

A letter from LT. HORACE RUSSELL HANSEN, O-1325088  
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Christmas Day, 1944  
Germany

Dear Folks and Friends,

Today our section is taking it easy. We are doing only the most essential tasks, and trying to digest a big turkey dinner. Everything is quiet on this sector of the Ninth Army front and for the first time in a month I have an opportunity to catch up on some letter-writing.

Just after Thanksgiving the Colonel decided that Captain Ryan and I needed a rest so he sent us to Brussels on a three-day pass. After two months of mud, rubble, and violence in Germany, that trip was just what the doctor would order.

Starting out we felt plenty prosperous. We had a command car with side-curtains and a driver, clean clothes and shined shoes, a bottle of cognac, and all the pay the finance officer could legally give us.

Before turning north at Liege, the route was the same I had made in the reverse direction last September, so I watched it with interest. I spotted several areas along the way where I had dug foxholes and sweated out night bombing raids. It all looked very peaceful. The scattered damage now seemed insignificant in comparison to Germany. A lot of trains were running, and I was surprised to see a big switchyard operating, one that such a short time ago looked like a mess of spaghetti.

My first impression of Brussels was that it looked so much like one of our own eastern cities. Streetcars were clanging, automobiles honking, and traffic cops whistling at the stop lights. The stores were all open and sidewalks were jammed with Christmas shoppers. It was so thoroughly normal as to seem unreal after only a four hours' drive from the front.

The Germans had fled this part of Belgium without a fight. The only damage I saw was some bullet and grenade scars on a ministry building near the palace. This had happened about a week earlier, when an underground group had tried to oust one of the ministers. Otherwise, Brussels is probably the most completely whole large city left in Europe. The Germans apparently feel dilatory about this neglect and have been giving the place a belated treatment of flying bombs, with notable failure. Outside of the noise and excitement that goes with these things, Brussels is the perfect place for a three-day escape.

We had no trouble getting comfortable hotel rooms. The city was off-limits for all of our troops, except those with passes for official business (we have a broad-minded General), so we enjoyed a rare distinction all around, and received a lot of attention. There was steam heat, electricity, and no end of service. There was a cocktail lounge and music off the lobby. It wasn't long before we began to feel civilianized.

The shopping district was not very attractive, but what lacked in appearance was made up for in interest. There are stores of every kind and size, and all of them had plenty to sell. There is the typically European little shop, specializing in one kind of article, in endless number on every street and large indoor bazaars, and there are huge department stores. It would have been easy to spend a fortune in a day on tempting things you don't find in the states, like hand made art-metal pieces, unique glass and silverware, and lace. There seems to be plenty of wearing apparel, including luxury items. I saw plenty of silk neckties and in one shop a

few silk shirts. Even silk stockings can be obtained at black market prices of 500 francs (about \$11.50) a pair. All prices were high, but business was very brisk.

The department stores are the closest reminders of home. Displays, counters, cashiers, escalators, everything just like the ones at home. The Christmas atmosphere was complete to such familiar sights as Christmas trees, toy departments, jams around the necktie and handbag counters, and a Salvation Army girl with a pot and bell at the entrance. Everyone speaks French, and the vigorous gesticulation that goes with it made the shopping scene a bedlam.

I tried to do some serious shopping in one of these places and quickly found that my pidgen French was strictly small shop. I was completely outclassed. I was trying to describe the individual coffee filters I wanted. The more I tried, the worse the confusion became. Business in the department ceased as all the customers around there tried to help me by guessing what I wanted and talking all at once to the poor salesgirl. Finally, the floorwalker came to the rescue. He procured the interpreter who, in turn, got two competent looking clerks to help, and for the next hour I enjoyed the most escorted and solicitous Christmas shopping I've ever done.

