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Hello folks:

22 September 1944 12:30 PM

It has been quite some time since I have gone to the trouble of writing a family letter because I felt that you all got to read the letters I send home via Soph. However, things have been interesting enough for the past day or so, especially to-day, to warrant writing a family letter.

At the present time we are located on the top of a hill (about 3000 feet high) which is enshrouded by clouds most of the time so that we seem to be in a constant fog. This has gone on for two days, and is just now clearing up so that the sun shines in our area. Accompanying the clouds we have had a gale for two days, which to-day has subsided. This was so bad that we had to send back for our winter underwear in order to keep the cold from penetrating to our marrow. In fact, it actually snowed on a slightly higher mountain to the front of us. Three days ago, when we first came up here, I came along in order to pick a site for the company to move to, and went forward to a small town only a mile or so in front of our present location, only to learn that this town had been captured a few hours before I came there, and that the troops were now fighting the Jerries for the next town only 400 yards or so down the road. I decided that that was no place to put up the company, and started back up the road to look for a place a bit to the rear. Shortly after I left the town Jerry threw in about a dozen shells. Believe me I was glad to be away from there. I selected the spot in which I am now located solely because it was the only possible place in which to set up my company. Actually it is the worst spot that we have set up our station in either in maneuvers or in combat, and with the cold, damp wind, accompanied by rain squalls, you can picture how miserable it has been here on our mountain top. This mountain is, or rather was, since I don't believe it exists any longer, the Gothic Line. The entire mountain side is littered with Jerry dead. In fact, one still lies only 25 yards behind the tent in which I am writing this. None of us pay any attention to it and certainly we aren't going to bother burying any of the bodies since we hope that we will move out of here before the stench becomes troublesome.

Since areas were so difficult to find forward of us, and the sheer mountainside to our rear precluded any possibility of units with many vehicles finding a place to set up, we have had at least a half dozen other units move right in with us, ranging from a division headquarters down to an engineer company. This resulted in the road leading into our area being totally chewed up so that we finally had to have our ambulances by-pass our station and take their patients directly back to the clearing company rather than risk the possibility of getting stuck in the mud or possibly overturning into one of the numerous shell holes around here.

When one looks around this area one can see why it was so difficult for us to break thru the Gothic line, and yet how we were able to do so. All up the mountainside the Germans had dug deep dugouts into which they would retire when the shelling got heavy, and come out when the shelling subsided. They had large numbers of pill boxes which were protected in front by tremendous masses of rock, so that shells bouncing against the rocks merely caromed off without damaging the pill boxes. However, we simply had too much and too many for them. Our artillery shelled almost continuously for three days, and our planes bombed and strafed regularly during this time, until we were finally able to move forward and take the hills ahead of us. In the last area in which we were located, only 400 yards behind the aid station, we were able to watch all this going on, as the we were sitting in an orchestra pit and looking up at the stage. In fact, we felt that near to the action. We could see our infantry try to advance, only to be pinned down by machine gun fire from one of the plainly-visible pill boxes. Then they would stop and the artillery would shell some more before they would try again. Surprisingly enough, through all of this tough fighting casualties have been amazingly light, and when we sit up at the top of this hill and look down to where we were located before, it seems impossible to believe that such apparently impregnable positions could be taken with so few casualties. It's like the Bill Mauldin cartoon showing GI Joe standing on top of the mountain with his over-tired expression, this time with an added look of wonderment, saying, "Here they was and there we was..." incidentally, Bill Mauldin's cartoons are gems, and take it from an infantryman - They're true to life.

You'd have to see these mountains to understand how we finally broke thru. All these mountains are covered with pine trees, or I should say WRE, because most of these have been cut down by the whizzing pieces of shrapnel which our artillery threw up here. You may believe me or not, but I have traveled several miles through these mountains and all up through the area near the crest of the mountains every single tree has either been shorn off by shrapnel or has two or three deep gashes in its trunk caused by shell fragments. It seems impossible that anything could have lived thru such intense shelling, and in fact, Jerry paid plenty for even

trying to hold this line. Since we moved up into our present area so quickly after it had been captured by our troops, the scavengers in the company, and I include myself in this category, had a field day picking up stuff which the Jerries had left both on the ground and in their dugouts in their haste to get away without being captured. I was able to pick up a number of things which I have already sent on their way to the states, as have most of the men in my company.

