

June 12, 1945

Happy Birthday Darling

My dearest darling,

Well, I wrote once today – this is, I wrote after 12 o'clock last night. Today is really your birthday, and I've been thinking about you every second of the day (I usually am anyhow!) I certainly hope that something I sent gets there – I sent different things at different times. You know, if I were home I'd even bake you a cake too! – Not “pretty wonderful” either – “really wonderful!!”

You've asked me quite a few questions in your last letters and now I can answer some of them. Mail isn't censored anymore. First of all, you asked me to tell you everything that has happened since I came over. Well that's a long story, but since it's your birthday & I feel closest to you when I write, I'll try to hit the “high spots”. To start with, there are quite a few dates and places that I've forgotten. Days in combat & traveling seem to run together as if there were no time at all. I know that I was only in the town where I was hit for something like an hour & yet it seems not that it was a week or more. I can remember exactly how the stones that I was climbing were set in the wall!! So someday I'd like to look at this letter & sort of remember it as my diary – O.K.? (of course you're entitled to the privilege of reading my diary --- because if I was somewhere, you were there too --- anyhow!)

As I remember, it all started in November. One cold morning we were all rushed out of bed at 2 o'clock – dressed, ate (good chow, so we knew we were in trouble) – final clothing inspection (at Ft. Meade) for our overseas vacation. Of course everyone was expecting it, but nevertheless, when the call comes you begin to have that empty feeling in the pit of your stomach. The first sensation is relief – the waiting is over. Then you think of home. If only there was one more pass, if only I could hold you one more time & tell you that I would be all right, maybe you need one more assurance of my love. But no pass, no call, no cable, --- “loose lips sink ships”. There is only one thing to do – write a few lines home & sweat out the train! While you're writing those few lines, everything inside you wants to say that you're leaving --- that's the only reality --- yet that's the thing that you can't say! You want this letter to be special. You want to say something that will really show that you're ready to go, but that you also realize that you're leaving behind everything that means anything to you! So you write a very ordinary letter & mail it, just as if everything was schedule --- and of course it is. Nothing much to do until the trucks get there. Finally they arrive & things are busy again: full-field, duffels, check, check, check – until you're so angry that you partially forget what's happening. (Sounds like good psychology now that I look back on it.) We could scream & curse at the stupid regulations & let off a little steam. Listen, tell your mother that I screamed some, but I didn't curse! (as I recall now.) Truck to the train & we find out that 20 or 30 rumors that we're heading for Bayonne on the P.R.R. that runs through Holmesburg!! (John's hometown in Philadelphia) Our P.O.E. (port of embarkation) was New York & I remembered that you and I were always planning to go there together. As they say in the

& across several other portions of my anatomy.) I felt very lonely & yet I couldn't help looking forward to the trip. After being with you since coming up from Texas, the loss seemed twice as sharp!

Off train, another check & across onto a ferry. Across the river – there's the ship! (are you sure I'm allowed to tell you even now?) Our outfit was first on board. Our company acted as fun crews and M.P.s. Problems right away. The "Limeys" (British) didn't want us in the turrets when alerts sounded. "Mommy's Little Johnny" almost got trampled to death as he was taking a tarp off too slowly, as the "real gun crew" jumped into the turret from about 10 feet up!!

Well, I'm strange, I guess – I enjoyed the crossing, alerts and all! Before we left N.Y. Harbor, we were already using the terms "back in The States" & over here" – as though we'd been away for twenty years. Not much to do except pull guard & when the alerts sounded, get out of the way of those Limey gun crews!! Two meals a day – not too good, Limey chow, everything boiled together – tea at each meal (instead of good old G.I. coffee). Your mother would have liked that. Tell her for me – s'il vous lait – (great French, non?) An uneventful trip except for one violent storm which rattled all the gear hanging from our bunks! Bit even the "evasive action" – 60 degree turns every half hour – dumped us out of our bunks. I think that if I were captain of a U-boat, I'd wait for that regular "evasive action" move & blow the Queen Elizabeth into the nether regions (as your father would call "hell")!!

One morning we found ourselves off the coast of Scotland, in a cove near the Firth of Forth, near Glenock. There were tow small aircraft carriers riding at anchor & several cruisers. The landscape was really beautiful – hills that slipped right down into the cove – everything seemed to be dark blue-green, cloudy most of the time. But oh, when the sun burst through for a few minutes it looked so – well, you give me a word! We'll have to go back there sometime! I really think that we will! We rode at anchor for half of the day & our Limey gun turret crews broke out – what else? – some Scotch & even some champagne. Knowing how your mother would frown, I imbibed only a small portion of the Scotch. By the way, we "crossed" in 5 days. Then small boats, L.C.Is - & we headed to shore. The town looked exactly like you would picture a Scottish town. A huge medieval castle high on a large spire of rock, overshadowing everything! We boarded trains & spent the first half hour telling one another how superior ours (trains) were "back in The States". As I remember it, old as the trains seemed, they were fast. So we came down through Scotland & England to Southampton in only one day. One day in Southampton & then the Channel crossing in a ship (believe it or not) that had been used to ferry American troops in WW I!!!

