

Group B: Battlefield Experience Materials

Directions: Using the primary and secondary sources below, learn about the experience of soldiers who fought in both the Normandy Invasion as well as the push into Northern France. After exploring these sources, you will write a letter describing training or deployment of U.S. soldiers in this campaign, so look for ideas and facts in these sources to help inspire your letter.

Letter, Curtis A. Kirkwood to Mrs. A. T. Kirkwood, 1944, Page One State Historical Society of Missouri

1st Bgt. Curtis A. Kirkwood
Co. C, 18th Inf. A. P. O. #1
40 P. M. New York
N. Y.

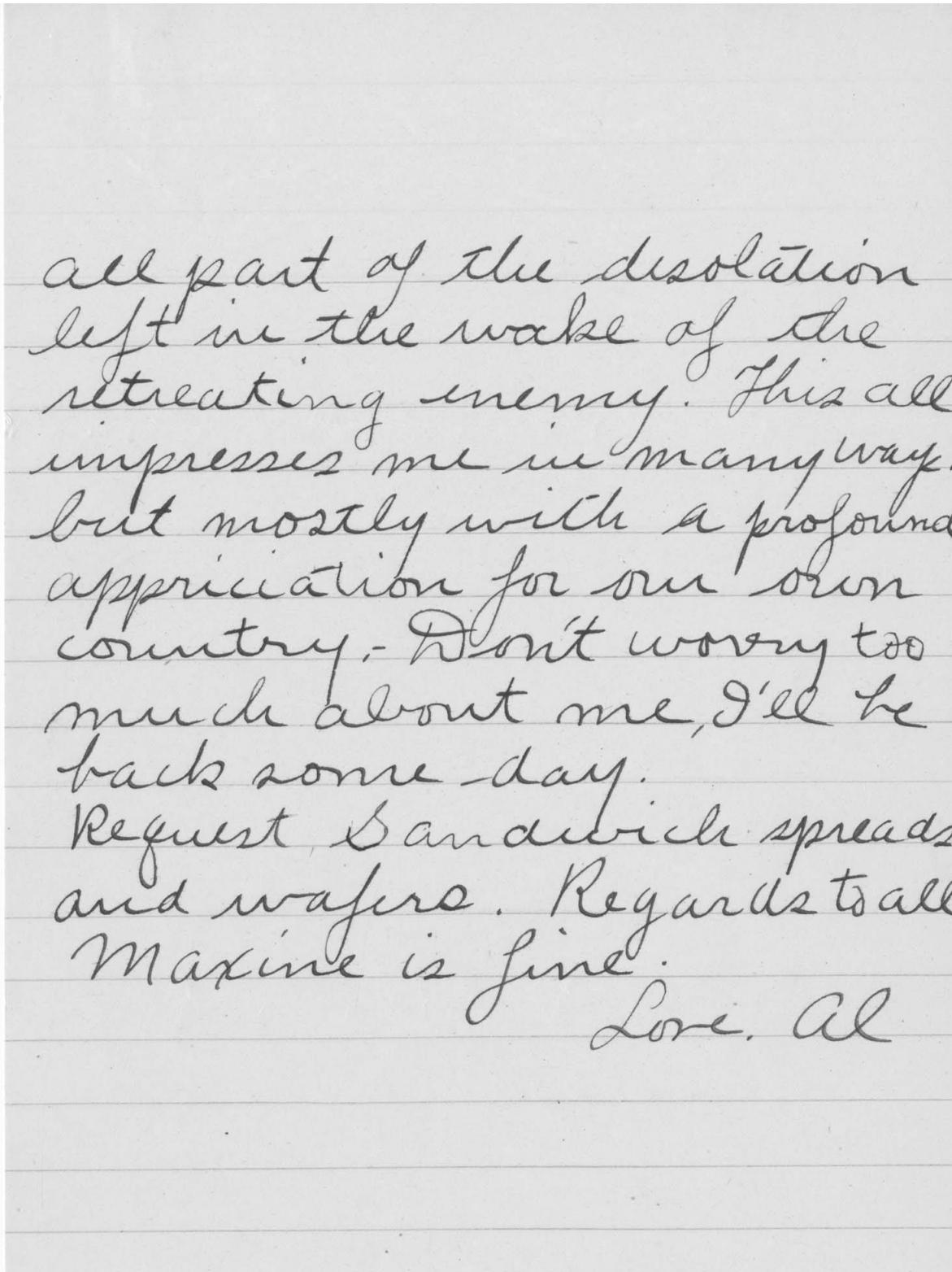
Dear Mother,

France is a beautiful country, even under these adverse conditions one cannot help but observe the scenic wonders and picturesque customs and habitations. There is evidence of the tragedy of war everywhere. - One can see it written on the faces of wandering refugees as they plod wearily along the road bravely trying to smile at the liberating Americans. The idle farm implements, unharvested fields, shell torn homes, -

