Chapter 1: Preparing for War

I enlisted in the army on December 9, 1940 at the age of twenty-two in Binghamton, New York. I had already registered for the draft but felt that the sooner I could be trained to fight as a soldier, the better. I was sent from Binghamton to the Plattsburgh Barracks in Plattsburgh, New York. This was a pleasant town in northern New York state, right on Lake Champlain. The army barracks were right on the lake. I was assigned to L Company, 3rd Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment. We were part of the First Infantry Division. This division is known as the "Fighting First" and the "Big Red One." The 16th and the 18th Infantry Regiments were also part of this division.

There are about 15,000 men in a division. Each regiment of 3000 divided into three Battalions of 800 men. There are four companies in each battalion and one company known as a "Heavy Weapons Company." Each company had 216 men and 6 officers.[1] Our divisional commander was Major General Terry Allen and his second in command was Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr.[2] General Roosevelt was not unlike his father Teddy, in stature, being tall, lanky and flat nosed. He nipped the bottle a lot and reminded me of an Indian because of the blanket in which he was constantly wrapped around in. The General always came to our company mess hall and bragged that L company had the best coffee in the division. It took me two years to find out that the cook spiked his coffee with whiskey. General Roosevelt was responsible for our division going overseas early because he went to his cousin in Washington to say that his division was ready for action.

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The smallest unit in a company is a squad of twelve men. A squad has a sergeant as the leader and a corporal as second in command. My drill sergeant had six years' experience as an instructor. He was thorough and very efficient in his teaching. I admired him greatly, for his patience paid off in training me to be an expert. He was an American of German descent and

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[1] Olexa's numbers here are consistent with regimental records (MRC 301-INF(26)-1-13, 5-10). A chart dated Dec. 26, 1940, a couple of weeks after he joined the company, shows a standard strength of most companies in the regiment if 217 men, plus a small number of specialists. These numbers are substantially higher than those recorded on August 15 of that year (129), and November 3 (119). Olexa was thus among the first large body of recruits added to regular army formations in late 1940 as the country prepared for the possibility of war. These recruits were regular enlistees, rather than draftees, who began to appear in substantial numbers in June 1941. John Kelly, "History of the 26th Infantry," unpublished MS, MRC 1991.25 Box 445.

[2] While Allen and Roosevelt led the division in North Africa and Sicily, neither was with the unit when Olexa joined it. A number of different generals led the division before Allen, including Walter Short, who commanded it for a few months in mid-1940 and would later have the misfortune of commanding the Army forces in Hawaii at the time of Pearl Harbor. Karl Truesdell took over from Short on Oct. 1, 1940, and was the commander when Olexa joined the unit. Donald Cubbison replaced Truesdell in January, 1941, and was in turn replaced by Allen in May, 1942. Roosevelt, initially a colonel, became the commander of the 26th Regiment in April, 1941, and eventually was promoted to brigadier general and was the division's assistant commander before Allen's arrival. (MRC 301-1.13, 3-70) Roosevelt, who initially was his regimental commander and would later lead the landing force west of Oran, Algeria, that the 26th was part of, seems to have been the only one to make much of an impression on Olexa.

became an officer, had a platoon of Japanese Americans, and gave his life for his country in the rugged mountains of Italy.

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I was in the Second Platoon, 3rd Squad, and our platoon leader was Lt. Dreier. He was a big man six foot three inches, wore size 14 shoes, of Jewish descent and well liked. He was wounded seriously in the battle of Oran in North Africa. I was his platoon runner who was to carry verbal and written orders between the platoon and the commanders (C.P.)[3]. I had to stay with the Lt. at all times in the field. The squad leader of the 4th squad was perturbed that I wasn't in his squad as his first gunner. He finally got his way and I carried a Browning Automatic for a full year. The weapon weighed 20 lbs., was magazine fed and gas operated. This weapon would jam if it were not properly taken care of. I didn't like this sergeant because he was G.I. from the word go. Everything according to the book, word for word. I'm glad he went to the officer candidate school. He was good and rose to the rank of Captain.

Having a Weapons Platoon, we also had to learn how to operate the 30 Cal. [caliber] light machine guns and the function of the 60 mil. [millimeter] mortars. Our regiment was gaining in skills and we had the privilege of going to Lake Placid for ski instruction. This resort town was only 25 miles away, what had a time was had learning to ski. We managed enough to walk with skis and miss a few trees on the downhill slopes. We never had to use this skill but it was fun while it lasted. This skill is where Winthrop Rockefeller could show his skill. He never went oversees with us but took his training in the battalion Heavy Weapons Company and later transferred to a special service unit before we were shipped overseas, [and later] became the Governor of the state of Arkansas.[4]

Our stay in Plattsburgh was short lived and we moved to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, by truck. What a cold journey, we froze in the back of those trucks. The division had to come together and Devens was the place. The 16th and 18th Regiments arrived a few days later, mobilizing to go on maneuvers in a mock war.[5]

At company and battalion level we hiked on 25 and 30 mile forced marches, rain or shine and at any time of the day. This separated the men from the boys. Morale was high and plenty of bitching going on. Part of a soldier's equipment for sure. Hand to hand combat, bayonet practice, hand grenade throwing and obstacles courses kept us busy and fit. Meeting time tables, moving troops and equipment, getting supplies, ammunition etc. kept the officers busy and gave them

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[3] CP is the army acronym for command post. Each company and battalion had one. As a runner, Olexa would normally have moved between the platoon and the company CP, but might also go on to the battalion CP on occasion.

