

UP THE ITALIAN BOOT

It was now summer and getting warmer or hotter. For the next two and a half months, we advanced northwards towards Livorno and Pisa. Much of the time we were in the foothills of the Appenines, sometimes in rolling hill country of wheat fields or grape orchards.

In our sector or front, the Germans generally had not set up strong defensive positions but fought rear-guard actions while firmer defense lines were being established farther north across the Arno River, which traverses the city of Florence.

The 4th of July 1944 found us dashing down a wet and muddy grassed hillside as artillery shells landed sporadically around us. When we heard a shell coming in, we would hit the ground and slide a few feet further downhill, then get up, the front of the clothes all muddy, and scramble away. When we reached *the* roadway alongside a stream at the bottom, we met boys I recognized as being from L Company of the 442nd with whom I had trained back in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. I inquired about Masaru Tengan, a close friend from back in high school at Lahainaluna, and was told that he had been killed just that morning.

Some of us refilled our canteens with water from the stream. Someone later told us that there were a couple of dead Jerries in the water further upstream, but we paid no heed and were thankful we hadn't seen anything, though we did change the water at the first opportunity. No one I ever knew took ill from drinking such raw water because it was standard practice to treat it with halazone tablets we carried. The tablets imparted a slightly disagreeable taste to the water but rendered it safe to drink.

In combat we always wore woolen olive drab clothing, which wicked out perspiration much better than cotton fatigues and were therefore less prone to becoming smelly. Even if the wool were swabbed in mud, the mud could be scraped off easily, and when the mud dried, the remaining dirt could be shaken off. We also carried a field jacket; a shelter half; and a blanket, half blanket during summer months.

Riflemen each carried two grenades, either in an extra canteen pouch or hooked and taped to a loop on the front strap of the backpack; this in addition to the extra ammo. Each also had entrenching tools, small picks and shovels. Extra socks, underwear, a washcloth, toothbrush, spoon, and a tiny GI can opener were basic items. All of these plus a helmet and daily rations - which also included toilet paper, candy, cigarettes, matches, and water -- added up to quite a load. To save weight and avoid fatigue, many of us did not lug a bayonet.

On top of all this, someone in the squad carried a rifle grenade-launching attachment along with the special grenades. One man also carried a BAR (Browning automatic rifle), something like a small machine gun, which weighed twice as much as a regular Garand M1 rifle, the standard weapon of the infantryman. The M1 was an eight-shot semiauto which weighed about eight pounds unloaded. Semiauto means that after it was loaded, you simply squeezed or pulled the trigger for each shot you fired.

This is in contrast to the standard German rifle, a bolt-action Mauser, in which after each shot, the bolt had to be manually pulled back to eject the fired cartridge and then pushed forward and down to load the next round into position for firing. The U.S. rifle, of course, could be fired much faster than the Germans', although before war's end the Germans had also developed and issued a semiautomatic rifle.

The difference in firepower compensated for by their machine guns, which fired twice as fast as ours. One could always distinguish them in battle by the difference in the rate of fire. Ours went "tat-tat-tat-tat," theirs went "burp."

Both sides also used submachine guns. Our standard was the 45-caliber Thompson, or "Tommy gun," similar to those popularized by Hollywood's gangster movies. The Jerries' submachine gun standard was the 38-caliber Schmeizer machine pistol.

Machine guns and submachine guns are fully automatic, which means that once you squeeze or pull the trigger, it keeps firing until you release the trigger or the gun is empty.

U.S. officers generally carried carbines, which are like baby Garands, smaller, lighter, and less powerful but which had a fifteen-round capacity. One round is one cartridge.

Men assigned to mortars and machine guns carried pistols (Colt model 1911 45-caliber semiauto) or carbines as their personal weapons.

Gas masks were available, but since most infantrymen dumped them as unnecessary weight, they were not issued after a while.

German equipment was generally well designed and made. Their helmet was considered superior. Their entrenching tool could be converted from hoe to shovel and was well enough designed that the U.S. Army began issuing exact copies to its own troops.

Interestingly, their belt buckles, made of aluminum, were inscribed with the phrase "GOTT MITT UNS," which means, "God is with us."

