

Chapter 7: Sea Scout

With a couple more days of rest, trucks arrived to transport us on a journey back to Oran. The trip would take a week with stops along the way, stopping for the night, getting food to eat prepared by the cooks, every morning and every evening. In the town that had "Sauna Baths" all the men for a small fee of 15 Francs took the steam baths, washing our clothes at the same time. The only clothes we had were the O.D.'s on our back, and they were filthy. Somehow along the way I contracted athlete's foot. The itching and burning around my toes began to bother me. My feet began to swell and I was afraid to take off my shoes. The medical unit was somewhere in the convoy and we had been on the road three days. That night in camp I looked up the medical tent and hobbled inside. "What's your problem soldier?" A staff member asked. "My feet, and they hurt," was my answer, as I began unlacing my shoes. "Boy, they're beauties Sergeant, because you got a good case of athlete's foot." The medic got a basin and began pouring a purple liquid into it. "Soak your feet in this for a while," handing the basin to me. "I'll give you some salve to run into those cracks to help relieve the burning and itching." My feet felt like they were on fire. Putting my feet into the liquid made tears come into my eyes it hurt so. "What have you got in this stuff? Acid?" "No, why?" was the medic's reply. "It's my feet and they're killing me." "Relax, Sergeant, I said you had a bad case and you're going to hobble around a few more days before you are well." A half hour of soaking made the itching and burning stop, also the tears that flowed like a fountain from the pain. "Put on these clean socks when you wipe your feet with this towel." "Thanks for the socks. Mine can stand up by themselves," [I said] as I tried to put a swollen foot into a shoe. The task was impossible till each shoe was cut on each side of the tongue. A G.I. with bad feet is really a casualty and I was to go around like a hobbled horse for about a month. The men dubbed me the "Purple Flash," making sport of the misery I was in. One took this good naturedly or be called a 'sore-head'.

Riding the trucks wasn't so bad especially when the convoy went through a town. We always had an audience watching and "wolf calls" could be heard when there were girls. Our arrival at northwest of Oran was unnoticed because we were in an isolated area five miles from the city. Each company had been assigned an area for our stay to recuperate. Pup tents began to appear as the men hastily worked to get this chore out of the way. In a matter of a few hours a tent city dotted the countryside. The thought of war being the least on our minds. Orders from the "High Brass" came through, that all personnel was free to go to town. Camp was deserted as the G.I.'s moved like ants on the city of Oran. I would have given my right arm to be with them, but my feet made me stay. For men who put their lives on the line, they deserved all the recreation they could get. The men were clean and shaven but the clothes were shabby. This was May and troops in the rear were wearing summer clothes, which were called "Suntans." Without written passes, the men ran into trouble with the Military Police and non-combatant officers. Some landed in jail for fighting while others were reprimanded because of their appearance. The only answer given in defense was, "we just came back from the front, Sir."

The next day, the men arrested were brought back to their units. New clothes were issued, brought in by the supply trucks. By late afternoon each man was paid wages due. The game of chance was everywhere, shooting dice, chuck-a-luck, card games, etc. Name it and you could play it. Gambling six hundred dollars away was not what I called fun. A truck was dispatched to take anyone who wanted to go to Oran. My feet bothered me but I wanted to go. Anyway, I could rent a hack of some kind to get to where I wanted to go. George, my companion, went along with me, feeling sorry for me. The driver left us off in the heart of Oran. Many drinking

establishments were going full blast with music being heard in the streets. Spotting a plush jewelry store, I started to cross the street toward that direction. I had that rock in my pocket and wanted to know if it was a diamond. Entering the store, George and I felt out of place. This was a swank establishment. I also was determined to buy a wrist watch that could be read in the dark. There were many showcases with watches, diamonds, necklaces, and silverware on display. A petite young girl in her twenties came up to us. She was a knockout, very pretty with dark eyes and brown hair. Her figure and dress were superb. When the cologne scent hit our nostrils, George and I were in the seventh heaven. I noticed too that she was wearing a large diamond big enough to blind your eyes. This gal was the first of the opposite sex to be within touching distance let alone grabbing distance in a long time. Our eyes were almost bulged out of their sockets as we stood admiring her beauty. "Can I help you?" she asked in perfect English. "Yes, you can, I need a watch that I can read at night," [I said] still riding on cloud nine. "We have a few, but they are very expensive," was her reply. "Let me see what you have," I said as we came to the watch display. "Is there anyone around who could examine this rock to see if it is of any value?" "Here are three fine wrist watches that you may be able to pick from." Curiously the girl looked at the rock as it sparkled in the light.

Speaking in French, the girl called out to someone who was out of sight. A well-dressed man appeared in a thin stripe suit. "Oui," he said. The girl again rattled a lingo in French as the man came to us. "I asked him to look at your stone," the girl replied. Taking the stone and looking at it with his eye piece, he gave a grunt. It may be a diamond he said in French, with the girl giving us his answer. Walking to another counter near the wall the jeweler placed a box on the counter with some vials in it. Placing the stone on some cotton he took an eye dropper and filled it with the liquid from one of the vials. It looked like acid to me as the liquid bubbled. The jeweler asked in French where I found the stone. "Tunisia," I replied. A second vial was taken and poured into a small container. The stone was dipped in this solution for a couple of minutes and rubbed inside of the cotton. The stone sparkled in the light when the jeweler examined the stone again with his eye piece. "It lacks two or three colors that a diamond should have," I was told. My hope was shattered as the stone was handed back to me. "The stone is a piece of hard quartz of a high quality," the jeweler added. The stone was clear and glistened as it was returned to me. Back at the watch counter, I chose the watch that satisfied my need. "How much for the watch?" I asked "Expensive," was the jeweler's answer. Turning to the petite young lady I asked, "How much does he want?" A French lingo went on between the two. "Four thousand francs," the girl replied in English. "I'll take it." Looking at the jeweler who seemed surprised. The watch was a good one and today a minister who lives in the Detroit area has it as a souvenir. Thanking the man for his help, George and I turned to leave the store. The girl followed right behind us to the door. Turning to face her I asked, "to whom are you engaged to?" "A Lieutenant in the Thirty-Six Division," was her answer. Taking one good whiff of that cologne, George and I left the store. "Remember the 36th in Starke, Florida?" I asked George. "Do I," he replied. "We showed them a thing or two didn't we Sarge?" It was the 36th Division that made the invasion of Italy, Anzio Beach.¹ They had heavy losses but distinguished themselves as fighters in the Italian Campaign. After drinking a good bottle of wine and having something to eat, George and myself went window shopping. It was ten-thirty when the truck arrived to take a load of men back to

