

Later Sunday, 22 Aug 43

Hell folks:

I've got the chance to continue writing so I'll try to catch up. ~~Let's~~ Let's call this one "Life in the Desert", altho part of it will be concerned with Death in the desert.

It is amazing to see just how much life the desert does support. Aside from the millions of plants which are spread widely thruout the desert there is also a tremendous amount of insect, reptilian, and mammal life here. Most of these seem to live in the ground in holes dug by them or other creatures. I don't know just what they eat to keep alive, and certainly what they drink is a mystery to me, but nevertheless they do live. At night, when the lights in our clearing station are the only lights for miles around myriads of insects are attracted to our area. Most of these seem to be crickets, but there are also moth types and others that I have never seen before. Around the treatment tent we have a family of lizards which seem to be tame until you try to reach over to pick one up, then they show surprising agility and it is quite some job to catch one. They are capable of dropping off the end of their tail if you should grab hold of this. I have actually seen one of them do this. It leaves them short-tailed but there is practically no bleeding when this occurs. They feed on insects, and the boys have developed a game of catching crickets and throwing them, still alive, in the vicinity of the cricket which pounces on them ~~ix~~ before the cricket can even begin to fly. One of these small lizards will eat 5 to 9 of these crickets in succession before he seems satisfied. In addition to this pet family, there is also a family of rodents which look like a cross between mice and squirrels, i.e. like mice with slightly bushy tail which go about their daily life paying practically no attention to us. As one drives across these desert roads one sees these run across the roads at surprising speed. I have not seen any, but there is supposed to be a family of kangaroo mice in the vicinity of one of our infantry units. Then there are snakes, a large non-poisonous type called the king snake, and smaller poisonous desert-rattler, both of which I have had the opportunity to see and help kill. In fact, I cut off the rattlers of a desert rattler which almost bit one of our men while we were on a hike. Altho it was only about 2 feet long it had 9 rattles on it. Birds are not very numerous in the desert itself, altho in the nearby irrigated areas they can be found in great numbers. However, aside from the carrion birds which can be seen flying around occasionally, there is also a very ugly bird called the sandpiper which we see around quite commonly. It usually runs as much as it flies. Jackrabbits are quite numerous, looking like thin dogs with long necks. I also have seen one coyote, which looks very much like a dog.

As far as my life in the desert is concerned, it still has it's interesting, even the unpleasant points. At Camp Pilot Knob, where we were formerly stationed, the weather was extremely hot, but the wind blew sufficiently to keep one from noticing it too much. However, if the wind became too strong, then a sand storm resulted. I had the experience of taking a hike during one of these sand storms. Did I write you about it, or did I just intend to write you? I don't remember, so here goes. It was only blowing moderately when we started out, but after we had walked about 15 minutes of the 3 hour hike, it really turned into a real sandstorm. The sand was so thick that you couldn't see more than a few feet in front of you. It was impossible to keep your head up because the sand would then blow into your eyes, nose and mouth so that you couldn't see, or breathe. So it was necessary to keep your head down and look at the feet of the man in front of you to make sure that you were going in the proper direction. It was impossible to talk, and the nose which is dry under ordinary dry desert air, became dry to the point of pain, as did the throat, despite the fact that the mouth was kept closed. We always carry a canteen full of water on these hikes, but I had usually been accustomed to drink no water during the hike. However, this is one day where I would have been glad to have had a gallon of water. That canteen cup was a godsend, but still felt like just a drop in the bucket. I had been wearing my glasses when we started out, but they became so covered with dust that they were of no use whatsoever, and it became necessary to remove them in order to see anything. After walking out for an hour and a half, we turned back and then with the storm to our backs the situation was alleviated. When we arrived back in our company area we looked like dust men, being covered from top of head to the soles of our feet with a fine layer of dust that took a great deal of washing to get off. This also infiltrated through our outer clothing into our underwear, so that underwear which had been white to start with was now a rusty brown color. This was by far the toughest hike I have had to take, and I would hate to have to go a distance of 15 miles in a storm like that. We covered 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

