

WHEN they arrived in nowhere, they set up pyramidal tents by the score. There was a set pattern, a veritable town plan, here the tents of "A" Battery, here its park for guns and vehicles, here its office tents, here its officers' tent, and so on to the conjunction of "A" with "B" Battery and so on to the full 531st Battalion, thence to the Brigade pattern, then the Regiment and the Division. The whole spread its parts uniformly over a great stretch of desert, never (almost never) a light to be seen at night, never a campfire.



Maneuvers in the Mohave Desert.



Maneuvers in the Mohave Desert.



Maneuvers in the Mohave Desert.



Maneuvers along the Colorado river.



Al on hill top.



Al and week-end biouac tent on Mohave desert

AL TO JILL DECEMBER 6, 1942

Dearest love Jill,

Note the new address: Bty B, etc. Desert Maneuvers, c/o Postmaster, Los Angeles. It is now Sunday afternoon. Yesterday I rode into Rice, California, six miles down the road, which is only a spit in the sand, and purchased a couple of magazines and some air mail stamps. From there is where I'll leave next Friday evening to meet you in L.A. perhaps around 11 p.j. at Bill's place. That's the way things stand now. I guess you can take the noon daylight to LA on Friday. Any telegrams

to me should be addressed to Rice, Calif. I believe they'll get to me from there.

From Rice, Vitera and I drove 20 miles to where the 4th Division, Armoured Forces, was bivouacked. And what followed made me sore as hell. On a hunch, I looked through the officers' file, and there was John D. Hess as big as life with Company D of the 137 Armoured Infantry. I leapt into the jeep intending to give Hess une grande surprise and found out when I got there that he had left for Fort Knox three days ago to attend a nine-week school in maintenance. I almost hit the ceiling when I heard that. It was so close. The 4th A.D. has been there only a short week or two, after coming from Louisiana. It was the same outfit John joined in N.Y. from where he wrote you. An officer who bunked next to Maidments (?) is our Liaison Officer but Maidment is nowhere in the 4th or 6th Division.

Last night the B Btry officers' tent was full of card players and I was inveigled into losing some money. They were playing a lot of odd games where skill is no good to anyone. I rarely lose at straight poker but lost some heart-breaking hands last night at a game called, fittingly enough, "Son of a Bitch". I had intended to read and write letters, including one to John, but will do that today instead. About 10 o'clock we stopped the game for a few minutes to eat some kosher salami Berman has brought back with him from Chicago.

The nights are freezing out here and by 1 a.m. we were huddled shivering around the candles and lamp that lit the card game. When I did turn in, the bedding roll stuffed with two blankets and two quilts was just enough to keep me warm. Some of the men are buying sleeping bags for about \$9.50 and they swear by them. I just hate to purchase anything so bulky. I wear the army woolen underwear constantly, for though the days are bright and sunny, there is a tang to them which creeps through a cotton suit, especially when riding in an open car.

So far, I've received no mail except a bank statement from the El Paso Natl. closing our account with your \$113 withdrawal.

There has been only one mail call to date, tho from now on it will be regularly held.

The chaplain's going into LA tomorrow to purchase some records from the Chaplain's Fund, a slush fund the army gives the chaplains to make religion more comforting. I've given him some names & numbers of symphonies and other music, including the recordings of the Red Army Chorus to buy, both of us being in a conspiracy to not cater to the lowest common denominator of tastes.

The sunsets here, of course, are gorgeous. We are, it seems, surrounded by low mountains, which despite their stature are crusty and sharp, belying their age with their vigor. The bases of the mountains are long, sloping, smooth acres of crushed rock, the results of millions of years of erosion. Still the rock is so tough that it breaks rather than melts.

The division encamped fulfills that bustling picture Tolstoy describes very well. The encampment is enormous but with the enormity of a mount of ants. There are thousands of details, yet all is swallowed up in vast space. One striking difference for your imagination. Tolstoy writes of the numerous fires. But nowadays "blackout" is a vital word, and every encampment is constructed to exist without lights that are apparent. So only occasional searchlights and truck lights play about the darkness and no materials are available for campfires, even if the soldiers thought of lighting them.

I'm sending you some negatives, Darling. Please have several prints made of each so that I can give them to the men in the pictures.

