The Night War: 60th Anniversary Edition

by praximeter (Zimario)

Summary

In 1947, Master Sergeant James B. Barnes's surviving field journals were posthumously published as the classic war memoir *The Night War*. Now a high school history classroom mainstay and required reading at West Point, this highly anticipated 60th Anniversary Edition presents the original, unedited text alongside detailed historical notes that provide important context to the extraordinary wartime heroics of Captain America and the Howling Commandos.


Notes


*Of the literary canon of WWII, the posthumously published The Night War comes second*
perhaps only to Anne Frank's Diary of a Young Girl or Elie Wiesel's Night. Compiled from Barnes's surviving field journals and published by his siblings in 1947, this classic of wartime literature provides an unvarnished look into the extraordinary tale of Bucky Barnes, Captain America, and the Howling Commandos, the 20th century's greatest heroes.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Foreword

When I was asked to write the introduction to the 60th Anniversary Edition of the classic World War II memoir *The Night War*, I admit to some healthy apprehension. After all, what could I possibly say about the book that every schoolkid, West Point cadet, history professor, and presidential hopeful has not already said a thousand times, much more eloquently than I ever could? You see, unlike my famous uncle, I'm not especially predisposed to putting my thoughts down on paper.

So in preparation to write this brief foreword, I sat down to read *The Night War* for perhaps the fifteenth time in my life. Just as I had as a young man, I imagined Bucky steeling himself as he prepared to assault the beaches of Sicily (and Salerno, and Normandy). I tried to put myself in his
foxhole, sharing a smoke with his pals. I tried to comprehend his fear in Azzano, and his
astonishment at the sudden appearance of his sickly friend-turned-Captain America. I shook my head
in wonder at the outrageous feats of brilliant (and some might say, stupid) daring that were the
hallmark of the Howling Commandos’ raids on Hydra.

Above all, I marveled at his bullish, unwavering devotion to duty, sure, but to his friends before
everything else. I was proud of his outrage at the treatment of his friend, Gabe Jones; sad for his self-
doubts and recriminations; amused at his antics with the pretty Sicilian gals. Of course, between the
lines, it was easy to see the survivor’s guilt, the fear of not returning home, and the love for family
that are timeless mainstays for all those serving in times of war.

The world knows Bucky was a hero. But what his journal shows us is that he was a man, too. He
had friends he loved, friends who died, battles he fought, and moments of such paralyzing fear that
it’s a wonder anyone could find the strength to keep going. It reminds us that his friends—so many of
whom never got to return home, either—were just as vibrant, brave, and beloved as he.

Doubtless there has never been a war more necessary to fight than the one my uncle helped to win.
Yet this book, this window into another time, reminds us of the extraordinary human cost paid by
that “Greatest Generation” so that we might live a safer, happier, freer life.

It has now been 60 years since that fateful year when the guns finally went silent. Of course, there is
still war in the world. I have two sons in uniform myself. But the lessons Bucky teaches us in The
Night War—not intentionally, of course, considering he probably never intended anyone to read it—are simple, and just as enduring as human conflict itself: first, all people are people; second, when the
going gets tough, keep going; and finally, above all, try to do the right thing whenever you can.

James B. Barnes II
Retired Colonel, United States Army
© 2005

1943

July

Invasion of Sicily

July 13

Well it is done. We have seen and survived combat somehow. Landing did not go as planned. I
know of at least 9 men who drowned just getting to the beach and one of them a pal who was in 2d
platoon that got transferred to a different company and they ended up going up the beach with the
26th [1] Goddamn fucking op fell to pieces. Dick McCafferty from Providence is who got killed.
The poor bastard was a fisherman too, I can’t quite believe that he drowned. He is the first man I
know to die personally and though we all knew it would happen I find myself not able to think about
anything else. He has two brothers also, both in the Pacific in the Navy and I do not know his
parents’ names and I suppose the brass will notify the family but I just feel sick about it. Dick was a
good man, although I think you can probably only call him that now as he cannot have been more
than 19 or 20 and did not even have to shave which we all had him over on. Funny bastard I think
even got our drill sergeant to like him somehow, I swear he just refused to do hospital corners and
finally Parks did up his bed for him and then his bed was perfect and the drill sergeant came early
one morning and Dick was sleeping on the floor already in his full kit. I still cannot figure if it was him being that lazy or if he got lucky on a chance at a joke because Sgt. Banks could not believe his eyes. I cannot believe he is dead and not even by a kraut bullet.[2] Just tripped at the wrong time. His poor mother.

A and B company stormed the beach with the 16th and we were pinned down for hours by the stukas.[3] It was not at all like training, that is God’s honest truth. I think all of us still have our blood up as we were out there for two days and though we should be sleeping and I know several fellows are, I am not one of them. Somehow everything is clearer and more terrible in combat. Krauts flew sortie after sortie and that scream of the high alt bombs is just as I remember Murrow describing on the radio from London.[4] I feel as though these few acres of beach have been our own London for these two days and not only can none of us hear a damn on account of the explosions but I am sitting here my back against the wall of a hangar which we are using to get some rack time and my hand just will not stop shaking. It only stops shaking to write.

Howe was terribly injured next to me. It was shrapnel that got him in the face and neck. There was more blood than I have ever seen even after I got the sulfa powder[5] on him—it all disappeared instantly. It was so loud with the shells that I screamed for the doc but no one could hear and so I gave Howe my morphine and got Walters to help me drag him and then Walters caught shrapnel so it was down to me. Walters is all right just got caught in the leg and he’s on a boat out of here.

There was so much blood on me by the time I got him to the doc that he thought I was hit too and I did not even hear him ask me if I was hurt until he slapped me in the face. Howe was just gurgling blood but his face was white as hell and his eyes were staring up at nothing and when I looked at him I froze because I thought for sure he was dead and that I’d just dragged a dead man two hundred yards. But Howe is going to live though his face is all tore up.

His blood dried all over my blouse along with the salt and it makes me think of Steve’s test paper when he has the time and money for watercolors, everything all blurring together dried rippled stiff. It feels that way in my head too. The pitch of the dukws[6] and the smell of Baker and Yates’s sick at the bottom of the boat and the ocean making everything a splattered darker green and the rumble of the Shubrick’s[7] guns and of course Howe’s blood and all of the sand turned to mud and the earth getting torn up to hell pass after pass of the bombers. I am filthy too. No showers to get cleaned off in and I have had enough ocean for now. Everything is going again in my head all out of order but it all comes back to Howe. The doc said he will make it.

July 16

Dreamed the landing again. I am finding that combat is so much more terrible than any of us imagined. I am shocked by the fear of it all. I think until now none of us even knew what fear could be. Somehow I found myself moving and firing my rifle and doing what was needed but it felt throughout that I was somehow screaming away in my own head: how can this be real? How is any of this happening? And when we get to a safe position or at least some cover and the ack acks are firing and the planes overhead are shrill and everything is the loudest anything you ever heard, it takes every ounce of—to be honest I don’t even know that it can be called courage—to get up and keep moving. It doesn’t feel like I thought courage would feel. In the moment it feels like beneath bit of sand or driftwood is the safest place on earth. And then you look over and see a fellow you don’t know blown to bits so badly that there is nothing left of him I recognize as a man. And still I must keep moving. Tippett could not at first. We were beside some rocks and for the moment, safe, and then the mortars started coming and both of us along with Nichols simply could not move or breathe for the fear. But we had to keep moving so we did. And yell at the others also. I dragged Tippett along with me, both of us still dripping, and I suppose it is the nature of battle that I didn’t even feel how heavy he must have been, but soon he found his feet and that part inside men that lets us do this
at all. I want nothing more than to go home and never experience it again. It is dead quiet aside from
the sound of the guns far away, no one talking or laughing as before, I think all the fellows must be
having the same thoughts of what in God’s name are we doing here?

**July 18**

Healy, Vogt and Sheehan from 1st platoon came by. Sheehan’s got a pal who’s a cook, so he found
himself some extra dog food[8] that he decided to trade for smokes. So they settle down with me,
Miller, and Frank Castellano, and Frank goes and gets Dietz who doesn’t smoke who’s the perfect
man for this occasion. So anyhow Frank comes back and says, “Now Dietz, not a word here pal,”
and he goes to Sheehan and says very officially, “I am Private First Class Dietz’s attorney in this
matter, let me assure you that he’s a fellow of substantial means,” and he starts haggling for the chow
using Dietz’s smokes.

Now Frank did finish high school unlike me and Dietz but that’s hardly college is it? So I go, “Hey
Frank, how many times did you see Young Mr. Lincoln?” and Miller elbows me and goes, “Buck,
you mean Young Mr. Castellano.”[9]

Anyhow by the time Frank gets to convincing Sheehan to take “bank credit redeemable upon next
resupply” so that we get the hash now and Sheehan gets smokes later, Miller goes, “Objection, your
honor!” and stops it all, and then says, “Point of fact: we are going into action here tomorrow and not
getting resupplied before then,” on Sheehan’s behalf, now Miller wants the extra chow as much as
any of us but he likes a good joke more, doesn’t he? And I’m good for a joke too so I say, “More
importantly, here, Tech Corporal Castellano, is the fact that the United Bank of Dietz is facing
serious risk of bankruptcy as a result of this impending action,” and Dietz starts laughing and goes, “I
feel Jerry coming with the foreclosure papers as we speak!” Miller looks very serious. “Son, do those
papers sound like an 88?”[10] and Sheehan goes, “It does to me, Sarge!” Frank looks at Dietz as
disgusted as I ever saw him: “You fucking moron, Dietz, the bank is the one who gives the
foreclosure papers, not gets them!”

**July 19**

Sitting around with 1st Sgt. Talley and Flynn & Vogel from 3d platoon and of course me, Miller,
Carter, and Glenn and once he finishes with the briefing (“5 morons laid up with the clap, tell your
men to use the frogskins[11] God gave them” basically) Vogel breaks out a bottle of some sort of
vermouth he found somewhere and says, what do you say fellows?

Anyway, get to talking and Flynn’s telling how he heard a couple of his buck privates arguing with
each other about who ought to ask Sgt. Flynn about how he got that scar. See, Flynn’s got a stripe
like a map of God damn Chile down the side of his face—makes him look as mean as a made man.
So Flynn gets his buddy, a Pfc. Rossetti who I don’t know, to go spread a rumor that Flynn got it
from when he was in prison for murder. “But Rossetti!” they’re saying, horrified, “convicts can’t
serve!” and Rossetti goes, “just be glad Uncle Sam’s pointing him at the krauts!” and busts up
laughing at their faces. Any boys too dumb or too young to believe that have no place being infantry
on the front lines, God damn.

Anyhow, so Carter goes, “well, how did you get that scar, Arthur?”

Poor bastard gives the biggest sigh. “Don’t spread it around, but I got dropped as a little baby.”

And without a beat, Miller goes, “Well we know that, Flynn, but how did you get that scar?”

Anyhow after we stop laughing and seeing as Flynn didn’t get his scar from a brawl after all, we get
to talking about the biggest fight we’ve ever been in, and hell, I’ve got some of those! And so Miller goes to me and says, Buck, you boxed, didn’t you?

“Sure did, pal, but the biggest fight I ever been in wasn’t in a ring,” I start up, and it makes me sick for home to think about it but I have never had the chance to tell anybody what happened on account of the fact that everybody back home knows about it already!

So my friend Steve is a real fighter, I start off, and then yell for Castellano so he can get Plinsky, considering Plinsky’s got probably thirty pounds on Steve but they’re the same height. “So I’ve got this friend Steve, a real son of a gun, type of fellow who’ll pick a fight with anybody he thinks might pick a fight with him, and he’s about Plinsky’s height but skinny as a goddamn broomstick. So me and Steve go up to a jazz club in Harlem, now Steve don’t like jazz really but he’s a good sport and the best friend you’ll ever have, so we’re at the jazz club and it’s time to go otherwise we’re walking back to Brooklyn.” Of course Castellano’s the only one from New York so this doesn’t mean much.

Anyhow, we’re not in our neighborhood, we’re walking to the elevated and we run across a couple of fellows who looked like they stepped straight out of Lady Killer, and they know it too, and I don’t know what happened but we’re walking and Steve laughs a bit and sure enough, now we got two big fellows getting heated, saying, “hey punk, what are you laughing at?”

Well if there’s one thing Steve hates it’s anybody calling him a punk. So he stops short and I think, Oh Lord, don’t do it! Because the dumb shit opens his mouth, all piss and vinegar and says, “I saw a funny joke walking,” and he’s fresh enough that they know exactly what he’s doing, and so the second one, hell of a guy, bigger than me, well he goes, “oh yeah? What kind of joke was it then? Why don’t you tell us the joke?” This guy was trying to give us a chance to get the hell out of there!

Well I try to step in and go, come on, pal, let’s get out of here, I hear our train coming, and I don’t know if Steve’s blood was up on account of he got stood up at the jazz club or something, but he plants his feet and looks up and down at the two guys, and just says, “I’d tell you but I got a train to catch and can’t explain it three times,” cool as can be, and well it takes them maybe fifteen seconds to figure out he’s insulting them (so Steve was probably right) but after that it’s fists flying. Well Steve’s small but he can scrap OK, and I’m no slouch myself, (Castellano snorts on account of the time him and me had a little exhibition—fucker still angry I left out that I was any good—but how’s a fellow supposed to get any bragging done with Castellano around hogging it all?) anyway we’re in some trouble, and then we hear some whistles and a few coppers are running towards us, and at the same time I see the train headed our way so I grab Steve, yank him by the arm in the train just as the mobsters scram, and got the hell out there. And here’s the thing: we both got our noses busted, and a broken rib and busted knuckles, and for Steve a tooth missing, all because Steve’s got bad lungs and he had a little cough that they thought was a laugh, and he’s too much of a little shit to correct the record!

Anyhow I haven’t had a letter from Steve at all since June, and of course mail has been so very slow that we haven’t had any mail at all for four weeks, but telling stories about home does make a man miss it terribly. We are so very far away from home.

**July 23**

Some fucking town that ends in O. I don’t know. But most of 2d Bn got pulled back and today we had decent hot food for the first time since Africa—not even A rations but stuff from here. Bread and pasta and two fellows from Tennessee in the 16th actually butchered a fucking cow. They found it wandering around the village because the fences have all been cut and it had a tag but there are hardly any civilians here anyhow and good God I had seen enough fucking cows at Fort Howard but at least did not have any guys trying to go after them with a knife and fork. Anyway apparently they
knew what they were doing because ten hours later we had fresh beef and steaks and 2nd Lt. Kurlansky from 3d platoon found some sort of machine in the house he billeted himself in that he says will make hamburger. I don’t want to know. Meat is supposed to come from the store wrapped in brown paper and thank God I was not born in Tennessee and instead in Brooklyn like a civilized man. If they do make burgers I will eat at least five seeing as we had a darts contest earlier and some of the replacements bet their shares against me and Miller and Glenn helped me hustle them.

July 24

It did make hamburgers and we did not have the right bread or cheese but Goddamn were they fucking good. I gave two of mine to Sgt. Pike from 3d Platoon seeing as he introduced me to Mary With The Very Red Lips back in Africa and any pal who talks you up to a dame who will put it in her mouth deserves a goddamn burger all right. He said I owed him beers also and I can’t say I disagree. Maybe there’s a Maria with Very Red Lips around here somewhere and I can help poor Pike out.

July 27

Walking through some of these little towns that we are “capturing” is not what I was expecting back before we shipped. I suppose it’s that we saw all of the newsreels from Africa and maybe that is a little of what we thought we would see? Of course it seems just as hot and dusty here, but these bleached stone houses and cobblestone paved roads too skinny for our jeeps are really nothing like I’ve seen before outside of pictures. (Roads really are that narrow. Earl took over for the driver after much convincing and was sure he could do it — damn thing got stuck — white paint of the Army star totally scratched — driver near in tears because what the quartermaster will say — I watched the whole thing having a smoke).

Harry says the strange part is the fact that so many of the houses are empty or locked up or what-have-you—and I think he’s right—a town with no people in it just seems flat wrong. I guess the civilians have tried to quit Sicily knowing it’s a battleground, and in any case the Italians we have met are not great supporters of Hitler or Mussolini—but what else are they going to say to a pack of GIs? Some of these dames though—!!!

July 31

Pvt. Rivera in Miller’s squad hit today in legs and back by shrapnel but Harry says the doc says he will survive

Chapter Notes:

[1] 26th Infantry Regiment, a formation which also participated in the amphibious assault of Gela, Sicily.

[2] “Kraut” is a pejorative term for German soldiers.

[3] “Stuka” was another name for the Junkers Ju 87, a German dive-bomber and ground-attack aircraft.

[4] Edward R. Murrow was a famed CBS news broadcaster who received wide acclaim for his coverage of the Blitz.
[5] Antibacterial powder soldiers were instructed to sprinkle on wounds.

[6] DUKW, or “Duck” boats, were amphibious assault transport vehicles.

[7] The USS Shubrick (DD-369) was a Navy destroyer that participated in the Battle of Gela.


[9] *Young Mr. Lincoln* was a popular 1939 film depicting Abraham Lincoln’s early legal career.

[10] The 8.8 cm Anti-Aircraft / Anti-Tank artillery gun used extensively by German forces was commonly referred to as the “eighty-eight”, and made a distinctive “boom” sound when fired. The 88 was so feared that it became the moniker for virtually every kind of German artillery.

[11] “Frogskin” was slang for “condom.”

[12] *Lady Killer* was a 1933 crime drama.
August 1943

August

Sicily Campaign

August 2

It is August now but what does that fucking matter from this hellhole? Pinned down for days trying to take this goddamn town. We have ammunition but little for the MG 30 cals, only because the line is harassed so badly that getting guys back and forth for supply is too risky. There is a break in the shelling. These goddamn krauts are dug in.

It got me to thinking about Tom Baxter and Seamus Moore. I remember going out once after a long shift, all of us dead tired and me and Walsh complaining like you wouldn’t believe, all this new stock had come in at the same time and we were working around the clock, never been so tired in my life, this had to be in 38. And Moore said, you dumbass shits don’t even know what tired is. And Tom just shook his head and said, Moore, knock that off, we ain’t even drunk yet. And I said, no, no, let him talk, after all it was me who did at least a quarter more work than Seamus Moore did on any given day, wasn’t it, so ain’t I got a right to be worn out? And I thought he was going to hit me but I guess it was a good thing I was smiling, since most people figure I’m just having a laugh most of the time anyway. And Moore’s face got real still. “You never fought for days on end, did you boy? You never sat in a trench, not sure if you were dead or alive, so tired because the shelling won’t stop, you watch your pals get blown to pieces right next to you, and you think this is tired?” He was real shell shocked I suppose.

I forgot to say Frank Lorenzo (I think his first name is Francesco? Anyhow he speaks Italian) from 1st platoon got killed this morning. He used to be in my platoon before the landing and he got turned around somehow so’s he ended up on my rifle team. He got hit and we called for a medic but all the medic could do was give him morphine. He’s not my man anymore technically and I’m not the brass but I started to write a letter anyway and then I realized my hands were still bloody. I can’t write a letter like that.

I am the one who had to tell Chenowitz in Miller’s squad about Frank. I felt awful about it. Chenowitz and Frank both knew each other from home and were in each other’s pockets like you wouldn’t believe—back when Frank was in our platoon Joe Fortunato used to say, “if you sock one to Lorenzo, Chet’s the one goes flying.” Miller used to joke that the war’s great tragedy was Chenowitz and Frank ended up in different platoons. You know I wonder if it might be true. If Frank had been with Chenowitz I can guarantee you he wouldn’t have gotten lost and ended up in my squad. The way Chet tells it, he’s the only reason Frank didn’t get lost and end up at the Naval recruiter instead of the Army. Chet just started bawling something awful when I told him. Made me sick at heart to see. It’s like if Steve were here and got killed. Thank God he is home. I don’t know what I would do.

Fortunately Miller was able to scrounge up some whiskey. It’s about the only thing that makes my hands stop shaking. Harry is awful broken up about Frank as he was in his squad before it all. He says to me, quieter than Harry’s ever talked in his life, he says, “Buck, this is not going to be the last time is it?” And I know what he means because the same thing came into my head the minute the goddamn shell exploded and I saw what it did to Frank: this is what we are going to be seeing from
now until the war’s over, or else it’s our turn or our buddy’s turn.

Frankie had a brother that got wounded but I don’t know where, I suppose in North Africa since I believe he was Army too. And a little brother too who’s home in Staten Island, which is where Frank’s from and I gave him a hard time about that. His folks own a bakery and I guess Frankie was always going to take it over even before his brother got killed. Frankie got mess duty once back home and got real popular after that. Our CO back then, Lt. Booker who got moved up to the company (God save us from Halliwell the 90 day wonder[1]), called him “cannoli” which trust me was a big fucking mystery to all those poor schmucks born south of Jersey.

I saw both of Frankie’s legs get blown off. He didn’t even make a sound at first and then he called for his ma. He was crying and he just kept calling for his ma. Me too pal. I think that’s all any of us are doing, even if we can’t say it out loud until we know it’s the end. Me I don’t want to bring my mother into this. I want her and everything good to stay in Brooklyn for ever. Poor Frankie and his poor mother. I don’t think I can ever forget the sound he was making crying for his mother.

**August 7**

Gene Plinsky hurt two days ago but not too badly and we now have Troina for ourselves but it seems just because Jerry gave up.

By Adler’s account Gene was ahead of him when we were trying to advance against the line on the 5th providing covering fire when Gene yelped like a dog getting stepped on by accident and went down. Ricochet kraut bullet straight into his ass. Damn kid got shot in the ass. Plinsky is one of those fellows you cannot get down however, and all he really had to say was “thank God I’m not taller, as it might’ve been my legs!” and that’s for sure as hell true. Of course if it had been his legs then he might have punched his ticket home!

Anyhow Able has gotten off all right despite these being the worst days of anyone’s life. Rivera and Esposito both wounded from Miller’s squad, Timms, Dennitz, and Shea from Carter’s, and just Plinsky from mine and of course poor Frank. We heard B company had two KIA as well, a Hubert and Granger, don’t know either of them but we said a mass for them and Frank with Father Kavinsky in a real actual church even though it was bombed to shit.

Line for confession was about eighteen guys deep so I skipped it. Frankly I don’t want to reflect on it all and I certainly don’t want to pray the rosary. I just want to rest and to see if Harry’s found any more whisky because that seems like the only way I’ll get any rest at all.

**August 9**

Here’s where Miller being a married man really does a fellow favors. Yesterday spent getting our gear all in order for moving out now that we are not going to be staying here and instead linking up with the 45th (at least that’s the word that Harry heard). This morning after a briefing got cancelled (of course not until we’d already assembled and stood around for two hours—fucking Halliwell—he knows how to stand around all right, or else shit himself if he hears an 88), well me and Harry decide to take a look around. And we’re walking this courtyard plaza place that was bombed to shit and I hear a dog. No shit I hear a dog.

So we start looking around and sure enough there’s this poor thing all banged up with cuts and covered in dust and halfway buried with what looks like its tail broken and maybe its paw.

“You know,” says Harry next to me as we’re trying not to scare the poor thing, “I never met a fascist dog before.”
Typical Harry to get me laughing. “Well surely you’ve met a commie dog, Miller?” I say as I get the little fellow free and hold him up under my arm—only dogs I knew were the ones that hung around the docks, but they’re not man’s best friend for nothing—and start looking for a collar or something.

“Dogs got to be capitalists, Buck,” says Harry like it’s the most obvious thing in the world and like I wasn’t getting one over on him on account he voted for Browder in 36 on a lark.[2] “You ever see what they’re willing to do for table scraps?”

Anyway we both figure that in a town this size there’s got to be a doctor or two or maybe even a vet. So we keep on going after giving the fellow a bit of water, two GIs wandering Sicily for a dog when we ought to be getting our platoon in order. But the poor dog didn’t ask for any of this, did he?

“Guess we ought to hope there aren’t any leftover krauts hiding around,” says Harry after about ten minutes.

“Thanks pal, so helpful,” is my response, and so I yell for help as loud as I can to spite him: “Got a dog here! Canis lupis that needs help. Help! Help-o!”

Miller cracks up. “Cane! Cane!” he’s shouting and apparently that is Italian for dog, and I gotta do him one better but my Italian’s shot with help-o. I go: “Domine, ad adjuvandum me festina” and of course Harry really loses it then on account of he didn’t grow up “papist” and so I figure that if there’s one thing me and the Italians got in common it’s a hell of a lot of time at Mass, so I start: “In nomine Patris, et filii, et Spiritus Sancti, etc. etc.,” and this is how you know God’s got a sense of humor because the shutters of this cottage above us open and two dames lit up like angels from the sun behind them poke their heads out and start talking in Italian and Miller can’t hardly believe his eyes and neither can I.[3]

Long story short. Harry’s got no eyes for anybody except his wife but I got two eyes don’t I? Benedetta and Sofia. It’s one thing to see a beautiful dame in regular life but to see two of them when you’re in the middle of a goddamn war is something else altogether. Almost like you can’t believe your eyes. But Benedetta’s got a little English and they both laugh and giggle at me like a regular American dame would for yelling Latin in the street. But they see why I was doing it once I show them the dog and invite us in and Harry gets nervous as hell but I guess these dames lived on a farm or something because they know what to do with the dog and they’ve got the little thing bandaged up in no time. And then Benedetta asks if I want a tour and I say yes ma’am sure do and Harry positively scrams.

Anyhow—ended up late for briefing with Halliwell which would be worth it in ordinary circumstances but in this case was exceptionally worth it.

August 10

It’s funny I think the only thing you got to do to fix a forgetful man is put him in combat—he will close his eyes and find that he cannot forget a single thing he ever saw smelled felt or heard.

August 11

To spend the rest of this war in between Benedetta’s thighs—heaven. This morning had several free hours and made my way to her little house—brought a little Army chocolate to share with her and she looked at it like it was a new pair of silk stockings. Did me in her mouth for what felt like a god damn hour not letting me come and when I did holy hell these Italian dames are something else. No doubt it wasn’t the trip around the world Uncle Sam planned on me taking but by God I’ll take it.[4]
August 13

Jerry gave up on Sicily. Took a month! Home by Christmas after all!

August 14

Left our “happy village” yesterday, very sad for all—most sad for myself and Benedetta of course—bella Benedetta—the dog is fine, she has named him Bucky and he is well on the mend and is certainly expected to survive the war—hoping he will share a bit of that luck with me, or perhaps trade places and I can be the Bucky that stays with Benedetta—told this to Harry and Castellano, who socked me one that I definitely deserved.

August 19

Word is the Thunderbirds & Patton beat the Tommys to Messina, Miller heard they got there yesterday and we have been completely on the sidelines for the past two days getting stinking drunk off the worst godawful wine I ever tasted but at the same time our not being in combat any more does make it taste wonderful! We tossed out an entire bottle for Dick McCafferty, Frank Lorenzo, John Howe (who did die in the hospital we heard a few days ago—poor bastard, I guess the medic who told me he was going to make it was playing chaplain with me or something), & Malcolm Cooke (who did not die but the poor son of a bitch lost a leg and an arm). Several of our boys are complaining that we ought to have been the ones to win the race but sure enough I counted two clerks, a truck driver and a goddamn adjutant saying it and I think me, Miller, and Glenn would have gotten courts martialed if we hadn’t been too drunk to do more than tell them to go fuck themselves. They aren’t the schmucks on the line are they?

At any rate with the krauts skedaddled this island really is not half bad apart from the dust & sun. I have never been so hot in my life these past few days and I have lived on the fourth floor in Brooklyn in August for God’s sake. Me and the fellows are so dark as to be mistaken for Italians and the guidos among us might as well be stowaways from Africa.

August 20

Finally some mail. How wonderful it is to get mail. I cannot even put it into words how wonderful! Suddenly we go from a sour bunch of miserable men to where you might think Jerry had surrendered that’s how joyful everyone suddenly is. Thank God for mail. It has been more than a month on account of us moving so much after the landing but now that the war has really begun it feels like we are further from home than ever. I got nine letters from Ma, two from Dad and seven from Curly and three each from Jack and Ted and none at all from Steve which I cannot account for other than his awful handwriting getting his letters sent to the wrong place.

Dear wonderful Curly put some of Ma’s perfume on her letters and I have no idea how she thought of that except perhaps reading about it in one of her magazines. I almost started crying like a little baby when I opened her letter and smelled the smell I hadn’t even realized I was missing. News from home: apparently little Patty Flannery died in the Pacific. Before I left I know he was engaged to Betty Leahy so I feel awful for her all right. No matter how she always gave Patty the brush-off we all knew he’d win her over eventually. Poor Betty and Mrs. Flannery, just about the nicest lady in all of our neighborhood. I can only imagine Ma is rolling up her sleeves to help out.

Curly doing well in school, she transcribed her report card from the end of the school year and I will see her finish high school and go to college if it’s the last thing I do! Jack’s letters were about two lines of what all the fellows his age are doing: who is in training, who has shipped out, who is
assigned to what. Good god as if I don’t get enough of that already! Rest of Jack’s letters were “I read about Sicily were you a part of this battle or that battle or this battle or that battle?” I don’t doubt for a second that he will sign up as soon as he is eighteen although it makes me sick to think of it. Fairly to Jack though he did get me up to speed on the Dodgers—and a whole lot of trading to the Giants! Medwick, Allen, and Camilli gone! Medwick! Outrage isn’t strong enough - at least Herman is staying put for now, or at least if he’s been traded Jack knows better than to tell me!

I know they are writing me constantly as I spend half my time writing them as well, how I wish mail would come more often—or to have a telephone call—to hear Ma ask me how I’m eating (poorly! But drinking too well) or just to hear her voice at all—don’t think I could bear to talk to Dad—he could hardly speak when I said goodbye he was so terribly upset, so much worse than Ma, it aches to think of it. Of course now that I am here I think I understand a little why. It will be a quiet night as everyone is reading their mail again and again and again.

August 21

Wonderful, darling Curly. So in my letters home I have spoken often enough of Harry I suppose that my Miss Gumshoe Becca Barnes was able to piece together enough about him to send a letter to his own kid sister! Apparently I mentioned his hometown, and certainly his last name and—knowing exactly how many Millers I’m sure there are in what Harry calls the “city” of Lowell, Mass. (poor confused bastard doesn’t know any better) apparently she pieced it together because I said his family runs a grocery next to some mill on the river, and so a letter arrived addressed to “Miller’s Grocery, Miss Miller, Younger Sister of Harry” to his family’s grocery after Curly decided she was going to be best friends with Bobbie (Barbara), Harry’s kid sister. And Curly didn’t even know her name but somehow sent a letter to her! I need to retire “Curly”—she is a regular Philip Marlowe! Harry showed me the letter from Bobbie which was mostly about me, her asking “is your friend Bucky really a professional baseball player?” (one day) and “is he taller than you?” (yes) “tell your friend Bucky to take care of you and in return I will take care of his sister Rebecca.” Feels like we have been laughing for hours about it—so strange and wonderful our two kid sisters could make us so happy from so very far away.

Other good news—Harry’s wife Margaret still perfectly healthy, doctor now thinks it may be twins. Harry delighted but sick at the thought he might still be here when she gives birth. Home by Christmas is all we can hope for!

August 22

107th transferred to 36th Infantry under VI Corps — all rumors say we are invading the mainland—certainly they are preparing for one. Miller working his friends at Battalion for more information. Of course we knew we were not going to be spending the rest of the war in Sicily—I didn’t finish school but I do know Hitler is in Germany—but somehow it feels so terribly fast that we are going back into it all again, like we have not caught our breath at all yet.

August 27

Had to give the fellows the clap talk today. Again. Good lord. The goddamn Army issues prophylactics but these idiots see these Italian dames and lose all sense (not that they had much to start — we are infantry) Chaplain came to me and Harry very apologetic, says to us that Bn HQ directed all the company chaplains to give a talk to the men about wrapping it up. This is a classic officer idea if I ever heard one: get the priests to talk to us about using rubbers! So anyway Fr Kavinsky has the brains to know how that will go over so he sees us two and asks us to get the other noncoms together but first did we know where Talley was. So the trouble is that Talley’s girl back
home sent him a goddamn Dear John letter he got three days ago and all anybody’s seen of him is him puking his guts out or with a “puttana” and considering we’re in between actions and Talley is Talley—best damn 1st Sgt. in Uncle Sam’s army—we are all pulling out the stops to cover for him.[6] But Fr Kavinsky sure as hell doesn’t need to know all that. And Miller decides to have a laugh and says. “Is that Cpl. Talley sir?” to the chaplain like he’s never heard of him.

Fr Kavinsky looks like a startled bird most of the time anyhow with that beak and his eyebrows which I think are enough that a bird might actually confuse them for a nest but this was a whole other level of surprise. “1st Sgt. Talley, S/Sgt. Miller,” he says, completely bewildered. “I’m looking for 1st Sgt. Talley.”

“Father, did you mean Sgt. Fitchner?” Harry asks. “I can get you Sgt. Fitchner.”

“Or Sgt. Glenn,” I say, thinking that Cal will be disappointed he missed this.

“Maybe you meant Sgt. Carter?” —Harry’s turn

Well Fr Kavinsky’s no idiot. And he’s an officer of course but being a chaplain is wholly different than a CO so we can get away with this kind of thing. “I take it I won’t be able to locate Sgt. Talley” he says, very tired, as I am frankly quite sure now that without us saying it he knows perfectly well that Talley is the last man in our company to hear a lesson about prophylactics at the moment, and so Miller claps my shoulder and says “You know Sgt. Barnes here is excellent at speeches” the god damn traitor.

So anyway we organized all the noncoms together and told the fellows to be smart about the “figa” and to use GI rubbers for god’s sake.[7] I’m about ready to hand in my stripes frankly.

August 31

More boat exercises—all of us miserable about them—we chose Army for a reason! At least I can swim! There are at least twenty men in all of Able that cannot. In the past two days Harry, Tom Kelly, Ernie Powell and I have been holding lessons because I can’t stop a kraut bullet but I can at least make sure they don’t fucking drown. And then Halliwell, Kurlansky and Webber came up to us and Kurlansky is smiling because Halliwell looks like he’s about to court martial us. “S/Sgt. Miller, can you please explain what is going on here? This is completely outside regulations!” and Webber (thank God at least the senior officer has a brain) says, “George, they’re teaching the men to swim. Seeing as we’re doing another beach landing.” Well, confirmation it really is going to be another beach landing although if you asked the goddamn pigeons of Brooklyn I’m sure they’d be able to say the same thing considering we’re meant to be fighting Jerry and the mainland’s where Jerry scuttled off to.[8]

“Of course,” says Halliwell—he is a true redhead and the only one of us still pale as hell because he keeps getting burned red and then his face peels and it’s like nothing happened. Poor fellow because it means he blushes like a dame. “Capital idea. Excellent.”

“That’s what I thought too sir,” says Harry, face completely straight, “I’ve got a capital idea here Sgt. Barnes, that’s what I said. We’re going to make these boys swimmers. Capital swimmers, positively top-notch I say sir, indeed.”

Goddamn Harry! I tried not to smile but Webber saved us by laughing enough for the two of us. After they wandered off Very quiet Powell says to me “Sarge, lord as my witness if brains is lard he cain’t grease a skillet!” Where does he come up with these?
Anyway now the boys are good enough not to drown—so long as the orders stop coming to increase our gear again and again. At this rate we will be carrying at least 60 pounds each, more if you’re a machine gunner.

[1] “Ninety-day wonder” is a pejorative term for a civilian-turned-officer who earned his commission after completing the 90-day Officer Candidate School.

[2] Earl Browder was the Communist Party’s presidential candidate in 1936.

[3] “Domine ad adjuvandum me festina” is Latin for “Oh Lord, make haste to help me”, and “In nomine Patris, et filii, et Spiritus Sancti” is Latin for “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”


[5] “Tommy” is a slang term for British troops.

[6] “Puttana” is an Italian term for a prostitute.


[8] “Jerry” is a pejorative term for German soldiers.
September 1943

September

Invasion of Italy

September 1

Home by Christmas. Home by Christmas, I think everyone must be saying it in their sleep like it’s a prayer—I guess it is. Joyce and Lipscomb came by with a couple bottles of wine and so naturally Castellano showed up and later Harry wandered by and we had ourselves a decent time. Well conversation gets to home and what we are all going to do after all this and Lipsy says something like “I am going to my cabin on the lake and staying there for ever” and so Frank asks him where his cabin is, and he says New York, and I say, bullshit there’s no lakes in New York. Well I said it without thinking but you can’t blame a guy for forgetting that apparently it keeps going after the Bronx?

Harry and Ed get their laughs off me of course and Frank asks me, “Sarge, have you ever even left the goddamn City of New York?”

Truth is that the first time I ever left home was for training. I told them that and Ed says it was the same for him, only he’s from Pennsylvanina. Well Lipsy is shocked. “How can you spend your entire goddamn life in New York?”

Well first of all I’m from Brooklyn, playing it up a bit so Harry and Ed get a chance to roll their eyes at me, and Harry says, “You don’t say, Buck? Are you really?”

So they’re all laughing and then Ed goes, “But Sarge, if you never left New York, how the hell do you know how to swim?” And then it’s Frank who’s downright cackling, and my turn to be the straight man, saying “Well Ed, New York is on the fucking ocean” and then we are all close to crying we are laughing so hard—and maybe a little drunk too.

Anyway turns out Ed’s a machinist and could have gotten a deferment on account of his factory was converting to munitions.[1] Lipsy asks him bet you wish you’d taken it don’t you?

And we all expect Ed to have a laugh about it but he just shrugged. “I heard about Pearl Harbor like everybody else.” Isn’t that the truth! We all thought we were going to be fighting Japs didn’t we?[2]

“When I go home,” said Harry, “I’m going to college.” Harry’s got big plans. After all he might have two babies here in a couple of months. And Harry’s probably about the smartest fellow in our company so it doesn’t surprise me.

So Frank asks me, “after your baseball years are over Sarge, what then?”

I never even thought about it, not really. You ask me that question two years ago, before Pearl Harbor I would have said finish out my year for Uncle Sam and then go back to normal, find a couple of sweet dames for me and Steve, get back my old job. But there’s really no going back after all this. Truth is I do long for my old life but at the same time what we are doing must be important even if it feels like a godawful slog most of the time—it must be. And I want to do something worth a damn is all. Maybe me and Steve will get to make comics like we talked about when we were little
(and make people laugh—that’s worth something), or invent a fantastic machine, like a car that goes up walls or boots that make you run as fast as a horse. But mostly there is nothing I want to do as much as just to go home at all.

Anyway I told the men I didn’t know and then we finished the wine.

**September 4**

Put on alert to be ready to move at any time. I guess we are well and truly leaving Sicily behind. Mail again today. Curly terribly excited about school. No more awful Dodgers news from Jack. A letter from Teddy, apparently he has got his ship date which I found very hard to read indeed. Perhaps we can somehow finish this job before he has to fight. Letter from Pop saying he has been reading all he can in the papers about Sicily and that it seems I am doing my job over here and that he could not be less surprised to hear it. Somehow that is sticking with me. All anyone can ask is that a man does his job isn’t it? I have been thinking a lot of Dad since coming here. When I left the apartment the morning I shipped I remember looking back at him and Ma. Ma was like I expected but he was the most heartbroken I have ever seen another person be. When I think of him now that’s what I think of.

**September 7**

Miller heard a rumor from his pal in Bn HQ that there will be no bombardment before the landing. All these ships and nothing. It is not as though the fucking krauts won’t be able to look up with a pair of binoculars and see us coming. Don’t see why we can’t use the goddamn ships. What else are they there for other than carrying us to climb up the beachhead? Me and Miller could do that ourselves with a goddamn rowboat.

Got a couple of replacements. I don’t think a one of them is over twenty. Kane, Rossi, and Webster, all privates, all baby faced but they can all swim thank God. So Rossi’s from Queens and seems to think he’s a real brawler. “Let me at them is all I’ve got to say about them fucking Krauts,” he says at mess this morning, where he and Webster joined me, Miller, and Glenn. Well, Harry goes, “Rossi, you’re a buck fifteen soaking wet, if you came at my own sister I wouldn’t lift a fucking finger, and instead put ten dollars on her knocking you out.” Well Rossi gets a bit puffed up and Miller wasn’t wearing his jacket, just a singlet so this poor bastard’s got no idea Miller just got his rocker—he thinks he’s just a grunt. I get the sense that he rubbed Harvey Rogers the wrong way too, who is on his mortar team and ought to have given him the lay of the land.

So Rossi doesn’t know to keep his mouth shut. Possibly he never has shut it in all his life. Seeing as he’s from Queens, that’s what I’m betting on. “Sure she would,” he says, and then goes with an elbow over to his pal Webster, “I saw that sweetheart grip you got, she’s got me by what, a hundred eighty pounds?”

Now this is Rossi’s first full week in our platoon. You don’t go making wise cracks about guy’s sisters—especially if they aren’t true, which it was not, on account of Harry’s kid sister is twelve and the dame on his gun is his wife Margaret who is one classy lady. So this poor dumb shit of a kid. Harry is cool as ice too. He doesn’t say a word. Just grabs his jacket and pulls it on and gives the kid a second to see the stripes and rocker, his eyes go wide, and Harry’s the best straight man there ever was.

“Hey Buck,” says Harry to me, like this kid hasn’t said anything at all,

“Sure Harry, what I can I do ya for?” I say,
“1st Sgt. Talley, he asked me earlier to send up a fellow for latrine duty, you remember that?”

“I sure do, Harry,” I say. “It was double latrine duty, wasn’t it?”

“You know I think you’re right.” Harry’s all thoughtful.

“And them krauts, they’re real pieces of shit, aren’t they Harry?” I ask, and next to me Glenn starts up with that great cannon of a laugh, and Miller scratches at his chin (poor Harry can’t grow a beard worth a damn either—in that way maybe Rossi can be forgiven for thinking he was any old grunt)

“You know Buck, I hadn’t realized that, but I think you’re right. Jerry is a piece of shit. And look at our good luck. Getting Pvt. Rossi here on our platoon just at the right time.”

“Seems like he might like to show us how it’s done when it comes to pieces of shit,” I say, and Glenn’s crying laughing now because we are just dragging this out, a real Abbott and Costello act, “or maybe he wants a bit of practice.”

“Hell, he don’t need practice,” says Harry, “seeing as he was made for this. Let me at them, he said! He really knows what he’s doing with pieces of shit, don’t he, Buck?”

“It’s what he said.”

“He did say that,” says Harry, “Hell, we got ourselves a latrine specialist I think. Cal, what do you think?”

Glenn can only salute, and Rossi looks just like Jack did when he busted the green grocer’s window playing ball a few years ago and had to come clean about it to me when I heard about it from Mr. Murphy and cornered him.

“Pvt. Rossi,” says Harry, “As 2d Platoon’s latrine specialist, please report to 1st Sgt. Talley on the double.”

Rossi still isn’t sure if he’s kidding, he’s shifting foot to foot, like he’s wondering if he should run for it.

“On the double, he said,” I am helpful.

“Really let them have it, Rossi,” says Miller, and now he grins, and that’s when the kid knows he’s fucked, and scrams.

You know with all these kids to try and keep alive, and Jerry to kill, me and Miller got to get our laughs where we can.

“That wasn’t half bad,” Harry says to me once Rossi packs it in and it’s just me and Webster and Glenn.

“No shit,” I say. “She’s got me by a hundred eighty pounds!”

“You know I tried, but she don’t even fit on the goddamn grip,” Harry says, and cracks up laughing finally.

“No need for a duck boat, all’s we need is your sister,” I get one in,

“That carrier that got sunk in the Pacific, somebody tell them to just call my ma and the Navy’s got a replacement—the USS Miller!”
“Fuck the Navy, give her some helium tie her to the beach and we got ourselves a new barrage balloon” - Glenn.

And then the three of us are all really going and Webster is sitting there, his eyes all wide but silent as the grave, doesn’t know if he gets to laugh too—smart kid. He’ll do all right.

Also forgot to mention Gene Plinsky is back. “Bit of a hitch in his get-along” as Powell says (whatever the fuck that means) but he’s all right.

September 9

At least with pencil the water will not erase it totally. Here we go again. If I can be so lucky as to hang tough with my men and survive this again and keep them alive I will thank God for it. Earlier I was thinking of Ma and I didn’t know how to spell it right so I asked Harry to ask Goldberg in 1st Platoon if he knew it. Goldberg came and found me and says it’s Gam zu l’tova but spelling doesn’t matter on account of it’s Hebrew or Yiddish he didn’t know which. I remember Ma saying it when things were at their worst, right after I left school and it looked like Dad was going to lose his job on account of his temper. Frankly it’s hard to account for a God that’s got this in his plan but just thinking of Ma’s voice, Gam zu l’tova, “This Too Is For The Good,” well it helps a little anyhow because I can at least do my part if nothing else and I think she can be proud of me for that.

September 12

There was a kid two men down from me. He was a replacement shipped in maybe two days before the landing. Had some Polish name nobody could remember. I can’t remember it. His fingers were tapping his rifle, going over his rifle like a rosary, like it would keep him from getting sick on the boat, even if it wouldn’t keep him alive. He just didn’t want to get sick on the boat. Sarge, he told me when he saw me looking, Sarge, last thing I want is to hurl. Water wasn’t even real rough, and he said he’s got uncles with a fishing boat back home I don’t know where. He wasn’t sick because of the water. He was just that fucking scared just like Yates last time around. Except he didn’t throw up, he got hit in the gut ten feet up the beachhead, I saw him fall and somebody ran over him, didn’t see him, probably better and quicker he drowned than died with that gut wound, and we had to keep going. I can’t remember his name. He wasn’t in my platoon even for three days. And I know he had a ma, maybe a brother or a sister, who remember him, who knew his first name and his last name because they shared it, but I don’t think there’s anybody who saw him die who even knew his name. When I go I know Ma and Pop and Steve and Jack and Teddy and Curly will remember me, but not this me, will they? They won’t know this me, this person, who had to leave a kid drowning in his own blood on the beach and didn’t even know his name. Though maybe I guess I wouldn’t want them to. I guess that’s why I figure I write all this down.

September 15

So tired I can barely hold the pencil. It is my turn for a smoke and I’m writing half from light from that and half just by feel. I keep thinking somehow if I put myself in this notebook then if I die I won’t be gone completely. The part of me that cannot breathe or stop screaming for all of this goes into the notebook and what’s left of me—a man that can keep going is what stays on the outside. Never would have thought in Brooklyn I could be so afraid. Never did a damn worthwhile thing my entire life and now I am here. What will they say about me if they say anything at all? Bucky Barnes, devoted son who danced too much and chased skirts too much and was going to spend his whole damn life hauling crates and saving nickels for a nice suit or two. Jesus Mary and fucking Joseph. Smoke’s done and it is Miller’s turn.
September 17

I have killed five men today. I know I have killed before but not like this, always in immediate defense of my men, in service of the objective in combat but this was a patrol, a scouting mission that Halliwell tapped me for so I chose Nichols, Delaney, Glenn, and Castellano and the objective was there all right and the orders were to dismantle the arty battery near F——- which has been causing all of us trouble. I am the best shot in the company. I am probably the best shot in the fucking battalion and everybody knows it and it is why Halliwell chose me. It had to be quick else it would give away our position and I said I would do it because none of them have shot a man in cold blood either. It was the objective and I know that if we were to have been discovered it would have been a firefight, I know their 105s have stopped our advance but I found a good position, couple hundred yards out, and shot them all. We assaulted the guns and killed the rest and Castellano and Skip destroyed two guns and Delaney the others. There were 15 men manning the battery and I killed five of them.

September 21

I have been to war now for 165 days, if you include the day we shipped and today. I wonder that it might more sense to count the days before instead. Days since hot beefs at Dinah’s and beers on Steve’s ma’s roof back in 36. Days since me and Steve took those dames to Coney Island and got sugar all over their faces. I can only remember one of their names, Louise I remember was my date, we made time a few weeks after in her parents place because they were out visiting cousins in Queens. She let me put it in and it was hot as hell that day in their apartment but I think we would have crawled inside each other if we could have. Louise was a real laugh. What a ball we had. I don’t even know how I can remember any of that now. It seems like maybe I’ve been here all my life, and God giving me thoughts of Brooklyn is just a new way to make this war the most awful thing I ever knew. Also we just got the news that Turner’s going to make it, just lost his leg. Lafayette on the mend too. And Halliwell says he is putting me up for a bronze star for the assault a few days ago. Hell, give me another day with Louise instead, give me an hour with Louise over a hundred medals.

September 22

Back on the line tomorrow. Gam zu l’tova. I can believe it when Ma says it but it is so hard to hear her from here. It rains and rains. We cannot seem to advance an inch without trip wires and traps and mines. It is one thing to be pinned down by mortars and another to march forward knowing any step might be a mine. It is very hard on the men, Harry, Glenn, Carter, and all the noncoms are doing what we can but to be honest it is hard on us too with several WIA.

September 24

Jerry at it all fucking night. Seems like they ought to have fucking run out of god damn mortars. My turn with a smoke and I’m writing this and my hand can’t stop shaking that’s why it’s a mess so bad I can hardly read what I wrote. We haven’t slept in two days. Supposed to switch off with reserve company but word came through from 1st Sgt. Talley that Baker got hit hard and they’re getting pulled back not us. FUCK. It has been hours and hours of shelling and I am hearing it even when the krauts aren’t firing. Me and Miller and Nichols in here together. Skip has gone through his rosary a dozen times at least. When a mortar hits is a tree it is the most awful kind of explosion. There is nothing we can do but hope it doesn’t hit us there is no fighting mortars just outluckng them.

September 27
107 pulled back. Able Company 23 wounded, 7 KIA. Dick Hoffman, Gus Pritchard, and Tom Kelly dead from our platoon. Never been so tired in my life. They had hot chow for us and me and Miller fell asleep eating and half the rest of us too and I woke up thinking we were getting shelled. They say we have 48 before going back and we haven’t been resupplied but all I want is quiet, just some quiet and rest and to be warm with no fucking rain and no mud and no mortars but most of all I want this to be over. At Troina we could fight back.[7] Here we are just waiting for them to run out of shells and I cannot stand it.

September 30

I think it is the 30th. It is night so it may be October already. It all looks the same anyhow. Miller and me rigged up an army blanket tent in our foxhole and Halliwell said he couldn’t see any light so there we go.

Goldberg told me today that it is the start of the hebrew new year. He is on 1st platoon’s mortar team and he got a couple hits in earlier and he gave me a smoke and said, “hey pal, did my part, raised some noise and a couple of dead krauts too” and I said what the fucking shit are you talking about? Anyhow I think he thinks I know a whole lot more about being a yid than I do. But he told me it was the new year and all the sudden it made sense. Ma had a friend who worked at the green grocer’s and she’d come over around this time of year with a jar of honey and also whatever fruits she could get her hands on and ma would candy them. Only time of the year she’d do it, not even Christmas. And according to Goldberg that’s the tradition. And then ten days of saying Hail Marys or whatever the Jews say and then it’s Yom Kippur where I guess we find out if we said enough Hail Marys.

I remember Nana Veenie telling me about it when I was real young, and then me telling Steve and Steve getting all bent out of shape because I couldn’t answer all his dumb questions which is a Steve classic for sure. I think he actually picked a fight with me about it.

And here we are with a new year starting—somebody’s new year anyhow—and all I got is army chocolate and fucking shells screaming out that the krauts are doing not even to get us but just to keep us all awake and I’m thinking, what the hell did I fucking do that this is the penitence I got, sitting in a mud pit breaking my teeth on shit chocolate and hoping I don’t get blown up? Must’ve been something real bad. All of us poor bastards must’ve fucked up real bad that this is what we got.

Chapter Notes

[1] Men with occupational skills important to war production were often exempted from military service.


[3] A “rocker” indicates a promotion to Staff Sergeant, which adds a “rocker” beneath the three chevrons of the sergeant insignia.

[4] Soldiers would often replace the grip on their service pistols with clear glass or plexiglass from downed aircraft, and keep a picture of wives, girlfriends, and family members beneath the clear covering—a “sweetheart grip.”
“Arty” is slang for artillery.

“Made time” is slang for sexual intercourse.

The Battle of Troina in Sicily took place from July 31 to August 6, 1943.
October 1943

October

Italian Front

October 4

Got a visit from Capt. Cooper. He was with Halliwell who looked real proud on account of whatever his men do, he gets credit for I guess. Anyway Cooper heard about what me and the fellows did to that battery and he comes up to me and says, Son, I hear you’re a hell of a shot (calls me “son” – what a fucking clown—I know for a fact I’ve got him by a good two years—God damn West Pointer) Anyway I don’t say much because what does a man say to that. Halliwell jumps in and says, “Sgt. Barnes here took down five men from 300 yards, sir. Confirmed.” Like that is something to be proud of.

I’ve thought a lot about it. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it if I’m honest. Because there’s enough fellows in my platoon, hell enough fellows in this company who come up and say, say Barnes where’d you get to be such a crack shot? Especially Ernie Powell from 3d platoon on account of he’s a country boy and apparently all they do is wander around the woods and shoot at things, at least that it what I assume because I cannot understand a single word the bastard says. He is a good shot anyhow and I’ve heard through the fellows that the minute we get out of here they want us to have a proper contest at it (“law, sarge!”), and if I tell the truth I will be perfectly happy to never fire a gun again after this war is over. But that is not the kind of thing that plays good when ole Sgt. Glenn wants to tell the tale of that assault.

I had Gene Benson say to me, not impressed like these other bozos, he says to me: “I don’t know how you could do it, Barnes. I know it needed to be done, I’m just saying I couldn’t’ve done it.”

I think Benson’s got the right of it. I killed five men from a hidden position. I think most people would call that what a coward does. It doesn’t feel like I’m yellow even though I am afraid all the time, but I don’t think being real good at shooting a gun is all that much to be proud of. They didn’t know I was there. They didn’t even have enough time to figure out what was happening before they and their buddies were down for the count. We went up close to them after to destroy the piece and I saw exactly where I shot them, all of them with these surprised looks on their face like, I never thought it’d be my mother who lost her son. I fired six times and got them in the throat, the head, the chest, the chest, the head, and the head. Twice on the last one.

Makes me feel sick if I’m honest. But it had to be done, didn’t it? It had to be done. That arty was a meat grinder.

Cooper is grinning at me like I’ve just been dancing with the prettiest dame in entire place and says, I’ve got a mission for you, son, something real special. And what am I supposed to do but follow him and do what they need me to do?

Anyhow that is the mission. There is an entrenched platoon of Charlie company pinned down on our right flank and Cooper and their CO have an idea about using me with some cover to flush out the krauts from one direction and drive them into Charlie who will quit their current position and flank them.[1] This is all so our boys can get a move on. I don’t want to but it’s not like I want anyone else
October 7

Kid looked like he was maybe 17. Little hairs on his upper lip that had never been shaved in his life. Got him once in the throat and once in the chest. Mission success is what Cooper called it and Halliwell thrilled to pieces like he’s the crack shot and not me. Wish he were. Another Jerry dead so what does it matter except that I’m the only reason he’s lying there with flies on his face, waiting for us to advance enough that the grave diggers can bury him? It wasn’t just him either, there were others but they at least looked older than my god damn kid brother Jack. Delaney said, “I wonder what their names were” and for a second it was like I couldn’t breathe and my heart was beating so fast it was like we had just run ten miles. And I heard Rowe say “What do you fucking care? You gonna write a condolence letter to Mr. and Mrs. Kraut?”

I talked to Fr Kavinsky. He says that all I’m doing is my duty, that it’s killing and not murder in a time of war, but he isn’t the one pulling the trigger. That kid wasn’t going to kill me. It wasn’t self defense. It was me lining up my shot and pulling the trigger all because some stupid kid made a bad call on where to take a piss and orders were to get at the krauts and get them to move. Well I did that and when I was gone Able got pulled back so I have time to sleep and eat off the line but I feel sick as hell and even though I am as tired as I’ve ever been I don’t think I will sleep.

October 9

So yesterday it was quiet and so Harry and I split a bottle we drug with us from Sicily. And Harry Miller is nothing if not a goddamn observant son of a bitch and so he says out of nowhere, “Buck, you know it had to be done.”

And of course he’s talking about the artillery we assaulted and then the assignment yesterday which everyone has heard about and I guess he can see that I feel real black about it even though I haven’t said a word to him or anybody. But it is hard when you have a mess of buck privates clapping you on the shoulder happy as hell that it’s their sarge who’s the crack shot, their sarge who’s the talk of the goddamn battalion and all I really want to do is run to Fr Cleary back home right after morning mass like I used to as a kid when I tried to play hooky from school and he’d take confession and make me say contrition and then give me a bit of whatever he had around. What wouldn’t I give for one of those caramels he carried around in his pockets. It always seemed like those could fix anything. What in God’s name would Fr Cleary say about all this, and what I’ve done.

Anyway after a while Harry said: “How many of the fellows might have gotten killed if you’d just ran at the fucking thing?”

That’s the truth of it all right. The thing is, I knew I could make those shots back with the artillery. I knew I could and I knew that it was safer than flanking them like Halliwell suggested. And what was I going to do, let Skip take the damn shot when I was right there?

“Thing is, pal,” I told Harry, “I didn’t hesitate. I just did it. And then yesterday, I thought I wouldn’t be able to do it again. But I did. It scares me to hell. It makes me sick to my stomach.”

“Buck, you’ll do just about any goddamn thing you can to keep your men alive,” Miller said, like it should have been obvious to me but it wasn’t. “Of course you’d do it again. That’s why we’re noncoms.[2] That’s what we’re here for.”

Harry has a way of putting things. Because all of everything else—Fr Kavinsky telling me it’s not murder in a time of war, and those damn boys excited to hear the story from me directly—none of
that does any good at all. But a reminder of why I did it and why I’m here—so that no other mother’s poor son has to shoot five men or a kid in a kraut uniform in cold blood—that helps a little in a way saying Hail Mary Full of Grace doesn’t. I don’t know if it’s good enough for God to forgive me but if my men are alive and not dead at the end of the day then perhaps somehow I can live with it.

October 11

Freak accident with mortar tube in Harry’s squad and we have two dead because of I think a malfunction with mud or something I don’t know. But Ernest Ball and Phil Ellis are dead and this is a real shock to all of us as we’ve been getting along all right without any KIA for two weeks. They are dead for no reason at all and it happened so suddenly that there was nothing anyone could do, just according to Chenowitz their foxhole exploded. I think Chenowitz might need off the line permanently. He has not been the same at all since Frankie Lorenzo, and Ernie and Phil are his fire team. He has been sitting silently for the last two hours and I have Lipscomb on him to make sure he doesn’t lose it completely but God do I feel awful for him and for Harry. No reason for this. No reason for any of this but they were just doing their damn job and a piece of shit mortar tube is sending cars to their mothers and for Phil his wife and son—he got a letter a month ago his kid was born. I am sick to death of this all. Men like Phil deserve to go home alive & to hold their kid and be there to see him grow up. The saying is “all is fair in love and war” — it has to be the biggest fucking bull shit I ever heard.

