

Wednesday, Sept. 20th, 1944 0700

So much has happened since I have been able to write you 2 days ago that I hardly know how to start this letter. From being front line troops only a few days ago when we watched our artillery pound and pound and pound those pill boxes before us, to being rear echelon troops, almost, when our boys finally broke the line, then moving forward again to being front line troops and once again we're rear echelon boys--by merely staying in the same spot overnight. So it is up here.

I wonder if you remember that the 18th was 2 years since I've been in the Army. That's nothing to brag about and I hope I have no more army anniversaries. I wanna go home!

With the breakthru of those pillboxes, our men were able to go right on up over the hills and since there was no road up thru them which meant that we had a serious problem of evacuation, because the farther forward the troops went the farther was the litter haul which our litterbearers would have to make to get patients back to the ambulances. Once night fell there was nothing to be done but sit tight and wait for the first light of day to go out and try to find a way closer to the front lines to get those patients back. We knew there was a road on our right in another sector and farther forward this road curved over toward our sector so that our boys had a shorter litter haul if they hauled straight to the side instead of to the rear. We had heard that this road had been knocked out by our air corps and was practically impassable, but our engineers got to work and by the time we sent out two ambulances and a couple of jeeps to investigate the roads and go as far forward as possible they had the road open so that we were able to send those vehicles all the way up to the best place to pick up patients.

We had already sent out the 2 ambulances and jeeps when Maj. Minor, a battalion executive officer, came in and told us that they had 20 casualties up front and told us to send 5 ambulances. I sent 4 more ambulances up, since he assured me that the road was passable and I got in the Chaplain's jeep and took off to see where we could set up a station, making arrangements for half of the station to follow me up, while the other half remained in the Tobacco barn. The road up was a winding one, thru the mountains and at innumerable places where the road had a cliff on one side and the mountain wall on the other, the air corps had dropped bombs simply shearing the road away. However, our engineers had come in with bulldozers and had either filled in these places, or if this impossible, had scraped away the mountain side to make a new roadway. At any rate we were able to get by without any real trouble.

The farther up into the mountains we went, the more reason we found to explain the Jerries' inability to hold us back. We had thrown so much field artillery at them that EVERY tree in the thick woods near the top of the mountain had either been knocked to the ground, or cut off, or badly scarred. Practically every square inch of that area had been cut into by shrapnel. There is no question but that it was expensive to take these hills, but not in lives of American soldiers, thank God. The expense was monetary--involving the costs of thousands and thousands of shells. For Jerry it was expensive in lives. In the relatively small area that I passed thru, I saw at least 25 to 50 German dead and not a single American one. We passed by the top of the hill and started down toward the valley which led up to the next hill. I knew I was getting near the front lines and was getting a bit leery of going too far forward but I hadn't reached the point where our ambulances were parked, so I knew I still had to keep going. Finally I began to pass infantry troops on the march forward and I KNEW I was too far up. Still on I went and a couple of curves farther forward I found John and the ambulances. They were in a small town consisting of only a few beaten-up houses. This town had been captured only a few hours before and the troops were now fighting for the next town forward and only 400 yards away around a bend in the road. I told John that that was much too far forward for the company to set up and after shmoozing a bit took the jeep and started back to look for a possible place to set up a station. Since the road ran between mountain and cliff there wasn't very much to choose

from. We saw a road leading down to a house in a valley and decided to investigate it. Many artillery shells had ruined the road leading down, making it impractical for our vehicles but our curiosity was roused as to what we'd find down there so we went all the way down. The place had been used by the Jerries, at least 6 of them, since we found 6 rifles there and also the flag with which they had surrendered. They had left quite a bit of their stuff scattered all over the place and we rummaged thru it and found a few articles of interest. Then we decided that we'd better quit scavenging and find a place for the company. The next place we looked at was a building, again with a very poor road leading in to it, and with too many guns surrounding it, so that we decided we'd be better off being out in the open and looked for another ~~next~~ spot which we found close by. Actually, it was a very poor place compared to all the places which we have previously occupied but compared with what there is to be had around here it was good, as we found out when a number of other units tried to take it away from us. At any rate, while I was looking for a place to put the company, the town forward where they were waiting for word from me, was shelled so they came on back without further ado and I met them out at the road as I was going down to get them.

