

CHAPTER SEVEN

World War II

"When I was somewhat younger, working on my famous Dresden book," writes author Kurt Vonnegut Jr. in a preface to his novel "Slaughterhouse Five," "I asked an old war buddy named Bernard V. O'Hare if I could come to see him. He was a district attorney in Pennsylvania (Northampton County). I was a writer on Cape Cod. We had been privates in the war, infantry scouts

"I got O'Hare on the line in this way. He is short and I am tall. We were Mutt and Jeff in the war We were captured together in the war"

Bernard V. O'Hare, Hellertown resident, Bethlehem attorney and Northampton County district attorney from 1964 to 1968 was captured with his friend Vonnegut in the later days of 1944 when the American Army was reeling from German attacks in what is now known as the Battle of the Bulge. He and Vonnegut were prisoners of war through the last six months of the war in Europe. Both survived the bombing of Dresden, the terrible firebombing raid that destroyed that ancient German city of the Elbe.

O'Hare was one of thousands of native and transplanted Northampton Countians who served during World War II and were shipped to every corner of the world from 1942 to 1945.

"I was captured on the 16th of December," O'Hare remembers. "It was snowing like an SOB." He and Vonnegut were infantry scouts roaming behind German lines gathering information. O'Hare remembers being in a foxhole when a German shell landed nearby. He was knocked unconscious and when he came to, he was staring down the barrel of a German rifle.

O'Hare, Vonnegut and others marched into Germany four days, without adequate food, to a rail center, were stripped of their boots and Army greatcoats and stuffed in boxcars.

"We started singing Christmas carols," O'Hare remembers, "and it was still snowing. It was one hell of a winter."

O'Hare recalls always being near starvation while a prisoner in Germany. He was in a group of prisoners taken to Dresden in March 1945 and he survived the terrible bombing in an old slaughterhouse. Later the American prisoners were forced to remove the thousands of bodies from the rubble of the city that had been called the Florence of the Elbe.

Charles S. Smith, Easton attorney and resident of Forks Township, was a 19-year-old infantryman in 1944, serving with the 26th Infantry Regiment of the First Infantry Division. He went into the front lines in France, fought during the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, and later in Germany. He was in Czechoslovakia with American troops on the last day of the war.

"It was a hellish experience, full of self-doubt and fear. You're always mixed up," he remembers. His most vivid recollections of the war are the "whispering sounds" of German artillery as it came towards the American positions. He also remembers the dead "in grotesque positions, with their heads blown open. You wonder when it will happen to you. The longer you were in it, the better the chance."

Smith joined the First Division near Aachen. The night the German attack began the Battle of the Bulge, his unit was transported by truck to Belgium.

"War was a monotonous thing. It was battle after battle after battle," Smith remembers.

Christmas morning, 1944, Smith found himself facing a German attack.

"You could see them coming 100 yards away," he says. "There was a strange sense of irony about that day."

Smith recorded his experiences during the war in letters to his mother, Mrs. Hetty K. Smith, 233 N. 11th St., Easton. The following are excerpts dating from the early part of 1944:

May 5, 1944
Camp Blanding, Fla.

Dear Mother,

.... We have been having a pretty rough time of it so far staying up until midnight, three of six nights and not quite so late the other nights. We went on a speed march—the first day we were out here we did it. After hiking out here almost eight miles (got up at 3:30 to start out, putting in a good day's work and then going on a 5-mile speed march in one hour in the middle of the afternoon

Your loving son, Charles

June 11, 1944
Fort Meade, Md.

Dear Mother,

Well, Mother, I finally have gotten to Fort Meade after thirteen months. It still hasn't

dawned on me yet as to the real reason we have been sent here. It seems just like another camp. But it is for one reason I am not sorry. I'm in the Army—as I certainly must be or somebody please wake me up soon—I might as well get in on the main show. That's what we've been training for and spending Uncle Sam's money for . . .

This is a nice camp and a wonderland after Camp Blanding. Naturally the equipment we receive and will receive is the very best—the stuff you get in training camps is all class B material.

They have German and Italian prisoners here. But the Italians are hardly prisoners since they can go anyplace on the post without any guards. They wear our uniforms with a long green patch sewed on the left sleeve on which Italy is written . . .

Your loving son,

Charles

June 21, 1944
unknown

Dear Mother,

Well, Mother, we have been shipped from Meade as I expected and just about the time I thought. We have arrived at our destination okay. I really am not allowed to say where. As you can see on the envelope our mail is censored and everything we do is strictly controlled. I can say, however, that we are someplace on the eastern coast and it is possible we will be shipped again in the not too distant future . . . We have a pretty easy life here doing mostly bunk fatigue . . .