Along a hillside road we came across a few enemy dead and stopped for the night at a small cluster of farmhouses. The squad occupied the barn-like ground floor of one of the buildings, and I took the first stand at guard duty. We were not especially wary because other than the dead we had passed, there had been no sign of enemy presence. The houses appeared undamaged but deserted, and we did not disturb anything. I did, however, check out the half-open ground floor of the adjoining building. There were some carts and implements, but otherwise it was deserted.

Just before dusk, one of our boys looking out a window saw someone beckoning him to come. So our guy curiously walked over, and the figure turned out to be a Jerry soldier who handed over a rifle and pistol to surrender. Where he came from I don't know because he wasn't there when I checked the place out.

Farther along some days later, we crossed a small ravine and started to set up for the night. The squad leader approached me and said that although we hadn't seen them, the unit advancing next to us was supposed to be farther up the same ravine and that battalion headquarters wanted to know if they were there. I was thinking we'd have to go and check on it when he said,

"Take one guy with you and go see if they are there."

Damn it, it was already dark and visibility nil. I turned to the fellow nearest to me, quickly explained what we had to do, grabbed my rifle and stuff, and set out. Carefully feeling my way to avoid stumbling into trees and rocks, I kept thinking,

"I sure hope that other outfit is nearby because I have no idea where I'm heading in this dark. And I hope there aren't any Jerries around."

After groping our way carefully through the dark for a few hundred yards, I came to a small tree and a voice practically at my feet said,

"Who's that?"

What a relief. An American. As my tenseness drained away, I quickly explained who we were and asked to see an officer. Their lieutenant was called and he confirmed that they were the outfit next to us.

Going back was going home. No strain, no pain.

After reporting to the company commander, I went back to get some sleep, but before I could, I was told that the battalion people wanted to know.

"But I already told the captain and I can't tell them anything more."

"Yeah, but they wanna talk to you. Go!" "Oh, shet!"

So I had to go to battalion, wait a while, and tell them the same thing. I didn't really mind, though. To me the important thing was that nothing had happened to us, we had made contact, and we returned safely without incident. (Lucky Number 4.)

The platoon was now moving up a gentle slope through a wheat field. The column stopped moving just as I reached an earth bank near the crest where those ahead turned to the left, following the curving bank at the edge of the field. A few of us were clustered there when suddenly a Jerry machine gun, somewhere in the nearby wooded hill to the right, opened up on us. The fellow next to me was hit and went down, writhing on the ground.

I leaned back, pushing hard against the bank, and tried to see where the hell the firing had come from. I was excited but not all that scared and not really aware of what the others were doing, so intently was I looking for the source of the firing. I think some were doing the same or had hit the ground.

Then Jerry fired again, and just like in the movies, the bullets kicked up the dirt at my feet and beyond. I also felt a hot flash on my left shin and on the tip of my okole and thought,

"Shet, that bastard has me bracketed in his sights. Gotta get outta here!"

I moved back about five yards along the curve of the bank, and that took me out of the line of fire. All this took place in just a few seconds. No one fired back because we couldn't tell where the gun was. The wounded man was still thrashing on the ground, and thinking Jerry might now try to hit him again, I called out,

"Try not to move. Try to stay still!" Immediately I felt kind of foolish for I'm sure he couldn't comprehend under the circumstances.

Then -- Talk about guts -- the medic, a kotonk, calmly walked up to the wounded man and started working on him. Fortunately, Jerry had quit shooting and must have taken off before we could locate his position and shoot back.

Though he was in pain from a bullet wound in his right side, the wounded man seemed otherwise okay.

I was the only other wounded. A bullet had passed through the front of my left shin, making two holes where it went in and out, but not hitting the bone. Sheepishly, I dropped my pants and asked someone to check my okole where I had also felt a sting, but that bullet had just grazed my ass and there was no wound to speak of. The machine gun fire had bracketed me, bullets had passed in front of me and behind me, and I had come away with only a minor wound. (Lucky Number 5.) I went back to the rear, but as soon as it was clear there would be no infection, I was sent back to rejoin the platoon.

Most of the resistance we encountered as we pressed on were what news reports call minor and mop-up operations.

One day we heard a burst of firing to our right front and we scurried into a drainage ditch. As I anxiously peered over the edge, a lone Jerry sprang up about thirty

yards ahead and started running. There must have been about a half dozen of us firing at him and he went down, whether to take cover or from being hit I don't know.

