TOM CANNING ON D-DAY PLUS ONE ALL THE WAY TO THE RHINE

On the twenty-first of November 1943, we took a tug up the Hudson River to where the Cunard liners dock, and boarded the Queen Elizabeth. We stayed in New York Harbor for two days. As you can imagine, it was mental agony — a so-near-and-yet-so-far sort of thing. There I was looking out on midtown Manhattan, on the West Side Highway. I thought of the many times Frank drove us along that road. The last object I saw on good old terra firma, U.S. style, was the parachute jump at Coney Island.

On the trip over, I was on a forty-mm ack-ack gun. No submarines or planes, not even any seasickness. Just a bit of homesickness and a little self-pity: "Oh, why didn't I have a broken eardrum."

We docked in Greenock, Scotland. It's a beautiful spot, one of the few places in Europe that was not disillusioning to me.

From there I went to Birmingham, England, and on the seventh of December arrived in Weston Super-Mare and joined the 413th Anti-

Aircraft Battalion. Weston is in southern In England near the city of' Bristol. It's a pretty, quiet resort town. Most of my stay in the United Kingdom was at Weston. Though we did go to Wales f' or ack-ack practice and we went on maneuvers around southern England, e.g., Taunton, Torquay, Exeter. In April, we went to Weymouth to prepare for the invasion. Part of the preparation was a mock invasion of' the English coast below Plymouth. June 2nd we loaded on the LSTs [landing ship tanks] for France. There had been nightly air raids at Weymouth, but the Luftwaffe didn't bother us after we got on the ship, until D-Day night. We had been scheduled to go ashore that day, June 6, at about noon, but the German coast guns were still active in our sector (Omaha), and it was impossible to get the heavy equipment in. That night the German air corps attacked. An ME 100 swooped out of the dusk at our ship. It was so low that I could have reached up and touched it, I supposed. But at the time I was too busy crawling on my belly to the nearest shelter. The next time he came over, he clipped our barrage balloon cable, and the ack-ack opened

up. He crashed in the sea. That fate overtook a good number of' the German planes that night. Eventually I fell asleep, anxiously awaiting the safety of' the Normandy beach the next day. My sleep, however, was what might be described as fitful.

The next day a narrow path was cleared through the mines, and the LST pulled right up to the beach. When our tractors and guns came ashore, the first ack-ack on the beach, there was still sniper and artillery fire. Of all the descriptions I've read of the beach, only Ernie Pyle describes it accurately and realistically. The official communiqué might have said resistance was light, but neither the beach nor the Channel was a pretty sight. Bodies, mostly American, were piled on either side of the narrow path along the beach. There were legs without bodies and bodies without arms; tanks and trucks blown to hell.

Before I saw the Normandy beach, I never realized how horrible war is.

For thirty- six hours we went without sleep. We dug, camouflaged, and then all the first night

we fired. Planes came over constantly, and we fired constantly. For about two weeks the Luftwaffe and, as a result, the American ack-ack were overworked. But the Germans finally gave up. Their losses were too high.

On the seventh of July our outfit changed from anti-aircraft to tank destroyers in preparation for the St. Lo breakthrough. The first night at the front we were subjected to what might be called an intensive shelling. We all spent the night in slit trenches in a pasture littered with cow manure, praying and sweating. The rest of our tank destroyer experiences were anticlimactic after that night. We never did get to knock out any German tanks. Fortunately we never even saw any. Then on the twenty-fourth of July the great air armada came over, leveled the town of St. Lo and blasted a gap in the German lines through which the First and Third Armies poured into the heart of' France.

At that time, we returned to anti-aircraft duties, digging gun holes and waiting for the Luftwaffe. We went to St. Lo; then to Carentan, the first good-sized town we guarded in France.

There was also a town called St. Laurens de Calvados where we always had fifteen to thirty gallons of Calvados in water cans. Our last position in France was at Melun, a city about twenty miles south of Paris. We moved in just as Paris was being liberated. It was while at Melun that I visited newly liberated Paris, still a gay and beautiful city. It saw the Louvre, Notre Dame, Palais de Justice, the Champs Elysees, the Latin Quarter, and beaucoups bistros.

After we left Melun, we continued our trek northward to the friendly, gay little country of Belgium. The trip was a long, weary, and triumphant one through newly liberated country. Freedom had usually arrived a few hours before us. In some towns we were the first Americans the people ever saw, the tanks having moved through the previous night while the residents slept. We moved down the Meuse River through the cities of Charleroi and Namur. The western part of Belgium was unscathed by war; saved from damage by the Germans' hasty retreat.