October 13

Shells and rain for at least the last eighteen hours. Radios not working at all so we are dug in just trying to return fire and hoping command hasn’t misplaced us on their map for the next strafing run against these goddamn kraut positions. Short on rations as it has been impossible conditions—this fucking mud—and we did not get resupplied before this assault so me, Glenn and Castellano have been going to each foxhole to take stock of what we have and split the difference as needed. Which means my own foxhole is a mud pit, these little shits better be grateful.

Rumor from Gene Benson in 3d platoon who ran over with ammo for Rizzo and Delaney that Halliwell is KIA this morning. If so that is the third officer since Salerno for 2d Bn.

October 14

Halliwell wounded not dead but very badly indeed. 1st Sgt. Talley made the rounds and was keeping it quiet but apparently Halliwell in very bad shape and may not make it. Heard a shell coming and tried to cover Andrews and Fitchner from 1st platoon but didn’t make it. Fitch alive but evacuated also and Andrews KIA. What the fuck was Halliwell that poor bastard even doing on that side of the line. That had to be five hundred yards from 2d platoon.

October 16

Relieved by Charlie company and not a moment too soon as I don’t think a single Able man has slept in days. For all the shells and bullets and grenades and fucking mines I think we advanced possibly three or four yards. Visibility poor. Terrain poor. Weather miserable. Too tired to think. We are all so very tired and very many casualties not the least of which is feet that I think may soon fall off, have not had dry socks in days. Joe Fortunato WIA from my squad but will be all right—thank Christ.

October 18
2d platoon has caught a break. 1st Lt. Charles Fischer new CO. Straight from Baker and Miller’s friends there (how does he know someone everywhere?) say he is aces and are very sorry to see him go. Able is now 30% under strength and according to Talley, the regiment is in worse shape by comparison so we are likely to be cycled back on the line shortly.

October 21

Heard the fellows singing—very strange given that everything behind and in front of us is downright awful but sure enough it was Dunning, Rudi, & Rossi singing a goddamn song Rossi wrote about me. I immediately scrambled and got Harry because this was too good to miss. Anyway we snuck back to the little show which was being held in Dunning and Rizzo’s tent along with about 8 or 9 others from me and Harry’s squads—here’s how it goes:

On the day I shipped out for the war,
My mama stood there on the shore,
Waving her hanky,
Sobbing quite frankly,
My poor little boy, she swore.

What’ll he do, over there without me?
What’ll he eat, and where will he be?
For ma didn’t know,
About that old pro,
Uncle Sam’s very favorite draftee.

Bucky Barnes is the Brooklyn boy’s name,
And we all know his great claim to fame,
Ain’t his many sweethearts,
That you can’t beat him at darts,
But that he worries and nags like a dame.

Eat all your rations and drink all your coffee!
Go see the doctor, I heard you were coughing!
Where’s your wool jacket?
And your damn sulfa packet?
Nanny Barnes’s real calling is bossing.

So when you get that good old Sarge chew out,
And find yourself starting to doubt,
Know that one thing is true,
True through and through,
Hand to God you’ll be ready for krauts.

It was all Harry and me could do to not laugh because plainly the fellows were drunk as hell off god knows what and their singing not very good apart from Rossi who is a fine tenor if you can believe that but it has a tune that is not half bad to go along with it!

Harry’s idea to do nothing right away but wait for a good time to get one over on Rossi—maybe start humming it in a foxhole or something. I have written the words down from memory and am thinking of improving them (if I can think of some rhymes for Benedetta) or perhaps sending them to Steve who will surely recognize “Nanny Barnes” — hell he’d probably want to add another twenty verses!
October 24

Mail and rest but mail first. Finally a V Mail from Steve—says absolutely nothing—hardly a mention of him in Ma’s letters either and it’s worrying to say the least. Steve never had a problem in his life opening his trap so I cannot figure how he has nothing to god damn say in a letter. Four sentences about praying for me at mass and “all the men doing your duty” – Christ, does he lay it on when he feels sorry for himself! Nothing about having enough work or his health or anything. I cannot believe he is still mad at getting left behind and God knows he has sure held grudges longer than this but you’d think a guy wouldn’t take it out on me! I’m not his god damn scoliosis am I?

Ma did get Curly A Tree Grows In Brooklyn like I asked for her birthday from me, I think she was really delighted to know that I’ve read it about three times over here since it came with all of the other pocket books last month. She wrote her letter in her meticulous sweet way. I will transcribe the whole thing here because her letter is now in my breast pocket and may well get ruined but I feel somehow safer for having it on me.

Though I am of course so very proud you are doing your part and fighting the Nazis, you do know how badly I wish you were here and not there! I miss you so—all of Brooklyn seems smaller and duller and emptier when it does not have my big brother in it, and I know you will hate hearing it but I cried and cried reading the book you gave me for my birthday and imagining it was you reading aloud to me like you did when I was little. And I went to Williamsburg and looked for her tree myself and imagined myself as Francie until realizing it’s not me who is Francie, but you—my sweet big brother who always tells me stories and cares for me and does anything to help. Then I found somehow that I could miss you more, even when I thought I already missed you as much as anyone could miss a person. Thank you for my birthday present - for Christmas please send yourself. So much love and kisses from your adoring sister, Curly.

So very tired. I cannot believe it has been 7 months since home. Somehow these 7 months have felt as long as 7 years. How many more of her birthdays will I miss I wonder?

October 31

Thinking of Halloween in 37, the year before Mrs. Rogers died and all Curly wanted was to go to the contest at Central Park because she saw the advertisement in the paper. She was determined to be a nurse and Mrs. Rogers heard about it of course and so on Halloween day at lunch she brought a costume for Curly that she had made herself by taking in her own uniform so it would fit—and she brought instruments home from the ward. It was a surprise for Curly when we all got home from Mass and I remember she just started bawling she was so surprised and joyful. Steve and me took her and Teddy and Jack to the contest and she did not even come close to winning but that was the happiest little girl in all of Manhattan regardless. There was a photo booth and I paid for two pictures, and Curly wanted them both with Steve (naturally—she is thirteen now but I am sure she still plans on marrying him even if she won’t crow about it like she used to). In one picture she pretended to be treating him for his asthma (“I am a nurse, Steve!”) and in the other he was kissing her hand like she was Snow White or something. That’s the one Mrs. Rogers put up over her kitchen sink. It was the last thing Steve took down from the old place. Come to think of it that was Mrs. Rogers’s last real Halloween, as the last one she was in the hospital. What a wonderful lady she was. Anyhow it is Halloween here—no monsters other than krauts and shells and plenty of them—I like to think Mrs. Rogers has kept me safe so far and if she can just hold on for a while longer maybe I will see Curly again.
Chapter Notes


[3] “V Mail” is short for “Victory Mail,” the military post system used by the United States to reduce shipping volume.

[4] Armed Services Editions were small, pocket-size paperbacks issued to troops beginning in 1943.
November 1943

November

Behind Enemy Lines

Undated

This is a letter to my family and I’ll keep this on my body as long as I can. I am Sgt. James Barnes of Company A, 2d Battalion, 107th Infantry Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, VI Corps, US Fifth Army. Serial # 32557038. Out of Brooklyn my folks are George and Winnie Barnes and my brothers are Theodore and John and my sister is Rebecca. To Ma: should have wrote more Ma, I’m sorry, I love you and I’m proud to be your son, you too Pop, and I hope I did you proud, you and Ma and the boys too, I tried my best Dad I swear I did, please tell Steve for me that I’m sending all the stupid back his way and that it’ll be hard but if he could try not to get his face beat in so much, he’d be doing everybody a big favor, me especially since I can’t be there to dazzle the dames for him no more. Sorry pal. Did my best to get back but it all got fucked up. All my earthly possessions please to Rebecca, you’re the best of us Curly, the best and sweetest sister a man could ask for—I won’t make it for Christmas but you have all my books and I am so sorry but that is the best I can do. If you don’t go to school I’ll haunt you. Everything of mine to Curly but my glove to Jack please, and Jack if you don’t make the Dodgers after all this is over it’s a damn shame. Don’t fall for the damn slider pal and Teddy, it’s on you now, your job to be the big man, take care of them like I know you will—I wouldn’t trust anyone more. Sorry, sorry, love & love & love, Bucky. Please to who finds my body return this letter to my family. Wenn Sie meinen Körper gefunden haben, wenden Sie sich bitte diesen Brief an meine Familie schicken. Entschuldigen Sie mein schlechtes Deutsch.[1]

[1] German: When you have found my body, please send this letter to my family. Excuse my bad German.
December 1943

Chapter Notes

Some period-typical racial language in this chapter including "Jap," "negro," and "colored." Also, the n-word appears once. It is not used by a main character and takes place in an altercation with OMCs who are clearly in the wrong.

December

England

December 2

I think the only thing that keeps me believing any of this is real is Steve. I would never have put him here in my head, I’d never want him here when he could be back home, where he is supposed to fucking be, instead signing himself up like a piece of shit fucking idiot to be a God damn science experiment. It is looking at the face of my friend in a body I do not recognize and a uniform that I thought he was safe from. I think it is too late for me but I cannot stand to watch what war will do to him. I can stand it for myself, this loss of myself that I think must be my soul or goodness that everything now feels empty but I cannot watch it in him. I desperately do not want to watch.

I cannot seem to get my thoughts in order at all. The last, I think it has been seven days, the several days of marching and then debriefs and then flying to England—it is all happening like watching the fog on an early morning over everything from Brooklyn Bridge. My body is going and in one moment I am here and then in that room and then in another moment at Venafro— which is the most awful of all.

It feels like I cannot breathe enough. I keep seeing Harry’s face and how surprised he was and then how terribly scared. If I think about it too much my heart starts going horribly fast in my chest. It is heartbreak I think. I feel like I may never breathe again for this heartbreak.

December 3

This is what happened. Surrounded more or less and our only chance is covering fire and we know there is some ammo with Tom Rowe and Ed Joyce as they are plainly dead and their MG still OK. If we are going to get anyone out of there alive we need it especially as Dietz is alone manning his gun with Sullivan dead and barely any ammo. I am to lay down covering fire and Harry goes over the top and I am everything still except my trigger. He gets there and I can hear him say “oh God” because I know Rowe and Ed are in pieces and he is running back and there is a shell that explodes. It feels like a man could live his entire life in the time that it takes for the shell to scream in and explode. I think I start running before it even does explode. He is gone so slowly but so terribly fast. I close my eyes and this what I see, more even than what happened in the camp. He keeps trying to talk but the blood and noise makes it impossible. There is no difference in his hands or my hands from all the blood. Lipsy and Frank are there. Lipsy screams in my face. Get the ammo to Dietz and then he and
Adler are back. Harry is still alive. The sky is lit up like day there are so many bombs. Dietz must get the gun going and it doesn’t jam even with all of Harry’s blood all over the rounds. Words are coming out of me that may not even be words at all, a chant or a prayer somehow either to God or to Harry. All those many times I have simply said the words for forgiveness in my life but now I know what really desperately begging God is like, nothing contrite or humble or holy about it at all, it is ferocious vicious so consuming that in the moment I might have sacrificed everything I ever knew or was if God would just make him all right somehow. But it did not work at all. Get back to Dietz and Harry is dying even though I am trying so hard to keep his guts in. The smell is awful. Even though we are still under fire I cannot look anywhere except his face until his desperate fear flows away with what is left of his blood and he is dead.

Later

A letter did not go to my parents. Thank God the notice did not go to them. Ma and Curly would have been so crushingly afraid I think. Letters were here waiting instead for me. Reading them is like reading some other guy’s letters. Curly going to sing in a Christmas pageant and a post card from a dame whose face I cannot even recall saying she’s got my handkerchief still from when we went together. I wrote home that I was sorry for long delay that it has been busy on the front but all is well. I have so many letters of my own to write but I try and I cannot get even a single word on the paper. Pencil in my hand snaps every time. I do not know how to say what is inside me and even the letters that I wrote to Ellis and Ball and all the rest’s families seem like they are a strange artifact of another man’s life.

December 4

I can’t seem to bear being alone or to be with anyone at all, even Steve who seems to be taking to his bars if the endless briefings he goes to are anything to judge by. If alone then it is just a short jump to being back in that place.

I think no man has ever felt more alone in his life than with his friends blown up and having to stare up at that mask afraid of what will happen to him next. Until then I thought I had known the worst fear of my life but I think it was not so bad because I was knowing it together with my men. And even if none of us said a word we all knew. And if a man cried a little in his foxhole no one said a word. That is how you know we were all the same, each man facing this same horror and it less horrible for knowing you had a stand up fellow on either side of you. Alone in all of this is the worst thing a man can face. I cannot bear being alone.

Going down to the pub. If there is anything Harry and I learned since July it is that a bit of whiskey will put it all out of mind for a while.

Later

God help me. They told me I can go home—home—but I can’t. I cannot go home now, not with Steve here, not when he needs me at his back. This is all there is. What wouldn’t I give to go home, to be home back before everything, even if it meant I never knew Harry or Castellano or Joe Fortunato or poor Glenn Lipsy Skip Adler and all of them. To be home before it all, for none of it to happen but for all of us men to be home.

But other than the fellows in the hospital I have only one friend left in this world and I cannot do anything but do my part somehow. I don’t think that will make it worth it to my Ma when she gets a gold star in her window but it is the only choice I can make. I could not bear it otherwise.
December 5

Hot bath and decent food. I took two hot baths one right after the other and then a shave not with a god damn piece of shit razor 9 other guys are using.

In the mirror I look the same as before maybe still banged up but on the inside it's something else. It is like if the east river is the styx maybe or just everything awful—death and fear and on that table I jumped off the bridge into it and it feels like I am still falling and cannot get my hands on anything at all.

Steve has set his mind to going after the bastards. We are a motley bunch these poor souls he has pulled together. A California Jap and a GI named Dugan (both from the 15th IR—I guess we must have fought with them in Sicily, anyway it seems the 3d Infantry came along to Salerno after us after all) a frog, a Tommy, and a colored GI who must be the unluckiest cook to ever live. Anyway I met all of them there as we were cell mates after they split the 107th apart and apparently I have them to thank for my life as they’re the ones who told Steve I was still alive. Steve has it in his head that we are to be a unit like a sort of American special air service unit, that is what he said and I said, Steve I don’t know if you noticed but I think Lord fucking Falsworth and the frog might take issue with that.

He grinned as joyfully as I ever saw him and frankly it was shocking at how truly happy he seemed. Everything is grand now, he has his friend alive and a beautiful dame and an outside that matches the inside and no idea at all that war is a thing that makes men killers not heroes. But I can’t say that to him. I cannot speak at all it seems like. He is already spending enough time looking at me like he thinks I need a quack.

Anyhow they are not wasting any time. As soon as we all have a clean bill of health (minus Steve of course, apparently he can’t get sick now—what a strange time and place for God to answer that prayer) they are sending us to what his lordship calls a “country house” where I guess they figure we will do some training before going after the fucking bastards. I am tired as hell but not quite as busted up as before so I would rather get going and get it all over and done with.

I have written a letter to Margaret but I don’t know if I can send it as I can barely read it myself my hand was shaking so badly when I wrote it.

December 6

Can’t believe I missed Thanksgiving and am only just now realizing. I imagine Ma and Curly made a couple pies and Ma probably took at least one down to Fr Cleary (who no doubt has 20 other ladies bringing pies as well). She also took one to the boarding house, I’m sure of it as she never could resist somebody who looked like they needed some mothering. Letters say that Pop has been working around the clock and that all is well so I hope they had money for turkey but most of all I hope it wasn’t an empty house and perhaps some other family came. Jack has enlisted naturally so he is away and Ted will have shipped by now and I cannot imagine how terribly sad Ma must be with just Curly at home and a couple blue stars in her window – the world’s worst imitation of us.

I am mad as hell about Jack even though we all knew it was coming. Never mind Ma’s got two boys already in, never mind that there’s about a million ways to do your part but Jack went and enlisted in the god damn Marines. Had enough stories secondhand from fellows with brothers and pals over there to know that it is godawful. He couldn’t have chosen the Navy where at least he will stay on the boat?

Thinking about Mrs. Rogers too. I know Steve is too considering it was the fifth anniversary when
we were marching back. Five years. Her dying before Thanksgiving always was hard on everyone as she loved it so. The years she accepted Ma’s invitation to come to our apartment were so special. I remember me and Steve looking across the table as delighted as two kids could be that we got to have a whole day of nothing but eating and running wild with each other on a holiday. Of course it was harder after 29 but even if the table got worse it didn’t seem that way to us.

Every time I can remember from maybe eight years old until she was gone Mrs. Rogers would say, “Thank you God for my darling, lovely Bucky,” talking about me during grace, “I am so thankful for the second son you’ve given me—and that Winnie’s willing to share him.” Not even her own kid and she believed that about me, like she really meant it regardless of if I deserved it. Every so often I catch Steve drawing her from memory. He does these dark lines, traces over them again and again until the picture’s ruined, because he’s so afraid he’ll get it wrong and that one day he won’t recall her face enough to draw it. No chance, pal, I tell him every time, and he says thanks and that’s it. Thing is, I know he won’t forget. But with everything this war takes out of a man I can’t help but be afraid I will. It doesn’t seem like there should be room in a person for the kind of things I’ve seen and the good things too. Already I find myself hitching a laugh or a wise crack to my left thinking “I can’t wait to see what Harry says about that” and of course he isn’t there any more, and he never will be again. And what happened to him, those terrible few minutes, it already comes to mind faster than any of his thousand laughs do.

Anyway, prayers I know keep going before and after you say them. That’s something Fr Cleary liked to say. And it doesn’t seem right, Mrs. Rogers thanking God for me when I couldn’t even keep her boy safe in Brooklyn, when I promised her that I’d look after him and keep him safe and instead he’s in a war. Or any of my friends safe frankly. Or that she could call me lovely when I have now lost count of how many men I have seen die in ways I think surely must shock even God. I know it’s different. I was a boy. But it all runs together inside.

December 7

I just want to sleep—they have me in a room by myself and I just want to sleep but I cannot stand it by myself I keep waking up and I don’t know where I am for the longest seconds or minutes or years of my life – God I just want to sleep.

December 8

These Tommys have to be the biggest snobs that ever walked the earth. I cannot figure how an island full of fellows who happily drink their beer warm got to thinking they know better than the rest of us. Today arrived at the “country house” and I suppose I was imagining something like Lipsy’s cabin that he talked about constantly—hell I could draw a picture of the fucking thing by now. But this place is a goddamn palace. I’ve never seen anything like it my life except maybe when me and Steve got ourselves kicked out of the Plaza. And we pull up and I swear to god Falsworth sighed like somebody kicked his cat and said, “this bloody rockpile again.”

Anyhow we did not waste any time at all going straight into the field with a mess of fellows from all different places including from Poland I guess who are here to teach us what to do behind the line. My idea is to call in a flying fortress or a hundred and bomb the hell out of them.[7] But I guess that is not an option.

Issued standard rifles and the minute I stripped mine and realized it did not have all of the notches and marks as mine did I found myself suddenly as angry as I’ve ever been in my life. It is not that my rifle is lost of course. But it was rage I felt at all of this, and most especially at these fucking krauts who are the reason we are all here and the reason so many are not here. I was so angry that for a
moment I could not quite breathe or see and even now in writing about it I feel it in my chest, next to my heart like the way sometimes on ships fires will break out and all they can do is contain them and hope to reach home. That is how it feels I think. I want to soldier on and do this job which is to end something evil and then go home. To say it like that is almost too big. It is better just to think of the next thing which is to eat a meal not spam and to sleep for a couple hours without getting shelled and to find a smoke in your pocket you didn’t know was there. But it is a fire burning in my chest to get them back for Harry & Glenn & Skip & so many. Get the krauts back for them and maybe somehow go a live a good life that they never will get to have for themselves.

December 12

Jesus Mary and fucking Joseph. After another day of marching through the damn rain I finally got Steve to admit he didn’t even fucking go to regular basic training & that his selection program was just a couple weeks long. What in the hell kind of outfit is this fucking thing anyway? Steve knows about how to put on his sharp uniform (I had to fix his bars for him—punk) but they didn’t even teach him to field strip a Springfield for Christ’s sake. It’s like they’re trying to get him killed. And now I got Falsworth and fucking Dernier trying to tell me how the Brits do it or the god damn free French do it. I have had enough of all these jokers. I don’t give a fuck if we’re supposed to be modeling our unit after the British commandos and we’re sure as shit not doing what the guys who fucking lost are doing. I said that too and the frog tried to sock me one (the little shrimp can try) but Steve got in the middle of it and all I care about right now is teaching Steve some god damn small arms tactics. He wasn’t even sure how to fix his damn bayonet yesterday. Jesus Christ the shit I get into. At least I know he can throw a punch. He always could do that pretty good. I just wish he wasn’t so good at taking them. It got him too used to it. And more to the point if all you got is hammer then every kraut looks like a nail doesn’t he? God damn shithead needs to diversify.

December 15

I thought the most tired I’ve ever been was on the march back from A——. But fuck these British bastards are as merciless as goddamn Jerry himself. We have been training now for days and days and it is good for us & good for Steve to learn, but I don’t see why training can’t come with a hot meal every so often. I am hungry all the time. I already know how be hungry, I don’t need extra training for it. Jesus Mary and Joseph.

Nearly missed my part earlier in an exercise in H—— because we were next to a butchery and I could see roasts and sausages inside. God help me. I might go AWOL just for that next time. Sarge, said Morita, one day I hope to find me a woman who looks at me like you were looking at those roasts. Me too pal. And I said Steve’s already got us beat there don’t he? And you know Steve of course, red as a fucking tomato in August and he said, “keep it civil, Sergeant.” I don’t think I’ve laughed that hard since me and Harry heard Rossi and his pals warbling their little song about me. I said, “Sergeant? You’re calling me Sergeant now Captain America sir? Punk, I’ve been dragging your dumb ass out of trouble since before you knew how to spell trouble, fact is I still ain’t sure if you can spell it.” He got that look on his face like he’s trying real hard to keep it together, like he wasn’t sure whether he ought to laugh or hell, sock me one across the jaw, and he said as prim as can be, “I was always an excellent speller Buck and you know it.” Nuts! Steve’s going to be the death of me.

December 18

Her name is Joan M. with hair halfway to her ass when she unrolls it, dark like an Italian girl’s but she’s pale as cream and tastes as good, lips like a pair of strawberries (which is what I said to Dugan and he says with a wink, army strawberries? The bastard)
And her laugh. Didn’t know people could still laugh like that at a time like this. Found her in the pub once we got back from maneuvers and got a 24 hour pass. Bought her a Scotch to match her accent. She’s a wren and that’s all I remember because we went back to her flat and fucked. She let me slip it in twice and she had a good time too (of course) and made these little sounds, these little high pitched sounds like a bird out of breath and singing at the same time, holy hell I had forgotten what sounds a woman makes. I’d forgotten that but I remember all this other shit. God damn, imagine somehow staying in that room with a dame like God made her, drowsy on my bed, wore out because of me and making those sounds in my ears, and fuck the rest—Dugan in particular.

**December 19**

Mail today. I suppose I was not that clever with my letter to Ma as what Steve did has been in newsreels everywhere and people are falling over themselves about it all. Poor Ma, though I know it is better that she found out after we escaped then if that notice had made it to her door. But her letter did make me feel just awful and reading it made me think of all the guys mothers who did not get to write “I am so terribly grateful to him.” This is the letter, I am writing it here because sure enough Curly’s did get ruined and I want to keep it where hers was.

> My beloved son, I know you do not tell me all that happens at the front. Sometimes not even that you are on the front at all, though I can read the newspapers well enough and find on the maps where you are, and imagine what new horrors you are facing. Perhaps you think hearing the truth of it will somehow make me more afraid for you. But one day when you are a father yourself and you have your own son—you will know that to be a parent is to love, and to worry, and to cherish, and you are so dearly cherished. I don’t know what of the story is true, only that my little Steve is somehow now not at all little, and for once he was the one to pull you out of trouble. I am so terribly grateful to him. Your letters are what little I get of you, my darling, so please send them. Your loving mother.

I do dream about walking in the door, the reverse of when I left and everyone was so upset. Instead she’s making potato pancakes in the kitchen and Dad is smoking on the fire escape, Curly doing her homework by the radio and Jack reading his comics (and not a Marine) and Ted probably fixing something Jack broke and Ma looks up and sees me and I can just imagine the smile on her face. What wouldn’t I give to just see her for a little while. I miss her and everything awfully. Imagine if Time Machines were real and I could go back.

It is strange to think of those days in Sicily when all of us were sure we would be home for Christmas, and of course when Troina was the worst thing I ever saw in my life. I should stop thinking anything is the worst I’ve ever seen as God seems to take it as a challenge. At any rate it looks like we will be spending Christmas here at the “country house” but it does have a cook and I guess the folks stationed here are putting on a Christmas program with singing and dancing. It will not be too bad. What I want of course is all of us crammed around our table on Christmas Eve with Ma’s bread and a turkey and mamaliga and wine and all of it, and Curly bouncing in her seat so excited to go to Christmas mass and then for it to be Christmas tomorrow, and for Dad to toss me an orange he wrapped in paper and tell me to “guess!” and for me to say, “is it a baseball, Pop?” like I did every year.

**December 22**

I met Howard Stark today. Me, Bucky Barnes of Brooklyn. I think Steve will never let me forget it because I have never been tongue-tied in my life and there I was like a blushing dame in a dance hall, too embarrassed to say a word even with Steve about in tears he was laughing so hard. Hell, I
don’t know what happened. But anyway Steve met Mr. Stark back in Brooklyn during the big old show and for that alone I ought to punch Mr. Stark straight in the mouth, but then he introduced me to this gun.

I guess as soon as Mr. Stark heard Steve had found himself a sharpshooter (as if that was new, I could hit a bottle from fifty yards with my slingshot as a kid and Steve knows it even if he couldn’t see the bottle at ten yards let alone fifty back then) he started going through his own armory. Now Mr. Stark doesn’t do a lot of work with small arms but I guess he’s real friendly with the fellow who designed this rifle the M1941 Johnson and so he got a hold of one of the factory set-asides, the show rifles who’ve been fired, hell, probably twenty-five thousand times apiece and are the most accurate of the rest. Then he took her apart and built her back up and fixed her up with this scope like nothing I have ever seen before and she is called Betsy. We took her out on the range with Falsworth and a few of his buddies and Mr. Stark of course. I have been using an M1C[12] like I used to have and I thought was pretty good, but I have never heard a quieter gun than Betsy in all my life. Mr. Stark says he modified the carbine and the barrel to reduce the noise and he did something also to do with muzzle flash. She’s a beauty. Anyhow I showed the Tommy bastards how it’s done and got a couple of free beers for my troubles, seeing as none of them know how to back down from a bet. Even if they are warm they are better than paying for warm beer.

Later

Aside from that day in A——, I have finally found a reason to like Captain America other than the broads who blush at him when he walks into the pub and then settle for his pal when they figure out he don’t have eyes for anybody but his best girl. So Steve apparently heard in a letter from my Ma, and Jesus, thanks Ma! that Teddy is here in England in A——[13]. Shipped out with the 506th PIR[14] months ago when I was in Italy. Anyhow Steve wrangled it with the brass that yes, yes, training was important but everybody deserved a two-day pass for Christmas, and also permission to go to A—— as there is a training airfield around there and we are all supposed to be getting our jump wings.[15] Well Falsworth did some work on his end and apparently so did Agent Carter, and it is all worked out—we are free for two days and then staying in A—— for at least four days after. I will have six days with Teddy assuming he can get away from his unit. It is not Christmas yet but no doubt this is the best Christmas present I will ever receive. For the first time since coming to England it seems like something will be all right finally.

December 24

Train from London to A—— this morning—Teddy there waiting with a few of his platoon with an army truck at the station. It is hard to explain what it is like to see your kid brother when you last thought you would never see him again at all. It took about all I had not to lose it completely but I hugged him for about an hour and then so did Steve, who has not seen him since last Christmas either as Teddy was in training. Teddy’s eyes about popped out of his head like he was a real life looney toon when he saw Steve. “I thought I was seeing things,” I told Ted while Steve got red, “That’s it, I’m done for, I am imagining Steve running around looking like some kind of Max Schmeling[16] type dressed up in a flag, I must be on my way out.”

“It’s a hell of a sight,” says Teddy, sounding just as gob smacked as he looked, and peered closer. “Steve, I haven’t looked up at you since I was twelve!”

And Steve rolls his eyes, “Thirteen, thank you, Teddy,” and just like that it’s all normal again even if Steve is even taller than me now. Anyhow we introduce everyone, Jones, Morita, and Dugan are with us—Falsworth staying in London to spend Christmas with his family and Dernier presumably with several bottles of wine & as many dames as he can find. In the truck which is driven by a friend
of Teddy’s who is certainly not supposed to be driving it—they are all airborne, which based on what I have heard about the 82nd means they no doubt think they are real hotshots. Anyhow his friends are Pfc. McNamara and Cpl. Bergen and they seem like decent fellows, at least judging by the fact that McNamara drove us all straight to the pub instead of to base! Of course pub was full of mostly other men from the regiment and as soon as they figured out who Steve was they wanted the story about A—but seeing as we’ve been told to zip up about that he had to give the abridged version. And then all anyone wanted to know about was all those USO[17] girls. Drank for hours and tossed out about six pints for my men and then some fellow started tickling the keys in the corner and we got ourselves a little dance going—with about eight whole dames who live in this town, and half of those old enough to be our own mothers, but who the hell cares—it’s Christmas.

**December 25**

So late it may not be Christmas anymore. But I still can’t seem to sleep more than a few hours at a time and I took off my watch so I don’t know if it’s still Christmas. If there is one thing that seeing Teddy has reminded me of is that there never was a sweeter or kinder boy than him—and so what in God’s name is he doing as a paratrooper? I cannot account for someone like him being put into war at all—he doesn’t deserve it. I think all I can hope for is for somehow Steve and me and this strange collection of commandos to find a way to end things before it becomes Teddy’s job to take it on as well. I can’t stop thinking of Teddy facing Italy or another Venafro.

I am also thinking very much about Margaret. By now she would have had the babies. Harry felt so rotten about her going it alone with him here. And now it won’t just be for the war, not just for a first Christmas with their babies, but forever. I cannot think of it without feeling almost hopeless. I don’t understand how God could stop a guy like Harry from making it home. I did write my letter to her and send it but I don’t know if it was the right thing. If I was her I can’t imagine wanting to hear from your husband’s best friend who didn’t keep him alive. What good am I if I can’t even do that?

Anyhow this was the first Christmas of my life I spent away from home. I remember in 42 it was a close shave because of training but I made it. Teddy here is homesick too but not quite as desperately as me. I suppose it is because he and the rest of his pals are excited to just get on with the job—they haven’t been in combat. Teddy has told them enough from my letters that they knew where I have been and wanted the details—“you ever shot a kraut?” like they were asking, “you ever hit a homer?” Fortunately Dugan was there as he is a better storyteller than I am these days. Christmas 43 is done. It feels empty wishing this but maybe God will have some mercy on everyone at last and it will be Christmas in Brooklyn next year.

**December 26**

Technically everyone is back on duty today but Teddy’s command is being generous seeing as half the regiment is hung over and the other half still drunk. Teddy swung by the house where we are billeted and the couple who owns the house made us both tea (The Rathwhistles, Reginald and Clementine—where do the Brits get these names?) and then we stepped out for a smoke or five. Not with his pals around Teddy suddenly looked a lot more like my real kid brother, he always was so serious (though anyone would be compared to Jack, wouldn’t he?) and then just like that, he was 11 and me 15, and coming to me worried and almost in tears about Dad losing his job and should he quit school too? This is what Teddy will always be in my eyes—no matter that he has his jump wings and he’s a man of 22 and no doubt soon will be in combat, he is forever my kind hearted brother whose first thought is always for others.

Anyhow it was plain that something was on his mind and that is another thing about Ted—it may be difficult to say or do but once his mind is set, he will do it. That is why I did not argue with him.
about enlisting—no one can make Teddy do anything but himself. (Of course Jack is not quite like that—more often than not he will do the opposite of what you tell him just to spite you—lovely funny Jack).

He asked me after a moment, “what happened out there?”

I tried shrugging it off—“you heard the story, pal”—and all Ted has to do is give me a look and suddenly it is like I cannot speak at all.

“I know the 107th was shredded,” he says in his quiet way. “Even if it doesn’t say as much in the papers. We read that of the 400 or so that got rescued, only about 200 were GIs and them from all different units. What happened?”

I told him the basic story, that the regiment had ordered 1st and 2d Bn to assault Venafro in support of the 30th infantry, that there were more krauts by far than any of the intel said, that Able’s role was to support Charlie and Baker after the main thrust, that by the time we arrived it was a fucking slaughterhouse. I tried to tell him but I could not really get all the words out about how we fought for eighteen hours straight until word came down the line that Lt. Kurlansky had called for Able’s surrender, as the only officer left alive anybody knew of. That when the Kraut commander came to take the surrender he accepted it and then drew a luger and shot Kurlansky in the head. I remember watching it and not feeling anything at all, so blank from all that had happened and Harry. I suppose it was combat fatigue.

What I said was: “Nearly all my friends are dead.” And it is true. Otis Sheehan and I spent practically the entire march trying to get together what we could of Able and were only able to find less than two dozen of our entire company alive and most of them banged up to hell.

Of what happened at the camp—I could not tell Ted that. I don’t even want to remember it. I keep praying that I will stop remembering it.

Teddy doesn’t say anything for a long while, just lights another smoke for me as we walk around the village. I can imagine Harry raising an eyebrow and saying, “well, this is quaint.” It is in the middle of the country, with cows and sheep and little gardens. It is so peaceful that it feels like it cannot possibly be real.

“How did you get through it all?” Ted asks me finally.

I thought he meant about being a POW, but he said no, he meant about combat—was I scared?

And he is looking at me, his calm face as open as ever, he always was the most solemn of us all. I find for the first time in his life I am not sure how to answer his question. Better to try and prepare him somehow, knowing that nothing can prepare you for combat? Or is it better to lie and say that it is not as scary once you are in it? And I thought of Harry and then just said, “Be the kind of man you’d want next to you in a foxhole.” Because at the end of it all though we are fighting Germany and Hitler etc., etc., when you are in combat that is the last thing on your mind. You are not fighting for God and country you are fighting for your friends and just trying not to let them down. A man in these circumstances will do just about anything he can to not let his friends down.

Anyhow Teddy has never let anyone down in all his life. He will not start now. And I told him that too, and then it was time to meet Steve & the rest back at the airfield.

December 28
Only two days at A— to get our wings—called back to London for briefing and we expect a mission. We have only been a unit for 4 weeks but I suppose the brass think that’s enough. Meanwhile froglord are still arguing about the better hand signals to use. There is an anxiousness in my chest about all this but at the same time I feel resolute. I am resigned to this decision and would make it again & again but that does not stop a man from thinking about the combat ahead. Steve says the telegram did not say much only where to return & when.

There was another group of GIs boarding the train at a different stop (I do not know which stop, apparently the British don’t have station signs?[18]) and they came into our car and got very angry that Jones was here. Well that’s one way to get on Steve’s bad side for sure. We were all seated and this fellow with the same accent as Powell (God rest his soul) got the idea to start a fight. Easy then not to mistake him for Powell, who could never say an unkind word in his life, hell he did not even curse (“I always been happy as a gopher in soft dirt Sarge what do I got to cuss for?”). Well for the first time in his life Steve’s got the reach to back up his principles. He says, “son, I’d ask you to apologize to Cpl. Jones here.” And this idiot was a buck private, and I suppose didn’t realize Steve’s got two bars on account of he wasn’t wearing his cover. So this kid says, “I’ll slap my own mother before apologizing to a nigger.” And then we all stood up Jones included but I got Dugan to hold him back on account of if this does turn into a brawl then the negro’s going to get blamed for it isn’t he? But Steve just reached down, put on his cover and then stood up on the moving train and said, “I don’t like to repeat myself.” There’s advantages to rank! Well Jones got his apology and the other GIs found another car and the ride back was not too bad.

December 30

Waiting for weather to get worse for our transport. Yes, that is correct—not to clear but to get worse so as to conceal our infil. We are to parachute in well behind the Winter Line[19] in order to pursue our objective in A——. I have done enough seaborne landings now to know I do not prefer them, which is not to say that I wanted a switch to airborne but it is out of my hands now. I guess they thought two days of jump training was enough. Anyhow we have K-rations enough for at least a week but command does not believe it will take that long assuming the 45th does their job on the return side. We only have to meet our objective and then link up with the Thunderbirds. It sounds so simple when put to paper. I don’t think I’ve slept since A——. I will do my part.

December 31

Drop successful despite awful weather which cleared this morning. Landing clear. It is cold as fuck but marching warms a man up a bit. It was cold in England but nothing to this. Also no snow in England and plenty of it here. Just hours left of 1943. Surely it is the worst year the world has ever seen at least (and I suppose this goes without saying) the worst I have ever seen. Now that our great crusade has begun I feel harder somehow than I did before. In the last month it feels like I have been just limping and gasping along but now that we are doing something it feels like I may be able bear it all a little while longer.

Chapter Notes

[1] Missing in Action notification, which would have been sent by telegram.

Mothers placed a banner in their front window which was decorated with a blue star for each son serving in the Armed Forces. If a son was killed, his mother replaced his blue star with a gold star.


15th Infantry Regiment, a formation of the 3rd Infantry Division.

The British Special Air Service was a Special Forces unit created in 1941.

The Boeing B-17 was a four-engine heavy bomber known as the “Flying Fortress” because of its size and durability.

In addition to S/Sgt. Harry Miller, T/4 Sgt. Calvin Glenn, and Cpl. James “Skip” Nichols, 56 other members of Able Company were killed at Venafro, and another 16 were killed at the Azzano Work Camp. Of the Able Company’s original complement of 146 men, just 49 troops survived the war.

The M1903 Springfield was an older standard issue rifle of the United States Armed Forces later replaced by the M1 Garand rifle.

AWOL: Absent Without Leave.

“Army strawberries” is slang for prunes.

The sniper variant of the M1 Garand rifle.

Aldbourne, England.

506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, a formation of the 101st Airborne Division.

Slang: Parachutist Badge.

A boxer who was heavyweight champion of the world in the early 1930s.

The United Service Organization engaged in fundraising and put on shows and live entertainment for deployed troops. In summer and fall of 1943, Captain America performed in USO programs.

In preparation for German invasion in 1940, the British removed street and station signs. Once it became clear by 1941 that Germany was not going to invade Britain, most signs were re-installed.

Series of German defensive fortifications in Italy.
January 3

Assaulted the objective yesterday and it was a success. Total element of surprise and they were underran and unprepared for assault. Those miserable fucking weeks at the “rockpile” now worth it and Falsworth doesn’t have to say a word, but I swear to God he lights his cigarette as smug as anyone could ever light a smoke. I wonder how he has got to this point in life without more broken noses. Betsy performed beautifully. Steve looks like goddamn Achilles out there, like he thinks he’s invincible because he has a magic fucking shield, the stupid shit. I had scouting duty along with Dernier so he could prepare his bit. It all went to mostly plan except for taking longer than expected. Never has that been said in all my months at war. I must be stuck in a dream of Falsworth’s and not know it.

Now the hard part begins, especially as we ran out of gasoline for the kraut trucks we stole. Morita on the radio has been keeping track of the Fifth Army’s movements so we should be able to link up. But the god damn kraut line (who knows which one, they are endless) is holding fast and we are just seven men, not the 1st Armored. Though they may well think we are with as much noise as Steve makes stomping around.

January 6

Second day in this fucking storm—no movement possible and we are low on rations. First time in two days my hands warm enough to hold my pencil since we have gotten better at keeping the fire going—thank God for Jim Morita. Who ever thought I would be grateful for “dry brush” that will burn at least a little? In Brooklyn I don’t think I even knew what dry brush was—wish I still did not. Morita says people go camping for fun in California. I will take a dame to the park for fun and that is it.

Even with the fire my hands are shaking but I think it is hunger not cold. It seems like K-rations do nothing at all. I eat all of it in a minute flat, fast enough to make Falsworth’s face cramp up he is so disgusted at my manners and as soon as it’s gone it’s as though it has disappeared from everywhere, including my stomach. It is bad enough that even drinking our shit coffee gives me the shakes and that is not all right considering I must have a steady hand for my rifle among all of us. God I am fucking hungry. What I wouldn’t give for one of ma’s breads or a burger from Delancey’s and an egg cream and even Curly’s cookies she made a few years ago for my birthday that I nearly choked on. God I would eat a dozen of those cookies now. They had about a pound of cinnamon in them at least, I have no idea how she found the money for all of it. And a coke, a cold coke and a bag of licorice after work with Steve at Rita Hurley’s folks’ corner store and then maybe take some dames out and have beers and go to a Horn & Hardarts after. I would take every nickel I have and eat out
the entire automat right now if I could. I swear to God I would kiss Steve’s ma for one of her awful corned beef sandwiches she made when she forgot about the corned beef because someone called on her to take a shift. I think I’d eat ten of them. I think writing about it is making it worse.

January 7

Storm cleared and we made up some ground. Found a farmhouse with nobody in it and snow all inside. Dernier found some potatoes and carrots and three jars of tomatoes in the root cellar and made a stew. Supposedly the French can cook but Dernier at least cannot—he says it was no good because there was no red wine in it. Personally I think it was no good because there was no salt and he possibly did not get the dirt off the potatoes but it didn’t matter of course, we ate it all and were grateful as hell for it.

Funny part is Jones found two bottles of wine an hour later and Dernier turned up his nose because they were Italian. Well me, Dugan, Morita, Falsworth, and Jones did not, and then Dernier didn’t either. I thought maybe if I could get a little drunk then for a minute or two I could make myself think I was at home, sitting next to Curly in front of the fireplace with her reading to me and Ma making real coffee in the kitchen and Pop trying to ignore Jack and Teddy wrestling, like when they were kids and not anywhere near here, not in a uniform and nobody giving them a gun. But I didn’t get drunk, there wasn’t enough.

January 9

Finally connected with the 45th & gave Jerry a little hell when we did. Took out some arty and armor and nearly got our heads shot off by our own guys when we crossed the line. Krauts got real confused after that and even though we were low on ammo we stuck around a little to help the boys out. Somebody had a working radio since Jim’s took a bullet and so we made contact with command after and Steve made his report which I laughed at him for after. Should have seen his face get serious and voice all like he was a real tough guy, a regular Jimmy Cagney.

We met with the local brass too and I guess the fellows in the foxholes made a real impression on Steve since he went again and volunteered us to stay—that is what he told us anyhow but I think the full bird he spoke to was just savvy enough to make Steve think it was his idea. They have good supplies here though so and some tents and we have at least a day before we go back out so am going to try to sleep & sleep & sleep if I can, and eat in between. I have to say I did not expect to be back in woods and mountains on the line again and I cannot help but think of Venafro but it will not be the same. It cannot possibly be the same. We know what we are facing here as we just cracked through the line in the other direction so it will not be the same.

January 11

Steve has never fought in a foxhole before but that is where we are now, fucking krauts have a crack shot over the line somewhere and Steve has a giant fucking target on his chest and I will not let him get up from this foxhole, forget that he is the CO—the stupid self-sacrificing shit. It is cold as hell and I am doing all I can to keep my hands warm at least so they do not shake Betsy. I shot two Krauts yesterday and Steve saw and before it has been in his immediate defense not in cold blood across the line where they were only having a smoke. I would rather me do it instead of him having to but damn do I hate him seeing what it takes and what this war is like. I am giving myself one smoke before going out because I cannot hold Steve for long and there’s a good shot out there who needs to meet a better one.

January 12
Steve and me helped get a man back behind the line to a doc but really it was Steve as I was covering us. Poor bastard had his guts half out and he was screaming and I knew he was dead but Steve didn’t and by the time we got to the Doc he wasn’t even screaming any more. Steve I do not think has seen one of our own die like that before. He smoked through half my ration and told me he could have gone faster, should have gone faster and the poor stupid punk always did think it was always all on him, didn’t he? I don’t know how to help him though because I have seen enough men die and it does not get easier at all. In fact all I could see was Harry and it was enough to make me feel like I was dying myself.

January 14

On a Liberator converted to a transport plane headed back for jolly old England.[1] Command not exactly delighted that Steve went and improvised our staying on the line but the Col. has sent along a letter describing how “his men’s morale has never been higher” which I know to be a load of horse shit. Though watching Steve charge a tank and bust up its turret with a god damn shield is a hell of a sight even if it gave me enough heart attacks for a lifetime. Plane too cold to sleep even though I feel like I haven’t slept in days.

I remember when Ma was pregnant with Curly. I guess I was real worried because I didn’t see how any new baby could be as great as Ted and Jack. She said to me, “Beloved—remember this: love is the one thing you can never run out of.” Well on the battlefield is a strange time to think of that but it came to mind after our little platoon was off the line and eating some hot chow, tired as hell and quiet but all of us alive in no small part thanks to each other. I guess a part of me has been thinking all along: “these jokers will never be a real unit. Not a one of them except Steve could stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry and Talley and Glenn and Lipsy.” But as it turns out there are always more good men to be found—though we are an odd lot they can all be counted on and if I have learned anything, that’s all that matters.

January 15

Billeted in London in a very swell house on Grosvenor street.[2] Apparently it has been requisitioned for the war effort and its owners skipped off to their other house in the country. I cannot imagine even owning a whole house much less two of them. I remember when we moved into our apartment with three bedrooms when Curly was eight or so and she asked me so seriously, “Bucky, are we rich now?” Hah! What a laugh. Although if things go south for me here I have written Ma to use the death benefit for a house, so maybe I will “own” a house one day after all.

Anyhow Steve has been assigned his own room as Captain America and the rest of us are doubled up, me with Jones, Dernier with Dugan because Falsworth flat refused to share with “the frog.” Steve was dead embarrassed about getting his own billet like that. He’s embarrassed about the captain stuff in general but there’s a reason I’ve followed him around my entire life isn’t there? Anyhow I told him to knock it off and to make sure he kept the place clean for his best girl and he popped me one that actually hurt a little!

Anyway it is strange to have a place where your footlocker stays put. Stranger still that two days ago we were on the line and now we are getting asked if we’d care for any tea and eggs and bacon. You get used to being at the front no matter how awful it is but it is very disconcerting to be dragged back into civilization and London of all places where you do feel out of place. I never felt like I didn’t belong somewhere in my entire life and Falsworth is OK after a while but talking with these people sure reminds a man that he didn’t finish the tenth grade.

Mail waiting for us when we got here also. I did send Ma a letter from A— with Teddy and my
signature at the bottom, I thought she would be really delighted to know that the three of us got to have Christmas together. Christmas cards from her and Curly and several from dames I know—according to Curly’s letters all of Brooklyn is “overcome with pride” about Steve (and me too according to her—but I got eyes and I can guess as to which one of us makes a housewife “overcome with pride”) Still I guess it is not a surprise to be getting the reverse of a Dear John letter! Nothing from Margaret or the rest of Harry’s family and Bobbie has not written Curly either (at least not that Curly says). It feels awful not knowing anything or how’s she’s doing or even what she named the babies. One of the best times we ever had was Frank Castellano getting everyone riled up to on a betting pool for the Miller babies. Frank organized the whole thing and took a cut naturally but he’s such a showman nobody minded. I think he found himself with enough smokes and blue pages to last the rest of the war after all that. And Harry played along, refusing to tell until enough guys bought in, not until DeMarco came up with some fresh fruit and then DeMarco won and guessed “Edith” after his own mother. Then of course as it turns out Harry rigged it with him the minute he heard about the fruit! Harry never misses a chance for a joke.

London is loud but a far different kind of loud than I have gotten used to. I guess the bombing here is not so bad now and I’m not exactly nervous about it but it still feels like I’m just waiting for the shelling the start. The minute I shut my eyes my skin starts itching. It is not that I want to be back in the field exactly but somehow when you have a job to do and your pals lives are at stake, your mind quiets down for a while and a little quiet is all I want.

January 22

Letter from Frank Castellano. It is the first I have directly heard from an Able man—not surprising since most everyone is still in the hospital or well on their way home. I do know of several who have decided to go back to the regiment—of the top of my head Jim Delaney[3], Sheehan[4], and also Sgt. Doherty[5] from 1st platoon. Anyhow Frank writes that he is determined to go back as well. He was not too terribly injured just very sick and malnourished with an infection in his leg and he says is getting better. I feel sick to think he may go back to Able without me and Harry and nearly all of our platoon. I don’t know how he could stand it. In any case I don’t know how there is even a regiment left with all the bad juju around it now. But Frank did write that he heard half of 3d Bn was in reserve and so they will rebuild off that. Three whole intact companies for an entire regiment!

Frank has also gotten a promotion to Tech Sgt. which is overdue in my opinion and certainly his, he signed his letter in block capital letters and underlined “sergeant” three times. His letter did not say much other than what news he has. I think the truth of it is that while we both know that we will never see Harry or Skip again it is unbearably awful to put that into a letter. There is no taking it back when you put that in a letter. Meanwhile here with Dugan & Jones & the rest we all know to keep our traps shut about our dead friends. And I don’t think Steve has any real idea at all about any of it. Not that he should—he is the reason we’re not all dead after all.

January 25

SSR[6] butting heads with OSS command and SOE[7] and a mess of other letters about the logistics for next op. We are going to an island in Greece, I suppose writing that down that would make Carter give me a hateful look but it’s not as though saying “an island in Greece” narrows it down much does it? I have done enough staring at maps over the past few days to know that much. We all have ants in our pants to get going.

January 27

And here I thought parachuting into Austria was the worst idea I’ve ever heard. Command’s idea to
do a beach landing at night—just the seven of us with the plan being that once we radio in they will drop a company of airborne from the 504th PIR to support. Meanwhile I know for a fact that the 82nd have just done a landing at Anzio and it is fucking rotten to ask them to turn around and do it again a week later. Anyhow I have no idea how OSS/SSR got Gen. Clark to agree to this plan but I am hoping he finds some sense. Though my guess is that he doesn’t have much to begin with if Salerno is anything to judge by (Harry had a joke: “Infantry cry, “Home! Home! Home!”; and Clark hears “Rome! Rome! Rome!”) In any case we have enough going on in Italy that I don’t think a single company of airborne is enough to start a second front in Greece, no matter what the 82nd thinks of themselves! All it will do in my opinion is put a hell of a lot of good men at risk when I think if the 7 of us can keep our heads a bit, we will do just fine—hit the objective and get out alive.

In the briefing by a “Leftenant” Axiotakis we heard about the state of Greece and it does get your blood boiling. The estimates say thousands dead of famine because of the fucking krauts—not soldiers or partisans dead but mothers and children. Before we shipped I remember talking with folks who still thought we should only be paying attention to Japan as who cares about Europe blowing itself up. I think people at home have things too easy. How is it possible a whole country forgot what it was like going to bed hungry? I have never forgotten it. There is good and there is evil in the world and no matter what about what anyone says about the “damn Imperialists” there is nothing to argue when there are mothers and children starving.

January 29

SSR has changed their mind after all thank God. It will be just us. Never thought I would be happy about going into combat without reinforcements. But I can’t stand to see another company get slaughtered and if this H— position has half the firepower of A— that is what will happen. Gam zu l’tova.

---

**Historical Notes: Operation Bonfire**

*December 31, 1943—January 9, 1944*

Weissensee, Austria was the location of one of the most top-secret bases operated by SS-Forschungsdienst (SS-FD), also known as the SS Research Division and more popularly by its insignia: Hydra. An infantry training and munitions research center built on the banks of Lake Weissensee, the complex housed more than eight thousand highly trained SS-FD personnel in a mix of above- and below-ground facilities, some of which were built beneath the surface of the lake.

In the early hours of December 31, SSR107 (later nicknamed the Howling Commandos) parachuted into Austria's Gailtal Valley, nearly 100 kilometers from the base's location. They marched under the cover of darkness through the alpine terrain and in the overnight hours of January 1-2, executed a surprise assault on Weissensee.

Weissensee’s thousands of resident SS troops and researchers were woefully unprepared for the assault—partially because of their recent New Year celebrations, and partially because of the base’s remoteness and perceived invulnerability from Allied bombing. In preparation for the action, SSR107 laid strategic explosives in key areas: access tunnels to the subterranean and underwater facilities; munitions storage facilities; common entrances and exits; and, most importantly, the research and manufacturing plants that were the source of some of SS-FD’s most deadly weaponry. SSR107 then staggered the detonations using radio control over a period of approximately one half-hour.
Many thousands of SS-FD personnel were either killed outright in the explosions or trapped thanks to the collapsed tunnels. According to the After Action Report filed by Captain America, SSR107 ultimately engaged in combat with approximately 500 troops who were able to organize and respond to the attack, but the destruction of aboveground munitions stores as well as the defenders’ extreme confusion about the scale and scope of the attack made any effective counterattack impossible.

Only hours after detonating the explosives, SSR107 withdrew using two SS-FD all-terrain Kübelwagen vehicles which they had prepared earlier. The seven commandos drove the cars about 350 miles south through the difficult and snowbound terrain of the Austro-Italian border before running out of fuel. They then marched nearly another 150 miles through brutal weather conditions and difficult geography to eventually link up with the American 45th Infantry Division, fighting their way through a surprised company of Wehrmacht soldiers in order to make it into friendly territory.

Operation Bonfire was a brilliant moral, tactical, and strategic success. The Weissensee base was virtually wiped off the map, its combat capabilities nullified, and key SS-FD infrastructure and personnel reserves irreparably damaged. By that point in the war, highly trained and mobile infantry units were a luxury of priceless value to the foundering Nazi cause; it is estimated that the Weissensee assault represented a 15% loss of SS-FD’s combat capability.

More important than the strategic victory, however, was the critical moral and psychological victory achieved by Captain America. The sobering reality that Allied forces were audacious and capable enough to drop small forces deep behind enemy lines, virtually undetected, and that those forces could execute such a devastating assault, sent many senior SS-FD commanders into panic. SS-FD had enjoyed martial superiority over every force it had engaged since 1942, when SS-FD forces wiped out an entire regiment of the British Expeditionary Force in Norway. Two crippling defeats in the span of five weeks—first in “Vorstellenlager” (“Camp Imagine”) in Azzano, Italy, and then in the “impregnable” Weissensee, caused SS-FD to make several strategic errors in the following 14 months of all-out war.

---

**Chapter Footnotes**

[1] The Consolidated B-24 Liberator heavy bomber was the most-manufactured multi-engine aircraft in history.

[2] From 1944 to the end of the war, Captain America and the Howling Commandos were billeted in a house close to the European headquarters of the Office of Strategic Services, which was in command of the unit. Though the house remains privately owned, its owners have maintained two of the bedrooms used by the Howling Commandos as-is, and make them available for public viewing on Armistice Day each year.

[3] Cpl. James Delaney (1922—) returned to the 107th Infantry Regiment and served with distinction for the duration of the war, earning promotion to Sergeant in late 1944.

[4] T/4 Sgt. Otis Sheehan (1922—) also returned to the 107th Infantry Regiment and earned a Silver Star and Purple Heart for his actions during Operation Overlord. Sgt. Sheehan was discharged as a T/3 Sgt in 1945.

[5] Sgt. Rudolph Doherty (1917—1945) served in Normandy and Belgium, and was killed in action in January 1945.
Strategic Scientific Reserve, a classified program of the Office of Strategic Services.

Special Operations Executive, the classified British espionage organization tasked with deploying spies and saboteurs into Nazi-occupied regions to organize and foment resistance among civilian populations.

General Mark Clark, who commanded American forces in the Mediterranean, was accused of being a “glory hound” because of his obsession with capturing Rome to the detriment of other strategic objectives. Derisively nicknamed “Markus Aurelius Clarkus,” Clark is considered one of the most inept American commanders of the war. Clark did capture eventually capture Rome, but not until June 5, 1944—and ironically, the achievement was soon forgotten in the light of the monumental D-Day invasion.

Though “Lieutenant” is spelled the same in American and British English, the British pronounce it as written by Barnes here.
February 1944

February

Nazi-Occupied Greece

February 2

The situation here is not like anything I have seen before. In Sicily I think the war was too new for it to impact the civilians more than just in battle terms, and in Italy we were not off the line enough to know how badly off the civs were. But here it is horrible. We have made contact with several SOE assets. This small island has only about four hundred people left who are free, most of them the very old or sick plus women and children. The H— base here has imprisoned the rest for work. The name of our contact is A.[1] and he cannot be more than 16 or 17 but he is as determined as Steve. He has connected us with his pals who can radio back to London and so have reported our safe arrival. They are not especially impressed at the 7 of us I think but nonetheless when A.’s grandma (or at least an old lady who is hiding him in her root cellar) met us she tried to feed us. This woman who has not eaten anything more than old vegetables in months! We instead shared some rations with her (might as well in any case, as they don’t seem to do me any good – had to punch a new hole in my belt last week).

The plan tomorrow night is for Dernier & Falsworth to coordinate with the partisans to work explosives around what we are calling Tophat. Thank God for having Steve around to haul heavy things because I thought Dernier had to be joking when he showed us the crate of equipment he was planning on bringing with us. I gave him a little shit about it too saying, “Hey Steve, you know we are going to be waist-deep in water climbing a beachhead, don’t you?” And he just grinned, and sure enough he had no problems at all—just balanced the thing on his shoulder and got to the beach before the rest of us. It is the most amazing thing I have ever seen, everything Steve and I used to dream about when we were kids and thought his sickliness would be something he got over somehow.

Anyhow Dernier seems to have brought every stick of TNT on the British Isles with us, and seeing the state of people here frankly I cannot wait for us to light up these H— fuckers with it.

I am going to be doing a bit of scouting while Steve, Dugan, Jones, and Morita stay hidden. Unfortunately all four of them will stand out far too much to go out in daylight whereas I can manage it—either on account of my dark hair or perhaps that I’m nearly as skinny as these poor bastards. Steve put up a good fight until I pointed him at all of the photographs Mrs. M has in her little house and said, “Steve, tell me which of these you could pass for!” and he finally gave it up although he doesn’t like it. Of course he doesn’t—he never could stand to let other people go it alone.

February 3

As Falsworth says, “the stage is set.” Oldest partisan here is our friend A. The rest are boys. They are all determined as hell however, and knowing that it is their fathers and brothers who may be dying inside Tophat and their mothers and sisters starving out of it, it is easy to understand why. I have gotten Jones and Morita to help me give them a bit of weapons training as none of them have ever seen men who looked like them before, so they pay good attention—especially when Jones speaks a little Greek, as he is a dab hand with languages. He was even away at college before enlisting and to
think a fellow like him was made into a quartermaster is a damn shame, especially seeing as you can count on him the same as the rest of us—he does his duty as well as any man I served with in Able! Eating rations today he was telling me about where he was trained somewhere in Georgia and how there were three colored soldiers[2] who were arrested after getting attacked by a couple of yokels. They got accused of making eyes at a white dame and the local police held them for days before the army did anything—and meanwhile one of the fellows got beat so bad in jail he lost his sight in one eye and was discharged. To think that could have been Jones if he’d simply been in the wrong place makes me ill.

