

University of Pennsylvania

"Departing for the Ends of the Earth to do My Humble Part: The Life of William A. Rich,  
Volunteer Ambulance Driver for the American Field Service, 1942-1945- A Study of  
War Letters"

By

Alice Stewart Hickey

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Faculty Advisor: Professor Jonathan Steinberg  
Thesis Director: Professor Kristin Stromberg-Childers

*“Who shall nerve heroic boys  
To hazard all in Freedom's fight,—  
Break sharply off their jolly games,  
Forsake their comrades gay  
And quit proud homes and youthful dames  
For famine, toil and fray...  
When Duty whispers low, Thou Must  
The Youth replies, I can.”*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

To my grandfather, who left me an amazing story to tell

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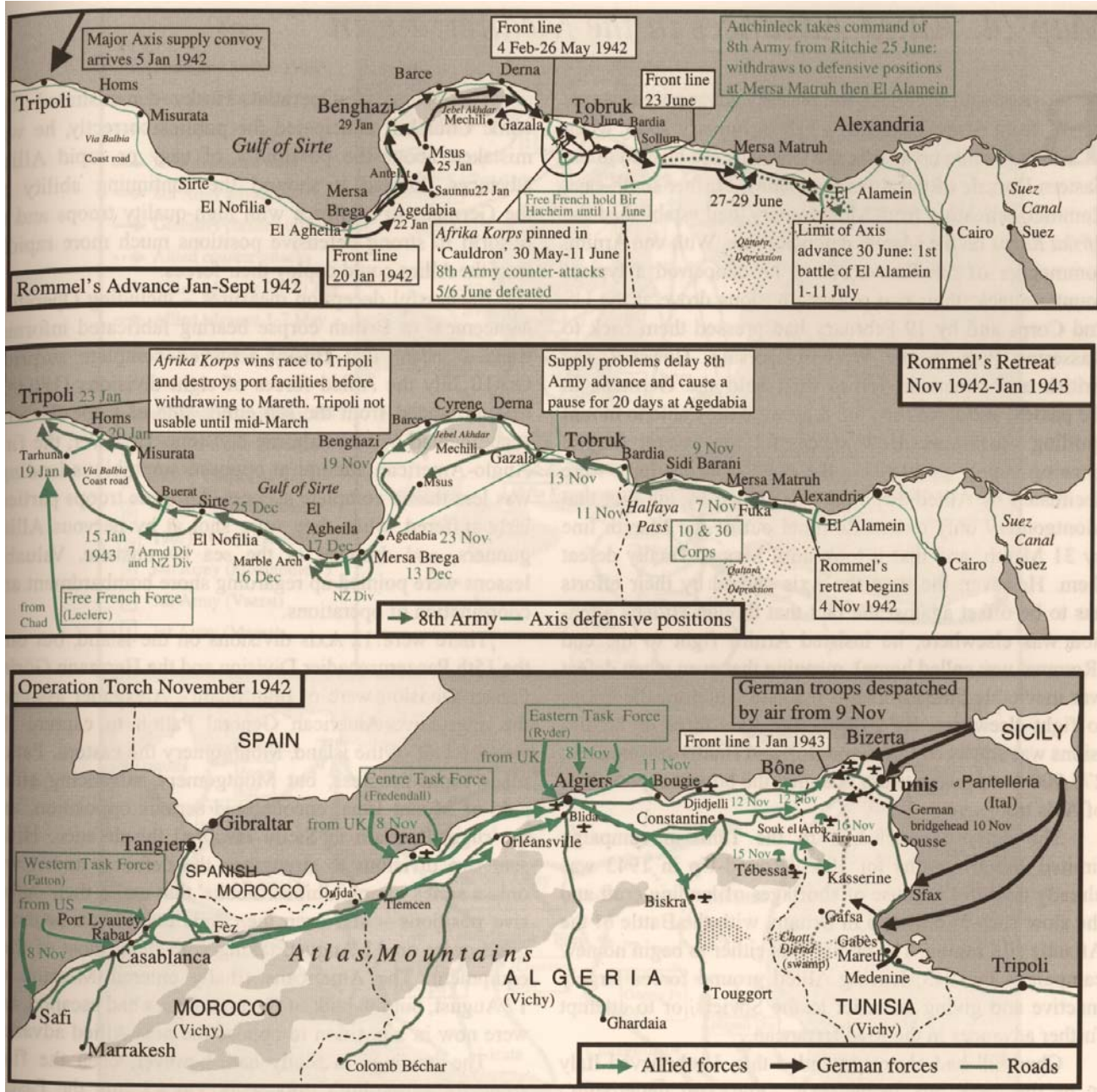
At Penn, Professor Stromberg-Childers has been much more than a thesis director for me. She always had a warm smile to alleviate my angst and an easy manner that made our thesis section into a group of supportive peers. As for Professor Steinberg, he has been my guiding star- I would not have been confident enough to finish this project without his investment of time, interest and assistance. He gave insightful comments for every draft I turned in and wise words when I was most in need of them. Also, thanks is due to Rachel Ormanský, my peer editor, who has been constantly encouraging and always helped me choose the right place to put my commas.

Lastly, I would be remiss to not thank my parents who taught me diligent efforts and intellectual curiosity never go unrewarded.

## List of Abbreviations

‘60 Beaver Street:’ American Field Service Headquarters in New York City  
ACC: Ambulance Car Company  
Ack-Ack: anti-aircraft artillery  
ADS; Advanced Dressing Station  
A.F.S.: American Field Service  
APO: Army Post Office  
BLA: British Liberation Army  
CCS: Causality Clearing Station  
Cov.: Company (British Form)  
DDMS: (British) Deputy Director of Medical Services  
GH: General Hospital  
GHQ: General Head Quarters  
HQ: Head Quarters  
LFA: Light Field Ambulance  
MCO: Medical Command Officer  
MDS: Main Dressing Station  
NCO: Non-Commissioned Officer  
NZEF: New Zealand Expeditionary Force (usually referred to as 2NZEF)  
RA: (British) Royal Army  
RAMC: (British) Royal Army Medical Corps  
RASC: (British) Royal Army Service Corps  
RAP: Regimental Aid Post  
Recee: Reconnaissance  
Vol.: Volunteer

