

C O P Y

30-9/44

Dearest Mother,

The original of this is written to Jack, but I haven't had time to do more than have it copied. Hope you can make it out.

When I knocked on Charlotte's door and she opened it and we faced each other, neither of us could speak, I finally had to tell her that I would pick up lunch at the hotel and return later.

But let's go back a little. The day before we had landed in a neighboring large port in the midst of a rainstorm, - landed in the true sense of the word, in that we had been beached by small craft, the port facilities being still incapacitated. That whole maneuver was a great experience and my first amphibious operation. The scene was a Cezanne summer landscape with a cloudy sky (you know the large canvas in the Chicago museum.) I was the first man on the beach and was able to do some active reconnaissance, diverting the vehicles and the men to their proper positions. It was almost dark before we could push off to the staging area. I had a jeep and took two men with me through the town and out to a suburb near the town where they make pottery. The region was already overcrowded and the units were bivouacking in the wet fields. Needless to say, the verdant soaked passage was an indescribable relief from the African scene. By knocking at the farm gates and asking our way around we finally located a huge stone barn on the top of a hill, with two lofts of hay and plenty of room, heated by twelve cows and as many large percheron horses. Then it was a question of locating the elements proceeding by foot and by vehicle and by train. This took until long after midnight and I finally reached the point where I envied the men hoofing it out over the cobblestones to their rustic retreat, at least their blood was circulated. I was sopping wet, sitting on a wet jeep seat, with a canvas top that leaked down my neck and a windshield wiper that didn't work. Finally by series of very lucky coincidences everyone got to his destination - mine being a billet on a street leading up to a Arc de Triomphe, a seedy little hotel, newly swept with fairly comfortable beds, but at least dry and warm. It rained all night and the thought of facing those poor kids in the hay loft with their sodden equipment was not a gay one; but somehow toward dawn the rain pipe outside was silenced and the sun rose on a cloudless sky. I hastened out to the farm and found everyone spreading their equipment over the hedges and cornstalks and olive terraces to dry. Tobacco, cigarettes, bank notes, letters, everything had to be undone and exposed. There was quite a problem controlling the swarm of curious children, attracted like flies to the inviting spectacle. The men were all happy and rested and the previous night had become an unpleasant dream. Needless to say, the landscape that spread itself in all directions was breath-takingly beautiful and this meant as much as you can imagine to these poor men.

Toward the end of the morning a French captain, my buddy in the squadron and another American liaison officer and I, pushed off to go down to the sea. We passed through the pottery making town, detouring several times for broken bridges and then up through the tortuous canyon roads, lined with blackberry bushes. There were German gun emplacements along the way and especially at the top, heavy concrete barriers and tank obstacles. The forests have been extensively burned. The "pretty girl" was in good condition, but already from the first glimpse of the port, two vast liners lying on their sides at a crazy angle, one against the other, dwarfed everything, even a large new apartment house, between the hotel and the town.

I stopped the Englishman and found his place in good condition but him still in a central department, somewhere, expected daily by his people. We sampled last year's and the year before's wines and found them as good as ever. The car, needless to say, had been taken. It was an extraordinary moment, as you can imagine and not unlike a dream. The town itself and the population are fine but operations were going on to remove the unnecessarily elaborate precautions taken by the Germans to render the port impermeable. The only irreparable damage that I could see was the removal of the beautiful umbrella pine that shaded the large square where the fairs used to be. I hurried on to the house and found the gate unlocked. Charlotte was preparing lunch and through the glass door I could see the spotless kitchen. The house was clean but somewhat denuded and the scene which I previously described took only a few minutes. One look at what used to be the tennis court showed me that we would have to proceed with caution. It all looked like a study in booby traps. I don't know how to describe it. First of all it has much more the aspect that it had when we first moved in. The original slope of the rock has been exposed again and everything they did was either blasted down further or carried on out toward the big pine trees. These last, fortunately, are undamaged, but the little grove toward the town has been shaved off. The little parapet around the circle was too low so rather than heighten it they removed all of the border paving stones and created a trench. The little house is filled with Harrisburg would have called "documents", - uniforms, gas-masks, diaries, newspapers, Mineralvasser bottles, letters and gadgets of all kinds. The little girl (at least a foot taller) seems to have covered the whole area and the fact that she hadn't been blown sky-high is surprising to say the least. The powder house has been added to towards the road and the flight of steps buried again. An entirely new passage down to the rocks has been created and two of the most beautiful brand new water tanks, with faucets and pipes in perfect condition, seem to have been left behind in payment for damages. The beautiful white rocks are covered with rust from the wire barricading and down by the mosaics are other emplacements. All of this, however, is thrown completely out of scale by the entirely surrealist tangle of cruise boats, protruding themselves across the panorama. Smoke, incidentally, still rises from one of them, emphasizing a feeling that one has anyway that the Germans have just pulled out.