We landed at Le Havre, which had been "pounded to pieces" & got our first view of what we could expect from than on in! Landed in France that night. A light snow was falling & it sort of hid some of the ghastly ruins – quite a few burnt our vehicles & even an up-ended American bomber --- guess what is was – a B 24!!! Four miles and we were at a "Replacement Depot" down a road lined with Lombardy poplars, more gutted buildings – but no people!!! Even a cemetery & some graves with helmets from WW I. I thought of

my father & yours – maybe they were once on this very road! We left the depot the next morning & boarded the famous “40 +8s” & started for (?) – a big question mark. (ed. Note – the reference to “40/8” denoted the capacity of either forty men or eight horses). As we now know, we were headed for Belgium – Verviers – where we joined the “Checkerboard” 99<sup>th</sup> Division. I reported to a captain & was assigned a platoon and believe it or not, to a “patrol” on my first night. I was in shock – but not really. Now I know why. The captain saw my records & thoughts that my time with the 102<sup>nd</sup> had been in combat & that I had just been reassigned!

The next day, in the afternoon, all hell broke loose. We were caught in an artillery barrage – really a duel. We were near some “dragons teeth” and T.D.s (tank destroyers) were help up. We jumped off & fanned out. Two Tiger tanks were making a run from our rear – trying to get behind the protection of the dragons teeth. We couldn’t stop them. Another patrol & we ran into bad trouble – B.A.R. (Browning Automatic Rifle) man and the sergeant leading the patrol were chopped to pieces. We were taking fire from a bunker to our right front – in the row of dragons teeth. I threw my first grenade in anger & it helped some. We lost 7 people out of the 30 that one afternoon!

I’m getting a little tired, but I should write some of this down ---

We pushed on in the attack & ran into trouble at Bergheim – this time we called the P 47s in on the Tiger tanks. We were maneuvering for a smash at Cologne. We sliced across the Cologne Plain south of Dusseldorf & hit the Rhine (river) – one of the first outfits to hit the Rhine. Somewhere along there we passed through Rolf’s outfit (104<sup>th</sup> Inf.) (“Rolf” is John’s brother, Rudy Tafel) We took a town on the Rhine and began to duel with the Jerries (Germans) across the river. They had direct observation & poured the mortar rounds to us – shell after shell. Sgt. Horge “had enough” & they had to send him back to Regt. We were short on leaders and some guys (me included) moved up a rank.

One morning we were “alerted” from an ‘alert’ (sounds crazy, doesn’t it?). We flashed out and took 4 or 5 little towns. Now things began to get a little hazy – but one morning a colonel drove up in a command car and said something big had happened!!

Back to battalion for orders & briefing. We were ordered to push off 60 miles down the Rhine to a town called Remagen. The Armored had captured a bridge across the Rhine intact!!! The bridgehead was packed with armor & artillery duel was going on with the Jerries on the other side of the Rhine. We walked into hell. It was a Sunday – March 10 – I’m pretty sure – so many smashed vehicles, so many mangled GIs. Casualties among the MPs directing traffic across the bridge were higher than 30 percent, we were told later.

We crossed on foot at 2 o’clock that afternoon. The T.D.s stayed behind and threw counter-battery fire into the hills. I remember trotting from girder to girder reciting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: .. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me..’ Shells shrieking and moaning, everything crumbling, everything bursting before our eyes – men, jeeps, everything – nothing was invulnerable.

And yet most of us got across. But 10 out of the 12 men who joined the 99<sup>th</sup> (Division) with me were gone by this time, and 5 of them got it at Remagen.

In Erpel across the Rhine, we ran into 88 ackacks (anti aircraft guns) – barrels parallel to the ground. As we looked back they were trying to blow up a pontoon bridge north of the Ludendorf Bridge. We went north along the Rhine to widen the beachhead. I kept thinking of you as I walked and it helped to steady me. I thought of home on a Sunday, warm dinner, church, clean clothes, quiet, and peace – while all around this world that I'd been sent into was exploding and burning – absolute chaos – churning!

The Jerries came in and strafed the bridge time after time but we were up in the hills out of their range with problems of our own. We took a small town and stayed for half a day. Monday we moved into the attack again. We were supposed to go into reserve but our planes had mistaken the 393<sup>rd</sup> Regiment for Jerries & strafed the hell out of them! We moved up among the dead & used their foxholes! It was pitiful. Most of the dead were very young and were so terribly torn up. It's hard to see your own dead when you know that a mistake was made & eagerness to be the first (across the Rhine) caused these boys to be too far ahead of their schedule & unmarked!

Our next attack was to cut off the Autobahn. The Luftwaffe didn't want us to achieve this goal & they were very busy "sticking it to us" every time we moved. The Luftwaffe also decided they would "prefer" to have the bridge at Remagen down – so they threw everything they had at it. It seemed that nothing could withstand their attack. It also seemed that nothing could fly through our ack-ack. The sky was full of bright red puffs alternated with dark black puffs of smoke. It was beautiful in a ghastly sort of way!

