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MY WAR: 1944-1945

by Max S. Lale

The upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the “terrible winter” of 1944-1945 in Europe has resurrected a host of memories. The proximate reason for this was a decision to transcribe 213 letters I had written to my late wife, Georgiana Aspley Lale, spanning my arrival on the continent in September 1944 and my departure through the port of Marseilles fourteen months later. In between, I had seen something of England, France, Belgium, and Germany and had fought in the Battle of the Bulge, at the crossing of the Roer River, at the Remagen Bridge, at the Ruhr Pocket, and in the Bavarian Pursuit.

These letters report to my wife on the climactic months of a military career which began in the ROTC unit at the University of Oklahoma in 1934. Starting with horse-drawn French 75mm guns left over from World War I, it ended as I worked for Thiokol, a firm located near Marshall, which produced missile motors for the Army’s Sergeant and Pershing weapons systems, a near-incredible leap in weaponry for one lifetime. Call it ego, nostalgia, or consciousness of mortality, but I since have had the typed transcripts bound for family members.

I set myself the task of transcribing the letters after a battlefield tour in 1992 with several others who had served together as second lieutenants in 1940, one of whom had similar letters he had written. Fortunately, Georgiana had saved my own letters, some of which had become brittle and on which the ink was fading—a difficulty which was complicated by cataract surgery as I worked—but survive they had.

Armed with a reserve commission in the field artillery, I had volunteered in 1940, seventeen months before Pearl Harbor, for a one-year tour of active duty. The monthly pay of \$125 was attractive, though the quarters allowance of \$40 did not cover the expense of an apartment. I was assigned to the 12th Field Artillery, the general support regiment of the Second Division at Fort Sam Houston.

The 12th was a proud regiment, entitled to wear the French *fouurragere*,

as were all the division's units, for World War I service. Maxwell Taylor, later Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who commanded the 12th for a year, wrote of it that it "was a splendid representative of the Old Army at its best, manned by professional soldiers who had spent much of their service in it. There were five batteries, and each had a first sergeant with at least ten years in that grade."¹

This was at a time when many of the World War II leaders were fighting "the hump," the infamous lock-step promotion system dating from the end of World War I. When I reported, Dwight Eisenhower was a lieutenant colonel quartered on Staff Post, just around the parade ground from the 12th's headquarters. Walter Krueger and William H. Simpson, both destined to become field army commanders in combat, commanded the division while I was a member. J.C.H. Lee, also a division commander, became Communications Zone commander in Europe during World War II. Maxwell Taylor was a captain in the files when he commanded the 12th, and I was a first lieutenant on his staff as S-2, intelligence.

As an officer in Battery C of the 12th I served with several other lieutenants who achieved rank and distinction during and after World War II. Several of them appear in the letters. Among them was Herron N. Maples of Bonham, now living quietly in retirement in San Antonio, whose final duty assignment was as inspector general and auditor general of the Army, in the grade of lieutenant general.

My next stop was the battery officers course at the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, where I had attended ROTC summer camp in 1937. Our graduation party was held at the Polo Club, which later burned, the evening of Saturday, December 6. Coincidentally, the Second Division Artillery was at Sill serving temporarily as school troops for the expanding numbers of battery officers and officer candidates at the school.

Because of the congestion of students using the firing ranges during the week, the only opportunity for the 12th's officers to hold service practice on a new range was on weekends. Such a practice was scheduled for Sunday, December 7. As a brand new graduate, I was assigned to conduct the practice on the west range that morning. Suffering the consequences of the party the night before, I was about my task when a cloud of dust approached the observation point from the south. It was the division artillery commander come to announce the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Shortly I was assigned as a gunnery instructor at the school. It was a pleasant, if arduous assignment, lasting a year. Early in 1943, with new battalions proliferating in the building army, I was ordered as S-3 (plans and training officer) to a new battalion, the 261st, to be organized on the post at Fort Sill. The 261st was organized as one of several others assigned to the new 401st Field Artillery Group, the first such organization in the Army.

We trained at Camp Swift, at Bastrop near Austin, where we received our draftee fillers, in our case from the Mormon areas of the northwest. They and our officer and NCO cadre hardly spoke the same language, being Virginians, and consequently had considerable trouble understanding each other, as did the mess sergeants who served coffee, tea, and colas in their mess halls. It was at Camp Swift that we watched heavily-guarded train loads of German prisoners descend to the cage from North Africa, still in desert combat dress.

Early in the fall, the group and its attached battalions were ordered to Fort Sill as school troops—providing the weapons and crews for service practice, conducting tactical demonstrations and participating in the so-called fire power demonstrations for all students. Demonstrating the massing of fires, the latter was a technique which the group headquarters employed with marked success in many TOT (time on target) missions against German formations.

