

I am writing this to honor my Dad, Pfc. Russell M. Wainright and his friend and WWII foxhole companion, Cpl. Herman H. Ernst. This is dedicated to all the members of Company C of the 246th Combat Engineer Battalion. It is also dedicated to my mother, Dora, who helped win the war on the Home Front.

Russell died at the age of 90, just before Christmas in 2004. I knew that he had been in the Army in WWII. And while he told me a few stories about his experience, in general he just didn't want to talk about it. After he was gone, I didn't want his story to die with him, so I went on a mission to find out more. In my Dad's effects, I found many letters written by him during WWII to my mother, Dora. I found Battalion and Regimental histories that he had saved. I also found a Christmas letter, addressed to him, from a Herman Ernst.

I wrote Mr. Ernst a letter telling him of my Dad's death. This started five years of correspondence between Mr. Ernst and me, which lasted until his death at the age of 85 in November 2009. I will forever be grateful to Mr. Ernst. Through him, I learned about my Dad and his experiences in WWII. Because of him, I became closer to my Dad. While Herman and I never met face to face, we became friends. Herman sent me other letters and remembrances that he had written. Prior to his death, Herman asked me to share the information that he had given me. I promised Herman that I would write down his story - to honor him, my Dad and the men of the 246th.

Back in WWII, before the days of email, computers and cell phones, letters were the only way to keep in touch with friends and family who were far away. So people wrote letters, lots of letters. Mail, especially during war time, could be slow. The gap between questions and answers, statements and responses, could sometimes be measured in weeks. In telling their story, I used the words of Herman and Russell as much as possible. Because of this, there will be misspellings and grammatical errors. Herman and Russell were real people, often writing under stressful conditions.

My mother, Dora, carefully saved every letter my Dad wrote to her. While in the Army during WWII, my Dad wrote to her every chance he could. While Herman's letters were memories, written 60 years after WWII, my Dad's letters were written while he was actually living WWII. Because of this difference, my Dad's letters are completely different. My Dad's letters describe the daily life of the GI. Sometimes the most important part of a day was getting letters from home, getting a package, having a shower, getting a warm meal, or having dry socks. Every letter he wrote mentions every recent letter or package he received. And even though Mom wrote daily, Dad's letters always ask for more letters from home.

My Dad's letters were lengthy, chatty, conversational and full of love, but restrained. Most of the letters are long, so the parts I am including here are just small portions. These extracts try to show the reality of a soldier's experience, not a TV or movie version. Sometimes the letters are 10-12 pages long, and say virtually nothing. They were meant to be upbeat and reassuring, a way of staying close even though miles apart. Sometimes the hardest part about being in the military is the separation from your loved ones, for months, if not years at a time.

Freedom is not free. During wartime everyone serving their country has but one life. This life is uniquely their own. They each have friends and family. Winning a war requires great sacrifice, not only from the ones in uniform, but also from everyone on the Home Front. All are giving their lives for their country (sometimes temporarily, sometimes forever).

There is an old, soldier adage, "War is long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror." A soldier's life is filled with waiting, boredom, loneliness and writing endless

letters. It can also be filled with sheer terror and the horror of war. There is no glory in war, only death, destruction and a great amount of terrible suffering.

Dad worked hard to protect Mom from the horrors of war. He tried not to add to her worries and stress during these extremely difficult times. Instead of being letters from the front, the letters often sound like letters from summer camp, until you read between the lines. Even then, Mom worried a lot and must have spent a great deal of time trying to read between those lines.

In addition, all of Dad's letters had to go through censors. Letters were not private. All letters were read by a censor before being mailed. Certain things and some subjects simply were forbidden and could not be included in any letter. Other topics were avoided, knowing that a censor would also be reading the letter. Dad sometimes asked Mom if any parts of his letters were censored. He wrote, "I try to be a good boy" to avoid the censors' cuts, but even then, some of his letters had whole paragraphs literally cut out with a razor.

Herman Ernst sometimes censors himself. He wrote, "I take a long time [to write these letters], because my old memory is faulty. I am 83. Sometimes in the early morning, I see those places and the men who never age. Many things, I can't put on paper, because women might read them.

"One of my friends from the 1st Platoon [about 30-35 men] came from Oregon, to my home in Ludington Michigan. (He needed to talk about the war and he had questions that he had been trying to answer for 60 years.) We talked for 2 hours. Most of the time, he laughed like mad. He died soon after our meeting." [H.E.]

Russell mostly kept his memories inside. When I lived at home, I often heard my Dad yelling out in his sleep, having dreams of those times. My Mother told me that he would awake from those nightmares in a cold sweat, swinging his fists, and still fighting for his life.

My Dad was a PFC (Private First Class) in the 246th Combat Engineer Battalion, Company C, 3rd Platoon, 1st squad. He was Assistant Squad Leader under Squad Leader, Corporal Herman H. Ernst. Dad earned a Purple Heart for wounds during the Battle for Normandy. Herman got his Purple Heart during the Battle of the Bulge.

The two of them were in almost continuous action, from the Normandy landing to the Elbe River in Germany, when their unit linked with the Russians. The 246th earned a Presidential Unit Citation for their "extraordinary heroism" during the battle to cross the Roer River at Julich. Dad earned five Bronze Campaign Stars for his action in all five major campaigns of Western Europe: Normandy, Northern France, Central Europe, Rhineland, and Ardennes. In addition to those same medals, Herman Ernst earned the Bronze Star, with a V for Valor.

My Grandmother once told me a story: One evening in late 1941, a strange thing happened. In her neighborhood, in East Lansing, Michigan, people were coming out of their houses to look at the evening sky. It was a spectacular sunset. It was amazingly beautiful, but at the same time terrible and horrifying. Grandma said that the entire evening sky was a bright, blood red. She said that the sky looked like it was melting, dripping blood - dripping blood on the Earth. No one else had ever seen anything like it. Grandma said that she had seen it like that a few times before.

Grandma had grown up in Germany, in an area where invading armies came frequently. She remembered her childhood and the many times her family had to hide in caves, waiting for the soldiers to leave. Sometimes, during those times, she had seen skies like that. The results

were always the same. It was a sign from God that there was to be a terrible, bloody war, which would cover the ground with blood.

Not long after this event, America was at war. Eventually, my Grandma would see all four of her sons and one son-in-law go off to help fight this terrible war. My grandparents were both German immigrants. This made it even more heartbreaking. They still had family living in Germany. Some of Dora's cousins would die during the war, fighting for their homeland, Germany. After the war, my grandparents would send money for Care packages for family members struggling to survive in war devastated Germany.

During WWII, it was customary in America for a family to put a large blue star in the front window of their home whenever a spouse or child was in the military. If the person died in service, the star was changed to gold. Grandma would eventually have 5 blue stars in her window. Fortunately, all 5 came home safely; their stars remained blue. One of those blue stars was for my Dad, Russell Wainright.

Dad was a tall, handsome, muscular, farm boy at 5'10" and a solid 180 pounds. He grew up working hard, plowing fields, walking behind horse drawn plows. He was quiet and shy, more at home outside and in the fields, preferring animals to people. Even though he was quiet, he had a wonderful (but dry) sense of humor. His middle initial was "M". When asked what the "M" stood for, he would always answer with a straight face and a twinkle in his eye, "Mud".

He graduated from Eastern High School in Lansing, Michigan in 1932. In the summer of 1933, Russell and his best friend decided to go to the Chicago World's Fair. The two hitchhiked the 200 plus miles to Chicago. Russell spent one day at the fair, then turned around and hitchhiked home, leaving his friend there. Russ said that it was too crowded, too many people.

A few years later, Russ met Dora. Dora, or "Dort" to her family, was tall at 5'8" and thin at about 120 pounds. A good looking brunette with beautiful blue eyes, she would proudly say that in school, she was the "second tallest girl in her class". Dora was very out-going and vivacious. She loved to talk and joke, even with complete strangers. All over town, sales clerks knew her and liked her. Unlike Russ, who still lived in the country on a farm with his father, step-mother, and only one sibling, an older brother, Dora came from a large family of four brothers and three sisters, with many other family members living in a few block area.

Dora was working at a local bean elevator. One day, Russ was doing business at the elevator and saw this good looking girl working there. It was love at first sight and Russ became a frequent visitor to the elevator. Dora's out-going personality finally overcame Russell's shyness and they had their first date on March 27, 1937. Whenever Russell came to call, Dora's father would entertain the family by loudly announcing, "Hey, Dora! Your butter and eggs man is here to see you." My Mom and Dad were married on Columbus Day in October of 1940.

Dora's father sold Russell a piece of land, which had an abandoned, one room, tarpaper shack on it. The floor of the shack consisted of many layers of old newspapers – a real fixer-upper. After a great amount of work, it would become the home where our family grew up and where Russell lived until his death 64 years later. Russell got a job at Motor Wheel, a large factory which made wheels for the car industry. Except for his time in the military, Russ would work at Motor Wheel for 37 years, until he retired on June 30, 1976.

On December 7, 1941, Russell and my mom, Dora, were spending a quiet Sunday afternoon at home. My Mom's 17 year old brother, Ralph, was spending the afternoon visiting with them. The three of them were sitting at the table, listening to the radio and playing the popular board game, Monopoly. Suddenly, the radio program ended and an announcer came on the air. The U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor had been attacked by the Japanese.

Most Americans had never heard of Pearl Harbor, but they knew that U.S. soldiers and sailors had been attacked - ships had been sunk and Americans had died. That Sunday, war had entered their living room. It was no longer peaceful and quiet. The game was over. They knew that their lives would be forever changed. America was at war, and Americans would be fighting and dying all over the world for the next three and a half years.

My Dad was drafted and inducted into the Army on April 15, 1943, at Ft. Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan and entered into active duty on April 22. At the time he entered the Army, he was already 28 years old and had been married for 2 ½ years. Herman Ernst, at the age of 19, was already married, with two children. Herman and Russell were both sent to Ft. Lewis, Washington for basic training and assigned to the 246th Combat Engineer Battalion.

The 246th was part of the 1104 Engineer Group of the 4th Corps. The 246th had 600 enlisted men and 34 officers. The senior officers and NCOs (sergeants) came from the 32nd Engineer Construction Regiment, which had built the Alcan Highway in Alaska and Canada. The junior officers were recent ROTC graduates. The enlisted men were mainly from Michigan.

One of the highlights of basic training was "shot" day, a day that the men of the 246th never forgot. When it was time to get their many required shots, everyone got in single file, took off their shirts, and slowly passed through two lines of medics, each armed with hypodermic needles. By getting shots simultaneously in both arms, the many shots were completed in half the time. This was before modern technology created slender, sharp needles - these needles were huge. In addition, this was before disposable needles (which were not in use until 1954), so every needle was used many times - over and over again. Needles were worn, dull and blunt, and every shot was painful.

In early August 1943, after basic infantry and engineer training, the 246th was sent to eastern Oregon, to build an air field and roads in preparation for the "Oregon Maneuvers". The 246th camp was set up just south of Wagontire, Oregon. For four months, they lived in two man pup tents.

The "Oregon Maneuvers" was a massive field exercise, involving over 100,000 army troops. It was meant as the final training exercise before these troops were sent overseas and into combat. The training maneuvers took place on a vast area of land in eastern Oregon, over 10,000 square miles of National Forests and other government lands. Designed to simulate actual combat, it involved the coordination of infantry, armor, artillery, air force, engineers and other support groups.

The actual maneuvers started in September 1943 and ran until the end of October. All November, after the training was over, engineers worked hard repairing roads and bridges that were damaged by tanks and other heavy equipment. It was high desert country, in August, it was boiling hot. Every day, temperatures reached the high 90s. Nights were near freezing; warm pup tents and sleeping bags attracted rattlesnakes. In November and December it was always cold. The 246th did not get back to Ft. Lewis until December.

Herman wrote, "We were at Ft. Lewis one year - we were well trained. A lot of that time, we were in the wilderness of Oregon. When we started back to the Fort, it was December and the snow in Oregon was 3 feet. We froze!

"The Chief, Clyde Matthews, was a Pima Indian from Arizona. The Pimas, a clan of the Apache Nation, were a tough solitary tribe who wanted to be left alone. But in 1943, Clyde was drafted and ended up in the 3rd Platoon, 246th Combat Engineers. During training, we shared a tent, becoming close friends. In Oregon, he would catch rattlesnakes by the tail and snap their

heads off. He did not like the Army, so when they sent him home for a 13 day leave, he stayed for a month.” [H.E.]

Not everyone was lucky enough to participate in the Oregon maneuvers. Ft. Lewis continued to receive and train new recruits during this period. A cadre of experienced GIs had to stay at Ft. Lewis to keep the fort operating. Russell was no longer a trainee and was chosen to remain at Ft. Lewis. With the rest of the battalion on maneuvers, Russ would have more free time and not be in continuous training. So in September, Dora decided to take the long train ride to Ft. Lewis, to stay with him awhile.

They both knew that he would be heading overseas soon. She said that it was a long, long train ride. During the war, every available railroad car was pressed into service. The car she rode in was old and old fashioned; the seats were hard and wooden, with straight backs. The only ventilation available in the cars was to open a window. All the cars on the train were packed to overflowing with military men.

During Dora’s visit, she rented a room in Tacoma, Washington, in the private home of a local couple. Russell got special permission as a married man, to live off post with his wife, returning to Ft. Lewis every day or when otherwise required. While Mom was at Ft. Lewis, Russell got a few days of leave. They took a short trip to Mt. Rainier National Park. In shirtsleeves, on a sunny beautiful day, they hiked and played in the snow. Even though it was fall, they made snow angels, snowmen and threw snowballs. They knew it might be their last chance to be together, possibly for years, possibly forever.

On October 2, 1943, Dora wrote her parents, “Well here it is the first of October and summer is over, it doesn’t seem possible. We are going to have steak for Sunday dinner. We are going to have some company over in the afternoon, a couple from Michigan. Russ had charge of quarters yesterday [the person in charge, who remains on duty and handles administrative matters after normal duty hours]. Today he has guard duty from 5 to 9 this afternoon and again tomorrow morning from 5 to 9. He will be here about 10:00 Sunday morning, then he won’t have to be back until Wednesday morning. Gee, it will seem funny when the rest of the boys get back and he won’t be around so much.

“Well Don went and did it [her brother got married], sure hope he is happy. Martha came from a large family, too – 5 girls and 3 boys. She wrote us a letter the other day, says she has the sweetest husband and the best in the world. I hope she always thinks that. She sure sounds like a nice girl.

“We went to a show Thursday afternoon, we saw ‘Claudia’. Last week we saw ‘My Friend Flicka’ - it was a swell picture. Mom and Dad, I miss going with you. But when we get back, that will be one thing we will do, won’t we darlings?”

In those pre-television days, going to the movies was a major entertainment and social event. Also, newsreels were always shown along with the feature film. This was a good way to keep up on the war news. Newsreels were 7 to 10 minute news documentaries similar to today’s TV news shows. They were changed daily, showing the day’s current events and breaking news.

“Russ just called. When he isn’t here, we keep the wires hot. We will be married three years October 12, it doesn’t seem possible. We are still just two love birds – hope it will always be that way. It doesn’t look like we will ever have an offspring, but we won’t give up. Everyone else we know seems to be making up for us.” [It would be 4 more years before they would have their first of four children.]

At the end of November, Russ requested and received a furlough (an authorized leave of absence), allowing him to travel back to Michigan. After a nice Thanksgiving dinner in a Ft.

Lewis mess hall, Dora and Russ had to rush into town to get train tickets. They boarded the train the day after Thanksgiving and traveled back to East Lansing. In this way, Russ had time to settle his affairs and say his goodbyes before going to war. Russ visited all his friends and family, who gave him a big farewell party. Unfortunately, Russ could not stay for Christmas and had to go back to Ft. Lewis. They still did not know how long it would be before Russ had to "ship out", or even where he would go. Dora returned to Tacoma with him.

On December 20, 1943, Dora wrote to her brother, Ralph, who was also in the army. Ralph was home for a short leave. "We sure were glad to hear you made it home all right. We hope you are home for Christmas. Russ and I will be together, but from then on we don't know what will happen. They [the 246th Engineers] got orders to go to a 'port of embarkation'. They [the GIs] have all sent their civilian clothes home. Gee we sure feel bad about it.

"Since we got back, the weather has been just perfect, except for lots of fog. Today, it started to rain and it will probably keep up all winter. Russ never gets in until 8 to 9:30 and he has to get up at 5:00. Do you know what we would like for Christmas? The war in Europe to be over! Merry Christmas Ralph and may our New Year bring Peace. God Bless You. Love and Kisses. Chin up and keep smiling."

While in the military, communication with family and friends was limited. Outgoing mail was carefully censored, so that valuable information was not erroneously leaked to the enemy. What seemed like basic, ordinary, commonplace information, might give the enemy the critical, vital information that they could use to sink a ship or kill troops.

After 10 months of training, everyone knew that the 246th would soon be going overseas. But any details were kept secret from the soldiers. In letters sent home, even speculation about when or where they were going was now forbidden. So when the 246th left Ft. Lewis, family and friends might not learn for weeks or months that their loved one was overseas, possibly never to be seen again. There was no opportunity for farewells - no chance to say goodbye.

Dora's little sister, Gus (Augusta) told me that Dora would always remember the day Russ left for Europe. While Dora watched through a window from her rented room in Tacoma, Russ walked alone down the road. When he reached the corner, he stopped, turned around, gave a brief wave, and then continued on his way to the train station to go back to Ft. Lewis.

On January 2, 1944, a cold, rainy Sunday, the 246th boarded a troop train in Ft. Lewis and headed east. During the long trip, men were not allowed to even leave the train, except for occasional stops for group calisthenics. All communication with the outside world was strictly forbidden; no mailing of letters, no phone calls.

After leaving the Chicago area, the countryside started to look familiar. They were back in Michigan! They were Home! The train started going through familiar towns and villages. Many men wrote short letters on penny postcards addressed to their loved ones, telling them that they were going overseas. The men would tie the postcard to a Washington apple and throw it out the window as the train slowly passed through the Michigan villages. They hoped people would find the apples and mail the cards for them.

When the train went through Battle Creek, it was just too much for some of the men. As the train slowed down, passing through town, a number of men jumped from the train and went AWOL. When they were discovered as missing, the MPs knew where to look for them. They were all at home with their families. The MPs rounded them up and took them under guard, to the staging area in Massachusetts, to join their fellow soldiers for the trip overseas.

After 6 days on the train, they reached Camp Miles Standish, near Boston. Ten days later the 246th was on a former fruit company freighter, now a troop transport called the "Explorer".

The "Explorer" sailed the evening of January 19, 1944. It had a Merchant Marine crew of 200 and carried 2,000 troops. The "Explorer" joined a convoy of about 200 transports and supply ships, guarded by a Navy escort of 2 cruisers, 2 aircraft carriers and many destroyers. There were ships as far as the eye could see. The "Explorer" was relatively fast and could run at 22 knots when fully loaded. It had a five inch naval gun, 2 three inch anti-aircraft guns, and several 50 caliber machine guns, all manned by Navy crews. However, Russell and Herman were also assigned to a gun crew.

England

On January 31, 1944, after 12 days at sea, the convoy reached Scotland. Those 12 days were miserable! The weather was bad and the seas were rough. It was typical winter in the North Atlantic. Most of the men became seasick, for which they were given crackers to eat. The troops slept in bunk beds that were 18 inches apart. The beds lined the walls and reached from the deck to the ceiling. Everyone ate standing up, at a long table, holding on to their mess gear so that it wouldn't slide on to the deck.

Herman wrote, "On the ship to England, [the Chief] drew deck duty. While swabbing, the ship gave a lurch and the Chief went sliding down towards the vast Atlantic Ocean. I got him by the collar and he pledged that we would be blood brothers forever."

The "Explorer" traveled up the Clyde River and dropped off its cargo of soldiers in Grenock, Scotland. The 246th traveled by train to Salisbury in Southern England. Their camp was a few miles out of Salisbury, at a place called Grim's Ditch. The men lived in tents, usually 9 or 10 men (one squad) to a tent. Each tent had one electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling and a coal stove for heat.

A million and a half American GIs were flooding into England preparing for the invasion of France. Family and home were thousands of miles away. Most of the GIs were young. Many had never been more than 25 miles away from home. D-Day was still 4 months away. That's a long wait for active, healthy young men with time on their hands. Training can only fill so much time. The military's goal was to keep the GIs' morale high, while keeping them sharp. Keep them busy and out of trouble. Keep the letters and packages coming from home to remind them why they were there and what they were fighting for.

By the end of the war, over 16 million Americans had either joined or were drafted into the military. They were living and fighting all over the world. In order to win the war, they not only needed the weapons of war, they had to be fed, clothed and fully equipped. In addition, America needed to supply vast amounts of all these items to their Allies everywhere, many of whom had been at war for many years. The war required the support, hard work and sacrifice of all Americans. The American people would do anything to support the war effort.

Imagine walking into a store and not being able to buy the things that you wanted, even though you had the money to pay for them? Many things were in short supply. In order to ensure that the military got all the supplies they needed and to make sure that everyone on the Home Front got their fair share, the government had to set up a system of rationing. Everyone had to personally appear before a local rationing board. Every person in a household, including babies and children, received a ration book. The ration book had stamps or coupons. A family could not buy more than their coupons would allow, and the amount allowed was generally a very small amount. Even that small amount was often not available. Americans were urged to "Do with less--so they'll have enough", with "they" being our GIs.

Tires were the first thing to be rationed, followed quickly by gasoline. Tires were needed all over the world by the millions for the military and they had an annoying habit of getting shot up and ruined. Imagine, 3 years into the war, and your tires are bald and 10 years old. First, the rationing board may say you don't need a tire coupon, take a bus. Or you may only qualify for one tire. It doesn't matter that you need 4 tires, so does everyone else.

Tires and gasoline were critically needed by the military. In early 1942, in order to save on both items, Congress passed a National Speed Limit of 35 miles an hour, and most Americans were authorized only enough coupons to buy 3 gallons of gas a week. When purchasing gasoline, a driver had to present a gas card along with a ration book and cash. Automobile races of any sort were banned. Unnecessary trips or travel were strongly discouraged. Driving just for sightseeing was illegal. Using public transportation or carpooling were ways to help win the war. Speed limits were not only heavily enforced, speeding was considered by many un-American. The people around you, who had loved ones fighting and dying, often felt that the ticket you got for going over 35 MPH was richly deserved; your wasting of precious resources could be viewed as aiding the enemy.

New cars and car parts were not even being produced. Car companies were making tanks, army trucks, landing boats and airplanes. Shoe companies were making boots. Clothing manufacturers were making uniforms and tents. Shoes and clothing were rationed. Appliances of all kinds, both large and small, were also not being made. It seemed that everything made in this country, everything that was done in this country, was for the war effort, to help support our troops. Even pennies were made of steel, because the copper was needed to make bronze shell casings for bullets.

Many items were in short supply because they didn't come from the U.S. They came from other countries, which may now be controlled by the enemy or from countries that could no longer produce those items because they too were at war. Sugar, coffee, meat, cheese, butter, margarine and canned and processed foods of all kinds were closely rationed. They were all needed by the military in vast amounts and, because of that, were in extremely short supply on the Home Front.

Families were encouraged to grow their own. Many families had "Victory Gardens" in their yard to grow their own fresh vegetables. People planted fruit trees. People were taught how to can, pickle or preserve their own fruits and vegetables. Commercially canned or processed fruits and vegetables all went to the military. Fresh eggs were hard to find. Huge amounts of eggs were dried and sent to the military. Families were encouraged to raise a few chickens in their backyards for eggs. Milk was dried or condensed and put in cans, all going to the military. People were taught the importance of the three "R"s – Recycle, reuse, and repair. If something was still usable, keep using it. Take good care of your things. When something broke or became worn - fix it, patch it or repair it. The clothes you owned in 1941 might not be replaced until the war was over.

Everything was recycled. The resources were needed for the war effort. Communities had scrap metal and paper drives. Women were even told to save all their waste kitchen fats, the oils and fats were needed for making explosives. Women kept a container by the stove, in which they poured every bit of melted fat. The kitchen fats were then regularly taken to collection sites to be recycled. Children collected scrap metal and paper, and even peeled the aluminum from candy and gum wrappers to make aluminum balls to give to the war effort; everyone helped.

American women had to learn how to cook in new ways. They were accustomed to using a lot of processed foods and canned goods which were no longer available. Food was too

precious to waste. The government furnished wartime cook books and instructions. Women's magazines were filled with recipes and helpful hints.

Women were encouraged to cook without fats or oils. Cooking fats and oils were needed for the war. They were told to cut back on the amount of lard or shortening when baking. They were told to broil, bake, poach, or boil food. Women were taught how to make sugarless or low sugar cakes and other desserts (remember this was before there were any artificial sugar substitutes) and to use chicken fat in their pie crusts. They were taught how to cook using leftovers. They were taught to make lots of soups, nearly every bit of food that entered the kitchen would end up in the soup pot. One government issued cook book stated, "Practically all leftovers except sweets may go into the soup kettle. When making stock use the bones from steaks, chops and roasts, ham bones, the gristly end of the tongue, carcasses of roast poultry and poultry feet."

