

A Letter From LT. HORACE RUSSELL HANSEN - 01325088

HQTRS - DET - 86 REPL. BN. APO #873
c/o Postmaster, N.Y., N.Y.

France
August 6, 1944

Dear Folks and Friends,

For the last two weeks we've been moving most of the time to keep up to the front. We no more than get dug in and we move again, but it is a nice feeling to get more ground behind us.

I have no permanent assignment yet - still waiting for someone to hand me the relay stick - meanwhile working on officers' classification at Hqtrs. My transfer to the Judge Advocate General's Dept, from Infantry, dated May 20th, is still making the rounds "thru channels". In the Army, channels is an obstacle course for paragraph troopers, a black, mysterious labyrinth filled with stars, eagles, and oak leaves.

The fast moving lately started with the big breakthru S.W. of St. Lo, as you all know. My saltwater APO won't disclose my outfit or place, so the Censor will let me tell you a bit about it anyway. It was preceded on 7-25 by a 3000 plane attack, the biggest air support ever given foot troops yet. I had a grandstand seat, and what a show!

For over 2 hours there was a constant stream of first heavy, then medium bombers, then fighters giving them demolition, then anti-personnel bombs and finally strafing. It was a few miles away, but even where we stood the ground jarred and our clothes were pressed against us each time a load went off. We cheered the air corps plenty that day.

I don't blame the Krauts for being a little peeved about this pasting, but hardly expected they would pick on us for reprisal. A couple of days later came a night plane attack. It's the closest I've come to losing my dog tags, so by way of keeping the chronicle complete, I'll tell you how foolish and scared I was.

Our artillery had moved out the day before and our area was considered safe. It was a clear night, not too cool, and I decided to sleep above ground in the pup tent instead of a damp hole for a change. That was part of the foolish part. Anyway, I was just dozing off when our AA opened up with everything all around us and bombs started dropping nearby.

What did I do? Like always, I gawked at all the pretty fireworks like a kid at the state fair. There was plenty of time to hit the hole, and who wants to miss a good show? Maybe some more would be knocked down and I wouldn't see it. (end of the foolish part.) Tracers forming an invested "V" started swinging right toward us. The planes buzzed us and some trigger-happy guard fired a string at them, so they turned around and came back.

It happened so fast I didn't have time to hit the hole or reach for the helmet near my feet. When I heard the whistle of the bombs coming down I got the worst case of pre-rigor mortis ever survived by a living organism. When the load went off I bounced on the ground, and fragments crashed thru my tent into the hedgerow next to me. There were precious few inches between these holes and my backside. What saved me was the decline in the ground toward the hedgerow.

There weren't enough medics and aid men around, so I helped pick up the bloody odds and ends and the wounded, a messy job in the dark. I noticed that only those above ground got it - an abiding lesson. Since this the only risk I take when digging a hole is getting charged with desertion.

Imagine how the Krauts must feel catching this stuff day and night plus having our artillery observer planes always looking down their throats. Only occasionally do we get some of their artillery (guesswork aiming and a lot of duds) and rarely any daytime strafing back here, But this is peanuts compared to bombing. There's something about night bombing especially that's very disheartening. I still cringe just hearing them come over. Incidentally, there's one who makes the rounds regularly just at nightfall. He's known familiarly here as "Red Check Charlie".

I took a look at that bombed area near St. Lo a few days later. The whole hill was completely churned up. I counted up to 50 wrecked tanks, some almost buried, and gave up. Dead Krauts and cattle were all over. The breakthru went so fast there had been no time for cleanup. There were some weird sights like a bank balanced on its end, a cow hanging in a tree, and a headless Kraut in a sitting position with legs crossed. The stench drove me out after about 15 minutes.

St. Lo, a large town, was bombed previously. It was completely gone, not one whole building left - the worst destruction I've seen yet.

Before all this happened and we began humping to keep up with our lines, there was a little time in the evenings to visit the natives. Our pidgen French has improved some and Nick, Charlie and I have always been able to get our laundry done, and once in a while buy things like fresh bread and butter, potatoes, onions, eggs and meat. We give them cigarettes, soap and hard candy in exchange, which they want rather than francs. Charlie gets in the mood for some backyard cooking occasionally, and while it isn't too good it beats G.I. rations.

The amazing thing about these people is the way they stuck to their property with the battle all around them. Now that we know Frenchmen a little better we're beginning to understand that his physical property is his whole world and he'll go thru hell to keep it. The mistake too many made was to take cover in the basement. They dig some of them out long after their houses have been shelled.

The natives all told us the same story. At first the Germans came with official "requisitions" for crops and cattle, paying small prices with their trick money. If they liked the house they just took it. Later they took anything they wanted without any formality, including all the good clothing which they sent home to Germany. If they saw a woman they wanted she was "invited" to their quarters.

There was one particularly mean trick. The French Red Cross had collected shoes and clothing for destitute refugees. When the stock pile was built up, the Germans took it, shipping the stuff home.

Normandy is a fertile grain, vegetable and dairying country with climate like Minnesota, except for no snow in winter. With the Germans gone and no market for surplus, the natives have plenty of food. Before the war it supplied foodstuff, particularly dairy products, to England.

