BEGGING FOR CHOCOLATES

A Story of World War II Italy

Edited with commentary by Richard Allison

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A story of World War II Italy

A COMPILATION OF LETTERS,
JOURNAL ENTRIES, INTERVIEWS,
POEMS, CARTOONS AND HISTORY

EDITED WITH COMMENTARY BY

RICHARD ALLISON

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Operation Thunderclap and
The Black March: Two Stories
From the Unstoppable
91st Bomb Group (2014)

COVER PHOTO: When Lt. Dick Stroud mailed home this snapshot taken in Naples of himself standing next to a mother and her three children he wrote that the pictures of "...the streets, people, buildings, etc., show up much better than they really are..." Dick was prohibited by army regulations from photographing war damaged places, so he took photos of the natives instead, to convey what the situation was really like. Capt. Bill Allison wrote from Naples during the same time frame, explaining that an 80% devaluation of the Italian lira at war's outbreak created a humanitarian disaster in an overpopulated country: "There is a great shortage of milk here. All of it is rationed to children under one-year old. There is not enough even for that. In 1943 almost one-half of the children born died before they were one-year old from malnutrition." Conditions of poverty in Naples had ameliorated somewhat when this photo was taken in January 1945, but 300 miles north in the area of the front, the starvation situation remained critical. Note the USAAF "crush hat" worn by Dick and the bare legs of the children, an Italian custom even in wintertime. — *Sarah Stroud Ollison photo collection*

REAR COVER PHOTO: A G.I. stands reverently before the altar of a bomb-damaged Catholic church, Acerno, Italy, 1943 —*Office of War Information photo*

"When I see the people here, I am thankful you folks have the food, fuel and shelter and live in a country where there is enough for all. I took so much for granted before coming here. I have also observed that the closer men live to danger and suffering, the more grateful they are for things that ordinarily go unnoticed."

Bill
Christmas Eve, Signa, Italy 1944


Berne
Switzerland
Ascona
Brenner Pass
ITALY
Austria
Bolzano
Milan
Vicenza
Treviso
Trieste
Venice
Po River
Bologna
Serchio
Pianoro
Pisa
Florence
Leghorn
Corsica
U.S. 12th Air Force
Rome
Anzio
Foggia
Caserta
AFHQ
Naples
U.S. 15th Air Force
Salerno
Bari
NOVEMBER 1944

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the Italians whom Bill saw close up, to those he described as decent and hard-working in the face of adversity, to those who were not *Fascisti* but rather just ordinary people trying desperately to survive in the midst of a horrible situation. It is also dedicated to the citizen American soldiers depicted in the story: Mark Renick, Jack King, John Lesesne, Dick Stroud, Bill Newnan, Leon Weckstein, Wade McCree and thousands more like them; to those who manned the snow posts and those who dug their shelters into the sides of hills for protection; to those who typed and those who directed mortar fire; to those who lived in the big house; to those who saw the angry enemy up close; to the poets and roosters; to the Americans who wrote **H**ome regularly whether or not there was news to report.

And also to my father Bill Allison.

Richard Allison
Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan
May 2017

"This was the most heavily fortified area along the entire front—held by German forces not materially inferior in strength to those which would be attacking. Under unfavorable conditions of weather and terrain it seemed to me an appalling undertaking. Even with overwhelming support of our air forces, I thought it would be a difficult and costly venture even if it could succeed."

LIEUTENANT GENERAL LUCIEN K. TRUSCOTT, JR. CRITICIZING THE PIANORO BATTLE-PLAN OF HIS SUPERIOR GENERAL MARK W. CLARK FOR THE FINAL CAMPAIGN IN ITALY. FUTA PASS, ITALY, DECEMBER 1944

"A certain division in Italy has had 400 days of actual combat, casualties have been heavy and eventually the men get into a frame of mind in which the only future they see is death."

CONGRESSWOMAN CLARE BOOTHE LUCE, QUOTED IN *STARS AND STRIPES MEDITERRANEAN*, ROME, ITALY, JANUARY 4, 1945

"Today, March 16, [1945] I am in receipt of a letter from you which shows that the United States Government is barring the Soviet representatives from the Berne negotiations. The U.S. Government's refusal to admit Soviet representatives to the Berne negotiations came as a complete surprise to the Soviet Government and is inexplicable in terms of the relations of alliance existing between our two countries."

PEOPLE'S COMMISSAR FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE USSR VYACHESLAV MOLOTOV, PROTESTING THE SOVIET UNION BEING EXCLUDED FROM PARTICIPATING IN SECRET NEGOTIATIONS WITH SS GENERAL KARL WOLFF OVER THE SURRENDER OF THE GERMAN ARMY IN ITALY (LETTER RESPONSE TO U.S. AMBASSADOR W. AVERELL HARRIMAN)

"We can let the work cover the romance, and the romance cover the work."