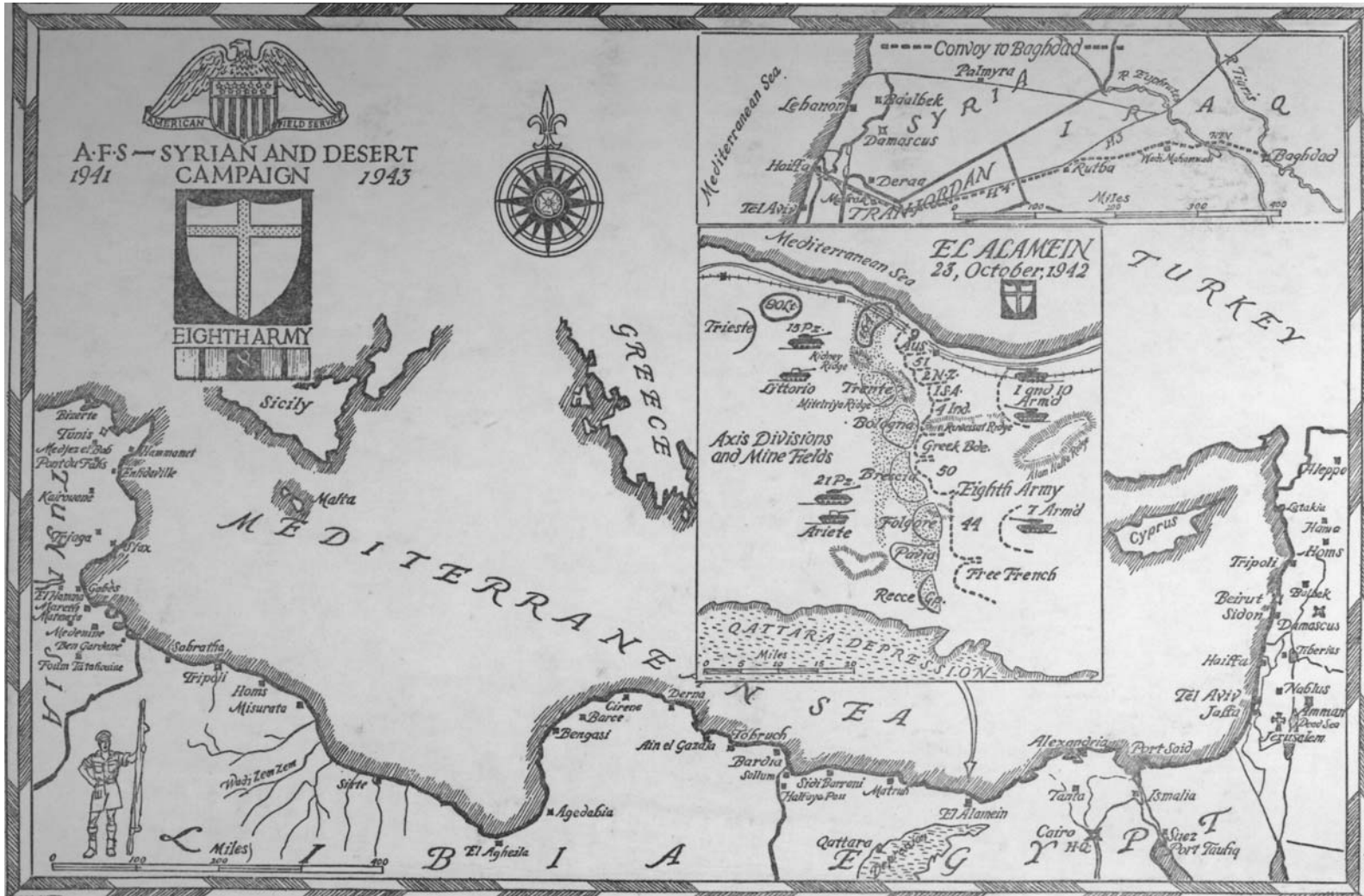
## Maps: North African Campaign



Map of the North African Campaign. The top map shows General Erwin Rommel's early successes. The middle is the movements of the Eighth Army but does not show the battle of Tunisia, in which Rich was involved. The bottom map shows the movements of the American-led Operation Torch in Western Africa.

[Folloy, Martin H. *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Second World War*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Map 23 "The War in North Africa 1942."]

## Maps: North African Campaign

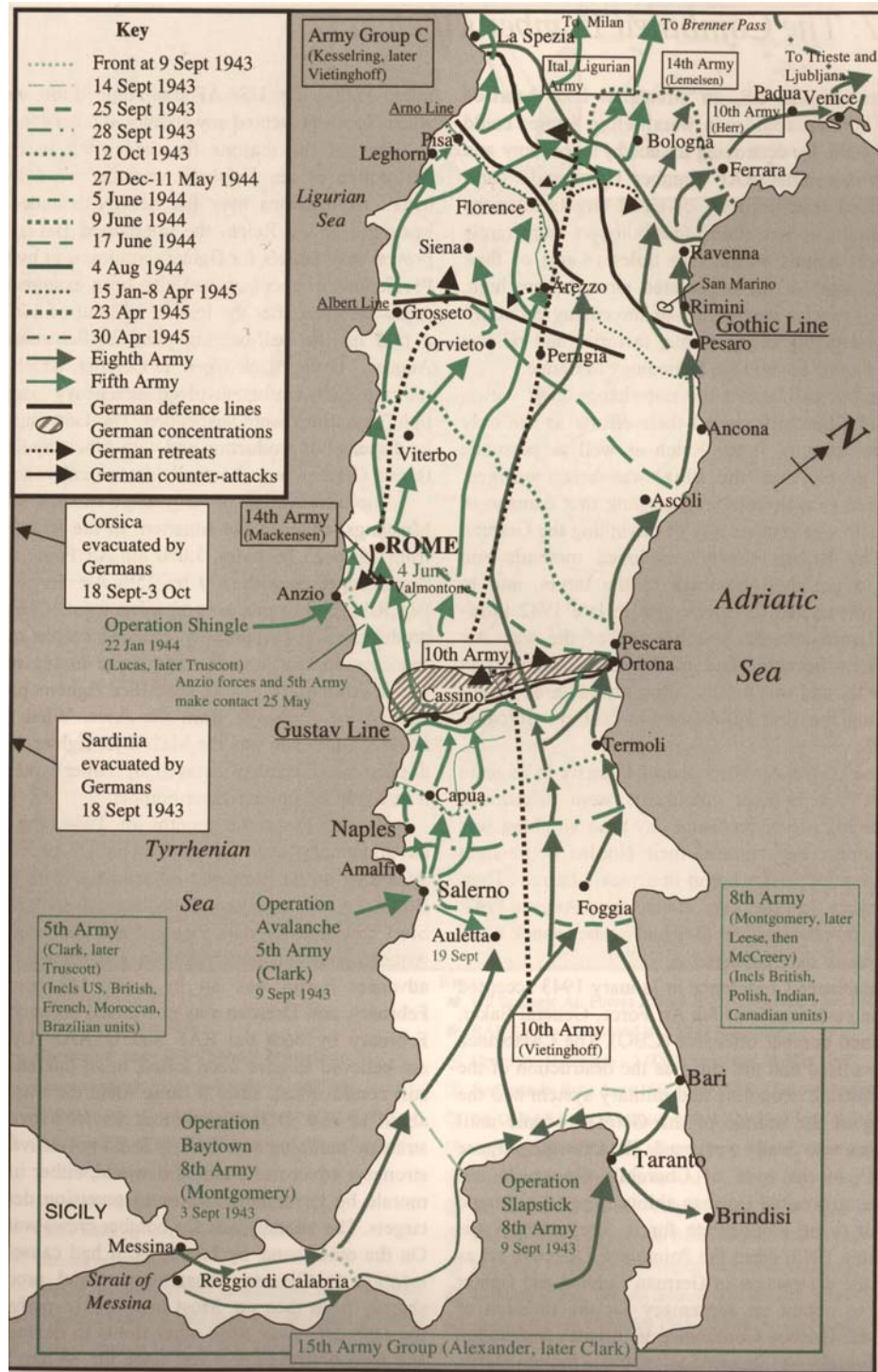


Map of the places the A.F.S. served in North Africa. Note the detail of the Middle East, showing the places in which A.F.S. men trained before they joined the British 8<sup>th</sup> to fight Rommel, specifically Baalbek and Haiffa. In the top left hand corner the map also shows the ribbon that each A.F.S. driver was awarded and the Eighth Army 'patch' which became a status symbol within the A.F.S.

[Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. New York: The Platen Press, 1956. Inside of front cover, left-hand side.]



## Maps: Italian Campaign



Map of the Entire Italian Campaign, showing both American and British Movements.  
 [Folloy, Martin H. *The Palgrave Concise Historical Atlas of the Second World War*. Map 26 'The Italian Campaign 1943-45']



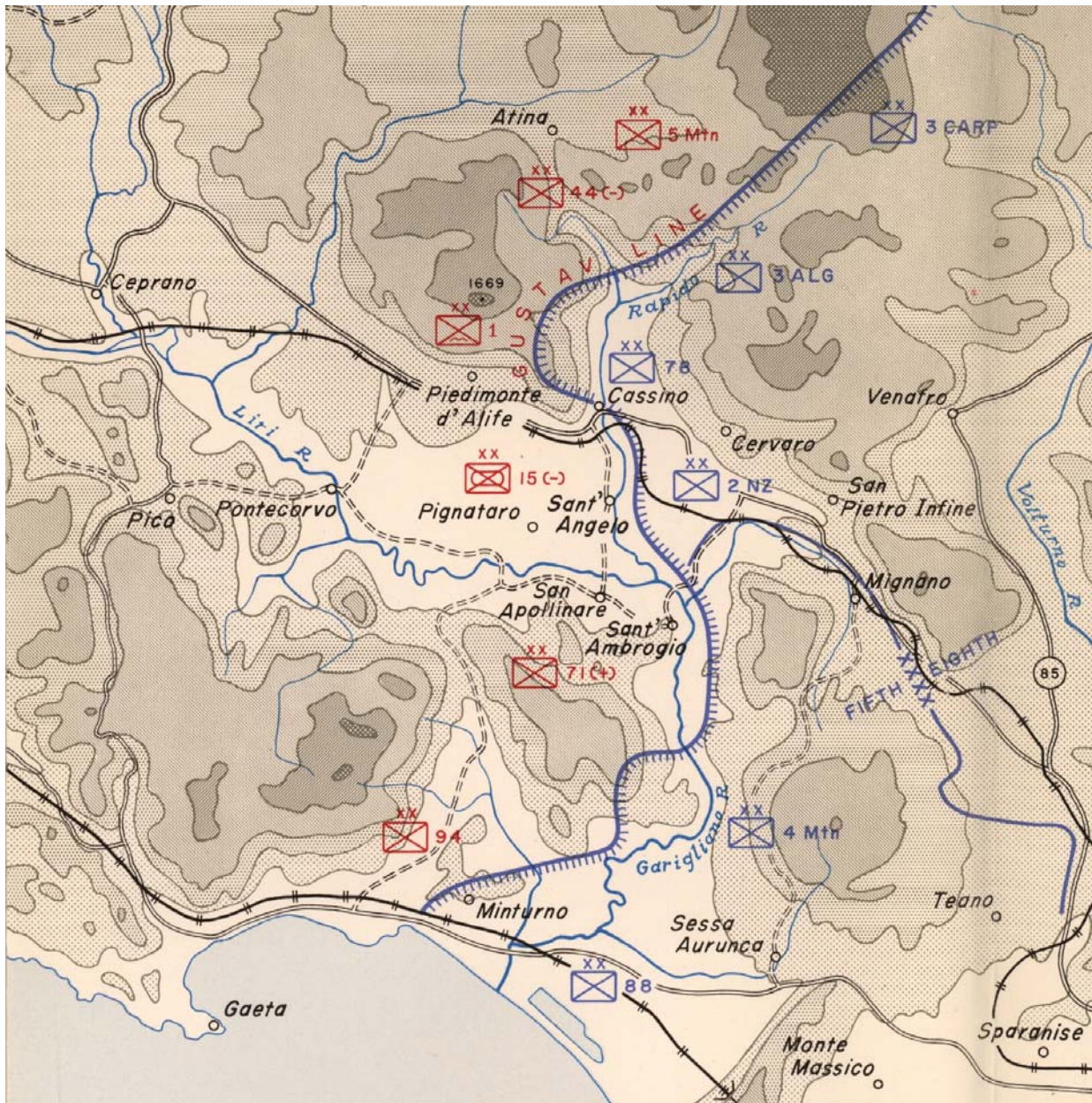
## Maps: Italian Campaign



Map of A.F.S. positions within Italy, again showing the patches and ribbons awarded to A.F.S. drivers for their service in this theatre.

[Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Inside of back cover, right-hand side.]

## Maps: Italian Campaign



This map is useful not only because it gives the viewer a sense of the topography of Cassino, which is characteristic of much of Italy, but also an idea of what an evacuation route looked like. The route Rich drove ran from where the 78 Polish Division was located to Venafrò on the other side of the hill. The red divisions marked are German and the Blue shows Allied positions.

[Blumenson, Martin. *United States Army in World War Two: The Mediterranean Theatre of Operations: Salerno to Cassino*. Washington: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1993. 'Stalemate, Spring 1944' Map from included 'Map File.']



Maps: French Convoy Route, Belgium, Germany



The A.F.S. traveled up from Marseilles to Brussels via the Rhône Valley, through Lyon and Dijon. 'D' Platoon was sent from there to a small town, called Bergen, near the city of Celle where Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was located.

[Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Inside of front cover, right-hand side.]

## **Chapter One: “That Freedom and Mercy Shall Not Perish From This Earth” The Origins of This Thesis and Introductory Information**

Within the historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, war letters are some of the more remarkable documents available. In the study of World War Two, they are especially valuable because the sheer number that have survived give historians a vast range of experiences from which to draw conclusions. Written in the face of uncertain and daunting odds, they illuminate human voices in a war that could be easily reduced to a series of campaigns and grim statistics. The letters give a tiny glimpse into the experience that defined a generation around the world. Over sixteen million American men were drafted during World War Two and, for the most part, handwritten letters were their only form of communication with loved ones on the homefront. For some families, they were all that was left of their sons, brothers, fathers and uncles in September 1945 when the war ended. In many families, war letters were carefully preserved; my family is no exception.

This is a narrative reconstructed from one man’s correspondence during World War Two. The letters that form the basis of my thesis have a fascinating story of their own. After nearly fifty years, one side of two complete sets of correspondence came together. The first set came from my own attic; they are the letters my maternal grandfather, William ‘Bill’ Alexander Rich, wrote to his parents during his service in World War Two. The second set, also written by Bill Rich, were returned to my family via a more circuitous route. During the war, my grandfather corresponded with and dated a woman named Mary Dixon Sayre, whom he affectionately called ‘Dickie;’ she had saved all their letters.

Dickie's brother, Professor Robert Sayre found the letters one day and decided that they had great interest as family mementos. He thought that they should be returned to our family since Rich was the author. Professor Sayre found my cousin Dickson Ferguson through the community that both families have summered at since before World War Two, Point O' Woods, Fire Island. Ferguson sent the correspondence along to my mother. These letters, and those to Rich's parents, along with the numerous newspaper clippings, war memorabilia and small keepsakes enclosed in the envelopes, sat in our attic in a box- my mother had no idea what to do with them. The task of transcribing the three hundred and fifty letters, each four to seven pages long, seemed too daunting until the summer of 2006 when she and I finally sat for three hours every day; we read them all. My grandfather's war experience, something that he never talked about- ever- revealed itself.

