

August 1986

Pete,

I am going to miss your father. I first met him 45 years ago this month.

As you probably know, he and I bumped into each other in Italy a few times. We could have met in Africa, but I didn't understand Army ways--while I was in Africa, and he did not know what kind of organization I was in, where it was or what it was called. Years later we found we were around Sidi-Bel-Abbes and Bizerte at about the same time. They were about 1,000 miles apart.

So, I thought I would write down for you the circumstances of our few meetings. Maybe it would interest you, and you might like it for your kids.

I spent my war in the 84th 4.2 inch Chemical Mortar Bn. Motorized. We arrived in Africa too late for your father's war by about a week. General Patton did not want us for Sicily as we were descendents of the British Stokes trench mortar of W.W.I., and no tanker of W.W.II wanted to even think about trenches. So we stayed as reserve outside of Bizerte.

Then we drove back to Oran, about 1,000 miles, waterproofed vehicles, got on a Liberty ship and, you guessed it, went back to Bizerte Bay where we got our brains knocked loose by the German Air Force for about 5 days and nights. Then off for Italy.

The Battalion Gunners and all support personnel went ashore on "D" day A.M., but since I had been given a truck to drive, I stayed on board with my truck loaded with ammo and Mortars. And there we sat for about three days in the Bay of Salerno while the rest of the Battalion went into the line as infantry.

Finally they hoisted our trucks out of the hold and put them into a little landing craft run by English soldiers. When my truck went down, a sailor told me to slide down "this rope." Wrong rope. I ended up in a landing craft about 50 feet from my truck. U.S.-British relations took a down turn for awhile, but we finally got sorted out. And so ashore and as time passes we get to January 1944. By this time I had learned how to read the bumpers of the U.S. Army vehicles. I was seeing more and more 1's with a triangle which meant that somewhere near was Bill Gibbons if I could find him. By this time our mortars and gunners were at Anzio and because of lack of shipping space, the rest of us were waiting our turn to go up. We were waiting for shipping space in Sophia Loren's hometown of Puezilli, outside of Naples.

I got hold of a command car and a trip ticket and went looking for Bill at 1st Armored rear which I had spotted near the junction of the roads to Cassino and Venafrò. I found a major who told me that my "cousin" Bill Gibbons was at Cassino. This ended my search for "cousin" Bill since we had just spent more than a month in the mountains east of Cassino, and I lost nothing at Cassino or in the mountains that I needed to go look for.

If you wonder about the "cousin" bit, I found it far better to promote myself to cousin level than to try and explain our true relationship.

-27-

Of course, I was also dismayed to find that First Armored had an "A" and "B". This confused me for the rest of the war.

Shortly after this they found room for us on the L.S.T. for Anzio. As you probably know, we in Italy were stripped of most of our support vessels after Anzio Landing. They were all sent to Europe ^{for} of Normandy.

I quickly settled into a routine whereby I made 2 or 3 trips a day or night to Nettuno. I specialized in Q.M., ordinance and Signals, first for my company and later for the battalion. In the middle of May I came back from a trip "downtown" and was met by two H.Q. officers. Did I know a major from 1st Armored Staff? Yes, I did. Did I know he was looking for me? No, I didn't. He, the major, had been at our C.P. and wanted someone to bring me over to his C.P. in the afternoon. What did the 1st Armored major want with me? Well, he's my cousin! I thought the two officers were going to lose their tempers over who was going to convoy me over to see Bill.

So Major MacMurray won out and took me over to see Bill. Of course, the fact that I did all my own driving, usually, was forgotten. So off we went and found Bill. Everytime Bill and I started to catch up on things, Major Mac cut in. Finally, Bill took me to his dugout so we could talk in peace!

Frankly, all the time we were at 1st Armored I was very nervous. They were located in a forest with all the undergrowth cleared so that there were only these big old trees. My group had bad luck in woods. We lost a dozen men in the first month of Italy because of tree bursts of incoming shells.

Years later I was telling Bob Harrel about this, and your father was listening. He seemed genuinely puzzled at my reaction to trees. He looked upon woods as cover for his tanks. I looked on them as potential deathtraps.

Shortly after our meeting we all left Anzio headed north. My unit was attached to the First Special Service Force. This got us the dubious honor of being with the first Allied forces to penetrate the inner city of Rome. What a scramble!! Who he? Facist, Nazi, German soldier in civies, Communist partisan, O.S.S.???

So we go from May at Anzio to late December at Lucca. Right after the opening of the Bulge in Europe, some Italian Facist Alpine troops hooked up with some German troops and cut a hole in the 92nd Division in Italy. The First Armored was called in, we were displaced from the mountains overlooking Bologna and moved about 100 miles west. An Indian group was rushed in, and after about 24 hours, the hole was plugged. In about 48 hours I went to the hospital with pneumonia. When I got out and was walking around the walled town of Lucca, I saw 1st Armored vehicles all over. I told my first sgt. I needed some time to get some strength back, so I got a pass and went looking for your father. I found his H.Q. in a villa on a hill, of course. By the time I got up the long driveway, I was a wreck. I ran into a sgt. who wasn't too keen on letting me see your father. I finally told him to tell the Major his cousin was outside. This got some results. We had a nice talk. Apparently I looked like death, because your father was upset at my appearance. A young second lieutenant came in and your father told him to sit down and wait until we had finished talking and then take me home. The Lt. said we was too busy. Your father told him that he wasn't busy until your father told him he was busy, and then he was to be very busy. Finally your father said he had things to do. He looked at the Lt. and told him I was to be taken right to my door and not to be dropped off some place at the Lt's. whim.