Well, now I know what it is to face the mouths of machine guns spitting forth live ammunition. You have all read about the rigorous and realistic training that they have been giving to the doughboy making him go over the "infiltration course", a sort of obstacle course, while machine guns shot live ammunition over his head in order to make him keep down, just as he would have to do in ordinary combat. I had the opportunity to go over this course the day after I returned to California with Ros and the kids. I didn't tell Ros about it until it was all over. Most of the company had already gone thru it while I was away on my leave but since it was required of everyone in the division, I had to do it just as soon as I got back. The experience was not at all frightening because the machine guns shot at a level of 40 inches, being fixed by a wooden bar so that they couldn't shoot lower than this. Since 40 inches is better than 3 feet high, it didn't worry me at all, because I knew I'd never get up that high with live ammunition going over my head. The course was 50 yards long, and it was necessary to creep, not crawl. Creeping consists of getting along over the ground by pushing yourself with your feet and pulling yourself with your elbows. You are not permitted to get up on your knees and crawl. The fanny stays right down at ground level all the way. I had been forewarned to pad my elbows because the ground was very rough. In fact we had had a large number of patients in our clearing station with cellulitis of the elbows resulting from secondary infection in the excoriated elbows caused by crawling over the infiltration course. We were supposed to make the course in 10 minutes or less. Of course there were a couple of barbed wire entanglements ingeniously constructed to take the most time to get through, and we had to climb in and out of two trenches as well as a couple of craters of the type that shells or bombs would leave. I started over in the first wave of 10 men, and found that I was not at all frightened as the bullets whistled overhead. I took my good natured time in creeping, and kept raising my head to make sure that none of my men became panicky, shouting, like a good officer, to each of them in order to make them feel more secure. I felt quite brave, altho I don't know of any good reason why I should since it was not at all dangerous. I did find that distance is a matter of relativity, and that 50 yards traversed in this manner was a helluva lot farther than 1 mile of walking. I stopped and rested 3 times during that 50 yards in order to accumulate enough breath to keep going. The last time I stopped was only 5 yards from the end, directly beneath the mouth of a machine gun (50 calibre) which really made a lot of noise. When I finished, I found that I was in the group of the first five to finish. Others had started after the first wave and many of these finished before the men in the first wave. It was a swell experience, and one which I won't forget in many a day, not because of its danger, but because of the extreme exertion required. After I finished I returned to my cot and laid down to rest and fell asleep for 2 hours.

While I was away on my leave they had a heat wave in the desert. As you know, the temperature there usually is about 138 degrees during the hotter part of the day. I don't know how hot it became during this period, but it seems that everyone suffered with the heat. There were 8 deaths from heat during the week. Four of these you people who read time read about. It was the incident of the soldiers getting lost in the desert while out on a problem with an officer. The officer had to leave the group to find some water when they failed to find water at the appointed place. He warned all the men to stay there and wait for him to return, but 4 of them decided to go off in search of water on their own hook. The officer returned in a few hours with water for the rest of the group, but they were then unable to find the four men. A searching party of several thousand men was sent out to look for them and after a couple of days three of them were found dead, literally cooked by the sun. And I mean literally. From the description I received from the officer on duty at the station they were a pretty horrible sight. They have never found the fourth man. A week later another man was lost in the desert in a patrol of 5 men. They too ran out of water and he stayed behind to wring water out of a cactus plant, while the others went ahead. They soon found their supply of water, but when they returned for him he was nowhere to be found. Again a large searching party looked for him for almost a week, and all they could find was a few articles of his equipment.