I used the letters to reconstruct the narrative Bill Rich never told. Originally, I had wanted to make a comparison between the wartime experiences of my grandfather and his father, Dominic Rich. Both volunteered with the same organization, the American Field Service (A.F.S.), though in different world wars. The idea that Dominic Rich could have told so many stories about his work during the Great War while Bill Rich never related a single vignette fascinated me. What had happened to my grandfather that had forced him to close off his war experience from everyone? It was not until I read the letters from April and May of 1945 that it became clear. As I transcribed the collection of correspondence, from brittle airmail paper to electronic format, I became more interested in what could be learned from an exploration of war letters as historic evidence than a

comparative study between the two Riches. This thesis is, therefore, my conclusions about war letters as historical documents followed by the story of one A.F.S. driver. The letters give a historical microcosm of life as an ambulance driver; the correspondence also preserved the thoughts, observations and opinions of a young man who volunteered to serve in a world war.

I did my thesis work at a time when other historians are also becoming interested in the historical memory of veterans. Even now, the Library of Congress is engaged in a huge collection effort to secure the letters, diaries and memorabilia from American veterans of all wars. The study of battle has, for now, shifted away from analysis of battles and strategy to a focus on the common soldier's experience. The way that combat is perceived by combatants, and how those observations are recorded, is a growing field of study. Though I did not know this when I began my research, this trend soon became clear. It became even more apparent when Ken Burns' documentary series, *The War* was released in the fall of 2007.<sup>1</sup> Burns' series moved away from traditional documentaries which are concerned with facts and battles; he attempted to capture the memories of the people in the extended interviews. I have also attempted to recreate a depiction of World War Two from the personal narrative of one person. Since that one person was in the American Field Service, it was difficult.

While there is a vast sea of writing about the Second World War, there is only one secondary source published about the work of the American Field Service during World War Two; a small number of memoirs have been published privately by A.F.S. veterans.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Coincidentally, Burns interviewed an A.F.S. driver, Ward Chamberlin, as one of his 'witnesses.' Chamberlin was Rich's Company commander in India.

<sup>2</sup> There are, however, a good number of books written about the American Field Service's work during World War One, both in English and in French.



In fact, I am only aware of one other book in print of that mentions the Field Service.<sup>3</sup>

This made my job harder and easier. I was not worried about having to refute previous scholarship in the area and the story I recreated was fresh and new. On the other hand, there was very little secondary source material to help me draw out the details of the specific A.F.S. experience.

I relied heavily, therefore, on two sources for facts, dates and figures; both are connected to the A.F.S. organization itself. The first, and only secondary source, is George Rock's *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. This was my main reference for details about section movement and the geographic details that wartime censorship removed from Rich's letters. It also helped explain some of the larger structural decisions that were made by top A.F.S. leaders which Rich talked about, but was not able to explain fully. The book is compiled mainly of letter excerpts and official A.F.S. records. Rock's most useful contribution is a reconstruction of where each A.F.S. section was during every part of the war. He also has compiled a set of appendixes that give information about each volunteer, the numerous awards given to the men of the A.F.S. and the Roll of Honor.<sup>4</sup>

The second resource that I used to fill in gaps in the letters was the American Field Service archive itself. It contains copies of every piece of paper the A.F.S. generated during World War Two: personnel files, company diaries, reports on how many tires were used each month, the state of each unit's ambulances and newsletters

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<sup>3</sup> This book is a series of letters that concern the liberation of Belsen Concentration Camp. It is Muriel Knox Doherty's *Letters from Belsen 1945: An Australian Nurse's Experience with the Survivors of War*. It was published in 2000 by Allen & Unwin.

<sup>4</sup> A Roll of Honor is the list of men who were killed while in the service of, in this case, the A.F.S.

written by the volunteers for their own entertainment.<sup>5</sup> The *A.F.S. Bulletin* provided invaluable information about how the volunteers saw themselves and their mission. The archive also houses company diaries, official correspondence, and personnel files for each driver, not to mention photographs, medals, awards, citations, other collections of letters and a newsreel that featured Rich and his friend. Every possible question I had about the A.F.S. as an organization could be answered by a document found here or the incredibly helpful archivist, Eleanora Golobic.

From these two starting points, I began to look at the books, magazines and movies that Rich himself referenced in his letters, in order to get some sense of the time period. This approach led me to a number of books published during World War Two by A.F.S. drivers who returned home between 1942 and 1945 with tales to tell, as well as *Time*, *Life* and the *New York Times*. The group of books by Field Service men Rich read and told Dickie to read included *War without Music* (1940) by Peter Muir, *Mercy in Hell* (1943) by Andrew Geer and *Ambulance in Africa* (1943) by Evan Thomas. All three men were Rich's age and had served with the A.F.S. between 1940 and 1943; Thomas had even been at Kent School with Rich. Rich had strong opinions about each of these books, and his thoughts on each allowed me to extrapolate how he felt about issues such as the role of the Field Service, which Thomas talked about at length, and how A.F.S. men should behave.

These three books only covered the years 1940 through 1943 though. I also wanted to find a number of other accounts told by A.F.S. drivers that covered the entire

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<sup>5</sup> This is not entirely true. Steven Galatti, Director General of the A.F.S. during World War Two, took a number of file cabinets home with him when he retired. What was in those files remains unclear and why he took them is still more uncertain. This suspicious move on Galatti's part, along with a number of missing State Department files that pertain to the Field Service, has led some A.F.S. veterans to suppose that the A.F.S. may have been a front for an American spy-ring during the war.

period Rich was in the A.F.S.- in other words, accounts that covered 1942 until 1945. I unearthed two sources for this. The first was an unpublished memoir called *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*, written by A.F.S. driver Charles ‘Fox’ P. Edwards. Though the account has been heavily edited and politicized by Edwards himself, the main narrative gave me a vivid idea of what the A.F.S. life was like. It was also helpful that Edwards saw action in a number of the same battles as Rich. Second, I discovered an interview transcript from another A.F.S. veteran named Allan Prince. Though his story was slightly different than Rich’s, it gave yet another account of the A.F.S. experience and how the men felt about their service. I was also fortunate to correspond with two A.F.S. veterans who answered some of my more general questions.

The American Field Service had its origins in France during World War One. When war erupted between Germany and France in August 1914, a group of influential Americans in Paris and Francophiles in New York decided to establish a military hospital in Paris. In September 1914, a group of young men, French, British and American, assembled in Paris to drive the ambulances that had been given by Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, a generous supporter of American Field Service’s efforts in both world wars. In May of 1915, there were sixty A.F.S. ambulances on the front lines in France; by the end of 1917, over twelve hundred cars had been donated to support the French army.<sup>6</sup> Their work in the different theatres in Europe was invaluable and completely novel.

Steven Galatti, World War One veteran and Director General of the A.F.S. during World War Two, wrote, “there were never any precedents for what [A.F.S. drivers] did.

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<sup>6</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 15.

