer dreams up this boot and goes to Washington. He tells the big shots he’s got just the shoe for the ‘boys’. They told him what they wanted and this boot is IT. The brass says ‘okay’ and sends for some Pfc., who’s some senator’s son or relative. This Pfc. is in the Quartermaster testing all kinds of equipment for the ‘boys’. Well, this joker walks around a nice polished floor for a while and says the boots feel ‘duddy’. Now to see if they’re waterproof, the Pfc. steps into a tray of warm water for a few minutes. Stepping out, he says they’re wonderful and we’ll be crazy about them. The manufacturer gets the contract, the Pfc. gets a furlough for a dangerous test, the brass pat themselves on the back for helping the ‘boys’ and we get some fancy boots that aren’t much better than the old shoes...which stink all the way around.”

“Do you lay awake nights thinking of ways to tear things apart?” laughed Tony.

Along with the boots, a new type of field jacket was also issued. It was longer, reaching to the hips whereas the old ones only came to the waist. They had four large pockets instead of just two, were darker green and considerably warmer. They were not as smart looking as the old ones but the men preferred comfort over appearance and the new jackets were warmer.