In the spring of 1944 I was ordered to attend the advanced course at the school. It was during this course, shortly before graduation, that I was transferred from the 261st battalion to the 401st group as executive officer, a slot in the tables which called for a lieutenant colonel. I had hardly finished the course when the group and its six battalions were moved to Camp Polk, outside Leesville, Louisiana. In the officer's latrine only the second or third day after we arrived I learned of the D-Day landings in Normandy. Three months later, the group and three of its battalions were ordered to Europe, three battalions to the Pacific. Because his battalion was bound for the latter, one of the commanders made me the gift of a down sleeping bag he had bought. I put it to good use in the terrible winter of 1944-1945.

Our port of embarkation was New York through Camp Shanks. We were delayed in sailing for three weeks while the *Queen Elizabeth* under went some refitting. The delay allowed for visits in the city, during which this country boy could see his home state celebrated in the great musical

“Oklahoma!” with the original cast. Once on the Atlantic, the *Queen's* crew delighted in the quip that if we were attacked by submarines, the sensible thing to do was to run a bathtub of water, because it was better to drown in warm water than in the cold Atlantic.

When we reached the coastal waters of Ireland, we were joined by British corvets, accompanied by dolphins, which escorted us to an anchorage down firth from Glasgow, opposite Greenoch, Scotland. Carrying our personal gear, including monstrously heavy gas-proof uniforms, we were lightered directly to the railway station at Greenoch, the first of 13,500 troops off the ship. Within hours we were on our way overnight to Southampton. Laden with our gear, we marched immediately to the harbor area and boarded a small vessel previously in the mail service to South Africa. The next morning we went over the side on scramble nets and into a landing craft captained by a young ensign. He made three attempts before he could position his awkward vessel to lower the ramp onto the sands of Omaha Beach, still protected by tethered blimps and littered with debris from the landings.

It was from an apple orchard bivouac at Valognes, near Cherbourg, that I wrote the first of the 213 letters. It was there, too, where I was promoted to lieutenant colonel. I had to borrow a pair of silver leaves until Georgiana could get me a pair from the States.

There followed two months of rain, mud, cold, and finally sleet before we could round up all the equipment we had been required to leave aboard our transport. Finally, everything in hand, we were committed east of Aachen on the boundary between the British and our own Ninth Army, the first of three American armies with which we worked during our combat. This was during the tumultuous days following the German breakthrough the middle of December, the so-called Battle of the Bulge.

Shortly we found ourselves in Belgium, on the north shoulder of the bulge and serving in First Army, firing in support of the 30th Infantry Division and serving as a fire direction center for the XVIII Airborne Corps Artillery, still in England. When the bulge eventually was collapsed, we were off to the Roer River to support a crossing and then chasing Germans toward Cologne, on the Rhine River. The surprise capture of the Remagen Bridge led us upstream to positions from which we managed a dozen battalions, ranging from 3-inch AA guns to a battalion of 240mm giants. We crossed the river on one of the pontoon bridges thrown across

before the railroad bridge collapsed. I had seen it just ten minutes before it fell in the water.

Chasing Germans again, we were in on the kill at the Ruhr Pocket, where 400,000 German troops surrendered. From there we joined the Third Army in Bavaria, commanded by George Patton, whose (personal) mission—beyond saving the Lipanzer horses in Austria—was to prevent a retreat to the much-discussed redoubt in the Alps. The end of hostilities found us well below Munich, within striking distance of Czechoslovakia.

During 1,200 map miles travelled and 141 days of continuous combat, the battalions under 401st Field Artillery Group's control had fired 75,214 rounds of ammunition.

In reading and transcribing my letters for the first time almost half a century after they were written, I was struck by perceptions which today I hardly would credit to a 28-year-old. The rapid maturing of this person, as evidenced by the changes reflected in the letters, amazes me still. It is a stretch of memory to realize I had shared the responsibilities for as much fire power as we employed in pursuit of General Eisenhower's mission to liberate the continent of Europe.

Too, I was struck by the frequency with which I bumped into and was visited by friends, both military and civilian. One was a professor at the university (a civilian, perhaps on the OSS payroll) with whom I had dinner once at the "Willow Run" mess in London's Grosvenor House.² Perhaps the most unlikely reunion occurred alongside a muddy road in Germany on a wet and cold day as I waited for traffic to thin. A voice called out to me by name from a passing command car. It was Albert Schutz, with whom I had served in the 12th FA in 1940 and 1941 but had not seen since.³

It all sounds like so long ago but yet so near.

With no intention to sound chauvinistic, in the words of a soldier from the last century, I am glad I had "a finger in that pie."⁴

The following are excerpts from a few of the letters written a half-century ago.

