

22 Feb 1945, Thursday

Hello gang!

It's been quite some time since I have written all of you at the same time, but at that it isn't as long as some of you have written me. I would have written before now but no little has been occurring of any importance that I didn't think it worth mentioning, and then I have the added alibi that our typewriter was in for repairs for a couple of weeks.

At the present time we are located in a small Italian village off the main highway in our sector, supposedly in combat but located so far back that it would be a ~~mere~~ shell indeed that would find its way all the way back here. The village consists of nine or ten houses, built on the side of a rather steep hill, so that the backs of the houses have one more floor than does the front. This extra floor is usually a barn, and as a result we have some very strong odors floating around. All the houses that I have noticed to have a date of construction on are dated before 1800. They are the usual brick or rather stone houses in which stones are piled flatly, one on top another, being cemented with some adhesive material not unlike the cement we have in the states. Of course none of the houses have running water or inside toilets. The water is carried to the houses from neighboring springs, of which there are two in the village. As for toilets, there is the ubiquitous chamber pot for ordinary needs, and a few village toilets for "extraordinary" needs. The latter are small stone cabins, not unlike the old American outhouses, except that they are contiguous with the end buildings and have no seat in them. The straddle method seems to be the method of choice over here in Italy. Since there is no running water in these places, when the toilet becomes filled it is emptied by one of the inhabitants, its contents being used for fertilizer. Such a procedure of cleaning out the toilet leaves the entire village with a strong odor that remains for days. It took just one such cleaning to teach us that we would do better building our own latrines than filling up the village in ordinary times, has been swelled to 60 by refugees from some of the larger cities north of us. Some of these refugees are interesting people, several being extremely active participants in every sense of the word, others being of fascist inclinations, but not actively so, at least not with our knowledge.

Our boys are spread out all through the village, living in one room in this house, one in that, etc. In fact, every house in the community has at least one room devoted to our men. The people seem to be quite pleased with having us, and despite the fact that we have been here more than a month, we haven't run into any real trouble with them. There have been a couple of "incidents" which I will mention later in the letter. The room in which the officers live, is in one of the nicer houses of the village. It is a large back room on the ground floor and must be reached by walking through the kitchen of the owners. Actually I guess that room shouldn't be called the kitchen, but rather a kitchen-dining room-living room combination, for it is the place that the family spends all of its time except when they are in bed. As is customary in practically all these Italian homes, all the cooking is done over the fireplace, a large open affair in which small branches are used for fuel. This is the only room in the house that is heated in any manner, other than carrying live coals from the fire in small containers into any other rooms. This accounts for the life of the family being centered in this room. In the evening after supper the entire family pulls up chairs facing the fire and sit there and talk, while neighbors come in to visit it with them. The women always work while they sit there, sewing, unraveling woolen socks in order to knit new ones, knitting, crocheting, etc. After being here for more than a month, I have yet to see the mistress of the house idle at any time. When I hear of some of the women back in the states complaining of how hard they work, all I have to do is think of practically any Italian house I have lived in and picture the difficulties under which the women here have to work, and then realize how lucky that American woman is that she really doesn't know what hard work is.

The hygiene of this place leaves a great deal to be desired. All of the kitchens are so fixed so that they have a sink, the drainage of which goes right out of the window onto the ground outside. You can imagine what the place would look like after generations of this type of thing occurring. When we first moved here there was considerable snow on the ground

so that we had no idea how dirty the place actually was, but as the snow gradually melted it became necessary for me to send the men out to clean up the grounds. In this way the excuse that you didn't dirty the ground is no alibi, since you are told that you are the ones who have to live in the place, so you might as well clean it up before you are ordered to do so. As a result I have had the entire company out every morning, cleaning up the whole village so that we have now gotten it to a point of cleanliness which, altho not remarkable for the U.S., is more clean than any of the natives can remember it being. Believe me it was quite a nasty job, for a while, for there were all imaginable types of dirt on the ground, but now it is no problem at all and the men can clean up in just a few minutes.

We have been very fortunate to have been able to find an unoccupied village when we came to this place, since buildings were at a premium, and many units were living in tents. Apparently the reason no soldiers had grabbed off this village was because it was located away from the main road and had to be reached by a most medieval type of highway. However, we came right on down to the village and then proceeded to make repairs on the road, which soon received the name of "B ball highway". As the weather improved and the snow melted our highway became a stream of mud, and for a while it looked like we might be stranded here for the winter, but a couple of days of intensive work by the boys in draining the road, and a considerable number of loads of gravel resulted in a road which at least can be gotten up. However, just to make sure, I have the boys go out every few days and do some additional work on the road both to keep it in condition and also to give them a bit of exercise.

