

HQTRS. - 29th INF. DIV. APO #29 c/o Postmaster, N.Y., N.Y.

Dear Folks and Friends,

Holland - 9/18/44

Before coming into the Low countries, I had a couple of interesting experiences in France, a little removed from the Army life.

A Frenchman named Francois Dupre came to our camp one day asking for protection from the F.F.I. which had been threatening him. He was the custodian and headman of a coterie of 22 servants in a huge chateau nearby which had been abandoned by its Nazi owner just a few hours before our troops arrived. Now the F.F.I. was claiming the place as a sort of war prize and, on Dupre's refusal to open the place to them, they vowed to "get him" as a collaborator. The situation was complicated by the insistence of an American named Gustin Wright, who lived nearby, that properly he should control the property until our Civil Affairs Commission arrived. He was president of a French musical society and had some scheme to turn the place into a conservatory which he would control.

The Colonel thought that I might be able to explain the legal angles to the chief contestants and maintain peace at the place, so I took an interpreter and a guard detachment with me and moved in.

The chateau is owned by Harold Rittman, a German bridge builder, who had constructed the concrete works in the French coastal defenses. The impressive group of buildings was enclosed by a high stone wall. The tremendous old residence was contrasted against a long, three-story modern building which the servants described as the "madhouse". Here Rittman entertained the playboys of the Nazi hierarchy.

The place was functionally designed and streamlined for pleasure and nothing else. Downstairs was a dining hall with a large professional stage at one end, a big kitchen at the other. On the two upper floors were 20 bedrooms, each with a soft silk-quilted bed, radio and bath. Also upstairs was a game room and a fancy bar. The cellar held a mammoth stock of every sort of liquor, including some wiskey -- Johnny Walker, Black and White, Canadian Club, etc.

The servants described a typical party there. The orgy started with liquor, then dinner, a sexy show by Parisian performers, more liquor, and then finally decelerated in the small hours as more pairs of feet were heard on the stairways.

We lived in this place, minus the blondes, for three days in utter luxury, complete with fine French cuisine and wine, for which we gladly exchanged our "C" rations. I occupied the big bedroom reserved for Goering.

Marcel, the stable boy, took the interpreter and me for a buggy ride one sunny afternoon to see the fabulous chateau de Balincourt, home of "Countess de Bourbon". There was more grandeur piled up there than any other country place I have ever seen.

Approaching the castle was a straight driveway bordered with gardens, statues and pools. The horses hoofs seemed too loud and I felt like a silly intruder when we pulled up before the imposing entrance. I felt better when the butler turned out to be a cozy little guy, wearing a sweater, who said he was honored to have us call. He explained that the "Countess" had recently moved to the little chateau at the farm because the place was being turned over to her twenty year old daughter, who had just married a British Army Captain as part of her dowry.

We'll call the place an art gallery and museum and let it go at that. The interesting story concerns the occupants, of whom we learned plenty, as the old butler turned out to be quite a tatter. He said that the Count de Bourbon became an invalid in early married life, long ago, and that a friend of the family, Basil Zaharoff,

the mysterious munitions king of the last war, had taken up with the Countess. While the Count withered away and died in a Paris hospital, Basil and the Countess had two illegitimate daughters, both of whom assumed the name "Countess de Bourbon". The one just moved out was 50 years old.

I couldn't help but think of the British Captain who had just acquired Balincourt and a bastard of a bastard of a wife. His good fortune would be a bit hard to explain to the boys at the club.

Our luxurious, if bizarre, life in that fantastic valley came to an abrupt end on the third day when our outfit pulled stakes. We left the place with nothing settled, as the Civil Affairs Commission had not yet arrived. The intrigue was still going strong, probably even sharpened by our presence and its connotations, and all these nice larcenous people were at least looking daggers at each other, while Rittman considered a more important problem somewhere in Germany.

In one place we had a bivouac in a game refuge, by far the best campsite yet. It was a beautiful spot, like a big park. Before anyone had thought of the necessity for posting an order against hunting, some of the boys were broiling some pheasant and venison.

Lt. Williams, Special Service Officer, heard of a Victory celebration in the town of Arronville, so a few of us went there in his "International" sedan -- so called because it was a French car, stolen by the Germans and captured by us. It was a small town but plenty alive.

The festivities started with a fiery talk by the mayor, followed by the solemn performance of denuding the scalps of three "Nazi lovers" whose public disgracing had been delayed to provide zest and symbolism for this occasion. The three women were tied to chairs on a platform in the middle of the town square looking properly shameful and quite unattractive.

