

Chapter 6: Last Battles in Tunisia

See material on pp. 91-98

“The battalion is headed for Tebessa¹ to a rest area.” “We might be able to catch up with them,” remarked the driver. Our conversation as we traveled on was about the senseless tragedy that could have been avoided had someone given the order to move out those vehicles. Upon reaching Gafsa, we turned at the crossroads and headed south [actually northwest] toward Tebessa. We had many experiences on this road. Men’s lives were taken and vehicles were destroyed. This was a road vital to the Allies in moving supplies and troops. “Messerschmitt Lane” we called it. The German fighter pilots had a field day on quite a few unsuspecting victims. Darkness was closing in on us and still no sight of the convoy. The driver turned on the lights, the dull blue rays appeared on the road bed. Nearing the Thelepte airport, we were directed by a guide with a light to head east toward Kasserine Pass, over the mountains, to the town of Thala behind the British sector. From Thala eastward to the Mediterranean Sea, the fertile valleys and rolling hills stretched north and south as far as the eye could see.

Driving at night slowed us down, for we were now heading into the mountains. At Kasserine Pass we were again directed by a guide to continue eastward. Hours ticked away and the going was rough because we were unfamiliar with this part of the country. The air was chilly as we began to descend on the other side of the mountain range. Shining a light on a sign at the base of the mountain, it read, “Thala 5 Kilometers.” It was a welcomed sight because we had not caught up with the convoy traveling ahead of us. Thala was a small town and it wasn’t long before we were on our way in a northeast direction heading for Souk-El-Arba. This was a good tank country between the mountain ranges to Tabarka, Bizerte, and Tunis, all on the coast.

The convoy of our battalion had stopped about midway between Thala and Souk-El-Arba. The bivouac area was a good place, it had some brush and trees throughout the area to conceal the trucks and men. It was dawn when we reached our destination and we were plenty tired. L Company was already heading for its bivouac area, so we fell in behind them. As the company was marching along, a lone figure was seen standing near the road with an old blanket wrapped around his shoulders and grinning from ear to ear. “What Company?” was the remark. “L Company, General,” was the answer. “Best coffee-making company in the division,” the General shouted, still grinning. This was the last time I was to see this tall lanky General who was Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. A General well-liked by everyone, with plenty of guts for a fight. Within minutes I picked out a nice big rock where I would lie down for a snooze.

The sun was rising, sending forth its warm rays, a nice day for us to enjoy. As I sat leaning my back against the rock, I spotted a shiny object which at first looked like a piece of jagged glass. Upon examining this object, I could see through it. It was about an inch and a half in diameter and it had many glistening colors. “Hey George!” I yelled, (he was just a few feet from me) “look what I found.” Holding it up between my fingers for George to see the sun made it sparkle enough for him to be curious. “What is it, Sarge?” “I think it’s an uncut diamond.” “I don’t believe it, Sarge.” “Well, I might be lucky for once, George.” “Ya, you might,” was his answer. “I’m going to throw it hard against the rock to see what happens. Stand back, George, the pieces may fly in all directions.” “Fire away Sarge, I’m ready.” Throwing the object hard against the rock like a baseball didn’t even chip it as it bounced away from us. “What do you

¹ They were actually returning to Morsott, north of Tebessa. *Danger Forward*, 72.

think of that, George?” “Ah, it’s always the rank that gets the best of this man’s army.” “The hell you say, George,” as I put the object in my pocket. News of my find spread through the company like a fire fanned by the wind. I had to put it on display and let everyone handle it, gloating like a prairie chicken in a mating dance. Two days later, my object had grown to the size of a baseball by word of mouth, making me chuckle to hear this. I carried this object in my pocket throughout the war, only to lose it at home and it hasn’t been found.