We moved out the next day and from then on attack! Attack! Attack! The Jerries were off balance & the bridgehead had to be widened. On day, maybe March 15, the bridge collapsed and we were on the other side of the Rhine! The Jerries made one last coordinated drive to push us back across the Rhine. We responded by counter-attacking even though we had no 393<sup>rd</sup> in reserve. We took a small lumbering town – Van Kuey was killed there. He and I were together since Texas. We lost our platoon leader, so I had to take that job! A Jerry tank came in from our rear & we were pinned down. We got a couple of Bronze Stars for getting a couple of Tigers (actually, they were running out of fuel when caught them!) We took that town & I went into a house to watch a "recon car" that was in a little creek bed – Wham! A round came through the house & Spencer was killed. I called for a medic across the road & a Jerry blew him apart as he tried to cross the road. His helmet with its big red cross on a field of white went cartwheeling down the middle of the road.

We moved on in attack to the Wied River – that's another place I'll never forget. I got my Belgian 38 there. We pushed on. Jerries by the hundreds were surrendering now, but as we started to cross the river (about as wide as the Pennypack Creek at "the rocks") all hell broke loose. Everyone got across except a machine gunner loaded down with ammo. He went under and drowned. The next platoon started to cross so I stayed to direct them. They all got across except two, when a Jerry sniper opened up with a "burp gun". He got

those two & I hit the water near the other shore & flopped behind a “pebble” – at least that’s how small it seemed to me. It was still dark & he was in the brush along the river. Every time I’d move he’d cur loose & water would splash right in front of my face. Where was my platoon when I needed them? I lay there, my hear was pounding & I knew he could hear it & it annoyed him – so he tried to stop my heart from pounding. Well to make a long story longer, finally I inched around my “pebble & plowed a half dozen rounds into the trees where I thought he was. He was there. When we picked him up the next day he had 2 rounds in him & was babbling about the Geneva Convention & rights of P.O.Ws.!!

We moved out to take another town – a big town – house to house fighting’s a dangerous business. Town after town & I was beginning to have chills & fever & a deep chest cold. It rained every day. We started to run across Nazi P.O.W. camps – some British (R.A.F.) & even some American G.I.s (from the 28<sup>th</sup> Division captured during the (Battle of the “Buldge”). At Moosburg we ran into an armored division guarding an underground factory. I went into a burnt out barn & climbed up to reconnoiter – Wham! A round hit the wall that I was climbing up. I thought that it was the end of me. When the dust settled I got up, with only a slight stinging sensation in my right ankle – a burning. I really didn’t know that I was hit. Well we got back to TD & I had trouble getting aboard. What I really thought was that I’d chipped a bone in my ankle. When I took my boot off in the evening, the ankle started to swell, so I put the boot back on to cut down on the swelling. I still didn’t realize that I had a piece of shrapnel in my ankle! I was feeling pretty badly – all the time by then – but we were riding T.D.s & I figured things would clear up in a few days. I began to worry on patrols, though. I’d go our all right, but coming back I’d be exhausted. This never happened to me before & I’d led more night patrols than anybody in my outfit! One day I went in to check on the chest cold & found out that I had a raging fever – 104 degrees, so they said! They decided that I’d been hit & the ankle was gangrenous & that I had pneumonia. They called it “walking pneumonia”.

They fairly pumped me full of shots & actually gave me a bottle of Scotch & told me to drink as much as I could! (Do you know that was the first Scotch I’d had since Scotland!) Well I just dozed along “drugged to the gills” waiting for the “meat wagon”. I wasn’t fully conscious & when a nurse came along, for a while I’m sure I thought that is might be you!! Later she came into the hospital tent & said that I wanted to see some identification. She was laughing, but do you know, when they got me ready to leave, she came in with my 38 & some letters she’d saved from the “scavengers”. Lots of nurses, orderlies, & particularly doctors have their “souvenir weapons” – taken from someone like me, “drugged to the gills”!

One day we got into a C-47. I was feeling good so I rode co-pilot! The planed was full of litter cases – guys hit so badly that I just couldn’t lie down. My leg was swollen to twice its normal size & hurting, but nothing like these poor guys! Finally we landed on a field near Paris & took a bus to Eaubonne where I was in the hospital. Then the days are hazy for a while & when I felt better they seemed to run together, one pretty much the same as another.

About all that's left to say – for my diary – is that one day I got our --- and then you can just start the story all over again – check, check, check --- catch a bus, jump on a truck, board a train (40 +8s) – back home to my outfit & quite a nice homecoming party! This account is very sketchy & inaccurate, but it's the best I can do! I'll tell you more when I come home – O.K.? Satisfied?

Say, I sure did write a lot – I've been up all night. But a night away from you might best be spent writing to you. I feel very close when I'm writing or re-reading your letters.

Well to finish this part of the story & answer another of your questions, which was "What's next?" The shift to the Pacific is beginning. Some of us will be transferred to other units, come back through the States, than to the C.B.I. (China, Burma, India) Others will go to the Med (Mediterranean) & across the Atlantic & thru the Canal. I can't say which is my route – I just don't know.

Well, love, I guess I'll pack it in. I'm tired, but do you know that it almost seems that we were together tonight, doesn't it?

Goodnight Darling  
All my Love,  
John