I'll get around to telling you more about our area further on in this letter or in tomorrow's letter. I want to get caught up on the past before I go into the present.

In our last area, at the tobacco barn, I didn't do much moving around because shells were occasionally falling in and because Jerry had had plenty time to sow mines. However, I had learned that there was a nice creek nearby and needing a bath, I decided to investigate. A number of my men had already been there and I knew there was a safe path leading down to it, so I had nothing to worry about. The creek ran along at the foot of a tall cliff and the road going down to it led thru the most beautiful pine grove one could ever hope to see. It was far prettier than anything at Mt. Airy. The water was ice cold, as is to be expected in these mountain streams but left you with a feeling of exhilaration once you had adjusted to it. It's a good thing I took the bath when I did since we moved the next day and I'm sure I have no idea how long it will be before I get the opportunity to bathe again. I also did a bit of laundering while I was at it. I was somewhat afraid that I might catch a cold since the weather has turned fairly cold here--in fact Van and Vince both have heavy colds--but when you need a bath you have to take one.

You may remember I mentioned the beautiful villa just 50 yards from us where regiment had set up its C.P. Well, I've learned that it is the residence of a foreign ambassador to Italy. It's more beautiful than I originally led you to believe, with a gorgeous patio with tropical plants in one of the side buildings.

Our last night in the barn was not a busy one, altho we officers spent considerable time discussing various means to use to evacuate patients in case the troops ran into trouble. Fortunately the problem solved itself by the opening up of the road on which we had to depend, so that we were able to evacuate the patients the following morning. The boys did run into trouble, too, as I learned in part Monday night when they brought in one of my litter bearers suffering from "exhaustion". He was the boy who had been knocked off his feet by the concussion of an exploding shell only 2 days before. We had let him rest for 2 days and then he had again been sent forward. He was following the aid station and had just gone down a hill when he ran into an artillery barrage. They had to turn back and get up to the top of the hill as best they could, and when this boy got to the top he collapsed and had to be walked back to the company. He was pretty nervous when he got in to us, but not alarmingly so. We sent him on back to the clearing station to get some rest.

I have already told you, in part, what went on yesterday. On my trip up the good road to the point where I was to meet the ambulances and John, the picture of devastation wrought, both on Jerry and the countryside, was almost indescribable.

They may have had the advantage of high ground and prepared positions, but we had far too much power for them. I'm sure that if we had held this ground and they were attacking, they would never have advanced a foot against us. They had dug-outs built into the backsides of the mountains going deep into the ground, reinforced with logs--all in all very comfortable places to live. However, to fight a war you have to bring up men and material and we kept the area so covered with artillery and planes that it was an impossibility. I had the opportunity of seeing what happened to some of those reinforcements coming up and believe me it is horrible. I won't try to describe the horrible sights and sickening smells we passed on the road. Suffice it to say that they lost a tremendous number of men, animals, vehicles and materiel.

When I finally found our ambulances, 1500 yards in front of the spot where I was to meet them (now do you understand why I thought I was going too far forward) they were parked along the road in a partially destroyed town. All patients had been evacuated, both by our ambulances that I had sent at first and by some of Co. B's ambulances in whose sector we are because of the road. Fortunately casualties were not very heavy. From the town, perched on the side of a hill, I was able to look ahead into no-man's land and watch our shells dropping with undiminished fury on the Jerries, another 1500 yards in front of us. A small town was nestled in a valley below us, a town which had been in German hands only a few hours before. The troops of our combat team were only a half mile ahead of us, and a town only 400 yards ahead was being fought for by our adjacent unit.

Altho the town from which I could see most of this was not in our sector, it had been captured by one of our companies when the adjacent unit was held up there. While I went back to look for another place to put our station, John went forward to the town in the valley, accompanied by 4 war correspondents who were very enthusiastic about the work we had done. They said it was our combat team which had broken thru the Gothic line (actually I don't know how much strength the Jerry has before us to constitute more of the line) and that they were going to give us full credit in their dispatches--mind you--our combat team--not the division. They were especially enthusiastic about Capt. Little and Co I (he's as small as his name suggests) which captured the town that was holding things up. Of course, I've been sold on our combat team for quite some time, feeling that it is the best in the division and that means in plenty of divisions. I shall eagerly watch reports from now on to see whether the correspondents keep their word.