[4] Winthrop Rockefeller was born in 1912 and was a grandson of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller. He left the business world and joined the Army as a private in early 1941, and was initially assigned to the 26th Regiment. He soon left the unit, became an officer, and served with the 77th Division in the Pacific. He served as governor of Arkansas between 1966 and 1970.

[5] Fort Devens was northwest of Boston. Most of the division moved there in January, with two detached battalions from other regiments arriving several weeks later. Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 123-124; "Brief History of the 26th Infantry 1901-1956," unpublished MS, MRC 1991.25 Box 455.

valuable experience. Although our training was vigorous, we had time for relaxation. Weekend passes were given to go to the neighboring towns or even New York providing you got back for reveille Monday morning. My favorite place was Boston only 30 miles away, Riviera Beach[6], walking in the [Boston] Common and Scully Square were the places I went to most. I had four friends and we always got along together and enjoyed each other's company. One was a cook who married an English girl, joined a circus here in the States because his wife wanted excitement. Two of the three friends were from the south. They were quiet and loyal. One of them was my assistant gunner, a Polack just like me. I shall write more about this friend later on.[7] I will say though that he and I put on a good shooting exhibition in a shooting gallery in Boston for 2 hours, shooting all kinds of targets, even putting out the flames of lighted candles. We also had a crowd watching. The gallery man was so awed and surprised at our marksmanship that he let us shoot without charge. Good for business, he said.

In the spring of 1941, we were sent to Cape Cod for our first undertaking of amphibious training. We boarded a troopship which was our home for two weeks. Every morning at dawn over the sides we went, down the nets into a landing boat and on signal headed for shore. The shore line around Cape Cod is big rocks and what a time we had. We had to jump over the sides of the boat[8] and swim and climb over the rocks and charge the beach defenses that were set up for us to take. Our progress and efficiency surprised the Brass in Washington. We were living up to the reputation of a distinguished outfit. These landings were the first for American troops to undertake and each landing was more precise and proved valuable for others who would follow in our footsteps. Rumors in late June 1941 were floating around that we were going to Puerto Rico. Orders were given a week later for each platoon to go to the supply room and be issued equipment for jungle training. Sun helmets, repellants, mosquito nets and a jungle knife (with sheath) to chop the under growth. I carried this machete into Africa, [but] there was no use for it in the area where we were.

In the first part of July our battalion sent an advanced detail ahead of us to get things ready for our arrival. We boarded trains the next day, and our destination was Brooklyn. On our arrival we headed for a troopship and got on board. This time the battalion was together. The whole division was to take part in maneuvers. As we were approaching the gangplank, I saw a [group of] reporters to one side. They yelled, and asked if Winthrop Rockefeller was among us, but no one responded to their inquiries. Rockefeller had married a girl from New York on the last pass he had, whose name was Candy we were told.[9] Within the hour the gangplank was removed

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[6] Near South Yarmouth, on Cape Cod

[7] His name was George Maczak, and Olexa spells his last name in a variety of ways in the manuscript. To avoid confusion, the spelling used here is the one used in the unit records.

[8] The LCVP, or Higgins boat, which had a ramp on the bow that enabled men to run straight onto the beach, was still under development, so the men had to jump over the sides of the landing boats they trained with. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 123-124, notes that the first Army experiment with amphibious landings, made by the 3rd Battalion of the 16th Regiment on Chesapeake Bay in March, used large wooden lifeboats propelled by oars, and locates the subsequent exercises with the full division at Buzzard's Bay on Cape Cod.

[9] This particular piece of gossip wasinaccurate. Rockefeller was a celebrity and arguably the most eligible bachelor in the country, and was likely surrounded by more than his share of rumors. Rockefeller did not marry until 1948, to an actress named Barbara Sears, and the two divorced in 1950. The divorce attracted the attention of the scandal sheets of the time, and Olexa may have been thinking of some of this when writing.

and the tugs were pulling us away from the pier. Out in the channel we were soon moving under our own power. The Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island and the skyscrapers were beautiful to see. As we gained speed the buildings, the harbor and the shore line began to disappear in the background. Three ships headed south for Puerto Rico, [or so] we thought, for we never reached the tropical islands. Our first day out was just leisure, some were gambling (a major pastime in the army), others were watching the sea and the waves. A school of porpoises came out of nowhere following the ship. It was fun to watch them as they dove out of the water and with a great surge of speed got ahead of the ship. Our second day at sea was a briefing of what was going to happen and where we were going. North Carolina was out destination. What a downfall; our hopes were shattered, no Puerto Rico, no senoritas.[10]

Our objective was to land in force (15) miles from the Marine base [Camp] Lejeune, surround the base, destroy the coastal guns and force the commander to surrender the base to us. The third day, under the cover of darkness the ships anchored twelve miles out at sea. In the pre-dawn hours, men and equipment were going over the sides of the ship. As each assault boat was loaded, they rendezvoused in a circle, waiting for the signal to move. In the horizons the first rays of light were appearing, the signal was given and the assault boats were headed for shore. The invasion was on, a twelve-mile ride, cramped soldiers kneeling in position remaining silent. The hum of the motors in our ears traveling full power for shore, on board ship the high "Brass" with their maps and markers directing the movements of troops, the Navy and Air Corps, the Navy cruisers bombarding targets inland that may hinder the landing on the beaches. Daylight was upon us as the assault boats drove onto the beaches the men were already jumping out and over the sides glad to be on land running for the dunes for protection. The landing was a success, not too much confusion for the soldiers moved well. Placing men in defense positions, others grouped together to move forward. I never saw so many land crabs as they scurried from under our feet running to their places of safety. We encountered a big sea turtle that weighed about 400 pounds. It must have been laying eggs in the sand. What strength this creature was [had] as we tried to hold it back. Letting the turtle go, it disappeared quickly, swimming out to sea.