¹The 36th Division had landed in Morocco in April, 1943, and was training in North Africa at this time. It landed at Salerno in September, and here Olexa seems to be confusing that landing with Anzio. Allied forces landed at Anzio in January, 1944, but the 36th Division did not move to that area until May.

camp. I was glad because my feet began to swell. The trip didn't take long, and each G.I. headed for his pup tent. The city of Oran was lit up like a Christmas tree and everything seemed peaceful. Taking off my shoes was a big relief.

As I lay back to rest, a familiar drone of planes caught my ears. "German bombers," I thought out loud. Sirens in Oran began shrieking and echoing all around the city and the harbor. Giant searchlights came into play from all parts of the city. Reminded me of the search lights placed at the county fairs to attract customers to the fair. The beams of light lit the whole sky above Oran. The bombers were coming in from the northeast direction and headed for the harbor and the ships anchored there. Spontaneously the ack-ack guns came into action as the bombers appeared in the lighted sky. An endless line of tracers from the guns went skyward, exploding shells could be heard for miles. The bombers moved to the right, trying to evade the searchlights, but the beams of light followed them. The ack-ack was so heavy by now that we had to take cover. The shrapnel was falling on us, making hissing sounds and buzzing sounds just like bees as the gravity pulled them back to earth. The bombers were turning to head back in the direction they had come. Eight bombers were counted but none were brought down. The question of why the Germans wanted to bomb Oran was a mystery. Yes, the harbor was filled with battlewagons, cruisers, destroyers and supply ships. The Germans were unsuccessful in their bombing mission. Word was passed around that the bombers were looking for the 1st Division that was scattered throughout the country side. With the excitement over, the area became quiet once again. The sound of the bugle playing reveille made us grumble a little, but we knew roll call would be taken shortly. Getting dressed, the shrill sound of the First Sergeant's whistle meant for us to fall out in formation for roll call. After roll call, I approached the 1st Sergeant, "I'd like to go on sick call this morning Sergeant Hap." "O.K. Sergeant, be at the C.P. tent at 9:00 hours sharp." "Oh, another thing, the Captain wants to see you after breakfast." "O.K. Sergeant, I'll be there."

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Climbing into the jeep dispatched to take us the medics, we waited for three more men to arrive. In the medical tent, Captain Rainey was joshing me a little for trying to 'Gold Brick'. "It's an idea, Captain, because I don't know what duties or formations we are to perform today. Propping my feet up on a bench, the doctor examined the cracks between my toes and on the bottom of my feet. "Good case of athlete's foot," the Captain remarked, painting them again with that purple solution on a large swab. "Keep your feet dry and give them plenty of sun and air, soldier." "I'll try Captain, for I won't be able to go on duty." "Right you are, soldier."

Later in the day, the duty roster and other notices were placed on the bulletin board. The first sheet announced my demotion signed by the Captain. The second was a duty roster of work details. The third sheet announced the promotion of Private Murver² to Sergeant. The Corporals of the whole company were overlooked, yet they were rightfully in line for the promotion. Private Murver had a speech problem and an eighth-grade education. He was a fine soldier under fire and could be depended on. He lacked drive and decision making, but this would come with experience. The fourth sheet gave orders that any soldier getting a bad sunburn would be court martialed and report for duty each day. All signed by Captain Jitters. Another sheet made up by the medical corps warned all personnel not to expose their bodies to the sun more than five

² Another pseudonym, as nothing like this name appears in the available records.

minutes, front and back. Sun tan oil for the skin was available at the company supply tent. The best tan I ever received was under this blazing African sun, with five minutes exposure for the front and back each day, it was enough. You could feel the sun's rays burning and see the red spot appear quickly. By being careful, my body was a dark bronze which didn't fade for almost a year. I've never had a good suntan since because of burning so easily. There were a lot of men who exposed themselves too much and really suffered with second and third degree burns.

Captain Jitters gave strict orders that no man would go on sick call including me. Everyone had to pull duty. Our honeymoon was over, but I felt sorry for those fellows who were really burned and carrying field packs on their backs. I managed to hobble along behind the men in the Second Platoon. My feet hurt badly and were swollen again, but I did my best under the circumstances. In the field we had drill exercises and attack formation against simulated enemy positions. I was a "Johnny come lately" in all field exercises. In the squad drills, Sergeant Murver would let me drill the squad because I could mark time in place as they executed the commands of the drill. Sergeant Murver was at a loss in the field exercises, for he could not get the men to understand his plans of action in the attack. Although I was addressed as a Sergeant by the squad leader, I made it plain to him that I was a private under his orders. "Dammit, Sarge," he would say, "I can't do the job like you can." My reply to him was that he had the training and to start thinking of his charge as a squad leader. I gave him all of my cooperation and pointers when he was groping for answers. After asking a question about a field exercise and giving an answer, Sergeant Murver would turn to me and say, "isn't that right Sergeant?" Within a week the Sergeant was going a pretty good job as a squad leader. But he always ended his remarks, "isn't that right Sergeant," to me.

One evening as I was resting before dark the Sergeant came to me just to chit-chat. What he wanted most was my assurance that he was doing the right things as a squad leader. In our conversation the Sergeant began to tell me about an unusual dream that he had had. He said, "in my dream I was standing on the platform at the railroad station of my home town. There were soldiers standing in formation with the mayor and other town officials. A band was playing as the train with two big flags flying on each side came towards us. The train stopped with two short blasts of a whistle. The baggage car door was opened and six soldiers carried out a casket draped with a flag. The casket was put on a stand and opened for those who had come to pay their respects. Looking in the casket, I saw my mother and wept. She was buried with military honors along with other servicemen in the local cemetery. I'm scared, Sergeant, that something has happened to my mother." "It's just a dream, Sergeant, so forget it." "You'll be hearing from you mother any day now." Almost a month to the day Sergeant Murver was killed in action in the invasion of Sicily. I believe the dream as he told it to me was the reverse, and his mother was waiting for him at the platform in North Carolina.

