

"HOWE AND HOW---

As an ex-ASTP<sup>1</sup> student, expelled from the refuge (in my case) of Texas A & M, College Station, Texas, my history with the 103rd Infantry Division (Co. L, 3rd Battalion, 411 Infantry Regiment) began in the spring of 1944, at Camp Howe, Texas, a few miles south of the Red River.

I and thousands of other ASTP-ers (all PFC's after 10-12 months in the army) arrived to hear our first 5.30 roll call the first morning: "Rise up, all you Phi Beta Cappers..."

The old 103rd privates and corporals had been cleaned out--sent off to be fill-ins for divisions already in England, getting ready for D-Day--or to go to the soggy (ugh) Pacific. So, we nerds faced our rather dubious non-coms and young lieutenants with our own dismay and a little queasiness. But we survived our second full dose of "Basic Training" and arrived in New York (Camp Shanks) to get ready for shipment overseas.

In brief, I want to mention the high-points (such as they were) of that period (August-September 1944) before getting to the combat tales.

1. Train-ride--Texas to Camp Shanks: 40 (50?) year old train cars, faded, worn, broken seats (surely used by Buffalo Bill and his circus performers), rifles and green duffle-bags sprawled in the aisles. Three to four days--hard seats, fatigue, too much cigarette smoke, sleeping sitting up--boring--but a hell of a lot more acceptable than what was coming up.
2. My night-mare on the train, somewhere in Tennessee (?). Sleeping sitting up, the third day I suddenly saw a German bayonet striking right at me; I gasped, woke up, and startled my seat-mate. I'd been reading World War I stories and got too involved. Fortunately no real World War II bayonet got as close to me as that Tennessee dream thrust.
3. Camp Shanks--Italian POW's were all over the place, going to town (NYC) on passés, running the mess-halls, etc. etc. Amazing. We envied them--their war was over.
4. Going up the long gang-planks to our troop-ship (the former Italian liner Rex): As an asmatic I found it tough--rifle, barracks bag, overcoat, gas-mask, entrenching tool (shovel), bayonet, mess-kit, extra pair of combat boots and extra uniform, raincoat, sweater, long-johns, woolen hat to be worn under the

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<sup>1</sup>Army Special Training Program for "brilliant" GI's (125 IQ or better).

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steel helmet, about 70 pounds I'd guess. I really had a hard time going up the very long and steep ramp. I could not breathe, wheezing, choking, I had to stop to whistles etc. of the MP's-- "Keep it moving--," Along came a buddy, good ol' Anderson whose father had a cranberry bog in Oregon, who grabbed up my bag and slung it over his shoulder to join his own, and we struggled up the incline--he was as strong as an ox, and non-asmatic. On the line a month later, he was assigned to Battalion headquarters as a runner, eventually awarded a Bronze Star for rescuing files (he told me this himself) under mortar fire and I went to the line as a scout, rifleman, bazookaman, BAR carrier, etc. We both survived so I am not bitter!

Two months later I was overwhelmed by an asthma attack while fighting in a heavily wooded area in the Siegfried line. I staggered along falling further and further behind and finally could no longer see anyone in the company. at the bottom of the slope, just above a small dirt road, I saw a German helmet. Thinking it was empty I reached down to pull it out of a pile of leaves--but--there was a head in the helmet, and a body to go along with it. I chose not to collect a souvenir.

A few minutes later, I was on the side of the road trying to get enough oxygen to move down the path, when a jeep with a red-cross painted on it purred toward me. I waved it down and told the medic aboard that I had asthma and needed a shot of adrenaline, or something. He said, "How can you have asthma and be in the infantry?"

I said, "That has been my question, too, for a long time," and climbed into the back seat of the jeep.

A mile down the road I found my company resting, strung along the roadside. Breathing better, I joined them.

5. Arriving in Marseilles after eighteen (nineteen?) days at sea, we walked off our Rex (can't remember the new U.S. name) into a bombed out port area, to walk ten miles or so, bag, rifle, etc. etc. in to the bare stony hills above Marseilles. (Some men dropped out of this long, long line to disappear for a few days--before being rounded up by MP's. They caught hundreds--most of them treed in brothels hither and yon).

