

My Trip – Lull in Holland 4 January, 1945

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Aug. 25, 1909 – May 14, 1978

When I awoke this morning, I was sleepily aware that the day was to be different, but could not at first identify the difference. Then I remembered. This day was to be all mine, without duty of any kind. I stretched luxuriously and it seemed to me that the feeling of leisure must be far more wonderful than the possession of great wealth.

So I stretched, contentedly and to the limit, like a lazy cat and got up to remove the blackouts from the windows. It should have been daylight but was not, quite. It was snowing! Great fluffy, swirling flakes waltzing through the air. Coming from the Deep South I have never seen anything but dead snow, left over in the mountains in another part of the world. I suddenly remembered a small nephew who had lived all his four years in a dry part of California. He saw his first real rain in Louisiana, where the rain is very real. I did not execute all his antics at the sight of falling snow, but was tempted.

I opened the window and caught some of the snow in my hands and let it fall on my hair. Down below in the cabbage patch my Belgique and Dutch dishwashers, having finished their matutinal clatter with the breakfast enamelware, were throwing snowballs. I called down to throw one to me. They all missed, so I gave them their own favorite American expression, “No goot!”

Thinking I was being very silly I went back to bed, reminding myself of the many days, weeks, even months which had passed without such a wonderful privilege. It has been my fortune to assume the inglorious title of Hospital Dietitian, and as long as we have patients the duty is constant.

I honestly tried to do all the things reviewed last night when going to sleep. But I could not stay away from the window. I read enough to turn one page, wrote one strange, incoherent letter, and gave up. I put on my longies, woolen shirt, Limey breeches (I have not worn a skirt since 4 June), scarf, knit cap and trench coat. The pockets I stuffed with Old Golds, a can of tuna, scout knife, a magazine, tablet and pencil. Now I'm longing for my overshoes and a blanket to sit on, since my Cosmopolitan has been relegated to the position of rear guard. A most wonderful cushion.

Skirting the hospital area via the ambulance drive I continued on up the hill. This road turns abruptly to the right at the foot of a cliff. I followed the trail up the side of the cliff, planting G. I. Footprints in the undisturbed snow. I turned to look down at my progress. They were such a well ordered row of footprints, with a neat “hut, two, three” appearance, that I was a little unhappy to realize their impermanence.

This cliff just ahead of me is pocked with caves. The inhabitants of the city nearby have for years spent their nights here, for safety. They file past the hospital every evening, men (mostly old, with

canes and derby hats), women and many children, all in wooden shoes. In one of the caves is an inner care reinforced with steel doors, behind which are some of the art treasures of Holland.

I entered a cave and immediately became hesitant, having had many warnings of mines and booby traps. There were stones piled about suggestively, a roll of wire netting, and some empty K-ration boxes, which put me at ease. I scooped out a seat for myself against the wall so that I could look out the mouth of the cave. The trees were all covered with a snow meringue, and underneath was a perfect filigree from the melted drippings. I opened the tuna and ate it with my knife blade. The coffee in my canteen was slightly cold, and since it is not good when hot, according to my chickory sensitized palate, I let it dribble down over the pebbles into the sand, wondering what it would look like when it, too, became frozen.

Not being able to read, since I am sitting on the magazine, I have been obliged to stare at the snowy world which becomes hypnotic, or to write. There is a continuous overtone of the distant rumbling of artillery. Heavy guns. Today we are pushing. By late afternoon, or certainly by evening, we will have an influx of casualties. And tomorrow another lad, all tangled and enmeshed in bloody bandage and plaster, will look up at me with the light of heaven in his eyes and say "Ma'am, I ain't et for five days." Do I love my work? Now I ask you. I shall never forget these foxhole Joes at Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year, when they saw that favorite American dish, ice cream. I warned one soldier, when he asked for a third serving of turkey, to save room for ice cream, and he stared at me and said "Are you kidding?"

Am I kidding? No. Indeed I am not. It has been seven months since I have had the heart to kid.

Seven months. How full they have been. Looking back I can almost believe it is some remembered story, rather than a part of my own life. Experiences which are tremendously real at the time assume the vagueness of a fantasy, so that one is tempted to believe it was all an imagination.

How excited we were on 6 June. We had eggs for breakfast that morning, and eggs in shells were a rare treat in England. But many of our people were so excited they couldn't eat. We had been "hot" for some time, awaiting the great day. The following night our convoy got away on the long trip to the marshalling area. In the early hours of Thursday we left our sleepy English town, tucked away in the Cotswolds, where we had lived for the past six months. The day was dreary until we reached Devonshire, and from thereon to our terminal we rode through mile after mile of flaming rhododendron, a lovely fairy-like world. It seemed an affront to pass through so rapidly, on our way to a war.