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My concept of Africa was dense forest, cannibals, elephants and snakes. But in reality, Africa has its cities, harbors, fertile lands, valleys, rolling hills, mountains, forest, rivers and lakes. Not to mention the great Sahara Desert and the millions of people living on the Great Continent. With a farewell and hearty hand shake, I left George standing in the company street silhouetted above the pup tents in the back ground. Africa with its enchanting cities and tropical breezes blowing closes an era which one cannot forget.

Checking in at the battalion command post, we waited with eight other men for further orders. Each company in the battalion was represented. “M” Company sent a truck driver with whom I was acquainted. We called him the “Mad Russian.” He was a big fellow and funnier than a bedbug by his actions and mannerisms.³ Most of the men present had been in London, taking the combat swimming course. That was ages ago, and our curiosity as to what we would do was driving us crazy. Within a half hour a three-quarter ton truck pulled up in front of the command post. It was painted a dark grey and on the hood was the word “Navy”. A navy chief [petty officer] read off our names and told us to climb on board and we were off, headed in the direction of Oran.

Driving up to the wharf in the harbor of Oran, the driver stopped to let us off. Unloading with our gear on our shoulders, we followed the Navy chief to a launch tied up a short distance away. As we walked, I gazed about, looking at a flotilla of ships of every description, battlewagons, cruisers, destroyers, troopships, supply ships, launchers and tugboats. Now I realized why the Germans tried to bomb the harbor. The most impressive ship to me was the Battleship *King George V*. I was awed at the size of the guns on her deck. Anti-aircraft guns dotted the ship like ants ready for battle. I looked toward Djebel Murdjadjo, the mountain peak where the Battleship *Rodney* destroyed the coastal guns that defended the harbor of Oran during the invasion. Part of the French fleet was anchored here as they were escaping from Toulon.⁴ It was beyond my comprehension, the power of the fleet of ships in this harbor.

With all men boarding the launch, we were soon headed out toward the sea. In the bay outside of the harbor were two American cruisers, one the USS *Boise* and the other the USS *Savannah*, both playing an important part at the beginning of the invasion.⁵ Destroyers were anchored here and there protecting the harbor entrance and cruisers which were close by. We were headed for the US destroyer *Guppy*, which was to be our home.⁶ We were buffaloed just as to what soldiers would do on a navy ship. We were very anxious to know what our duties would be. With the launch pulling up to the ship, we climbed the steps to the deck. The Chief in charge told us to drop our gear, and we followed him to the galley. The aroma of food in the air made us feel as hungry as bears. Taking a tray, silverware, a plate and a cup for coffee, we were ready to be served breakfast. A cook brought a tray of link sausages. Toast just tripping with melted butter heaped on another tray beside the links, just waiting to be taken. The “Mad Russian” was behind me in line and I asked him to pinch me, for I wanted to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. “Help yourselves, fellas, eat all you want!” the cook replied as we dug in, missing nothing. The

³ The division records include a roster of the 26th Regiment’s Sea Scouts, including Olexa (listed as a corporal) and Drukas from L Company, and one Stephen Kostic from M Company, presumably the “Mad Russian.” (MRC 301-INF(26)-3.22, 189)

⁴ At the time of the French surrender in Germany, a large part of the French fleet in the Mediterranean had been transferred from its main base at Toulon to bases in North Africa. What was left of the Toulon fleet was scuttled in the Harbor when Operation Torch started to prevent the Germans from seizing the ship. Smith, *England’s Last War against France*, 47, 417-423.

⁵ These ships were light cruisers, and both took part in the Sicily operation.

⁶ Submarines, not destroyers, were named for fish in the US Navy, and the first USS *Guppy* was a submarine commissioned in 1947. The destroyer that Olexa refers to as “Polly-Wog” was the USS *Mayrant*, DD-402, identifiable due to its executive officer (see note below). Olexa seems to be using nicknames for the destroyers, much as he did for most of his officers and comrades.

“Mad Russian” had enough links to feed six men, not to mention the scrambled eggs. The meal was fit for a king. I had forgotten what good food was, and the Navy had it. These Navy men never knew what it was like to miss a meal. They griped and found fault, but this soldier took advantage of his good fortune, remembering the lean days in Tunisia. Everything in the kitchen was spotless and clean. I remembered Christmas Day sharing a can of beans with a fellow soldier. I could kick myself for getting into the infantry. But I alone chose the branch of service to be in, even if the grass looked greener on the Navy side.

With our stomachs full and almost bursting, we managed to get up on deck. The sailors had their specific jobs and duties to perform. This was the life, standing by the rail of the destroyer taking in the view of the harbor, ships, city, and the rugged Atlas Mountains. To our right a destroyer came steaming by, it was sleek and moved thru the water making a wave that rolled away from the ship toward us. The ship was of no little significance – “The USS *Polly-Wog*” with two men on deck. One was the commander, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Jr.⁷ and [the other] a sailor named Casey who became my brother-in-law.⁸ Everything on this destroyer was intriguing to us as we walked the deck. The gun turrets, the ack-ack guns and the drums of explosives, known as depth charges, for submarines. Although we were to leave this ship within a short time, we were going to board her once again for the invasion. The Navy had their job and I had mine, but yet I wouldn’t want anyone to follow in my footsteps, either.