And mother, please don't worry about anything because there is really nothing to worry about. This is happening everyday to lots of people. So just pray a little at night as I shall be doing for you and everybody at home.

Your loving son,

Charles

July 14, 1944
place unknown

Dear Mother,

We have arrived all right and sound here someplace in England. Seeing the country life is about the most beautiful sight imaginable . . .

July 25, 1944
Somewhere in France

Dear Mother,

.... Going thru the French country and small towns with very many streets was much like the pictures you see in the papers of troops riding thru with the little children and old men and women waving to us. Signs of recent battle are evident here and there.

Today we gave some of our rations to some little French girls who always come around at mess time. They are so polite with their "merci monsieur

With loads of love,
Charles

August 18

Dear Mother,

.... We saw a USO show last Sunday and it was wonderful. Edward G. Robinson, Dinah Shore (the singer) and a lot of other stars were there. Dinah Shore sang song after song as we hollered for them—all in all she sang twelve. I had to sit on my helmet to see and there was a big dog under my legs (who got caught in the crowd of GIs and couldn't get out) but it didn't make any difference.

... I sure would appreciate it if you could send some candy bars. I don't know how long it would take, but they would taste good no matter when they arrived

Your son,
Charles

Aug. 15, 1944
Somewhere in France

Dear Mother,

.... Some of the fellows have been souvenir hunting the last couple of days. They walk into camp with just about everything cause there is quite a lot of equipment left by the Jerries. They can keep it for all I care.

Charles

Sept. 3,
Somewhere in France

Dear Mother,

.... Still moving and not having a very hard time of it either. We get plenty to eat but K rations can and do get tiresome

Your loving
Charles

Sept. 20, 1944
Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

Well, we're here at last in their own backyard and we will keep on going until we have them for good and for all.

Everything is okay and nothing to worry about. We do a lot of griping at night sometimes, but something would definitely be wrong if we were satisfied with everything

Charles

Sept. 19, 1944
Somewhere in Belgium

Dear Mother,

. . . . While I was in France I went to Paris one day and slept in a real hotel in a real bed and had a real bath! Another fellow and I went and really had a wonderful time. Saw the Eiffel Tower, La Louvre, Tuileries and our hotel was just off the Place de la Concorde. It certainly is a wonderful city, but run down from lack of care

Charles

Oct. 4, 1944
Somewhere in Europe

Dear Mother,

The days are getting shorter now and with them seems to come the rainy season. There is hardly a day that it does not rain and everywhere it is muddy again. We have been issued some of our winter things since it really gets quite chilly at night. We certainly were glad to get them.

Everything is fine with me as usual and nothing to worry about and everything to be thankful for. Aside from the shelling we are not having it too bad now.

Good Night Mother

Charles

Nov. 13
Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

. . . . It snowed again last night and this morning. The ground and trees were just blanketed with snow. I don't know what we would do without our overshoes—the mud is ankle deep. At first we slept in our foxholes with tops over them made of logs and mud. They were okay

for a while—we put pine needles on the bottom so it was soft and quite warm. But after a few days of rain, drip, drip, drip—it began to come through. So now everybody is sleeping in their tents. The weather is really pretty cold and slobby—quite a distinct change after 14 months in the south. I'll write always, just as often as I can and when I can get the chance, but in the cold weather the hands get a bit cold. I know you'll understand.

The candy sure tasted good in the package you sent.

Your loving son

Charles

Dec. 8, 1944

Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

I am at a rest area now for a while and having a wonderful time Boy, mother, we are staying in a jam factory—imagine it if you possibly can—and sleeping in the store room. It is nice and warm and dry with the very pleasant aroma of apple jam

Charles

Dec. 22, 1944

Somewhere in Belgium

Dear Mother,

Here I am again, Foxhole Charlie, fine as a bird or should I say beaver because I dig holes and cut down trees for a roof. I am not suffering much. I have a good foxhole for a change and made it so it doesn't leak—yet. Last night it snowed three or four inches—but I was warm in my hole and inside my sleeping bag.

Had a swell rest back in the town we were in. But I guess the war would never be over if we stayed back there all the time. Our job is up here, not in the rear.