We then moved off in a different direction and shortly came across a hastily abandoned enemy position. There we found some flame-roasted fresh ears of corn, a half-consumed can of butter, and had ourselves a tasty snack.

We entered an old-looking, battered hillside town. Most of the buildings were damaged. Inasmuch as the residents evacuate when fighting passes through an area, we were surprised to find an elderly woman yelling and crying and gesturing at us as we passed. We concluded that she was complaining that American shelling of the town either had killed someone in her family or had destroyed their home.

A couple of us went to check out a house that overlooked the area where we were going to bed down for the night. The house was vacant, but I decided to look up the fireplace. To support myself while I looked up the chimney, I placed my hand on a ledge inside the fireplace, and my hand touched something which turned out to be a small revolver with a folding trigger. It was tiny enough to be concealed in one hand. Three of the chambers were loaded with what appeared to be 22 short cartridges.

I took it outside to see if it would fire. For such a small gun, it made a loud bang. I think I scared the shet out of a couple of guys just below; they gave me a dirty look. But I just grinned, showed them the pistol, and shrugged.

As we started to cross a low valley the next day, a Jerry machine gun started shooting at us from a vineyard on the hill beyond, but at some distance. We sprinted across one at a time and one of the guys was hit in the ammo belt, but fortunately the bullet was deflected and he was unhurt.

We knew Jerries were around, so we were very tense as we spread out and advanced slightly uphill through a grape field interspersed with olive trees. The spacing between me and those on my left was getting too great, so I trotted across the next open field to close the gap. There was a single grape trellis at the edge of the field, and just as I got to it, I heard and saw Tamotsu Hasegawa, about ten yards to my left, yell and point,

"Jerry! I saw him! over there!"

I had hit the ground. Tamotsu was behind an olive tree, and I could see him getting ready to throw a grenade. Looking in the direction he had pointed, just on the other side of the grape trellis, I could see a mound of dirt which I figured would be the Jerry's position. TO make sure Jerry stayed down in his hole, I fired a few shots over the foxhole as Tamotsu threw the grenade right into the hole. As soon as the grenade exploded, I rushed up to the hole, ready to shoot. There was just one Jerry. He was clutching a machine pistol and groaning in pain. I bent down and pulled the gun out of his hands. About this time someone else came up, shouting,

"Shoot 'em! Shoot 'em!"

I hesitated but he did not, pumping a few rounds into the Jerry to put him out of his misery. I checked Jerry's weapon and found that a ruptured cartridge stuck in the chamber had jammed the gun. The thought occurred,

"Why hadn't he shot me when I came across thefield?"

He had probably tried and been spotted by Tamotsu. He must desperately have been trying to clear his gun when the grenade got him. I wondered why he hadn't just surrendered. Probably panicked. In any case, I felt I had been lucky. At a range of about five yards, he could have wiped me out if his gun hadn't jammed. (Lucky Number 6.)

Right after that I saw a figure about 30 yards ahead run and hit the ground. I could still see him and quickly drew my rifle up. The safety was off, my finger was on the trigger, and I had the figure lined up in my sights, but a sixth sense said,

"Wait! Something doesn't look right!"

Sure enough, the figure got up, and it was one of our guys. While we had been delayed, the guys to our right had continued moving up and were now that distance ahead. I never said anything about this to anyone, though, and I never got to talk with Tamotsu Hasegawa about his spotting and getting the Jerry with the grenade.

Later that day, someone asked me,

"You no was scared when they were shooting at you?"

"Shooting at me?"

"Yeah, they was shooting at you!"

I didn't think I was shot at when I crossed that open space, unless, of course, he was referring to earlier in the day, when most of us were fired at as we dashed across the law valley.

When I rejoined the platoon after hitchhiking back from a few days' pass in Rome, they were in holding positions just this side of the Arno River. The situation was reminiscent of Anzio. By day we occupied farmhouses and at night outpost positions alongside a road a couple of hundred yards from the elevated bank of the river. It was somewhat less tense in that two men occupied each position, although much of the time one or the other was out contacting those in the next position thirty or forty yards away.

