

## Chapter 12: Recovery

The train finally began to move, gaining momentum as the engineer pushed the throttle. The clickety-clack of the wheels on the rails soon put us to sleep as we rode through the countryside. We could hear the wail of the train whistle as we sped on into the night. A small light at the end of the car was shining. The nurse and an aid man sat near a table loaded with medical supplies. A water jug hung on the wall filled with water that swished back and forth, in rhythm with the sway of the train. While moving through the darkness, I could not help but to think that my guardian angel lifted the veil of protection to make me immobile. Only the sovereign providence of God knows the answer. It was early morning when the train pulled into the station and stopped. A fine mist of rain was falling. When the car door opened, I could see faintly a sign in black reading, "Nottingham". My mind began to click, was this the region of Robin Hood? I could hardly wait to get answers from the questions I would ask. Within a short time, teams of men filed into the car, picking us up from our perches and hauling us outside. Vehicles of every description were waiting to take us to the hospital. As soon as each vehicle was loaded, it took off for the hospital. The ride from the station to the hospital was about four miles. The countryside was filled with trees, large and small. Was this the Sherwood Forest of the legend of Robin Hood? I was thrilled, never realizing my good fortune of actually seeing this part of England that is famous the world over. The road twisted and turned through the trees, which stood tall along the banks. Sherwood Forest, I muttered, visualizing a tall Englishman behind each tree with a drawn bow.

Leaving the road a short distance away, we entered a clearing, with a narrow lane leading into a large field where the hospital buildings were standing. The buildings were wooden barracks spaced about 30 feet apart. There was a boardwalk connecting each ward, which kept one's feet out of the mud. The truck we were in braked to a halt, and two men unhitched the tailgate, letting it fall down with a bang. "Hi fellows, you are here at the 182nd General Hospital<sup>1</sup>, welcome!" "I'm Corporal Falsone, the barber." I felt the back of my head. The hair was pretty bushy. "Drumming up business already, eh Corporal?" I remarked. We were carried down the boardwalk into the third ward building. There were eight buildings to house the wounded on this side. Entering the building, there were two rooms on either side. This was a forty-man ward with twenty beds on each side and with a small stand for personal things. We were carried to the far end of the ward and placed on the cots, which were beginning to fill up rapidly.

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At noon our food was brought into the ward, served by two orderlies. We had individual trays with three pieces of spam, mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, half a peach with juice, and coffee. The nurse made an appearance just long enough to harass us about dropping food on the floor. Every soldier in the ward gave her a scowling look. This seemed to satisfy her ego as she turned and entered the room opposite the medical office. The nurse spent a lot of time in this room, which aroused my curiosity. "I'm going to look into that room when I am able to get

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<sup>1</sup> The 182<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital was located in Sudbury in Derbyshire, about 15 miles west of Nottingham. "182<sup>nd</sup> General Hospital," WW2 US Medical Research Centre, [www.med-dept.com/unit-histories/182d-general-hospital/](http://www.med-dept.com/unit-histories/182d-general-hospital/).

around," I vowed. The two orderlies in the ward tended to our needs and furnished water for us to drink. They even volunteered to get us anything from the canteen. We couldn't buy anything, for all we had was French money. A promise was made to see if we could exchange the French money for the English pound notes. Supper was at 5 o'clock, which consisted of meatloaf, boiled potatoes, spinach, fruit cocktail, coffee and homemade bread. That bread became a favorite with us because it tasted so good. There was plenty of real butter to spread on the bread, rounding up the meal fit for a king. After supper some of the men had their wounds redressed to replace the blood-soaked bandages. The soldier with the left arm and right leg missing was taking it hard, and weeping. We felt sorry for him at his loss. The nurse at this time came out of her office walking up to his bed and remarked. "Do you think that you are the only soldier to lose an arm or a leg?" The wounded soldier straightened up in his bed. He stopped crying as his face changed to a look of hate. He swore at the nurse, releasing the pressure of physical tension from inside. The nurse came right back at him, stating that he was going to be court-martialed for swearing at her and sent to prison. The atmosphere in the ward was that of hatred towards the nurse. The soldier was mad enough to kill her as she wheeled about leaving the ward. "That woman has ice running through her veins and she ought to drop dead," someone remarked. None of us in the ward could get settled down, expressing our feelings to one another.