At the hotel, things seem exactly the same, except for tomato plants where the geraniums used to be. If anything, it looks rather cleaner and better kept up. Madame had gone to Marseille but mademoiselle and monsieur and the bartender gave us a very hearty and touching welcome. The lunch and the drinks which they produced in no time at all were of the old quality and all "on the house". Their view is very much jeopardized by the new apartment house, and the town is almost invisible behind the steamers. The tales they told were unbelievable and in another subsequent visit, when I stayed the night, I got a very thorough account of everything. Jeanne and her mother took off about two years ago without saying goodbye to anyone, into the interior, and have not been heard from since. Things must have been pretty bad for everyone and about as we imagined. Later it was apparently easier. They left at the most trying time.

To go back to the house, your clothes and mine are non-existent. The china and the silver and the linen seem to have been farmed out to the Agostinis and other people and are presumably O.K. Some of the furniture has disappeared but the house is entirely habitable. When I called on the lawyer I found him out, but his wife gave me a satisfactory account of all Charlotte's activities. She said, "she is faithful, honest, but very hard." This lady, apparently, had never been dragged into the Daour incident. As we drove back through the port we were mobbed by the fishermen, most of them brothers of Charlotte's husband and you would have thought they were my oldest friends. Of course everyone asked for news of you and Bob and Maudie and the rest of the crowd. I found that Frank Arthur is still doing business from Paris. Marguerite is there also and wants to come down as soon as possible.

From Lilly I learned that Ophelia has been in Geneva for two years at the Hotel Regina but, of course, now she can move out, if she wants. We wrote her a joint letter with Minou from Montredon. That place looks very much the same and something that I took for destruction along the garden front turned out to be the remains of a pergola that Berard had designed and built and Lilly didn't like it. The atmosphere was the same. Dogs and people of every breed and race all over the place. There was lots of news from Paris, the most astonishing of which was the reported execution of Cocteau.

There is absolutely no destruction in Aix, although the highroads around are like the proverbial Chinese family just moved out. Altogether morale and relations are a hundred percent better than they were in Africa and Italy. There are countless subtleties and sidelights that I cannot go into in this, but on the whole it is to the good. I have been able to take lots of photographs and find they can be developed here. The food situation is strained without being acute, no question of a dorade at Verdun's. The old port from several angles looks very much the same. Jeanne's particular view is unchanged, and if you turn around to the right you would be shocked. The Kaiser's yacht, if you please, is still there. The

main drag is spotty but will look the same again. Colonels and Generals are inhabiting our old haunts. Don't forget that this place always had a rather tacky, down-at-the-heel look. I would say that due to the drastic cleaning up that has been necessary, it has never seemed as bright and shiny as now.

Cannes, as you probably already know, is not irreparably damaged and Antibes is all right. The beautiful part of St. Tropez is badly mangled and the great tragedy of the southern coast is the almost complete destruction of the Quai Cronstadt at Toulon. Minou said she had to ask her way around, she couldn't recognize a single landmark.

You would laugh if you could see the provisions taken to make the Gineste impervious to gliders and paratroopers. All of that desolate plain, at the top, is a forest of poles, with pyramids of rocks, doubtless heavily mined.

A Czeck painter at Montredon says that he knows someone in Cassis who knows where the Daours went to in the interior. I will try to track it down, later. Lilly's stories of the affair are, of course, funny but heartless.

The weather is clear and sunny and when the mistral blows, cold. The countryside is very beautiful and it is the period of the vendanges. There seem to be things in the shops. Photographs can be developed and printed, all of the hand arts and crafts are flourishing, but a transportation problem makes things difficult with the natives. I move around a good deal and hope to give further news soon. Haven't had any news from anybody for almost a month, but I suppose that is natural.

Must send this off. Will try to be more regular in the future. What news of Maud? I have sent her one of these. Loads of love.

Jerome



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