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Letter, Curtis A. Kirkwood to Mrs. A. T. Kirkwood, 1944, Page Two

State Historical Society of Missouri

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and appears to be from the 1940s. The text is written in dark ink on a light-colored background with horizontal lines. The letter is addressed to Mrs. A. T. Kirkwood and is dated 1944. The writer is Curtis A. Kirkwood. The letter discusses the writer's experience in the military and his appreciation for his country. He mentions that he will be back some day and asks for sandwich spreads and wafers. He also mentions that Maxine is fine. The letter is signed "Love, Al".

all part of the desolation
left in the wake of the
retreating enemy. This all
impresses me in many ways.
but mostly with a profound
appreciation for our own
country. - Don't worry too
much about me, I'll be
back some day.
Request sandwich spreads
and wafers. Regards to all
Maxine is fine.
Love, Al

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Letter, Curtis A. Kirkwood to Mrs. A. T. Kirkwood, 1944, Transcript

State Historical Society of Missouri

1st Sgt. Curtis A Kirkwood
Co. 'C' 18th Inf. A.P. O. #1
c/o P.M. New York
NY

Dear Mother,

France is a beautiful country, even under these adverse conditions one cannot help but observe the science wonders and picturesque customs and habitations. There is evidence of the tragedy of war everywhere. One can see it written on the faces of wandering refugees as they plod wearily along the road bravely trying to smile at the liberating Americans. The idle farm implements, unharvested fields, shell torn homes - all part of the desolation left in the wake of the retreating enemy. This all impresses in many ways, but mostly with a profound appreciation for our own country. Don't worry too much about me, I'll be back some day.

Request sandwich spreads and wafers. Regards to all. Maxine is fine.

Love, Al

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Letter, Ralph Gilliland to Mrs. J. B. Gilliland, September 17, 1944, Page One

State Historical Society of Missouri

September 17, 1944
Somewhere in France

Mother - I have started several letters but somewhere in the process of finally getting them mailed I have failed. I will absolutely do better - promise - I have written several times about the wild enthusiasm of the French people on being freed from the Boches. (as they call them), and there must have been innumerable articles and pictures sent to the States, concerning the same subject, but it is still one of the uppermost things in my mind. It has been one of the most unusual experiences, permitted to mankind, to drive across France and see, and be a part of the liberation of a people. Very often some of us would be the first Allied soldiers

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Letter, Ralph Gilliland to Mrs. J. B. Gilliland, September 17, 1944, Page Two

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In some small community - You could drive thru an apparently deserted village, and by the time you could turn a jeep around and drive back, the streets would be lined with French, American and British flags, and the people would be swarming the streets, with enough flowers to deluge a jeep, or two - and fruit for the soldiers. Everybody wants to shake hands (an old deeply-rooted French custom, & have their little ones give you two-cheek kisses, & all thru the villages and along the roads the people (mostly women, and old men & children), line the roads, waving, giving the "V" sign & throwing kisses. One morning I drove thru a village just ahead of a column of tanks, which were going to the front. The people were just getting up and all along the

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Letter, Ralph Gilliland to Mrs. J. B. Gilliland, September 17, 1944, Page Three

State Historical Society of Missouri

street, doors & windows would pop open & the strangest assortment of heads & shoulders & people would appear. An upstairs shutter would fly open and an old man in a stocking cap would wave - across the street & down further a woman would wave, (her hair tied up in a cloth), a little boy would run to a garden gate with jacket on, but no pants, & start jumping up & down, girls in flannel night gowns, old people rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, mothers obviously interrupted while preparing breakfast, little girls with hastily grabbed flowers, trim young ladies, ready to go to work, would appear to wave, & cheer, & laugh. One woman ran up with a basket of ripe tomatoes & in

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Letter, Ralph Gilliland to Mrs. J. B. Gilliland, September 17, 1944, Page Four

