

Christmas Day, 1944
Somewhere in Belgium [Chardeneux]

Dearest Liz:

Well, Christmas Day turned out to be another beautiful clear day. Your husband, contrarily, has been in a terrible humor all day. I suspect that it's because he is upset and fed up that he is not with you. Also there is a certain amount of nervous strain connected with this war business. . . .

The war is funny. The destruction of war is as remarkable in its absence as in its presence. The impression we have at home of a countryside completely laid waste is not true at all. There is always a great deal more time and space where it is safe than there is where it is not. . . .

Our Belgian farmer continues to be very cooperative and hospitable. Most of us are sleeping on the floor of his two small front rooms. . . . All the boys are impressed with how hard the daughter, Angéle, works.

The farmer and his wife and other old people in the town have never seen a typewriter and are now busy watching Hanna type out a requisition on it. . . .

I had hoped to meet Angéle Breda on my visit to Chardeneux on April 16, 2014. Unfortunately, she died in 2012, but her son Marc Breda was there, living in the house where my father and his comrades once stayed. The barn my father described has been converted into a community café, but retains the original structure. Marc called Suzanne Vierset, a longtime friend of his mother, who joined us at the barn/café. Suzanne was only eight at Christmas in 1944. She remembers the chocolate the soldiers gave the children, which was momentous because they had not seen chocolate since the Germans invaded in May of 1940. And she remembers the room in her house where no civilians were allowed, which must have served as battalion headquarters that week. Small children at the time, Suzanne and a friend were able to sneak a peek and saw the walls lined with maps.

Marc disappeared into the house and emerged with a framed photo of his mother as a young woman, and another of her in later years tending sheep. As I read them the description my father had written of Angéle, Marc and Suzanne confirmed her sunny disposition, which she retained all her life. I was thrilled to make this connection to my father, sitting in the barn/café and easily able to picture it as it was, with stacks of hay filling one end and cows just on the other side of the wall.

[Chardeneux]
26 Dec 1944

Dear Sweetie:

. . . It is now nine o'clock and I have been going continuously since about seven thirty this morning. I organized an SOP (standard operating procedure). . . . Afterward I had sick call. Then went up to the front lines to see how the aid men were doing in the companies. . . . Getting back here was like getting completely out of the war. We really have it made where we are. . . .

The whole aid station gang has been watching Angéle all evening. She is spinning wool yarn with which she knits herself socks and sweaters. She has also knitted herself a dress! . . .

Jim was in charge of the 15-man medical detachment, nine of whom were out on the front lines as aid men during combat, one with each platoon. The three companies of the 275th Engineers were each supporting one of the infantry regiments of the 75th Division, namely the 289th, 290th, and 291st (references to Combat Teams, or CTs in the battalion reports refer to the infantry regiment plus any supporting units such as a tank battalion or engineering battalion). These green regiments were facing their first combat as they were parceled out to other divisions and arrayed along the defensive line of the road between Manhay, Grandmenil, Érezée and Hotton. Facing them were the divisions of the Sixth Panzer Army, whose mission was to fight their way northwest.⁴

On December 27, the Headquarters company relocated to a crossroads just north of La Forge, a collection of houses a little north of Fanzel, where they ate their Christmas dinner a few days late. Jim got slight frostbite on his toes, which he attributed to his own carelessness while in the motor convoy.

Somewhere in Belgium [La Forge]
28 Dec. 1944

Dearest Liz:

Sorry I couldn't write last night . . .

We hated to leave our "home" and they hated to see us go. The women bawled all over the place. We were really one big family there. Last night we stayed [in Heyd] with an interesting woman . . . one of those strong-charactered looking people. . . . She was living alone with her three little boys ranging from three to six. She took us (eight) in with the greatest good cheer and what she had was ours. She was one of the cheeriest souls I ever saw. She'd have to be, because I guess she's had a lot to bear up under.

Tonight we are in the kitchen of a cross-roads pension [in La Forge or Les Aunais], whose owners have taken off for God knows where. It is very comfortable but the home like atmosphere is missing. . . . We are in beautiful wooded country where it looks like the trout ought to abound.

We are getting now so that we move with relatively little effort and great efficiency. . . . The discomforts of war may be terrific but there are also a surprising number of comforts. For one thing, the H & S mess sergeant doesn't like to serve cocoa, because most of the men bitch about the absence of coffee when he does. So we carry a good supply of cocoa, milk powder, and sugar and are able to have cocoa several times a day when we have a place where we can make hot water. When we don't, your husband has been forced recently (oh the shame of it!) to drink coffee! . . .

What's the news from the home front? What are the ration shortages now? Are you getting cigarettes? We are still getting very few—were supposed to get five packs per man a week, but aren't getting them. Hershey bars are non-existent. We got four "candy bars" ten days ago, none since. Of course, I imagine when we are a little less active, extra-curricular supplies will come thru a little better.

Just took time out to make up a little cocoa. — My fifth cup today! That's two and a half quarts! . . .