On command, L company moved forward in a western direction, our objective was a half mile away, which was a deep channeled canal. Just over the dunes was a swamp, wading in the water and underbrush we moved forward with caution, snakes galore, and the mosquitoes feasting on our hides drilling for blood. Reaching the canal made us forget the ordeal of snakes and mosquitoes. We had to cross this water barrier and on to the next objective which was a paved road. Crossing the channel was easy when the rubber dinghies were brought to us. The road was needed to move troops and equipment north on the final assault on the marine base 12 miles away. We suffered casualties in our attack. The umpires had to rule on the battle, tagging men as wounded and killed. The medical corps had to have patients to become efficient in their work and litter carrying. I was lucky I didn't get tagged. These men were taken back to the beach and put into the hospital tents that were put up for emergencies taking care of the wounded. The men were later returned to the ship and out of the action that was taking place. In action it is better to wound a man then kill him. It takes a lot of man power to care for wounded and bring them to good physical health again. To keep one man at the front it takes 11 men in the rear to

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[10] The 3rd Battalions of the 16th and 18th Regiments, which had received amphibious training before the rest of the division, had gone to Puerto Rico, which is likely why the others hoped that this would be their destination.

supply him. I and K Companies came into action when the second objective was reached. I Company taking over the north pincer drive and K Company going south to expand the bridgehead. With the assimilation of naval fire and bombing from the air, Camp Lejeune surrendered. K Company advanced to the town of Hampstead, North Carolina with little resistance and casualties. L Company was put in reserve suffering the most casualties. While the "Brass" was finishing up the campaign we enjoyed a day of rest on the beach before boarding the troopship and heading home. Two days later we were back in the New York harbor and docking at the same pier. Once again the reporters were near asking for Winthrop Rockefeller. How they knew of our arrival is still a mystery to me. This time the Brass let Winthrop give them an interview. I saw him go down the gangplank and giving his response to the questions the reporters were asking. He posed long enough for one picture and up the gangplank he came. The picture in the papers didn't resemble him because of the large mustache that he grew. Getting back to Fort Devens a few hours later, [he, or possibly the entire unit] was welcomed by all.

In mid-September 1941 we again went south to Star, North Carolina, by truck to finish the land maneuvers we started in July. The campaign mushroomed into armies, being engaged on a broad and bigger scale.[11] The advanced work detail did a fine job before our arrival. Everything was ready for us. Tent City was our home, each company having a designated area to stay in. Fort Bragg was 30 miles away. Pinehurst, a resort town, was about 15 miles west of us. Gold [Goldsboro] was the big attraction with a fine golf course. The training here was vigorous from platoon, company, battalion and regiment tactics in the field. The "High Brass" was again using their strategy with division and army corps strength.[12] As the battle progressed, the tank corps, heavy artillery and air corps were being engaged as the drive south became a stalemate between the blue and the red armies.

See material on p. 4

The maneuvers of the Blue and Red Armies were coming to a final close. Trucks with troops, tanks and heavy artillery were moving to new positions as needed. Our company moved into a wooded area, taking up defense positions and securing our flanks. We were ready in case of an attack. In the wee hours of the morning, it began to rain real hard and in no time water began to run. I did not pitch a tent like the others but curled up under a blanket near a tree. I was the platoon runner and had to be ready to carry messages if I was needed. My mistake was to bed down in a dry creek bed and the rushing water from the rain flooded me out like a drowning rat. I jumped to my feet yelling, "man the lifeboats, man the lifeboats," just to be funny. This was my second mistake. At dawn we were at the chow truck and as I was standing in the mess line, the 1st Sgt. said to me, "Hey, Olexa, what was all that noise about?" My explanation wasn't good enough to offset his writing on a pad "Olexa—K.P. Olexa K.P.**"** for a full week. I was ribbed a lot by others but I learned the hard way to keep my big mouth shut. I was a good man on work details and thanks to him I never pulled a guard detail until I was a sergeant.

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[11] Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 124-126, provides an account of the division's activities in North Carolina in October and November that corresponds well with Olexa's account, and has a similarly positive assessment of the division's performance.

[12] An army corps was a group of two or more divisions, and two or more corps constituted an army.

One day as a sergeant, I was "gigged" by my company commander on an inspection. Inside of my rifle chamber were two grains of sand. Dirty rifle, was the remark. "Fall out, Sergeant, and clean it thoroughly." It's automatic extra duty for a noncom to be gigged. Relieving the men in the defense perimeter, we stood guard so that the other men could be fed their breakfast. Dawn, twilight and dusk are the most vulnerable times for an attack. There is no element of surprise when you are alert and ready.

