

CHAPTER 6

ORDERED BACK TO ITALY

***** WE'VE RETURNED TO ITALY *****

We were finally told that we were going back to Italy, up to the Gothic Line, I think. The Gothic line was a strongly held German defensive line in northern Italy that the American Fifth Army had been trying to break all the time we were in France.

In mid-March of 1945, the regiment was told it'd been ordered back to Italy. The day before we were to load out, there was a memorial service for all the old-timers from the Battle of the Lost Battalion. I was selected as the bugler. I had to practice hard as I hadn't played a bugle in months and months. It was a nice service, and today when I hear taps played, even on a TV program, I remember that memorial service.

At last we were ready to go. Early one morning, all units were taken to the docks and loaded on landing craft and taken from Marseille back to Leghorn, Italy. I don't remember spending the night on the craft so it must have only been a one day trip. From the Leghorn docks we were taken by trucks way up to near Carrara where most of the Italian marble comes from that is sent to the United States.

By this time, we had a few more replacements in our squad. The new recruits in Italy were just as they had been in France; not very effective and in need of more training. When we went into combat, we tried to make sure these guys kept close to a veteran. They lived longer that way. I had this one new guy that kept falling sleep on me when he should have been awake while he was on watch at night. Finally I had to scare the heck out of him. When I caught him asleep, instead of just calling his name or prodding him, I came up and yelled, "Kamerad" in his ears, and he came jumping out of that foxhole thinking the Germans were there. He thought he'd had it! After that, he never went to sleep on watch again. That was the only way I could cure him.

***** INTO THE GOTHIC LINE *****

The 442nd RCT including the 100th Battalion was assigned to the 92nd Infantry Division. It was an all Black division with white officers. It did not have a good combat record and had been taken out of the line and reorganized. It was just going back into combat when we were assigned. I personally never had any encounters with the Black soldiers nor did my company.

After a year of absence, our old squad leader Leonard Takasagi, came back into the only fight while I was there. It seemed that in every battle we'd been in, he had always been sick and in a hospital for one reason or another. Now he led us up towards the front of the Gothic Line. The going was very steep and rocky and the trails were along the edges of the mountain. You had to walk on the trail or you would go tumbling down the mountain side.

As we hiked on, there was a terrific gun barrage coming from all our ships out in the sea. There were hundreds and hundreds of them--crusiers, battleships, and everything else. As it got light, we could see them out there in the Ligurian Sea. All those ships seemed to cover the whole sea, and they fired an unbelievable barrage against the Gothic Line in an attempt to break it. The Germans were so deeply dug in that all this shelling hardly touched them. Anyway, we kept on hiking up this trail trying to get to the top of the mountain. Strings of machine gun tracers kept coming down continuously. They were red and orange and there were dozens and dozens of them hitting not two feet away from us. It was unbelievable! In spite of all that, we had to stay on the trail. Once we got to the top of the mountain, we kept slipping and sliding because it was still a little dark and it was a rocky mountain. The smell up there was terrible and we couldn't figure out what it was. Later we heard that a whole regiment of Black soldiers from the 92nd Infantry Division were pretty well battered up there. The story was they had gotten socked in by bad weather and the Germans wiped most of them out. Supposedly the officers goofed up when they should have known better, but I guess they were green with no combat experience, just taken up to the front and pushed into combat.

Anyway, after we got up there, we had to stay along the trail which was so very rocky that we couldn't dig foxholes. We had to build little rock mounds around us to get a little protection.

The first day we're up there I hear someone yell, "Hey Shimizu, take over." I said, "What the heck now?" I'm only a Pfc and I'm sick and tired of taking care of the men. A voice came back, "You take over." At this time I went to look for myself. On his first day in combat in a year, my squad leader, Takasagi, had a mortar shell land right in a little hole by his feet, and it blew the top of his head off as well as taking his face clean off. He didn't know what hit him. With him dead, I had to take over the squad again. It had been a whole year that I've been in combat, and I'm only a Pfc and I'm getting kind of peeved over the whole thing! In spite of functioning as the squad leader in lots of combat action, no one ever bothered to promote me, even to corporal.

It started getting dark and there were some Germans around the bend in the trail so that we couldn't go any farther. We held up as there was a German machine gun set up covering the only way we could go. There was also a barbed wire fence in front of a trench. After it was dark, the platoon sergeant told me to go check it out. I selected my bazooka man to go with me. A bazooka was a shoulder held weapon with a five foot tube that held a shell about four inches in diameter. This shell was designed mostly to pierce tank armor. When it did, it made a little hole when penetrating and then made a big hole after it exploded inside the tank. We also used bazookas to blow up bunkers as well as tanks. It was a wicked weapon, and that's why I took it along.