Letter No. 1

France

3 October 1944

The trip over was fine and most uneventful. Wilson and I had one of the

finest cabins on the ship (we shared it with four other majors) and neither of us was sick. Ray Broadfoot was aboard, coming over for his second trip...A couple of my students were also aboard, as well as people from practically all the allied armies, so it was quite interesting. There were many evidences of the war already, and it is quite apparent that the French people are suffering again, as they have every so often for many centuries.

Letter No. 2

France
4 October

I have practically nothing left in my luggage—I'm wearing most of the stuff I brought along in my val-pack. I only wish now I had more of it, but of course at the time I was lugging it around I wondered why I had brought so much.

Letter No. 8

France
12 October 1944

We got a line yesterday on my bedding roll...I should be in such a place that I can put my hands on it tomorrow...guess if I am going to fondle the solid rubber arctics and the two pairs of shoes and the double, mummy, eiderdown, 100%-wool-and-a-yard-wide sleeping bag contained therein.

Letter No. 9

France
14 October 1944

Somebody already had beaten me to my slicker and suit of pajamas I had put in the bedding roll, but the sleeping bag and arctics were still there they made a good deal as far as I am concerned, for those were the two items I wanted most.

Letter No. 39

France
1 December 1944

I am now in the throes of investigating another set of charges for court-martial, and you guessed it: I'll probably have to work all day Sunday on it...I propose to buy myself a going-and-coming beaver hat with a bull dog pipe for use after the war—all I'll have to do to qualify myself completely for a detective

job is re-read all the stories about Sherlock and the Baker Street irregulars.

Letter No. 40

France

3 December 1944

The investigation I am working requires signed statements from about 10 Frenchmen in this vicinity. The easiest way, apparently, was to arrange to see them all at one central place, at the same time, so... I made arrangements with local gendarmes Friday afternoon to assemble all these people at the mayor's house at 1300 Saturday afternoon...I left camp at 1300, with two stenographers, two typewriters and Gendreau⁵ for use as an interpreter. Sure enough, when we arrived at the mayor's house, the one room was lined with Frenchmen of all ages, sexes and types, and all dressed in their Sunday best. And believe it or not, I was the representative of the liberating army come to put the wheels of progress in motion. I think they were all impressed with the battery of typewriters and the interpreter, even the mayor, who showed up in a celluloid collar and arbitrated this decision and that, cracking a joke once in a while when Gendreau would translate into French to the polite delight of the assembled citizenry. As I finished with each one I excused him, and we went through the formality of shaking hands all around, including all the other Frenchmen, the two soldiers and myself, as well as the chaplain, who is almost one of them, although his family has been in Canada for over 300 years...This young fellow told us he had spent two years in the French army as an infantry private and two more as a hostage prisoner in Germany, although he was back to civilian life in unoccupied country, following the armistice, when he was taken. When they took him to Germany, he told them he was a taxi driver in Paris, and the mayor, he of the celluloid collar—fixed him up with forged ration papers and whatnot, so he could elude the Germans here. The fellow told us with his own eyes great numbers of Russian men, women and children who had been evacuated to Germany from their homes in Russia, who were placed in big enclosures and left to starve to death after they had eaten all the grass available. Very gruesome.

Letter No. 46

Belgium

15 December 1944

We parked our trucks in the town square, between the church and the war memorial with the town well, and were immediately *swarmed* by children of both sexes and all ages, before we could do more than catch our breath, the

children had taken all the soldiers to their homes for the night. There still were children left after all the soldiers had been taken care of, begging us to stay the night at their homes...they have been doing the same thing every night for three months. It seems that one night a column spent the night in their town. The soldiers were tired and cold (and although they didn't say so, I'm sure it must have been raining), the result being that the townspeople decided not to let that happen again. They organized a committee, with the town druggist as the chairman, and they have been taking soldiers in ever since. And the most perfect part of it all: They refused to consider it as billeting. The druggist said "of course not. We don't want money. We want only to make you as comfortable as possible."

Letter No. 50

Germany

Christmas Eve 1944

The "peace on earth, good will toward man" which the season brings to mind is not an inalienable right, I have come to learn—rather it is a thing to be bought and held by the effort of all of us, acting to prevent its theft by the ghouls who would steal it from us... This morning we were visited by a major-general making the rounds of his units and wishing all a Merry Christmas, strengthening his wishes by leaving us two bottles of captured German cognac as a Christmas gift.

