

THE FINAL WEEKS AND GOING HOME

Amy trucks brought us into Genoa. I remember a drive up a long, sloping city street and shortly after reaching the crest being able to see part of the port and the waters of the Mediterranean. I suppose everyone knew of Genoa and its connection to Columbus and it would have been nice if we had a chance to tour the city, but it was not to be. Often when we were in a historic city, it would cross my mind that were it not for the war, I would probably not have otherwise had the opportunity to be there.

Some days later the battalion was moved to Ghedi Airfield, close to Milan, where it remained for a while processing thousands of surrendering Germans. The processing involved the confiscation of weapons, cameras, and similar military equipment.

Prisoners as they arrived were lined up on the grass of the airfield and instructed to place all their possessions on a blanket in front of each. They were allowed to keep personal items and toilet articles. Piles of cheap plastic cameras and assorted knives accumulated. The good cameras were kept by our men as personal souvenirs, as were some handguns, binoculars, ceremonial daggers, and emblems of various sorts.

In checking out some crates on a truck, I came across a batch of Nazi flags, about four by six feet. I kept one to bring home and gave away the others. I do not recall when or where, but I had also acquired a pistol which I was to bring home with me.

When checking the possessions of individual prisoners who had their items laid out on a blanket before them, I also looked under the blanket every now and then. In several instances this uncovered money, currency, and silver coins. I would look the man in the eye, smile, and move on to the next, not taking his stash. A few tried to hide items in their boots, but they turned out to be harmless things, like flashlights and notebooks. We did take away many straight razors despite protests that they were needed. We had been instructed to confiscate them, so I figured the military would be distributing plastic safety razors in their place.

After a couple of days of this, I was asked if I wanted to be a jeep driver. Figuring that being a driver would be more interesting in that it would offer me a chance to see more of the country than I would otherwise and that it would be better than standing guard duty and such, I agreed. What I didn't tell them was that I didn't have a driver's license and that I barely knew how to drive. Fortunately, the first few days it was mostly just taking guys to and from their guard stations, and if I wasn't doing something right, they would tell me.

The unit was next moved to the outskirts of the small resort town of Lecco on the shore of Lake Como, where the men generally enjoyed a period of rest and relaxation. Driving officers to various assignments gave me an opportunity to see most of the lake as well as Lake Garda, both beautiful bodies of fresh water.

A long drive in a convoy then moved us to Livorno. The company was housed in a separate outbuilding, and showers and a kitchen were set up. The men were assigned to guard various ammo dumps, supply areas, and such.

One in particular that I remember was a junkyard next to the sea. The shallow beach was still only knee-deep a hundred yards out and the water flat and clear. The junkyard itself covered several acres and contained all manner of wrecked, damaged, discarded, and surplus war material. It seemed like you name it, it was there: damaged and shot-up or destroyed vehicles of all types and sizes, appliances, furniture, office equipment, kitchen things, various containers, fuel cans, bunks

and other bedding, dismantled and destructed weapons, helmets, uniforms, tents, old tires, tools, et cetera, et cetera.

Many of the items appeared to have been purposely rendered inoperable or useless and then discarded. The immensity of it all brought home to anyone seeing the dump the wastefulness of war.

So why were the men guarding such a dump? Given the opportunity, some U.S. military and Italian civilians were carting away salvageable material to sell for whatever they could get. An attempt was made to haul away used tires, but this group was chased away. Rumors abounded that some big-time GI operators made small fortunes dealing in such materials.

As I had figured, being a jeep driver enabled me to see a few places I probably would not have seen otherwise, places like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Brescia, Cremona, and some other smaller towns. I also got a chance to drive an officer and two other men on a several-day pass back to the Beausoleil-Nice area for a final fling. The only highway linking the two countries then was along the coastline of the Italian and French Riviéras, passing through a number of very picturesque coastal towns. While we cruised a few of them, our primary interests were sights and scenes of a more human nature.

The military had already been shipping men home to the U.S. as fast as they could, and some of our boys had already left. Soon it was our turn, a large group of 100th and 442nd boys, plus some others from other outfits.

When we left Italy to begin the trip home, it was with mixed feelings. Yes, I wanted to go home, like most everyone else, but I also knew that it would be a very long time, if ever, that I might Europe again, and I wished I could stay and see more of Europe. That would have meant reenlisting and committing for a few more years, a most abhorrent thought since I was only a PFC and intensely disliked the martinet mentality of the non-combat military. You don't know how many jackasses there are in this world until you get into an organization like the Army.

The trip back to the U.S. by ship was uneventful. After five days of being seasick, I got my sea legs and the rough seas we encountered later didn't bother me. At times while we were in the crowded bunks in the forward hold, the whole front of the ship vibrated violently after a loud bang upon being slammed by large waves. It was somewhat disconcerting, having read in the past about some wartime cargo ships that broke apart in rough seas. The pitching late one night was enough to slide a fellow who was taking a crap right off the toilet and onto the floor on his ass.

The long hours of idleness afforded me a chance to read a couple of thick paperback books, one on Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon church, the other about the artist Vincent Van Gogh. It was a revelation and education in that these were the first real novels I had read outside of the literature anthologies in high school.

We must have made port in the New York-New Jersey area because we were all on deck straining to get glimpses of the Statue of Liberty. The euphoria associated with the end of the war in Europe had passed, and there was no welcome band and such. We flew across the country in a few hops by military aircraft and after some visiting in California boarded a ship home to Hawaii.

Everyone had been on deck long before we pulled into Honolulu Harbor. Again there was no fanfare, no grand welcome, no parade as we were an advance group, not the main body of returning 100th-442nd men as a unit. Still, it was an emotional time for most.

I had never been homesick since I had experienced four years of high school in a boarding facility at Lahainaluna. I wasn't married and I didn't have a girlfriend waiting for me and had already decided to try for the University of Hawaii, and I wasn't as excited as many of the others.

In a way I regretted that the grand and glorious adventure was over, but I was content that I had served and done my part. I had survived the war and I was back, grateful for having made it safely and for the opportunity to have seen the United States, North Africa, Italy, and France.

Besides having physically survived, I was also fortunate in that I was never involved in any horrifying, tragic, or traumatic incidents that affected my psyche. While I lost some good friends and buddies killed, I was not present at nor saw their dying. Neither did I have the experience of enduring and am not haunted by the cries of badly wounded men suffering slow and painful deaths. (I suffered only one mild postwar nightmare, this while in college a few months after discharge, when I awoke and sat bolt upright in a cold sweat one night while dreaming about being caught in a mortar barrage.)

Now for what lay ahead. Not to worry.

At Fort Kamehameha we were informed about the GI Bill of Rights, which assured me that I would be able to go to college; counseled to apply for and later received approval for a twenty percent disability compensation for war-related injuries; and was officially discharged from the Army.

It was December 28, 1945. I was then less than a month shy of my 21st birthday.