I wish you were living in this tent with me. I know you'd enjoy the rather rugged existence and you'd be a joy to have around - for, as befits the ideal wife, you round out my life so smoothly that no matter where I turn in my desires you are there with the answer.

Love as always, Al

P.S. Your only trouble is you use such fuckin bad langwich.

AL TO JILL WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

[date ?] - noted in pencil: could be anytime when he happened upon a WU station.

LD796MWY (CDU654) INTL

CD SANSORIGINE VIA RCA

EFM MRS ALFRED DEGARZIA JR.

5436 RIDGEWOOD CT CHGO

ALL MY LOVE DEAREST. MANY HAPPY RETURNS. KISSES.

ALFRED DE GRAZIA

EVERY Monday at dawn the Division would strike out on maneuvers that would end with a return to its encampment on Friday night. The site, the conditions and the training were chosen and formed to emulate the kind of desert warfare that was occurring even then in North Africa, where the Italians, British, Australians, New Zealanders, and Germans had been chasing each other back and forth since 1940, and where, at the moment when the Lieutenant's Platoon arrived in the desert, the British Eighth Army has defeated the Axis forces at El Alamein. American and British armies have just disembarked at several points extending from Casablanca in Morocco to Bone in Algeria and are clearing the last of sporadic resistance from French troops loyal to the Petain Government in Vichy. Meanwhile, new German forces are pouring into Tunis. Unless he could make it over there soon, there would not be much need for desert training in itself.

One important gap, he could realize, existed in the training. There was no air force, whether friend or foe. Two of the most important elements of modern warfare were missing in the mock war: friendly planes to reconnoiter and bomb the enemy panzers and troops, and the planes that gather intelligence from the air and dive-bomb your installations and columns. The accompanying ground-air coordination could not be practiced, either. The same was true at Fort Bliss where there were a great many planes that could properly train with the troops. Southern California was also loaded with aircraft in training

and readiness. When on maneuvers, the anti-aircraft batteries had to practice against sleeves instead of live targets. The shock and surprise of the piloted plane descending upon you from nowhere are inimitable; they were missing from the otherwise elaborate simulation of the desert campaign.

Nevertheless it was probably the best training that the Army afforded, and he liked all of it except the part that kept his wife far away, first in San Francisco, then with their old friends from University, Bill and June King, who lived in Hollywood. Bill worked for Walt Disney, helping to draw an infinite series of cartoons on winning the war; his studio was the greatest single workshop of domestic propaganda. The Lieutenant's nearest geographical reference was an ugly desert stop called Rice; you got there by hitchhiking on some passing truck; a train labored through there around midnight on Friday and could be caught up with at a trot, whence, after it halted at Palm Springs, a bus could be found that ultimately arrived at the Greyhound Station in Los Angeles sometime Saturday morning. Then a taxi could deliver you to June's Hollywood ranch-house and your lover. After a few hours of food, sex and talk, considerately arranged by June, the first in her large kitchen, then in the spare room, finally in the living room, all has been done, the Other Life has been renewed, and it was time to start back, reversing the order of travel. On Christmas, the Command indulged him with an extra day. Other soldiers had the same idea and the trips were not only complicated but also crowded, forever being delayed. On his third trip, busing in from Palm Springs, a drunken soldier lost control of himself, and started up a continual stream of invective directed at the world, suggestive remarks to a pair of women behind the Lieutenant, and anti-authoritative generalities that might even have been taken personally by the Lieutenant, since no other officer was around. He turned and told the man to shut up. To no effect. As the bus pulled into the station, he stood up and called out, "All military personnel stay where you are! All civilians please disembark." No problem. The bus driver sat by, the civilians descended in good order, the soldiers sat where they were. "All military personnel will disembark now, except that Man there, pointing!" No problem. The military descended in orderly file and disappeared as fast as they could. To the last of them, he said, "Send

the first M.P. you meet over here double time, get it? You, come with me!" he ordered the man. "You are under arrest!" "The soldier made no attempt to escape. He began to plead innocence, "All I was doing was sitting there looking out of the window." He whined and protested like a character out of Dickens. "Never mind that! Stand where you are!" he was warned. The M.P.s came up and saluted. This man was causing an obscene drunken disturbance, they were told, "I want him in jail." "We can't keep him, sir, unless you come and prefer charges." "O.K. Here is my phone number, call me in an hour." Away they went, and he arrived late at the Hollywood cottage. The M.P.'s phoned as they had promised. "I will not prefer charges," he told them, "especially if you let him cool his heels for a couple of hours." The incident was closed. The man would hardly have time to get drunk again before having to return to his Post.