Letter No. 54

Belgium

1 January 1945

We were ordered to move on slightly more than two hours' notice. The colonel and his party immediately pulled out, leaving me to follow with the remainder of the headquarters over strange roads, in the midst of a driving snow storm and with everybody, including myself, thinking how nice it would be to be in bed. We drove all night, arriving in the new area the middle of the morning⁷...We had been here only a couple of hours, but the colonel was holding a meeting nevertheless, when I looked up and saw Ray Millican standing in the open door—he had come over to see me and the colonel⁸...He hasn't changed a bit—still looks like the pink-cheeked youngster he did four years ago...Odd, too, because his outfit landed on D plus six, which means he has seen a lot of fighting.

Letter No. 57

Belgium

6 January 1945

We still have snow on the ground, and more of it drops in on us almost every day—I can't get over how pretty the country is around here. It's a bit of a novelty to see snow on the ground which looks like it is a permanent fixture, instead of an intrusion, as it always looks in Oklahoma.

Letter No. 61

Belgium

15 January 1945

Obviously I can't tell you the whole story, but I think I can assure you that a certain percentage of the Krauts won't fight another war, thanks to us and our battalions. The hunting is pretty good, and I'll be able to tell you when I get home about the big battle in the West and what we did to help win it.⁹

Letter No. 63

Belgium

20 January 1945

After rolling into the sleeping bag at 2200 last night, I got up at 15 minutes after midnight to go back to work, and here it is 0510, of a cold winter morning in Belgium. Even with only a little more than two hours sleep, I don't feel too groggy...The night has been pretty busy with plans for engaging Jerry to hustle back to Germany, which is always a pleasant occupation if you have to miss the sleep anyway.

Letter No. 73

Germany

9 February 1945

Are you marveling at the international character of my travels these days? As a matter of fact, I think nothing of visiting around from country to country...I think I can tell you now, without offending the censor, about some of the places I have been recently. I took the bath, which I wrote to you about, in *Spa*, a lovely little town in the Belgian hills. Other spots in my itinerary, not necessarily in the order in which I made them, are Francochamps, Malmedy, Waimes, Bulligen and St. Vith, which you may recognize from your intensive study of European geography and the art of modern warfare. Although I can't tell you precisely what we did there, or who we were with there, I think you will realize what the story is.

Letter No. 76

Germany

13 February 1945

I see in some magazine that's floating around that Freeman's third volume

of *Lee's Lieutenants* is off the press. Will you see if you can buy a copy to save for my return to domestic life?

Letter No. 78

Germany

16 February 1945

T J's visit was interesting as it could be, for a number of reasons. You may recall that the old man is inflated with his own importance, but deflates quickly and is impressed no end by "important people." With that in mind. I introduced Tom to the colonel, slipping in the business about his being assistant G-3 of the ___ Corps. Very impressed! Even invited Tom and me and the captain with Tom to put our plates on his private desk come chow time, in order to get all the low-down. I gave Tom the wink, and we proceeded to slip in remarks about Lucas and Taylor and other people the old man knows about. After chow, the old man even told me to take Tom and the captain (a doughboy) to see some of our big guns. Naturally I didn't argue. He says Slim is a Lt Col, which I didn't know.¹⁰

Letter No. 79

Germany

18 February 1945

Visits from T J are becoming quite commonplace—this afternoon I looked up and here he was, with a Captain from his office. They were on their way farther up the front, and stopped to see if I wanted to go along (they apparently thought I might be able to, not knowing the old man like I do) ... It's just like old times: T J talks just as big, and gets a kick out of his own gags. Did I tell you in the last letter that he had seen Max Taylor? T J attended a big meeting as a representative of his CG, and one at which he and a colonel were the only two officers below Major General (quite a meeting, as you can see). Well, Taylor was there, and, to paraphrase Tom's story, bounded across the room and pumped him by the hand, asking "How in the hell are you?" As T J told the story, he was almost thrown out of the meeting, until he could explain that he was the general's personal representative, so his stock rose tremendously—this before Taylor greeted him.

Letter No. 80

Germany

20 February 1945

By the way, I meant to tell you in the last letter about my haircut—oddly enough, one of the old letters I received the day before yesterday asked about

that very thing, and I meant to tell you the whole story. Last Saturday night Isenbarger,¹¹ who had never given a haircut in his life, acceded to my demands in the matter, and agreed to experiment on me...It turned out to be a damn fine haircut, so Kleinsmith,¹² and then the colonel, decided they wanted the same... You may now visualize me as the usual Prussian-style military man, or at least the outside of my head is about the same. Still nothing to compare to Tom Sharpe's, but a convenient length, nonetheless. Haircuts are quite a problem in combat, as the history of mine will show. I got one in Cherbourg, France, early in December; Bill Overmyer¹³ gave me one early in January at Chevroheid, Belgium; I managed to get one in Spa, Belgium, at a civilian shop late in January (the only time I have been out of the combat zone since we went in) and last Saturday night I had the latest.