In war, armies and governments had to make all kinds of special agreements for this handful of volunteers.”<sup>7</sup> This statement reveals a number of important aspects of the A.F.S. and their role during both world wars. The first is that the group of men were *volunteers*. A.F.S. drivers would actually become known as the ‘gentleman volunteers’ because of the families they came from. The vast majority of these men came from New York City society and almost all were ‘college men’; three hundred and twenty five came from Harvard alone. Yale and Princeton each supplied over one hundred and eighty.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of *The History of the American Field Service in France* explained why the drivers had to come from such prestigious schools, other than because the life a volunteer was expensive. It stated

As the United States was neutral--and the French were afraid of spies---the volunteers had to be recommended by [six] influential citizens. They also had to have enough financial resources to pay their own passage across the Atlantic and buy their own uniform [and often their own ambulance as well].<sup>9</sup>

James Lapsley went on to say, “drivers were picked...not everyone was allowed to join.”<sup>10</sup> This type of exclusivity continued in recruiting process during World War Two and the letters of recommendation guaranteed it.

Second, these were men of means who had a great degree of social influence. Governments involved in total war do not make exceptions often for tiny special interest groups- let alone groups of unknown caliber that wish to work on the front lines with a foreign army. The connections of the first A.F.S. men made their acceptance by the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Page 1.

<sup>8</sup> “Appendix C: Colleges and Universities Represented in the American Field Service with the Number of Men From Each.” *History of the American Field Service in France: “Friends of France” 1914-1917 As Told by Its Members*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920. Vol. 3. Page 440.

<sup>9</sup> [James T. Lapsley III, \*Gentlemen Volunteers. American Ambulance Drivers in the First World War\*. \(Master's thesis at UC Santa Cruz, 1971\).](#) Accessed from the American Field Service Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

American, French and British governments much easier. The American Field Service was, and still is, the only civilian group to ever be approved for front line duties with a British or American army. This distinction alone speaks not only to the excellence of the service the A.F.S. drivers provided, but to the strength of their influence.

Lastly, Galatti's quote about the uniqueness of the A.F.S. shows that this group provided a service that was of such great import 'armies and governments' made huge efforts to gain their services. Art Howe, a friend of William Rich's, tried to define what exactly the role of the A.F.S. driver was; it turned out to be a hard task. He finally wrote

We were known in World War II as 'Drivers' a term used in purely British Ambulance Companies...another term used for us was 'Volunteer'...I had suggested that the term 'Medic' used for American Army medical troops in the lines was more appropriate than 'Driver.' We were indeed trained in basic first aid and used it, although not to the level (as I understand it) of a GI medic...in addition to the driving which itself required great skill, endurance and courage in the conditions all of us at one time or another faced...[we preformed] (1)stretcher bearing, (2) assistance in medical treatment and surgery, (3) personal services for men in desperate circumstances (often about to die)...(4) transportation of messages and medical personnel...(5) assistance at burials.<sup>11</sup>

To have men who did all of these things, who drove their own ambulances and who did not have to be paid, was too good a situation for the French Army in World War One, and the British Army during World War Two, to refuse. In desperate need of ambulances, both armies accepted A.F.S. drivers. The A.F.S. did not disappoint any army their served with. Despite their sense of themselves as 'civilians' and 'gentlemen,' the A.F.S. worked as hard, if not harder, than many actual military units, wherever they were.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*. Unpublished memoir. Available at [http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/chisiamo/charles\\_edwards/foxTC.html](http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/chisiamo/charles_edwards/foxTC.html). (Accessed June 7, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> I can only prove this statistically for World War Two, but I infer from the documents available it was true for World War One as well. Files at the National Archives and Records Administration contain charts made by U.S. Army Ambulance Units that detail how many patients were carried per month. The number of patients carried by A.F.S. ambulances in similar intensity combat are comparable, if not higher.

After 1915, A.F.S. volunteers who drove ambulances in France performed frontline evacuations at every major battle, including Ypres, the Yser, Bois-le-Pretre, Verdun and Chemin-des-Dames. Their ranks swelled and over twenty-five hundred men served out at least one six-month contract with the A.F.S. even before America entered the war. With this many drivers and ambulances, the A.F.S. sent units to Greece, Serbia and Albania. They also drove supplies to the front; the manpower shortage in the French army was crippling. It was in France that the A.F.S. proved itself as a hugely efficient and capable organization. The work was grueling and the A.F.S.'s performance under the circumstances amazed all, especially given the tiny number of drivers who composed the Field Service. Between 1914 and 1918, the A.F.S. "kept its trucks on the road 669 out of the 744 hours in one month."<sup>13</sup>

The work of the A.F.S. did not go unrecognized. Over two hundred and fifty A.F.S. drivers received the *Croix de Guerre* for their front-line service with the French Army or support of it. Two of these recipients were brothers from New York City, Dominic William Rich and Vincent Lawson Rich, both in Section Fifteen, who had come over in 1917 to serve out a six-month contract. Two of four brothers from a prominent New York family, they had left Harvard to join the A.F.S.<sup>14</sup> Their section received a dangerous assignment when they left Paris. The drivers were posted in Dombasle-en-Argonne, a tiny village in the shadow of Hill 304 and Mort Homme, on the Verdun front. Clitus Jones, a driver in their section wrote, "the little run from Montzeville to Esnes is well known to every American section that ever worked in the Verdun sector. Nearly the

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<sup>13</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 16.

<sup>14</sup> A third of these four brothers, Francis Rich, would join the A.F.S. in 1939 and was part of the famed Section 40 in France. Too young to serve in World War One, he had grown up with his older brothers' tales of daring as drivers. Older than many of A.F.S. men who were in France at that time, Francis Rich nevertheless distinguished himself for 'valor and bravery'.



entire road was in view of the German trenches at the foot of Mort Homme. Many sections won their spurs on this road.”<sup>15</sup> Dominic Rich received the *Croix de Guerre* for his rescue of a wounded French count from no-man’s land at Verdun.<sup>16</sup> Also while in Argonne, Dominic Rich was seriously wounded during a shelling while on a reconnaissance mission with fellow driver David Van Alstyne, Jr.. On September 28, 1917, both of the Rich brothers enlisted in the United States Army Ambulance Service. When the United States joined the war in 1917, most A.F.S. drivers took officers’ commissions in either the American Air Force or the American Ambulance Corps. Dominic Rich himself developed a penchant for flying and became a 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant in the developing American Air Force by the end of the war.

After the armistice, the Rich brothers returned home to New York City, where Dominic Rich founded the bond trading firm of D. W. Rich and Co. In 1920, he married Helen Gilbert. Gilbert had attended Abbott Academy and Vassar. She had also worked as a Red Cross nurse during the Great War and had met Rich in the south of France near Verdun. The couple had five children: William (Bill) born in 1922, John (Jack) born in 1925, Elizabeth (Betty) born in 1926, Mary born in 1930 and Peter born in 1932. The family spent their summers in the community of Point O’Woods on Fire Island, where they knew the Sayre family from Columbus, Ohio.

The Riches and the Sayres became great friends. Bill and Dickie grew up together in the summers at Point O’Woods, Fire Island; they sailed, played tennis and swam together. The five Rich children roughly matched up in age with the five Sayre children.

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<sup>15</sup> “Section Fifteen: The Story as Told by Clitus Jones, Keith Vosburg and Jerome Preston.” *History of the American Field Service in France: “Friends of France” 1914-1917 As Told by Its Members*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920. Vol. 2. Page 104.