With lots of love for my dear mother

Charles

Jan. 1, 1945

Somewhere in Belgium

Dear Mother,

Happy New Year, Mother

Mother, I don't want you to become worried if you receive a telegram about my being wounded. I was nicked just a tiny bit in my left shoulder from a piece of shrapnel. It was so slight I'm not going back to the hospital for it. I thought it would be better to let you know

*beforehand so you won't get excited or alarmed. I don't even think it will leave a scar
I'll close now mother, with prayers in my heart for you at home.*

*Love to a wonderful mother
Charles*

Jan. 20
Somewhere in Belgium

** Dear mother,*

Snow, snow—Russia has nothing on this part of the country. The wind blows continually making snow drifts above the knees. My hole was completely snow bound this morning and a buddy trying to find my foxhole fell right in the door

Charles

Feb. 11
Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

I've been busy again as you can read in the papers what we've done. The snow was pretty miserable, often waist deep in snow drifts. Right now it's turning to rain—most of the snow here had gone—leaving some of the poorer roads a sea of mud

Charles

March 11
Somewhere in Germany

Dear Grandmother and Grandfather,

Just a few lines to let you know I am well and everything is going alright How's grandfather? I often recall the countless happy times we had. How wonderful were those days.

Been fighting in towns and small cities lately for which I am very grateful. At least a bed or mattress can be found to sleep on. The food is better because in most instances the roads are intact and the chow can easily be brought up.

*Your grandson,
Charles*

March 14, 1945

Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

The weather is beautiful today and it is hard to think of war. I don't know where in the world they found them, but I saw a couple of GI's throwing a baseball around . . . and the countryside is wonderful.

I am enclosing a clipping from the Stars and Stripes about the 26th Infantry and also part of the 3rd Battalion. I was with that group with my platoon leader as we explored many of the streets which had not been cleared of Jerries. However, we left about a block before they encountered a Jerry tank . . .

Charles

April 3, 1945

Somewhere in Germany

Dear Mother,

Been busy—really going as you probably noticed in the papers because I know you follow our progress. Things seem to be picking up and I hope continue that way . . .

The country is beautiful—the roads go up the mountainsides gradually and when you finally come to the top it is as tho someone rolled away a huge curtain and there before you lays green fields and tiny villages, smooth rising hills which dissolve into deeply rounded basins. I can't describe it. It is untouched, most of it now, except for the industrial cities which are huge masses of wreckage . . .

Boy it is really surprising—these people. They all hate Hitler, none of them are Nazis, they are all glad you come! Yet every house has pictures all over of German soldiers, all kinds of literature about Deutschland, Nazi flags under piles of clothes which failed to hide them. They beg us not to destroy their homes, ask if you will sleep in this or that room instead of the other room because it's their room. How can they expect pity or respect when their boyfriends or husbands were the ones that directed the artillery shell that killed a good buddy of mine—my platoon sergeant and a lot of my other friends. What a sugar tongued people they are—act like it's all a big mistake—they never meant any harm. It makes me so mad every time I think of it. Cowards, every one.

Charles

May 10, 1945

Somewhere in Czechoslovakia

Dear Mother,

It has finally happened, Mother. The war in Europe is at last over. We had been expecting it for several days. Even when it was rumored to be over we attacked 12 miles on foot cross country, but we didn't hit anything at all, except a few scattered Jerries waiting in little towns for us—their officers told them to stay behind and wait for us. Even yet, columns of Jerry vehicles loaded down with German soldiers and some civilians continue to pour thru our lines. Many are pulling behind artillery pieces of all sizes and descriptions and what a welcome sight.

Peculiar as it might be, I don't feel so much like celebrating—there probably is a lot to celebrate though. It was a gradual disintegration, there were a few pockets here and there but you would feel them falling apart piece by piece.

Last night it was good—we had the lights on until twelve o'clock, playing Rummy and listening to good soft American music on the radio. You could look out the window and see something that before the war was commonplace, but now seems so out of the ordinary: looking out the window at the other houses in the small town, almost all the windows were brightly lighted and a sight. We had wanted to see that for a long time—even jeeps flashed their headlights full beam and lighted up the roads. Before, all the lights a vehicle at night used was two small luminous dots on either side.

When the war was officially declared over we were about halfway on our objective traveling up a muddy road thru some woods. I Company received the news first since our communications were out with the C. P. They were on our left flank a few hundred yards and when they heard the news—went wild. They fired machine guns, M-1's, carbines, pistols everything up in the air. Just emptied all their ammunition. Of course, we had not heard anything about it so when the firing started we all dove for cover and set up our guns to cover the flanks. Even the tanks began to get into position. We waited for about a half hour before one of our patrols contacted I Company and found out the news. Everyone was happy and no one griped about how heavy his load was—we all just talked, shouted, laughed as we marched back to the town we had jumped off from.