Letter No. 82

Germany

25 February 1945

Only three more days in February, and the long range prediction for March looks distinctly favorable...Tonight the world is a bit noisy, what with artillery doing a lot of talking, so I really have to stretch my imagination to believe it really is the Sabbath. You have read in the papers about us, no doubt—the war has started again, and it looks like we will be quite busy for a while.¹⁴ I really don't object to that, though, for you don't win wars by sitting on your tail and waiting for them to end...Another nice thing about the war getting under way again is that the old man gets all excited about being a soldier and forgets to heckle the hired help. When we get settled down for a spell, he always begins to make inspections and look up records and the like, so we always look forward to another fight. If we will just keep fighting, I think I'll make it. If this slows, though, I don't know. I'm beginning to get pretty tired, the kind of tiredness a couple of good nights sleep won't cure.

Letter No. 84

Germany

2 March 1945

The war goes on apace these days (as all good wars should) and it is not too hard to believe that there may possibly be an end to it before too long... Today has been as busy as any in a long time, now that the war has become one of movement, and the activity is reflected in the behavior of all of us. We are all sleepy and tired, but happy to be so. I have often read that an army on the move is a happier army than one which sits, and now I can believe it...today has been

a peculiar one, when I stop to think of it. In a little patch of ground alongside a building showing only moderate evidence of the war's passing, I saw a bed of pansy blooms, colorful and delicate and altogether exotic to the landscape. It hardly seems possible I saw them, for the day has been cold and windy, and there have been snow showers off and on all afternoon. A strange world. And then tonight, just at dusk, I stood from a long distance away and watched the plumes of smoke, the flashes of flames, and listened to the long, low rumble that marked the death of one of the oldest cities in Europe.¹⁵

Letter No. 85

Germany

4March 1945

This is a strange world tonight—I am sitting here at the firing chart, warm, pleasantly sleepy and suddenly aware that the day is Sunday, and the basement is as peaceful as if the war were ten thousand miles away. Outside it is wet and cold (I know, for I was out in it all afternoon), and at least half of my sense of well-being derives from knowing I am warm and dry for the time being, no matter what the night is like outside...Life continues to be pretty hectic, with frequent displacements and rapid advances, and we are all losing a lot of sleep. However, none of us is complaining, for it is a pleasurable experience after producing something with your own hands, or finishing a trying task that has been weighing on your mind. The only trouble is that this task seems to have no ending—I'm sure the peace will burst upon us, for all our knowledge that it must come, like the exit to a long tunnel, bright and startling. Then we shall all feel like taking a well-deserved rest.

Letter No. 87

Germany

9March 1945

... we have moved once since I wrote last and are in the process of moving again. As a matter of fact, that is probably the reason I am able to sit down in relative peace and calm to write this—the old man is forward at our new CP, and Benze¹⁶ and I are holding down the old one. We have to split the headquarters every once in a while, which makes it swell for me and my letter-writing...There are so many things in your letters that seem to warrant comment: Bob Lamb being missing in action, George¹⁷ being married this month, Mrs. Dunn tipping her hand and the Colonel's about our assignment! I suddenly realize now what division Bob belonged to, and I know it took quite a beating in the breakthrough...it's a shame so many of them have to pay the price to get

this over.

Letter No. 90

Germany

14 March 1945

Tonight has been pretty nice! The old man had a BnCO meeting at 1800, after which I had a couple of them in my bedroom for a drink of Scotch, by way of relaxation. One of them you know—Nat Gifford, ¹⁸ Killian's CO. I introduced him to you in Cowan's Cafeteria one of the first nights we were in Lawton after the group went there from Swift. The other is a West Pointer, 1937, and a very nice fellow from Maine named Marr. The latter has been very nice to me—brought me a bottle of wine and a bottle of champagne tonight, just to be neighborly.

Letter No. 93

Germany

26 March 1945

...the sad note in the whole thing is a story in Sooner Magazine, which I shall clip and send to you soon (accommodations are none too good right now)—Johnny Kayser ¹⁹ was killed with the 95th Div near Metz several months ago, of course you can't fight without paying the price, but I am always hurt when good people die in this business—we must make the victory stand up to what we are paying. By this time (you have to wait 30 days before you can say anything about it) I can tell you of some other casualties which will interest you: Lt Howard ²⁰ was critically wounded some time ago, in an accident which killed two of our best men—the war gets terribly, terribly cruel when you look it in the eye.