OSS DIRECTOR ALLEN W. DULLES TO EMPLOYEE/SPY/MISTRESS MARY BANCROFT. BERNE, SWITZERLAND, 1942-45

If I were an artist, with nothing to do,
I'd paint a picture, a composite view,
Of historic Italy, in which I'd show,
Visions of contrasts, the high and the low.
There'd be towering mountains, a deep blue sea;
Filthy brats yelling "Carmella" at me,
High plumed horses, and colorful carts;
Two toned tresses on hustling tarts.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN, ALLIED FORCES HEADQUARTERS CASERTA, ITALY 1944-45 (TO BE CONTINUED)

*"Let those at **H**ome see Rome."*

BILL—SOMEWHERE IN ITALY, 1945
(ALSO TO BE CONTINUED)

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Allied Forces Headquarters shoulder patch

INTRODUCTION

December 24, 1944

"What have I gotten myself into?" Captain William "Bill" Allison despaired, as he sat at a table and watched the crude, wire-suspended incandescent light bulb flicker. This latest mess resulted when Army electricians jury-rigged a lighting system up to a new generator that was promised to work better than the one it replaced.

Bill sighed. "There are many challenges here," he thought. "Self-inflicted ones."

A month and one-half had passed since Bill left Detroit for Europe. Now he was alone in a small upstairs office in a drafty baron's mansion in Signa, Italy, not far from Florence to the southwest, and also not far from the Nazi army to the north. "I might as well be in China," Bill wailed, slowly shaking his head as he thought of how the war had turned a popular resort area into an empty and desolate wasteland. He fantasized about phoning home.

Bill shuffled papers on the table before him, a partial draft of his second military report for his superior, Major Renick. He had struggled with it for two hours this morning and now in the afternoon was back at it. His first report, done the week earlier had been easy for him to write. Since then Bill had completed additional inspection trips to different forward supply areas, but he was at a temporary loss now for new ideas to submit. Renick, three hundred miles to the south at theater headquarters at "MTOUSA" was due this second report in a couple of days.

"MTOUSA" Bill thought. Who came up with that acronym?

Bill glanced at the nearby "log sheet" of letters he had written to his wife Dotty and two-year old son, Davy, and also to his parents. He had mailed out a total of fifty-seven letters and had received none in return. He knew this was not due to the failure of his family to write. "They are waiting for me at Caserta," Bill thought, or rather imagined (or desperately hoped). "Batches of letters." "MTOUSA."

Bill ruminated upon the circumstances that had brought him here. Part of it was complaints, he knew, complaints written in the form of scores of angry letters to Congress, authored by G.I.s (or the parents of G.I.'s) serving in the Apennine

Mountains on the Italian Front. With the advent of cold weather these soldiers suffered. They needed more stoves and the fuel to run them, more tents and building materials to bolster the tents from slashing winter winds, more protective wool clothing, boots, greatcoats and raincoats. They needed more of everything, including the "Three Bs" — bread, bandages and bullets. The gist of their grievance was that from D-Day forward the U.S. Fifth Army in Italy had become a "forgotten army," an army that for one reason or another (be it impassable roads or the re-allocation of precious resources to a more vital warfront in France) was not being restocked adequately. The U.S. Fifth Army and British Eighth Army still faced a determined foe in Italy — approximately 300,000 Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht soldiers. The issue had sprouted political legs and the U.S. Congress was now directly involved in the plight of the U.S. Fifth Army. Bill had followed the news stories about this controversy before coming over.

Bill thought of his son Davy at the Detroit Zoo shortly before he left. An elephant enchanted the boy, and it was a most endearing moment to watch his son attempt to formulate a new three-syllable word. "Elphant" Davy said, gleefully. "Elphant, elphant!" When the boy heard his parents affectionately correct him enough times, out popped "Elephant!"

While Bill was stationed in Detroit, the word came down the chain of command from Headquarters, U.S. Army Transportation Corps, Washington D.C., that an officer was to be sent overseas from the Automotive Tank Command to assess the transport of supplies to the Italian front. "I drew the short straw," Bill laughed to himself, mentally reliving this event. Bill had not been "ordered" to go, it had been subtler than that. Because he was an eleven-year Army reservist, it was suggested to Captain Allison that it might look good on his record if he "volunteered," so he did so in lieu of being commanded to go.

Bill reflected on his parting. What a surreal experience, he thought, and not an easy one. First, there had been the farewell with his youngest brother's widow and her year and one-half old son, Jim, or "J.B." Dick Allison, J.B.'s father, a P-47 fighter pilot died in a 1943 airplane accident in Wales five days after J.B. was born. Then there was the farewell to his parents who lived on a small farm in western New York State. They feared for Bill, of course, as they had for Dick, and moreover were unsettled about whether the draft might take their other two sons, teachers and married with children. "I'm not going over in a combat status," Bill told them.

Bill tried to convince Dotty to believe the same. As a good soldier's wife, what choice did she have? She reminded him however, of that affidavit he signed in 1942 consenting to go on active duty. Active duty for Bill had turned out easy for the first couple of years, all stateside with his family, first teaching courses in Chicago for an Army Signal Corps school and then working on vehicle inventions at the Tank Command in Detroit, something he loved to do. "Sorry it didn't last, Dotty," Bill acknowledged to his wife, imagining wistfully she could now hear him at a distance of 5,000 miles.

