

## Chapter 16: The Long Road Home

### Part A: From Aachen to the Hürtgen Forest

The second barrier of the Siegfried defenses would be much harder to penetrate, and it would be costly in routing the enemy from these defenses. Aachen was one of the important places, and a gateway into the heart of the Rhineland. Our convoy arrived in a wooded area and we began to relieve other units that were already there and dug in. As the transfer began, we were briefed on the situation within the sector, leaving us to defend the area. The wooded area was thick with trees, and most of them pine trees. The rain turned to sleet, making our night miserable and wet. Although the 1<sup>st</sup> barrier had been penetrated, we were now straddled on the road to the city of Cologne in the northern fringe of the Hürtgen Forest. Our progress was becoming slow, because of the nature of the terrain. Only infantrymen were able to walk through the thick brush and trees. Tanks and halftracks had to use the narrow rutty lanes through the forest. Mines had to be removed in the lanes, which stalled any drive. The Germans also had barbed-wire entanglements, fifteen feet high and about twenty feet deep, with tin cans attached to make noise. The defense positions behind the barbed wire made it difficult to approach the barrier without being seen, let alone splice Bangalore-torpedoes to blow a hole to get through. German artillery and heavy mortars were already zeroed in on the area and could rain shells on any assault moving up to the barbed-wire. This was an ingenious barrier made by the enemy, making infantry losses very high. Replacements [shortages] were still very acute, and each unit was undermanned to keep the drives moving. The Germans took advantage of the slowdowns to resupply, because of their short distance to bring up the needed materials and men. The enemy too had all of the advantages of the defenses in this sector.

Hostilities became nil as the rain and sleet kept falling. Everything we owned was now soaked with water. Taking off my shoes, I rubbed my cold feet and put on a coat of gun oil. The oil seemed to help my feet even though my shoes were drenched with water. I could not help but to think of those nice buildings where we could be dry. All day the wet snow kept falling as we jumped like jumping jacks to keep warm. Late in the afternoon the Jeep arrived with a hot meal. I never shivered and shook so much in all of my life as I did going for chow when it was our turn. We had to keep our mess kits against our chest in order to eat without shaking the food off the spoon. The coffee was good and hot, and as strong as tobacco juice, but we drank it.

Orders were given that all noncoms and officers were to meet with company commander at his command post. When all of the leaders were assembled, we were informed that a unit would move through our lines at dawn to take the city of Eschweiler<sup>1</sup>. We were informed that there was an underground munitions factory there. The task of taking this objective would be slow and the engagement would be bitter as well as costly to the Americans in this operation. At the break of dawn, the first contingent of troops began moving through. Rain mixed with snow

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<sup>1</sup> Eschweiler is located east of Aachen, and outside of the Hürtgen Forest. It was not on any of the axes of attack of any of the American units sent into the forest. Otherwise, his description of combat and physical conditions in the Hürtgen Forest, where the division was engaged between Nov. 16 and Dec. 7, however, are quite accurate. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 318-323.

was still falling. The unit was part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division<sup>2</sup>, and the point kept moving down the narrow lane. Two tanks could be heard approaching from the rear. These would support the infantry whenever they could. They would be unable to move off of the road, yet the fire power would be of great help. About a half mile into the woods, the point came upon the first barbed-wire entanglement. It was massive, and bangalore torpedoes would have to be used to breach this barrier. The movements of the forward troops were detected by the Germans who began firing two machine guns that swept the entire area. Heavy mortars began falling and exploding with great intensity. The Germans realized that an offensive had been in progress, and now began bombarding the area with artillery. The enemy withdrew from their positions during the mortar barrage. The shells hit the trees, knocking large segments of tree tops and trunks to the ground.<sup>3</sup>

The Germans began walking the shells towards our positions, causing havoc to the forward troops as well as the trees. What men were alive, and able, were running with fear showing on their faces. The two tanks were abandoned by their crews as the artillery shells kept creeping towards us. The noise of falling debris and the explosions of shells sounded like a tornado in progress. Within a short time, the shells were exploding around us as we lay in our foxholes. I don't think that anyone at this time was worried about being cold or about the sleet that was falling. Our main worry was falling tree tops and shrapnel. It was mid-day when the shelling subsided. Our muscles and bodies ached all over from the ordeal. Many men were killed by concussion alone. Only a trace of blood from the nose, mouth or ear could be seen on many of the dead. Some were mutilated pretty bad, and arms, legs and torsos lying about was hard to stomach. Details were sent to pick up the bodies and limbs, a ghastly job, but it had to be done.

The Germans had won the first round, but now it was decided to move under the cover of darkness. The night attack through the forest was a success. The barbed-wire barrier was breached without too much difficulty, and bolt cutters were brought to good use as the assault units slipped through. The element of surprise routed the enemy in Eschweiler as well-organized squads pushed the frightened enemy out of the town. At dawn the Germans threw in heavy artillery barrages within the city as well as the woods to keep reinforcements from coming into Eschweiler. We were threatening the secondary defenses of the Siegfried Line, which the Germans would like to hold at all costs. With the mission accomplished<sup>4</sup> and the shelling by the enemy subsided, we were moved to the rear for that much needed rest.

Our rest area was between Aachen and the city of Verviers, Belgium.<sup>5</sup> We had pup tents to sleep in, and we were promised that our extra blankets would be brought to us. It was getting

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<sup>2</sup> The 47<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division was attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division at the start of this campaign. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 319.

<sup>3</sup> The creation of explosions in the treetops, known as "tree bursts," was intentional, since the explosions rained both shrapnel and jagged pieces of wood directly down onto the troops below and into any positions that did not have overhead cover. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 321.

<sup>4</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Division remained engaged in the Hürtgen Forest until early December, and had not accomplished its mission when withdrawn. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 324. Olexa had been wounded and sent to the rear by this time, and may be confusing what happened after Aachen with what happened after the later engagement.

<sup>5</sup> It was located at a place called Hervé, where the division had set up a rest camp. During November, prior to launching their attacks in the Hürtgen Forest, men from different regiments rotated there. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 319.

much colder now, as the temperatures began to drop drastically. When the truck arrived with our large blanket rolls, I immediately spotted the one I had marked. In this roll were the two swords from the Eupen, Belgium campaign. My second in command, Sergeant Popolowski, and myself carried the blankets to our area. All that was left of my platoon was four men, and that was including myself. We divided the blankets among ourselves. Hurriedly I untied the cords binding the blanket and rolled them out. The swords looked beautiful and I sighed with relief, and placed them in my pup tent

Later in the afternoon, a runner from the company commander came with orders to assemble at the command post. The company commander had a big walk-in tent with a stove that made the tent quite comfortable. Lieutenant Eager Beaver was sacking on a nice folding cot. I was informed that replacements were to arrive shortly and that I would get my men. My platoon leader didn't say anything to me, although I sensed he was still sore about my bucking his orders. When the replacements came, I was given thirty men, which were three squads of 10 men each. The men were mixed, air corps and infantry, with three master-sergeants as squad leaders. "Who's the ranking Sergeant?" I asked. "I am," was the response from one of the air corps sergeants. "You outrank me, Sergeant, so the platoon is yours. I'm only a staff sergeant. The responsibility of the platoon is yours." "I don't want the platoon, sergeant, because I am not a combat man." All the three Master Sergeants refused to take over the platoon, and willingly turned in their ranks and became privates. It must have been a blow to them, for they were two grades higher than I. The pay scale was much higher also. I admired these men and felt sorry for them. I still kept them as squad leaders and they proved themselves as leaders. The company commander also informed me that I was selected to take one full day of rest and recreation starting at 0800 hours the next morning. "You will be taken to Verviers<sup>6</sup> by truck tomorrow." I pondered the thought of taking the swords with me to see if I could find someone to send them home for me. I had two German Lugers besides the one with the missing firing pin. Sergeant Popolowski had taken the new men to our assigned area and I was standing just outside of the command post tent.

A Jeep rumbled up with two men in it and I immediately recognized one of them. I ran towards the Jeep, "Corporal Lebonitz, you old son-of-a-gun," I yelled. I hadn't seen this soldier since Africa. He had a trick shoulder that would dislodge itself, and because of this he was placed in limited service. We embraced each other and danced around whooping it up like dancing in a country square dance. "Boy, am I glad to see you Leb." "Like-wise," he responded, looking me over. We would pester this guy a lot when we had pork chops to eat.<sup>7</sup> This man was a good soldier and I was proud of him. He was now a Sergeant, the same rank that I had. "What outfit are you with Leb?" I asked. "Supply, Sarge," he answered. "Boy, what a break you got. Did you get your shoulder taken care of?" "Yes, I did, I'll show it to you." Unbuttoning his fatigue jacket and pushing the left portion back enough for me to see. I stared at a gruesome scar that ran the length of his collar bone. Man, was it ugly and I was sorry to have asked. Leb didn't seem to mind, though. "I had a hard time trying to locate you guys," Leb replied, "and I'm glad I

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<sup>6</sup> Verviers appears regularly in the division records as an R & R destination for men from the unit. The other common destination was Paris, which would have been a lot more fun, but would require longer leave. About 1% of the men in the regiment received passes to Paris. Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Presumably because Lebonitz was Jewish and did not want to eat pork.

was able to catch up to you.” “How long ago is that Leb?” “Ever since I got out of the hospital in Algiers.” “Boy that’s a long time ago,” I remarked. Leb and I walked to my tent as we reminisced old times. I was the only one in the Company that he knew. All those he asked about were either wounded in action or dead. He was awestruck to hear about these men that he had been associated with, and never realized that the war was taking its toll of the many friends he had. Arriving at my tent, I turned to Leb and said, “Leb, I have two swords that I want to send home and I am glad you are here and maybe you can help me. For your troubles I’ll give you a German Luger and three clips of ammunition or two hundred dollars to mail these swords for me.” “I’ll take the Luger and the ammunition,” my companion responded. “I don’t know what the cost will be to send the swords but here’s twenty dollars.” Leb was very excited to see the swords, especially the General’s sword. Somehow, the new men gathered around us admiring my prizes. One Master Sergeant said, “I’ll give you five hundred dollars for that General’s sword.” “No,” was my answer. “I’ll make it a thousand,” was the second offer from the air corps Sergeant, waving the money for me to see. “No dice,” I responded. Scribbling the address of my brother-in-law, who lived in Conewango Valley, New York, on a farm, I handed it to Leb. Lieutenant Eager Beaver saw the group of us standing and was curious as to what was going on.

When the Lieutenant saw the swords he asked, “who has the possession of these weapons?” “I do, Lieutenant,” was my answer to his question. “Don’t you know that these weapons should have been turned in?” “Not these, Lieutenant, for they are mine and I plan to keep them.” “That General’s sword should be turned in, Sergeant, and I’m taking it from you. That’s an order Sergeant.” “I’ve waited a long time to get my hands on these swords, Lieutenant, and you take the best one away? I bet you want it for yourself, seeing you will never find one as good anywhere.” “O.K. Sergeant, that’s enough mouthing off,” relieving me of my prize and walking off with it. All of us were dumbfounded, for we had little to say. “Somebody ought to shoot that snake, for he don’t deserve to live,” someone replied. I could have cried, but I was fortunate to have at least one sword. The crowd dispersed hurriedly and Leb assured me that the sword would be sent. Shaking hands, we said our ‘Good-byes’ and my friend left. “See you in Toledo, Leb.” My friend turned and waved, responding to what I had said.

Our rendezvous the next morning for that rest and recreation was at the battalion headquarters. There were about twenty of us, and it wasn’t long before we were on our way. Arriving in Verviers, we were dropped off in front of a large tent. Lining up, we walked inside and of all things, we were deloused by two men sticking a nozzle inside our clothes, and blowing a powder that came out of the nozzle with a force of air. Our next move was to remove all of our clothes and place them in piles. One pile for shirts, one for pants, and one for socks. Our underwear was discarded when we moved down the line to get a new issue of clothing. Holding our new clothes, we were shuttled into a building at the rear of the tent. Placing our clothes on a large bench, we opened a door and entered into a room that was like a sauna--filled with steam. The room was hot and even the marble floor felt the same on our feet. Showers were running full blast and we began scrubbing ourselves with soap. The heat felt good and made us relax. Most of us took the allotted forty-five minutes to shower and then got dressed. In the same building on the other end was a mess hall where we were served real eggs, sunny side up, toast, coffee, sliced peaches, sausage and jelly. Wolfing down the meal, we all went back for seconds some had thirds. All of us wondered whether the army was spoiling us or really wanting us to relax. After breakfast we all headed for the center of town. What a letdown. The stores and shops were

boarded up and closed. The place was dead except for the trucks and vehicles moving thru with supplies. The air was cold and crisp, so we headed back to the mess hall and stayed in the building until dinner time. Meatloaf, dehydrated potatoes, coffee, bread and peach pie, a fine meal for men that ate rations most of the time. It was miserable just sitting around with nothing to do. We had money, but nothing to spend it on. Most of us by now were sorry that we had come to town. We were fed at 5 o'clock that night which consisted of ham, apple sauce, bread, gran beans, dehydrated potatoes, plums and coffee. At 0600 we were on the truck and headed back to our units. The idea of rest and recreation was good, but we should have gone to Liège, which was a much bigger place and wide open.