I finally decided it was time to go. I took two grenades in addition to my BAR. My buddy Hongo had the bazooka and one shell. We didn't know the lay of the land so we went up the trail very carefully until we got to the barbed wire fence the Germans had put in. At this point we had to crawl up over the chest high bank on the uphill side of the trail to get close to the barbed wire. It was covered with empty tin cans hanging on it. They made noise when the fence was touched and alerted whoever put the fence up. I started to crawl across the barbed wire fence and tin cans and suddenly a flare goes off and lit up the place bright as day. I was lucky as the bazooka man was an old-timer too. He had come overseas the same time I did. As soon as the flare popped, we both froze and didn't look up even though we were stuck in the barbed wired. As soon as the flare went out, we finished crawling across the fence at which time we were able to find the layout of the place. We located the German dugout with a machine gun so I told my buddy to fire the bazooka first and then I'll throw a couple grenades and we'll take off. Hongo fired the bazooka and

blew up that bunker which was made of big logs and rocks with dirt on top of it. I then threw my two grenades. That bazooka shell and grenades did a really good job on the bunker and the Germans inside. We hurried off as fast as we could in the dark back to our own positions. The Germans didn't come after us and there was no resistance from them at that time. We assumed that they were either killed or wounded.

The next morning, we were able to move north to Carrara. We went miles and miles and caught a few Germans that were in other dugouts. They came out and ran around awhile before giving up after seeing how many of us there were. Finally, we ended up in the town of Carrara, a town with lots of of pretty marble stuff. This is the town where they cut a lot of marble from the nearby mountains.

We stayed mostly in private homes for a few days. We didn't force ourselves on anyone and most of the Italians felt honored that we'd stay with them. My squad stayed in the house of Mister Renaldo Venucci, a marble cutter in the quarries. His family had all gone elsewhere to avoid the fighting. I could speak a little Italian so we could converse with him. He was gone about half a day one time and we found out that he'd gone to another village to get some chestnut flour. The next morning he personally made us pancakes from chestnut flour and they were good! I had never tasted them before and they were a real treat.

***** A GERMAN BULLET HAD MY NAME ON IT *****

We left Carrara and start hiking up another mountain. After we had hiked about half way up the mountain, a young German soldier, about 16 or 17 years old, came out of the woods, put his hands above his head, and surrendered. He then told us in German "Stop, don't go up anymore. My kamerads are up there." He could have evaded capture rather than surrendering, but I guess he was the smartest one of the Germans. At this time, many of the German soldiers were just young kids or old men because the German army had lost so many men in fighting the last couple of years.

After hearing this, we turned around and walked slowly down the the mountain for about a mile. Then we split up to go back up and to try to flank the German troops. When we got near to the top of the mountain, it was pitch black so we couldn't see any-

thing. We were on one side of the hill, and we really weren't sure where the enemy soldiers would be. The platoon sergeant told us to dig in here while at the same time the weapons platoon with their machine guns and other equipment dug in about 300 yards away. It happened that the German soldiers were near by and up the hill a little. These were smart old-time German soldiers, so they let the whole weapons platoon finish digging in below them. As soon as our boys were finished digging their foxholes, the German soldiers pulled the pins from their grenades and rolled them down the hill into the weapons platoon's area. The grenades blew them apart! They were really messed up, and we could hear men screaming, but after awhile we couldn't hear anyone screaming anymore, and it was quiet the rest of the night.

Early the next morning, Lieutenant Deluka told us to go on a contact patrol and see if any of the weapons platoon guys survived. Nine of us got out from behind the little mound of rocks where we had slept and came out into the opening where there wasn't a blade of grass to hide behind. We started towards the place where all the action had taken place. By that time we could see the hill very clearly. For at least fifty yards there was nothing, it was wide open. Like I said before, those German guys were good! They let us all walk almost across the open field. I was the last to come out and by that time, the lead guy was quite a ways up front. After we were all in the open, the Germans opened up. They were so close I couldn't see the machine gun bursts, but I heard the "Ba-Ba-Ba-Ba" as the machine gun fired. All I saw was the bullets hitting besides me, and I thought, "What the heck?" Rows and rows of dust were kicking up to the left of me so I turned to my left and all of a sudden my right leg just straightened out and over I went. I still didn't feel anything, and I didn't know I was hurt. By now, our one machine gun had opened up on the German position. When the firing finally quit, I stood up and tried to run back to our own men, but I fell flat on my face. Then the pain hit me, and I knew that one of the ricochet bullets had messed up my leg. That was the end of combat for me. It was really bad luck!

A combat aidman came out and dragged me over the the hill. The pain was terrible!! The German bullet had gone up my right leg against the main nerve, and it felt like my whole foot was blown off. The pain kept going "Bang, Bang, Bang" with each pulse and it was pounding in my "blown off" foot. I told the medic, "My feet! My feet!" so he took off my shoes and there was no wounds there. He finally ripped my trousers open and found blood, but

very little coming from my leg. The entrance wound was very small, but the pain was so bad that the medic gave me quite a bit of morphine that he had in his aid kit. Pretty soon, some civilian stretcher bearers from Carrara showed up and took me down the mountain. I still don't know why they came or how they got there so fast. I do know they had an extremely hard time getting me down that mountain as there were no trails, lots of bushes, and the slope was very steep. When at last they got me down, an Army ambulance was waiting, and I was loaded aboard.

Of the nine of us that started out on that contact patrol, two were killed and two of us were wounded. The other five were extremely lucky! Two weeks later the war in Europe was over, but I spent VE-Day in an Army hospital in Leghorn. I never did learn if any of the weapons platoon guys were still alive since our patrol didn't get to their position. Because I was wounded and evacuated, I didn't have anyone to tell me what the fate of those guys were. I hope there were some survivors.