

A LETTER FROM LT. HORACE RUSSELL HANSEN, 01325088,  
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FRANCE  
15 July 44

Dear Folks and Friends,

I have been transferred from an English cowpasture and drizzle to a French cowpasture and rain. Something new has been added, namely, foxholes.

Here the cows do better by us than we do by them. While they flounder and fall in our maze of camouflaged holes, they provide us with pathways that are safe from land mines. Their markers have become our flagstones, and we have ceased griping about cleaning manure from our shoes.

We are situated at the near rear of the front lines as replacements, waiting our turn to take the place of casualties. We are called up by specification numbers for our specialty as needed. Mine is heavy weapons, not ordinarily called for as often as riflemen. Most of our replacement company has already gone up.

The time from landing in England to here seems short, but for some of my friends who left the states in the same group with me it was really short. They were in the first wave on D-day and I talked with two of them in a hospital before I left England.

We started over here suddenly by being aroused at 2 A.M. one nasty wet and black night. We were told to be ready for inspection in ranks at 3 A.M. and we made it. How I got all my equipment and clothing packed in the blackout still amazes me. As usual, we waited in ranks for an hour for the colonel to show up. Then after the inspection, as usual, we waited several more hours before moving out. Trucks, train, and trucks again got us to the pier where we waited several more hours, when finally some sagacious individual discovered we were on the wrong pier. When we got on our boat, just in time, we found that our baggage detail, 2 officers and 4 men, was missing, and with them all officers' luggage.

We were on a small channel boat that tossed like a cork, but I slept like a clod until the next noon. I hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before - rations had been overlooked in the rush - so two of us prowled in the hold, broke open a box of mixed rations and enjoyed our revival.

Late in the afternoon we transferred to LC's and landed on the invasion beach. The temporary causeway was damaged so we waded in.

It is impossible to describe the beach. It was one big mess of half-sunk ships and barges, bomb craters, barbed wire, smashed pill-boxes, life preservers and equipment piled in makeshift heaps, German minefield markers everywhere.

The most impressive sight was the hundreds of ships out on the water as far as we could see, waiting to unload. Ducks were taking loads from the ships in a steady stream. Trucks and jeeps were all over the beach like ants.

These ducks (amphibious trucks) are one of the marvels of the war. They tie up to a boat and are quickly loaded by cargo nets with several tons of supplies. A propeller drives them to shore, where the 4-wheel drive takes over. At the supply dump a crane lifts out the filled nets, the driver gets a few empty nets and goes back for another load. Hundreds of these ducks operate 24 hours a day.

We assembled the company on the beach and went inland down a marked trail in a column of twos.

The first casualties I saw were fresh ones. A group ahead of ours was temporarily halted by congestion. A soldier and walked off the path a few yards to urinate and stepped on a bounding type mine. Only his legs and some blood were left. One other was killed and 14 injured. I saw enough to keep me on the beaten path and behind the cows ever since.

Walking along we saw more eyesores of the invasion, - pulverized buildings, stripped trees, smashed gliders, cast-off parachute equipment, hasty grave lots, barbed wire and bomb craters everywhere. We came to a macadam road and moved single file to avoid the traffic which was bumper-to-bumper and moving fast in both directions - everything from jeeps to heavy tanks. Overhead was a constant flow of low-flying planes.

We passed through two small villages. The natives who bothered to look our way seemed tired, a few gave us a faint smile and a half-hearted high-sign. Some raised the Nazi salute by force of habit, others a weak "V" sign. None looked enthusiastic and I don't blame them - they were seeing just another section of the big parade. All of them were ragged, wore wooden shoes. They seemed well-nourished, but this is all farming country.

When we reached the bivouac area we were aware that we had hiked 7 miles in wet boots. It was near black-out time and I was keenly aware that it was raining, that I had no change of clothing, no tent or bedding, and had nothing to eat since noon.

A hay mow in a dry barn seemed like a good idea so Lt. Frank Schrey and I started to look for one. On the way we found a motor pool and talked the colored guard into giving us a can of "C" rations which we consumed in a covered truck. It was now black-out and still raining so we burrowed in some canvas right there and went to sleep.

Next morning the guard awoke us, and the transport officer took us to his officers' mess for breakfast. They had been established since D plus 2 and had a good set-up. We dried out a bit by the field range, wrote a couple of letters in the orderly tent and went back to our own outfit.

A heavy tank outfit was moving into our field, so we had to assemble our troops and move out in a hurry. From here on we started to get some decent organization. Rations, water, and some gasoline for "hot boxes" (gas-soaked sand in a can, as a stove to heat rations) were brought to us and the men fixed themselves a warm meal. Our company barber made a chair with ammunition boxes and I had all but the shadow removed from my noggin.

