

A letter from LT HORACE RUSSELL HANSEN - 0-1325088

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Dear Folks and Friends,

Germany - October 10, 1944

Another APO; another job; another country. While the situation gets relatively hotter as my APO number becomes smaller, I have the good fortune of being permanently assigned to Judge Advocate work, and I've crossed the last border. In short, I'm quite happy. My mail will reach me quicker than ever, I like the job and the outfit, and I feel closer to the end, and home.

Before coming here, there were two woeful weeks that for continued cussedness top anything yet. Day by day, the rain lasted longer, the mud got deeper, the wind colder and sharper. No one had any completely dry clothers, bedding or shoes.

For a replacement outfit behind the lines we were catching more than our usual share of trouble. There was occasional daytime strafing, a few robot bombs and constant nighttime bombing. To make is worse, our foxholes quickly filled with water seeping in from underneath.

Our usual practice was to move often, picking locations for tactical proximity to the front with least regard for comfort. That was the case in this soggy, wet Dutch valley. Unfortunately, the battle bogged down and we had to stay put. While the front lines were massing for attack, Jerry was throwing everything he had, trying to break up things in our rear.

We moved to this place in darkness. Ordinarily we moved in daylight because it was safer, but it just happened that this time the trucking companies were available only at night.

Movement of several thousand men, and all the equipment, is a major operation in daylight, and I always marvel at how it is accomplished at all in darkness. You can't see much except silhouettes and everything is done mostly by feel and habit. The trucks are led by walking guides to the loading points, and in less than two hours all the crates of rations and records, the heavy kitchen ranges, pyramidal tents, ordnance and all the men and their equipment scattered over several acres are on trucks. As the trucks scrape their way out of the woods they are fed into the convoy on the highway.

The negro drivers of these QM trucking companies have one of the toughest jobs in the war. They are called upon by everybody all the time to move men and supplies. With the railroads knocked out and with distances becoming greater, they are working night and day, catching short naps when they can. Most of them have gone through enemy fire. They are serious about their job and do it well.

I sat in the cab next to the driver on this trip and it beat me how he stayed on the road. There are no headlights, just two small pinpoints of light, enough only to warn oncoming traffic. For air raid security, the interval between trucks was stretched to where the tiny red tail light ahead was kept at the vanishing point. He was just sensing his way along on the road because I'm sure he could see no more than I.

Everything was going well until we met some medium tanks going to the rear. One of the tanks sideswiped three trucks, putting them out of commission and injuring a few of our men. It was just one of those things -- too dark, too much traffic and not enough road.

We were congratulating ourselves, when at last we turned off that main highway, for having missed the air patrols, when we saw a lot of searchlights straight ahead of

us. When we reached the area and stopped, we could hear the planes. There was no time lost between detrucking and digging in. We have long ago learned to keep our entrenching shovel handy, and everyone just leaped off the trucks without unloading and went to work. It was an eerie, frantic sound in the pitch darkness to hear all those scratching shovels going at the same time.

We were lucky not to get caught at half mast that time. The planes dropped their flares about a mile away, and while they lit us up, we were not seen and the bombs landed on something else.

But the next night we got some. I don't know which is the most terrifying, the flares or the bombs. There's something about flares that makes you feel positively naked. The Jerries use a powerful white parachute type. Judging from what I know of our own flares, these are about 50,000 candlepower each, and they drop around 50 to 100 over a likely target. The flares burn about 5 minutes and light up the place like a vaudeville stage. Camouflage, designed for color and contour, to blend with foliage and conform to slanting shadows, is useless in vertical flare light. If it looks as grotesque and unnatural from the air as it does on the ground, it must be a dead giveaway.

You lay there in the brilliance listening to that distinctive bumblebee drone of the Jerry planes and feel as defenseless as a strapped-down victim in a torture chamber. Your worry about not having a heavy cover on the hole and rationalize the unlikelihood of a bomb landing in it. Your anxiety during those long minutes reaches such a high tension that it is almost a relief to hear that ultimate whistling that means it will soon be over.

The bombing that night was mighty. I could tell by the first terrific explosion that these were demolition bombs and that they were after an installation and not personnel. They came down one after another, in single loads, on a spot at the edge of our area.