About mid-day, orders came for us to move out. The sun began to shine through the clouds. As we spaced ourselves in single file marching out on both sides of the road in a southern direction the blowing of bugles filled the air. Officially the maneuvers were over. What a welcome sound. We danced in the mud with a jubilant roar of approval. As we danced a big black limousine with two flags on its fenders approached us. It came to a full stop and out stepped a four-star general in the oozing mud and began shaking hands with the men who were near him. This man was General George C. Marshall, [Army] Chief of Staff, complimenting the men for a job well done in the field.[13] We now would have showers, good meals and good dry beds to sleep in.

Thanksgiving was two days away and a pay day was five. My pay of thirty-six dollars a month was like a fortune from the twenty-one dollars a month I received as a private. I had been promoted to Private First Class. Tent City on pay day was a busy place. Each tent or area was a gambling casino. Shooting dice, chuck-a-luck [a dice game] and card games. I liked blackjack and five card draw because I could win. Rolling the dice was a no-no, but I liked to watch the men bet on the next roll. I remember one such game with seven thousand dollars stacked in the center of the blanket in a heap. Little Tony had the dice, blows on them with a remark, "I'll buy a new Packard baby," he made his point – a seven. Excitedly he stuffed the money in his shirt and pockets this also broke up the game for the other men went broke. True to his word, Tony did buy a new black (1941) Packard Sedan. Everyone in the company got a ride, being envious of his good fortune. Believe it or not, a month later he lost this car in another dice game. Easy come, easy go! The next day December 1st orders again were given to break camp and head for home, Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

We journeyed by truck convoy and arrived early Sunday morning December, 7, 1941. As we were making up our beds the radio on the shelf came alive with the special news bulletin. Pearl Harbor is under attack and the Pacific fleet is sunk. We gathered around the radio dis-believing what the announcer was saying. As we listened more details were given of the Japanese bombing the city of Honolulu and great damage was being affected [inflicted].

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[13] Marshall was one of the most highly respected senior generals in the Army before the war, and would have preferred a major theater command like Eisenhower's in Europe or MacArthur's in the Pacific, but President Roosevelt kept him in Washington to run the entire army. While the division performed well, Gen. Marshall was less than satisfied with the performance of most of the senior commanders who participated in the exercises. Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 126, notes that thirty-one of the forty-two senior commanders never held combat commands overseas. These included Karl Truesdell, the former 1st Division commander who served as a corps commander on the losing side, and Donald Cubbison, who led the division during the exercise. Officers who performed better, including Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley and Terry Allen, quickly moved up the ranks, with Allen replacing Cubbison six months later.

I must slip back to our convoy trip north to a little town nestled along the Susquehanna River on our trip home. Each day one company was detailed to send out guides for the convoy to follow, leaving a soldier at the crossroads, left and right turns through a town or city and under street lights to stop traffic, as the convoy traveled on.

The guide detail started out at 2 A.M. in the morning and traveling as far as the convoy was scheduled to stop leaving soldiers to direct the convoy as it approached. In the little town of Forty Fort, Pennsylvania. I was placed under a four-way intersection to halt traffic when the convoy rolled on at a moderate speed. We arrived at my position about 9 A.M. that morning and I had about a three hour wait. It was cold and windy with a few snowflakes falling. My wait underneath the stop light is a memorable one, [because] of the kindness of its citizens. As I stood there under the light, cars would stop and the drivers giving me a cheery "hello", handing me an apple or orange, sandwiches and candy bars. Others just stopped to give a word of appreciation for the men in the service of their country One lady I remember especially drove up in her car and stopped, handing me her entire lunch: hot coffee, ham sandwiches and a piece of cake. I drank down the coffee in a hurry, for I was shivering from the cold. This lady saw me when I arrived and guessed that I would be hungry. She had a brother in the service and was wondering if he would be home for Christmas. I apologized to her for my shabby appearance and not having shaved. As she drove off, I could hear, "What shabby soldier?" Old men and women, no doubt grandparents, stopped long enough to say hello and remark about the weather. A humble salute to this little town which is thirty-three years late. I had enough eats under my feet, and at the corner light pole, to feed everyone on the truck that stopped to pick me up. I hit the jackpot town, U.S.A. Thanks, Forty Fort, for your kindness. I often thought of this town overseas and it has a place in my heart. I was one embarrassed soldier looking a mess, and representing the Army, yet in this town they didn't see a shabby soldier.

The commentators on the radio were making the announcement that all military personnel on pass and furlough please return to their bases immediately. Where that order came from is still being debated. What a farce. All the boys hearing this broadcast did return to find out that they were not needed and that they had wasted precious time getting back to their bases. We could in no way take off to defend Hawaii, and even the boys on the west coast who were much closer to the conflict could not lift a finger to help. The blaring on the radio did bring in men who had deserted the services in peace time. They were ready to help and fight for their country. Most of these men were tried by a military court for desertion. They were given short terms and forfeited three months' pay.

On December 15th, 1941, I took a furlough for the holidays, my destination, Detroit, Michigan, where my folks were living. I stopped at a little town near Buffalo, New York to visit my two married sisters and a brother. I went to school here and had many friends. One such man owned the local newspaper, [and] he stated that any letter I would write to him would be printed in his paper.