*See material on pp. 317-318*

#### Part B: Moving to the Rear

*In the original manuscript, Olexa follows the account of the court martial with a summary of the Battle of the Bulge and notes that the 1<sup>st</sup> Division had to move in support on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 99<sup>th</sup> Divisions on the north shoulder of the German breakthrough, but no actual details of his own experiences, which makes sense, since he had left the division by then, although he does not seem to have recognized this, and simply assumed that those memories were blanked out due to his injury. The German attack began on December 16, and on Dec. 17, elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division murdered over 100 American soldiers near Malmédy Belgium, an event to which he had a personal connection, which he describes in the following paragraph.*

At Malmedy the enemy did succeed to break through with an armored column but were later driven back by the American 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. In this engagement of hard and bitter fighting the Germans did take about 150 American prisoners. A German tank commander ordered the Americans into an open field, and had the tank crew fire upon them, which later was called the "Malmedy Massacre." Within this group of American prisoners was a soldier from my home town by the name of Paul Goss. I knew his father and mother well, and went to school with him, his brother, and sister. When the machine gun on the tank began firing into the group he fell to the ground and two dead buddies fell on top of him. After the shooting the German tank Commander ordered the German soldiers to bayonet the wounded. Somehow my friend survived the ordeal without being bayoneted. When the news of the massacre spread, the reaction by everyone was to kill every German they could see. Sometime later the government notified my home town that Paul Goss was one of the survivors. I was only 5 minutes away, so near, yet so far away when all of this happened.

*Contrary to his statement, Olexa was not five minutes away from Malmédy, at least not at the time of the massacre. Instead, he had already begun his tour of hospitals in Belgium and France, en route to a psychiatric facility in England. His letter dated Dec. 3, the first that he had written since Nov. 14, before he went into the Hürtgen Forest, indicates that he was in a hospital in Belgium recovering from "war nerves." He passed through several hospitals in Belgium, one of which was the 130<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Ciney, Belgium, to which some of Agnes's letters to him were routed. He picks up his story with his injury, and thus in late November rather than mid-December.*

During the intense fighting and shelling by the Germans in our sector, I was knocked unconscious by the concussion of an exploding shell. I was not wounded and did not remember anything and found myself in an aid station.<sup>8</sup> There in a house, I was sitting against a wall in a room when my senses came back to me. Looking about, I could see other soldiers lying about with no bandages and snoring to high heaven. I slowly got to my feet and walked to the door turning the knob and stepping into a hallway. “Hey, soldier,” someone yelled, “you got to stay in that room.” Turning I saw a medic sitting near a makeshift desk. “How did I get there?” I asked. “You walked in with a bunch of other men,” the medic replied. “You better get back into that room,” the orderly responded or “I’ll call the doctor.” “Good,” I replied, “if I’m not wounded, I’ll go back to my unit.” “Lieutenant, Lieutenant!” the medic yelled and the officer made an appearance into the hallway. “This man came out of that room and won’t go back in.” “Well soldier, how do you feel?” the Lieutenant asked. “Fine,” I responded, “but I don’t know how I got here. I’d like to go back, Lieutenant, to my unit.” “I’m afraid you’ll have to stay a while until I examine you.” “I don’t hurt anywhere, Lieutenant, so I must be alright.” “Did you take those pills I gave you?” the doctor asked. “I don’t know” was my reply. Opening my cupped hand, I saw two light blue capsules. “Blue 88’s,” I thought, “they’ll knock you out for twenty-four hours.”<sup>9</sup> I was slowly realizing why those men were in the deep end of sleep. The Lieutenant looked into my eyes with a light and remarked to the orderly that I was O.K. “Give him two more pills and put him back into the room with the others.” The orderly dumped two more 88’s into my hand from a large jar. I now had four lethal pills in my possession and I made up my mind that I wouldn’t take any of them.

Sitting in that room for another hour was about all I could take. I viewed each soldier in the room looking at their features as they lay snoring on the floor. These men had seen some hard fighting [I could tell] because of their clothes and physical exhaustion. Getting to my feet, I slipped the knock-out pills into my pocket and went to the door. Turning the knob, I pushed but the door didn’t open. I was perturbed when the door didn’t move the second time I tried, and realized it was locked. Putting my shoulder to the door, I pushed with all of my strength against it, breaking the lock, and I was now in the hallway. The orderly was gone from the desk, so I went to the stairway and made my way down to another hallway on the first floor. A medical doctor came into the hallway and asked me what I wanted. “I just want to get out into fresh air,” was my response. “Don’t venture too far, soldier and don’t stay out too long,” “I won’t,” was my answer and I stepped outside. The winter wind was blowing as large snowflakes floated about, hitting the ground and melting into oblivion. It was cold, but I was refreshed to be out in the weather. Looking about, I saw two other houses and a truck and a jeep parked nearby. There

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<sup>8</sup> He was indeed wounded, but with what is now known as a traumatic brain injury. The lack of detail in his account of events after the fall of Aachen is likely due to the effects of that injury. A few vivid memories, like the visit to Verviers and his court martial, stood out, but apparently he could not recall much else, and does not say anything about his relations with Lt. Eager Beaver after the court martial. If the court martial took place shortly before the move into the Hürtgen Forest, there would not have been time for many new problems to develop, and the conditions in the forest and the recent reprimand from Col. Corley likely prevented new conflicts from developing, or at least ones that Olexa would remember later.

<sup>9</sup> “Blue 88s” was the nickname the men gave to sodium amytal, a barbiturate that was used as a sedative for men with physical injuries as well as for psychiatric cases. It put them men into a deep sleep, which could be of some help for those with physical injuries, and tended to leave men in something of a stupor. In some cases, it was used to ease anxiety and reduce men’s resistance to going back to the front, although that did not happen in Olexa’s case. McManus, *The Deadly Brotherhood*, 193.

was a large sign nailed to one of the houses, “3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Aid Station.” I had on a thin fatigue jacket and the famous go-to-hell knit cap that sat on top of my head. I was outside about ten minutes just watching the snow fluttering about and then went back inside. The medical doctor asked me how I felt and I responded by saying I was fine, and was ready to leave for my unit any time. The doctor told me that I was going back to the Regimental hospital to the rear with some other men right after chow. It was the noon hour and the medical staff was at the mess hall tent eating. When they returned, food was brought in on trays for the patients who were awake and could feed themselves. The men upstairs could be sleeping till supper time without stirring. The doctor surmised that I didn’t take the pills but didn’t say a word. Not long after lunch time, a jeep from the Regiment arrived and three of us jumped in and were on our way. Along the way we met four ambulances that were to pick up the wounded litter cases.

Going into a tent at the Regimental Aid Station, I was surprised to see 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant Hap setting at a desk. “Sergeant Hap, you old son-of-a-gun, what a sight for sore eyes,! I yelled. The Sergeant was on his feet and hugging me like a bear. I was doing the same, and we embraced each other. “The rumor was, Sergeant Hap, that you died of fatal wounds,” I responded. “Boy, it’s good to see you.” Within a short time, I was responding to the questions put to me of the men in L Company. Sergeant Hap was [had been] in charge of the Weapons Platoon in the Company. Every man asked about was either wounded or dead. The Sergeant was awed at the answers I gave him about the men he knew. The last straw was broken when I revealed the story of Lieutenant Eagan, our company commander, and how he died. Sergeant was filled with emotion and the tears rolled down his cheeks, dropping on his chest. I too had memories and cried silently with him. Our composure and emotions were soon regained, and we began wiping away the remaining tears with our shirt sleeves. “Colonel Rainey is in Command here, Sergeant, he’ll be glad to see you.” “Colonel, huh?” I responded. “I remember when he was a Captain in Africa. I don’t think the doc will remember me, Sergeant Hap.” “I know he will, Sergeant,” Hap answered. “He’s got a good memory.”

After checking in at the admittance tent, Sergeant Hap and I took off down the company street to a brick building. A sign read: Regiment Aid Hospital. Tents along the street were lined up straight, housing some wounded, and men recuperating from exhaustion. Lieutenant Colonel Rainey was sitting at this desk when the sergeant and I entered. He even remembered the day I sent him flying through the air when he applied some alcohol to my neck wound in Africa. We laughed heartily at this incident which happened ages ago. Although I asked to be sent back to my unit, the Colonel informed me that I had to stay a couple of days to rest, and forget about the war. “We have a mess tent set up where you will be able to get anything you want to eat at any hour. How’s that for a start?” the Colonel asked. “There will be plenty of blankets to keep you warm, a soft mattress and a cot with a pillow. There will be no one giving any orders, and you can do what you please within reason. We want every man from the front to enjoy himself before being sent back,”<sup>10</sup> I was flabbergasted, and wondered what would the army do next. The first thing on the agenda was getting an issue of new clothing, and that included new combat boots that laced up ten inches on your leg. This was something new to me.<sup>11</sup> After a nice hot

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<sup>10</sup> This approach was part of the Army’s effort to help psychiatric casualties recover and be able to return to their units. The hope was that a few days of rest in a secure setting with good food and facilities, but not too far from the front and their unit, would restore their will to fight. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers*, 169-170.

<sup>11</sup> McManus, *Deadly Brotherhood*, 35-37, notes the poor quality of the combat boots issued to soldiers, and efforts to provide better ones in the winter of 1944-1945.

shower, I was ready to eat, and I seemed to be famished. In the mess tent, which was a large one, there were tables and benches with food set up gourmet style on one end.

When I entered, there were some men already eating and a couple of men just starting to put food on to their trays. There was a cook behind the food counter to help. I was amazed at the food before me. In the meat section was baked ham, chicken, T-bone steaks, hamburgers, roasted and Polish sausages and German franks with skins. I had to pinch myself to know that I was awake and not dreaming. In the vegetable section were peas, beans, succotash, cabbage, mashed potatoes, fried potatoes or boiled potatoes with skins. The dessert section was all kinds of puddings, jello with pears, peaches, plums and cherries in their own juices, just waiting to be scooped. The pie and cake section was something else. If anyone had a favorite it was there to take. At the very end was the beverage section. Hot coffee in urns, with large white cups just begging to be taken, half pint milk bottles placed in ice to keep them cold, tea bags, glasses and hot water to make your own. Every new arrival was guilty of taking more than he could eat, and I was included. Everything was quieted down at 2100 hours with all lights turned out in the sleeping tents. The mess hall was lit up like a Christmas tree which glowed in the dark.

Lying between the clean white sheets without a care in the world, I fell asleep. What we were experiencing was a bit of paradise, which was beyond our imagination, yet everything we had was a reality. At 0600 hours we were awakened by the sound of a bugle. I hadn't heard one blown in ages. Although the air was chilly, we had no problem getting out of bed, and heading for the wash room down the street. Breakfast was served at 0700 hours and we lined up to help ourselves. Another section was added for breakfast foods. There was a big pan of hot cakes, one of french toast, eggs scrambled, eggs sunny-side up, sausages and bacon. Cereal and pint milk bottles were on the tables. Orange and grape juice containers beckoned each man as they went by. After breakfast, I fully realized that this place was really a place of rest. The cares of the world and the war seemed to vanish. When the men would return to the front, they were refreshed and this place would be a vivid memory. Although I seemed normal in my thinking capacity, I still had a little difficulty in remembering things. On the second day, after breakfast, we were assembled outside of our tents to receive orders. Some of the men were notified that they would return to their units and had to return the blankets, sheets and pillows to supply. My name was not on the list or called, which meant that I was not leaving at this time. During my walk around the area, I bumped into Sergeant Hap. "Hey, Hap." I yelled, "when am I leaving this paradise?" "You won't be, friend," he responded. "You're going back further to the rear." I didn't believe my friend, but he was right.

On the third day, after breakfast, Colonel Rainey approached me and said "Sergeant, your combat days are over. I'm recommending that you be placed on Limited Service. With your experiences as a combat soldier, you will be able to train others in warfare as an infantryman and tactics used for survival." At first I thought the Colonel was not serious, for I still wanted to return to my unit. I was dumbfounded at first as the Colonel explained, "all of the men you knew in your company are gone. Let the new men carry on the fight. You have served well and have done your share in this war." That afternoon, 25 of us climbed into a truck and headed for the city of Liège, Belgium. It was near dark when we arrived at our billet area, with rows of tents holding twelve men to a tent. A hasty meal was served at the mess tent, and we walked down the muddy street to retire. There were plenty of blankets for us to keep warm in the tent, and as we crawled under the blankets we could hear the rain and snow falling on the tent. Liège was a fuzzy memory of events with rain and buzz bombs exploding. Above our camp on a hill overlooking the Meuse River was a large hospital. It was a brick building jugged with windows.



Every time the mechanism of a buzz bomb went off, we extended ourselves on hands and knees and waited for the explosion.<sup>12</sup> The concussion was great, which would knock us to the ground. There was nothing of a military value in this area and we wondered why the Germans were sending those destructive weapons into this area.<sup>13</sup> A buzz bomb did hit the hospital about center, doing extensive damage. The bomb hit the operating section, which was manned 24 hours a day to operate on the wounded. Many operating teams of doctors and nurses as well as the wounded were killed in the explosions. We were taken out of the danger zone by walking.

