

CHAPTER 8

The Swiss arms, traditionally open, welcomed us in a spacious hospital in Belp. My wound was not serious, in spite of the pain. Two days later, I stopped using my crutches and was able to walk slowly, but it took several more days before I felt well. Meanwhile, the Swiss military processed our papers.

Less than a week after our arrival, the Italian Embassy in Bern came to visit, and to our amazement we were handed military pay. This payment slip, which I keep in my scrapbook with my partisan I.D., states that Germano Donati at the Military Internment Camp of Konolfingen/Bern has paid Soto Tenente Alfredo Vorschirm the sum of Swiss francs 18.75. This official payment conferred legal recognition to the Army of National Liberation and to my military service in Italy.

Shortly thereafter, we were supposed to be transferred from the hospital to that same internment camp in Konolfingen, but I had no intention of waiting out the hostilities in Switzerland.

The news of the war was very encouraging, and I felt euphoric. The long awaited second front had been opened in Normandy. Paris had been liberated and Russia continued to hammer at the German war machine. American paratroopers had just invaded the south of France, where battles raged in the Piera-Cava region.

Renée sent my coat and other belongings to the hospital. She was relieved to hear that I was safe. Benno, whom I had not run into in the mountains, had also been able to escape to Switzerland and was together with Céline. He had heard that I'd fallen in combat, and rejoiced at news from his resurrected brother.

I put on my coat to hide my soiled uniform and discreetly left the hospital. At the Belp railroad station, I bought a ticket for Geneva. Arriving in the evening, I easily crossed into France, the Swiss no longer being vigilant and the French even less so. I still had to crawl at night, flat on my belly, to make it to the other side. I remembered that other autumn when I had crossed in the other direction. This time the face of Europe had changed dramatically . . . for the better.

A train took me to Nice, where I was going to join the American army. The war wasn't over yet.

I was sent from one officer to another, from one interrogation team to another, until they were convinced that I wasn't a spy, and I stood before General Frederick, Commander of the Airborne Forces in the region. I only intended to offer my services. I mentioned that I spoke English, German, French, Italian, Flemish, and Dutch, that I had fought with the partisans in Italy, and that I didn't expect any pay. The General made it clear, with a smile on his lips, that the US paratroopers didn't need my help to win the war but that he would be interested in my knowledge of the languages. I was taken to the 517th Parachute Combat Team, where Colonel Rupert Graves assigned me to Headquarters Company of the Third Battalion.

I felt completely at ease and happy in the splendid American uniform I was issued. Shining insignias of the US Army—and my polished paratrooper boots—reflected my inner satisfaction and pride.

From Hitler to Trujillo

This was an organized army—an efficient war machine, like a huge business corporation whose officers all looked like vice-presidents. Everything was of excellent quality, from nourishment to equipment. The morale of the troops was high, bordering on the arrogant. The quartermaster looked after the needs and whims of the soldiers. It was the kind of army where the poor felt rich and where the wealthy didn't find themselves too much out of place.

There was a world of difference between the *partigiani* and these soldiers; here, no passion reigned. The American army was an enormous machine without a soul; the guerrillas were a huge soul without a machine.

While the partisans felt a deep personal involvement in their unorthodox activities, the Americans were simply conscientious and disciplined. They had a job to do and they did it well. While the partisans were idealists, the Americans were practical. They were, on the whole, friendly and kindhearted. The paratroopers were all volunteers, part of an elite corps, and they enjoyed more prestige and pay than other army soldiers did. I made good friends in my new milieu.

With the fall of Sospel, the Champagne Campaign had ended, and the unit rested in Nice, where I joined up.

I once again enjoyed the sun and the blue Mediterranean. The Casino de la Méditerranée, reserved for US military personnel, served doughnuts and coffee.

Strangely, to me at least, there was a Japanese American regiment in Nice, mainly from the West Coast of the United States. Like all American citizens, they had to do their military service. The High Command probably considered this 442nd infantry regiment better suited for duty in Europe, rather than combat against their own kin in the Pacific.

I'm not sure how it had started, and it doesn't really matter; but some of the Japanese-Americans were sitting at a table in one of the best cafes in the center of town. It all happened so suddenly that I just had time to duck when chairs and fists started flying wildly. This spectacle of soldiers of the same country fighting each other was revolting, confirming to me that, given certain circumstances, no one anywhere is safe from racism and intolerance.