Letter No. 94

Germany

28 March 1945

When I returned to the wars Saturday night after my trip to London, the outfit was outside Linz, on the east bank of the Rhine. I crossed the river on a pontoon bridge just below Remagen, site of the now famous Luddendorf Bridge, and I found the bunch deep in a pine forest. They were all dug in snug as a bug, having been given inspiration by the German artillery earlier in their stay here—as a matter of fact, I found my hole in the ground very comforting on several occasions while we were there, when the rounds started crumping into our area. However, we had no casualties, and everybody was happy. Then

the big pursuit got under way, and we have been trying to catch up with the war ever since....²¹ Last night we spent in the very ornate Nazi Party headquarters of a town of which more later, which the party bigwigs had evacuated so rapidly that the heat, electricity, telephones and water closets (how very British I have become) were still operating. Imagine how we loved sleeping inside, having running water and using German electricity to light our CPI. The Germans had left so recently that a lot of their boys hadn't had time to join the parade, and consequently were left at the post. We rounded up 25 or 30 of them while we were there—harmless creatures who were scared stiff that we would shoot them before they could surrender... This breakthrough and pursuit must be like the Sicily and Northern France rat races—in all honesty, I saw today groups of 10 to 15 German soldiers sitting beside the road, practically begging someone to take them in tow, with two Americans in a jeep riding herd on them. I have seen only one dead German—usually, as in the Roer River fight, when the action gets fast, you see lots of bodies lying around until someone disposes of them... the Germans are *now* all fine people—they smile, look delighted in general, and are only too happy to do anything you wish (there is a stock joke going the rounds that they all have cousins in Milwaukee)... the French soldiers we have liberated say they have seen Russian girls of 13 and 14 shoveling snow off the streets of Coblenz, barefooted. Fine people, these Germans! What fun the Russians will have when they occupy their share. I suppose it isn't good, but you soon develop an unlovely callousness to moving them out of their homes and playing the conqueror—I only hope they learn their lesson this time, and I am read to do my share to teach them... I am afraid this is a most peculiar love letter, honey. The only explanation I can offer is that there is a contagion in the army these days, a taste of victory to come, and it gets into your blood, like a fever.

Letter No. 95

Germany

30 March 1945

We are still rounding up German soldiers, believe it or not, and we are having more fun running a civil government than you could shake a stick at. I think probably the little episode the other night when we shot the one has had a salutary effect, for the Burgomeister has been rounding up guns, ammunition and soldiers for us, in order to avoid being shot, I suppose. They are all scared, and we plan to keep them that way. They are funny people—this morning a woman came in complaining that her child had no milk to drink for several days—I was sorry I didn't know the German to ask her if the French and

Dutch children had milk during the four years their countries were occupied. At any rate, we were unable to do anything for her, even if we had wanted to. None of us have any sympathy for them, for the reason, no doubt, that we all have been taught to accept the consequences of our actions—these people apparently feel they are the victims of something they had no hand in planning, and they seem to feel they are being mistreated.

I may have been a bit over-optimistic the other day in predicting the end of the war, but it still looks good. Our people are still going on and still taking prisoners, and as long as that continues the end is bound to come soon. It can't happen too soon for me, for I am ready to go home and become a city councilman or something ...

Letter No. 96

Germany

2 April 1945

It was a bit like Easter at home: the German children were out as early as curfew would allow, searching for brightly colored eggs as our own youngsters do. And, strange as it may seem, most of the families in the town gave Easter eggs to our soldiers! I haven't decided yet if they are genuinely pleased the Americans have arrived, and the war is over for them, or if they are deceitful enough to try to use such occasion as an attempt to soften the occupation. They are a strange people.

Letter No. 97

Germany

5 April 1945

This CP is something—it even has a bathtub, plus running hot water, and I hope tonight to get a hot bath. Already I have shaved twice at a basin, with a fine mirror in which to admire my homely Countenance as I whittle the whiskers. ²² And a bed to sleep in—my cup runneth over! By the way, I forgot to tell you that we are back at the same old stand, pumping them out at the Germans, so this business of having a comfortable home is even more impressive. A very ultra way to fight a war, no less.

Letter No. 98

Germany

7 April 1945

The war still goes on apace, although we have a lot of trouble finding out just exactly what is going on. However, I am content as long as we continue

to advance and knock Krauts over—eventually it must end, and as long as that happens. It is only when things slow down to a walk that I get restless.

Letter No. 99

Germany
10 April 1945

Spring has really arrived, even if it is a different sort of spring than I am used to. Sunday morning (another early move) I could hardly do more than admire the morning. When I got up and out, there was the sheerest wafer of ice on all the puddles, and the sliver of moon gave a ghostly appearance to the mist in the distant valleys. A heavy frost gave the whole world a downy appearance, a strange sight against the green of the grass on the slopes. But then the sun came out and the day became crystal brilliant, sparking and flashing strange lights and colors. The mountain brooks which tumble down to the valleys seemed to come alive with their glinting as they turned and cascaded along. The air warmed, and the day was suddenly like early spring at home. Even if the Germans are a twisted race, you cannot deny their homeland is beautiful.