Most meats went to the military. Generally all that was left on the Home Front were the more perishable cuts, such as liver, sweetbreads, kidneys and tripe. Women were taught how to cook with these cuts of meat. They were also encouraged to use cheese as an alternative for meats. The government proclaimed that for the duration of the war, Mondays would be "Meatless Monday". Later there were also "Wheatless", "Sweetless" and "Porkless" days.

The 246th got in shape for the fighting to come by taking 25 mile hikes with full field packs. They also learned how to build bridges, clear mine fields, and run all manner of heavy construction equipment. Herman wrote, "We spent 4 months in England before D-Day. It was pretty good duty, except when you had guard duty. The Ack-ack [slang for anti-aircraft fire] during the air raids fell down on your helmet. You had to remain on your post, because that hot metal can set fires."

Russell's first letter from England was dated 2/1/44 and sent via V-Mail. With V-Mail, the writer writes a one page letter on a special military form. The V-Mail form is on standard 8 ½ by 11 inch paper. The military photographs the completed form, then makes a miniature photographic negative of the letter on film. The original 8 ½ by 11 letter is thrown away. When the film reaches the destination, a 3 by 4 inch photographic copy is made, placed in a small envelope and mailed by regular mail. With millions of letters being sent all over the world, V-Mail saved a huge amount of precious cargo space. However, the shrunken letters were often very difficult to read.

Russ wrote, "I did manage to write you before we left. I would have liked to have called you instead of writing, but I know you understand. Still cannot say where we were stationed at P.O.E. [port of entry]. Anyway we are here some place in England.

"We have Seattle weather hereabouts and the land here is somewhat better. Very good uses of the rolling hills, yielding much to support the war effort and the land we passed through was something for sore eyes. It makes some of our farms look cheap, for being kept up, even though there is a war going on.

"Lots I'd like to say on things, but no can do. I sure hope you get over worrying so much. Boy! We sure are a long way from home. The first day out on the boat, I was fine, but the next day was I sick. Course I wasn't the only one. We all wished that we were off that boat and back on land. Well, keep the folks and all in contact. Keep your chin up. With loads of love, Russ." [R.W.]

2/5/44 - "I'm getting some of your mail, but my mail isn't going out, so just be calm. Been pretty nice here, the sun is shining bright and not cold. This weather is something like Washington [State]. They say that it is almost spring here, a month or so before our weather at

home. The boys sure got a kick out of the pinups of you that you sent. Turner said for you to have another one taken and send it to him, but raise the dress up higher next time.” [R.W.]

1/22/44 – Written on a Valentine’s card from Dora to Russ – “For you, my Darling Husband. This is the Valentine I had for you way back in 1938 and I was afraid to give it to you.”

2/9/44 – “Sweetheart Dora, Tomorrow is payday. We get paid in English money. I haven’t been to town as yet, so I haven’t had the chance to spend any yet. Some of the boys who have been in town say there isn’t much to spend it on. One fellow bought a Valentine for his wife. Gave the clerk a pound note, got his change back, [and found] that it had cost him \$2.00. They sure took him. I don’t need any money, but I sure could use some candy or fruit cake. Not over 5 pounds and show this letter of a request for a package from home. [The military did not allow family or friends to send packages from home, unless the soldier specifically requested a “package from home”, so such requests were frequently found in letters home]. They keep us working pretty hard here and I’m sore all over.” [R.W.]

2/11/44 – “Just got back from chow, such as it is. Feel kind of tired. We have to walk three miles out to our training area and back twice a day, and then some days we have long hikes. The wind sure was cold today, though spring is in the air. The farmers are out plowing, getting ready for spring planting.

“We haven’t got paid yet, but I haven’t been to town yet to spend any. They say there isn’t much in town and after dark you can’t see a thing because of the blackout. It’s sure a lot different over here than it is back there, for there really is a war going on. But don’t worry; I’m not in it yet.” [R.W.]

2/16/44 – “We got some of our PX rations today, wasn’t much. [PX stands for Post Exchange, a military store where GIs can buy incidentals and other small items for a reasonable price. At the PX they could normally buy such things as candy, gum, snacks, soap, razor blades, paper, pens, envelopes, etc.] Sure wish I had that flashlight that Jim [brother-in-law, Jim Carpenter] had given me. I’m going to try and buy one here; sure hard to get around with this blackout on. [Russ had accidentally dropped the flashlight in a river, during bridge building training back in Washington.]

“We got paid Monday night, which included my ration money while on furlough. I got a total of 7 pounds, 5 shillings and 3 pence in English money, which would be about \$28.33. I am sending \$15 which should come with your allotment check out of my next pay for February; and if you want to buy bonds, it’s all right do as you see fit.

“I should have gone to church tonight, but didn’t. I’ve been twice since we’ve been here. There’s a free show [movies] on every night, but all old and I have seen all of them before.” [R.W.]

The war was extremely expensive. Americans were encouraged to buy War Bonds (U.S. Savings Bonds). Americans bought bonds by the billions. Even children saved their pennies to buy bonds. A starter stamp album was available, where stamps could be bought for as little as 10 cents. When you filled the stamp album you traded it in on a bond.

2/22/44 – “Today turned out swell, because it reminds me of home. Just a nice downfall of snow. It sure is nice and white out on the ground. I’m fine tonight, if you can call being fine with a headache. I ate too many doughnuts and steak on KP [Kitchen Police, doing general labor in the kitchen and mess hall] yesterday. I don’t mind KP anymore. No dishes, just serving, pots and pans to wash, and general cleaning up.

“I got a pair of handlebars growing [on my face]. You know the ones that grow when one forgets when shaving to get right under ones nose on purpose?” [R.W.]

2/27/44 – “I went to town last night with Whitfield. He’s married and 30 years old, so we have each other to watch out for, so we don’t do anything drastic, if you know what I mean?”

“Do you know Charles Anderson, that tall lanky cook from Lansing? Well he’s going home on discharge – stomach ulcer. I sure would like to be him; of course I wouldn’t care for the ulcers. It’s been two days since I wrote, but not much to say that they will allow. Keep a stiff upper lip. Love and kisses, Russ.” [R.W.]

2/28/44 – “My Shining Sunshine, How is my honey tonight, out beneath the sky so gray, for it is snowing and the sun is shining nice and bright in the West. The sun is going down in the west, sort of a summer pink with gray clouds above, shining through the trees. If you’ve ever been camping, you know what I mean!

“The boys are getting up a poker game right close by. I swore off playing poker because I played a little and lost.” [R.W.]

2/29/44 – “My Lovely Screwball, I’m fine except for my cold is tightening up from lying on the ground so much.” [R.W.]

3/5/44 – “Hi Hon, Today we had all the fried chicken we wanted to eat. I will admit I made a hog of myself, of course. To answer your questions about how often one can send a package. Answer, as often as I make a request for one. You yourself cannot send one without my consent. Let me know how much it costs to send a box.” [R.W.]

3/16/44 – “Got your two swell letters yesterday, plus a box of candy from the Motor Wheel Girl’s Club.

“What would you rather have me do, write V-Mail or Air Mail? I get these stamped envelopes [for Air Mail] at sixteen for one dollar. Not bad, of course V-Mail does not cost me anything.

“I got two sore arms tonight. You know what from; two shots and a vaccination. Sure am tired tonight, two days in a row we’re getting up at 4 o’clock in the morning. So here’s for happy dreams and lots of love.” [R.W.]

3/20/44 – [Sent via V-Mail] “I’ll have to have you send me some writing paper. I didn’t think that I’d ever use all that paper I left home. Two weeks in a row, the PX had no paper. A couple of the boys wanted to play some pinochle, so I dropped everything and played. Then I went to a show in the camp. I’ve seen it before. It was crazier than before – ‘By Hook or by Crook’ – Red Skelton and Eleanor Powell” [A 1943 musical comedy – Originally released in the USA as “I Dood It”]. [R.W.]

On March 20, 1944, Dora sent Russell an Anniversary card with a lengthy letter. Dora wrote, “My Dearest Sweetheart, Hi Russ. Here’s hoping you’re alright. I sure hope you get this card on the 27th. That was a wonderful day. I’ll never forget that first date [March 1937], because it led to many more wonderful dates. Of course our wedding day was the best day of all. But if it wasn’t for that first date, we wouldn’t have had a wedding day. That would have been bad, since you are such a grand husband.

“Gus [her 15 year old sister, Augusta] and I went to town tonight because it is Monday and the stores stay open until 9:00 on Mondays. I thought that I could buy me some non-rationed shoes, but no soap, they’re not worth anything. My black shoes hurt my feet. We left the car where we work and took the bus, so we could save on gas. Then we took the bus back to the car after we were through shopping. We just had an hour to shop.

“Good night Russ and Good Luck. On this special day, I will send a great big special kiss to you, Hon. I love you very much. Yours as ever. Lovingly, Dora Sunshine.” [D.W.]

During the war, Dora and Gus worked at the Mason-Abbott Residence Hall grill at Michigan State University, selling hot dogs, burgers and ice cream to the students. With so many men in the military there was a huge labor shortage. For the first time in America, women by the millions found jobs outside the home, especially in war industries and manufacturing. The many women working in industrial jobs formerly considered “men’s work” proudly accepted the nickname Rosie the Riveter. Women found that there was no job they couldn’t handle.

3/23/44 – “Dearest Dearest, I went over to the medics last night and got my throat swabbed out, one side was pretty sore, not bad today. Sleeping on the ground sure doesn’t do any good to my cold. Sure was a sorry looking sight watching these men trying to walk around here. Some of the boys couldn’t get their shoes on this morning after that hike yesterday.

“I haven’t forgotten the good old days. My folks never knew, for some time, that I was going with you. And me so bashful – I still am. I guess that’s why I can still go to town and only go to a show and eat. Good night, sweetheart of my dreams. I’m bubbling over with love for you.” [R.W.]

3/25/44 – “So you’re not going to put in a garden this spring. This weather sure makes me want to be home working around our place – me out there working and you trying to get me to stop and come in and rest - and did I, no.” [R.W.]

4/6/44 – “My Dearest Sunshine, Got guard again tonight; 11 to 1, and 5 to 7. I would rather have day guard and have it all in one stretch, instead of two hours on and four hours off, with two hours coming up.

“I didn’t write last night. Instead I went to town. Of course I just went to a show and had some fish and chips. I just got back from a show that we have here in camp. Sure was a good picture, ‘No Time for Love’ with Fred McMurray and Claudette Colbert [a 1943 romantic comedy].

“Well, it’s getting on to nine and one of the fellows just came in and hollered ‘all blinds up’; meaning all blackout curtains up. [At night, all outside lights were turned off and all windows were covered with blackout curtains, so no light would show. Any stray light could turn you or your building into an enemy target.] We went out to the lake today for some training and a couple of the fellows got to monkeying around, one being our platoon Sergeant. He fell into the lake and got all wet. The same thing happened back at Fort Lewis at American Lake, with the same fellow.

“We got our PX ration today. Not much, just one small bar of candy, a box of sour balls, some cookies, soap, two double edge razor blades, and cigarettes (which I get for the boys). I suppose I should hang up for tonight and try to get some sleep before guard. Good night my Love.” [R.W.]

4/7/44 – “Dearest Dora, Another day and another dollar, maybe more. Today is Good Friday and I hope you are happy this day. I wanted to go to church this afternoon, but they had other plans for us. I received your box and small package today. Sure was swell and the homemade fudge was sure delicious. If you don’t believe me, ask the boys. Just one piece left. I sure hate to eat it now, for when that’s gone that will be all until next time.

“That was a wonderful Easter Card; it really hit the nail on the head. So sorry I didn’t send you one. But I didn’t forget you, that is if that corsage gets there today, for that is the day that I set for you to receive it so you would have it to wear on Easter Sunday.

"I'm sitting on my cot and a little homemade writing table before me; made by one of the boys in our barracks. We all use it; of course we have to take turns.

"Boy, we sure have quite an Art collection here on the wall. It's really nature in the raw. I sure get a kick listening to the boys in here; sure comical what they talk about and the way they put it. It sure keeps one going. Even the Major, when he comes in here, has to stand and gaze at all the beauty. Of course, they're only pictures; I have something better than that back home; if you know what I mean." [R.W.]

4/10/44 – "Hon Bunch, So, you're still having winter back home. Oh I would just as soon be back there, winter or no winter. Yesterday, being Easter, I went to sunrise service here at the camp. It was a little foggy and felt and looked like rain. After that, I took off for town; we had trucks waiting for us. We had a pass until noon, so we could go to church. We went to one of the oldest and largest in England. It was a Cathedral and old and very nice inside. We are not allowed to write the name of the Cathedral.

"Had KP today and I am pretty tired tonight, but not too tired to write to you. I'm writing this, sitting on my cot, in my bare feet. Still it's only a little after nine o'clock and it's still light out as day." [R.W.]

Russell went to Easter service in the beautiful Cathedral at Salisbury. This spectacular cathedral took 38 years to build, from 1220 to 1258. It's a magnificent cathedral, with the tallest spire in Great Britain. It's huge with a roof covered with 4 acres of lead sheeting. The cathedral clock is the oldest clock in the world. The cathedral contains an original copy of the Magna Carta, which was signed in 1215.

Herman wrote, "Your Dad, on free pass time, went to historic sites. I, on the other hand, went to the 'The Black Knight', a pub of ill-repute. South Hampton was a place to go by train; where all the tough, old sailors hung out. A train ride in England was always an adventure, but your Dad never ventured forth. I did spend an early Sunday A.M. exploring the depths of Salisbury Cathedral's basement vaults, where Knights were interred with their armor and battle colors." [H.E.]

4/11/44 – "You know I was telling you about our Art Gallery that we have on the wall. Well things are sure happening around here nights. You know them dreams one have. We sure get a laugh out of some of them. It hasn't happened to me, yet.

"We had the radio last night. We listened to the Red Skelton program. It was as silly as ever. Last night we heard Jack Benny. This will be enough broadcasting for this night. Signing off at four minutes after eight, European Double Summer Time. Love Russ" [R.W.]

4/12/44 – "Darling Hon Bunch, Now about the buildings in England. As you know from history, England is pretty old. Out here in the country, the buildings are made of brick, with thatch roofs made from wheat straw. The farm houses are built so that you just open the back door and walk right into the barn. They make room for all the ground they can. Of course, you know the country is so small that they have houses built right together, so you might say. Two or three families live in one house. The country is so small that there is a village about every three or four miles apart. The boys had a ball game with Company A. I catch for our team, and of course, we won." [R.W.]

4/17/44 – "Here I am, sitting on my raincoat and leaning my back against a tree, around seven o'clock in the evening. The trees and the bushes are leafing out and flowers are all over the ground in the woods. Did you get the letter with the violet stuck in with tape? We were out on a hike, when I ran across a patch of violets, so I stopped and picked one for you and you only.

“I went to town last night, tried to find something to eat. There were so many GIs in town, you could hardly turn around. So you can imagine all the places were full, with nowhere to eat. Oh, the show was pretty good, ‘September to Alcatraz’ and an English picture, ‘Summer Lightning’. I go on guard duty at nine o’clock.” [R.W.]

4/18/44 – “Sweet Heart Sunshine, Another day’s work done. Just finished washing in, and out of, my steel helmet. Of course, I het [dialect for heated] some water in a tin can. I shaved too, believe it or not. For Easter dinner, we had cold cuts. If you think that was a wonderful meal, you are crazy! Well, I’m going to try to get home next Easter. Don’t be disappointed if I can’t.” [R.W.]

4/20/44 – “Dearest Honey Bunch, The rain started around 8 o’clock and didn’t quit until sometime toward morning. It was a pleasant sound – to hear it patter on the roof of our pup tent. Had to crawl into our tent and undress...and at the same time not touch the tent, for if you do, wherever you touch it will leak. Had everything in my tent, except for my helmet liner and that had a couple of inches of water in it.” [R.W.]

4/26/44 – “Dearest Dora, I haven’t written to you for two days. I was on guard duty Sunday night and all day Monday. And on top of that I was sick, and how. I spent most of my time when off duty in bed, so I really didn’t care what I did. This Tuesday, I felt a little better, so I took my day pass on Tuesday. I walked around town. Took in two shows, one I had seen before – ‘Best Foot Forward’ [a 1942 musical comedy, starring Lucille Ball] and ‘My Son, the Hero’ [a 1943 slapstick comedy]. Both pretty good movies. I want to go in this week and see ‘This is the Army’ [a 1943 musical comedy, with music by Irving Berlin, starring Irving Berlin, Lt. Ronald Reagan, Kate Smith (singing “God Bless America”), and many more], if possible.

“Went to sick call this morning, had a pretty bad sore throat. I may have my tonsils taken out after the swelling goes down. What do you know, I got KP tomorrow. At least I get all I want to eat. But the way they’ve been feeding us these last few days, I wouldn’t even think of feeding my pig I haven’t got. With this cold, nothing tastes good, but I still wouldn’t feed it to a pig.” [R.W.]

It was a long way from America to the front line. The millions of GIs in Europe were on the end of a long supply line. The only fresh food was food that could be foraged by the individual soldier from abandoned farms. As much as possible, the GIs would try to cook their own meals. Military food was primarily food that could survive the long trip from America. The food was meant to be filling and nutritious. There was little variety; taste was of secondary importance. Often the GI got the same meals for every meal.

There were lots of powdered milk and eggs, dried fruits, beans, dried, smoked and salted meats, chocolate bars, and canned meat, fruit and vegetables. The canned meat varied in quality, from Spam (the best quality) to canned meat made from everything but the squeal (mixtures of ground and seasoned pig ears, tongue and snout). One frequent breakfast “treat” was called by the GIs “SOS”, Sh*t on a Shingle. SOS was made from dried chipped (thinly sliced) beef which was cooked until reconstituted, then “creamed” by adding condensed milk, thickened with a little flour, with salt and pepper, and served on a slice of toast (the shingle).

4/27/44 – “Hi Something or other, What are you trying to do? First you tell me you had some raspberry plants or bushes. Then you turn right around and soft soap me as though you did something wrong. I wish you’d get over that idea that you are doing everything against my will. Don’t forget, you are your own boss and I want you to feel that way – please do.

“So good old Ralph [her brother] was sitting, looking at our album, and dreaming of the days before. Well we all share his feeling and dream with him. Only we don’t dare dream too

much of those days, do we? Well I told you I had KP the next day, but no, I got it Friday. And from what I hear the companies have to get up at four and usually KPs get up an hour earlier. Oh me! So I'm going to knock off for tonight. I feel much better today, maybe a few more days and I will be back to normal." [R.W.]

4/28/44 – "[Today] has been pretty nice except it's cloudy and I'm not getting any mail today. Oh well, I'm getting used to that, more than ever. But I still look forward to hearing from you; when I don't, I just don't care if I write or not, and I just have to urge myself to get one wrote.

"I had all I wanted to eat, but I still don't care if I eat or not. Nothing seems to taste good. We had pork chops for dinner. We have them about twice a week.

"I forgot to mention about what they call in England the Famous 'Religion Stones', which they claim are three thousand years old [Russ is probably talking about Stonehenge, which is a short bus trip from Salisbury]. Wasn't much to look at, just a few large stones stood up on end, and a few lying over the top. Of course, it might have been something to look at, at one time. We saw that yesterday on one of our travels around the countryside. There are a few hills around here. Maybe not as bad as those hills in Washington, but you know how it is, just to walk around with a full field pack.

"We were supposed to have a party tonight in camp. They [some GIs] tried to find beer, but they haven't found any yet. They went after some ATS girls [Auxiliary Territorial Service – women in the British Army – similar to American WACs] and got just eight. Am I going? Who me? No there won't be anything there for me. Boys all around me are shining their shoes, changing their clothes, and what not; all thrilled with the idea. Oh those poor girls. If they don't get any more girls ---? A lot of dancing, they won't do, if you get what I mean." [R.W.]

4/29/44 – "Hi Chocolate Drop, Hmm, that's a new one isn't it? Now, if you were only here tonight, on our night, I sure would see that you would melt right into my arms. I didn't have too busy a day. We had about a ten mile hike this morning and had most of the afternoon off. And what did I do but go to sleep.

"You would of thought I went to the dance last night, which I hear didn't let out till around 12 o'clock. They didn't have any girls in uniform. I heard some of the boys say that they looked like some girls who were just picked up from the streets, for some looked pretty dirty. They didn't have half enough girls for the boys and still they did most of their dancing outside.

"I just went outside of our tent and let the side down and lace the corner, so it will make it warmer tonight. I really think it is better for us to sleep out of doors than in. In the barracks, one couldn't open a window without someone raising a rumpus. Out here, there's nothing they can say about it. I'm in charge of this tent." [R.W.]

4/30/44 – "Dearest, [Today] I hit the jackpot with four letters from you. They made me very happy. And yes, a package, with three candy bars and a package of gum. It's been a grand day, with the sun shining all day long. Nice and warm out with not a cloud in the sky. I've been busy washing clothes and putting out my bed clothes to air.

"Do we have lots of sugar in England? If they do, I don't know where they keep it. Yes, some of the time we have sugar for some black stuff they call coffee, or tea if we're lucky to get it, for I'd rather have that than coffee anyway. It sometimes doesn't even smell like coffee." [R.W.]

5/2/44 – "Howdie Hon, Went to town last night, to a show. The show was 'The Girl He Left Behind' [a 1943 Busby Berkeley musical, with lots of music and dancing and little plot. It

was released in America as 'The Gang's All Here']. What will I do about those movies I missed back home while over here? I should worry, just so I get home.

"So you ran right into Gracie Fields that day at the base. [A famous British singer/actress of stage and screen. The highest paid British actress of the 1930s.] You got to meet an actress. You know they don't make movies over here anymore, at least since the war began. So all the actors are roaming around the streets of London, taking up their old jobs they were doing [before] they got themselves famous." [R.W.]

5/7/44 – "Dearest, Today is Sunday and it's starting out to be a nice day. I got up at 8 o'clock, just in time to get breakfast – hot cakes, syrup, and some kind of dry cereal, tomato juice and coffee which I didn't drink any of. Army coffee is still the worse yet." [R.W.]

5/11/44 – "Dearest Dora, Glad you're getting the old place fixed up, by getting trees and what not. I don't care much about having apple trees, because they're cheaper to buy than to monkey around with. Peach and cherry trees are what we want. Those apple trees are the right kind. Maybe by the time I get home, they might bear.

"You've been asking why I only write on one side of the paper. It is for the censor. In case they needed to cut a word out, it wouldn't interfere with writing on the other side. You see they cut words out, instead of blacking them with ink." [R.W.]

5/12/44 – "Hi Honbunch, Another day just about to come to a close – nine o'clock. Here I am writing this letter when we have a dance going on, with real American WACs and English beer. Will they mix? Maybe I'll go up after a while and see what it's all about. It's been another nice day. I went to the hospital this afternoon to have them look at my tonsils; they're just a little enlarged.

"What's this about [your brother] wanting to know about girls? Do you mean over here? Well there are a few good looking girls over here, but not too many. Most of them have bad teeth, sort of wide spaced in front. I have seen a few red heads, but not too many. Most of the girls are busy chasing boys around and probably wouldn't care to write to anyone back home.

"I'm glad you received that penny. You know that's worth two cents in American money. No, that's not medicine on that letter. That must have been the tape I used to stick the coin on with. Don't worry your pretty head over such little things.

"You ask me if your writing is improving. Well it could be, but really I don't notice too much, because I'm so glad just to get your letter that I don't take time to make cracks about them. Anyway, they look alright by me, so why should I kick." [R.W.]

5/15/44 – "Hi Hon, I was writing my letter in my tent, but had to get up and do some work around my tent and caught a cramp in my leg. Now I'm standing by a fire, trying to thaw my leg out. Trying to hold the paper in one hand and write with the other. Not an easy job at that. We had quite a heavy frost last night. I'm sure glad I had guard duty the first part of the night, instead of near morning.

"Had a four hour hike this morning, not too bad; a lecture on first aid this afternoon. Guess I must be getting old. The boys still take me for 24 or 25 [Russell was actually almost 30 at this time, trying to keep up with 18, 19 and 20 year old kids]. I don't know how I do it. I sure don't feel that young." [R.W.]

5/16/44 – "Dearest, It has been raining off and on all the afternoon, even trying it's darnedest to keep me from writing this. And the winds still hold to the north and it's sure a cold wind. Some dream you had, you must have ate pretty heavy of something. It couldn't have been me [in your dream], because you have to be over here for two years before you can get a

furlough. It must have been the old me, to get that way and not kiss you. You sure it was me helping do the dishes? This reminds me, I have KP tomorrow.

“So glad you’re receiving my mail almost every day. I like to help you all I can and I know that will help. But don’t count on it too strong after a while. But I hope I can continue as in the past. Well you know what they say about having a lady bug in the house [a sign of good luck], don’t you? I hope you have all of that and then some. Of course you don’t know how it is to be without a bug around the tent.” [R.W.]