Anyhow I do know the fight Steve had to have about having Jones in our unit at all.[3] It did not worry me at the time as I don’t think Steve has ever lost a battle of words in his life, sharpest tongue in Brooklyn outside of Curly probably but thinking now I imagine how Jones must have felt. How unrighteous to be asking to fight and to be said you aren’t fit on account of your color.

The plan tonight is for Dernier & the boys to take their places while Steve and me take point and Dugan, Jones, and Morita take the flank. I was able to produce some maps that Mrs. M improved seeing as Tophat used to be a public property and she remembers it pretty well. Even with our preparation I am nervous. It can always go wrong. In Italy Aldo Carter was always complaining about the plan failing and Harry said once, “Carter, just expect the opposite of what you want to happen, and plan for that,” and Aldo went, “and what if the opposite of what I want to happen doesn’t happen?” and Harry goes, “then somebody call Ike, you’re the luckiest bastard in Italy and you’re now in command of Fifth Army.”

**February 6**

The awful part about all this is that even though we were successful and even though we have fifty of those bastards chained up waiting for the Navy task group to send a ride our way, and none of the boys got seriously hurt & all the rest of this Tophat op that went well—we are still leaving these people where the fucking krauts have burned through their fields and food and with no end in sight of it all. Red Cross is having a devil of a time helping in Greece at all especially in remote places like this island and there is no guarantee at all that even though we have destroyed Tophat that these people will survive the war. We have helped free them at little but it is terrible to think that their end may be the same. To die free is still to die.

I also thought somehow that because these krauts were H— krauts that it would feel different, sharpshooting them. That perhaps I wouldn’t feel as sick about it or something. But I don’t know that it has changed at all. Is that better or worse? Part of me thinks I shouldn’t give a damn, that if I cared at all about Harry & Lipsy that I would be god damn delighted to do it. But when you are in the middle of battle and it’s a fight for your life you don’t have the time to think about anything. When I have my eye to my scope and I am calming my breathing, thinking is all I have. It takes away the fight and the fear and instead there’s no choice but to confront the fact that you are going to end a life. And they are H— krauts and God knows every single one of them can go to hell but the thing is, never in my entire life did I want to be somebody who could send them there.

**February 9**

London. Back “in” Grosvenor street as Monty says. Debriefs over—hours and hours of them—and thank God as I was so fucking hungry I was fantasizing smashing the WAAC’s typewriter just to get out of there.[4] Informed that it will take at least a few weeks to “process” all of the intel we recovered and “interview” the “guests”—having been a “guest” in the other direction and had several “interviews” I would rather not imagine how that will go. Morita and I have put in a letter to see if somehow some aid can get to H—but they told us that even if our request is approved it’s doubtful
we will know about it. I have written down their names with Monty’s help (“I have Classical Greek, Barnes, not modern Greek, but I shall endeavor to assist”—who talks like that?) and I am resolved to try to look them up after the war—Mrs. M especially. She would have been great friends with Veenie I think.

Anyhow we have a few days of R&R. I want to eat, sleep and get roaring drunk for all of it—Dugan is making a competition out of it and winning as he started drinking on our transport home—me & Jones determined to catch up.

**February 11**

Mail. Margaret Miller wrote. When I saw it was from her the letter in my hand felt suddenly like it weighed a hundred pounds. It was not very long. The babies are named Harold Jr. and George (after Harry’s father). They are healthy and they were born on Nov. 24. She got the notice about Harry on Dec. 3, after the news about the rescue of the 107th at A—hit the papers. I feel so wretched I could weep.

In the letter she writes that she does not blame me or anyone other than the enemy and knowing from Harry what a fine lady she is, it is not a surprise to read that—but it still does not feel like I wish absolution would. She also wrote, “If you do know what Harry’s last moments were like, please do write and tell me even if you worry that I’ll find it painful. The not knowing, and my awful imagination, makes every moment I spend thinking of him almost unbearable. My worst fears somehow creep in even when I think of our best times together.” What can a man say to that? I know she must be desperately hoping that he died at once, that he did not know it was the end and that he experienced no pain. But that is not what happened. The truth is that he suffered. Harry suffered and he was frightened and there was nothing anyone at all could do to help him. I could not help him. And I know that this is the same end that millions have gotten in this war, I know that it is the same end that I may face, or even Steve (God forbid—I had better be gone already otherwise I couldn’t stand it), and perhaps it is selfish of me but I think I would rather die than tell her what happened. The nature of his death might be common in this new day and age—and what an awful thought—but I know that for myself watching Harry die is the most awful thing I have ever seen and the most awful thing I have ever felt and for his Margaret, how cruel could I be to even think of telling her the truth? If there is one thing I have never wanted in my life it’s to be cruel.

At the same time I think of Steve and his dad, and also Henry O’Halloran and his dad, and how Steve’s dad died at Meuse.[5] And Steve was in the same situation as little Harry and George are now—born only a couple months before. O’Halloran was a little older I suppose, but his dad died too, only he never knew where or anything—just that it was in the war. I never asked him but I figure he must have always wondered. I don’t know if it’s the same. After all little Harry & George will know that it was at Venafro and that their father was one hell of a soldier and one of the finest men I ever knew. I will tell them so myself but that’s not the same as what Margaret is asking. What kind of world is it that these are the questions a man must wrestle with—to deny a widow her only request or to devastate her by honoring it?[6]

**February 14**

Yesterday from a Red Cross girl I heard about a Valentine’s Day charity for war orphans and told Steve about it and so today we decided to go and Dugan came along too. Anyhow it turns out it was specially for young girls, not a single one of them older than Curly, and the idea was to raise money & clothing for them. Well Steve’s famous as goddamn Clark Gable and word spreads fast around London I guess because within a half hour of us arriving the place was a real bonanza. But I have to say it maybe was the best Valentine’s Day I ever had—and that counts 1940 & Dottie!
There was a swell band but when we got there it was just everyone all standing around—so I went up to them and asked if they knew In the Mood. Sure enough they did, so I went straight over to the pack of girls—and a very pale and sad lot they looked, no wonder—and with my cap in hand, picked one and said, “Miss, would you care to dance?” Their faces! Never saw somebody’s face go so red so fast! Anyway she collected herself and said to me, “Without even knowing your name? I don’t think so!” And I laughed and said, “Well miss, I am Staff Sgt. James Barnes of the United States Army!” and she grinned and said, “There’s no one here to introduce us!” and poked at a friend of hers even smaller than she was, and her little friend in her tiny voice said, “May I introduce Miss Susan Clemmons?”

So I bowed a bit and offered my arm and little Susan took it—she can’t have been more than ten years old and here she was schooling me on manners! But the minute we got to the dance floor she leans in and says so seriously, “Sergeant Barnes, I’m afraid I don’t know how to dance to this!” and I told her, “don’t worry about it doll, I’ve got you!” and she bursts into the most joyful smile I ever saw. Well I swung her around a bit just like I used to do with Curly and that got everyone else “in the mood” too (ha! and the band could really play). Steve had Dugan run over to the Red Cross club a few streets over to collect a few more GIs and so after a while we had a whole pack of “doughboys” (what the girls called us) dancing with each other and with these girls and I honestly do think it ended up being more fun than anyone could ever imagine an event for war orphans could be! And Steve’s got two left feet but even still he was in high demand—kids over here see the posters and newsreels the same as anyone else!

Around ten o’clock or so it was time for all the kids to go but Susie found me again and took my hand and said, “Please Sergeant, won’t you write me?” and what’s a fellow to say to that? I told her, “Every week, as long as you call me Bucky!” and she smiled the way little girls are supposed to smile—in a time when her parents never got bombed by Jerry and her only brother’s not killed at Dunkirk.[7]

I got her address from the girls minder and I will write her—and maybe see if I can get Curly to write her too.[8] It was very hard not to imagine Curly in Susie’s place—Curly has all her brothers in the service too, and knowing that eventually we will be going back to France there could well be another Dunkirk, couldn’t there? It’s awful to think about things like that but even if I am off the line, it does not seem that going behind the line could be that much better for my prospects.

February 16

More bad news out of Anzio. The going is very tough for everyone we are hearing. I find myself reading about the 3d Infantry with the thought that the 107th would have ended up in Italy regardless, only we would have been assaulting Anzio instead of Salerno, if we had never been transferred to the 36th. I suppose the worst thing a man can do is wonder “what if” about a war. At a certain point when you are in a foxhole getting shelled or about to go over the top hoping that your covering fire does its job, you realize that it is all chance anyway. One moment your buddy to your right is cut down, the next maybe it’s you. “What if” does no good then and it does no good now.

Anyhow here in London and with Steve’s bars we do get a lot of news about the front. Dugan and Morita set a pint aside for the 15th IR. They were both in Charlie company but didn’t know each other until A—which is hard to imagine seeing how they’re in each other’s pockets now! “I don’t know about you fellows, but it’s days like this sitting around in a pub that, grateful as I am to be off the front, I feel like shit for it,” Dugan said after we got to talking about the latest reports. It’s strange that even though by rights the three of us should be home by now (even if for Morita that’s California—and who would want to go there?) and we are only here still because we are following Steve wherever he leads us—it still feels somehow like we’re letting our men down by being here
and not there.

I did get a letter the other day from Chet. Poor, poor Chenowitz. He was injured enough that it was not even a question of him being shipped home but he needed four weeks in England before he could even punch his ticket. And now he is home and though he did not say as much in the letter—it was mostly “I heard from Castellano and Benson and so-and-so”—it is clear how very lost he is without Frank Lorenzo not to mention Ellis and Ball. “I went to the park to watch kids play some ball, and saw that the corner shop window Frankie busted with a fly ball once was still boarded up”—Chenowitz needed Able looking after him after Frankie, I can’t help but worry he has no one at all looking after him now. He also addressed the letter “Sarge”—I will need to write him that considering we survived A— together, and that he is now discharged, the least he can do is call me by my goddamn name.

February 17

Leaving for another week of training Monday so tonight all of us went to Rainbow Corner in Piccadilly on account of neither Monty or Dernier has ever been to America and until we knock off Jerry, Rainbow Corner’s the best we have. And in any case with it so gray and dreary outside us GIs are homesick as hell. But Rainbow Corner on a Saturday night is a hell of a party! Guys from all over the theater are there, some on their way home or to other assignments or just those here in London like we are, or close enough they can get to London by train.

Anyway with Steve drawing attention outside we got Jones in with no trouble. And then once we were inside all of us found a small room with a jukebox and billiards and darts and Dugan ran up and got a mess of cokes and doughnuts and burgers (much better than the ones from Sicily!) for all of us, and I swear we must have ate the kitchen empty with how much we packed it away. For myself I am trying to plan ahead assuming this training will offer as poor a diet as the last one. Steve eats more than any person I ever saw, and apparently more than anybody else has ever seen either.

“Captain,” said Falsworth when Steve had cleared off the burgers and was starting in on the waffles (God bless Rainbow Corner), “You’re going to lose that girlish figure at this rate,” and Dugan, “Shut the hell up Monty, Cap’s got the best goddamn tits in Uncle Sam’s Army.” Steve nearly chokes on his waffle—I don’t suppose the serum helps that? And we are all laughing and Jones had been dozing a little but he jumps awake saying, “Tits?” and Morita claps him on the shoulders, “One day you’ll understand, Jones,” and I say, “and here I thought Steve just liked wearing his Mae West under the uniform!” And then Steve and Dugan snorted their cokes out their noses at the same time, they were laughing so hard.

February 19

Awful bombing last night. We spent almost all of it in an air raid shelter and though the conditions are very different it is hard not to think you are in a foxhole getting shelled. The sounds are different but the helplessness is the same. Steve hates it especially—how he has always loathed helplessness. To look at him most would say his strength and size are what makes him exceptional—the truth is that it’s just that his body finally matches his will. But even he cannot do anything against bombers.

We were in a shelter with dozens of others including other Americans who were the most upset about it. The Brits meanwhile appeared resigned to it. And why shouldn’t they be? It has been their lot now for three years. Anyway the initial reports on the BBC say that the bombing was very bad. On a train now to T—for training. I intend to write letters and then sleep—it is easier on a train next to the fellows somehow.
February 22

Next op is set. We are coordinating with the fellows in charge of “F section” (who are right bastards if the last two days are anything to judge by) because of some sort of artifact (and its minder) are traveling on Goering’s personal train to Paris and it is our task to retrieve it.[11] [12] If you ever needed another reason to hate the fucking krauts, this is it—what kind of prick’s got his own train?

Agent Carter knows just about everyone in F section. It turns out that before she went on loan to OSS/SSR, the reason the German doctor who worked on Steve was even in our hands (talk about giving somebody a piece of your mind if you could!) is because in late 1940 Carter was in SOE and in theater—by herself she got the doctor from Strasbourg to London. Honestly sometimes I think somebody ought to call Ike—who needs an invasion force when you’ve got Carter? Just send her in and she’d have the war wrapped up in a week!

Despite all that experience she is not dropping with us—but she is not as miserable about it as I expected. I asked her why and she gave me the sourest look I ever saw on a dame and goes, “Use your head, Sgt: I know too much,” meaning if she’s captured, her intel is too dangerous to go to enemy hands. And Jones looks at her like she’s the goddamn second coming (course that’s how all of us look at her I think) and goes, “Hell, I don’t believe for one second you’d break.” And we laugh a little because it’s true—I’ve known the woman three months and if she got captured, I’d pity the krauts not her!

But she didn’t laugh at all—instead she shook her head and gave us all the severest look any of us ever received outside our own mothers and goes, “If there’s one thing you all must know, and not only know but sincerely take to heart, it’s this: it does not matter how strong one is, how smart one is, or how brave one is—with enough time, everyone will break.”

Jones stopped laughing straight away and his expression went very bleak indeed. For me I could feel Steve’s eyes on me considering how he found me at A—. Hearing her say that made my stomach twist up something awful. I never even got asked questions, not intel questions anyway, and I lasted a couple weeks but I still wake up sometimes thinking I really wake up and be back there in that place. There is a lot in this war that makes me afraid but outside of losing Steve I am the most afraid of that, more even than getting killed. What they were doing if it had kept going I don’t know if I could have lasted. You can’t really remember pain but you do remember fear—it sticks to your ribs and doesn’t go away.

What’s funny about it all is that tomorrow is training on what to do if we’re captured. What a crock of shit. I think between the six of us we have a handle on it.

February 23

Mail. Curly wrote how she read an article in a magazine that says that there are billions of letters sent to GIs every year. If ever there was proof that the state of the world is unnatural, it is that: men aren’t meant to go so far from home, do & see terrible things, for months and months. Families are not meant to be apart like this. I think of my letters from home like long thin strings, piano wires, stretching from Brooklyn to here and reading Ma’s words is like she just plucked the string from her end and I get an echo, just for an instant, before it fades away. Mostly I like imagining her writing them. She has her writing desk which has moved with us from apartment to apartment since I can remember. Percolator on the stove, quilt of Mrs. Rogers that Steve gave her on her lap, looking out over the fire escape and maybe it’s snowing outside and everything is quiet and she is thinking of me and Teddy and Jack and how one day soon, surely soon, we will come home. How many times did I walk in the door to see her in that exact spot, dusty with flour but she had a thought to write down or a letter to finish?
To think how many mothers just like her (though not as sweet or as kind—how could they be?) are doing the same thing—not just home but here in England and in France and in Russia and even in Germany—dutifully writing letters to sons who may never get them, plucking those piano wires and endlessly waiting, just waiting, for it to be plucked on the other end, thousands and thousands of miles away. Never in history has it been mothers who started a war.

February 26

What I want is Mrs. Kowalski’s little potato dumplings she used to make dozens of at a time and then invite practically the whole building. And Veenie’s challah and Mrs. Moore’s fried apples and fried potatoes—and mashed potatoes and beans and turkey on Thanksgiving and the maple candy from Rita’s family’s store that they only ever had in summer. Franks at the ballpark and beers and shaved ice and hamburgers. Bagels and lox at Ma’s cousin’s bakery in Borough Park. God I am hungry.

February 28

Going tonight. This is so much more complicated than anything we have done til now. And it is not the woods or a remote island but Paris. Paris, where they hung a god damn swastika from the Eiffel Tower. And according to all of the intel Paris is dire—hardly any food, everything rationed, “Boche” patrolling the streets. Some of the stories Agent Carter has from her friends there and from all that goes on at 84 Avenue Foch is enough to make a fellow sick to his stomach, and in Steve’s case so angry he was about to jump in the channel & swim to Calais himself perhaps with Dernier holding on to his ankle or something—judging by the size of him these days I wager it would be faster than a duck boat.

It was the new moon a day or so ago and cloud cover tonight which seems to me the opposite conditions you’d want for a parachute drop but they don’t ask enlisted men these things, do they? In any case the plan is to drop us north-west of Paris and we are meeting several F section assets who will provide us bicycles—it will be a ride that will take many hours—it’s March—I can only imagine the state of the roads but we will get through it somehow.

Jones & Morita will be staying on with the “résistants” to do their bit with the train and so it will be just Steve, Dugan, Dernier, Monty, and myself going into Paris. Dernier is beside himself with joy—he has not been back since January 1941 when he was arrested and deported. He & Jones have been teaching us French—Steve is asking for things like “where are the Germans” and “help us” but me and Dugan just want to know what to say to French girls. Monty already speaks French of course (posh shit).

Ought to be resting but too keyed up to sleep—by now it seems I should be over these combat nerves but hearing from Agent Carter and Dernier what the inside of 84 Avenue Foch is like keeps playing in my head like a minute newsreel over and over—here we go again.

Historical Notes: Operation Tophat

February 1—6, 1944

Operation Tophat took place on the Greek island of Hydra (Ύδρα), which was first occupied by German forces in 1941. In early 1942, SS-FD, also known as “Hydra”, took possession of the island and repurposed its famous monastery, Profitis Ilias, into a laboratory. SS-FD built additional outbuildings nearby for munitions experimentation and the manufacture of prototypes.
As the island offered little strategic value in the broader context of the war and certainly lacked the resources to operate a major base, historians largely agree that the choice of island was due almost entirely to the fact that the SS-FD considered the island their namesake. The result of this unfortunate coincidence was the death of nearly 150 Hydra residents at Nazi hands and the enslavement of hundreds more. By mid-1942, SS-FD troops had pressed roughly half the island’s population into forced labor in the facility.

On February 1, 1944, SSR107 conducted an amphibious infiltration with the support of the submarine HMS *Unruly*. In the early hours of the morning, SSR107 rendezvoused with Greek resistance fighters Andreas Psarros, Aleksandros Papademos and Nikolas Labropoulos. Together with close to two dozen other island citizens, several days later SSR107 conducted a surprise assault on the Profitis Ilias monastery, which had been codenamed “Tophat.”

The operation consisted of four major components: First, Sgt. Barnes sniped and killed three high-ranking SS-FD officers from three separate positions within the span of approximately one half-hour. Second, Jacques Dernier orchestrated multiple explosions close to Tophat’s outbuildings to serve as a diversionary tactic and to split the base’s defending forces. Third, Captain. Rogers, Sergeant Barnes, and Corporal Jones led one ground assault while Lieutenant Falsworth, Sergeant Dugan, and Corporal Morita led the other. Finally, Greek resistance fighters orchestrated an uprising among Tophat’s imprisoned Hydra citizens, generating further chaos and confusion.

The battle lasted for nearly twelve hours. Tophat itself was well-defended, with several German pillbox installations in a defensive ring around the facility. Using improvised explosives facilitated by Dernier, SSR107 destroyed the facility’s ammunition stores and demanded the surrender of the SS forces. Of the 125 SS-FD troops stationed at Tophat, just 47 survived to offer their surrender. 17 Greeks were killed and 40 wounded, and SSR107 took no casualties.

In addition to freeing the hundreds of Hydra citizens imprisoned by SS forces, Operation Tophat was a tactical and strategic success. After the destruction of *Vorstellenlager* at Azzano, the Tophat site became a major SS-FD research facility. 28 of the captured Germans were engineers and scientists, none of whom were sufficiently cognizant in the chaos of the battle to destroy their backup data or research materials. This oversight resulted in a significant Allied intelligence coup.

The most important strategic outcome of Tophat is that the site contained extensive materials regarding SS-FD operations and plans, the most critical of which was the revelation that the SS-FD organization utilized Enigma machines with 9 rotors instead of the typical 3-5 when transmitting encrypted communications. This crucial piece of intelligence led to the mid-1944 construction of the “Hydra bombe” at Bletchley Park, and ultimately to Ultra gaining the capability to decrypt all SS-FD intercepts by November 1944.

---

**Chapter Footnotes**

[1] Later identified as Andreas Psarros (1929—2007), a noted Greek journalist.

[2] Later identified as Pfc. Martin Warner (who lost his vision in one eye) and Cpls. Francis Richardson and Joseph Hill, who became involved in the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s alongside Gabe Jones.

[3] In fact, it took the personal intercession of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt in December 1943 for then-Pfc. Jones to be allowed to serve in “America’s First Integrated Unit.”

[5] The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was a battle of the First World War that took place from September 1918 to the end of the war, and was the bloodiest battle in American military history with more than 26,000 killed in action. Cpl. Joseph Rogers, Captain Steve Rogers’s father, was killed in October 1918.

[6] George and Harold Miller Jr. later donated Sgt. Barnes’s correspondence with their mother, Margaret (1920—1987), to the National Air & Space Museum. They also donated the original of the letter Sgt. Barnes wrote to them specifically, which described his friendship with their father and the dreams Sgt. Miller had expressed for his then-unborn children while sharing a foxhole with Barnes—including going to college and falling in love. George Miller became an aeronautical engineer who worked at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory from 1965—1988, and Harold Jr. became a history professor at the University of Chicago and the editor of this edition of *The Night War*. Between them, they have nine children.

[7] Susan Thatcher (née Clemmons) (1935—) was adopted by one of her cousins, Petty Officer John Clemmons, after he returned from Royal Navy service in July 1945. She later became a professor of chemistry at University College London. Sgt. Barnes did indeed keep up a correspondence with her through 1945, and she donated those letters to the Imperial War Museum in 1978.

[8] In May 1940, more than 338,000 troops of the surrounded British Expeditionary Force were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk, France.

[9] Pfc. Chester “Chet” Chenowitz (discharged as Cpl.) never fully recovered from his experiences in the war and the loss of his close friends. He never married and struggled with alcoholism and depression until his death in a car accident in 1962. He was 40 years old.


[11] The “F Section” of the British Special Operations Executive was dedicated to spy and sabotage operations in France.

[12] The most powerful official of Nazi Germany after Hitler, Hermann Goering was later convicted of war crimes at the Nuremberg Trials and sentenced to death.


[14] 84 Avenue Foch was the infamous Paris headquarters of the Gestapo.
March 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March

Nazi-Occupied France

March 1

I am writing all these names down and will fill in the last names once we are back in England because by God these people deserve to be remembered.

Jean-Louis Martin
Paul Beaune
Marie-Françoise Fouillard
Marc Lemaurier
Georges Metz
Geneviève Marcel

They met us at the drop, two dames and four men—checked our clothing for anything incriminating (we are acting in a real “British Intelligence”[1] picture with this one—I don’t know yet if I’ll like it more than our usual mission but so far it is more fun). They had their own bicycles as well and we set off when it was still 1 in the morning London time—Geneviève (who is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen) had two watches on her wrist, and she has very good English so I asked why and she showed them to me and said, “Paris lives by Boche time now, but I keep Paris time beside my heartbeat”—and I like the idea of that so much I was seconds from changing mine to Brooklyn time only I don’t have a second watch for “Boche” time, and unfortunately my life is set to Boche time these days.

Anyhow—we pedaled for a few hours and then said goodbye to Jones & Morita—of course they can handle themselves but I do hate to see our unit split up for even a second. They went with J-L and P while Marc led the way to a farmhouse which is empty and which they are using as a base of operations—we are still at least forty kilos from Paris but the plan is to take the train in like we are regular people tomorrow. We brought food with us on the drop and Marie-Françoise had wine and cooked with Georges’s help (but not Dernier’s thank God) and we ate and drank together, this small army filled with purpose. Later Dugan noticed Geneviève writing in her own little notebook and says in his loud drunk way, “a match made in heaven Sarge!” and of course she looks up and asks me if I am a writer too—what a laugh—but I tell her I’m no Hemingway but somehow all of this is easier if I can just write it down at the end of the day.
She looks at me for a few long seconds after that, looking like Rita Hayworth’s prettier sister with the fire beside her lighting up her face, and finally says: “I understand you. For me, it is this: all Europe is imprisoned. And I can do my part, and come and go as I please, but for how long? The English, they have a writer, a woman,[2] who said: “Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.” She shrugged her little slender shoulder and then said, “in writing about it I am reminded that even if France today is ‘travail, famille, patrie’”[3] – and then she pulled back her coat sleeve and touched her wrist, the second watch, the watch for Paris, and said, “My France remains liberté, égalité, fraternité.”[4] What a woman.

March 3

I have seen some strange things in this war. But Paris, a place I have only ever seen pictures of or seen that time I took Bertie Hagar to see L’Atalante,[5] it seems like a faded version of itself, an old rug that has spent too long next to a window getting walked on. The sounds are like no other city I ever heard—no cars except for German ones driven by boys in uniform who look like they might be Curly’s age if they’re lucky, no color but the red in swastikas, and everywhere underfed people in layers of dark, threadbare clothes, the entire city filled with echoing “clip clops” as everybody go about in shoes with wooden soles since there hasn’t been any leather in years, according to Marc. What a very strange place, especially when you think of how I always imagined it, back when I read The Hunchback of Notre Dame and A Tale of Two Cities and all of Dumas and even The Scarlet Pimpernel.

In any case we got very lucky on the train. We all split across multiple cars so it wouldn’t look so strange to have a big group of young people altogether, especially young able-bodied men as it seems most of those have been forced into labor in Germany,[6] including a brother of Marie-Françoise. Our papers held up fine (I guess the Brits really know what they’re doing there) and the bandages we rigged up around Dugan’s face made it so no one expected him to talk—he speaks the worst French of anyone I ever heard. Me, I can at least get a few words right so the least anyone thinks is I’m an immigrant, according to Georges.

Geneviève got word from her sources that “Mr. Chaplin”[7] is on schedule. He is going to be attending meetings at The Majestic[8] where the rest of the important krauts are but our intelligence indicates he is staying at the Ritz with his mistress and that the artifact we are looking for is either going to be there or on the train—but less likely the train on account of the H— krauts don’t trust Goering. Either way, it is Jones & Morita’s job to deal with the train—the rest of us are tasked with The Ritz.

Lodging difficult here because the police and the Gestapo have been merciless with the French resistance, especially as all the French know that soon the Allies are coming back. Steve and me are in a small apartment about a half-mile from The Ritz with Marc and Geneviève. Dugan and Dernier with Georges and M-F at another apartment a few blocks away. The building was chosen because it has three exits—through the back garden and also up to the roof. And there is a secret knock so we know that whoever comes to the door is safe—and another knock if they have been arrested and coerced by the krauts.

Geneviève told me it used to be only one knock was needed. But enough people began getting betrayed that they had to come up with a new system. She told me: “I have been arrested, I understand the fear. It is that I am beautiful and a woman that I was lucky, and they pitied me, and did not hurt me very much, and I was freed after only a short time.” She said it like it was nothing. But as someone who has also been captured, it is easy to see in her eyes that she is not so indifferent about it. Jesus—“did not hurt me very much.” It makes me raging mad to think of her, or any woman, in kraut hands.
At least we are doing something about it. While it is terrible to see combat as much as we do, I think back of those awful days in the mud and rain and cold of Italy, of digging in again and again, gaining a few yards a day and for what? It is hard to feel like that does anything to win the war. It is hard to feel like you are doing anything other than waiting miserably for your turn to either get blown up or mowed down by the fucking hun buzzsaws. And there are still so many poor bastards doing exactly that. As awful as our lot is, theirs is no doubt worse for knowing that over each hill is another kraut line with another row of pillboxes and behind that line, another line of the same, and another after that. It is enough to drive a man mad. Sometimes I think maybe I have gone mad, or that the whole world’s gone mad together. Maybe that is a little more the truth of it.

At any rate, here we are doing something. The flat where we are staying is very small and has been rented through the end of the month. Marc & Geneviève are both asleep, exhausted from last night and all the bicycling and no doubt the stress. The strain of being on that train today and even walking through the streets was immense. I can’t believe they’ve been at it for close to three years now. And so many of their friends and associates arrested or worse. I suppose it is very hard to get the news out but if people back home had any idea what it has been like in France I think they would be shocked. Marc said that he had been a part of a different “circuit” for some time that got infiltrated by the Gestapo and nearly all of it arrested, but it was sheer luck he was not also arrested. He has no idea what happened to any of his friends except for those he knows were shot. For Geneviève I think her story must be worse—she was silent all throughout Marc’s explanation, only speaking to help him with his English. I cannot decide if I want to know everything or if I’m afraid of the tragedy of it. All this sorrow weighs on a man.

Steve is sleeping. He only seems to need a little sleep now. Me I sleep as little as he does but it’s only because I either can’t fall asleep at all or want nothing more than to wake up when I am asleep. I remember when it was restful—no greater feeling than finishing a double down at work and coming home to a cold beer in the icebox and then twelve hours to lay in bed and listen to the Dodgers play on the radio. And it’s so hot it feels like an oven inside and the windows are open and everybody’s trash and cooking oil seems overpowering and the air is heavy and wet and the whole city is lazy, hot, indolent, storm clouds in the distance—with your job done for the day and still sweating and stinking and nothing to do but lay there waiting for the rain—I can picture it exactly, and almost taste it. Funny how badly I long for those long hot miserable summer days.

March 6

Another day, and we are not found out or captured yet—thank God for that. Yesterday in small groups we left the flat to do our part—in my case I went with Geneviève (any chance I get) to an apartment building & “boulangerie” not far from The Majestic where there is a drop box that has been safe as houses for at least a half a year according to G. Incredible relief to get the message from Jim & Gabe that they are all right and getting their bit set up along with the others. J-L & Paul have organized rail workers and other partisans for the train part—and after hearing from Marc what kind of scrutiny the trains are under frankly Jim and Gabe’s bravery astonishes me. All the newsreels and the radio interviews are interested in Steve & Dugan & me and it is a damn fucking shame because to look like the two of them do and go behind enemy lines anyway is the kind of courage that, if the world survives all this, people will write books about one day. It is moments when I think of them that for just a second I feel the kind of pride to serve that all the USO shows and propaganda movies try to make regular folks think we soldiers have all the time. Not pissing yourself afraid waiting for the landing vehicle to reach waist high water so you can rush the beach, not praying to survive in a foxhole (or at least go painlessly), not sitting in a tree killing people from five hundred yards away—who could be proud of any of that? But serving beside Jones and Morita—that is the kind of honor that’s humbling.
Today spent surveilling—reconnected with Steve & Monty & Dugan and went to the spot Marc found after confirming that his source in the Ritz put Herr Chaplin in the hotel room we asked for. Steve and me set up for a few hours observing and this is possibly the best joke I have had at least since Sicily after the fighting was over—Herr Chaplin & his mistress[11] were making time when I got Betsy set up to surveil them. Talk about something nobody wants to see. I acted like nothing was happening and then asked Steve to check the scope. He moved so fast away from the gun that he nearly blew our cover. He hasn’t gone that red in years, I think if we hadn’t been reconnoitering he would have punched me. In any case I haven’t laughed so hard since I don’t know when.

Fortunately the episode did not last long (perhaps not so fortunate for Madam Chaplin? Ha!) and we got down to the work of locating our objective—did not take long since because as we suspected Chaplin did not bring it to the Majestic. Thank Christ. I’m brave enough for most things but infiltrating High Command is last on my list of things I want to be doing.

After a while Steve got antsy (something no one could possibly be surprised at looking at the last 26 years of Steve Rogers). He asked me as I had Chaplin in my sights: “do you think you could pull the trigger now?”

I was surprised. We have never talked about it but Steve is the most direct person there ever was—and I know him enough that he does not like to think too hard on what my part is in all of this. I asked him: “is that an order?” and he yelped almost so loudly that I thought we might get spotted, “Jesus, Buck, no!” and gives me this wounded sort of look. Another Steve Rogers special—I don’t know how somebody who’s gone through life with as many knocks as him still thinks the world is, at heart, a fair and decent place. That is one of the reasons I never wanted him to go to war—it is so essential to him, and special, that for war to crush that would be a goddamn tragedy. But nobody ever stopped him when he had his mind set to something, did they? I ought to know.

“I just meant—do you think you could?”

If these long dark months I have spent at war have taught me anything, it is that nearly all men can do things more terrible and unnatural and awful that we ever thought we could. Battle has a way of stripping the civilization away from a person. It is a turpentine for decency. But it is one thing to shoot a man in combat, or even to vanguard an assault, like in Greece. Laying flat on a Paris rooftop, sun going down and everything blacked out but the dusk just enough to let you see the outline of it all, this place where I think it was Thomas Jefferson or maybe John Adams who said that going to Paris will teach you history, beauty, and the meaning of life[12] And yet when I go to Paris, I’ve got a gun in my hand and Steve wants to know if I could shoot a man in cold blood—even if he is the enemy.

I didn’t think all that when Steve asked me—not in so many words. I think some of it is just in your gut, pictures and feelings, and if I write it down I can put it into words a little. I said, “I don’t want to, but I could.”

He looked sad, but he didn’t say anything—since when do we brothers need words? —but lit a smoke and gave me half.

**March 9**

The day after next is the day. Everything is set. Our source in the Ritz has confirmed Chaplin is going to The Majestic for another set of meetings, and his mistress going to the pictures and lunch with other kraut wives. The riskiest part of it all is switching the driver at the Majestic to Dernier for when he comes back. I think Dernier would rather gouge out his own eyes than say he is a French policeman, even if it’s part of a mission. We will have about three hours to go through the hotel room
and then get to Gare du Nord and on the train before Dernier brings Chaplin to the station also. If all goes according to plan by this time two days from now the train will have been “sabotaged with no survivors” and we will be on a plane with Chaplin & his artifact back to London.

Geneviève and M-F are as cool as Agent Carter. They have been bicycling all over Paris today helping to coordinate the rail worker part. G putting herself at real risk especially because she has already been arrested once and with everything going so poorly in the east and everyone knowing the allies will soon be invading, I guess all of France is getting riled up against les boches. And they know it too. Today she was even stopped by a policeman—obviously she was fine as she told us this just a few hours ago but imagine if it had been a gestapo instead of a French? Anyway the copper said to her: “Je vous connais. Tout Paris vous connaît. Vous êtes le héron bleu.” It means “I know you. All of Paris knows you. You are the blue heron.” When she was telling us her voice shook a little. I guess when she was first arrested she found out that the police called her that in their notes and spying—“the blue heron,” because they didn’t know her name yet and that is how they described her—a tall woman in a blue coat, a blue coat that is now threadbare but still blue, if faded, and as tough as the woman wearing it.

But he let her go. She said to him only three words: “Le héron Français.” And he stepped back and turned away. Imagine if he had not—imagine if she were back in 84 Avenue Foch because of helping us. I would never forgive myself. What amazing courage she has.

March 10

It is late. Or I suppose very early. Everyone trying to rest though I doubt anyone is sleeping well. I am not even trying. We are so close to the trap here, so near to the teeth, and if anything should go wrong then all of us will be dead at best and captured at worst. G came to me with a bottle of wine—somehow the French still have wine—and poured two glasses without saying a word. It was half past three—too late and too early to drink, but in war you break all kind of rules – including sleeping at reasonable hours which I have not done since probably the day we began the fight at Sicily.

She did not say anything right away except “Bonne anniversaire,” and I know enough French now to figure out she was wishing me a happy birthday. I guess I looked suspicious at her because she smiled at me—an innocent sort of smile, not the kind where it is from relief that the mission did not end in tragedy, or that at least there is enough food to eat for tonight, but the kind of smile where it is purely for the sake of having surprised somebody on something small. “Capitaine d’Amerique,” she explained with her usual amused little laugh. (Of course it’s Steve who told her, no doubt he is tickled pink seeing me with hearts in my eyes over this woman)

I told her she was a couple hours early. Truth is after so long of everything being awful, and your life being so entirely different than anything you knew before, or ever expected, something as little as a birthday seems frankly strange. Like a bubble of a happy past that has risen to the top of your heart and burst just when you least expect it. A birthday! Here! Who thought there could even be birthdays anymore?

“I know,” she said, “It is not yet your birthday in New York.” (accent so much stronger than normal I think because she was tired—it gives a man thoughts) She tapped her Paris watch. “But we make the best we can. No flour, sugar, milk, or eggs for cake. Pardon. Mais un peu de vin for the man turning…?”

“Vingt-sept.” (nothing like meeting the world’s most perfect woman to make a fellow practice his French)

She teased me with a smile: “L’homme âgé.” (I find myself memorizing these smiles of hers and
filing them away, like maybe one day months from now I can unfold it in my mind like I might a letter from home and be transported back)

Geneviève is only 22 but as with everyone in Europe, that hardly matters. We have all seen enough of life to be “âgé” together. After a bit of drinking quietly she then asked: “if you are home, what are you doing?” and I told her I didn’t know, but would rather not imagine it, as if everything were the same except I was home, then both my brothers would still be away and Steve and the others still here.

She scolded me for being “too literal” and then said, “this day next year, how do you imagine it?”

The truth is—and I think every infantryman knows this in his heart—that it is dangerous to think so far ahead—much more dangerous than thinking of the past. At first everybody does—you can’t help it. And there does come a time when you go from thinking about what you’ll do when you get out of the army and all the food you’ll eat, dames you’ll dance with, movies you’ll see, places you’ll go, to wondering how any of that could ever come to pass knowing what you know now. That’s the problem, I think, is that when I long for home, it’s not that I long for Brooklyn now, (although I do) it’s more that I long for who I was then. I miss life before all this. And it’s worse for knowing that you can’t go back. It’s impossible to go back. I think I would have liked her to know the guy I used to be.

But none of this is something she doesn’t already know—we all know it. So I thought for a minute and said: “the war’s over, and Jack and Teddy never had to fight at all. The commandos all made it home. And by then Steve has married his best girl, and maybe soon I’ll even get to be Uncle Bucky. And my ma and kid sister make me a cake and my dad gives me a book—maybe an Agatha Christie because of how we both like mysteries, and he probably will already have read it and written his guesses in pencil in the margins. And then Steve and me take our best girls out dancing, Steve his wife and me…” I smiled at her, and for a little second, maybe not even a second, it was like we were two regular people and her simply a gorgeous dame embarrassed about getting flirted with. “To next year,” she said after blushing a little, raised her glass which was almost empty, “À l’année prochaine.”

March 14

I cannot believe it worked. We are back in London. It has been the longest and oddest two weeks of our lives. Herr Chaplin in custody and singing “like a canary”, the artifact “E” secreted away somewhere I expect we will not be told, and all seven of us not hurt. But our French “comrades” (owing to Paul & Marc being hopeless communists) uniformly chose to stay even though there was room on the plane and no doubt they will be in terrible danger. I feel sick at the danger they all face. The photograph M-F managed to take of Goering’s train after the bombs and derailment by SNCF[13] workers (Falsworth had the negatives it turns out) will be the front page of the London Times tomorrow and no doubt the New York Times and every other newspaper. Some of the public affairs people were chomping to talk to us though it was at the end of about 15 hours of debriefing and none of us was in the mood at all, even Steve who normally tries to do his part with a showgirl’s flair. (which I will never get tired of teasing him over)

This is what happened: Marc did meet Chaplin’s driver and paid him several thousand francs to be late and to go have a drink at a particular café—where Dernier was waiting to pickpocket him. Dernier got his keys and after a few drinks with the “special powder” cooked up by SOE the driver’s uniform also. Meanwhile M-F was surveilling the mistress at the theater. Chaplin’s meetings went short at the Majestic but thank Christ not too short, because Steve and Monty and I had a hell of a time getting into the Ritz undetected—it might as well have been a party convention with how many goddamn Nazis there were everywhere and regardless if Steve looks like their “ubermensch” they’ll
know quite well by now he’s not considering all the photographers he’s had taking his picture!

Anyway—we did get to the hotel and got the artifact E as well as a suitcase of other documents and Geneviève was exactly where she was supposed to be with the bicycles. We pedaled to Gare du Nord barely before Dernier got there. Apparently the fake telegram worked so well that Chaplin was howling for him to drive faster—as Dernier was describing it I thought that never has someone said “schnell” so contemptuously as the world’s proudest Frenchman.

The rest of us met Jones & Morita (Paul and J-L had already pedaled several kilometers out along with many other partisans) and boarded the train with the help of a résistant who called himself “M. La Jaconde” (G laughed and told me “La Jaconde” is what the French call the Mona Lisa—and too bad we made it to Paris and Steve never even got to go to any museums! One day maybe).

After that it all went very fast. G stayed hidden while the rest of us cleared the train, mostly empty on account of the short notice departure, and then met up with Dernier who already had Chaplin at gunpoint. We had him switch his uniform with one of the krauts we kept alive and then jumped the train as soon as we got the radio signal. Perfectly on time the SNCF truck picked us up for another few kilometers where we got to watch the train derail and blow up—Chaplin I think nearly cried seeing that.

We then had to use the truck another several kilometers to get to our egress, and say goodbye to all our allies. I think a part of me thought surely at least G will come with us—her already being in so much danger—but I cannot account for why I thought that other than wishing for it, she who has Paris married to her pulse.

“Next time you come to Paris, bring your army,” she said, with her smile like she is laughing at a secret joke. She gave me a letter folded to a quarter the size of a postcard. We said goodbye to everyone and the plane came soon afterward. In six hours we went from blowing a train up to being welcomed at OSS/SSR Command—this is such a strange way to do war.

March 16

Thank God for Carter. As our job in France is now done (for now—I do plan to return with an army!) SOE was apparently planning to forget our existence at all. Carter has ways of getting what she wants no matter what and so we heard this morning that our entire team is safe and in hiding in new locations—they all made contact with a spy radio operator as they were supposed to. We are all relieved. It feels like those two weeks were as long as two months, and even though we could hardly communicate with Georges or M-F, being there in Paris was like being in a foxhole—another sort of foxhole than I am used to, and another sort of fear, but in essence the same. And you do not make it through that kind of battle without in a way becoming like brothers and sisters (not Geneviève though—I keep hearing in my head: l’année prochaine. l’année prochaine. l’année prochaine. I have another sort of “family” in mind with her)

Her letter was very short, a mix of French and English that I was just able to piece together without having to ask Dernier or Monty for help (God forbid, as it is I am getting enough grief about not even getting a kiss from her—“some tomcat you are,” Dugan said).

L’année prochaine avec mon homme âgé: top of the morning, one walks up Montmartre et Sacré Coeur, petit déjeuner dans un café, Café Grand Canard. Fresh, real bread (pas de sciure) beurre et confiture de framboises. Bells in all Paris sound—joyeuses—à l’heure française! At Sacré Coeur one can view all Paris free, and all France. Toi, à côté de moi, et un bisou. [14]
When I read it, it feels like a prayer or a poem—a psalm maybe. Come back with an army, she said—and seeing as there seem to be more Americans in Britain than British, I think it will be soon—I hope it will be soon. Of course hope is awfully dangerous—on the worst days I think it might be easier not having any at all—but that is impossible when I now have “next to me, you, and a kiss” written in her unusual handwriting, left-handed, the same hand that has two wristwatches on it.

L’année prochaine, l’année prochaine.

March 19

Several days R&R. A lot of mail waiting for us when we got back. I now get Steve’s mail addressed to me from Ma and Curly, on account of I guess the Army is getting so much addressed to him that they are not sending any of it through. Dugan was dead disappointed when he heard that, as last time Steve got a bag of mail there were about a hundred girls photos in there along with their return addresses, and Dugan got a real kick out of “helping Cap answer letters.” Of course Steve is mad as hell they’re keeping the mail—not on account of the dames, as I’ve never seen somebody with eyes only for his girl like Steve since Harry, but because so many little kids send him letters: “Dear Captain America, please keep my brother safe” — “Dear Captain America, please hurry and kill Hitler soon”—and Steve tries writing them all back because of course he does. In any case I said Steve, better to spend your time doing what they’re asking for rather than on writing them about it. And he said, I can’t do both?

For my part, several letters from Ma, Curly, and even two from Ted, who is not in Aldbourne anymore but did not say where he is. Nothing from Jack directly but Ma says he has written her and is doing fine. Also a letter from Margaret Miller the twins are healthy and have three teeth between them which I suppose is good. Frank Castellano still tracking down everyone from Able, and I guess word is getting around because everyone is writing him. He got a letter from Joe Fortunato, who is home in Philadelphia and soon getting married to his girl. He’ll have a hell of a limp but I guess not any problems walking down the aisle. Pfc. Carl Yates is also back to the 107th and recovered, and so is Walters who got hurt back in July. Also Lt. Fischer is back in command of Able, or whatever is left of it—according to Frank they have combined us with Charlie and Fox. How strange to be Fischer and have missed Venafro by just three days because he took a bullet to the leg at Rocca Veragotti. Luckiest bullet of this entire war I would say.

From home—Curly still top of her class and volunteering at a hospital on weekends because she has decided again to be a nurse—Mrs. Rogers would be proud. Curly also says she sent a postcard of the Empire state building to my Valentine Miss Susie Clemmons, and says that she has written to Bobbie Miller again but still not gotten any responses. Poor Bobbie—I can imagine how unfair it would feel to lose a brother like Harry. In fact I don’t need to imagine—I know it perfectly myself.

One more day R&R and then we are doing signals training for several days. Dugan growling about it already.

March 22

Wildest day and a half we ever had in London. On Monday as our last free day we all decided to go out to a pub. Well more troops here in London clearly means more idiots. We tried to go one of our usual spots when an entire platoon of “hillbillies” stood at the door and picked a fight about not allowing Gabe inside. Now what got us into trouble was two things—first is that we got asked by the BBC to do a series of interviews on the 20th and the American brass stopped Dernier and Gabe from joining in on account of Gabe’s colored and Dernier has practically been writing poems about De Gaulle who everyone knows Ike hates. So naturally Steve then goes on about Gabe and Dernier not being allowed to participate very angrily during the interview which was being recorded instead of
broadcast live, and so OSS forced the BBC to censor it. So Steve was howling mad all day and all the next day about that. And then we run into this pack of clowns who assumed Gabe was trying to get into the pub on his own and didn’t realize that we were all with him or more to the point that Steve is goddamn Captain America.

So the GIs start tossing around what Monty later called “impolite language” (after we got arrested) and Gabe grabs Steve’s arm and is telling him, Cap, let’s go, let’s get out of here, and if anything that makes Steve even more enraged, and frankly the rest of us are riled up for our part too, and Steve turns to the ringleader, a Sgt. Monroe (first name Angus I found out later maybe I can sneak off and challenge him to a bit of bare knuckle), and says, “Son, you ain’t half the man Gabe Jones is.” And punches him across the mouth!

So there’s about thirty of them and seven of us and that’s bad odds on their part for damn sure. We caused a real ruckus, enough that London coppers and then MPs showed up and started shouting that everybody was getting arrested and courts martialed and credit to him, Steve just identified himself as Steve Rogers and it wasn’t until the barkeeper, who had been two seconds from calling for Steve’s head, suddenly shouted out: “My god, you’re Captain America!” Well then the whole place goes up in uproar because while not ten minutes before we were “ruffians” causing trouble for having a negro in our party, now it’s different because that negro is Cpl Gabe Jones and these are the Howling Commandos!

Well Steve leans in to the lead MP who is also a Captain and says, “sir, you ought to arrest us. No favoritism.” So the entire lot of us get arrested and marched down to the MP HQ and it takes all of an hour for word to get to OSS/SSR and we are released without charges—but no charges also for the fucking GIs who started the whole thing by going after Gabe, either! Needless to say SSR was beside themselves, but Steve is—well, there’s no other word for it, satisfied as hell that he got to throw some punches even if he couldn’t get Gabe on the radio like we all wanted, and Gabe deserves, in the first place.

March 24

This signals training is not precisely what we hoped it would be. I thought it was to be encryption and coding and decrypting and solving puzzles, but instead it is how to work old radios and radio protocols and so on. Seeing as we already have Morita and Jones who know everything there is to know about that, I cannot figure how this is worth our while. The only good thing to come of the past two days is that our instructor Mr. Carroll has got a stutter—and Dugan was sitting there plainly confused as hell and bored nearly to tears, if he wasn’t chewing a cigar that wasn’t even lit and somehow snoring at the same time, and Carroll stomped over (or tried to as he’s a little fellow) and goes, “Sgt Dugan, are you just a dum—dum—dum—dummy?” And Dugan went, in the worst godawful British accent I ever heard, “why yes, sir, I think I am,” and so we have been calling him Dum-Dum-Dummy for the last two days and it has not stopped being funny yet—and I don’t expect it to. “Whoy yes, sah, I fink I am!”

March 27

Urgently assigned to new airborne mission in C—. It is one of the bases Steve identified at A— and apparently some of the intel from Mr. Chaplin has reprioritized it—no time to even train for the jump and mission. We are going out tomorrow night. Only a few hours to get gear together and write new letters for my family if we don’t come back—this is a “macabre superstition” according to Monty but I wrote a letter before Sicily, before Salerno, and before Rocca Veragotti but not before Venafro and look where that got us?
March 31

There is no doubt that our particular enemy the H—krauts are a serious one with serious fire power and god knows what else up their sleeve. However it is “supremely satisfying” (Gabe) to find that they run and scream and blow up just the same as regular krauts when the Eighth Air Force puts them on their dance card! What a hell of a sight!

We missed our drop zone by several miles because of poor weather but were expecting to hump it regardless, Dernier Monty and Jim weak as kittens as they are terribly sick with flu (and naturally did not tell anyone) but Steve and me were able to pick up the slack by sharing their gear between us. Fortunately this was not what Dum-Dum’s taken to calling a “boom-boom” operation on our part, our job was simply to infiltrate, secure intelligence, wreck their 88s and ensure any special equipment was destroyed before we called in the bomb raid. And it all went as smoothly as could be expected as it was clear that they were not at all prepared for a surprise attack and we kicked it off at about 0430 and had no real problems initially—there were not even men manning the artillery half the time.

Only thing that went wrong at all is me catching a bullet in the arm—my left arm at least so my trigger finger not affected though now it hurts like a SOB. Caught a little shrapnel too in my side. With my blood up in the fight I did not even realize what happened until we had finished our part and got the hell out of there and Steve caught up to me and went so pale I nearly thought he was twelve again with the case of pneumonia that nearly killed him. Since this “Cap” business he has really turned into a “Nanny Barnes” himself!

In any case we set the beacons and evacuated the base with the materials and then got to watch the Eighth Air Force raze it to the ground from a safe distance. Because H— has been siphoning fuel from other kraut installations and storing it here the place really went up. And the bombers kept coming—there must have been at least 150 of them and they flew low and in formation, Monty thought they were not even 20,000 feet up and supposed they were showing off for Cap knowing that we had destroyed the air defenses. I can still feel the explosions in my chest it was so loud. As difficult as Austria was, and Greece and France, it is a relief to get the chance to have a bit of help—and to see what a bit of American muscle in the sky can really do! There was not even a single kraut plane anywhere to be seen. So much for the mighty Luftwaffe!

In the open yesterday and today as we have a long way to go for our secondary extraction (as the airfield near the base is now blown up to nothing). Hoping in 72 hours to be back in J.O.E. The others are really very sick.

---

**Historical Notes: Operation Chaplin**

*February 28–March 13, 1944*

Operation Chaplin is one of the most famous actions of the entire Heracles Campaign. The target of the mission was the capture and extraction of SS-Forschungsdienst (SS-FD) Gruppenführer Ernst Schäfer, the chief liaison between SS-FD and the larger SS organization, the Wehrmacht, and Abwehr (German military intelligence).

By March 1944, SS-FD had grown increasingly “rogue” under the leadership of Johann Schmidt. Facing steady Allied pressure on the Eastern front and in the Mediterranean, and the inevitability of the Allies invading in the West, most senior German military officers had recognized that the best possible outcome of the war for Nazi Germany would be a negotiated peace. Of course, Hitler disagreed—as did Schmidt, who had grown steadily more disillusioned with the Führer’s leadership as he sought power in his own right.
SS-FD’s extraordinary weapons of war—and their fanatical hoarding of them—caused further dissension in the ranks between the SS organization and other elements of the Nazi machine. Following the devastating losses at Vorstellenlager, Weissensee, and the Greek island of Hydra, SS-FD all but shut down its material support and aid to other SS entities and the Wehrmacht, in several cases ordering an immediate withdrawal of its forces serving in the east. This was not well received by military leaders, or by Hitler himself, who often forbade retreats until he ordered them personally. Schmidt’s insubordination enraged the Führer, and in an effort to repair the relationship, SS-FD sent its most diplomatic officer, Gruppenführer Ernst Schäfer, directly to Berlin in mid-February.

It is important to note that while Schmidt had successfully established a compelling cult of personality around himself within the SS-FD organization, the vast majority of his troops remained loyal to the Reich, and by extension Hitler, above all else. Additionally, SS-FD was considered by many Nazi officials an “upstart” organization. Orders of magnitude smaller than the legendary Death’s Head Units, for example, SS-FD was still dependent on senior SS leadership and the Nazi party for funding and manpower.

Ultra intercepts revealed Schäfer’s plans, including the detail that Hermann Göring, an old friend, had given him the use of his private train as he traversed the Reich to smooth the ruffled feathers of the SS and Wehrmacht officers whom Schmidt had insulted. As a highly ranked officer with detailed insight not only into the operations and capabilities of the SS-FD organization, but also direct access to virtually every other senior leader within Nazi Germany, OSS/SSR considered Schäfer a potential treasure trove of intelligence crucial to the success of the Heracles Campaign and to the broader war effort.

Intelligence gathered during Operation Tophat had also revealed to the Allies that SS-FD operated a substantially more complex Enigma machine than had been previously believed. British intelligence determined it very likely that Schäfer would therefore travel with his own Enigma machine in order to transmit secure messages back to SS-FD leadership. Thus capturing this machine, known to SSR107 as “Artifact E,” became a secondary objective of Operation Chaplin. With an intact SS-FD Enigma in their possession, the codebreakers at Bletchley Park would be able to establish a decryption program and later, a dedicated bombe, to decode SS-FD messages.

In the early hours of March 1, 1944, the seven members of SSR107 parachuted into Nazi-occupied France to make contact with a number of highly experienced Special Operations Executive (SOE) assets and local partisans of the French Resistance. The team quickly split forces, Jim Morita and Gabe Jones staying hidden in an apartment by day in order to avoid the attention they would receive as people of color. They worked closely with partisan assets embedded in the SNCF to organize the derailment of Schäfer’s train, whilst the other commandos planned the abduction of Schäfer and the theft of his SS-FD Enigma machine.

On March 11, SSR107 and their French allies began to execute the complex plot, beginning with the delivery of a counterfeit telegram supposedly sent from the German High Command which summoned Schäfer back to Berlin. The urgent nature of the communiqué was designed to prevent as many of Schäfer’s staff from accompanying him as possible. At the same time, elements of SSR107 broke into Schäfer’s hotel suite at The Ritz and stole the “Artifact E.” Jacques Dernier soon delivered Schäfer to the Gare du Nord, where his borrowed private train was waiting. Several SNCF workers had disguised themselves as SS troops in order to prepare the train for an early departure.

SSR107 and several of their French compatriots also boarded the train, hiding in the engine room along with an SNCF conductor named Jean-Pierre Moreau, who had stolen a uniform of the train’s SS staff. Once the train departed Gare du Nord, SNCF workers closely coordinated rail traffic and signals to direct the train onto a westward track that had been sabotaged the previous day. Onboard, SSR107 began a surprise assault of the train’s skeleton crew (exclusively composed of Göring’s
personal staff and SS-FD troops). Jacques Dernier, meanwhile, had successfully captured Schäfer. Once SSR107 secured the train, they forced Schäfer to disrobe and dress the body of dead SS-FD trooper of a similar height and appearance in his own discarded uniform. Dernier also planted a series of explosives at key points throughout the train and rigged them to detonate on a timer.

Once within 3 kilometers of the destroyed tracks, the onboard saboteurs abandoned the train with Schäfer. They met a waiting French partisan by the name of Maurice Beaumont, who had stolen a German personnel truck in order to transport them to their rendezvous point. Soon after, SSR107 and the French partisans were able to observe the train’s derailment and total destruction.

More than 100 French résistants were involved in the legendary Operation Chaplin—many of whom remain anonymous to this day, and some of whom later contributed to French society as politicians, teachers, scientists, artists, and writers. At least 43 French men and women were arrested between March and July of 1944 and accused by the Gestapo of participating in the sabotage of Hermann Göring’s train. It is unclear how many of those arrested were actually involved, but records do show that during that period, Nazi authorities executed nearly 200 French prisoners in retaliation for the attack.

The sabotage of le train du gros boche, or “the fat German’s train” is considered one of the French Resistance’s finest moments. The action received worldwide attention for its audacity, and inspired even those Frenchmen not actively engaged in the Resistance to take a stand against the Nazis and Vichy, which had decried the attack as an act of terrorism. In a radio broadcast soon after Operation Chaplin, French general Charles de Gaulle said: “Le boche perd ses avions; il perd son train; bientôt, il perdra tout.” (“The German loses his planes; he loses his train; soon, he will lose everything.”)

Certainly the propaganda value of the action was not lost on senior Nazi officials, or on Hitler himself. Despite the fact that it was assumed to be a failed attack on Göring—just as the Allies hoped—the Nazis were nonetheless incensed at the insult. Internal documents revealed that not even SS-FD leadership suspected that Schäfer had been the real target all along—or if they did, they assumed that he had been assassinated. To the Reich’s lasting detriment, none believed he had been captured alive.

By nature diplomatic and pragmatic, Schäfer quickly realized his predicament upon being rendered to Allied custody in England. Ultra decrypts and eyewitness accounts provided by other captured SS-FD personnel had implicated him in dozens of war crimes, and with no possibility of escape, German victory, or rescue (considering that Nazi leadership believed him dead), Schäfer decided his only option was to negotiate. He willingly provided vast quantities of in-depth, recent intelligence in exchange for leniency. His information played an important role in the planning of Operation Overlord as well as the ongoing Heracles Campaign.