Letter No. 101

Germany
16 April 1945

It's a theatrical war again! Here I am, living in a country mansion sleeping in a bed, and trying to keep my mind on fighting the Germans, and while all this is going on, the sun is shining merrily and the German householders are changing the daffodils in the vase on the hall table. It seems fantastic that I could go out two or three miles and find all the evidence of war, but I could do that very thing and have no trouble doing it.

Letter No. 103

Germany
21 April 1945

I wrote last on 17 April...Late that day we received warning orders for a big move, and immediately started making our plans. As it finally worked out, Colonel Dunn took off the next day, the 18th, with the light vehicles of the GP and three battalions, leaving me to start 19 April with all the tractors, guns, ammunition and assorted odds and ends of the whole outfit. The light column got away a little after noon, and I started getting organized for my march. My column started moving at 0230 on the 19th, at 15 miles per hour—what an

ungodly hour of the day that is! From that time, after a minimum of sleep, we marched all day, all the next night, and until the afternoon of yesterday, for a total of nearly 300 miles. It will be hard for you to imagine, I'm sure, but that is a tremendous march to make with heavy equipment...but to make it a forced march is even worse. I finally got to bed at four o'clock yesterday afternoon, after a quick shave and wash, and slept until 0715 this morning...The march was a bit of a mess, with equipment dropping out, Jerry planes trying to interfere, and the final insult of having our destination changed en route and our not knowing anything about it. You have heard the expression "the fog of war?" This little deal was really foggy! ²³

Letter No. 105

Germany
26 April 1945

We had an experience today that I wouldn't have traded for anything I know about. We found two English officers, one a captain and the other a first lieutenant, who had escaped from the Germans ten days ago, after having been prisoners of war for four years. Their joy was an absolute beauty to behold. For the last ten days they had been hiding in the woods, frequently wet and cold, waiting for the Americans to get close enough to be able to rescue them. We let them wash and shave, and fed them, and talked their arms off. They asked if anybody had been to England recently, and of course I was able to tell them as much as I knew about London—their anticipation of returning home was absolutely childlike. They showed us the food they had rounded up, and the map they had got together for the trip—most amazing ...it's hard to believe, they were captured before maneuvers in 1941, while I was still a second lieutenant—and all that time to be a captive. However, they said they had never lost faith, although I imagine I should have after some of the things they told us the Germans did to them. It's hard to find anything in warfare that is beautiful, but if there is such, then this experience was—there is no other way to describe it.

Letter No. 106

Germany
30 April 1945

Let me explain that today is the eighth consecutive day on which we have displaced the command post, and already we see another move coming early tomorrow. We have moved so often and so fast recently that the various locations are blurred in my memory. All German place names are alike now, and we remember them individually by some little incident or person or thing

that has nothing to do with the town as such. One CP we remember because it was there the turkey gobbler was so mean, and another because it was there we saw the big-busted Russian slave girl, and a third because it was there we saw a dead GI in the church yard...Everything has a feeling of perpetuity when we get to rolling fast. Day after day we roll down German roads, ever going deeper into the interior of the country. Now they are country trails, and now they are autobahns, but always they are alive with army vehicles rolling forward. You get the feeling that the army is an immense flood pouring over the countryside, tipped with violence at the crest and depositing flotsam in the backwaters. You move with the tide, and it carries you along in an almost effortless fashion—I have experienced a similar sensation in fever, when things got twisted.

Letter No. 109

Germany

7 May 1945

At long last the great day! We hear today that the surrender terms were signed early this morning, to be effective at 0001 Wednesday. By all the rules I suppose I should be writing a brilliant account of my reactions to the peace, something I should be proud to read 20 years from now. Instead of that, the best I can do is to heave a sigh of relief that it is all over, and I am one step nearer home...Of course I am glad I didn't get myself killed (although I never thought I would), but the end has been obvious for so long that there really is no surprise at all ... I had three drinks of cognac after supper, but there is no desire for celebration.

Letter No. 110

Germany

10 May 1945

The end of the war came very quietly for us, except for an experience last night. Day before yesterday we heard Winston make the official announcement that hostilities had ceased. Hardly the sort of speech I had expected—I had thought he would bring forth something comparable to the “we shall fight on the beaches” speech. Even so, I felt it marked the end of a period. It came over BBC ²⁴ at 1500... Last night I helped the Russians celebrate the victory, rather by accident, it is true, but what a celebration it was. There are a number of Russian officer prisoners of war near us, quartered in a barracks near ours. Yesterday afternoon they had the colonel over for a party, and the colonel took MacGregor along to speak German to German-speaking Russians. Late in the