<sup>16</sup> The French aristocrat never forgot what Rich did. When Dominic Rich got married in 1920, a beautiful dinning room table and chairs were sent from France as a wedding gift.

In continuance of the family tradition, all three Rich boys attended Kent School and then Harvard, graduating in 1947, 1946 and 1953, respectively.<sup>17,18</sup> Betty and Mary both attended Abbott Academy during World War Two; Betty went on to Skidmore and Mary matriculated at Northwestern. Dickie attended Concord Academy and Vassar College; she and Rich corresponded before the war as well, though those letters have not been included in this thesis. Interestingly, in 1940, Rich went to visit the Sayres in Columbus, where Dickie taught him how to drive in her family's Ford Sedan. Both families would later joke that her driving lessons had been the reason Rich was involved in a jeep accident. The Sayres read Bill's letters aloud at dinnertime during the war, just as the Riches did. Rich wrote about every aspect of life with the American Field Service, an amazing group of volunteers who dedicated themselves to provide the best medical evacuation possible.

During World War Two, two thousand, one hundred and ninety-six men served with the A.F.S. Twenty-five were sons of A.F.S. drivers from the First World War. Like the generation of volunteers before them, they were a relatively elite group, drawn from the best universities; a large percent were notable New York men who matriculated at Ivy League schools. One hundred and forty-five came from Harvard, one hundred and twenty-three from Yale and one hundred and three from Princeton. The A.F.S. ran an ad in the Harvard magazine *Lampoon* to encourage students to volunteer. Though these

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<sup>17</sup> The Rich family had a long tradition at both Kent and Harvard. In Dominic Rich's generation alone, he was Kent '14 and Harvard '20, Vincent was Kent '15 and Harvard '21, Francis was Kent '25 and Harvard '29 and Benedict was Ken '28 and Harvard '32. The women of the Rich family had equally long legacies at Abbot Academy, now part of Phillips Andover Academy.

<sup>18</sup> The reason that Bill Rich graduated the year after Jack, though three years older, can be explained by Bill's decision join the A.F.S. in 1942; he left his studies at Harvard incomplete and only returned in January 1945, after the war in the Pacific ended.

concentrations were noticeable, the volunteer body of the A.F.S. during World War Two also included men from every state, save three, and over fifty different colleges. The amount of time America was involved in World War Two, in comparison to World War One, and the presence of a draft, account for this wider diversity in the A.F.S. Charles Edwards, in *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*, spoke to the character of the A.F.S.: “there were elders too old for Selective Service having had significant midlife careers. There were youths barely meeting the age requirements. Others of all ages had medical disabilities; still others were objectors to war.”<sup>19</sup> The character of the different groups shipped out at various times varied widely. The first men to serve under the A.F.S. banner during the Second World War, however, were, like the generation before them, true Francophiles. These men were called ‘Section Forty’ and their story became part of A.F.S. lore, as well as Rich family history.

When the war broke out in 1939, Section Forty went to France as soon as they had a group of ambulances assembled. The diplomacy of allowing American citizens to be part of a war in which America remained neutral caused some difficulties. In the end, however, Steven Galatti, Director General of the A.F.S., prevailed through his relations with French diplomats and connections in the State Department.<sup>20</sup> The issue of American nationals with a French army resolved itself when the A.F.S. volunteers were officially

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<sup>19</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/chisiamo/charles\\_edwards/foxTC.html](http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/chisiamo/charles_edwards/foxTC.html).

<sup>20</sup> Many small, single focus groups that sought to join the war effort were rejected by the Department of War or the State Department. There is an entire file of requests at the National Archives and Records Administration about these groups. Some of them were quite specific about what they wanted to be allowed to do. Others were much less focused. All were quite adventurous. One organization that wished to form a parachute battalion to help with the invasion of Japan, whenever it was to occur, was declined permission to go anywhere near Japan with the line, “it is a policy of the War Department of long standing not to approve any units over which it has no control.” (Letter from E.S. Adams, Major General, The Adjutant General to Mr. Tommy Allen, 1622 ¼ Morton Ave., Los Angeles, Calif., August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. RG 407)

declared non-combatants, recognized by the German Foreign Office as such and issued Geneva Cards. Because of this, they received special prisoner-of-war status and were forbidden to carry weapons.

Section Forty arrived in France for one of the most interesting parts of the A.F.S. story during the Second World War. The men departed for France in March 1940; on their way to France, the ship they traveled on assisted in the rescue of American survivors from a German U-Boat attack. On May 11 were called to the front. Section 40 was split into two smaller sections by mid-May; Section I stayed in Paris to assist at the American Hospital in Paris for as long as it remained open. Francis Rich, Dominic Rich's brother, was one of two drivers assigned to this special detail. After the French-German armistice on June 22, 1940, A.F.S. headquarters (HQ) moved south into Vichy France. Both sections were out at frontline posts in the weeks before the surrender, cut off from communication with HQ. After the ceasefire, the volunteers began to wonder what their orders were. They realized they could become trapped in France; they had been told that the border with Spain would be closed on July 1 which would isolate them from any port from which they could sail back to the United States.

Francis Rich and his section disappeared from June 17 until June 29, when they finally caught up with HQ in Biarritz. In the final chaos of the German invasion, their orders at the front had been revised, reissued, countermanded and then issued again. The entire section had been confused about what they should do and where they should be headed. Despite the circumstances, four drivers, including Francis Rich, distinguished themselves by continuing to transport wounded soldiers away from the front as the French Army collapsed around them; at Biarritz they would each be cited and receive the

*Croix de Guerre*. The general confusion that existed caused the two sections to be separated; each made its way individually to the south of France where they were forced to abandon their ambulances in a field because they could not be driven across the border. The A.F.S. quickly crossed into Spain, and then, after a strenuous negotiation with Portuguese authorities, headed for Lisbon where they sailed back to the United States.

After France fell, “the original purpose of the American Field Service...ceased to exist.”<sup>21</sup> The organization regrouped in New York City and a fresh section of A.F.S. drivers was sent to work with the British and Free French in the Middle East. Another group went to India and Burma to assist the British there. The British were desperate for ambulances so, after some diplomatic wrangling about details such as how the men of the A.F.S. would fit into the hierarchy of the British Army and who would pay for their passage from America, more A.F.S. units were sent out. Some of these volunteers were not cut out for military life at all and seemed to think the A.F.S. was a grand tour of the world at war. In the Middle East, Sections One and Two were less than disciplined. After a party one night, a certain A.F.S. driver

...got hold of a gun and took to shooting out street lights...another was arrested by the MP to whom he tried to sell part of an army car...several ran up large liquor and hotel bills...and two, finding themselves in the Holy Land, thought it would be nice to keep on driving [in the A.F.S. ambulances] until they reached Cairo, which they did.<sup>22</sup>

It was clear that there were a few men too wild for the A.F.S. lifestyle, which was regarded as being relaxed, but not to a point of hooliganism. The groups that followed were comprised of men dedicated to the motto of the A.F.S. “that freedom and mercy shall not perish from this earth,” and whom “[accepted] individual responsibility within

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<sup>21</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 51.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Page 73.

the framework of comradeship, and of mutual respect among fellows who do a job because they want to, not because they have to. We were A.F.S. 'volunteers' in the defense of freedom and for peace."<sup>23</sup>