Nothing happened in our position, but we knew that Jerry patrols had approached close to others. We heard that one of the guys, while alone in a foxhole, suddenly had a Jerry loam up in front of him. He killed the Jerry with several shots, and, all shook up, took off to join the boys in the next foxhole. Now and then we tried looking across to Jerries' side from the attic of our farmhouse but could never see any sign of them.

Hanging from the rafters were bulb onions, which we helped ourselves to. Also, during the day, limited movement behind buildings was okay, and it being the season, we enjoyed peaches and apples growing outside.

Field telephones had been set up so the platoons were in contact. At night empty beer bottles were set up across all approaches such that anyone walking through would knock them over, the sound alerting those within.

Still, as indicated earlier, there were no incidents in our area, not even when finally one morning we crossed the waist-deep, fifty-yard-or-so wide Arno River. The Jerries had moved to defensive positions further north.

Life was not always combat. There were many stretches when the unit was in reserve or rest situations. When the unit was pulled off the line to give the men some relief, it did not mean idleness. Training and orientation activities were scheduled.

At the conclusion of one of these activities, an orientation to the types of German mines, something went wrong as the materials were being loaded onto a truck and the whole thing blew up. I was not at nor witnessed the incident, but I lost a good friend from back in high school, Katsuhiro Kanemitsu. He was some distance away but was hit in the head by a large piece of metal and killed.

During these respites from combat, hot meals prepared in the company kitchen became the order of the day, a welcome relief from the K and C rations in the field. Notorious as they were, K and C rations served their purpose:

The breakfast serving included stuff like canned ham and eggs, crackers, powdered coffee or cocoa, toilet paper, and cigarettes. Lunch consisted of canned

cheese, crackers or hardtack, lemonade powder, and candy. Supper was canned meat and vegetables or meat and beans, crackers, bouillon cubes, and more cigarettes.

Most of the boys routinely discarded the cheese, and being one of the few who liked American cheese, I never lacked for it.

Sometimes we even got to take a hot shower in the mobile bath units operated by the Army. It was strictly GI, by the numbers. First you stripped and tossed your clothing into piles: Shirts here, pants there, et cetera. Then on a whistle, those in the showers would move out, a new group would move in and wash for a minute or so, rinse off, and move out on the next whistle. After drying, we picked up clean clothing.

On the front line, of course, there was no such thing as taking a bath. If you were somewhat removed from the front and water were available, sponge baths were possible using the steel helmet as a water container.

Some of the more pleasant activities occurred during the periods of respite. Movies were sometimes available, and there were occasional visits from traveling USO groups. Some guys were always looking for a piece of ass, and it was not unusual for prostitutes to find and service the camp.

This was the time, also, to visit with friends in other companies and write letters home on V-mail, a microfilmed arrangement which reduced the bulk of mail the military physically handled. I tried not to write anything of consequence as we had been told that all letters would be screened and anything considered vital censored out.

As combat troops usually on the move, we did not have much opportunity to fraternize and form friendships with the Italian people. Neither did we have the time and inclination to learn the language except in a most rudimentary form. On first contact, we were almost invariably thought to be "Cheenese." It was sometimes amusing to see the puzzled looks of doubt, disbelief, and bewilderment when we explained, or tried to, that we were indeed American soldiers but ethnically Japanese, from Hawaii. I suspect many remained convinced that we were actually Chinese.

A significant part of the war was conducted by the Allied air forces, mostly American and British. One day -- when or where escapes my memory -- we watched fascinated as a seemingly endless stretch of bombers flew by overhead. The formation took quite some time to pass; it filled the sky as far ahead and back as one could see. It was one of those thousand bomber raids that we read about in *The Stars and Stripes*, probably headed for the oil fields and facilities in the Balkans. It made one wonder how anything could stand such massive bombardment.

The Allied armies on the Italian front were comprised of troops from many different countries and we sometimes visited with them. At one time we were next to a Brazilian group and were surprised to find that many of their noncoms were ethnic Japanese. When the opportunity arose, some of us visited the New Zealand troops and exchanged jackets.

In the evenings we often reminisced, talking about ham, drinking coffee or beer. After a few rounds of beer and the appearance of an ukulele, we'd end up singing. I used to marvel at the ability of some of the boys who could play the uke. The gamut of songs ran from popular drinking songs to bawdy ones and Hawaiian songs.