Their hair was quickly removed, with flourishes, by the barber, while the ring of people solemnly watched and said nothing. It was so quiet you could hear every scissor snip. When at last the barber finished, a man wearing an F.F.I. arm band made an indelible swastika on the forehead of each woman. The "treatment" completed, the women were untied and led away while an old gent dressed in an ancient French army uniform played a roll on his snare drum. A few people shouted some remarks, obviously impolite, and that was that.

There was some free wine and cognac for the few of us that attended, drunk with a spirited exchange of toasts, then some competitive games. The best of these was "Beheading the Goose". A big white goose was hung up in a basket with a hole in the bottom, permitting its neck to dangle groundward. The basket was suspended about six feet high on a rope between two poles. The crowd was roped off in a large oval, inside which the blindfolded contestants attempted to cut off the goose's neck with a saber, with the goose as the prize.

The first man, a husky Maqui, started walking slowly toward the goose, about 15 paces away, while the crowd yelled directions louder and louder as he came closer. When he finally braced himself for his one try, the bloodthirsty excitement and yelling was at its peak. He made a terrific slash, too low, and the crowd sagged with groans. More tried and missed or failed to completely sever the neck, which seemed as hard to cut as a loose-hanging rope. Finally one G.I. was induced to try, and having made careful calculations on the paces and height, he methodically ended the contest, walking off with the bloody goose amidst a lot of "bravos". They seemed happy to have one of our boys win.

Later, I saw the barn where they kept the hairless women, eighteen of them. You can't imagine how inhuman they look, without hair their heads seem too small for

their bodies and the swastikas on their foreheads add an evil look to their drab worried faces. I asked what happened to the male collaborators and learned that they are not penned up because they need no "protective custody". Instead they are required to report to the Mairie (city hall) at a certain hour each day, and if they fail the F.F.I. hunts them down as fugitives. They assured me that the collaborators who failed to report are soon dead ones.

In Western France there was increased enemy resistance and as we neared Belgium the roadsides were thick with wreckage, especially around the battlefields of the last war. Going through this area we saw many beautiful cemeteries and monuments, British and American as well as French. A big battle had raged all around these memorials.

At one, a French cemetery bordered with stone arches and pillars, a German truck had been blasted part way into the grave lot, knocking down some pillars and flattening several rows of headstones. At another, a British monument, there was an obelisk with four foot-long bronze tanks, pointing in the four cardinal directions, at its base. A smashed Tiger tank was lying on its side with its .88 gun pointing skyward, not twenty feet away. The evenly spaced trees, not 26 years old, on either side of the Memorial drive were ripped ragged from the fierce fire of aircraft.

I wish I had some snapshots of these scenes. I would like to glue them on the peace table as reminders.

Our convoy stopped for lunch next to a wrecked German airdrome. We have seen a lot of them, but this was the first one I saw on foot. The long concrete runways were painted green; the hangers were made to appear as a French village, Hollywood prop style. Misshapen chunks were all that remained of the planes destroyed on the ground. AA guns on the perimeter were made useless by the Germans themselves by melting breeches with the thermite bombs. Stockpiles of crated ammunition, bombs, rockets and grenades, were evidence that the place was abandoned in a hurry. Rows of 500 pound rocket bombs were resting in their crate-racks, poised at a 60 degree angle ready to be fired toward a small town nearby. Letters scattered around showed, as we have noticed before, that mail to German soldiers from home was censored, a significant difference from our army, which has never found this necessary. An old farmer, who owned this former hay meadow, was filling in the bomb craters and told us with a smile and a shrug that he had done the same thing in this same field after the last war.

When we made the last hop out of France it was easy to tell when we crossed over into Belgium. In the border town we went through there were twice the number of noisy well-wishers than its buildings would hold and almost everything was covered with the Black, Yellow and Red flags of the pre-Hitler Kingdom.

At first appearance, nothing was much different from France, except the flags, but as we went in farther the changes were very noticeable. The buildings and houses here were of brick instead of stone and were more trim and clean. Sidewalks and streets were scrubbed every morning. People were dressed a little better than in France. The men wore suits tailored like ours, but the trousers were "pantaloons" with a tight fitting cuff about six inches above the shoetop, worn with heaven woolen socks. Women, dressed more plainly than in France, were neater, though less attractive as a lot than French women in towns of comparable size. As a whole they were as friendly, if less demonstrative, than in France.