Schäfer remained in Allied custody for the duration of the war. In 1946, the 64-year-old died of a heart attack shortly before his own trial at Nuremberg was due to begin—but not before he testified in the trials of more than a dozen Nazi officials, including Rudolf Hess, Albert Speer, Wilhelm Frick, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Fritz Sauckel, and Hermann Göring.

---

Chapter Footnotes

[1] *British Intelligence* was a 1940 spy film set in World War I.

[2] Virginia Woolf. The quotation comes from *A Room of One’s Own*.


[6] In 1942, Vichy France and Germany instituted the unpopular “Service du travail obligatoire,” or Compulsory Work Service, which ultimately forced 650,000 French men and women to live and work in Germany.

[7] “Chaplin” was the codename for *Gruppenführer* Ernst Schäfer, a high-level SS-FD official who was the target of Operation Chaplin.

[8] Luxury hotel which served as the German High Command headquarters in France.

[9] The Mauser MG 42 machine gun was known for its reliability and high rate of fire, leading to its nickname of “Hitler’s buzzsaw” for the distinctive sound it produced when continuously fired.

[10] “Boulangerie” is French for “bakery.”

[11] Believed to be Ilse Auerbach, a German film actress popular in the 1930s.

[12] Thomas Jefferson, “A walk about Paris will provide lessons in history, beauty, and in the point of Life.”


[14] “Next year with my old man: top of the morning, one walks up Montmartre and Sacré Coeur, breakfast in a café, Café Grand Canard. Fresh, real bread (no sawdust) butter and raspberry jam. Bells in all Paris sound—joyful—French time! At Sacré Coeur one can view all Paris free, and all France. You, next to me, and a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Looking forward to your thoughts on this chapter--it was a beast! Sincere thanks to those of you reading and commenting! Your feedback is so, so appreciated.
April 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April

Nazi-Occupied Czechoslovakia

April 2

Very poor weather. Not much progress to our egress coordinates. We are perhaps 40 miles from the base. Yesterday to give the fellows a chance for rest we got out of the rain in what we thought an abandoned barn and as it turns out is a barn the owner is still using, a little guy who discovered us and at first looked so afraid I think he thought we were there to rob him or worse, but after seeing our walking talking American flag (and the fact that we are all in awful shape), he was very friendly. Of course I suppose he would be even if we had been there as enemies—no doubt there are millions of people everywhere doing whatever they can simply to avoid the attention of guys with guns. It is hard to think of regular folks as enemies—they didn’t ask for this same as we didn’t.

He insisted that we stay in his house with his wife and two small daughters—none of them can speak a lick of English but Monty with his German and Gabe with his bit of Polish were able to communicate OK. They figured out that Jan’s son was conscripted by the krauts and sent to Stalingrad in 1942 and they have not heard anything from him since—the awful thing is Alžběta (Jan’s wife) did not even look sad necessarily when she showed me her son’s photograph, just a terrible kind of empty, as if even the idea of having hope that he is still alive has not even occurred to her.[1]

They fed us though they have very little themselves and Jones had an extra couple D rations[2] and I had half a pack of charms which we gave to the girls (Karolina and Eliška) who are so skinny. But at the end of the day they are still little girls and there is not much a fellow with a kid sister needs to know how to say in Czech to be able to make a couple of little girls laugh! I taught them some hand clapping games (I have no letter paper otherwise I would write to Curly now and tell her I taught them all the silly words to “Miss Mary Mack” that we thought up together when she was ten or so, this is an accomplishment considering they don’t speak any English). It took some work as my left side hurts quite a bit and I had to teach them with just one hand.

We also gave Alžběta a couple of our chutes[3] that she can use to make warmer clothing for her family. She was a mother to all of us, nursing the rest of them as sweetly as their own mothers would, even humming a little and even if it wasn’t a tune any of us knew just the idea of it, of a sweet, kind woman treating us like her own sons, almost like a magic spell that made all of us boys again instead of tired soldiers.

She also washed my coat and tried to sew my arm and side up but it is doing all right and does not seem infected so I just had her bandage me back up. I cut and braided up some of my parachute cord to make a jump rope for the little girls, and me and Steve did a short demonstration for them that got a lot of laughs. I think Steve had the most fun out of anybody with that seeing as his lungs were never good enough to play jump rope with Curly and even though he’s used to being big and strong
when it comes to being a soldier on the battlefield I think it’s the little things he can do now, like jumping rope without needing a nebulizer, those are what still somehow surprise him.

Jan convinced the storm will clear tonight so the plan is to leave before dawn tomorrow. Sleeping under a roof does wonders for a man’s spirits—but more important these people are so kind & generous while being so very poor—it reminds you why we must keep going and soldier on no matter what. We are also leaving Jan one of our service pistols and some ammo—the krauts took his shotgun and he has nothing for protection other than a shovel—if only we had thought to take a gun from the H— base as if Jan is discovered with a goddamn Colt 1911[4] he will be in serious danger—but worse if he has nothing at all.

April 7

All of us dead on our feet but back here in J.O.E.[5] finally. Hardly any sleep at all since leaving Jan’s farm as the others were terribly ill and it was just me and Steve to keep watch and help them along and in Monty and Jim’s case carry them. Of course we also ran out of rations and somehow Steve can keep going and going but I was out cold the minute we made it to the transport plane and slept all the way to England. Woke when we landed (yesterday morning) and back to sleep in the car from the airfield back to London. SSR tried to make me debrief until Steve told them I’d been shot and then I got ordered to see a doctor but the last place I want to be is in a goddamn fucking hospital clinic on an exam table getting shots so I played hooky and somehow found my way to our billet in Grosvenor street. So tired I do not even remember the walk. It felt like every ounce of me had been scraped out. Ate at least five pounds of eggs, sausage, bread, jam, and two bottles of milk and then slept for a day and a half (which is today). Not just mail but a box from Ma waiting.

April 8

Here is a terrible thing I have not gotten out of my head. When Jan first brought us into his house and introduced us to his wife Alžběta she was working on making a soup. Everybody just sort of collapsed at the benches around their table except Steve who went to help Jan with firewood and we all just sat there quietly we were so tired and in the fellows case so ill. Well I perked up when I heard some noise from another room and that’s when I saw the girls who I guess had been in bed or hiding or something. So I got up to give them some of my extra candy and they weren’t scared of me exactly—just maybe not sure what to think with a bunch of men in their little house, but I heard a little choking noise and looked over at Alžběta and she had the strangest expression on her face. She had been paring potatoes and had her knife in her hand so tightly her hand was white behind the dirt. I think did not recognize it as fear at first. I gave the girls the candy and said hello and showed them my picture of Curly from her 1st communion that I keep on me and I don’t think the girls understood she’s my sister but when I looked back at Alžběta she was going back to the potatoes. I think she was ready to knife me if I’d so much as startled those little girls.

What kind of world is this that I’ve got to have proof of giving a damn about my kid sister before a mother thinks her children are safe. I can’t stop thinking about it. She would have done it, she would have jumped at me with that knife, forget the six men all double the size of her (easily) all with guns, even if most of us were sick as dogs. She would have done it if she thought I was going to hurt her girls. I cannot imagine my own mother being on this miserable pit of a continent and having to make that decision in defense of Rebecca. I am sick at thinking how many mothers have had to do it and not just prepare themselves to. Sure we men are shooting each other dead on the battlefield and that is a senseless, awful waste but there are mothers and girls who don’t have guns to fight back yet are forced to fight for their lives the same as anyone. Before all this I never thought much of Father Cleary talking about how men are born bad. But everything I have seen and witnessed and even done makes it hard to argue. I remember one of his homilies about it. “Their feet run to evil and they
hasten to shed innocent blood, wasting and destruction are their paths.”[6] Mankind is a piss poor lot I think.

April 9

We got a telegram from a pilot captain in the 350\textsuperscript{th} bomb squadron: DEAR CAP AND COMMANDOS STOP 0 PLANES LOST STOP HELL OF A JOB STOP WE WILL DO OUR PART FOR YOU ANY TIME. They are based not far from London and it’d be goddamn crackerjacks if we got to meet them! I know Steve’s got that notion percolating in his head all right. He has already got us some R&R through at least the 16\textsuperscript{th} (we all lost weight, even Steve and SSR medical officer put his foot down when he saw the condition we were all in though I am healing up all right) and Carter is on his side as well the sly thing, as she is posing it as a “morale opportunity” which really means we’ll get to meet the bomb squadrons all right so long as we let the newsman take our photographs doing it. Only I think they want to wait until we don’t look like we are at death’s door!

My birthday box from Ma, Dad and Curly: three pairs of socks, a new Philip Marlowe, 2 bags licorice and a box of sugar cookies that were only a bit stale but that hardly matters—shared them with Steve as he is as homesick as I am for Ma’s cooking. Also a mess of newspaper articles Curly has been saving about Steve, me, and the others. Apparently everyone is really going wild at home about us. So this morning I sent home a couple medals and my shoulder patches from the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 36\textsuperscript{th}, for Curly to have as I think she will get a real kick out of showing those to her friends and will no doubt make a production out of it. I also sent her two embroidered handkerchiefs that Alžběta gave me that were done by her girls though I am keeping the one that she did herself. She added the date and a little American flag and “God bless you” in Czech (I asked a Czech pilot Monty knows to translate) before we left and I found it in my pocket after she washed and repaired my coat for me. It is just a bit of cloth but it feels like armor somehow.

April 12

Steve came back from briefing today with a look on his face like he gets when he’s struggling over getting the shading exactly right on a drawing, or perhaps if paint’s not doing what it’s supposed to. He stares at it like it’s a puzzle to be solved, like me and crosswords, until he takes the brush and does some small little movement that means nothing to me but suddenly whatever he’s working on comes perfectly into focus—a mess of colors suddenly transforms into something.

Anyhow in the kitchen I was making roast potatoes and chicken (this is how I’m spending my extra pay as a S/Sgt—real food and as much of it as I can eat, instead of what Dum-Dum calls “splashin rations” on account of how they come out—poor bastard—I have not had dysentery since Italy thank Christ for that luck) and Steve walks in all quiet hands in his pockets just like it was back home, when he knew I didn’t need (and nobody wants) his help in the kitchen but felt like he ought to be doing something anyway. So I ask him, what do ya want pal?

He made a bit of small talk, how’s your arm? And your side? You sure you’re all right? And I rolled my eyes at him and use my bad arm (should call it my “right arm and my all right arm” – ha!) to pick up the roast pan and put it in the stove, and tell him to spit it out, and so he says: “We’re going back to France.”

I knew straight away he didn’t mean “we” like the commandos, and the way he said it, the solemn finality of it, it sent chills down my spine. I didn’t say anything at all but looked up and he just nodded.
Of course it’s not like we didn’t know it was coming. But seeing the jeeps crowding these skinny streets and the thousands of guys in army green and even seeing for ourselves what the bombers are doing—it is different from hearing Steve say, resolved, that soon the invasion the whole world has been waiting for is going to happen. And while we have hardly been sitting on our hands—in fact I wouldn’t have minded any sitting on my hands—it feels like now it’s real fight.

He doesn’t know any more about it—not what we’ll be doing or where exactly or when, other than I assume it will need to be once the channel calms down a bit. But knowing for sure, for certain, that it is around the corner makes me feel like the world itself is taking a deep breath, the deepest possible breath, and the exhale will be a terrible storm and fury.

April 14

Sleeping when the door bursts open and the fellows stream into the room, all in full service uniforms and somewhere Gabe found a trumpet (which he plays very poorly) and in the middle of all this is Steve with a box of medals and a signed paper—a purple heart and bronze star for Czechoslovakia. I never heard anything so stupid in my life and I think that is precisely why Steve did it. Medals for getting shot and for not getting sick! Ridiculous! Anyhow Steve insisted I pin them to my “uniform” as is (that’s what sleeping in just your PT shorts gets you!) and as a bit of a joke the other fellows stood at attention while Steve read the citation, which he somehow was able to keep doing even while I was trying to wrestle him down. At any rate it was a good laugh for all of us especially now that the fellows are recovered.

After a while they did leave and then Steve gave me something else—two drawings from memory of Geneviève, one small enough to go in my breast pocket and the other to stay in my footlocker where the commandos will not find it. In one of them she is serious, all concentration, exactly as I remember when we were setting out for the Ritz that day. In the other he captured her funny little smile, the one where you sense that she is having a private laugh all her own, a joke just for her that on the occasion where she catches your eye and you are let into the joke, just for a second, it feels like a prize by itself. I have no idea how he did it, how he can put a pencil to a piece of paper with nothing on it and end up with a person’s real self on the page. I must have stared at the drawings for five minutes before he cleared his throat and reminded me he was still there. Fortunately Steve is a better man than I am—God knows I have been merciless with him mooning over his girl! —and he simply told me “happy late birthday” and left me alone for a while.

Of course I know it is not the same for me as Steve has with his “amazon”. For one, they actually know each other. A few weeks and a couple of moments alone aren’t the same. I think it is more the hope of what it could be, the idea of next year, the idea of the kind of person another version of me could be worthy of one day.

April 16

Got a note to go to Mr. Stark’s laboratory which is in the country. I mentioned it to Dum-Dum who had the idea of borrowing a jeep instead of taking a train. Well he assumed I could drive and I assumed he could! We’ve seen it done enough but why the hell would a man from Brooklyn ever learn how to drive? And I guess Boston is the same! So we walked up to the jeep and both tried to get in the second seat and then once we figured it out we decided to try a game to see who would get to drive—I suggested taking pebbles and seeing who could hit the street sign from twenty feet (best of ten) but Dum-Dum just rolled his eyes “very fair contest there Sarge” and just held out his hands for rock paper scissors and the bastard won best of three. So driving was his job and I don’t think we’ve ever had more fun or been more afraid for our lives. You get used to them driving on the wrong side here but in Dum-Dum’s case trying to figure out how to work the transmission took up
most of his attention and he kept driving into the right side I suppose subconsciously. In any case we escaped London alive and made it to G— House an hour or so late (not that Mr. Stark would notice—he seems to keep to a different sun & moon than the rest of us). What he wanted did not take long (I think it was just an excuse to have some company, especially enlisted who know how to have a good time) and then we took him with us to the pub, he will forget to eat food but he’s always willing to go for a couple pints!

**April 19**

French phrase books—memorizing maps—issued new gear—training exercises planned. None of this could fool anybody for a second even if Steve hadn’t already told me. We went through a day of this and then at a negro enlisted club we have taken to going to (no trouble for Gabe, and as it turns out the negroes are more friendly to white soldiers than we probably deserve, and certainly more than if it was the other direction—plus they are more shocked & excited to meet Gabe than they are any of us—I think that’s the way it probably ought to be) So Jim comes back with a round and waits for Steve to take a drink to ask blandly as only Jim can, “So when we invade France next month, will we be airborne or seaborne?”

Steve about chokes and while he is coughing gives Jim that stern disapproving look that I know very well, and also delivers a nice two-fingered salute as Monty calls it and well that’s about the most goddamn un-American thing I’'ve ever seen him do, and I say so! “Rosie the Riveter would be goddamn fucking ashamed,” says Dum-Dum, and Monty. “If this is your attempt at being Captain Britain, save it; we don’t need a traitor to his own kind,” and Gabe, “I don’t see how you can lead us to Berlin if you can’t even flip the bird correctly, Cap,” and Dernier, a contemptuous look and “la barbe,”[8] and by then Steve had recovered enough to tell us to go fuck ourselves in all the ways a proud son of Brooklyn knows how. He’s not a total lost cause!

But even after that of course Jim gives him a “look” reminding him of the real question at hand and Steve just says, “They don’t know yet. and for fuck’s sake, we can’t talk about it here,” and Gabe says as dry as the goddamn Sahara, “All due respect, Cap, but somehow I doubt there’s many German spies here in the colored club.” and Steve’s cornered and it’s a damn good argument so he told us what he knows, which is not much. Just that it may be Dunkirk or Calais or another place altogether that they are playing very close to the vest about, and that with our primary mission’s current difficulties that it is likely we are going to be attached to a Ranger company—but that’s all he knew. “Ranger company” is not great news—it means seaborne and I have done enough of those. By the look on his face so has Dum-Dum.

**April 23**

Field exercises, only they are not so much field exercises as town exercises—we have been attached to a rifle company for training. It seems they are expecting this will be a lot of house to house combat. I cannot believe they would put Captain America on that except as a stunt. It is good for us to train anyway, I haven’t done house to house anything since Italy, but I admit that there is an awful, aching fear in my gut about going back on the line, back at the front, fighting battles that never end, mortars and foxholes, and while I am ashamed to even admit it (I guess it means I’ve really gone soft) I think at least part of that fear is reasonable. On our missions they are planned and we have the element of surprise, and we’re attacking fixed positions. On the line all it takes is a mortar hitting the wrong place and not even Steve can survive that. Anyway it is very late. This is a “calm before the storm” and rather than resting I am finding that I can’t stay asleep more than a couple hours at a time. At this rate I will be so tired when we are invading France that I will fall asleep on the beachhead.

**April 25**
Mail—I have a strange mix of correspondents these days! Two from my little redhead Valentine Miss Clemmons (that is how she signs them “to be proper”), one from Margaret Miller, one from Teddy, one from Castellano, and one each from Annie (meaning Tech Sgt Cliff Ainsley) and Gene Plinsky. Plinsky it should surprise no one to hear is a terrible letter writer—his was about four lines long: “Sarge we are All getting our drinks Payed For the minite any body hears we know you so give them krauts a bit of Hell don’t forget the “Little People” and give My Name to Jean Terny if you meet her, or to Duke Ellington if he needs a Harmonica!” Hell, I didn’t know we are supposed to be rubbing elbows with Gene Tierney or anybody else—all we are doing is jumping out of planes or training to! I know Steve has met Betty Grable and Marlene Dietrich and Rita Hayworth (some friend he is) but I guess that was when he was running around America with tights on and not here—bastard! At any rate it is a good thing Plinsky’s a whiz at fixing things otherwise I don’t know how a man who can’t spell the lady’s name who has the same name as him would get on in life. Of course with Plinsky all he needs is two seconds to make you laugh and then you’d do anything for him. I guess that’s what they call charisma.

Anyway—the fellows are all OK and Castellano says Fischer still a top notch CO—of course we only knew him briefly before Rocca Veragotti but then again it does not take much combat to find out if a rifle company CO is worth anything, and Fischer is a man I’d follow again.

April 29

Down at Barking Cat (I will never understand Brits) as we usually do on Fridays if we can get away as it is a small place a bit out of the way that is next to Monty’s old “club” called Spade & Saddle (?) which has shut down since the war and getting bombed. Well the Barking Cat (a real dive) has taken up the mantle of Spade & Saddle (“a degenerate den of gamblers and gossips, but a good bit of fun”—Monty) as well as being its normal self, in other words a bar with two kinds of bitter, awful food (except shepherd’s pie and fried fish) and a mess of rough and tumble types not even Monty can understand when they speak—except they all say it’s English!

One of the fellows there goes by Reg (about our age but he does war work) and recently has decided running a stud game is a fine way to scam the yanks out of our dollars. I think everybody that sits down to play poker must believe he’s a hustler, because we all of us spent about an hour playing dumb asking for an explanation of the rules and Monty doing his best to translate “aye mate weah gotta bitta oi-low fink you play?” We played for a few hours—between the seven of us lost at least $150 in all—except Jim who actually did not know how to play only he came away plus $75!

April 30

Made to go to medical today along with all the rest of the commandos—we all have clean bill of health other than the nurse giving me a look I have never gotten in my life from a dame: “you’re a little scrawny to be a Howling Commando, aren’t you?” Me! Scrawny! I would have laughed except I was on an exam table and mainly trying to keep my head. I think I said “anybody looks scrawny next to Captain America ma’am”. Anyway there was a mirror and I’ve got eyes—Nurse “manly pride, what’s that?” Tyson isn’t exactly wrong—all this running around Europe does wonders for a man watching his figure I guess. According to her I am 147 pounds and that is down more than 30 pounds from before I shipped last year. Anyway I have orders to eat more. Hah! If I could I would! If this invasion happens that does not seem likely.

Historical Notes: Operation Umbrella

March 28—April 6, 1944
Operation Umbrella was one of the most crippling blows levied against SS-FD, and certainly one of the most substantial achievements of the so-called “Oil campaign” perpetrated by Allied bomber groups across Nazi oil refineries and stockpiles throughout the Reich. The target was the SS-FD base at Kozmice, Czechoslovakia, a small village close to the major industrial center of Ostrava. Since 1939, SS-FD had used the facility at Kozmice to store the excess fuel, coal, and munitions its operatives throughout the Reich had employed administrative espionage to divert from other Nazi organizations.

While SS-FD had developed highly advanced (and heretofore not replicated) weapons and vehicles which relied on a separate energy source, the vast majority of its troops, arms, and overall operations relied on traditional petroleum products. Much like the V-series of “flying bombs,” SS-FD’s special weapons and vehicles were highly effective, but in limited supply.

Just weeks after Operation Chaplin’s successful capture of Ernst Schäfer, codebreakers at Bletchley Park found ways to use his information to develop cribs for SS-FD messages. Allied forces learned that in response to the devastating losses at Vorstellenlager, Weisensee, and Hydra, SS-FD had elected to decommission many of its existing bases and consolidate its forces. One of the bases to be decommissioned was Kozmice—a priceless resource that would provide the fuel SS-FD needed in order to reestablish itself in newly secure and secret locations.

Kozmice therefore became a very high priority target. Destroying it would severely compromise both SS-FD’s future operational capability as well as force SS-FD formations to continue utilizing known bases.

Prior to decrypting these intercepted messages, OSS/SSR had believed the Kozmice facility to be a simple personnel outpost. Learning from Schäfer that it was in fact a oil depot of serious significance, and having that intelligence confirmed by Bletchley Park, led to the rapid planning and preparation of a joint operation between SSR107 and the Eighth Air Force.

On March 28, SSR107 parachuted in to the “steel heart” of Czechoslovakia. Under the cover of darkness, Captain America and the Howling Commandos traveled more than 10 kilometers until they reached the Kozmice depot. Over the next two hours, SSR107 destroyed and dismantled virtually all of Kozmice’s robust air defenses and captured important intelligence. While engaging with the defending SS-FD forces, SSR107 successfully set the transmitting beacons which would guide the bombers to their target.

On the early morning of March 29, just hours after SSR107’s exfiltration, the 100th, (“The Bloody Hundredth”), 91st (“The Ragged Irregulars”), 95th, and the 303rd (“Hell’s Angels”) Bombardment Groups of the USAAF Eighth Air Force executed a massive daylight bombing raid of Kozmice. Thanks to the efforts of SSR107, the Kozmice depot was essentially defenseless and only three planes of more than 165 were lost—and those due to mechanical and/or pilot errors.

The Kozmice depot was razed as a total loss, for a fourth major defeat for SS-FD. Historians widely agree that the destruction of Kozmice—and the shockwave sent through SS-FD as the result of such a wholesale defeat—led to the increased factionalization of SS-FD, with the major camps either swearing renewed allegiance to the Reich or the most fanatical elements abandoning the Führer entirely. In any case, the result was a paralyzed SS-FD organization that had been more-or-less immobilized, disarmed, and thrown in total disarray. SS-FD would not begin to recover from this blow until the latter months of 1944.
Czechoslovakia was invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany in 1938.

D rations were high-calorie “Army chocolate” bars that served as emergency rations, at about 1800 calories per ration (about 3 bars).

“Chute” is short for parachutes, which were made from silk and often shipped home to be reused and even sewn into wedding dresses.

The Colt 1911 is a .45-caliber pistol that was the standard-issue sidearm in the US Armed Forces for 75 years.

“J.O.E.” is an abbreviation for “Jolly Old England.”

Isaiah 59:7. “Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.” King James Version.

Sgt. Barnes was awarded his second Purple Heart after receiving multiple wounds during the early stages of Operation Umbrella. He continued to fight despite his injuries, personally covering the commandos’ withdrawal and killing three SS-FD machine gun teams who were within range of all seven commandos. During the following week spent behind enemy lines, he and Captain Rogers barely slept or ate while helping—and in some cases outright carrying—their sick comrades as they traversed more than 75 miles in hostile territory.

A rude gesture involving flicking one’s hand away from one’s chin, and generally means “get lost” or “f—k off.”

Chapter End Notes

Sincere thanks to my beta reader, devildears, for her support, insight, and fastidious attention to detail. <3

Additional thanks to all those who read, comment, and give kudos. Your feedback is super motivating and highly appreciated—looking forward to your impressions of this chapter!
May 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May

England

May 5

We are now attached to the Big Red One.[1] Full week of training. We know very well by now how to live in the wild and sleep in pup tents and don’t need more training for that but Steve and Dernier at least are not very accustomed to being a part of a large formation and neither are Jim and Gabe (as infantry anyway) so I suppose it’s good practice. Amphibious landing likely—3 days work with Higgins boats[2] this week. Weekend pass but we are staying in Blandford not going back to London though there is a train. Not billeted anywhere and instead sharing a hut with half a rifle platoon who are all too much in awe to say anything to us—must be replacements. Steve got word that invasion pushed out but don’t know to when.

May 7

I guess it is probably the circumstances but having seen a bit of Africa, Italy, France, Austria, etc. I have to say England is the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. It’s like somebody took the best parts of Prospect Park and said “let’s make this a whole country.” There are some beautiful places in Italy too but I have mostly seen them bombed to pieces or else while myself getting bombed to pieces and I think those circumstances may have prejudiced me. Today Steve and me went down to the coast. Neither of us have ever seen anything like it. I guess on clear days on some parts of the coast you can see France. It is wild realizing the enemy is that close. And England standing on her own for so long in 40 and 41 with the krauts waiting just across the channel. We have met a few fellows in fighter command—I remember me and Steve glued to the radio during the battle of Britain, Steve even keeping a tally each day of how many planes lost by the krauts & how many by the Brits. At a pub we were talking to a couple of local fellows and the way they described the dogfights: the smoke from the planes trailing in the skies like snakes, the sound of the spitfires[3] screaming overhead to meet the Luftwaffe—it is a hell of a thing to picture (of course we met a couple spit pilots in London & Jim joked: “how can you tell if a RAF officer’s a spitfire pilot? –their ribbons? –no, he’ll fucking tell you!). One of them even saw a kraut 109[4] spiral into the channel after getting shot down by a hurricane[5]—and a fishing boat captain went to capture the pilot, who was dead when he got there.

Anyway Steve brought his sketchbook and I know he hates being watched when he draws so I went down to the beach. The last time I was on a beach not getting shot at was in Sicily, when me and Miller were teaching guys to swim, and you couldn’t confuse that beach for this one. It was sunny (somebody ought to run an extra edition just with that bit of news) and warmer than it has been since the whole time I’ve been in England. In fact I haven’t been anywhere this warm since that first couple of weeks in Italy—only we weren’t thinking about that then.

I was in uniform and there were other people around but I found a couple of big rocks and just stretched out on them and used my cap to shield my eyes and just did nothing for a while. It is one of those things where you get to listening the waves and the seagulls and even aircraft engines when
they pass overhead but it is the most relaxing sound you’ve ever heard—kind of like early mornings at home when all the neighbors are just starting to come awake and the shops are firing up their ovens and the papers getting delivered on the front stoops. All those little sounds that make a place seem peaceful before people remember all the money they need to make and the work they need to do. I guess in our case it’s the battles we need to fight—and the krauts we are supposed to kill. As they are people too I guess they must be thinking the same thing, if a kraut soldier got a Sunday afternoon off and was a hundred miles south of me in France, thinking to himself, “if only this day could keep going and going,” the same as me.

May 10

Food is awful here—almost all terrible B rations or the stuff you just mix with water. With all the fucking boxes and crates and storage areas everywhere you’d think at least some of it would be food worth eating. At breakfast today Dernier told me half in English (which is real progress) that he had a dream about hamburgers—the ones at Rainbow Corner back in London. And damn if my mouth didn’t start really watering—and how cruel to answer that with powdered eggs. Of course I think he was a little ashamed of himself, like he ought to have been dreaming about frog legs or something.

May 12

Out to the pub with a couple of guys from our makeshift barracks—S/Sgt Hank Massey, Cpl. Joe Casolari, Pfc. Elliott Conaway, Pfc. Angelo LaGuardia (not related to the mayor—I asked), and T/4 Sgt. Dwight Perlmutter. Just the enlisted men—I gather the officers had something in mind for Steve & Monty. Probably better in any case considering it seems these fellows can’t find their tongues if he’s around.

Despite this being the 1st Infantry most of these guys have not seen any combat—just Massey. So they are raring to go naturally (it seems most men, even if they’re drafted and don’t enlist, somehow get excited about battle once they’ve been trained up—I guess just like practicing baseball makes you want to play a real game). Well after a couple pints (and them figuring out we aren’t allowed to say anything more about our missions than what’s in the newsreels) Perlmutter asks: what’s the craziest damn shit you ever saw in combat?

Well we got a lot of shit that matches that description by comparison to your average grunt but Carter’s put the fear of God into us about keeping our mouths shut. But then Dum-Dum comes up with this fellow Jack Churchill he heard about—a British officer who ran into battle with a goddamn sword.[6] And then I realized I’d heard of him too, unless the Brits have got more than one of these jokers! Story goes that at Salerno he charged the beach with fucking bagpipes a bow and a sword like he was god damn King Arthur. And he even played the bagpipes. And Dum-Dum claims a pal of his said later that he heard from one of his pals that the whole reason Churchill didn’t get a buzzsaw’s full attention is that the krauts (who got captured later and this is how they know) thought he was crazy and couldn’t believe their eyes. Well shit! Steve might be on to something with the fucking target on his chest after all!

Well once Salerno comes up then it’s obvious what they want to know next: beach landings. Now out of all of us just me and Dum-Dum have actually done one—Greece doesn’t count on account it was only 7 of us and not getting shot at—but me and Dum-Dum were both at Sicily and then of course me at Salerno. The fact is that amphibious assault has to be the worst kind there is. There is so much that can go straight to shit. I think of how far off the mark our boat was to our landing zone, and how hard it was to even get out of the water at all. And depending on the defenses it can seem like the krauts never run out of ammunition at all, like their mausers can’t overheat like our Brownings or something—they do of course but it doesn’t seem that way when they got a dozen of
them pointed at you. That’s one thing the Nazis have got on us I think—it seems like every company’s got four times as many MGs as ours do.[7] Not to mention that once you get seawater in your eyes you can’t see for shit, and you can’t hear because of the shelling and the screaming. It is goddamn hell is what it is—just as bad as being on the line in Italy only the fights at Gela and Salerno didn’t last so long.

“There’s only two ways you can go,” I said finally, because how do you describe it to guys who haven’t seen it for themselves? – “dead and straight to hell, or straight into hell and dead.”[8]

May 17

Exercises 12 hours a day last 3 days—we are all tired (even Steve). Food still awful—we have done some work with the Navy though and Steve being Steve meant they were happy to give Cap (and us) some of their chow—better at least than the shit we have been eating. I am starving—and no doubt disappointing Nurse “You’re scrawny”. Still no word as to the date. Channel is choppy but surely it has to be soon.

May 18

Monty got word from his pals about what we have all been wondering: why the sudden brakes on Operation H—?[9] He doesn’t have much information only that the work we’ve been doing has caught SHAEF’s[10] attention more than we realized—and it seems like they have started to figure out Captain America and his pals (in Monty’s pal’s words) “have a disproportionate positive effect on the general course of pitched battle” which I guess is a fancy way of saying it’s not just a morale thing but a combat thing that makes us worth their while, and OSS/SSR has gotten overridden by SHAEF who want to see us attached to regular units. Of course Steve is Mister “brass knows best” but I think that must be only because he doesn’t realize an 88 can kill him with or without the superman serum.

May 19

It must be happening soon. This entire week nothing but training and briefings only the briefings don’t say anything since we don’t know where we are invading yet other than it’s a beach in fucking France. Heard Ike is making the rounds but Massey told me he visited 1st Div. back in April, when we were still in Czechoslovakia.[11] Of course if any of us meets Ike it’ll be Steve!

May 21

Got the news a couple days ago that we finally beat the krauts at Monte Cassino. Monte Cassino—not even 20 miles from Venafro, and that was 7 months ago. I cannot believe it was 7 months ago and those poor fucks have been fighting over that same stretch of mud through the winter and facing those fucking kraut MGs and artillery for months. It makes all of it feel so pointless. All my friends slaughtered so that more men could be slaughtered for the next half a year? It makes me so angry I can’t breathe. Harry killed, and yet here we are and everyone knows that the real fight is going to be in France not Italy. In one of Castellano’s letters he managed to track down most of Able and he has found that at least 60 died at Venafro and A—and we know it’s more. I saw most of 2nd platoon die myself. Carter, Joyce, O’Riley, Wallace, Webster, Dunning, Rossi, Rowe, and obviously Adler, Glenn, Skip, and Harry. All those men dead for nothing—for a piece of goddamn shit rock in the middle of fucking Italy nowhere near Berlin. It makes me sick.

May 23
Last couple days on sand tables and maps. We finally know where we’re going. I guess they figured Calais is too easy.[12] In any case we are assigned O—[13] along with the Big Red One and all these fellows we have been training with. At least for now—there has been a ruckus at OSS/SSR with SHAEF because they don’t want to send their one and only super soldier in with the infantry—we hear this and Jim just lifts his canteen “Appreciate the concern for us,” very straight faced. Hah! I guess we are disposable by comparison. OSS/SSR trying to put the fear of God into SHAEF—how it will look if Captain America gets killed in Normandy, Jesus Mary and Joseph. But Steve is (naturally) fighting back with all he’s got. We have spent the last however many weeks entrenched with these men and we have no intention of letting them lead the way without us. Steve fired off a very angry telegram and had a screaming match on the telephone to which I said, “Jesus Christ Steve you ought to thank God you are the only super soldier we’ve got as if you weren’t, you would be spending D-day getting court martialed!” He just grinned—same old grin that got us into I don’t know how many fights growing up.

May 25

Looks like June 5.

Steve cornered me this morning with, “Buck, tell me about Sicily and Salerno,” and I just rolled my eyes, “Pal, you’ve been leading us all over Europe for 6 months, don’t tell me now that you don’t know what you’re doing,” and he just crossed his arms (which was a lot funnier when he used to do that to look stern when he was 5 foot nothing and a 100 pounds) and so I just asked him, “what do you want to know?”

Well he doesn’t say anything at first and then says he knows I led men up the beachhead. Well I don’t know how the hell he knows that as I don’t talk about it and I say so. He at least has the sense to be embarrassed! And as it turns out everything has been written down and put in our OSS/SSR files that Steve read through back in December. Well shit! So I explained a little about Halliwell and then also that we had the finest noncoms in the entire damn army. And in the end Halliwell did all right but there are just some guys who aren’t fit to lead men and unfortunately for him he was one of them. If you gave him a clear mission and a clear task, he was OK—put him in a full assault with a hundred krauts staring at you and he was helpless. So 2nd platoon was left to me, Carter, Harry, and Tippett and our Tech Sgts Rogers, Annie, and Glenn who were real professionals.

But Steve asks: “But what about the assault itself?”

The fact is that it isn’t really about the shots you fire or grenades you throw. If you are leading them as me Harry and Carter had to do, it is more about getting the men to follow than it is about bullets. Most men just want to be led. I told him how Halliwell was frozen stiff, and even though I have written about it a little this is the first time I ever talked about it to anybody (outside of Harry—and that is different seeing as he was there) and certainly to Steve—funny how something you dream about all the time can be so hard to put into words. I said: “The most important thing we did was get our men off the boats. We just kept screaming to move forward. Keep going! Let’s go! Move your fucking ass! And eventually they did.” I remember dragging some guys up the beach, who were so scared that their legs didn’t even work, and helping guys reload their guns because their hands couldn’t stop shaking and you could see in their eyes that nobody was home. But of course it’s not just noncoms—at the end of the day there are only a couple of us and a lot more regular guys. And to have guys like Frank Castellano, Jim Delaney, Gene Benson, Joe Fortunato, George Rudi, Skip Nichols, Paul Lafayette—hell! They are as important, more important, than good noncoms. At the end of the day I guess it is how many men do you have who can keep going, versus how many who can’t. I guess that’s not all that different than anything in life—only the stakes are a little different.
May 27

Letter from Teddy. No doubt it will be the last I hear from him until after the D-day and probably for a long time after that. If I think about him and the job that the rest of the 101st and 82nd have in all of this my stomach starts twisting so bad I want to throw up. My kid brother, jumping from a fucking plane into Nazi territory. This is exactly what I never wanted. His letter was short—he knows we are doing our part too as it’s been on newsreels and no doubt part of the briefings to the other units —“The Commandos lead the charge in Europe!” (bullshit as OSS/SSR finally got SHAEF to put us in the second wave for O—, Steve is still angry but the fact that we are going at all will have to be enough).

The thing is that Teddy has always been so serious and rational except for one big thing he can’t see clearly about and that’s me. I get it a little—I am his big brother and just like I always wanted to be like Dad I guess there’s some of Teddy wanting to be like me (of course he always does follows his own mind regardless). But in his letters he is so sure of me—sure of what he hears about in the papers and the newsreels and sure that we will make it through—the only thing it reminds me of is me those couple of days before Sicily, when we know we were going to be seeing action and every man thinks to himself, “it won’t be me who gets it!” but of course all it takes is for one of your friends to get hit and suddenly you realize that there is no such thing as a sure thing. We all just as likely to get killed as anybody else. And I think part of Teddy thinks that there is no chance me and Steve could be goners. There is such a strange optimism in his letters—“home by Christmas”—that makes me almost laugh because I remember thinking “home by Christmas!” in July last year, so very sure of myself. I cannot tell if it’s just that Teddy hasn’t see combat yet or if he believes in me in that much—in any case I don’t want him to lose his conviction either direction but war has way of making you do exactly that. I hate this—I am tired of this—I want so badly for him to be home safe.

May 29

No weekend passes as the base is sealed—this is an unhappy Monday as everyone I see somehow still got drunk still but off God knows what instead of Tommy beer—or else they are so tired they can’t walk straight. This is what happens when you coop up a bunch of soldiers for a weekend!

The countdown is really on now. We have all written letters and sent them back to the house at Grosvenor street for our foot lockers—though I guess those are getting put in storage so it probably means we really aren’t going to be back in London for a long time. Cleaning our gear again and again. Packing and re-packing. We have some exercises but they are light as I think command doesn’t want to wear us out.

Historical Notes

The first four operations of the Heracles Campaign to eliminate SS-Forschungsdienst (SS-FD)— Bonfire, Tophat, Chaplin, and Umbrella—had been completed with a degree of unmitigated success that not the Strategic Scientific Reserve, its parent outfit the Office of Strategic Services, or Allied command have even dared to imagine. By May 1944, SS-FD's operations were sluggish and ill-supplied, reeling from the loss of thousands of personnel, munitions, and fuel reserves. It was perfect timing; with the long-planned invasion of France to come in June 1944, subduing SS-FD was a substantial strategic measure that prevented Allied forces from facing the extreme weapons of war for which Hydra forces had become infamous.
Yet the success of SSR-107 and of the Heracles Campaign caused new problems within Allied command. With their eyes on a larger prize—namely, the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany—and the unit's growing fame on the field of battle, Allied leadership withdrew resources from the Heracles Campaign in order to reallocate SSR107 to the larger war effort. The argument was that SSR107's mission had been to cripple Hydra, which they had accomplished, and with Bletchley Park now building a bombe machine that would decrypt SS-FD intercepts, and, theoretically, warn the Allies if additional intervention became necessary, there was substantial pressure to see what a highly trained unit led by a super soldier could do in concert with regular units.

The decision was made in April to embed SSR107 with the 1st Infantry Division in preparation for the D-Day landings planned for late May or early June. After months of dangerous missions deep behind enemy lines, SSR107 began to prepare to face not simply a Hydra base caught by surprise, but the feared Wehrmacht and SS divisions charged with the defense of Nazi-occupied France.

Chapter Endnotes

[1] The “Big Red One” was the nickname of the US Army 1st Infantry Division, whose insignia was a red “1” on a green field.

[2] “Higgins boats”, or Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVP) were amphibious landing craft.

[3] The Supermarine Spitfire was the legendary single-seat fighter plane of the Royal Air Force (RAF).


[5] The Hawker Hurricane was another RAF single-seat fighter plane.


[7] An apt observation of German infantry tactics, which differ sharply from American tactics. American light infantry is built upon the foundation of the individual rifleman, compared to the German focus on the machine gun team, in which the rifleman’s sole purpose is to protect the machine gun. This philosophical difference between American and German infantry tactics continues to this day.

[8] During the Vietnam War, soldiers embarking on a patrol would often say to one another: “Time to dash to the shed, boys!”, a morbid reference to this piece of advice. “Dead And Straight to Hell” (“DASH”) or Straight to Hell and Dead” (“SHED”). The phrase has since become a common American idiom equivalent to “between a rock and a hard place.”

[9] Operation Heracles, the overarching campaign to destroy SS-FD (Hydra).


[12] In fact, Calais was the most logical point for the Allies to invade—which is why Germany
concentrated its defending forces there in the lead-up to D-Day.

[13] Omaha Beach, one of two beachheads assigned to American forces. The others were Gold, Juno, and Sword, assigned to British and Canadian forces.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
The 1st Infantry Division was indeed based in Blandford in the lead-up to D-Day, and they did have to eat mostly B Rations. Also true that Eisenhower inspected them on April 2, 1944.

Jack Churchill--guy who went into battle with a broadsword and bagpipes--was a real dude.

Thanks to everyone for your comments and kudos--they are very appreciated! Feedback the fuel that keeps this fire going, so thank you and I hope you enjoyed May 1944. D-Day is coming!
June 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June

Operation Overlord

Mail—letters from Ma (one for me and one for Steve). I know Ted must have gotten the same one. I guess the entire world knows D-day is coming. Ma is talking about all the neighborhood going to Mass a hell of a lot more than they usually do. With as many guys as I meet from home it’s no
wonder—there can’t be many sons left in Brooklyn. Ma’s handwriting not so neat as it normally is—I think she must worry a lot normally but she’s never known in advance that her sons were going into action like this and I can easily imagine her hand shaking. When she hears about what the commandos get up to, it is only after they’ve got a newsreel out at the pictures and she knows we are OK. Poor Ma—poor mothers everywhere.

June 4

War is mostly swinging like a grandfather clock from the dullest boredom of your life to fear so sticky, like oil that won’t wash off, that it takes days to realize you’ve swung back to being bored. But I think the worst is this awful anticipation in your gut with nothing to do but knowing it’s happening soon. Where we are the activity is unbelievable—never seen so many ships in my entire life and I worked at a shipyard! It seems like every man could ride to France in his own fucking boat if he had to. And all any of us have to do is clean our weapons and look at maps and read letters from home and wait and wait and wait. It is like a hive of bees in your stomach—a hive of bees inside everyone you see, so we are all just one big mass of nervous men who can’t sit still and who’ve got nothing to do but wait. God but this waiting is awful.

Later

Postponed. We even got in the goddamn boats and then it was called off. I suppose thank Christ as I have been in a seaborne landing in bad weather and if it isn’t awful enough on its own nobody wants to be sitting in the middle of 20 guys upchucking their guts out. Everybody just wants to get going though—not geared up anymore but just waiting and you’d think we were schoollkids sitting through Mass on our birthdays instead of soldiers trained for combat with how goddamn twitchy we all are. Sister Callaghan would be slapping the backs of heads left and right if she was here.

June 6

Ike said on the radio: “The eyes of the world are upon you.” I will settle for Teddy’s Steve’s Jack’s Gabe’s and the rest of the fellows, Ma’s, Dad’s, and Curly’s if we can all just somehow make it home.

June 7

Pitcher clocked me in the head once at the ballpark when I was maybe 13 I remember Steve going after him (Sidney O’Keeffe) spitting curses at him like it was on purpose even though everybody knew half the pitches he threw were going to go wild. I remember hearing Steve scrap with Sid and the other kids yelling but everything was sort of thick and slow like a record going at the wrong speed a 78 at 33 or maybe where my head was technicolor and the rest of the world radio. Only my antenna was busted. My antenna’s busted now too, maybe more busted than it’s ever been, or just rusted.

All of us alive Steve shot in the thigh but OK somehow thank fucking Christ we are in a church with about 45 other guys the whole place quiet as Borough Park on a Friday night just guys breathing except I think in our heads it is still loud. All any of us can possibly be hearing are the guns the 88s the way sand is under your boots when it’s red through ears ringing men screaming the buzzsaws hitting the sand like each bullet’s a lightning strike and the sand sprays up like when a guy gets hit in an artery.

Tripped over a leg by itself. This is the only thing my antenna can pick up is me tripping over some guy’s leg and when I fell it was right into some other guy’s guts. How do you stop seeing this shit
when it hits you in the face like this and it is all that even seems to fit inside my head these days. I keep thinking each battle I am in that somehow it’ll be like the last one and that it’ll be like how me and Steve saw Snow White about five times in five nights and you know what’s coming after a while but I have been in this fight for almost a year now and every time it feels like it is the first time. [2]

June 8

Word is the drop was a real snafu[3] for the airborne and they are scattered everywhere asked everyone I could find from the 101st or 82nd if they have seen Teddy but no one has. News men here wanted us to go back to the beach and act out what we did, Steve hates saying no to anybody but I was about to get myself court-martialed I was “mad as a red-assed dog” (Powell) after they asked until Monty stepped in and told them to pound sand. Asking us to play pretend—for fuck’s sake!

June 9

When we finally sat down on D-day after the fighting stopped (for us) we had K-rations and Dernier showed up with a bottle of hooch (just as godawful as the stuff me and Steve used to get drunk off of in school) and not too far away there were some other fellows and one of them started singing Jimmy Dorsey’s tune with Bob Eberly (and Kitty something) I think and even though the song could not be more different for a second I could have sworn I was in Italy listening to Rossi sing. It is how he got to be called “Lily” (after Lily Pons), he could sing like you never hear anybody sing except if you’re ushering at the opera like Ted’s pal Billy Wetzel used to before he joined up. To this day I think it is the most beautiful thing I ever heard—nobody knew the words (it was in French) but with a song like that and hearts in the condition ours were you don’t really need to know what the words are. Poor Rossi—to think he was just a kid who could sing like that and could have gone places and instead he’s in the ground.

June 10

“You know what your Ma used to say Buck, rub a little dirt on it and you’ll be just fine,” Steve said when he caught me looking at his leg. You know for the longest time I liked that me and Mrs. Rogers treated Steve like he was a regular fellow not a cripple and now I find myself wishing she maybe would have said “if you find yourself with a Nazi bullet in your leg don’t you fucking volunteer for a goddamn night raid Steven.” We are all very tired but there’s a job to be done isn’t there. Word is a ranger company holed up in a little town with hard fighting – Saint-Martin-de-Mer. and it’s our job to be the cavalry. We have been resupplied no hot food except what we could scrounge up from a café cellar (felt a little bad about that but Dernier was the first to suggest it and as he’s a frog I guess it’s fine).

June 12

We have maybe two platoons and enough ammo for one. There are civilians everywhere in cellars—saw a family killed from their house getting bombed—it must have been our bombs that did it as the krauts haven’t got shit in the air. The mother had a rosary in her hand and I realized that good god it has been months since I prayed the rosary. I guess I wore out all my prayer in Italy.

Two Lts here are Woodbridge and Garamendi, both smart as hell and twice as tired. Couple of kraut snipers pinning us down in the northwest corner of the town and we think it’s at least a couple Pzg[6] companies which means we are outclassed—Steve strong but he did not carry a Sherman[7]
here on his back. Me, Dum-Dum, and Dernier doing recon shortly I had to break out my sternest look to get Steve to stay put as I am not convinced about that leg at all—also said I would write Ma and Curly and he shut his mouth after that but not after complaining I’m unfair. He’s fucking right I’m unfair!

**June 15**

Heard we are linked up with the Brits. Still nothing about Teddy though I guess I should have known that’s how it will be. My fear for him a lump of coal in my stomach where the minute I see an eagle patch it stokes up into a full flame.[8] We have a day of R&R before mission at Brégandes. It has been almost ten days since D-day, I told Steve that and he couldn’t believe it either. I can’t figure if it feels longer or shorter—Steve says longer because it feels as if it has been one long drag of reloading your gun laying down covering fire diving away from windows and for me trying to spot a fucking kraut sniper before he gets one of our guys. There were three of them and I got them all but not before they got Garamendi O’Halloran 2 Pfc’s. I didn’t catch the name of Cray Whelan Thornton a Sgt and Haggerty and at least 4 others who just crumpled to the ground bloody bodies.

Supposed to be resting for Brégandes but of course in my head the same old record playing—I can’t sleep for listening to it.

**June 17**

Never been so fucking hungry in my goddamn life. It has been non stop since D-day and our guess is the guys in the supply line are grabbing any halfway decent chow and leaving the shit for the infantry—figures. I will also thank God if I never have to eat another K ration in my entire life. Gabe says to me “you’re Irish what the hell do you know about good food anyway” and then he starts going on about his mama and his “aunties” and all the food they cook. Hell I never even heard of fucking “fried okra” “beans in fat back” and “cracklins” but I was drooling all over Betsy just hearing him rhapsodize like he was William goddamn Blake! Goes to show even the best guy you know can go mean when you don’t expect it! And then I reminded Gabe that I’m half yid not full mick and Monty goes “Bloody hell mate you really don’t know good food then” and Dum-Dum busts up laughing “you’re a damn Tommy your lordship unless you forgot—neither do you!” and then Steve starts sighing like a lovesick dame thinking about my ma’s dinner table. Me too pal.

Anyway we are still alive after Brégandes – killed a lot of krauts and captured probably half a platoon and busted the guns and a couple panzers. Took 2 rifle squads with us and only 4 casualties all wounded no KIA and at least one of those guys punched his ticket home—a Cpl. Roarke who (after the morphine) was almost laughing “I’m going home after hitting the fucking trenches with goddamn Captain America my dance card’ll be full for the next 10 years” and Steve grinned at him “save some dames for the rest of us pal” and then the ambulance driver got there. No KIA! Hell of a good day.

**June 19**

Ran across a company of the 101st and several fellows who know Teddy and that he was OK as of a couple days ago – not hurt in the jump and was at Carentan. I guess the night of the jump he got mixed in with guys from the 82nd as it seems that everyone missed their drop zone – if the airborne was a deck of cards all in order and the planes the dealer then they got shuffled up damn good. Wrote a letter to tell Ma—first letter I wrote since D-day it has been so busy. I guess SHAEF got their answer as to whether we could be worthwhile attached to the regulars—we have been on about six patrols just ourselves and maybe a rifle squad not even counting Brégandes. So tired even not showering or having cots or anything doesn’t bother us. It is hot and we all stink but we are just 7 of
June 21

Radio out just us plus a squad—one MG team two mortar teams and rifles – another patrol but moving through a “cleared” village we spotted movement – at least two SS companies plus panzers from the north west and east trying to get back this road & the village – this is a tight spot. Engaged yesterday enough that they halted but we expect an assault this morning—no contact with command as the radio caught a bullet. Steve is CO and he’s never backed down from a fight in his life. But it is not just his life on the line but 20 men’s lives too plus the four companies (plus Bn HQ and logistics) 15 miles west of us and who could be at risk if these SS fuckers get through us enough to establish a front—he is weighed down by this decision in a way I have not seen him be in his entire life. This may be a last stand for us here. Cannot figure how many are between us and HQ – Steve suggested he go by himself since he thinks he can run the distance but we don’t know how many krauts there are. We think they want to split the divisions so it could be a lot. And Steve says his leg is fine but all this combat and shit food has done a number even on him and he is limping when he thinks nobody us looking—you would think the dumb stupid punk ought to know from the last twenty years that I always keep at least one eye on him whether he is superman or not!

Plan for now is to recon and see if we can’t use TNT to set some traps – we have a couple kraut MG 42s (and ammo) we captured plus two mortar teams – Gabe has got those. Rifle team has a bazooka & 6 rounds. All fully supplied with ammo us included (and grenades) – we have some very good fellows here (Sgts Soto, Cochran & Massey, Pfc Winslow, Queenan, Harris, Bliss, Saunders, Conaway, Dearborn & Smith, Cpls Franklin, Burgess, Roche & Wecker, Pts Seeger, Keene, Johnson, Franchi & Panetta. We will have to be enough – if we aren’t – we are all of us going down fighting.

Later

Waiting for signal from Jim & Dernier – should not be long now and should be keeping watch (not writing) from this church tower but as ever the only thing that stops my hand shaking is this – alone here with overwatch to myself – a kraut in my scope – from this vantage with the moon I can see it glint off Steve’s shield. It only makes sense for this to be my job but to have all of them looking for me to have their back and by God I will do my best but to this point in this war that has never been enough – I remember when I was little and me and Steve would get in a scrap (again, even after promising Fr Cleary not to, again) and Mrs. Rogers would look up and say “Lord, make your strength my own!” but it has seemed to me for a long time now that God has given up on us awful creatures on this bloody bombed rock of earth. At any rate I don’t know that I need strength as much as sharp eyes and steady hands – sharp and steady is the only prayer that matters now and the only one that can help me keep us alive.

June 24

3 KIA (Cochran, Harris & Bliss) 11 WIA (Conaway, Dearborn, Smith, Johnson, Keene, Roche, Burgess, Seeger, Winslow, Panetta, & Saunders). Steve hit with shrapnel but OK, Gabe shot in the leg but OK, myself in the side but it went straight through. We are off the line and Saint-Georges-Eglise has about 115 krauts to add to their church plot. Steve tearing himself up about Cochran, Harris, & Bliss and Panetta & Johnson (who were very badly hurt and may not make it even back to England) and he does not seem to see how goddamn lucky it is that any of us are alive at all & with our objective secured and another road cut off from Jerry. I am almost as shocked to be alive as when we finally put down our guns on D-day. It feels the same, this pulsing blood in your chest that doesn’t know yet the danger’s passed, dog tired, the world louder and brighter even though there are
no guns or shouting or grenades exploding. Never have I seen a welcomer sight than a column of American tanks and fresh infantry wandering into the firefight of our goddamn lives. Steve still not slept – he is agonizing over the letters he must write to the families—these are the first he has ever had to write. I hope the last.

**June 25**

Dreamed I was in the church tower – a second too late every time – kraut hit the ground just seconds after Gabe and Jim and Dum-Dum, and Harris and Bliss, then Monty and Dernier. All of them perfect head shots even though Harris and Bliss got blown up not shot. Harry there too and Lipsy—Steve next to me like he used to be (like when he was small) not saying anything, just staring at it at all horrified out of his mind and then I looked over and he was gone too with a hole straight between his eyes and I was the only one left—everybody even the krauts were dead.

**June 27**

Went to the field hospital where Gabe is laid up—it is not that bad just straight through his calf (hurts like a fucker I’m sure) but when I got there a couple lieutenants in clean uniforms were trying to get him on a boat to England—Powell would say that’s “crookeder than a snake crawlin up a hog wire fence” – I got a driver with an empty jeep to take me back and get Steve. Thank Christ they were only lieutenants—no doubt trying to ship Gabe back to goddamn Virginia just to get him out of the commandos. Never seen Steve angrier than when he was pointing at guys laid up in the white tent (they had to put Gabe in a separate tent—Jesus Christ it’s not like being a negro is catching!) and asking if any of them were getting shipped home and of course only a couple were and they were the ones missing legs not ones with holes in them. Anyhow they picked a fight with the wrong sons of bitches and they figured it out quick—threatened us with a court martial and Steve just laughed at them as nasty as anyone ever laughed in his life and they skedaddled finally. Steve bullied his way into a telephone hut to call back to London and I stayed with Gabe who was staring at the tent ceiling like his face was made of stone. I remember meeting a couple guys from the 99th fighter squadron (not pilots but a couple aircrew who got banged up doing firefighting)[9] when we were in London in February and the way they looked at Gabe like he was the goddamn president. One of their own standing shoulder to shoulder with Captain America! And then we’d walk out on the street and suddenly he is just an “uppity negro” again. All the while he is one of the best and bravest men any of us ever knew. I told him “you know Steve won’t let them kick of you off right? He’d quit first.”

Gabe looked just miserable and said “I know he would, and he’d disobey a direct order for it too and get arrested or court-martialed. I’m just tired of this, Sarge. I’m just so tired of it.”

Fact is I’m half Jew (of course plenty of people hate the mick half too) but you don’t know it unless I say so. Everywhere Gabe goes he’s a negro before he even opens his mouth. And he got shot in the fucking leg on a mission where it was 27 up against about 200 SS and a couple tanks and we won and the first thing these jackasses do is try and send him away. They ought to be giving him a goddamn medal.[10] But it doesn’t help to say any of that. So I sat with him a while and we imagined what was happening with baseball (he goes for the Orioles but mostly cares about the negro leagues so he follows the Black Sox).

**June 30**

News men here again. I guess the reports about Saint-Georges-Eglise have made it to the papers and I think all the reporters in Normandy must be here following us around. Orders from OSS/SSR to cooperate and Steve told just me later it was the price of keeping Gabe—only he is holding them off
until Gabe is on his feet a little better because God only knows Steve will have him at his right hand
the entire newsreel just to spite everyone who thinks he shouldn’t be. We are supposed to be driving
over to Saint-Georges-Eglise tomorrow and pointing out everything and going through the order of
battle I suppose. I draw the line at play-acting. Considering it is mostly blown up now I think they
will have a hard time “getting the sharpshooter’s view from the clocktower” like the fellow told me
he wanted. He asked me with a smile on his face what goes through my mind when I line up my shot
—God and country? Pearl Harbor? Uncle Sam? —and I stared at him struck dumb from the question
so long that I think he thought I was just plain stupid. The fact is that it is none of those things—not
even close. It is sick, numb fear and careful, barely breathing so that I don’t miss. I must never miss.
And then when I shoot, an awful thought curls up from my trigger finger to my heart “how many
mothers must be praying I will miss?” What kind of devil sends a thirty oh six[11] to answer a
mother’s prayer like that? I wonder if my own mother will even recognize me on the newsreels. I
almost hope she can’t.

**Historical Notes**

Captain America and his Howling Commandos played a decisive role in the early days of the
Normandy Campaign. Along with elements of the 1st Infantry Division, SSR107 stormed Omaha
Beach in the second wave of landings in what many contemporaneous accounts lauded as Captain
America's finest hour. Indeed, the unit's experience and presence of mind under fire not only had a
marked effect on battle itself—SSR107 personally destroyed multiple German artillery batteries and
pillboxes—but also on the morale of their fellow infantrymen. "I just followed the man in red, white,
and blue," as one soldier was anonymously quoted in a New York Times report the following day.
"He kept charging forward, so I did too."

SSR107 saw eighteen days of combat in the month of June, beginning with D-Day and continuing
with some of the most famous engagements of the early Normandy campaign.