*See material on pp. 236-237*

On the 4th of July the commander of the hospital with a couple of aides entered the ward. To each man he presented the 'Purple Heart' pinning the metal on each man's lapel as they lay on their cot. When the Colonel<sup>2</sup> came to my cot, he asked how I was. My reply was sarcastic, stating that I had been in the ward five days with no one changing my bandages. Without a word the Colonel reached into his pocket, bringing out a pair of scissors [and] cutting the bandage up the center. My wound had a drain of white rubber that looked like a homemade noodle protruding on both sides of my left ankle. "The wound looks good soldier." The Colonel remarked. "I'm going to remove that rubber drain. It will hurt some when I pull on it, but it will only last a second." In one quick jerk, the rubber drain was out. It felt like sandpaper was being rubbed through the wound bringing tears to my cheeks. "How did you get that long scab on your nose and forehead?" The Colonel asked. "I dove through a barbed wire fence one night on patrol with machine bullets cracking the air around me." "It's healing good, so there's no need of an anesthetic." "I'm sorry to have been so rude to you Colonel." "It's O.K. soldier, it's better to get things off your chest." With the task of presenting each man the purple heart, the Colonel thanked us for our devotion to duty and to our country.

Ole 536 came stomping to my bed with bandages and tape in her hands. She lit into me like an alley cat on a fence "How come you had to tell the Colonel that your bandages hadn't been changed?" "I was going to change them today." On and on she yacked, roughly handling my foot to make it hurt. I didn't say a word, but I hated her because I thought she was the meanest woman I ever met. There was no compassion in her vocabulary for anybody, I thought. Every man in the ward felt the same way. She was pretty but, oh that mouth, which rattled on

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<sup>2</sup> The unit history (ibid) identifies him as Col. Charles Kirkpatrick.

and on. I kept thinking to myself, “Lady, the day I leave here I’m going to give you a piece of my mind that you will never forget.”

Monday arrived, with most of us scheduled to take therapy in another building. Crutches were handed to those of us with leg wounds while those with arm or shoulder injuries would walk. I had to cut off three inches from the bottom of my crutches so they could fit under my arms properly. I practiced walking with them in the ward. My thigh and calf muscles had shrunk and I thought they never would expand and be as big as my right leg muscles. I was very worried about this. In therapy I had to put my left leg in a tank as high as my crotch. The water swirled within the tank as a heater on the other end made the temperature of the water rise. The therapy made my leg feel good, although it looked like a cooked lobster when the treatment was over. Every man as treatment progressed stayed away from the ward as much as possible. Ole 536 still hassled us whenever she could. We went back to the ward only for meals and at night to sleep. The less we saw of this gal, the better. I managed to manipulate the crutches pretty good and traveled quite fast, although once in a while I would be sent sprawling when a crutch would get stuck in between two slats in the boardwalk. We could exchange our French money at the canteen, so that is where we hung out. There wasn’t a man I knew among the patients at the hospital, and I didn’t stop searching. We didn’t forget the three men who had to stay in the ward because of the nature of their wounds. We shared everything with those guys, for they were part of us. In the day room we sat at tables writing letters home. Ole 536 didn’t bother the three men too much, but once in a while she would let them know that she was around.

A week went by, and on Monday morning Ole 536 told the three seriously wounded men that they were going home. She rattled on, and on, stating how lucky they were and what they could do when they got home. Each man had lost at least one limb. The soldier in the corner snapped at Ole 536 by saying, “what can I do back home with a leg and an arm missing?” “Someone will have to carry me where ever I want to go. You call that lucky?” “You can do a lot if you want to soldier, or pity yourself,” she shot back. “I don’t want to go back, Lieutenant, for I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.” “You poor fish,” Ole 536 remarked, “jump back into the water and swim the way you should.” The confrontation ended when Ole 536 left the ward. We were happy for the men, and yet they had a point. Our constant struggle for happiness in life has many forks in the road. Choosing the right turn will be our own decision to success. Contentment comes when we do that which is right.