Over the loudspeaker came a voice ordering the new arrivals to assemble on the port side of the ship. Standing at ease in formation, a Chief read off our names and we responded “here.” Our group was to become well acquainted with the Chief, for he was a ‘Judo’ expert. He was a career man with 22 years in the Navy. Spent most of his time in the Orient: China, Shanghai and Singapore to name a few places. The Chief was about 5 foot 7 inches tall, weighed about 150 pounds and had a slight build. We were to find out that his reflexes were as quick as a cat and made us feel like fools. We dubbed him ‘Mighty Mite,’ an appropriate name that fitted him to a ‘T’. The Chief’s job was that of Engineer in the boiler room. A Navy Lieutenant approached us and introduced himself as Lieutenant Minnelli. A well-built man, broad shoulders, just under six feet. He was a bug on physical training and we learned to respect this man. He was good to us. The Lieutenant was to lose his life in the invasion of Italy at Salerno. We were saddened by the news months later. The Lieutenant was cut in half by enemy machine gun fire while steering an assault boat onto the beach.

After mess at 0-1300, the Lieutenant told us there would be a meeting held on the bridge deck. Waiting in line for mess, I thought it was Christmas: crisp pork chops, mashed potatoes, peas, corn, lettuce, salad, home-made bread, and apple pie with milk or coffee to drink. We were never given a meal such as this by the army. The Mad Russian had six pork chops, plus everything else. After having such a big breakfast, I was trying to figure out where this man was putting it all. Now I was convinced that I got into the wrong branch of service. A little later I was to change my mind again. But right at this moment, as a matter of fact, I was feeling sorry for

⁷ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jr., served as executive officer on the USS *Mayrant* in 1943, which did participate in the Sicily campaign.

⁸ Casey was a common nickname for Cornelius, and this one was Cornelius den Hollander, who married Agnes’s sister Bea after the war.

myself. My problem was having too much goodies at one time when there were days I had nothing. I was well acquainted with heartburn, thirst and hunger, while these gobs had everything. I actually envied the sailor and didn't realize it. They never ran out of cigarettes and could buy them every day for 5¢ a pack. I smoked cigarette butts so strong they would almost kill an elephant. The sailor wouldn't believe that I spit water back into my canteen to conserve it on Scorpion Hill. The man on the P.A. system reminded us G.I.'s to report to the bridge deck pronto. I was glad to be headed somewhere, clearing my mind from self-pity. Anyway, I had to face the music no matter how sour the notes in life were. The Navy was doing a splendid job, we needed them and they needed us. All of us are crazy Americans and I liked that.

It wasn't long before all of us G.I.'s were assembled. Roll call was taken and each man responded when his name was called. "You men have been selected for a special mission in conjunction with Army-Navy operations in the invasion of Sicily. All of you will go into extensive training to harden yourselves for endurance as swimmers. This operation is the first of its kind to be tried in the Invasion of Sicily. You will have calisthenics and judo classes every day to sharpen your reflexes. Your mission will be to mark the beaches so that the landing forces out at sea will be headed for the right objectives. As the training progresses you will be shown pictures taken from a submarine of the landing areas. A model drawn to scale will also be on display for you men to study. This model will show the exact terrain, road, harbors, rivers and beaches. The troops in the assault will land on five beaches. Each beach has a specific objective with the color code: Red Beach, Yellow Beach, Blue Beach, Green Beach II and Red Beach II. Three men will be assigned to each beach with a color code given to each team at the end of the training period. This mission is dangerous and may cost you your life. We are stating that the whole project is voluntary. At the completion of the training, you will be asked to volunteer for the assignment or you may go back to your respective units. Twenty men have been chosen with ten men training on this ship and the other ten men to receive their training on the *USS Bull-Frog*.⁹ At 1800 hours an Army Captain will board our ship to observe the training, since this is an Army-Navy venture. At 0860 hours tomorrow morning your training will begin. Chief 'Mighty Mite' will begin instruction in the fine art of Judo. At 01000 hours I will conduct calisthenics with swimming to follow and every man will be in the water." Drukas and myself loved to swim, so that part would be no problem for us. After being assigned bunks in the crew's quarters we were free for the rest of the day. In our quiet moments a discussion, once again, came up concerning the nature of our mission to take place. Some of the men expressed that they would take the training but leave when the training was completed. I had already decided to take up this new challenge because I would either land as a swimmer or with my own unit. Both missions were dangerous and I could contribute much by helping to guide the landing forces to the right beach. Drukas revealed his desire to stick it out with me, and I made it known to him that I was doing the same. Although we trained together, we were separated later, to meet again in Algiers after the invasion.

⁹ The Sea Scout unit seems to have been created for the whole division, rather than just the regiment, since the beaches listed were ones that were used by the 16th Regiment as well as the 26th, both of which made the initial landings at Gela, with the 18th Regiment in reserve. The roster for the Sea Scouts in the 26th Regiment's records lists fifteen men, including its commander and senior NCO, all from the 26th Regiment. If Olexa is correct about the numbers, it is possible that some men from the 16th were part of the team as well.

Having had a good breakfast of French toast, sausages, coffee and orange juice, we assembled on the deck at 0800 to start our training. Following Chief 'Mighty Mite,' we walked to the rear of the destroyer where mattresses lay in an area set up for us. These were to cushion our falls while taking judo lessons. The Chief began his instruction in judo by stressing the point of making contact with an opponent, and following through with counter punches to the arm, neck, and Adam's apple. Other moves by using your feet and hips in such a way were to throw your opponent after making contact. By a quick movement of reversing an opponent's arm, you would make him flip in the air landing on his back. In this movement you could break the arm, elbow or shoulder socket. Another movement upon contact was to throw the opponent over your shoulder, letting go or to pull hard, making the person land hard on his back. Movements were also given to try and counter the holds, lessening the chance of injury, especially if the opponent had a knife, bayonet or weapon pointed at us. A quick death movement using a knife on an opponent to silence him was demonstrated. The approach was from behind, slipping the arm over the left or right shoulder driving the knife between the base of the neck and collar bone. This action severs the jugular vein. A gruesome act, but essential in keeping an opponent or enemy sentry from warning others of your presence. Pairing off, we were ready to execute the movements in slow motion or by the numbers as we call it. The Chief was thorough in his instructions. He would show us our mistakes and how to correct them. Engrossed in our training, time flew by in our first lesson of judo.