In the afternoon a convoy of trucks came along. We loaded and started south. I'll never forget this ride. I didn't risk looking on one side of the road too long for fear of missing something on the other side. In the midst of all the destruction was an unbroken mass of tanks, trucks, ammunition, airplanes, piles of supplies, and hedgerows were alive with troops. We passed through several villages and two large towns, all severely hacked up. The Germans were still very close to one of these towns, where a major battle had just been fought. Just as our convoy cleared the town there were two terrific explosions behind us. German artillery was still trying to knock out the bridge there, we learned later.

After travelling about 20 miles we started wondering what constituted a "rear area". It seemed to us that we had just about used up all the rear area and that it was time to stop. We went a few more miles and hit this spot.

A headquarters officer oriented us on the map and on the ground. Our position was in the middle of the tip of a spearhead and the Germans were two miles to the south on a high ridge we could plainly see. We were cautioned to dig in, camouflage, carry our weapons and ammunition, and stay on beaten trails.

I dispersed my men in the allocated area and we all started to dig in. About a half hour later all hell broke loose. Artillery opened fire on both sides and behind us. We instinctively hit the ground.

We've all been close to artillery fire before on maneuvers, but nothing as massed and terrific as this. At first we mistook the muzzle blasts for enemy shellbursts. When we realized what was happening we dug in in earnest, expecting return fire any minute.

We wondered why the return fire never came. The answer, of course, is that Jerry has no aerial observation to direct his fire. Instead, we soon learned, he sends his few planes over in darkness, hoping to knock out our batteries, whose location would be revealed by muzzle flashes. The purpose would be to gain a shell-free time at night to move his troops and supplies to the front, a difficult task in daylight because of our ceaseless air patrolling.

These night operations are more run than hit because our AA is terrific. It looks like the fireworks finale at the World's Fair, and sounds as if the world is coming to an end. We are told that here is the greatest concentration of AA anywhere, and I easily believe it.

We've been here a week now. In the meantime we have taken the ridge, the front line has been straightened, and we are out of the pocket. Our artillery is now in front of us and the ground doesn't shake as much. We have come out of our foxholes and have taken a few looks around.

The first thing I did was take a bath. Water is scarce, but I managed to get a few helmetsful. My bathtub was a hole in the ground lined with my raincoat. I heated some water in a German helmet to save my own from blackening. Even with warm water it was chilly going, but the good cleaning restored by self respect.

Four of us went out one day and visited all the natives we could find along the road. They were all friendly and we had a good time practicing our wee bit of French. We knew enough, with the help of our issue guides, to buy some fresh bread, butter, cheese and wine. After canned rations and hard biscuits, it was a nice change. At one place we were invited back for dinner. This you gotta hear about.

The family of eight lived in a place a little more pretentious than ordinary - a two-story, stone place bordering a cobblestone courtyard, with the house part at one end of the oblong. They had just finished milking the cows in the field and were coming in as we arrived. Two donkeys trailed behind carrying the milk cans on wooden racks astride their backs. The milk cans were unusual - shiny brass affairs shaped like large spittoons.

This family was fairly well off, comparatively. They had 32 acres, 28 cows, and a few sheep. Their clothing was well worn but clean. They waddled like ducks in their wooden shoes, which, I imagine, are none too comfortable for all-day walking.

The house was big, - rooms twice the size of ours. The floors were made of foot square tile. The furniture was lined up along the walls leaving each room very bare looking. Rough hewn timbers supported the high ceiling, windows and doorways were huge. There were few pictures or decorations, but the place looked well lived in and comfortable, especially the kitchen.

The Mama and the oldest Daughter, Marie Louise, were finishing the cooking in several places at once. There was a suspended pot in a tremendous fireplace, two more in the coals, and more in the oven.

The eating took 3 hours. There were five courses - soup, then lamb, fresh peas and carrots, warm bread and butter, then roast duck, French fried new potatoes and salad, then strawberries with sugar, cream and Calvados, finally coffee, crackers and cheese. It was delicious. They do something to food that is out of this world. I even enjoyed the lamb, something I studiously avoided at home.

They have little wine and drink hard cider with meals. There were seven 1000-litre casks of the stuff in the storeroom. Incidentally, calvados, a potent drink, is distilled from dregs of cider.

After dinner they taught us some French and we attempted to teach them some English. The youngest daughter, Collette, was most anxious to learn our language. She had her own method, - pointing to things and asking for the English word. She pointed to her eyes, ears, nose, etc., then rubbed her face and I said "face". At this the whole family howled with laughter for several minutes. The Papa explained afterward that their word "fesse", which they pronounce exactly as "face", in French means one's behind.