When Russ was asked if he saved her letters, he wrote, “No, sorry to say, we are not supposed to keep any letters from home. Got as far as that patch on the page, then I looked in the envelope to see if the leaf was there. It was. Sure a little one. So I slipped it in my billfold along with your curl of hair. You know this is the ETO [European Theater of Operations] so that’s a silly question to ask about planes flying over at night. No they don’t keep me awake nights, it’s the hard ground and the cold that keeps me awake.” [R.W.]

5/17/44 – “How’s My Sweet, I just was poking up my fire here in front of me and was thinking how nice it would be to have some wieners to roast on this fire. That gives me an idea. Why can’t you get some of that smoked meat, like smoked linked meats? You know what I mean, something that won’t spoil coming over? Some of the rest of the boys get them sent from home. I got that box with the fudge in it, but it didn’t last long.

“The only [problem with your letters] is I get to the end of a letter and I look for more, but no such luck. I guess I shouldn’t expect so much.” [R.W.]

5/24/44 – “Dearest Honbunch, Here I am in town again this evening, but not on pass. [I’m] on guard to see that no one runs off with the pass truck. Sitting here eating a 10 cent Almond Hershey bar which we got at our PX. It sure is chilly out and it’s a good thing that I can stay in the truck.

“I see you still need an alarm clock to wake you up in the morning. We have something more gentle to get us up - a bugler - and then we hate to get up. I don’t know what I’m going to do with you, if you don’t cut out working so hard. Washing and polishing that car is hard work and no work for women. Sorry you got a stiff neck. I really don’t think you knew what you were getting into, did you? Anyway, I’m proud of you.

“So you think you got a little tan that day, good for you. I have my face and hands tan, but no further as yet. It’s been pretty cloudy of late, but no rain yet. I figure you would get spring fever, just like I can feel it over here. I sure got a kick out of you having the clock set to our time. If it helps, go to it. I’m kind of sorry I mentioned it to you – talking about having my hair shaved off. A lot of the boys are cutting each other’s hair, and what a sight some of them are.

“No I didn’t have the day off that Sunday. We had to go back to our old camp and police up the area. Anyway we couldn’t get to town.” [R.W.]

5/28/44 – “My Dearest Darling Wife, I just got back from breakfast. Not much, powdered egg omelet and wheat cereal, oranges, and coffee. Went to town again last night We don’t know how soon we will be cut off of passes, so we go as much as we can.

“No, the girls don’t chase me around, and when I go to a show, we’re always seated with other boys. That’s one way of staying away from them.

“Don’t expect too many letters from now on, but I will write as often as possible.” [R.W.]
D-Day was getting closer.

5/29/44 – “Sunshine, Here it is seven o’clock, got my raincoat laid down on the ground and me on top of it, writing to my beloved wife. Your fudge was good to the last crumb. The

boys wanted a couple of games of pinochle. We didn't do too hot, but we had some fun out of it. While we were playing cards, it started to rain. Large drops, so it didn't rain for long. The four of us tried to get into one pup tent while it was raining. [You asked about] fish and chips. It's a chunk of fish fried, and the potatoes are cut in sticks and fried in deep fat." [R.W.]

When Dora wanted Russ to write a letter to a girl friend of hers, he wrote, "Sorry, I won't have time from now on. [Besides], one sweetheart is enough for me to handle at one time. But I have seen some soldiers walk down the street with one on each arm." [R.W.]

On June 3, 1944, Russ wrote about a letter Dora sent him concerning Memorial Day, "Gee Kid, you're swell to remember my mother's grave. I wanted to mention it a while back, but I know with two gallons of gas a week [due to rationing] it would be hard to do. You don't know how you make me feel, knowing you are doing that for me. You know, you are getting to be a pretty nice kid – better with every day that I know you.

"Our camps back home are much better than the ones here. Our last camp was being made into a hospital while we were there. That's one of the reasons why we had to move. The weather is cold and cloudy. Here it gets light around five or five-thirty." [R.W.] The military was getting ready for the expected D-Day casualties.

On June 6, 1944, D-Day, the Normandy invasion has begun. Russ tells Dora about all the many people, family and friends, he had written to so far this day. Russ was apparently writing to everyone to reassure them that he was fine. For security reasons, he was unable to talk about D-Day, so his letter was chatty and light, not saying much of anything.

"Hello Honey, How are you, this cool day? Yes, the wind is blowing and the dust is blowing around our tent. It still hasn't rained much. We have some mosquitoes, but they don't bother so much as a little small fly about the size of a flea or smaller. They suck blood like a mosquito and the bite bothers you for days – much worse than a mosquito bite.

"I just got back from another game of pinochle, which we won. So I will close with good cheer and lots of love. Please don't worry, I'm alright. Love Russ." [R.W.]

The original plan called for my Dad's platoon (the 3rd Platoon) to land in Normandy at Omaha Beach on D-Day. Their original mission was to land in the first few waves, to help clear the beach of mines and other obstacles. My Dad told me that at the last minute, the plan was changed and other engineer companies took their place on D-Day. My Dad always told me that if the original plan had been followed, I would never have existed. The engineers that had replaced them were cut down as they left the landing crafts and never got off the beach.

The new plan called for a special detachment of 14 men from the 246th Engineers to temporarily join the 29th Infantry Division (the Division featured in the "Saving Private Ryan" movie). This started a long relationship with the 29th. During the American Army's push across Europe, the 246th frequently was attached to the 29th.

Herman wrote, "We worked for those boys [the 29th Infantry Division] during the 11 months of the war. General Gerhardt [the commander of the 29th] never gave credit to any unit outside of the 29th."

The 14 engineers landed on D-Day with the 29th. They left the beach with the 29th and moved inland until they reached the Vire River. Their mission was to prepare a bridge over the Vire River for demolition should it become necessary to blow the bridge in the event of a German counter attack. After setting the charges, the detachment set up a defensive position near the bridge, digging in to wait for the balance of the 246th.

On June 7, 1944, the day after D-day, Russ is still trying to think of something to say that will get past the censors. "Darling, How's my girl this evening, with all the news going thick

and fast? I'm fine. I just got off of KP. I've been laying here for some time, listening to the radio, and trying to think of something to say. I didn't tell you they had a hundred gallons of beer here last Sunday, but I guess it didn't last long for I [saw] a lot of the boys in town, trying to find more to drink.

"I'm going to try and go into town tomorrow night. Time will tell. Who knows? But we might move tomorrow – sooner or later. One never knows, does one? So, my lovely one, I will close this short letter of sweet nothings. With my love and some kisses for you. Love, Russ." [R.W.]

6/9/44 – "My Darling Wife, Hope you are fine this wet and rainy day. This has been the most rain since we got here. It rained all night and most of the day. Sure is plenty muddy all around here. Bea [his step-mother] was saying it was the first week they hadn't heard from me since I left. I'm afraid it will be longer than that and the same with you. Military reasons.

"I'm sure it's been a trying time for you these last 3 or 4 weeks. You haven't got any mail from me and then pops up D-Day and you begin to wonder where I was and etc. You can stop worrying when you get all my letters in one bunch. And, the last few to see that I am OK. You see, I told you not to worry. I'm sending you a money order of some extra money I had on hand. I guess I won't get a chance to go to London, so it's no use of me keeping it with me." [R.W.] Many men got rid of all their money before going into combat in France. Some "blew it" on gambling, drinking or women; others sent it home.

6/21/44 – "Dearest Hon, It sure has been a long time since I have written. It wasn't any use, our mail wasn't going out. And our mail, believe it or not, was going to France for reasons I can not say. Well, I have been too busy getting our clothes and equipment ready for – what may come, what may. I can't tell. You know what. I hope this letter will relieve you. I am still in England, but how long we do not know.

"I hope your work is keeping you busy so you didn't have time to think too much about what might happen over here. But you're a big girl now, you can bear it. It has been plenty cold here and of course they would have to take away from us two blankets. We have been getting passes to go into church on Sunday mornings, which I have been taking advantage of. They have pretty nice church in some of these places. On Sunday we went in and half [the service] was given only by young people. Pretty nice at that.

"I finally got a brush haircut last night. About the same as I had when we first went together. Some of the guys in the motor pool started a bald head club shop, no admission to anyone for a haircut who wanted to join. Don't worry. Everything is 'oak ke doak ke', or in plain Yank 'OK'. Went to another camp today and took in a show, which we do about one or two times a week. The Company sends in trucks loaded with boys each week, so that don't make it so bad. At least [it gives us a reason] to keep half way clean. Well, I am going to quit for this time. Who knows where I'll be when the next time I write. Chin up, sweetheart of mine. Love Russ." [R.W.]

6/25/44 – "My Dearest Wife, Again I'll lie down on my blanket and try to write a few words of cheer. This being 'Our night' I just have to write, even if it's 'hello, love and kisses, and good night'. By now I hope you are getting all kinds of mail from over here. Ours, I don't know when we'll get it. It kind of looks like we will have to go to France to get it. How long that will be, no one seems to know.

"Now to get back to you again, for my thoughts are with you always. We all know what our loved ones were thinking when D-Day broke over us. I hope my letters relieve you. You

know, I'm kind of glad you are busy now. I weighed myself again last week, and I still weigh the same, 13 stone 7 lbs. (175 lbs.).

"We had one of those American dough girls, or I might say there were two dough girls [who] came to our camp with their clubmobile. They were pretty nice. After serving us with doughnuts and coffee, they came out with the same and ate and mixed with the boys. Of course they were asked to stay for dinner. They turned on their phonograph and danced and talked with most of the boys." [R.W.]

The Clubmobiles were converted London buses. In England, the American Red Cross sent Clubmobiles (service clubs on wheels) out to the camps giving out coffee and doughnuts to the troops. A few weeks after D-Day, the American Red Cross sent Clubmobiles to France. However, these Clubmobiles were converted 2-1/2 ton GMC Army trucks. They had built-in doughnut making machines and stoves for making huge urns of coffee. Each Clubmobile had three American Red Cross volunteers.

These young ladies, often referred to as "Donut Dollies", traveled throughout the European Theater going from one base to another. Each day, the "Dollies" made hundreds of doughnuts and gallons of hot coffee. They would drive around military bases distributing free hot coffee and doughnuts to the GIs, along with lifesaver candies, cigarettes and chewing gum. The Clubmobiles also had Victrola record players hooked up to loud speakers, playing all the hit songs.

Russ wrote, "Played seven games of double pinochle this afternoon and evening, until nine o'clock. My partner and me were the winners five out of seven, not too good but had some nice games. There isn't much money around this month for most of us sent our money home, or went out and spent it, or lost it in poker. They figure they won't need it very much longer. That was two weeks ago, so we're all short. I did manage to go to town last night with three shillings and six pence – two shillings for fish and chips and just enough for a front row seat at the show for one shilling. I come back with just six pence. Boy, how I hate to squeeze like that. Oh well, we get paid soon, either in English money or French money. Keep your chin up baby mine, till we meet again. Love Russ"

6/28/44 – "My Dearest, Today is Wednesday and a very wet and dreary day. It rained half the night and most of the day. The Clubmobile girls with their doughnuts and coffee came out again today. Kidding with the boys – and one even took over guard mount (which was very comical), and to finish up she had the boys all line up, and she kissed every one as they came by. Just think, I wasn't on guard. Look what I missed. Oh well, look what I have waiting for me, to give me my share. How are you making it now days, with all the goings on in the world now. It sure looks good any way, if you look at the right side.

"Surprise – I just got a letter from you Monday. Gosh, I could hardly believe it. Oh yes, it was of June 15th. Sure glad to get it anyway, even if it is the first since D-Day. And you, I know, haven't had any news or letter in a month or more. There must be a pile of mail over in France waiting for us boys. We're not anxious to get over there, but we sure want our mail.

"Sure would like to have some of that warm air you have back there. You say it's too hot to sleep nights, well here it's too wet and cold to sleep nights, and me with just two blankets. Yes they took two of them away from us. It's a good thing we can curl up together, of course not so good as we used to, you and I.

"So you have to fill out a new form for next year's fuel oil. Well maybe it's just to see how much fuel oil they will have to get next year. Course we never did use all of our [ration] stamps, did we? So I guess you'll get enough oil. I think this is about the fourth letter since D-

Day. Of course two weeks after D-day mail wasn't going out, so why write and now I can't get back in the groove. Oh yes, I did get to see 'Thousands Cheer' [A 1943 musical romantic comedy with Gene Kelly – billed as a "love story of an Army Camp"] – sure was a good picture." [R.W.]

Normandy

Now that the 246th Combat Engineer Battalion was in France, their mission was to provide engineer support for infantry and armored units, and to fight as infantry, if needed, as a combat unit. The 246th would go on to fight and support other units through campaigns in Normandy, Northern France, Belgium, Holland and Germany.

On June 9th, the 246th was trucked to the port of Southampton. During the night of June 9th, the A and B Companies of the 246th crossed the English Channel on the transport "John H. Richardson". They landed on Omaha Beach early in the morning on June 10th (D-Day +4). The 246th were assigned to the XIX Corps whose code name was Tomahawk. The 246th was given the code name "Anvil" and became part of the 1104 Engineer Combat Group assigned to First Army under General Omar Bradley.

The special detachment of 14 engineers rejoined the Battalion. June 10, the following day, the 246th went into action near Carentan. When they reached Carentan, it was still on fire. They were immediately assigned to support the 29th Infantry (who was also a member of the XIX Corps) on the road to St. Lo.

Herman wrote, "As for D-Day, the first members of the 246th that went in were the dozer crews and demolition men. The rest of us landed with dry feet! The beach was full of LSTs and LSIs ['Landing ships, tanks' and 'Landing ships, infantry'], litter of all kind. [The Allies] lost 6,000 men, the first 6 hours. The hospitals were huge tents, with medical people doing 24 hour stints. LSTs were hauling wounded back to England. Our air force controlled the air totally. We have a large cemetery there. Keep writing Terry, it builds my spirits."

Some of the Combat Engineers' major responsibilities were to build bridges over rivers, clear barbed wire and other obstacles, clear roads of mines, repair roads, and clear mine fields. Because of this, often it was the Combat Engineer who was leading the way for the infantry. In this motorized, mobile type of war, an Army could only go as fast as their engineers. Without engineers out in front doing their job, the Army couldn't move.

On the fourth of July, Company C, along with Russell and Herman, crossed the English Channel on the ship, "Jessie Applegate". They also landed at Omaha beach, with their first assignment to find and rejoin the rest of the 246th. Their first combat mission was to clear mines from a field to be used as a Command Post for the 30th Infantry. Company C worked all night and half the next day searching for mines. Fortunately, all they found was about 40 pounds of shrapnel, 12 tin cans, 8 rusty bolts, 3 hinges, 4 broken plow shares, and NO mines.

Generally the engineers used mine sweepers (what we would call metal detectors) to detect mines. Once metal was found, the engineer would carefully probe the area with his bayonet. If it was a mine, he would uncover the mine (by hand) and defuse it. This was bad enough, but sometimes a mine sweeper either was not available or could not be used. Then it got even more dangerous. Of course, it was even worse when someone was shooting at you while you were doing it.

My Dad explained to me how they would clear an area of mines. A squad of engineers would form a line and get down on their hands and knees. Then very slowly, an inch at a time, they would probe the ground in front of them with their bayonets. They would slowly stick the

bayonet into the ground at an angle, so that when the tip of the bayonet hit a mine it would be the lower part of the mine. In this way, they would hopefully not hit a mine's detonator, which would be on the top of the mine. When the tip of the bayonet struck metal, the engineer would slowly, carefully, and by hand, uncover the object. They would pray that it was not a mine, and that if it was a mine, that it would not explode in their face.

If it was a mine, then the engineer would have to slowly and carefully disarm it. Once every square inch within reach was thoroughly checked, the engineer would crawl forward another foot, and start the entire process all over again. An engineer needed a cool head, a steady hand and a ton of patience. He also had to have complete trust in his buddies, as they must have trust in him. Imagine doing this for hours at a time, day after day, under all weather conditions.

From Herman - "It was different when I was a private, happy and content to obey orders. After we hit France, the Captain cornered me and said, 'You're a good soldier, but it's time to get off your ass and take responsibility.' After that, I had the first squad: 10 men, 2 machine guns, 2 bazookas, and a lieutenant who was scared stiff of explosives."

The first major assignment of the 246th in Normandy was to build two bridges over a railroad underpass. They were completed at night, under murderous fire from enemy troops. This allowed the 29th and 30th Infantry to "jump off" the following morning (July 3); to advance toward the enemy and expand the beach head. The mission of the 29th and 30th was to capture the major crossroads town of St. Lo.

A few days later, the 246th built a 36 foot bridge over the Vire Canal on the highway to St. Lo. They built this bridge under heavy fire in 13 minutes, allowing the 29th to continue their advance to St. Lo. After the St. Lo breakout, the 246th built, cleared of mines, and repaired mile after mile of shell-torn roads and bridges.

Herman wrote, "Normandy was a huge garbage dump of LSTs, LSIs, floating bodies, and all manner of waste. We lived through it. I don't know how. We kept going. With the breakout, the Germans lost one million men in dead, wounded, or captured. Our Air Force caught the Germans in a gap. And you could walk for 5 miles on smashed and burned tanks and trucks. For the Germans it was a huge tactical error. For us it was a stunning, decisive victory. At one time, we had 4,000 tanks driving ahead of us, the 2nd Armored Division, known as 'Hell on Wheels'. I wish I could forget this, but no dice."

Shortly after landing on Normandy, Company C produced their first enemy casualty. Riding his motorcycle down a lonely country lane, the company messenger was delivering a message to a forward Command Post, when a German sniper fired at him. He stopped his bike, located the sniper, and shot him from his tree.

Herman wrote, "[Your Dad and I] were together 3 years. Eleven months in combat. We were in those muddy holes in Normandy, with German shells keeping us awake.

"I can well remember the beaches of Normandy. Your Dad and the 1st Squad spent 3 days dug in that hill overlooking Omaha beach, because we had some of our trucks mired in. They used our dozers to haul them out. It was some awful job. The Germans kept laying in the artillery. They were well trained and dedicated." [H.E.]

On July 7, 1944, Russ wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, Ralph, "I got both of your letters yesterday, along with about 16 from Dora. It was the first that most of us have received since D-Day. I'm a little farther away from home again, over in France. Not much going on except a lot of noise. And me of course parked under my tent, trying to catch up on my back mail. The weather here is wet. It rains 2/3 of the time."

On July 11, 1944, Dora received a letter from her sister-in-law, Martha, from Murray, Utah. Don, Martha's husband, was also in the Army stationed in Utah. Martha wrote, "Dearest Dort, Don and I were helping water the lawn here and Don says 'Just think how much fun we could have if it were our own lawn.' We sure have a lot to look forward to.

"We're going to write to Russ again tonight. The last letter we got from him was all about you. We kinda gathered maybe he liked you. No kidding, he thinks there is no one quite your equal. He said he'd received so many letters from you and he just waited for them to come. Every time I read one of his letters, I stop to think how lucky Don and I are. But don't worry Dora, God will watch over him for you. And though you are millions of miles away, you are still close to each other."

On July 11th, Company C captured their first prisoners. Lt. Kersting and Pfc. Nimphie were locating mines and booby traps in front of the 30th Infantry's position. They were fired upon from a damaged tank. Kersting sent Nimphie back for Infantry support, while firing at the tank to keep them bottled up. Nimphie returned with two bazooka men, who hit the tank with two direct hits, killing all of the crew but two who surrendered.

On their way back to the 30th's position, the four men, with their two prisoners, came across a lone German soldier, who quickly surrendered. Further down the road were several houses full of Germans. With the bazooka men guarding the prisoners, Kersting and Nimphie approached the houses, shooting at the windows as they went, killing two Germans. Kersting then called up a Sherman tank. With two bursts from the Sherman the front wall of the building disappeared.

Kersting walked to the front of the building, yelling in German for the men to surrender, telling them that they were surrounded. The Germans came out of the house in a single file and dropped their weapons at his feet. Kersting captured 30 German soldiers, and nine Germans were killed, with no American casualties.

Nimphie was awarded the Silver Star. Kersting was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. Several days later, as Russ would say, "we were working on a road" clearing mines. Kersting was working with the third platoon reconning a proposed road site, to be used by the 30th Infantry for the evacuation of casualties, when he was killed by an IED [explosive device].

Herman wrote, "[The Chief] had the eyes of a cat, could see in the dark. At St. Lo, under the command of Lt. Kersting, the 3rd Platoon was ordered to go out on recon. Lt. Kersting took Clyde [the Chief] as his guide. Bob Bedell got the 1st Squad as close as he could without drawing German fire. Henry Marks, with 2nd Squad, was dug in across the main road to St. Lo. There was an American tank, still running even though it had been hit and the crew was dead.

"Sgt. Mac took the 1st and 3rd Squad up a secondary road and dropped off two men for a listening post. We could hear the Germans on the other side of the hedgerow. The Chief was leading Lt. Kersting up a jeep path, when we heard an explosion. The Chief had tripped a booby trap. Kersting was killed and the Chief lost a leg. His loss meant a lot to his squad. [The Chief] laid there for an hour, calling out all our names, warning us, telling us not to come in. That was the last I saw of the Chief. His war was over. We never heard from him again.

"So many of the men have asked me about the Chief. My memory will fade, but I can never forget this man. Every thousand years, God calls the young men to right wrongs and wipe out evil. [I hope that] our young men remember what their grandfathers endured.

"During the action at St. Lo, your Dad and I were outpost at a hedgerow right on the other side of the German line. [The Germans were on one side of the hedgerow and Russell and

Herman were on the other.] We were under orders to be silent - no dogging! There we stood, listening to the Germans. [Your Dad] never flinched. We lost 2 men at St. Lo. Lt. Kersting was killed - Clyde Matthews was badly wounded and sent back home, missing a leg." [H.E.]

Because of my Dad's size, strength and dependability, he was also the squad's Bazooka Man. In addition to all of the rest of his weapons and gear, he had to carry a heavy bazooka across Europe. There was only one kind of bazooka man that survived for long – a good one. Herman wrote, "You asked about your Dad's skill with a bazooka. With that weapon, you get one shot. After which, everyone in the area knows where you are - so don't miss! The Germans were very good with mortars." [H.E.]

On 7/17/44 Russell wrote, "How's my girl tonight. It's only 20 to ten, just got back to camp from a road job. Got back from clearing a road of mines. I took a bath in a pail of water getting water from a spring at the back of our area. Kind of cold, but it sure felt good. "Gosh, I'm dizzy right now, must be the hard cider [Normandy is famous for its apple cider]. Didn't drink much, but boy is it terrific. A sure bet Dad would like to be here. A couple of the boys are right beside me heating up a can of corn beef and the little tiny flies are sure biting. My head sure needs a scrubbing, and how, but what's the use, there is so much dust around on the road that it doesn't do much good to wash it.

"Boy that beef smells good. Just put on a canteen of water with bullion cubes in it. Got my cracker and beef and will eat it now. Wasn't bad, was it? It's getting kind of dark, even though it's only 10:30. I still got to make my bed yet. Got some nice French hay for our bed tonight." [R.W.]

7/23/44 - "Sweetheart, It sure has been a mess around here the last few days. Course I mean rain and rain it has been doing. You no doubt have heard about the rain holding up our army. I know how it is now when I was told before how the boys worked in knee deep mud.

"Well today is Sunday, so I've been told. There will be a church service held at three o'clock and I plan on going. Gosh, it's hard to believe that it's Sunday, because one works that day just like any other. Our squad will be going out this evening to work on the road. I went out last night until ten and our truck almost got stuck. Sure wish the sun would shine for a few hours anyway. Most of the boys are sleeping in foxholes and were they ever full of water." [R.W.]

Herman wrote, "St. Lo was the key to Normandy. We were dug in for over a week, until Operation Cobra. [The Allies] sent in 5,000 planes to destroy the German Panzers. The lead planes (the Pathfinders) made an error and dropped the first bombs short, on our own positions. The first man to die was General McNair, an observer. Several front line infantry units were hit pretty badly. Company C lost a few, but stayed active as a unit."

Seven weeks after D-Day, and the Allies were still stuck in the Normandy beach area, hanging on by their fingernails. Operation Cobra was designed to allow the Allied Forces to break out of the Normandy beaches, where they were pinned down. Shortly before noon on July 25th, approximately 1,500 B-17s and B-24s (over the course of over 3 hours) dropped more than 3,000 tons of bombs, with an additional 1,000 tons of bombs and napalm dropped by medium bombers. This was one of war's most devastating air attacks. Unfortunately, many bombs fell short, killing nearly 200 American soldiers and wounding over 500 more. One American infantry regiment was wiped out. As Herman Ernst would say, "another day in the life of the 246th".

"Your Dad and the 2nd Squad made a sweep of the main road and dug in until the bombardment let up. The air attack destroyed the German Armies (in front of the beach head) but also left a one mile gap in our lines.