Bill reminisced on the many times he played soldier for two weeks during the summers at Camp Grayling, Michigan. It had been spit and polish inspections, tenting, maneuvers and war games. Bill graduated from the University of Michigan College of Engineering in 1933 (being elected to Tau Beta Pi Honor Society) and was commissioned through R.O.T.C. He needed the tuition assistance that R.O.T.C. provided and two careers seemed a good idea at the time. He would end up with two pensions he reckoned, one civilian and the other military. He did not envision another world war, however.

Camp Grayling and reserve army life had been nothing like Italy, 1944. Bill was re-thinking things, and particularly whether he wanted to stay in the Army for a full term reserve career. He did not wish to experience what he now experienced ever again.

Bill glanced at the red, white and blue shoulder patch on his officer's blouse hanging on a nearby hook. He had worn this blouse the previous evening for the first time since leaving the States, the occasion being a Christmas party at "the big house," his name for the mansion he now lived in on a temporary basis. The patch bore two stitched letters in the art deco style, "AF," and he carried this blouse today to this room should he need it for extra warmth. "Allied Forces Headquarters" Bill mumbled. "MTOUSA, Mediterranean Theater of Operations United States Army." What a mouthful, he thought.

Most of the other officers and men at the big house wore a similar patriotic-colored shoulder patch only rectangular shaped, slightly tapered at the top, with a large letter "A" and a smaller number "5" on it, signifying U.S. Fifth Army. The background for this patch was the silhouette of a mosque, symbolic of the victorious African campaign. The U.S. Fifth Army had been engaged in continuous combat operations since being formed in early January 1943, and Bill was keenly aware that to many of the officers at the big house this mosque patch, along with

sleeve hash marks signified almost two years of very arduous duty. Bill respected these long-term veterans and was careful about what he said in their presence, being mindful of his rookie status as a G.I. overseas. These men served at a time when his command MTOUSA had been "NATOUSA — North African Theater of Operations U.S. Army."

Bill mentally laughed at the length of the upper combat chain of command. Americans Lucien Truscott and Mark Clark, Britain Harold Alexander, Eisenhower, Marshall… and the lowest of these was three stars! Bill's commanding general (MTOUSA himself) was in administrative command with three stars: Lieutenant General Joseph T. McNarney, USA. The other major military leader in the theatre was British General Richard McCreery who commanded the British Eighth Army and reported to Clark.

Bill had been instructed to make his reports to MTOUSA only, that is, he was not to share any of his findings and recommendations with members of the U.S. Fifth Army Transportation Section, his host at the big house. MTOUSA expected an independent evaluation from Bill, also from a Major Cowan who accompanied Bill on his trip north. This circumstance was known to the commanding officer of the U.S. Fifth Army Transportation Section, who had cooperated with the officers from MTOUSA. There was a built-in tension created by this requirement, however, and Bill had to be mindful of it, and also respectful of the seniority of the officers on the U.S. Fifth Army staff. His and Major Cowan's jobs were not to ruffle feathers, but rather report and recommend in the manner instructed.

The Christmas party he had gone to the night before had been inappropriate, Bill believed. There was Army brass dining, drinking, smoking and making merry, couples "dating" and at least one notable member of Congress making the rounds, someone who had stayed behind after the Congressional Committee on Military Affairs had gone home. Bill had been to the war front and seen with his own eyes how G.I.s struggled in horrible conditions. The rear echelon lived well, he saw. It had been a real Saturday night event, with a tinge of glitz and no-holds-barred partying.

Of course none of this could go into his weekly reports.

A blast of cold winter wind buffeted the massive outside window-shutters that were closed snugly. The giant window hung in French door fashion and was covered on the inside by highly-polished hinged wooden doors that were latched shut. For all intents and purposes, Bill felt as if he was sealed inside a cell

of a fortress. The room was small, almost nook-like, but had a high ceiling. Bill marveled at the degree of Italian craftsmanship that had gone into the making of the tight-fitting wooden fixtures that sealed the windows. He had seldom seen anything handmade of wood of that high quality before. The same could be said for the cabinetry, table and sole chair in the room. Still, the small chamber could not escape being drafty, even with its tight-fitting window joinery. A heating vent in the floor opened to a larger downstairs room, one with a small fire burning in it; this helped some but not much. The room that he slept in with its own fire was less humid but lacked privacy. Bill had sought out this closet-office to be alone; he needed to spread out his notes, collect his thoughts and prepare his not-to-be-shared report.