When it was over, everyone talked to his nearest neighbor about it. That was standard. Nothing was gained by exchanging guesses about what was hit; it was just a natural thing to want company right then, to talk off the piled-up tension, and to find out in a left-handed way that the next guy was just as scared as you were.

The next morning I went over to find out what was hit. They were after the bridge on the highway. Our guards there told me about it. Several planes dove at the bridge but all their bombs missed. One of them hit a farmhouse a hundred yards away and completely obliterated it. The guards were plenty shaken but none were injured.

After that, the planes came back at night again and again but always failed to hit the bridge. One night a single plane dropped a load of anti-personnel bombs but they fell harmlessly in a vacant field. During the two weeks our AA got 3 of their planes. I saw one of them get hit and turn into a suspended red ball of fire. It seemed to hang in the air for a few seconds, then it blew up with a tremendous flash that filled the sky with a short, red glow. This was the first one I had seen go that way. All the others exploded when they hit the ground.

At 2300 one night we got a call from Corps HQ that five Jerry tanks and some infantry were seen on the highway approaching our position from the west, and to be ready. Apparently they were stragglers that had been by-passed and were trying to get back to Germany under cover of darkness. We waited, laid low and heard them go by. They weren't looking for a fight and neither were we, so we were happy to let them slip thru. They were well taken care of by an anti-tank outfit further up.

At 1400 one afternoon our Chaplain was returning in his Jeep from a trip to the rear and was caught in a column of tanks that was buzzed by 3 Jerry planes. There wasn't time to do anything, he said, but just watch them. Fortunately, they didn't strafe and apparently were just scouting. This was nothing unusual and a typical example of how nervy and desperate the Luftwaffe is becoming. From the beach to Holland, such risky, daylight ventures in "our air" was rare, but now is a frequent occurrence.

Another drizzly afternoon there was a sudden snarl coming into our area at treetop level. We heard it and saw the planes at the same time. A smoking 109 Fighter was trying to squirm away from two Thunderbolts dead on his rear flanks. As they went screaming thru our headquarters area, the 109 was dipping one wing and then the other and the Thunderbolts were squirting short bursts at him. One of these bursts splashed up a straight line of mud right thru our latrine location. We didn't see the 109 go down but he was a sure goner. Our only damage was another good scare.

One day I had to go to the rear to see the Coprs Judge Advocate about Soldier Voting and rode with the boys on the mail truck. Just on the outskirts of a town a tremendous explosion literally bounced our 2½ ton truck on the highway. The driver stopped it and we scrambled off like mad and hit the ditches. I noticed as we did this that glass was pouring out of windows like sugar onto the sidewalks. When we recovered from the shock, there was a dead silence, then some women started to scream. We went back and saw what had happened -- one of the most peculiar things I've ever seen.

A robot bomb had landed in a lumber yard about 50 yards off the highway and to the rear of the spot where we felt the jolt. One of the boys facing to the rear had seen it coming down but was too numb to say anything. He said it looked like it had about a 16 foot wingspan. None of us had heard it over the roar of the truck and, of course, the thing nosedived silently after its fuel ran out.

The crater was about 30 feet across and about 5 feet deep. Lumber had been thrown high in the air and was scattered all over, but some neat piles very near the crater were not disturbed. A large piece of the gas turbine engine (if that's what it is) was still intact, but torn open enough so we could see that it was made up of rotary blades. Two bodies were found and many civilians were cut from flying debris and glass. When we started off again we surmised that the glass pouring onto the sidewalks was caused by suction in the narrow street following the vacuum after the explosion.

I have not yet seen a flying bomb but heard enough of them to satisfy any slight curiosity I might have had. They come around any time of the day or night and drop most anywhere. The uncertainty of where they might land is unnerving. We hear them flying over with their distinctive sound -- something like a two cylinder outboard motor. If they land anywhere near, we hear the motor sputter out, then silence, then carrump, and that's all, brother. Military damage from them is nil, but I can testify that they scare the daylights out of the Dutch, if that's any comfort to the Jerries.