One of my boys, Herbert, has acquired 2 Italian or German mules and has been evacuating his casualties on them. I don't know where he found them since all I've seen around are dead cows and mules by the score. In addition we have had litter patients carried back by Jerry prisoners. This helps our boys considerably. Monday night, I have learned, a group of my litterbearers were pinned down by artillery fire for several hours and got lost from the unit they were with. All day yesterday they were straggling in to the company, some having gone back the same way they went up, others going forward and running into other of our men and learning where we were. Finally all of them have been accounted for with no one injured. Our luck still holds.

Tag, Hussey, my driver, and I were in the jeep when we went back to look for a place to set up the station. As I told you, we saw the house down the hillside and drove down to it. When we were only a short way off the main road, we realized that this road was too bad for our vehicles to traverse, but scavengers that we are, we decided to see what we could find. It was a farm, one small house of which had been occupied by German troops. You could tell that Jerries had been there by the mess around there--they're not very neat soldiers. A white cloth tied on a stick was mute evidence of what had happened to them--I'm sure they were taken alive as there were no bodies around, other than a horribly bloated cow. There were at least 6 of them, 6 guns being strewed about on the ground. As is usual, they left everything behind them and apparently their captors had rummaged thru it and taken all the good things. Tag, having never

been up forward until now, had plenty of souvenirs to look for--helmets, caps, belt buckles, etc., but since I have already collected most of these items, I was more interested in other things--anything which might attract my covetous eye. I found a small fancy girl's wrist watch which doesn't work, several scissors and a good sewing kit, etc. When I've collected enough of this junk I'll send it home to add to the collection. Jerry seems to carry much more junk than we do, apparently because he takes what he wants from the civilians. Of course, we don't, usually buying our stuff and mailing it home at once.

We left the house on the hillside continuing our search farther back along the road. Another house, not far from the road, caught our eye, but there were too many guns around it and we decided against it, ~~lest~~ lest the guns draw counter fire. While there, however, we met up with a number of very high ranking officers who were looking over the ground ahead of us, trying to determine what tactics they would employ to take it. One must admit that in this war those of high rank spend a considerable amount of time at the front lines.

We next went to the area in which we are now set up. The road leading in is bad and it is on the forward slope of a hill facing the enemy, but beggars can't be choosers and we know there wasn't another spot to set up for miles down the mountainside, so we took this place as a last resort. We went pretty far off the main road, just in case Jerry should decide to come over at night and strafe the road. On this side road we passed by an offshooting road where we noticed 5 German vehicles, including 2 ambulances, knocked out by our artillery fire. Obviously an aid station had been here, so I stopped to investigate. They had the station set up in a very nice two room dugout, but oh! so filthy. To add to the filth there were 5 dead Jerries smelling up the vicinity, so I didn't hang around there long. When the boys finally arrived they started "prospecting" the hills and found all sorts of stuff. Dead Jerries were strewn all over the top of the hill and some of the boys went thru their pockets. One officer (not in my company, as we haven't gotten that low yet) too \$500 in Italian money off a dead parachutist. I have been eager to find a pair of German binoculars and also to get one of their P38 revolvers. However, since I won't bother any of the bodies, it looks as tho I won't get any of the former. As for the latter, I got one yesterday from a soldier that we were sending back to the clearing station with impetigo. He had taken one off a dead Jerry but knew he'd have to give it up at the hospital so he gave it to me. He said he'd get himself another one when he went back up, and I don't doubt it.

Yesterday, while I was back looking for this spot and the rest of the boys were still in the small town ahead of us, 12 Jerries came up the road, hands on their heads as token of surrender, with no soldier accompanying them. It looked like they would have to surrender to our medics when an infantry boy came along and pulled out his revolver and took charge of the. For a moment, it looked like our quota of one captive would become a total of 13.

Well, dear, I've got to catch the mail clerk. I could write the rest of the day. Don't worry about me--I'm rear echelon again for the time being.

Walt.