In Nice I sold the first of my diamond stones. For sentimental reasons, before moving in with my regiment, I booked a room at the Hotel Imperator, where I had lived with my parents.

While there, a totally unbelievable incident took place. A few days after registering, I was summoned to appear before a judge at the courthouse. At the indicated time, I entered the courtroom when my name was called. The considering was brief and the judge sentenced me to six months in jail for entering the unoccupied zone of France in 1942! Somehow a dusty mass of paper had followed me all the way from the Vichy government, and the enigmatic judge blurted out his sentence without realizing the absurdity of the case. Tens of thousands of foreigners, including paratroopers, allied pilots shot down over occupied territory, as well as Frenchmen from the north had illegally crossed the border of the two zones.

The judge didn't lift his eyes from the file; but even my American uniform wouldn't have impressed him. Everything had occurred so quickly, no one attempted to arrest me, so I walked out of the courtroom the same way I had entered.

When I bought the local paper the following day, my case was commented upon. The article ends, "By the expression on his face, the defendant didn't seem to have understood the sentence. Neither did we."

From Hitler to Trujillo

I immediately returned to my battalion, which got ready to depart for the north. I had expected the airborne unit to be transported by air; but instead, we boarded boxcars like those that four years earlier had taken father, Benno, and me from north to south. I now found the same setting in quite different circumstances. As painful as the trip in the “40 Men or 8 Horses” railroad cars had been, this one turned out to be, if not comfortable, at least pleasant, with the doors of the cars wide open.

We arrived in Soissons at our new quarter—a barracks with a vast courtyard. Captain Stephen Grant, Lieutenant Morgan, and First Sergeant Holland were remembering good times in the States, talking with confidence about the future. Bill Alexander, a big guy who constantly chewed gum, was busy convincing anyone who would listen of the superiority of Texas. I remember scribbling down the names and places of my friends: Phil Bonner of Boston, Morgan from Bostrop, Louisiana, and Peter Sturgeon from New York.

A group of friends—Wieckersheimer, Knerr, Weiss, and Childs—were amused by my first jump experience. I had been given a parachute after only a minimum of instruction and went with the others on board a C47. I had never flown in an airplane, let alone jumped from one.

I certainly didn't feel at ease when I boarded the plane with my parachutes, the large one on the back and a small emergency one on my chest. The door of the plane remained open, and I saw the fields, the forest, and the houses, all very small. Soon a circle came into sight. It was the point marked for the drop—the drop zone.

When a red light blinked and the sergeant shouted, “Stand up and hook up,” I slid the hook on the rail and approached the exit. After a moment's hesitation, I closed my eyes and jumped into the void. As I dropped, I felt a fluttering in the pit of my stomach. Just as I got ready to open the emergency chute, a violent jerk made me aware that my parachute had opened.

I looked up and saw a hole in the middle of my open chute, which, although perfectly normal, surprised me at the time. My speed slowed considerably and I experienced a wonderful feeling of well being. Up in the air, everything was on a higher plateau than on the earth below, with all its absurdities. A slight wind prompted me to pull on the cords to influence my course. The descent took less than two minutes and the impact of the landing was rather brutal. I rolled over on the ground several times to cushion the shock and avoid breaking my neck or fracturing an ankle.

I got up and gathered my parachute, but it still carried me away from the drop zone.

My four other jumps became routine; but the more I jumped, the less I was at ease, perhaps because I thought about the law of probabilities.

After these five obligatory jumps, I was permitted to display the winged insignia on the left side of my uniform. Only then was I truly accepted as a paratrooper.

Christmas 1944 was approaching. Soon, C and K rations would give way to stuffed turkey. We were convinced we'd go on leave to Paris, and everyone rejoiced at the thought.

Marshall Von Rundstedt had his own ideas for the holidays—like pushing his powerful offensive through the Ardennes. We were rushed to the unexpected confusion in Belgium and faced bullets and mortar shells in the white snow, suddenly stained with ugly red spots. I was eager to see action, particularly since I had dreamed once of defending this country of my youth.