Rich joined the A.F.S., partly because two of his uncles and his father had all served with the organization, but also because he had been disqualified from the draft. He had a problem with his right ankle and his eyesight was poor. Each of these conditions alone made him '4-F,' a draft designation that ensured that Rich would never see frontline action, though the draft restrictions were loosened as the war went on.<sup>24</sup> In the spring of 1943, Rich again tried desperately to get a commission in the American Army, but his eyesight was too poor, even with the relaxed rules. If he joined the United States Army, all he was eligible for was a desk job back in the States. He eventually gave up on the idea, especially after he spent a few days in the front lines with an American infantry battalion in Italy during the fall of 1944. Instead, he lived vicariously through his Harvard friends who had received commissions in the Air Force and his brother Jack, who was naval ROTC at Harvard.<sup>25</sup>

Rich knew he wanted to be part of the war, not sitting at a desk. He felt that is was his duty to serve. In a letter to Dickie, he expressed a strong opinion about why he had chosen to not take a 'civilian' job stateside. He told her:

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<sup>23</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/P03.001/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>24</sup> '4-F' was a designation used mainly for skeleto-muscular malformations. After the draft was instated in 1940, over 30% of American men who were of age were excluded from active service. 4-F was one of the most common disqualification classifications.

<sup>25</sup> Rich had one good friend, Bob Massey, who left the A.F.S. to join the U.S. Army and ended up being posted in China for the duration of the war. A few of the letters he wrote to Bill Rich survived and are an interesting comparison between the two lifestyles.



You asked what the average Tommy or Yank is fighting for- first and foremost, to get the GD war over so that we can all go home. He's in it, he's not sure why, I'm not either for that matter, but it's a job that's got to be done. The Tommy probably has more personal reasons for fighting the Jerry than the Yank does. Not having been subjected to the same indoctrination or psychological conditioning which the Yank fighting man receives, I don't know what he is supposed to be fighting for. For my own part, it's pretty much of a defensive war. Britain and the US trying to regain what they had territorially and economically before the war. Ideological and sociological problems are too great to think about when you are out in the cold and mud. The home he left, or perhaps a little better version of it, is what the soldier thinks about.<sup>26</sup>

Rich clearly felt that there was a reason to fight. What he did not know was that his ideas about American involvement being 'defensive' would change in the spring of 1945 when he would remark "our work, at present, is of nature that makes one vividly aware, if anything can, why we are fighting this war against Germany."<sup>27</sup>

Rich's story with the A.F.S. began in the fall of 1942 when he left Harvard to volunteer with the same ambulance corps that his father and two uncles had served in during World War One. A tremendous, unflagging service continued to be the hallmark of the A.F.S. in World War Two, though the role of ambulance driver and supply-transporter- distinct during World War One- would be conflated into one job. Rich would see action in four theatres of war- North Africa, Italy, Germany and India- evacuate the wounded from a number of storied battles and be wounded himself; in the spring of 1945, he assisted with the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. He saw the best and worst of war. He witnessed the ability to save a man's life by effective transportation and the attempt to eradicate an entire race from the face of the earth.

Rich embarked from New York in November 1943 bound for the Middle East, where the American Field Service had its training camp in Baalbek, Lebanon. After time

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<sup>26</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, December 24, 1943.

<sup>27</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, May 3, 1945.

spent in Lebanon and Syria, Rich and his section took part in the massive offensive across Tunisia to capture Tunis; they saw the surrender of the entire *Afrika Korps* and the close of the North African theatre. After a long period of rest in Tripoli, Rich was transported to Italy in October, 1943. He spent eighteen months in there; he evacuated wounded soldiers at Termoli, Cassino, Rome, Florence and Rimini, to name only the major battles. While in Italy, he contracted jaundice and was involved in a serious jeep accident. In December of 1944, Rich went home for a thirty-day leave. He returned to Italy for a few months, and then, in early April 1945, was transferred to France, then rushed to Brussels. From Brussels, his platoon was sent to Bergen-Belsen where they worked until after V-E Day. Upon the end of European hostilities, Rich elected to stay with the American Field Service and went to serve in India. He was in South Asia less than two weeks before the United States dropped the Atomic bombs and World War Two ended. In two short days, he flew back over all the countries and theatres in which he had served. Rich arrived back in America on Thanksgiving Day 1945. He had been gone for over three years.

The job of evacuation was not easy; from Rich's letters, though, you would never know this. During large offensives and battles, A.F.S. men would transport patients for up to twenty hours a day without rest. After a driver navigated a battle field and avoided driving over a mine or getting hit by artillery fire, he would have patients loaded into his ambulance. Sometimes they were only slightly wounded. The A.F.S., however, mainly transported seriously injured men. The ride was not comfortable and the soldiers would feel every bump in the road. They bled all over the ambulances, screamed and died en

route. The evacuation routes were designed to minimize the number of men who died between posts, but it still happened with frequency.

The A.F.S. Cows. were each assigned to be part of a larger ambulance corps, called either a Light Field Ambulance (LFA) or an Ambulance Car Company (ACC). Their posting depended on where they were in the evacuation chain. From the battlefield, a wounded soldier would be taken to a Regimental Aid Post (RAP) where injuries were treated in a very simple manner; at this station, the most serious patients, those with head or stomach damage, would receive their first attention, but only because they needed immediate attention in order to live. However, the RAP was mostly equipped to treat basic wounds and was more of a mobile pharmacy than a discrete hospital unit. Usually stationed behind a protective mine field, one or two minimally equipped medical vehicles comprised their point of the evacuation system. A.F.S. drivers were attached to Light Field Ambulances (LFA), British evacuation units designed for mobility and triage. From there, if the wounded man had more than minor cuts, he would be driven the two to ten miles back towards an Advanced Dressing Station (ADS). These outposts were run by part of an Ambulance Car Company, the other type of unit the A.F.S. served with. Ambulances massed here to take the most serious patients farther back behind the lines.

<sup>28</sup> Better equipped and better shielded from artillery fire, these outposts usually had tents for the most seriously wounded to be examined in, though there was still very limited bed space or ability to perform major medical operations.

If the patient could make a ten to twenty-five mile trip to a Main Dressing Station (MDS), they continued on there. The MDS was the first real hospital-like environment the soldier would encounter. Numerous tents, arranged like wards, made up the physical

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<sup>28</sup> Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Pg. 284.

structure of the MDS; the most serious patients were actually admitted for treatment at that point. There was some basic surgery done at MDSs by mobile surgery units, though the British constantly worried about the sterility and hygiene of these places so far afield.<sup>29</sup> If the doctors at the MDS deemed the patient still fit for transport, ambulances would drive them the twenty-five to seventy-five miles to the Casualty Clearing Station (CCS). This was where the main battle-side surgery theatres were and the standards of care were the highest ‘in the field’. Looking more like a real hospital, it was the station in the evacuation chain which would handle the highest volume of men over the entire course of a battle. It was the first medical station that was truly away from the fighting and shellings.<sup>30</sup> There would be entire wards established in tents, complete with nurses and orderlies and specialists who would continue to triage the wounded. From the CCS, men in serious, but stable, condition were loaded onto trains or planes and flown back to field hospitals and hospital ships.<sup>31</sup> If a man had been wounded badly enough, he would be repatriated. Many soldiers did not survive the journey from one state of evacuation to the next.

