

# *Chapter 1*

1942–1943

Single, 32, and subject to the draft, I decide to enlist in the Volunteer Officers' Training Corps at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis. There I'm ushered into a room full of civilian men. When my turn comes, I'm referred to a sergeant major.

“What branch of the service are you thinking about?”

“I've been practicing law for more than ten years, the last six as a felony prosecutor. I think the Judge Advocate General's Department [JAGD] should be right for me.”

“You can't serve an injunction on Hitler.” He turns in his swivel chair and types out a form. “I'm sending you to Camp Roberts in California. You'll be in basic training in the infantry.”

He doesn't like lawyers. Disappointed, I swallow hard and take the paper. At Camp Roberts, I deliberately stand at the front of a squad of 12 GIs (literally “government issue,” the common name for

privates) and do everything I can to show that I want to get ahead. At the end of boot camp, a few of us who have completed officers' training make corporal. Along with the mayor of Carmel, California, and an opera singer from Philadelphia, I am by April 1943 on a train to Georgia.

Fort Benning is even tougher than Camp Roberts, but I work hard at everything and make second lieutenant at the end of the three-month course. My first assignment is to train rookies in Alabama and Mississippi—for eight months. Then the army sends me to England.

Spring/Summer 1944

On June 6, D-Day, the Allied invasion of France is in progress. I have been sitting in a tent in a cow pasture near Yeovil, England, for almost a month. Finally, a sergeant tells me, "The colonel wants to see you at three o'clock sharp."

The colonel has my personnel file in front of him. "Hansen, I see that you are 34 years of age and have six years of experience as a felony prosecutor. You are too old to lead men 14 years younger on the front lines. I'll recommend that you be assigned to the JAGD. Meanwhile, I'm sending you to France to serve in a replacement company."

So, at 2:00 A.M. on July 7, I am suddenly awakened and told to get ready for inspection in an hour. We ride on trucks to Southampton, then on a "tugboat" across the English Channel. After a rough trip, we transfer to a landing craft, then disembark at Utah Beach, an American invasion site in Normandy. A temporary pier has been damaged by German artillery, so we wade in about 200 feet.

The beach is a mess of half-sunken ships and barges, about 75 of them, the aftermath of D-Day, during which nine of every ten

Allied troops were killed or injured. No wonder—the flat landing beach extends 300 feet to an almost sheer cliff that was covered by German artillery and machine guns. Bomb craters, barbed wire, smashed life preservers, and equipment piled in makeshift heaps litter the beach. At the top of the cliff are hastily dug mass graves.

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On D-Day plus 31, I assemble my 20 men, some rookies, and others just out of the hospital, including officers of all ranks. In a column of twos, we march inland with others down a trail marked by American mine markers. The first casualty I see is a fresh one—a soldier walked off the marked path to urinate and stepped on a bounding-type mine. It exploded about waist high, killing him and injuring 14 others. Nauseated, I look away.

We pass through two small villages. The natives who bother to look our way seem tired; a few give faint smiles and halfhearted “V” signs. No one looks enthusiastic. I can’t blame them—they are watching just another section of the big parade, and why should they think we can win? All are ragged, and most wear wooden shoes. They seem well nourished, but this is farming country. I wonder about their poor clothing.

Our first bivouac area, near Sainte-Mère-Église, leaves much to be desired, and when a heavy tank outfit moves into the field, we move our troops out in trucks to another one. From there we move south, passing through several villages and two larger towns, all severely damaged. The Germans are still close to one of the towns near Carentan, where a major battle has occurred. As our convoy reaches the town, we hear two terrific explosions behind us. I learn later that the Germans are trying to knock out the bridge there.

As we wait near the rear of the front line to replace the battle casualties of the 29th Division, I talk with wounded officers and men who return every day from the front. They say it's impossible to crawl through the terrain here. At the edge of each two-acre field is a ditch about a yard deep and a yard wide. A pileup of dirt six feet wide—overgrown with thorny brush, trees, vines, and weeds—separates the ditch for one field from the ditch for another, forming what is called a hedgerow. Each hedgerow provides a drainage ditch, an effective fence, and a permanent land boundary. But the arrangement also gives an enemy standing on one side of the hedgerow an excellent camouflaged view—he can see us, but we can't see him.

The Germans burrow themselves into the hedgerows in L-shaped foxholes, below the root system. They have machine-gun emplacements concealed in the corners, where there is a good field of fire. We need artillery to blast them out. They also string land-mine trip wires through the hedgerows in this perfect setup for defense. Later, American tanks with long, two-inch steel rods on either side will poke holes through the hedgerows, so sticks of dynamite can blast large holes, permitting tanks to get through. But this ingenious plan is too late to do much good. Given the landing site and the hedgerows, I think Gen. Dwight Eisenhower picked a poor spot for the invasion.