Belgium, I believe, is the most densely populated place in Europe. You hardly leave one town and you are in the next. In the coal mining region it looks just like Pennsylvania, and there are lots of industrial cities. As everywhere we have been the plants and railroad yards are wrecked, but more trains are operating here than in France. There were a lot of American automobiles on the street, most of them adapted to charcoal burners.

This is the first place I have seen dogs used to pull carts. All breeds of dogs are used, but one type, that looks like a Chesapeake and is about twice as big, is the most popular. I have seen them pulling heavy carts loaded with milk cans and vegetables; long carts on two high wheels with a man pulling in front between the shafts and with the dog hitched underneath between the wheels; and wheel chairs carrying invalids.

In one town I had two pleasant surprises -- excellent bottled beer, vintage 1941, and ice cream (glace, they call it), with a choice of 27 flavors -- the first of either I have had since New York.

In Belgium, the people speak French or Flemish, depending on the region, but generally French is spoken only in the west. Their franc notes, worth slightly more than French, are printed in both languages. I tried to speak with one bivouac neighbor, in French, about getting some straw. He shook his head indicating no savvy and said, "Flammink", then spoke a fast line and I noticed that Flemish has a lot of "inks" in it. It reminds me of Milt Gross -- "Nize bebbly, ittink opp all de coonstotch puddink, and I'll tellink you de story from rad Ridink Hood".

A priest visited us one day and I took him to lunch. He used half of my mess kit, sat on a pail and ate "C" ration (stew this time) which he said, with apparent sincerity, was delicious. He spoke good English, as many priests over here do, and told me the story of Belgium occupation.

It was the same story we heard in France for the most part, but there are some significant differences. Belgium got off on the right foot when King Leopold conveniently capitulated early in the game, and since then organized resistance had been slight. In France, each time the Maquis struck, more "privileges" or material wealth was taken away until finally very few had cars, bicycles or radios and no one had enough food, fuel, clothing or tobacco. France was such a bad subject that looting of homes by soldiers was winked at. In Belgium, most people have been able to keep cars, bicycles and radios (though "enemy" programs were verboten) and have done fairly well on living necessities. The whole attitude of Belgium was different. It is a small impotent country and its people are peacefully inclined and industrious.

The priest was most loquacious on the inhuman treatment of Jews. He saw old men and women beaten on the street for failing to wear their white star or for talking to a Christian and he also saw small children kicked viciously for no reason whatsoever. All able-bodied Jews had been taken to Poland for slave labor. Those who remained had a hard time getting food. They couldn't personally go to a Christian store and often had their ration cards confiscated for insignificant reasons. The priest said that he and others in the Catholic church, including nuns in convents, helped these unfortunate people hide themselves, and got them food and clothing. Some were shot or imprisoned for doing this.

Another bivouac neighbor invited me to a good dinner and fixed me up with a hot bath. The only denials they suffered were lack of good soap, coffee and enough sugar. They had a modern home that any of us would be proud to have (Belgium is decidedly more in the modern trend than France). Their maid, an intelligent Jewish girl of 19, spoke fair English and told me how she and her sister were herded on the train at Mons with other Jews marked for Poland. When the train was going slowly through a switchyard on the edge of the city, both of them leaped off. A Nazi guard on the train fired a submachine gun at them, missing her but wounding her sister in the leg. Her sister has been in the hospital ever since (for the last year) but she found shelter and hiding with this Flemish family, who treat her like a daughter. Her parents, if alive, are in Poland.

Howard Triest, our water tender, is a Jewish boy who got away to America from Munich in 1937. He had a special pass to see his aunt in Brussels and told me his story when he returned. His aunt was hard to find there because she had been hiding

in seven different places for the last 3 years, none of the addresses being registered, and it took him two days to trace her. She had lost 90 pounds and was quite ill. His parents, who had fled to Marseilles, France, were "schnappen" (snatched) there a year ago and there was no news of them. Howard is only 19 years old, but bears all this tragedy very bravely.

There are many more incidents like these that we have learned first hand, like the Jew who told us his pregnant wife was taken away 2½ years ago with no word from her since. You have read a lot of these things, but like me, you may have thought them exaggerated in the press. For those of us here, who have learned to know Nazis as inhuman terrorists, dirty fighters and arrogant prisoners, there is no doubt. What you have read of their deprivations is as true and plain as the fact that pigs stink.