Since our infantry is going straight across country, taking mountain after mountain, our problem of evacuation of patients is practically insoluble. Nor roads go up thru these mountains, and so we are unable to follow the troops with our ambulances. Of course we send our litter bearers along with the aid stations and when any casualties occur, the aid stations treat them and then leave the patients behind with our litter bearers and the aid station proceeds forward with the troops. It is then up to our litter bearers to get the patients back. If they are lucky they may find a unit that has taken some Jerry prisoners and then they can make the Jerries do most of the carrying. However, this is the exception rather than the rule. It is impossible to carry litter cases on mules, so that is out. As a result, there is only one thing to do, and that is to carry the patients back as best they can. The boys are getting pretty smart, by now, and enlist the aid of units thru which they have to pick their way on their way back to our advance ambulance loading post, far in front of our company. The day before yesterday, one of our battalions fought its way far ahead of the regiments on its left and right. As a result it stuck out like a sore thumb. The only available road, at the time, was one which went thru the sector of one of the other regiments, and since this was still unsecured, we were unable to get our ambulances very far forward. This, of necessity, resulted in a long litter haul for our men. They enlisted the aid of some men from our battalion. There were five patients to be carried back, and only five of my litter bearers to do it, the rest of them having previously carried patients back to the ambulance loading place and returned to the company because the aid stations were still moving forward and it is a practical impossibility to find them when they are on the move. Since it takes four litter bearers to carry one patient for any distance more than a few hundred yards, they got 19 men from one of our battalions to help them carry these patients back. When they had worn out this group of men they got another group from the next unit back. This they continued as they went back, exchanging fresh men for the worn out men from each succeeding unit. It took them 22 hours to get those patients back to the ambulance, 22 hours and 100 men. It makes us feel good that we are able to get any of the men back under the present almost impossible conditions. We also appreciate the cooperation we are getting from the fighting units up front. We never have to argue to get men to carry back the wounded. It isn't that they want to get back out of the range of fire, either, because they don't get that far back. It's merely the feeling that they want to help a wounded buddy. They appreciate the difficulties entailed in our problem of evacuation under the present conditions, and also, at least after they have carried a litter until they were worn out, appreciate the physical labor required. In fact, we have yet to find an infantryman who would be willing to change places with our litter bearers. They all say that they would rather carry food and ammunition over these mountains than have to carry patients. And we feel sorry for them when we see them loaded down with cases of food and ammunition plodding their way up and down the mountain.

Because of the tremendous length of the litter haul, I have felt the compulsion of moving my company as far forward as possible. However, everything hinges on the capture of a town which has a road leading out of it, parallel to the front lines right into our sector. Once that town is captured and the Jerries pushed far enough back so that they can no longer shell the road leading into the town and off into our sector, we will be able to move into the town and send our ambulances down the lateral road to pick up the patients. This would solve our entire problem. Knowing this, and having the report that the town had fallen during the night, I decided to go forward and pick out a spot in the town in which to set up the station. John, in his jeep, preceded me since he had been over the road before almost up to the town, and I followed in another jeep. As we went forward we looked for possible sites to set up a station in case we should be unable to get into the town, but every available site was occupied. Finally we passed over the crest of the next group of mountains in front of us and we noticed that here units were not so profuse. On we went, passing our reconnaissance troops who were parked along the roadside, passing a company of infantrymen wading along the road in two columns, and finally passing alongside some tanks parked on the hillside. Now, when you pass by tanks in which the men are not sitting on top, or are not lying on the ground on blankets, then you

