

Chapter 2: Oran

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At this time, I want to inject a tribute to the men of the burial detail, unsung heroes of which little has been written. These are the gallant men who after a battle or skirmish gather up the dead, not only our fallen comrades but that of the enemy. Depending upon the battle, weather and how long the bodies are exposed, the stink is so great that a seasoned man will vomit. Some bodies are badly burned, some are in pieces, some mangled and others an upper torso or a lower torso. Bodies may be buried by the burial crew, maybe three or more times before the final resting place. When a body is taken in the field his personal belongings such as a watch, rings, money, etc. are put into a bag and given to the battalion chaplain. The chaplain sends these articles to the next of kin with a letter of condolence. My humble thanks and appreciation to you men who labored so hard and long at a task that never seemed to end, yet so vital to mothers, fathers, wives, children, brothers and sisters. Your unselfish devotion is worth your weight in gold in a job well done with little recognition, because the work is unpopular.

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Continuing our advance southward on the top of Djebel Murdjadjo, The terrain was rocky, with patches of scrub brushes growing here and there. The going was considerably easier with the scouts and myself scanning possible places the enemy could be in hiding. We advanced about a mile when suddenly I saw a Monk dressed in a dark gray robe with a white rope sash around his waist. At his side was a big German Shepherd dog looking toward us. I immediately halted, the squad alerting the platoon sergeant, to standby while I moved forward to investigate. As I returned and looked in the direction of where the Monk and the dog stood, there was no one in sight. I moved quickly to the spot where the Monk stood. I asked the scouts if they had seen what I saw. Their reply was negative and I was puzzled. I ordered the squad to scan the bushes and the rocks in the area for footprints while I headed toward the eastern ridge where there were huge boulders that jutted above the mountain top. Moving again with my friend George, cautiously, a foot path appeared and went right into the massive rock wall. Taking our time so that we would not be ambushed, I spotted a passageway, wide and high enough to walk through. I eased my head around the corner for a peek, the passageway was dark with a lighted opening at the other end. The passageway was about 30 feet long. Captain Jitters was on his way to find out what the delay was about. I had already informed my platoon sergeant of my observation and the passageway as he approached me. I also told him of what I saw and that no foot prints had been found at the place of my first sighting or anywhere in the area.

Captain Jitters at this time appeared with his runner. "What's the trouble," he asked and I related the same story to him as I did to my platoon sergeant. The captain looked at me in disgust and asked if I had been drinking, my reply was "no, Sir", sticking to my story. "You better change your brand of liquor sergeant, so as not to have any more of these pipe dreams. Where does the passageway go?" I replied to that none of us had entered into the passageway and were awaiting orders from the platoon sergeant, although we could see through the passageway. "Hop to it, sergeant, and see what's on the other side." Putting caution to the wind, I entered into the passageway with George right behind. I was mad. Walking in a hurried pace the lighted opening

at the far end was now before us. Before stepping out into the light, we stopped, being ready with our automatics in case of trouble. One at a time, we jumped out and to one side covering each other. The view from the passageway was breathtaking. Looking down the mountain slope we sighted Bou Sfer, the little town we had taken, to the right was the French garrison buildings, and to our immediate front, the beach, and all of the ships anchor that brought us, still unloading cargo. There was a path leading down the mountain side to Bou Sfer and the road to Oran. Taking a quick look around the passageway, we summoned Captain Jitters. I was still looking for that Monk and his dog. My vision was 20/20, my head clear and I knew that he couldn't have moved that fast to be out of sight. The path to Bou Sfer from the mountaintop was visible all the way. Where could he have gone? Why didn't the dog bark? Was our mission accomplished? Did we have to move further south on the mountain top? These questions were going through my mind as Captain Jitters came into view from the passageway. "Beautiful sight, eh sergeant? We need not go any further. Send a runner to the platoon leaders to assemble here and have the 2nd Platoon take up defense positions 100 yards south and west of the passageway." "Yes Sir," was my reply as I made my way back to the other side of the passageway, calling Hasta La Vista to notify the platoon leaders.

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Meanwhile orders from Admiral Darlan were given to all French commanders to cease fighting. Casablanca was the first sector to stop. Oran was still fighting in small skirmishes. General Giraud was given the position of Commander in Chief of all military forces in North Africa¹.

The final cessation of hostilities of all French forces including the Navy and Air Force which were under Admiral Darlan by November 13, 1942 stopped.