SSR107 launched a nighttime attack on an entrenched German position at Saint-Martin-de-Mer,
where Rangers were cut off from their parent unit and trapped in the small village. In the confusion,
some Wehrmacht defenders even turned their guns on one other. SSR107 located the encircled
soldiers and were able to bolster their defense with the aid of Sgt. Barnes, who successfully launched
a one-man counter-sniper offensive against several SS snipers embedded with the Panzergrenadier
companies in the village. Over the next day, SSR107 and the two Ranger platoons they had set out
to rescue executed a series of daring guerilla assaults on the German forces, ultimately forcing a
retreat and the loss of virtually all of the enemy's vehicles. Upon their relief by a reserve battalion, an
Army photographer took what became an iconic photograph of the soldiers’ return to friendly
territory in which Captain America and Bucky Barnes are both pictured shoulder-to-shoulder, each
bearing a wounded man in a fireman's carry.

Soon after the Battle of Saint-Martin-de-Mer, SSR107 and elements of their supporting unit
Company F of the 1st Infantry Division set out for the crossroads at Brégandes and successfully
routed German forces there without suffering a single fatality. SSR107 destroyed key artillery and
anti-aircraft batteries at Brégandes and captured more than forty enemy soldiers, including a senior
Abwehr officer attached to the unit, Oberstleutnant Hans Kreutzer, who provided valuable
intelligence to Allied forces.

Despite these and several other notable engagements, without a doubt the crown jewel of SSR107’s
Normandy campaign was the infamous Battle of Saint-Georges-Eglise. What began as a routine light
patrol ended with SSR107’s violent and woefully outnumbered defense of the small village, which
capped two roads capable of providing an efficient shortcut back to the 1st Infantry Division's field
HQ. If attacked, the division would have been split apart and all supply chains cut off to the
formations on the front lines.

Over the course of three days of nearly nonstop combat, Captain America and SSR107, along with two supporting rifle squads, designed and executed one of the finest small-force defenses of a fixed position of the entire war. In his combat engineer capacity, Jacques Dernier constructed a series of devastating traps and choke points for the opposing forces. He raided wine cellars and liquor stores of the virtually abandoned village to create Molotov cocktails for use when their short supply of grenades and other explosives ran out. Gabe Jones led the rifle squad’s two mortar teams, spotting for targets and on more than one occasion, placing himself in the direct line of sight of the enemy so as to be able to direct accurate mortar fire. Meanwhile, Captain America, Timothy "Dum-Dum" Dugan and James Falsworth led the rifle elements of the defense.

Perhaps the most famous element of the Battle of Saint-Georges-Eglise, however, was James Morita and Sgt. Barnes's sniper offensive. From the church tower and rooftops, and with Morita's help as a spotter, Barnes coordinated overwatch protection, directed movement on the ground using a two-way radio, and even shot thrown Molotov cocktails, igniting them in midair so as to provide brief visibility to the defenders once flares ran out or to shower enemy forces with fire from above.

The fight continued until SSR107 and their 1st Infantry Division compatriots were joined by fresh Allied forces in the form of an Armored division, which used the very road being defended in the battle for its point of ingress. More than 130 German soldiers were killed and 100 captured, whilst the 27 defenders suffered 14 wounded in action and 3 killed. The stunning story of the Battle of Saint-Georges-Eglise—and its shocking 9-to-1 odds—made headlines around the world.

Captain America and SSR107’s actions during Operation Overlord catapulted the unit to global fame. For the first time not operating under classified conditions, the full scope of the extraordinary bravery displayed by SSR107 was described in detail in newspapers, radio broadcasts, and newsreels. More than ever before, Captain America became known and respected throughout every echelon of Allied forces, from cooks to generals, and for the remainder of the war the Howling Commandos would be in high demand throughout the European Theater.

---

Chapter Endnotes

[1] Borough Park, Brooklyn had a large Jewish population, who would have observed Shabbat on Friday nights.

[2] One of the most famous and oft-quoted entries of The Night War, Barnes’s reflections on the horror of D-Day inspired playwright and Vietnam War veteran Jermaine Hall to write the acclaimed 1993 anti-war play “It Is Still Loud,” in which the main character reads excerpts of the June 7 entry at a spoken word performance.


[4] Barnes was almost certainly referring to the hit 1944 recording “Besame Mucho,” performed by Jimmy Dorsey and his Orchestra and featuring Bob Eberly and Kitty Kallen.

[5] In a 2003 interview, Company A veteran Frank Castellano confirmed that the song performed on that chilly October night by Private Salvatore “Lily” Rossi (1925—1943) was “Je crois entendre encore”, an aria from the Bizet opera Les pechêurs de perles. Rossi was the youngest son of Nikola
Rossi (1889—1948), a tenor noted for his *bel canto* style.


[7] The United States produced close to 50,000 M4 Sherman medium tanks during the war, which all Allied forces used.

[8] Soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division, of which then-Sgt. Ted Barnes was a member, wore the distinctive “Screaming Eagle” unit insignia.

[9] The 99th Fighter Squadron was an all-African-American squadron more popularly known as the “Tuskegee Airmen” or “Red Tails,” for the distinctive red paint on their P-51 Mustangs.

[10] In June 1994, President Bill Clinton finally awarded Gabe Jones the Medal of Honor for his valor in combat during the Battle of Saint-Georges-Eglise—50 years later to the day. Jones became the first black man to serve in World War II to be decorated with the nation’s highest military honor.


Chapter End Notes

For those interested, this recording of *Besame Mucho* is the song which reminds Bucky of Private Salvatore Rossi's rendition of *Je crois entendre encore*, one of my personal favorite arias and certainly a piece that I imagine would have been extraordinarily affecting to hear performed whilst a tired, cold, and frightened soldier in a foxhole.

Additionally, [here is the full text of General Eisenhower's speech before D-Day](http://example.com), of which Bucky quotes just a single line. It's powerful stuff.

The 1st Infantry Division did assault Omaha Beach on D-Day. However, Brégandes, Saint-Martin-de-Mer, and Saint-Georges-Eglise are fictional.

As ever, thank you for reading. Looking forward to your thoughts and feedback!
July 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July

Normandy

July 2

One of the reporters was a dame. There was a gaggle of them all surrounding Steve and Gabe with me and the rest off a bit, Morita sharing his smokes with Monty and I was just looking around at the village. It is like it got frozen the minute the fighting stopped and the krauts gave up, an hour maybe after Dernier’s last charges went off behind their “line” (if you could call it that) and busted their wheels, and after I dropped the last obersturmergruppenfuehrer or whatever the fuck the kraut officer ranks are. It was after the church tower came down. I don’t know if you can call this place “Saint George Church” if it hasn’t got a church any more or by the looks of it, any saints, and no parishioners either except for the bodies that are still left, if you know where to look—and I do. None of ours of course but once you cover a man with rubble and dust you can’t tell if he’s a kraut.

So this woman reporter wandered over to me and she didn’t say anything at all right away so neither did I. I hate it when I have to answer the news men’s questions—somehow me, Bucky Barnes, who’s spent my whole goddamn life sweet talking everybody I ever met, gets tongue-tied trying to come up with different ways to say “gosh am I honored to serve!” and “we’ll be in Berlin by the Fourth of July!” and all the other stuff the propaganda office tries to get us to say. Anyway she finally goes: “it must be strange to come back to the site of such a battle and it be so quiet.”

Not just quiet, I told her—frozen in time. It reminded me of an article I read back in 1940, about when Finland was fighting the Soviets and a war correspondent ran across an entire field of corpses frozen “in fighting attitudes”—bodies frozen stiff sticking their bayonets in other frozen bodies. It was right after I got drafted and reading that sort of thing, it sticks with you when you’re about to be a soldier and there’s a war on—even if it wasn’t our war yet.

Anyway, the dame goes: “James Aldridge.”

I didn’t know what she was talking about so I looked over at her and I suppose she saw the stupid in my face because she explained that the guy I was talking about is somebody she knows, and she quoted the whole thing from memory and the part that sticks with me is:

> As if the men had been suddenly turned to wax, there were two or three thousand Russians and a few Finns, all frozen in fighting attitudes. Some were locked together, their bayonets within each other’s bodies; some were frozen in half-standing positions; some were crouching with their arms crooked, holding the hand grenades they were throwing; some were lying with their rifles shouldered, their legs apart. [11]

It’s not cold here it’s hot (I’ll take it over snow and ice any fucking day—Bonfire op was a goddamn miserable time) and there isn’t anybody frozen throwing a grenade but when I look at Saint-Georges-Eglise I can still see in my mind’s eye where everyone is, and all the krauts, like the moment has passed here but in my mind it is stuck, the kraut squad by the southwest corner of the café is
reloading their gun and a hundred yards away Gabe is climbing over the rubble to try and spot for
the mortar team even though it means he’s in the open. And I’m behind him so if I want to shoot the
kraut who’s got him in his sights I’ve got to shoot towards Gabe—he’s got to not move because
either the kraut who he doesn’t know is there going to get him or the MG team who’s reloading
will or I might miss and hit him. I didn’t miss but all I got to do is close my eyes and I see it
happening.

“How do you keep calm in the heat of battle?” she asked me with a pencil in her hand and a little
notebook in the other and I didn’t know what to say so I just said “practice.” It’s not the first time I
was on over watch and Steve’s downrange or Jim or any of them. Somehow they trust me to have
their back and I think it’s that faith that makes them do stupid fucking shit. Of course I didn’t say that
to the dame exactly (my ma would kill me for talking to a lady like that).

Long story short she started asking me another question and then Dum-Dum comes up next to me
and goes, “Sarge you get her to publish your future prize winning novel yet?” and she laughed and I
didn’t know quite what the joke was but then as it turns out she is married to Hemingway. She got
interested and tried to ask me about my “writing career” (fucking Dum-Dum over here’s a regular
Bob Hope) and I mumbled something about keeping a diary and tried to get away but she followed
me and kept asking questions: “did you think about surrendering?” “did you know how many
Germans there were?” “what was the view from the ground, the soldier’s perspective?” and then I
was getting so riled up at all her questions that for second I forgot she was a dame and just snapped
at her, “I wasn’t on the goddamn ground,” and then pointed out all the buildings still standing from
where I shot however many krauts I shot. And then I asked her what the hell a dame was doing in
the middle of goddamn Normandy anyhow and she just crossed her arms and said, “I want to
understand the war.” And I laughed a little and said, “good luck lady – me too!”

Quick as a fox she leaned in: “What do you mean? – you don’t know why you’re here?”

And I said no, I understood perfectly about Hitler etc. and of course that perhaps there has never
been a more just war than this one, for whatever that is worth (not much to the men dying in it). But
the idea of ‘war!’ No I still haven’t got my walnut wrapped around that—and I have participated in it
not just asked soldiers about it after the fact. (she smiled—so she can take a joke) I don’t think it can
be understood. In fact all you are thinking in the middle of it, even if it is only a small part of your
attention because the rest of you is preoccupied trying not to let your friends die, or to die yourself—
is “How is this happening? What’s in God’s name is happening?”

She thought I meant that it was hard to keep track of everything—no, I’ve got a mental map of
everything, all the buildings and where everyone is and where they might go—that is the sort of
thing I dream about all the time, losing track of someone (or making a mistake calculating angles and
wind), and I don’t know if it is just me who thinks of the battlefield that way or if every soldier has it
at least a little. So then she thought I meant that combat is surreal. No again—it is the most real thing
anyone ever felt. Sometimes if you are in it long enough, the “surreal” part comes once you are out
of it. Like after Gela or Omaha—after Azzano—after any of our missions where suddenly we found
ourselves in London and watching fellows dance with their best girls or people laughing and eating
dinner like we weren’t just fighting for our lives eight hundred miles away. No, in the middle of
fighting—in the middle of me climbing up to the third floor of that house, of trying to go as fast as I
could so my guys didn’t have to go one more minute with my eyes off them—the past and future
don’t exist except to grab hold of the next brick and the next after that and then to pick the right
window and then to try and shoot between heartbeats so you don’t miss. You can’t miss. And all the
while thinking: I’m supposed to be home. I’m supposed to be picking up end of day bread (on sale)
on my way home from work at Ma’s bakery that she likes around the corner from Fort Greene Park.
I’m supposed to be complaining about the Dodgers losing a series or getting a bit of sunburn or my
pay coming late, and wondering where I ought to take out Millie King if she ever says yes.
Of course I didn’t say much of that to her—we have got a lot of rules to follow about keeping up morale and it’s not like I want anybody thinking I’m yellow or a goldbrick[2] or anything. But she asked me enough questions that I finally felt like I could get away with one of my own—when was Hemingway going to come out with another book? And she said she didn’t know. And I said, well hell if he is running around Europe with the rest of us I expect that when this is all over he will have enough to say for ten more For Whom the Bell Tolls—she looked a little sad then and said, you’re probably right.[3]

July 3

Took a donation for anybody’s extra charms (nobody ever has extra but if I show up with Betsy over my shoulder in her full scope and getup then the regular joes just about fall over to give me theirs—funny to see guys get “star struck” at me like they do with Steve and normally I don’t like it but if it wrangles up a birthday present for my best pal, OK. Anyhow I found him in the second floor of a house that’s half blown to shit but a couple of beds are still there and there’s a basement full of wine—so it’s a popular spot. It was just him and Jim, Jim catnapping and Steve with his legs hanging over the side of the bombed-out second floor and just resting for a minute, he was even swinging his legs a little like when we were kids and we’d stick our skinny knees through the fire escape on a hot day just to catch a bit of breeze—too dull and hot to do anything else.

“Hiya Buck,” when I sat down next to him and put the ammo case in his lap, and “the hell is this?” And I go, happy birthday, you dumb punk, and he opens up the ammo box to see about a dozen packs of charms—one of them half gone (I like a bit of candy as much as the next GI) and he laughed and grabbed one. “You steal these?” and I say, Steven Grant, I never stole nothing in my entire goddamn life, and he rolled his eyes “tell that to Rita Hurley’s parents.” He handed half the roll over to me and so we are sitting there for a while just eating candy like it’s 1927 and we’re just two kids instead of men at war, and he says, “you know my birthday is the 4th of July now,” and I said, what in the hell are you talking about? And he explained that I guess when he was cavorting around in a troupe full of pin-up girls some propaganda officer thought it’d be aces for Captain America to be born on Independence Day instead of July 3, which isn’t nearly so patriotic. “That’s the dumbest goddamn shit I ever heard,” I told him after lighting my smoke and he just smiled a little. And then I asked him, “you ever feel like it’s hard to remember yourself before all this?”

He said “no” right away: “I remember how I was before every time I can catch my breath, or run, or jump,”—and I said “and kick, punch, throw yourself in front of a panzer”—and he just grinned and then said, “but it does feel like the last year has been every bit as long as the 25 years before it.” And I said: “Jesus H do I know exactly what you mean.”

July 5

Had a dream I was playing baseball like we did back in Africa before Sicily. It was Harry pitching, Lipsy at 1st, Skip 2nd and John Howe at 3rd and me at shortstop of course. Glenn was catcher and it was Adler, Pritchard, and Ernie Ball in the outfield. Every single one of them killed now except me. It was Powell at bat—I remember because we had a “world series” where every platoon in Able put up two full teams and played each other in a tournament until it was 2nd platoon (my team) against 3rd platoon (Sgt Pike’s).

The kind of dreams I have these days I think a part of me expected it to be the krauts at bat or something, or maybe for me to be looking around at everybody and suddenly it’s Pritchard shot in the throat like he was in Italy, Ball blown up in his own foxhole, Lipsy shot point blank in the head like he was at Azzano, and Harry bloody and maybe holding my hand in one hand and the baseball
in the other, still trying to pitch—(I have had that dream before)—but this time it was just all of us fellows playing baseball together, before any of us saw combat or died. I don’t know that I have ever woken up so sad and happy at the same time—I wish there was a word for when grief and fondness and longing get so mixed together you can’t tell them apart.

**July 7**

Command got the idea to do a bit of infil and see what intelligence we can grab. Now I know OSS/SSR has to be losing their collective goddamn mind that we are still in here in Normandy and also under the command of the regular army and until now I was fine with it as we have done good work here and once there comes to be actionable intel on H— I am sure we will be recalled. But 7 men for a dead of night op just to try and get our mitts on a kraut officer, never mind we don’t know which one, or what he looks like, on the off chance he might have a map that says “whatever you do don’t let the Americans see this secret path to ending the war tomorrow!” Jesus Mary and goddamn Joseph!

**July 8**

Not every officer is a dope I guess—op called off. Steve thinks we are getting pulled back to England soon—frankly I would not mind a bit of a rest.

**July 10**

Got my hands on a bottle of cognac (rangers really know how to find the good stuff) and went and kidnapped Jim & Dum-Dum from a training exercise “Cap’s orders” and we went and sat ourselves in some café chairs on a bombed out street and poured out a couple glasses for dead pals and talked about Sicily. It has been an entire year. Who ever would have thought the war would still be going on? I remember fellows the few days before the landing talking about how in the Great War it only took a couple of months for the doughboys to end things once we got “over there” and surely this one could not be much different—we spanked the Germans once we can do it again!

Of course Jim was not infantry then, he was doing mechanic work (he can take apart and put back together anything and was in school to become an engineer — that is my guess as to why they did not put him in a segregated unit after all) but he still had a devil of a time. He was working on a disabled tank with some pals when it moved a little and hit a mine that I guess had gotten missed. Two of his guys blown to smithereens by the tank shrapnel—and this after the fighting was supposed to be done on his beach. Dum-Dum was seaborne—what a godawful day that was, it was almost easier to count the men who were not seasick than the ones who were. By Dum-Dum’s account (he was at Licata) the seasickness + anticipation was almost worse than the fighting itself—they captured their objective on the 10th unlike us at Gela. Of course I think that if any of us in our little platoon is a born soldier it is Dum-Dum—he laughs more in the middle of combat than he does hustling Tommys at billiards three sheets to the wind.

Thinking of Gela does give me a little sympathy (but not that much) for the krauts now that they are fighting a war where the only birds in the sky are American. Just about every guy I knew (me included) was cursing out the air forces for not doing anything to help us meanwhile we were getting killed by the Luftwaffe. I remember Castellano in my face yelling “whatever fucking happened to a goddamn bomber an hour?” right after another stuka strafed us not even twenty yards away and Harry yelling “bombers are expensive Frank, you aren’t!”

**July 13**
Mail! First mail since the invasion. Letters from everyone except Teddy, even Jack wrote a postcard with a picture of the Hollywood sign on it dated June 6th though it was very short:

*Bucky & Steve—give them hell! Me and my pals all crowded round the radio waiting for reports, taking bets as to when we’ll finally hear “London calling!” or perhaps and even better—“Berlin calling!” Show the krauts how it’s done! All my love, your favorite brother Jack (Lance Corporal)*

Lovely Jack—I can just see Jack saying all that with his crooked smile and uncombed hair, and probably a black eye and a new chipped tooth, bouncing up on his heels like he used to as a kid when he’d get so excited about something it was like his body wasn’t enough to hold it all. I guess that he’s writing from California and no mention in Ma’s letters about a ship date means he isn’t shipping soon—one can only hope the Marines will decide he’s better off pitching for the Dodgers maybe.[6]

Also letters from Ma and Curly—Curly put about a half a sentence about being top of her class again and she wrote about getting placed for a science high school but didn’t say which one. A few months ago I wrote her saying all the places I imagined she was writing her letters to me from—our fire escape or the zoo or the roof of her friend Olive Dempsey’s building with the great view of Brooklyn Bridge, or somewhere else I forgot. Anyhow she wrote to me in this letter: “Now I know you’re trying to get me feeling sorry for you—as if Bucky Barnes ever forgot a thing in his entire life!” and she’s taken to going all over Brooklyn to write me letters—one from the steps at the Brooklyn Museum and then another from the top of the arch at Grand Army Plaza (she wrote it just a couple minutes later she said) where she said, “I am sure that one day when you win the war they will have a parade for you and Steve and you will march straight under the soldiers and sailors arch with all your medals!”

Seems to me she is spending too much of her time reading the papers and listening to the radio and possibly sneaking into the pictures just for the newsreels—I wish she could find a way just to be a little girl instead of worrying about all this. I am awful afraid me or Steve will finally get our number called and some ace reporter will wire the news home before the army even gets a chance to tell our family properly. Not that I guess there’s any real “proper” way to tell somebody their son got killed. I can’t imagine the news coming from a guy in a uniform helps at all. But hearing about it on the radio has got to be worse.

**July 16**

Moving out to Vieilleville-sur-Orne—it’s late now but I guess Monty (the general, not ours) has been “whinging” (how our Monty calls it) to Ike about just the Americans getting the Commandos on the front even though he’s in command of Overlord—well I guess it worked because we are going in to “put the fear of God” into the krauts there who are putting up a real good fight against the British infantry near Caen. This feels like another cheap stunt to me as they are making us leave our 1st Div. pals behind even though we trained with them for weeks and weeks before D-day and have been in battle alongside them ever since. It is grade A bullshit. We are just 7 men (and Gabe still with a limp too) and having good trained men that we can rely on is essential if we’re going to be any use as regular infantry. Steve tried to argue the same thing but got overruled and he is fired up as hell about it. On short notice we gave our best to Lt Woodbridge and Massey and as many as we could find but the orders came in and we only had about an hour to get ourselves in order before moving out. It is bad juju to abandon your men in the middle of a campaign—none of us happy about it at all.

**July 27**
We were right about the bad juju. Back in London—all alive but banged up—we all thought Jim in a very bad way but it looks like he will be OK. Dum-Dum and Monty both WIA pretty bad but should recover, Gabe OK too. Dernier with a hard knock to the head—doctors say he is badly “concussed” and we all joked that it’s hard to tell the difference between regular Dernier and “concussed” Dernier—of course this is not at all true as he can hardly stay awake & is very ill. This is what you get for thinking Captain fucking America is an infantry battalion all on his own.[7] Steve OK (naturally in the best condition of all of us) and I will not be winning any footraces any time soon but we are all at least alive. A sorrier lot you never did see—all the famous Howling Commandos laid up like a bunch of fucking grunts straight from the trenches. I lost enough blood that I blacked out in transport and woke up in the hospital with them working on me and gave the doctor and nurses a real scare as I did not know where I was at all except in a fucking operating theatre. Steve told me later (looking like he had aged about fifty years mind) that the doctor fubar’d[8] my anesthesia and felt awful about it. Sorry but I think I got the worse end of it pal. Christ I haven’t been able to sleep since—leg hurts all over like they are still cutting into it and they have me in a room alone instead of a ward I guess either because I am a real “V.I.P.” or that I kept waking up yelling—for fuck’s sake the last thing I need is a quack coming round asking me about my goddamn feelings.

July 29

Thank god for the best friend anybody ever had. Steve busted me out of the clink (this makes the second time)—the sappy bastard tried to carry me like I was his fainting dame. I said no dice pal and hopped along as best I could until we made it outside and there was Gabe with a truck waiting like he was my own personal red ball express.[9] And now we are back at Grosvenor street where we haven’t been since April and I am dead tired or as Powell would say “rode hard and put away wet.” Lord I could sleep for a goddamn year.

July 30

Woke up to Gabe reading Frankenstein aloud in our old room—don’t know how it is but I think a part of me must hear him talking when I’m asleep because I wake up knowing I’m not alone. I wonder if Steve told him it was one of my favorites or if it’s just more evidence that Gabe is a real psychic. I remember me and Steve reading Frankenstein as kids and I used to pick out scenes for him to draw and he’d get prickly when I told him to make the Monster taller or hairier or Doctor Frankenstein look more like Sister Callaghan (as a joke is what we told Mrs. Rogers later—she wasn’t fooled) and he used to snap, “hey who’s the artist here?” Anyhow I guess as kids we had no idea yet our “accumulation of anguish”[10] would turn out to be like this. It seems to me “anguish” is one of those words that you get to define over and over as you go through life.

Historical Notes

On Martha Gellhorn

Famously, Martha Gellhorn did not publish the contents of her interview with then-Staff Sergeant James Barnes until her June 1969 Atlantic Monthly article, which covered the protest of Brown University students against their commencement speaker, then-National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. In his speech, Kissinger quoted one of Barnes’s February 1945 entries, and was accused of taking Barnes out of context in order to criticize the anti-war movement. In her article, Gellhorn quoted Barnes as saying:

I know the krauts gotta be put down. I know it ain't like the last war, where it all got started because of old men wanting what some other old men got. But none of that
matters, not really, when it's you in the shit and it's your buddies getting blown up, your
guys who you're supposed to be watching out for. At the end of the day, all war is
just kids getting blown up, and even if there's a good reason for it, it's still just kids getting
killed, isn't it?

Gellhorn received media censure and even death threats, with many accusing her of politicizing a
war hero to serve her own gains. Anti-war activists, however, were invigorated by the article and the
quote, and signs bearing the words "It's just kids getting killed!" became commonplace at Vietnam
War protests.

Despite years of incessant questioning and public pressure, Gellhorn never released any of the other
material she'd saved from her brief interview with Barnes.

**Operation Goodwood**

The reassignment of SSR107 to the British 3rd Infantry Division under the British I Corps is
considered one of the luckiest mistakes of the unit's command of the entire war. As Barnes bemoans
in the preceding entries to Operation Goodwood, SSR107 had not drilled with any members of the
British 3rd Infantry and were unprepared to participate in what would become one of the most
significant tank battles of the entire European Theater.

Nonetheless, SSR107 was embedded with Yoke Company, 2nd Battalion, 185th Infantry Brigade
and saw action beginning on July 18, with the assignment to assault the German position at
Vieilleville-sur-Orne, a village along the Bourguébus Ridge that offered a road to one of the bridges
crossing the Orne River that command had identified as a key goal. The village was defended by two
battle groups of the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*, about double the strength expected by
Allied forces.

Along with members of Yoke and Zebra company, SSR107 led a vanguard assault against
Vieilleville-sur-Orne, ultimately becoming trapped behind the line following a vicious counterattack
by the defending Germans. In the ensuing two days of battle, SSR107 was able to remain in radio
contact with the rest of the 185th Brigade, and despite suffering serious casualties, coordinated a
sustained assault against the 12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend* until the early evening of July
20th, when additional British Third Infantry Division forces arrived as cavalry.

Yoke and Zebra Companies received 50% casualties in the two-day operation, and all members
of SSR107 except Gabe Jones suffered injuries severe enough that SSR command called for a
medical evacuation of the entire unit. Of the seven-man team, Jim Morita, Timothy Dugan, James
Falsworth, and James Barnes were the most seriously injured, with both Morita and Barnes suffering
hypovolemic shock in the field hospital--in Morita's case, due to a series of torso and leg shrapnel
wounds, and in Barnes's case, severe trauma to the femoral artery in his left leg.

By July 22nd, the unit was back in England and the procedure for assigning SSR107 to regular
infantry units under official administrative review--supposedly by Eisenhower himself, although that
has never been confirmed.

---

**Chapter Endnotes**

the horrors of the Winter War.

[2] Slang for someone who shirks responsibility or makes excuses to avoid a task.
The “dame reporter” was Martha Gellhorn, who was indeed married to famed writer Ernest Hemingway from 1940—1945 and herself became one of the 20th century’s most acclaimed war correspondents.

Technically, Operation Husky (the invasion of Sicily) began on July 9, 1943 with airborne infantry drops preceding the main amphibious assault the following day.

Edsel Ford of the Ford Motor Company famously promised that his aircraft production plant at Willow Run would produce “a bomber an hour” by applying the principles of mass production that his father, Henry Ford, had perfected with the automobile. The claim was widely publicized and generally perceived as evidence of ludicrous naiveté about the complexity and difficulty of aircraft manufacture. However, by 1944, the plant did indeed meet the goal of producing one aircraft per hour—and then exceeded it.

Lance Corporal John “Jack” Barnes enlisted in the Marine Corps in October 1943, just weeks after his 18th birthday. Though he completed basic and specialized training by February 1944 and many of his recruiting class were shipped directly to the front in the Pacific, Barnes was assigned multiple additional stateside training cycles. Declassified memos years later confirmed that this was intentional, as the War Department was deeply concerned at the Barnes family’s growing notoriety and the risk to home front morale in the event of another “Sullivan brothers,” incident—the 1942 sinking of the USS Juneau, which carried all five Sullivan brothers to their deaths. However, Jack Barnes was ultimately assigned to a combat unit in January 1945 and first saw action during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

The Howling Commandos fought in Operation Goodwood (July 18—20). Primarily an armored engagement, the Commandos supported the assault of the German entrenched position at Vieilleville-sur-Orne, a key village along the Bourguébus Ridge. The village was defended by two battle groups of the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend. Though the Commandos’ assault was ultimately successful, they and their supporting British infantry units suffered heavy casualties.

“F—ked Up Beyond All Repair.”

Primarily staffed by African-American troops, the “Red Ball Express” was the famously fast convoy system that supplied Allied forces throughout the Normandy campaign.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s Monster in Frankenstein: “Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.”

Chapter End Notes

Martha Gellhorn was real and was in Normandy around the time that the interview with Bucky would have taken place. She was a total badass, and pioneered women in conflict journalism.

The Y and Z Companies of 2nd Battalion, 185th Brigade, 3rd British Infantry Division were real units, and did fight in Caen, but the village of Vieilleville-sur-Orne is fictional.

Thanks to my beta DevilDears for her help, and thank you for reading! I really treasure your comments and look forward to your thoughts on this chapter!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
An exhausted Staff Sergeant James Barnes after the Battle of Saint-Georges-Eglise, which was fought over three days against shocking 9:1 odds.

*National Archives and Records Administration*
London

August 2

Everybody at OSS/SSR except Agent Carter seems not especially sympathetic at our getting busted up to hell at Caen. I figure it is mostly that they think as long as we are on British soil it will be harder for infantry divisions to convince Ike they need us to go fight panzers with our bare hands.

Gabe OK but the rest of us have all seen better days—and apparently Steve too except he heals so fast (when he has enough food) he’s been back to normal for a week. It has been such an exhausting couple weeks frankly that I don’t even have energy to be angry about Vieilleville-sur-Orne—just glad it’s over, and apparently we captured our objective—if Steve’s the Joe Louis of the ETO[1] I’ve got no intention of letting him meet Schmeling in the ring anytime soon.[2]

August 5

Agent Carter came to see me today—just me when the rest of the fellows were out or still in the hospital (Monty & Jim). I was camped in the front parlor cleaning Betsy when she let herself in and frankly I have talked to her maybe one or two times ever without Steve so I did not know what she wanted at all. But she sat down and then said, “how’s the leg, Sgt?” and I told her “I think you mean 1st Sgt. ma’am” and she rolled her eyes at me and so I just said I wasn’t going to be giving Fred Astaire a run for his money anytime soon if she was looking to be my Ginger Rogers but that it was healing up pretty good. She didn’t much seem in the mood for jokes as she didn’t even smile and in the last year I have figured out that when you’re wounded people tend to smile at any sign of a joke at all—so I knew she had to be chewing on something important. After a minute she asked, “how about your trigger finger?” and with nobody (not even Steve) there I got pretty quick what she was after and to be honest it made me feel a little sick like when you’re in an airplane and they change altitudes (or do evasive maneuvers) so quick your stomach drops.

She explained that they have gotten good intel (thanks to Operation Chaplin apparently, only I can’t figure out how considering any intel we got in Paris has to be months out of date by now) that a H—officer codenamed Labor[3] is going to be attending a meeting this month in A—[4], and a whole bunch more shit I can’t write down except that I guess he’s a high enough risk that sending a sharpshooter in is the only way OSS/SSR figures to deal with him—Geneva protocol be damned. I said I can think of another way: how about bombing wherever they are meeting all to hell? But I guess it is happening at a real famous church and the orders came down not to target it on bomb raids. Jesus wept. Anyhow I think Carter thought I’d be pleased. She said to me “you know Sgt, you could have a career in this once the war’s over,” and I said “Carter who are you kidding that I’ll make it that far, and even if I do, I’m not picking up another goddamn gun for the rest of my fucking life” and I felt a little bad for cursing at her but Jesus H! Of course she’s the coolest dame to ever walk the earth so she just raised her eyebrow at me and said, “does that mean you’re refusing the mission?” and I said, that mean I got a choice? She didn’t answer for a while but finally said, “Eliminating him now means one less mission behind the wire for your men. You want to help give them a better shot at a homecoming at the end of all of this, or not?” I’ll give it to her—she knows how to play dirty. I told her fine, but for fuck’s sake, not a word to any of them.

August 7

Gave up my crutch as my leg seems to be doing better than expected and I’ve about had it with all of Gabe’s Tiny Tim wise cracks. Jim out of the hospital and Dernier mostly back to normal except he is downright devastated to be back in England—when the fighting stopped on D-day finally I
remember him kissing the ground and saying he was never going to leave the continent again—and with everything moving so quickly to Paris he is especially upset. I guess I can understand—if I ever get to go home to Brooklyn I’m never leaving again either.

**August 8**

Letter from Margaret Miller—not a V mail but a regular letter with a picture of the boys in it—they are sitting together in a red wagon with an American flag and it’s dated the 4th of July. In her letter she writes that they are the spitting image of Harry but I guess I don’t have an eye for that kind of thing because they just look like babies to me. She says they are crawling too, and getting into a lot of trouble and making each other laugh—now that part I do believe as that sounds like Harry! Steve asked me what I was looking at because I guess he thought it was from Ma or Curly and I realized that outside of maybe a handful of times I have never even talked about Harry to Steve ever, and what a damn shame as they are the two best guys in the world, and what great friends they would have been! So I told him a little about what a real stand-up he was, how he could do the best Bogart and Cagney and Jimmy Stewart I ever saw, and how he used to do bits pretending to be them when we were on the line, only guy who could make you laugh no matter what awful shit was happening. And then I told him about how one of our replacements in 2nd platoon who was so young he sounded like his balls hadn’t dropped yet (Joe Webster) and so Harry got him to play Scarlett O’Hara as if he was Mussolini and the kid turned out to have a real knack for it, doing an Italian accent and going: “Adolf, oh Adolf, if you go, where shall I go? What shall I do?” –and Harry like he was in The Great Dictator, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a d**n”![5] And then Steve asked, “what happened to him?” and I found that though I can easily tell stories about Harry now, that last one, that last story, that is one that I still cannot find the words for.

**August 10**

Awful dream—woke up and before I knew what I was doing I was limping from me and Gabe’s room to Steve’s and I shoved my way in and sat with my back against the mattress like I used to when he was sick and I was just waiting for him to wake up—or when he had pneumonia in ’39 praying for him to. Anyway it did not take long for him to wake up and say “That you Buck?” in his dopey tired way and of course he didn’t need me to say anything, he recognizes me like his own face in the mirror same as I do. So he rolled himself off the bed next to me along with half the quilts and just like we were kids made a sort of nest on the floor and just sat for a while. I suppose he was waiting for me to talk (seeing as I used to never shut up—maybe the more bullets I shoot the fewer words I got) and he finally asked me, “what happened to Harry, pal?” and I didn’t answer him but I did tell him about Lipsy, poor Lipsy, who was the most loyal son of a bitch in all of Able Company and who didn’t hesitate one bit when I said we were going to try escaping, and got shot in the head for it. And also Lt. Kurlansky who surrendered to save as many of his men as he could and got executed, and stupid, ballsy Sal Rossi, and how he starting singing that one night in between shelling, most beautiful & saddest thing I ever heard, only time Rossi was ever serious in all the couple months I knew him. Rossi got blown up by a grenade. I also told Steve about Calvin Glenn, who talked about buying a farm after the war, and all the kids he was going to have after marrying his girl Beatrice, and about Skip Nichols, who could recite from memory almost any poem you asked him to (so long as it was Longfellow, Yeats, Whitman, or Frost), and Warren Dietz, who not for a single fucking second thought of anything except keeping his MG going, anything to cover us for just one minute more, even though the shells were coming down every couple seconds and exploding the trees and still he kept his hands on his gun, face like chalk, one hand firing the other feeding ammo, one of the bravest things I ever saw and then he got killed in the camp. After a while I stopped talking my throat was so dry. Steve did not say anything but he didn’t need to. It was like when the two of us went down to Brighton Beach after his ma died even though it was almost
December and just sat for a while. I have had dreams like that too—dreams where I am just walking around our neighborhood or sitting in the park or just laughing at a joke somebody made, even though in the dream I don’t know the joke or the guy telling it.

**August 11**

Meetings and briefings and handshakes for cameras—most of us on the sidelines after the fellows from the propaganda office came and were “dismayed to find us in this condition” like we’re a jammed gun instead of soldiers with gunshots in us—not Steve though. He can schmooze on command now. When did he learn that. I miss when he used to just be mine instead of everyone’s.

**August 14**

Mail. I feel a little frayed these days, like one of Curly’s long thin lumpy scarves from when she was learning to knit and didn’t know how to cast off properly. Or perhaps Mrs. Rogers’s crocheting—where you could have an entire blanket to start but if it is not tied off correctly then you can pull and pull and pull and the entire thing unravels, it was nothing but yarn all along—the same stuff made and unmade endlessly. I must be just a few rows of blanket left holding on. Anyway mail from Ma—it has been a year and a half since I saw her. I wish I could speak to her, or even just walk in the door of our apartment and where I always ran my mouth all over Brooklyn Ma could look at me and know what I was thinking without me saying a word. I wish I could listen to her tell me about her day and help her with dinner and then when it was in the oven she’d put her hand on my face and say, “You’re a loud thinker, beloved,” like she would when we had so little money and I was afraid to tell her about quitting school. I remember knowing it was the right thing to do but feeling so ashamed because she always told me “this world of ours has big plans for you” and I knew what she meant was that she had big plans for me—and who could bear to disappoint a mother like her? I never wanted to disappoint her, or anyone. I did write her about Caen as I’m sure it made it to the news but it seems everything we do is in the news so no letter I send can make it to her fast enough. But at the very least she knows I’m alive. Letter from Curly too, only a couple of lines:

> Dear Bucky, you have already sent me one purple heart. Please stop collecting more. This written from the Navy Yards where I am with my friend Olive Dempsey, and we are imagining that each time we see a figure in green with a bag over his shoulder appear on a gangway, they are our big brothers coming home. Your adoring sister, Curly.

Got me thinking about Olive’s brother Morrie. He was a couple years younger than me and Steve, signed up for the Navy in 42 after Pearl Harbor like everybody, he was talking how he was going to be an aviator which of course means he’s probably air crew now seeing as he didn’t go to college. Nice kid though—no doubt the last time he shot a gun was in boot camp if they even do that in the Navy. He’s just on a ship somewhere doing his part. Even if it was just peeling potatoes it’s still doing his part. There’s a whole army full of guys doing their part without ever shooting a gun, and a whole country of people doing their part at automobile factories making jeeps instead of continentals—none of them shooting a gun either.[6]

**August 17**

OSS/SSR has sent Steve on a tour of airfields and apparently dinners with politicians and generals. Lord I can only imagine his table manners in that company. Maybe Monty will give him lessons. Anyway I am being sent to the “country” to do “testing” with the rest of the fellows left behind but the minute I got into the car that was waiting it was Agent Carter and another agent I didn’t know from OSS/SSR and I realized what this was all about. At least I had Betsy already. The other agent
did not even introduce himself except to say “at least you’re not gimpy” and I got the sense he wasn’t all that happy to have a “gun slinger” involved in the op and I said hey pal, you asked for me, and Carter gave him a “look” that shut him up and me too honestly.

August 18

Day spent on maps and also they have models of Aachen with buildings that they built from photographs. We have gone into enemy territory before of course but never Germany itself, not really, even if this is just barely Germany. My German is mostly limited to “Fahr zur Hölle” (and “bitte” and “nein” if I am honest) so I’m going to have company in Carter and two other agents which I don’t like at all. Carter I would trust at my back the same as any of the commandos but two fellows I never even met before today, and one of them this Leland Marshall prick who is the one from the car yesterday. My stomach is like Ahab’s worst nightmare of an ocean thinking Carter is coming with us. I asked her why this was different (when she couldn’t come with us to France because of the risk) and she said two reasons: she’s one of the only people who knows what Labor looks like and she can authorize lethal force. Jesus Christ “lethal force” which is me. I haven’t slept thinking about it. This is different and I feel sick about it. He is a combatant and I am too but it is one thing to shoot a man across a battlefield and this feels a lot different from that. It’s not a comfort to know that Carter is calling the shots as I’m the one pulling the trigger. “One less mission behind the wire for your men” is the only thing I can hang my hat on. How did all of my life come to this. Years of playing baseball and working double shifts and saving pennies to take dames out on the town. That feels like the dream now instead of this nightmare—perhaps it never happened at all. It is times like these that I wish I asked Veenie and Poppa (or Ma) more about how being a Jew works. If you’re a Jew you’re going to heaven no matter what you do—“chosen”. And I guess through Ma I count, or half count. I have to believe that the Catholic half has me going to hell. I think at this point even Father Cleary would say so. Even at my worst he could always tilt my chin up at him and look me in the eye and say “You’re a good boy, James—you just need to act like it.”

At least I have a good head for maps as this is not enough time to train for anything properly. But what I am training for—for the first time it does not feel like a battle I am jumping into but just killing. Killing has to be too nice a word. “Murder” is the thing I am afraid of, only what is the difference really as the book the Jews Catholics and Protestants all agree on doesn’t say thou shalt not murder. It says thou shalt not kill and I have done more of that now than I can even count. I don’t even know how much.

August 19

The questions I’m getting from these mooks: “can you move quietly?” –Well I don’t know, can you kill krauts? “have you had espionage training?”—The way I see it the farther away we are from Herr Labor the less espionage we need—isn’t that why I’m here? “What is your effective range?”—the same as my gun’s “what’s that?”—1,500 yds “We have no use for machismo here, 1st Sgt”—go fuck yourself

August 21

I will have to tear out these pages and tape them into my journal once we make it back to England. Everything identifiable left behind even my dog tags. No commandos insignia no rank no watch that Dad had engraved when I turned 18. Just a pair of eyes and hands and a rifle and a uniform in order to get around the Geneva protocol. Just a soldier in a uniform. Drop went OK obviously. Asset met us with the truck and we got smuggled in a false bottom in the back. Couple hours of gasoline fumes and stale air and suddenly we are in Germany here to kill a man.
August 22

Marshall and Thompkins the lookouts and Carter spotter. Overnight setting up Carter goes “I hope SSR got the word to Bomber Command to ignore Aachen tonight” and I go “you hope?” and she shrugs a little as if to say nothing to be done now.

Anyway once I got zeroed and nest all set we had some time. First she asked me about all the math that normally I just do in my head but that they made me work out with a pencil to prove it all out, or to prove I knew what I was doing though you’d think all the dead krauts at the business end of my rifle would be proof enough of that, wouldn’t you. I didn’t say much about it except I’d always been good at figures and she looked at me like I was having her over and said “but you didn’t finish high school” and I said, “well I didn’t quit because I couldn’t do arithmetic” and she left it alone.

She asked what growing up with Steve was like. So I told her it was mostly trying to keep him alive and she looked disappointed, “you mean because he was sickly?” and I said no, because he’s an idiot with no sense of self-preservation, and she actually laughed— as quiet as somebody in a sniper nest can laugh anyway. And she told me about Steve throwing himself on a dummy grenade and I am going to kill that stupid punk when we make it back.

So I asked her if she’s got any brothers or sisters serving or anything and sure enough, she has a brother in Burma and a sister doing “secretarial work” and I know her well enough to tell when she is feeding me a line so I said, “same kind of secretary as you?” –“Not quite the same, no, but very nearly. My sister was always cleverer than me.”[8] Ain’t that the truth! Sisters always are! So I told her about Curly, and then naturally Ted (who she already knew about) and Jack (who she didn’t). She asked me more about Curly, and when I told her she was going to be 14 in a couple weeks she just smiled and said, so she was 12 when you shipped, and I said yeah, and she just shook her head: “world of difference between sisters at 12 and sisters at 14. She’ll be a handful if she’s anything like you and Steve.” Of course I know that—so I told her about Curly getting spitting mad at being left out at baseball (nobody left her out once she showed up in trousers and proved she could catch anything the pitcher threw) and how she could run and run like a damn racehorse, so fast with just her braids flying behind her (somehow Ma tamed her hair into braids, and she would squirm and her face would get so red because it hurt but she wasn’t going to be a baby about it)—and then later I’d show up and go “Ma, Ma, get out of here, I’ve got it” and take over.) Or Curly stomping around, pretending to act like Jack when he was trying to be smooth with his school friends, or her getting into trouble at school for sucker punching a kid who pulled her hair (Dewey Mangum, like I’d forget that little shit). And Ma gave me a look about it, and I said, what, I didn’t teach her to throw a punch! And Ma rolled her eyes—“you taught Stevie, then Teddy, who taught Jack—and Jack taught her!” Hell I’ll take credit for it then! Carter just delighted at “Stevie.” I got a feeling next time she’s sore at him that’s what she’ll call him.

August 24

London.

August 25

She said “well done, soldier,” after I took the shot and there were women on the street screaming. Because this wasn’t a firefight in fucking Saint-Georges-Eglise. “Well done soldier.” Jesus fucking H. I said “that screaming is why I am done after the war” and she said (earnestly perplexed I think) “what screaming?” and I guess we were so far away she couldn’t hear it and it was all in my head. It didn’t feel in my head. I still can hear it though I guess that means it is in my head. Got back to Grosvenor street after debrief Steve still gone but some of the other fellows there (not Dernier who
apparently skipped off to France without permission—you cannot tell a Frenchman what to do) and I just went straight to me and Gabe’s room and tried to sleep even before getting clean. Gabe comes in. “You reek pal” Yeah well I haven’t gotten cleaned up for four days, or shaved either—and clean! What a joke. He hassled me into the bath though so I did it and went back to my bed and he’s there reading. “What did you do?” and Jesus that question. I told him to fuck off and he didn’t (psychic) but he said, I’m going to read and I’m such a fucking piece of shit head case that I know he meant read aloud to me like I’m some little kid that can’t sleep by himself without waking up shouting his name and rank but Gabe’s too good a man to put that into words so I just put my back to him and he read for a while. Christ if the quacks got hold of me. Woke up yelling and Gabe was gone but at least he didn’t come in to check on me. Man’s got to have some dignity (mine seems to have skipped off to God knows where).

The thing is that I don’t know how to get back from this. I just keep trying and trying (the only thing I know to do) and I somehow soldier on but there is this small ugly part of me that must be the most awful coward. I am so very tired of it all. I dreamed on the transport back of just braiding Curly’s hair. Endlessly trying to be gentle not force a comb through it just using my fingers and she’d be sitting on the chair in the kitchen her legs swinging (she’s perpetually maybe 5 years old—smallest little pipsqueak until she starting shooting up around when she turned 10) and humming or retelling me (using voices) a radio play she heard and me just braiding her hair combing it through braiding it again like a perfect calm Saturday afternoon when she came running in from playing and Ma said “Do something to fix that nest please, beloved.”

August 26

Paris liberated. “The bells in all Paris sound.” I can only imagine how they are ringing today. We have not heard anything from our Paris friends since coming back to London. I have written a few letters to Geneviève that I never sent (where would I send them? “Plus gentille belle de Paris”) and should probably burn. How overjoyed she must be today, if she is OK. Paris runs on Paris time again. She can free her wrist of her boche watch—“Vive la France!” And Dernier—skipping town a few days ago—the timing on that frog!

August 29

Message from Dernier—he did make contact with some of our pals. Awful news. Jean-Louis and Marc both arrested in June. Marc was in Romainville[9] prison and Jean-Louis in Drancy[10]—Marc in the hospital now as Romainville was liberated and he is very ill according to Dernier.[11] No sign whatsoever of Jean-Louis—he has not been found anywhere in Drancy and Dernier believes the worst—that he was deported east to God knows where.[12] There have been no letters from him. We fought like hell but were not fast enough it seems.

August 31

Everyone but Jim with an official clean bill of health. Steve said to expect a training cycle. I said unless the training is in Paris I think we’ll be down our sapper and he said good point. Gabe said “I could use some “training” in Paris.”

Historical Notes: Operation Charlemagne

In the years after the war, the facts surrounding Operation Charlemagne, or the assassination of Obergruppenführer Gunther Schönhofer, were mired in controversy. Certainly there is no doubt that Schönhofer was a dangerous, well-connected Nazi with well-documented aims related to using
V-1 and V-2 rockets in conjunction with chemical weapons. Had he succeeded in convincing Nazi officials to redirect sorely needed funds to his proposed program, it is conceivable that thousands more soldiers and civilians would have died or suffered grievous wounds because of the grotesque compounds Schönhöfer was developing. Yet the clandestine and, per several anonymous British officials, “unsporting” nature of Operation Charlemagne drew significant censure and debate.

The rules of warfare surrounding assassination and "targeted killing”—namely, what constitutes extralegal killing versus acceptable combatant activity—are ill-defined, and often reinterpreted. Historically, the targeting of officers or nobles was considered dishonorable and ungentlemanly; acts of war that relied upon deceit and "treachery" clearly fell outside the bounds of appropriate rules of engagement. Yet others would later argue that the notion that war could be "civilized" in any way is in itself fallacious. In a conflict such as the Second World War, in which civilians were as likely, or more likely, to be bombed by targeted raids as soldiers, the lines of "gentlemanly warfare" were even further blurred.

Certainly Schönhöfer was a valid combatant. He was a member of the German armed forces, and he was in uniform at the time of the killing according to witnesses and Agent Carter’s action report. Similarly, as he noted in his conflicted journal entries about the operation, Barnes was also in uniform. This was no accident: to stay within the bounds of the Geneva convention, Barnes was carefully instructed to wear an American uniform. Had he been wearing civilian clothes, or even in an ad hoc uniform such as that of a Resistance force, but lacked insignia, he could have been in violation of the international rule of law.

There can be no doubt that Barnes himself agonized about the morality of his actions. At the time, he was not informed of the nature of the intelligence about Schönhöfer that had convinced the Allied brass that assassination was the best option. He knew only that his immediate superiors deemed the operation necessary. It is likely that Barnes never learned just how dangerous Schönhöfer’s chemical weapons could have become, had he successfully met with the deputies of the three most powerful men of Nazi Germany—Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Hermann Göring—as was the plan on that August day in Aachen.

Operation Charlemagne was the only action of its kind ever performed by SSR107 or, more specifically, by James Barnes, despite its astounding audacity and success. Given that Barnes shot Schönhöfer from more than 1,400 yards away—more than three quarters of a mile, which was an unheard of distance at the time—it is perhaps unsurprising that enterprising Allied officials wanted to leverage his skill. There is documentary evidence to suggest that additional plans were drawn up to target other high-level Nazi officials—including propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s powerful secretary Martin Bormann, armaments chief Albert Speer, and even Hitler himself—but none was ever attempted. Yet in the 1970s, a declassified SSR report about one such plan suggested that Captain America himself had weighed in on the subject in October 1944, with a simple note written in the margins: "Steve furious - good luck keeping him away from newspapers if this is sent up.”

---

**Chapter Notes**

[1] European Theater of Operations

[2] By 1944, Heavyweight boxer Joe Louis was famously undefeated except for one 1937 loss to German Max Schmeling. Louis would ultimately finish his professional boxing career with a record of 66-3.
“Labor” was the code-name for SS-FD Obergruppenführer Gunther Schönhöfer, a virulent Nazi and chemical engineer. Schönhöfer was identified as a high-priority target after Bletchley Park decrypted messages which described his plans to use V-1 and V-2 “flying bombs”, or guided missiles, to bear chemical weapon payloads. Though Schönhöfer’s proposals had been ignored by other high-level SS-FD officials, he did successfully set a meeting with deputies of Heinrich Himmler and Hermann Göring, and most notably, Richard Schulze, one of the Führer’s former aide-de-camps who had served as his ordnance officer.

Aachen, Germany.

A play on the original Gone with the Wind line “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn!” using “duce” (Musslini was self-styled as “Il Duce,” or “The Duke”). According to Company A veteran Frank Castellano, who corroborated this story in a 2003 interview, Miller pronounced “duce” as “deuce,” which is slang for excrement.

It is estimated that only 10-25% of the ~16 million Americans who served in the Armed Forces during the war ever saw combat situations. On the home front, roughly one third of American industrial output was related to war production. The American labor force at the time was about 54 million strong.

Fahr zur Hölle (Go to Hell); bitte (please); and nein (no).

Gwendolyn Carter MBE (1916—2002) worked as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park’s Hut 8, where she helped to decrypt the German naval Enigma. After the war, she married fellow codebreaker Arthur Westlake and completed her doctorate in mathematics, which she had put on hold in 1939 to join the Government Code & Cypher School (GC&CS). She became a professor at Cambridge and continued to consult for Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) until the late 1970s.

The Fort de Romainville was a Nazi prison camp near Paris.

The Drancy internment camp ultimately deported more than 67,000 people directly to Auschwitz.

Marc Lemaurier (1920—1993) recovered from his imprisonment at Romainville and became a politician and schoolteacher after the war.

Jean-Louis Martin (1919—1944) was arrested by the Gestapo in June 1944 and deported to Auschwitz the same month, where he was murdered sometime in mid-July. Though a baptized Roman Catholic, Martin’s mother was Jewish. Martin was posthumously made a Grand Officier of the Legion d’honneur.

Chapter End Notes

Operation Charlemagne, and Gunther Schönhöfer, are fictional. Aachen itself had a lot of symbolic and sentimental to the Nazi regime. It was the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne's seat of power (and the cathedral his place of interment), and the Nazis considered their Third Reich the natural descendent to Charlemagne's "First Reich."

Thank you for reading, and a big thanks to my stellar beta reader, devildears!
I have been looking forward to posting this chapter for a long time and I am really excited to hear your thoughts, so as ever, thank you in advance for your comments and ongoing support! :)
September 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Above: “Staff Sergeant James Barnes with French résistants after the Battle of Saint-Martin-de-Mer, June 1944.” National Archives and Records Administration.

September

England

September 2

If I make it I think I will try to come back and see London without the sandbags and barrage balloons and endless swarms of people in uniform. A whole world forced into uniform at the fancy of a couple madmen. At least in my class As (for a dog and pony show later) I can be anyone.[1] Hanging around our usual spots means our faces get placed and these days I just want a bit of peace and quiet and maybe to be a regular joe like me and Steve used to be. Walked this morning as we have the whole day free and I must have walked ten miles in a whole loop around London. Finally made it to Kensington gardens which may be my favorite spot in this entire country aside from that day months ago when we were in Blandford training for D-Day—our free Sunday on the coast.

Kensington gardens is not a park like Central Park or even Prospect Park, it seems strangely wilder than those even with the sandbags everywhere. I just wandered (and went through about a carton of
smokes) and found a bench next to a statue of Peter Pan and sat for a while looking at the water and people walking by and there were even ducks in the water, just going about their business. It was so strange to imagine—I wonder if animals (when we are not looking) shake their heads at us and despair: “what beastly uncivilized creatures people are.” (British ducks, Brooklyn ducks would say “these fucking mooks are at it again”)

I could write a story about it and send it to Curly probably—maybe a small duck family getting awful tired of tucking into a hollow log as a bomb shelter every night (which they share with a fox, a baby deer, a turtle, and a weasel—they are all smart enough to have a truce) wondering “when will these jokers figure out it is better to tease your ma, wrestle with your brothers, earn a handshake from your dad, read out loud to your kid sister, and have a couple laughs with your pals than spend all your time thinking of ways to kill each other?” Steve could draw the pictures. Curly did love his cartoons he used to do during mass to keep her happy.

I remember reading Peter and Wendy to Curly when she was about five. Ted and Jack were “too old” for kid books (this had to be in 35—so they were 12 and 10) but they used to listen in even if they pretended they weren’t—and Ma too (“you do have a lovely reading voice, darling”—“and a real face for radio!” Jack used to like saying). Curly said once “Bucky, which one is the second star to the right so that I can fly to Neverland?” and I told her it was at the top of the Empire State Building and Teddy argued it ought to be a star you could see through Brooklyn Bridge and Jack thought that was stupid, and said “I’ll be Peter Pan!” and Curly got mad at him, saying she was going to be Pan, Jack: “You’re a little girl, you’re Wendy” and she threw the little wooden doll Dad made for her at him square between the eyes and said “imagine if I had a slingshot or a sword!” and even Jack laughed at that (though he got an egg there later).

Anyway it was decided that if Curly was Pan (“shouldn’t she be Curly?” Ted wondered[2]) then Ma would be Wendy, Ted would be John (“But I’m really John!” cried Jack) and Jack all the Lost Boys together (“well all right” he said) and then Curly started to giggle so hard she was half choking trying to get the words out when she declared that I was Nana. So I licked her hand and her face and picked her up by grabbing the back of her dress and swung her around our living room until she was yelling “down, Nana, down!” and beside herself laughing—the best kind of laugh in the world. God do I miss them all desperately.

I can’t figure how long I sat there on that bench. I ran out of smokes. And an older fellow finally came up and sat his wife down beside me and there wasn’t enough room for all three of us so I stood up and he said, “you’re fighting the good fight, aren’t you son” and he nodded towards the slab of color on my chest and I said something like, “trying to do my part sir” and he shook his head at me. “I don’t mean in the trenches,” and he tapped at his temple, “I mean up here. You’ll be all right, mate. The fight’s nearly gone out of old Fritz.”

I felt hot and cold all at once. I hardly even remember tipping my cap to him and walking through the rest of Hyde Park to get back to Grosvenor Square through the sound of my own heart beating in my ears like the loudest subway you ever heard. How far gone must I be that an old man watching me sitting on a park bench can see that I am not right in the head.

**September 4**

We have a job to do in Germany. Jim called it playing pathfinders for the pathfinders.[3] I guess we are finally back in the hunt for H— krauts. Briefed today by guys from SHAEF and OSS/SSR and the plan is for us to drop in perhaps ten days from now. We are still missing our sapper. Monty said “have we any good wine to lure him back to England with?” and Gabe laughed and said “good wine in England, do you even hear yourself” and then looked to me to chime in so I said “who needs wine when we have got a chance for him to blow up krauts?”
After a while I went back to go over my gear. We are out of our regular uniforms back into our other ones—mine are filthy and one jacket still has blood on it from getting shot in Czechoslovakia.

September 5

Well I did not get arrested. No court martial either. The colonel called me to his office and just sat with his papers and pen and folders of god knows what for maybe fifteen minutes with me standing at attention until he finally said “you trying to hitch a ride on the Queen Mary, son?”[4] and that is all it took for me to feel more ashamed than I have ever felt in my life. It was like when I was a kid and I’d eat something I knew might be off but ate it because I was that hungry and it’d be miserable hours of waiting for it to hit me. I told him no sir. And he asked “You want to sit a desk instead of going into the field,” and I said no sir. “At ease” and I stood there for a while. He said “get yourself together 1st Sgt” and I said yes sir.

Gabe was waiting for me just him not the others. “If you’re going to start a bar fight for no reason, at least let me know ahead of time so somebody’s got your back” and I couldn’t quite laugh. There are two guys in the hospital because of me.