A time of grief is a time of love, it is a time of faith and a time of hope. If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, then we are the most unfortunate of people. When a man climbs a mountain, he sometimes loses the way, and when he does reach the top there won’t be any free candy. Rain drops of charity or love when shared will double our wealth. Freedom has given us the highest standard in the world and will not survive in an undisciplined life. Our castles will crumble when we change our moral and spiritual ways. Not a man left the ward that morning. We stood by ready to help these men in any way we could [until] the time arrived for the men to leave as the stretcher barriers walked in. We said our good-byes, and the men were carried out of the ward and down to a waiting ambulance which started them on the journey home.

Glancing down the hallway of the ward, toward the room I vowed to enter, I saw a large box sitting on a study stand. No one seemed to notice as I wheeled on my crutches and headed

for the door. I wheeled into the room like a Mack truck and stopped abruptly by the box. I had no idea of the shock I was to receive. Lying in the box was the torso of a soldier who lost both arms and legs and was mumbling over and over that he wanted to die. If there was any day I wanted to die, this was the day. Recovering from my shock, I turned and rapidly moved toward the door. I was filled with grief and tears as my shoulder hit the doorjamb, sending me to the floor in the hallway. I picked myself up and took off like a rooster in a barnyard, making an exit in record time. I shook and shuddered as I headed down the boardwalk away from the ward. I had experienced many things because of war, but I wasn't set for the one I had just seen. I could not help but think that this man's dreams were crushed. His lifestyle would be drastically changed. No man can say that he will stand alone. As one looks about things change, such as the grass, the leaves, the brook, the river, the mountain which influences us one way or another. This soldier didn't reach the goals of happiness or climb the ladder of success by serving his country. His desire now was to die, for his motivation and self-confidence had vanished. How much is practical to fill our dreams, when tragedy strikes. Losing two legs and two arms. This veteran will be sent to a veteran's hospital near his home. Only his parents and relatives will visit him. Society will be cruel to him and to others who were maimed, burned and defaced by ugly scars from the results of war. At first people will show pity, then ridicule, or poke fun at a struggling man walking the street or at the horrifying scars that are visible to the human eye. A national holiday should be set aside for these men who have fought so bravely and survived. A red-carpet day with a warm and pleasant expression of gratitude. We have a day honoring the dead, why not a day for the wounded? Fate is cruel to individuals, worse than death because of the suffering, which could be for years. These men can hold their heads high because they served their country and faced the ravages of war. If society forgets, then where is the loyalty?

Here at the hospital, with therapy, exercise and medicine, my health was improved, and near the stage of being sent to a rehabilitation hospital for further recovery<sup>3</sup>. My days at this hospital were numbered and Ole 536 was right on our backs to keep us in our resentful mood. One day returning from the canteen, I heard a woman crying in the office of the hospital's commander. The door of the office was open and I glanced in that direction. To my surprise it was Ole 536. "How could a woman like her cry?" I thought, because of her meanness. I stopped to listen as Ole 536 poured her heart out to the commander. "Colonel," she remarked, "I want to be relieved of my duties. I cannot take the physical torture of the men in my ward. They hate me and despise me, resent my presence." The Colonel after hearing her plea shot back at her in a terse voice. "Lieutenant, it is your duty to keep those men under your charge resentful. By hating you, they have a will to go on living and recover. This is your job, now get back to your ward." My feelings were ones of remorse, she had made me hate her so I could recover and face life again. I hustled myself down the boardwalk and into the ward to my cot. As I sat down the nurse entered the ward, yelling at us as usual. I cried silently for her because she cared for me, and everyone in the ward. She was doing her job well under duress, as the men responded in a hateful attitude. Ole 536 craved to be loved, but her duties made everyone hateful and

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<sup>3</sup> Rehabilitation hospitals were intended to get wounded soldiers back into shape so that they could return to duty, and were modeled after ones that the British had developed earlier in the war. These centers used programs identical to the one that Olexa describes. "The Rehabilitation Program European Theater of Operations APO #871," WW2 US Medical Research Centre, [www.med-dept.com/articles/the-rehabilitation-program-european-theater-of-operations-apo-871/](http://www.med-dept.com/articles/the-rehabilitation-program-european-theater-of-operations-apo-871/).

resentful. I marveled at her performance now, knowing the real purpose of her actions. To do what is difficult for others is a mark of talent. She as well as others in her field should be honored, receive medals for their contribution to mankind.