6. With about 20 others, I was detailed to unload artillery shells--about three feet long, three or four per caisson (I don't really recall) boxed in raw, splintery lumber. We worked for 12-15 hours a day--our woolen gloves torn into rags on the 80-90 pound shells--oh, how we envied our bosses--a "negro" engineer--port battalion--they weren't allowed to fight--and we, blessed white guys, did some of the unloading for them. Incidentally, it

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was below freezing (we're now into late September or early October).

7. On the train, shades of WWI, on the "40 and 8's" (40 men and 8 horses) I'd read about, box-cars, some needing scraping, for animal dung abounded. Tic, tic-tickety-tic the long troop train chugged north, up the Rhone, newly cleared by the divisions landing on the Riviera a few weeks earlier, who had pushed the enemy up into Alsace-Lorraine. We sat with our legs hanging over the sill of the box-cars, four or five of us at a time in the gap, enjoying a free tourist-visit to France. Two days of this--pooping and peeing along the right of way--God, it was medieval. Fortunately, we were 19-20 years old, at best, and it was better than walking!

8. Arriving in a snow-storm near St. Die (Alsace) we marched into the woods, going into "the line." Combat was about to begin--look around carefully--the next day some of us would not be "there." As for me--I was sent off with 10 or 12 other pfc's (we were all the 6-foot-plus guys) to unload more ammo. More fun than Marseille--several days later we returned by trucks to the line. Going up through the woods, silent, a snowy day, we were directed to our company. I strode up to my designated area, walking, upright: "Hey, stupid, get down--the Heinees are just over there"--and so they were, about 75 yards downhill where they'd been shoved the day before by the 411th. I had missed the first action. Some of the company were indeed already "gone."

9. Up and down hills, sometimes the wrong hills, the weeks went by--thank God we had dumped our extra shoes, overcoat, etc. and the duffle bags (including my father's camera--recouped in June 1945--all rusted and rotted out for it and my bag had sat in a wet, open field the rest of the war). Mostly marching, a little fire-fight here and there, not too many casualties--it was getting colder--hillier--we were deep into the Vosges now--headed toward Strasbourg (but later we knew Eisenhower was "saving" Strasbourg for DeGaulle's Free French units on our right--we were in Patch's 7th army). So, up into Belgium a touch--some little fights near Saarbrucken (we pfc's didn't have maps, so we generally didn't know where we were, and few of us could understand German, especially the Alsatian variety).

On to Hagenau, Mulhausen, and near-by hamlets....

10. I remember beautiful Colmar, canals, trees (bare of course, we're in mid-November), up and down marching, lots of snow now--more than ever--colder, very cold. I remember sitting on a crag, somewhere, on a Sunday, fairly bright day, looking down on a town, a couple of thousand feet below--everything miniature, people going to church, the bells tolling, a few ox-carts struggling over the icy wooden planks of the old bridges. My

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love of culture, of beauty, of general happiness, got a bonus that morning. Then, some artillery shells came over, "short-rounds," and we scrambled the hell away from that scary hill.

11. As, by then a bazooka-man, I was assigned with my new right-hand ammo-bag buddy from Tennessee to guard a snowy cross-road in the middle of a howling blizzard--miles from the little town we'd just invaded, and near Speyer. It was, perhaps (who knows, none of us had watches) 2am--we stood, stamping our frozen "boots" (we were in "Sno-paks" by now), pulling our necks in like turtles--but, believe it or not, drinking champagne. We'd just knocked off a small (German) storehouse loaded with wine lifted from an Alsatian warehouse. A few cases were piled up in the middle of the road thanks to the jeep driver who had lugged it out there for us. So--what do you do at 15 below zero (?) farenheit (a guess), with wine bottles at 2am? You take your bayonet, hold it by the blade, gingerly, and crack the neck, cork and all, off the bottle, pour a little on the ground, to get rid of possible glass bits, pour the rest into your mess-cup, and drink. Nothing to it--and there were a lot of bottles. To be honest, however, I remember being very cold--not so thirsty--and so we left lots of liquid for our replacements at 6am.