The Boy Scout movement was strong in Belgium and, as everywhere, it was dissolved as a sissy outfit that needed to be replaced in the New Order by the Hitler Youth. Needless to say, no one but the obedient sons of collaborators joined up. Boy Scout uniforms were supposed to have been destroyed, but when we came through they were a close second in prominence to the unbleached sack cloth and black tams of The White Brigade, the Belgian underground come to daylight. You could tell by their strut and the way they saluted us that those boys felt as liberated, vindicated and proud as their elders in the white pajamas.

The Krauts abandoned Belgium in a hurry and apparently in fair order for a change. Anyway, we had a light time of it for about a week, running into little on the ground and not much from the air.

Here in Holland it's a different story. We are on their back doorstep and their stuff is close and handy. The weather has been extremely bad for flying for some time, so they've had a good chance to man their forts and make a few more. We're closer to their airdromes and they can put more in the air now. We're catching more rocket bombs and robot planes too.

Worst of all, there are increasing numbers of "native" informers in our midst. This is a real problem because there is no way of our telling who among these friendly neighbors gets the information to the enemy. Cautious movement and good camouflage is of little avail. Jerry planes in the last three places have been finding and bombing us as surely as if we had sent them the map coordinates.

Holland was doing as well in the occupation as Belgium until the general strike on May Day in 1943. Since then, the people here have been as badly off as they were in France. Radios were seized, rations reduced and property confiscated without compensation. Homes were systematically ransacked for every bit of metal, right down to small ashtrays. Church bells were all taken, even if it required damage to the church; copper power lines were torn down and inadequate steel ones substituted.

My all-time favorite bivouac neighbor is Jannis Bernardus De Hullu, a retired Dutch schoolmaster who was evacuated from Zeeland when the Germans flooded that part of the country. He is a London University graduate, a keen observer and a good host. He introduced himself when I was walking along a small country road leading into a tiny village. He took me to the house where he and his wife have rooms and we had afternoon tea. I felt a little guilty for absenting myself from camp but the visit was extremely worthwhile and the Vla, their "national cake" (made with cherries) was a tasty treat.

He told me about the collaborators, of which Holland has had more than its share. These people were mostly the riffraff who had never made good or had criminal records. For example, the burgemeester of a nearby town had been ousted for corruption but recovered his job when the Nazis came. All collaborators were paid, given double rations and could keep a radio. These were the people who "turned in their neighbors

to the Gestapo, who selected the hostages, and who put their enemies on the slave labor lists. On the mere whim of one of these rats, a peaceful citizen might find himself in jail. Once in jail, it would be three months before charges would be brought, or he would be set free with no explanation of his arrest in the first place. If he came to trial, the burden was on him to prove his innocence. He assured me that this was standard procedure.

The underground, called the "Onderduiker" (under diver), was so secret that he never knew positively of any person who was in it. They operated at night, distributing propaganda and sabotaging. They obtained their food by taking cattle, grain and vegetables from wealthy farmers at night without their knowledge, leaving an itemized receipt. Dutch farmers have complete faith that their restored government will redeem these receipts. "Hundred and hundreds" of hostages were shot because of their activities, he said, but this never lessened their efforts.

In this little village, one Jewish lady was concealed in a basement for two years, and a British airman was harbored for seven months, until he could be secretly evacuated. Punishment for such crimes was capital, and every time some one was caught at it a bold obituary of the offender was printed in a box on the front page of the daily paper.

The Dutch are distrustful of the English, fearing that peace terms may be as bad as the occupation. Their experience with England has not been too good, and they can never forget the Boer War, in which many Dutch colonists died trying to keep England from stealing their gold fields in Africa, according to their version.

During the occupation, German soldiers were "disgustingly smooth and polite" to the Dutch girls they liked. They would give them money and buy them silk dresses and leather shoes which were otherwise unobtainable. Some of the "stupid girls" went for the sleek uniform, polite treatment and pretty presents and soon found themselves unhappy mothers. The German army condoned this on the basis of assimilating subject races into the New Order and gave an allotment of ten gulden a week to the mother for the baby's support.

This sort of thing was so common that there was a popular story among the Dutch about the problem. It concerns a typical village where an irate committee of solid citizens called on the mayor and exhorted him to see the German Captain and try to put an end to this widespread social disgrace. Obliging, the mayor saw the Captain but got nowhere. "It is not in my power to help you", said the Captain, "and, besides, doesn't it say in the Bible that all good men should go forth and multiply?" "Yes," said the mayor, "but it doesn't say to multiply and go forth."