you know that things are happening in the vicinity. However, everything was quiet and we were getting quite close to the town in which we were interested. We were just going around a bend from which the town lay before us in full view when some infantrymen in a jeep waved to us to stop. Now when you're that far forward, you pay attention to anything anyone has to say, so we stopped. The infantry officer told us that Jerry was shelling just down the road, and as he told us that we heard a shell sing just over our heads and strike into the hillside above us. Needless to say, we didn't stand around and talk, but jumped out of our jeeps and laid down against a stone wall, which, very, very, very fortunately happened to be handy. Above us was a hill side, next to us the road, and just on the other side of the road a ravine about 10 feet deep. Well, apparently Jerry felt that three jeeps and 10 men was an object worth shooting at and he proceeded to throw in the shells. I thought he'd never quit. There we lay, trying to make ourselves as thin as noodles, pressing against the ground and against the wall at the same time. First Jerry would drop one on the top of the hill, just 20 feet above our heads, then he'd drop them over in the gully, just a few feet below us, all of them hitting in our immediate vicinity. I'm afraid that I was too excited to count how many he dropped in, but I know it was between 30 and 40 shells. Since things were pretty crowded where we were, each of us was lying on the feet of the man in front of him, altho none of us noticed the weight of the others until after everything was over. The shells that hit above us didn't worry us, since they burst with an upward deflection and couldn't possibly hit us. However those that hit in the gully just to our right worried us plenty since we could hear the shell fragments singing thru the air after each shell burst. However, apparently the bank was just high enough to stop anything from coming as low as we were and all of these fragments flew harmlessly over our heads. Once the shells stopped dropping in we wasted no time in getting out of there. Such a cloud of dust you never saw with speeding jeeps everywhere. Apparently they had caught some other jeeps up the road a bit in front of us and they came speeding past us before we ever decided to get off the nice, lovely, wonderful, safe ground. Need I say that the direction which we took was back where we came from rather than where we had intended going? I decided that if that road was too hot for me, it was too hot for my ambulances to be traveling over.

I picked out a small room in the same building that Co. A, has part of its station in so that we can treat casualties from our combat team before sending them back to the dressing, but that still doesn't solve the tremendous problem of the long litter haul. Since there is nothing we can do about it for the time being, we will probably have to let another day go by before we try it again.

While I have been in the process of writing this letter, we have been visited by a news correspondent and two photographers. They originally came in to eat chow with us. The news correspondent happened to be next to one of the men who had come in for the long litter haul, and the latter, thinking that he was talking to an infantryman mentioned the fact that they had had a bitch of a litter haul taking all of 22 hours. The news correspondent ~~pricked~~ pricked up his ear and asked the boy to tell him the story. When he learned the whole story he decided that it was a story that would make interesting reading and proceeded to write down the gist of it and take the men's names. They then took pictures of the men. The news correspondent, Jack Scott, writes both for Yank and also for The NY Times Magazine Section. He says that the story will appear in Yank in the next edition or possibly the one after that at the latest. Keep a watch for the picture and story. In addition, the Life photographer, Ed Lemming, took pictures of the boys as well as a number of scenes of the dead and the devastation wrought around here by the fight for this hill. I asked him whether any unit had been given credit for breaking the Gothic line and he told me that our regiment was being given full credit for it, altho of course the unit designation will be held secret until it can give the enemy no information which might help him. Companies I and K are the ones which are receiving the greatest amount of credit, and Capt. A. Little of Co I is probably in for some major award. Capt. Little is as small as his name connotes. He would never strike you as a hero, being a bald headed little runt of 30 to 35, with a sickly complexion, a very quiet manner of speaking, a fellow that you would picture behind a desk rather than in the front lines leading a bunch of fighting GIs. I believe he was a lawyer in civilian life. I first became acquainted with him when we were preparing to come overseas with our combat team. At that time he was in the headquarters section doing the book work the his appearance suggested he should be doing. On the way across he was the sickest man on the boat, and with his pasty complexion whenever I see him I always see him as he was on the boat.