Another unusual type of incident occurred at Camp Pilot Knob while I was away. Instead of the type of latrines to which we were so accustomed (straddle trenches), they built the fancier quartermaster master box latrine. This consists of digging a very deep hole (20 feet) and placing a box over it with toilet openings similar to the chic Sales type. In order to keep flies away and a foul odor from developing, these are daily sprayed with a mixture of

oil and cresol. Everyone is warned of the explosive quality of this oil, which beside being sprayed in a fine stream, is also acted upon by the heat of the desert to keep it pretty explosive. Well it seems that there were 6 men sitting on these holes at the time that one of them absent-mindedly threw a lighted cigarette butt into the hole next to him. A terrific explosion occurred resulting in throwing all of them off the openings, the box going quite some distance into the air. All of them ended up in the hospital with severely burned ~~parts~~ perineums. It would have been funny if it had not been so tragic.

For two weeks, while we were still at Camp Pilot Knob I was fortunate enough to be able to come home to Calexico every night. Of course this meant getting up at 4 AM in order to get back to camp on time (50 miles away) but it was worth it to be able to be with my family. The house which we got in Calexico was swell for Ros and the kids because it had enough privacy so that they could get out and take sun baths daily. We bought a hose so that they could keep cool by spraying each other and they spent most of the day in the sun. All of them got so brown that it was hard to tell them from the Mexican populace. The kids and Ros had a swell time when I took them across the border into Mexico, and Judy would stand around with mouth agape trying to understand the language. We all had an enjoyable meal at a Chinese restaurant in Mexicali, and you should have seen Elaine eat Chop Suey. I was very lucky in Calexico to strike a town that was kind to the soldiers. As soon as we arrived I put in an application for gas and they gave me 75 coupons. This with what I had left from the trip west left me with more than a hundred coupons so that I felt gas rich, as I still do with 75 to last me until Nov. 21. Then on top of my request for gas I requested two new tires which I got without any trouble. So now I have four practically new tires on the car, and a spare which is not bad. I traded in the tire I received in Springfield, Missouri as one of my bad ones without ever having had it on the car.

A week ago our division moved up to Camp Coxcomb. Since I had my own car, they gave me permission to travel alone. Since it took the division more than 24 hours to make the move, I had more than a day off. I took Ros and the kids to Beaumont California, which is situated in the mountains and we looked for a place there. The man at the red cross promised us a place so we told him we would move up Sunday (1 week ago to-day). This we did, and found that the place had not yet been vacated, so we found a place in a tourist camp where we have been staying since. Fortunately we expect to get out by Tuesday. We're getting a nice little 3 room cottage at the surprisingly low rent of \$17.50 per month. This is in contrast to rents of \$100 - 125 for the same size apartments in Palm Springs. Of course the Palm Springs places are infinitely nicer, but we have the advantage of living in a place which, altho only 30 miles from Palm Springs is 2000 feet higher and therefore very cool. In fact it is necessary to use two covers at night. The only disadvantage this town has is that it is 120 miles from our camp (there are no towns closer than 60 miles, and this is the only town not in the heart of the desert that is within reach). Despite this distance I belong to a driving team of 3 officers who make the trip every other day. This means getting up at 3 AM on our return to camp in the mornings, but we get to catch up on sleep during the siesta period from 12 to 2 and also the following night. I have finally been able to find a place for Ros where she is not too isolated and in the heart of a town. Up to now she has always lived in the country or on the outskirts of a town.

As I mentioned above, our division moved by convey from Camp Pilot Knob to Camp Coxcomb a distance of 200 miles. This required the movement of more than 2100 vehicles and they were on the road for 36 hours, i.e. from the time the head of the column left the one camp until the time the tail arrived at the new one. This went off without a hitch except for one accident, but this was a bad one. As you know, a convoy drives for 50 minutes and rests for 10. It was during one of these rest periods that a trailer diesel truck (out here in the west the trailer trucks are just twice as long as those in the east) followed by a second similar trailer, one loaded with 14,000 gallons of oil, and the other with 14,000 gallons of gasoline, were blinded by the lights of a vehicle approaching and struck a parked jeep. This caused the front trailer to jack-knife and it was struck by the second trailer truck. A fire resulted which burned 6 men, I don't know how severely; burned up 4 army 2 1/2 ton trucks with the barracks bags on them, one jeep, and both of the trailers. It also burned up the bridge on the road, requiring a nasty detour. Fortunately the trucks were loaded with barracks bags instead of men, or the accident

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of men, or the accident would have assumed the proportion of a tragedy.