My thoughts go back to another man who wrote to me every week faithfully while I was in the service. Although he suffered a severe stroke, his letters kept coming. What binding and unselfish friendship this man had for me. He owned a little butcher shop and peddled meat, fish and vegetables throughout the farm community. He was big, fat, a slow mover, and had a heart

of gold. The day I read of his death, I cried. I found out that it was a great effort for him to write. Six and seven full pages telling me about the town and the people I knew. He had to hold his writing arm steady with his other hand, being in great pain to write these letters. How fortunate I was to have such a friend who loved me as a son and signed his letter "Will Shattuck."

I was glad to see my mother and father when I arrived in Detroit. I hadn't seen them in two years and it would take another three and a half years before I would see them again. My mother made those special Polish dishes that I liked. She was a marvelous cook and a wonderful baker. I was living like King Tut and didn't know it. My stay at home soon came to a close. The day had arrived for my return to Fort Devens. As mothers will do, she cautioned me to be careful. She told me of a dream that she had of an injury to my left leg. How serious, she didn't know. For over two years this was on my conscience. I sat on that leg, laid on it, stuck it in a hole when possible and would have pickled it if it would have helped. So one day in France I was wounded not guessing where--it was my left leg. I was on a dead run when it happened. My worries were over now, my mother was right. With a good bye kiss and a hug, a few handshakes, I boarded the train. A toot of the trains whistle and an "all aboard" from the conductor, I was on my way. I thought to myself, how long will it be this time? Will I ever see them again? My mother was a workhorse in the field, she could pitch hay and do a man's job with the best of us. My dad was a "Jack of all Trades", doing a good job in whatever needed repairing. He worked mostly in the factory as a tool and die maker. It was good to get back to camp and I had two days left of my furlough. I spent these last days visiting with my girlfriend, who later became my wife. Her dad was a veteran of World War I, and was amazed to hear of new and better tactics the army was using. I gave him a revised soldiers' handbook to bone up on the new army. When I came back to camp, the rumor was floating around of the whole division going to Florida.

By the end of January[14] we again boarded the trains and headed South. It took three days and two nights to reach our destination- Starke, Florida, about 30 miles from Jacksonville. The camp was about eight miles from the little town of Starke and the bus service was excellent. Our training here was vigorous once again. We trained among the palmettoes in the field. The weather for our stay in Florida was nothing but rain. I had my doubts about the sunshine, for we marched, ate, and slept in this weather. We were warned about the snakes in the area. Mostly rattlesnakes and coral snakes. The rattlesnake we knew, but the coral snake was a different matter. They were about a foot long, red, black and white in color. One species was poisonous and the other was not. One had a black nose, the other a red nose. WATCH OUT for the one with the red nose, we were told, it's poisonous! Believe it, when the snakes would appear, as we crawled through the pines and palmettoes, I didn't lay there to see if it had a red or black nose, I was gone! No passes or furloughs were given. Forced marches of 30 miles were common with full field packs. Warfare tactics in the field, shooting at targets with the live ammunition that popped up before us, having skirmishes and assaulting positions where the enemy was entrenched to get the feel of coordination. After each war exercise critiques were given on our good points and our faults. Targets were brought to us and the number of hits were counted to show how good our aim was. This was good training and we bitched when we had to do the

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[14] Wheeler, *The Big Red One,* 136, places the departure date as Feb. 14, and divisional records confirm the mid-February move.

same thing day after day. This was child's play, and the day would come when everything became real. We could not make another run to correct our mistakes.

Camp Blanding was a big place with good barracks and many tents with wooden floors. The 36th Infantry Division moved in with us from Texas.[15] This outfit was called the Texas Longhorns. Braggarts from the word go. If you have ever met a man from Texas, you'll know what I'm talking about. Well, it took the boys from New York and New Jersey only a short time to let them know what the First Division was made of. One Saturday, a First Division soldier came back to camp from Starke, beaten up and bleeding. The story he gave us heaped more resentment against this Texas outfit. A song was becoming popular called, "Deep in the heart of Texas" which caused the trouble. Two or three Texans would hit the bars and restaurants, play this tune on the juke box and make every soldier in the place stand up just as if it were the national anthem. Well, they picked on the wrong outfit. Within an hour, every soldier of the Fighting First in camp was headed by bus for town, me included. We moved through Starke, going into every bar and place of business, looking for these Texans. I must say, the fights were good and the "First" came out on top. Starke was put on "Off Limits" for all personnel, but we continued fighting in camp when we met.

Something had to be done, so the division commanders made us mingle with each other on the parade ground. Hatred subsided some as the days passed. Our division commander watched us close and kept repeating that we should fight together instead of fighting with each other. The 36th followed us into North Africa, later making a landing in Italy. They were a good outfit, but we were better. Since Alaska became a state, Texas, would have to swallow some of their pride, because Texas isn't the biggest state in the union any more. Today when I hear that song, it takes me back in the years to this incident in Starke where the Fighting First beat the Texans at their own game. The trouble with the Texans is that they live too long among the tumbleweeds and cannot see the beauty of America beyond their state. Morale was high among the men, a good sign, for we would be leaving Camp Blanding within a couple of months.[16]