At night in the blackout the city is full of excitement. All the cafes, dance halls and night clubs are open, and all have beer, wine, champagne, and cognac. They are easy to find by just following the biggest crowds or the blare of the swing bands. Theatres were showing mostly American movies. Not to be outdone by the blackout, they had gaudy posters done in luminous paint. Every little while we ran into black market hawkers, selling the two most hard-to-obtain items in Europe. Out of a doorway a woman we couldn't see would whisper, "Shawcolott - - Seegarett?"

At first we followed the crowds at random and found ourselves getting into large dancehalls. One was like the next -- a big, garish place jammed with teenage jitterbugs. The music was mostly American, hotter and faster than I've ever heard it, and the dancing was violent. The twists they had include bumping their chests together and stamping their feet.

After that we got a guide and found some beautiful nightclubs, like the Corso and the Ave Marie. The Corso made us feel so much at home that we readily admitted a little nostalgia. The music was smooth and the song were in English. The champagne was good and the dancing was wonderful. It was great to be an American that night. Especially so since we were the only ones there.

There was no schedule for the flying bombs except for the ones that came over regularly about 0500. Just the right time for catching you short of sleep and to upset you for the beginning of the day. Anyone who can sleep after the screaming of all those sirens and the nasty, spasmodic roar of a bomb at that hour is plain inhuman. These were very low, but fortunately travelled beyond the city before the explosion in the distance could be heard.

Besides having well-stocked shops, Brussels is one of the very rare places we've been where enough food is obtainable at restaurants. We noticed that steak or hamburger, French-fried potatoes and salad are also the preferences of most Belgians. They drink wine, beer, or lemon mineral, but never water, with the food, and coffee afterward. Most places serve the coffee in individual filters. When the coffee has dripped thru, you remove the top and the freshly made coffee is in a glass with a silver holder. I liked these so much I bought a few which are now on the way home.

We went fo a tea dance on Sunday afternoon. I met an RAF captain there with a "Norway" patch on his shoulder, and spent most of the time talking with him. We exchanged experiences and when I found he had escaped from Norway I had plenty of questions.

He is a civil engineer from Oslo. When the Nazis invaded, he fought in the delaying battle northward as an infantry officer. Near Narvik he organized a group of 200, all determined to escape to England and continue to fight. They dressed as civilians and, on ski and on foot, made a devious and dangerous journey of 350 miles thru the mountains into Sweden. On the way, he said, they made their way thru five Nazi outpost lines by stealth, ruse, and "a little fighting". A few went ahead to get the help of the people on the way. At one place where they had the closest squeek, the farmers suddenly jammed the roads with wagons and livestock and held up the German armored cars long enough for them to get thru.

In Sweden they separated and each devised his own plan of escape. The captain boarded a Finnish boat for England, but the Gestapo caught him before the boat left port. He escaped, got another Finnish boat, which unfortunately put in at a Norwegian port, and he was arrested again. He knew enough Gestapo lingo by now to tell a believable story about being a Wehrmacht intelligence officer on a secret mission, so the ship was held while his story was checked. The Finnish skipper stormed about demurrage liability so furiously that finally the Gestapo was forced to release the ship. It went directly to New York, and he was there for over a year until he could arrange passage to England, arriving there in August 1942.

He landed with the invasion forces and ever since has been supervising RAF airdrome construction. He has become so impressed with our Infantry that he has made application for release from the RAF to join us and continue on to the end against Japan. He is forty, married, and has plenty to lose, but is just simply that type of sincere patriot. I have his address and we agreed to correspond some fine day when we at last reach our homes.

After the conversation he said, "I recommend a fine girl to dance with you", and led me around to a table. She was easily the stoutest girl in the place. After the dance, I begged my leave of him and the place before we got into a conversation about women. I'm beginning to wonder what the girls in Norway really look like.

Brussels is called "Little Paris", but the resemblance is very slight. The people do not have the finesse of dress that marks a Parisienne, nor do they have the charm of manner. The buildings are old and dark and lack tasteful trimmings. There are a few beautiful monuments and statues scattered around but the only really impressive thing is King Leopold's palace. It is off by itself on the edge of the city, -- several low, light stone buildings set in some beautiful landscaping.