As Bill pondered what to write, not too far away nineteen-year-old Specialist 4th Class Sergeant John L. "Jack" King of Bellefontaine, OH, a railroad town of 6,000, thought of the Christmas that his parents and five-year younger brother, Dan, were about to have. Jack missed his family and wished he could be home to celebrate the holidays, as did soldiers everywhere, but Jack was not unhappy. He had been in Italy for six months now and his division, the 91st Infantry, referred to as the Old West "Powder River Division," or variously nicknamed "Pine Tree Division" after its shoulder patch, had participated in the liberation of Rome, Florence and Pisa and even partially breached the Gothic Line at Futa Pass, elevation 3,000'. As a member of this hard-fighting outfit, one of eleven U.S. Fifth Army divisions now facing-off against the Germans, Jack, who had a year of college at the University of Dayton, had been exempted from combat duty due to a happenstance of fate that played to his benefit. While training to become a "dogface rifleman" at Camp Adair, Oregon, the Army checked Jack's service record and discovered that he had taken high school courses in typewriting and shorthand. Without his asking, Jack was assigned to the 91st Division Headquarters Company, promoted to sergeant and placed in charge of two enlisted men. He worked in the adjutant general's office, a heated space with 150 others approximately fifteen miles behind the line, primarily typing up leave and travel orders.

Favorable duty status notwithstanding, wartime Italy had been no vacation. Like everyone else Jack wondered what would happen to him next and he knew there were no assurances. On the positive side, things European had intrigued Jack. He had taken to maintaining a diary, being careful not to write about wartime-prohibited subject matters, but rather recording the names and tidbits about

places he stayed at or visited. He purchased his small diary book (entitled "My Life in the Service") likely at a PX and every page contained a motivational quotation such as this: "Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier" — *Samuel Johnson*.

As regards the wintertime lull, as year-end approached Jack recorded men being given time off: "Issued leave orders for 375 men to visit Florence," he wrote. "We have been here in Pietramala on Route 65 for a month and one-half," he added, "a winter resort in peacetime." "I hope we can stay [here] during the winter." "If all we do is hold the line maybe I'll learn how to ski."

Jack loved and missed his family, yes, but Italy had opened horizons for this nineteen year-old. Alpine skiing in Dayton had not been an option! Gary Cooper-like in appearance and standing 6' 5", Jack wore a perpetual grin and possessed the optimism of youth.

Shivering, Bill reached for his blouse and slipped it on. Since he wasn't wearing a necktie and his gabardine dress pants, which he left on a hanger in his bunkroom, he was technically out of his "pinks" uniform. This did not concern him, however. The door was closed and no one would see him. Last night had reminded him how comfortable his heavy Army blouse could be. It should be comfortable to wear, he thought — he had paid a pretty price to have it made to order at Hart Schaffner & Marx in Chicago. Bill tried to be a snappy dresser when he could. The same was true for his wife, Dotty. The two made for a strikingly handsome couple; Dotty was ten years younger than Bill, and Bill was proud of that.

His status at the Christmas party had been unusual, Bill reflected. Here he was only a captain, a junior officer, but that small special shoulder patch singled him out. "I see you are from headquarters," someone would invariably say, starting a conversation, and the next question invariably would be, "What are you doing here?"

In the receiving line at the Christmas party Bill stuck close to Major Cowan and let him do most of the talking. Then Bill was introduced to the Congresswoman. "I see you're in the Transportation Corps," she said, focusing on his lapel insignia after spotting his shoulder patch. "Here to review the supply situation, are you?" Bill blushed and nodded affirmatively. "What is your assessment as to why our troops aren't getting what they need?" Grinning defensively, Bill mentioned road conditions due to terrible winter weather and managed to deflect her follow-up questions about "inadequate" planning.

A moment later, moving down the reception line, Bill smiled as he remembered this politician giving a fiery keynote speech at the 1944 Republican National Convention in Chicago. He had heard it on the radio. Roosevelt had chosen to run for a fourth term and the Republicans were spike hot about it. Over the airwaves she vehemently accused the President of mismanaging the war and causing undue American fatalities. To wild cheers she harangued delegates about FDR's turning American democracy into a "dictatorial bumbledom." Later, during the campaign, she went even further and accused Roosevelt of lying to the American people. She argued that he had set up the war on hapless China by furnishing Japan with the oil to fight it, and then invited the attack on Pearl Harbor by precipitously cutting Japan off from the same oil. Bill remembered well her most vitriolic charge: that FDR was "the only American President who ever lied us into a war because he did not have the political courage to lead us into it." The no-holds-barred rhetoric of 1944 had been unprecedented, Bill remembered.

And the Roosevelt camp retaliated with its own cheap shot: "A sharp-tongued glamor girl of forty," they branded this Congresswoman.

The volleys between the Republican "glamor girl" and traditional cigar-smoking southern Democrat "good ol' boys" proved to be something fresh for U.S. politics, and Bill did not know exactly what to make of it. Election day was over but if the conduct of the war in Italy was now to be a continuation of political mud-throwing, then Bill, a Republican himself, had no desire to become either a named or unnamed source. The lady from Congress did have moxie, Bill appreciated — and she was vivacious, even at her "advanced" age. Bill thought of her in her black silk from the night before — unique for a warfront, he knew. The other females at the party, USO girls, WACs, Army nurses and civilian employees, many younger and some quite attractive, did their best at sprucing-up but did not stand a chance against the well-fitting black silk.

Nor for that matter, did they against Clare Boothe Luce's smile, wit, unending laughter and aura of self-confidence.