Changes were being made in officers, and promotions were given to the enlisted men. We were losing our older sergeants, some getting a higher rank and other going into the officers' ranks as Second Lieutenant. I was promoted to the rank of corporal, assistant squad leader.[17] The Fourth Squad in the platoon, being the Automatic Squad, was dissolved. One automatic rifle team was attached to the remaining three squads. I was placed in the third squad with my buddy George, who was the Browning Automatic gunner. The G.I. sergeant I had in the fourth squad left for Officers School, Whoop-dee-do, I never missed him. I got rooked into lending five dollars to my old platoon sergeant. He knew when he was leaving and I didn't. He made the grade of top kick[18], he was a good drill sergeant, a career man, married and had three kids in

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[15] Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 126, indicates that the 36th Division was already in the camp when the 1st Division arrived. He notes the brawling between the units, but not, as Joe's son Karl pointed out to me, how it started.
[16] Olexa here glosses over a four week stay at Fort Benning, Georgia, in May and June, where the 1st and 36th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Armored Division conducted maneuvers. Wheeler, *The Big Red One*, 137-138. He did, however, send several letters from there.
[17] His letter dated May 2, 1942, announces his promotion to corporal.
[18] "Top kick" was Army slang for the rank of 1st Sergeant.

Plattsburgh, New York.[19] General Roosevelt still kept coming to L Company for his coffee, our cook was still with us a spiking the coffee as usual. He was a good soldier giving us a lot of encouragement. He wanted us in action and got his wish. The general knew what war was all about. We didn't, but it wasn't long before we knew also.

In the latter part of June 1942, we left Camp Blanding for Indiantown Gap [Pennsylvania]. This was our last stop in the states, a marshaling area for troops going overseas. We should have guessed this at Camp Blanding when all of the changes were being made. Snuffy Smith, our former company commander, was now commander of a new company (the Cannon) company. This company had halftracks with 75 [millimeter] howitzers, heavy machine guns and heavy mortars. This officer could walk the legs off of a centipede. A graduate of West Point, what he lacked in height was made up in his big feet.

Our new company commander was the executive officer, Captain Jitters[20], a chain smoker, a mistrusting officer, causing havoc among the men in his company. I had a few skirmishes with this man that I will remember for the rest of my life. Our training here was relaxed and 3-day passes were given to anyone who wanted to leave camp. The medics were busy giving us booster shots and other shots, to immunize us against diseases we may encounter overseas.

I took a 3-day pass and went to visit my girlfriend in Ashburnham, Massachusetts. This was the last time I saw her till after the cessation of the war. In the last part of July, we were issued passports with our pictures in them to carry as identification.

On August 1, 1942 we boarded trains and headed for Brooklyn to embark for overseas duty. Arriving at the marshaling yards, we marched straight to the ship that was to take us to Scotland. To my amazement the ship was the *Queen Mary*, a three stacker. It was so large it jutted way out into the channel. This ship traveled from England to America, loaded cargo, and went to Australia. On the return trip she stopped in New York to pick up troops headed for England. This ship had no escort and traveled alone.[21] By day the ship followed a zig-zag course, by night it was straight a course and at full speed. When at full speed the ship rocked. Our regiment was the last to get on board. The whole division was together and we slept in shifts. Our sleeping quarters was on deck below the water line and the kitchen was just above us. The kitchen fed the troops 24 hours, in groups. One unique thing in the dining hall was an indicator and map that showed the position of the ship at all times. Twelve hundred men were fed at one time. Our battalion was chosen to pull guard duty for the trip which took 3 days. One could get

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[19] This sort of shift in personnel was common throughout the army, with older lifers and National Guardsmen and Reservists who had been called up as the army expanded in 1940 and 1941 being replaced with younger men, and those officers and senior enlisted men who did not seem to show much potential as combat leaders or who had specialized training or administrative skills needed elsewhere shifted to other units and assignments. On a broader level, as new units were created, experienced officers and men were shifted from established units to the new ones.

[20] "Captain Jitters" is one of Olexa's pseudonyms. Divison records indicate that his real name was Captain Stephen Morrissey. MRC 301-INF(26)-30.9, 126.

[21] Fast ships like the *Queen Mary* commonly crossed the Atlantic without escorts, since they were considered fast enough to make it unlikely for German U-boats to be able to catch or target them. Since the ship survived the war, this seems to have been a reasonable assumption.

lost on this ship so we had sketches made to guide us. A little city was contained on one deck, with all kinds of little shops. You could buy almost anything desirable that met your fancy. One thing stopped us cold, we hadn't been paid, and no money was to be had. The officers had the most plush rooms on the voyage.

In the early hour of August 2[22], the tugs were at work getting the Queen away from the pier and into the channel. As the ship was slowly moving out of the harbor the lights of New York shined bright, and as I viewed the State of Liberty for the second time, I mumbled a good-bye and a promise to return if it were possible. I was fortunate to be stationed on the promenade deck for guard duty, being lucky enough to see everything and enjoy the activities that went on. When the *Queen* got into deep water, full power was gained in a short time, and into the black murky night she sped. At dawn the ship took its course, the guard detail was relieved and the men who had spent the night sleeping were awakened and fed. The men in the second shift took the empty sleeping quarters for their rest.