“After dark, Company C was sent to plug up the gap - - to take over the front line position of our destroyed regiment. Sgt. Mac led our 40 men to the gap. He dropped off two men to a hole. The 3rd Platoon took over for an entire company. They took over the holes of an [infantry company of the 29th Infantry Division that had been decimated in the air attack], where we held until morning. The 1st and 2nd Squads went in the center, with the 3rd Squad into the road block. The rest of Company C and all of ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies went into the northern leg.

“The 1st Squad was down to 5 men. Your Dad and I held in one hole for 8 hours. We were in a hole where we could hear German voices. You had to be careful in those holes, because those infantry men put grenades on the lip of their holes. When you found one, you got rid of it, because it might malfunction.

“It was a long night. At dawn, they said, ‘rest time is over’ and we were engineers again. They put us to work on the torn up roads. Whenever I looked around, your Dad was there. That was just the start of our war. We were learning!

“The devastating affect [of the air attack] was most evident in the torn equipment and dead Germans. We took lot of mortar fire throughout the long night; showing us that the Germans were still there. With the first light of dawn, we could see the terrible ruins of St. Lo, with only the bare skeletons of buildings - still smoking. We found a lot of dead Germans, but no live ones. Those huge [German] tanks were upside down, like tops. Our road machines were hard at work clearing away the rubble. The 19th Corps gave the 246th the new mission of road repair, mine clearing and road block removal. Wainright and Saldivar were kept busy with German mines, which is a very slow and dangerous job.

“General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group was on the run through the German lines, with General Patton's 3rd Army leading the way. At dawn, Patton's 3rd Army broke out, headed east, to wrap up Normandy. The defeat for the Germans was devastating, as they lost 3 Armies. Their Air Force was non-existent. Your Dad and I sat on a hill watching the hundreds of [Patton's] tanks, streaming through the breakout. It was an awesome sight to behold. The skies were controlled by our P-51s [fighter planes], while the ground was being swept by our tanks." [H.E.]

As one member of Company C wrote, “I think like in a dream most of the time. This is so big it’s overpowering. But the Americans are tough and aggressive and we are really chewing up the Germans by killing them and taking prisoners. Our men are wonderful boys and they deserve so very much more than all of America can ever give them. War is the most horrible trial of life.”

“We have had some tough times and pretty rugged fighting and work over here. France stinks of dead cattle and dead men. I haven’t seen many French people as they hide out until we get past. One kid of 14 saved me by tipping me off where some Krauts were hiding. The hedgerows and fields – and houses in Normandy are bad. It’s sneaky fighting and it’s either you or the other guy and plenty quick. So far I’ve cut down a few and captured others. They are mean animals and I hate them. I was pretty nervous and scared at first, but now we all have that fatalistic attitude that if it comes, it’s coming and no one can do anything about it.”

The hedgerows of Normandy were mounds of earth (used as a fence) to keep cattle in and to mark boundaries. Over the centuries, these mounds became covered with an impenetrable growth of brush, trees and briar. Each hedgerow was thick and tall, a solid wall of vegetation about 6 to 10 feet thick. Every field was surrounded by these barriers. Behind every hedgerow were heavily armed German soldiers, waiting. The distance between the front lines of the

opposing armies was sometimes measured by the width of a hedgerow. Normandy was a checker board of thousands of fields surrounded by hedgerows.

Once you got through a hedgerow, then you had to run as fast as you could across a flat, empty, muddy field, while the Germans fired machine guns and mortar shells at you from the next hedgerow. The American Army measured their advance by the number of hedgerows seized in a day – four one day, five the next. Combat engineers often led the way, clearing farm lanes of mines and blowing holes in hedgerows.

August 1944 and Company C was finally leaving Normandy. They had built miles and miles of roads, spent hundreds of hours finding and defusing mines, with only three deaths. After two grueling months, the American Army was finally out of the Normandy hedgerows. The war was still deadly and the Germans did everything they could to delay the Americans. But, the Allies were now chasing the Germans across Northern France. During this push, the 246th received no rest, only hard and dangerous work seven days a week.

"Your Dad and I slept in the same 2 man pup tent and there were times he opened up and talked. He and I were big enough so the rowdy boys of the platoon left us out of their bouts of stupidity. A clear head will get you a good night sleep." [H.E.]

"The 1st Squad was a very close, clannish group of soldiers. Wainright was a dependable, calm, steadfast GI. When the going got rough, he was with you. He did not smoke or drink. He was the 1st Squad anchor." [H.E.]

"Your Dad was a very unusual man. He was loyal, brave and moral. He never did approve of me and the rest of those reprobates of the 3rd Platoon. Maybe that's why he never answered any of my letters. But I liked and respected him. That's why I wrote - I owed him." [H.E.]

Engineers were still leading the way. In late August, Company C was camped near St. Germaine. On August 25, 1944, Company C left their area at day-break, heading north to repair some bridges. The only problem was that the bridges were in front of the American advance. They were traveling into enemy controlled territory. The bridges they were to repair were still in German hands and still intact.

American Intelligence had information that the Germans were planning on evacuating that area. Headquarters presumed that the Germans would destroy the bridges when they abandoned the area. So they ordered Company C forward, expecting that by the time they got to the bridges, the Germans would be gone and the bridges would need to be repaired or rebuilt. Company C had an enjoyable trip. It was a beautiful day and the weather was great. Everything was going great. At least until the Company's trucks passed through the front line Infantry, still in their foxholes and still several miles from the bridges. All of a sudden the day wasn't going so great. But orders were orders, and the Company continued on. When they got to the bridges, they found the Germans were gone. And fortunately, for some reason, the Germans had failed to blow their bridges. So Company C happily turned around and headed back to St. Germaine.

A few days later near Versailles, the 3rd platoon got orders to clear mines on the roads to Versailles. On the way to the worksite, their truck ran over a mine. This was the second Company C vehicle destroyed since D-Day. Fourteen men of the 3rd platoon received the Purple Heart due to their wounds. During the course of the war, all of the original members of Herman and Russell's 1st squad (the ones who left England together), were either killed or wounded.

Herman wrote, "The 246th Combat Engineers had bridged the Seine River, only a few miles from Paris. They named the bridge the 'Dinah Shore Bridge' in honor of Dinah, who was here with the USO show. The 3rd Platoon went to the USO show that night and had a very

wonderful night.” The United Service Organizations or USO is a private non-profit organization that provided morale boosting activities to the troops. USO shows featured top entertainment as they traveled from camp to camp. Dinah Shore was a famous American singer, actress on TV and in movies, radio star, and popular GI favorite. She recorded over 80 hit songs. After the war she had a long TV career, starring in seven TV shows and earning 3 Emmy awards.

Northern France

“The Battalion headed east in an all-out push for Paris. Our work in Normandy was over. We won a huge victory, as the Germans lost 2 Armies and their Armor. The war seemed at a standstill. We slept in our holes, in quiet. The 29th and 30th Infantry Divisions went over ‘The Dinah Shore Bridge’ on the Seine River, on their way to Paris. Everyone was yelling about the war being over by Christmas. What nonsense, as the Germans still had 7 million men under arms.” [H.E.]

"I watched the WWII series [on TV]. Some of those scenes really took me back. You must use your imagination to get the liberation of Paris. When we went into Paris, there were 3 million people, all clamoring and trying to get into our squad truck. I can still see your Dad, up in that .50 caliber machine gun turret. Millions of women swarming all over us. Wine and cognac came from every side. Everything was chaos, out of control. We could not repel or change anything. The girls were hugging and kissing us. They had wine bottles in their hands. Your Dad absolutely abhorred that sort of thing. Your Dad did not drink, smoke or entertain any vices. Our Lt. Golden was the same, but he left us alone. When he gave an order, I saw to it the squad obeyed and that was all.

“They had suffered under 4 years of German tyranny and we were the shining Knights to free them. The church bells had not rung in 4 years of German occupation. They all gave out with gusto.” [H.E.]

"Our path through Paris was ‘The Liberation’. [The much photographed scenes of] the 29th Infantry marching [in triumph through Paris] was the next day. The 246th got no down time at all. We made history, but were not permitted to get any enjoyment out of it. We went right through, chasing the Germans into Belgium and Holland. With the city of light behind us, we were teamed up with the 113th Calvary and their tanks and kept pushing the Germans. Hitler had ordered the SS to destroy Paris, but with units like the 246th out flanking him, he had to fall back.

“On our drive through France, we had to endure the poor attempt of the Frenchmen to [cover up their own guilt, by accusing others] - they stripped the women accused of collaboration [i.e. the ones sleeping with German soldiers], sheared and shaved their hair and did other evil things. It was the same age old story; blame someone else, anyone but me. We [of the 3rd Platoon] were 40 men against thousands, so there was nothing we could do to stop them.” [H.E.]

"In my next letters I will take you to Holland, Belgium and into Germany itself. The Germans were the butchers of 7 million people." [H.E.]

"We got the job of hitting the German line in Belgium, because the British were taking a beating in Arnhem, Holland. They lost over 20,000 men." [H.E.]

Rhineland

On September 5, 1944, Company C crossed the border into Belgium. They were now reassigned to Simpson's 9th Army. During the Army's race across Belgium, the 246th was still leading the way, clearing a path. “The 246th was in the leading elements - basically fighting as

front line infantry. The 246th were often the first Americans to enter the small towns and villages. They were the Liberators! Every work squad, doing routine work, liberated several Belgium towns a day. Company C feasted on the gifts given them by the grateful citizens - fresh fruits and vegetables; and innumerable bottles of beer and wine.” [H.E.]

Once, a squad truck with 14 men was sent out on a sign posting job. With their hammers, nails and assorted signs, they “liberated” four towns. When they came back to camp, the truck was loaded with: about 50 bottles of beer and wine, two sacks of apples, one sack of pears, three helmets full of plums, two helmets full of grapes, one helmet full of tomatoes, and a pile of wreaths and cut flowers.

When the 246th reached the city of Bilsen, Belgium, Company C got orders to clear snipers from the surrounding woods. It was dangerous work, but they only lost two men, Pvt. Young and Tec 5 Linbarger. Both received leg wounds from small arms fire.

East of Bilsen, the 246th joined the infantry again. With the support of only two tanks, the 246th were alone in front. They were the point of the spearhead. Along a four and a half mile front, the 246th, with their less than 400 men, drove the Germans to the Albert Canal. After they drove the Germans across the canal, they were ordered to hold this line and to keep the Germans from counterattacking until the tanks and the infantry could get enough supplies to move up and relieve them. The 246th held the Germans for 9 days, until they were relieved by the 41st Armored Infantry. During these 9 days, Company C was in plain sight of the Germans. German patrols infiltrated their lines every night. No one slept for 9 days.

“The infantry and the tanks ran out of gas and were stalled in Paris, but they kept us supplied, because the Germans had to be pushed, and we [the engineers] were mobile infantry. [For] 2 days we were in holes along the Wurm River in Belgium, [and] the Germans were set to make a stand. When we stopped, we got on our support - Calvary tanks. The 3rd Platoon rode tanks, to punch a hole in the German line. At night, the line squads slept with the tanks. We could hear the Germans chattering like magpies. If they got too close, the tanks would fire off a shot of canister. It kept them back.

“Every time I looked around that tank, your Dad and Davis were there. We lost a lot of men, but we took the flat land around Hasselt, Belgium that our air force needed for an air force base, to send P-51s against Germany. Your Dad was a good soldier and never let his platoon down. Your Dad was a gentleman and was the cleanest man I ever knew. Whenever we lit, he would get some water and wash.” [H.E.]

On September 14, 1944, Company C was once again infantry. They were ordered to help take the city of Maastricht in Holland. Then while fighting continued throughout the city, Company C became engineers again, building a 570 foot long bridge across the Meuse River. The bridge was started and finished all on the same day. Herman wrote, "We chased the Germans across France and Belgium; we caught up with them at Maastricht, Holland, on the Maas River [Meuse River in German]. The Germans went a few miles east to their main line (the Siegfried Line). We built this bridge in 6 hours. The 1st and 2nd Platoons [went] ‘on line’ [guarding the bridge], while the 3rd Platoon was on the far side [of the river] dogging the Germans.”

This bridge was the longest bridge ever built by the 246th. Work on the bridge was interrupted several times that day by orders for the engineers to use their boats to ferry across prisoners who were captured on the other side of the river. “They split the 3rd Platoon in two places. The 2nd and 3rd Squads went into holes above the city, while the 1st went up a hill

overlooking the railroad bridge. The 1st Squad had dug in [on the hill] on the far side of the bridge, with a two-way radio to help direct traffic and a machine gun [for security] to cover the river crossing. Your Dad spent 24 hours with a radio commo [a two-way radio] and a machine gun. We kept the bridge and we did not lose anyone. Not much of an army, but we did the job. Those holes were cold and wet." [H.E.]

On September 20th, Company C entered Germany. Again, they were fighting as infantry. They were among the first foot soldiers to set foot on German soil. They were assigned to the 113th Cavalry. A few engineers were assigned to each tank to act as infantry. During this action the 3rd Platoon captured 40 German prisoners.

"When we were involved in one push, our squad had a tank to ride. Your Dad held on to the steel with one hand, and bazooka with the other. The 3rd Platoon - 40 men, 3 tanks. When our code word "baby" came on the radio, we would jump off, until we hit the German lines. In less than an hour, we knocked out their mortars and took prisoners for G-2 [intelligence]. [The 246th] lost 3 dead and 7 wounded. The word "knock out" was the order to fall back to our lines. Once back in our holes, your Dad filled his helmet and washed. I fell asleep in that hole." [H.E.] At one point, the 2nd Platoon of Company C had squads digging in for the night in three different countries. The 1st Squad was in Germany, the 2nd Squad in Holland, while the 3rd Squad was in Belgium.

During the offensive in Germany, four engineers became trapped behind enemy lines. They were in a building surrounded by Germans. Grenades and mortars slowly reduced the building to rubble. A rescue party, supported by a light tank and an armored car, moved as close as they could without being seen by the enemy. They rushed the enemy, catching them by surprise. They chased off the Germans, after killing 12 of them and wounding several others.

Herman wrote, "Our infantry and tanks had run out of gas, back near Paris. We had no artillery support or air cover. "C" Company was given the job to take the [railroad] bridge over the Maas [Meuse] River and cross the river. The 10th Army wanted it intact. The 1st platoon was given [the job to take] the bridge. The 2nd platoon was in reserve.

"And the 3rd platoon got the [job to take out the German] machine guns and the mortars. Our [platoon of] forty men jumped off, but only 3 of us got to the guns. We knocked off the entire works. Your Dad [with his bazooka] hit the house where observers were directing fire. It went up like tinder - no body count. He [your Dad] and Davis went down the hill, shaking down the POWs and putting them on Bob Bedell's truck. First Squad was down to 5 men, your Dad, Bedell, Saldivar, Davis and me." [H.E.]

Herman Ernst was being modest when telling this story. The three 3rd Platoon soldiers who were the only soldiers out of 40 men to reach the machine guns, were Sgt. Cebuls, Pfc. Miles and Cpl. Herman Ernst.

On September 29, the 3rd platoon, supported by two light tanks, was ordered to cross a canal and form a bridgehead on the enemy side. The German soldiers were all well dug in, and the 3rd platoon was soon pinned down by the murderous fire from the German machine guns. Cebuls, Miles and Ernst out-flanked a machine gun nest, capturing 5 Germans and killing several more. They then turned the enemy machine gun around and used it on the enemy. The three all earned Bronze Stars with a V for valor for this action.

During the fight for the bridge, the 246th was getting hit hard by a line of German riflemen, all in their foxholes. One Sergeant from the 246th gathered up an armload of German potato masher type grenades. He then ran down the German line, going from foxhole to foxhole, dropping an activated German grenade in each hole.

During much of the fighting, the German line and the 3rd Platoon were only separated by the 30 foot canal, with both sides throwing grenades at each other. When both sides ran out of grenades, each side took turns trying to convince the other to surrender.

Herman wrote, "From there we went into the siege of Aachen. They hustled us off to Aachen, Germany to go on line with the 29th Division that had just come up. We never got any down time. We were a tired bunch of GIs.

"We were tossed in as infantry at Aachen, where the Germans made a stand. That was the first German city to fall to us. We paid a price for that hunk of real estate. [The 1st Squad] lost 2 men in the first hour - a sergeant and a private. Neither the Lt. nor platoon Sgt. said anything about where they were taken. It took a week to get the 1st Squad back to 6 men. We never got back to 10 men until the war ended. We just kept on going." [H.E.]

"During the siege of Aachen, the 3rd Platoon was alerted at midnight. We drew K-rations, ammo, and grenades and boarded our trucks. After a bumpy trip, Bob Bedell got the 1st squad up, so Sgt. Mac could lead his 5 man army up a hill to the position that he wanted held. He said 'dig in and hold'. We still had not received replacement from our last action. Five men is not much of an army, but we dug in.

"After a couple of hours, we heard some activity on our left flank. Bob Bedell and I crawled out to check it out. As it turned out, it was some 113th Cavalry digging in a tank. Bob yelled out, 'don't get trigger happy, we are on the next hill.' We got back into the hole with Saldivar. Wainright and Davis were in the next hole, both on high alert.

"Every shadow seemed to me a German soldier. The rest of the night was without incident, except for a few mortars and flares. With the dawn, Sgt. Mac came to gather his army. We joined the rest of the platoon. We were all dug in on a hill, overlooking Aachen. The Germans were hard pressed, but they hung on. We stayed in the line two more days and one night. The platoon CP [command post] was in a farm house at the bottom of the hill. There we could pick up some rations. The 3rd Platoon took no casualties. When Sgt. Mac came to pull us out, we were ready for some shut eye and hot food. The Germans gave up! And back in Holland, we got replacements and a little rest." [H.E.]

Back in Holland, Company C stayed in a small village called Spekholzerheide. "Spek" is in southeastern Holland right on the German border. Herman wrote, "We liberated Belgium and drove into Holland, where we fettered out for a week to get replacements. The 1st squad was down to 5 men - me, your Dad and Davis, Miller and Saldivar. Not much of an army. All except for the 1st squad lived right with the Dutch people. The 1st Squad had the [job of] training of the replacements - your Dad took over showing the bazooka and what not to do. I handled the basics of demolition, which the Dutch girls said broke their windows." [H.E.]

Herman wrote, "After we finished our mission as infantry in [Germany], they pulled us out to get replacements. We hunkered down in a little Dutch town [Spekholzerheide] and the 1st Squad got the job of training the new men. I taught demolitions and your Dad did bazooka. The new men were afraid of both. For a week, we blew up anything that stood up around that town. The people were nice to us; we had dances and parties, both of which your Dad and I remained impassive to."

"We received three replacements who were being instructed in mine work by Gene Davis and Russell Wainright. I was ordered to go with Lt. Golden and Sgt. Mac to look over our river crossing site. We drove to the infantry command post, then worked our way to their forward observer, where we could see the blown bridge and our assigned crossing sites. Their spotter scope showed no signs of life on the far side of the river.

“Wainright's army of 4 had found some mines which they put in a fox hole with a block of TNT and blew [them] up. One of the replacements told me he wanted a transfer. I told the boy the only way out of the 3rd Platoon was to get wounded.”

“When we moved into Speckholzerheide, we booked it to the dance hall. The Germans had looted everything! We came up with a piano and other useful things. There was a German warehouse that provided Danish ham, Dutch Chocolate, and all kinds of canned goods. There was a large quantity of sugar which we showed to a man whom Bob found. [The man] came up with three kegs of beer and several cases of cognac. Company C had some very wonderful parties and became very close with the Dutch people.” [H.E.]

“Another member of 1st squad was Sebastien "Sub" Coli. Sub Coli earned a Purple Heart during the war. While the 246th was in Holland, Sub met Erica, a local Dutch girl, and after the war in 1947 they married. At the time of Sub's death in 2006, Sub and Erica had been married almost 60 years.

“I was so dumb, that I did not know he was serious about that girl. We stayed in that Dutch village (Speckholzerheide) for a week. We had to get and train replacements. It was a hard week for the NCOs!” [H.E.]

"Coli was with your Dad for 3 years. They shared many foxholes. He was in many ways like your Dad. He was loyal, and a loner, silent and steadfast. He was dependable. Now he's dead. Time is doing what the Germans could not do.” [H.E.]

"The Germans had given up at Aachen, and the 3rd Platoon was pulled out of the line. We were snug in our new billet, when Corps G2 [Intelligence] sent Company C an order. They discovered that the railroad bridge east of Aachen was still intact and mined. The 3rd platoon was ordered to clear all demolitions from the area. We drove around Aachen, east of where we were dug in for 3 days.

“The bridge was mined, but with no land mines. I cut the detonator wires and followed them up to the depot, where a dead SS Officer lay. He had been shot in the head from a long distance. There was no exit wound in the back of his head. He had the firing device in his hand. Ernie George helped me take the explosives down the hill, where I set them off. It would have destroyed the bridge. With the bridge, Corps could bring supplies from the beach to the German border.” [H.E.]

East of Aachen, the 246th again joined up with the 29th, this time with the mission of blowing up pillboxes. The 246th had another death when Cpl. Lovelace entered a pillbox too soon. The TNT had not fully exploded and Lovelace died from breathing TNT fumes.

In mid-September, the U.S. Army reached the Germans' famed Siegfried line. This was the heavily fortified German defense line, designed to protect the German border from invasion. The line was heavily defended with pillboxes (small, concrete bunkers generally manned by a machine gun crew) all linked with a maze of tunnels. The Nazis claimed that the line was impregnable and could not be breached. The 246th again became infantry in the U.S. Army's all-out battle to break through the Siegfried line.

After the break through of the Siegfried line, the 246th were sent back to the Siegfried to blow up the German pillboxes. The 246th blew up approximately 150 pill boxes. Per Herman, "In October, we got the job to blow pillboxes in Hitler's main line. [Each pillbox took all] 10 men in the squad, all toting a 40 pound box of TNT - 400 pounds! [The concrete] was reinforced with 1/2 inch steel rods." [H.E.]

Near Herzogenrath, Germany, Company C became infantry again, this time with the 30th Infantry. Company C was on the front line in muddy foxholes. The ground was so wet, that

Company C spent much of their time digging new foxholes. Concussion from the German shelling caused the walls of the foxholes to crumble and water would seep through the sides of the holes in an almost continuous stream.

Once, the 246th was ordered to lay booby traps in front of the infantry positions. After dark, the Company jeep went out to lay the traps. The jeep struck a mine, killing Sgt. Lehman and wounding four others. Stan Stopa, the driver, was thrown from the jeep by the explosion and didn't get a scratch.

On October 12, 1944, Dora wrote a letter to Russ on their 4th wedding anniversary. In one of the few letters that Russ was able to save, Dora wrote, "Darling Sweetheart, How's my Honey Pal? A nice day today, but this is 'our night' and a beautiful moon out. Guess what I did? I went out by moonlight and picked a rose off of your rosebush. I planted it for you. It is fragrant and beautiful. I sure enjoy it and I make believe you gave it to me – after all it is your bush.

"We had to take inventory today [Dora was still working at the ice cream shop/grill at Michigan State University.] I have a grill to take care of, all by myself. But it wasn't bad at all, because the college football team had a game and all the coeds went, so we didn't have any trade. The game was 23 to 6, of course MSC won [Michigan State College was their name prior to becoming a university].

"Louise [a friend] has been over all day. She had helped me do some work this summer, so I promised I would take her to a show. So I took Gus [Dora's 16 year old sister, Augusta] and her downtown to a show. Gus fixed my nails and then Louise's. Then Louise fixed Gus's. So we have pretty "red cake" nails. Gee, my nails are cute. Not very conceited, am I? But my diamond and wedding ring really shows off my nails on the one hand.

"Dearest, how are you doing? Honey, someday let's take a canoe ride on the Red Cedar [the river that flows through the MSU campus, a popular place to rent canoes], shall we, in the moonlight? Dearest, good luck and chin up. I love you sweetheart. As ever yours, love 'Screwball' Dora." [D.W.]

After the fall of Aachen, Company C was sent back to Spekholzerheide, Holland for some well-earned rest, refitting and reinforcements. After months in the Hell of war, they were back for seven weeks of civilization. They were warmly welcomed by the Dutch. As one engineer said, "they are among the nicest people in the world---and the only place where one would feel more at home is at home itself". The people of "Spek" opened their homes and schools to the engineers for living quarters. In gratitude for liberation, they held dances with live music nearly every night.

For the GIs of Company C probably the area's greatest joy was found several miles west of "Spek". Much of the area around "Spek" had been producing coal for hundreds of years. A short truck ride to the west was the coal mining city of Heerlen, Holland. Heerlen had several major mines, and down in the largest mine the company had installed hot showers for the miners going off shift. This was a huge treat for the cold and dirty GIs. Unfortunately, the clean condition did not last for long, since coal dust was everywhere.

Even though they were on a seven week "holiday", Company C was kept busy. They built bridges, maintained miles of road and constructed a major highway as a main supply line for the 29th Infantry Division in Germany.