Bill knew of the politician's circumstances. Prior to becoming elected Luce had been editor of *Vanity Fair* society magazine and the Broadway scriptwriter who wrote the fabulously successful avant-garde play *The Women*. He knew she was married to one of the most powerful men in America, a die-hard leading Republican contributor, and that she had "stolen" this man, Henry "Harry" Luce

from his wife and mother of his two young sons, delightfully scandalizing New York society.

Bill thought again of her rousing convention speech; he had liked it at the time.

Bill believed that she had done nothing wrong in asking him the questions that she did, that in fact these were the same questions he had been sent to ask. He was not at liberty to provide her with information, however, and the subtlety did not escape Bill that she might be the real reason he was here. What the sixteen double-chinned fuddy-duddy male members on the Military Affairs Committee had to say about their inspection visit to the war fronts would probably not get much reported, Bill reckoned — but definitely would in her case. Her husband Harry Luce controlled huge parts of the publishing industry, and the words of his wife would be read.

Bill and Dotty Allison, newlyweds, December 1939

"Luce" was a married name that worked well for her, Bill knew, but he also appreciated that she went by Clare Boothe Luce and never Clare Luce. Using her maiden name sent a message that she was her own person, that she had an identity apart from her husband's.

The wind outside howled.

Bill reflected on what he had recently witnessed in the mountains and knew that the same strong wind now bore down on others who lacked his good fortune to experience only draftiness in a baron's mansion. "I will finish this report," he resolved, again looking at the flickering light bulb, "by candlelight if necessary." "I've got to help those guys," he thought. This, his second weekly report was more

of a challenge than the first. Was he running out of ideas? Bill knew that as a lowly captain he was not likely to change the outcome of this war. Still, there had to be *something* he could do to improve living conditions at the front.

Bill's family worried about his being painfully underweight and possibly not physically strong enough to endure what might be asked of him. He promised that he would try to eat heartily and take care of himself. Bill had left Dotty and Davy with his parents in New York State, but expected that by now she and Davy were back in Detroit.

Bill had seen the mid-December 1944 newsreels of Mussolini's "Il Duce" spewing forth vitriolic hatred while rallying his base in Milan. The dictator's reformed *Fascisti* divisions had been trained by Hitler's forces properly this time, and would soon be spilling southwards, hoping not only to destroy the Allied armies but also to kill Italians loyal to the Italian King, who had turned against Mussolini. God, what a mess, Bill thought. It was an Italian bloodlust *vendetta,* a civil war within a world war. Bill had flown north and witnessed from the air a country half-destroyed. How much more destruction would there be before peace came?

What neither Bill nor the American people had seen or read about were the many behind-the-scenes efforts going on: the involvement of religious leaders, industrialists, the neutral Swiss and the secret Allied intelligence communities, the American OSS and British SIS. The censored news outlets did not report on these activities.

As Bill contemplated what to put in his report, Captain John M. Lesesne was grateful for a peaceful Christmas Eve. The 1941 honors graduate of The Citadel had stayed at his command post most of this day. Jerry had been mercifully quiet. With time to reminisce, John looked at the first pages of a small pocket diary that he had started on November 4, 1944, the day before he led his command, Company "B" of 100th Chemical Mortar Battalion up Highway 65 to take its position on the line. John and his platoon leaders had made an inspection trip to the forward areas earlier that day during the daylight hours. On this, the date of a baptism to "firing," as mortar crews referred to it, platoons two and three were inserted on the line. First Platoon remained temporarily behind at what was known as "company rear." Normally a company would have four platoons and four companies would constitute a battalion, but in the case of the 100th Chemical Mortar Battalion the organization was done in threes — Companies "A", "B" and "C" constituted

the 100th, with each company initially having three platoons. The intent was to bring the number of platoons up to four per company.

Thinking back to that eventful day, John uttered under his breath: "A month and a half finished." After a pause he asked himself: "How much longer?" wondering when offensive operations might commence. There had been considerable talk and some preparation but so far no orders.

John, who had briefly attended Episcopal seminary prior to joining the Army (but had no intention of going back) made a Christmas Eve prayer of thanks to the Lord that none of his men ("boys" as he called them) had become a casualty. A couple of Purple Hearts had been awarded, yes, but for minor wounds only. John knew that this string of good luck was not the case with the other mortar companies and the infantrymen in the area, or for that matter, even the far off artillerymen who waged daily duels with their enemy counterpart. There had been action since coming up and yes, John himself had experienced close calls and was aware of Germans and Americans killed, but again, no one from Company "B" had been seriously hurt.

And what a relief it was, he admitted to himself that the action now seemed to be tapering off with the onset of winter. John had no reservations about what he was doing and the need to do it; he had wanted to go to West Point but could not do so because of his eyesight. The Citadel, near where he had been raised in Charleston, SC, had been his second choice for a military education. John had volunteered for overseas duty and he wanted to be and was in command. The lives of approximately 155 "boys", the Company "B" strength, were in his care[1] and on top of that another twenty-three attached to his command from the 100th Chemical Mortar Battalion — his ammo detail. These boys looked up to him, at age twenty-four, as the "old man."