On the second day out, each soldier was paid ten dollars. You could go to the ship's store and spend it or if you were a gambler, you could make yourself a fortune, provided Lady Luck shined on you as the dice rolled over the floor. Gambling, eating and sleeping were the main attractions of our trip. In a space of just a few hours men were winning a fortune, and losing it in a matter of minutes. As I stood guard on the deck, the gambling went on feverishly. One incident coming to mind was of a soldier having ten thousand dollars heaped in front of him, he bet the whole thing on the next roll, twenty thousand now in the pot. A quietness hit the group of men kneeling in a circle as the man rolled the dice. "Snake Eyes" was the shout and the pot was lost The man that lost was so frustrated that he went to the rail and jumped overboard. It happened so fast that even the men by the rail hadn't had the time to stop him. "Man overboard" was the cry the length of the *Queen*. The man's fall was about 9 stories high and there was no attempt to try and rescue him. I learned later that at the speed the *Queen* was traveling she would have traveled five miles before stopping. One man in the vast ocean would be hard to find also jeopardizing the *Queen* and all the men on board for torpedoes. Two more unhappy incidents were to occur, the third and final day at sea. Another group of soldiers was gambling, betting was getting warm as the dice were rolled. One soldier is hot as he bets and makes his roll. The pot is now 6,500.00. Bet it all as he shook the dice. "You're raided" came a voice outside the circle. It was a 2nd Louie [lieutenant]. The soldier rolled and the dice turned up a 3 (crap). Not a dollar did the Louie put down and [he] was already gathering up the money on the deck. This soldier who lost said nothing, and went to his quarters, put on all of his gear, ran to the ship's rail, and overboard he went. As he was plunging toward the sea, "man overboard" again was repeated the length of the *Queen.* The ship continued on its zig-zag course, two blasts on the fog horn as if to say "Sorry." The third man to go over the rail a few hours later must have been despondent. Without a word, he too took the 9-story jump. "Man overboard" again echoed [across] the ship as the *Queen* traveled. We looked as the soldier hit the foamy water and was gone. Two more blasts of the fog horn as the *Queen* announced you are on your own.

At 9:00 in the evening a bomber circled the ship and dropped one big flare. As this flare descended the whole area was a light as day. For us who were aboard were greatly concerned,

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[22] Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 128-129, confirms the departure date and gives the arrival date as Aug. 8.

were we being bombed? How was the ship spotted? The ship's captain had 3 flares shot into the sky identifying itself and the plane took off in the night. We were now one hundred miles from Scotland and by morning we would be at the port unloading.

Greenock[23] was the seaport town. We anchored in a cove and the mountains around us were beautiful. We had to unload our gear into barges that brought us to shore. The *Queen* looked ever so lovely as she lay anchored in the quiet waters. Today the *Queen* lies anchored off of the city of Long Beach, California. Many souvenirs were sold to individuals as her hull was dismantled and made over into apartments. She was my *Queen* and I shall always remember her on the high seas going it alone, laden with soldiers, who would fight for a nation as great as ours.

Boarding the train in Greenock, we headed south. The high mountains and lowland hills were a sight to behold. Patches of beautiful flowers everywhere swinging in the soft breeze. Along the stone fences and near the houses were roses of many colors. Sheep on the hillsides with their shepherds dotted the countryside. Only God could make such beauty which seemed so peaceful, as the train hurried on. The coaches of the train had many doors which opened up on the platform side. Each compartment had 12 soldiers. On the opposite side of the coach was a passage way for those to pass from one coach to another, quite different from the train coaches in America. There were two scheduled stops to feed us tea, crumpets, fish and chips and meat pot pies. The women serving us were very gracious. They asked many questions about America, where we were from etc. The English and Scottish brogue floored us, hard to understand at first, be we got used to it.

Our next destination was Tidworth, a small town in the Salisbury plain region. This area of England is like the wheat belt in America, low rolling fertile land, rugged mountains in the north and western parts of the country. The people are a blend of many groups. The Celts, Romans, Saxons, Jutes, Vikings, Danes, French and Jews, each adding its culture to the English way of life. The English love tradition, independence, are proud of nobility and guard their privacy. In the town [county] of Wiltshire is an ancient monument called "Stonehenge." It is a group of rough stone 30 feet in length weighing 28 tons, each, standing in a circle. Our battalion marched twenty-five miles to see this wonder of wonders, built by the Iberians during the Old Stone Age, as part of our training. These stones were brought 300 miles from Western Wales believed to be connected with the Sun Worship. Although there are many castles, the Warwick Castle and one in Edinburgh, Scotland are the ones I am familiar with. To me they were cold drafty and desolate. I would not want to live in them. However, they looked lovely set on a hill with a lot of water around them, a draw bridge was raised or lowered as the only means of getting inside. Our living quarters in Tidworth were a row of red brick buildings joined together two stories high, a front and rear entrance, four rooms downstairs and four on the top floor like tenant houses in the states. Showers, wash rooms and toilets were in a central location and each company assigned to one such area. Training was limited here. One day in the latter part of August we were ordered to fall out with full field gear, ammunition and grenades being distributed to us. We stayed in formation all day and part of the night ready to embark on trucks.

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[23] The actual landing was at the nearby port of Gourock ("Brief History of the 26th Infantry"), but the men likely would have passed through Greenock, which was a more substantial place, and may have entrained there. Both are on the Firth of Clyde, below the major city of Glasgow.