After a meal of powdered eggs, spam, and black coffee prepared by the cooks, we all went back to our area for a much-needed snooze. The words “Chow- Come and get it” woke us up for dinner. We usually eat by rotation, a platoon at a time, so I scurried off in the direction of the jeep with the chow, to find out when our platoon was to eat. Lt. Fortce², the leader of the 1st Platoon, approached me as I came up to the mess line. “Sergeant, how would you like to go with me on a treasure hunt?” “A treasure hunt?” I asked, puzzled. “Looking for artifacts about a mile from here in some ancient ruins. I stumbled on this place this morning. We may find coins or old tools and maybe some old pottery. I had some archaeology in college, so I have a good idea what to look for.” “O.K. I’ll go, Lieutenant but I won’t be of much help.” As the Lieutenant and I walked toward the area of the ruins, he excitedly said that he may find things of great value. That piece of rock you found may prove something. “It might at that, Lieutenant,” getting my hopes up to a higher degree. “See those rock formations and columns, that’s an ancient city.” The city was on some high ground where a person could view the terrain in all directions. As we walked about the ruins I asked, “What are we looking for? All I can see is a heap of rocks.” The Lieutenant laughed and answered, “I’ll let you know when I spot something.” With the skill of a great craftsman the Lieutenant observed a piece of ground and etched out a 3’ x 8’ foot piece with a small pick. “That’s a grave Sergeant!” “We’ll look some more and dig into it later.” I was puzzled and amazed when the Lieutenant etched out another grave not too far from the first one. “How are you able to locate these graves, Lieutenant?” “Oh, by the way of the ground and the slight depressions.” “Oh, that’s it,” I answered, not fully understanding what he meant. “I must be stupid, Lieutenant, because I can’t see what you see.” The Lieutenant laughed again remarking, “You would if you were an archaeologist.” “Well, I can dig a foxhole as fast as anyone under any circumstances.” “Yes you can, but an archaeologist has to be careful not to destroy objects buried in the ground.” Within a short time, the Lieutenant located two more graves, which made four in all. The graves were not very deep, and a stone slab about 2 inches thick covered each grave under four to five inches of sand. Removing the slab was not as difficult as it looked. The walls were of stone, which supported the slab over the grave. Nothing of great value was found except for a few clay pots. Each grave, as it was uncovered, had a blackish-brown streak in the middle, about six feet long and eight inches wide. “What are these streaks?” I asked the Lieutenant. Those are the remains of a body placed in the grave. The Lieutenant probed each grave carefully with a steel rod at intervals around the streaks, locating nothing. “It just isn’t our day Sergeant.” “Maybe we’ll get lucky some other time.” After replacing the slabs, we covered them once again with sand. Our spirits were at a low ebb as we walked back to our bivouac area. “Anyway Lieutenant, I still have this rock to look into the first chance I get.” “You sure do,” was his answer. “I also have the American flag we had to sew on

² The regimental records identify a 2nd Lieutenant William Forse of L Company as receiving the Combat Infantry Badge on July 27, 1944. MRC 301-INF(26)-1.13, 119. Why his name does not appear on the list from January, 1944, which includes the North Africa veterans, is unclear, but Olexa mentions him again in Normandy, so he was with the company long enough to receive the award for later campaigns.

our arms, three armor piercing slugs from the spraying of bullets on Christmas Day by that woman tailgunner, and small electrical parts, plus a piece of plastic from the fighter plane that gave us a good strafing at El-Guettar. I'm fortunate to have them, for they are a part of my life." "You may need a valet, Lieutenant, to carry your stuff, providing Lady Luck is with you." "I may at that, Sergeant, because I'm not giving up searching for treasures. Thanks for going with me, Sergeant, we may have better luck next time." The chow line was forming as we arrived, and off I went to get my mess gear. I was as hungry as a bear.

We were all relaxed from the perils of war. This seemed strange, for it was quiet and peaceful. Most of the men were writing letters and the thought of war was far from us. General Patton relinquished his command of the II Corps to General Omar Bradley. Preparation for the invasion of Sicily had been in progress for some time. Like a prized ripe plum, Sicily was the next target, a proper objective reducing hazards to shipping, and a stepping stone for the invasion of Italy itself. Patton was to command the American forces while Montgomery commanded the British forces. The code name for the invasion of Sicily was dubbed HUSKY by the Allies. The Germans were still putting up fierce resistance against the Allies [in Tunisia]. A pincer movement to crush the German forces from the Mediterranean South to Pont-Du-Fahs to Enfidaville to the gulf of Hammamet was made.