Added to all this disturbance were the earthquaking blasts of 240 mm guns on the sides and behind us. I should mention that our location there was in the middle of a spearhead (the first since that one near the beach) and this knowledge probably sharpened our sensitivity. Anyhow, this gun, the biggest fieldpiece we have, lets out a blast that sounds like a shell burst when you hear it from the muzzle end. Some of the time they fire a schedule and there is a long series of evenly spaced blasts. You get used to these. But every once in a while, after a lull, they all let go at once and when that happens, the noise is so terrific that the men run for their holes before they realize what it is. We just get semi-accustomed to hearing them in one spot when they change positions and the blasts come from a new direction.

Once a battery of these guns fired a barrage directly behind a ridge to the west, and the muzzle burst, even from that distance, billowed in the tents and made our ears ring. The shells passing over have a distinctive sound of their own -- not the whoosh of the 155, but the tumbling roar of a train going thru a tunnel.

Do you remember that Charlie Chaplin movie of the last war -- how he was fighting the mud as much as the shellfire, and had so many funny close calls? Well, that's about what it was like. Three of us lived in a dugout that had a deep floor of mud and water. We used straw, branches and board to make a false bottom, on top of which we laid our bedrolls, but could never keep them dry. We could use no lights as it was not completely covered, so when we crawled in at night we dragged mud from our boots over the blankets, and chunks of mud from the walls frequently fell down on us. We griped at each other's clumsiness, dirtiness and lack of upbringing by way of trying to be good-natured, and spent most of the night lying there and talking, between blasts, about pleasantries back home. We laid bigger plans for our future personal pleasure in that hole than could be accomplished in a lifetime.

Like others, I thought from my training experience that one could eventually become acclimated to the violence of a battle zone. The exact opposite is true. The more you are exposed to it the more sensitized you become. Instead of acquiring a dull immunity, it piles up to an eventual intolerance that varies with each individual.

The threshold of resistance in some is small, and as the psychic injuries pile up, the resistance gets used up and the cracking point is reached. Even in the rear areas, I have it happen to some in 24 hours, while others appear to be unaffected. This is rare in a rear area but a real problem on the front. The terrific stuff used in this war is more than a human is built to withstand, and we are going to see a lot of physically-whole mental wrecks when this is over.

I was glad to get out of that hot spot even though it meant moving further up with this division. It feels good to be surrounded by a seasoned outfit that has fought from the beach to here, has a top notch record and plenty of power.

We have many pleasant memories of Holland, and you will find us in unanimous agreement that the Dutch have all-around finer qualities than any of the other three peoples we saw before. They are more democratic and open-hearted than the English, not as much fun as the French, but much more genuine and sincere, and even neater than the Belgians. They are gentle-mannered, quiet and industrious, and in many ways are more civilized than we are.

In all the Dutch towns we were in, I never saw litter on the streets, trash in back yards or a tumble down house. From children to old men, their clothes were neat and clean. Their homes are as modern as ours, even to the new streamlined types, and on the whole are more solid. Most of them are brick with tile roofs and have all the modern appliances. The absence of tenements and shanties was so noticeable that I purposely looked for signs of poverty in every town, but found none. From appearances at least, it seems that they have had a prosperous past.

Everywhere we went, a formal gracious committee of citizens called on us. They always wanted to do all our cooking, laundry and put us up in their homes. That was the least they could do, they said, after we had come so far to liberate them. It was hard to turn down these homey offerings but it was necessary because our men were being hit by civilian snipers and we knew there were spies in their midst. Even after turning them down they would come back again when they saw us getting deeper in the mud and ask us to reconsider. One burgomaster offered to close the schools so we could use the building if we felt that would be more proper than staying in their homes. Honestly, these Dutchmen are downright loveable.

I went to one farmer's house to ask permission for the men to have some of his straw. I think he would have given us the blankets off his bed. It was a miserable, wet afternoon and I goldbricked there for about an hour and dried my feet. His stout, beaming wife gave me a cup of strong hot soup and kept grinning and saying, "Iss nice, yah?" The farmer asked me for permission to kill one of his pigs. He apparently was not yet fully appreciative of the meaning of his liberation. He was still hanging onto his ration books, though their use had passed out with the Nazis. He told me that everyone around there had been limited to 15 laying hens and was required to turn over 40 eggs per year per hen or suffer a fine of one gulden for each egg shy of that number. When I left he gave me a silver spoon saying that he knew I would like a souvenir, then he cracked, "While the English fight for survival and Europe fights for liberation, the American soldier fights for souvenirs". He was still standing in the doorway laughing loudly at his "good joke" when I was 50 yards down the road.