After a night and a day in the marshalling area we boarded our Liberty ship and were ready. For what? We did not know. We were to land in Normandy on D plus 6. The channel crossing was cold, but calm. Sunday night, as we neared our destination, we were alerted because of the possibility of air attack. The attack was visible, the display of tracers and ammunition flashes more fascinating than terrifying. None of us had ever heard the sound of battle, except for ack-ack and an occasional bomb in London.

We stopped moving before daylight, after which we eased into our position among the thousands of ships standing off shore. Battleships, Hospital Ships, LSTs, LCTs, PTs, barges, ducks, cargo ships, cruisers, Liberty ships. Multiply the largest and most varied regatta you have ever seen by many times and you will have a fair picture of that water off Normandy beach. There was much wreckage. The bit of beach we could see was littered with it. The water was full of it. But Cubs were taking off and landing on an air strip up on the bluff; bulldozers (wondrous creatures) were busy on the beach, and there was a steady stream of moving vehicles. There was one building in sight.

A landing barge came alongside and the crew swarmed up our ladder to talk to "girls." They were mere youngsters but knew all about everything. They told us about the German division which had been on maneuvers in this area; about the incredible number of casualties; about the mines, and the snipers, which they assured us were still numerous. We were inclined to be skeptical, but later learned that every word was true.

It was not possible for us to get ashore that day, Monday, so we spent another night on the ship. The nights at that season were short, but active. Especially if you were sitting in the midst of a mess of supplies. Early in the afternoon of Tuesday the nurses went ashore in ducks. We had a bit of difficulty negotiating the rope ladder with all our paraphernalia, but managed without accident. We bounced and splashed our way to the beach and drove right on, pausing only long enough for instructions, then going inland for three miles or so. The town we drove through was a shambles, as every town and village in Normandy was to become. The town clock had been stopped at 0745, its spire showing a great shell hole. One house with no face and very little roof presented quite a picture. The dining table was laid, with a long white cloth and a bowl of white daisies. We passed a field which was completely empty, except for a lone soldier standing there, talking over a telephone.

There were few civilians to be seen, and they seemed surly and quite ignored us. As we moved further into France the people were overwhelmingly friendly, but I rather think the Normans were comparing our occupation with that other one, which while insidious, was less noisy and destructive.

We were taken to a field and told we would probably spend the night there so began arranging fox holes. I billeted out in a ditch under the hedgerow and was quite comfortably settled by the time the truck arrived which took us to a field hospital for the night. The next morning we went to the area selected for our evacuation hospital, and by midafternoon were set up and receiving patients. All our equipments had not yet arrived and among the missing were the mess chests. I hoped they would arrive before morning, but had to serve the patients' breakfast in "C" ration cans, and they ate with tongue blades. And that went on for days but I heard not one complaint. They were too grateful for the hot food, and with a newly revised sense of proportion probably though it a very small inconvenience.

By the middle of the next day most of our wards were full and the business of repair well established. I walked through a ward and was appalled at the complete and thorough mangling. It shocks one's faith in humanity to see such destruction, and to realize that it is the result of brilliant, creative minds.

We soon learned to identify the various noises and differentiate between sending and receiving. Artillery we heard all the time. Occasionally the heavy guns were behind us, firing away right over our heads, it seemed. That took a bit of getting used to. So did machinegun firing. I shall never forget the first time I heard that. My immediate reaction was to see what was going on, so I ran outside and watched. There were two planes flying over us shooting at each other. I noticed people all over the area hitting the dirt so went back into the tent and felt perfectly safe until I saw all my cooks under the table. I got under the table also. The dogfight continued until Jerry went down in flames. One of the nurses had to have a new messkit and the little Red Cross worker was heartbroken because another bullet had gone completely through a case of cigarettes.

We were forever having to patch the tents which were torn by flak. That peninsula positively bristled with anti-aircraft guns and they put on a show for us every night. The beach was still very attractive to the enemy and we felt rather too near, but were an equal distance from the front, so there wasn't much to do about it. We usually staid outside the tents and watched during an attack. For some reason the noise sounds so much closer than the tracers looked, so it was considerable easier on the nerve to watch.

Within a few days we had many prisoners of war working about the hospital, carrying litters, policing the area, washing dishes, etc. They were all very young and seemed delighted with their situation. The group in the dishwashing area used to sing beautifully, with much harmony. It is difficult for a normally sympathetic person to regard these youths with the hatred they undoubtedly deserve. I recall one incident which touched me deeply. There had been a counterattack the night before and several of the casualties were civilians. One was a tiny girl of perhaps four years, unidentified. She had a badly fractured skull and leg. I had made a nipple from an eye dropper and was feeding the child when someone came to stand by the cot and watch. It was one of the prisoners, and when I looked up great tears were welling from his eyes. I have often wondered what his thoughts must have been. Perhaps he did not like war either and was not proud of that particular result.