My memory was somewhat vague, but we were in a factory with wooden floors. I could see the pulleys and belts of all descriptions that were motionless. The hardwood floors were badly worn from war and the place was very clean. Gathering my senses together, I saw chaff, wheat, rye and oat seeds in remote places which I recognized as a mill, where grains were brought in to be ground. The menace of the buzz bombs exploding was still very present. Our anxiety and fear was great among the men in the factory, who wondered just how long it would be before one would hit the factory. The Germans were five miles short of the target, which was a large gasoline dump. We were in Liège three days with little else to remember.

How, and when, we left Liège is just a blank and void. My next recollections of memory was watching a chore lady on her knees, with a pail of sudsy water and a brush, scrubbing a marble floor. It was a large hallway with big archways and rooms to the right and left holding the wounded who were on cots. The place was a monastery that had been turned into a hospital. Somewhere in my tour I saw monks or priests walking about in dark robes with a sash of grey around their waist. I was not sure, but I believed that we were near the city of Brussels, Belgium.<sup>14</sup> At this hospital, I was with others on an insulin program. The insulin stimulated our appetites in a way to make us eat like pigs. We were fed six times a day for one week. Although I was in fair physical condition, I did gain weight. I was not given any drugs, although many of the fellows took paregoric.<sup>15</sup> My mind didn't function as fast as it should have to be on a normal keel, but I was improving.

My next recollection was riding in a train sitting on a coach with three other men. I don't remember leaving the hospital, but now I was well on my way in the direction of Paris. As the train moved, I was intrigued by watching the countryside. The day was sunny and crisp, and the rolling hills, farms and trees were interesting to see as they came into view and disappeared. Peace again was in the land, the Nazis were gone, and once again the people are free.

Arriving in Paris, we were taken to a large dormitory that had a small court. From the train to this building was a short walk, however, I do not remember walking or sleeping except of going to a commissary to buy cigarettes and candy. Behind a counter were three petite, well-shaped French girls. They spoke very good English and we were amazed. It was a delight for us to talk to the opposite sex and get answers. Combat soldiers see very little of a relaxed

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<sup>12</sup> One characteristic of the German V-1 "buzz bomb" was that its jet engine cut out when it had flown its pre-set distance, and which time the bomb fell to the ground and exploded. As long as you could hear the engine, you were safe, but if it shut off while near you, you were in danger.

<sup>13</sup> Liège was targeted because it was a major communications hub and had large quantities of supply dumps in the area, providing enough potential targets across a wide area to make it suitable for V-1 strikes. There may not have been much in the area of the hospital worth shooting at, but the V-1 was not a precision instrument, and might land anywhere in the area, whether a valuable target or not.

<sup>14</sup> He was probably at the 130<sup>th</sup> General Hospital at Ciney, Belgium, since Agnes's letters to him dated Nov. 14, Nov. 20 and Dec. 13 wound up being routed there. This unit specialized in psychiatric treatment.

<sup>15</sup> Paregoric is an opiate used to treat diarrhea.

atmosphere, which at times seemed strange to us. During the night there was an air raid, and the sirens shrieked and the guns began to boom upward into the black night. Early the next morning we were on the train headed for Normandy. As the train traveled, work crews were cleaning up the rubble in the rail yards as others were relaying tracks that were damaged by Allied bombs.<sup>16</sup> It was hard to understand the ravages of war. I could not remember a time in this war where I could see birds, or hear their songs, which to me was a strange phenomenon. Birds, God's creation, also should be everywhere but none were to be seen. Even they have suffered and seemed to have disappeared. Abe Lincoln says in part, "I can see how it might be possible for a man to look down upon the earth and be an atheist, but I cannot conceive how he could look up into heaven and say there is no God."

As the train continued its journey, chugging and puffing under the strain of its cargo, I could not help but remember what transpired in this part of France. I could not forget the lives of men and [the] blood that was shed and the battles fought to drive the Germans back. My role as a combat soldier was over, and as the turn of the wheels of the train kept moving, I was farther and farther away from the dangers of war. It was about 4 o'clock (1600 hours) in the afternoon when the train halted at a small town near Omaha Beach. Trucks were waiting for us, as well as ambulances, to take us to an evacuation hospital near the beach.<sup>17</sup> The day was cold, with dark grey clouds rolling across the sky to the east.

Arriving at the hospital, the walking cases were sent to the far end. The ward assigned to us was very warm and comfortable. There were forty of us in this particular ward, which was known as the 'psycho section'. After the assignment of a bed and receiving pajamas and bathrobe, we were told that chow was being served at the mess hall. The weather was nippy, with a strong wind blowing that made us hurry to and from the mess hall. Darkness enveloped the hospital area and the men in the ward lay on their cots, some listless, some nervous, and the rest laying on the bunks. At 2100 hours just before the light were to go out the nurse with an aide began giving the men medication prescribed from a chart. When the nurse came to my bed, she stated that I wouldn't need any medication. I watched the men as they drank their portion of the medicine and settling back on the cot in a happy manner. Within a short time, they were in happy land, and I knew that they had a good dose of drugs. When the lights were turned off, I lay wondering what would become of me. At 0630 in the morning, we were awakened by a shrill blast of a whistle that made us jump like frightened rabbits. Breakfast was at 0700, so we hurriedly got dressed and headed for the wash room. Returning from a refreshing shave and wash, I made my bed and waited for permission to go to breakfast. None of the men in the ward or the mess hall had a familiar face that I could recognize.

Back in the ward, the nurse told us of a library tent where we could take out books to read. Reading a book would be better than staring at the four walls, so I took off. Walking down the hospital street beyond the mess hall, I saw a sign, "Library," in front of a large tent. Walking in, I noticed stacks of books on two tables placed together. No one was present, so I began to

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<sup>16</sup> The bomb damage was not from the German air raid the night before, but from the massive campaign launched by the Allies prior to D-Day, which devastated the rail net in northern France to prevent the Germans from moving reinforcements to the area.

<sup>17</sup> Several of the hospitals set up in Normandy had moved on by then, and it is not clear which one he went to this time. He sent letters to Agnes on Dec. 28 and Dec. 30 from there, and since his visit seems to have lasted only about five days, he had likely stayed at Ciney well into December, and left for England around the first of the year.

look for a book that would be interesting to read. I cannot remember the title of the book I chose, but I was always interested in adventure stories.

At 0900 hours of the second day, four head-shrinkers came into the ward and began asking each patient how they felt. When the team came to me, I noticed the officer asking the questions was the Major –the Chief head shrinker. “How are you?” the Major asked. “I must be o.k.,” I replied sarcastically, “because I don’t get any medication like the others.” The Major looked at the chart and asked for my name. Responding to his request I gave him my name and rank. “Well, Sergeant,” the Major remarked, “you are lucky and don’t need any medications like the others.” Most of the men were complaining that they weren’t getting enough of the stuff to make them sleep longer. Some complained of headaches, others complained about stomach pains. The Major said something else which bounced off my head and moved to the next patient.

On the third day, after breakfast, I was taken by an orderly to a tent that was half lit up. Inside was a large picnic table with all kinds of blocks, round and square pieces of wood with molds of the same description. I sat down since no one was around. The orderly had asked me if I could return to the ward myself and I assured him I could, so he left. I was alone in the tent about fifteen minutes, when a captain walked in. “Good morning,” he said, sitting opposite of me at the table. “Another head shrinker,” I thought. “Am I really that bad?” “Sergeant, I’m going to give you some tests to see how you respond. I want you to place those round and square blocks in the molds for me. “Oh, that’s easy, Captain,” and I began the task of placing each block in its proper mold. Within a short time, the job was done. The head shrinker was watching me like a vulture. “Golly!” I thought, a little kid could do what I was doing. “Good! Good!” the captain replied, handing me two nails looped together, “Can you take these apart?” he asked, “Ya,” I replied, “I used to own a pair.” Twisting the nails a certain way, I slid them apart and laid them on the table. “Golly, you’re good,” the captain remarked. “Those things are easy,” I replied “and I’m not sick in the head, either.” “Who told you that?” the captain said. “Nobody,” I responded, “but you think I am.” “OK, Sergeant, I want you to add some numbers for me as I give them to you.” “How much is twenty-four and fifteen?” My mind was a blank and I just stared at the captain. “What’s sixteen and sixteen?” “Hold it, doc, give me a chance to think.” “Well, can you give me the answers, Sergeant?” “Give me time to think, I need a pencil and a piece of paper.” “No, I want you to add them in your head.” “I can’t think that fast to add, but give me a pencil and a paper and I’ll guarantee you’ll get the right answers.” “How does an apple and an orange compare with each other Sergeant?” “Well, they are fruits, smooth and somewhat round,” I replied. “Do you have the figures for me Sergeant?” “No, I don’t because I’ve got to think a little longer.” “What are the numbers I gave you?” “Let’s see, twenty-four and fifteen.” “What’s the other numbers?” “Oh,” I replied, “sixteen and sixteen.” “Can you give me the answers I want?” “Hell no, Rome wasn’t made in a day, and I’ve got to think. Give me a pencil and paper before you get me mad, and I’ll have the answers.”

With the last remark, I just stared again at the captain across the table. He watched me like a hawk sighting a mouse. “OK, here’s a pencil,” which was just large enough to place between my fingers. “Do you call this a pencil, it’s just two inches long. Golly, when I get back to the ward, I’ll get you a big pencil.” All the while, the captain just watched, saying nothing. “I need some paper,” was my next response. The captain tore a sheet from the pad he was writing on and handed it to me. “Do you remember the numbers I gave you?” “Yes,” I replied. “Are you sure?” he asked. “If I can’t remember, you can put me in a padded cell.” “Who said anything about a cell, Sergeant? Just give me the figures.” “Let’s see, twenty-four and fifteen is thirty-

nine.” “Sixteen and sixteen are thirty-two.” “OK Sergeant, you can go back to your ward.” So I got up and left.

During the afternoon, I saw my chart of the nurse’s desk. Picking it up, I read ‘neurosis-anxiety state’. It was convenient for the nurse to have all the charts so handy and lined up in a row on the wall. Knowing what my sickness was, I had to find out the meaning. I hurried to the library tent and found a dictionary. Neurosis – mental functional disorder. Anxiety – being uneasy or worried. Not a bad diagnosis of my condition. Now I understood why I wasn’t getting the drugs like the others, which made me feel good. During the morning of the fourth day the head-shrinkers were back asking the same questions. The same major stood in front of me and asked, “how are you doing Sergeant?” “Fine, Sir,” I replied which seemed to startle him a little. “I’m sorry for my rudeness the other day, Major,” He shook his head up and down accepting my apology. The Major moved on to the next man who began telling him of having bad dreams.

After the noon chow, I was informed by the nurse that I was going to England and to be ready to leave by 1400 hours (2 o’clock). England, I thought, I hope it will be near Blandford or Salisbury. I knew this area well, just like the back of my hand. At the precise hour, only half of the men in the ward left. A truck took us to the same airfield near Omaha Beach where I had boarded a plane months before to make the same trip to England. This plane had seats, and I got a window just behind the wing section. Our names were called from a roster by a nurse, and we settled back to wait our departure. The pilot and co-pilot started up the engines for a pre-warm up before takeoff. Another plane was waiting nearby for another group of men to arrive. The other pilot started his engines, although the other truck was just getting on to the airfield. We watched as the other truck drew up to the plane and the men hopped on board. The pilot informed us over the speaker that he’d give us a tour around Omaha Beach before leaving for England. “Fasten your seat belts,” the pilot remarked, “and no smoking till we are in the air.” We taxied to the far end of the airfield, turning west on the runway. Again, the pilot revved up the motors of the plane to full throttle for a while, then reducing the speed for takeoff. As the plane began to move down the runway gaining speed, I could not but help to think once again of Omaha. This was the fourth time I was to view the landing site of D-Day, June 6, 1944. Twice by air and twice by land, which gave me mixed emotions. I thought of the men who had died on this beach and those who were wounded. I could not believe how I survived and to see this beach for as many times as I did. The plane was airborne as we started to climb over the English Channel. The other plane was not far behind us as our plane began to bank, giving us a full view of Omaha. The pillbox was untouched, to be a reminder to others in its destructive state of the men landing here in that early dawn making history. One thing new was added to this beach that brought tears to my eyes. Just above the beach in the sand dune were neat rows of white crosses making the graves of the gallant men who gave their lives for God and Country. We all wept in silence as memories flashed through our minds of the men we knew and loved. The naval landing craft still jutted in the waters below, although the tanks and other assault equipment had been removed. Completing our circle as the white caps of the channel could be seen, we wiped away our tears. The plane like the homing pigeon had completed its circle for a hearing and now we were headed for England. At the last continent of Europe was behind us and the horizons of England and our tomorrows will appear. We will face them unafraid with dignity.