I like the French as people a lot more than the British. They are vivacious, have a quick, good sense of humor, laugh easily and freely, are unashamed to show affection, and generous. Much more interesting, and a lot more fun than the stolid, calculating British. (By the way, I've had my fill of England - have no desire to return there.)

Towns are off limits, but by talking nice to an MP a few of us get to roam around in two of them. A major battle was just fought at the largest one.

The buildings are all stone, streets narrow and winding. It had been badly mauled but all the civilians seemed busy working at something. The cafes were closed, the few open stores had little to sell. The railway station was a twisted mess. Two locomotives were sieved from air strafing. In one block only the creamery was standing. It was the busiest place in town. French flags stuck out of the few inhabited places.

We saw several women with all their hair cut off - retribution for "shacking up" with German soldiers.

I've been talking with several wounded officers and men who have been returning every day from the front. It's a tough, slow battle because of the terrain. All of this part of the country is divided into small, square pieces of about 2 acres each, hemmed in by hedgerows.

At the edges of each field is a ditch, about a yard deep and a yard wide. The parallel ditch in the adjoining field is about 6 feet away. The dirt from the ditches is piled up between them, forming a sort of wall. A ragged, impenetrable profusion of thorny brush, weeds, vines, and odd-sized trees grow along these walls, altogether making a drainage ditch, an effective fence, and a permanent division of property. This is the damned thing we call a hedgerow.

It is almost impossible to crawl through one. A man standing in the ditch has an excellent camouflaged trench. He can see you but you can't see him.

The Germans burrow themselves into these hedgerows and make machine-gun emplacements, particularly in the corners where they have a good field of fire. It takes artillery to blast them out. They string land-mine tripwires through them. It's a perfect setup for defense - and plenty tough for us. So, when the battle seems to move slowly, remember hedgerows and hedgerows.

Yesterday was Bastille Day, commemorating French freedom from tyranny in 1789. It's like our 4th of July. The chaplain scraped up a band, invited the natives, and everybody raised hell. The band played the Marseillaise and the Frenchmen sang - timidly at first, but not for long. They seemed to need a minute to reassure themselves that there would be no reprisals, then they really let loose. It did our hearts good to watch them. They all had big, broad smiles, flung their arms, threw their beret into the air, and sang like mad. The artillery booms made a downbeat in the wrong place sometimes, but it was a howling success. Easily the most vivid thing I've seen yet.

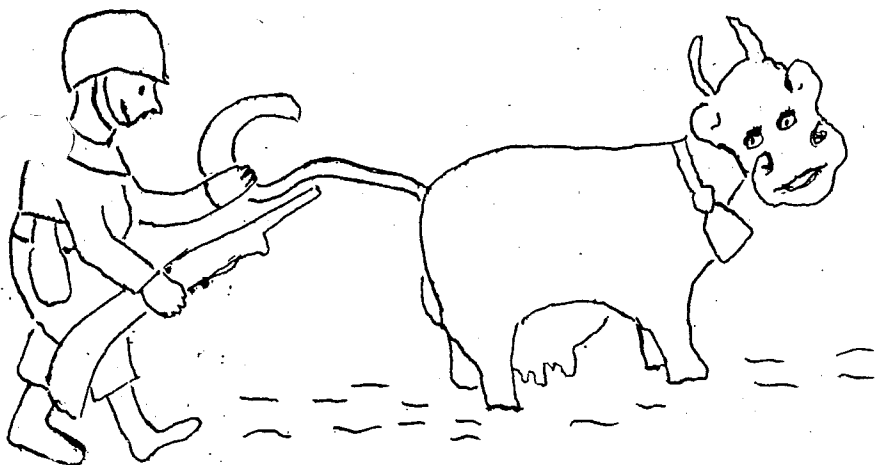
I now have a foxhole deluxe, lined with heavy cardboard from ration boxes. It is covered with my shelter tent, complete with camouflage, and is very dry.

The chow is better now - we're getting dehydrated food and it's good. I'm getting fairly comfortable, so if my usual luck persists, I'll be moving out very soon.

Best regards to all of you,

H. R. H.

P.S. No mail has caught up to us since my last letter, hence no personal P.S.'s.



Note: This is No. IV in the series of letters which we have sent out from Lt. H.R. Hansen. The first was from the Atlantic; the second, from England; and the third, on a postcard, was written just after he had landed in France. H.R.H. is not responsible except as inspiration, for what you see at the left.