

Innsbruck, den

Stanz Hofner

Baufeiter und Reichsstatthalter

On that night last October when we left Camp Shanks, N. Y., to board a boat in New York Harbor there was much time for thought on the train, the ferry, and at the wharf. Some of the fellows forced conversation and tried to make jokes but most of the time they were silent. I remember some of the thoughts that were running through my mind. I was inwardly glad that I had gotten all of my men passes to New York City every night of the two weeks we were at Shanks instead of every second or third night as most units did, and was satisfied that I had done the right thing in letting one of the agents spend most of his time with his wife who lived in the big city. I listened to those around me, saw the look on their faces and realized how deeply and uniformly they loved America and felt that most of them were sacrificing a great deal to be in the army and to make this trip--far more than I was.

I remember turning over in my mind the reasons for war and the cause of our going into the army and far away. Concluded that the men who run our nation's foreign affairs and diplomacy have indeed a responsibility of great magnitude that their success or failure affects the lives of each and every one of the people. The soldiers around me seemed to represent a cross section of America. None appeared to be very enthusiastic about the job ahead but one had the feeling that each would do his part.

A very pretty red headed Red Cross girl gave us each a doughnut and a cup of coffee as we stepped on the gangplank. I said to myself "Well at last I've started on a great adventure--I've always wanted to make a tour of Europe. It may be painful and difficult but at least it will be interesting. Perhaps I'll even have some experiences to tell about--that is if I live to recount them."

It was a disappointment not to get a chance to wave good-bye to the Statue of Liberty with tears in my eyes as everyone does in the movies, but I'll be doubly sure to greet the grand old lady when I return. 'Twas during the wee small hours of the morning when we pulled out. In the dim light of a misty, cloudy, miserable morning we faintly viewed a segment of the Jersey shore sinking into the horizon. I thought "America was mighty good to me for the past quarter of a century. It seems like such a short time. Gosh, I can't really be 25 years old!"

The next couple of weeks dragged by. The food was good and as usual I had a terrific appetite. Didn't get a bit seasick but confess I took a fiendish interest in watching those who did who had bragged that they were immune to such a

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childish ailment. There was one good storm when another ship in our convoy came within ten feet of ramming us. Next to a women's sewing circle, a troop transport is the best manufacturing plant and distributing agency for rumors. The only place I didn't hear we were going was any port in the United States.

One would think that life on a boat would be a very simple thing to regulate with a minimum of rules and regulations. On our ship such was not the case. We had several pages of mimeographed instructions every day. Some few of the rules appeared very reasonable and necessary. Once we sighted a convoy of over fifty vessels. The rumor went around that it was carrying our division SOP (Standard Operating Procedure i.e. local unit rules and regulations).

I became pretty well acquainted with the ship's chaplain, a South Carolina Presbyterian, whom I tried to persuade to send his fifteen year old son to my alma mater. He loaned me some books to read. The one I enjoyed most was The Meadow by John Buchan which several years ago Colin had mentioned to me as being a very good novel. The church services on the top deck were very impressive.

All during the trip I slept an average of twelve hours a day. I obtained some phrase books and started to study a little French and German but with scant effort and little success. The rest of the time was spent playing cards and it was noted that my ability improved with a little practice.

When we got off the boat we were told to follow the troops in front of us. After walking about a half a mile, they piled into some trucks and we did likewise mingling in among them. After riding fifteen miles to the staging area we found that this was a special detail to set up the division headquarters and lay out the camp. Everybody else including the seven of us CIC agents were scheduled to march out the full fifteen miles across country with all of our gear. We quietly disappeared and went a mile or so toward town and helped the stragglers come staggering in who no doubt wondered why we looked so fresh. This is one of the mistakes I made that none of the agents have blamed me for or complained about.

I will never forget the next week when we lived in pup tents at the staging area. It took me a couple of cold miserable nights to learn how to fold my blankets so they wouldn't pull apart and give me nightmares of the North Pole.

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The next week we stayed in Marseilles, did a little investigative work for the local CIC, and generally became accustomed to the people, customs and language of France.

Our first case was to open a safe the Gestapo had left in Marseilles. We feared that it might be booby trapped so we got a locksmith to open it. Although we told him what it was he didn't seem a bit perturbed. We watched him work from behind the corner of the wall to the next office. After drilling so many holes in the safe door that it looked like a piece of Rockfort cheese, the safe opened. We rushed in, pounced on it and pulled out two old newspapers and a full bottle of brandy which stated on the label "Reserved for the Wehrmacht". The contents of the bottle were examined and found not to be poisonous. Since then we have had cases that have proved more productive and more interesting but none that have been more exciting at the time. Though it would appear a logical thing to do, in our nine months over here we have never heard of a case where the Germans booby trapped a safe.