"When I got word to go to the CP, I was given a map - grid coordinates - and told to put a section of bridge across a canal. I got your Dad, Athes, and that nut, Stan Stopa as jeep driver. Laying the bridge was a snap, but here come all of those Germans, with their hands up. Four of

us and all of them! Your Dad shook down the POWs, while Athes covered him. I borrowed a treadway [a type of temporary bridge] truck and packed them in for the trip back to the company area, in the nick of time for chow. We had feather beds and hot baths. Another day in the life of the 3rd platoon." [H.E.]

On November 3, 1944 Russell wrote, "My Dearest Sweetheart, Just got back from town again, on pass. Ate me a little lunch and over to the writing room I go. Course it's much warmer there, and maybe I can write a little better without shaking from the cold. Had guard last night and it wasn't warm out. Boy my poor feet, they sure get cold, even in bed. I guess I haven't anyone to put my feet in ones back. Course I could with my bed partner, but I'd hate to have him hunt himself up a new bed partner – he helps me keep warm.

"What did I do in town today? Yes, the same thing as ever. Go to a show, drink a little beer with some of the boys, and try to find something to eat (which is a very hard job). We didn't find any beer, but we did find some coffee, mashed potatoes with apple (mixed in with the potatoes, it wasn't bad), and brown bread. Then in comes a Hollander, and he has a birthday, and he buys us some soft drinks. Course, that's better than nothing at all. We drank them and thanked the man.

"My bed partner is Joe Urso. He was the one who took my guard on that last Sunday we had together. By the way, we are invited to his home (when he gets one) and show us the hot spots of New York, after the war. Course I accepted his invite. He has been married just four days and that was when he was home on furlough. He's not such a bad boy. He has his bad points, also has good points.

"I'm fine, even if it's damp and chilly around here. Oh well, spring is just around the corner – after the winter, I hope. Sure looks like we will have to stay here this winter. I pray not.

"I saw a wonderful sight last night. It happened to be a plane shot down, and when it hit the ground, [like] all the fireworks you could imagine, all colors of the rainbow. It's a sight one won't forget for some time." [R.W.]

11/13/44 – "Dear Hon, It's not raining this morning, but the ground is still wet under foot. The mud is piling up around here and on that road we're building and it still rains. I guess that's about the only thing one can say, that history repeats. I know we all wanted it to repeat yesterday, but no dice.

"It's our day off and here I am. I forgot to tell you about our dance Friday night. It was a nice dance alright except I danced only once. Just couldn't get into the mood to go wild. Of course you weren't here and maybe that's why.

"I guess I will go and get a haircut and shave and go to town this afternoon and see another show. I might just as well take in as many now as I can.

"Darn, I just had to get me some soda water, to kill the gas that's coming up in my throat – too much grease. Of course it's my own fault, because I fried some potatoes for dinner yesterday. I can't fry them like I want to, so to keep them from burning one had to use more grease.

"I suppose you liked the way the elections came out. I guess it was all right. It was a bad time to change bosses at this step of the game.

"I sure could use a candy bar, but I'm all out and we're not getting our rations. I hear that we are going to have another dance again tomorrow night. Sure wish you were here to go with me. I sure hope they have a different band than they had last time. Maybe I'll get myself to

dance this time. Of course, we're going out to work tomorrow. But with this cold of mine, [it] might not get me down if I didn't work out in that rain and mud all day.

"Well, how is everything back on the home front? I hope a lot quieter than on the Western front. It sure is a wet mess over here, when we are widening the road for a main supply route to Berlin. We are to have it done in two days. But, [with] the weather and practically no bottom to the road, it's been pretty hard getting it done. But we engineers will get it fixed in time.

"We have boots and such to wear on our feet, but it's still miserable working. I hope someone sends me some hand lotion, but I know they won't. So I will ask for some. My hands are getting red now with the wind and rain. I'll just put the request for a box at the bottom, before I forget: Please. Box Request." [R.W.]

11/13/44 – "Honey child, It's evening here and of course a mist is falling outside and I'm in our CP reading room. It happens to be nice and warm. About an hour ago, I got back from town. We saw most of 'Sensations of 1945'. It was a pretty good show. Have you seen it? I hear it's one of the latest pictures out. Do you know what I found back at camp? A box from you dated September 27th." [R.W.] This movie is a 1944 musical comedy, with little plot, but many top acts. It starred Eleanor Powell and Dennis O'Keefe, with performances by W.C. Fields, Sophie Tucker, Cab Calloway, Woody Herman, Les Paul and many more.

11/13/44 – "Hon, I just got back from a GI movie; that crazy Joan Davis in 'Kansas City Kitty' [a 1944 musical comedy]. It was a good show except that it didn't last long enough to suit me [71 minutes long, including credits]. I also went to a show this afternoon, and can you imagine seeing one of those old silent pictures of old. Yes, a cowboy picture – I got quite a kick out of it. I had guard last night and also today. I'm having trouble getting this hand to get this pen a-going. Maybe my hands are cold. It's a little cool here in our home and a little bit awkward sitting here with just my knee to write on." [R.W.]

"[This camp] has a real shower and they have plenty of hot water. One can even go and shave. It's sure nice. I have two pens to work with. This one happens to be a Jerry [German] pen. And now that I have just fixed me up a small table, I can write much better. But it still doesn't help my spelling, so just skip over those words" [R.W.]

Herman wrote, "In all those months, we never had our clothes off or a bath. We never removed our clothing to sleep. It was normal for them to roust us out in the middle of the night. This may be hard to digest, but in 11 months in Europe, we had one shower. When we fell back to Heerlen, Holland, we sent 40 men at a time down in an operating coal mine [where there were showers built for the miners] and spent 10 minutes under hot water." [H.E.]

11/15/44 – "Dearest Hon Bunch, For once it didn't rain today, but I sure thought it would snow this morning. I'm glad it didn't rain so to give our road a chance to dry up a little. I'm fine as can be except for this weather. I'm sure glad I'm not living in foxholes right at present, for it sure would be miserable with all this mud. I hear that they are having a party at the CP [Command Post], so I'm trying again to write in our hole behind nice thick walls. I missed going to another show tonight, but I guess I waited around too long to wash up and eat my chow and not my shoes.

"Guess what? I went to the dance last night and I did do some dancing. Oh me, I guess I did alright. You don't mind, do you? If you just say so, I'll be a good boy again, for you. It broke up about one o'clock so I didn't get much sleep last night and we get up at six and had breakfast in the dark. Of course, we have lights in our hole, but no heat. That's bad, but we keep

warm except me and my feet. [I'd do] anything to keep my feet warm. Did anyone send me a scarf for Christmas?" [R.W.]

11/16/44 - In regards to finding time to write letters, Russell wrote, "My Darling Girl, I want to keep you happy, even if I am far away from you, and [at the same time] so very close to you that it sometimes hurts to think we are so far apart.

"What did my folks have to say when you showed them the Purple Heart? That Purple Heart is really nice looking, isn't it? Yes, do take care of it. I'll try not to get any addition to it.

"Went to a show this afternoon and can you imagine seeing one of them old silent pictures of old. Yes a cowboy picture - got quite a kick out of it." [R.W.]

Herman wrote, "Terry - "When I went fishing, it was always with a companion. From the time he could walk, my son went with me. After reading again about your Dad's solitary gardening and fishing, I remembered so many other things. He was able to endure and keep all of those most brutal things bottled up within himself. He did not let his emotions get the better of his duty." [H.E.]

"There was another man like your Dad - Elmer Dixon of the 1st Platoon. Dixon was unshakeable, even when his best friend had his legs blown off by a mine. The legs landed beside Elmer's hole; still he kept his head, stayed cool and got a medic to evacuate the man. He stayed on his mission! Where do we get such men? Elmer and I wrote for 30 years, until he died and now I write to his widow. Eugene Davis is another of our squad still alive. He shared many foxholes with your Dad." [H.E.]

"Once, we were hard-dogging the 2nd Armored Division, when we came to this beautiful city. There was a causeway between two lakes, where the Germans had blown the entire section out. The tanks went overland but all of those supply trucks were backed up for 50 miles. There was no time for building bridges, as the tanks were running low on gas and ammo. The 19th Corps officers gave orders to demolish all the brick buildings and fill in the damaged roadway. That was my job - I used beehive charges, turning that town into rubble. Our squad trucks doubled as dump trucks, so in 2 hours the supply trucks were on their way.

"Your Dad never said a word, but he looked at the rubble and shook his head. We did what we had to, but did not like it. That night in our snug billet, he was writing a letter to your Mom, when he said, 'Ernst! Do you ever regret those things?' I said, 'No. Those Germans were killing our tankers.'

"Bob Bedell came over and ranted, 'Did you see what you did to all of those houses?' Bob kept nothing in, even after we got home. In 1945, he would get drunk and call me, ranting on and on about all of those inhumanities. He still, after 60 years, calls and writes about all of that. He was always very emotional.

"War is the most inhuman and extreme of all man's endeavors. Your Dad was able to accept it and do his job. Eugene Davis never said anything, but like your Dad, was always there. After 60 years of writing [Davis] still sounds the same.

"Bob Bedell is in bad shape and a lot of the time, is bed-ridden. The Doc has taken away all of his tobacco and booze. [Bedell] still calls and writes. I still do not smoke or drink. As you can see, I talk too much - your Dad always said that (in a nice way)." [H.E.]

Herman wrote a letter to Bob Bedell, the 1st squad truck driver, "I was sure happy to hear from you. So much time has passed since you went to the hospital that I thought you were dead. That Memorial Hospital brings back bad memories. My Dad died there in May 1943. I was given emergency furlough, but he died before I got home.

"I had quite a shock! Johnny Margaretis called me from California. I saw him killed on the Roer River crossing. The 2nd squad was working on the foot bridge, when a shell hit. John got hit and tossed in the river. Lincoln went in after him and got him up to the medics. On the way back to the bridge, a shell hit and killed Bill Lincoln. We never heard from Margaretis, so I just figured him dead. He was a top notch motorcycle nut. He owned and flew his own plane. He says he can't remember anything before the hospital.

"That was a rough day. The first squad had the power boats. Miller had the down river boat and I had the up river boat. Wainright, Davis and Athes were in my boat. I was in the prow with the ropes and the floats. When we turned and went up to the treadway span, I saw John get hit and go in the water. 'A' Company and 'B' Company were working on the treadway when both officers were hit. Our Captain Mac took over and finished the crossing. I never saw Lt. Golden all day. What was left of the 1st squad was sitting on some rocks at the river, when you came up with the truck. So ended another day for the 246th." [H.E.]

"Bob [Bedell] is one of the last 3 of the 1st squad. He is on oxygen now, after a long hospital stay. John Margaretis was a good friend of your Dad's. We could not help John, because we were going up stream to where 'A' Company was putting up a treadway bridge for tanks. One of their men was in the river with an injured leg. We never heard from John, so we assumed he was dead. John calls from California every Sunday night. He was in the 2nd squad. They never gave us time to even think of our lost men." [H.E.]

"The NCOs (sergeants) are the backbone of any outfit. They make a unit function! The platoon is 40 men welded together in everything and closer than brothers."

"Lt. Golden never approved of our underhanded ways. Sgt. Miller and Ernie George did things in a very un-GI way. Bob Bedell was the First Sgt. driver. Stopa was a jeep driver and very capable. [That group of scroungers] made life tolerable for 'C' Company - anything movable belonged to the 3rd platoon.

I lived in the same area as Stopa, but never called him. He died a few years ago and now I see him often. He has joined the others on eternal outpost, forever young. He has good company.

"Clifton Farr, the clean, soft spoken, all-American boy (from Chesaning, Michigan), who could not grasp the violence of war and was the first to die in Normandy."

"Jim Bateman was a tall, dark, handsome Tennessee boy. He was well educated and was a school teacher, exempt from the draft. One Friday night (back in Tennessee), he got into a bar room brawl and sent two men to the local hospital. The Judge said jail or army! Jim joined the 246th in England, April 1944, 1st Squad, 3rd Platoon. Being in the same squad, we become close friends. In France, we slept in the same holes and bucked the same chow lines.

"In Holland, September 1944 the 3rd Platoon was given the job of knocking out a machine gun nest. Before we were given the order to jump off, Jim and I were in a bombed out house, setting on our helmets, eating a K-ration. Jim had a premonition. Forty men started off, 3 of us made it! Jim died 6 inches to my rear - a direct hit by a mortar. My friend was killed, I was alive. We took out the gun and took prisoners. I felt sorry for that line of good defected men, going into prison camps. The only difference between us and them was that we had the weapons and would fight again.

"I will forever miss Jim. The men in a squad are closer than any brothers. For over 50 years, I have tried to forget. I can still see their faces glowing with eternal youth." [H.E.]

"I just thought of another mission the 1st Squad had. It was a huge monastery; bypassed by the 19th Corps. We were ordered to check it out. When we got up there, we found it was an

ammo depot, with many thousands of rounds of artillery shells. They were piled 4 feet high. No church people were there, so we got on the radio and reported in.

"Lt Golden said 'get out of there, right now!' The 19th Corps sent a flock of trucks to haul those explosives out of there. Your Dad and Davis were on the mine sweeper. It wasn't mined! The Germans left in a hurry. We moved too fast for them. Back at Headquarters, we could breathe easy again." [H.E.]

11/18/44 - Russell wrote, "Dearest Pal, We have been pretty busy doing some training the last couple of days and today we're not working. It seems that on days we have to go out and work, it always rains or a wet snow that makes things very much miserable. Two nights in a row we have had quite a heavy frost and the ground was hard for a while in the morning. Then it warms up and rains.

"I think I'll go and take a shower, shave and wash up a few clothes that I have on which might need washing. It's hard to keep clean around here [from the coal dust]. When I make my bed, my hands are black from handling my blanket.

"I'm doing this writing with some of the boys around here, so if I get too many words that don't belong, then it's because I pick up words they say. Oh they are not such a bad bunch of boys after you're around them much. A few of them are newcomers, but still a good lot. By the way, when are they going to build that cabin up there on the lake, or will we have to build that when we go up there camping. I guess we can do it. It's kind of hard to see those huge fish [they are catching]. I hope they are all like that when I try my luck fishing." [R.W.]

On November 20, 1944 Russell wrote from Holland, "Dearest, It's been a grand day, not a cloud in the sky. I worked most of the day. [I] went to church this morning in a small little old church just for us and a few people who could read or speak English. It was nice going to a place like that where one didn't have to sit on the ground." [R.W.]

11/21/44 - "Dearest Gal of Mine, It has been raining all afternoon and is still at it. Went to a show. We saw 'Danger Deed' - kind of a long picture but pretty good. I'm really getting caught up on my shows. Might just as well for there will come a time when I won't get the chance.

"Some of the boys got a bunch of packages today, but no dice for me. I get mine about the time when they don't get any. The only thing is, they have four or five packages to share and when I get the only one it doesn't last long.

"Gosh, only three more days before Thanksgiving. Just thinking what that meant to us a year ago. Yes, we went home the next day. I'll never forget that day, when we got into Chicago and we only had an hour to get our next train. You were a peach that day. I don't know how I get along without you. But here I am, all alone. No! Not alone. I still have you with me, and all the boys over here - all one big family.

"Went up to the mine this morning and took a shower and washed out some clothes. I had my ODs [olive drab uniform] washed out and some other clothes by some Hollander - washed, patched and ironed, all for a cake of soap. That was my OD pants that had the rip in the knee that I had caught on some barbwire. Sorry that you couldn't have been the one to do it for me.

"Look how I've been chattering along here for four pages and what have I said? Nothing as far as I know, but to you, I hope it is everything. I do get full of nonsense sometime and write on and on and say nothing. [But] you know I'm pretty faithful, keeping my evening date with you."

Talking about my Mom's letters to him, Russ wrote, "I know that your 'Hi Honey Bunch' comes from the bottom of your heart. How about your toes? What do you think of us? I know we have your thoughts in mind. Mmmm! Hickory nut fudge, I hope you made a lot of it for me and of course the boys, too. And thanks to your mother for the sugar [sugar was scarce and rationed, having to borrow a cup of sugar was a common occurrence, and it had to be repaid]. After all, she has three other boys in the service and I am glad to be the fourth." [R.W.]

11/23/44 – "My Dearest Sweetheart – Thanksgiving has come around again and just a year ago we had dinner back at Fort Lewis, with the boys. What a day that was - did we rush after that dinner was over – back to town to get our money – and down to the train depot – scared that we wouldn't get there in time to get our tickets. Oh me, what a day!

"Went to another show this afternoon – 'Song of Bernadette' - Sure was a long picture [156 minutes]. Some of the boys didn't care for it, but most of us liked it, I know I did." [R.W.] The military tried to get the best and newest entertainment for the GIs. The "Song of Bernadette", a religious drama telling the story of St. Bernadette, was released in New York City in December 1943. But even though the troops in Europe were seeing it in November 1944, the movie was not released to the rest of America until April 1945.

"I had guard duty last night – course it rained most of the night and the wind blew a little too much. Can't see how they can do anything in this kind of weather.

"You people back home don't know what it is all about, except for the ones who have loved ones over here. I heard one of the boys state that he had a letter from home, and they said that since the election, people want the war to last a long time. I sure hope it won't last too long. I hope you are right about me being back there in time to help eat that hog. Just keep the faith! Dora and Russ! We have a lot to be thankful for this Thanksgiving.

"What are you going to have this day? I know we won't have the best, but I did see 10 or 12 turkeys in the kitchen. I do hope we'll be around to have it. This sure is the longest time we have been in one place so long. One will hate to move out – sure hope – hate to go back near the front again – but war is war." [R.W.]

"What's the low down, or don't they say anything in the papers about these rest camps they have over here? We rest, but still if there is any work to be done, we go out and do it – mud or no mud – and it's mostly mud, wherever one goes. I have heard about those rest camps, but I know this is not one of them, just because we are here resting from front line work.

"So you voted; did it count? Don't answer, I know it didn't. Yes, a few of the boys did vote, but most of them weren't old enough, can you imagine that? Those that were, didn't vote, cause me, I wasn't a resident so I couldn't. And of course my vote probably wouldn't have counted either."

Russ wrote about building bridges, "It's a lot of work and heavy – needs a weak mind and a strong back, which I haven't got, but I do it anyway. I might have gotten a little weight back, being that we're back here and not digging any fox holes. I pray that we won't have to dig any, but who knows, we don't?

"I know when I have something – something good to return to – and I want to hold on and hold on tight. How's the chin tonight? Fine, keep it up, and I will do the same." [R.W.]

Herman wrote, "Thanksgiving Day, 1944, in Germany thousands of miles from home. The 3rd Platoon hit the road right after morning chow. Sgt. Anderson's cook truck was open for breakfast at 6 A.M., with hot coffee, chopped beef and toast. The 3rd Platoon got a new mission, to repair the roads for preparation of the Roer River crossing. We worked a long stretch of a

secondary supply road leading to the 29th Infantry. The 19th Corps was bringing up four divisions of infantry and 175 batteries of artillery.

“The 1st Squad under Sgt. Harry Miller took the lead. We were sweeping for mines. The 2nd Squad under Henry Marks filled in the holes and tore down the road blocks. The 3rd Squad under Ernie George did the final cleanup. Bob Bedell, our driver, kept as close as he could, so we could get in the back and keep warm. It was cold, with a wet snow. We worked our tails off. No German shelling!

“My watch told me it was noon, while my nose told me the men [back at camp] were eating their turkey dinner. Still no orders to return to the company mess truck. After working our way back to the jeep, we headed back to the 3rd Platoon work area, where Ernie George had issued K-rations to all of the hungry men. Miller opened a “10 in 1” for us [a box of field rations designed to provide one meal for 10 men]. We built a fire in an old artillery base. It felt good, then we loaded up and headed back for our dinner. We made it back to the company area in time for supper, hot cakes and sausage, to wind up Thanksgiving Day 1944. The mess Sgt. was sorry, but all that was left was a couple of wings and some cold mashed potatoes. Another day in the 246th.” [H.E.]

Normally, Company C did a good job of feeding the men (at least the best they could under the circumstances). The engineer’s job was often back-breaking work in the cold and the mud, and they needed good food to get it done. In France, the Mess Sergeant had “borrowed” a set of thermos pots off a German horse-drawn kitchen. The goal was to never serve the men a cold meal while they were out on a job, even if it meant driving the Company Mess truck several miles on bad roads, under fire by snipers.

Of course the Mess Sergeant had to use the food that was available to him. Often this meant (in the words of the men of Company C) having once again “C” ration stew for dinner. “Corps used line platoons for all their dirty work. You never took your clothes off, because they would call you out at any time. You could freeze walking around without shoes in snow at 20 below.” [H.E.]

From a letter written by Dora, date unknown, Russell saved a single page. It was one of the few letters that Russ was able to and chose to save. Dora was obviously feeling lonely and down, when she wrote, “What I want for Christmas you can put in an envelope – a letter from you. I would like you to put yourself in one. Yes, it’s impossible. But let’s keep our chins up. A letter will do, honey.

“So on ‘Our Night’, you went to a dance and had a girl and beer. Oh me. Thanks for saying you would have more fun if I was there with you. I’m sure you would. Russ I don’t really mind if you dance and have a good time, so don’t let me kid you. Just so you think of me, and remember who I am. I know you are true blue, so please enjoy yourself.” [The bottom of the letter is torn off at this point.]

[On the back of this page] “I had to tear the bottom of the page off. Why? Again, I answer my own questions. Because, I am dumb and I was doing some thinking that I shouldn’t have done. Please excuse this terrible letter, honbunch. You will? Thanks Russ. Darling I will stop right now and I will do better tomorrow, I hope. I love you Russ. Did you hear me? Chin up sweetheart. Love and Kisses. Your faithful wife, Dora.” [D.W.]

After Thanksgiving, it was time to leave “Spek” and Holland behind. Herman wrote, “Our supply lines ran to Antwerp, Belgium and [supplies] were pouring in, things for restarting our war. It was sad to hear Lt. Golden, when he said we were moving out. Bob Bedell backed

the 1st Squad truck up and in a few minutes, we were on our way. Back to the terrible violence of combat." [H.E.]

12/4/44 – Russell wrote, “My Dearest One, Again, I take pen in hand after a few days of absence. Been marching and then I catch KP and oh what a day that was. One really takes a lot of dirt now days on KP – poor management if you ask me. Three of us worked until about ten o’clock peeling spuds and apples.

“We’re getting the same old weather - - rain; and of all days, on my KP day next morning the sun came up nice. Christmas is just around the corner. I think I’ll skip shopping for Christmas again this year.

“Just took time to get our rations. I just traded my cigarettes for candy. Didn’t do so bad either. I know that several packages are coming tonight, so maybe I’ll be a lucky one. Joe already has one. I bet that won’t last long. I’m not hungry being that we just finished with chow. Being Sunday, we had chicken, but not the way I like it. They made sort of a stew that I didn’t care about. Went out this afternoon, did some road work. Oh me, guard duty tonight.” [R.W.]

“Well, I just got a letter from you. I see that you have my new P.O. number. That’s because I’m not in the First Army any more, and we can’t write what we are in. You no doubt have read the latest on what Army is now over here, so just form your own opinion.

“I’ve got another money order for you - \$50. Now that we are in Germany, there’s no place to spend it, nothing but ruins – town pubs [are] a mass of wreckage. So, it’s pretty hard to find places for us to live. We have it pretty nice, but no lights. But we have a roof over our heads and heat to keep us warm on our off hours.

“I heard you received my box. I got a kick out of you telling the trouble getting it open. You know I built that box so that it would stand that ride back over the water and packing and unpacking on the boat. Just so that pin looks like a diamond to you, which I wished it were, but I don’t think the lady would have given it up so easily if it were.” [R.W.]

My Dad hand made a wooden box in Germany. It is about 15 by 15 inches and about 6 inches deep. It is made from scrap material - wonderful craftsmanship - reinforced all over with steel – with homemade steel hinges and locks – painted black – and strong enough to survive several world wars. In it was a brooch – a gift from Dad, and other mementos and souvenirs. My Mom kept her most valuable things in that box – all of these letters from my Dad. And after 65 years they are still in the box.

Ardennes – The Battle of the Bulge

On November 29, the 246th was moved back to Germany to support the 29th Infantry. The next major mission was the crossing of the Roer River and you needed engineers for armies to cross rivers. Now the American Army was in Germany. After breaking through the Siegfried Line, the American forces busily prepared for their next big push. But then, all plans were off, when on December 16, 1944 the Germans launched a massive, all-out counteroffensive. This would become known as “The Battle of the Bulge” (due to the huge bulge on the map in the American line where the Germans pushed the Americans back).

The Germans sent 30 divisions, including four Panzer (tank) divisions, against the American line in the Ardennes, a heavily forested area in Belgium. In the Ardennes, only a few American Divisions were guarding a 50 mile front. Germany’s goal was to cut off the 1st and 9th Armies and destroy them. The Germans hit the American line at a weak spot between the 1st and

9th Armies to the north and Patton's 3rd Army to the south. The 246th, at the time, was with the 9th Army (on the upper shoulder of the bulge, on the German Army's northern flank).