On the way back to his encampment, the sorrow of parting was counterattacked by the military vision only when he left Rice in the pre-dawn. Then, in the gloom surrounding the road could be perceived through the headlights of the car the first elements of the Sixth Armored Division, blacked out, of course, unlike the taxicab, ghostlike. As the sky lightened, more and more reconnaissance cars could be seen, half-tracks, and then he could hear and smell the foul snorts of the steeds of war. The tanks began to show up and spread over the dunes -- as far as the eye could see, which was farther with every minute of dawning. He knew the order of battle, he knew the order of march, he knew that his own battalion was in the rearguard, practically the last unit to move. He had time to arrive at his tent by the dirt path, pull off his clothes, dress in camouflaged fatigues and arm himself, and find his platoon, with its trucks beginning to warm up, its cannons hitched to them since Saturday.

He was now Executive Officer and, lo!, there came his Battery Commander, portly Captain Dorset, waddling out of the morning mist, receiving salutes. Captain Love had been promoted to Battalion Exec, a good choice by the Colonel. Dorset had come in new to the battalion and battery; he was from Maryland, with a commission from college, and promotions somewhere in irrelevant commands. The Lieutenant and, by a first consensus all around, the others of the battery, hadn't liked him, thought him a panty-waist, with his fat and his porky

pouting face.

He felt better about Dorset now. Dorset had shown guts and decency. When the Battery took off on a long hot march, the Lieutenant and the others joked that he was in poor shape and couldn't make it, huffing and puffing, red-faced, through the sand. But he stuck it out. That was one thing. Also, despite his sulky face, he was fair-minded and did not pick on anyone. That was remarked.

And he let it be known that he was not anti-semitic, that he had some Jewish in him along the line. It might seem strange: why should this come up? It came up incidentally and without the Lieutenant's prompting. He just said he didn't like anti-semitism and that was it. But it came by way of comment on the running noisy quarrel between the Battalion Medical Doctor, working out of his ambulance, happily named "The Butcher Shop," and the Battalion Dentist, with a covered truck of chairs and infernal devices. The one was named Belosky, the other Berman, both of them lieutenants, the first a full-voiced large baritone, dark and handsome, of Polish-Italian descent, the second heavy-set, of round soft features and round glasses, tenor-voiced, of Polish-Jewish origin. The voices are mentioned because Lt. Belosky would frequently start up an argument with Berman, who would vigorously respond, and usually the argument would end with the two loudly calling each other, respectively, a dumb Polack and a dumb Jew. No matter what the source of conflict, it would end up the same way, whether a missing analgesic or a hand at cards.

Our Lieutenant would endure these scenes as did the other officers of the battalion, craftily lending respect to Berman's assertions where otherwise Belosky might think himself ahead. He was content that his fellow officers did not take sides. Yet it was remarkable that no one tried forcefully to put an end to the nonsense, especially to the strident assertions of Belosky, that usually started up the fracas. Perhaps they thought little of the annoyance, and no one wanted to squelch anybody. Perhaps there was this, which was important: that Americans, being such strong individualists, do not regard such defamatory exchanges as collective debates, involving the community, but as personal disputes between two men, with nothing larger at stake. The Medic developed no following whatsoever, a fact supporting this

theory.

Anyhow there was a lot of cantankerous interaction, what with the sandstorms, the boredom, the drinking, and the aggressive card games that were set up each evening in one or another of their pyramidal tents.



Al with the new Garand M1 rifle, Mohave desert

JILL TO AL DECEMBER 9, 1942

Darling -

I've lost your address & you haven't written to me yet, so this may never get to you but here's hoping. I went shopping today and to my great amazement uncovered vol. III of War and Peace (I & II out of stock - sic!) and sent it to you, maybe also to wrong address. Hope not, it's as rare as radium, apparently.