Unknown to us, the Germans began landing troops in the Tunis/Bizerte area around 9 November. The Germans were no fools, they were pouring in troops to protect Rommel.² Precious time was lost by negotiations of the High Brass. British forces were unable to capture Bizerte and Tunis as planned. The Germans were now established in force in North Africa. The British however, under General Anderson advanced beyond Beja and to a point where the outskirts of Tunis could be seen. Later however, the British had to retreat to Beja because of the heavy buildup of the Germans, and the lack of troops and equipment.³

¹ Giraud, who turned out to be something of a pompous windbag, had demanded full control of Allied forces in North Africa, but was only given command of the French forces, and proved so difficult to work with that he was soon shunted aside. Darlan retained his overall leadership of the French in North Africa until his assassination in December. Smith, 401-405.

² Rommel's forces, which had only begun to retreat from El Alamein in Egypt when the Torch landings took place, needed to reach Tunisia in order to be able to either continue the fight or withdraw with relative safety to Italy, and the Allies had hoped to seize Tunisia before the Germans could protect it, but long distances, bad weather and terrible roads would make this impossible. Atkinson, 247-249, 260-261.

³ Atkinson, 253-255.

At dawn of the 11th [of] November we were ready to march back to the fort in the direction we had come. In a count of twos, the third platoon moved out at 120 per [steps per minute] marching gait with the First, Second and Fourth Platoons following in order for Oran.

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Passing through the garrison, we soon were headed down the winding road to the city of Oran. The harbor was filled with ships that were scuttled during the fighting and later being repaired to be used as needed. The streets of Oran were narrow, cobble stoned with the main street in good condition.

We were headed for the La Sénia airport, which was north and west of Oran about 3 miles. Paratroopers were to have landed from the air and seize the installations. Many of the paratroopers were dropped in the marshy area beyond the runways. The defense of the airport was light and little damage was done to the main buildings and hangars. We saw no paratroopers or French on our arrival. There was no evidence of much fighting or no dead bodies anywhere lying on the ground. K Company had the task of taking up defense positions around the airport while our company took refuge in the hangars. The sun began to set in the west while each platoon was given an area to bed down for the night.

The day of the 12th, the company made a few changes within its ranks by promoting some of its personnel. First Sergeant Eagan was promoted to Battlefield Rank [given a battlefield promotion], 2nd Lieutenant, taking over the Weapons Platoon. Lieutenant Goods was transferred from the Second Battalion to take over the Second Platoon filling the vacancy of Lieutenant Dreier. Lieutenant Osbeek of the Weapons Platoon was promoted to 1st Sergeant.⁴

Lieutenant Goods was a good-natured man, small build, funny as a bed bug when he got excited and stuttered, cool man under pressure. On one patrol that I shared with him we were strafed by machine guns from a tail gunner of a German bomber the JU-199⁵. Evidently this bomber was returning from a bomber run when they spotted us in an open valley. Driving the jeep, we dove into a gully and immediately spread out in all directions for cover. We knew we were in trouble when the bomber changed its course and started to circle back on the first pass. The tail gunner concentrated on the jeep. Luckily for us that it was two-thirds protected; only part of the jeep was shot up and it still was operational. On the second pass around the gunner decided to shoot at Lieutenant Goods and myself. As the bullets came earthward, Lieutenant Goods got up and started running. Six bullets tore through his coat between his legs, knocking him to the ground. With a clenched fist lying there he stuttered. "You.., you... bastards, it isn't a fair fight!" I laughed till my side split, the Lieutenant roaring with me. The bomber didn't return

⁴ This account is somewhat garbled. Eagan was not promoted to lieutenant until after the Sicilian campaign, although he may have taken over the Weapons Platoon at the time noted by Olexa, without a formal promotion. Lt. Goods, whose real name was Norman T. Woods, did replace Dreier, who soon recovered and served on the battalion staff. Osbeek, whose real name was Robert Ostwald, would also eventually become a lieutenant, although Olexa has his promotion schedule confused, since a lieutenant outranks a sergeant.

⁵ There was no such aircraft with that designation. He may be referring to the Junkers 188, a slightly upgraded version of the Ju 88, a long-range aircraft that did have machine guns in its tail, but probably the more common Ju 88, which came in an assortment of versions.

after the second pass. We were very fortunate in the outcome of our experience. The driver and my assistant gunner were not scratched. The Lieutenant cursed the Germans all the way back to our lines. Had the jeep been destroyed, our party would have had to walk the last 25 miles.