It was on a Saturday night that we entered Liege. It was a beautiful city and the people

were proud of it. "Le petit Paris," the people called it. Saturday was their first full day of freedom, and that evening they were in a spirit to celebrate. As our long convoy of trucks and tractors weaved through the crowded, ancient streets, the Liegois wept and shouted and laughed. They reached out to us, to give us fresh fruit, to offer us wine. It was the sort of uninhibited demonstration one reads about or sees on the screen, but rarely participates in. We were all impressed, and we felt that perhaps, after all, Europe and the world were worth saving.

It was our job to guard the city against the Luftwaffe. Liege was an important city, the supply center from which the attack against Germany was carried out.

Our battery went to a suburb of the town called Herstal. That was on a Sunday, and all of the people rushed to the field where we were digging the guns in, to talk, work or just look at "les Americans." A Monsieur Vaessen invited Charlie (Jaworski) and me to Sunday dinner that night. Of course it was strictly against the rules to leave the area, but who could resist a home-

cooked dinner after being away from home for over a year?

Monsieur Vaessen treated us royally. Awaiting us was a chicken dinner with all the trimmings, cooked by his stout, motherly wife. After dinner we sat around, talked, smoked, and drank cognac. The curate of the local church was present, and he was glad to hear that I was a Catholic.

Life was pleasant at Liege, as pleasant as it's ever been in the Army. The Germans came over now and then, but they did little damage.

Toward the end of our stay the buzz bombs began to come over, making their weird, ungodly noise, and leaving behind their weird, ungodly destruction. At the time we thought of them only as a nuisance. Before we could see the terrible effect they were to have on the city, we left for the German-speaking town of Eupen, near the Belgian-German border.

Our stay at Eupen was brief, but it was there we learned what a winter in the field would be like. It rained, it

snowed, the wind blew, the temperature fell. We built little shelters with sandbags and spread straw on the ground I' or a floor. We slept close together, and we knew it was going to be a rough.

Some time in November, we moved through the Siegfried Line into the newly captured city of Aachen. The Siegfried Line isn't merely the row of dragons' teeth that runs along the German border. It is a deep, tough area crammed with mines, bunkers, and pillboxes that stretches all along western Germany and runs ten to twenty miles deep. It is a miracle that the infantry and engineers, for they are the ones who really cracked the line, broke through it as quickly as they did.

Our job at Aachen was an interesting one. The Germans were holding a line east of Aachen in the vicinity of Eschweiler. It was similar to the line at St. Lo. They were dug in, and neither tanks nor infantry nor artillery could open up a gap through which our troops could pour into Germany. So the St. Lo tactics were going to be used: blast a hole open with heavy bombers and then make a dash through. But at St. Lo some of

our bombers dropped their eggs prematurely, killing General McNair and beaucoups American troops. This time the sky was to be marked by bursts from 90-mm smoke shells. That was the line where the bombs were to be dropped. The 413th was to put the bursts in the sky. *Stars and Stripes* described it thus: "It was revealed at SHAEF that a huge pyrotechnic display preceded the first Army's attack to indicate targets for Allied bombers. Smoke shells, barrage balloons, ground panels and radio were employed to guide the air assault, which was reported successful."

As you know, the First Army didn't manage a breakthrough last fall. From Aachen, we moved to L'schweiler, where we stayed about three days. We left when we, like the rest of First Army ack- ack, were sent to a cold, desolate part of' the German Belgian border. Our mission was to shoot down the buzz-bombs making one-way trips from Germany to Lieg'e.

Two days after we arrived at the border, the buzzers stopped coming. It was cold, quaint, snowy, mountainous country. As everybody kept saying, "It's just too damned quiet here." It was

one of those dormant sectors, and the army considered it unimportant. There was one division, spread out over twenty-six miles, and fresh from the States at that, in front of us. That made an awfully thin line. Hut we didn't worry about that; we just wondered why it was so infernally quiet.

Early on the morning of December 16, we found out why At 5:45 we heard the first shells (they were "screaming mimis") and saw the red-orange fires they made in the town of Manderfield, about two miles away. Calls came over the hot loop to watch out for German scouting parties, and we stood in the barricaded gun-pit that gray morning, scanning the surrounding hills for moving figures, and hitting the ground as the shells came nearer.

As the day grew brighter, the shelling increased in tempo. We were eating morning chow, too frightened by the shells to gripe about the powdered eggs as was our wont, when we saw a Sherman tank silhouetted on a hill about a mile in front of us. Suddenly a direct hit, and the Sherman was a burnt-out bulk.

The shells had cut the communications wires so often, in so many places, that it was useless to try to repair them. We waited, lying in slit' trenches. The Germans were somewhere close, we knew, but where? Finally, the battalion colonel came to the position to see what was what. He was hit; our captain was hit; a number of enlisted men were hit. The place became known in battery legend as "Purple Heart Hill."