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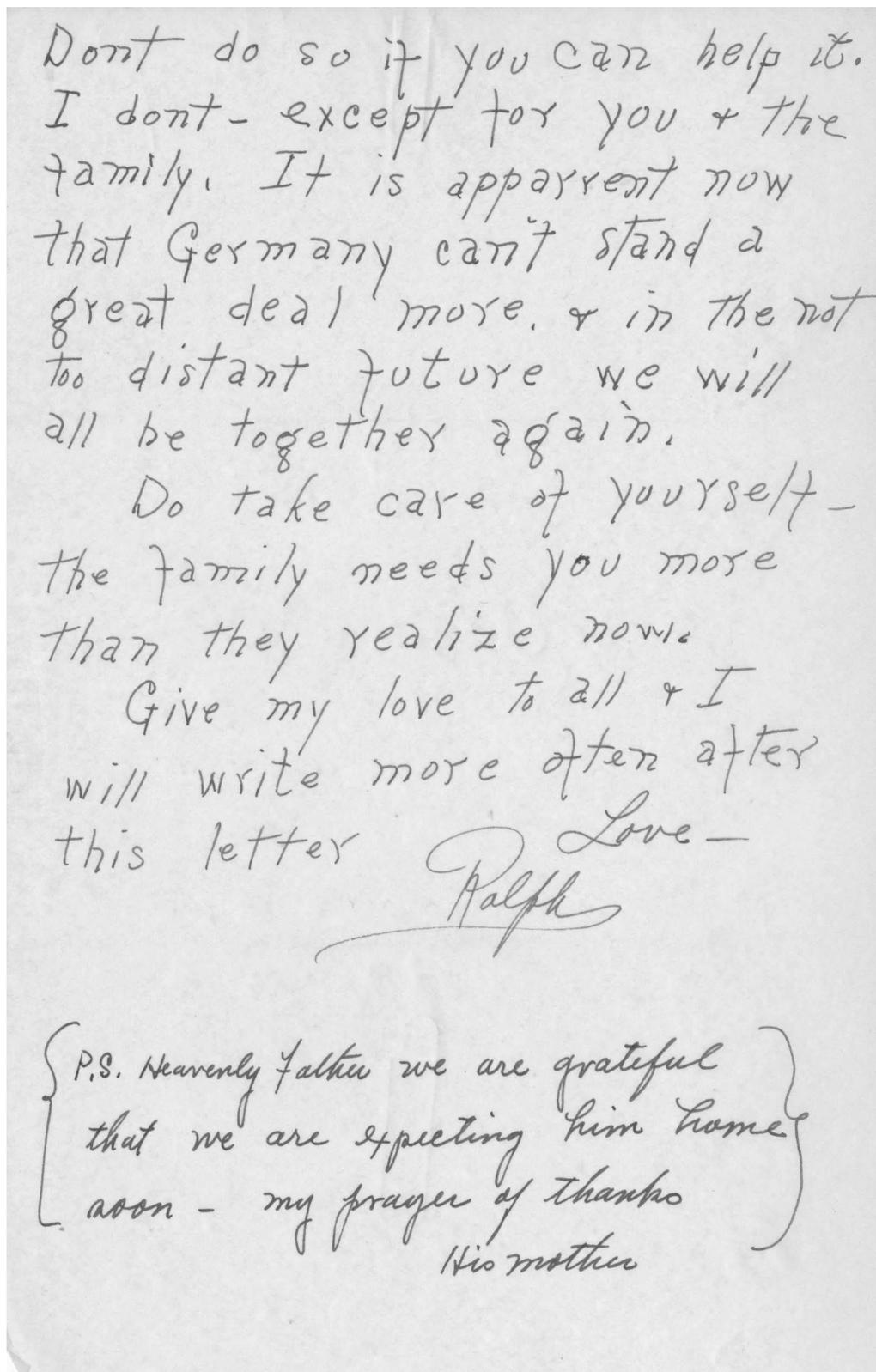
her enthusiasm, spattered us with some, as we drove along. I caught one tho & it tasted good - tasted good because of the feeling in the air - in the people - in the country that is France. The payoff came when we passed an old gentleman shaking hands with the guards outside the big iron gates of the bank. He had on a derby hat, an old-fashioned flannel night gown, & looked as tho he should have been wearing spats!

So you see life in France isn't all tribulation & discomfort. It isn't too soft but one becomes accustomed to the rough parts & in many ways has the advantage over those at home, who do not know when to worry, & so must be inclined to worry all the time.