The Allied Command wanted to contain the German breakthrough and not allow them to expand the bulge northward. So they ordered the 1104 Engineer Combat Group (of which the 246th was a member) to improve the American defense positions along the northern edge of the Ardennes Forest. The 1104's primary mission was to: string barbed wire along the front; dig machine gun emplacements; and attach explosives to large trees along all roads (which would be set off in case of a major German attack, felling the trees and creating massive instant roadblocks).

The 1104 sent the 246th Engineers to the Heurtgen Forest in Germany. Their job was to maintain the roads through the forest and to attach explosives to trees. They also installed hundreds of road blocks to try to block the German advance through the forest. To help them repair the roads, they "hired" 90 German civilian volunteers, who were very happy to work for a salary of three hot meals a day.

The Heurtgen Forest is south and east of Aachen, on the northern border of the Ardennes bulge. In 1944, it was a dense forest of tall fir trees, deep gorges, high ridges, narrow trails and few roads. The fighting in the Heurtgen Forest was very bloody with heavy American casualties. The fir trees were closely packed and rose 75 to 100 feet tall, allowing little light to come through. It was always gloomy, dark and dank. German minefields, booby traps and barbed wire were everywhere. German bunkers, machine gun nests and mortar teams were carefully placed and seemed to be everywhere.

Between the 16th and 23rd of December, storms with freezing rain or snow were a daily occurrence and nearly constant. It was bitter cold, with nightly temperatures dropping to well below zero. Knee-high or deeper snow covered the ground. The snow had a thick crusty layer of ice on top, which made walking even more difficult and exhausting. The GIs lived in foxholes, with mud deeper than their boot tops. It was impossible to keep your feet warm or dry. GIs were always wet and freezing cold. Trench foot, frostbite and pneumonia turned soldiers into casualties by the tens of thousands.

GIs had hardly any visibility, while German observers were on the high ground. Any movement by the Americans, or a fire built to try to get warm, resulted in an immediate rain of German artillery or mortar shells. Artillery shells were set to burst in the tree tops. Foxholes gave little protection from artillery, spraying the soldiers with sharp splinters of wood and hot shrapnel. Thousands upon thousands of shells turned a forest into toothpicks.

Throughout the Battle, the area had record breaking, bitterly cold temperatures, along with major snowstorms. When my Dad talked about the Battle of the Bulge, the first thing that he always mentioned was the snow and bitter cold. He told me that many men had not yet been issued winter gear and clothing, so many men suffered greatly from the cold. He said that he would have given almost anything for a pair of long winter underwear.

My Dad talked about how thin the Allies' line was. In order to hold the line and slow the German advance, the Allies used any and every available man. My Dad said that the officers would grab cooks, company clerks and any other support troops they could find. They would give them a rifle and some ammo, advise them that they were now infantry, and send them up to the front line.

Herman wrote, "I was thinking of your Dad this A.M. It was December 16th when [the 246th] moved into the line in the Ardennes. That day, it was 20 below and sleeting. We had some cold nights in those holes. [The Allies] had about 40,000 men. The Germans threw

240,000 men at us. That was three Panzer Armies - crack troops, pulled out of the Russian front. The Corps situation map showed that, in 24 hours, [the Allies] had lost an entire Corps of men and equipment. It looked hopeless for [the 246th]. It was our job to plug the gap in the American line. We knew we were expendable when they took all our trucks across the river and the bridge was mined, set to blow and they left us on the other side - the German side of the river.

“The 3rd Platoon had a section on a road junction and were told to stay alert and hold. Ernie George set the guard and woke me about 4:00 A.M. The moonlight and the frequent flares made the dense woods come alive and made my vivid imagination go wild. Ernie took over my hole while I took extra blankets and K-rations to the outpost. Wainright manned the bazooka, with Margaretis on the .50 caliber machine gun. Gene Davis was their ammo man. These men had been on alert for 4 hours, being blue with cold, so the blankets and food were welcome. We were waiting for the Germans to resume their momentum, with only a few flares to show us they were still there. With the dawn, we were able to line the holes with pine boughs, which made it considerably warmer.

“Sgt. Mack came up and told us we were hit on a 40 mile breakthrough in a last stand to cut the allied advance. Wainright and Gene Davis took the mine detector out and swept our perimeter. Here, we who serve the flag, met and stopped the finest army in the world. Of all the millions of Americans, few had knowledge of this. Lest we forget! We were all expendable! [But] we held and the Germans were stopped.

“A couple of miles in front of our position [back then], is [now] a German cemetery where over 10,000 men are buried. Germans come to pay respects. It's the only clearing for miles. Our people are buried in Holland, none in Germany. Nelson Harper went back there a few years ago and found our graves. For years, there were ladies from Speckholzerheide, Holland, who went there on Sundays with flowers. There are still bodies in the Ardennes and mines.” [H.E.]

On December 17, 1944, Russ wrote a letter which is a good example of what he did not include in his letters. December 17 was the second day of the Battle of the Bulge and Russ's unit was right in the path of the German offensive. Russ wrote a long 8 page letter, light hearted and chatty. It includes almost two full pages where the only thing he talks about is how he wished that someone would send him some more writing paper. Then he wrote a full page about a potato shortage. He seems distracted, thinking about something else. There is only one brief mention of the war.

On the 17th, Russ wrote, “My Dearest, I hit the jackpot last night, four packages and one letter. My brother, Don, sent about three pounds of peanuts.

“I guess you won't have to worry much anymore about me going to dances over here and having my arms around some girl, for it's now a court martial offense to even speak to any Germans. Of course we can still look at them.

“Oh man alive! Jerry is overhead [German airplanes] and he's really getting the works. Now I will get back to pleasanter things.

“Oh me, the mail just came and another package for me from Don, a pair of socks, and gloves and a scarf.”

Dora's brother, Art, had just got a “Dear John” letter from his wife, who was pregnant, even though they had been apart for well over a year. Russ wrote, “So Art is on the eight ball again. Too bad, but a lot of people are getting hurt being so far away from each other. Usually,

up here on the front lines, when a man's wife breaks up with him, they start getting careless and don't give a damn, and the next thing you know, he gets himself killed.

"Speaking about eating, I had a monstrous meal tonight – chicken, dressing, mash potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, pineapple bread and coffee." [R.W.]

Herman wrote, "The situation in Berlin worsened and Hitler had to pull the 7th Panzer Army out to face the Russians. About Christmas time the weather cleared and our air force started killing Germans by the thousands. They were flying from a field that we [the 246th] took as infantry in August 1944. It was a horrible carnage, but it soon evened out the odds in our favor. We never had our clothing off or a bath in 5 months. Whenever I turned around, your Dad was there. He never bugged out.

"Our squad was a close knit unit! When they brought our squad trucks back, we got other duties in the daytime. I can never forget those men or the look on their faces when we drew [a] hot job." [H.E.]

"As for Christmas dinner - - the 3rd Platoon was out in the field all day, so we missed any of the goodies. When we got back, the Mess Sgt. was sorry, but all that was left were 2 wings and a neck. The mashed potatoes were frozen solid. We got back in the truck; the 1st Squad opened up a box of 10-in-one (a box of rations enough for one meal for 10 soldiers), and we had our own feast. We ate and slept there until they moved us to a new billet, where we got dry and more sleep." [H.E.]

Now straightened out, the Bulge on the map was gone and the American Army continued their advance towards the Roer River. Company C was now supporting the 8th Infantry. Company C was ordered to create a barbed wire defense across the 8th Infantry's forward position. This was an extremely dangerous mission.

The German front line was only a few hundred yards from the American line. The 8th Infantry was dug in on one slope of a valley. The Germans were on the other slope. In between the slopes (where the barbed wire was to be strung) was a level valley only about 100 yards across. The valley was covered with snow, so if there were any light, anyone working out there would stand out against the snow. Since the work was to be done right in front of the Germans' noses, the work crews could not be sent out until well after dark, and only when the moonlight wasn't too bright. The job was expected to take at least two weeks.

Obviously, the engineers could not drive their truck down into the valley. So they had to carry the heavy rolls of barbed wire and steel stakes about a mile and a half in the dark, and down an icy slope, falling every few steps. Each trip took at least an hour. In addition, they learned the hard way that much of the valley was mined, when one engineer stepped on one. Sometimes the engineers discovered machine gun nests when tracer rounds started zipping by them in the dark. Any noise resulted in flares and mortar fire. Since the mortars were so close to their position, the engineers hit the dirt as soon as they saw any flash.

On the night of December 31, at the stroke of midnight, the Germans started firing flares to celebrate the New Year. It was hard to tell who was more surprised, the Germans when they saw several work crews busily stringing wire right in front of their position; or the engineers who were standing there like deer in headlights. Mortar shells blanketed the valley, as engineers dove for whatever cover they could find. Thankfully, Company C only lost 6 men.

Herman wrote, "The Ardennes - 27 December 1944. Orders from 19th Corps came with a new mission for the 246th and 247th Engineers, which involved over 1,000 men. The 18 line platoons of these two units were to string barbed wire across the Corps front. That was a terrible

time - - at night we were out in front of the infantry lines laying barbed wire. It was 20 below zero. Very cold!

“It was numbing cold when [our driver] Bob Bedell got the 1st Squad up to the Engineer Supply Dump, where we met our Infantry guide. We loaded up [the truck] with rolls of wire, stakes, and support rods, which was a very hard business through the deep snow.

“We made the Divisional outpost around midnight. We got the lay of the front and were told that the German lines were quiet. Our guide showed us where the AP mines (anti-personnel mines) were so we could start with the wire stringing. The 1st Squad drew security to keep a look out for German patrols.

“It was exhausting work since the frozen ground made driving the stakes a difficult task. The wire line moved in an East to West compass line - steady and silent. As we cleared the second outpost, we were told they had detected movement to our front and we could expect flares along with mortar fire at any time. We were just about out of wire when the first flare lit the sky, followed by the crack of bursting mortar fire. In our fall back, Davis fell into a German foxhole, to be greeted by a dead German, who was frozen hard as a rock. Wainright helped Davis out and then caught up with the rest of the platoon.

“Back on the truck, we counted noses. All accounted for, so we headed back to our billets, where Sgt. Anderson's cook truck had oatmeal, toast and hot coffee. Elmer Dixon told me the 1st Platoon lost two men. Ernie George posted the guards and we crawled into our sacks for some rest. Another day in the life of the 3rd Platoon.” [H.E.]

1/11/45 – Russell wrote, “Hi Sweetheart, It's been pretty cold here all day long and of course the night before [when] I was on guard. This has been the coldest day we have had since winter began. Boy, I sure wish I had my earmuffs. This wool knit cap we have, I don't like to wear. Yesterday we put up some drift fence along the road to the front. In some places, the snow was pretty deep. Now let's change the subject to more pleasant things.

“You mean to say you got all those candy bars for me? Gosh, two dollars' worth. That's about 40 bars. That is if you paid a nickel a piece for them.” [R.W.]

The next major obstacle for the American Army was the Roer River. In early February, Company C was back with the 29th Infantry, preparing for the river crossing. The Germans had built two great dams on the Roer; their plan was to wait until the crossing started and then blow the dams. This would release a wall of water, which would flood the area and sweep Allied troops, bridges and everything else before it. If the Germans handled it right, the Americans would be held up for weeks, giving the Germans precious time to organize their defense. The best place to cross the Roer was at the city of Julich. The Americans knew this, but so did the Germans. And the Germans were ready for them.

The Germans blew the dams on February 9th. They expected that this would hold up the Americans for over a month. The engineers (of course) were to lead the way, since the infantry needed not only bridges to cross the river, but also bridges to cross the hundreds of feet of flooded land. The American engineers promised the generals that they could start building the bridges by February 22. So instead of mid-March, the attack was scheduled for February 23rd.

The engineers' mission was a tough one. The crossing area was heavily fortified and defended. Fifteen bridges were built under tremendous enemy fire from mortars, small arms and artillery. During the building of the bridges, raging flood waters smashed their work, time after time. One bridge was rebuilt nine times. Then once bridgeheads were established, the engineers cleared thousands of mines and miles of obstacles so that the Americans could advance.

On February 16, 1945, Russell had time to write a letter, and he wrote, "Germany – Hey Pal, How's my wonderful one this grand day? The sun is shining for all its worth and it's really like spring out. We could use a few more days like this for some time to come, but this Germany has a curse over it. As far as I'm concerned, the sooner I get out of this place the better. I don't get this about you not hearing from me for a month. [Maybe] they were lost." [R.W.]

At nightfall on February 21, the engineers started. The plan called for a squad from Company C to clear the road leading to the site where Company B would build a bridge, and fill a bomb crater in the middle of the road. Another squad would stretch a life line across the Roer River. Then Company B would build the bridge. This had to be done by 3:30 the morning of the 22nd. It had to be completed before the infantry (under cover of a massive artillery barrage) could cross the river.

A group of 10 men from Company B never reached the river. They got to within 200 feet of the river, when they encountered a mine field. All but one man was wounded. The bridge could not even be started until the mine field was cleared. The 1st platoon of Company C was ordered to clear the mines from the road leading to the river. Mine detectors were no good, since the Germans were now using wooden and plastic mines. So in the dark, under small arms fire and heavy Artillery bursts, the 1st platoon crawled on their hands and knees probing the road and its shoulders with their bayonets.

Hours later, they were still 300 yards from the river, and it was beginning to get light. Snipers started firing, rockets and mortar shells started dropping. There was no shelter. The platoon was finally forced to withdraw. All day long they tried to reach the river, getting forced back each time. Then, the 1st platoon's platoon leader became wounded. First platoon was relieved and 2nd platoon got the job. Their platoon leader tried new tactics. The 2nd platoon went down one at a time, with most of them making it to the river where there was some cover.

By nightfall all of Company C had made it to the river. Under cover of darkness, boats and other equipment were hauled to the bridge site. All night long they worked, while listening to the cries for help from wounded GIs lying in the middle of the mine field with their legs blown off from mines. By morning the bridge was ready for construction and by 11:00 it was done.

A rescue party of 6 engineers volunteered to cross the mine field on the far shore of the river and bring out the wounded who had been there for over 36 hours. They saved one man before a member of the rescue party stepped on a mine, losing his legs. The rescue attempt had to be temporarily postponed.

The 246th Combat Engineers and their accomplishments at Julich during the Roer River crossing were even featured in a Life magazine pictorial article (May 1, 1945).

A Presidential Unit Citation was given to the 246th Combat Engineers for their "outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy during the period 23 February 1945 to 25 February 1945" during the Roer River crossing at Julich. To quote from the Presidential Citation:

"At H-hour minus 45 minutes [the 246th] began the assault.... Unpredictable problems such as removal of underwater obstacles and fighting as infantry to reduce enemy strong points, did not impede the progress of the 246th troops assigned to clear the mine infested far shore. This aggressive action on the part of the clearing details enabled the remainder of the battalion to begin actual construction.... Fanatic enemy resistance, which brought the casualty total since D-day to 35 percent... failed to dim the fighting spirit of the men, nor did the additional difficulties of the flood waters loosed from the huge Schwammanuel Dam by enemy demolition.

“Subject to incessant dive bombing, strafing, directly observed artillery, mortar and small arms fire, the working parties continued their mission despite the withdrawal and replacement of casualties and key personnel, which was accomplished smoothly only as a result of previous weeks of intensive planning in minute detail and thorough training of every man in an alternate duty.

“Outstanding examples of individual heroism were numerous as the battalion continued its progress, opening the first footbridge fifty minutes after construction began. From this time on, successive completion of all assigned bridges fed a continuous flow of ever increasing traffic across the flood swollen river and into the bitterly defended bridgehead.

“The 246th Engineer Combat Battalion completed its extremely difficult mission only after meeting and mastering several seemingly impossible problems with which they were confronted. This final accomplishment of their assigned mission enabled the 29th Infantry Division to drive forward and crush enemy resistance which began the famous breakthrough of the 9th Army to the Rhine River.”

Herman wrote, “February 1945 was a devastating month for the 246th as we were destroying the finest military machine in the world. We were part of the 12th Army Group, which was the largest and most powerful in the Allied force. We pushed the Germans day and night. The dead were all over and we were taking thousands of POWs daily.

“Our losses on the Roer River crossing were heavy. All the company commanders except for ‘C’ Company were lost. My small corner of this madness, the 3rd Platoon, lost 5 men. Bill Lincoln and John Margaretis were originals, while the other 3 were replacements without faces or names in my memory. No words can describe the hurt as Bob Bedell wheeled the squad truck over our treadway bridge, where so many of our men died.”

For 2 days, Company C cleared the streets of Julich. They worked day and night clearing road blocks and filling bomb craters. They began the task of opening and repairing its streets for the heavy traffic moving toward the Rhine. After five days and nights of continuous labor, Company C moved to the city of Munchen-Gladbach [currently named Mönchengladbach, Germany].

2/29/44 – “My Sunshine Pal, I’m fine as could be expected. I hope you are fine and well. Sorry to hear that you are not eating too well. One has to eat to live. It’s been another cold day outside, of course if one gets into the timber and does some exercise, one can keep pretty warm. Another clear night with a full moon, and no one to look at it with.

“We have about a quarter of a mile to walk for our chow, so they better feed us good when we get there. This crisp air, along with pine trees all around, sure makes a hunger and that’s no fooling.” [R.W.]

Herman wrote, “Once more we dogged the 2nd Armored Division [nicknamed ‘Hell on Wheels’] through the smoking ruins of German cities, where white flags were everywhere. [In] one city, our P-47s [fighter planes] had hit a hospital across the road from where the SS [fanatical troops, the Nazi elite, self-proclaimed members of the master race] had fired anti-tank rockets at our tanks. Two of our tanks were burning, while all the buildings were blown to rubble causing heavy civilian losses.

“When our battalion rolled into Munchen-Gladbach, we received a well-earned five days’ rest. The 29th Division had cleared the city without damage. The city had not been bombed, being of no military value. Here was a place of refuge for thousands of women and children from the terrible destruction of Berlin. The city was full of refugees from Berlin. This was a city

of great history, tall buildings and wide streets, where even Caesar brought his legions to winter. Now the American Army was the conqueror.

“Munchen-Gladbach was really an Eden for tired soldiers. The spa [with its] hot baths were favorites of peacetime Germans. The only duties we had were guard and city patrols.

“When the 3rd Platoon caught up with ‘C’ Company, the company was billeted in a farm complex. Sgt. Anderson’s cook truck was set up, giving us a hot meal and some comforts. Sitting on our helmets while polishing off C rations, Bob Bedell and I spoke of home, Owosso, Michigan. So ended another day in the 3rd Platoon.

“The billet of the 3rd Platoon was a tourist hotel with all the posh accommodations. [It had] all kinds of eats and booze. The revelry lasted all night. To your Dad, this was iniquity. [But] we had the guns, so we made the laws.

“After posting guards, we went to sleep on featherbeds right beside a warm cook stove. [The next day] Miller and I had a room with the balcony overlooking the garden. Your Dad and Davis [had] pallets on the floor [and kept their featherbeds] near the cook stove. We spent two days sleeping and eating. There was a bar on the ground floor, which Henry Marks opened up. Max Nimphe was the bar tender, with Ernie George grilling sausages. Ernie cooked sausage and eggs for every meal. What a far cry from the mud holes of Normandy!

“[While we were there at the hotel,] our drunken medic set fire to the barn. It burned all night. That medic must have been the oldest GI in the army. He drank medical alky all the time. We got him after our original medic was killed in France in June 1944.

“The 3rd Platoon began its occupation duty with guard duty. I got word to go to the CP [command post] for orders. Lt. Golden said to take a couple of men to put in a section of treadway [a type of temporary bridge] over a canal for Corps. The treadway truck was waiting, so the job was finished in an hour. On its completion, over the bridge came a lot of Germans with hands up. They wanted to quit their army and become American POWs. The jeep was too small for them, so I borrowed a treadway truck and hauled them to the CP, just in time for sausage à la George. Stopa found out the POWs had not had any supplies in over a month. We gave them some K rations and shipped them to Corps for processing.” [H.E.]

“We had quite a week there in that tourist hotel. There were three school teachers in the next building, who spent a lot of time with us. They were well turned and educated. They spoke excellent English and tried to impress us as political liberals. As I remember it, the phrase was ‘nicht Nazi’ [‘not Nazi’]. Your Dad never cracked a smile, when he said, ‘How could you not be a Nazi and hold a teaching position?’ The teachers’ homes and families had been destroyed by our B-17s [the Flying Fortress - bomber]. No matter how long we talked, they could not understand how farm boys from Michigan could beat their professional armies.” [H.E.]

The 246th stayed in Munchen-Gladbach while the American Army resupplied for the next major push. Herman wrote, “It took about a week to resupply 4 million men. Our things came from [the port city of] Antwerp, Belgium, thousands of trucks. The 2nd Armored had 4,000 tanks. It was with great reluctance that we renewed our war.”

Central Europe

March 4, 1945, Company C received 17 replacements for the men lost at the Roer. The new recruits were mostly infantrymen. Trained engineers were becoming harder to find. Company C continued to clear and repair roads for the American push towards Berlin. The American tanks were pushing hard and moving fast, often bypassing enemy strongholds. Because of this, Company C moved mainly at night to avoid attack. Often, they would find

themselves in a German town after dark, without knowing whether enemy troops were gone, or still there.

Company C often found themselves to be the only American troops in the area. Squads that left the main road often came back with a load of enemy prisoners. Many German troops were waiting for the right time to surrender. Enemy soldiers who approached a strong group of Americans were likely to be shot at. A small squad of engineers on a work detail was more likely to think first and accept the surrender.

"After we crossed the Rhine River, G-2 [intelligence] passed the word that Hitler had ordered his SS to kill all of the concentration camp prisoners and to destroy the camps, as he wanted no evidence. We kept up with the 2nd Armored, without let up. The 3rd Platoon liberated a Russian POW camp, but no SS guards. We found uniforms, guns, and some helmets. The camp was well run, for the men ran the State farms. They had shelter and plenty of food from the farms.

"There was a man in my squad who spoke Russian and German. From him, we learned the SS guards panicked when they heard our tanks. They took off, into the endless lines of refugees going to the west, away from the fighting. The camp was clean, with no dead or dying. Life here was a lot better than the Russian army. We later learned that these men were put into boxcars and turned over to the Russians, where they were sent to prison camps or shot. None of this was our choice, as it was part of the Yalta Agreement." [H.E.]

By Russian thinking, the POWs were either spies who were released by the Americans so that they could gather information about the Russian Army and their defenses; or traitors who allowed themselves to be captured despite Russian orders to fight to the death, with no surrender. Either way, they could no longer be trusted.

In April, one of Company Cs jobs was to make pre-fabricated bridge parts. They used a large German box factory they had found in the area. The former factory workers were all Russian slave labor. The American Army had released them from their barbed wire prison camp inside the factory gates. The grateful Russians were happy to show the engineers how to run the machinery.

Herman wrote, "In [the Rhine River] crossing, we were losing men and equipment. The compressor trucks made so much noise that the artillery could zero in on us easily. One of our men came up with the idea of making a frame for the Squad trucks. They could then set up the compressor trucks back out of range and put the bridge floats on the frames, then send it to the bridge site.

"The 3rd Platoon was given the job of getting the 2x6 lumber. Ernie George found a German sawmill, being worked by Russian POWs. Ernie's squad located trees. Henry Marks' squad provided security, since there were still German soldiers up in the woods. When I explained what we wanted, the German boss said he could not do it without orders. Ernie told him if he did not start up the sawmill, we would blow up all the houses, starting with his. In a matter of minutes the sawmill was running.

"Eugene Davis, our carpenter, laid out the size and got the lumber loaded on the squad trucks. Back in the company area, the 1st Platoon, under the direction of Elmer Davis, built the frames. The idea was a complete success. It saved a lot of lives and equipment.

"Then everything fell apart when Henry Marks' squad found a Russian women's prison camp. The whole 3rd Platoon moved in to liberate the place. [Even] the German women guards were happy to see us, as they were afraid of the POWs. After a few hours, Lt. Golden called us back to do night time perimeter defense." [H.E.]

"We did not get into the women's camp, as Lt. Golden watched us too closely. With resupply, the tanks were on the chase again, with us close behind. We plugged [the German's] supply line and cut all communications. Another day in the life of the 3rd Platoon." [H.E.]

"If the 246th and the 247th had not pushed day and night, Hitler's final order might have been carried out. He ordered all [prison and concentration] camps to be eradicated and prisoners killed. [We had a] terrible task, but we did the job. The roads were plugged with released people going west. We kept on a course heading east to Berlin, ending up on a hill over the Elbe River. Your Dad and I watched 90,000 German POWs going west to POW camps on the Rhine River. Even then, 19th Corps did not let up on us. We still had a lot to do. That same day, May 7th 1945, we were ordered up into the Hartz Mountains to hunt for SS hold outs." [H.E.]