The central object of curiosity to all newcomers is the Mannekin Pis, a statue-fountain of a small boy in the act of passing water. The story is that a rich merchant lost his small son, and vowed that he would erect a statue of him exactly as he was found. The story, and the statue are famous, so much so that postcards and small brass replicas are for sale all over the city.

As we were leaving we stopped the car to ask directions out of town to the first place on our route. In an instant there were several around the car and soon a lot more, all jabbering in French. It became more confused by the minute so finally we just drove off. I looked back and saw the crowd still arguing visibly. Just like Paris!

What we liked most about Brussels was that it was so much like what we left back home. We had an enjoyable, if restless, time and the battle zone seemed much more tolerable when we returned.

The big push all along the line, as you've read, stopped at the Roer River. In comparison with past advances it must have seemed small, and short in duration. The answer in mud and water, the world's worst obstacles to land warfare. Attacks must necessarily be made overland, as roads would funnel both men and machines into concentrated enfilade fire. The flat fields retain the water, and after weeks of

rain they become literal mud bogs. A rifleman, equipped with heavy boots and overshoes, can hardly walk, much less run, in this slippery clinging stuff. His success depends on his ability to run forward a short distance, hit the ground, get up quickly, and run again in short spurts, so as to reduce himself as a target as much as possible. Imagine doing that over flat fields 2000 yards long. Then add to that the enemy obstacles -- barbed wire, land mines, grazing machine-gun fire, and artillery with direct observation.

The enemy was exceedingly well dug in. He had plenty of reinforced concrete blockhouses and pillboxes, and narrow zig-zag trenches everywhere. No amount of airbombing and artillery alone could get him out. It took stouthearted mudsloshing against merciless fire to get there, ~~the~~ bayonets, hand grenades and flame-throwers to finish the job.

Even tanks with special wide tracks couldn't go far in that mud before they bogged down, or at least their necessary ability to maneuver was seriously cut down. Air support was down to a minimum because of constant low overcast and rain. Altogether it was a lot worse than the hedgerow fighting in Normandy.

The Roer is a real obstacle. The long rains and smashed dams have made it wide and fast moving. Its approaches are mushy all along. The ground gradually rises to high ground on the enemy side and he has commanding observation. He is determined to hold us here on this last good line of defense before the Rhine at all costs. Any movement on our side is met with hails of artillery. Even at night he fires at every sound. The air raids on our line and rear have been increased, both night and day.

When the Krauts hit us a good punch on the First Army front, I was frankly thankful for the geographical location of the Roer, but confess that I have been holding my breath nevertheless. When their attack started, they filled the sky around here with planes, and dropped parachutists in our midst. Obviously they were attempting to cut communications, prevent movement of reinforcements to the front, and divert some of our aircraft away from their drive. Their efforts were intense for several days.

I have never seen the Luftwaffe so audacious. They sent fighter-bombers in twos and fours over us all day long. They bombed and strafed everything in sight, without pattern and in utter promiscuity. Even lone, unescorted bombers came lumbering in. Our AA was something to see. When they came over, as much as 90 degrees of the horizon would be filled with big, black puffs in a matter of seconds. I saw a lot of them knocked down by AA, but only a few in dog fights, as our planes just weren't being sucked in and diverted. All of us were well dug in, and military damage to our outfit has been nil.

Incidentally, during a lull I saw a large flock of ducks flying over us toward the enemy lines. It was the first flight I've seen over here, so I stood there watching them closely and thought of the good old hunting days. Some more planes came in, and flak started bursting just ahead of the ducks. It happened suddenly and the sky to their front was filled with black puffs. They turned suddenly to the right, but as the bursts made a progressive pattern that way they made another right turn, putting them on a reverse course. I expected some to get hit, or at least scatter, but neither happened. They kept a perfect V-formation all the way, and their wings didn't miss a beat.