Glancing at his diary John read what he wrote about that first day, the date of insertion. He knew censorship rules prohibited soldiers from keeping diaries, but he kept one anyway. If it was not in his pocket, he kept it hidden and locked. John's handwriting was so compact that even if one did chance upon the tiny booklet, reading it would be extremely difficult without eyestrain.

> *Sunday 5 Nov. 1944 A rather odd experience, moving up to the front for the first time, me heading a convoy of jeeps, no lights at all, dark as H — except for gun flashes and searchlights. We had to cross one stretch*

of road on which Jerry was placing interdiction fire. I wondered if the boys were scared — they should have been — riding thru the dark, not knowing what they were going into or when they would be shelled.

Mortar work was dangerous, and one knowledgeable on this kind of warfare opined, "The guys who operate them [Ed: the mortars] are at a big disadvantage. Because of the mortar's limited range, they have to work so close to the front that they are a favorite target for snipers…"[2] That said however, belonging to a chemical mortar battalion was not as perilous as being an infantry mortar man or even more dangerous, a *patrolling* infantryman where daily probes to find the enemy resulted in casualties. The winter had given a partial respite for the patrollers, but not much of one.

The U.S. Army history for the 100th Chemical Mortar Battalion reflected that when organized in August 1944, the strength authorized was thirty-nine officers and 556 enlisted men including medical. John had no way of knowing at this time that when the war ended in early May 1945, only five would be killed and five wounded from his battalion.[3] Had this information been available to him, he likely would not have backed off his statement that his "boys" should have been scared on the day they inserted. That drive in the dark, as he indicated, had been eerie.

The range for all classes of U.S. Army mortars was between 200 and 4,500 yards and the longer distance might be extended some depending on the lay of the land. The mainstay of the U.S. heavy mortar arsenal was the 4.2-inch diameter chemical mortar, that weighed 333 lbs. and could deliver high explosive or white phosphorus shells weighing up to twelve lbs. at a maximum rate of fire of five rounds a minute.[4] The 4.2" had a riffled barrel that was unusual for a mortar, and the spinning shells required no stabilizing tailfins. One of John's platoons might operate three to five of these mortars at a time, and a dramatic photograph showing a nighttime firing of one of these behemoths reveals a crew of five, all backs turned away from the muzzle at the moment of detonation. These men bent over as far as possible. A mortar blast in one's face was definitely something to avoid!

The 4.2" could also be used to deliver toxic liquid fillings such as mustard or phosgene gas — the agents that made World War I trench warfare uniquely horrible. John was thankful that gas warfare had not erupted in the present war, at least so far. In case the enemy resorted to poisonous gas, however, John was

aware that the U.S. Army maintained stockpiles of chemical shells near the front for retaliation.

The other weapon used by mortar battalions was the more portable 81 mm (3.19 inch) M1 Mortar that weighed 130 lbs. and was designed to deliver conventional rounds, smoke and sixty-second illuminating star shells.[5] Finally, U.S. infantrymen used the M2 Mortar, a 60 mm muzzle-loading tube weighing forty-two lbs. that could shoot a three pound shell 2,000 yards (a peashooter when compared to a 4.2"). John never fired these little ones, but he heard them fired in combat.

The shoulder patch the 100th wore was as ugly as it was cleverly vulgar: the number "14020" appeared with the "100" in gold weave and "4.2" in pink, both numbers set against an olive background. It was the outside striping, however, that gave it a masculine identity: a pointy mortar shell thrust upwards nestled between two balls.

100th Chemical Mortar Battalion sleeve patch

The 100th had been commanded by Major Russell E. McMurray since late November and John consistently referred to him in his dairy as "Maj. Mac." The command post for the 100th was at Filigare and would remain there until the North Apennines campaign commenced in mid-April 1945. John's command post for Company "B" would move twice during this period, but he did not know this yet.

Thinking about last summer when he knew little about mortars but had been on active duty for two and one-half years, John chuckled. Now he was an expert! Why, he even worked on an invention to improve the 4.2" baseplate that was prone to shift or even buckle under the heavy repeated recoil of the powerful charges. His unit would be called into action when the situation required the lobbing in of these charges at close range and it was impractical to use field artillery, say a 105 mm howitzer for example.

On this Christmas Eve, Captain Lesesne completed his diary entry from the day before: "We reorganized the command post," he started, referring to the winterization of the small room where he and nine others slept. "Set up the stove in the bedroom."

> *It had been snowing lightly all day and… about dark the snow began to fall heavily and it became quite cold. Tonight Pappy and I took supplies to Jimmy's platoon. We couldn't see the moon, but outside everything was quite bright. Under different conditions with a lovely gal such as Miss Jackie Sumner beside me, this would have been a beautiful ride. The snow covered mountains… We made the trip there and back without incident.*

Bill focused on the current military situation, and the reason why he had been sent over. He had been advised before leaving that the U.S. Fifth Army was stalemated before another Nazi-built battle line, this time the "Gothic Line," and the most formidable fortification yet. A defensive system of entrenchments, razor-wire fences and bunkers crisscrossed rolling country and a number of treacherous mountain slopes. In some places this line was miles deep. The Gothic Line snaked across the Northern Italian boot between U.S.-occupied Florence and Nazi-occupied Bologna. U.S. forces fought on the western side of the Italian boot and the British and other allies, the eastern side. The Germans were of course to the north, with the Waffen-SS facing the Americans and the Wehrmacht, the British.