For the first three days after we arrived at Camp Comstock it rained at some time during the day. Now rain in the desert is a rare thing, but I saw it rain here harder than I have ever seen it rain before, and it resulted in a river to be forgotten experience. Saturday, 14 Aug. I left our camp at 5 P.M. heading for Calexico to pack the car and bring the family to Beaumont to our new home. A storm had blown up at about 4:45, but it looked like just a strong wind. The road from camp to Desert Center is rather a well paved one with a considerable number of dips in it. Since our camp proper is located about 2 miles away from the road it takes about 10 minutes to get to the main highway. We had seen the rain coming down on the mountains in the distance, but thought nothing of it. After we had been driving for about 10 minutes the rain began to come down in sheets. It became quite difficult to see, but I continued on slowly because I was anxious to get home. A short distance farther along the road we began to run into streams of water flowing across the road at the places where the road dipped. We navigated the first two of these without any difficulty, but when we came to the third one, it was a raging torrent. There was one car stuck on the other side, having gotten practically thru the dip before the wires had become wet and it had stalled. At the suggestion of the four sergeants who were riding with me, I decided to try it. I slowly started thru and was getting along well when I suddenly stalled. I tried to start the engine, but to no avail. There I was, stuck in a raging stream on the main highway, with the water steadily creeping higher, and the rain coming down in sheets. There were rocks in the stream striking against the car hard enough to be heard inside. There was only one thing to do, and we did it. We got out of the car, dressed as we were, stepping into water well above our knees, and pushed it on thru the stream to the safety of the rise on the other side. We then returned and pushed out the other stalled car, and then a third one which tried to navigate the dip. We were all completely soaked. Even the money inside my purse was soaking wet. I next tried the motor and sure enough it started up again. We drove to the next dip and there we waited for an army truck to pull us thru. The road bed no longer was a road bed, but rather a river bed, with piles of stones everywhere. It took us more than an hour to negotiate about 2 miles of road. It is amazing how much rock a stream can carry when it gets up the speed that these did in running off the sides of the mountains. The amount of deposit carried by these streams was even more evident the following day when I returned to camp after the water had run off the roads. In some of these places where I had had difficulty, the rock was piled 2 and 3 feet high on the road. It took 5 days for them to get around to clearing off the road to a point where it could be traveled at a satisfactory rate.

Chip: I ran into a Capt. Katzenstein, who is X-ray man at the 36th Evac Hosp which is down the road 15 miles from us. He was in X-ray at the Jewish Hospital, and has been in the army for 2 years. He has just been transferred to the 36th from a mechanized division and seems to like it very much. He was the German refugee who took the X-ray of Ros after her accident. Lew Ayres is a soldier in this outfit, and seems to be quite popular, but considered a bit queer. He is a vegetarian (is that enough to classify a guy as queer?) and has a number of peculiar ideas. He is not very well, and was away on sick leave the day I was there. I wonder what the reaction of the nurses of the evacuation hospital is to having the handsome Lew Ayres to work under them. His brother donated a loud speaker apparatus to the unit which is swell. Calls from headquarters can be heard all over the area very easily, and it makes things quite convenient.

I'll tell you more about our new camp in my next letter. It does not seem as hot to me, but many of the men seem to be complaining more than at the last place. In a hike this past week, 200 men fell out in one infantry battalion, and 20 of these had to be hospitalized. We have had one heat death, a chaplain 44 years old who was diagnosed as a coronary and heat stroke. This place is really a little too tough on these older fellows, and despite my 35 years, I still don't class myself with "older fellows", at least not quite.

I haven't run out of material, but I have out of patience, so I think I'd better close until the next time.

Love to all of you,

Walt and the desert Felsons.