(Four decades later we learn of an even more ill-conceived secret, pre-D-Day, test invasion on April 27, 1944, on the southern coast of Devon. Two German torpedo boats sank two unarmed landing barges, killing at least 749 Americans. Some shot at each other. Misinstructed by inexperienced officers, many drowned in life jackets worn about the waist. The families learned of this 43 months later.)

Today is Bastille Day, July 14, commemorating the French people's victory over tyranny in 1789 and similar to our Fourth of July. The chaplain scrapes up a band and invites the natives to hear it. The band plays "La Marseillaise," and the Frenchmen sing—timidly at first. After reassuring themselves that there will be no reprisals, they really let loose. Wearing broad smiles and flinging their arms, they throw their berets in the air and sing like mad. The artillery crew sometimes beats time in the wrong place, but the band is a howling success.

I've been in France only a week, but so much has happened, it seems like a month. We've been sending replacements to Gen. Charles Gerhardt, commander of the 29th, in record numbers, as his troops, in hand-to-hand combat, try to take the city of Saint Lô. After that we'll be done with the hedgerows.

On July 20, I hear on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) station the report of a bombing at Hitler's headquarters. Will the war soon be over? Then there is complete radio silence. Four days later, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels announces that Hitler is conducting the war as usual.

Finally, on July 25, the static front (both sides dug in) at Saint Lô is broken by the bombing of 3,000 American sorties. A few days later I see the bombed area near Saint Lô. It's completely churned up. I count up to 50 wrecked enemy tanks, some almost buried. Dead German soldiers and cattle are scattered everywhere. The breakthrough has come so fast there's no time for cleanup. There are some bizarre sights—a tank balanced on one end, the carcass of a cow hanging in a tree, and a headless German soldier sitting against a tree. The town of 12,000 has been bombed previously. Now it's completely gone, not one whole building left.

We are besieged by rain, but when it stops, Gen. George Patton's armored forces fan out in a wide area, southward, then eastward toward the Seine River.

I take advantage of lulls in the action to talk—with my pidgin English and standard-issue phrasebook—to French civilians in the area. When the Germans first invaded, they came with “requisitions” for crops and cattle, paying small prices with counterfeit money. If they liked a house, they just took it. Later they took anything they wanted, without formality, including all good clothing, which they sent home to Germany. If they saw a woman they wanted, they took her, too.

One local woman tells me that the French Red Cross collected shoes and clothing for destitute refugees. In a remarkable act of generosity and with hardly any clothing themselves, the workers took the goods to a church to give to the refugees. “The Germans took the clothing and shoes and shipped them home,” she says grimly.

Normandy is a region of plentiful grain, vegetable, fruit, and dairy products, with a climate similar to that of the American Midwest. With the Germans gone and no market for their surplus, the natives now have plenty to eat. On some farms, the potatoes aren't dug up, fruit is left on the trees, and the grain is not cut. I ask a farmer, “What are you going to do with all this food?”

“Nobody asks us for it,” he answers. “Your troops are moving too fast, and they seem to have enough food of their own.”

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While waiting to move on, Lieutenant MacDougal (Mac) and I stumble upon a beautiful chateau in a valley near the camp. Large and isolated, it houses the elderly Vicomtesse de Puthod, her son, and three daughters, all in their teens and early twenties. A Cambridge

graduate, short and thin, the vicomtesse is genuinely cordial and speaks fluent English. She invites us to dinner and tells us her story.

“My husband is an architect in Paris, and this is our summer home,” she says. “When the Germans started to occupy this area in 1940, we agreed I should take the children from Paris because food is plentiful here. I moved in, and we housed 35 refugees.

“I got here just before the Germans, who eventually demanded use of the place. My adamancy and the fact that we housed refugees got me by, and I was able to remain. The refugees eventually left, but like others in our situation, I kept my family here. I trained the children to lie flat on the floor when shells came close, and we all escaped injury.”

“What was it like before the invasion?” I ask.

“Before the American invasion, British agents (dressed as peasants) did an excellent job of harassing the Germans,” she says. “The snipers were mostly German women who had lived in France before the war. Reprisals for killing Germans reached as high as 50 to 100 French people for each dead German. Most of the killings have been the Free French of the Interior (FFI), the members of the French Resistance commonly called *maquis*.

“There would be no French Resistance if it weren’t for [Charles] de Gaulle,” she continues. “People of all political persuasions feel he has the best chance to lead France. He is regarded as a hero.

“General de Gaulle wanted to occupy France, stating that four years of Nazi occupation was enough. We heard that General Eisenhower felt there were too many Communists in France and that occupation by de Gaulle was too risky. I think de Gaulle should take over now. The people went wild when he spoke here recently.”

“What happens to those who have collaborated with the Nazis?”

“Lists of collaborators are kept for the day of reckoning when we get our own government,” she says sternly. “We choose to do this properly and legally.”

As the evening draws to a close, the vicomtesse hands me a piece of paper. “My greatest concern now is my inability to communicate with my husband, to tell him we are safe,” she says. “If you get to Paris, please give him this message. It tells him what has happened here during the occupation.”