*See material on p. 238*

The hospital train chugged away from Nottingham, south to our new destination, which was the city of Birmingham.<sup>4</sup> The treatment at the rehab hospital made Ole 536 a saint compared to this place. It was for our own good, though, although we grumbled, bitched and resented the way we were treated. Arriving by truck from the railroad, we were assigned to billets of 15 men each. Our gear was thrown in a pile with orders for us to lug it by ourselves. The Quonset huts were about 5 blocks away. The area around the hospital was beautiful. It consisted of grass and trees like a person would see on an estate of the wealthy. We helped each other in tying the gear so we could drag it. We all had difficulties physically in moving this gear. I walked with crutches, dragging the gear a step at a time. It was pitiful as we grumbled about the army in general. It took us about an hour to get to the Quonset huts, but we made it. We were tired from our ordeal and plopped onto the cots. Within an hour, an army Major came in with two orderlies. We were given orders to make our own beds and keep the billet clean. We also were told that the area of the Quonset huts outside had to be policed daily. The washroom and toilets were centrally located and big enough to accommodate 50 men at one time. The mess hall was further down, near the administration buildings. One last thing before the Major left, he took five pairs of crutches with him. "Major," I asked just before he left, "how are we with leg wounds going to get around without crutches?" "Use your legs or crawl," he said abruptly then left. Talk about grumbling and cussing, each billet sent a haze of resentment into the air. We were going to write to General Eisenhower, our congressmen, and even the President about this 'hell hole'. In the days that were ahead we had to rely on one another for help. I don't believe anyone in the Rehab hospital wrote any letters except to loved ones. Getting things off of our chests about the treatment was a good antidote. Those of us without crutches had to hop or crawl here and there, wherever we went. Those with arm, neck, and back injuries tried to help us whenever they could. Our muscles had shrunk from lack of use. We had to get exercise and use them as much as possible. Every time I tried to step on my foot it was like getting an electric jolt. I cursed the Major every time for taking away my only means of getting around.

At 5 o'clock the bugle blew, mess call. It was good to hear the bugle once again instead of a shell exploding. With all of the aches and pains I encountered on my way to the mess hall, I wondered whether it was worth all the trouble. All the other men felt the same way. The meals were very good and nourishing. On my return to the Quonset hut, I was in for a surprise. Glancing up towards the second billet I saw a soldier with his back towards me. "Hey, Fletcher<sup>5</sup>, is that you?" The man turned with a gleeful look, recognizing me. Like two charging bulls, only at a snail's pace, we approached each other. We hugged and cried like two lost brothers. I finally found someone I knew this side of the Channel. This man was hit in the left knee by a bullet that

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<sup>4</sup> This would have been Rehabilitation Center #2, located at Bromsgrove, an estate outside of Birmingham. "The Rehabilitation Programs," WW2 US Medical Research Centre.

<sup>5</sup> The list of L Company soldiers receiving the Combat Infantry Badge dated July 7, 1944, includes Private Ted Fletcher. MRC 301-INF(26)-1-13, 120.

was meant for me by a sniper inland from Omaha Beach. "How's the wound?" I asked my companion. "O.K.," he said, "give a look," as he pulled the pant leg up. The wound was a gaping hole with half a knee gone. "Wow," I said to myself trying to hide the shock. "I'll be O.K. after another operation Sarge. How's yours?" "Mine is not as bad as yours Fletch," lifting my foot for him to see. "How are the men in the platoon Sarge?" Fletch asked, eagerly waiting for me to speak. "Most of the men you knew are gone. Many of them were wounded and some killed in action." Fletch was stunned to hear of those he knew that were killed in battle. "I can't believe it Sarge, I can't believe it." "It's true Fletch," I managed to say, holding back the tears as I visualized the lifeless bodies of men who were my buddies. We talked on into the night of our experiences, the narrow escapes and the rain we had to endure at the Front. We lived in misery and shared everything with each other.