Navy Lieutenant Minnelli was our next instructor. Two Army men were following him as he headed our way.

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We were soon to learn as our instruction progressed that brute force or strength was not the dominating factor. By using your brains, and reflexes, with swift determined movements, made the art of judo effective. I prided myself at being good in calisthenics as an army instructor, but the Navy Lieutenant was one of the best. Jumping jacks, knee bends, trunk bends, arm and leg exercises, running in place, to name a few, would drive us to the point of exhaustion. I had trouble with my feet, but I was determined to get back into good physical condition which would be a plus for me in the days ahead. After 50 minutes of this grueling exercise, a break was in order and was gladly accepted. While I was leaning against a gun turret on the deck, the Lieutenant approached me. "I notice you are limping soldier, is there something wrong?" "Yes Lieutenant, I have athlete's foot and I wouldn't wish it on a dog." "Better go to sick bay after the swim and have the doc look at your feet." "O.K. Lieutenant, but don't get any ideas of sending me back to my unit. I've seen things worse and I'm determined to complete my training and help to make this project a success." "You've got guts, soldier, I wish you were a Navy man," the Lieutenant replied, grinning from ear to ear.

The Lieutenant was soon to learn that Drukas and myself loved to swim. By rolling up our boxer-type shorts and tying the legs to the trunk portion with string, we made our type of swim trunks that looked like the bikinis of today. Diving from the destroyer into the sea was fun. On my first dive, the salt of the sea hit the cracks in my feet like a bolt of electricity and a tear or two was shed because it hurt so. Clenching my jaws as I swam, I knew that I would suffer till my feet would heal. While swimming around the ship, my thoughts went back to the days when I

was a boy swimming in a big pond that had many snakes, turtles and suckers. In February we even broke the ice just to swim in the ice water. Oh, we would have a good bonfire going to warm our backsides as we stood naked before the licking flames. Ma and Pa did the worrying, warning us that we would die from pneumonia.

The Lieutenant himself joined us as we swam. He was an excellent swimmer, moving thru the water like a fish. Ten laps around the destroyer was enough for one day. I liked to swim the breaststroke and sidestroke. There was no particular way we had to swim, which suited us, for we were not restricted in our performance. Sharks were in the area, but we never gave them a thought, nor did we see any surface. We began to swim in the afternoons as well from the second day on, and I loved it. In our judo lessons, we were learning fast. The “Mad Russian” was always the center of attraction. The Chief would throw him all over the place and he would come back for more. Every day we each had our turn with the Chief. Sometimes two of us would rush him, but we never got the Chief. Every day as our lessons progressed, I watched the Chief put the men through the paces until it was my turn. As I watched him one day, I found a flaw in his defense. It was just before the Chief made contact with an opponent. He would blink his eyes. “I got you Chief, I got you,” were my thoughts. I couldn’t wait till it was my turn again to be his opponent. When it was my turn, I stood crouched, waiting for the Chief to blink his eyes. At that instant, I moved and floored him. I never shall forget the surprised look the Chief gave me as he was sitting on the deck. Like a wounded bull, he got up and charged me. I watched his eyes and floored him again as he blinked. The Chief was dumbfounded. Nobody ever had floored him. All of the others were surprised as they stood in silence. The Chief was an expert, but there was a weakness in his defense. I wanted to be good at judo and be able to defend myself, taking an advantage of a weakness my opponent might have. I also realized that I wouldn’t be able to see a man blink his eyes when it was dark. By being alert and observing, I would be the one to survive. “Hey Joe,” the Chief asked getting up off the mat, “what am I doing wrong?” Like a damn fool I told him. “Chief, you’re blinking your eyes just before your contact.” Well, I never did floor the Chief again, but he had a respect for me as we faced each other as opponents from that time on. Our swimming and calisthenics were much improved as we finished the first phase in our training.

The second phase began in mock exercises of approaching the beaches just northwest of Oran at night. We were brought in towards the shore by Navy assault boats to within a half mile of the beaches. From this point we were to take a rubber raft to about a hundred feet from shore, or where we could hear the waves break upon the beach. One man stayed in the rubber raft while two men would swim to shore. Even though there were men on the beaches knowing that we were coming, they couldn’t find us. Each night we landed, the observers were unable to detect us until we flashed our lights to let them know we had landed. By swimming up to where the waves broke to splash on the beach we would roll with the splash onto the beach and then make our way to the high sand dunes about fifty feet from the water. Our chances of getting on the beach and re-entering the water without anyone detecting us was very encouraging. Captain Deceive and 1st Sergeant Cohort with some Navy personnel were the enemy. They tried their darndest to catch us, but we slipped in to accomplish our missions. Our progress was more than what was expected in this new venture.

For the third phase of our training, we left the destroyer and made camp on the beach. The Army took over the chore of bringing food to us, and what a disappointment in the nature of the food. We called it 'slop,' but we had to eat. Navy Lieutenant Minnelli and the Chief came every morning to continue our training in judo and swimming. Our judo lessons were on the beach, and for calisthenics we would swim out to the tanker that was beached. It had a nice wide deck that was exposed above the water. The craft was about a hundred yards from shore and in deep enough water to swim and dive. With the Lieutenant and Chief swimming with us, we had a marvelous time.

Being the fourth week of our special training, we were now ready to work with the troops to make actual landings. The beaches picked for this operation were five miles up the coast. Barbed wire and beach obstacles were already in place. The mines buried in the beaches were removed for training and safety for the troops. The salt water and air helped my feet to heal, and I was wearing socks to keep the sand from embedding into my wounds. Army personnel were already boarding troopships as the day of the invasion was fast approaching. Our group of swimmers were briefed up to the point of knowing where the invasion would take place. Each man at this time had the privilege of accepting an assignment or return to their respective units. Half of the men left, with the remaining men to carry a bigger burden on their shoulders to make this dangerous mission a success. Every night, a landing was made to test our strength. One night, with sentries stationed at intervals on the beach, we moved in with our craft and rubber boat. Our crew were just three men instead of five. Drukas and myself slipped into the water and headed for shore. My objective was a road that could be used by the invading troops which came right onto the beach itself. Drukas had a small building to his left about a hundred yards. We found out later that the objective in the real invasion was the same as these in practice.