Our rest period came to a sudden end, and we hated to leave the peaceful surroundings. Anyway, the thought of war meant death, destruction, misery, and heartache for everyone. We hate to think of it, but we have to gear ourselves physically and mentally once again for this vital task and try to survive. Black dark clouds began to appear, driving the sunshine into oblivion. As we scanned the sky, we well knew that the rain was on its way. Gusts of hot tropical winds began to blow, and thunder rumbled, echoing across the heavens, and lighting cracked in the distant sky. Raincoats were the only protection we had, and in a matter of minutes we were soaked to the skin. This was a drenching rain to last four days, tipping our morale to its lowest point. Mud and water bring about physical exhaustion when there is not shelter from the weather. The ultimate test once again comes to the forefront of the endurance a combat soldier must have to live. "Are we forgotten men?" "Why must the weather make us miserable, yet, we are not alone?" The Lord of the universe and the constellations is watching over us. We are to experience more hardships, yet take them in our stride which is our way of life as a soldier. Heartache and grief are our enemies which we experience day by day. Motivating our thoughts towards God gives us the place we need to see us through each situation we face. Some of these situations are good and enlightening, while others are bad and distasteful.

See material on pp. 98-130

Unknown to us at this time, the Germans withdrew from the hill. Units of the American II Corps had entered the seaport of Bizerte. The British had captured Tunis as the French were mopping up pockets of resistance. L Company moved off of the hill to its original jumping off point to rest. The 2nd Battalion of the 26th Infantry Regiment had taken the city of Mateur. Luck was with us. A wine press was in the outskirts of the city with 1500 gallons of wine ready to drink in three large vats. With radio communication, trucks were dispatched to pick up wine for all units. When the trucks arrived with the wine, each squad got 5 gallons to drink. A merry time was had as each man began to relax. Remembering seeing a dead German with a Luger on his hip up on the hill. I decided to go after it. At the time, I didn't realize the ordeal that I was going to get into. I also decided to go into the ravine where the Germans had been staying, maybe I

could get ahold of a few souvenirs. Hostilities in our sector were over, but we had to remember to be careful. Stepping on a mine and tripping over an unexploded shell might blow a leg off.

Starting off on my venture, George my faithful companion, asked me where I was headed. "Up on the hill to get a Luger," I answered. "I'll go with you Sarge," grabbing his rifle and running to catch up. "Holy Cow! Sarge, what we went through on that hill, we're not for going back up are we?" "I want that Luger, George, before someone else gets it." "Anyway, we many find something else of value to keep in that ravine where the Germans slept at night." "We might at that, Sarge," was George's answer. Walking down the gully toward the road to Mateur, the hill seemed to be much larger in size. Beginning our upward climb from the base near the road, I cautioned George to be on the lookout for shells or grenades that might be lying around unexploded. "How far up is that German?" George asked. "Almost to the top, near some low bushes," was my reply. "Golly! What a guy won't do to get a pistol," George laughed in a joshing fashion. "You didn't have to come you know," I remarked. "I'd go with you anywhere Sarge! To hell and back if need be." "Yeh, I know you don't want to miss anything," giving him a little dig. Nearing the spot where the body lay, the stench from the decayed body was terrific. George and I halted to compose ourselves looking at a torso facing downhill. The head, right shoulder, arm, and half of the guts had been blown away by a shell that landed beside the man running to his fox hole. The distance between the body and the place of safety was five feet. The sight of the body was appalling. A million maggots wiggling in the decaying flesh with the smell coming so strong that we made a hasty retreat. George and I gagged for a few moments trying to control our vomiting due to the stench. "Golly, Sarge that's awful." Both of us tried to laugh at the ordeal we experienced. As George watched, I made a second attempt to take the pistol out of the holster which was on his hip. Being near the body, the stench was much greater. My mouth was filled with salt liquid that made me vomit. George was on the ground laughing so hard he began to heave. I backed off, the smell was so overwhelming, and joined my friend to laugh with him. We laughed till our sides hurt. Fifteen minutes went by until we gained a normal atmosphere. "I nearly had that Luger, George, I nearly had it." "Yah Sarge, but it's still in the holster." "I'm going to make another try with my gas mask on, that ought to help me with the smell." Putting on my gas mask, I was fully confident that I would get that Luger. With George shouting encouragement I walked briskly up to the body and as I was reaching for the Luger the stench in my mask was too great so I threw up gagging as I removed the mask from my face. "George," I ventured to say a little while later, "I'm going to come back at sun down." The heat from the sun is making the smell around here unbearable." "Good idea," was George's answer.

