

Hello gang!

Tuesday 16 May 44

Well, I finally feel like a real veteran because I have seen combat that is combat. We have been an important part of the Italian push, and don't minimize the importance of the medics in these pushes. Every infantryman has now developed a totally different aspect of the "pill rollers" whom he formerly scorned, and now thinks that our men are more heroic than any of the infantrymen. The feeling is mutual for we have all the respect in the world for those poor suckers who have to go up the hills in the face of enemy fire with a load of equipment that would weigh down the average civilian.

Things were terrifically exciting with the start of the push, and believe me the medics were not out of it. Our boys were up with the battalion aid stations carrying patients from the front lines back to the aid station. This is not the usual situation, for usually our duty is to carry patients from the aid station to our ambulances which then bring them back to the collecting station. However, the terrain was such that the infantry couldn't get by with their relatively limited medical detachment, and so we were asked to help them out, which we did without question. It was a pleasure to get the reports back as to how well my men were working up in those forward areas, going out after the wounded under shellfire, being the only ones visible above ground in many cases because the infantrymen would duck into slit trenches and dugouts when the firing got heavy, but my boys just continued up the trail to the patients who were lying injured. Of course, they would drop to the ground when shells were coming close, but for the most part they continued with their work without paying too much attention to the shells. We have numerous instances where our men went out into no-man's-land to pick up wounded and the Jerries and our doughboys would direct their fire to another sector while our men were out there and then would continue their shooting after our men had pulled out with the patients. However, there are other instances where they fired over the heads of our men with their machine guns, in order to warn them to stay out of the field, and when this warning was ignored, began firing about 50 feet in front of them at the ground. Our boys didn't need anymore warning ~~than~~ than this and turned back to the aid station picking up wounded enroute. Some areas were totally inaccessible to our men for days because of heavy mortar fire enroute. Only on one occasion did the Jerry deliberately shoot at our men, and that was a sniper behind our lines, who shot an aid man when he was only 500 yards from the aid station. When the infantryman heard about that they sent out two squads who circled around the sniper and we weren't troubled with him any more. On another occasion 16 of my men were returning from a trip after wounded when a machine gunner must have decided to have some fun with them and began shooting, but his aim must have been bad because he came much too close for comfort and really scared hell out of my boys. In fact we had to send them back for a rest because of the nervous reaction to this. On another occasion a wounded man and an aid man were captured by the Germans and they sent the wounded man back with the aid man along with a German aid man. Then both the American and German aid men returned to return some more wounded. However, after the second trip and return to the German aid station, neither of them returned, so that the American aid man ended up as a captive.

One of my men was a real hero. He went out to a hill which was still being fought for and started taking care of casualties. The fire got so heavy that he was pinned down and couldn't even raise his head. Finally he got the idea that everyone on the hill was dead and that the only reason the Jerries were still shelling the hill was to kill him. I find that this is a not uncommon notion that men who have been under fire for some time get. Finally the shells began to drop practically on the fox hole in which he was hiding, and he took a dive into a neighboring fox hole only to land right on top of a dead soldier. There he had to stay until the shelling stopped for a bit, and he hurried off the hill out of that area. As soon as he got away from there he ran across a wounded man who had had both legs amputated by a shell burst and he had to pick this man up and put him in the shade and make him comfortable while he went back for litter bearers to bring him in. All this totalled up to make a boy develop battle fatigue, and when I saw him at our company he was simply a nervous wreck. We had to send him further back for a rest, but he is coming along OK and will probably be back with us in a couple of days. We have had so many heroic things happen in our company that it would only bore you to tell you all of them. Everyone, from the General down, and I don't mean only our division general, has had a good word to say about the excellent way the medics performed their function in the first days of the push.

Actually, we were so busy back here in the station that I did not have my clothes off for five days, including my shoes. We even got additional help from a couple of the docs one of the other collecting companies which had not yet been committed. If it had not been them, none of us would have had any rest at all. The cot in my den was getting 24 hour service, with one officer or another using it constantly, trying to snag off a few hours sleep while three of us stayed on duty at all times.

It really has been a pleasure working on these wounded, in that we felt that we were really doing them some good. We used quite a bit of plasma and it is remarkable to see

respond to its use. There were some patients who came in to us in extremis and who responded so well to as many as 5 units (1250 cc) of plasma that there is no question that this saved their lives. Actually we have had no patient die in our station or in any of our ambulances during the present push. This would not have been the case were it not for plasma, because you can believe me when I say that we have seen some pretty horrible wounds. However, fortunately, these are in the great minority.

We have been helped greatly by having had a large number of Italian soldiers used as litter bearers, attached to our company. If it hadn't been for them I don't think that my men would have ever been able to keep going up to the present time. These Italians could not work forward of the aid stations during the day, because the Germans don't respect the Red Cross when worn by the Ities, so during the day they would take care of the short haul from the aid station to the ambulance and at night they would go out almost to the front lines. They are indefatigable, and can't do enough to help us. We have had a group of them working around our station and they have made the work ever so much lighter for my men. Almost before an ambulance with patients stops in the yard, they are out there with the back door open, unloading the patients and carrying them into the station. I swear I don't know what we would have done without them.

At the beginning of the push things were very tough and everyone was extremely upset by the fact that it seemed a hopeless task, but we slowly made progress and now it seems that we really might go places. It seems as soon as we got past a certain point, the Germans began to give up and it wasn't long before we were taking large numbers of prisoners. Some of the wounded prisoners came thru our station and they seemed to be kids for the most part and they really seemed glad that the war was over for them. Several of them told us that if they had known how they would be treated by the Americans, they would have given up a long time before. They really hate the Russians and hope that it will be the Americans and not the Russians that get into Germany first. They feel that the war is lost for the Germans. Of course, we were all interested in our Jerry prisoners. The rooms would crowd up with our boys and the Italian boys everytime a Jerry was brought in. At first the Italians resented carrying them on the litters and even were a bit rough in the handling of them, eg. dropping the litter onto the table instead of gently lowering it, but when they noted that we took care of the Jerries just the same as we did our own wounded, their attitude changed and soon changed to one of glee when they saw the numbers of Jerry wounded that were being brought in.

Yesterday and to-day, with the Jerries on the run, our casualties have decreased and as we were not busy everyone has had the opportunity to get refreshed. I had a haircut and shave by one of the Italian ~~fellows~~ soldiers, and we even have them cooking spaghetti and meat for our company for supper. I also took time out to have a bath and to sit for a pencil sketch which one of the Italians made of me, and I really think it is excellent. I'm hoping to send it to Ros. It only cost me two packs of cigarettes. Not bad pay (90¢) for 20 minutes work.

My company has been extremely fortunate as far as casualties is concerned. Despite all the moving that my men did in the front lines, only two of them were wounded, one only mildly and the other one with a brain injury but he is recovering. We did have an ambulance destroyed by a shell, but the men weren't in it at the time. A jeep was temporarily knocked out by a shell, while our driver was hiding underneath it, and altho the shells hit low on the jeep, they just missed the driver. Our station, which we thought would be a center of shelling because of harboring units, turned out to be the safest place in the entire area, and during all this push only three shells fell anywhere near enough to have been called close. Actually, as far as excitement for me was concerned, aside from the patients, this was tamer than the previous trip up here.

Well, that's about all for now. I hope to have time to write regularly.

Love,
Walt.