It’s funny that I do want this all to be over and to go home but the minute Phillips was staring at me asking if I did it on purpose, if I am that fucking yellow I remembered why I’m here and what am I good for if not to keep soldiering on for these men and for Steve? As awful as this is I could never leave them to it alone. And he told me to get my head right and I am fucking trying but I don’t even know what that means anymore.

I do not even know why I threw the first punch. I don’t even remember it and I was not drunk. I am letting Gabe think I was drunk because that’s easier than saying I think I’ve gone nuts. One of the guys had round specs and the other guy laughed at something (it was the way he laughed I think?) and suddenly it was like I was outside of my own body and couldn’t stop. I was not even angry.

September 7

Mail. It feels like reading letters that got written to somebody else. Curly is training for cross country and begging me to write Ma to tell her that she ought to be allowed to go to a dance hall with friends now that she is almost 14 (like hell!) and in high school and that she’s so tall now she thinks that when I get home and we have the radio on in the sitting room I can dance with her not having to stand on my shoes, as she has grown about five inches. Five inches! If that’s true she’s probably up to my chin. Her talking about us twirling around the sitting room like when she was little got me thinking for the first time in a long time what it might be like to go home. Not to go back before the war (which is what I think of most often) but if the war ends and if I live through it what kind of life that could be. I can hardly even picture myself in my old bedroom, or on the fire escape with Ma’s herb garden or in the sitting room. I used to fall asleep to radio plays on Sunday afternoons and wake up with Ma’s cooking but the thought of me sleeping there like I sleep here (or don’t) makes me sick to my stomach. It is a broken frayed creature that I have become now. It is easy to hide in letters home but the thought of seeing Gabe’s worry he’s so bad at hiding in my kid sister’s face makes me want to die. It’s the screaming in Germany that I hear mixed with screaming in Troina and Salerno and Venafro. Or even the screaming from Weissensee which we did not hear but could imagine for ourselves when we collapsed those tunnels. I am full of screaming and only some of it is mine.

September 10

Four days to the drop. We have been training together as it has been almost two months since we were all in combat (other than myself, if that counts). Everyone no longer limping or wincing at
bullet holes tearing and pulling inside. Dernier convinced back to England. The team together. It is easier to breathe with a job to do and the team back together. It is easier to sleep as with a mission you are at least moving in a direction and if we do our part then we are another day closer to the end.

The plan is simple by our standards but not considering the thousands of krauts no doubt standing between us and our objective and of course between our objective and Allied territory on the return side. I don’t think any of us have hearts immune to danger but there is a kind of numbness that I feel when thinking about the task ahead. Yes it’s time to climb into a C-47.[5] Sure we can watch Steve mess around with paints and add a couple details to their pinup. Sure we will all even sign our own names in paint and laugh with the crew who say “hell it is a genuine pleasure to have you boys on board.” When all I can think is yes I have cleaned my gun and filled my magazines and I am ready to do the fucking op already.

September 12

This time we are going ahead of the Airborne. I prefer it. I would take jumping out of a plane over sitting in a boat getting guys vomit on me any day. And knowing I can be in the plane, not thinking about Teddy already on the ground (God willing) and already fighting the krauts while we are stuck on the channel, that is like getting handed a glass of ice water on the hottest day of your life, so hot you are on fire, and the relief is immense, the kind of relief you do not have even the capacity to imagine when you’re in the fire. I have not had any letters from Ted but I know he’ll be a part of this one. I can go first this time. If we do our job then his job will be easier.

September 13

“Good to see you again Sgt.” This fucking prick! Who can ruin a guy’s day with six words like that? Leland goddamn Marshall that’s who. I saw him and for a second could not even breathe I was so surprised. And Steve goes to me, “Buck, you know Marshall?”

“Best shot I’ve ever seen,” says the shitheel with a god damn smile, “I would run another operation with you any day, Sgt.” It was just supposed to a be a last-minute briefing on what to expect once we’re in German territory and instead I get Steve looking at me not even wounded or angry just plain confused “what’s he talking about?” and in that moment I was perfectly convinced I might never breathe again. I don’t even know what to call it. Was it fear or shame or just that I have tried my entire life to be somebody who doesn’t disappoint Steve Rogers? We sat on that roof in Paris and he asked me if I could pull the trigger and on a roof in Aachen I did pull it. Carter tried to say it was like Yamamoto but it sure as hell did not feel like I was dogfighting a zero when I shot him.[6] I said, “I’d hardly call training on a sniper rifle in Hertfordshire[7] an op” and then left.

September 15

It is almost impossible to write in a transport plane but I guess if there is one thing I have it is steady hands.

I don’t how I forgot that Steve is like Frank Hinckley with his newspapers when he gets an idea in his head. Doesn’t matter if it’s the middle of summer Hinckley is hanging on to his old papers for the winter and then by the time August rolls around and Hinckley realizes we could have a snowstorm that lasts a week and he’d still have enough papers for his fireplace but he’s so goddamn stubborn he won’t do anything about it. So I guess Steve “hung on to his newspapers” and pulled rank and gave the kind of stern look that somehow seems to work on everybody and got access to the action report Carter filed even though that kind of thing is supposed to be “compartmentalized.”
I know because we were gearing up this morning and Steve came over and said, “Don’t ever not tell me again,” and I think it took twice the courage Omaha did for me to even look at him I was so ashamed. He has not been so serious or so sad since his mother died. I am some kind of first class jackass. I couldn’t say anything. He grabbed me by the shoulder just like I used to do to him when he was a hundred pounds lighter and he said, and I think these words are burned into my head now: “You have a mission to do, you do it. But you go behind enemy lines and you don’t tell me about it? Never again, Bucky, I swear to God. Please don’t do that to me.” If there is one thing Steve could never abide it is being left behind. I don’t know how I could have thought that what I did in Germany is worse than leaving him behind.

September 18

They had prisoners almost all of them dead and the rest died when we were trying to free them. They were so far gone they could not even speak. Drugged or gave up. Needle marks everywhere on them. Needle marks and marks where they were tied down like I was. Bruises on bruises. Base nearly empty when we got there I guess it was bad luck or we got a mole either way they had only a skeleton crew and then rooms of what might as well have been skeletons. Only four of them were alive. Stripped of everything down to the bone to where you think they are a body first a person second and then you get to if they are a man a woman or a child. Two of them were children. They all died. I saw it all happening and I lost myself so bad that it was like I shut my eyes for a second and when I opened them it was Steve’s hand on the back of my neck and him saying “Come on pal, come on Buck” like I was somebody’s lost dog you’re afraid of and hoping won’t bite you. I have not stopped shaking. We are on our way somehow unbelievably to Paris not London and I cannot sleep or stop shaking and it seems like I do not even have enough of myself left to be ashamed that I am such a fucking shell shocked coward that I need my best guy next to me just to know where I am.

September 19

Paris reborn is what Dernier calls it. It is incredible to see what six months can do for a place—and a month of freedom from krauts. There are flowers blooming by the Seine. Imagine that. Where before everything was an awful gray, like exhaustion and surrender crushed into stones and roads now this whole place is alive again. I think it is strangely easy to see the life in other things when you have so little life left inside yourself. Like how when you are sick you tell yourself how much you will treasure your health once you get it back—and then you forget your promise the minute the cough goes away. (Never Steve—he was so grateful for his healthy days even if he tried to act like it was just usual—the serum could not have found a guy who deserved it more). I remember being sick in Azzano before everything and how I did not know what was real. This feels like that—more dangerous maybe because the hallucination is of loveliness instead of nightmares.

We debriefed before being set free for three days of liberty. We are staying in The Ritz believe it or not. This war has a sense of humor.

September 21

Yesterday and today I climbed to Montmartre looking for Café Grand Canard for my “belle mademoiselle” not thinking I would find her or even having a plan if I did. But today she was there, in her blue coat, sipping a coffee with some bread and jam and reading a newspaper. Her hair was covered under a silk scarf. It was all just as I imagined. Strange that it was only six months ago that I met her but it feels so much longer than that. Almost as long as before Venafro, or before arriving in Africa, before Pearl Harbor, before all of this. I have looked a lot at the drawing Steve made of her and thought that even if my own memory failed me I at least had the drawing to help clarify the edges of her but I find that she is more lovely than I remembered and far sadder besides. I think a part
of me was afraid she would not recognize me—or maybe that she would. What does a Frenchwoman need with a scrambled up GI anyhow. But just as I was not sure what to do, she looked up and the finger she was using to wrangle her lighter skipped off and she smiled at me, all delight and surprise and somehow I found my own lighter in my pocket and walked up to take care of her cigarette. It took a couple tries on account of my hand shaking. Not exactly smooth as god damn Cary Grant.

We did not even talk right away, not really—she was at the café because she heard the news that Captain America was in town and thought I might remember her promise she wrote to me. And when I couldn’t speak she took my hand in hers and kissed my palm. It was the gentlest thing anyone has ever done to me. It made my throat lock up like my lungs forgot how to breathe. “Mon homme âgé, et un bissou” no doubt it takes the broken part of me to even write this down but it was worth waiting for, a strange small moment of peace. For just one second I was not myself and it was all right to feel like a man who could almost deserve her kindness.

**September 22**

Basilique de Sacré Coeur is the highest place for miles. Some windows of it got bombed out but otherwise it is fine, all pale white domes and curved walls and windows standing guard over France, hunched on a hill. Geneviève took me to the steps and terrace and turned me around to view the rest of Paris. You can see everything, even the Eiffel tower which looks oddly spindly-like it could fall over with enough wind when of course up close it seems immovable. When I said that she laughed and called it a metaphor for “Marianne.”[8] It was a clear day and despite the aircraft and the sense in your gut that there is a war on (it never goes away does it? Sometimes I am afraid that even if I do make it through, it will always feel like the war is just out of sight), it seems somehow as if Paris is in the middle of a long, peaceful exhale.

We stood there for long enough that the bells rang. I guess it is one of the largest bells in the world. It joined in all the rest of the bells in all the churches in Paris last month, when De Gaulle marched in. I asked her what it was like and she took a long time to answer. And when she did she could not quite look at me. She said, “it ought to have been all joy. Instead it was mostly relief.”

We walked almost all in silence, all over Montmartre and then rode together on her bicycle to “le Marais” where she lives alone in the apartment of her childhood. And it wasn’t until we sat on her small balcony with some wine that she told me the answers to the questions I was too chicken shit to ask back in March. Here is the truth: she has a brother somewhere in Germany, a POW, Claude, and an older sister living in Holland with her husband who she hasn’t heard from since 1943, and her parents who got arrested because the fucking krauts broke down the door of their apartment looking for her, before she was arrested herself. They are god knows where—not in Drancy. No letters or anything. She did not cry when she told me, only I finally realized that it is hollowness I recognize in her rather than sadness as I first thought. “Birds of a feather” as they say. After a while she toasted my glass and said very softly into the night: “A la victoire.”[9] Everything sounds more beautiful in French—even hopelessness.[10]

**September 23**

Sometimes I don’t wake up yelling. Sometimes it is just that I wake up locked inside my own head, everything I am replaced by awful choking fear and panic that I guess finds its way to the surface when we haven’t got a mission to do. That is how I woke up in Geneviève’s apartment. I came to with her voice—“Bucky, Bucky, s’il te plait, réveille-toi, nous sommes à Paris, Bucky, s’il te plait, tu dois respirer!”[11]—she was so afraid that she lost her English completely and when I did wake up I did not recognize her at first and could only apologize like a fucking child. She held my hand for a
while. I didn’t know it was possible to feel like more of a limp wrist then I already did from the night before yet somehow I found a way. And she said “you were a prisoner then?” just as gently as when she asked me to talk about Steve and like the goddamn coward I am I just said “please don’t make me talk about it” even though it’s her who has lost everything and so what if I am tired of fighting and killing and seeing people die—it is the least I can do when my own parents are safe at home, and hers are probably dead. Just thinking about that makes me miss my mother so badly I can’t breathe. After a while I made my excuses and left—R&R was over anyhow.

September 25

London again. So much for “home by Christmas” as it all has gone to shit in Holland. No word from Teddy but that is expected. Just me and Steve went out to drink tonight as the other fellows were at least sober again but very sorry for it as they have been so ill you’d think we’d been in the trenches with dysentery for three days not in Paris. An even if Steve can’t get drunk anymore he can at least get tired and he looked as worn out as I felt. No doubt I was not my sharpest self either. And we were a couple drinks in just talking about Paris and what he and the fellows did while I was off with Geneviève and of course Steve gave me a look at that but I had to come clean and explain that I wasn’t tomcatting. Hell the old me would have let him think it (even Steve who I never had to impress even though I tried to) but she’s better than that (and me worse than), and in any case I find I am too tired to put on much of a front about anything these days. Still he didn’t really understand and the only way I found to explain it was saying “Sonsbeck was real bad Steve” and he got it. Bartender got us another round and we drank most of our pints and Steve said suddenly “You know how I always had a real good memory?” and I said sure, and he said, “and how the serum made everything better?” and then I got what he meant. God almighty I can’t stop seeing that place either, those little kids, and this may be selfish but I was so relieved I almost could weep when I realized Steve was seeing it in his head over and over, same as me, that I’m not alone in this too. I don’t know what it is that makes me so arrogant thinking I’m the only one who can’t get the bad shit out of his head. Steve is just better at handling it I think—he always was. It made me lose my mind at how resigned to death he was—he used to make jokes about it “come on Buck I’m a goner by thirty, let’s just go for it” whatever it was (usually trouble for me).

In any case if there is one proverb or lesson I have hung on to it is from Steve and not anybody else—not Fr Cleary or Ma or anybody. It was when we were kids and before I left school, and he’d gotten himself into another brawl where it was 5 on 2, for once me not around to help out (I heard about it after). It might have been the Simpson sister (her stutter) he was defending or the Friedman kid with the fairy brother but regardless it was a losing fight the minute it started and Steve started it anyway. I asked him why—this was around when O’Keeffe’s old man died in a brawl over paychecks, just a knock to the head nobody even noticed and he was gone the next day and that was all I could think about (poor Sid). Steve said, “You got to try to do the right thing. Even if it doesn’t work, or if you fail, at least you tried.” He probably doesn’t even remember that but I do. Everything else I ever believed has been stripped away in the past year and a half except that. Forget confession and acts of contrition, I think the only thing I have ever been really devout about is Steve. If I just keep trying that will maybe be enough to still be worthwhile.

September 27

Don’t even have the excuse of being drunk. No way to treat anybody not even F.L. who only did what I asked anyway.[12] Worst kind of jackass to keep promising myself I’ll be better only to give it up the minute I get a chance. Used to think it was Steve who liked suffering. Maybe I got it backwards. You can only like it if you have a choice about it. Steve never had a choice about the way he was, his lungs and spine and everything. But he had a choice about getting into scraps. And then there’s me who was never sick a day in his life. Only thing I never chose was getting my draft
September 29

Training. I suspect it’s punishment for Paris. Seeing as I found a way to make a fool of myself even if I didn’t get drunk and empty my wallet for delicate company I suppose I deserve it along with the rest of the fellows.

September 30

Mail. Normally Ma just relays whatever Dad says, like “keep your extra socks dry” (thanks Pop I’ve only been at war for a year and a half in the army for almost 4 years and a noncom besides since 42!) or “keep your head on a swivel” (can hardly do that when I’m on over watch can I?) but in a letter today he wrote in his own hand:

I was a tired skinny dough boy the first time I saw you since getting home, and you smiled even though you didn’t remember I was your Pop. I was proud of you then, my own boy, and I am proud now that you are a man finding his way though the kind of hell I have tried to forget. Come back to your mother and me, James, as it is my chance to smile and remind you that it’ll all be well, as my boy once did for me. Love, your father.

It’s the most he has ever said about his war outside of being three sheets to the wind, and the longest letter he has ever written to me (he has always been embarrassed about his spelling and handwriting—as if that makes a man). And even if I don’t see what there is to be proud of (I guess if you watch the newsreels but he of all people has to know that is all theater—this is the man who heckles magicians and tells their crowd how exactly they got tricked) it is still a comfort enough to put in my breast pocket. I guess that boys trying to make their fathers proud is the sort of natural law not even a war can stop.

Historical Notes: Operation Arizona

The objective of Operation Arizona, during which then-First Sergeant James Barnes earned his fifth jump star, was the destruction of the SS-FD laboratory at Sonsbeck. The Sonsbeck laboratory was both an active research facility as well as one of HYDRA’s few surviving weapons depots. With the Allies beginning to overpower the increasingly desperate German defenders on the Western front, Sonsbeck liquidated its munitions assets in early September, sending the majority of them to the line. Those lethal HYDRA weapons caused thousands of Allied casualties, and were projected to pose a serious threat to the success of Operation Market Garden.

On September 15, 1944, Captain America and the Howling Commandos flew behind enemy lines on a single transport aircraft, and jumped from an altitude more than 7,500 feet higher than what was recommended in order to avoid the staunch German anti-aircraft defenses. Under the cover of darkness, the seven men traversed more than 20 kilometers of enemy territory in order to launch a dawn attack on the Sonsbeck laboratory. Their caution, however, proved unnecessary; in the days preceding the operation, SS-FD had abandoned the facility and more than two dozen prisoners kept there.

As described in Barnes's harrowing September 18 entry, the prisoners ranged from children to adults, and appeared to have been the subject of egregious human medical experimentation similar to what was later discovered at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Of the four prisoners still alive when the facility was searched by SSR107, none survived the journey back to Allied territory, and none of the victims was
ever positively identified.

On Geneviève Marcel

Though a celebrated hero of the French Resistance and later, a respected poet, Geneviève Marcel rarely spoke in public and only once commented upon her appearances in *The Night War* in a 1968 interview with *Le Monde*. When asked about her relationship with Barnes and the few days she spent with him in Paris, Marcel said:

> Je ne peux pas expliquer le phénomène de rencontrer une personne et de connaître immédiatement son âme comme je connais la mienne. In English: "I cannot explain the phenomenon of meeting a person and immediately knowing his soul like I know my own."

American media and popular culture latched on to the idea of Marcel as "Barnes's lady love," and a version of her appeared in numerous cartoons and films as a "femme fatale" and love interest for Bucky Barnes in the fashion of Agent Peggy Carter to Captain Rogers, most notably in the 1976 action film *Skullhunter*, in which the character of Marcel inexplicably plays a major role in the fictionalized version of the Battle of the Bulge.

After Marcel's death in 1979, her estate—led by her longtime partner Angelique Lefebvre—pursued aggressive legal action against the unauthorized use of Marcel's image in American media. Marcel's adopted daughter, French journalist Jacqueline Marcel, laughed off the persistent rumors of a wartime romance between her mother and the famed commando, saying in 2002, "My maman said only this about Barnes: what we had in common was that no two people ever hated being "heroes" as much as us. It's not the heroes who live good and happy lives."

Certainly Marcel never quite recovered from her wartime experiences, and suffered from depression and anxiety for most of her adult life. The tragic loss of her brother, a French POW, and of her parents, for whose deaths at Nazi hands she blamed herself, became persistent themes in her body of work.

---

**Chapter Notes**

[1] By the spring of 1944, SSR107 were noted for wearing custom uniforms which were outside regulation. By wearing his Class A uniform, Barnes was reclaiming his anonymity.

[2] “Curly” was the name of one of the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*.

[3] Pathfinders are soldiers inserted into a combat zone in advance of the main force, who coordinate and operate the drop zone.

[4] The *RMS Queen Mary* was a luxury ocean liner that was converted to a troop transport ship during the war. The implied question is whether Barnes had been attempting to force the Army to discharge him.

[5] The Douglas C-47 Skytrain was a transport aircraft. The particular aircraft that flew this mission was the *Fabulous Frannie*, which is now on display at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, LA. The aircraft’s nose art—which indeed was augmented by Captain America—can be found on tee shirts and coffee mugs in the museum’s gift shop.

[6] In 1943, American codebreakers decrypted Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto’s flight plans. American forces used this information to shoot down his aircraft.
According to SSR archives, Barnes and the team who conducted Operation Charlemagne (the assassination of Obergruppenführer Gunther Schönöhöfer) spent time at Bride Hall, the Special Operations Executive Station VI located in Hertfordshire.

“Marianne” is the personification of the “Goddess of Liberty” and a symbol of the state of France.

French: “To victory.”

The Marcel family suffered greatly in the war. In May 1940, Claude, the Marcels’ only son, was captured and imprisoned in multiple German stalag camps until contracting pneumonia and dying in November 1944. In 1942, Gestapo agents arrested Louis and Marie-Thérèse Marcel on suspicion of harboring members of the Résistance, of which their daughter Geneviève was a member. After a short stint in detention at Drancy, Louis and Marie-Thérèse were deported eastward into the Reich in late 1942 on a train with other political prisoners, and both were dead by 1944. Geneviève’s sister, Pauline, and her husband Gustave Moreau, were active in Dutch resistance efforts and survived the war. Considered a hero of France, Geneviève also survived and became a celebrated French poet. She taught at the Sorbonne until her death in 1979, and was survived by her daughter and noted journalist Jacqueline Marcel; and her longtime partner Angélique Lefebvre.

French: “Bucky, Bucky, please, wake up, we are in Paris, Bucky, please, you have to breathe!”

The context of this entry is unclear; neither the surviving Howling Commandos nor Agent Carter ever offered any information regarding the identity of “F.L.,” and there are no records of any requests made by Barnes to OSS/SSR leadership. There are also no records of any misbehavior, such as Barnes’s arrest earlier in the month.

Wow, so someone rec'd this fic on Tumblr and basically made my entire life. So thank you! And welcome to the many new readers who've found their way to this fic from that rec—I am delighted you're here and I can't wait to hear your thoughts and feedback about the story. <3

As ever, huge thanks to my amazing beta, devildears.

Quick notes:
The Marcel family's story is based very loosely on that of the Boulloche family, which you can read about in The Cost of Courage by Charles Kaiser. Have tissues handy.

The Fabulous Frannie is a fictional aircraft, but you really can see a C-47 at the National World War II museum that transported pathfinders on D-Day.
October 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October

England

October 2

Apparently the brass have got it in their heads that they want more small special units like SSR107 so this training we have been sent on is not so much us getting trained it’s us doing the training. Have to say that it is not all bad. We have a mix of fellows, one or two paratroopers and rangers who got hurt in Normandy and volunteered and also a couple replacements who somehow avoided the depot[1], the greenest GIs I ever saw outside of me and Harry’s boys before Salerno.

My job today was to put them through their paces on rifles and then pick a couple who might be able to hit the broad side of a barn with iron sights[2] if pressed upon. Got a couple of contenders, kid from Philadelphia who reminds me of Joe Fortunato, by the name of Geno Nicotera, and a paratrooper who has probably got the most combat experience out of any of them, Harvey Morris. Got a group of about ten of them all staring at me like I’m General fucking Patton or something, one of them a Cpl. Booker who I swear to God did not even blink once, and changed the way he was holding his rifle to match me and then changed his goddamn stance so his feet were the same distance apart as mine were. God save me from “fans.” Since Saint-Georges-Eglise everyone has lost their goddamn minds – and Steve with his straight face (like butter won’t melt in his mouth) not laughing but he might as well be, saying to me, “you’ve always been my hero Buck it’s about time the rest of the world sees it” —punk.

October 4

Took the boys to 800 yards today—only Nicotera, Morris, Dorsey, Cousins, and White are worth a damn. Maybe Eustis if he learns to shoot with an audience. If he can’t hit the target with me standing over his shoulder then I’ll be damned if I let anybody assign him overwatch for goddamn mess duty much less a firefight. Of course those conditions are hard to replicate on a rifle range. It is one thing to control your breathing and watch the wind while flat on your stomach on easy terrain with no krauts shooting at your pals, with as many minutes as you need to set up the shot, because the target isn’t running around looking for his chance to shoot Steve in the back. It is why I cannot be too impressed at Dorsey’s groupings[3], not when he looks up at me like somebody’s pet dog who brought you the newspaper and expecting some table scraps every time he clears the chamber. Still that’s nothing to how it went later: “It don’t matter how many you get dead center, Dorsey, the First Sgt ain’t taking you out dancing” said Morris, thinking I couldn’t hear and Dorsey got his feathers ruffled, shooting off at the mouth like “why don’t you try hitting any dead center,” that sort of thing —always got to have a know it all in the “classroom” I guess? Dorsey as it turns out grew up chasing “varmints” around the old family property like Ernie Powell, and sure he can shoot but not so well as his attitude might suggest. After all a deer doesn’t shoot back, and Dorsey’s got his jump wings but not any jump stars[4] He has been giving trig pointers to the others too, forget that half his arithmetic
It did not take me long to run over to where Dernier is running a little class of his own and liberate a couple grenades, and we already had a Thompson and an MG set up at the range so I put Eustis and Cousins on those and told the boys Dorsey was going to show us all how it’s done. And as it turns out the hot shot can’t hit much with Nicotera throwing grenades on the range and me screaming in his ear and both the other guns going. I let it go for a while and then stopped them all and said, “aren’t you going to call for a medic Dorsey?” And the dope said “why, First Sgt?” and I said “for all your pals you just got killed” and he shut up pretty good. That’s the thing about being a sharpshooter. You can have an ego if you want, except in the field. In the field you have got to know exactly what you can or can’t do. Thinking you’re a goddamn hero is only going to get your friends killed.

October 5

Still no word about Teddy, Steve and me both have been calling in favors trying to find out where he is. By all accounts we got the worst of it in Market Garden over the Brits. The idea that Teddy could be dead in Holland somewhere is eating me up. And me here in England pissing around with a bunch of replacements (and Morris) while Teddy’s fighting Jerry—some “hero” I am! According to Steve we are here at least for another week and frankly when I’m in the middle of teaching it’s not so bad but the minute the day’s over I am so restless it’s like I can’t breathe. Funny how you can dread combat and crave it at the same time. It is all so clear when you’re fighting for your life, so simple, even if after it’s over everything is worse, like Mr. Armstrong and his third law of motion: “for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” [6] For every second of uncomplicated combat, where I at least know what to do, even if it is awful, there is equal and more terrible horror after the fact.

October 7

Steve informed today in no uncertain terms that the citations he wrote for Gabe and Jim for Saint-Georges-Eglise are going nowhere. So Dum-Dum leans in and says “three musketeers, Cap” and Monty just hummed, “quite,” (our dear lord snob) and Steve’s jaw went all determined: “it’s not right.” And so I had the idea for Steve to mail the citations to Gabe and Jim’s families instead—so that way at least they know Captain America respects the sons they raised even if Uncle Sam doesn’t. Steve went ahead and withdrew all our citations, except for the fellows serving with us. “One for all and all for one.” It’s a fun idea to read about as a kid but I think it takes serving in the company of men like these, us Davids and Jonathans, to realize it’s not a sacrifice or an “elegant ideal”, but instead a sort of easy devotion that’s as natural as breathing. Of course we are one for all and all for one—how could we be anything otherwise?

October 10

Nicotera came to find me today in the quarters me and the fellows are sharing. I was not doing anything unusual just cleaning gear smoking and listening to a bit of music on the radio but Nicotera had scrounged up some bourbon (god knows where! – Joe Fortunato could always find the good stuff too I wonder if it is a Philadelphia thing?) and he poured us up a drink. He had something on his mind (I knew because for once he wasn’t running his mouth—kid is not coordinated enough to talk and think at the same time) and if there is one thing I have gotten pretty good at doing in these past couple years in Uncle Sam’s army it’s playing shepherd to boys who should never have found themselves within a hundred miles of a battlefield in the first place. So I gave him my Colt and started drinking his bourbon and waited for him to talk.

It didn’t take long. He asked me, “how do you know if you’re ready to fight?” and I said—you
don’t. There’s only one test for that, and it’s going to war. And then he said, “how do you know if you can pull the trigger?” and that took me longer to answer. The fact is that when it is your friends on the line you don’t hesitate—and even if it is not sharpshooting there is an instinct for survival that takes over. But Nicotera wasn’t asking me what it’s like to fight on a beach or in a foxhole. He was asking about the thing that I have been training him and these other boys to do.

The truth is that I have always been good at things and I always liked that. I guess who doesn’t. But I liked running faster and hitting harder and playing shortstop better than anybody in our neighborhood growing up. I liked dancing with the prettiest dames and making them blush and other fellows looking at me (jealous) and I liked my best guy being the best guy you ever knew (even if I was the only one who knew it then). And I like doing my job. Hell I like being the best at whatever it is I’m doing. And these days that is killing people and I am good at it. I have killed men up close and from 1,500 yards away and still the first thing I think is satisfaction and the second is “thank god I didn’t miss” and the third is “who’s next?” I do not contemplate what it means that I am a killer nor why I am so good at it or wonder what my mother thinks of what her son has become, until after. Whatever conflict is in my heart doesn’t bother me until my mind catches up to remind me. I suppose combat doesn’t just invigorate fear. I feel more alive when closest to death whether risking it or dealing it than I ever do these days in between action. What kind of man does that make me? How is it that I can despise this war and what I must do to survive it yet still feel satisfaction doing it—“two souls alas live within my breast”[7]—but the good soul is just an echo and the other is a beast.

I did not really have an answer for Nicotera. Why should I when I don’t even have an answer for myself. I think the only thing I can hope for is that while I am here I will keep doing my job and when our task is done I will have my own farewell to arms—“the world breaks everyone and those that don’t break it kills.”[8]

October 13

Recommending Dorsey, Morris, Cousins, Nicotera and White.[9] Five out of 25 who are now so full of themselves that I am reasonably sure they are planning to take on the rest of the Siegfried line[10] all on their own. God save us from overeager greenhorn sharpshooters.

October 15

Train back to London yesterday. Steve got word that OSS/SSR has signed off on us to be dropped into Aachen to help the boys there and also go after another laboratory. So much for leave. At least I’ve got the maps already memorized.

October 17

Apparently OSS/SSR eager to get us into the fight for Aachen not just out of goodwill for Bradley.[11] Supposedly there is yet another weapons cache not just a laboratory behind the German line. Seems to me they had me here in August we might have taken it out then but since when do they ask grunts for strategy?

At any rate it has shaken me to see Aachen again. Not so much because of what happened with Labor, or even the look that Steve gave me when I pointed out the cathedral (I would bet one hundred dollars he bullied his way into reading the mission report). Rather it is that until this point I have seen destruction happen gradually. For Aachen I was here two months ago and there was bomb damage sure but the buildings I saw then are now fragile freestanding brick walls with everything else collapsed into rubble. And this is just one city in hundreds.[12] It seems like the war will keep going until everything and everyone is gone—even if this war ends another one will take over
eventually and we’ll be the old men telling boys “keep fighting the good fight” because the “fight” just keeps going and there was never anything good about it anyway—just a lie to keep us going.

We are behind the wire so far. The plan is for just the seven of us to move out after dark. All reports say the krauts are fighting tooth and nail even though they have got to know they’re outnumbered. Today during briefing by senior officers there was a major who lost nearly two whole companies because Jerry got his hands on Hydra weapons. Strange how it still turns my stomach to hear about even though we are coming up on a year of fighting these bastards. This time last year it was mud and rain and praying to God not to step on a mine, and for your buddy not to either. This time last year it was Rossi singing opera in a foxhole and all of us so weary and shell shocked that we didn’t even care if him singing let the krauts direct their mortars on our heads. It seemed worth the risk.

October 20

Mission complete and back in friendly territory. Thank God the laboratory was empty. I have been dreaming of another Sonsbeck and the starved dead children we would find here. Thank God it was empty.

October 22

Krauts gave up on Aachen. This bombed wreck is now Allied territory—the first bit of “real Germany” we have got our hands on. Despite the fact that we are on his doorstep old Adolf has not wised up. At this point I think Jerry will make us keep going until there are no krauts left.

October 24

Makeshift cadence courtesy of a corporal in the 26th Infantry: “Old Johnny is ordered to march to the Rhine, and so he and his pals all fall in line, it’s time to go ruck, the brass gives no fucks, that Johnny has found his fraulein!” Gabe just shook his head: “I’m with you, Sarge, give me a good Frenchwoman any day.” The cadence is not so bad but it doesn’t have half the flair of a Lily Rossi number “on the day I shipped out for the war…”

October 25

It seems OSS/SSR decided to follow us here to Aachen for a field HQ. Maybe that means we are not following “Johnny” for now. And they also brought footlockers and mail. Haven’t gotten any mail since September—I wish either we would stay put long enough for the army post to figure out where we are or they could keep better tabs on us. We go around with a guy dressed as a flag, it doesn’t seem like keeping track of him should be too hard! In any case a letter from Jack the first since D-Day and he is still stateside and raring to go (which should surprise no one). The thing about Jack is that he is about the most persistent little shit that ever walked the earth besides maybe Steve. I doubt I can count on the Marine Corps to ignore his whining forever. At least here the things we do might help V-E Day[13] come sooner and help out Teddy (still no word). I can’t do anything about goddamn Japan from here.

I told Steve that when we had a moment to ourselves and he didn’t say anything for a while until he asked me if he thought we’d be sent to the Pacific after the war was won here. I said, “I think they got a saying about a cart and horse, pal!” and then Steve told me about one of the fancy dinners he went to with a bunch of politicians and generals (not Ike) the last time I was in Aachen and how the entire time they weren’t so much interested in talking about the front lines or even what OSS/SSR operations were in the works so much as talking about after the war. And Steve was downright disturbed because one of them turned to him and said “of course you’ll be instrumental, Captain, in
growing American influence here in Europe and around the world” and all Steve could think to say was “I’m focused on beating Hitler, sir” and they all laughed like it was a joke.

To be honest it made me a little sick and I could see it did to Steve too. And then I thought of what Agent Carter said to me back after Caen—only a couple months ago but it feels like a year: “you could have a career in this once the war’s over” and I think that’s the price of becoming a symbol: you can never go the other direction. Nobody knows Uncle Sam’s last name after all. And I may just be “Cap’s best pal Bucky!” but it’s Steve who’s “Cap” and I don’t see how the men in charge will ever let him go. And to think of my Steve getting trapped behind that shield—not even to fight the war in the Pacific but forever is just about the most awful thought I ever had. There’s no room for a Steve who picks fights with made men in subway stations when he’s got to carry that shield everywhere he goes.

October 27

Rumors that Gen Hodges[14] has caused enough ruckus up the chain of command that we are getting sent to help out the 28th Infantry. It has not even been a week since Aachen. From what we’re hearing two thirds of the division don’t even know what a CIB[15] is much less have one on their chests. I can’t help but think this will be another Vieilleville-sur-Orne all over again—brass feeling their nuts because they got a super soldier they want to throw at the krauts meanwhile it’s our nuts getting shot at. Of course that’s the way of it I guess. It’s not the guys holding the rifle that declare war, is it? I like Ike but I didn’t see him at Omaha Beach, not Patton Clark or Bradley neither. I’ve listened to a hell of a lot of fireside chats in my life but never across a campfire in a foxhole with the guy that signed my draft card. I figure it’s a pretty good bet old Adolf never defended a pillbox with Hans or Fritz and it’s a fact that Uncle Joe didn’t starve at Leningrad. Democratic fascist communist, it doesn’t make any difference—the men in charge are never the men who charge.[16]

October 29

Moving out in a couple days for wherever the 28th Infantry is. Letters mailed and we had our last bit of hot food. God bless the brass for bringing kitchens with them when they set up HQs. Only I think it’s almost worse to eat food not out of a can or box, because when it’s back in the field you remember what you’re missing.

We have been quartered in a house with an old lady and her husband—not a single word of English between them unless they’re just being stubborn, which, based on how this war is going I’m guessing stubbornness is something of the national character around here. But they have been nice enough—done exactly what was asked of them even if they couldn’t stop staring at Jim or Gabe. Because I’ve got a little bit of German now the “Frau” was nice to me, at least until I saw her going around wiping down everything Gabe touched so I waited until I was cleaning my Colt on their kitchen table to ask them if they could help me find a “jüdische Kirche”[17] anywhere nearby and the look on her face! Gabe was there too and I don’t think he has laughed that hard since our good times at the Rainbow Corner—even if his laughter was a little mean, though if anybody has earned the right to enjoy a little scorn it’s Gabe. At any rate the Frau is wiping up after me too now, and I make a mess. I figure my Ma’s rules about being a houseguest don’t apply to krauts. With everything in this awful state I guess we got to get laughs where we can.

October 31

A year ago we were on the line, and had been for two months and before that it was Sicily. I have fought for my life (and my men’s lives) in day and night and sun and rain and hot and cold and still I
think nothing has quite come close to the interminable hopelessness of Venafro. Sure we have encountered odds just as bad since and our enemy hasn’t changed just grown more desperate. But Venafro was when I learned I still had innocence left to lose. Even after months where the world had narrowed down to mud mines mortars and machine guns, to where it could bring a man to tears hearing a beautiful song, like it was the only beautiful thing the world had ever created, still Venafro found in us something to take away. In a couple days it will be a whole year since my friends got killed and I didn’t. How do you live with yourself when it’s your friends who bit it and you didn’t.

---

**Historical Notes: Operation Juliet and the Strategy of the Heracles Campaign**

By October 1944, most of SS-*Forschungsdienst's* (SS-FD; "Hydra") infrastructure and physical bases had been destroyed, whether by SSR107 activities (Operations Bonfire, Tophat, Chaplin, Umbrella, and Arizona) or by the Allies' sustained bombing campaign against strategic targets. Yet SS-FD was, in its original capacity, a research service; the organization operated laboratories throughout the Reich that required little overhead and practiced extreme secrecy even within the larger SS entity. In many cases, the research laboratories even refused to communicate with one another and with stakeholders by telephone, radio, or telegraph, preferring instead to conduct business via courier, in order to prevent any possible interception of their communications. Unfortunately, this meant that the inroads the Allies had made into decrypting SS-FD radio traffic at Bletchley Park were next to useless when targeting these smaller SS-FD installations, in contrast to their extraordinary success in rooting out the more traditionally operated military bases.

Another obstacle facing the Allies was in fact their own prior success. With its dwindling resources, growing desperation, and increased isolation from the larger Nazi regime, SS-FD in the summer of 1944 made a series of organizational changes that left it more decentralized and secretive than ever. The daring assassination of Obergruppenführer Gunther Schönhöfer in August 1944 was the final blow to the formally flamboyant and aggressive culture of the SS-FD machine; perceiving their security was at risk like never before, key leaders, including Johann Schmidt, went deep underground and maintained contact with only a very few trusted confidants. The several OSS/SSR spies who had successfully infiltrated the organization were now not only shut out from contact with SS-FD leadership, they also were subject to strict communications protocols which prevented them from relaying information back to the Allies. The end result of this extreme decentralization led to significant difficulties in planning the next stages of the Heracles Campaign.

Contemporaneous accounts and notes made during this period indicate that SSR107, and in particular Captain Rogers, was extremely frustrated with this turn of events. While the Allies knew of a number of research laboratories still presumably in operation, thanks to materials collected at other locations such as Vorstellenlager, the Greek island of Hydra (Ύδρα), and the facility at Sonsbeck, the intelligence failure during the Sonsbeck operation dramatically worsened the risk/reward analysis of deploying SSR107. In short, the Allies deemed these other research laboratories to be “small potatoes,” and not worth the danger to their crack special operations team.

Yet the horrors witnessed by SSR107 (and very likely personally experienced by Barnes at Vorstellenlager) did not easily fade from the memories of the commandos who had tried, and failed, to save the captives at Sonsbeck. Enough intelligence and documentation had been captured by SSR107 regarding SS-FD human experimentation and torture of prisoners that OSS/SSR was certain the organization was perpetrating egregious human rights abuses against hundreds, and likely thousands, of victims across the Reich. The Allies considered SS-FD’s campaign of sadism unmatched in scale or scope until the full horror of the Holocaust became clear in the later months of the war.

SSR107 formally requested on multiple occasions to be deployed to these other operating
laboratories, of which eight total were known. Several of those requests—signed by all seven members of the team—were finally declassified in the late 1970s. Unfortunately, only one of those requests was ever granted, and it became Operation Juliet. In mid-October, the commandos were sent to the outskirts of Aachen, Germany, the location of fierce fighting as the Nazi defenders were forced for the first time in the war to defend one of their oldest and proudest cities. As Hydra weapons had been deployed in battle throughout the region, OSS/SSR was hopeful that an operation to destroy the known SS-FD outpost would swing the course of battle in favor of the Allies. Unfortunately, however, yet again SSR107 stormed a mostly empty facility, encountering only meager resistance. While there were no prisoners to be rescued, there was also no meaningful intelligence secured, and Operation Juliet was the last "humanitarian" mission approved for Captain America's Howling Commandos.

Chapter Notes

[1] There were 17 “replacement depots” in the European Theater of Operations. Soldiers newly shipped in would be housed in those “pools” pending reassignment to a unit. Replacements saw a notoriously high casualty rate compared to veteran soldiers, generally because they were inexperienced and because they experienced difficulty integrating into established units, members of which often resented them.

[2] “Iron sights” are simple, non-optical sighting devices.

[3] In target practice, “grouping” refers to placing multiple shots on a target. The proximity of the shots indicates the shooter’s skill vis-à-vis accuracy and consistency.

[4] Cpl. Maurice Dorsey was a paratrooper who had earned his “jump wings,” but had made no combat jumps for which he would have received “jump stars,” making him a greenhorn soldier.

[5] Operation Market Garden was a notorious failed attempt to break into Germany through Holland. It was the largest airborne operation of the war, even larger than D-Day.

[6] It is likely that Barnes is referring to his high school teacher, rather than to Isaac Newton. There are records of a Thomas Armstrong who taught science for thirty years at Barnes’s high school.

[7] Goethe’s Faust: “Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast/And each will wrestle for the mastery there.”

[8] Barnes is referencing Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms, in particular the following quotation: “If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

[9] Cpl. Geno Nicotera served with distinction in France and Belgium before being wounded in February 1945. Cpl. John Morris and Maurice Dorsey served in Belgium and Germany, and formed a friendship that would last the rest of their lives. Pfc. Dewey White and George Cousins were both killed in action in early 1945 in the Ardennes.

[10] Also known as the West Wall, the Siegfried Line was a system of defensive bunkers and traps along the western border of Germany.

The Allied strategic bombing campaign of cities, industrial centers, and transportation infrastructure remains one of the most controversial elements of Allied war strategy. Proponents claimed that repeated bombing would demoralize civilian populations and encourage surrender, yet as the British experienced during the Blitz, the opposite happened. More than 2.2 million Allied and Axis civilians were killed or wounded by aerial bombardment, and particularly in Europe, countless cultural centers, landmarks, and homes were destroyed or damaged.

“Victory in Europe Day,” a term coined as early as September 1944. It would eventually be celebrated on May 7-8, 1945.

Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges was in command of First Army.

The Combat Infantryman Badge is awarded to infantrymen who have seen combat. The implication, of course, is that the 28th Infantry Division severely lacked veteran soldiers, which was true.

“The Men In Charge Ain’t The Men Who Charge”, a variation on this sentiment by Barnes, became a popular slogan during the height of the Vietnam War protests and appeared on signs and clothing. The phrase made a reappearance in the 2003 Iraq War protests in a slightly more modern and inclusive form, “The Ones In Charge Ain’t The Ones Who Charge.”

German: “Jewish church,” though the more accurate term would be “synagoge.”

Welcome to many new readers of this fic! I am so, so delighted to have you! Thanks to all who have commented and given kudos; it is so rewarding to hear feedback and I appreciate you reading and sticking with me throughout this angst-fest. <3 Hope you continue to read and enjoy.

Thanks as ever to my beta devildears, who routinely claws me out of my self-inflicted miasma of anxiety and self-doubt. ;-) <3

Notes:

The United States did not actually have a sniper training program in place at the time of the war. The British and Germans both did, but nobody could hold a candle to the Soviet sniper machine, which produced hundreds of snipers--including many women!--who were absolutely lethal in the field. Certainly by this point in the war, the U.S. did have "dedicated marksmen" within platoons, who were those soldiers with superior aim and coolness under fire, but still no formal program, not even among its crack troops (airborne paratroopers). So, in this 'verse, I imagine that the upper echelons of American brass were looking at Bucky, thinking "I gotta get me one of those!"
November 1944

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


November

Battle of Hürtgen Forest

November 2

Jesus Christ the stories about this place. It seems the krauts have spent perhaps all their time since the last war making this “Hürtgenwald” the worst place on earth. It is like fairy tales of Hans and Gretel getting lost in the woods and taken prisoner by a witch—only instead of Hans and Gretel it’s Johnny and his M1 and instead of a witch it’s mines tripwires kill boxes and bunkers. No oven here—just mortars and buzzsaws. Certainly no fattening up either seeing as we are back to K rations.

We have not gone on the line yet just seen the aftermath. From what we have been told in briefings if
the fellows advance a couple yards in a day that’s a goddamn good day. At that rate we will be in Berlin around the same time Hirohito says “gosh darn it am I sorry about Pearl Harbor!”

November 3

I don’t know why we are here. Krauts must have a thousand MGs for every GI with as many bullets that are flying and mines too. They sent boys forward into a death trap yesterday. We are behind the line and Steve’s in playing “Cap” with the brass—what do they think we can do to help? We are just seven men. This is not defending a village or parachuting in behind enemy lines at night. This is an awful “No Man’s Land” that I thought this war was supposed to never have. These poor fellows, these grunts, when they see us they have hope in their eyes, like they believe the stories that we are invincible and that the krauts never see us coming and that somehow we’ll get them out of this mess.

For nearly two years now I have had that hope pinned on me by my men: that I’m their Sarge who knows what to do and will keep them alive. What a laugh. If only they knew how many boys who I was supposed to be protecting I’ve let get killed. People only seem to remember the ones who stayed alive.

Later

Krauts have snipers here and so I am getting sent in to Schmidt.[1] Steve never looked so angry in his life when the major told him he couldn’t follow. Maybe all the brass wanted all along was me behind my scope, like SSR these days. “Give ‘em hell soldier” said the major. Based on the state of some of these poor bastards I’d have said we are already there.

Later

---[2]

November 5

I forgot what a retreat looks like. I think I’ve gotten in the habit of a small part of my heart thinking we’ll find a way to win no matter what. That is Steve all over. But outside of a couple officers and noncoms nobody had any “Steve” in them at all. And why should they? A couple rifle companies and a tank or two up against what looked like half the Wehrmacht. A crack shot is worthless against panzers but I kept trying because what else could I do. It was not until the Cpl who was hanging tough beside me went down that it even occurred to me to run. Either I have caught “reckless” or “stupid,” maybe both. I got the Cpl (Roy Cavendish, Albany[3]) on my shoulders and then ran. I don’t know if there is a worse feeling than running from krauts. I have not seen men lose their minds (or bowels) like that since D-day.

---

November 6

---

This is slaughter. It is guts and limbs and sobbing men everywhere. We fell back to Kommerscheidt. This is the first combat most of these boys (and officers) have seen. It is a goddamn slaughter. I am keeping the perimeter as best I can. I cannot stay too long in one place as the krauts have snipers too. If I can just help hold the perimeter then surely at some point the fog will lift and we will get some fucking air support.
November 8-9, 1944, Steve I did my best

November 9

Not slept in days. Made it back behind the wire. In Rötgen now. So covered in blood dirt etc. I think Steve thought I was two seconds away from dying but only have a couple scratches plus a little shrapnel. Radio traffic did not come through no one knew how bad it was. I think only maybe 400 men came back. Kommerscheidt gone. Feels like the only thought left in my head from these last four days is I don’t want to die. It was all I could think. How many thousands were thinking the same thing. It doesn’t seem fair.

November 10

Slept 12 hours then Gabe woke me up to give a briefing to brass including Cota and Hodges. All of them fine in clean uniforms maybe a little tired but all I could see when I looked at them was how the bodies of guys who got killed looked once the tanks crushed them. There were hundreds of bodies crushed either by men stampeding or tanks the same as rotten squash somebody threw at a trash bin and missed and somebody stepped in. Just blood and bone and army green mixed in with mud so you can hardly tell it used to be a man. And these guys all have clean uniforms.

I gave my briefing and answered their questions and it was just me but by the time I got out of there all the fellows were waiting. I guess they were all about to go AWOL when nobody in signals was telling them what was going on. But seeing as they were getting road worker troops to pick up rifles I don’t think there were too many radio men who had enough time away from returning fire and getting blown up to radio back about it.

In any case the fellows said hello and the pack of us started slogging through the mud to get back to our quarters (barn (not bombed yet) with hay and a tap: the Ritz) and the others went on ahead to get chow and me I just sat down on a pile of blankets all rolled up against the barn, Steve too and for a few minutes it was just us sharing a smoke and looking at nothing at all, only Steve’s hand was shaking either with cold or anger or I don’t know what. Finally he said, “I’m not letting you go alone again” – I said “I don’t want to go at all.” He wrapped his arm around me and just for a second I could breathe.

November 11

Dernier says it’s Ferdinand Foch who said: “This is not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years.” He said it right after they signed the treaty with the krauts the last time. 26 years ago my dad was somewhere near here, probably within a couple hundred miles of us sorry bastards, and Steve’s dad was somewhere getting killed or I guess he was already killed. And now their sons and about a million other guys sons are here dying in the same mud they did.

I guess the plan is to shore up defenses and at least not lose more ground. Orders came from OSS/SSR to help out and in all capital letters to Steve “MORALE.” I haven’t seen any reporters but I guess the news is out about this hellhole. We seven are sticking together though I doubt I could get away if I tried, Steve has not gotten more than a couple feet away from me in the last four days. If I were less of a goddamn shit heel I would mock him for it. Instead he seems to be the only thing
November 13

Dreamed I was a PI like Philip Marlowe and I was home. “Mr. Barnes I’ve got a real strange report of some men walking around alive” the call came in over the telephone and so I had to walk out in the street which was filled up with frozen corpses (and it was narrow), which was how it was supposed to be, and as it turns out there were some kids playing stickball and nobody could figure out where they came from or what they were doing and it was all real suspicious. I woke up sick to my stomach, in the dream it wasn’t just soldiers who were lining the roads (and all the taxicabs were tanks also) but it was regular folks too. I guess if I was “Freud” it would be my subconscious saying I was afraid the krauts are going to invade New York but that seems too easy to be honest and silly too considering they just as trapped here as we are.

Instead maybe I think it is more that I’m losing the sight of home and not just the sounds. It used to be I could imagine Brooklyn perfectly and even when we’re in a city or a town there are times when the light catches a building’s roof and it could almost be a flash of home if you look at it the right way. The difference is the music of it all. I can remember people murmuring and yelling on the streets and automobiles honking their horns and the way ladies shoes sound on the sidewalk and the crinkle of paper when a boy handing out advertisements lets one go and the wind catches it. The only problem is that for a while now all those sounds have gone away. I can’t hear it like I see it. All that’s left are truck engines and tank treads and the way a kraut squad starts yelling and screaming when I get one of their boys. (and they are boys—haven’t seen a single one of them who could grow a beard). And the fucking shells screaming down and the thump and boom of them hitting and when a man does get hit and suddenly the loudest thing in the world is the burble and squelch of his blood and flesh and him crying for someone to help him, God maybe. I can think of home but still hear all that. And now it feels like I can think of home and all I’m seeing is that too, this godawful rottenness louder and brighter than everything else.

November 14

In Kommerscheidt I was sure I was going to die. I think more sure even than D-Day or all through Normandy. I guess something about being at Steve’s side makes me feel like I will make it through. But in Kommerscheidt in the seconds between running and shooting and helping boys drag their friends who were cut in half out of the kill zone I couldn’t decide if it was better or worse to be in the battle alone and die or have the fellows there in that hell beside me. It seems awful selfish but I wanted Steve by my side so badly. The men there knew me from newsreels I guess but it was not even like Normandy where we were shoulder to shoulder with men we had trained with and who were our friends. And in those circumstances of men going wild from fear it becomes every man for himself anyway. I was surrounded by thousands of soldiers but I have not felt that alone since Azzano, or more like a body and not a man. I guess everyone dies alone in the end but to face death on a battlefield and know you are alone seems worse somehow.

November 16

Well we are together at least. Attached to the 22d infantry now in a slog. Got to hand it to the krauts by pitching this battle in this goddamn forest it does not matter that Rosie is building a tank every twelve minutes at home. Hardly any armor and no air support either. It is sleeting and we’ve seen bodies that got missed that are now frozen stiff. Those poor bastards.

November 18
7 dropped by a kraut sniper today. I think it must be the same one from yesterday. He is good. The effect it has on the men is terrible. It is one thing to pop your head out of a foxhole knowing a mortar might scream down and put a gold star in Ma’s window but for some reason the fear in these boys when they know a sniper is on the other side of the line is immense. Dernier said (in French) “there is nothing more frightening to a man than transforming into prey” – and I think that he must be right. At the end of the day a mortar is trying to kill anybody it lands near—a sniper is trying to kill you.

For me I can’t think of them as men like us—or as boys like our boys on the line who are so afraid. The minute I spot him in my scope he must stop being a man. They have to or else I couldn’t do it. They become men again when they drop—and that’s when it’s between me and God, or I guess me and the devil.

**November 19**

These are different and worse battle conditions than anything we have experienced before. The closest me and Dum-Dum can figure is late October last year in Italy. Except then it was mud and rain and here it is mud rain snow and sleet. It is so goddamn fucking cold. I guess the one benefit to hunting krauts is that we are not staying put in foxholes and can at least get our blood moving a little. Steve figures if we get closer to the krauts than anybody with common sense would then they won’t get us with their 88s or mortars because who would be so stupid as to get within a hundred yards of the line? So that’s our play. In this weather it is hard even for me to hit anything further than a 100 yards so I guess we better hope the krauts give us more credit for self-preservation than we actually got.

**November 20**

“Hey Buck,” Steve said last night when it was just us two keeping watch, “this could be Mirkwood” and I said “I don’t think the krauts are elves pal” and he laughed and said “maybe giant spiders” and I said “Jesus we’d be in trouble.” So he said it was the battle of the five armies instead and then after a minute: “I sure would draw it different now” – I remember the comics he did of it and how there were a couple guys fighting (he really has an imagination for the orcs) but neither of us back then could imagine the bodies. Finally I said “Steve this is the desolation of Smaug” and he just nodded—no doubt even the writer of the Hobbit could not have imagined our fighter bombers or kraut 88s.

“We haven’t got enough commandos to round out the company,” Steve said, and so I said he ought to draw the fellows as dwarves. Dum-Dum is Bombur (Steve said “too easy”) and Gabe is Balin (“he needs a beard then”) and I said “they all have beards Steve, they’re dwarves” so Steve asked what kind of beard I’d have—easy—none—I keep my face smooth like a civilized man. Easy to say but not easy to do in a foxhole in all fairness, I am about two days away from being a dwarf. I decided Monty is Thorin seeing as he’s the biggest snob we ever knew, and Carter is Gandalf, and then Steve picked Oin and Gloin for Jim and Dernier (they started the campfires! He remembered that and I didn’t). So Steve asked “what about you” and I said “I am the bear” (Beorn) and he didn’t like that but asked “and me?” – Pal: who else but you could ever be Bilbo?

–“while there’s life there’s hope.”

**November 21**

Got the kraut sniper.
November 23

I am so goddamn sick of cold and rain that can’t make up its mind if it wants to be snow. Jesus fucking Christ. Impossible to have any kind of fire even in a foxhole. Everything wet. Can hardly feel my feet. Even Steve is cold which does nobody any good since we’ve been taking turns next to him. What the fuck are we doing here. Krauts have this entire place covered in mines kill boxes and dragon’s teeth. Armor is useless. It is hill after hill after hill with them looking down waiting for us the whole time. Like Italy in miniature only with more woods and cold.

November 24

Thanksgiving. We have two things to be thankful for: first is that apparently behind the wire they decided to hand out turkey sandwiches (and coffee though it may have been cold tar—we chewed it) to all us poor schmucks on the line. Cook + truck driver did the rounds and Steve did his best “Cap!” voice to get us all triple rations and confessed later that he did not even feel bad about it. This is real progress. So the second thing is that we had about twenty turkey sandwiches in our dirt beds and then the shelling started and where a green infantryman might have dropped the sandwich we are none of us green. So Jim on his MG cheeks full like a goddamn cartoon and me on my rifle with half a sandwich blocking my scope firing blind. Shelling stopped (not very close to us after all) and then we finished the sandwiches in about two minutes flat. Happy Thanksgiving to us.

Later: “You know fellows” said Dum-Dum, “at least a year ago I did not have a soggy johnson” on account of he tripped backwards into a real bad hole that was filled with mud and god knows what else (piss—I knew for a fact) and Gabe goes “Dum-Dum what makes you think any of us care about the state of your johnson?”

November 25

I have to wonder if the entire western front and wherever else we are fighting krauts is as bad as this. Maybe we got a little full of ourselves in Normandy but as it turns out the krauts didn’t care as much about France as they do about Germany. And Normandy was hell so what’s this then?

My helmet got shot off yesterday by a kraut sniper. I got him back but for a second I thought I had been shot in the head and I was a goner. Gabe who was spotting for me screamed and I came to a second later with all the fellows staring down at me with horrible looks on their faces and I thought oh God I really am dead and then realized I was fine just stunned. I got the sniper. He might have the high ground but I’m the best.

I (got the fucker)

November 26

Ran out of smokes. We got a little too excited over our Thanksgiving ration I guess. Dernier hunted around for butts and opened them up to get whatever there was left and rolled new cigarettes and he got three good ones out of it. Of course it tastes like smoking mud and shit but we’ll take it. Sleep in shit eat shit smoke shit—join the army!

Later

Linked up with Dog Company and got dragged to meet a kid by the name of Capitano. Capitano was on the line real close to the krauts and had a real downstairs problem so he jumped out of his foxhole got his drawers down and started going. Well these krauts are real pricks because he starts
getting shot at – missed him to the right, to the left, hit the dirt in front of him, hell, even hit the shit behind him according to him. And the whole time he’s trying to get his gun and return fire and his buddy’s yelling at him to hit the dirt. Well he did not get shot, and as near as anybody can tell it was just a kraut having a laugh, and so did I mind sending the krauts back a joke of our own? Jesus Mary and Joseph — grunts!

November 28

There is not much in this town that is not bombed to shit but I will take even half a roof and rocks for a floor if it means not sleeping in mud and sleet. It is called Langerwehe and it is the best place on earth based on a real simple test—“is it those fucking woods?” and since the answer is NO then there we go. Advance continues but us and a bunch more grunts are off the line. Thank Christ. I have had enough of trench warfare and hills and constantly staring up at the next round of krauts. It is not quiet here but to be honest it is almost strange to even be able to hear at all something other than shells and men wailing. It has been nothing but shelling for days and days.