It would be a revelation for our farmer to see his Dutch contemporary and his buildings and machinery. He has large brick and concrete barns and sheds, built to last forever. Everything, in and out, is whitewashed or painted and is immaculately clean. There are no mushy wallows in the barnyard, but cobblestone courtyards. Manure piles are kept under cover, all the barn floors are stone or concrete. He has all the new electrical equipment. Machinery is never seen rusting out in the weather. He has fine looking cattle, mostly Holsteins, and husky horses, usually Percherons. This is the typical Dutch Farmer, and not the exception.

Altogether, Holland is the most modern country we've seen. I have often heard our men compare it with England as a vivid contrast of the new with the old. We probably expected to see a storybook Holland full of quaint antiquities but saw instead a bit of home with a few brighter trimmings. Incidentally, if you are interested, the windmills, although some still stand, have long ago been replaced by electricity for grinding feed and flour.

The mention of England recalls some long-simmering gripes that our men are constantly repeating. They go something like this -- "What the hell are those Limeys doing? We took France while they took Caen. Now it looks like we will take Germany while they sit up in Holland." And about planes, "Where are their bombers, are they afraid to use them in daylight?" And about British camps, "Damned if those birds don't always shack up in towns while we freeze our butts out in this mud." And about passes, "Why the goddam hell are towns off-limits for us when those Limeys roam all over the place and get all the babes." And about the peace, "Wait and see, they'll screw up the works and get all our ships."

If all this contradicts the Sunday supplement, let me add that these cracks are only the most nearly printable ones.

There's little to say about Germany yet. The border was strung tight with a thick maze of barbed wire. Beyond that the countryside looks the same, if a little more rolling and wooded. Most buildings are smashed like they were back in Normandy. Most civilians have fled but a few hang on, having refused orders from their own and our army to move out. Not much can be done about that and it is only a minor problem. The small children are the same little beggars we have seen all the way from England.

We have been paid in marks of our own printing, worth 10 cents each, but expect that we will eventually use the value thereof for something nice in New York.

Guten tag,

H.R.H.

P.S.'s

To all of you: This is positively my final permanent APO number. It carries a mail priority. Easy to remember too, don't you think?

Lt. Al Rathert: Washington is a nice spot, so stay ~~there~~. Thanks for the news. Hope to see you as I intend to stop there before too long.

Dr. Levine: Let's put it truthfully. Since you took my place GHM has skyrocketed.

Brother Dick: Look up the word "desultory". Does it fit?

George Feller: Surprise! I already have the Christmas card. Give the gang my warmest thanks for their personal greetings.

Lila and Carlo: It was nice to get your friendly letter. The new venture sounds like a racket, with such a fancy title.

Lt. St. Clair: I'm in the same outfit with Lts. Cohen and Fitch. They're on the line now and I'll be seeing them in a day or two as this work takes me all over the place. Finally left Nick and the others behind. Sorry to hear about allegretti and Neilsen.

Jim Lynch: Do you check Bill's communiques for libelous statements? I can't believe what he says about you and Mr. Fitch.

Naomi: Overheard a boy on KP here mention Northfield. Our talk disclosed that you are ultra-concervative, using two tees tied together with string so you wouldn't lose them. He was your caddy. Small world.

John Devine: Have the big package of literature and I'm reading all of it.

Fred Eiden: Just read cond. of "U.S. War Aims" by Lippman. Fairly realistic, but like others he overlooks the undercurrent of revolution and the strong influence of Russia all over Europe. Two simple facts are (1) the C.P. influence was strong and on the rise before the ware; (2) only arms are in hands of underground movements that have strong commy units and leadership. Like it or not, it's in the picture.

All the Folks: Impossible to answer all your letters, but don't let that stop you. It's good to hear that everything goes so well.