At the Gothic Line in some places the Germans had constructed elaborate dugouts into mountainsides that penetrated into the rock some seventy-five feet. In addition to housing artillery, these dugouts could shelter up to twenty men. Barbed wire in front of the German guns was often twenty-five feet deep, one foot high and placed on any given mountain side at hundred meter intervals — designed to slow an Allied advance while German machine gunners and artillerymen fired.[6]

By the time he arrived fighting would likely be light, Bill was told. The onset of winter would determine that. It was no secret that the Allied master plan called for a huge coordinated final offensive against the Nazis in Italy. First, a few key mountain positions, not specified to Bill, needed to be secured. Then troops had to bring stockpiles of supplies forward and place them in special spots, close enough to access quickly but disbursed widely enough not to reveal a grand strategy. At the same time vehicles needed to be readied and positioned and

troops massed. Unseasonable weather could be an obstacle to preparations. The Allied goal was simple and the Nazis knew it: break through the Gothic Line, blow past the German defenders and bottleneck them from retreating over the Alps into the Fatherland. Once out of the mountains, the U.S. and British Armies could finally, after more than a year of frustration, do some downfield running. A stretch of flat lands and good roads lay to the north. The Transportation Section's job was to provide the means for the mass of the U.S. Fifth Army to get there. The Po Valley waited ahead.

Headquarters, Allied Forces, specifically the Transportation Section of MTOUSA offices at the Royal Palace of Caserta near Naples, was a good place to be stationed, Bill appreciated. He looked forward to returning there soon. His immediate superior, Major Renick, seemed like a good person to work for. Bill liked working in the *really* big house, a major European palace, no less!

Bill thought of the Christmas tree he knew would be up and decorated and in a corner of the small Detroit apartment shared by Dotty and Davy. Davy reacted wondrously to Christmas 1943 as a one and one-half year old. "What must Davy be like this Christmas?" Bill asked himself, longing to be with his son to share the joy expressed on his face. Since Davy had arrived he and Dotty had talked frequently about the need for a real home with a big backyard but the war had put their dream on hold.

The last ten days had been perhaps the most stressful of his thirty-six-year life. Bill had inspected the war front and was now back at the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Army Transportation Section. No one had shot at him, true, but he had seen both civilian and military misery that had shocked and emotionally upset him. And he had never been so cold in his life. He had inspected a plethora of international units in addition to regular U.S. Army divisions, to wit: a large Brazilian Expeditionary Force and South African and Indian forces. One U.S. division he visited was unique in character — the almost all-African-American 92nd Infantry Division, new to the front. Each sector of the Gothic Line had its individual supply challenges. Depots might or might not be convenient to troops in an area depending on the road situation.

Bill had formed preliminary opinions on a few matters that he might recommend to help the supply situation, but was not overly confident of a good result. Still, he would try. He believed that sufficient material supplies were now pouring into Italy at the northern port of Leghorn and that the U.S. Fifth Army

Transportation Section and other units were doing the best they could do in the face of deplorable winter conditions for trucking operations. Larger, more powerful vehicles had been requisition by MTOUSA, but requesting and receiving were different matters. Between the mud, snow, ice, winding mountain roads, dangerous loose rocks, potholes and slickened steep drop-offs, more G.I.s now perished driving trucks than at the hands of the Nazis. If the war front remained quiet for a time, however, the transportation problem would solve itself, Bill believed — in spite of the horrible situation. For the Americans the front line extended a distance of some ninety tortuous miles from a slim coastal plain upwards in an easterly direction to rugged centrally located Monte Grande, where the British were.

In addition to the U.S. Fifth Army Transportation Section, a large separate U.S. Army command known as the Peninsular Base Section ("PBS") provided for the rear area transportation of supplies. PBS's job was to get material from port areas to near where the fighting was. U.S. Fifth Army would then allocate the supplies among its units on the line, based on need and battle planning. PBS had its own fleet of trucks for long haul operations and coordinated truly a team effort: quartermaster, engineer, ordinance, weapons, transportation, medical, signal, petroleum, oil and lubrication components all came under its jurisdiction. The Transportation Corps of course maintained and drove the trucks.

The QMC light truck company — "QMC" for Quartermaster Corps — was the unit to haul in, time and time again, everything from toilet paper to mortar shells. A standard QMC light truck company had forty-eight assigned vehicles.[7] The G.I. nickname for this truck, based on tonnage of payload, was "Deuce and a Half," and it was produced mostly by GMC. This truck, the workhorse of the Army, could travel at forty-five mph and in a pinch could transport approximately two-dozen soldiers, and at the same time tow a heavy gun. Its operational range was 300 miles.