The towns - some are only slightly damaged - look pretty much alike. Buildings are all stone, built tight together. Streets are narrow and unplanned. Cemeteries are always in the churchyard - both church and tombstones very ornate. There are outdoor shrines - neat, artistic statues and gardens - every few miles between towns. Main-roads are blacktop, sideroads gravel - a powdery dust or thin, slippery soup, according to the weather.

One evening, Lt. Nichols and I roamed around and found a beautiful chateau in a valley, so we paid a visit. The Vicomtesse de P_____ lived there with her son and 4 daughters. She was genuinely cordial and spoke English so we had an interesting time. We wound up with an invitation for dinner the next night.

The Vicomtesse has been aiding the French underground, the British and our own intelligence. She had quite a story. Her husband is an architect in Paris and this is their summer home. When the Germans started to occupy this area in 1940 she took her children from the Riviera and moved in, housing 35 refugees at the same time. She got there just before the Germans, who eventually demanded use of the place. Her firm adamancy and the housing of the refugees got her by and she stayed put. When the invasion came, the refugees left, but like the others she kept the family there. She trained the children to hit the floor when shells came close and all of them escaped injury. Two of our 155's came close, one knocking off a tower, the other hitting a tree blowing in a lot of windows.

Her greatest concern now is inability to communicate with her husband and tell him they are safe. She must have financial troubles too because meat and milk alone are costing her 2500 francs (\$50) a week. If they were deprived of anything it was well covered. Anyway, they were cultured, gracious and entertaining. It was the most pleasant evening in France so far.

She was remarkably well-informed and her comments were interesting, so I'll pass a few on.

There would be no French underground, she said, if it weren't for De Gaulle. To Frenchmen of all shades he is the one living chance to come back. He is idolized like a hero. His instructions are universally accepted as preachments of an almost divine judgment and are as scrupulously followed as an army order. No outsider could understand all he means to them, she said.

She thinks we have made bad mistakes treating him as we have, but charges this to our lack of understanding. Anyhow, she says Roosevelt is looked to as the great world hope for a proper peace and hopes he is re-elected. Oh yes, she said there is the possibility of a communist revolution in France after the war and in that event only De Gaulle could stem it.

Here are a few other things she said. Before the invasion British agents dressed as peasants did an excellent job. Women snipers were mostly German women who lived in France before, and who worked with military units or just lived with officers. Shooting of French hostages is the unforgiveable crime above all others. (She witnessed the shooting of 125 at Caen.) Lists are kept of collaborators for the day of reckoning - when they get their own government. They choose to do this properly and legally. Right now these people are loose, suffering only loss of their hair so far. Thinks De Gaulle should take over now - describe how the people went wild when he spoke here recently.

She gave me a written introduction and a message for the Vicomte when I get to Paris.

We had a different kind of excitement this afternoon. Three Kraut paratroopers were found in a thick double hedgerow not over 200 yards from where I'm sitting now. A guard captured two of them and we're looking for the third. Apparently they dropped in just before our horde suddenly moved in here and they couldn't find a way to get out.

I feel especially good today. The weather is perfect, nice big formations of bombers went over all afternoon, had a bath in the creek, some Red Cross donuts, and our first steak for dinner. Or maybe I just got up on the right side of the ground this morning.

Bonne chance,

H.R.H.

P.S.'s

Mother and Irma - Anxious to hear about the vacation. Did Dick's leave come in time? Letters still a month old. Still trying to buy some worthwhile French souvenirs.

Bea and Burt - Haven't heard from you in a long time. Have you quit making Brownies? How is Denny?

Lt. Bengé - Thanks for your mutual interest, and I like your suggestion.

Leona Hazen - Is there some way you can get Larry and me in touch again?

Burnie - A Hansen habit doesn't change. My foxhole is so well covered I can use a candle for a bed light. Reading Eric Knight, Robert Benchley, Thorne Smith etc. for a change.

St. Paul College of Law News Letter - When your No. 17 went out I had been in France for several days. Tempus fugit of APO Snafu, I don't know which.

Lt. St. Clair - Some dope on the boys from our outfit. Just had coffee and donuts with Lt. Eddie Bean today at a Red cross Clubmobile. He's been on the front since the beach, escaped from capture, is recovering from a leg wound, goes back tonight. Lt. Trist Davis in since D plus 6, lost all but 10 of his platoon, got hit in the cheek, is back there again. Lt's Fitch and Cohen went up to the same outfit yesterday. Lt. Nichols, Pickert, Schumanski, Swenson, Iria and Capt Gagliano still waiting with me here. Capt. Craig went up 2 weeks ago. Cy Slocumb made Chaplain's Asst. has a jeep and gets to travel around. Nick and I are regular passengers. Cy leads the singing on Sun. - I saw him with my own eyes? What's the hot poop on Camp Forlorn?

George Feller - Did you break your right arm?

Helen Olson - Mother sent clipping on cousin Kieth and his doings in a B-17. How are you and Edith doing?

Col. Thos. Sands - Transfer approved by 2 Hqtrs., 2 more to go.

Lt. Dick Ryan - How about breaking into Desmond's caustic communique so we'll know if you are still reconning in Italy. Not impossible now that we could meet over here.

Group Healthers - Don't stop with only 2 hospitals.

Dr. Levine - Thanks for seeing Mother.

All of You - If you change address, or want to add someone to the list for no good reason, write or call ye publisher, George Jacobson, Ne.4896, 2635 University Ave., St. Paul, Minnesota.