I went down and got in the Lt's. jeep with a Sgt. driver. I asked him what kind of an officer Major Gibbons was. He said that he was tough but fair. That it would be a better "bleepin" war if there were more officers like him. This was indeed a high compliment.

When I had arrived at the jeep, the Lt. was disgruntled and sarcastic. When I got to the front of the building we were quartered in, I got out, saluted the Lt. and thanked the driver. The Lt. said, "What have you got on the Major, anyway?" So, since I was 30 years old and he was about 21, it wasn't really too much of a contest. I said, "Nothing Lt., he is my cousin. But you can be sure that I will tell him about the interest you have in his personal affairs." The driver almost burst a blood vessel trying not to laugh.

As the jeep left it passed some of my officers coming back from noon chow. What an uproar. The jeep had pennants on it from 1st Armored Div. H.Q. and probably had a plate on the front with one or two or three stars on it. What a kidding I took.

A couple of weeks later I was fixing up our messhall with come tables so we could have some comfort, and there was your father. He was greatly relieved because I looked better by far than I had in his office.

No, Pete, I didn't tell him about the Lt's. smart-ass talk. I just thanked Bill again for the ride and said that the Lt. had dropped me right at my door. I figured the Lt's. big mouth would get him in enough trouble without my help.

Then we shifted back up into the mountains just south of the Po Valley where we were attached to the 10th Mountain Division. They were a bunch of real nice people, well-trained and spirited. But they had a horrible Division staff. They almost drove our little battalion crazy. We were getting ready for what was to be the last big effort, but we didn't know that.

One evening, just at the end of dusk, the damndest uproar slowly built up in the road outside the garage we lived in. We went out, and the road was full of tanks, T.D.s, half tracks, etc and all confused. We finally got hold of someone in charge, and I volunteered to take the lead tank down a road and down to the bank of the river and then south and then show them another road back up to the highway they were now sitting on. Everything work to perfection, and as they left at dawn, headed north to Vergato, which belonged to the Wehrmacht at the time, guess what I saw on the last units? Right! 1st Armored. But, what I didn't know was that Bill was in New Jersey waiting for a ride to Italy. So, in a few days we came down out of the mountains and across the southern valley of the Po.

We pulled into a courtyard of a huge building which turned out to be a wine warehouse. It was pitch dark, so I put my bed roll down under a huge empty wine cask.

Someone was yanking at me and telling me something about a Colonel. I finally got myself awake and wanted to know what the Colonel wanted. "Not our Colonel, a Colonel" said the messenger. "He's sitting in a jeep out front, and he wants you." So I put on my shoes, grabbed my pistol belt and helmet and went out the front door into the dawn. And promptly went into cardiac arrest. As far as I could see to the south was stalled bumper to bumper traffic, likewise to the north. Also, since we were at a T intersection behind me. We were taught never to clump up never, ever. And there were hundreds of vehicles and thousands of men sitting ducks for German planes or artillery. And your father sitting in a jeep about 50 feet away laughing at me

because he was reading my mind.

So, I staggered over to him, my combat boots unbuckled, my pistol belt over my shoulder, no helmet, hadn't shaved for a week, or washed or changed clothes. We never did when we were on a roll. No. time.

So, as usual, always conscious of correct military procedure, I said, "Jesus Christ, Bill, what the hell are you doing here? You are supposed to be in Montclair, N.J. waiting for a plane to Italy." Then I looked in the back seat. Whooo, boy!!! A major and a captain, totally devoid of humor, mentally going through the Articles of War and ticking off the applicable ones. Bill laughed harder, and my old friend the driver was again trying not to laugh.

So here is what brought your father and me together on the south bank of the Po River, at a little village named San Benedetto in Italy. He had been at Lindsay's in New Jersey only a few days before. He had gotten a ride, he had reported to his H.Q., he had attended a staff meeting and as the only officer with combat experience (It had lost all staff officers the day before.) he had been handed the 81st Armored Infantry which did reconnaissance for the main force. This upset me, and I made a short speech about letting some other officers get some valued combat experience. The captain and major were giving me dirty looks, so I took Bill across the road, introduced him to my company commander who got him some breakfast.

I never saw Bill again until Martha's Vineyard some years later and then again when he came to our house in New Jersey the day he went back into the Army. He was going to N.Y.U. to take some courses, and I met him at Newark Airport.

After we crossed the Po on the longest pontoon bridge I ever saw, the 1st Armored turned left for the French-Italian frontier, and the 10th Mountain kept straight north for Brenner Pass and Austria. We made the last amphibious assault of the M.T.O. War across Lake Garda. The 10th Mountain put some riflemen and a couple of our mortars in some DUKW's to attack some German Paratroopers.

We had been plagued by faulty 4.2" ammo which had reduced our morale to 0 since the shells sometimes exploded just after they cleared the muzzle of the mortar tube. We were firing with a 30 ft. lanyard, but this didn't suit the 10th, so "Bang" the boys hit a bad one and Sgt. Curly Weiner and his assistant squad leader were killed. "Curly" was bald and a bit older and one of the few original gunners from our landing in Africa in 1943. Then we found that the war in Italy had been over several hours, but the 10th had forgotten to tell us. Rotten staff work.

I'm afraid this isn't a very good job, but it is all I have, and E. Hemmingway I am not.

I am pleased that you are doing well. I was at the Point when I was 3 years old and again when I was 63 years of age. Neither time would they allow me to become a student. So many rules!

George B. Snowden
January 1987