afternoon Mac came dashing in for me, saying he needed help to bring the colonel home. It seems the Russians have a quaint practice of drinking gigantic toasts at frequent intervals, and the old man had gone clear under. Well, by the time I got there, they had put the colonel to bed, and the Russians, having just begun, insisted I stay. They had an accordion and a piano going full blast, and three Russian girls to dance with, plus more wine than I ever saw. I labored sturdily, but by about eight o'clock I was clear under myself. They rolled me into bed, where I spent several thoroughly uncomfortable hours before we decided it was time to go home. By that time the old man was on his feet again—MacGregor was still going strong—so we bid the party farewell. It was one of the strangest experiences I have ever had. After a couple of drinks I got so I could carry on the most animated conversation in English while one of the PW's talked Russian to me, both of us looking as if we understood every word. They are the most hospitable people I ever met—they insisted we drink prodigiously, they wanted to shake hands every five minutes, and they clapped us on the back and congratulated us on the end of the war every time they thought about it. Of course I have felt all day my head was going to drop off, but it was an evening I'm glad I didn't miss.

NOTES

¹*Swords and Plowshares*, (New York, 1972), p. 38.

²Nicknamed for the weapons manufacturing complex in Michigan and so-called because it fed 5,000 meals at each serving.

³A member of the 1940 graduating class at Texas A&M, as was General Maples, Albert had an identical twin brother who also served in the 12FA Bn at the same time. Both brothers now live in San Antonio.

⁴Walter P. Lane, *Adventures and Recollections of General...A San Jacinto Veteran. Containing Sketches of the Texian, Mexican and Late Wars, with Several Indian Fights Thrown In* (Marshall, Texas), 1928.

⁵A Catholic priest, one of two chaplains assigned to the group headquarters. A native Canadian, he grew up speaking the same French spoken in Normandy, from which his family had emigrated.

⁶Before attending Chaplain Gendreau's midnight mass, I had led a security patrol over ground frozen hard as a rock, illuminated by a magnificent display of northern lights.

⁷This march took us from Ninth Army to First Army, to reinforce fires from organic battalions on the north shoulder of the Bulge.

⁸Major Millican, a 1941 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, was S-3 of one of the artillery battalions of the 30th Infantry Division. He had served with me in the 12th FA Bn at Fort Sam Houston. At the academy he was a roommate of Colonel Dunn's son, who had drowned in the Hudson River during his senior year.

⁹This reference is to American counterattacks during the Battle of the Bulge.

¹⁰T.J. Sharpe, then a major, was an OU ROTC graduate of 1939 who served with me in Battery C of the 12th FA Bn. He retired as a regular army colonel, having competed as a member of the U. S. pistol team at the Olympics in Helsinki. John Lucas had served as commander of the 2nd Infantry Division while we were members, and later commanded a corps. Taylor had been our commander in the 12th FA Bn. Slim was Alton Neely, a 1940 graduate of Texas A&M who also had served with us in the 12th FA Bn.

¹¹S-3 of the 401st Field Artillery Group

¹²One of our captains.

¹³A dentist assigned to the group headquarters. He was from Muskogee, Oklahoma.

¹⁴After a delayed crossing of the Roer River, at which we supported the 82nd Airborne Division, the race was on to Cologne and a possible crossing of the Rhine River.

¹⁵Cologne.

¹⁶Bob Benze was assistant S-3. We frequently alternated at the firing chart when the command post was divided during displacement

¹⁷George Hargrove and I had taught together at the artillery school. While an advisor with a Chinese division in the Pacific Theatre he had been wounded severely and later evacuated and separated.

¹⁸Commander of one of the attached battalions at the meeting.

¹⁹A classmate at the University of Oklahoma.

²⁰One of our liaison officers. He was wounded and the men killed when their jeep ran over two stacked Teller mines. In violation of all orders, Major Lee Kays, the group's S-4 (supply officer), walked into the mine field to recover the bodies of the two enlisted men.

²¹This was on the way toward the battle which became known as the Ruhr Pocket fight, where Marshal Model committed suicide rather than surrender.

²²The usual practice was hot water in a steel helmet

²³This march took us from First Army to Third Army for mopping up operations in that portion of the lines. That many of the tracked vehicles fell out of the

march was because of faulty orders, which called for a rate of march of 15 mph rather than a maximum speed of 15 mph. I verified the orders by sending a liaison officer back to the corps artillery headquarters for a repeat, knowing the risk of moving a heavy column at excessive speed. At the major rivers, engineers were working on bridges under artificial light, so I knew the end was near. However, the light column was strafed the night earlier, causing casualties and exploding ammunition in some of the columns vehicles. It was a harrowing movement, from which it took days to recover.

²⁴We listened regularly to BBC, by which we kept our watches synchronized.