

## Chapter 11: Caumont

*See material on pp. 197-233*

The chaplain was holding services, so I asked if I could be sat down and join the singing that was in progress. “Rock of Ages Cleft For Me” was the hymn as the chaplain handed me the hymnal. Major Rainey worked at the task to cut the laces of my left shoe and removing it. “How does it look, Major?” I asked. “O.K., Sergeant,” he answered, keeping me from seeing the wound. Artillery shells could be heard exploding quite intensively as the Germans shelled our defense positions mercilessly. The platoon that relieved us had many wounded and dead. When the service was over, I remarked to the chaplain that I had planned to attend, but not under these circumstances. We had a hearty laugh about this. More wounded began to arrive at the aid station and they had to be taken care of. Three of us were placed on a Jeep and, laying on stretchers, we were taken to the rear. Carelessness on the part of the men of the 5<sup>th</sup> Division didn't help matters. These men learned the hard way. And somebody had to die.

The evacuation hospital was a series of tents on the high ground overlooking Omaha Beach.<sup>1</sup> Navy craft of all descriptions littered the beach and extended to a half a mile into the Channel. The hurricane winds made its impact, leaving destroyed equipment everywhere. The Jeep driver brought us up to a tent with a sign saying “Receiving.” The three of us from L Company were brought inside and laid on the ground. Other men were there waiting as the aid men attended their wounds, getting information of the nature of their wounds, where they were located, the outfit and unit they belonged to, and what weapon caused the wounds. A piece of shrapnel about the size of a half dollar was lodged in my ankle. The pain at this point was so great that I was pulling the grass with my hands to keep my mind straight. The ankle was swollen about three times its normal size. A nurse came into the tent so I asked if I could get a shot of morphine to relieve the pain. She checked my medical tag and found that I didn't get a shot at the Battalion. Within a short time, the nurse returned, giving me the shot that I needed. The morphine shot was so powerful that I went out like a light. When I woke up, I was already moved into a surgical ward. Supper was being served, and I was given a plate heaped with Swiss steak, gravy, mashed potatoes, peas, half of a canned pear and coffee. I had to pinch myself to see if I was awake. My shrapnel wounds hurt very much when I moved. My two fingers were stiff and swollen from the sliver of steel. My left thigh had many puncture holes that were painted with iodine. After eating this hearty meal, I fell back to sleep. I was given another shot around midnight, which woke me up. I could see the nurse hazily and her voice sounded afar off. “You're going into surgery at 6:00,” she said, and I didn't hear anything else.

Precisely at 6 A.M., two aid men arrived with a stretcher. I was carried to a surgical tent a short ways away and placed on an operating table. A nurse placed my right arm on a board and shoved a needle into my vein. A doctor at this point picked up my wounded foot at the same time his fingers slipped into the wound. “Nothing serious,” he remarked. My reaction was a vicious kick to the doctor's face, sending him into the tent wall. I swore a blue streak and vowed I would

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<sup>1</sup> Olexa would have been treated at the 5<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hospital, which was several miles inland, near Trévières. The airstrip used for evacuation of men to England, however, was along the coast near St. Laurent sur Mer. WW2 US Medical History Centre, [www.med-dept.com/unit-histories/5th-evacuation-hospital](http://www.med-dept.com/unit-histories/5th-evacuation-hospital); Graham A. Cosmas, *The Medical Department: Medical Service in the European Theater of Operations* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of History, 1992) 232, accessed at [history.army.mil/html/reference/normandy/TS/MD/MD7.htm/](http://history.army.mil/html/reference/normandy/TS/MD/MD7.htm/).

kill him if I ever saw him again. The wound began to bleed and the intravenous needle had to be reset. The nurse held my head firmly because I wanted to see where that damn doctor was. I was mad enough to fight. "Start counting, Soldier, we are almost ready to operate," came a voice to my rear. I was up to 25 and still counting when the nurse said to the surgeon this guy has already taken enough intravenous solution for two men already. I was up to 35 when my mind made a big pop. Back in the ward I woke up with a start, vomiting into a pail that was near the bed. I heaved that green stuff like a fountain in the town square. "How are you feeling, Sergeant?" was the voice I heard from an aid man. "With my fingers, you bunny, are you blind?" I managed to say in between gags. "I feel awful at the moment and will till I get this stuff out of my stomach, so let me be." about a half hour later the aid man returned with another pail. He grinned at me and I managed to smile to let him know that I wasn't mad at him.

The smell of flesh, blood and medicine in the tent was sickening. I looked about the tent but there was no one I knew. The other men from L company were nowhere in sight. On the fourth day<sup>2</sup>, every man in the ward was placed in ambulances and taken to an airstrip about five miles away. Arriving at the airport, we were carried into a C-47 cargo plane designed to hold three rows of stretchers the full length of the plane on both sides. Three other planes were standing by, awaiting the arrival of other patients. The nurse attending us told us that we were going to England. When the last patient was in place, the door was closed. The pilot started up the engines and we began to taxi down the runway for takeoff. At the end of the runway the pilot remarked that we would circle the beach, giving us a view of the beach from the air. Speeding up the motors, we began moving down the runway and soon we were airborne over the waters of the Channel. The pilot banked the plane for us to see the beaches from the windows, making a complete circle, then headed straight for England. The trip by air didn't take long, for we were to land near Southampton. The landing was a smooth one. British lorries were waiting for us to take us to a train. Each man was given a pack of cigarettes, a toothbrush, toothpaste and a bar of soap. Inside of each car of the train were brackets to hold the stretchers in place. We had to wait three hours for other patients to arrive. In our wait, the British nurse tended to our needs and made us comfortable as possible. We were told that we were going to the North country, arriving at our destination sometime the next morning.

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<sup>2</sup> This would have been June 26. His first letter from the hospital in England is dated June 29.