*See material on pp. 239-240*

One day a call came for men with O type blood to volunteer to give blood. It was badly needed in the evacuation hospitals near the Front they said. Three hundred of us showed up at the donor's station within the hour to give blood. The nurses and orderlies were jabbing us like mosquitoes as the blood flowed into the containers. It took nearly the whole day for the nurses and orderlies to complete the task. In the mess hall that night the hospital Commander praised us for the response of giving blood. What the Commander didn't know was that combat men shared. As the days continued to go by, our desires became stronger to get back to our outfits and with the men we knew. Three days later, after giving a pint of blood, I was told to report to the administration building to a Sergeant Yeager. Stepping inside the office I asked for Sergeant Yeager. "Sergeant, you don't have O type blood and I want to see your dog-tags!" "What's wrong Sergeant?" I asked. "Your blood type is B negative." "Holy-Cow, I've been wearing those tags since I joined the army." "What if I would have been given a blood transfusion at the Front?" I asked. "You would have survived because eventually your body would have made more new blood." "Phew!" I was glad to hear that, although I wasn't sure the Sergeant was right. "How long will it be before my new dog-tags arrive?" I asked. "Two days, Sergeant, I promise, pick them up then." "O.K. Sergeant, I'll see you in two days." Arriving back at our hut, Fletch, was waiting for me. "I'm leaving tomorrow Sarge, for the States." He was hopping about like a grasshopper with glee. "You lucky so and so," I said, hugging him like a bear. "Golly, I'm going to miss you, Fletch." "You've been a good soldier and I'm glad to have served with you." "Ditto Sarge, I feel the same about you." After breakfast the next morning half of the men left. Not everyone was headed state-side, but I knew Fletch would. Fletch moved out of my life like a castle on a sandy beach. He'll limp when he walks, but he still has his leg, thank God. Other wounded men arrived replacing the men that left. These men were treated the same way and their reaction to the treatment was the same as any disgruntled soldier.

Two days later after the men's arrival I met Lieutenant Fortce on my way to the Canteen. "Hello, Sergeant, it's good to see you." "Likewise, Lieutenant," as we firmly shook hands. "How's the wound in the chest Lieutenant?" I asked. "I lost a lung Sergeant, but I'm glad to be alive. I'm headed for the States then a discharge." "I'm sorry Sergeant, of what I had done to you and thanks for your forgiveness." "That's okay Lieutenant," I replied, "it's forgotten." I was still puzzled but surmised that the Lieutenant thought I was a coward the day I was strafed at the outpost in North Africa. I didn't see the Lieutenant or bump into him for the remaining days of

my stay at the rehab hospital. Within a few days I boarded a truck with others and was sent to the 10<sup>th</sup> Replacement Depot.

Replacements from here would be sent across the Channel to the combat outfits needing men. My leg wounds and ankle bothered me some, but I kept my mouth shut. I wanted to get back with the men I knew. Combat men like myself were needed badly and I was worried of being assigned to another outfit. At the replacement depot, I asked if I could be sent back to my regular outfit. Their response was that “every effort would be made to see that I did, but not to count on it.”<sup>6</sup> My mind was made up that once I was in France, I would go AWOL to my outfit. Our stay at the 10<sup>th</sup> Replacement Depot was three days. In this time, we received equipment and gear to ready us for combat duty. We also were given extra booster shots from the medics and I wondered if I had any real blood running in my veins. Leaving the 10<sup>th</sup> Depot by truck, we went to Southampton and loaded on an LST which was anchored in the harbor. Must have been about three hundred of us on board as we moved out into the Channel headed for France. All of us were men who had been wounded in battle and [were] now heading back to our outfits. All of us were eager to get away from the rear and to the Front. Our destination was Omaha Beach, although we didn’t know it at the time.<sup>7</sup> We ran into a little rain and rough seas about half way across. By the time the coastline of France was seen the sun was peeping through the clouds again. The navy crafts destroyed by the Germans and hurricane were still scattered along the coastline. Two long steel-meshed docks had been put up by the engineers for the unloading of supplies. My thoughts went back to the hardships of D-Day landings.

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<sup>6</sup> The assignment of replacements was a major problem due to high levels of casualties in infantry companies. Most of the replacements were either fresh from the States or reassigned from support units, and lacked combat experience or even appropriate training. Returnees like Olexa tended to want to return to their own units, and the Army went back and forth on whether or not to grant such requests, since this sometimes led to an oversupply of men in one unit when others faced serious shortages. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy*, 274-275.

<sup>7</sup> One of the ironies of the Normandy invasion and subsequent campaign was that for all the Allied interest in seizing working ports, it took a very long time for them to be captured and put in working order, and supplies continued to be landed on the invasion beaches for months afterward, with the Allies creating an infrastructure that enabled them to offload the LSTs quickly and move men and cargo by rail directly from the beaches.