There were a lot of these sly, quietly told stories. Another one is, "What is the difference between Hitler and de Gruyter?" (de Gruyter is the name of Dutch cooperative stores that use the familiar ad -- "10% refund and best quality.") The answer is -- "Hitler gives Seisz Inquart (sound like $6\frac{1}{4}$ in Dutch) rommel." (means rubbish in Dutch).

He described the hasty departure of the Germans just before we came here. They took every car, horse and wagon and bicycle they could get their hands on. They used the small country roads, speeding with cars and trucks in the daytime, using the horses only at night. All of them were anxiously scanning the sky for our aircraft. Many, he said, were young boys, 15 and 16 years old. Once in a while, the Hitler salute was given in mockery, with the gesture of raising a stiff arm, then bringing it straight down quickly as if to say, "Down with Hitler." Everyone was reading a propaganda sheet that had just been distributed. He kept one and translated it for me. Briefly, it said that while the allies have superior weapons and a large army, this was not the reason for the "withdrawal," the real reason being that they were fighting for time to get out the new secret weapon which would quickly end the war. (Incidentally, one of our prisoners said that their "master strategy" was to "let" us all get on the continent where they could slaughter us all at once).

It looks like we will be here a while waiting for things to get organized for the big push we are all staking so much on happening and succeeding. The weather has been the worst yet -- constant rain and cold wind. Water seeps into our foxholes and no one has dry feet. Trucks slip and stick in the thick mud and everything seems bogged down.

We are restlessly awaiting a good turn in the weather so we can get out of here. Not only because we are becoming a better target each day; we want to get into Germany and have it over with as soon as possible. Everyone is talking about the demobilization plan, but secretly we are all thinking about what the winter is going to be like.

Chow these last few days has been fit for a king. We took over an abandoned German supply dump with a big stock of fresh beef. With the potatoes, onions, tomatoes, apples, pears and peaches we find in the fields, we are having daily feasts.

It gets dark at seven (we're on single summertime now) and the hole being the only safe place for the certain arrival of Jerry planes, we "retire" at that time. Never have I had so much time for sleeping with no sleep.

Whoa,

H.R.H.

P.S.'s

TO ALL OF YOU: Mail has been coming in nice big bunches lately, proof that my scheme is working. Wish I had the time to answer each of you personally, but, as we say in the Army, I barely have time to get this jerked off, in snatches and sometimes. The Falstaff in me is prompting something like this:

This printed post to you
While impersonal, it's true,
Saves me time and woe
And pleases the A.P.O.

What I'm trying to say, left-handed like, is to keep 'em coming. I like the ones with lots of small talk and local news clippings.

John McCouneloug: Thanks for all the inside dope. First I've had on that episode. Sometime will you tell me what happened to Amidon?

Burnie: Thanks, and I'll be in the mood for a celebration.

Capt. Carroll Robb: Washington, second stop.

Lt. Highberg: Me too.

Mother and Irma: Cigarettes are scarce here too - transportation - but I've always managed to get enough. The candy came in good shape. No less than 15 said it was wonderful.

Dick Archer: Receiving "C.U.Way" - the kind of stuff I like to get - catches me up on what my friends are doing. Nice letter, too, denks.

"Old Man" Kazolla: I'll have that corrected. Your strong right arm is making me very happy.

Ducky Zucky: We all enjoyed the cartoons.

Earl Rentfro: The opportunity to do things with CMIS makes me itch to get back. Thanks for all the news.

Roy Borgengren: Someday soon I'll answer that nice, long letter in kind. I'm looking forward to reading your new book.

Nonie: The letter from Big Sandy made me daydream. When you saw Mother swimming, you saw more than I have.

Brother Dick: Received the picture of you and Audray. No doubt that she will add to the appearance of the family.

Andy Bratter: Have I lived to see the day when you are fighting the Republicans?

Bill Desmond: Your rib on Buzz bomb well taken. Most occurred after I left, but still few in total outside London. Can now personally testify that these things are terrific, and that inaccuracy is what is worst on the nerves.

Helen Gannaway: Homer and I now further apart than ever.

Ray and Geno: Has the heir to the Solem millions arrived yet?

Shaky: Your long teletype best yet. Conclusions on China debatable. I think - agree on the rest.