Meanwhile--more snow, winds, stung toes, frozen noses, and hours to go--it was then that I decided, should I survive the war, never to allow myself to get so cold, so lonely, so God-forsakenly sad... and furthermore--I would do something to try to make sure my fellow-Americans and everybody else for that matter (Asian, Germans, Bulgars, Gold Coasters [now Ghanaians], you name it) would never have to stand in such a barren tundra (call it close to the Rhine) and wonder why the human race could get so stupid, cruel, and crazy. (I blame this moment of enlightenment for my later career as a student, teacher, diplomat, and publisher).

12. Time marches on; we get through the Siegfried Line, some of us survive the "Little Battle of the Bulge" (nothing like the Big Bulge--though when I came back from the hospital, not shot but very sick, all of my comrades--pfc's and non-coms--were gone. Left? Just Freddy Stein from Rifle Company "L".)

13. Two high points of my bazooka-man days were these--a Tiger tank was caught in a mud-wallow in an open field. The order came to all bazooka to get slinking along a railroad track raised about four feet higher than the plain. I and five or six others crouched about 300 yards to get off a rocket or two. (We had to be careful, for there were 20 or so German infantry-men scattered around the locked-in tank). Just as I got about 100 yards from the tank, I peeked over the embankment to decide on a blast--

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somehow the Tiger tank pulled up out of the wallow to give us a shot, then it rumbled off--none of us could hit it as it lumbered away.

Another day, in April, we had just been boated across the Lech River to mop up a small group of rear-guard Nazi infantry. We slogged and slipped, half in the icy edge of the river and half on the deeply grooved-out banks. After a bit we got to a sort of beachy area and were told to hold, each of us perhaps five yards from the next man.

Along came my captain, now Major Kassoos, my old Co. I commanding officer. "Herdeck," he growled, "is this your bazooka?" and he waved it in my face. (Someone had cast it off).

"No, sir," I snapped, "Here's mine," and I swung around to show him the folded tubes slung over my shoulder. He steamed off. (We never did get along well!)

14. Stuttgart, periphery, there is a Bierstube--some of us invade the place looking for our first beer in six months--the German owner, his wife and daughter, stare (aghast is the best word here) at us troopers who plunk down a few hundred thousand marks and say we are buying the joint (all this in somebody's high school German). So, papa pours the frothy beer into giant steins--we seize them, march back to the stiff benches and bare tables--we "prozit" each other and begin to drink--whoops--some idiot, not from our outfit, fires a carbine round into the ceiling, and flakes of plaster pour down like a phoney Hollywood snowstorm. My mug has a huge chunk of plaster and paint floating in the "soup"--no longer beer but goop. The papa and mama and daughter (shades of the Wild West) duck behind the bar--outside a whistle and two MP's rush in. "What the hell's going on here," they shout. Ten feet inside the stube they see a black soldier (we hadn't seen him join us) and collar him--"Come along," they growl--or whatever MP's growl--and I, the righteous one, disgusted, terribly disappointed, shout, "Wait a minute, don't you see that guy with the still-smoking carbine--he's the idiot who pulled the trigger." So the "cops" drag him out, and the black fellow gives us a grin and a shrug and goes into the world beyond. The party's over, and we straggle out, leaving the pub-owner with his lucky marks.

15. Coming to Oberammergau on a snowy morning in April 1945, we found dead German troopers sprawled in the streets, lying below the 10-meter murals on the beautiful, sometimes bullet-pocked walls. Some battalion, not mine, had "moved through" at dawn. Nothing for us to do except look down at the slain and up at the colorful expressions of awe and religious feeling. We tramped on through to a little fire-fight later that day and then got on

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tanks to ride south toward the Brenner Pass. The lead jeep got hit by an "88" shell, but the rest of the convoy pushed on... "My" tank had been 60 feet behind the blasted jeep.

16. We're now in Innsbruck, the war's over--we're alive, alive--oh, we're hungry. "K" rations are not "C" rations (which are reserved for Generals and the Air Corps) but now we have a chance to eat something not two years old and tough as shoe-polish. We steal eggs from a poor lady's hen-house--not many, maybe 10 or 15. But, horrors, there's no grease, no water in our taken-over chalet, no fuel (at the moment). What to do?