Part C: In the Psychiatric Hospital

*Psychiatric patients identified by the doctors as being incapable of returning to the front were sent to the rear for treatment, and from there would either be sent home and discharged or given noncombat assignments. While Col. Rainey had told Olexa that he was going to a training unit, he spent about two months in a psychiatric hospital first. While Olexa's account makes it seem as if he was in good shape by the time of his arrival, he did not write to Agnes again until January 21, about three weeks after his arrival, and only began writing regularly in mid-February. He also indicates that he worked as a plumber's apprentice at the hospital for his last three weeks there, so he may have still been feeling the effects of the concussion for some time after his arrival before being cleared to work. By this time, his letters indicate that he was growing impatient to move on to his next assignment, which he would eventually do in early March.*

The trip across the channel in the plane didn't take very long. We were soon flying over the seaport of Portsmouth and Southampton to an airport in Gloucester, almost in the Shakespeare country. Two trucks were waiting for us when the places came to the designated spots near a large hanger. We were taken to an evacuation hospital<sup>18</sup> in Gloucester proper, to a large brick building. Our truck was the first to unload, so we went into the building which had a long wide hallway. While waiting for further instructions from either doctors or orderlies, the second group of patients began filing in and I was elated to recognize one of them. "Sergeant Brown, you old son-of-a-gun," I said, taking him by the arm. "How are you?" I asked. There was no response from him. He was in charge of the mortar section of our weapons platoon of L Company and a good mortar man. "Sergeant!" I spoke again, "do you know who I am?" There was still no response but just a glassy stare, so I released my grip on the Sergeant's arm. I joined my own group again as a doctor and two orderlies were coming towards me. "Into this room," the doctor said, pointing to a doorway nearest to him. The room was quite large, and had two long tables and chairs against the walls to sit on. I recognized the doc to be another head shrinker, and we were told to have a seat. When the roster was called, each man stood up telling the doctor how he felt and what was wrong with him. The answers were numerous and the ailments many. When Sergeant Brown's name was called, he stood up and said, "Doc, I've got rabbit blood and I just seem to want to hop." With this, the Sergeant began to hop about like a jumping jack rabbit around the room into the hallway, and out the front door. All of us quickly ran to the large windows of the room to see Sergeant Brown still hopping down the street. The doctor gave a yell, "Go after him!" to the orderlies who seemed to be dumbfounded. The doctor seemed surprised himself, and had a little smile on his face. The orderlies really had to run in order to catch up with this patient, and they finally caught him. Sergeant Brown hopped all the way back with an orderly on each arm. Where the Sergeant got all of that energy was a mystery to me. In the building again I could hear Sergeant Brown say, "See I told you, See, I told you!" to the doctor who went into the hallway. I never saw Sergeant Brown again, and I could not help but pity him.

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<sup>18</sup> Evacuation hospitals at this stage in the war were nearly all on the continent, closer to the front, and none seem to have been at Gloucester. However, the type of processing that Olexa went through was essentially the same as practiced at evacuation hospitals. For hospital types and locations, see "WW 2 Military Hospitals" and "WW 2 Military Hospitals—European Theatre of Operations", at the WW 2 Medical Research Centre website, <https://www.med-dept.com/about-us/>

The two groups of patients were split up again, with twenty of us less violent being transferred to another hospital by truck. Our destination was to Cheltenham, about thirty miles north. We still were in Shakespeare country and near the city of Coventry which was not too far away. Cheltenham was a much larger city than we realized, yet the Germans did not bomb this city like the others.<sup>19</sup> We arrived at the 187<sup>th</sup> General [Hospital]<sup>20</sup> about chow time. Our names were called from a roster and we were assigned to the second ward. This part of the hospital was known as the psycho-center. The first two wards were known as the light anxiety neuroses cases, while the third ward was known as the heavy depression cases. The ward itself seemed cozy and clean, holding sixty beds. The orderly of the ward had our chow in warmers, which he placed on a stand by each bed. The beds were already made and all we had to do was put away our toilet articles and toothbrush. After chow we were told that ‘lights out’ was 2100 (9 o'clock) and reveille at 0630 hours in the morning. We were told that our beds had to be made each morning neatly, and that we would eat at the mess hall for every meal. Around 2100 hours the head nurse began giving the patients the prescribed medicine which they drank and asked for more. I didn’t get any, only a chuckle from the nurse, saying, “what is a sane guy like you doing here?”

As we lay in our beds with the lights out, a miniature war was going on in the heavy ward. Getting up and looking out of my window, the lights of the heavy ward were glowing. Men were yelling, some were screaming, others banging the walls, and orderlies [were] running up and down the ward. The ward had caged windows, with wire mesh on the inside wall as well. I could not see any other activity, so I climbed back into bed. The noise in heavy ward subsided some, and little did I realize that I too would be involved with this ward.

Most of the patients were now in ‘happy-land’ snoring like troopers. At 0630 hours the orderly blew a whistle that blasted us out of bed. I was on my feet and dressed in seconds, waiting for a charge. That darn orderly didn’t realize the commotion he would make, because we were combat men. The patient nearest him chased him right out of the ward and down the street at full throttle. Within a short time, the patient returned, but the orderly was long gone. Golly, we laughed till it hurt, to see that orderly take off. The whistle in light ward was never blown again. Matter of fact, we got a new orderly that was cautious in what he did. After breakfast, the chief head shrinker came into see how we were doing. He was briefed on what had happened, and I could see that he was a full colonel by a full chicken<sup>21</sup> pinned on his shoulders. Each man was called into the head nurse’s office and interviewed. We were asked how we felt and what hurt, or ailed us. We were also given a choice of doing some chore within the hospital for as long as our stay in the hospital. I chose to work with a master plumber, who needed a lot of help. The plumbing in England was all above ground, which caused many problems. My duties began the next day, which helped in my rehabilitation immensely.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cheltenham had mineral springs that made it a resort town in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and had health facilities rather than heavy industry, which may explain why it fared better than nearby Coventry, which suffered some of the most devastating bombing of any city in England. Cheltenham is only about five miles from Gloucester.

<sup>20</sup> There is a 187<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in the list provided in the article cited in note 1, but it seems to have been on the continent by this time, so Olexa may have the wrong number here.

<sup>21</sup> A full colonel had an eagle insignia, and was often referred to as a “bird colonel,” as opposed to a lieutenant colonel, the next rank down, who wore two oak leaves.

<sup>22</sup> The timing of this is a little unclear. Assuming Olexa’s description of his stay in the evacuation hospital is accurate, he would have gone to England in early January. After the Dec. 30 letter sent from France, the next one is

At 0830 hours I was escorted to the plumber's shed, about two blocks from the ward. One building along the way stood out by itself, with a large sign reading: Morgue. I was to visit this building many times in my stay at the hospital. Walking into the shed reminded me of a blacksmith shop, everything heaped in piles. If you can find it, hurray. If not, keep looking. The stove was fifty-five-gallon drum setting on three concrete blocks, and it was fed by waste oil dripping into the top to feed the fire inside. A makeshift stove pipe carried the smoke and fumes outside through the window. The heat was terrific, providing you stood about six inches from it. Looking about, I couldn't understand how anyone could find anything in this shed. Tools of all descriptions were cluttered all over on a long bench near the wall. An old lamp like the one in a pool hall hung over it, with the light blaring down, casting shadows about the shed. I shook my head, looking at the orderly that brought me here. Within a short time, the plumbing crew reported for work. I was introduced to a tall, thin man, Sergeant Greenbaum, who was a master plumber from New York City. The other three men were plumbers also.

The Sergeant asked me how much I knew about plumbing and I told him enough to get by, which made him smile a little. He was delighted to learn that I knew what an elbow, tee, ell, eighth bend, reducer and sleeve were. I also knew pipe sizes, a cutter, threader and a vise. I never saw a man beam so much at my knowing something about the plumbing business. "How do you know so much about plumbing?" the Sergeant asked. "A farmer has to know quite a lot of things besides milking a cow," I responded. This made Greenbaum chuckle. "You'll work with me as my assistant and we'll have plenty of work to do." Greenbaum wasn't a tidy man, but he knew his plumbing. He could find anything he needed at his ingenuity, yet he had one weakness that I could not understand, which made him terrified.

We had three areas to cover that made Greenbaum and me very busy. Our first stop was the main boiler room of the hospital, the second stop was the light and heavy wards, and the third stop the morgue. At the boiler room there were four men to keep the boiler fired up for heat and hot water, which supplied the whole hospital. There also was a night crew to keep the fires humming throughout the night. Defective valves were the main problems connected with the boiler room. In the light ward and heavy ward, it was clogged toilets and sinks, more so with the heavy ward, that made us return time and time again to unplug the toilets and sinks. The morgue always had frozen pipes and the slab always had clogged drains when an autopsy was performed.

The morgue was always the last stop, since it was used mainly during the night. The morgue had two big unheated rooms and a large room with a slab sink made of marble with drain holes and nozzle-like faucets that reminded me of a dish sprayer on a kitchen sink. There were large bottles of chemicals that I presumed were embalming fluids. Approaching the morgue, which was our last stop, I noticed that Sergeant Greenbaum was quite fidgety. Greenbaum stopped on the walk leading up to the door and asked quietly, "would you go in and see if there are any corpses laying on the floor?" "Sure," I responded, "but why don't you come too?" "I cannot stand the sight of a dead body," was the Sergeant's answer. Opening the door of the morgue, I gingerly stepped inside and flicked on the lights. This room and the next were bare to the walls. The third room looked as if it had been used, for the chemical jugs were not in their usual places, and besides, the slab sink had frozen particles of flesh slightly frozen to the bottom. A body had been worked on, but had been moved. Sergeant Greenbaum was waiting for me as I opened the door and yelled, "all is clear." The Sergeant struggled through the door with his box

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dated Jan 21, by which time he was in England. He does not mention his health or what he is doing in this letter. His next letter, dated Feb. 19, indicates that he is doing odd jobs, which likely refers to the assignment as a plumber.

of tools and hurriedly went to the slab sink. Turning the shutoff valve near the floor, the water rushed to the spray faucets, which seemed in order as we tested them. The drain, however, was clogged, so we had to remove a panel to get at the drain. Placing a pail underneath the trap, Sergeant Greenbaum unloosened the nuts and removed the trap. Meanwhile I was busy getting the blowtorch going to melt the ice. Our task was done within minutes, and were soon on our way back to the plumbing shed.

Outside, two aid men were removing a body from an ambulance. When Greenbaum saw this, he dropped his box of tools and ran. "What's the matter with the Sergeant?" one of the aid men asked. "Oh, he's afraid to see a corpse, which makes him awful nervous." The men had two bodies, which they brought into the morgue, and laid them on the cement floor. The bodies were wrapped up tightly and neatly in a white sheet with a tag tied around the big toe. One was a captain, and the other a private. Both had died of wounds received from somewhere at the front. These men got back this far, yet died, although the medical corps did everything to save them. Outside again, I began picking up the tools and placing them back into the carrying box.

Back at the shed, the master plumber was trying to repair some gauges that were needed in case of a breakdown in the boiler room. The Sergeant ignored me altogether, and I understood his actions and feelings. After dinner, we were notified by telephone that we were needed at heavy ward, and hurry. Grabbing our tool boxes, we hurried in the direction of heavy ward. On our arrival we were directed to the wash room. Water was flowing underneath the closed door into the hallway, and running into the ward area. Somehow a patient had broken an elbow joint just above the floor by pulling on the suspended pipe and stood laughing as the water gushed out. The shutoff valve was on the outside of the ward, so I ran to close the valve. When I returned inside, I could see the patients sitting on the floor in the water and giggling like little boys. Sergeant Greenbaum was getting the pipe to place a union in the line and to replace the elbow. I had to run for a vise and a pipe threader which were at the shed. The Sergeant was waiting for me, and we began to thread the pipe for the union. We also made new threads to replace a new elbow, aligning the union, and our work was completed. While Sergeant Greenbaum went outside to open the main shutoff valve, I noticed that each shutoff for the hot and cold water had to be opened by inserting a key. Patients were walking in and out of the wash room just for the sake of looking around. Other orderlies arrived to help us clean up the mess and mop up the water.

While mopping, I got a good look at the ward. At the far end were small caged rooms with a patient in each room and a padlock on each door. In the center of the ward were cots such as in the other wards where the less violent patients slept. Three of these patients were sitting on the rafters above their beds. The orderlies were unconcerned about them and kept on mopping. I stopped long enough to ask why the men were up there, and the orderly replied that they were waiting for the air mail to come. Beyond the wash room and at the front of the ward were the violent cases. Each room at this end was padded and each patient was like a wild animal. Looking through a small window I saw this one patient standing at the far end pounding his head against the wall. He didn't have a stitch of clothes on. Blood was running down the pad in streaks towards the floor. "Nurse!" I yelled, "can't something be done for this patient?" Running to the window, she glanced in and began to give orders for the orderlies to rush in and overpower this patient. The door was unlocked and the men rushed at full speed towards the patient. Somehow the patient turned enough to meet the challenge as the orderlies grabbed him. His forehead was a bloody mess and he began to yell. Another orderly brought in a straightjacket, and after a great struggle the patient was contained, except for his kicking while lying on the



floor. The nurse had called the chief head shrinker, who hustled in with three more orderlies. A shot was given to quiet the patient and he was taken out strapped to the stretcher. His forehead needed a few stitches to close the wound to stop the bleeding. I helped to clean up the blood that was a mess, and the room was clean again.