The 246th liberated many prison and concentration camps where people lived in horrifying conditions and were forced to work as slave labor for the Germans. Of course, the most shocking camps were the death camps, with their living dead.

"Terry, did your Dad ever talk to you about any of this? [All of] this hit your Dad pretty bad, but he never bugged out on me. The SS were histories worse example of humanity, but they were not stupid. They did not die like the Japs, but melted away with the millions of DPs [displaced persons, refugees, forced laborers] to the West. They got rid of their tunics and joined the long endless lines of DPs. We had the guns, so we were the law; and it was our job to get the SS. But! We wanted the first boat Home!" [H.E.]

Later, while getting ready to build a bridge over a river, the American army found an abandoned German Tiger tank trapped on the American side of the river. The Germans, as they retreated, had destroyed the only bridge in the area, leaving the German tank on the wrong side of the river. The streets in the little village were so narrow that the tank was stuck like a cork in a bottle. Company C had to move the tank since it blocked the road.

The American tanks were in a hurry to get to Berlin. They were racing to get to the Elbe River, which was the last significant German defense line between them and Berlin. The engineers once again had to lead the way. At one canal, the tanks were lined up for miles waiting for Company C to finish building a bridge. Even though the bridge was going up in record time, the tanks couldn't wait. The column of tanks started across the bridge before it was finished on the other end. The engineers at the far end were literally throwing shovels full of dirt under the treads of the tanks as they left the bridge.

The 2nd Armored Division won the race to the Elbe, reaching and crossing the river on April 11, 1945. Unfortunately, the bridge at that point had been blown by the Germans, so they could not cross "in force" with their tanks. Due to heavy German resistance and huge casualties, the engineers attached to the 2nd Armored could not build a bridge, even after several attempts. So on April 14, the 2nd Armored abandoned the bridgehead and decided to try again farther south to help the XIX Corps with their crossing.

In the meantime, the XIX Corps of the 9th Army had reached the Elbe on April 13 and were preparing to cross. As part of the XIX Corps, the engineers of Company C got to the Elbe River on Sunday April 15, 1945, just before the 2nd Armored Division. Company C found that there was not enough material to bridge the Elbe. So on Monday the 16th, they quickly sent trucks back to the previous river. There, they disassembled the bridge on that river and transported it back to the Elbe. As they built the bridge, the rest of the Army prepared for their last offensive. Berlin was less than 50 miles away, with a clear highway in front of them. The Elbe crossing was planned for Thursday morning, the 19th.

At officer's call Monday evening, they were told there was nothing between them and Berlin but a few scattered home defense units, which consisted of old men and young boys. All the effective German troops had been withdrawn to defend Berlin from the east and the oncoming Russians. The German Government desperately wanted the Americans to take Berlin. They knew the Russians and did not want to become part of Stalin's Communist Empire.

On April 17, Tuesday night, the officers were called to another meeting. At this meeting, they were told that it was all over, this was as far as they could go. In February, the leaders of the three great Allied powers, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin had met in the city of Yalta to make plans for post-war Europe. An agreement was written (the Yalta Agreement) and signed by all three leaders. In the agreement, all of Europe east of the Elbe River was given to the Russians. The American Army was forbidden to cross the Elbe. So, the American Army had to sit and wait for the Russians troops, who reached the Elbe on April 25th.

On April 29, 1945, Company C moved to the city of Goslar. The entire 1104 Engineering Group was there. Their job was to repair the large and much bombed military airport outside of the city. The 246th spent a week in Goslar, repairing many huge buildings for the use of American troops.

Then, on to building a large timber bridge to replace one destroyed by the enemy over a major highway. On May 7th, while working on the bridge, Company C sent out three work parties, two of them to locate timber needed for the job and one to the giant Herman Goering steel mill. Their mission at the steel mill was to take steel "I" beams and cut them into proper lengths for the bridge.

After a couple of hours practice, the engineers had part of the Herman Goering steel mill back in operation, this time for the Americans. Company C soldiers were moving steel beams with giant cranes, and running huge shearing machines and giant drill presses. As they were doing this work, a messenger came into the mill. "The war in Germany is over. Suspend all operations and report back to camp."

V-E Day and After

From Herman, "May 7th 1945 - This was the day the war ended in Europe - the 3rd Platoon was dug in on top of a hill overlooking the Elbe River, where the 2nd Armored made two crossings during the night of the 6th of May. We had moved into these holes during the night. We had two .30 caliber and two .50 caliber machine guns. Your Dad and Davis had one .50 caliber and the bazooka.

"It was a long, wet and noisy night. [The American Army only] had four divisions on line. The Russians had 240 first line units, 4,000 artillery pieces, with the German Army in between. The Germans were so close the Russians were shelling their own men. It was utter devastation, until Eisenhower issued an ultimatum to the Germans: 'Stop fighting or I'll close the front to prisoners.'" [H.E.]

"The night before the war in Europe ended, the 3rd Platoon dug in on a hill overlooking the Elbe River, 40 miles from Berlin. The Germans were making a last stand and we were taking a lot of shelling. When your Dad woke me he said, 'Do you hear that?' Silence - no guns! Then Bob Bedell came up the hill and told me the war is over and that Lt. Golden wanted me at the C.P. [Command Post]." {H.E.]

On May 8, 1945, V-E (Victory in Europe) Day, the war in Europe was officially over! By V-E Day, the 246th had been overseas eighteen months, fourteen of them in combat. They were seldom safe from enemy fire of one kind or another. A bath or a shower was a rarity.

By the end of the war, the battalion had captured too many German prisoners to count. Their casualty rate since D-Day was nearly 40 percent. They had landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day during the Normandy invasion, and now they had crossed the Elbe River. They went farther than any other American combat unit in Europe, with the exception of a recon platoon from the 3rd Armored, which had crossed the Elbe a few miles upstream and were the first to link up with the Russians.

Herman wrote, "All the Germans wanted to flee the Russians and become U.S. POWs. The Germans knew what it meant to be Russian POWs, so they quit. That A.M. [May 8th], your Dad and I stood on that hill and watched 50,000 Germans heading West. I saw a line of men, shoulder to shoulder, fifty men wide and 10 miles long, heading west to barbed wire camps. These men had lost everything. Their cities were rubble, their families dead or missing. We had no food or water to give them. All of the wounded men just died on the way to POW camps."

In early May, the 246th and the 247th were involved with the rescue of the famed Lipizzaner horses. General Patton and the 3rd Army got the job to rescue them. "The horses were trapped in Czechoslovakia and the Russians were heading for them. General Patton sent units through the Russian lines and picked up all of the horses and their trainers. [The 246th and 247th] got the job to help protect their flanks [on their return trip]. It was rough for us, because we did not have any support weapons except for the 3 light tanks with 37 mm guns who rode with us. We did not spend any time in Czechoslovakia at all; we just sneaked in and out in one day. The 246th and the 247th had only 9 squads each and they kept us busy. That was a doozy!" [H.E.]

"After the war [in Europe ended] in May 1945, the village of Buedingen, Germany was our 2nd stop; our 1st stop took us too far east, where we ended up in Russian territory. When we moved here (to Buedingen), we put up signs in English, German and Russian – 'Keep out - Russian Zone'. This was a garrison city - old time, regular army. We had a wild 2 days. Your Dad and Davis had a room where the CQ [Charge of Quarters, the person who handles administrative matters after duty hours] lived; they did not enter into any of the festivities. The garrison troops [who formerly had been in Buedingen] had been sent to Berlin, to stem the Russian onslaught and were lost forever." [H.E.]

A few days after they reached the Elbe, members of the 246th were sent into the Hartz Mountains to hunt "werewolves". Throughout Germany, there were rumors that units of SS, calling themselves "Werewolves", were gathering troops to continue the war. The "werewolves" were to fight in commando units, or as guerillas. No "werewolves" were ever found. It appears that they were only a rumor.

In mid-May 1945, the 246th moved to an area near Kassel and began the process of redeployment. Now that the European war was over, the American military command had to decide what to do with the millions of soldiers now in Europe.

A process called "Adjusted Service Rating" (ARS) determined each soldier's fate. The soldier just called ARS "the Point System". Soldiers received points based upon different aspects of their military experience. A soldier received a certain number of points for: months in the army (one per month); months overseas (one per month); combat medals earned, including battle participation stars (five points each); and number of dependent children (12 per child). The soldiers with the most total points were the first to go home (the original cutoff was 85 points).

Newly arrived units were being immediately redirected and were being shipped directly to the Pacific, by way of the Panama Canal. The war with Japan was still going on. Millions of

American soldiers would be needed in the Pacific. It would be their job to fight the battles leading up to the expected invasion of Japan, followed by the actual invasion and fight for the Japanese Homeland.

Soldiers who did not have enough points to go home would either become occupation troops and be deployed throughout Europe in the American Zone; or be reorganized, trained and reequipped before being shipped to the Pacific. With either outcome, it would take time to process and transport the vast number of soldiers still in Europe. With no battles to fight, the Army's mission was again to keep the troops occupied and out of trouble.

My Dad (who finished the war with 78 points) told me that if it hadn't been for his Purple Heart (which was 5 big points), he would have been sent to the Pacific to fight against Japan. He and nearly every other combat soldier believed that being sent to invade and conquer Japan was the equivalent of a death sentence. After surviving the war in Europe, they could not imagine surviving another war, especially against the fanatical Japanese.

There is no glory in war. Herman, who had seen the results of war in Europe, the deaths, devastation, suffering, and ruined lives, and the total destruction of cities, wrote: "When we dropped that atom bomb, we saved 5 million Japanese lives and the complete destruction of their major cities. Today there would be no Japan. During the Korean War, Japan helped us with their manufacturing skills. They supported our medical teams with hospitals. I saw Japanese Royal Marines working in the engine rooms of our LSTs. [In WWII], our Navy was over extended. Anyone that says otherwise is insane!" [H.E.]

On May 20, 1945, Russell wrote, "Darling, Sure was a mud hole here in the woods when I got back from a little vacation, and it's still pretty chilly here. Twenty-four of us left Sunday noon for a rest center – some 200 miles one way. It was pretty hard on one's seat all that ways. And our officers, trying to get us there early, took one of those short cuts which proved costly in time.

"The road at one time was a class 'A' road, but after the Germans made that push back into Belgium and got pushed back again, it left the road in pretty poor shape. And of course it had to rain most of the ways. Yes, we had a canvas over us so we kept dry. Oh yes, we got lost a few times, so that when we got to the rest center we had covered 280 miles, getting there around two o'clock in the morning. And no beds for us, so what did we do but laid out our bedrolls on the floor and went to sleep. That was at Spa, Belgium. [Spa is a world famous resort town of less than 10,000 people, known since Roman times for its mineral springs. This town is the original Spa and the origin of our word "spa"].

"Our passes start at 12 noon for three whole days of nothing to do but sleep, if one cared. But I'm not sleepy. Breakfast was from eight until ten, served by some nice waitresses, at least they looked nice. The food didn't cost you anything, but you could tip the waitress, if you wanted to. Just about everything was free to the GI, but the employees looked for tips. Haircuts, shaves, shoe shines, free but tips. Dinner was from 12 to two.

"Movies at the Casino at two o'clock, a new one each day. [The Casino at Spa was built in 1763 and is the oldest in the world.] From there, we go to the Zebra Bar, which is still in the same building. They serve you beer or coke with entertainment for two hours, from 3:30 till 5:30, and is very good. It's all Belgium entertainment, no tips there. We ate supper around 5:00 to 6:00, so we could make the stage show at seven o'clock.

"We ate all our meals at the Laeken Hotels. I didn't tell you which hotel I slept in, did I? Well it was Hotel Du Centre, which looks to me like it was a whorehouse at one time. Oh yes, Spa at one time was second to Monte Carlo for gambling.

“Now to get back to the Casino for the stage show, taking place at the theater, though still in the Casino. Yes, this Casino place is a pretty large place. We have 1 hour and 15 minutes of songs, band music, and entertainment, from one of the leading bands of Brussels, and most all speak and sing English. The entertainment is very good.

“After the stage show, there is a big dance going on at the Trocadero, and that also is in the Casino and that also is a very large Night Club, with a Belgium band and American music, and English speaking singers, and plenty of girls and beers and cokes.

“Did I dance? Sorry to say, but I didn’t. I just sat, drank cokes, and once in a while a beer, and watch the girls and boys dance. For after all, my best girl didn’t show up, darn. It was quite short notice anyway, so I doubt if she could have made it. And it’s quite a jump to the place where she lives. You know I was thinking of you. More so the first night [when] I slept between two sheets and didn’t have to sleep in my clothes.

“Getting back to the Trocadero, they dance until 10:15 when there is a floor show for a half hour of dancing girls, singing and entertainment, which also is very good. All Belgian except the last night, when they had some girls from Holland. Dancing is continued at 10:45 till 12 midnight, when we all return to our hotels and everyone had to be off the streets by one o’clock.

“Thursday morning, we had to be out of our rooms by 9:30. That was our last day there. Ten o’clock that morning, we left Spa and went through Germany into Holland. We were slowed, [so we had to] over stay somewhere between Spa and camp, so we stopped over at Spekholzerheide. We were stationed there for almost two months and that’s [where that] brickyard or factory is I wrote about back in November during Thanksgiving time. We were on the line at Aachen in October and from there back to Holland for a rest. Most all the boys got acquainted with all the families there. We went around to see some of those families, who most of us hadn’t seen for eight months. They were sure glad to see the boys from the 246th Engineers, and of course we got bedding for the night. We left about eight o’clock Friday morning, driving across the Roer River at Julich, this time without a hard time of it like we did in February.

“Before we got to the Rhine River, our truck had three flats and one after we crossed the Rhine. We got back to camp at six. What a trip. But we did see Frankfurt and Cologne, and what a mess, and I know that Berlin is even worse.

“In my heart and mind, you are in the limelight all the time. I guess that’s what keeps me a good boy. Aren’t I the lucky one, to have a girl with such power over men! Before I left on my pass, I sent that box with some of my personal belongings, which I won’t be needing now. Don’t let that alarm you, because I am just trying to lighten my bag, so that if we go home first, I won’t have too much weight to carry. After we turn our truck in, everything will have to be carried on the back. Monday, we will all go back to school for more learning. I’m told I was to go for map reading and driver school.

Russ explains why he is now writing on both sides of the paper, “Now we can seal our own envelopes. But there are still things we can’t talk about. But most of those things they don’t tell us about anyway, so there is nothing to tell. We can tell where we are located, but I really don’t know myself. I do know we are about 50 miles from Frankfurt and near Giessen.

“It’s been around two hours that I’ve been on this letter, off and on [between] carrying wood for our fire and eating a K-ration. We ate dinner at 10:30 for the boys at camp. The rest of them were out working and the cooks took hot meals out to them, some 25 or 30 miles from

here. Me, I stayed in to rest up from my vacation and to clean machine guns, which were in very bad shape on account of the rain.

“We have around 30 some odd boys leaving from our battalion, for discharge. That’s not very many, out of 1000, is it? Charlie Turner, you remember the one that was going to hold your hand when we went home on furlough? Well, he’s one of them. Just got 85 points, course he has two kids. He came to me last night and wanted my home address. I wonder if I did right? He said when he comes around to see you, he will bring his wife along.” [R.W.]

Herman wrote, “[Your Dad and I] were in combat for 11 months, without any relief. When we finished a bridge and secured it, another outfit would come up and run it. The Army calls it ‘duties of Administrative responsibility’. Bob Bedell and I drove back to one of those bridges and those men had everything but a swimming pool. Some of those places were engineer equipment dumps - - Millions of dollars in bulldozers, cranes, trucks and all types of equipment. Bob had hit a mine with the 1st Squad truck, so we need a replacement. Bob was OK after they took a piece of shell fragment out of his eye.”

On June 1, 1945, Russ wrote, “Sunshine, Now that we can write on both sides of the paper, my paper will last that much longer. Of course I could write on both sides before, only if the censor wanted to cut out something, it would spoil the rest of the letter on the other side. It isn’t very often that we get out of the woods – to get into the sunshine, and it’s pretty damp and chilly in here.

The Colonel says that as long as we don’t get any more to eat than we’ve been getting, we can’t work. And that’s true, because on V-E Day all the ships that were bringing food over to us, turned around and went back or to the CBI. So of course we are short of food now. Boy, I know I feel it, because I get hungry long before chow time. But I’m going to ask you not to send me any more packages and let those that you have sent catch up with me. By that time I will either be on my way home or -----.

China-Burma-India Theater (CBI) – The war in Japan was still raging. Now that the European phase was over, the U.S. plan was to transfer the European troops to the Pacific. The U.S. Navy would continue to push from the sea. Ground troops in the form of the American Army would fight their way from Burma, across China and invade Japan from the west.

“I didn’t do any writing last night. I worked pretty hard down at the motor pool, working on a truck. But I did go to a show in town last night. I believe I told you the town where I am located, Gedern [a small town near Frankfort am Main, close to Bad Nauheim]. The picture was pretty crazy, but some of it was pretty good. It had a bunch of girls in it, with Frances Langford playing the leading role. Oh you wish to know the name of the picture?” [R.W.]

Russ then follows, with almost 3 full pages of teasing and tantalizing Dora, playfully trying to make her guess the name of the movie. The name was “Girl Rush”- a western, comedy, musical released in 1944, starring Langford. Langford was a very popular singer, especially with the GIs. She was a regular on many radio and TV shows, and acted and sang in nearly 40 movies. She traveled and performed with the Bob Hope USO show entertaining the troops all over the world from 1941 to 1989 (in the Persian Gulf War). Her signature song was “I’m in the Mood for Love”.

“There was no movie tonight, since we are having an inspection tomorrow morning. It will be in ranks, with rifle and full uniform. I got my rifle clean, but I don’t know what they expect from us as far as our clothing. I don’t know many men who can produce a class outfit. I’m going to wear what I have on and call it good. I should shave [tonight], but maybe I’ll have

time in the morning, I hope. I don't see where we'll be getting any passes, so I'm not worried about that part. But there are other things that are more important. And that is to get things over to the CBI as fast as possible. The sooner they finish up Japan, the quicker I can, and thousands of others can, go home to stay." [R.W.]

6/15/45 – "I just got back from a movie. Yes it as a swell movie – 'His Brother's Sister' [a 1943 musical/romantic comedy starring Deanna Durbin]. Everyone seemed to be a little more cheerful today [since] we had sunshine almost all day. Last night Mike and I went hunting for onions. We found them, but we got pretty wet doing it. We got enough to last us a few days and they sure taste good. The only thing, I didn't have any salt to dip them in. We must have walked about two or three miles cross country before we ran across what we wanted. Just try walking in hay fields and such, after and while it's been raining.

"This morning, the whole company went down by our water point, where they have fixed up some ball diamonds and sort of an athletic field. We all had to try out for various things to find out who is good for a field meet that will take place next weekend. In the afternoon, the second platoon challenged the third platoon to a game of soccer. I didn't play. I got a bad crack in my left foot and I got to baby it along." [R.W.]

6/23/45 – "Darling sweetheart, As I set here, out under the tall trees, thinking of you and home, I'm wondering; how are you; what are you doing; what can I do to help this far away. It's been another one of those hot days, with an almost clear sky all day long and the sun is shining bright. An order just came up to get ready to go fetch a load of lumber, so I'm just waiting for our squad leader.

"It's now 10:30 and I'm going to try to finish this letter before lights out at 11:00. We got our lumber alright. When was it ever such warm work? I lost my helmet liner on the way over. The roads were dusty and I was dusty and all wet from sweat. I walked back after we got back, because we over ran the spot where it flew off my head.

"I'm leaving in the morning somewhere around 8:00 on a work assignment in or near Bad Nauheim. It seems that the lumber we got tonight is for floors for hospital tents and I was picked from the platoon to help out. Just one other fellow besides myself, will go. The second platoon will finish the rest of the work. It'll sure be a good thing for us for we are to take things along with us to last a week. That will be bedrolls, underclothes, socks and shaving things. Oh yes, writing paper and pens. In between words, I'm eating cold pancakes and cherry jam. I'm just eating on the fly.

"It doesn't look like I'll be home for some time. I hate to have to say this, but you've got to know sometime, so it might just as well be now than later. I missed out going to the show tonight and I see the boys are just getting back. Yesterday I saw 'Rhapsody in Blue' [a musical biography – the story of George Gershwin. It was released on September 22, 1945; three months after the troops saw it in Germany]. Boy that was a long picture [135 minutes], but it was very good, I thought." [R.W.]

6/25/45 – "It rained over at Bad Nauheim for about a half hour, but not very hard. That job of ours came out just fine and boy we really worked. We had to have that dance floor built and ready by eight o'clock. It was ready and were we ever tired. It was for the 150th Evac. Hospital at Bad Nauheim. They are out in a field, in a woods, but [the floor] was on a hillside, so to make it level, one corner had to rest on the ground while the other side was up in the air about four feet. We sure had a time convincing those nurses and doctors that it was level, because it sure didn't look level to us even though it was level. Anyway, we did a good job of it.

We took showers at that outfit [150th Evac.], but there wasn't any one of us had any soap with us. So we bummed some off the nurses. They were alright for they were all American nurses. We took good hot showers and then we were all invited to attend [a party] in the enlisted men's recreation tent, where we could get all the drinks we wanted. Whoa, was that ever powerful stuff. I had about ¾ of an inch in my canteen cup, with addition of sweet cider which made me about half a cup. Did I feel it, and how. Sure glad I didn't take more, for the other boys were really in a bad way. I couldn't make my eyes see straight, but I knew what I was doing." [R.W.]

Bad Nauheim is a world famous resort town in Germany known for its salt springs. Hitler had a secret command complex (the Eagle's Nest) in the nearby mountains. General Patton's headquarters were in Bad Nauheim at the time of his death in 1945. Russ brought home several German postcards of Bad Nauheim.

"Today the whole second platoon went back to build floors in about sixteen tents which I imagine was for the officers, but they wouldn't take me this time. Boy it would have been good to get out of these woods. I was sitting here breaking wind and it got so I couldn't stand my own smell, so I just had to leave.

"Today was the final day of our little track meet between our three Companies. Bet you can't guess who won the meet? That's right, we did win, by about 20 points. Our CO [Commanding Officer] told us no matter what the rest of the company did, it would be a free day for us. Some of the boys already have taken off for Frankfurt, and some for showers and a swim [at the Bad Nauheim baths]. Me, I don't know what I'll do tomorrow, maybe go to Bad Nauheim, and then I can get back in time for guard.

"I got quite a kick out of reading your letters over again. A few lines I just had to read out loud to my friend Mike, here across the table from me. He is also writing to his wife and he says his wife is writing about the same things as you do. I know my wife is pretty swell and I [don't care] what she says, as long as it makes me happy, your every word makes me happy. By you talking about strawberries being ripe makes me hungry for some good old strawberry shortcake and whipped cream. But let's stop talking about that. I just can't stand it. I'd like to help you with this garden of ours, only it might be full of weeds before I get to it. Maybe our love will keep it clean."

6/29/45 – "Morning Darling, The top of the morning to you my sweet. What's cooking this morning? Now don't tell me chicken. You want a neck? I played lazy this morning and didn't get up until nine o'clock. Of course I missed breakfast, but that wasn't much – French toast and cereal without sugar, ain't that something? After getting up, I took my mess kit and put some water in it, put it on some red hot coals, broke two eggs into the water and added salt. That with a half slice of bread was my breakfast. The eggs I had picked up the night before. [Fresh eggs were rare and a delicacy after months of having only powdered eggs.]

"We now have six man tents to stay in, and don't have to stay in our pup tents. I got a message over the phone this morning that Lyle [his cousin] wanted to meet me in Frankfurt somewhere around six or six thirty. But since some of the boys got caught in those whorehouses over there, the truck has not been going any place. So I don't know yet how I'll make it, unless the CO digs up a jeep somewhere. I'm to find out in an hour from now.

"Those men who were picked to transfer out, it got called off. There was no place for them to go. I can't see why they have to break up this outfit. I know that at one time this whole outfit was to go home and all they were waiting for was the date the boat was to dock. But

orders were changed shortly after that. Heck – or should I say worse? I won't, but I can think it can't I?" [R.W.]

"We're not doing anything now days. We have a new CO beginning July 1st. Formerly our platoon commander, so we know he's a good egg. I see you got that letter about Charles Turner coming home, well he's still here. So, don't look for him right away. You know, it must be tough knowing that you have enough points to go home for a discharge and can't get there. That hurts. I don't have enough points, so the only thing I have to worry about is the CBI. If only I can get back to the States, I might be able to keep from it." [R.W.]

7/1/45 – "Sweetheart, What do you know? It's the first of July, just three more days and I'll be over here one year. It will be one year ago the 4th of July, we landed in France. Doesn't seem possible, does it? I imagine it seems longer for you, being there alone. Got back from Bad Nauheim yesterday afternoon around two o'clock, after being to Frankfurt Friday to meet Lyle. I caught the pass truck that the second platoon had in town. The second platoon is still working in Bad Nauheim. I slept there that night. Did I see Lyle? No. Either they took the message down wrong at the CP or it got changed coming on down the line.