PBS had approximately twice the number of supply carrying vehicles as the U.S. Fifth Army, over two thousand. MTOUSA's job was to ensure that the two commands worked together for the common good. Rail lines could not reach U.S. Fifth Army troops at the mountain front, so trucks, large and small, were essential for the war effort. Ultimately, however, it was the mule that delivered needed provisions from forward supply areas over the most rugged tracts of mountain. All in all, over 10,000 pack animals were used in the Italian campaign.

On average each could carry 220 lbs. Bill laughed at the thought of a descendant of Eeyore the Donkey being the ultimate fighting machine in the day and age of blitzkrieg. Italian mules were different from American mules — they fed off homegrown hay and chopped straw known as tibben, while the American animals ate only grain and hay. At the onset of the campaign only Italian mules were used; this would change.

"What a terrain to pick for a fight," Bill muttered to himself. "Mules." "Gee-haw."

Bill toyed with an idea for a new truck trailer, one that might make transport more efficient and safer for heavy, larger loads, up to and including tanks. Bill was a tinkerer, and using cardboard, glue and bits of sawed-off pencils (the only materials available) he quickly dummied up a working model with multiple moving axles. "I must send this design to the Tank Command," Bill said to himself. "It might be patentable." In submitting this invention proposal, Bill responded to a call that came from the top of his section's chain of command. Bill's chief called "to increase lift capacities of the truck companies by means of truck-tractors, semitrailers and heavy duty trucks capable of carrying eight-ten tons."[8] Bill knew his invention idea would not come into being in time to affect the outcome of the Italian campaign, but maybe it might be of use against the Japanese.

In Naples, Italy, three hundred miles to the south, First Lieutenant Richard E. "Dick" Stroud was desperate to receive a Christmas letter from his wife, Sue. Along with their two-year-old son, Richard, Jr., Sue had moved into her parent's home in Garland, Texas. In her letters their son sometimes went by the endearing familial name "Dickie," but more often than not "Pumpkin." Dick, like Bill, was a recent arrival to Italy and in the employ of MTOUSA only on the Air Forces side. He worked as a supply officer at the 18th Depot Supply Squadron of the Air Service Command, and was frequently on the phone, most often to Pisa in the north and Bari in the south, near where the two U.S. Army Air Forces, the Twelfth and the Fifteenth, operated.[9] A high school chemistry teacher prior to the war, Dick was a few years older than Bill and had been married ten years. The Army had found him, commissioned him and trained him for this new line of work while his wife continued to teach high school and raise Pumpkin.

The 18th Depot was tasked with keeping track of available airplane stocks throughout the MTO and requisitioning deliveries of needed supplies from the United States. When Dick was not on the phone, he was at a Teletype machine placing orders. By the time he arrived, the supply situation from port to port

was well in hand, but one always had to think ahead and consider the time factor involved for the delivery of *thousands* of needed parts. Dick knew well what price might be paid in American lives if he or members of his unit failed to process orders timely. Planes wore out from stressful usage or returned shot-up from missions and were repaired and serviced on a twenty-four-hour basis. Supplying two U.S. Army Air Forces was a huge operation. Most of the work Dick did was for the Twelfth — the fighter-bombers that operated over enemy occupied Northern Italy. The office he worked in was staffed with four officers and twenty-two enlisted men, and headed by a captain.

Like Bill, Dick was shocked by what he saw. He witnessed a seriously battle-damaged Naples and a civilian population ravaged by war from the year before. He knew the same sad process was now taking place in Northern Italy. Dick harbored no illusions about the importance of his job. The only thing to do was to win this war as soon as possible and then he could go home.

Anticipating Christmas, Dick wrote to Sue: "There is not much of the spirit in evidence here, but in imagination I can be at home with you wrapping packages, fixing up Pumpkin's things and probably explaining to an astute youngster just what it's all about. Maybe next year, Darling."[10]

In a few weeks Bill would fly back to Caserta where the temperature would be slightly warmer and the pace more routine. He would commit to work long hours there, but also be able to relax somewhat and better savor the cartoons of Bill Mauldin and leisurely read the news reports from *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, clipping his favorite items for the file he had started. At the Royal Palace of Caserta he would also catch up on the local poetry competition and maybe even pen a few stanzas himself. Maybe enter a checkers or chess tournament? Most important, he would read and re-read letters from "**H**ome," as Bill usually wrote the word. There was a heated room in the palace where he could do these things after work, a special place for him to be temporarily away from his daily activities involving the war. And as painfully thin as Bill was, being in a heated room served him well.

The incandescent light bulb flickered again, and Bill wondered if the new generator might be going out — again. There was a knock at the door. Bill stood and removed his blouse so he would not be seen wearing it for additional warmth over his work uniform. "Come in," he said.

"Captain Allison," the soldier replied, "You have a letter from home, Sir. It came in with the air pouch from Caserta."

Bill thought as his pulse spiked: "Major Renick, God bless you!" MTOUSA had come through. "Thank you," Bill said to the soldier, grasping the letter. Bill's second report would have to wait a little while longer, but that was OK. He had several more days to complete and mail it in. It would be finished early as Bill's spirits now soared; he had renewed energy for everything, as the letter pipeline from his loved ones had finally begun. This was the boost he needed; the best Christmas present he ever received.