The patient in the next padded room was vicious. If he saw you looking through the small window, he charged the door like a watchdog. He snarled and yelled, making a face to show his hostility toward anyone at the window. I've seen men like him before in the battlefield whose minds had snapped from the pressures of war. What things were locked in this man's mind made him this way, and me knowing that his recovery would be slim. The patient was fed by sliding his food through an opening at the bottom of the door. To clean this room the patient had to be overpowered and placed in another room. Tin cups and tin plates littered the room where they had been thrown. Food was stuck to the walls. I could not help but to feel sad as I backed away from the window, leaving the patient as he pounded the door from the inside. Freedom which is rightfully his to enjoy henceforth will not be. Society will say 'Prove yourself and you will be free'. Proving ourselves as sane being under the duress of war and under all kinds of physical strain is not easy, because we are judged by different standards and modes of behavior. An individual can stand as steadfast as a rock yet a rock can be crushed. With my first day as a plumber's helper ended, I returned to light ward.

News of the long-awaited Russian offensive had begun which caused some excitement among us in the light ward. The news bulletin said that Russian artillery lined up hub to hub and began firing on the German positions at dawn on January 12, 1945. This undertaking would bring the Russians from the Vistula to the Oder, not far from Berlin. I could not help but to think of the devastating effect of the artillery on the Germans as the masses of shells were exploding, covering practically every inch of their positions. The Ruhr, the Saar and the Silesia regions were the objectives of the Allies during the sweep across France, and were now within the scope of reality.<sup>23</sup> As the days passed, the work as plumber's helper became somewhat routine. Heavy ward and the morgue took up most of our time as the cold weather continued. The British working about the hospital said that this was the coldest weather that they ever experienced. Sergeant Greenbaum and I came to respect each other, and I enjoyed working with him.

The procedure was still the same when Greenbaum and I had to go to the morgue. As always, I had to enter first while the Sergeant remained outside and waited for me to say that all was clear. One day, on the spur of the moment, I decided that if any corpses were in the morgue, I would pull a fast joke on Sergeant Greenbaum and see what would happen. Entering the morgue as I always did, I looked into the second room and saw three bodies on the floor. The bodies were wrapped in the same manner with sheets and a tag on the big toe. I walked over to the bodies and crouched to read the names. One was a lieutenant colonel, the other a captain and the third a private. All belonged to an infantry unit. Walking towards the entrance door, I gleamed and chuckled for I was about to spring a good joke, which would backfire. Everything's O.K. I yelled to the Sergeant, as I waited for him to enter carrying his heavy tool box. When Sergeant Greenbaum saw the dead bodies on the floor he dropped the tool box and froze. Greenbaum was in a severe state of shock and didn't flinch a muscle. Grabbing the Sergeant by the arm, I pulled him through the door, forcing him to lie down outside on the ground. Taking my overcoat off, I placed it over the Sergeant to keep him warm and lifted his feet. I didn't want

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<sup>23</sup> The Ruhr and Saar Valleys were targets for the Western Allies, and the Soviets were pushing into Silesia, in southeastern Germany.

to leave him and get help, so I waited. In a short time, Sergeant Greenbaum began to feel better, which relieved me greatly for this man could have died. Lifting the Sergeant to his feet, I took him to light ward. Explaining to the nurse what had happened, I left to finish the work at the morgue. The drains were frozen again, which didn't take long to thaw from the heat of a blow torch. I felt sorry about the prank, and when I had finished my work, I took all of the tools back to the plumber's shed. I hurried to light ward again to see how Greenbaum was doing. The nurse had given him a shot to quiet him so he could rest. Later, after the evening meal I went and apologized to the Sergeant for my stupid act.

#### Part D: Training Camp

*While one of the generalizations made about the American success in the war is that it was due to the sheer amount of manpower available, actual combat units were eternally short of fighting men once serious fighting began. Most soldiers in the Army had noncombat assignments, or at least ones that placed them at one for two removes from the front lines, and the units they served with tended not to take high casualties. Within the combat units, however, casualties often exceeded 100%, or even more. The replacement system, as Olexa's story indicates, provided plenty of bodies, but often ones who were not well trained, and these men tended to become casualties in part due to inexperience. The costliness of the Normandy campaign in 1944 had quickly exhausted the pool of replacements, and the expansion of land campaigns in the Pacific put even more of a strain on manpower resources. One partial solution to the problem was to strip men from noncombat units in the rear and train them as infantry. Such men needed to be trained by experienced soldiers, and this would be Olexa's job during his last few months in the Army. As had happened when he was in L Company, his superiors soon recognized his abilities and used him for special assignments until he was finally allowed to go home.*

I was at the hospital three weeks to the day helping Greenbaum, then I was told that I was to be discharged from the hospital<sup>24</sup>. The chief head shrinker told me that I was to report to the 6696<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion<sup>25</sup> near Salisbury for duty. I was ready the next morning and taken to the railroad station, which was only a half hour away, where a train was leaving for Salisbury. I had no baggage except an officer's pack which held my toilet articles and my luger without the firing pin. How I managed to hang onto this pistol was a mystery.

Yes, I had said my good-byes to those at the hospital. Sergeant Greenbaum was hoping that I would be assigned to the hospital and continue to help him. The Colonel told him that I was too valuable a man and was needed to train men for the Infantry. I was glad to go back to my old stomping grounds, Tidworth, Salisbury, Blandford, Swanage and Bournemouth. I had walked the streets of these towns many times on leave. The 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments had trained here, among the rolling hills, valleys and wheat fields, for the Invasion of Europe. I had

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<sup>24</sup> Olexa was still at the hospital on Feb. 21, 1945, based on the date of his last letter from there, and sent his first from his new assignment on March 4. If he is correct about having spent only three weeks with Greenbaum, then he likely spent most of the month of January recuperating, but not working.

<sup>25</sup> Olexa's letters home are marked with his unit designation, which he did not quite remember correctly here. His letters from March place him in the 522<sup>nd</sup> Replacement Company, 65<sup>th</sup> replacement Battalion Later ones assign him to the 6196<sup>th</sup> Reinforcement Company, part of the 6903<sup>rd</sup> Reinforcement Battalion, both of which are identified as provisional units.

four hours on the train to do some tall reminiscing with memories of the men I once knew. We were the fightingest outfit, and proud of it. As the train chugged towards its destination, I thought of my new unit, my duties, and the men I would be working with. The great German offensive of the Ardennes at this moment was halted to a standstill. Within a short time, the allies would recover and make an offensive that would bring them to the Rhine. This drive would put pressure on the German defenses from Arnhem in the north, to Strasbourg in the south, from February 8 to March 25<sup>th</sup>. Radio Europe kept us abreast of the news which was gratifying to us, who had lesser roles in the rear.

The train finally came to a stop at Salisbury, and I piled out with my gear. Soldiers were everywhere on the platform and in the large waiting room. Three cars down was a sergeant standing on a baggage wagon yelling “6696<sup>th</sup> over here.” That meant me, so I ventured in his direction. I found out also that I wasn’t the only one going to the 6696<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion. There were fifteen of us, all combat men. Our names were called and we boarded a truck that took us into the rolling hills in an easterly direction towards Tidworth. Some of the veterans I talked with saw action in Africa, Sicily, and Europe. They were from the 9<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions. The camp itself was fifteen miles from Salisbury, with wooden barracks scattered in clusters, with each company having a large area for training and drill. The truck came to a halt at the battalion headquarters and we piled out with our gear. A master sergeant read off five names and told these men that they were to go to I Company. Five men were called for K Company and the last five men would go to L Company, which included me. Each company had a man present to bring us to our respective companies. It was a good half mile across the parade ground to L Company. Arriving at company headquarters, we were ushered in to see the First Sergeant. The 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant sat behind a desk giving us the once over and looking at the roster for our names. I saw the 9<sup>th</sup> Division patch on his shoulder and knew that he was a veteran with an ETO ribbon and four campaign stars on it. “Welcome to L Company, gentlemen,” the Sergeant remarked. “We are glad to have you men for a big task of training airmen for the Infantry. The job won’t be easy, but it must be done. Your experience and training in combat will be a great asset to these men who will be sent to infantry units in Europe.” Three of us had rank and were assigned to a platoon. I got the Third Platoon, which had 80 men. “I’m Sergeant Trenton, and as time goes on, I’ll get to know each one of you by name. Any questions?” the Sergeant asked. “How’s the old man?” I asked. “A very good commander,” was the reply. “Veteran of Africa, Sicily, and Europe, 9<sup>th</sup> Division and wounded in action. He is the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Philips from Indiana.” The 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant was right about the old man. He was stern but good in his answers and decisions. I got to like him and the 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant very much.

The coincidence of serving in another unit and same company as I did in the First Infantry Division elated my morale greatly. My role with the Third Platoon would be that of an instructor and acting platoon leader. The Platoon Sergeant and squad leaders were Air Corps<sup>26</sup> men with rank to command the four squads of the platoon. Each squad had twenty men. We had a formal meeting with the company commander after the evening meal. Our impressions of him were very good at the start, and his “vibes” of us were very gratifying. Each one of us were

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<sup>26</sup> Olexa had already seen many men from the Army Air Forces transferred to the infantry, and this only increased at the end of the war, as the air war had largely been won, and there were few targets left for the massive bomber forces. Some units transferred to the Pacific, but others were disbanded, and many of the ground support personnel were transferred to the Infantry, where replacements were badly needed, both for occupation duty in Europe and for the invasion of Japan.

asked which unit we served with and the length of service. We were given a typed training schedule and manual to be instrumented Monday through Saturday. The Third Platoon occupied two barracks of forty men, each with a sealed room in the back which the sergeants occupied. There was no door entrance in the barracks itself into the sergeants' quarters, and we always had to walk to the rear to get to our quarters. My platoon sergeant held the rank of a Master Sergeant and my squad leaders were Tech Sergeants, one grade above my rank.<sup>27</sup> They were kind a skeptical of me till I proved myself to them in a training exercise.

The men of the platoon too were indifferent, because they belonged to the Air Corps with different backgrounds in training. Their morale was low since having been transferred from one branch of service to another. They had done a wonderful job keeping the planes in the air only to be rewarded in a transfer to become a foot soldier. Many of these men were married to English women and had one or two kids running around. Our task in retraining these men would test our experience and abilities to make them soldiers ready for combat duty. These men never had to carry a weapon, let alone knowing how this weapon of war would function. It was pathetic for a veteran like myself to see neglected rifles with rust and dust, and then to see dirty belts and packs, beds not made, and debris piled three feet high near the stove in the barracks. No effort was made to remove this debris before falling out for duty at 0800 hours in the company street. Things had to change drastically to improve their way of life, instead of being like pigs.

Within a week the Third Platoon was shaping up. They hated and resented me because I dumped them out of bed a half hour before the bugle blew for reveille. I put my noncoms on the spot and had them help to get discipline in the ranks. I told them to be examples, by doing the same duties of cleaning, caring, for their equipment and dressing with shoes shined. I scrubbed my equipment in the wash room to let these men see how it should be cleaned. At first, I was alone, then others started to trickle in and catch on. My noncoms began to open their eyes and realize what I was trying to accomplish. No one spoke to me except in line of duty, but I was determined to make these men good soldiers. Unknown to me, I was being watched by the 'old man,' and within a month and a half the Third Platoon showed a remarkable change. I worked like a beaver, cleaning my equipment, shining my shoes, and pressing my shirts and pants with a pot filled with sand, heated on top of my little stove.

The attitude of the men changed, and I was fair with them, and complimented them when it was necessary. In the field on our training exercise, I would point out mistakes that the men were doing, and showing them the right or best way to accomplish the exercise. The squads would take turns in advancing on enemy positions, or through a field till the men could think of the possible dangers that would lie ahead. The men listened eagerly before and after an exercise to my criticism and tried to do better. In the tall grass, targets were hidden to surprise the squads in an advance to see what reaction and decisions the squad leaders would make. Each squad would do the exercise two or three times till each man understood his role or part in engaging the enemy. The last exercise was done with live ammunition. Each squad had a Browning Automatic Rifle to fire, which was an asset in helping the riflemen. When the exercise was completed, the squad had to inspect each target to see how many hits were made. Seeing is believing, for most of the targets hadn't been hit. The men could not believe that they had missed the targets completely.

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<sup>27</sup> The platoon sergeant thus should have been the platoon leader, but since Olexa had combat experience and the men who outranked him did not, Olexa was in charge.

Picking four men and taking the automatic, I told them to watch and see what could be done when your weapons of defense were used in the right manner. The targets were pulled up by a rope, by a man in a pit, and each squad that went through the exercise didn't know when the enemy would pop up. At the starting point, I told them to look sharply, and when the targets appeared, to drop to the ground and start firing. I carried the automatic at the hip level with the sling over my left shoulder and the bipod extended, which was at the end of the barrel. I had three magazines with 10 rounds each, and one in the chamber. Each magazine holds 20 rounds. When the men were in place, I gave the forward signal and we started to move. About a third of the way in the course, the targets appeared, and we dropped to the ground. I had set the rear sights to three hundred yards, so I brought the automatic into action. I could see the outline of them just above the grass and began firing. I fired the automatic in bursts of twos and threes, covering all of the targets I could see. When the targets dropped back out of sight, I was on my third magazine. The men who were watching the exercise got up and ran to the targets, which were seven in all. Six targets from my position [were] on the ground. The other four men had fired one clip of 8 rounds and were firing on the second clip when the targets dropped.