"I was in Frankfurt at 6:15 and waited around at least an hour. If I only had a pup tent, I could have went out to where they stay, but no dice. As it was, I just walked around looking at the girls as they go by. It still doesn't hurt to look anyway. I got out of Frankfurt about 10:45 and into camp somewhere around 12:00. I'm here back in the woods and it's still raining. I did play some horseshoes this morning with some of the boys. We got beat some of the time, but not every time. Twenty-two men are leaving the Company tomorrow, some to different outfits, so it doesn't look good, does it? I'm not much in the writing mood. I used to be able to write five and six pages, but now when there is nothing to do, it's kind of hard to think." [R.W.]

7/8/45 – "Darling, The second platoon left about eight o'clock to go back to the woods for our stuff, take down tents and move into the new camp. They say that it's a pretty nice place. It's in a house that used to be an old P.O.W. [Prisoner of War] camp. The only thing that ain't so nice is the fact that the whole camp has a ten foot fence around it, plus a barbwire entanglement.

"We're just waiting for a truck to come in and pick us of the third platoon up and take us into camp to pick up clean clothes. That sounds like our truck now, so it may be I'll stop this letter now.... Hang on!

"Here we are again. Was it a rough ride? Now don't tell me you enjoy it? Twelve hours later and I'm ready to settle down and do some writing. You're still hanging on to the line, aren't you? You don't mind this bottle I have sitting beside me, do you? It's only sweet cider. I don't know if it will make me any sweeter or not, but I'm drinking it anyway. That other stuff is pretty rough on a person, and I don't expect it to get the best of me.

"Pretty warm tonight, or should I say evening, for it is still light out and I'm sitting at one end of the tent. The other end, someone is playing at the piano and about four GIs trying their best to sing. In the other corner are about half a dozen hanging on to the bar, and me drinking cider.

"Well we made our trip back to camp. Took us a little over an hour to drive it. Just about a mile from the nearest town, by the name of Wetzler... not such a large town. They say it's pretty well all Nazis, which means they don't like us very well. Who cares, we don't like them either.

"Oh these guys have a pretty good set up. Room! Large enough for two beds, and a large mess hall, and one good thing about it is we have Polish [workers] for KP, and that means a lot to us boys.

“The boys are repairing roads back there. I don’t know how long this job will last, maybe a couple of days and maybe more. This is the kind of work I like, so I wouldn’t mind if we stay here a month or more, but of course I still want to get home someday.” [R.W.]

“What do you know? I went to a circus last night. Yes a real circus and real animals in it. I’ll enclose the program just so you’ll know it’s the real thing. This was in the next town; there were hours of entertainment, all for the sum of free. It was a German circus with different nationals in it and oooh the girls. Careful now, I was just looking. You didn’t mind, did you?”

Enclosed in the envelope was a program, in English, for the Williams-Althoff circus. The Williams-Althoff circus was and still is a world renowned circus. It was the first circus to tour Europe after the war. The world famous animal trainer, Guenter Gebel-Williams, was the adopted son of the owners, and got his start with this circus.

Then my Dad wrote about a photo album and other things he had sent to my Mom, “By the way, guess where I picked up that album? Well that was picked up about the second day after the crossing of the Roer River, in that much leveled town of Julich. There really wasn’t much left after we crossed. We had to clear away the rubble from the streets, for a supply route. Glad you liked that bracelet. It took me a long time to send it, that silver case wasn’t supposed to be sent in that box. I picked that up the first day we hit Germany. That was a hot old place, when we entered just behind the tanks. That card, I picked that up in France.... I picked that up sometime in July of last year when we were building a road. It’s been so long ago that I have forgotten some of those towns.” [R.W.]

7/18/45 – “My Darling, It’s been another grand day as far as the weather is concerned. The day started out with the loss [as in leaving the unit] of nine more men, with two of them sergeants – one my squad leader.

“Next on the program was moving day for the rest of us. We moved about 30 miles. We moved into houses that have as many as 40 men living in them. Yesterday we finished up our road work in that area. The Army just wants us to keep busy. That’s still better than Combat Infantry. I know you have a lot of questions, but I can’t help you out, because I don’t know any more about what’s coming off than you do.

“Last night I went to the movies. That Anne Baxter – has she got it! Boy, they better get me home soon or I’ll go nuts. Yes, that is possible. I know I’d sure like to break down sometimes. It’s a hard pull, but I am master of myself still. Again until next time, be careful. If you can’t be careful, don’t forget to name it after me. But do be careful, won’t you?” [R.W.]

On July 22, 1945, the soldiers of the 246th found out about the Presidential Unit Citation and Herman wrote, "After we won the Presidential Unit Citation, the 3rd platoon was ordered to a Red Cross party, in a German Beer House. We did not want to be there, but had no choice. We all sat there, while they entertained us. After the festivities, one of the ladies asked me what my job was. Your Dad put his hand in my field jacket pocket and came up with a 1/4 pound block of TNT. He said, ‘I destroy things!’ You should have seen those girls jump! Sgt. George told the ladies, ‘TNT won’t go off without a detonator’. They did not invite us again." [H.E.]

7/23/45 – “Darling, I suppose you think it’s funny I’m writing to you again this day instead of waiting until tomorrow? Well it so happens, that I was just lying on my cot, trying to sleep and someone comes into the room and slaps me on the leg. And me, without looking up, demanded ‘What do you want?’ And what do you think he said? I still can hardly believe what he said. ‘Would you care to go to Paris?’ And I said, ‘Are you kidding?’ But I guess that he wasn’t.

“So now I’m about ready to go, except for writing to you, shaving and changing my clothes. I’ll eat an early chow and be ready to leave at 5:30 this evening. Well, what do you say? Now, I still have other things to do before I leave. So I must leave you. I hope they have mail service where I go. The least I can do is help you out, because I know there [will be] more trying days than before. Loving you as ever I can. Please be with me while I’m away. Loving you for always. Love Russ.” [R.W.]

8/3/45 – “Dearest Darling, Been pretty busy the last few days, riding trains and trucks and now I am settled down for a while to see what is going to happen. It’s been pretty warm here in France and cold at night. Matter of fact, we almost froze, but we thawed out after the sun came up. What might you be doing these days? I expect you to answer when I get there. Now don’t get your hopes too high now, but it does sound good, doesn’t it? I hope it’s true though and this might be it. Cross your fingers and be quiet in case. Course I know they’re crossed all the time. I think you’d better just forget writing any more letters till I give you the go sign.

“Well, I got one good night’s sleep anyway before they transferred me out. This time only five men left out of the company, leaving only 24 men of the old bunch left to be sent out. We left about 5:30 Tuesday evening, but not until we were paid and had a dish of ice cream and then a letter from you to send me off.

“Two trucks left Group with about 30 men in all, with all our equipment, for another ride to Kassel [Germany], then on to Paris again. But this time not for a pass, but to pass on through to another train depot, to catch another train to Eth, France. Trucks then picked us up and took us up to 2992 Replacement.

“Now the 64 dollar question [from a popular radio quiz show of the 40s called “Take It Leave It”, where the grand prize was \$64. In 1955, it became a TV quiz show called “The \$64,000 Question”]. Time will tell, but if everything goes right, I’ll be your birthday present [September 2nd]. How’s that! Hoping to see you soon. Now just be at ease and don’t get all hot and bothered, that’s just an IF. Happy?” [R.W.]

By August 11, 1945, Russ was at the 40th Reinforcement Battalion. Here, there was more waiting, followed by more waiting. A lot of time was spent filling out Army paperwork. Some of the paperwork was getting permission to bring home trophies: a German .32 caliber pistol, a Voigtlander camera and German Hensoldt-Wetzlar military binoculars.

On August 18, 1945, Russell left Europe, on his way home, arriving in America on August 28, 1945. Five days later, on September 2, Japan surrendered. V- J Day, the official end of the war with Japan. The war was finally over.

My Aunt Gus told me what it was like when Dora got the news that her husband was coming home. There was Dora, running down the road – down the center of the road – waving her letter, yelling “He’s coming home! He’s coming home!”

She still didn’t know when he would be home. During the war, her little sister, Gus, frequently stayed overnight with Dora, so she wouldn’t be alone at night. One night, in the middle of the night, Gus and Dora heard a knocking on the window. It was Russ. His train had arrived at the train station in Lansing during the night. He had walked several miles from the train station to East Lansing, carrying his full duffle bag and all his belongings. After being apart for over 20 months, not knowing if they would ever see each other again, they were together. I asked Gus, “I bet you all had a big celebration when he got home that night.” Gus said, “I don’t know. I went home and left them alone.” Russell gave Dora a gift, which he had bought in France, two large bottles of French perfume. Of course, Dora was just glad that he was home.

For Russell and Dora, the wait was still not completely over. The processing of millions of military personnel, along with the handling of millions of tons of military supplies, vehicles, and equipment all takes time. Russ was sent to Camp Grant in Illinois, a huge separation center just south of Rockford, where on October 24, 1945 he was finally discharged from the Army. It took over two months from his arrival in America until discharge.

On May 21, 1945, the XIX Corps honored the 246th Engineers with an official commendation for “the overall excellence of your performance in eleven months of continual combat in four countries, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, [from] the Normandy coast to the Elbe River.”

The commendation also stated: “You have performed every type of combat engineer mission with outstanding efficiency. You have crossed a large number of rivers, breached the Siegfried Line, laid mine fields and removed them, maintained roads, supplied water, fought as infantry both defensively and offensively, cleared the way through bomb destroyed cities.

“You have supported some of the Army’s most famous Divisions and earned their unlimited respect and praise.

“I have never seen a better team spirit than you have developed with the supported divisions. [Your successful] record is based on your ready, aggressive spirit, your ‘can-do’ attitude and your whole-hearted cooperation and mutual respect with other units.”

In August 1945, the commander of the 1104th Engineer Combat Group issued a formal commendation to the 246th Combat Engineers. In the commendation, he stated, in part: “Through eleven months of combat, in continuous support of front line Infantry and Armored Divisions, the 246th Engineer Combat Battalion has met and mastered every engineer and infantry mission conceivable without failure. This remarkable achievement in combat during your numerous difficult accomplishments through five campaigns has earned for you a reputation from actual experience that stands second to none.

“You have suffered severe casualties in many instances while building bridges, assaulting fortified positions, crossing rivers, removing mines, laying mines, fighting as infantry, constructing roads and in the performance of many other duties, but you have always successfully accomplished the operation.

“You may be rightfully proud of the part you have played in the complete destruction and unconditional surrender of the German Army. This was a result of your unswerving loyalty, tactical versatility and adaptability to the most severe Conditions.”

Herman wrote his own commendation 60 years later, in an open letter to the men of Company C:

“To the men of Company C 246th Combat Engineer Battalion, it has been a long time since you landed on the beaches of France. There were a lot of jobs to do, tough, heart rending jobs, important jobs, and all successfully completed.

“From France in July to the heart of Germany in May, it was a long, hard way. All of the boys that landed in France with you didn’t make it all the way. There were many rough days, the hedgerows of France, the Albert canal in Belgium, the Siegfried line, the Heurtgen forest and the Roer River. All were major obstacles and all behind you now. They didn’t stop you, they only slowed you down for a while and then you carried on. There are those of you who will remember all of those obstacles. There are those of you that came in to take the place of some, that won’t remember them all. But, all of you are part of a great team, one of the greatest in the American army.

“They have to praise you for the many things you have done. Just look on the jobs you have accomplished since that day in France; the many hard things you have done; and the great spirit in which you did them. It is enough praise in itself that you have carried out and accomplished every order you have ever received. Can any soldier do more? It is a credit to know that every division that you have worked with has respect in your ability. It is a credit to know that no matter what is in store for you next, you will continue to serve your country --- to the best of your ability.

"Freedom comes at a high cost. It's never cheap. We gave Europe 60 years of peace and freedom. The only time so, in history. We are now so few!"

In another letter, Herman looked back at the war and talked about his friendship with Tech. 4 Elmer Dixon. Herman wrote, “Elmer drew the 1st Platoon and I the third. In America, we got together in the day room, the PX, or the post theatre watching war movies. In the field, we sat on helmets, eating chow. We worked together on bridges and we tore down barracks. We sweated in the desert sun and froze in the winter snow, but we were engineers.

“We endured through Normandy, the long chase through France and in the offensive action in Belgium. We blew the mighty Siegfried line to pieces entering Germany as conquerors. We fought and blew through the bitter winter of 1944. In the Ardennes, we held the German army, while they lost over 100,000 men. Bridging the Roer River, we opened the way into the heart of Germany. Part of each of us stayed with the honored dead. So many were killed or wounded in that battle [at Julich] – never to be forgotten. What a terrible price to pay.

“[At Julich,] Elmer’s platoon was hit the heaviest. There was a new edge to his voice after that. Over the Rhine and to Magdeburg at the Elbe where over 100,000 men surrendered. POW camps were liberated and a work camp with human skeletons. I lost track of Dixon, until 50 years later, when we began writing letters. Last summer, he visited me at a picnic table and we talked away all of those war years.

"Your Dad and I, in those mud holes for 11 months, just cannot be explained to anyone who has not experienced the bitter cold. Sometimes, at night, his bazooka would jab me. When it was his turn at guard, I knew he would not let me down. TRUST, mutual trust. [Your Dad] was the cleanest, God-fearing man, I ever knew." [H.E.]

Ernst wrote, “I was 19 when I went in the Army in 1943. We were so young and considered ourselves indestructible. Korea was different. I was 28 when I was pulled back in. When our troop ship pulled in to Pusan, we were losing. It was a tough war! I was 5 years married, with a 1 year old baby boy. We have [now] been married 59 years. I still don't drink or smoke!

"I spent a year in Korea. We never had a chance to win, because the Chinese could throw half a million at 40,000. We gave them the ground, by falling back, but it cost them a horrible price in men and material. The next day, we went right back to our dug-in positions (with no loss). There were no lateral roads, just north - south, up and down. I went back as a private, but they gave me corporal stripes and responsibilities, which I always detested." [H.E.]

"The last time I saw your Dad was in August 1951, after I returned from Korea. He asked me why I went and I could not tell him. It was so cold and desolate. The North Koreans had the best tanks in the world, while we had none. It was our field artillery and our air power that saved us. They bought us time! There was a South African unit that flew our P-51s, who flew low level hits. They were crack aces. Every place you looked there were wrecked tanks. There were 50,000 reserves there. MacArthur needed GIs he didn't need to train. There were a million Chinese and 100,000 GIs. We took so many POWs that we had to pen them up on an

island. The casualty rate for the Commies' side was atrocious. There is no glory in war, but one second under fire, you live more than 100 years of so-so life." [H.E.]

War linked men for life by their shared experience. War turned a stranger into someone closer than a brother. Herman sent me a copy of a letter that he received sixty years after the war had ended. It was written by a member of their squad, but Herman did not give his name. In many ways, it was also Herman's story. It's the story and feelings of many veterans, especially combat veterans:

"YES - Did I sleep in wet, bug infested foxholes, when it rained for 45 straight days in France? Yes! Was I in the middle of an American Air raid mistakenly directed on American troops at St. Lo, France? Yes! Was I scared to death? Yes! Will I ever be the same man that left America in 1943 to Fight for God and his country? No!

"Movies and books only suggest of what I witnessed. Every day of my life, I have thoughts of this experience, relive it, smell it, and hear it.

"The XIX Corps had demonstrated itself, from Normandy to the Elbe, to be one of the outstanding fighting teams of WWII. The men who fought next to me, sharing their food, cigarettes, body warmth, their mail from home, do not consider themselves Heroes. To this day, I ask myself: Why am I still here, still alive, an old man? Today, the men I fought with are dying at the rate of 1000 a day.

"Do I have witnesses to collaborate my story? Yes. I do not have to lie. I was there. Words or pictures cannot describe what I experienced.

"While in Europe, I desperately wanted to come home to America. But, I didn't want to go back to my hometown, because I felt that the people that knew me and loved me would not understand.

"Did my experience affect my life after the war? The war completely changed my thoughts, my goals, and relationships. I went in a young married man with a future; looking forward to a family and occupation; and I returned, divorced and not ready for civilian life. We were not marched down 5th Avenue as we thought, but skirted to Fort Dix Demilitarization for detaining. I was told at Fort Dix, NJ (by our American Government) that 'War Dogs that cannot be retrained will be shot'. We were probably animals when we returned.

"To this day, I have flashbacks triggered by sounds and smells. I have nightmares that make me jump out of bed. I cannot stand a strong wind, because when the wind blew, we could not hear the bombs and shells coming in. My relationships with women have not been good, except for my current wife who has stuck with me for 21 years; through alcoholism, and my many faults, she is my angel from heaven. I did not want to handle responsibility of any kind. I have not kept a job for very long. My first year back, I slept outside every day, because of my fear of attack. I could not work in the cold, because of a frozen foot I received at the Battle of the Bulge. I received shrapnel wounds to my back, because of mortar fire.

"I was shot just after Isigny, France, with a wooden bullet that I had to personally dig out of my arm. A medic did treat me later. I still have half a muscle to this day. I refused any Purple Hearts, because of the men who died who I felt were the true Heroes. And I probably feel guilt to this day for being alive. The one saving grace is that I had many good people, friends and family, watching over me in my life. Our country put us in such a f---ing sin. But I would do it again, because it came down to them or us. To think about my experience at any depth, physically makes me feel like puking. I become physically ill to this day. If not for my wife, I would not be telling this story.

"The men who I knew personally and died are too numerous to mention. I can recall their names. I can recall the place in which they died. By the end of the war, I literally was serving with strangers - reinforcements. I was there."

Herman wrote, "The Veterans Home in Grand Rapids was founded in 1886 and now has over 700 beds, which are full, with a long waiting list. Terry, this is a place to think about. I was in awe at every visit.

"There are men here who have never had visitors. These are the men who, when our country was attacked in 1941, came to her call. They gave up everything, to work 16 hours a day for \$50 a month to become killers. They were cheered the world over, as true knights of freedom. There were parades, flags, words of dedication and from our country, eternal pledges of gratitude and devotion. All over the world, they fought, bled and died on a great crusade. They liberated Europe and swept tyranny from the Pacific.

"Now our aging heroes are hidden away to die in obscurity from those who owed them so much. When my brother, a veteran of Patton's 3rd Army, was there, I would visit on Sundays. He died there and his grave marker is with his buddies. They are dying by the hundreds. They sit endless hours in wheelchairs dreaming of long past battles that never end. To visit their cemetery, is to see our Michigan Arlington - a place of eternal rest for our heroes. See the crosses and hear the trumpets sound taps which will give you a new sense of pride in our military." [H.E.]

"Terry, I too had cousins in Germany in the Army. It was very hard on my Grandma to have her brothers and nephews in conflict with us. My Uncle was in the Rainbow Division in World War I." [H.E.]

"After 3 years, I took one of my rare auto trips. I detest traveling. I went back in time to try to find my friends from the 246th. West of Owosso, about ten miles, I came on to Bill Harrison's home. He was a long time buddy of Elmer Dixon.

"At St. Lo, Bill was hit bad. The last I saw of him, the medics were trying to stop the flow of blood, which covered him. I thought he was dead. In August 1945, Kenny DeLong and I were outside of a local beer joint, when up the sidewalk came Bill. It was a wonderful shock, but anyone who spent a year with the 246th in Europe is immune to those little surprises. The bad part of this is that now Bill too is dead. He shot himself - the wound never left him." [H.E.]

"Davis, who was your Dad's ammo man, died - John Margaretis is still hanging on - I'm in bed most of the time. Our squad driver, Bob Bedell, is still staying with us.

"My wife and I are still in there. We are both 85. She is on oxygen. I get around OK - just slower! We get along! My wife is out now, working in her flower garden, with the portable tank. I still have my dog, Babe - She had one leg removed, but hops around the place, moving faster than I can. I had my 3 months check-up - the Doctor said everything checked out OK.

"My sister came down from Ludington to visit. I lived there 20 years, until my daughter wanted her mama closer. So we moved down here to Grand Rapids. It does make both happier, so that's worth it. After Ludington, living here is like in a cemetery. No Noise!" [H.E.]

"I went all over Ludington getting grass clippings and leaves for my wife's garden - which was the pride of Mason County. I had a friend who was in charge of the Ludington State Park fish cleaning station. I would go out and get fish insides daily and bury them in her garden. She loved that patch of land." [H.E.]

John Margaretis died September 5, 2009 at the age of 84. John enlisted in the Army during WWII and entered service on 04/06/1943 at Ft. Custer, Michigan. He served with the 246th Combat Engineer Battalion. The unit was attached to the 29th Infantry Division on D-Day

and landed on Omaha Beach. The unit was attached to the 30th Infantry Division for the battle of St. Lo. He was involved in the following campaigns: Normandy, Northern France, Central Europe, Rhineland and the Ardennes. He was awarded two Purple Hearts and two Presidential Citations. He was discharged on 12/01/1945. An owner and operator of dry cleaners, John is survived by his wife, 3 sons and 8 grandchildren.

Herman's words would have given him a good epitaph, "Time is doing what the Germans could not do."

Herman wrote on August 12, 2009, "Just a few lines. I just got out of the hospital. I had a heart attack. My wife is on Hospice and is terminal. Enclosed are my last two writings on the 246th. [The 246th] Newsletter man is dead - no more - there are only 3 left of the 3rd Platoon."

Herman wrote again on August 28, 2009, "We are moving into assisted living in a few days. I must care for my wife of 64 years. She is the most wonderful person I ever knew. Well Terry, this may very well be my last letter to you. I hope not!" [H.E.]

Herman wrote one last time on September 5, 2009, "Terry - We are both 86. Here Beth gets the 24/7 care she needs and I am at her side to see that it's done. After that, I join your Dad on patrol at the Rhine River. The specialists wanted to do open heart surgery (on me), but they gave me a 50/50 chance and I must stay with her, as She is the finest person I ever knew.

"Your Dad was devoted to your mother. I was an orphan. He never talked much about his life in Michigan. He seldom talked about his wife, except for one time, just before we crossed the Rhine River. We both knew the odds of such an operation. The 1st Squad had a nice warm billet. Your Dad and I were hunkered down, next to a fireplace, when he started to talk. I was wrapped up in a German sleeping bag. He told me his life story. I fell asleep. I could hear his voice, but that's all. Your Dad did not know this.

"The next morning, we hit the river, all 600 of us. We lost every Battalion officer, except my Captain. My Captain and I both got Bronze Stars with the "V" [for valor]. We stood in formation while a general pinned them on us. That Captain was like your Dad - a loner. In 3 years, [my Captain] never spoke to me; he ordered the First Sergeant to pass on his orders. [The Captain] was a boozier and I knew where to get it. Bob Bedell was my driver and sometimes we would go back to Bilsen, Belgium or Hasselt, Belgium, where I had friends who owned a brewery. There was a beautiful Hotel in Hasselt, owned by Mrs. Scheres - a very nice lady.

"Terry - mere words cannot express the joy that knowing you have given me."

On September 13, 2009, Bethel Ernst, Herman's wife of 64 years, passed away. Shortly after, on November 5, 2009, Herman Ernst followed her.

Other than spending time with the family, I believe that my Dad's two favorite things to do in life were gardening and fishing. He would come home from work at the factory, tired of the noise, commotion and people. He would change clothes and go out to his garden, where he could have peace and quiet. If there was nothing to do in the garden, he would sit alone on a chair, watching the garden grow, listening to the quiet.

On weekends, the family would go every Friday to the family's cottage on a lake. That would be every Friday, winter, summer, spring and fall - rain, shine or blizzard. Mom would have everything packed, and we would pick Dad up at work and keep right on driving to the cottage. When we got there, he would quickly help unpack, and then he would get out his boat (unless it was ice fishing season) and go fishing. He would sit in his boat, alone, hour after hour. He would fish almost all night, always alone - always looking for peace and quiet.

After the Hell of war, fishing and gardening must have been Heaven.

My Dad was very much in love with Mom. They were married 46 years at the time of her death. And, up until the day he died almost 18 years later, my Dad still considered himself married to her. He was looking forward to seeing her again.

My Dad, Russell, passed away unexpectedly on December 12, 2004. Dad went just the way he always wanted to go. We had a nice 90th birthday party for him in September. He was still active. Still the same Russell, right up until the day he died. No hospital. No nursing home. He was independent and lived alone until the end. He was still driving, shopping, gardening, cooking his own meals, and shoveling snow – a little slower, but still doing everything – like always.

That morning, he was doing his Christmas cards. He must have run out of cards, so he got in his truck and drove to the Meijers store to buy some more. When he got back from the store, he just collapsed and died – no suffering. He died in the house that he had built with his own hands; in the house where he had lived since 1939.

He had a beautiful funeral, with all of his friends and family around him. The graveside ceremony was absolutely wonderful. A beautiful sunny day. A flag draped coffin. A military graveside ceremony, with all the honors. A trumpet playing Taps.