

Chapter 3: Into Tunisia

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On the morning of November 15th, we marched to the planes and got on board. There were no seats in the planes so we sat on the floor with our equipment, each plane carrying 40 men. As our plane was taxiing to take off, I saw Lieutenant Eagan and his party approaching another plane getting on board. It was a good feeling to know that he was back. In a matter of minutes, we were airborne headed North. To our surprise, we had no fighter escort. We'd be sitting ducks for German fighter planes. The pilots followed the coastline fifty feet above the water as protection from diving planes. The weather got worse, and the torrential rain beating on the planes made flying very difficult. Even at a higher altitude the rain was the same. We were forced to land at a little town called Bleda¹ which had a medium sized airport. We were told by the co-pilot to leave as quickly as possible when the plane came to a halt. No sooner than we were clear of the plane it took off in the direction of Oran. We were soaked in a matter of minutes by the pouring rain. There was one large hangar at the edge of the field.

Our journey was half completed, and much nearer to danger than we realized. Each company was assigned an area to guard and as each company became secured, the rain beat on all of us the harder. Two days in this rain was an experience I shall never forget. We were like drowned out rats. The mud was soupy, we were cold and shivering trying to keep warm, we were beyond bitching and miserable. During the second night as the rain kept coming down in sheets, that hangar looked mighty pleasant standing by itself even though the windows were broken. We were just south of Algiers and didn't know it. "Shall we take a chance." was the question asked, "and take shelter in the hangar?" Within minutes the hangar was stormed from all sides as we poured in out of the rain. There was enough wood lying around to build fires. That hangar glowed in the dark from the light of the fires within.

If the Germans were flying in this weather, we were dead ducks, but lady luck smiled on us. Three men of the platoon decided to take a walk into Bleda, braving the rain. When they returned two hours later, they had 4 bottles of cognac, opening the bottles to share with friends. Hasta took a long slug and quickly spit, what he didn't swallow, into the fire. The cognac was half gasoline. Pouring the cognac into the fire brought the flames right up to the bottle. A lesson was learned not to purchase anything to drink without testing the purchase first. The rain subsided the third day, but the planes could not land because the runways were too soft.

On the morning of November 19th, the cargo planes once again appeared. Landing was a little difficult with the runway still a little soggy. The pilots were concerned about getting off of the ground loaded. However around 2 o'clock we boarded the planes in the pilots did a wonderful job getting us airborne. As yet we had no fighter protection so we flew low and near

¹ Modern Blida, Algeria, southwest of Algiers and about halfway between Oran and the Tunisian border. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 147, states that the move began on Nov. 20, not Nov. 15.

the mountains. Flying low would discourage fighters diving on us. We were told once again that upon landing at our destination to unload and clear the planes as quickly as possible.

The weather was much better but cloudy. Visibility was good, with orders from the pilot to scan the skies for enemy aircraft. Little did we realize that once on the ground we would live in the field till the campaign of Tunisia it was over. The place where we were to land was a flat valley twelve miles from the city of Tebessa. To the northwest was Constantine and Bône on the coast held by the British. In this area which was the southernmost point of the Allied forces it was suitable terrain for three future airfields.

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As the months went by the men under my command had to have their weapons in firing order. I made an example by cleaning and dusting my rifle every chance I got. I was heart-sick when I saw a dead soldier with a jammed rifle. I cursed under my breath as I examined the rifle that jammed. Grains of sand, dust and lack of oil are the enemies. If I could only drill this into their heads my men would stay alive. I also examined the weapons of Germans killed in battle. Some were jammed. The enemy: grains of sand, dust, and lack of oil. In the days and months ahead, I was to become a seasoned soldier from the events of battle that befell me, embarking in an experience not like a little boy trying to make up his mind to jump into a mud puddle and them landing in the middle of it my thoughts were “Why am I here?” What can I do? Who is responsible and what will the outcome accomplish?” I am here because of men seeking power and conquest. Ravaging the lands and people as they grab, leaving a holocaust of misery and suffering. Marching on for more power, and I am but a little cog in a big wheel, but by doing my part in a small way will eventually stop this steam roller that has been so great a motion, to a grinding halt. I shall see many, many ruthless exploits of the Axis power. Senseless killings, brutal treatment of prisoners, women and children because of greed.

A soldier was captured in the Battle of the Bulge. He was sent to Dachau, a German concentration camp. He was flogged with a razor strap from the top of the shoulders down the backside to his knees. Exposing his back, I saw nothing but raw flesh. Great Dane dogs were sicked on prisoners if they were late for roll call. This soldier wasn't giving information, net result a brutal beating. I am a veteran of three invasions and many battles, my sufferings were superficial compared to this soldier of eighteen, as he slowly talked about his treatment, and the fate of other Americans who were there with him. Tears of grief were running down my cheeks as I stood beside him. I was spared from this kind of treatment. Who wins in a war, although one side is victor? The motto of the 1st Infantry Division is a touching one. Meaningful in every respect to our way of life. This is the way it goes:

“No mission too difficult,

No sacrifice too great,

Duty First.”

This has a divine significance to me. I shall never know your train of thought to these words, but you'll know mine.