From Hitler to Trujillo

The German armored Panzer and Tiger Divisions had pierced through allied defenses. Confusion increased with the presence of German officers and soldiers who had infiltrated our lines in American uniforms. The news that the Second SS Armored Division had executed a number of American war prisoners in Malmedy wasn't very reassuring.

We of the Third Battalion advanced and eventually occupied the village of Manhay, a strategic point that dominated the crossroads from Werbeumont toward Liege.

Bitter cold and the fog immobilized the Air Force, which is why it took so long to liberate Bastogne, not far from us, where the 101st Airborne had been surrounded by the enemy. From our position behind an uneven terrain, we heard the ear-splitting artillery duel. We shelled the German positions and then charged over a snow-covered open field. The German tanks looked like huge prehistoric monsters, quite unlike the armored vehicles or personnel carriers we had assaulted in Italy. After violent combat, we took the town and pursued the enemy across the Salm River, the only waterway that had separated us from Trois Ponts and Basse Bodeaux. We were welcomed by dense machine gun fire. The Second Battalion took about 500 enemy prisoners.

When our 517th Parachute Combat Team was temporarily integrated into the famous 82nd Airborne Division, everybody was very proud to belong to a division that had accumulated such a distinguished record: first in Northern Africa, then in Sicily, then in the south of Italy at the Anzio beachhead, where they suffered great losses. During the Normandy invasion, when the second front was opened, they were the first allied troops to jump into occupied territory and liberate the French village of Sainte Mere l'Eglise. In the Arnhem battle in Holland, the 82nd lost many men trying to secure a strategic bridge. Now we were to become part of the history of the 82nd, sharing snow and blood in the Battle of the Bulge.

Our troops began to cross the Ambleve, returning the mortar and light-arms fire. I received orders to leave the Third Battalion and join the Second Battalion temporarily, with instructions to interrogate captured enemy soldiers.

Through this twist of fate, suddenly I was interrogating the other side. The roles had changed. If Mueller only could see me now.

In rags, the mostly teenage boys and elderly soldiers no longer resembled the arrogant super race of the occupation. With servile humility, they begged for their lives, fearing they would be shot like those they had captured in Malmedy.

I was still with the Second Battalion when we prepared to assault the German defenses in Saint Vith. I went on reconnaissance patrol with Edward Globokar. Silently, we approached the enemy positions. This mission reminded me of my guerrilla days a short time before. Here, as there, we had to be as agile as cats; we had to take advantage of the element of surprise and be on the lookout for valuable information. Here, however, it was more a conflict among armaments than among men.

We were at the edge of the cemetery of Saint Vith. I thought, I won't have to be carried far if I'm hit. Reinforced and backed up by elements of the US Seventh Armored Division, our battalion made the final assault against the enemy bastion of Saint Vith.

With the fall of that city, the Germans lost their last established position in the region, and the Battle of the Bulge came to an end. Of course, this campaign was fought not just by the 82nd; it was a major multinational effort, but I could see only a tiny speck of it.

Exhausted and with, hardly any sleep for days, we finally got to spend two days in Stavelot, behind the front lines. How wonderful it was to sleep under a roof, to be able to warm our hands and feet!



The anxiously awaited order to penetrate into the enemy territory was received with joy. We were to penetrate Germany! My emotions burst sky-high! My wildest dream was about to come true!

A convoy took us through an antitank mine field and through the massive defense of the famous Siegfried line, now mute, harmless and indifferent onlookers to our passage.

Rotgen was the first German village we entered. White flags and bed sheets hung from the houses. The inhabitants must have known we would act with less vengeance than the Soviet troops on the other side of the Reich, for the Germans had employed in Russia the scorched-earth policy and the Russians had *lost twenty million people!*

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As the snow melted, we crawled through the woods of Hurtgen toward Bergstein. The mud was sucking us up, as it had during our advance through the Ruhr.



The winding detours of the river between Bergstein and the nearby hills were defended by a series of blockhouses, whose approaches were protected by perimeters of explosive mines. They were finally taken, but at a high price in human lives on both sides.