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We leave our bivouac in good order as we move south. Another officer and I stop momentarily in a small town and just start up the Jeep again when two German officers pop out of nowhere. One says, “We surrender to American soldiers.” We turn them over to the maquis, to be taken to the camp for prisoners of war (POWs). The Germans protest, and I can’t blame them. The maquis don’t have any means of taking care of prisoners and often shoot them, saying, “They were trying to escape.” But we have no means of holding them. We are moving too fast.

The Germans are right to be afraid of the *maquis*, a word referring to Corsican bandits. They are a big help to us, relieving us of prisoners, sweeping the woods, cleaning out bypassed towns, providing information about the enemy, and guarding roads and bridges. They dress in civilian clothes and arm themselves with anything they can capture or steal from the Germans. Their only identification is the red, white, and blue band worn with the Cross of Lorraine on the upper left arm. They have no personal ID.

Ten men are in each maquis “cell,” each with one leader, the only one who knows the leader above or below. The arrangement ensures

that no one can betray more than ten men. During the occupation, the maquis have carried on raids and sabotage against the Germans, operating mostly from the woods. Many say they join to escape Germany's labor draft. This isn't easy; every person in France must carry an identification card to obtain food from the German occupation. The danger of exposure by paid collaborators is always real. So the maquis go into hiding. Some tell us frankly that they have joined simply because all good Communists do.

The maquis tell me of many instances of Nazi brutality during the occupation. In a recent incident, the German SS (Schutzstaffel, a shooting detachment) left a town after hearing of approaching Allied armored vehicles. As a parting shot, an SS man sprayed the street with submachine-gun bullets from the back of a truck, killing and wounding women and children.

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Driving farther south near Laval, we see farmer refugees drifting back. They have been through trying times—fire, lack of food and shelter, and searching interrogation, even at the hands of their rescuers. I ask one of them about being strafed by American planes and shelled by our artillery.

One man says, "I was scared stiff, and I was almost killed along with the Germans. I ran a lot and got some shelter under bridges and behind buildings. It was hell." The Germans, anxious for their own lives, simply abandoned the farmers.

In walking northward, the farmers set their wooden shoes and sore feet on free territory. Despite their suffering and the expectation of finding their homes in ruin, none fails to grin and wave at every passing truckload of Americans. Now they are sure of our winning.

Another man says, "We are tired and hungry. Do you have any food?" We give them all we can spare and say, "Best of luck."

When we turn east toward the Seine River, we find the people's spirits riding high on a wave of victory. Enthusiasm is unbounded. Work is practically abandoned. People line the roads, yelling themselves hoarse. Women throw kisses. Homemade tricolors of red, white, and blue hang everywhere. We are just past Le Mans.

In the towns, where homes and stores squeeze tight against the narrow sidewalks, people protrude from almost every door and window in a mass of smiling faces and waving arms. We can hear the cheers above the roar of our trucks. When a traffic jam stops us, a woman runs up to me with a bottle of wine and one of cognac and kisses me on both cheeks. Touched by her sacrifice, I almost cry.

Closer to the Seine, General de Gaulle speaks to the people, announcing the liberation of the capital. To the natives, Paris means France, and the floodgates of emotion open. The French people lose themselves in a tide of hysterical joy. The people come up to us and thank us no end. Again, I feel moved to tears.

One old woman in a second-story window spots a convoy of trucks loaded with German prisoners. It passes us, going the opposite direction, as we halt. The woman thumbs her nose as each truckload passes, on the way to POW camps in the American rear.

In another town, we meet some maquis who have armored vehicles and are American-equipped, even to their uniforms. Their only distinction is the bright red color of their caps and their tricolor armbands. They are off their vehicles, drinking cognac and kissing women. One well-oiled motorcycle rider wobbles uncertainly and falls slowly to the ground, out cold on the cobblestones.

## Witness to Barbarism

Welcome signs are plastered everywhere. One says, “Welcome at our liberty.” A woman pokes her arm into the cab and hands me two eggs, “Merci beaucoup,” she says with sincerity. Others along the way give me apples, tomatoes, peaches, and pears. The GIs in the trucks toss cigarettes, rations, candy, and gum all the way.

In the evening, we still must dig foxholes. There is no compact line between us and the enemy. Armored spearheads lead the way, but the Germans are all around us. Instead of hedgerows, there are open fields and occasional patches of woods for bivouacs. Scattered bands of Germans use them for hiding places—we find them in or near every place we camp. We disarm them, and if there are no maquis, we assign GIs to lead them to the nearest POW camp.

As we begin to move eastward, I say to Mac, “I’m delighted to be moving, even if it’s a damned nuisance to dig all those foxholes.”

“I don’t mind the foxholes, so long as we’re getting near Paris,” he tells me.



*Author with Lt. Joe Mike (right) at Arc de Triomphe, August 28, 1944.*