Yesterday, a Russian slave laborer told two of our riflemen that in the next town ahead of us lived a German officer who was disguised in civilian clothes. So off the trio went. The Russian found the house and they entered. Sure enough here was a tall, well built civilian whom the Russian pointedly said was a German officer. With a perfectly placid countenance, the German replied there must certainly be a mistake for he was no soldier but just a plain ordinary civilian. The Russian offered a bit of persuasion that the Germans always have understood—perhaps the only method of understanding capable of them. With his fists he beat the German down and the coward finally admitted he was a German officer. They searched his house and found a machine gun and plenty of ammunition hidden under the floor. So here comes the foursome now—first the German officer in civilian clothes and a German helmet on his head which was ridiculously small for him, then the proud Russian wearing a big smile, gripping a pistol pressed into the Heinie's back and finally the two riflemen. When they came closer—you could see why the Russian was smiling so happily. They were making the German sing an old song of theirs that they sing in all the pubs—"Ach, der lieber Augustine—Heil, Heil, Heil!" And so he sang this ridiculous tune all the way down the road into town past the civilians he had strutted before months before, past the many slave laborers he had beaten and bullied. Somehow this was a symbol of the great super-superior race—the invincible German! I must close now Mother, mail should come more regularly now, I hope. I'm hoping it will be soon.

Love to the best of mothers

Charles

*May 15, 1945
Somewhere in Czechoslovakia*

Dear Mother,

.... Yes the war is over now in this theater, and already plans are being put into execution that have long ago been drawn up. As yet I do not know just exactly what the Army plans to

do with me for the period that I am over here. I am going to do a little studying with the help of the Army's educational plan

The weather has been beautiful for over a week now and it gets very warm in the afternoons. We are in a very small villa and a sort of valley—hills surrounding us on all sides covered with different colored fields of different patterns. Yesterday I went for a walk up on the hillside and walked almost all around the town and just enjoyed the beauty—the landscape is beautiful No guns going off or machine guns rattling could be heard, no tension in the air—nothing but peace and quiet

Your son Charles

May 26, 1945

Somewhere in Sudetenland
(Bristadt—this tiny villa)

Dear Mother,

. . . . Now that the fighting is over here we will be able to go "garrison" again. I mean we have cleaner clothes, probably wear overseas caps instead of helmets when we are on duty

Charles

July 14, 1945

Ansbach in Germany

Dear Mother,

In *Stars and Stripes* a few days ago it said that the First Division was going to be one of eight divisions to stay here for occupational duty. I hope it stays that way mother. I want to come home awful bad, but I know you would rather I stay for Army of Occupation than come home for a few days and then go to the Pacific. As far as the educational program—it is supposed to get under way in August and I can hardly wait. I've made up my mind more than ever that I want to go to Lafayette after I get discharged

Charles

July 18, 1945

Ansbach in Germany

Dear Mother,

. . . . Mother, when you read in the papers that the 26th Infantry was leaving for the states it meant the 26th Infantry Division. I'm in the First (1st) Division, 26th Regiment

Our division is staying for occupational forces—but actually there are not many of the First Division men left, all the old men, those that fought in Africa and Sicily, are on their way home. And now their places have been filled by men with not enough points from divisions that are

being broken up now. My Purple Heart never did come through—just one of those things the Army gets mixed up

Charles

Sept. 10, 1945
Jirsdorf

Dear Mother,

. . . . I have a bit of a surprise for you mother—the 13th of the month I am being shipped with most of the rest of the company with 45 and up, to the 79th Division who I think are supposed to leave for home in the later part of October—and I have all fingers and toes crossed it will be sooner. These three days are dragging by—I'm so impatient to get home again. It's almost impossible, but thank our God it's true. How long and hard I've prayed for it and how many times I thought I'd never see it. Thanking God is the least I can do

Charles

To: T/Sgt. Charles Smith
From: Mrs. Hetty K. Smith

Dear Charles,

Your letter of Nov. 18 received today about your delay. But surely it cannot go on indefinitely. So try not to feel badly.

From the way I interpret the redeployment time table in the papers, the 90th (Division) is the next to ship out. And I am praying its right.

I have not heard from Jack since his return to Memphis. He will not be discharged until after Christmas. But I really feel you will at least be home by then We have just had our first snow and it really is cold. I attend Ladies Aid Meeting this afternoon and will go to the Star this eve and, I know it's not going to be long before you are here. With love and prayer for a fine boy,

Affectionately, Mother

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