Swimming to the right about a hundred feet where the waves were breaking, I spotted my landmark. Getting onto the beach was easy, but I misjudged where the barbed wire fence was located and ran right into it with full force. All I had on was a pair of small trunks, and the sharp edges of the wire cut into my skin all over my body. The cuts began to sting as I managed to push thru this obstacle. The noise was somewhat muffled by the breakwater, for the sentry guarding the beach didn't move from his position. He was standing with the top half of his body exposed in the sky-line. The soldier nearly panicked as I said, "Hi," and grabbed his rifle so as not to get stuck with the bayonet. "Wa! Wa! Where did you come from?" He asked. "From the sea, soldier, and within a short time this beach will be alive with activity." "You are my prisoner until the troops move inland to their objectives." "Holy Cow, an invasion on this beach tonight, right now, I can't believe it!" were the utterances of this soldier. Looking at my watch, it was time to flash my light signaling the assault boats to land dead center at the land mark. In a matter of minutes, the motors of the landing craft became louder with the Navy men driving the boats unto the beaches. The front ramp doors were lowered and out jumped the assault troops. The barbed wire was cut in three places as the men were guided thru the holes to the dunes. I kept flashing my light so I wouldn't be run over by some eager private. The sentry was awed by what he saw and remarked that he was glad we were Americans. Just before leaving, I said to the soldier, "if you want to live a little longer don't expose yourself above the skyline." Entering the water, the scratches I received burned like fire. Shining my flashlight as I swam, the rubber dinghy moved in my direction. Drukas had already been picked up, and as they rowed toward the assault boat that had brought us in, I examined my cuts. Getting on board the ship, I took a

shower and headed for the sick bay. I got a tetanus shot right off for lock-jaw and iodine on the cuts. Boy, that hurt, feeling the sting of every scratch.

In our briefing the next day we were assigned to a troop-ship making it our home for the practice landing. The troopship was the USS *Hunter Liggett*, with the 2nd Battalion, 26th Infantry on board. My companion, Private Drukas, was assigned to the USS *Sigem* with the 1st US Rangers.¹⁰ The code beach for the 2nd Battalion was blue and for the US Rangers it was red. Later we were informed that these troops were to be the first assault waves in the actual invasion. The Rangers took the harbor of Gela and the 2nd Battalion took blue beach, one mile east of Gela. The beaches extended to about 5 miles running East of Gela. The beaches were five in number, coded red, yellow, blue, Red II and Green II. Captain Deceive decided to team up with me for the invasion. Instead of three-men teams there were only two men for each beach. I didn't like the guy, but had to tolerate him. Sergeant Cohort went with another team.

The mock invasion exercises were soon over, and the ships began leaving the area of Oran. It was Sunday as the convoy of ships followed the coast line towards Algiers, and church services were being held for anyone who wanted to attend. I couldn't remember the last church service I attended. I was glad to express my thanks to my God for his protection and love. I prayed for my safety and all of the troops in the landings. The fate of my life was in God's hands, and I was afraid to die. I needed courage to face it, if it should happen, and strength to endure the hardships of war.

In Bizerte and Tunis, other ships fully loaded with cargo and troops were ready to embark as the H-hour of the invasion was drawing nearer. Special orders for each commander on board ship were given to be opened at the precise time as the convoys neared their destination. The convoy of ships with the 1st Division on board arrived in the harbor of Algiers. The harbor was beautiful, with the city of Algiers sprawled out along the coast line. The weather was excellent, with white clouds dotting the pale blue sky. On board each ship, the men of war gambled and talked of home as well as the coming invasion. No one left the ships as they lay at anchor waiting for the time of departure. After the evening mess of the second day, the models of the beaches were brought out and given to each company. The models were made up as to the exact terrain, roads, towns, airfields and pillboxes in each sector. The objective of the battalion was the high ground four miles north of Gela. It commanded the plains of Gela and an airfield used by German fighters. The U.S. Rangers were to take the harbor and town of Gela, linking up with the 2nd Battalion to secure the airfield. These objectives were to be taken at the first day of the landings.¹¹ The men were also briefed on the part of the airborne troops and the landings at Licata and Scoglitti.

¹⁰ The regimental history states that the Sea Scouts were transported on the USS *Barnett* and USS *Lyon*. The *Barnett* was an assault transport ship of the same class (APA) as the *Hunter Liggett*, which was deployed to the Pacific at the time of the Sicily operation. Olexa's battalion had sailed on the latter ship en route to North Carolina in 1941, which likely explains the confusion here. MRC 301-INF(16)-0, 36; 301-3.9.1, 8.

¹¹ This summary fits precisely with the division's field order for the invasion. (MRC 301-3: G-3 Operations Reports, June 43-April 44, 6-9)

See material on pp. 136-142

The air force had their troubles, too. Some of the planes had to return back to base without dropping the paratroopers. Others were way off target, with the troopers landing way beyond the drop zone. German light bombers and fighters appeared, headed for the ships as the ack-ack guns from the warships came into action. Three planes were hit as they released their bombs headed downward among the ships. They were near misses, which made big gushes of water leap into the air like a geyser. One destroyer was hit as it was maneuvering, sending accurate fire into the sky, hitting the plane that dropped the bomb. The Germans and Italians began shelling the ships from the shore again. The USS Cruiser *Boise*, steaming about, came into play, sending a salvo into shore. As the ship maneuvered, they sent salvo after salvo, silencing the guns that were harassing the unloading of cargo headed for the beaches.