What an ordeal this was for us. Unknown to us, the Canadians and British commandos made an assault on the city of Dieppe, France. This was a catastrophe, for the Germans were waiting for them. It was a blood bath and many men were slain. If a beach head were established, we were scheduled to land and hold on, but the Germans were very strong in this area.[24]

After the postponement of a European invasion by the High Brass, with North Africa was the initial place to make landings. The landings of North Africa were code named "Torch" and preparations were being made on a full-scale invasion. Casablanca, Oran, Algiers, and Bône were chosen. The 9th Infantry Division landing at Casablanca, the 1st Infantry Division landing near Oran, and the 34th Infantry landing in Algiers, and the British at Bône.[25]

See material on pp. 5-6

Our battalion traveled north to Scotland again. In one of the many deep inlet coves, we boarded a ship called the *Gold Stripe*, for amphibious training. This ship was our home till the landings in North Africa. Our training in landings were more vigorous, making one landing a day at dawn, we had force marching 15 miles inland, all uphill traveling. This was grueling and I was glad to be in shape physically from the ordeal of combat swimming school. There were no passes, no free time, inspections of our equipment, more shots by the medics. The assault boats were secured to the sides of the ship. Each morning the troops would load up and would lower the boats to the water. We didn't have to jump over the sides, they had a front ramp and we could run off onto the beach.

One main attraction on the ship was at 4:00 sharp, and lasting a half hour, a Scotsman would appear in kilts playing bagpipes, strutting like a peacock with stomping maneuvers and a marching gait with quick turns. This man stayed on the beaches of Dunkirk while the British evacuated France playing his bagpipes, strutting up and down. He never missed a day as long as we lived on board. What a grand finale he gave us the night before the invasion. I shall never forget this farewell performance.

Gold Stripe was used for carrying troops to and from the Dieppe raid[26]. She had a history of which the Sea Captain was proud. Morale was good, plenty of bitching going on, and it got worse when we were fed mutton every day. We had lamb hearts for breakfast one morning, I

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[24] The Dieppe raid took place on Aug. 19, 1942, only a week after the division landed in Scotland. The raid itself was in part an experiment to determine the practicality of seizing a fortified port, and in part a serious attempt to establish a permanent bridgehead across the Channel. Had it been successful, the division might well have been sent to reinforce the bridgehead. Instead, the raid was deemed a failure within hours of starting, and the invading forces were withdrawn the same day, leaving Olexa and the rest of his division at their training bases. After its failure, those responsible for it, including Winston Churchill, tended to insist that it was only ever an experiment. The Canadian 2nd Division, which conducted the main assault, suffered heavy casualties, including a substantial number of men who could not be evacuated and became POWs, and many Canadians resented the British for using them as guinea pigs. The British Commandos, who landed on an undefended beach, did so easily, and the principal lesson learned was that beach landings were a much better bet than landings against heavily fortified positions.

[25] The British landed at Bône on Nov. 12, four days after the initial landings.

[26] *Gold Stripe* is another of Olexa's pseudonyms. *Danger Forward: The Story of the First Division in World War II* (Washington, DC: Society of the First Division, 1947) 18, indicates that three ships carried the personnel of the 26th, including the assault transport *HMS Glengyle*, which did indeed participate in the Dieppe Raid.

couldn't believe it. They didn't look appetizing to me, so I had them thrown overboard. [With] what money we had, we bought food from the ship's store every time it was opened, and that soon was depleted. The battle cry of the battalion was "Baa! Baa!" We were now ready to fight. Anything but mutton stew. The cooks were mad we didn't eat, and we were mad at the cooks. We settled for tea and crackers once a day at 4'oclock for tea time.

We were glad when the ship got under way to join the convoy for Africa. Boat drills became essential. We were given areas to assemble in case of an attack by air or submarine. More ships kept joining together. Destroyers were now giving us protection from the subs.

At one point our convoy was only 200 miles from the United States.[27] Another convoy was to follow us which made the landings at Casablanca. Unknown to us, the "High Brass" was trying to get a French leader to assume the responsibilities of command of the French forces' cooperation in the landings and to get French assistance in bringing a quick cessation of hostilities. General Giraud's reception was cold by the French in Africa. He was ignored and his speech on the radio had no effect. By a stroke of luck Admiral Darlan, who was Commander in Chief of the French fighting forces, was in Algiers. He was the only one to achieve cooperation for the allies in North Africa. Darlan's orders were obeyed by the French forces which included the Navy at Toulon and the Air Force officials in Algiers.[28] We wanted to win an ally and not kill Frenchmen.

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[27] The convoy never got anywhere near that close to home, but did change course repeatedly and went well out to sea in a southwesterly direction (Wheeler, *The Big Red* One, 131), which likely led to speculation that they were heading toward home.

[28] The efforts to find a way to persuade the Vichy French military forces in North Africa to change sides and not oppose the landings were something of a mess. The Allied leaders knew that the Free French leader, Gen. Charles de Gaulle, was not acceptable to the Vichy leaders, who had outranked him in the pre-surrender army and viewed him as a deserter. Instead of de Gaulle, they tried to use Gen. Henri Giraud, a higher-ranking officer who had escaped from the Germans, but Admiral Jean Darlan outranked him as well, and the French commanders in North Africa all deferred to him rather than to Giraud. When the invasion began, Darlan waffled briefly before switching to the Allies. Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943* New York: Henry Holt, 2002) 93-96, 115-117.