Late one night we got the report that an unknown number of paratroopers had landed nearby. In addition to other tasks, I have the security detail, so I had to form an additional guard quickly for a complete perimeter defense and more listening posts around our position. It was dark as tar and in hurrying around

posting the men I stumbled and fell on my left knee against the edge of a low stone wall. They didn't come into our position, but I've been cursing them with each stiff-legged step, and now the medics tell me I can stall no longer and must go to the hospital tomorrow.

At dawn one morning our men found a lone paratrooper thrashing around in an open field. On a closer look they found that one foot was blown off. Ironically, he had stepped on a German foot-mine. The men tossed him a rope from the road, and in dragging him out they were hoping he would set off another. Some of their buddies had been thru a similar experience.

One group was captured in two stolen jeeps, and several others were found in a coal mine, dressed in our uniforms, complete down to dog-tags. Altogether these fanatics have been giving us some tense moments. Personally, I am on the alert more against our own guards, who are easily as quick to act as a paratrooper.

The weather, plus the static situation has caused some changes in our mode of living, most important of which is moving from muddy dugouts into basements, besides being about all that is left of buildings in this area, these basements offer good, dry shelter. Most of the old basements show recent reinforcement, and the newer "Hitler Houses" are little more than a shell atop a bomb-proof shelter.

Our section occupies a two-room job complete with stove, table, and chairs. There are even beds, springs and mattresses, and for the first time we are enjoying safety and comfort together, at least during the most important time, at night. There is so much loose stuff available from bombed-out houses that we have almost everything we need for comfort. If we had running water and electricity it would be almost as good as home - - in the basement. Our officers' mess, for example, is practically lavish. We have fine dining tables and chairs, lace tablecloths, good porcelain and silverware. A day-room has rugs, easy chairs, and davenports. We found plenty of Christmas tree decorations, wrapped in newspaper and put in boxes like we do at home, so we fixed up two beautiful trees, some wreaths, and even hung up some mistletoe. Last night some Red Cross girls and nurses came to the long-planned party, which I couldn't attend because of this damned knee.

There have been other pleasant things. We have a real theater in a nearby town, which is almost whole, missing only the rear wall. It's patched up with canvas, and is cold, but beats the usual barn as a showhouse. We have a 16 mm. projector and have been lucky enough to get such good movies as "Impatient Years" and "Saratoga Trunk".

I saw my first USO show on the continent there the other day, starring Mary Brian and Frank McHugh. The girls braved the cold in scanty clothing but presented a fine show. The cast had dinner at our mess afterward, and all of us expressed surprise at the youthful appearance of Mary Brian, remembering her back in silent picture days as one of our favorites.

Movies or shows have been running almost every afternoon, so that everyone, even riflemen on the line, gets to see them. In our situation we are also able to rotate everyone thru hot showers at the coal mine. By using portable gasoline generators we are able to have many radios operating. There is plenty of coal, and there are enough stoves to keep warm when we can be indoors.

All these German-furnished comforts are nice to have, but frankly we all would give up the comforts that go with waiting, to be closer to Berlin.

Radios and Berlin remind me of that sweet, cultured English voice that reputedly belongs to a beautiful blonde German dame. Just after the six pips of the BBC at 1200 and 1700 when we listen for the detailed AEF newscast, "Dirty Gertie",

alias "The Bitch" cuts out the BBC and comes in on the more powerful Berlin radio. She gives the "authentic news", then plays some sweet swing and does a little singing, fairly well, interspersed with propaganda. Some of it is subtle, but all is so obvious that it never registers anything but outright laughter or plain disgust. The other day she said very sweetly that she would "sleep with the first American to reach Berlin." On a regular evening program, she starts out with playing "Home, Sweet Home," then in between playing plaintive, old tunes she reads messages from British prisoners to their folks at home. Like a good sister she will say "Corporal John Williams of 17 Camden Lane, Devonshire, sends this message to his dear, sweet wife, Anne, - 'Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. With all my love, Johnnie.' - Yes, we should like to send Johnnie home to you, Anne," etc.