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Letter, Ralph Gilliland to Mrs. J. B. Gilliland, September 17, 1944, Page Five

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Letter, Water S. Gunnarson to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, November 15, 1944, Page One
State Historical Society of Missouri

France
15 Nov 44

Dear Ma. and Pa.

Winter seems to have arrived in this part of the Old World. Last night it snowed an inch or so, and the white covering has lasted through all the gray cold day. However, it has not been quite cold enough to freeze the everlasting mud. The English weather has been widely criticized but the French autumn and winter will not receive any praise from me. When the sun shines at all it is only through a momentary rift in the endless clouds.

Service Battery is now the sole occupant of this town except for a detachment of six men (engineers who work the water pump). There is not a single building here undamaged and most are completely wrecked. Our CP (command post)

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Letter, Water S. Gunnarson to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, November 15, 1944, Page Two
State Historical Society of Missouri

is in the vaulted wine cellar of an old inn and the various sections of the battery are dispersed through the town, wherever quarters for men and parking space under cover for vehicles could be improvised. A room here, a cellar there, with salvaged stoves and a few armfuls of straw and we are grateful for the shelter, particularly when the unenviable lot of the doughboy is contrasted therewith. We can count on three meals a day, generally hot meals, too, while the infantryman, during an attack, may have to go for a day or two with no meals served hot, and some meals missed entirely; at a time when he is running, crawling and lying in wet fields and muddy fox holes. Some of the men caught a horse and at first amused themselves by riding it bareback, then, after finding a buggy, they engaged in a little buggy driving through the town.

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Letter, Water S. Gunnarson to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, November 15, 1944, Page Three
State Historical Society of Missouri

One section of the battery, the motor maintenance, "accidentally" shot a young pig. As usual it was because they thought a German was hiding behind him, or else the pig didn't know the password. One man butchered the porker, to make the best of the matter.

Thanks Mom for the second package (assorted candy bars) which reached me last week and served a most pleasant purpose.

Our votes seem to be gone with the wind again. Maybe next time will do it.

As far as I can tell from here and according to the "Stars and Stripes" the war news is very favorable.

Saw three truckloads of German prisoners going to the rear, as we neared the main highway yesterday morning and two prisoners were being guarded at our battalion CP when I stopped in later.

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Letter, Water S. Gunnarson to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, November 15, 1944, Page Four
State Historical Society of Missouri

Christmas will soon be with us again and I write these Christmas greetings as a stream of roaring tanks race past and I earnestly pray that this war shall have ended before this message will have reached you. There is no question of relating our efforts, however, until the Allied armies are completely victorious on the battlefields. May God be with us all, here, and at home.

S Kal

(Signed) Walter

Written by
Captain Walter S. Gunnarson 0278309
Service Battery 216th Field Artillery Battalion
35th Division - A.P.O. No 35
Postmaster, N.Y., N.Y.
and sent to
Mr. Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson
459-63rd St
Brooklyn N.Y.

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Letter, Walter S. Gunnarson to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, November 15, 1944, Transcript
State Historical Society of Missouri

France
15 Nov 44

Dear Ma and Pa

Winter seems to have arrived in this part of the Old World. Last night it snowed an inch or so, and the white covering has lasted through all the day cold day. However, it has not been quite cold enough to freeze the ever-lasting mud. The English weather has been widely criticized but the French autumn and winter will not receive any praise from me. When the sun shines at all it is only through a momentary rift in the endless clouds.

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Skål [Cheers]--
(signed) Walter

Written by Captain Walter S. Gunnarson 0278309
Service Battery 216th Field Artillery Battalion, 35th Division - A.P.O No. 35
c/o Postmaster, N.Y., N.Y. and sent to
Mr., Mrs. Frederick W. Gunnarson, 459 63rd St. Brooklyn, N.Y.

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George Wilson, *If You Survive, 1987* (excerpt)

"...One evening just before dark while standing in line for hot chow we got a real thrill. Four German fighter-bombers zoomed right over us at treetop level. We scattered instantly and dove for the nearest cover. But their targets seemed to be somewhere near the coast. In seconds just about every antiaircraft gun and machine gun within range opened fire and we could easily follow the path of the planes by the red glow of the tracers. Every fifth machine gun bullet was glowing white phosphorus to help the gunners see where they were shooting. The display looked just like the fireworks back home on the Fourth of July, but the planes were so fast and so low that they were gone before anyone could take good aim, and none of them appeared to be hit.