Things became quieter within a few weeks and we began to look around and to make short trips away from the area. Towns were off limits but we were permitted to drive through them. I went with a group to Cherbourg, on Bastille Day. Our route took us through Isigny, Montebourg, and other demolished shells of towns.

We passed great dumps of wreckage, our own as well as enemy vehicles. We saw many glider frames and other wrecked planes. The fighting in the Cherbourg area had been fierce and there had not yet been time to clear away the debris. There were still numerous white roadside signs reading "Achung! Minen."

Cherbourg had been liberated only recently and was of course very festive on the holiday. We drove through the city and on up to the embattlements overlooking the harbor. The size of the guns and the number of them were most impressive, and I wondered if it could have been possible to take the city from the sea. It was a menacing sight. We looked across the harbor through glasses and could see the demolished docks which the enemy had left for us, and our badly needed supplies.

On another day we had a delightful trip to the jewel-like town of Mont St. Michel. The tide was out, leaving exposed the piles and blocks placed at regular and close intervals in the sand to prevent landings. The town was unscarred, showing no signs of having been occupied except for the cathedral, which was quite bare and without its stained windows.

We remained in our first area for four weeks, then moved forward to within four miles of St. Lo. We were again enclosed by hedgerows, with the mess installation set up in an apple orchard, which lent a picnic atmosphere to our meals. When we arrived we were attracted by machinegun fire, and climbed the nearest apple tree to see what was going on. The firing came from quite a large house about 500 yards away. There was an occasional burst of smoke from grenades, and we all came to the conclusion that it must have been snipers.

We were allowed a few days to catch our breath and get organized, so when the day of the blitz arrived we were ready for whatever might develop. What developed was the push for St. Lo. History has recorded it, but I saw it. I stood there spellbound and watched that endless procession of bombers. Watched them come from the distance, wave after wave; listened to the sweetly terrifying drone of their motors; watched them pass overhead, go onward, drop their bombs, turn and come back; felt the trembling of the earth, and the pulling of the air about my ankles. The ack-ack did not last long, but did hit a mark or two and the planes spiraled down in flames and trailing smoke. It was dramatic and awe inspiring, and the first blitz I had ever seen.

The casualties were heavy and began to arrive before the day was over. General McNair spent the night with us on that memorable day of 25 July, 1944, in our morgue

The night following the blitz gave us our first real terror. Jerry snarled back with a terrific counter attack on an armored division not too far from us. Flares made the night vividly bright; the planes seemed to scream in their diving; the bombs whistled and crackled, and we could feel those puffs of pulling air, like the breath of death. There were three in my tent and we made not a sound and didn't speak of the experience until morning, when we cautiously asked each other if they had heard all the fuss. I think we each thought the other two dead of fright.

After St. Lo, Jerry took to his heels and stopped only now and then to strike back. Within three weeks we were obliged to move forward to keep up with the troops. Our route took us through the remains of St. Lo. It was a terrible mess, still burning in places. We had a long ride and when we reached the selected wheat field learned that we would have to go even farther the next day. This move took us through lovely rolling hills to the western side of the peninsula. We set up in a park-like area skirted by a brook. This added attraction of "running water" was most welcome, and we had many baths in complete seclusion, because of the overhanging hedges and vines.

The fighting again was close, and intense for a few days. One night the bombs fell only 1000 yards away. However at the end of ten days we were again so far behind the lines that we had to move on. We all regretted leaving our beautiful spot and the very friendly neighbors. We moved over toward Paris on 20 August. Our patients this time were almost entirely Germans. The enemy had retreated, leaving behind a field hospital which they were shelling from the distance when our troops overtook it and evacuated their wounded to us. The patients were in a pitiful condition.

They were dirty, their wounds had been poorly treated, their bandages were made of paper, and they were all desperately hungry.

Everyone was optimistic during those days of long moves when our armies were speeding across France. Paris was liberated on my birthday, and we all made predictions and bets on the end of the war. Early in September our unit moved into a bivouac area with several other evacuation hospitals. Field hospitals could move more easily, and could easily take care of the few casualties we suffered in those days of speed.

We were perhaps sixty miles from Paris, and were permitted to go into the city for the day. I went in on 4 September, just one week after its liberation. The people of Paris were still celebrating. Such joyous faces on the Parisians! There was much hand shaking and kissing of the Americans. Vive la France!

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I now think I shall go back to my cell and do all those small things I meant to do. The snow has stopped falling, and I suspect it will begin to melt. I would like very much to put up the blackouts and turn on the lights and be busy, so that I shall not see the dissolution of this beauty, which to me is new. It has been a long time since I have been aware of beauty, and I fear that if I continue to watch it, I will forever compare anything that assumes the property of beauty to this, which in my heart I know is only momentary, and cannot last, even until tomorrow.