At Marseilles we were asked a thousand times a day for cigarettes and candy. When children six years old or less would ask for cigarettes I would say "But you are too young to smoke". Invariably the reply would come in a high pitched plaintive voice, "Cigarette pour papa, s'il vous plait". On one of those unusual occasions when the situation was reversed, I offered a six year old boy a cigarette but he refused evidently holding out for chocolate. His mother broke in and said "Go ahead. Take it as a souvenir." I've often wondered whether she snatched it away from him as I turned my back or waited 'til I turned the corner. s'il
s'il

I had my first bath after only three weeks in Europe. One of the fellows found that a base section outfit had a bath unit in a building near our billets. We went there and saw big signs "Off limits", "Only for troops of this unit", and "Keep out". We walked boldly in stating "We are new men". No one questioned us. I felt that I had melted away about twenty pounds during the hour I was under the hot shower.

Like Gypsies we traveled up the Rhone valley doing everything we were told we couldn't and stopping at Dijon and Lyon where we weren't supposed to tarry. We were scheduled to drive 25 miles a hour with ten minutes rest every two hours. Instead we drove 50 to 60 m.p.h. four hours a day and stopped to do some sightseeing or trading everytime we saw something that interested us. By the time we got to the front we were experienced European tourists and knew enough trading French to be only moderately cheated with each transaction.

At the front, which for us was a few kilometers behind the doughboys foxholes but well within the range of light artillery and even mortar fire and on some few occasions

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under direct enemy observation, we spent the first few days trying to get oriented to the working procedure in a combat zone. Things that seemed so very mysterious and frightfully difficult were taken as a matter of course by the battle wise boys who had been there before. Little did we realize that in a few weeks we would be teaching with an air of knowledge and confidence the same matters to the new men coming up who were as green as we were then.

I was surprised to find that the American soldier keeps his sense of humor even under indescribable, miserable conditions. For example I remember seeing a foxhole in mid-winter where a doughboy had lived for weeks during a constant rain and must have spent the greater part of his time bailing out the water that seeped in. When ordered to move forward he put up a crude sign "For Rent Cheap--Running Water". The front line soldier's humor is pretty grim but is genuine and helps to keep up morale.

One of the favorite stories that went the rounds was about a high ranking general, who incidentally is highly respected for his military accomplishments and common sense, who went up to the front to watch the doggies jump off in an important attack. The general was improperly dressed for this occasion having his boots and helmet highly polished and in every respect attired in a uniform fit for a social event. A tired, dirty, unshaved sergeant glanced at him, turned and yelled at his men "Jones, your field jacket is unbuttoned" "Brown, why didn't you shave this morning?" "Smith, your uniform is dirty" "You all ought to be restricted to the barracks for a week for this". As they walked on to the nasty work ahead, the general's face turned slightly red. I don't know whether or not the story was actually true but it could have been without stretching anyone's imagination.

As in every group of people there are extremely modest men and pure braggarts with most of the fellows coming somewhere in between. There was one obnoxious agent who topped the class of bull artists. If anyone would listen and being green we did with rapt attention for the first few hours, he would tell of his fantastic experiences in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. Story book fiction would read like dry statistics compared to his tales. He had captured a house full of dangerous characters single-handedly after throwing hand grenades in the windows. On important matters even generals would call him in for advice and would wisely act on his instructions.

At that time the city of St. Die was just beyond our front lines. Although most of the Germans had moved out to the heights surrounding the town, they maintained observation posts there and sent patrols in daily. We felt it important to get in touch with the FFI (French Resistance Movement) leaders to get certain information from them and to keep them

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from killing the French collaborationists and German agents they had seized before we got a chance to get some information from them. A French officer, the character described in the preceding paragraph, another agent, and I decided to go. As we neared our last outposts the fellow began to get very nervous and said he didn't think we ought to proceed. He began citing gruesome examples from his vast store of experiences. Finally someone told him to shut up. I noticed that he began to drag behind and finally was a good hundred yards behind the rest of us. The pay off came when he yelled to me after I had crossed a field "Hudson, are you sure the field isn't mined?" Someone retorted, "Find out for yourself. What do you want us to do, step on one so you can see where it was." After this experience he was a bit shy about recounting his experiences when I was around.