So we started down the hill. Nothing was said until we came to the path that led into the ravine with steep walls. The Germans dug into these walls making a place to sleep and rest. George working his way on one side and I taking the other. The items left behind were grenades, ammunition, blankets, tooth brushes, soap, paper, etc. Nothing of value that we would be able to keep. What George and I were looking for were iron crosses, swords, knives, decorations, ribbons, chevrons and the like. None was to be found, to our disappointment. So we left the area and returned to the company to rest. My ego was gone along with my pride when I returned to get that Luger. To my surprise, someone else did manage to get that pistol and I believe that he also heaved his guts to get that gun. My thoughts went out to the burial detail who had to pick up these bodies. What a reaction these men had in removing the bodies, I never found out, but I can guess.

Back in the company area I made my way to where my gear was lying. It was almost dark as the chow truck pulled in. "Hot Chow" echoed throughout the company from the voice of

the cook announcing that he had arrived. Hot stew, spinach, dehydrated potatoes plunked on top of each other and a ladle of hot black coffee poured in our cups. Everyone ate in silence, enjoying the food. To us it was like the food in the Conrad Hilton. Guard duty was assigned as we settled down for the night. A hot breeze was blowing and the men were discussing the events they had experienced on the hill. Most of the men expressed their regrets for the buddies and friends who were wounded or killed in the action. The night was quiet and each fell into a heavy sleep. How much longer would we be in this place was a good guess. Our hopes were that the "High Brass" would forget about us for a while. At six o'clock the chow truck appeared with breakfast on board. Powdered eggs, burnt toast, some sliced peaches, and good ole coffee to make your hair stand up. The cleaning of rifles for inspection later by the platoon leaders was the order given for the day. My squad was ahead of everyone, for their rifles were cleaned every day. I was a stinker if a rifle malfunctioned, and my men knew it. If a man in my squad were to be killed, it wouldn't be because of his weapon.

Around 9 o'clock a yell from one of the men on guard on the hill brought me to my feet. One the double I went to where the men were. "Look in the valley Sarge, beyond Mateur." Grabbing my binoculars, I focused them beyond the buildings to the north of the town. I couldn't believe what I saw coming towards us on the road from Bizerte, as far as I could see coming toward us, six abreast were the Germans giving themselves up. As the Lieutenant approached on the run, I gave my glasses to one of the men beside me to watch. "What's up Sergeant?" "Look North beyond Mateur, Lieutenant." "Holy Smoke, Sergeant!" Was his remark as he viewed the column of Germans marching towards us. "Better get the Captain to watch this, Sergeant, on the double." I didn't want to miss anything so I passed the order on to the poor private who took off on the run. It wasn't long before Captain Jitters arrived in a jeep. "What's up Lieutenant?" were his words as he jumped out of the jeep. "Look, the Germans are surrendering, Captain." "My Gosh! I can't believe what I see," the Captain replied, still watching the Germans. Everyone in the company came on the run to view the phenomena as word was passed like a gust of wind along the way. "I'm glad the 2nd Battalion will have to take charge of them," the Captain responded to the question asked by the Lieutenant as to who would have that honor. Nearing the edge of the town the Germans split in a column of three's entering the fields to the left and right of the road. It was hard for us to visualize that the fighting in North Africa had come to an end. The "Hun" who was so well equipped, trained, and seasoned in battle had been brought to their knees. Although they were efficient in modern warfare, they were not invincible. Hitler's master race met its first defeat in his desire to conquer the world. The Allies would be more coordinated in the days that lie ahead even though skepticism among the General's was voiced. All fighting had ceased, it was May 16th, 1943. We had come a long way since our landing near Oran on November 8, 1942. In Tunis the British, French, and Americans held a victory parade to celebrate they victory ending hostilities in Africa.