This exhibition gained the trust and confidence I needed from the men in the Third Platoon. On the firing range, the bayonet course, and grenade throwing, [I] proved to them that with determination a man could survive. One day, we approached a barbed wire entanglement, three feet high, with one strand across the top and five feet deep. For this course, the men had to crawl under the wire to get the feel and the strain of getting to the other side. The men did very well in the exercise until I brought up the possibility of men getting through the entanglement at a faster rate. The men said it couldn't be done, and I told them that it could. This aroused a great interest among the men, although they didn't know how I was to accomplish this. Taking an M-1 rifle, I backed up from the barbed wire and started to run towards the entanglement, leaping at the edge and placing the rifle on the top wire while falling. I flattened the entanglement and told two or three men to step on my butt as they ran to the other side. The men were amazed at this demonstration and began saying that I had something under my pants for protection. I had to remove my pants to prove to them that there was no extra protection, but I did have three cuts that were not serious. The point I tried to get across was that you cannot be timid. To do things in a positive way, never hesitate, and act at a moment's notice, will be the thing to stay alive.

From time to time, men would leave the area and go to town or to a nearby field to stay with a gal that they had persuaded to come to the camp. Makeshift shelters of all descriptions were made for the gals to stay hidden during the day. When darkness appeared, the men would bring them into the barracks to sleep. Food was saved by the men for them to eat. The days were cold, but the women had warm clothes and blankets that the men managed to smuggle to them. It took me two months to find out what was going on. One man placed a girl in my room while I was out and what a surprise I had when I entered my room. She was lying in my bed, and I politely told her to get dressed and leave, which she did. I saw her the next morning with three other girls running away from the barracks to their hiding places. Checking that morning with the other platoon noncoms in the mess hall, I was surprised that all of them said even the squad leaders had women in their sleeping quarters. I went to the noncoms' quarters after chow in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon barracks, and sure enough, three girls were in these quarters. Looking in the quarters where the men slept, [there] were four more girls. These men had women in their billets at the airfields on a regular basis. I was surprised to see these women in camp, and I wasn't going to squeal about them to the 'old man'. My squad leaders were married to English girls, and that is why the women were not in their quarters. My duties later would be changed where I would be

involved concerning these women. Back at my own quarters, I told my squad leaders that I was proud of them and shocked at what was taking place in this camp. We had no fences of barbed-wire to keep anyone out. Just rolling hills, which at one time stored war materiel of all descriptions for the invasion.

In competition with the other platoons in our company, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon did an excellent job. Clean barracks, equipment, dress, field exercises, and drill made me proud of them. The company commander complimented me on the best platoon in the battalion. I was awarded a 3-day pass to go into Salisbury. I thanked the men of the platoon who made this possible. My company commander must have been bragging about me at the officers' club, because my duties changed when I got back. Salisbury was a different town to me because my friends were absent, especially Maczak, that crazy Polock, with a lot of humor and crazy ideas. Feeling miserable and lonely, I cut leave to one day and hopped the bus for camp.

Arriving at Company Headquarters, I went to turn my pass in. Sergeant Trenton was very surprised to see me back and he showed it. "What's wrong Sergeant?" He asked. "Nothing," was my reply. "I just felt miserable so I came back." "Now, that you are here, the Old Man will want to see you." "What did I do wrong?" I asked. "Nothing," Sergeant Trenton remarked, "since someone else has your platoon." First Lieutenant Philips was sitting behind his desk when I walked in. I came to attention, giving him a hand salute. "Sir, I was told by the 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant to report to you." "What happened in town?" the Lieutenant asked. "I was miserable, Sir, had too many memories and no buddies to be with," I replied. "Sergeant," the Commander remarked, "I have orders from the Battalion Commander this morning requesting me to send you to see him as soon as you arrived in camp." "What will my duties be, Lieutenant?" "I'm not to discuss them with you, because the Colonel wants to tell you himself." Before leaving, the Lieutenant gave me a good compliment of my appearance and dress. "Sergeant, before the Company leaves on pass, after training, I'm going to have you appear before them as a model and tell them that this is the way I want them to leave camp." I thanked the Lieutenant for his kind words and left for Battalion.

I had no idea of what the Colonel wanted with me. I never saw the Commander, let alone met him, but I would shortly. Arriving at battalion headquarters, I walked in and reported to the Adjutant. Coming to attention before the officer, I saluted, remarking that the Colonel requested to see me. "The Colonel is two doors down," the Lieutenant replied. Walking down the hall, I knocked on the door noticing a sign: Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Kill-em. "Come in" was the response from inside. Entering the room, I again saluted the officer behind the desk and said, "Sir, Sergeant Olexa reporting as requested." Sit down, Sergeant, for I want to go over the details of your duties. I have been informed of the good work you are doing at L Company. I've checked your records which are excellent and feel you are the man for this job. I have 300 prisoners in this camp waiting for trial. Most of them are deserters and some going A.W.O.L. (Away without leave), and I'm putting you in charge. Some of these men have run away from the guards while on work details because they are 'chickens.' From now on, I want you to inform the guards to shoot to kill if they try to run away. I'm sick and tired of chasing the bastards through the fields and bringing them back to the stockade. With your combat experience, I want you to shoot to kill to get rid of the bastards. They're deserters and deserve to die."

"But Colonel," I replied, "these men have served well in another branch of service and are disgruntled at being sent to the Infantry for re-training. Their morale is low, some have a British wife and families that they are unable to see, since they aren't granted any passes to leave camp." "I don't care how they feel, they are here for training, and if they don't want to

cooperate, kill em, kill em all. Your duties as Sergeant are to see that the prisoners are fed and that each Company requesting prisoners for work will get the amount of men needed. Each Company will provide the food, which will have to be picked up at each meal. One jeep and driver will pick up the food from each Company's mess and bring it to the stockade. Prisoners will have to dish out the food for themselves. If they run out of food without all the men being fed, 'tough luck'. I and K Companies will supply the guard details. They are instructed they are instructed to report to you every morning at mess in the stockade. Any questions, Sergeant, before we go to the stockade?" "Yes, Sir," I replied. "I'll need a list of my duties, the Sergeants in charge of the guard and the names of the cooks or mess Sergeant to report to for the food." "Sorry," the Colonel remarked, as he looked for the orders on his desk. "Here it is." "One more thing, Colonel, although I am able to kill a man, I won't do it just because of my combat experience. Instead, I would shoot him in the leg to stop him if he were running away from me." The Colonel showed some anger at what I said, and blurted, "Kill-em, you hear, Kill-em!"

The prison compound was near I Company. The stockade was quite a big area with 4 towers, one at each corner, above the eight-foot fence, and four strands of barbed wire completing the top. At the north side was a large gate big enough to let a Jeep drive through. Arriving with the Colonel by Jeep, I jumped out and stood by the gate, looking into the compound at the prisoners. Rows of pup tents were at the south end, with one tripod holding a large water bag. One fifty-gallon unit wasn't enough to supply the needs of this many men. In the center area was a large tent with sides rolled up, where the food was placed and distributed to the prisoners. One other large tent was on the east side near the fence with a sign: Latrine. Some of the men were milling around while others lay in pup tents. "What do you think of it, Sergeant?" The Colonel asked, coming up to the gate. "I'd like to go in Sir and look around, find out what the prisoners need." "Need?" the Colonel yelled, "these deserters won't get anything more than what they got. I'm not going into the compound, but you can if you want to, it's your funeral." "I'll risk it, Sir," was my reply. "Sergeant of the Guard," the Colonel yelled, "See to it that the guards cover this man while he is inside." With that last order, the Colonel got into the jeep and was driven away.

I introduced myself to the Sergeant of the Guard, telling him that I was now in full charge of prisoners in the compound. "How many men are confined here?" I asked. "About 250 men at the last count, Sergeant." "Most of them went A.W.O.L. and are waiting for trial." The gate into the compound was unlocked, and I stepped inside. A lot of the men just stood and watched curiously, wondering what in blazes I was doing. I walked to the mess tent and looked at the wooden tables that held food. The tables were messy with food left on them and the ground beneath the tables had food dropped as it was served. Taking a pad and pencil out of my lapel pocket I wrote, "food on table and ground". Four men entered the tent to look me over. I wasn't afraid of them as I stood facing them. "Who's the spokesman in the compound?" I asked. The men looked at each other and one of them said he was. "What's your name and rank?" I asked. "Master Sergeant Williams" was his reply. "I'd like to inspect the compound with you, Sergeant, and see what I can do to improve conditions." "Are you kidding?" the Sergeant laughed. "No, I'm serious," I replied, "and I want you to accompany me." "Improve conditions, that S.O.B of a Colonel won't give us a thing." "I've been given this assignment, so I'm in full charge." "O.K., I'll go with you, but I think it's a waste of time." "It will be with that kind of attitude, but give me a chance as a go-between. You give me your gripes on paper and I'll go to the Colonel and see what can be done to improve morale. I may not be able to get all issues settled, but I'll stand my ground. Fair enough?" I asked. "O.K.," was Williams's reply. "I'm writing down things that

can be done to improve the compound on the inside, and tomorrow morning I hope that you will have a list to give me. I know right now that you don't have enough drinking water. But I see all kinds of paper up against the fence, all kinds of debris, just thrown on the ground. The latrine smells, and the men aren't putting the chemicals in holes. All kinds of old food on the tables in the mess tent. Also, I need your cooperation to get the men to spruce up the place before I hit the Colonel with your list of gripes. I know they won't like it, but an effort has to be made." "O.K., I'll talk to the men and see what they decide." "I thank you, Sergeant, for listening, and I promise that I will do everything I can to improve things. I'll expect a list from you tomorrow then." "O.K., I'll have one."

My vibes with Sergeant Williams were very good. He was a leader and one whom the men looked up to. After visiting the mess sergeants at each company, I returned to my quarters and waited for supper. After mess I made arrangements for a Jeep to pick me up at 0400 hours in the morning to gather up the food rations for the prisoners. The company commander and the 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant were still in the office, so we had a bull session and listened to the radio. Over the radio "Lord Haw Haw" and "Axis Sally" were trying to convince the American and British to defect and that we were losing the war.<sup>28</sup> They played all of the popular songs to entertain us. Lieutenant Philips offered me a drink of Scotch, which I declined. I drank wine once in a while, but left whiskey alone. "The Old Man" asked about my duties and was happy for me and my new job. We discussed the Colonel and his ways and the problems I would be faced with from time to time.

The Jeep from the compound was on time, with the driver heading for the first mess hall to pick up food for the prisoners in the stockade. When the pickup was complete, we had four large square containers of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and two large containers of black coffee. We also had one container of oatmeal and powdered milk with water added. The gate at the compound was opened and the driver drove into the mess tent. Sergeant Williams had a detail set up, a mess line with men standing by to serve. A whistle was blown and the men began to gather for the morning meal. Sergeant Williams was a great help to me, and I let him know how much I appreciated it. Everything moved smoothly, and for once all of the men were fed. When the Jeep left to return the pots and pans, I stayed to inspect the stockade grounds once more. It was after 0600 hours, with daylight making a grand appearance. The prisoners were tidying up their tents and began picking up the debris and papers lying around. Details were already working in the washroom while another detail scrubbed up the latrine. All these men needed was some encouragement, and within a week the stockade was in fine shape. I thanked the men for their efforts and hard work. Guard details from each company arrived at 0800 to take prisoners back to the company areas to work. At noon, the men were brought back to the Compound for feeding, and picked up at 1300 hours for work. The prisoners' day ended at 5 o'clock. My work day ended when the noon meal was over. I was grateful to Sergeant Williams for his full cooperation, which made my job a snap.

I was given a list of gripes from the Sergeant which would not be hard to fulfill. "No mail," headed the list. The others wanted a chance to buy cigarettes, soap, stationery, toothpaste,

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<sup>28</sup> "Lord Haw Haw" was William Joyce, born in the US to Irish parents who lived in Ireland as a child, and was educated in Britain. He became a Nazi and moved to Germany as the war started, and became famous for his English language propaganda broadcasts, which he delivered with an aristocratic accent. He was recognized as a talented propagandist, but by the end of the war, his claims that the Germans would win were not taken seriously. "Axis Sally" was an American woman, Mildred Gillars, who played a similar role.



etc. More drinking water. Each man needed two more blankets to keep him warm from the cold air. Some needed more clothing, listing the articles as fatigues, gloves, socks, caps, and underwear. No provision was given for those who may need medical attention. Confronting Colonel Kill-Em with this list would not be easy, but I headed for his office. It was 9:15 when I arrived at headquarters. The Colonel had just arrived and was in his office. Getting permission to see him from the adjutant, I knocked on his door. "Come in" was the Colonel's response. Saluting the Colonel after entering, I stated by business. Handing the commander the list, he began to read it. Nothing was said until he finished. Looking at me the Colonel remarked, "those men are deserters and deserve to be shot. I won't give them anything." "Colonel," I responded, "those prisoners have shown me cooperation, and since you have placed me in full charge of the stockade, I am requesting on their behalf everything on the list." I felt uneasy as I was granted permission to leave. The Colonel didn't say 'no' and he didn't say 'yes'. For the moment it would have to do, but I would have to face him again for an answer. Back at my quarters I lay down on my bunk and wondered about how to get results for the prisoners from the Colonel who hated them. I was awakened from my nap by the men returning to the barracks from duty. Everything went well for the next two days at the stockade. The morale of the prisoners was much better. Sergeant Williams was understanding when I told him that the Colonel hadn't made a decision as yet, and I was waiting to hear from him.