Our situation also permits of a little horseplay now and then. There was the recent case of Umbriago. One of the boys in an artillery battalion wrote the General that the boys in the outfit had been fraternizing with a German for the last two weeks because they couldn't find it in their hearts to spurn such a loyal and charming companion, and that a tragedy had befallen him that day. He had absorbed most of the fragments from an enemy mortar shell that had exploded in their midst, thus saving them from harm.

As expected, the General came to the outfit almost immediately. He viewed the remains of Umbriago, the horse, and remarked that he would have made a damned fine polo pony. Then the General heard the rest of the story, how a G.I. had given him lump sugar from a K ration and how the faithful nag had followed them from one battery position to the next amidst all the noise and shell-fire. The General was touched enough to order a formal funeral for the next day, which he attended. There was proper formation, solemn band music, and with a gloomy eulogy Umbriago was laid away in a prepared grave.

Another tragic mascot was Pete, the Jackdaw. A rifleman picked him up in Normandy and diligently carried him in a ration box on his pack all the way to Germany. The bird had more lives than a cat and was considered a charm by the boys in the platoon. Back in the hedgerows he was perched on his master's shoulder in a foxhole when a shell fragment skinned the feathers off the top of his head. I have seen Pete several times. Fuzzy feathers were growing back on his pate, but he got a bad leg-- trench foot or something. Then too, he was getting a touch of combat exhaustion. He scurried for cover even when our own guns were firing. He had lost his old, soothing calm and was getting people nervous by his actions. One day a German kid eyed Pete covetously, so the boys saw a double opportunity and gave him away. That German family will suspect sabotage when they find out how Pete likes to tear up everything in sight.

The most lovable mascot is a German shepherd pup that my friend, Lt. Gooss, picked up with some prisoners back in France. He has raised him from the bottle stage and has nourished him, thru trying times, to a fine animal, with nary a touch of C.E. He calls him Jerry.

We have lived among the same German civilians for some time and know them a good deal better now. As soon as they saw that we were here to stay, that we were gaining and holding, they began being pleasant. They are actually smiling and nodding at us, trying to curry our favor. Many insist they are Dutch nationals, geographically here by a turn of fortune. A sign on one house, with Dutch colors, says in English, "Here living good Hollandish."

With good and pleasant conduct, a few restrictions were lifted. They immediately stretched these few inches into a mile. Apparently we still have the old reputation for being soft-hearted suckers. The restrictions were reinstated and they responded with the original respect, and it has been kept that way. Disci-

pline and authority is the only way of life they understand and appreciate. Many of us think it will be a long time before they will be able, if willing, to re-condition themselves to democratic ideas, regardless of how they stood on Nazism.

There was an interesting sidelight when the Krauts started their recent drive. These civilians are permitted to have radios, and many are operating, especially around coal mines where they still have power. On the second day of the drive, Goebbels got on the air and said among other things that these traitorous civilians who refused orders to move to the East would promptly be shot by the returning army. It took a day for that news to get around, and promptly the whole lot of them were in a frenzy of terror. They came to us cringing and pleading for protection. It was a sad spectacle but entirely unmoving. We know first hand that the people of Normandy are as badly off right now and have had four years of that special brand of terror to boot.

The battle zone is bleak and ominous. Men and weapons are so well dug in and camouflaged that it looks like a no-man's-land. The rough, jagged mud is frozen hard and lightly covered with snow. Here and there whole fields are marked off with white tape and signs warning that German mines have not been removed. The scattered, smashed German equipment, the flattened villages, crumpled blockhouses and splintered trees, make the whole area look as if it had been hit by a dozen tornados. The atmosphere is one of tension. We are expecting the Krauts to try most anything at this state, even gas, and have fully prepared ourselves.

Meanwhile, complete faith in the ultimate strength of our armor, and especially our air forces, gives us an outspoken assurance, beyond hoping that the German counterattack will turn into their major defeat and hasten the end.