Our venture into St. Die was only partially successful. We contacted the PFI all right and they let us see one of the gestapo men we were most anxious to get our hands on. This scoundrel had joined the PFI to find out who the active resistance leaders were and was responsible for the imprisonment and death of more than twenty men. We wanted to question him at length and arranged to come back the next day and get him. When we returned the PFI chief said upon inquiring where the prisoner was "It's too unfortunate, I'm afraid you won't be able to see him. Last night he was shot. We didn't understand you wanted to talk to him."

From the outskirts of St. Die I saw the Germans burn the city. First they looted the building of everything they could carry away. Then they systematically destroyed every house in the northern three-fourths of the city (the southern part was too close to our lines and under our direct artillery fire). It seems that contributions from America helped rebuild the town after World War I. Though it was of no tactical interest to the Germans they destroyed St. Die, out of pure spite. As a matter of fact an official document was found ordering the burning of the city. The krauts did a very thorough job. I remember standing on a hill overlooking the place one evening and watching the fires and feeling a burning hatred for the nazis rising within me which has not and will not subside for a long, long time.

During combat when you are advancing and move into a new town every other day, getting a place to live and an office in which to work is quite a job especially especially since most of the buildings had been worked on by our artillery. The procedure was for all of us to rush in and put up signs at every possible place signing them in my name since I was in command of the detachment. We would then hope that we wouldn't be ranked out of all the places. At one little shot up town

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the fellows I sent but ahead overdid themselves. As I approached the place the headquarters commandant, a Lt. Col., stopped me and I could tell he was furious. He said "What do mean by reserving every house in town?" I said I didn't know, apologized and beat a hasty retreat. Upon checking I found that they had reserved seventeen out of the thirty livable places in the village all in my name. Thereafter, we had to be more discreet.

For many long nights during a long, cold and thoroughly miserable winter we read books, played cards, and tried to keep warm.

We had many opportunities to learn well the meaning of that phrase used in military textbooks, the "fog of war". Reports of all kinds would be very much distorted. For example, late one night the chief of staff called me in. An officer had reported that a civilian told him of about twenty-five jerries in the woods nearby who wanted to surrender. They were located at a spot several miles behind our lines having been bypassed during our advance. They were said to have waved a white flag to attract the attention of this civilian who went to them and was told of their desires. According to the story this Frenchman was willing to lead our troops to the place and would arrange for the surrender. The colonel wanted us to check on the reliability of the civilian before sending fifty men out to take the prisoners in order to make sure they wouldn't be led into a trap.

We talked to the Frenchman and found that the story was as described except that he didn't know it himself but had gotten it from a friend of his. We went to this character who should have all the dope and he referred us to another person. Before we were through we had traced the story through five people. The last one had seen what he thought might have been a stationary white flag on a hill in the opposite direction from that originally pointed out. He had not seen, did not talk to, and did not know of any German soldiers wanting to surrender. When a full account of the affair was given to the colonel he drily remarked "I guess that proves that truth is the first casualty in battle."

Catching our first gestapo agent was not at all an exciting event. This creature had done some tall talking to keep his fellow Frenchmen from lynching him. He had begged them to turn him over to the Americans claiming that he had important information for us. He had been responsible for a score or more of his countrymen. He was paid about twenty dollars per man he had denounced--that is a pretty good example of the value the nazis placed on human life.

Our living conditions were pretty miserable but compared to the front line doggies we had undreamed of comforts. Still, all of the time we were in artillery range of the

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enemy. Once an eleven inch shell burst about a hundred yards from the house where we were staying and a ten pound fragment landed in the next room. The noise woke me and my roommate up. We argued as to whether it was a shell coming in or going out. I said it had gone out and there was nothing to worry about. He claimed it was coming in but his action belied his words for he stayed in bed instead of going to the cellar. In the morning we found out what had happened and this was the subject matter for some minutes of sober reflection.

Once during January our division executed what the newspapers call a "strategic withdrawal" in which we retreated twenty-five miles. Never will I forget the expression on the faces of those French people as we pulled back after having spent several weeks telling them we had come to stay. A couple of months later we recaptured the town and some of the folk in the place looked as if they had aged ten years. The woman in whose house we had stayed had lost at least twenty pounds. Her daughters, ages 15, 16, and 17, had been forced to dig trenches and work on the roads for the kreuts. Our artillery and air force had wrecked almost every house in the town and the Germans had blown up all of the bridges. We didn't have much to say when they complained "You left us holding the bag. You withdrew and they blew up our town with bombs and shells." Such was indeed a military necessity but is hard to explain to people who have lost all of their material possessions in the process. I wish I had a nickel for every time I have said "C'est la guerre" and changed the subject or hurried on.