So tired I could sleep for a year but somehow my head has not gotten on board and I’m sitting here steaming by the fire (the stench is terrible—when you can smell yourself you know it is bad). Steve woke up a while ago. “You OK Buck?” Yeah pal as OK as I’ll ever be. He asked after a minute “where would you rather be, if you could?” And I said “you mean if there wasn’t a war?” and he said “sure, after the war I mean” —perfectly confident that we’ll make it! And the truth is I don’t care where so long as me and Steve make it out together. So I said “driving a cabriolet with the sun rising behind us” and he folded his arms behind his head and asked “what color” (classic black) then “where are we going” (anywhere) – “sounds good Buck.”

November 29

“Der Schädeljäger” — this is what the krauts are calling me. Heard it from a couple rangers guarding Jerry (what a joke—half of them can’t be more than 15—my kid sister could “guard” them) that every time a guy with an M1C walked by they were crossing themselves, and so the rangers who spoke some German asked why and apparently that is it: “Schädeljäger” — it means “skull hunter.” Skull Hunter Jesus H. The goddamn Nazis are scared of me. I was with Dum-Dum and Gabe when we heard and Dum-Dum laughed and hit me on the back and I kept thinking about my count I’ve been keeping and how each kraut I dropped had a buddy who found him with a third eye God didn’t give him but I did. I know they’re fucking krauts and I don’t care when it’s my men on the line but my whole gut feels like sour milk. This is not what I ever wanted. The idea that my ma’s son her “beloved” could become something krauts are crossing themselves over makes me sick. I got away from everyone and cried. What excuse could there be for me—Steve has fought the same war as me but it made him a hero and me a savage.

November 30

Moving out ASAP to rendezvous with SSR who are holed up somewhere in France we are told. It has been a long month in a long stretch of long months. We are all relieved to be going as this fight has taken more out of us than ten Weissensees.[10] Eating chow (warm!) Monty clapped my shoulder: “I think Jerry will be thrilled to hear the Skull Hunter is moving on!” and Dum-Dum, “I’d be thrilled too if I’d been shitting myself for a month” and Jim “Dum-Dum you have been shitting yourself for a month” and Dum-Dum “but that’s the foxhole shits not skull hunter shits” and Gabe “and what exactly is the difference” —and then Dum-Dum made us sorry he asked.

Later
A couple of trucks in a convoy going west so we hitched a ride and me and Steve took the first turn in a jeep, it was covered but that doesn’t do much. He was driving and after a while he said “Buck you’ve been yelling at me since we were kids about picking fights—that I am always looking for one” and I said “oh so he finally admits it” and he gave me a look so I piped down. He said “you were right. Hell I even found a way to fight with a goddamn shield” and I had a crack ready about him being a contrary little shit and instead he said “and sure, most of the time it was because somebody wasn’t getting treated right. But my whole life, I saw the guy doing the hitting. You always saw the guy getting hit.”

I said: “you were the guy getting hit” and he put on his Cap voice: “Bucky.” So I said—what exactly is the difference there pal and he said: “you know what the difference is” and I guess I do, and he pointed at my gun which was at my feet and said “that’s a shield too Buck.” I could not even speak it felt like for hours—and for a couple moments if I closed my eyes and kept my shoulder up against his, it was like the daydream of the cabriolet and all I could think was—“he loved him as his own soul.”[11]

---

**Historical Notes: The Battle of Hürtgen Forest and der Schädeljäger**

The Battle of Hürtgen Forest (September 19, 1944—December 16, 1944) was the longest battle ever fought by the U.S. Army. Though it was one of the bloodiest in American history, because it ended in a German defensive victory it would mostly likely be a footnote today if not for its role in *The Night War* and subsequent popular culture.

A precursor to the much more famous Battle of the Bulge (December 16, 1944—January 25, 1945), Hürtgen Forest was known for its horrendous conditions and difficult geography. Doomed from the beginning by poor Allied planning, logistics, and command, early gains were rapidly erased as the desperate German defenders took advantage of the vast quantities of fortifications, mines, traps, artillery installations, and pillboxes of the Siegfried Line. On some days, the Allies advanced just yards. In other cases, as in the battles at Schmidt and Kommerscheidt in which First Sergeant Barnes fought, inexperienced Allied soldiers were outgunned, surrounded, and slaughtered as they attempted to withdraw to safety.

The conditions were legendarily bad. Rain, sleet, snow, and brutal cold plagued the soldiers living in foxholes and, if they were lucky, tents. The difficult forest paths and constant threat of mines and shells made for astoundingly bad morale—as did the ever-present threat of sniper attack. During the Normandy campaign, the Allies learned firsthand the value not just of overwatch protection—which Barnes famously provided at Saint-Martin-de-Mer and Saint-Georges-Eglise—but also of an effective counter-sniper. Enemy snipers were a bane to the combat effectiveness of the boots on the ground; yet, as Barnes proved in Normandy and again in Hürtgen Forest, devoting even minimal resources to counter-sniper action markedly improved the combat capability of even those ground troops most targeted by enemy sharpshooters.

According to documentary evidence, Major General Dutch Cota issued at least three requests for Captain America and the Howling Commandos to be forward-deployed to the line in support of his command, the 28th Infantry Division. The requests were denied several times until the personal intervention of Lt. General Courtney Hodges, and a compromise was made to send in Barnes in a sniper support role. For six days early in November, Barnes was embedded with units of the 28th Infantry Division, which suffered devastating casualties. After Barnes made it back to Allied lines on November 9th, wounded and carrying reports of the near-annihilation of the infantry units he’d been asked to protect, Captain America sent a series of cutting reports and telegrams castigating the decision to deploy Barnes alone.
Most historians agree that risking a soldier of Barnes's prowess and importance to the SSR107 team could easily have been a catastrophic mistake. Yet the impact of Barnes's Hürtgen Forest campaign cannot be denied; not the military value of his 51 confirmed kills, necessarily, but rather the effect on the enemy's psyche. According to interviews, documents, and declassified memoranda stretching back as early as July 1944, German soldiers and even Nazi leadership were well aware of the man at Captain America's right hand, and just how lethal he was behind his rifle. The first known use of *der Schädeljäger*—German for "The Skull Hunter”—in reference to Barnes was in August 1944, when SS-FD leaders speculated about the perpetrator of the assassination of Obergruppenführer Gunther Schönhöfer. By October 1944, the moniker was widespread among German infantry units throughout the Western Front, and was often paired with a reference to Captain America ("der Kapitän und der Schädeljäger").

The exact origins of the name are hotly debated. One of the more fanciful explanations is that Barnes aimed for the Totenkopf, or Death's Head emblem that figured prominently on SS uniforms, in particular on field caps. While evocative, this explanation is not especially plausible; soldiers wore helmets in the field, not their field caps, and good snipers aimed for the center of mass, not for the foreheads of their victims. Yet there is a fair amount of evidence to suggest that Barnes was known for his ability to make headshots; several of the German casualties photographed at Saint-Georges-Eglise did in fact have what Barnes euphemistically called a "third eye."

Allied propagandists quickly latched on to the idea that Barnes had become a kind of boogey-man to the German soldiers. By January 1945, the Allies were dropping leaflets onto German positions that featured a demonic depiction of Barnes and the words, "Der Schädeljäger kommt euch holen!", or "The Skull Hunter is coming to get you!" Similar leaflets were dropped in German cities and towns, with the words "Der Schädeljäger kommt eure Söhne holen," or "The Skull Hunter is coming for your sons!" It is unknown whether Barnes gave permission for his image to be used in this way, or if he was aware of the leaflet campaign at all. It is suspected that he was not.

It is difficult to gauge the effect of the Skull Hunter propaganda campaign on civilian populations, though its impact on German soldiers was significant and by the end of the war Barnes had become a legendary figure in his own right—even after his death in March 1945. Shortly before committing suicide in late April, Field Marshal Walter Model, who faced Barnes at Hürtgen Forest and later at the Battle of the Bulge, famously said to his military retinue: *Meine Herren, es ist Zeit dem Schädeljäger ins Auge zu sehen*, or, "Men, it's time to look the Skull Hunter in the eye."

Curiously, the 1947 revelation that Barnes in fact despised the nickname did not lessen its popularity or its continued association with him. *Skullhunter* was the title of a 1976 action film about Barnes's role in SSR107, and to this day the members of the 107th Infantry Regiment are known as "Skullhunters," an homage to Barnes's service with that unit.

**Chapter Notes**

[1] The town of Schmidt was captured by American forces early in the campaign at Hürtgenwald, soon to be retaken by the Germans.

[2] Action reports and briefings filed during the Battle of Hürtgen Forest corroborate the interpretation that the tally marks in Barnes's journal, which appear for the first time in this entry, signify his “kills.” During the Commandos’ stint in Hürtgenwald, Barnes’s sniper campaign was credited with a shocking 51 kills, 33 of which are accounted for by these tally marks.

[3] Cpl. Roy Cavendish lost his leg above the knee but survived the war to marry his sweetheart. He has 7 children and 18 grandchildren, and lives in Vermont.
Major General Norman “Dutch” Cota was in command of the 28th Infantry Division, which suffered extreme losses in the disastrous early attacks on Schmidt and Komscheidt.

November 11, 1944 was the 26th anniversary of the end of the Great War.

J.R.R. Tolkien probably could imagine it; he fought in the Battle of the Somme.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* was published in 1937. The line quoted here by Barnes (“While there’s life there’s hope”) is spoken by Bilbo Baggins, the novel’s protagonist, when the company is trapped inside the Lonely Mountain.

Based on German documentary evidence from the Battle of Hürtgen Forest, it is believed that the sniper in question was Friedrich Köhler, a veteran soldier who fought on the Eastern front until 1944.

A characteristic of the Siegfried line were the pyramidal fortifications of concrete and steel rebar known as “dragon’s teeth” for the way they jutted up from the ground. They were intended to stop tanks and mechanized infantry from progressing.

A reference to Operation Bonfire (January 1943) which involved the destruction of the SS-FD base at Weissee, Austria. Bonfire was extraordinarily physically taxing, requiring SSR107 to travel hundreds of miles in winter conditions to reach their extraction point.

Barnes is referencing either 1 Samuel 18:1, “And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul,” or 1 Samuel 18:3, “Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.”

Chapter End Notes

Massive thanks to my beta devildears, who really got to shine in this German-language heavy chapter and was invaluable in coming up with der Schädeljäger, the text of the propaganda leaflets, and of course Field Marshal Model’s last words!

Notes

Model was a real Field Marshal who did commit suicide to avoid being tried for war crimes. He did not, however, leave behind any famous last words.

The Battle of Hürtgen Forest was way worse of a shit show than even depicted here. Command really did give out turkey sandwiches to the guys on the line on Thanksgiving.

The tale of Capitano, the poor kid with dysentery who got shot at by German soldiers across the line, is based on a true story.

Thanks to everyone for reading, commenting on, and following this story. This project is so special to me and I can't begin to describe how rewarding it is to receive your kudos and feedback. Thank you! <3 -prax
First Sergeant James Barnes in late December 1944, shortly after the combat action known as “The Charge for the 112th,” during which he earned the Medal of Honor for “extraordinary valor in combat in the service of his fellow infantrymen.”
December 2

Not France. Made it to Brussels late yesterday. We have not gotten a better welcome by anyone. This place has been liberated for a couple months now but based on the smiles people give us when they see American uniforms you’d think we were liberating them today.\[1\] And hell they don’t even know “who we are” yet! Detachment from SSR due in a couple days so we have R&R until then. We are instructed to “play Johnny” but that is hard to do when we are staying at the “Hotel des Colonies” which is sort of like their Ritz. It has hot water and a roof and real food. It may as well be Buckingham Palace. I will not have any trouble laying low as I intend to stay in this hotel eat three squares (or six, or as many as they will give me) sleep in a real bed and take a bath, all of these things at least once an hour and then start all over again.

December 4

SSR here and they brought mail. We have not gotten any mail since September so it was an entire bundle of letters waiting, most importantly from Ted who is alive and made it out of Holland okay although he is very torn up in his letter as two of his pals got killed—one of them who I met last year, McNamara. Ted of course went through Normandy and I know he must have seen awful things just as we did but there is no possible preparation for the grief when it is your friend. Just yesterday I dreamed of Harry. It was me and him walking in one of those hot dusty towns of Sicily and I was busting his chops and he was busting mine and that was the whole dream. Your mind can be unbearably cruel sometimes. I would almost rather dream of his last moments than of those good ones only because I lose him all over again when I wake up. And now that is Ted’s sorry lot too—he did not say as much in his letter but Ted was always too much like me that way—he feels things too much. Not like Jack or Curly or Ma where it is all water off a duck’s back. I know Ted must now relive it forever. God speed Pfc. Bill McNamara – another good one gone.\[2\]

December 5

Could not sleep. My body remembers how but my brain is a first rate jackass about it. Went outside to smoke even though it was cold and Steve was there too going through his own ration. “Hiya pal” I said and he was so wrapped up in his head he did not hear me coming which is the first time that has happened since before I left home. I still talk into his good ear just by force of habit—Dum-Dum asked me once about always being on his left “hey Sarge aren’t you supposed to be his right-hand man?” and I said “his bad ear numbnuts” and they all looked at me mystified. Well of course because I’m the only one who knows it wasn’t just that Steve was a little guy before the serum he had a Sears Roebuck worth of problems! –Steve just laughed and laughed.\[3\]

Anyhow tonight Steve was not smiling. He was never one to be pushed to talking before he’s ready (or pushed to anything for that matter) so I just lit a smoke on the tip of his and waited for a while and finally he said that he got into a dust-up with the SSR brass over the fact that the H— krauts still have other bases and no doubt have other laboratories but we just spent a month in trenches. And the 1-star in the meeting said “you are not the sum total of our fight against the H— organization Captain” and later Phillips: “It’s politics son—you had better get used to it.” The disgust in Steve’s voice! We have talked about it before, this fact that Steve is a prop whether he likes it or not but to be a prop and a pawn at the same time is intolerable. We are pieces on a board getting pushed around and never in his life did Steve allow anybody to do that. Hell half the reason I was afraid of him enlisting is because there’s nobody in the entire world less suited to taking orders than my best pal, I thought he’d get court-martialed “lickety split.”

But being stubborn is not what makes him special—anybody can be that (take these goddamn jokers we are fighting for starters). So I told him what I have been thinking about a lot since getting here:
The difference between watching out for the guy getting hit and the one doing the hitting isn’t what you think it is pal. It’s that you expect better of everybody. You look at the guy doing the hitting because he ought to be better than that, like you are, and every time you see that foulness out of somebody it’s almost a surprise. That’s why you look there first. And me I don’t even bother—I just help with the bloody noses after.” And he said: “that’s not nothing Buck” and I said “well that’s something” and he lit two more smokes and gave me one and said “I guess as long as we’re together we got both sides covered then” and I laughed “Jesus the pair of us” – but the fact is that he’s not wrong—I’ll take it.

December 7

Finally time in between briefings to finish reading all my letters. Dad did not write again except to sign “Love, your father” in a couple of Ma’s and as usual it’s Ma and Curly getting competitive with each other to see who can write the most. Curly even put a grocery shopping list in hers (it was for Thanksgiving—apples, flour, etc., all checked off except four rows for “Bucky” “Steve” “Teddy” and “Jack”). I showed it to Steve who smiled at the little scrap of paper as gentle as if it was Curly standing right in front of us. He said “Got to help her finish her shopping I guess” and I rolled my eyes “this mook” – but it is hard not to wonder how many kid sisters are out there who will never get the chance to check off their list at all.

Also got a V mail from Jack who is still in California I guess that’s why God’s been ignoring everybody’s prayers here, he is tied up keeping Jack from swimming to Japan.

Today also three years since Pearl Harbor. I remember listening to the news on the radio that Sunday night only a month away from “my one year in the Army” being up and getting rotten drunk “well I’m in for it now” – what a kid! To think there was a version of me just three years ago who had never seen death or war or a kraut in his scope at all—

December 8

Gabe got a letter from his parents about the citation Steve mailed them and this is the first he heard of it—the rest of us swore each other to silence and as it turns out we can keep secrets from each other or more accurately we can keep Dum-Dum from opening his trap so long as it’s about something that matters. It is the first time I have ever seen Gabe lose his cool. His letter came with a picture of his parents smiling big at the camera making two V signs. Steve grabbed him by the shoulders: “Victory Abroad, Victory at Home, pal” and he nearly cried. Later I asked him: “what are you going to do after the war?” and he gave me a look “you know that question ain’t allowed” and I said “it’s nearly Christmas pal give me something” and he said “finish college, marry a nice girl, etc.” and I said—that is an answer for reporters and he said “for Roi Ottley maybe” and it’s true—the only reporters who ever try to talk to Gabe are ones from Britain, and even then if there are any Army propagandists around they lock him down. Can’t have a negro getting asked his opinions after all! It makes me sick. So on a hunch I asked: “victory abroad?” and waited and he finally said “yeah, yeah. Victory at home” and he tried to play like it was a joke but you go into battle with Gabe Jones even once and you know exactly what it looks like when he is determined to do something—I swear if Adolf got a glimpse of Gabe when he’s leading a patrol he’d turn tail and run. So I said “you got me when the time comes pal” and he looked at me almost surprised: “hell, I already knew that” and if that’s not the biggest compliment ever paid to me I don’t know what is.

December 10

Apparently mail can find SSR but not us when we are in the field. Letter from Frank Castellano. The first I have heard from him since before D-day (in my postscript: “some social secretary you are
SERGEANT Castellano! Frank is in the hospital in England, he punched his ticket home in France last month—nearly lost his leg according to his letter but the doctors “got it to stick” and he is due to ship home in the next couple weeks. After all this—Sicily and Italy and Venafro and Azzano and France—Frank is finally going home. Apparently it is possible. Yet the last page of his letter was very hard to read indeed. He is going home—but it seems he knows just as I do that there is no real “going home” after all we have seen done and lost. I am copying the second page here as the original is going in my pocket. It is strange but seeing the names of our friends written in someone else’s hand makes it easier somehow.

Buck if I’m honest I don’t know how I’ll get by at home. I can barely imagine it. And now that I’ve lived a life with brothers in arms such as you and Miller, and Nichols, Lipscomb, Joyce, Glenn, Adler, and all the rest—God, our list of names would take more paper than I’ve got, wouldn’t it? —how do I go back when they never will? For 2 years I’ve wanted nothing more than to go home, just like anybody else. But now that home is closer to me than it’s ever been, it just doesn’t seem fair. Why am I the one who gets this and not our friends? The hard truth is that my heart feels so very heavy nearly all the time. How can any man carry that weight alone? I don’t know the answer. Sorry to not end this letter on a joke & for being maudlin. I swear I am still Castellano. Prayers for you daily. Look me up when you come home, won’t you pal? Your friend, Frank.

Those parts were easy but figuring out what to write back took me nearly an hour. How do you help a guy when you don’t know the answer yourself? Finally I decided on: “look at your address book Frank—after serving in a company of men such as ours there is no such thing as carrying anything alone.” I wrote it and I meant it but it is so hard to believe it on the darkest nights of this rotten fight. Even if it is the truth it is so hard to remember that it’s the truth. But I guess I’m not alone in that either.[6]

December 11

The Red Cross got awarded the International Peace Prize. The closest thing to “peace” the world could come up with in the middle of all this is finding the people just trying to clean up after everybody else.

December 13

Allowed some liberty. Originally the brass was thinking drilling to keep us sharp but Steve put a stop to it. “Keep us sharp” – the “sharp” is all that is left of us. What you forget about honing a knife to an edge is that the part you file away is gone forever—metal shavings that get brushed off like they were never part of the knife at all.

I guess I am grateful for the chance to sleep and eat (those are only about 95% of my waking thoughts after all) but as with most things you imagine, the reality is less wonderful than the dream. In my daydreams I am not preoccupied with what may be coming next for us (or what has already come). In daydreams it is just a sandwich and a beer. With this food and rest comes an awful unceasing restlessness, scraping out the man to leave a body that has forgotten how to close its eyes and a heart that doesn’t know how to stop racing. I know we are not in the fight right now but the rest of me does not. Whether it is real or in my head it feels the same and I am so very tired of it.

December 15

It did not happen like in my dream. I may have to write that a hundred more times. At Venafro Skip[7] was next to me for a while and in the break in the battle I remember him muttering to himself
“turning and turning in the widening gyre” at least four times and then “Sarge” about three times until I finally opened my eyes and saw that he looked more scared about forgetting the goddamn lines to a poem than he did of the fact that we were getting cut to pieces. “Sarge how does it go?” and I said “I’m not the one who memorized all of Yeats and Whitman Skip” and he said “and Longfellow and Frost” and then a couple minutes later (or maybe an hour—or maybe ten hours—who can keep track of time in hell?) he was killed. In my dream it was just Skip’s body (half blown up with his eyes gone and his jaw) — still whispering somehow “sarge sarge sarge” “sarge sarge sarge” and then “turning and turning in the widening gyre—how does it go sarge? How does it go? Sarge help me remember how it goes” and I woke up and barely made it to the toilet. I guess I made enough noise getting from the bed to the toilet that Steve heard and came into my room without even knocking, almost as urgently as he did a year ago at Azzano, and he did not ask what was wrong just sat down next to me for a while until I said: “the poem Steve—the widening gyre” and he asked “are you having a fit?” and I said “probably” and he said “what poem?” and I said it’s a Yeats and then I remembered: “things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned” and Steve just grabbed me around the shoulders and said “please Buck just breathe for a second” – it is what I tell myself all the time yet somehow when he says it, it is almost enough. It is god damn embarrassing to be a grown fucking man so shaken by a bad dream, and babbling like a lunatic. I think I am a lunatic.[8]

December 17

Nearly killed some bastard’s clerk. Came to with my knife against his throat he came in my room without knocking I guess to summon me to a briefing and he was up against the wall with blood dripping down under his jaw like he cut himself shaving only he didn’t. Nearly pissed himself. I backed off and dropped the knife and my hands were shaking (and every muscle I got quivering like after a long march) and I said “sorry” and he said “Jesus Christ I didn’t expect the skull hunter to be shellshocked” and I told him to get the fuck out (he was a Sgt.) and he nearly tripped over his own legs trying to get to the door. I guess I am scary to GIs too not just krauts (and myself). Almost drowned in the bath trying to get myself together after. Give me a gun and a mission and I can do that but it is the part in between that I can’t seem to handle like a man. Jesus goddamn Mary and Joseph what does that say?

Later

Back to the woods. Steve found us drinking and as soon as we saw him we all knew. You can almost see the fire burning in his chest when there’s a job to do. “Once more unto the breach dear friends,” said Monty as he finished his brandy and Gabe slapped him in the back of the head. “We’ll close up the wall with our English dead all right”[9] on account of Shakespeare is downright bad for morale (we have talked about this before) and Monty (drunk) got up and bellowed “Who needs Dutch courage when you have English courage!” and I said “OK Dogberry it’s time for you to get some English sleep”[10] – that goes for the rest of us too. Though if we are facing another Hürtgen forest no amount of sleep will be enough.

December 19

Colder than the north pole’s asshole Jesus H. We know of a couple companies either taken prisoner or surrounded and we all raised our hands to go after them because krauts are killing POWs here.[11] The 101st is here which means Teddy is here. I will sacrifice just about every principle I have if it means krauts don’t get their hands on Ted. “That’s a shield too Buck.” Let’s see how these goddamn Nazis feel about killing unarmed GIs with Captain America and the goddamn Skull Hunter after them, and the commandos besides.
December 20

There is a Bible verse I was scared of as a kid. It was Fr Cleary trying to explain how it’s bad for a man to be wrathful but good if God is, because whatever God does is good. “God is jealous and the Lord revengeth, the Lord revengeth and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adversaries and he reserveth wrath for his enemies.” [12] It is funny that we use the same words to describe what is holy if God does it but sinful for men to, when men are supposed to be created in his image and the whole point is becoming more like him. How are we supposed to tell? I remember reading that verse which he wrote down for me on a piece of paper and folding it and unfolding it and thinking: all it does is talk about his adversaries and his enemies. What about just regular people? Unless those are the same things.

I am not scared of it now of course—what are words when you have lived a war? But jealousy, vengeance, and wrath—I know those words now the way you can’t as a kid. Sometimes it seems like they are all that is left inside me besides the fear. And even the good things in my heart don’t feel good at all. Death and love seems to take up the same space inside, where I can drop a man from 200 yards and at the same time can hardly breathe for the love of my brother and Steve and for my men here. It is closer to wrath than love. I have found that I will do just about any horrible thing for any one of them and barely care that it is horrible until afterwards. Who cares about my soul when Ted’s or Steve’s or any of the others is on the line?

Later

###

December 21

Got to what looks like Charlie Dog and Fox companies. Fellows in dire straits for days but held tough despite cold injuries food etc. Plan went perfectly. Seeing Steve set his jaw and throw himself at tanks does not ever get old. Sometimes I think he shocks the krauts so bad they forget to fight back, at least right away. In any case we’ve got a lot of dead krauts who lost their chance to slaughter these boys at least. Steve mad as hell at me for hanging back as long as I did but I didn’t even need words to ask him “and what the hell would you have done pal” just rolled my eyes and finished my cigarette and he stomped off. [13]

December 22

Christ it is fucking cold. Not nearly enough food and weather too bad for air support. Back on line as krauts have snipers. You would think they would have run out by now. Weather also too bad for good shooting either—I am not afraid of fog or snow (just miserable in it) but sadly neither are krauts (I am fine if they are miserable).

###

December 23

So tired slept in open air. 2 hours at most. Hands so cold can hardly write. Got winter gear at least including knee length wool coat. Keeping one hand inside jacket so I can at least pull trigger. Hunting a very good shot. Weather better but company worse (by myself). Shells exploding frozen trees everywhere and being alone in it is awful but no real choice. It is one thing for Steve to plant himself in front of an officer and say “we go together or not at all” and another thing for me to say “I got to do it Steve.” Who else is there? Thought he might punch me when I moved out but he just
grabbed on to my shoulders: “come back” I said “that an order sir?” “you’re damn right it’s an order. Come back Buck” and I said “always do” – though I guess that’s true for everyone until it isn’t.

**December 24**

This place could not be more different from Hürtgen even though this is a forest too. There it was a wild place built up for years to be a death trap. This is a different kind of death trap something out of a nightmare. Snow and dead quiet except for the shelling and the trees all in neatly planted straight lines, an uncanny deserted Manhattan where every building is identical. Set up zeroed and snow in my mouth to hide my breath just *waiting*. It does not seem *real* and it is so cold I may as well be frozen here and it is like going down the steps from the top of the Arc de Triomphe like we did in Paris our first day, going around and around in the darkness, spiraling downwards and you have the thought “these steps will never end I will be on this staircase forever”—it is the same thing. Rows of perfect straight trees and snow in my mouth waiting for my shot *forever*. 

**Later**

|  
| Merry Christmas to krauts.  
|  

**December 25**

Spending night in a half bombed house with some paratroopers. One of them found a phonograph because his pal somehow got his hands on a disc of a Christmas radio program. I don’t know if it was the USO or something else but we got it to work on the phonograph. Maybe a dozen of us here and I didn’t know any of them from Adam but in a way on Christmas so far from home and it so bitterly cold that doesn’t matter—we are all going to feel very *alone* no matter how many guys there are around. When it’s not your Ma or your kid sister it can’t be the same. It would be different if I had caught a truck back to HQ where the fellows are which is what I tried to do. Instead I was here listening quietly to Christmas songs with a bunch of men all as homesick as me. We hummed along, but not to each other just ourselves. For a while it was just men breathing and singing a little, listening to the record and the wind and far away artillery outside until a new one none of us ever heard before came on. I did not even care if the others saw me or perhaps we were all weeping and that is why nobody said anything. It was Judy Garland singing the kind of song that it *hurts* to listen to, an awful ache deep in your gut in a place you can’t get to. “Next year all our troubles will be out of sight” — *God, if only*. If only it could be “Home by Christmas” next year. I would fight another 11 months and 30 days so long as it meant I could be home next year. I don’t want to spend another Christmas here. None of us should have to. It just isn’t fair and I know fairness doesn’t really matter to anybody except the guy getting the short end of the stick but it seems like it *should* matter. After the song ended one of the fellows played it again and then we played it again and again until the shelling started back up. “Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow” – all anyone can do is *try*.

**December 27**

Linked back up with the fellows. It was not too hard finding them as I think we and the rest of Uncle Sam’s finest (sorriest—coldest—hungriest) are surrounded and so there’s only so many places we could all be. This cold has a way of wearing you out like nothing else. Maybe it is all the shaking. Seeing Steve and the others was an incredible relief. Seen enough boys blown to bits in the past couple days it is hard not to imagine it happening to your friends, especially when you are not there to watch out for them. Though I guess there is not much I can do against artillery. “Don’t you know
Cap would just stare at it sternly and the shell would be too ashamed to explode” is what Jim said and I said “he better fucking not” and Jim: “he would try though wouldn’t he” and I elbowed Steve who gave me a baleful look “I didn’t say anything” and I said “you were thinking about trying it” he said “stare at it when it’s under my shield maybe” --Christ what a punk. It is good to be back with them—feels like thawing on the inside at least even if the rest of me is as cold as goddamn Mallory.[17]

December 29

[Editor’s Note: Much of the original entry was illegible.]

I shot one of our own guys I shot him it was “friendly fire” [Illegible] He was in the wrong place he must have gotten turned around [Illegible] downrange and [Illegible] the movement [Illegible] where did he even get it [Illegible] in the chest [Illegible] just one bullet [Illegible] far enough away I saw his head turn after I pulled the trigger and I could not take it back [Illegible] you can never take any bullet back but especially not this one how can anyone be forgiven for this. [Illegible] Steve [Illegible] running but [Illegible][18]

December 30

[Editor’s Note: Most of the original text comprising this entry was scratched or burned out. The original notebook devotes at least two handwritten pages to this entry, but only a few lines were able to be deciphered.]

In a foxhole with Steve [Illegible] All I want [Illegible] Never the same after this it can’t be [Illegible] can’t stop thinking [Illegible] Why am I [Illegible]

December 31

I don’t even know how many krauts will never go home because of me. But at least one man of ours won’t and it’s my fault. It is probably wrong of me (can I even tell anymore?) and I bet a lot of krauts mothers would disagree but it is like how it is worse to send an innocent man to prison than set a hundred guilty men free. I know it was an accident. It was an accident and I didn’t mean to and it was one bullet but god I have fired a 1000 bullets maybe 10,000 but my job is to protect. There is a man dead because of me. A gold star in his Ma’s window because of me. I don’t know how it is possible to feel so numb and in pain at the same time. I told Steve “I just want it to be over” and he knows me well enough despite what happened that he didn’t try to say anything. Words can’t do anything. I haven’t got any. All I got is a bullet I can’t get back.

Historical Notes

The Charge for the 112th and the SSR107 Campaign in the Ardennes

What became the Battle of the Bulge began with what is known in Germany as Unternehmen Wacht am Rhein, or Operation Watch on the Rhine, the Reich’s massive last-ditch effort to force the Allies to a negotiated peace. In late November 1944, Germany withdrew its most experienced troops from the defensive effort at Hürtgen Forest to prepare a assault on weak Allied lines near the Ardennes Forest, in an effort to retake Antwerp, one of the Allies’ most crucial ports. Though the operation was planned by Hitler personally, many of Germany’s top generals strongly disagreed with the strategy—and were ultimately proven correct in their position, though not until after weeks of brutal fighting and hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides.
The most remarkable element of the Allied response to the offensive, and to Germany's shocking early gains in the campaign, was the speedy mobilization of troops to the region. In a matter of days, Allied divisions poured into the area to hold the line against some of Nazi Germany's most lethal and experienced units. The extreme cold and poor weather conditions, including fog and snow, prevented the Allies from leveraging their greatest material advantage over the Reich: air support. The defense of Belgium was therefore up to ground infantry units such as the 101st Infantry Division, which became known as the "Battered Bastards of Bastogne" for their staunch defense of the key village of Bastogne even while outnumbered and besieged.

Captain America and his Howling Commandos arrived in the region on December 18th, 1944, two days after the German offensive began. According to contemporaneous memoranda, SSR107's presence was originally intended as a morale booster to the troops—in other words, a propaganda stunt. However, after hearing about the Malmedy Massacre, in which dozens of American POWs were killed by their German captors, the team volunteered to fight their way to the beleaguered 112th Infantry Regiment of the 28th Infantry Division, which was charged with maintaining the line against the German advance, and of which several battalions were rumored to be close to annihilation or surrender. With the events of Malmedy weighing heavily on the Commandos' hearts, it was the decision of an instant to try to come to the aid of the same unit with which they had fought weeks earlier in Hürtgen Forest.

Though Barnes devotes hardly any words to the event that would be nicknamed "The Charge for the 112th" in news accounts, what followed the Commandos' decision to fight their way to the 112th was one of the most remarkable small-unit actions of SSR107's long European campaign. Over the course of two days, SSR107 traversed more than 20 miles of hard fighting and vicious cold. In the dark of night, they were able to get past the German lines through to the exhausted and nearly surrounded 3rd Battalion in Wallerode, Belgium, bringing with them as many supplies they could carry as well as a plan for what we would term today a "guerilla"-style counteroffensive against the German attackers.

Over the course of twelve hours on December 20-21, 1944, Captain America, Bucky Barnes, and the rest of the Commandos orchestrated a vicious counterassault against the Wehrmacht and gave 3rd Battalion the chance for an organized withdrawal, ultimately saving the lives of close to a thousand men. In the final hours of the withdrawal, First Sergeant Barnes held the line, keeping the Germans pinned with a relentless sniper offensive, and drawing mortar, machine gun, and artillery towards his own position so as to give the men of the 112th a better chance at survival. Eyewitness accounts reported that Barnes even ran towards enemy kill zones to throw anti-tank grenades at German tanks and other mechanized infantry units. Barnes was one of the last men to leave Wallerode, and did so only once he ran out of ammunition, having fired more than five hundred rounds in the defense of the 112th.

Despite his bravery and self-sacrifice at Wallerode, Barnes was not immediately recommended for the Medal of Honor, the highest award for valor of the U.S. Armed Forces. It was only once reports of the battle reached SHAEF that the citation written by Colonel Chester Phillips was recommended to be upgraded from the Silver Star to the Medal of Honor. "In all honesty," said Phillips after the war, and after President Truman personally presented the award to Barnes's mother in May 1945, "working with those men, you just got used to seeing the kind of bravery on almost a daily basis that would be once in a lifetime for any other commander."

The Death of Pfc. Rodney Fiedler

The friendly fire incident on December 29th, 1944 is one of the most unforgettable and distressing scenes of The Night War. In earlier editions of the book, particularly those intended for the
classroom, the entries were often censored because of the controversy of a noted war hero such as Barnes having accidentally killed an American soldier. Yet the only reaction the Barnes family was concerned about was that of the Fiedler family. In late 1947, shortly before the initial publication of *The Night War*, Rebecca Barnes was able to track down Pfc. Fiedler's parents based on the information in her brother's journals. To her surprise, she was the first to inform them that their son's death had been an accident, rather than at the hands of the Wehrmacht. Nonetheless, she did receive permission to include the event in the final volume.

Upon learning of the incident—which was not publicized until after the publication of *The Night War*—reporters repeatedly reached out to the family of Pfc. Fiedler for their statement. In early 1948, his parents told *The New York Times*:

> We remain as devastated today as we were in January 1945 upon learning that our son, Rodney, was killed. It is a tragedy that he died, and a tragedy that it was an accident. We do not blame the young man who made the mistake. As ever, we blame the circumstances that sent our sons to war at all with the responsibility on their shoulders to defeat the great evil that was Nazi Germany.

It is unknown just how many soldiers were the victims of friendly fire incidents during World War II. Some estimates suggest that up to 20% of American casualties were inflicted by friendly fire rather than by the Axis powers. Over the years, the War Department—and later, the Department of Defense—has received criticism for its sluggish efforts to document such incidents, and not just during World War II: in 2004, for example, the Department of Defense was outright accused of attempting to cover-up the friendly fire death of U.S. Army Ranger and former NFL football player Pat Tillman. To this day, the practices and procedures for reporting such incidents are inconsistently followed.

In the case of Pfc. Fiedler, his accidental death has been the subject of intermittent criticism levied at Barnes and at *The Night War* since its initial date of publication. Some decry the incident as a "smear campaign" against Barnes himself (notwithstanding that he self-reported it and plainly held himself responsible), and others use it as evidence of the unsuitability of *The Night War*’s use in the classroom, describing the text as "glorification of violence and warmongering." Today, it remains one of the most frequently discussed episodes of Barnes's entire WWII campaign.

---

**Chapter Notes**

[1] While Allied forces entered Brussels in September 1944, the city was not officially liberated until February 1945, when all German forces were expelled from Belgium.

[2] Cpl. Bill McNamara (a Pfc. when Barnes met him in December) was one of five sons of Texas congressman Hutton McNamara to serve in the Armed forces, and the second to be killed in action. His older brother Lonnie was killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor.

[3] Sears, Roebuck, & Company was a mail-order catalog business that produced catalogs stretching into hundreds of pages, in which consumers could purchase anything from toys and home goods to houses.

[4] The “Double V Campaign” was a movement begun by African-Americans which emphasized the importance of defeating fascism abroad and defeating racism, segregation, and inequality at home.
Roi Ottley was a well-known black war correspondent.

First Sergeant Frank Castellano of the Bronx, New York survived the war and became Able Company’s unofficial historian, helping to found the Able to Help charitable organization and coordinating regular Able Company reunions. He married his wife, Kitty, in 1948 and has 4 children, 15 grand-children, and 3 great-grandchildren. He lives in Long Island, New York.

Corporal James “Skip” Nichols was killed in action in the Battle of Venafro in November 1943 at twenty-three years old. Nichols and Barnes shared a foxhole throughout the Italian Campaign and Nichols earned a Bronze Star for his actions at Rocca Veragotti. He was well-known by many in Able Company for his love of poetry.

The poem quoted by Barnes is “The Second Coming” by W.B. Yeats, which was published soon after the end of the Great War.

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more; or close the wall up with our English dead.” These are the first two lines of a famed speech uttered by King Henry at the Siege of Harfleur in *Henry V*.

Dogberry is the humorous, bumbling constable from *Much Ado About Nothing* known for his malapropisms and mixed metaphors.

On December 17, 1944 in Malmedy, Belgium, a unit of the 1st SS Panzer Division opened fire on a group of American prisoners of war, a war crime that killed 84. The event became known as the Malmedy Massacre after several survivors made it back to Allied lines and reported what had happened. Later, American GIs retaliated by killing unarmed Waffen SS prisoners at Chenogne, which was also considered a war crime but for which no perpetrators were ever tried or punished, unlike the perpetrators at Malmedy.

Nahum 1:2, King James Version.

The event described here is the famous “Charge for the 112th,” in which Captain America and his Howling Commandos executed a daring assault on German positions in order to aid an encircled battalion of the 112th Infantry Regiment, a formation of the 28th Infantry Division. The “charge” was a critical boon to morale, saving nearly 1000 troops from capture and helping to delay the German offensive in the early stages of the Battle of the Bulge. Barnes’s extraordinary bravery in covering their retreat was the basis for his Medal of Honor citation.

Parts of the Ardennes were cultivated, resulting in the unnaturally perfectly straight rows of trees observed by Barnes here.

Radio entertainment programs were recorded on phonograph discs and shipped to the front lines. The programs included storytelling, jokes, and music.

Judy Garland’s recording of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* first appeared in the November 1944 film *Meet Me in St. Louis*. The song was written specifically about the many families who would not be able to spend Christmas with their loved ones, with so many fathers, sons, and brothers serving abroad. The line “until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow” was later changed by Frank Sinatra to “hang a shining star upon the highest bow” because he felt the original phrase was too sad.

George Mallory attempted to climb Mount Everest in 1924, but he never returned and was believed to have died on the mountain. His preserved and mummified body was later found in 1999.
Pfc. Rodney Fiedler of Fort Calhoun, Nebraska was born on December 12, 1922. He was 22 years old at the time of his death, and one of thousands of friendly fire casualties to plague all combatant nations throughout the conflict. Prior to publishing *The Night War*, the Barnes family received permission from the Fiedler family to include these diary entries in the book.

Chapter End Notes

3rd Battalion is a fictional battalion of the 112th Infantry Regiment. Wallerode, Belgium is real, and close to St. Vith, which the real 112th Infantry Regiment was charged with defending in the early days of the Ardennes Counteroffensive.

The Malmedy and Chenogne Massacres were real.

I could not confirm that Judy Garland's live radio performance of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* actually appeared on any Christmas radio programs sent to the troops during the Battle of the Bulge, but it seems likely. I strongly encourage you to listen to it - it is a truly haunting performance.

Thanks to everyone for reading and commenting. It really makes my day to see your kudos and feedback on this story, which is so extremely special to me. Hope you continue to read and enjoy, and stick with me to the inevitably tragic end!

Huge thanks to my beta, devildears, without whom this chapter would have been a hot mess. <3
Titled “The Skull Hunter” after the moniker given to First Sergeant Barnes by German soldiers, this is one of the only photographs of Barnes actually holding his rifle. (Jan. 1945)
The Ardennes

January 1

He signed his letters “Fiddle.” His name was Rodney Fiedler but according to the two letters one from his ma and the other he wrote to his brother I think (or a pal) but didn’t get to send ended with “Love, Fiddle.” I got the letters because when I shot him the bullet hit his dog tags and when I ran to him and was screaming for a medic so loud my voice cracked like I was thirteen years old I was trying to stop the bleeding even though he was probably dead already. I had to push his coat out of the way to even get to where I shot him and I saw that the bullet had gone straight through one of his tags and there were letters in his breast pocket getting bloody so I grabbed them.

I couldn’t read most of them except for who it was addressed to and “Love, Fiddle,” and parts of the letter he got from his Ma. Steve was there “it was an accident Buck, it was an accident” only he sounded less somehow, the words all air and no voice like his asthma attacks used to be, like this is another of those awful things we have seen that explodes right through the wall you build around your heart to try and protect it from what we see and hear. Like that laboratory did. Only this was not an awful thing we saw it is an awful thing I did. It was not on purpose how could it be but I did it. And I have Fiddle’s letter here to his brother or whoever who will never get it now.[1]

The medic got there and put bandages down a long strip that the wind caught and he had to stuff inside the wound. I think it was for show. Fiddle’s eyes were glazed over and I have seen that enough times endless times to know what it meant. I nearly punched out the medic when he slowed down his work and breathed out this long breath that clouded up in the air and realized he was not even trying any more. Steve grabbed me from behind to stop me though I don’t think I would have done it. The medic just looked at me and I don’t think there has ever been a wearier man. “It happens” he said, and clapped me on the leg and then got up.

January 2

I remember I was about sixteen not that long after quitting school, the fall I would have been in the 11th grade and I came home from work to find Dad on the fire escape so drunk he could hardly walk and I was so angry at him that I hauled him inside and pushed him down on the little couch (still made up for Teddy and Jack to sleep on at night). I yelled at him “how is it I’m only real man in this family?” I have never forgotten it. He started to cry and he kept saying “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” over and over and I have never felt like worse scum in my whole life. I could not take it back even though the second I said it, my entire body went hot and I could feel my heart beating in my neck and my insides twisting up. I nearly threw up from the shame. How could I say that to him? When I knew it was the fall and he always got messed up in the head the couple weeks before Armistice Day? What kind of son says that to his father?

I didn’t know what to do I just stood there dumb and stupid and I remember Ma came home from shopping. She was letting Curly try to help (she was only two or three) and I remember Curly dropping her bag and apples rolling all over the floor and Ma not even noticing, she just went straight to Dad, him still crying “sorry, sorry,” and she wrapped him up in her arms and held him like he was Jack with a skinned knee not her husband. I remember her whispering to him, “all is well my darling all is well” and then singing to him, one of the poems she used to put to music and sing to us: “oh soft embalmer of the still midnight, shutting with careful fingers and benign, our gloom pleased eyes, embowered from the light, enshaded in forgetfulness divine”[2] – and it felt wrong to keep watching and Curly had started getting upset too because she didn’t know what was wrong, so I picked her up and ran the rest of Ma’s errands for her because it was least I could do. Ma never said anything to me.
and Dad and me never talked about it either because I was not enough of a man to say sorry. How
do you apologize for cruelty like that? I could have at least tried but instead I was a coward. How did
I have the words to tear him down but I couldn’t find any to build him up?

It is one of those moments in life that comes back to you at times when you least expect it. You are
going along doing your job and suddenly it hits you, a spike of that hot awful shame and you
remember what you did, not like it’s a memory but like it happened not even a second ago, like you
are back in that moment where you just realized that you cannot ever take it back and you must relive
that terrible guilt like it is the first guilt you ever felt, over and over again, the words you can’t take
back just out of reach no matter how hard you claw for them.

January 4

No animal can bear being cornered, especially not a man. We are on the attack now and serving the
krauts back their own medicine.[3] Thank fucking Christ as it means I can think of something else.

January 5

Supply drop came with food gear and clothes including snow suit. It is all white. Only parts of me
visible are my face and the finger pulling the trigger. It is easy to sink into this. Hunting krauts takes
up everything there is no room left over for anything else. Before it scared me now it is a relief.

Maybe it is not relief. Maybe it is something else. I remember buying my first suit with my own
money and Steve could not believe how much I spent and I just wrapped my arm around him (so
skinny if my arm had a couple extra joints it could have gone twice) and yelled out “the apparel oft
proclaims the man!”[4] and he rolled his eyes “what does his empty wallet say then?” I wonder if we
had that conversation now what he would say. I cannot seem to get any words out at all these days.
Even the words inside my throat are as frozen as the rest of me, except my trigger finger. Sometimes
out there in the snow alone it all feels like a dream. It could be night or dawn or day and it feels like a
sick interminable dream where if the “clothes proclaim the man” then imagining this beast in a sniper
suit is better than a mirror. I am so afraid I can’t go back. I think I can’t. It feels like I can’t. I can’t
see how. This war has been a long day, the longest of days made up of a thousand nights of cold
dark and it feels to me or maybe I am just afraid that the next day will never break at all.[5]

January 7

[Editor’s Note: Much of the original entry was illegible.]

Teddy hurt don’t know if alive. Heard news from [Illegible] FUCKERS [Illegible] my kid brother
[Illegible] not breathe [Illegible][6]

###  

###  

January 9

###  

January 12

Somehow mail. Made Gabe open letters from Ma so afraid she had gotten a telegram about Teddy
my hands were shaking. Nothing about him at all. Instead there is a lot about Jack who got married and shipped out and is expecting a baby with his wife. I made Steve read the letter out loud because I thought I had lost my mind and Steve read it about three times before just laughing—“Jack! Married!” It is unimaginable. Granted I have not seen Jack in almost two years and the last thing I remember him doing was him trying to scare Curly with his tooth he got knocked out playing ball (it’s like he never met her before, she said “have you got any more? I am collecting those”). But the idea of him on a ship out to fight the Japs and with a war bride home—good Lord I thought the world had gone nuts but now I am sure of it. Ma didn’t say much about his girl other than her name (Betty Bryce from California) but she is on a train heading to Brooklyn apparently as she hasn’t got much family and her rooming house doesn’t allow married women (or ones that are knocked up is my guess—I am going to kill that little shit next time I see him).

Curly wrote “I don’t know that much about sisters” in her letter (forget that she has been begging me for one for years) and sounds very nervous but I am glad. With all the newspaper clippings in her letters that aren’t V mail it is clearer than ever that she needs to do anything other than worrying about her brothers fighting a war, maybe the idea of a niece or nephew will help. This time she sent me a small one she labeled as “Sunday Times November” about Hürtgen Forest—“here in the dark alleys of Huertgen Forest, our infantry, fighting at bayonet point, is making slight progress.” The idea that my kid sister is imagining me gutting a man with my bayonet makes me feel as though I am the one getting stabbed—like my nightmare of her smiling at me while I figure out the angles and wind on giving some poor bastard an extra hole. In one sentence it talks about men bayonetting one another and in the next it talks about ack-acks making “life tough for the doughboys.” It does not make life tough. It makes life over. It’s not doughboys it’s boys and it’s her brothers and it might be Teddy.

January 13

Dreamed it was Teddy not Fiddle woke up choking and it was Gabe who shook me awake “you didn’t shoot Teddy Sarge you didn’t I swear to God” what kind of scum makes it about his brother even in his dreams what about Fiddle’s

January 14

I don’t see how I will ever sleep again. I have Fiddle’s tag in my pocket the one I kept even though you can’t read it because of the hole. And I have his letters. They feel as heavy to me as if I were carrying his entire body. I can’t sleep for this weight, and all the rest too. When I try it feels like tracking the contrails of the spits and hurricanes that flew over Blandford before D-day, how the barkeeper described it during the Battle of Britain, dozens of whirling spiraling planes and they couldn’t hear that guns over the engines but could imagine them. Did Fiddle have a wife. Or kids? Is Teddy alive. Is Jack still on his way to Japan, to whatever island they are fighting over now? Is Teddy alive. Did Fiddle’s Ma cry? Did his dad? Do they know it was my fault? Does his brother know, if he has one? Is Teddy alive.

The worst part is I was not tired, no more than usual when it happened. I wasn’t afraid or “shell shocked” my heart wasn’t racing my hands weren’t shaking I just saw the gray and focused and exhaled and shot and in the time it took for me to squeeze the trigger and the bullet to reach him I realized. It was like any other shot until it wasn’t. It could happen again. What if it happens again. How could any of them even Steve trust me not to do it again.

It is an awful thought and maybe a stupid one but I am so afraid that somehow Teddy getting hurt is my fault. Maybe it was God getting me back for Fiddle. Maybe it happened at the same time. If Fr Cleary were here he would say that’s not how it works, Ma too. But the way I see it is that nothing in the Bible about how the world is supposed to work seems to be true here. So why should that. What
use is “God’s plan” if this is it. It is sick if this is anybody’s plan.

January 15

Bombers have a maximum weight they can fly with, the number and weight of bombs they can carry until it is time to drop them and I wish it was the same for men with all we are carrying I wish somehow I could drop some but instead it adds and adds—

January 16

#

January 18

In a village all these French or Belgian I guess villages look the same don’t know which one. Not anyone’s turn to keep watch (we’re not on the line) but I was up anyway and Steve came and found me where I was smoking and pulled me up “come on pal” and so I followed him. It is hard to remember the last time I was so scared where the blood in your head pulses with it a fear that is not the same as fear of dying because what is a bullet next to Steve hating you. Or hell what is death next to that.

As it turns out for once in my life I am the one who thought too little of him. I think it must the first time and isn’t that something to be ashamed of—to go a whole life with a perfect record and to ruin it now. For how many years now have I been laughing at people who think they could get one over on him or beat him up (his body maybe but never his heart) or tell him what to do. But this time I am the joke and not the one laughing at it.

We got to some sort of shop (tailor maybe) with blown out windows and Steve just sort of fell against the counter top and slid down head between his knees “goddamn I’m tired as hell” so I said “kiss your mother with that mouth” and he smiled a little “sit down Buck” so I did – we must have sat five minutes before he said anything at all and it wasn’t quiet not even by a long shot with trucks rolling and arty going in the distance but it might as well have been as silent as when Fr Cleary calls everybody to pray in silence and it’s just a rustle of bodies and breathing and sniffling and it is somehow loud.

“I never felt safer in my whole life than with you at my back, Buck” he said finally. “Before Fiedler or after. You got that?” It took me a long time but he just waited until I said “I don’t know how to let it go Steve” and he said “I know” and I said “I don’t know if I want to be the kind of man who can let it go” and he said “it was an accident” and I thought about the last time he said that and felt almost sick but managed to say that I am tired of doing this and that I don’t want to do it and that I’m not like him or his dame who “could make a career out of this you know” and he said “Bucky I know you’re not her” and I said “I’m sorry” and he said “you don’t need to be” and I believe him. I believe him.

January 19

On truck to Paris. Dum-Dum said “it’s a Christmas miracle” and Gabe started laughing and couldn’t stop and then it got all of us going seven men packed into a truck nearly crying from laughter until Monty gasped “it’s not even funny” – which made us laugh harder. Even now thinking of it (they are all asleep) I have to swallow it down otherwise I will start again. It must be a kind of madness that grabbed on to us, our bodies catching up to the idea that we have again somehow survived.
January 21

Not just Paris—Versailles. OSS/SSR moved from Brussels to SHAEF and with Jerry tucking tail in the Ardennes they decided it’s time to call us in. We are being put up in Versailles and there is a plan for us to all meet with reporters and then Eisenhower. Who thought it was a good idea to take a bunch of grunts straight from the front and put them in front of Eisenhower much less this grunt who has not slept for a fucking year it feels like, Jesus Christ.

Later

Ted alive and OK in England. OSS/SSR brought the news with them they sent somebody to see him and get him to write a letter that they could courier to me. It was some adjunct I never met before who came and found me “Sir this is from your brother?” and I nearly passed out before even getting the letter open but he is alive, Alive and OK. Wrote me up what happened same old shit that we saw happen to a hundred guys out there in what was apparently “the bulge” (he was in the thick of it at Bastogne) but he’s got two legs two arms 10 fingers and 10 toes and he’s going to be all right. “It was a close call on the leg but they already have me crutching around” – I guess it happened right before Christmas and to think I was out there in the snow hunting krauts while my sweet kid brother was getting blown up. He says it isn’t enough for a ticket home (and he is too damn noble to play it up for one) but God I would do just about anything to see him go home. This relief is incredible. Who knew relief like this was possible.

January 22

All of us had check-ups with medical— “First Sergeant how is it that you are down to 143 pounds” I said “tell me lady do you watch newsreels” —she rolled her eyes “eat up while you’re here then” – Jesus fucking Christ thanks for that amazing professional opinion it never occurred to me to eat when there’s food

Later

Dolled up for reporters. They have us for at least a couple hours and want to do rounds with everyone because of what is getting called “the Charge for the 112th” (Wallerode) and Gabe leaned in “do you suppose they know it was a retreat” and Jim “it’s called a withdrawal Gabe don’t you know it’s a completely different maneuver” and Monty smiled his “English smile” (“It’s where I don’t smile, but there’s something about my mouth”) and started very quietly: “half a league onward,” and then Gabe “all in the valley of krauts” – “rode the seven suckers” (me) then Monty “forward the poor bastards!” then Gabe “Theirs not to tell Hitler to fuck off” “Theirs not to reason why” (me) and finally together “Theirs but to do and die.” Monty said “Jamie you dog” and I said I was too tired to rhyme with “fuck off” and Gabe said “we should have just said fuck off three times” and Monty: “cheers to that!”

Reporters not impressed with me – fell asleep twice – apparently all it takes is getting asked nosy questions and I can sleep.

January 24

We met General Eisenhower. Dwight D. Eisenhower. We met Ike. Thank God For Training. We all stood at attention when he came in and even after he said “at ease men” it was a room of silent overawed grunts because what were we going to do, ask him “say Ike when’s Hitler gonna roll over?” – and of course when he shook Steve’s hand it was like every photographer in the European
Theater was there getting their own version of it and Steve tried to smile but even he was nervous and General Eisenhower said, “it is with the help of men like you, Captain Rogers, that we will shape the century” and Steve said “I don’t know anything about that, sir. I just only ever wanted to do my part” and Ike said “And that is why. That’s all anyone could ever ask of a man.” I could not help but think: If only his ma could see her boy now.

After Steve it was Monty “Lieutenant Falsworth,” he said, “and then to Jim “Good to meet you, Corporal Morita” then Gabe “Well done in Normandy, Corporal Jones” and then me: “Master Sergeant,” he said, and I said “First Sergeant sir” (because I guess I am the moron who thinks our five star general can’t read my insignia) and he winked “not according to your CO” and I said “yes sir” (when in doubt say yes sir) and he laughed and moved on to Dum-Dum and Dernier (“my favorite Frenchman” – ha! Certainly not De Gaulle) and then his aide-de-camp rushed all the reporters out and he said, “how would you fellows like a Scotch?” and we had a nightcap and smoked (no shit cigarettes this time) and he wanted to hear about the Ardennes and then about our ops against the H—krauts. We must have talked to him for an hour. At the end he stood us up and we saluted and he said “Dismissed” and then at the end, “men—we are very nearly there. This awful job is nearly done” and we said: “yes, sir” and he said “go get ‘em.” And we said “yes sir.”

January 27

We are going after H—krauts again—no more regulars for us. OSS/SSR has us reviewing about four months of intel and I guess part of the strategy they cooked up in getting us spend an hour or two with Ike was about convincing him we shouldn’t be anybody’s “toy soldiers” anymore. You never saw Steve’s face go so ugly as when the intelligence officer who we don’t even know said that—thank Christ he was a junior Lt. otherwise Steve would have left with MPs. “you think it was just playtime, Lt.?” he said and the idiot said “it was risking our only super soldier for a good newsreel” and Steve asked “so the work we did doesn’t mean anything, is that it?” and the guy said “that’s not what I said” and Steve said (nasty) “how about the men who died up there, fighting shoulder to shoulder with us?” I think Steve was about to do his own personal impression of a grenade he was so angry. The guy did eventually find his brain: “I apologize for any offense” – and Dernier told him to fuck off (in French).

Of course the truth is that we can make a difference fighting H—krauts. In a foxhole we are just more grunts. All any of us want is to end this and so the idea that OSS/SSR has been sitting on their heels while god damn [Illegible] is out there makes me sick. How many laboratories are out there that are filled with dead kids who we might have been able to help when they were alive?

January 29

“This awful job is nearly done” – it is somehow easy to believe when it comes from Ike. I guess that is why I have not been able to stop thinking about it. In that moment, even if it was just that moment and stretched out no longer than a minute or two, for the first time in a long time it felt like we may somehow make it home after all—that I might one day walk through the door to our apartment and see Ma waiting for bread to finish in the oven, on our couch with flour in her hair and holding a little book of poetry Dad probably got her as a surprise and she would look up – “welcome home, beloved” and Curly would hug me around the waist with her skinny little arms and cry out joyfully “what took you so long!” – Teddy and Jack comparing ribbons and Steve busting Jack’s chops “a salute’s in order isn’t it there Lance Corporal?” – Dad offering a handshake and a smile “it’ll all be well, son” and I think if he said it I could really believe it. “This awful job is nearly done.” It feels like a kind of prayer, the holiest prayer I could ever pray—I cannot stomach “thy will be done”[12] but I can beg “let this awful job be done so we can all of us go home.”
Historical Notes

The "Schädeljäger Offensive"

The Howling Commandos arrived in the Ardennes on December 18th, 1944, and were not withdrawn until January 19, 1945, spending a total of thirty-three days in one of the most brutal combat zones of the entire war. During that period—which began with the legendary "Charge for the 112th" and ended with horribly cold days and nights taking fire in foxholes—Barnes proved to be the bane of many an enemy soldier, most of whom already knew to fear him from the legend that had grown like wildfire following his exploits in the Hürtgen Forest. Their fear was well-founded; Barnes delivered the most lethal known month of any American sniper: 73 confirmed kills in just twenty-five days of combat—roughly three per day.