About an hour ago I heard the good old rumble of our bombers going over. There were about 100 of them. The air is cold and clear. This is the third day it has been cloudless all afternoon. As the bombers go over they leave long, white vapor trails that seem to converge as they near the target. They were the most vivid trails I've seen, so I snapped a picture of them with a little camera I bought in Brussels. Some day that picture will remind me of the fortunate, last-minute turn in the weather that permitted our aircraft to smash the enemy's final desperate effort.

We have just had some fruitcake from home with a glass of wine. As I'm getting all this off my chest, I'm smoking a nice, big, Christmas cigar. So help me, I'm really feeling pleasant.

Happy New Year,

H.R.H.

P.S.'s -- My warmest thanks for all those nice Christmas remembrances. This is an entirely inadequate way of telling you how much they meant to me. I'm breaking precedent and writing V-mails as soon as I can.

Mother and Irma - Impossible to keep with you by V-mail. Just counted and I'm 13 behind, last dated 12-14. Received all the packages you mentioned, except arctics. Have several packages on the way to you. Also some snapshots taken here and in Brussels.

Bea and Burt - Have the pictures and Denny's note. He's certainly growing. Send Mac's brother's address and I'll see if he is nearby.

Ray and Gen - Best news of the month was hearing from you. There's a rare distinction in having a red-headed girl. Congratulations. Thanks for all the news of our friends. That's right - I'm saving the best of this experience to tell you personally.

Fred Eiden - Thanks for all the election results. Surprised about Starkey, the rest about as expected. Just getting dope on Chinese internal situation -- seems like the worst political mess anywhere.

Lt. Russ Gunderson - Glad to hear that you are finally getting over your troubles. Remind Link that I annoyed hom on the Court - he'll remember.

Brother Dick - I don't think Audrey will have you when she finds how fat you're becoming. 185! That's worse than I have ever been.

Lt. Larry Hazen - Just now received your letter 12-12. It ties for surprise with Ray's. Looks like you sailors have enough troubles too. Assume that because of long voyages we can keep in touch this way as well as any thru Leona, or would your FPO be faster? Sorry to hear about your father, Leona.

Lt. Gordon Hazen - Have your two recent letters. Larry, please note. Maybe if you both write me more often I can keep you two sailors in touch with each other as well.

Judge Loevinger - The possibilities look interesting. I would like to hear what happens. I admire Joe Ball's courage, and wrote and told him so.

Fred Hall - Get a bang out of your sheet. Tell Greenwood that Brussels would give Soltau heart failure a lot faster than Paris.

Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Cook - Many thanks for your thoughtfulness. Those first meetings of GHM seem a long way back now, don't they? But the recent figures certainly justify those early growing pains.

Van, Florence and Andy - Thanks for the good news, greetings and wishes. Can't you do something about reviving Desmond? I'm not worried about him, but I miss his communiques. I'm beginning to think I hurt his feelings. But I can't remember saying anything about Jim, however.

Lt. Highberg - Wow - 4 letters at once! One goes back to 8-3. Suggest using my full name and ASN. Received the picture, which is very small indeed. Sounds like they have you really busy. More later.

Roy Bergengren - Have your long, informative letter, literature on CUNA, and your newsletter. It is all greatly appreciated, the more because I know how busy you are.



Earl Rentfro - It looks like you have put the new lines on the way in good fashion. The literature is good, especially because it is so openly honest about the real nature of life insurance. I hope you are fully recovered from the recent illness.

Lt. Kieth Evans - Sounds like you have all the comforts of home back there, wife and all. I envy you even tho you are a paragraph trooper. Hello to Holt. Gave Lt. Gooss your address.

Mike and Eileen Kinhead - Those were very nice notes. It was good to hear from you. I had no idea about the illness, but have no doubt that you will lick it in your stride. Best of luck.

Judge Brill - Have your friendly letter and feel quite flattered. However, have no notion about pub. Received some apropos cartoons also newspapers from unidentified source; but I learned something from all those forgery cases and am quite certain about your hand-writing on the envelopes.

Judge Rensch - Thanks for the local news and the good wishes. I am happy to see that you are firmly seated on the District Bench.

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