Idea: just a couple hundred yards off there's a roaring stream. I still have three hand-grenades I'd been carrying on my elegant combat jacket. At stream-side I pull a pin, duck behind a fat tree, count to three and toss that baby. It hits the water, goes boom, and a few dead trout or whatever species, belly up, come to the surface. I scoop them out of the water with my helmet liner.

Later, we cook the eggs on a wood-stove in the fat and flesh of the fish, and we give a few extra fish to the lady of the hen-house.

17. Captain O'Brien, never known to me earlier or since, becomes my boss for a few weeks. He's been named the "Real Estate Officer of the Alps." His job, assisted by two German-speaking sergeants (refugees from Hitler's Rhineland, circa 1937) go with him to seize rooms, whole inns, hunting lodges for the raft of high-up officers soon to pour in with the U.S. Occupational Headquarters. I am there to keep records, do some typing, etc. O'Brien and his two "boys" go through some of the more remote alpine towns--their 45 caliber machine gun, swivel-mounted in the rear seat, swings left and right--remember, this is now mid-May. The two Gloversville, NY boys, one on one side, the other on t'other side, go through the houses "borrowing" wedding rings, table silver, coins, stamps, etc. Later, an old Austrian carpenter is rounded up to build shallow boxes--perhaps 20 inches long by 10 inches wide by 3 inches deep, to be stuffed with the loot--all to be signed for by O'Brien and to go through army channels, bypassing U.S. customs. Perhaps O'Brien bought the Phillies in 1946. Who knows?

18. Two last reminiscences--a) I had always wanted to do a little mountain climbing--we are now in Imst (or was it Landeck?) hard by the Swiss border. It's a lovely Sunday and I'm not on duty, so I go up--through the goat-tousured fields on a 45 degree slant, up through some trees, called a copse by Wordsworth I believe, up to bare ground, above the tree-line. What a view! Lots of toy villages, more churches, more bells, more ox-carts, and out from my jacket pocket comes some rindy cheese--some *brot*,

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some figs or whatever (products of barter and loot below) but not O'Brien's type--munch, munch, fresh air, the heights--oh, free, free at last! But the sun sinks low in the west. I must descend--down, down, sometimes precipitously--then to the copse--I am a bit chilled, and hungry--five hours I've been on the alp.

I decide to plunge through--but no, my guardian angel says "Erwarten Sie" (hold on a minute). So, with caution I hold on to a big trunk and lean into the brambly copse a few feet. Gad! There's a 20-foot drop a few feet into the mass of foliage. Pause, halt, go around, and so, safely back to our chatelet fifth floor for me--feather bed, Tyrolien deck, what a life--trout, eggs, and the war is over, over, over.

b) Back in Innsbruck, mid-June, ensconced in the Park Hotel (or some such)--B grade but big, clean, Captain O'Brien and "uns" are in several rooms turned into offices. Every morning, as I type away, the owner of this place brings to my desk two bottles of good red wine. Each day I "dank" him and chat--he has a touch of English--and I have learned a phrase or two of the Tyroler dialect. I wonder why the bottles.

It turns out he doesn't (yet) know American military ranks. He thinks I'm at least a sergeant. He is a former officer (I came across his crisp uniform in his office one day!) and eager to placate the "Amis"--anything better than the French who are (truly) rumored to be coming in to replace us. One day, no wine, "Warung?" I ask, "Why nichts wein?" He grimaces and turns on his heel. I am thusly demoted. No more sharing of those luscious bottles with a few buddies every night. All good things must end--and, after all, the war is over, over, over and we are still alive.

19. In late June I am assigned to the USSBS: the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey in Bad Nauheim, north of bomb-razed Frankfurt. It's a different world--to be discussed at some later date. Then off to Paris for a week and six months in Bushey Park outside of London, and then home on a hospital ship in January (asthma had returned with a vengeance in a London smog to beat all smogs!)

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I've skipped the combat stories. They are bad memories. Thank God we won--the Nazis cleaned out--Peace is better (for most of us!)

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ex-PFC 1943-1946