If I were to write of the many true stories of courage, heroism, and unselfishness that I have known of or witnessed, it would take volumes. Suffice it to say that those who did the most will probably be the ones to say the least about it. For example one of my agents was out on a raid and was bringing back a soldier whose leg was shot off when the soldier said to him, "Gee, you fellows sure are brave." He quoted that to me pointing out how truly unassuming and appreciative many soldiers really are.

Much of the time I was blue, despondent, and depressed largely because I felt I had such a big job to do and knew so little about it. For long periods there was very little I had in the way of visible success. One of the days when I was extremely despondent, along came a promotion for me which I felt was totally and completely undeserved. As I look back on it, during this time I was getting valuable experience and learning somewhat more than I realized.

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On March 15th the attack against the Siegfried line jumped off. The newspapers reports read something like this "Against stubborn opposition the _____ division advanced two miles. Casualties were heavy on both sides." On the ground you see death and destruction everywhere--wrecked equipment, destroyed buildings, dead bodies and parts of same, smashed pill boxes, weary soldiers, ambulances bringing back the wounded, ragged prisoners being marched back by equally tired and ragged Americans, dazed, shell-shocked civilians wandering around mournfully, and freed slave laborers happy but hungry and helpless. One reaches the concluding that war is just as bad as anyone ever said it was. Some phases of it are interesting and adventurous but it is not and never will be attractive and glamorous.

One bright afternoon during a rapid advance five of us accidentally got ahead of our troops and got into a town that hadn't been taken. We were talking to the mayor of the place when mortar shells began dropping in, the first landing about 25 yards away. Spent a few nervous minutes in a cellar. The mayor told us a route by which we could escape. When we tried it we found he had lied to us and we were trapped. Returned to the cellar but were too worried by the krauts to take care of our unreliable informant. Later all of us escaped without a scratch and with a little experience we will remember for a while.

After breaking through the Siegfried we were in occupation work for a few weeks. Once we traced down a buried treasure of about \$40,000 in gold. Once we questioned a priest and found that he was a German army officer in disguise. On one occasion when we were putting a gestapo agent in jail, the jailor's wife greeted him loudly with the words "Good Morning". She explained later that he used to work there and she was required to say "Heil Hitler" to all nazi officials but was prohibited from saying this to the prisoners so she would say "Good Morning" to them. Once she forgot and said "Good Morning" instead of "Heil Hitler" to the gestapo agent and he cursed her and threatened her with grave punishment if it happened again. That morning she was getting a small bit of revenge.

One morning in April three Red Cross girls, an officer, an agent, and I hiked up to the castle of Teck, the place where Queen Mary of England was born and raised. We had a two mile walk since a bridge on the road had been destroyed. As we approached the place white flags waved from the windows and the people held their hands over their heads and appeared to be very frightened. They told us we were the first Americans that had come there. One spoke perfect English and

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guided us over the place telling us interesting little anecdotes of historical interest. We were a little frightened when we found that the last German soldiers had departed only a few hours before.

One day we stopped at one of the notorious German soldiers' "rest camps" where they had kept approximately 300 women. None were there when we came but the day before we arrived 150 had left. The stories you have read about such places is not unsupported propaganda.

For a couple of weeks the division was advancing at the rate of from ten to fifty miles a day. One evening in my office at a town at least forty miles behind the front, a German lieutenant and sergeant walked in, stood at attention, saluted, and said they would like to surrender and handed me two p-38 automatic pistols, fully loaded and in perfect condition. Thus, I can always say that during the war I captured some Germans and will have nice little souvenirs to prove it.

Our arrival at Innsbruck, Austria, ended a seven months campaign during which our division, the 103d, was in the line for over 180 days, had killed and wounded over 18,000 krauts, and had captured over 45,000 jerries. In Austria the people greeted us with flowers, cheers, and demonstrations of great joy as if they considered us as liberators in the same way the French did. To show you that I am not cynical I must state that I really believe that some of them were probably sincere.

Austrian Tyrol is a most beautiful place. Even the author of travel guides would be giving the truth when he writes of this sector. Many of the leading nazis had fled to this area as the allies advanced on all sides, therefore, the work also was extremely interesting, and all this made everything we had done previously seem dull by comparison.

Recently I had the experience of talking to a man formerly of cabinet rank in the nazi regime. His mother was born in America and he spoke English perfectly. He seemed to understand the way we think. When asked how long he thought it would take to reeducate Germany to democracy, he replied, "If you try hard, you might have a good chance of doing it in fifty years. I don't think there's a ghost of a chance of the Germans being able to govern themselves in less than twenty years." He struck me as knowing what he was talking about.

I expect there will be enough to keep me busy over here for some time.