"About July sixteenth, our regiment moved northeast, close to Saint-Lô. Here we got the news that we were to become part of a special task force of tanks and infantry -- with no other purpose than making a major breakthrough of the German lines. This was the first large-scale tank-infantry team action ever undertaken by the Allies. The enemy in our immediate front was to be carpet-bombed before our jump-off, and then a large army of tanks and infantry would drive through any hole created.

"The crucial problem was the hedgerows. In Normandy, for generations the farmers had grown hedges to separate their fields, however small. They had started by digging small ditches around the edges of the fields. The earth was piled in rows between two fields, and over the years many of these dirt piles grew to become over two feet thick and three feet high. Hedges were planted on top, and their roots prevented erosion. Various bushes and trees also took root to form a barrier strong enough to fence in livestock.

"The Germans, of course, seized upon the hedgerows as the natural earthworks they were. They were excellent for defense. Easy to hide behind, the thick dirt embankment served as a very good shield against our small arms. Usually the Germans put machine guns near the corners of each field, giving them a crossfire that made a frontal attack by infantry nearly suicidal. Sometimes the poor infantry would fight a whole day to gain a few hundred yards -- and that only if they were lucky.

"The special tactics that were developed called for the tanks to break out into a field and spray the next hedgerow with their machine guns while the infantry walked or ran behind the tanks, using them as shields. When the tanks got close enough to the hedgerow they'd raise their fire a little, and the infantry would run ahead, keeping as low as possible, throwing grenades over the hedge. The tanks would plow through the hedges and the infantry would follow closely, then fan out to either side to capture any remaining enemy.

"Originally a tank could not handle a hedgerow very well, because the dirt mounds would tilt them up and expose their relatively vulnerable underbellies to the German panzerfaust -- a lethal, armor-piercing rocket grenade similar to our bazooka, capable of knocking out a tank. After a while a sharp steel scythelike bumper, fashioned from old train rails and the scrap iron from German beach obstacles, was welded to the front of tank about a foot above the ground. It sliced a chunk out of the hedge, which allowed the tank to keep low as it burst through and took the Germans by surprise.

"If all went as planned, we would mop up the enemy and continue the attack across to the next hedgerow, and the one after. The tactic seemed practical enough, but even in dry runs it was utterly exhausting to carry all our gear while running behind tanks, bathed in their hot fumes and the churned-up dust.

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George Wilson, *If You Survive, 1987* (excerpt) con't

"After several days of grueling drill in the new tactics, we were ready to go. Every day we got our gear together and waited for orders to jump off. That went on for about a week, because the bombers that were to do the carpet bombing were grounded by the rotten weather. All the waiting didn't do our nerves any good.

"Meanwhile, there were a few sidelights. One day I came upon one of my young soldiers who had his pistol in hand, apparently getting up the nerve to use it on himself. He was terribly depressed because he had received any mail from home since his landing France. I sat down and quietly talked with him alone for quite a spell until he was assured his family really did care, but that our mail was all messed up because of the fighting. The very next day he received a couple of letters, and that snapped him out of his depression.

"One day our ever-resourceful cooks decided to treat us. They said that a nice young cow had wandered into enemy mortar fire, and that fortunately they had been nearby and so knew it was fresh meat. The steaks were a marvelous change from regular Army rations. A little later, however, Captain Holcomb was somewhat [sic] embarrassed when a French farmer came calling and excitedly demanded payment for his slaughtered cow. He was turned over to a major from Military Government, and I suppose something was worked out.

"Another day Major General Barton, our Division Commander, held a regimental review to award medals for heroic actions since the invasion. As we marched by companies to the parade field some German fighter planes roared over at treetop level -- and men and heroes scattered in every direction, with some diving right through dense hedgerows. The planes never fired on us, and may never have seen us, so we resumed our march to review. We kept looking over our shoulders, but the planes never circled back.

"One of the men had some barber tools, so we took turns sitting on a stump for a quick haircut. I don't remember getting my hair cut again for the next eight months."

Secondary Sources

World War II: A Visual History

American Battle Monuments Commission

https://www.abmc.gov/sites/default/files/interactive/interactive_files/WW2/index.html

At the link above, click "enter," then click "1944" on the bottom of the page. Explore the materials available under the "Normandy Campaign" and "Northern France Campaign" buttons.