The US Rangers and the 2nd Battalion, 26th Infantry were fighting in the streets of Gela. The fighting was fierce, as each building had to be cleared out. The 3rd Battalion, 26th Infantry had reached highway 115 inland and moved west to link up with the 2nd Battalion at Gela. The paratroopers east of the 3rd Battalion were engaged with the Italians trying to contact the Americans near Gela. The 3rd Battalion in a swift move captured the junction of highway 115 and 117 running North into the mountains. With this objective in Allied hands, the Porto Olivo Airport west of Gela was now in view of Allied troops, making the enemy airforce to withdraw eliminating its use against us. Enemy tanks (Italian) and foot soldiers headed down highway 117 from the Piano Lupo hills. The fighting was fierce as the enemy kept pounding the 3rd Battalion with artillery. Our troops had nothing to stop the tanks as they approached. L and K Companies astride the highway stopped the infantry from advancing any further momentarily. The airport was vital to the enemy. This high ground commanded the plains behind Gela running east and west. As the enemy regrouped, the shelling by the artillery became very intense, forcing the 3rd Battalion to withdraw to the secondary position near the road junction. The Italian tanks again began to move towards us with the infantry following behind each tank. Somehow as the enemy kept creeping towards us the Battalion Commander finally got through to the Division Commander asking for artillery. [After] what seemed like hours to these men under siege, the naval guns fired to stop the enemy drive. The first salvo from the *Boise* knocked out one of the lead tanks, wounding and killing the troops behind the vehicle. Other warships at sea began firing further inland at the artillery guns that were pounding us unmercifully. It was a great relief when these guns stopped firing. The Division Artillery had not landed as yet to support the troops.¹²

With the Germans and Italians shelling the ships at sea, and the beaches, no tanks were brought in either. The beaches were ordered closed and no cargo was being brought ashore. Casualties were heavy on both sides. The Italians suffered the most for the dead lay everywhere. In Gela the bodies lay in the streets, buildings and burning vehicles. The civilian population seemed to have vanished into thin air. The effective fire of the navy gunners halted the enemy drive and sent the Italians in a rout to their rear. The third battalion, taking advantage of the rout, moved up swiftly to regain the high ground and secure its defense. Night was approaching as the shadows began to close on the first day of the invasion. The destiny of some men in this battle

¹² This account accords with Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 216-220.

came to a close, others were wounded and the survivors were to face a new dawn. War has a price reaching out and grasping those who will fall, devouring them as a dragon with no remorse.

Arriving at the cargo ship the USS *Chee-Chee*¹³, the Captain and myself climbed the rope ladder to the deck. We were greeted by the ship's Captain and asked about breakfast. We were taken from the deck to the galley and served eggs sunny side up, link sausages, buttered toast, jello, milk or coffee to drink, all we could eat, and we were hungry. We were unable to leave the ship till late afternoon, and were taken back to the beach.

It was almost dark when a launch from the USS *Hunter-Liggett* took us back out to sea. The other team members were there to greet us. Drukas, my companion, told of the harrowing experience he had at the dock in the harbor of Gela. I in turn gave him my experience on Blue Beach. Just after dark, the German bombers came, flying low. All anti-aircraft guns began firing into the air. It was like the 4th of July as the shells began exploding in the sky. The planes were dropping bombs everywhere, with three near misses exploding at the rear of the ship. It was a nightmare for us, as we had nowhere to go. The bombers harassed us throughout the night, quitting at dawn. No sooner had the bombers left then our own P-40 fighters showed up. The gunners didn't know they were Americans and began firing at them. Somewhere along the way, communication had failed. The result; we lost two fighters. Captain Deceive decided that it would be best for us to be on shore until the ships left for Algiers.

On shore we were harassed once again by enemy artillery fire. Nothing was brought to shore as long as the artillery fire continued. We dug fox holes in the dunes and stayed there. Out at sea German fighters and bombers made an appearance at intervals to keep the Navy gunners busy. Three fighters and one bomber were brought down. No survivors were seen as the planes hit the sea which engulfed them. Late in the afternoon a large LCT¹⁴ came steaming onto the shore. This ship had part of the 33rd Field Artillery unit aboard. As the ramp was being lowered to unload, a German bomber came flying low along the beach from the direction of Gela, releasing a bomb that dropped right into the middle of the huge ship. The bomb hit a gasoline truck as it exploded causing a chain of explosions that sent smoke and fire a thousand feet into the air. Bodies and limbs of men being blown in every direction. Chunks of artillery pieces and motor vehicles flying everywhere as well. What a horrible sight and experience to witness as we heard men trapped inside yelling. The ship was engulfed with raging fire and black smoke. As the smell of burning flesh filled the air, we sat bawling because we could not help anyone. In this trauma I died a thousand deaths, nearly blowing my mind. I prayed for the men and at the same time shook violently digging the sand like a crazy man. It was a wonder that the force of the explosion didn't kill us in the sand dunes for we were only a hundred feet away. Our reactions from the shock varied, but we were alive and in a different world at the same time. The ship burned all day and glowed in the night which could be seen for miles. Just after dawn of July

¹³ Another pseudonym. The task force supporting the 1st Division landing had a couple of ships designated as reserve transports, one of which was named the *Chateau Thierry*, which Olexa might have remembered as or dubbed "Chee-Chee." MRC 301-0.13.1: Operation Plan "HUSKY" (Operation order G-43), June 29, 1943, 5.

¹⁴ Landing Craft Tank, a landing barge capable of carrying multiple tanks or other vehicles and heavy equipment directly onto the beach. The LCT was not a "huge" ship, a description that would better apply to the LST (Landing Ship Tank), but it was open topped and had a bow ramp rather than doors opening to either side, so this unfortunate vessel may indeed have been an LCT.

12th, the first launch with a load of cargo arrived at the beach. Helping the navy men unload, we returned to the USS *Hunter-Liggett*. The troop ships were ready to leave for Algiers to pick up other units to be used in driving the Germans from Sicily. As the convoy headed for Africa, we looked toward the beaches and the still smoldering ship till it disappeared. Another phase of life goes into obscurity but will not be forgotten. Men seek God for peace within, and strength to endure the problems and hardships of man in war. Only a “Sovereign God of Grace” can bring peace once again in the world.

The weather took a turn for the better. Every now and then the sun began to peep through the clouds. The wind became gentle and the sea swells lessoned to small ripples of whitecaps. On board, our group of swimmers discussed the duties we would have back in the States. Our plans were to train other men for any mission which required the use of swimmers. To us the war was over, the hazards of combat would soon be forgotten. But we were dead wrong.