As with dirty jokes, I have a hard time remembering them in entirety, but some of the words went something like these.

"Drunk last night and drunk the night before
Glory to God and I'll never get drunk again.
When I'm drunk I'm as happy as can be,

For I'm a member of the blank-blank family."
Et cetera, et cetera.
"There once was an Indian maid,
Who was very much afraid,
That same buckaroo
Would shove it up her coo!"
Et cetera, et cetera.
"U.S.E.D., suckers every way,
50 cents an hour, 4 bucks a day."
Et cetera, et cetera.
"Down by the shack by the sea, by the sea,
Panipani no pay money."
Et cetera, et cetera.
"You may go I'll let you go may God bless you.
You'll be mine wherever you may go."
Et cetera, et cetera.
"Show me the way to go home,
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed,
I had a little drink about an hour ago
And it's gone right to my head!"
Et cetera, et cetera.
Others often sung included:
"Jatandre," a French song
"Lill Marlene," the Italian or English version
"China No Yoru"
and usually

"Kuipo"

Throughout it all, small groups of men were given passes on a rotational basis to recreational stations set up by the military. There were opportunities for sightseeing on visits to well-known places which are still visitor attractions today. For many, however, it was first things first. Houses of prostitution were accepted establishments in the cities, and where there was a will, there was a way.

Indeed, in Naples, which was notorious for the flagrancy, a GI could not walk certain areas without constantly being solicited by street urchins. Some had adopted a crude, attention-getting spiel which went something like this:

"Hey Joe, you wanna fuck my sister?"

Very young, good looking, big teats, small pussy."

As with all advertising and come-ons, the product rarely matched the claims. Those girls in the houses obviously were professional, but many others were ordinary girls reduced to prostitution by their circumstances. Nevertheless, the sex was sometimes very good, at others, very perfunctory.

Army pay never having been anything to brag about, those going on passes usually took along a few cartons of cigarettes scrounged from friends. Since a pack of American cigarettes sold on the street fetched as much as it cost for "a piece of ass," the black market in them thrived.

We understood that some GI's went so far as to remove the cigarettes from the packs, re-stuff them with sawdust, reseal the packs, and sell them to unsuspecting buyers. That may have been in retaliation for some of the buyers attempting to pay for the cigarettes with counterfeit occupation currency hot off the press. The counterfeits

we saw were so crude that there were misspelled words and the ink would smear when rubbed with a wetted thumb.

One group of guys looking for some "action" approached a young Italian couple as they emerged from a hotel room, thinking the woman was another prostitute. It turned out that the young lady was the gentleman's fiance and that they came to this hotel to do it. They all had a good chuckle. The Japanese "love hotel" is certainly no innovation.

On a multi-day pass to Florence, a friend and I rode many of the inner city streets on bicycles. Being wartime, there was very little vehicular traffic, most of which was military. At the time we knew little of the cultural significance of the city.

All good things come to an end. We returned with mixed feelings. We were happy to rejoin friends, but who looks forward to returning to action on the front line, for much of combat is frustration, fear, and fatigue.

We soon found ourselves in the cavernous confines of a landing ship and then on a larger ship headed for Marseilles, France.

There we boarded 40-and-8 type railroad box cars and kept moving back and forth, getting everyone loaded up. The journey to our bivouac destination was tiring, and we spent much of the time trying to rest or with legs dangling over the open side doors, watching the passing countryside. If you had to take a piss, you just stood and peed out the side.

The first long tunnel we passed through taught us a lesson. Those, including myself, who had their legs dangling over the side found, when we emerged from the tunnel, that the oily diesel exhaust from the locomotive, instead of being blown up and away, had been confined inside the tunnel and had smeared over our exposed trouser legs.

About a week after being issued new arms and equipment, we boarded GI trucks to head north. It was a long journey up the Rhone Valley. Watching the farm landscapes go by and catching occasional glimpses of the Rhone, I could not help but think how beautiful the whole countryside was. One of the jeep drivers in the convoy must have been thinking similar thoughts because when there was a temporary stop, he crashed into the truck ahead. No one was hurt, but the jeep was wrecked and pushed off the highway.

Every now and then we passed long lines of burned-out German trucks and vehicles which must have been caught in daytime by Allied aircraft and shot up. Other than these, there was little sign of war.