Our set up has been unique in that most of our company has not been working at all despite the fact that we are supposed to be in combat. Our litter bearers do go forward when their battalion is in certain positions in the front line, but at no time have we had more than 16 men up forward at one time. Naturally that makes us all a bit happy, because it is no big deal to have 16 men up there. The medical set up forward is that the aid station is split into a forward and rear station. The rear station is relatively safe, but that forward station is really something. First of all, it is under direct observation of the enemy, so that it is impossible to go up to it or leave it during the day time. As a result, my casualties must be relieved at night. You simply can't walk out in front of the building at all during the day, for as soon as you do a Jerry machine gun opens up on you. One day a shell landed a couple of feet in front of just a few yards in front of the aid station, and despite this closeness of the wounded it was impossible to go out and get or treat the wounded men until the infantry boys threw out a few smoke shells to hide the area, and then the wounded men were brought in and treated. The Jerries know that the buildings up there are occupied, and I have often wondered why they don't shell them until they destroy them. They do throw shells at the buildings and during the period that my last group of men were up there they hit the buildings (3 of them are contiguous forming one long building) about 15 different times. Now over 100 men were hurt at any of these times. One time while my men were out carrying a patient to the rear, the Jerries got a direct hit on their building, and their entire ceiling came in on them, but there was no one present in the room to be hurt. Believe me I was pretty glad to see those men come back without any of them being hurt. They didn't get any from there any too soon, because the following day a shell did cause some casualties in the same group of three buildings. They have a new doc up with this battalion aid station that was located in the building. He has been overseas for longer than we have, but has not worked with my forward unit until the present time. Needless to say he is scared, and with good cause. He proceeded to dig into the ground right inside the building, right to the disgust of everyone else, because of the substantiality of the walls in his portion of the building. However, I guess one can't protect himself too much up there, altho I doubt the necessity of going to that extreme.

I have a new medical officer in my company - Capt. Sawicki. He and I first met at Camp Grant when we both entered the army on the same day and in the same class of docs. We both received the orders to go to Shelly on the same day, and rode to Chicago together from there at the time I was heading for Shelly. He was unfortunately assigned to a battalion

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aid station. He has been with it ever since and believe me has had some really harrowing experiences. He is the recipient of a bronze star, purple heart, and has been recommended for a legion of merit award. His purple heart resulted from a shell bursting close to him knocking him unconscious without doing any other damage to him. Of course, he had to be sent back to be checked over, and that is why he received the purple heart. Believe me that story of how he got the purple heart is enough to make any man's hair stand on end. It was his job to follow up the infantry as it went ahead, and to set up a station whenever necessary to take care of any of the wounded. A favorite trick of the Jerry snipers was to allow the infantry to pass by and then to take pot shots at the medics as they brought up the rear, several hundred yards behind the infantry. That is what happened that day. They were some 400 yards behind the rear elements of the infantry companies when this Jerry sniper opened fire on them. They all dropped to the ground, and then would try to go forward every 5 minutes or so, hoping that the sniper had moved away in the meantime. Well, this sniper was as persistent as they were, and simply wouldn't let them move forward, so they decided to go back up the hillside and go by a different route. This meant that the last man went first and the first man, who had been Garwacki, was the last to go up the hillside. In the meantime the Jerries apparently caught sight of the men who were going back up the hill and opened fire on them. All of these men were loaded up with medical supplies, since in this mountain fighting you have to carry your supplies with you, so that it was all they could do to climb up to the top of the hill. By that time the Jerries had the range on them, and started dropping in the shells. I guess the good angel looks after the medics because, despite the fact that they were in a grove of trees just below the top of the mountain away from the enemy, most of the shells whistled over them and lit in the valley below them. However some of them burst in the trees, and it was one of these that knocked Garwacki unconscious. You civilians and rear echelon folks may not know that most shells explode just as soon as they touch something, be that something, the ground or merely a twig of a tree. As a result being near a group of trees at the time of a shelling is just about the worst place that a man can be, because the bursting of shells resulting from contact with the upper branches of a tree, is just about the right height to do a maximum of damage. It was only by a miracle that some or all of those medics weren't killed. As it was, Garwacki says that he was lying right at the base of a tree and when he came to he found shrapnel imbedded all through the trunk of that tree. Gar was beginning to break down from the nervous strain, and requested a transfer. He was refused in this because his battalion commander liked the work he was doing and didn't want to let him go. However, we got a few new medical officers in the ~~XXXX~~ division, and I requested that Gar be transferred to me, since I was one medical officer short. Goodness knows how the thing worked, for I'm sure I didn't expect my request to bear any weight, but at any rate the next thing I knew was that Gar was a member of my command. Needless to say he is a most appreciative and thankful fellow. Having a fellow like him around makes me appreciate the relative safety of my job. If only there was some medicine to do I wouldn't complain about my set up at all, but I don't do any medical work from month's end to month's end. My only contact with good medicine is a weekly medical meeting which I attend at one of the evacuation hospitals not too distant. They really go to a great deal of trouble to prepare their cases for presentation, and then have a speaker after the case presentations. All in all it is quite stimulating and well worth the trip over rough roads to get to. If only we could practice some medicine in order to apply some of the things which we have learned both past and present, I might feel that my time in the army wasn't entirely wasted. As it is, I'm afraid that I am slowly forgetting my medicine that I did know, remembering only major points but forgetting all the little things which go into making a differential diagnosis. Oh well, if I come out of this thing OK I'll pick those up again.

My days at present are spent doing very little of anything. With most of the company not functioning, we are back to holding classes, and since I don't give any of these I spend much of my time reading, or just checking around the area to make sure that everything is going on OK. Thank goodness there is plenty of reading material around, both good and bad, or else time would really hang heavily on my hands.

I had planned to tell you of a couple of experiences we have had with the villagers at I've come to the end of the three pages I had intended to write. Good luck, Wal

24th - January 1950