Orders were finally given to evacuate the area. We lost a few trucks and all the quadmount fifties. Personally, I left the place with the clothes I had on, plus my camera. I left behind my duffel bag, which contained Christmas gifts of books and cookies. The road back was rough. The Germans were shelling the avenues of retreat; the American Army was confused. There were traffic jams that would have made mincemeat of' us if the Jerries had had an aircorps.

That day, we passed through St. Vith and Malmedy (where the next day 150 G.l.s were slaughtered by the Panzer Corps, but the U.S.

troops there were ignorant of the German offensive when we drove through).

On the night of the 16th, after one of the hardest days I can remember, we set up as tank destroyers, but by midnight the Germans were about to overrun our position, so we headed north to Monschau in support of the Ninth Division. All the time I was living outdoors in the cold woods of the Ardennes, with nothing but two sweaters, my ODs (olive drabs), a mackinaw, and a borrowed blanket.

We formed a roadblock between Eupen, a large supply base, and Monschau. We were ack-ack, field artillery, and tank destroyers. We spent Christmas and New Year's there, shelling the Germans constantly. New Year' s morning the Luftwaffe pulled a big attack. In our area alone, seven Kraut planes were knocked down.

In the middle of January, when the Bulge was eliminated, we were pulled back to Verviers as ack-ack. It was obvious the Germans were through. We stayed in Verviers till the end of February, and not one enemy plane came over. We lived pretty well in Verviers-in big tents

instead of in slit trenches, in beds instead of on the ground. There was a Red Cross club, and it had movies every night. We could have spent the winter in a worse spot.

The 413th left Verviers at the end of February and again passed through the Seigfried Line into Germany. Our route took us through Aachen, Duren, and across the Ruhr River near St. Lo of the German breakthrough. Then came the battle of the Cologne Plain: move, stop, setup, and move the next day-it was a back- and heartbreaking job. It rained constantly, and there was mud ankle-deep. Our guns and trucks would be bogged down for hours. This ordeal of daily march orders kept up I' or two weeks.

Then one night at eleven o' clock we were called together by the battalion commander for a meeting. "This is it," he said in the manner of a Hollywood field commander. It was dark, cold, and dismal, and we were in no mood for dramatics. But the next sentence was stat: "We've got a bridge across the Rhine."

This was the news, the day we'd all been waiting for. We knew that the hard works, the mud, the shelling, were coming to an end. We

pulled out that night and sped for the Rhine. Our job was to guard the bridge at Remagen. There was a narrow aisle to the Rhine, with the rest of' the land west of the river in the hands of the Germans. We stopped first at a town called Bad Stockhausen. For the first two days, we were shelled almost constantly. Our mess truck was hit, and the driver was killed instantly.

Everything the Luftwaffe had left, they threw into the job of knocking out the Ludendorff [Railroad] Bridge, and the army-constructed pontoon bridges. There were the old, slow Stukas [German dive bombers], and the new super-fast jet planes, like the ME 262. The Stukas were like pigeons in a shooting gallery, but it was almost impossible to hit the jet-propelled planes.

While we were protecting the Ludendorff Bridge and the assorted pontoon bridges spanning the Rhine at Remagen, one of our batteries performed something of a memorable feat in the ack-ack world. With a pre-cut fuse on a 90-mm shell, one gun shot down a ME 109 without the aid of radar or a director.

On March 14 we went east of the Rhine to a position near Honnef, Germany. Our battalion spent about three weeks on either side of the Rhine. Protecting the bridges was second in importance to our job on the Normandy Beach. The Germans shelled and bombed the bridges constantly, but the bridges stayed intact and the First Army built up its bridgehead and bided its time while the other armies crossed the Rhine at other locations.

Soon all the Armies — British and Canadian, American 9th, 3rd, 7th — were across the Rhine, and the mad drive through Germany began. From Honnef we moved about 125 miles to the west bank of the Weser River, but the Luftwaffe didn't' reappear after the battle of the Rhine. We then moved 15 miles east of the Rhine to the town of Uslar. We stayed there two weeks, but all we did was sit. The Luftwaffe was finished, and the Wehrmacht had entered its last stages of disintegration.

Toward the end of April, our battalion, like most of the other AA [American Army] outfits and similarly unnecessary combat outfits, was pulled out of the field. We moved back to the

town of Sontra and established military government here and in the surrounding towns.

We gathered up firearms and ammunition, pulled in Germans trying to escape punishment for war crimes. We set about sending the displaced personnel back to their countries.\

After about three weeks in Sontra, we came to Dillenburg where our main job was waiting, waiting for the time when shipping will be available to take us back to the States.

That concludes my story of my life overseas. It doesn't seem so bad in retrospect. There are even periods that I recall as happy. But I’d hate to go through it again, and yet there is still the Pacific. So perhaps there will be a sequel to this story.