Arriving at the harbor of Algiers, the ships were deployed and anchored. Other units of soldiers would get on board and head for Sicily as replacements. The city of Algiers sprawled out along the base of the Atlas Mountains North and South. A launch was lowered as Captain Deceive, Sergeant Cohort, and the group of swimmers got on board for the ride to shore. On shore a truck was waiting for us and we were taken to the 306th Troop Replacement Depot. After checking in, getting our gear and blankets, we were taken to a barracks to await further orders. Captain Deceive and Sergeant Cohort left the depot for Allied headquarters at the other end of the city.

After breakfast the next morning, we were ordered to the depot commander. Upon entering the Colonel’s office, we saluted and were told to stand at ease. “Your orders,” the Colonel remarked, “are for you to report to your respective units as soon as transportation is available.” We were stunned at the news. Our hopes and dreams shattered. “Where’s Captain Deceive, Colonel?” I asked. “The Captain and Sergeant left stateside by plane this morning.” Our morale hit the zero mark. This is the thanks we get for a job well done in the Invasion of Sicily. What a low blow that was to us. The project and mission were highly successful, and this was our reward for a job well done. But later we were to be awarded the Bronze Star¹⁵, through the back door, so to speak with no military fanfare.

We were free to leave the compound, so we left, grabbing a trolley which cost us 5 centimes to take us to the heart of Algiers. Our first stop after leaving the trolley was a bar, to drown out our sorrows – drinking a few bottles of wine. We had some money on us and the wine was reasonable. Walking into the street again with two bottles of wine under our arms, we spotted a WAC¹⁶ waiting for the trolley. She was a blonde dressed in a khaki outfit (shirt, tie and skirt). This gal was the first American female we saw since leaving the States. “Where are you from?” I asked. “Texas, Yank, Good ole Houston,” she drawled. Right there I lost interest, I

¹⁵ Lt. Seton received a Silver Star for his role in the landing, and eventually returned to the regiment, leading Company B onto Omaha Beach on D-Day, and later served in the 1st Battalion headquarters. his name appears regularly in the unit records throughout the war. The date of his award, June 27, 1945, accords with Olexa’s reference to the lateness of his own. MRC 301-1.13: General Orders, 1939-1945, 272,1316.

¹⁶ A member of the Women’s Army Corps, which provided service personnel in rear areas.

didn't want to hear the phrase "Everything's big in Texas, Yank." We turned to go when the blonde asked where we were headed. "Up to the "Casbah"¹⁷ if we can make it," I answered. "You all can't go there," she drawled, "the military police won't let you." An air force staff car pulled up and stopped. "Hop in Debbie, we're going swimming" an air force Colonel shouted. Sitting inside the car were the Colonel and two Majors with two other WACs in tow. "So long Yanks," the blonde yelled, sitting near the Colonel as the car lurched forward leaving us standing on the die walk. We roamed the city enjoying ourselves, buying French bread and fruit to eat from the market place. Feeling our oats, we wound up near the steep wooden steps leading to the Casbah. The gal was right. The 'Casbah' was off limits to military personnel. Two M.P.'s stood guard at the steps. It was almost dark when we got back to the depot. Grabbing our mess kits, we managed to persuade the cook to feed us, although the feeding hour had passed. We were finally fed, getting a good obscene lecture that bounced off from our shoulders. That bastard acted as if he paid for the food. Mess is at 0500 Sharp – Yak! Yak!

Around ten the next morning, an ammunition ship in the harbor blew up. The force of the explosion knocked us off our feet as we stood talking near the bulletin board. The ship was a mile away, with smoke and fire raging high into the air. Half of the windows in the city of Algiers were blown out. Part of the dock and half of a warehouse was in rubble. We were high enough above the harbor to see everything that happened. Fire units with sirens blaring were headed for the disaster area. Within an hour the first civilians appeared to be treated by the medics in the compound. Young mothers with children, old men and women, arrived with deep cuts and gashes received from flying glass. What a pathetic sight, with everyone giving a hand to stop the bleeding and applying bandages. The more serious cases were taken care of by the doctors. Someone goofed unloading explosives, with no survivors from the ship. Later in the afternoon things quieted down and the compound was back to normal.

The company clerk headed for the bulletin board with papers to post. It didn't take us long to cover the distance from our barracks to where the orders were being posted. The orders read: The following men will be ready to leave at 0700 hours Thursday morning. Fifty men in all, giving name, rank, and serial number were listed. Our group was included, and twenty-four hours later we arrived at Bizerte. The train ride was enjoyable, as our quarters were the *40 et 8*¹⁸ French box cars filled with straw to lay on. When the train stopped along the way, we would get off, and had to run like hell to catch the train. The engineer didn't blow the whistle. It was hilarious to see the guys running hell-bent holding up their pants with one hand and trying to grasp the train with the other. We cheered the men on trying to grab their hands. Some fellows we hooked while others tripped with their pants at the knees rolling in the dirt. We felt sorry for the ones left behind, but as we boarded a big LCT¹⁹ at Bizerte, these men pulled in by truck. One guy stole a 2 ½ ton truck, picking up the stragglers and driving to Bizerte. The truck was left right at the dock as the big landing craft loaded with soldiers backed away from the dock. Some

¹⁷ The Casbah was the old quarter of the city, populated largely by Arabs. It was famous for its gambling dens and other sorts of establishments of varying degrees of legitimacy, and US troops were barred from it to keep them out of trouble.

¹⁸ This term refers to the capacity of these cars to hold forty men and eight horses. Passenger cars were in short supply, and soldiers often traveled on boxcars, as they later would once they landed in France.

¹⁹ More likely an LST.

of the men had bruises from their fall as we laughed at the attempts of these fellows to catch the train. A three-ring circus couldn't have been better. Who else but a crazy American would borrow a truck, pick up others and reach his destination? It was a wild ride, but they made it. Although the harbor had been bombed extensively the engineers had done a wonderful job in clearing debris and repairing the docks.