On the third day, after lunch, I was requested to appear at the Colonel's Headquarters. I wondered what the outcome would be, and was relieved when the Colonel granted my requests for the prisoners. The supply sergeant was ordered to appear at the compound during the supper hour to take the order for clothing. Blankets were to be distributed that evening. Men needing medical attention would be taken by truck under guard to the medical center. Three more water bags plus tripods were made available. I could have kissed the Colonel, although I disliked him, for granting everything. I hurried back to the compound to tell Sergeant Williams the good news. Another two weeks went by in a normal fashion with the prisoners being content.

The first day of March moved in, and it was brisk and cold. A light snow had fallen, which was scurrying along the ground as the wind blew. My birthday was just five days away, too, but I had no plans to celebrate. Training was still going at a vigorous pace. My evenings were spent with the 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant and some other N.C.O.'s listening to the radio. The broadcast itself was from Berlin. Lord Haw Haw and Axis Sally kept entertaining us with the latest hit songs. They kept insisting that we were losing the war and to lay down our arms and surrender.

Winter was still present, and I could not help but to think of the men at the front, freezing, doing everything they could to keep warm. Near the first of April, I was summoned to report to the Colonel once again. Everything was going well at the stockade with no trouble or problems, and I was puzzled. Facing the Colonel a little while later, I was listening to a set of new duties that had to be carried out immediately. The Colonel was informed about girls hiding out in the wheat fields and gullies in the battalion sector. "These girls," the Colonel remarked, "have to be rounded up and removed." I chuckled to myself at the news. These girls could walk in and out of our sector at any time, since there was no fence. "I'm requesting a truckload of M.P.'s (military police) to search every possible hiding place to get these girls. And I'm placing you in charge to search for these girls." "I'll need a map of the Camp, area, Sir, and hit these areas at the same time to get them all." The roundup would be executed with little fanfare and secrecy. The camp area was divided into four sections with a sergeant from each company to guide the M.P.'s in the search. At 1:30 they arrived in platoon strength. Briefing the men on the

overall plan, they were dispatched to each company and to begin the search at 2:00. Within a short distance of the barracks, as we fanned out, we found girls in shelters of every description. It reminded me of a hobo jungle. A truck accompanied each group to load the equipment and materials found. Forty-eight girls were taken into custody, and fifteen soldiers. The soldiers were taken to a stockade. The girls were taken to town and released with warning not to return. Pup tents, blankets, rifles, ammunition, packs, pots, pans, and rations besides the army clothes, were thrown on trucks. There was enough equipment to supply a small army. Four days later, the search was repeated with thirty girls taken. Some of these girls were the same who were taken into custody the first time. I don't know what happened to them, but on our third search, not a girl was found.

When the capitulation of Germany was made final, the men sent to the 6696<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion had completed training sufficiently to make them ready for combat. Each man was given partial pay and a three-day pass before their departure to France. Even the prisoners were released and sent to their respective companies, relieving me of my duties, (in charge of prisoners). Trucks arrived to take the men to Salisbury and within the camp it was deserted except for the training cadre. We said our good-byes to the men to await their return for assignments in Europe. These men earned their leave and we were proud of them. Within a month of their departure, we received word by mail that they were taken to the States to the state of Florida. Since the men left, we were to be in limbo for three weeks until a new group of men would arrive. We had no duties except to answer roll call every morning.

A week and a half went by when a call from Battalion Headquarters came for me to report to the adjutant. Passing by the prison compound, I was surprised to see two men in the confined quarters. Four guards were manning the towers. Confronting the adjutant a little later, I was briefed on the two prisoners, who had escaped from the guard two or three times while on work details. They were caught by the Military Police and brought back. I was informed that I would be in charge of one prisoner to take him to a court martial hearing being held in Tidworth, two days from then, at 0900 hours. His name was Sergeant William Baker, and considered to be dangerous. This prisoner had escaped from guards on three previous occasions. My orders were to "shoot to kill" if this prisoner tried to escape again. I was chosen by Colonel 'Kill Em' personally because of my combat experience. The prisoner was to be taken that day under guard to the prison stockade at Tidworth. My assignment was to take the prisoner from the compound to the building where the court martial was to take place. Tidworth was about twelve miles away, and I had to make sure that the prisoner arrived at the building on time.

Memories of this village flashed through my mind. We had trained in the rolling hills and fields just outside of the village before leaving for Africa. I thought of my friends who were now gone, but not forgotten. A lonely feeling swept over me, which I shook off. Arriving at Tidworth at 0730 hours, I went to the guard house to report to the lieutenant in charge of the guard. I had with me a Garand M-1 rifle loaded with a clip of ammunition, a round already in the chamber and the safety lock on. Tidworth hadn't changed, and I walked about in the area where our company was billeted. I walked the route I would take the prisoner on to make sure of getting the prisoner to our destination on time. From the compound to the court martial building was a good three blocks. Fifteen minutes would be sufficient, I thought, at a brisk walk. At 0820 hours I went to the Compound with the Sergeant of the Guard.

I wanted to see and talk to the prisoner before leaving the stockade. The prisoner was called to the gate with me standing on the outside. "Sergeant Williams [Baker], I'm the man to take you to the court martial building. No funny stuff, for I have orders to shoot to kill. We will

be leaving in 15 minutes, and when the gate opens, step out and start walking down the street; I'll be right behind you at 5 paces." The Sergeant didn't look dangerous, but I didn't want to take any chances. He was a typical guy, 5 feet 7 inches tall, blue eyes, and weighed about 160 pounds. When the prisoner stepped outside of the compound, he was now my charge. I stepped behind him with my rifle at port, safety off. Walking at a fast pace, I asked, "what are the charges against you, Sergeant?" "Away without leave (A.W.O.L.) three times and running away from my guards," he replied. "I have a wife and three kids in Leeds. I married an English girl in 1942 when I was with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. I wanted a pass to see my wife and kids when I came to the infantry training center but was declined, so I took off until I was caught. I was brought back and escaped three times." I was alert as we walked, just in case he made a move. I had already made up my mind not to kill this man just because the Colonel ordered it. I would however shoot him in the thigh to stop him. "I wish you luck, Sergeant, and hope you get a light sentence". We arrived at our destination, where 2 M.P.'s escorted the prisoner inside with drawn 45's. An hour went by when outside door opened with the prisoner stepping into view on the side walk. The M.P.'s were right behind him. "He's yours, Sergeant, to take back to the stockade." The prisoner was crying and wiping the tears from his cheeks as he started for the Compound. "What happened inside?" I asked. "They gave me 25 years at hard labor at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas," was his reply. "I only wanted to see my wife and kids." That was a harsh sentence for a man going AWOL. Murdering someone or desertion was a sentence this severe. I felt sorry for the man, and to this day I cannot believe why those officers at the court martial gave such a sentence. My hopes were, since the war was over, that his sentence would be reviewed and be given a lighter sentence. If not, he would have to serve the 25 years. What a tragedy! At the compound the prisoner turned to face me a moment inside and said, "Thanks" and I in turn said, "for what?"

A couple days later while at the Company Headquarters, news that the prisoners of war in the prison camps of Germany were freed and were being sent to areas in France, Belgium and England to recuperate. Meeting some of these men broke my heart. The treatment they suffered while in the camps was unbelievable.

## Part E: Going Home

*After the German surrender, nearly all of the Americans serving in Europe simply wanted to go home. Japan, however, had not surrendered, and before the middle of August, when the combination of atomic bombs and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria forced them to sue for peace, there was a real prospect that the Americans would have to invade Japan. Were that to be that case, much of the manpower used in that invasion would have to come from Europe, and experienced men were needed to both train and lead those forces. Due to Olexa's medical designation, he would not have been part of the invasion force, but he might have been retained as a trainer, which he feared would be the case. However, the US military recognized the need to allow those men who had seen the most combat to leave the service, and were beginning to send some of them home even before the German surrender in May. While he could not be sure, it was only a matter of time before it would be Olexa's turn to leave.*

A system of a soldier's eligibility for duty or discharge was being devised based on credits for length of service, length of time overseas, decorations and age. To be eligible, you had to have 121 points. The highest number I heard was 137points, and I had 127 points. This news

was received with joy, but we had to wait. Records of each eligible man had to be checked. Most of us didn't believe that the army would let us go, since we were in a limited service status, training men for combat, at that. Two weeks later<sup>29</sup>, I was given orders by the company clerk to turn in all of my equipment and be ready to leave after dinner. When this was done, I had only an officer's pack with my personal things and the Luger which was taken from the German Medic in Aachen.

Lieutenant Philips, Sergeant Trenton and other noncoms gathered together to wish me good luck. A jeep arriver to pick me up, and for the first time I realized I was the only man leaving. An envelope was handed to me by the driver which had a ticket for a train ride from Salisbury to Birmingham. Birmingham was the 10th Replacement Depot. I was there once before, on my way back to the front. My stay at the 10<sup>th</sup> Replacement Depot was three days while being processed. All veterans going home were in an area by themselves. I scanned a bulletin board looking for names of men I knew, but to no avail. I couldn't be that lucky to have someone like that to travel with. There were many WACs here doing all of the paper work for our departure. Just after breakfast, the men in my group had to fall out into the street with our gear. There were thirty of us, enough for one plane load. In all, seven groups were marched to a train which was waiting on a siding for our arrival. Just after boarding the train, it began to move, with Edinburgh, Scotland, our destination. When the train pulled into Edinburgh, there were seven British lorries waiting, taking us to a British camp having Quonset huts for us to stay in. Each truck group was led to a billet by a British soldier. Scattered about the camp were 20 of these huts, and my group was in number 10. We were told to stay in the hut area (a 24 hour alert). Planes bringing cargo and military personnel were landing at the Prestwick, about 30 miles away. There was no set time for us, so we had to be ready to leave at any time. About 5 blocks of buildings were bombed out in this sector with the rubble still present. The streets were passable leading into the center of the city which was another 10 blocks away. Some of the men were already leaving to go to town, taking a chance.

While standing outside of our hut I thought I recognized someone I knew near hut #7. "Punchy!" I yelled and he turned around to look at me. "Hi Sarge!" he yelled back and came a running. We shook hands and began to ask a lot of questions especially about the men of the L Company. We finally got to ask what our duties were on 'limited service.' Punchy was with the Military Police in France. I in turn told him of my duties in training Air Corps men for the Infantry. Somehow in our conversation we got to discussing the air-raid near Feriana in Africa and his flying eagle into the latrine. We laughed so hard, and cried with our guts and sides hurting so, at an incident that we had long forgotten. Gaining our composure, Punchy tried to chisel me out of 5 bucks. I told him I was broke, but gave him a British florin (50 cent piece). That was enough for him to get started in a 'crap game' which was already in progress in hut #7. It was a nickel and a dime game, and within an hour Punchy won everything. The winnings were about 15 dollars, and to my surprise I got back my coin. Outside again, I began to stroll around the camp to pass the time away. One Quonset hut at the entrance contained the British Cadre in charge of the camp. I saw a Tommy smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk. "How long will we have to wait for a plane?" I asked. "Anytime, Yank, for as fast as the planes are refueled, they are taking off again for the states. One group of pilots fly them in and another group that is rested flies them out. Just as soon as the planes are ready, we receive a call and everyone is gone." A

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<sup>29</sup> Olexa does not provide a date for his departure, but his discharge papers, indicated that he left the European Theater of Operations on June 22.

little while later, another Sergeant which I had befriended and myself decided to go see what Edinburgh was like. We didn't dare venture too far because of the alert. After a little sightseeing, the Sergeant and I went into a pub and had a couple of beers. In our absence a call came for 5 groups to be ready to leave. The British searched for enough men, but only 21 men were in the camp. When we got back, we had to be re-grouped. Punchy was one of the lucky ones to leave, and I never saw him again.

The next morning at three the whistle blew inside our hut, waking us up with a start. "O.K., Yanks, outside in 5 minutes with your gear, ready to go" a British sergeant yelled. We got dressed in a hurry and climbed into a lorry that was waiting for us. It was dark as the trucks began to move, and within 45 minutes we arrived at the airport at Prestwick. Near the terminal was a DC-3, the only plane around. It was still dark when we boarded the plane. A hostess greeted us as we entered, and told us to find a seat. The seating capacity was 30. I took a seat behind the right wing. About ten minutes went by when the pilot and co-pilot entered the plane. "Hi Fellows!" was his greeting as he walked forward to the cockpit. The pilot and co-pilot were in view of the passengers. We bombarded the man with all kinds of questions. "How long will it be before we reach the States? How far is it by air? Is the plane safe? Where will we land?" "Hold it," the man replied. "Our first hop will take us to Reykjavik, Iceland, which is four and a half hours." Warming up the engines, we began taxiing for takeoff. The plane had two lights attached to the wings to give the pilot vision as he approached the end of the runway. Revving up the motors once again, the pilot asked for permission for takeoff, and down the runway we went, like a shot out of a cannon. Within a short time, we were airborne and the pilot banked the plane to get an east bearing. The plane climbed for altitude to miss the mountain tops. There was nothing to see in the pre-dawn hours.