I also got a little pill box, very pretty, for Irmie and a haircut for myself. I window-shopped extensively & have come to the following conclusions:

Daddy, I want a brand-new:

yellow thin wool scarf

" cotton sweater

Pretty dress

" hat

Mules (bedroom slippers)

Cotton quilted housecoat

Could also use:

Compact (not really)

Bubble bath (not really)

No camera. Just lost interest.

What do you want?

We've been spending a very quiet time of it. I've learned how to change diapers and bottle the baby & Ann leaves me alone with him occasionally now, to my distress. Saturday night people came for cocktails. Then all went to the concert. I didn't want to go so I stayed with the baby. I was sort of tight but read through Nelson Algren's "Never Come Morning", a fine novel about Chicago Polacks.

Got my reservation for Friday Daylight and also wrote June. Their number is Hillside 3369 (Hi 3369). Address: 1338 N. Spaulding.

I miss you lots & am awfully sick of writing letters. I wrote seven yesterday (Sunday), all of them duty notes.

Gosh - I'll see you again this weekend. Please write if you can. Much love to you, darling. - Jill

HE must not have been reading her letters with his customary literal rigor. Nor was he near to where these things were sold. So when the time came, and it seemed as if he might get to her by Christmas, he pondered the question of gifts, visited the undersupplied Desert PX, and walked out \$9.50 poorer but with just what she (he) needed: a Sleeping Bag! Perfect for the Camp Follower. And she was such an Outdoor Girl! It could even hold the two of them in tight embrace the whole night through! He carried it with him when the time came to make the harrowing voyage to Hollywood. [[graz45; graz160]He said to her, look what I've brought for you, Merry Christmas, and she did what was quite foreign to her nature: she burst into tears. It was extraordinary, that sleeping bag; it was never used, almost forever, but he encountered it whenever a move was to be made, looming in his

baggage and hers like the hull of a boat turned turtle. And then finally it was worn until dissolved into a frayed rag, in circumstances that can await the telling.



The Lieutenant.



The Lieutenant strutting down Hollywood Hills

He was happy enough himself in his thick blanket roll that he spread on the desert floor when night fell. He liked especially to be detailed to reconnoiter for the Battalion. Then he might leave in the evening and sleep alone under the immense desert sky, careful to find a furrow or obstacle that a tank or vehicle would not dip into or climb over. Nighttime traffic in the desert was heavy, off the road, and poly-directional. Stories of rattlesnakes crawling in to share the warmth abounded; not much could be done about them, except to move over and give them room.

Then came the light of morning over the dunes, ever more gorgeous, resketching daily the sharp rough edges of low mountain ridges by filling in a background and foreground for them composed of oranges, reds, yellows, finally blues, and tan sands, punctuated by a cactus or a Joshua tree; then, unless the movement of vehicles was

destroying the limpidity of the air, a brilliant sun arose, to be experienced happily at its coolest during these days of its nadir. It would be hot as hell by springtime.

He was thoroughly at home in his environment -- military and natural. He had been nominated for First Lieutenant. He felt that the future was proper, too; the Sixth Armored Division was ready to go; it could go only to where he wanted to go, to North Africa. An order came in that fortified one's expectations: Go through your rosters and consider any soldiers who might have evidenced sympathies for the enemy and would not be fully trustworthy; when such are found, process them for discharge from the Armed Forces. The order excited a certain amount of soul-searching and casting about for likely spies or deserters. Battery "A" finally was able to focus its suspicions upon an ugly blonde farm boy from North Dakota who had been heard to say that the War was unnecessary and, anyhow, we had no business to be wasting ourselves overseas. The Lieutenant was looked up to on such matters, as he should have been. What do you think about Private Fred Hermann? He pondered. He talked with Hermann. Hermann smiled secretively and shook his head when he was asked whether he believed in the war. He was embarrassed at the attention he was receiving. He was one of the sloppiest soldiers in the Battery. For its part, the Battalion should probably evidence a serious effort at fulfilling the terms of the order: at least one man in a thousand should be unpatriotic. So it was determined that Private Hermann should be processed for discharge. He departed for home, looking a little embarrassed, but with the same secretive smile.

End of December 1942 letters