The French were still giving us resistance in the Oran area and patrols had to be sent out to locate these pockets. Lieutenant Eagan, a machine gunner and driver were given a recon-mission to the south of Oran into the desert toward Sidi-Bel-Abbes. They were captured by the French 10 miles from Oran and taken to the city of Sidi-Bel-Abbes. They were treated well by the French and were released two days later to return to our ranks.

Three miles northwest of Oran was a French ammunition dump. The Second Platoon of L Company was given the mission to guard the weapons and ammo left by the French. Most of the French guns were World War I vintage. They were heavy and awkward. The cartridges were about 6 inches long and made the rifle when fired kick like a mule. I was amazed at the amount of fire that came out of the barrel. Old belt-fed machine guns, grenades, bayonet and 75 [mm] howitzer shells making up the tally sheet lying about.

Our stay at the ammunition dump was short lived. We were transferred to defense positions northeast of Oran. Arriving by truck, the platoon was deployed to guard a crossroad a vital place to hold, defending Oran. Nearby was a well-kept farm house owned by a Frenchman. His farmland was covered with neat rows of orange and grapefruit trees. Lieutenant Goods could speak French, and the farmer treated us well. His concern was to get his daughter married. He said that he would be delighted to have an American son-in-law. The farmer was a man of means, but his daughter was something else.

Hasta-La-Vista, the young, tall soldier from Binghamton, New York, was chosen to be the farmer's guest. We had to soft soap this handsome soldier of eighteen to accept the farmer's invitation. We painted a rosy picture about the daughter, about the money he would have and a life of bliss with a beautiful well-shaped French woman. That evening, smelling like a scrubbed pig (Boutique style), Hasta-La-Vista was escorted into the house by the farmer. Our imagination ran wild as we discussed the good fortune of our comrade. Two hours later a dejected form appeared in front of a nice bonfire we had going. As Hasta-La-Vista stood there warming himself from the chill wind, we were ready to hear the good news about his exploits in the farm house. "She's as fat as a pig," he managed to say, "and thirty-five years old. The food was boiled vegetables and the wine very sour. What a hell-ava night, thanks to you guys!"

As part of our gear, we were given two pieced underwear, chemically treated to protect our skin against mustard gas. The smell was sickening, and whenever we could we buried it.

Down the road a ways lived an Arab with his family who worked for the farmer caring for the orange and grapefruit orchards. This Arab loved to warm himself up by the fire we had going. He mentioned how cold it was and asked us for a coat or something warm that he could wear. We obliged by parting with two suits of this nice smelly underwear. His face lit up with glee, "thank you", he said in French.

Giving him a cigarette was another treat for us as he squatted by the fire. Putting the cigarette to his mouth, he picked up a white-hot coal with his fingers and lit his cigarette as if he were lighting it with a match, then placing the hot coal back into the fire. We were stunned at what we saw, believing the man's fingers were burned. We hurriedly examined this man's fingers for burns, but nothing was missing. The Arab again reached into the fire picked up another hot coal and held it out for us to take with no physical reaction. An amazing sight to behold as he placed it into the fire once again. The cigarette that he was smoking was between the two larger fingers lit end toward the palm, shielded from the wind. We were bewildered and awed waiting for this man to act in getting rid of the cigarette as he sat smiling at us. As the evening wore on each cigarette that we gave him was placed and smoked in the same manner with no side effects. We surmised that it was a trick, and after the man's departure decided to explore and try duplicating what we saw. One by one each of us reached into the fire picking up a hot coal, instantly dropping it as it seared our fingers.

"Impregnate Joe," we called this man after boiling that underwear for two days to get rid of the smell. The day we left the area "Impregnate Joe" wore his prize, smelly as ever, thanking us again as we departed for Oran. News later came to us that the Frenchman complained to the authorities that he was insulted because we did not give him the smelly underwear, considering the Arab above him.

Arriving at the airport the second time, we were surprised to see C-47 transport planes scattered about the airfield. Orders were given that the 3rd Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment was to proceed as an advanced guard north into Tunisia. We were to fly about 450 miles from Oran to our destination.⁶

⁶ Gen. Lloyd Fredendall, commander of the US II Corps, to which the 1st Division belonged, had a tendency to detach units from their parent commands for specialized missions, which created an organizational mess and caused serious problems several months later when the Germans counterattacked. Olexa's battalion would spend the intervening period operating independently of most of the rest of the division on the far southern end of the American line.