By this point in the war, the exploits of Captain America, Bucky Barnes, and the other Howling Commandos were so widely known and circulated among American units that simply the knowledge that they were on the front was enough to lift spirits. Their presence generated such excitement that in the case of Barnes, GIs discussed and followed his "kill count" with the same sort of enthusiasm they might have once applied to keeping track of Ted Williams's home runs.

The nickname for Barnes's shocking sniper campaign in the worst winter of the war, the "Schädeljäger Offensive," was coined by anonymous paratroopers interviewed by a war correspondent in late December. It was a tongue-in-cheek response to the fact that the Allied counterattack was known as the Ardennes Counteroffensive before receiving its much more famous moniker: "The Battle of the Bulge." The correspondent wired the name—and Barnes's kill count to that point of 37—to The New York Times, which ran a short article titled: "Nazis running scared from Brooklyn's own 'Skull Hunter!'"

"It was impossible to reconcile the idea of Bucky with that nickname," said sister Rebecca Proctor in a 1985 interview. "When I was young, it was wild to think that the enemy was scared of him, that they thought of him as a kind of boogey-man. I could never picture it, not really--I thought of him as a hero, my own personal Superman. Of course, as a girl I knew that he was a soldier, that it was his job to kill enemy soldiers, but I never thought about what that actually meant, not until I read his journals. Even then I didn't understand it until I was a nurse in Korea. I couldn't truly understand why he loathed it so until I saw up close and personal what men are capable of doing to one another in warfare, and finally realized how heavily it weighed on his soul."

Meeting General Eisenhower

Though Dwight D. Eisenhower spent only about an hour with Captain America and his Howling Commandos, the meeting remained subject of curiosity for decades. Eisenhower was routinely asked questions about his experience with the seven-man team in interviews during the post-war era and certainly during his presidency. Perhaps the most memorable of these exchanges came in a 1964
interview in which the reporter read aloud Barnes's oft-quoted anti-war diatribe (below) and asked the former president: "How would you convince young men being asked to fight in Vietnam that Bucky Barnes was wrong?"

It’s not the guys holding the rifle that declare war, is it? I like Ike but I didn’t see him at Omaha Beach, not Patton Clark or Bradley neither. I’ve listened to a hell of a lot of fireside chats in my life but never across a campfire in a foxhole with the guy that signed my draft card. I figure it’s a pretty good bet old Adolf never defended a pillbox with Hans or Fritz and it’s a fact that Uncle Joe didn’t starve at Leningrad. Democratic fascist communist, it doesn’t make any difference—the men in charge are never the men who charge.

The reporter was roundly criticized for asking what was deemed an "inappropriate and disrespectful" question, but Eisenhower wasn't disturbed, offering the vague reply: "Master Sergeant Barnes was right that the ones declaring war are not the ones who fight and sacrifice for it. Yet it is the people's responsibility, in this nation where we enjoy the freedom for which he fought, to empower those leaders who are just, and wise, and deeply respectful of life."

It was not the only time President Eisenhower addressed The Night War. In the 1950s, when the book faced increasing calls for censorship and removal from school curricula for its "anti-American" and "vulgar" content, the President said in a 1955 radio address:

It was my great privilege to meet Master Sergeant James Barnes in January of 1945. He was an exceptional soldier, a fine patriot, and a man of conviction whose unflinching resolve as he stared down his enemy is worthy of the highest commendation. The men who fought that terrible war did so at great cost, and none paid a higher price than Sergeant Barnes, who gave his life in defense of the freedoms that some among us would now strip from him in death. Serving with Sergeant Barnes and the many others like him remains my greatest honor in this life. He deserves neither censure nor censor.

Chapter Notes

[1] Pfc. Rodney Fiedler had two older sisters, Louise and Wilma, who were both married at the time of his death. He had no male siblings. Surviving members of his unit confirmed that his nickname had been “Fiddle,” so most historians agree the letter he wrote to “his brother or whoever” was to a fellow soldier.

[2] The first four lines of “To Sleep,” by John Keats. Winifred Barnes was a great lover of poetry; at the time of her passing, she had more than 500 volumes of poetry in her home.

[3] By early January 1945, the German advance in the Ardennes had stalled, giving the Allies enough time and good weather to drop supplies and bring in additional troops. By that point, though
fighting continued, Nazi Germany’s loss in the “Battle of the Bulge” was inevitable.


[5] In a 1967 interview, sister Rebecca Barnes confirmed that this entry is what inspired her to title the book “The Night War.”

[6] Staff Sergeant Ted Barnes was injured on December 23, 1944 during the Siege of Bastogne. He received multiple shrapnel wounds and was ultimately evacuated to England, where he recuperated for nearly two months before returning to his unit in early March. According to the surviving Howling Commandos, Bucky learned his brother had been injured from an unnamed paratrooper of the 101st Airborne who had witnessed the injury but did not know whether it was fatal.

[7] The article sent to Bucky by his sister was “Huertgen Forest Aflame” and was published on November 19, 1944 in *The New York Times*.

[8] The Palace of Versailles complex, specifically the Trianon Palace Hotel, became the physical SHAEF headquarters in August 1944.

[9] The term “Battle of the Bulge” was coined by reporters as a description of the “bulge” in Allied lines following the initial German advance.

[10] The poem being mocked and misquoted here is “The Charge of the Light Brigade” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who wrote it in 1854 following the infamously doomed cavalry charge. The particular lines mangled by the Commandos are:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered.
Their not to make reply,
Their not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

[11] The only known recording of Barnes’s speaking voice comes from the interviews that took place on January 22, 1945, just three days after the SSR107 completed 33 straight days in a combat zone during the Battle of the Bulge. In the two-minute-long recording, which was not made public at the time and was only rediscovered in 1979, Barnes is noticeably tired, in several instances even slurring his words.


Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to my amazing beta and friend, devildears! <3
February 1945

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February

Occupied Poland

February 1

Take off tonight. Jump tomorrow. I don’t know that we have ever gone so far beyond the line, maybe Czechoslovakia which I cannot believe was almost a year ago[1] but in any case we are all antsy. It will be hours and hours in a C-47 freezing our nuts off and then jumping and hoping not to land in trees as it seems where we are going in Poland (or Prussia I guess) is covered in them according to all of the recon photographs. It feels different. Maybe because of what we are going after and that it has been many long cold months in the trenches—so long it seems strange to write just “months”—but none of us have forgotten what we found in Sonsbeck in that laboratory.[2] I don’t think I know how to forget that. But the rotten part is that I don’t know what I am more afraid of: finding another Sonsbeck or finding what we are looking for. What kind of coward even has to wonder?

Gabe found me walking the grounds near our quarters smoking through a double ration. Everything is cold and dead but this is the kind of place where just looking at it is enough to imagine it in spring and summer and a hundred years ago or two hundred years ago, all the way back to when somebody got the idea in his head to build it in the first place. You’d think all of Europe would be like that but it feels like I have seen all of Europe and never got that impression anywhere else—maybe it is too hard to think of the history when it is getting destroyed all around you.

Gabe lit a smoke too and we walked around for a while quietly until he said “In the camp, I knew two men who got picked and never came back.” I didn’t say anything because I never say anything about it and everybody knows not to ask (one of those things that doesn’t need to be said among men I guess). But how is it I am still so cut up about it—what kind of goddamn pansy doesn’t get over it after a year, after everything else, after all the bombs and battles and blown up friends? Maybe it is because bad things accumulate in a man and the good things fade away.

Anyhow Gabe knows me too well to expect me to reply so he kept talking and explained how before he was moved into our block one of the men in his cell was on cleanup detail, and how one of his jobs was taking the bodies from the laboratory to the incinerator, and how he used to describe what they looked like when they came out of that place.

It did not take a genius to know what he was asking, or at least talking about even if he wasn’t asking anything. It was something Phillips said in my debrief when I was so out of my mind I am surprised I even remember it: “a whole lot of men went in there, Sergeant, and you’re the only one who came out” – everybody else ended up “bodies.” I was the only one lucky enough to have the world’s biggest mook for a friend.

“I know if I were you, I’d be scared” Gabe said after a while and I didn’t say anything and he said “I’m scared. I’m scared every time.” Just the two of us in the dark, leaning up against a wall him not looking at me and me not looking at him. I told him “me too” and finished my smoke and tried to
breathe out everything along with the smoke but it didn’t quite work it never does.

God it is exhausting to be afraid. I would rather be angry, and I am angry but somehow when it is polluted by fear it feels even worse, like a part of you rotting—a corrosion of spirit or soul or heart, whichever of those anyone has left.

February 2

Marched a couple miles into the woods after the jump (jump star no. 6 – I am fine if it is my last one – I have had enough of these, and every other type of ingress too). While Jim and Steve were working out our orientation I said “hey Gabe any ground hogs in Poland?” and Dernier leaned in and said (in French) “what the fuck is a groundhog” (“grown hug”) and Monty “In God’s name please explain why exactly is it that you care” to me and I guess it’s only us “Yanks” who make our weather decisions off big rats. So I explain the whole thing and Gabe is rolling his eyes and so I say “if Dum-Dum sees his shadow it’s six more weeks of this bullshit and if he doesn’t we’ll knock off Hitler before March” and so Gabe yells for Dum-Dum to get up, so he rolls out of where he was bivouacked gun in hand and half asleep “where’s the krauts” and Monty steadied him: “deadly serious question for you mate: can you see your shadow” and Dum-Dum looked down and around “of course I see my fucking shadow” and Dernier yelped out “fuck!” Six more weeks of “winter”—of course if our war is done in just six weeks we will all be celebrating.

February 4

ZSW factory[3] abandoned. It is the whole reason we are here. Spent yesterday marching through 50 kilometers of forest to an empty fucking factory. No krauts no raw materials no documents – we are 700 miles from allied territory for nothing. Only possible good news is that the factory has not been abandoned long so we are going to do recon in the area and see if we can catch a break—maybe our prey hasn’t gone far.

February 5

I don’t know how to

There are no words for this. I have no words for this.

Later

There is a time for every kid growing up when he is sure he knows everything and he is shocked to learn he is wrong. It has been almost two years of the same thing, only instead of a child I am a man who continually forgets that what I have seen and done and what has been done to me and done to others is not the worst there is. There is always something worse, something so grotesque that you cannot conceive of it and every time I am surprised. How is it after all of this after witnessing over and over again that all men lie in wait for blood[4] that I am shocked but I am. I am viciously sickeningly shocked. I never wanted to be a man who had to learn again and again like I have today what men unchecked can do to each other.

February 6

I was scouting head. It is called Friedwald, that is on the sign.[5] “Peaceful Wood.” These fucking krauts. I smelled it first, an awful burning smell and saw the fences and then got within sight of what was beyond the fences next to the train tracks a big grave (filled with lime we found out) a hole that they had been made to dig for themselves their own grave and the guards one after the other with
MP35s[6] pop-pop-pop crumpling like sticks like leaves falling off dead trees. I cannot really remember what happened next. I saw it happening and I went somewhere else in my head and gave it back to them I was only two hundred yards away that is nothing fish in a fucking barrel and Steve heard and by the time he got there I had gone through half my ammo and goddamn Nazis fuckers were running around like rats when the lights on the train hits them. With Steve and the others it might have taken five minutes or five hours to finish it to get past the gate which Steve kicked open even though it was barred and that is the last of what I remember clearly.

There were so many and already today there are fewer than there were yesterday. Skin and bones hollow eyes I have never seen anything like this. None of us have not even Dernier who had friends detained by the krauts in poor conditions but this! This is not poor conditions it is torture. It is doing to people what no decent person would ever dream of doing to a dog or a cat or a fucking cockroach.

Most of them are Jews. They all have different color triangles but if it’s got a yellow triangle underneath the other triangle you know it’s a Jew. Not all of them are Jews. All men. Poles Czechoslovaks Yugoslavs Romanians Hungarians Germans “criminal” “asocial” “homosexual” “communist” all with different color triangles saying whatever the krauts hate them for hundreds of people turned into triangles.

You could not tell them apart from skeletons if you tried. When the fighting stopped and we had finished tying up the krauts who surrendered the prisoners got up from the ground where they had collapsed either afraid or exhausted they saw Steve’s uniform and they were crying trying to put their hands on all of us but we are not an army we are just seven men and we do not know what to do.

Later

I had to do most of the translating because there are not too many who speak French or much German at all but most of them speak Yiddish and I still have a little of that from Veenie and Ma thank God. So once the fighting stopped it was my job to translate as best I could. I was the only one of us who could understand much of anything and the only thing really I got at first was “food please” “food” “help” “bless you” – one of them came forward his name is Yakob he has some English and with my Yiddish I could piece it together. We asked what it was and Yakob said “Das Konzentrationslager Friedwald” Concentration Camp. Yakob said they were there to work and he showed me another man who was as tall as Steve but could not have weighed 90 pounds and he had a number tattooed on his arm. It matched the one on his uniform. They are tattooing people to keep track of them and he came from another camp in the east according to Yakob.[7] How many are there? Steve asked why there were only old men here and Yakob did not understand so we tried again in German and a little Yiddish and he still did not understand and then he said in English “I have fifteen I have fifteen” – he is fifteen years old and I could have sworn he was sixty. They are all chalk white and filthy, all sick, covered in open sores for some of them and fleas and those that have hair it is white no matter how old they are. I thought Yakob was an old man and he is only a year older than Curly.

Yakob Huffmann—Warszawa [8]

Later

There is hardly any food here just what the krauts had in their barracks and the camp guards (not krauts according to their uniforms or according to the ones we kept alive who speak a little German and another language none of us know).[9] What the “kitchens” had for the prisoners is basically water with cabbage parts. We put some of the “healthy” ones in charge of cooking but there is not enough. We did a count there are 1,689 people here. There were three more yesterday but they died.
More will die today I am writing their names down in the back of my journal to keep track but sometimes the other prisoners don’t know the full names of the ones who died. I only have a last name for the third man—Schwarz.

Later

The burning smell was from a crematorium. Outside of it bodies were stacked like firewood at least 150 of them with their shoes next to them in a pile as high as my waist waiting to be sorted. I tried to stop Steve from seeing it but he got past me and saw it anyway. The furnace was stuffed full of bodies and there is not much fuel left but the furnace was on still burning but not a high enough temperature it was filled with bodies almost to the ceiling. I don’t know how they got that many bodies in there, all stripped so they could reuse the uniforms just half burned legs and arms and ribcages reeking of meat and sickness and whatever the furnace was using for fuel and it was not a high enough temperature. That is why they made them dig the pit because they were going to kill all of them but the furnace was not big enough to get rid of all the bodies. The Krauts have a furnace here for hiding what they have done.

How many more of these camps are out there. How many more furnaces are there for camps with 1,688 people in them (another one died Levi Auerbach from Białystok) when we know thousands were deported from France and the Nazis have taken over half the continent even if we are getting close enough to cut Hitler’s throat (if only). How many from Germany when the night of broken glass was seven years ago.

I was in a camp. It was a work camp. But this is different. There they tortured dozens. Here it is thousands. How many thousands have they put into camps like these and worked to death?

February 7

Me Steve and Monty interrogated the krauts we kept alive. We should have killed them all but they surrendered and I almost did it anyway but Steve stopped us. I had my sidearm to his head but Steve stopped me. I would have done it if he hadn’t stopped me. I didn't care that the fucking kraut was on his knees and weeping. I still don’t care. How many have begged him and he did nothing? I have never felt so sick in my entire life. It is a snake in my insides, squeezing my guts and lungs and neck and almost my trigger finger but for Steve’s voice stopping me I think he is the only thing that could have stopped me.

Seems to me the reason we have the Geneva protocol is to prevent these bastards from doing what they have done to these people not to protect the ones doing it. But Steve is a better man than all of us. He stopped me and he stopped the prisoners too. They did manage to kill two krauts. Good for them.

The one we interrogated first is the one I almost shot. Sturmbannfuehrer Karl Volckmann who is the commander of this camp. He talked but did not say not much. Just that “all the prisoners are criminals.” Steve’s face when he said that. “What crimes did they commit?” he asked and Volckmann just looked around from me to Steve to Monty. “They’re Jews Steve” is what I said and I guess I looked so disgusted that Volckmann thought he had somebody on his side or something and he nodded “ja, ja, sie sind Juden” and smiled so I knocked two of his teeth out and Steve pulled me off him and I couldn’t break out of his hold and I said “be glad it wasn’t a fucking bullet Cap” and got out of there. We have nine of these piece of shit krauts to interrogate and 134 of their buddies in the pit they made their own victims dig. I counted. Give me five minutes and I will add nine more bodies to that pit. Give me five seconds and I will do it with their own fucking MP35.
February 8

A lot of hours spent organizing. It is very hard with what seems like a hundred different languages and also that most of them don’t understand why there are so few of us. We cannot let them leave either. The only way we can all stay alive is if the krauts don’t find out we are here. We already set up a guard rotation out of the healthiest and taught them to use the guns we collected from the kraut bodies before tossing them in the grave they made their prisoners dig. So today me Jim and Gabe helped the one doctor who was also a prisoner to do what we could for the people here.


We helped him for a few hours which was not enough time to get through everybody but it hardly matters since there are not enough supplies—some bandages and hardly any medicine. We did the best we could. Some of these people are so sick and frail and smell so badly it is hard not to let it show it on your face. I think all of us have chucked at least once since getting here and seeing what condition these people are in. Every minute every hour we see or hear or smell something more terrible than the moment before.

Later

From our captured krauts we learned that they were “liquidating” the camp because the factory—ZSW factory the one we came here for—has been shut down as of a week ago. That means we are one week late for our objective. If we had been a week early these people would be dead. I have never been so grateful for failure in my life, though to feel grateful about any part of this seems obscene.

Almost all the prisoners here were the workers in the factory so with it closed down the krauts were going to kill all of the sick ones and send the “healthy” ones to other camps. None of these people are healthy. We asked the krauts how many camps they said they didn’t know we asked if there were a lot they said “there are a lot of Jews.” That is what Monty reported back anyway as I am not allowed near the POWs now which is probably smart if Steve doesn’t want a war crime on his record.

We are also keeping 26 of the prisoners locked up in what was the sick barracks. It should have been 29 but the men here killed three of them before we realized what was going on. They are “kapos.” They are prisoners who sided with the krauts. I have been keeping Yakob with me as a translator (his English is already better than it was—with a little more food and hope he almost seems like a kid again, and a smart one too) and he had to explain it to me three times.

They are kraut prisoners who joined up with the Nazis. Yakob has a scar on his face from a kapo not a kraut and says most of the kapos are even worse than the real guards but they are prisoners too. Their job is to oversee the other prisoners and punish them and “keep in order” is what Yakob called it. What the hell goes wrong in a man’s head to make him turn on his own people. I cannot understand how somebody could do that. It doesn’t matter how long you are a prisoner or how hungry you are or how afraid you are the enemy stays the enemy. At Azzano they tried to get us to turn, offered extra food extra clothes extra rack time. I saw a soldier get shot for spitting in the face of the Nazi fuck who asked him if he wanted some extra chow. That’s the only answer to getting asked to turn on your own men. 26 kapos all better fed better dressed than the rest of these people combined and I cannot stand to look at them.[12]

Later
Can’t sleep and for once it is not because of dreaming of my friends or of Fiddle or being afraid to. My bedroll is inside the kraut officer’s quarters which we are using as a temporary HQ and it has been hours of staring at the ceiling thinking of those faces when we got the last of the guards. The bodies so skinny they seem unnaturally tall the knobby legs, just bones with paper thin skin emerging from the striped uniforms and the faces. Half of them so far gone they are blank the other half joyful. It plays in my head again and again. 1,681.

We don’t know how to help them all. We don’t know if we are doing it right. Already a couple died we think because of too much food—that is what the doctor said. We are trying to help but we don’t know what to do.

February 9

Yesterday Jim got a message out to SSR that Steve put together explaining what we have found here. But how do you put into dots and dashes the scope of this. How do you explain in code the sight of hundreds of starved and beaten men who have been prisoners of the Nazis for years and years. And that this is only one camp. In talking to some of them as we try to make sense of this place I have heard the names of dozens of others. Each man here has been to at least two or three. One man six. You could not find two men who have taken the same path here. How is that possible?

We learned from an older man who also speaks some English named Ernst that many prisoners here are educated, all smart and usually something to do with engineering or mechanical parts or radios. It is for the work in ZSW. Even Yakob was able to explain that he played with radios as a little boy (“as small boy” – he is a boy) and that’s why he was “lucky” to get here. “Lucky” I asked him because I thought I heard wrong and he said “yes yes Friedwald or killed” – and from Ernst we learned that in other camps like these most men do not last a week on the labor details before dying or getting shot. And in other places they do not go to work at all they are just murdered the day they arrive. Women children old men. That is what Ernst said. If it’s true it is the most unthinkable evil I have ever heard of and based on what we have seen here and been told and the numbers inked into men’s arms—I believe it. I cannot even think of it but I believe it.

Later

Message from SSR that made Steve rip a door off its hinges with his bare hands.

REPORT TO EGRESS COORDINATES.

Four words in response to Steve’s report. Nothing about a plan to help these people. Nothing saying that they knew or didn’t know this was here. “REPORT TO EGRESS COORDINATES.” Jim stayed on the radio set for another two hours waiting for the next message but there was no next message just “REPORT TO EGRESS COORDINATES.”

The problem is that we cannot stay here long and neither can these people if we want to keep them out of kraut hands. We have gotten some intelligence from our POWs about their communications with the other camps in the area (and hearing that made Steve lose his mind—he made them draw a map). It seems that the krauts are shaken up enough by the Red Army on one side and us on the other that they are out of sorts (and the bombing has taken out telephone lines) but we can’t count on that lasting for long. A train of fresh krauts could arrive at any time (or more prisoners—Yakob said he came here on a cattle car 200 to a single car).

All we have is us seven men and a horde of half dead prisoners to guard this place with. We are down to 1,672. We are just seven men and we are surrounded.
Later

Steve had Jim radio back:

SEND HELP STOP. TRANSPORT NEEDED FOR 1672 STOP. Awaiting PLAN STOP.

When we stormed this place and the fighting was over these people thought they were free. Some of them asked when they could go home and where was the rest of our army. They have never even heard of Captain America. All they know is that their only hope for survival is for Germany to surrender (or be destroyed—in all honesty that is my choice). And we had to explain that there is no army behind us—not for hundreds of miles, and that they can’t go home, not yet, even though for some it has been years since they have seen their wives or mothers or children, who may not even be alive, and we told them they have to stay here in this hell. My mother is safe in Brooklyn. God knows where their mothers are.

February 10

Took watch with Steve. Neither of us can sleep. It has been five days since we got here but we are so tired body and soul I think that it feels like five months. And it is all on Steve’s shoulders. He is the CO. There was never a man better suited to carry the burden of leadership but this is the weight of 1,678 men. Not even he should be asked to bear that. “I don’t know what to do Buck” he said when we were sharing a smoke and I just put my arm around him and held him like I used to when he was small. “You only ever saw one option in life pal” and he tried to laugh but it didn’t come out that way and he asked me “Bucky what are we fighting for if not for them?”

He stubbed out his smoke and told me how Jim came and found him and said “Cap my family’s in a camp too” and was nearly crying—Jim of all people.[13] “I can’t stop thinking of what if it were you, if you had an H on your tags.”[14] And I would be a liar if I said every third thought had not been for my ma or kid sister or Venie or any of that part of the family that we never even met because they stayed in Europe. It feels rotten to make this all about myself instead of the men here whose lot it is but is this where I would have ended up if he had seen an H instead of a C?

“And now we got orders to abandon them here. So what the fuck are we fighting for?” When Steve was little if you got him angry enough he would lose it and start crying and raging all at the same time. Growing up the rage never went away and neither did the tears—he just keeps it all on the inside now. It takes something awful for it to come out on the outside but this is no doubt the most awful thing we have ever seen. There was nothing I could do except hold him and try not to cry myself even though this all feels so hopeless.

I did not have much to say to comfort him. Some friend I am. “I don’t know what to do Buck” he said again and again. “I don’t know what to do.” Maybe a year ago I might have had the words or six years ago when Mrs. Rogers died or when we got into alley scraps as kids I could just say “C’mon Rogers let’s get a soda” and that would make it better. But I don’t know what to say to make it better. I don’t know if there is anything about this that can make it better.

February 11

WORKING WITH SWEDES STOP. REMAIN IN PLACE STOP.

Thank God.
There is one Jewish prayer I know and it’s because of Steve. When we were little and he would get sick all the time, the first time he would get to come over to our apartment after getting well again Veenie (if she was there and then Ma after Veenie died) would hold his face in her hands and kiss his forehead and say:

\[ \text{Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, hagomel lahayavim tovat, sheg'molani kol tov.} \]

She would wait and Steve would say it back, better than even I could (I suppose because I did not get so much practice), and then there was another part that Veenie would say back to him that I don’t remember. But I remembered the first part on my own, after the fighting ended and the krauts gave up and we were trying to make sense of everything and I didn’t want any of these people to be afraid of us. It was the only thing I could think of to say. Ma used to explain it as what Jews say to thank God for getting them out of a tough spot, whether it was pneumonia (like Steve) or a streetcar nearly hitting you. So I said it to them over and over to make sure they knew we were friendly and they wept and talked to me in Yiddish so fast I couldn’t even pick out individual words.

I only wrote the blessing here because I was watching a prayer service some of the men held for themselves. Not all of them but some did. Three men out of maybe 300 who prayed had bits of cloth that they have somehow held on to through all this, like the one of Poppa’s that Veenie kept on her dressing table. They wore it around their shoulders and prayed. After all this they can still pray. And half of their prayers were just thanking God—even I can pick up that part. Where do you find it in your heart to thank God after enduring what they have endured, and will continue to endure? Is it faith or just hope for faith because there is nothing else?

I went over because I saw Yakob there praying and stood apart so they wouldn’t think I was rude or listening in (I don’t know the rules for them). It was like singing, chanting, low voices in together and maybe it was praising God but it felt to me like grief turned into sound. Yakob saw me and came by after they were done so I said the blessing again, the only one I know and he smiled a little confused “you not the prisoner” and I didn’t get it “why these words?” he tried again and I did my best to explain. I asked him to write the blessing down for me and he did but gave me another strange look “you not know to write our prayers?” and I said “I’m not a Jew” because I’m not (not really) and he shook his head and called for one of the men with the prayer cloths whose name is Serge Braunberger—Metz.

He is French and I guess he is a rabbi, or a scholar maybe I wasn’t sure of the word. He is blind in one eye. I explained to him how my mother used to be Jewish but stopped when she married my father and that’s why I’m not. He smiled at me. He is missing teeth but he can still smile. He is missing everything but he can still smile. He put his hands on my shoulders and said:

\[ \text{Une juive n’arrête pas d’être une juive. Une juive n’oublie pas d’être une juive. Ta mère, elle est une juive; sa mère, elle était une juive, et toutes les femmes créées avant elles, jusqu’à ce que Dieu t’ait fait. Nous sommes choisis; Dieu t’a choisi aussi.} \]

I don’t know if I believe it. I don’t know if I can believe it. A part of me wants to, or wishes I could. But to be honest I don’t know if I believe in God at all anymore, or if I ever did if I could stop believing in the first place. To be chosen for doing nothing at all—what is the point of it if the same God that chose you allows this place to exist, or any of the other camps to exist, or the people who did this to even be born at all? What is the point of any of this?
1,659. Several dead we think from typhus.

February 13

SWedes cannot send ship stop. Report to egress stop. Urgent mission stop.

Nobody ever got angry like Jack did when he was little. He would scream and rage and throw himself on the floor and Ma would ignore him, and then he would stop and start crying. Steve’s anger is worse though. He stood there his whole face white the message crumpled in his fist “fuming like a bottled storm” is what Ma would call it.[18] With just the seven of us in the officer’s quarters the silence and weight of this place is heavier than anything has ever been. “But I don’t understand,” said Dum-Dum, “they want us to give up?” and Monty answered “they’re ordering us to. Cap, they’re ordering us to let these people die.”

Steve opened up the message he had crushed in his hand and read it again and didn’t say anything but I could see the second he made his decision and I did not know it was possible to be prouder of him. He was already standing but it felt like he grew another foot in two seconds and took a deep breath: “We’re not going to do that,” he said. He looked around at each us. One at a time, man to man. “This is not a democracy. But I will not order you to stay.” Gabe stood up too and said: “All due respect, Cap, but you don’t have to.” This is our message back:

ALL DUE RESPECT STOP. NO.

February 14

1,652.

Pavel Gebert Warsaw
Janusz Lansky Danzig
Heinrich Liebgott Bonn
Rudolf Flusser Prague
Oskar Weider Leszno
Amos K? Lithuania?
Samuel Klazcko Jaroslav

No response from SSR.

Later

REPEAT LAST STOP. SET BEACONS STOP.

Steve and me were helping dig graves when Jim came over with it. “You heard them,” said Steve. “Repeat our last.” And Jim grinned and saluted “yes sir.”

February 15

It’s easy to talk to the ones who are happy, or if not happy at least here. Some of the men here—it is
like whoever lived inside them before all this has died even if their body has kept on going. I don’t know if they know the difference between the krauts that were running this place and us. The others feed them and help them to the latrines but if not for that they would lay on the hard wooden slats of their “beds” until their bodies finally gave up. It is a kind of hopelessness that cannot be described by words. Even if there were photographs it would not be enough. Technicolor would not be enough. To understand even a small part of this human desolation you have to be here and smell it and see it and hear it and be helpless to do anything.

“His son was being my friend,” Yakob said of one of these living corpses, an older man (we are beginning to be able to tell the difference between the old and young). “He is called Kaufmann. His son is killed of Nazis,” and Yakob pointed to the fence by barracks no. 2. “Over there.” Yakob said it like it’s nothing. And sure I have been surrounded by death for years or I thought I was but these men have been living it. How do they go on? How will anyone who lives through this go on?

1,641

Later

Nothing from SSR.

February 16

Serge, the rabbi, on watch tonight with me. We are keeping about 100 men on watch at any given time. It’s about the same number of guards the krauts had and they will at least give us enough time to mount a defense if the krauts do come. Monty and Steve have been working with our POWs to send dummy messages to other camps but it is a risk. We have a couple of the prisoners who did secretary work for the krauts on hand and they are helping us keep the POWs honest as best they can. It will have to be enough. We have no choice but to believe it will be enough.

Anyway it was Serge holding a kraut rifle next to me just standing and I offered him a smoke and he said no and I said “what am I supposed to call you?” (all in French) and he smiled at me. “Je m’appelle Serge, mon jeune ami”[19] and I said “we call our rabbis Father” and he said “Je ne connais que deux pères”[20] and he pointed up to the sky “là-haut” and then to the ground “ici-bas.”[21] And then he explained that it’s different with Jews, that “rabbi” just means “teacher.” He said: “S’il faut m’appeler autre chose que ‘Serge,’ on peut dire prof”[22] and laughed. I asked him how he could laugh and he said: what else can I do? and I didn’t know what to say. Never in my life have I chosen laughter in hard times. “Jealousy vengeance and wrath” sure. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me anymore. It is the only thing that makes sense after witnessing this place. But this guy is standing here inside his prison laughing at a guy he doesn’t know from Adam and finding a way to go on better than I can—me, who has suffered not even a fraction of what he has. “But you have to be angry” I said and pointed to his gun “don’t you want to use that?” He said (in French): “This gun can’t give back to me what I’ve lost” and I guess I made some kind of face because he grabbed my jaw and made me look at him straight on: “My wife and children live in the same place as my anger” he said and put his hand over his heart, “if I set fire to the anger, it will burn them too.”

February 17

1,629 this morning.

Later

CLEAR A RUNWAY STOP. 2 DAYS STOP. AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS STOP.
Monty said “our gamble paid off Cap” and Steve shook his head. “I don’t gamble.” It’s true. I think Steve would take on the entire Reich for the men in this camp. And we very nearly thought we may have to. All we need now is to make it through two more days. We have work to do but if it kills us we will do it.

1,624.

February 19

Packed in to the belly of a C-47 with 5 dozen other men so cold everything is shaking but even if we don’t make it to England even if we are shot down “it is a far far better thing that I do now than I have ever done.”[23]

February 20

Thank God for Carter. Thank God for Phillips. The sight of the first plane landing in our makeshift airfield of frozen ground is something I will never forget in my entire life. Hundreds of men stared up at it like they didn’t know if it was real and then when it landed and we felt it land the engines were not enough to drown out the cries. No matter how feeble their bodies are their hearts were strong enough for that.

Many died on the planes. But 1,583 are alive. I don’t know how many of us are alive much less 1,583. 1,583 who at least have a chance. And more than a hundred names in the back of my journal that I ripped out and gave to the people at the Displaced Persons Office who met us at the airfield. They will at least be remembered even if we could not save them. That will have to be enough.

February 21

Locked into command post to write reports and get briefed. They have not said it yet but I can feel in my bones that we will be jumping out of another plane soon enough. Then we have interviews with reporters forget that we have hardly slept or eaten for days and have fleas but I guess that is the price of “the most egregious, unlawful, and unforgivable insubordination I have ever witnessed” according to Phillips who then shook our hands and looked each of us in the eye and said “well done soldier.”

Later

Four hours of liberty so I found Serge at the hospital where they are keeping them all for now. It took an hour just to find him. I don’t know if it is better or worse to see him clean in a hospital gown with bandages for his sores. He somehow seemed more frail, more ill than when he stood beside me on watch. But he still smiled when he saw me “Mon jeune ami” and I sat down beside him and found I couldn’t say much at all.

“I don’t feel young” was the most I could think to say. He said in French “if you’re old then I’m in trouble” and laughed and I tried to laugh too but instead it came out “I’m very tired Serge” and I suppose it was not hard for him to figure out I didn’t really mean sleep. He asked “how long have you been fighting?” “a couple years” and he said “Incorrect!” He reached and held my hand and said: “We fight all our lives. And we fight ourselves all our lives also” and he placed my hand over my heart and said “Ici. Elle est difficile, la lutte, et quelquefois tu vas échouer. Un de nos rabbins a dit: ‘nous ne sommes pas obligés de finir le travail, mais nous devons essayer.’[24] C’est le seul choix, la seule chose que tu peux faire”[25] You have to try.

February 22
Saying goodbye to Yakob[26] and Serge[27] was the same as saying goodbye to any man I have fought alongside. Yakob is still in a state of shock along with the rest I think. Even though we may have “liberated” Friedwald I don’t believe any of them thought they would truly survive it. Some still won’t. But they are here in England now. Yakob cried and hugged me and I could not stay dry-eyed either. I gave him my mother’s name as Steve is going to work on getting them passage home—to our home anyway, since theirs is gone. Many of them hugged us and kissed us and just got as close as they could to touch us—the ones who are still alive inside anyway. It was gratitude but it was more than that. They were sharing with us something deeper, their hearts reaching out and saying: “I see your heart there, thank you, thank you for seeing mine.”

When we were packed away split into two cars back to London Dum-Dum turned to me and said, the most solemn he has ever been in his life: “Sarge this was the best thing any of us have ever done” and I said “or ever will do” and he nodded and Jim said “it’s not enough though is it” because like the rest of us he saw the map that Steve made the POWs fill in. Friedwald was just one dot. These hundreds of men were just one dot. There were so many dots.

February 23

After all this back in London. It is unfathomable. We have exited a nightmare and yet somehow being in London is the part that does not feel real. How can what happened at Friedwald be happening all over Poland and no doubt all over Germany yet the only thing anyone talks of here is “how bloody close our boys are to getting the job done.” People say the words and I just want to scream at them “don’t you know what is happening?” but no one does know. People may read four inches on a “camp” somewhere but we lived it breathed it smelled it and buried its bodies.

February 25

Steve gave the summary to the other fellows but he told me how it really went. Our message got in to SSR and it caused an uproar because nobody knew what to do and there was more intelligence about our prey and it seems that intel found out pretty quick after the jump that we were in Poland for no reason at all. And Carter and Phillips both tried to at least run a war game on how the Navy or even paratroops might be able to help us but OSS command stopped them and ordered us back. Carter herself flew to Sweden with the Swedish ambassador as I guess they have ships they used to get Jews out of Poland but their hands were tied because our Naval blockade has done too good a job. And no help from the Red Cross either. It seems every U-boat Germany ever built is between Sweden and Poland. But at our “NO” it went back up the chain and Phillips went to a few of the colonels and generals he knows in the Air Forces (ignoring his own chain of command!) and they sent a telegram out to airfields with troop transports saying

CAPTAIN AMERICA NEEDS YOUR HELP. TAKING VOLUNTEERS.

None of us knew the C-47s and B-24s were volunteers. And Steve also said that three of 28 did not make it to us in Poland. That means a few dozen men who sacrificed themselves to help us.

Carter also organized the Displaced Persons Office and the press thank God. With the press there taking photographs of our 1,583 it stopped the brass from even thinking of punishing Steve not that he would have cared I don’t think. One of the OSS brass said to him “you’re lucky son, if you weren’t Captain America you’d be dead or court-martialed, and then dead” and Steve looked back at him and said “shame on you then” and walked away—there has never been a better man.

February 27
No surprise that we are going back into the field. It seems SSR was not lying about the “URGENT MISSION” that we ignored. We have been back on English soil barely a week deloused for five days and have not eaten nearly enough to get over two weeks of cabbage water and “bread” but there is a job to be done.

I am trying to think of Serge “if I set fire to the anger, it will burn them too” because it feels most of the time like my anger is already on fire. I don’t know when it got lit or who did it but it burns and burns and I want there to be something left of me at the end of all this. I want this war to be over and I want us to finish it and then I want to go home. I don’t know if that will douse the fire but it is the only thing I can think to try. I have to try.

Historical Notes

Operation Lorraine

February 1—19, 1945

The stated objective of Operation Lorraine was the capture and extraction of the two most important figures of the SS-FD organization: SS- Obergruppenführer Johann Schmidt and SS- Hauptsturmführer Arnim Zola, a Swiss-born physician and SS-FD’s chief scientist. By January 1945, even the most fervent Nazis recognized the inevitability of the Reich’s collapse; the SS-FD organization, however, tolerated no such “disloyalty” among its ranks.

Though the quantity and quality of SS-FD resources and personnel had been slashed by nearly 85% thanks to the Heracles Campaign and the Allied bombing campaign, SS-FD remained committed to its objective of landing a death blow against the Allies, and beginning in late 1944 had expended some of the last of its resources to commission some of the world’s most advanced aircraft, mechanics, instrumentation, and other bombardment technology.

In late January 1945, OSS/SSR learned from intercepts decoded by the dedicated Hydra bombe machine at Bletchley Park that in early February, Schmidt and Zola were due to arrive by train at the Ziegler-Sauer Werke factory located roughly 35 kilometers outside of what was formerly known as the Free City of Danzig (Gdańsk), a port city in northern Poland. Although little was known of the products and technologies manufactured by Ziegler-Sauer Werke at the time, simply the fact that Schmidt and Zola would be traveling together was notable enough to warrant OSS/SSR taking action. Plans were established by January 28, 1945 to deploy SSR107 in an attempt to capture Schmidt and Zola—and thus end the threat posed by the SS-FD organization to the Allied war effort.

Unfortunately, and unbeknownst to the Allies, Schmidt and Zola’s travel plans changed abruptly in late January as a result of the damage to railways caused by sustained Allied bombing. On January 27th, the two SS officers flew with a small retinue to Danzig, inspected operations at the Ziegler-Sauer Werke facility, and arranged for the products to be shipped by air to a series of undisclosed airfields in Germany and Austria. On January 29th, the factory was shut down.
SSR107 arrived on February 3rd, discovering an facility empty of personnel, destroyed manufacturing equipment, minimal materiel, and little actionable intelligence. On February 4th, the disheartened team elected to patrol the immediate vicinity of the factory, a decision that would ultimately save the lives of more than 1,500 people.

**The Liberation of KZ Friedwald**

*Konzentrationslager* (KZ) Friedwald (German: “Peaceful Wood”; known as the Łężyce Concentration Camp in Poland) was an all-male sub-camp of the Stutthof concentration camp system, which imprisoned more than 100,000 people in total. KZ Friedwald was located about 80 km from Sztutowo, the site of the main Stutthof camp, and while it was designed to hold only 800, at its peak it housed roughly 2,500 inmates ranging from political prisoners and ethnic Poles to Jews originating from Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, and elsewhere. An estimated 5,700 inmates ultimately passed through KZ Friedwald, which was built in June 1943. At the time of its liberation on February 5, 1945, roughly 1,700 people were imprisoned there.

KZ Friedwald was primarily a skilled labor camp. At any given time, 90% of its inmates worked in round-the-clock shifts at the nearby Ziegler-Sauer Werke factory, building navigational instruments and bombsights for the Luftwaffe, and later, for SS-FD’s fleet of advanced aircraft.

More than a third of KZ Friedwald’s population was college-educated, and inmates ranged in age from 13 to 60 years old. During its 20+ months of operation, it is estimated that 700 inmates died as a result of illness, malnutrition, or outright murder. The remains of more than 300 of these victims were found buried in shallow graves in late 1945; it is believed that the remaining victims were cremated in the camp’s small crematorium.

On February 5, 1945, KZ Friedwald’s staff of 48 SS soldiers and 95 camp guards began the process of “liquidation”: the systematic murder of all 1,700 inmates. During a reconnaissance patrol, Master Sergeant James Barnes witnessed several of the SS guards use submachine guns to kill more than two dozen inmates. In the act which would later earn him the dubious title of the “noblest halfwit in Europe” — coined by an anonymous British colonel — Barnes launched an immediate one-man assault on the camp from a distance of just 200 yards away. Hearing the gunfire, the rest of the Commandos soon ran headlong to his position, and in the ensuing firefight killed 93% of the camp’s guards, who were woefully underprepared to combat an armed assault by the theater’s most elite special operations unit.

During the following two weeks, the Commandos faced their greatest moral struggle of the entire war: to stay behind, abandon their mission, and attempt to protect hundreds of defenseless, desperately ill prisoners—or follow their orders to return to their predetermined extraction point. In the end—as described by Barnes in *The Night War* —the seven members of SSR107 sent back what became some of the most iconic words ever transmitted, second only perhaps to Neil Armstrong’s “One small step”:

*All due respect. No.*

In the next few days, the Allies devoted hundreds of man hours into finding a way to bring Cap and the Howling Commandos home—along with the 1,650+ men under their protection. Thanks to the efforts of the tireless Agent Margaret Carter, SSR107 commanding officer Colonel Chester Phillips, and nearly 300 aircrew who volunteered to attempt the 1000-mile roundtrip from England to Łężyce and back, on February 19, 1945, 25 aircraft delivered 1,583 victims of the Reich to safety.

“This was undoubtedly, unreservedly, the Howling Commandos’ finest hour,” said broadcaster Tom Brokaw in a 1995 television special. “The liberation of Friedwald made them heroes; the evacuation
of Friedwald made them legends.”

In 1965, the State of Israel recognized SSR107 for their actions in service to the victims of KZ Friedwald. Knesset member and Friedwald survivor Yitzhak Steinhaus personally presented Winifred Barnes with two honors: a plaque declaring Captain Steve Rogers “Righteous Among the Nations,” and the Hero of Israel medal, the young nation’s highest military decoration, which was posthumously awarded to her son, Bucky Barnes.

KZ Friedwald was just one of more than 15,000 of Nazi Germany’s labor, concentration, and death camps. Though it was the first such camp to be liberated by a Western Allied force, it was not the first overall; Soviet forces discovered Madjanek in 1944 and Auschwitz, Nazi Germany’s most notorious and extensive death camp, in January 1945. In April 1945, the Americans discovered Buchenwald; days later, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen.

In all, the victims of Nazi Germany include millions of Jews, Ethnic Poles, Russians, political prisoners, gay men, disabled people, prisoners of war, and Roma. The exact death toll of the Holocaust is unknown, but estimates range from 7 to 20 million.

**Life after KZ Friedwald: Yakob Huffmann**

In the weeks after their rescue, the number of KZ Friedwald survivors fell from 1,583 to 1,442, with many succumbing to illness, starvation, and injury. By the end of the war, that number had dropped again to 1,397. Among them was Yakob Huffmann, who turned sixteen years old in June 1945. The following year, he accepted the open invitation offered by Howard Stark in memory of Captain America—and its accompanying paid passage and job placement services—to try his luck in New York City.

Yakob was the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. From 1946 to 1948, he lived in a boarding house in Brooklyn and worked in a kosher butchery. In 1951, he read *The Night War* for the first time, and was astonished to see his own name in print. The following year, Yakob began a degree in English literature at the City College of New York, following in the footsteps of his father, Levi, who had been a university professor until his deportation to Auschwitz in 1943. Yakob would go on to read *The Night War* once a year, a tradition he continues to this day as Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, where he famously teaches a course on the book every other semester.

In a televised interview on the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Friedwald, Yakob teared up when asked about the book’s impact on his life:

> It is the rarest kind of gift, to have the chance to know and understand a man like James Barnes, even if all we know of him comes from the journals he wrote during what was undoubtedly the worst time of his life. But you see, if nothing else, he believed that saving us, saving me, at Friedwald was his one good thing: his greatest accomplishment in two years of extraordinary heroics. And after learning that? What kind of man does not take that gift, and try to make himself worthy of it?
Chapter Notes

[1] Operation Umbrella took place in late February 1944, and marked the collaboration of SSR107 and the Eighth Air Force to destroy the SS-FD fuel depot in Kozmice, Czechoslovakia.

[2] Operation Arizona took place in mid-September 1944. SSR107 assaulted an SS-FD laboratory in Sonsbeck, Germany and discovered the mutilated bodies of several prisoners, including children.

[3] ZSW, or “Ziegler-Sauer Werke” was one of the Luftwaffe’s suppliers of advanced navigation instruments and, later in the war, bombsights specially designed for SS-FD.

[4] Micah 7:2, “The godly has perished from the earth, and there is no one upright among mankind; they all lie in wait for blood, and each hunts the other with a net.”

[5] KZ Friedwald, also known as the Łężyce Concentration Camp, was a labor camp designed for 800 inmates.

[6] The Bergmann Maschinenpistole 35 (MP35) was a type of submachine gun typically used by the Waffen-SS.

[7] The Nazis used many different methods of tracking their victims, including using printed serial numbers to be sewn on uniforms, stamped metal bracelets, branding, and tattooing, which was most commonly used at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

[8] Barnes was preoccupied with capturing the names of Friedwald’s victims. Yakob Huffmann wrote his own name into Barnes’ field journal, as did several others.

[9] The Nazi regime often took prisoners of war and civilians from occupied regions and trained them to serve as concentration camp guards rather than using valuable members of the highly trained Wehrmacht.

[10] Sturmbannführer Karl Volckmann was tried for war crimes shortly before the end of the war and sentenced to death. He was executed on May 1, 1945.

[11] Dr. Józef Weiss was imprisoned in five concentration camps from 1942 to 1945. After the war, he returned to live in Kraków. He and his nephew were the only known members of his family to survive the Holocaust; Weiss’s parents, wife, brother, sister-in-law, and three daughters were all killed.

[12] Very few kapos were prosecuted in post-war legal proceedings. No kapos from Friedwald were tried, nor were any identified in surviving documentation about the camp.

[13] James Morita’s parents and younger brother were interned at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California. After the war, Morita used his notoriety as a Howling Commando and a personal witness of the Nazi concentration camp system to be one of the most vocal opponents of the United States internment program.

[14] A GI who identified as Jewish had an “H” for “Hebrew” on his dog tags.

[15] A Jewish blessing praising God after surviving illness, danger, or captivity. English: Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who bestows good things upon the unworthy, and has bestowed upon me every goodness.

[16] Likely a tallit katan, or tzitzit, a prayer shawl worn by Jewish men.
French: “A Jew does not stop being a Jew. A Jew does not forget to be a Jew. Your mother, she is a Jew; her mother, she was a Jew, and all the women created before them, until God made you. We are chosen; God chose you also.”

Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*. “He quelled, he kept down when he could; and when he could not, he fumed like a bottled storm.”

French: *My name is Serge, my young friend.*

French: *I only know two fathers,* meaning one’s God and one’s earthly father.

French: *Up there and down here.*

French: *If you have to call me something other than Serge, say prof* (short for professor).

From *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens: “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.”

Rabbi Braunberger paraphrased *Pirkei Avot* 2:21: “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.”

French: *Here. It’s hard, the struggle, and sometimes you will fail. One of our rabbis said: ‘We are not obligated to finish the work, but we must try.’ It’s the only choice, the only thing you can do.*

At the time of his rescue, Yakob Huffmann weighed just 89 pounds. He is the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. In 1946, Stark Industries offered free passage to New York and language and job placement assistance to all interested survivors of KZ Friedwald, and Yakob was one of 407 survivors who ultimately made the voyage. He arrived in New York City at 17 years old.

Rabbi Serge Braunberger was reunited with his youngest daughter Mathilde in 1947 and his brother Pierre in 1948. The small family lived in Belgium until Serge’s death in 1968 at the age of 71.

Chapter End Notes

Massive thank you to my beta, **devil dears**, for her incredible patience and effort; to **magdaliny** for an invaluable sanity check and a much needed Jewish perspective; and to **quietnight** for her general cheerleading and last-minute insights. <3 Thanks to each of you!

Important Notes

*KZ Friedwald is a fictional camp,* though the Stutthof Concentration Camp system was real, and the events of the Holocaust were more real and more terrible than I could ever hope to represent in a piece of fiction. All of the people in the camp were also fictional, but their stories could have belonged to any of the millions of people murdered by Nazi
Germany. The intent of this chapter was to treat this serious subject with sensitivity, respect, and solemnity. I hope I succeeded.
March

London

March 1

Mail and a box from home that is marked “DO NOT OPEN” on the return address in Curly’s handwriting. Six letters though which I opened right away—three from Curly two from Ma (of course—Curly has “won” again) and one from Teddy who I guess wrote it from his field hospital when he got hurt (before the courier) and it did not make it to me until now. “Alive and going to stay that way for the time being don’t lose your goddamn mind” is all it really says and then at the end “I am going back and you can’t stop me”—the little bastard. By now he must be back with his men. According to SSR the 101st are in France again—maybe God will let them stay there. I asked Steve “now that we are big heroes do you suppose we could put word in with Ike and let him know Teddy’s needed real bad at home?” and Steve rolled his eyes at me “I don’t exactly have Ike’s number there Buck” and I said yeah me neither, nuts.

This time one of Curly’s letters was written from the library but she did not say which one or draw it, other than a lamp from the reading room. The other was from our apartment—I know because she did a little sketch of the radiator and Ma’s writing desk and even though it was just a couple of pencil scratches made me feel homesick than I have been for a long time. The thing about Curly is that she doesn’t have the patience for drawing, not really, but just like she does with words, she can somehow tune in to the heart of things with a pencil, too. If she takes the time to look she sees the world the clearest out of anybody I know, even if she’s only a kid. So she drew a little squiggle for the radiator with a quilt over it because Ma is always cold and her writing desk with a scribble for the plant that won’t die on top of it. I think she loves that plant more than her own kids. She also drew Ma’s reading glasses folded on a rectangle of a book, two little circles and the temples that curl over Ma’s ears and get tangled in her hair. Somehow I forgot about that plant when I imagined our apartment or even Ma sitting at her desk. But with a couple of words and a dashed off sketch Curly made me feel for a minute like I was there again—if only.

In her last letter she wrote “James Bucky Buchanan ‘First Sergeant’ Barnes you are not allowed to open your present until it’s your birthday that is why I sent it early this year!” and I know better than to cross her—and as it turns out she sent a box to Steve too that he was allowed to open—candy and socks. “Dear Steve, this is your early birthday present please open it the minute you get it” Steve could barely get through reading it he was laughing so hard. What a pair of snots—talk about made for each other.

March 3

Still on R&R except for intelligence briefings. Not even our French vacation between Belgium and Poland was this light. I guess SSR was so dismayed at our limping back from Poland skinny fleabags that they figure we’ve earned three hots and a nap, or else this is their way of keeping us out of any more trouble.

March 4
Same as ever I can’t sleep. If not Fiedler it’s Friedwald, and if not Friedwald it’s any one of a dozen men, or two dozen, or three dozen—when did I lose count? And I did not even dream this it was just a thought that came to mind when I was smoking on the terrace: at Friedwald I threw up at the sight of a pile of stripped corpses taller than I am. They were heaped on each other, sunken in skeletons, two rows of them, so many I could hardly tell which legs and arms belonged to which body. It was the kind of sight I could never have imagined and one I never want to see again. Yet in the past two years I have marched past a long trail of bodies, maybe even more than Friedwald, and never once threw up. That is the sneaky part of war. They fool you into thinking it is man to man, or even platoon to platoon, when really it is millions to millions. One boy dies and to his family it is one death. But it’s one death a million times—“a field where a thousand corpses lie.”[1]

March 6

Sat down to write back to Ma because I haven’t written a letter in weeks, not since before Friedwald. I don’t know what to say. I went through a quarter of a pack of smokes trying to put something on my paper other than ashes. I wish I could just talk to her, or sit next to her and listen to her read aloud like she used to when I was little. Even if we didn’t talk at all but I could just hear her voice for a minute—I think whatever it is I can’t put to words would bubble up out of me somehow—she always had a way of doing that.

March 7

Last free night. The fellows went out but I couldn’t muster up the energy and neither could Steve, and the fact is the fellows are allowed to get more drunk if the pair of us aren’t there getting the civilians all excited, or though I guess it’s mostly Steve. Still there’s only so much “Oy mate old Adolf’s running scared from the skull hunter eh? Well done yank well done!” a guy can take. So anyhow me and Steve walked around and grabbed fish and chips and a couple beers we brought back to our billet and just did nothing for a while. I think I must be the only person left in the world who can forget ‘Cap.’ No doubt it’s true the other way around too. In any case it might as well have been a rainy smelly night on the fire escape at home, just smokes and beers and a couple hours getting our gear in order and trading turns between “Hey Steve you remember whens” and “Hey Buck you evers”—even if the air was half coal dust it was somehow easier to breathe for a little while. Maybe this is what Serge had in mind.

March 9

Packing up our chutes and double-checking them and all the rest of our gear Gabe just threw his down on the floor “I’ve had about enough of jumping out of goddamn planes” and all at once me Dum-Dum Jim and Monty “no shit!” and Monty looked so shocked at himself I would not be surprised if he gives up his lordship on account of being so unpatriotic. Anyway, it’ll be jump star no. 7—guess I shouldn’t have tempted fate by counting our last one after all.

Jump is tomorrow—cold & rainy here which is bad enough but it’ll be back to snow & ice where we are headed—frankly I have had enough of rain and snow and of weather as a general fact, I think if we were meant to run around in the wild God would not have invented New York City. At least I have learned to start a fire with not much at all—and thank Christ for that skill as I am sure I will have a lot of cause to use it when we are home in Brooklyn where
Master Sergeant James “Bucky” Barnes never completed his last entry.

On March 12th, 1945, he was killed in action after nearly two straight years of combat in the European Theater.

Nazi Germany issued an unconditional surrender less than two months later.
Believed to have been taken by Steve Rogers in March 1945, this is the last known photograph of Master Sergeant James Barnes.

Chapter Notes

Afterword

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Afterword

1945 was, and remains, the most difficult year my family ever experienced.

In March, we received a telegram that my oldest brother, Bucky, was killed in action serving next to Captain America, whom we all knew much better as our “extra brother,” Steve Rogers. Days later, the news came that Steve had also been killed in combat—this time saving not just Bucky from the clutches of the Nazis, but all of us here at home. Just a few months later, the letter arrived that informed us that our brother Jack, had been killed action in Okinawa.

“Devastated” is the only way to describe the state of our family during those months of excruciating loss. Jack remained our private sorrow, and while we felt that Steve and Bucky were ours to mourn, they were also the country’s to mourn. In the last year of the war, their exploits were newsreel fixtures, and their fame far eclipsed the real people behind the propaganda. Stories and speculation about the circumstances of their deaths—which were classified at the time—were rampant. Imagine how extraordinarily painful it was to ride the train and listen to perfect strangers suggest that the reason my brother’s body wasn’t returned to us was because “there wasn’t enough left of him to put into a box.” At the time, I was fifteen. I ran home crying.

After the war, many film studios and book publishers hoped to leverage the heroics of Captain America and his Howling Commandos into an improved bottom line. And many did so, releasing cartoons and comic books that depicted Steve as a catchphrase-spewing caricature and Bucky—most egregiously, in our view—as his naïve kid sidekick. The other commandos—Sgt. Timothy Dugan, Japanese-American Cpl. James Morita, African-American Cpl. Gabe Jones, Englishman Lt. James Falsworth, and Frenchman Jacques Dernier—were nowhere to be found. Knowing from Bucky and Steve’s letters not only the important role these men played in their joint mission but also just how much they loved and respected them, we were appalled by their disappearance in popular media.

In mid-1947, more than two years after his death, Bucky’s footlocker finally appeared on our doorstep, thanks to his dear friend, Gabe Jones. In it were his accumulated belongings over nearly two years of combat—excluding those he had on his person at the time of his death. Those hours I spent reading his 14 battered field journals for the first time, in which he confided his hopes, longings, fears, self-doubts, and profound griefs, were some of the most difficult and most precious of my entire life. This was not Bucky the Kid Sidekick, or Bucky the “Skull Hunter”—this was our Bucky, our kind, brave, loyal, determined, and deeply human brother.

Though Bucky’s worldly belongings had been entirely bequeathed to me, it was a family decision to publish his journals—every violent, funny, ribald, and tragic word of them—in the form in which they appear in this book. We faced resistance: in the late 1940s, many were not interested in reading about the grisly details of the war that their sons, fathers, and husbands had fought. But in the end, we published Bucky’s journal in its entire unedited form, with the simple hope that the rest of the world would know him, and therefore love him, as we do.
Chapter End Notes

This has been an incredible journey. Thank you to everyone who left comments, kudos, and asks in my Tumblr inbox -- I have appreciated your support more than you could know!

What's Next?

I have a lot more fic planned for this verse, including:

Three Days in December
This story covers Steve's experiences post-*Avengers* as well as his perspective on the events of December 29-31, 1944.

**The Work of Carnage**

This fic begins immediately after *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and it will cover Bucky Barnes's gradual reintroduction to the world--and to himself.

**A lot of one-shots, like...**

*Find Me (Where the Lovelight Gleams)*, a short coda to *The Night War* taking place in December 2014. Check *Lovelight* out now, and please subscribe to *The Night War* series or follow me on Tumblr at *praximeter* for updates.

--

My thanks to my amazing friend and beta, *devildears*, who has wrangled me back from the edge more times than I can count. <3

---

End Notes

Come cry with me on Tumblr as [@praximeter](http://praximeter.tumblr.com)!

Works inspired by this one: [Mission - Schnellzug EB912](http://praximeter.tumblr.com/post/112454989830/mission-schnellzug-eb912) by downrangedragon

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!