We had mixed emotions, jubilant to be going home, and sad to leave friends who shared your life. To be going home, I thought, is a miracle. A prayer of thanks rose in my heart to the Lord of my life. He had met my every need and more. A quietness except for the plane's motor came over us as we fell in a deep sleep. A blaring over the intercom woke us up. "Look at the sunrise, fellas! Look at the sunrise!" We were over the North Atlantic and the sun seemed to be rising out of the water. It had brilliant glow with the sun beams skipped over the water in our direction. Glancing at my watch, we were now two hours out of Scotland. I began to remember the many sunrises, the sunsets, and those pre-dawn hours that made us tense. Now I can say as I see its beauty, "I'm going home." Iceland with its many volcanoes is just below the Arctic Circle. The city of Reykjavik is its capital. Hot water and steam is piped from the hot springs to heat every building by this natural resource. Approaching our destination, the pilot radioed for instructions and permission to land, which was confirmed by the tower at the airport. The city itself was hidden somewhat from view as we began descend for our landing. The mountains were barren and rugged, with little vegetation. Approaching the strip, we could see the terminal, and planes of all descriptions spread out on the airfield. We were informed by the hostess that our stay would be one hour for refueling. You may eat at the cafeteria while you wait. In the terminal we sat at the counter and ordered breakfast. Three eggs, bacon, toast and coffee for .75 cents. A box lunch was made for each of us for one dollar, with two pieces of ham, 1 egg sandwich plus a piece of pie. Coffee would be given to us on the plane. Our next hop would take us to Gander, Newfoundland, and flying over a small portion of Greenland along the way. The box lunches were already on board the plane when we got there. Within minutes we were off the ground and climbing in the direction of Gander.

Dark clouds with squall lines moving fast in an Eastern direction began to appear about an hour out of Iceland. The pilot told us to fasten our seat belts and no smoking as he began to make our plane climb. "I hope to climb above the bad weather ahead," he remarked. The rain was quite heavy and our vision was zero within a short time. The pilot was struggling with the steering mechanism as the plane was vibrating in the heavy winds. The motor of the DC-3 labored on our upward climb. At 18,000 feet hail began to fall about the size of golf balls. We were mighty tense, not saying a word as the noise of the hail beat against the plane. The pilot fighting for control announced over the intercom that he would have to drive below the clouds to get us out of the bad squall. Descending towards the sea, the plane shook violently and we were unable to see as a yellowish haze barred our view. Somewhere in our journey down, the plane hit an air pocket, almost going out of control. The pilot and co-pilot were ashen white as the plane continued. Down out of the clouds we plunged, and we could see the huge waves raging with whitecaps on each roll. My life passed in front of me in seconds, for I was scared. As the pilot strained to pull the plane out of the drive, I said to myself, "I've lived through the war only to die in the sea." At that instant the plane began to respond and pull out. "Thank the Lord," was my response, my body shaking uncontrollably. Looking at the pilot and co-pilot, they were beat from the harrowing experience. We were a thousand feet above sea when the plane straightened out. Silence was broken about a half hour later, "Coffee anyone?" the hostess asked. Within seconds the plane became like a bee-hive. "Permission to smoke," the pilot said as we started to gain some of our composure. Our box lunches were given to us, which we wolfed down along with the coffee. This peril in my life was unexpected, and a breath away from eternity. Arriving at Gander, Newfoundland, the pilot brought the plane down on the runway for a soft landing.

The airport was a hustle-bustle with moving vehicles scurrying hither and yon like ants. We stayed in the air terminal while it was being refueled for the last lap of our journey. The plane was also being inspected for physical damage. Our harrowing experience was much discussed, and how the pilot fought at the controls to bring the plane out of the dive. In the air again an hour and a half later, the excitement of arriving home began to show. Anxious moments were prevalent as we flew above the ocean and the Provinces of Canada. Already the scientists have developed new basic changes of weapons ushering in a new era of warfare that is able to destroy the world. The employment of force by a strong nation will not prevent or eliminate war. Would the nations of the world again forget the destruction of its cities, ravaged land and suffering of its people? I pray not, for I look forward to a civilization that will be saner than the past.

Our final stop would be La Guardia airport in New York City ending our journey from England. As our plane came over the continental United States, the slate blue sky Maine kissed the mountains on the horizon, the trees reflecting the sunlight. The meadows were drenched in the different greens as the wild flowers bided us a special hello. The view of the coastline held us in awe as the whitecaps hit the rocks protruding from the ocean floor. The pilot announced over the P.A. system that he would follow the coastline so that we could enjoy the scenic beauty of our East Coast as we traveled. Never had we seen such beauty from the air. The plane was deathly quiet except for the motors as we marveled in silence at the earth below. The pilot would break the silence to tell us of the names of the cities as we approached—Portland, Boston, Providence and Hartford to name a few. Viewing New York City with its tall buildings twenty-five miles away kept us anxious and on edge.

The pilot was busy with communications as we approached. Permission to land was delayed, so the pilot circled the city in a 30-mile radius. As we climbed, I spotted the figure I was

looking for--The Statue of Liberty. "Hi, my lady, I've returned like I promised. You are darker grey, for the weather had not been kind to you as you stand tall in the harbor. You are the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, the melting pot of all peoples of the world. A pillar of strength, the image of America to the world, and a beacon of hope to all. To some, you are nothing but a ton of copper, cement and steel. To others the symbol of immigrants of yesterday. To me 'my lady' you are a torch of love that has a heart which never fails, the guardian of people's rights, the lone eagle of courage and power."

Permission to land was given and excitement was at a high pitch when the plane touched American soil. The pilot taxied the plane to the terminal and stopped and shut down the motors. We grabbed our gear eager to get out. While waiting I managed to thank the pilot for bringing us home and shook his hand vigorously. When the ramp was placed in front of the door, we hurriedly left the plane, running down the steps with a shout, "Hurray, we're home!"

We had to go through customs, so I took my German Luger pistol and placed it under my shirt and belt. It was all in vain for we were searched and the gun was taken away from me. I told the inspector that the Luger didn't have a firing pin in it, and it had sentimental value to me, but all he said was 'sorry'. Soldiers returning home aboard a ship could carry a duffel bag of pistols and not be inspected, and I couldn't have one pistol to take home. I was angry, but said nothing. We were met by a sergeant in the terminal lounge informing us that a bus would arrive soon. Some of us still had money, so we shared cold cokes and ice cream from the dispensers in the lounge. The women we saw seemed underfed, thin, and frail, not like those in Europe. After an hour's wait, the Army bus arrived and we piled in. The weather was hot, and we had wool OD's on, which made us sweat. "Where are we headed?" I asked the driver. "Camp Kilmer in New Jersey" was his response. It was slow moving with the traffic, but we managed to reach the camp around six o'clock.

Arriving in our designated area, we were told to line up in front of the door to the left. Entering the building, we were de-loused and told to strip near the rear of the building where hot showers were taken. Forming another line and dripping wet, we hustled by some men asking the size of our clothes, which were then handed to us. When fully dressed and outside, a Sergeant in charge told us Barracks #3 was our sleeping quarters and to line up at the mess hall, just two buildings away. The mess hall was set up cafeteria style, with all kinds of meat, vegetables, pastries, fruit, bread, coffee and milk. It was like a dream, and I had to pinch myself to find out if it was real. We were hungry and went back for seconds and thirds and the cooks just shook their heads. Trucks loaded with men continued to arrive—this was a 24-hour deal, with the mess hall serving continuously. Back at the barracks, we made our beds and were told mess would be at 7 o'clock sharp. We were free to do anything, but be present for roll call the next morning. This camp had a large commissary, so I bought a suitcase for myself. We were glad to be wearing suntans (khaki uniforms,) which were much cooler. While waiting for the lights to be turned out, I could not help thinking how fortunate I was to be back home. Within 24 hours I am to receive a surprise that will make me a jubilant soldier.

After breakfast the next morning, we were ready to leave for Fort Dix by convoy. There were ten trucks in our convoy and we headed southwest to Fort Dix. Arriving around 1:30 in the afternoon and going through the gates, we went about a half mile in and stopped. We were assigned barracks after a roll call and informed to be ready the next morning for processing and discharge. All of the men in the convoy were in the same area, which was company size. The processing building and discharge center were three blocks down the road towards the main entrance. Our names were posted on the bulletin board, giving the time for our departure to the

center. Chow was to be at 5 o'clock, so I ventured into two company areas scanning the names to see if anyone was around that I knew. I found none after looking over 500 names. However, what a surprise, I met a man who worked at the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) the same time that I did, way back in 1937 and 38. I did a two-year hitch building roads in the wilderness of Idaho. He wasn't as enthused as I was, and continued to horseplay around. It was a real letdown to me.

Back at my own barracks, I freshened up with a shower and waited for 5 o'clock. A few minutes before the evening meal, I stepped outside to wait. Looking across the street I spotted a person with a white head of hair. He was standing and talking with some other men. I looked again and shouted "Maczak?" "OLEXA!" was his response as we charged each other. I never was so happy to hug this Pollack and dancing a Russian jig at the same time. We had a good cry together, admiring one another. After chow we went to the barracks, talking until four in the morning, catching up on the news of each other. "You will come to my wedding George?" was my departing words before leaving. "I'll send you a telegram when to come." My companion was discharged that very day without our meeting each other again at Dix. I was thankful to see George in good health. His duties were the same as mine, training Air Corps men for the infantry.

Precisely at 9:00 that morning, we were undressing in the medical building and placing a large towel around our mid-section; we had to go from one room after the other visiting a doctor in each room. I've had many physical examinations, but this one should have been in the "Believe it or Not" by Ripley, because I was poked and jabbed just like a boxer in a ring. I've never had a physical like that since. Each doctor had to mark one of three sheets we had to carry for this examination and sign it. This process went on until 3 o'clock that afternoon, and we were glad to get back to the barracks to rest. The next day, we had to go through the finance building to get our records straight, mustering out pay, bonus and insurance status upon our leaving the service. I elected to keep mine and have it converted, one of the best decisions I ever made. We were through at noon, and I returned to the barracks for our final day, which was the 30<sup>th</sup> of June. Excitement and anxiety the next morning were running its course among us. At the finance building, our names were called and we were given our discharges. How they were able to accomplish this, with so many men, was a miracle. I believe typists worked in shifts to pull out all of this work. At another window, our discharges were given to a teller who in turn counted out the money we had coming, plus a 100-dollar bonus. Walking outside, a sergeant handed us a lame duck (discharge button), and we headed for the gate as a civilian. Within a short time, we were walking through the gate.

While standing near the bus that read "Trenton," I was at a loss. The Army dictated my life, and now no one gave me orders. From this point on I will have to make my own decisions. Each returning veteran will ask himself, "can I adapt myself to a normal civilian life when he has been like a coiled-up spring, wound tight?" Each one has been trained to kill and geared for war. The veteran has not been untrained or unwound of his military training. Can he unwind fully in time of peace? He's had battle fatigue, nostalgia, nightmares, frustrations and heartaches. Some never will unwind, holding everything inside, mentally withdrawing into a shell of silence. Others will half-unwind, locking their war experiences into a sub-conscious mind. Society now expects him to be the same person, or better, than when he left, yet it misunderstands him totally. Time is needed for adjustment, to switch from one phase of life to another, and to walk in the way of a good man. His behavior is to act as trained, instantly, to survive, which is never understood. Can he hack the life of a civilian and not have problems? Can he phase into



obscurity, to love, and be loved? To pursue happiness, to forget the war, get married, have a family, a job and home? Can he be liberated of one life, to feel needed, and to need others? If a bus or a flock of geese can bridge the communication gap by honking, then there is hope for us, and only time will tell. Yes, I am a man of war, chosen to fight such as men are chosen to serve in times of peace. This is not a fantasy world, look about you and see God's beauty. Be thankful that you have been born in America, the land of crazy Americans, where a nobody can even become a President.

Thirty-five years have passed since I walked out through those gates at Fort Dix, a man without orders. I just stood there and looked and looked, waiting for an order 'move out! But it didn't come. I was on my own... and have been until now. But I keep thinking, did we fight for – No mo' war?' The papers have headlines screaming with new trouble spots all over the world, and nations are in an armament race as never before.

We have been sitting a peace table for years in Korea and the country is still divided, North and South Korea. There is no solution between East and West Berlin. There is a perplexity of nations – a dilemma in which there is no solution. Look at the Middle East. There is no solution to their problems, between the Arabs and Israel. Unless God intervenes, and the Bible states that, that is just what is going to happen.

General MacArthur knew this and said that we are leading up to the "Battle of Armageddon", the way the arms race is heading. This battle is referred to in Revelations 19:11-21 and has to do with Israel. After that there will be an era of peace, but that too will end in rebellion by the armies of the world and God himself will have to intervene (Rev. 20:8,9).

I thought about these things on my flight home from Iceland they have never left me. And now, as I look down on my little grand-son playing on the floor .... I wonder about him. The awfulness of war ... is he too going to be called ... "for no mo' war?" (Remember that slogan?) Haven't we learned? Why don't we?