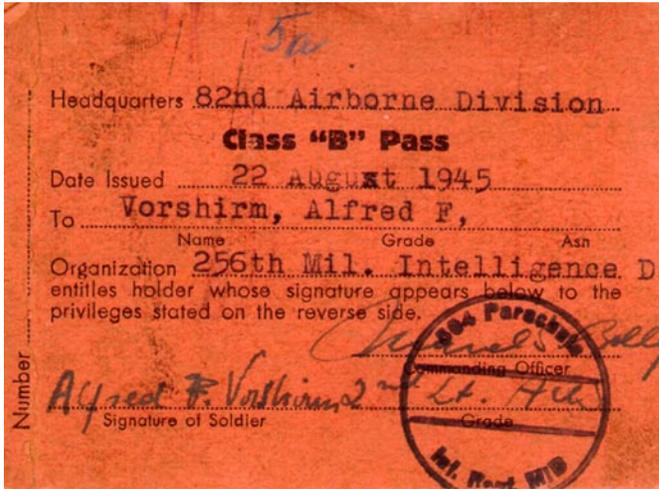
Soon the resistance on the other side slackened. After having been thrown back several times, we attacked with grenades and flame-throwers. First the advance post of Zerkall and then Bergstein itself fell into our hands.

That was the last of the battles in which I participated. With my friends Jay Robertson and William Goldsmith, I had jumped from one foxhole to the other, among the bullets and the dead.

With the Germans' defeat in the Ardennes and the Allies piercing into the *Vaterland*, little resistance by the Germans was encountered. Cologne fell, the Rhine was crossed, and entire armies surrendered.

From Hitler to Trujillo

Finally, at the Elbe River, the 82nd Airborne met its Russian comrades. We waited in vain for orders to parachute into the outskirts of Berlin and to enter the city. The orders never came, and the Soviet troops fought their way into the capital of the Reich. Political considerations took precedence over military strategy.



Hitler committed suicide, and Doenitz, his successor, capitulated. In the Pacific, Americans took Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Mussolini was executed by the *partigiani* near the Swiss border, not far from where we had fought and eventually had to flee.

CHAPTER 9

May 8, 1945 marked the end of the war for Europe's battlefields. When the news broke I was grateful for having survived. The horrors of Europe's so-called civilization had ended, but I couldn't partake in the general explosion of exuberance. I felt alone . . . very much alone. Through various organizations I learned that my parents had been exterminated at the Auschwitz death camp.

On October 29, 1945, Prince de Croy, the Head of the Belgian Red Cross who had saved my life and with whom I was in touch, sent me the following certificate, which I conserve with many other documents:

(Translation)

CERTIFICATE

The undersigned General Administrator of the Belgian Red Cross certifies that Mr. Alfred Vorschirm was arrested by the German occupation authorities (services of the Gestapo) in Belgium and incarcerated from November 1941 to July 1942, in the Prison of Antwerp, rue des Beguines.

The motive for his arrest was intensive propaganda in favor of the Allies. Mr. Vorschirm was freed as a consequence of the steps undertaken by the competent services of the Red Cross of Belgium, based on the International Convention of Geneva and the young age of the accused.

(Signed: de Croy)

Our outfit was transferred first to Laon, then to Joigny and Auxerre in France. The provisional integration of the 517th into the 82nd Airborne Division was formalized in a ceremony in Aubervilliers, and it allowed me to meet the Commander of the Division, Major General James (Slim Jim) Gavin, the youngest of the general officers of the American forces. We were absorbed by the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, thus dissolving our combat team.

My special status within the US Army was revised again, and I was once more submitted to the formalities of interrogation. Colonel Tucker, the regimental commanding officer, and Major Gorham, S-2 of Intelligence, ordered a superficial inquiry to satisfy red tape. After what seemed more a conversation than an interrogation, Captain Mattice sent a favorable report to Lieutenant Donald Wheeler of the 82nd Counter Intelligence Corps.

I was assigned to the 256th MID, the Military Intelligence Detachment of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. There I worked with Lieutenants Marcel Bollag and Walter Spitzer, both of whom became my good friends.

The first few months after the war were rather dull; we polished our boots and led a typical garrison life. I wondered how it would feel to go up in a glider, so I obtained permission to join the 325th^h Glider Regiment of the 82nd on a practice flight. To me flying and landing in a glider was a harrowing experience. For military purposes, gliders were towed part of the way by a standard airplane and then, with its men densely packed aboard, landed on their bellies behind enemy lines.