The storied history of the A.F.S. was advanced by its World War Two drivers because of the work they did in the conditions described above: eleven were decorated the Order of the British Empire, thirty-five the British Empire Medal, three the *Legion d’Honneur*, three the *Medaille Militaire*, sixty the *Croix de Guerre*, twenty-four the

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<sup>29</sup> Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Pg. 111.

<sup>30</sup> Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Pg. 284.

<sup>31</sup> Rich wrote to his sister Mary, praising the ability to fly men back to base hospitals, “one of the greatest things that this war has produced is “air-ecav”, the evacuation of wounded by air transport- in a couple of hours after coming off the operating table a badly wounded man will be in a base area general hospital. Formerly, it would have taken several days jolting over road or railroad. Unfortunately air-evac is not always possible because of terrain problems.” (6/24/44). This sense of urgency, and the need for speed, speaks to the experiences he had in transporting badly injured men.

Polish Bronze Cross of Merit with Swords, and thirteen were awarded the Purple Heart. Steve Galatti received the Presidential Medal for Freedom after World War Two ended. This vast array of decorations does not take into account the seventy-five A.F.S. men who were mentioned specifically in British dispatches, but it does show the constant bravery of the drivers and the wide range of Allied armies with which they served.

The *New York Times* ran headlines between 1940 and 1942 announcing “War Volunteers Sail Tomorrow: Many College Students,” “Ambulance Men Honored: 15 American Volunteers Receive the Croix de Guerre,” “Field Service Force Hailed by Churchill,” “U.S. Hospital Unit Under Desert Fire: American Field Service Force at Front Line in Egypt with New Zealanders,” and “U.S. Ambulance Men Save Many in Libya: Americans Have Covered 300,000 Miles Since Last May.”<sup>32</sup> The tales of danger and heroism in the face of the *Wehrmacht* made the American Field Service sound glamorous. The society pages of the *New York Times* filled with announcements of art shows, galas, operas and balls given to support and recognize the work of the A.F.S. As Bill Rich began to contemplate leaving Harvard in the fall of 1942 to go and fight, the men of the first World War Two A.F.S. were already recognized for their unwavering service in France and the Middle East.

The unflagging dedication of the top A.F.S. staff at headquarters in New York, affectionately known as ‘60 Beaver Street,’ combined with this publicity, made raising money for more ambulances and supplies easy. A term of service in the A.F.S. was not cheap. Service with the A.F.S. cost \$390 at least year. Basic equipment, not much more than a uniform and bedding, cost about \$150 and each volunteer was estimated to need

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<sup>32</sup> The citations of those *New York Times* headlines (in the same order) above are: March 22, 1940, p3; July 6, 1940, p2; March 24, 1942, p6; July 23, 1942, p3; August 27, 1942, p2.

about \$20 a month allowance, if they lived a bare-bones existence.<sup>33</sup> In August 1943, the A.F.S. finally began to pay its volunteers a living allowance of about \$20 a month.<sup>34</sup> Almost all drivers, including Rich, received an allowance from their parents to pay for sightseeing trips, personal expenses, bar tabs and restaurants. The money was deposited at 60 Beaver Street, which functioned like a bank. Volunteers could draw on their funds from anywhere in the world with the help of an A.F.S. field cashier; the system did not work well, however, and was cause for much complaint.<sup>35</sup> In comparison, officers in the U.S. Army made between \$75 and \$105 per month. The A.F.S. promoted sponsorship of their drivers. An A.F.S. driver turned fundraiser, Stuart Benson, recalled

I met a man on the train. He didn't know anything about the Field Service. I told him. He said, "I haven't got a son to send. I'll send another boy instead." And he gave me a check for \$390.<sup>36</sup>

Every A.F.S. volunteer also needed an ambulance and the cost of the vehicle was not included in the \$390 needed to volunteer. The A.F.S. would alternate between Ford-built ambulances and Dodges for until 1942 when they settled on the latter because of its indispensable four-wheel drive. Each car cost \$2000, which included a medical transport feature package. Some of the drivers bought their own ambulances, but the vast majority were given by private citizens or special-interest organizations.<sup>37</sup> The need to pay in order to serve with the A.F.S. was only one facet of the uniqueness of this organization.

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<sup>33</sup> Benson, Stuart. "Comments on the American Field Service and the Middle East (Speech)." Accessed on 6/7/2007 from <http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/SBenson.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 118.

<sup>35</sup> See Appendix B for a humorous letter detailing this and other A.F.S. complaints.

<sup>36</sup> Benson, Stuart. "Comments on the American Field Service and the Middle East (Speech)." Accessed on 6/7/2007 from <http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/SBenson.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Individual gifts from William B. Leeds (\$50,000) and Thomas A. Yawkey (\$10,000) gave the A.F.S. hope that they would be able to raise the great sums of money needed to run a worldwide ambulance service. (Rock, 63) Some of the organizations that gave ambulances included Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Philips Andover Academy, D.A.R., American Legion, American Golf Club and the American Friends of France. (Rock, 52)

The social organization of the A.F.S. was equally distinctive. These men fell into four different types, as described by ‘Anonymous’ in a tongue-in-cheek article from *The A.F.S. Bulletin*, December 1943. Because of the nature of the A.F.S. and its volunteers, there were a good many jokes about the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ kinds of sections. For example, *The A.F.S. Bulletin* related that “a number of ugly stories have reached us concerning St. Paul’s School alumni who have been coaxed into unsuitable sections by radicals posing as good Episcopalians and respectable Republicans.”<sup>38</sup> The author continued to describe the four groups that composed the A.F.S., the ‘intellectuals,’ the ‘socialites,’ the ‘Good Fellas,’ and the ‘budding officers.’ These groupings did describe the drivers and their reasons to be part of the A.F.S. quite well. However, the one overarching factor of A.F.S. personality was the fact that all the volunteers were civilians and intended to remain so.

Each section had its own feel. A section in the A.F.S., which followed British Army organization, consisted of six to eight drivers, each with six ambulances. These small groups were led by section leaders, also called a medical command officer (MCO); in the A.F.S., the MCO was chosen on a rotating basis by the section. Rich served as his section MCO three times during the war. Between three and six sections made up a platoon, commanded by a Lieutenant. There were about fifty volunteers per platoon in the A.F.S. during World War Two. Platoons were grouped into larger units called companies, abbreviated in the British style as Cov., with four platoons to a company. Captains or Majors led each company and were appointed by 60 Beaver Street. Most were World War One A.F.S. veterans. The American Field Service was a place for

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<sup>38</sup> Anonymous. “Are You Happy in the Service or How to Find Your Own Sewing Circle.” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed on 10/31/2007 from <http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/AFSletters/AFSB5.html>. See Appendix A for full article.



“college men” to serve their country in a less restricting, less organized, more democratic forum than the army. Since all the men were volunteers, they felt that their organizational hierarchy should be solely based on the merit of the man, and that despite the need for ranks- the British Army demanded it- all were equal.

Rich wrote home twice a week and to Dickie at least once a week during his time overseas. His letters detail his work, his friends, the men he met, the workings of the A.F.S., the problems of the Field Service and numerous observations on food and where the section was billeted. While his letters to his parents and siblings report the major activities in his life, Rich’s correspondence with Dickie is more interesting. It is in these letters that a twenty year-old’s sense of a total war comes through. Rich related everything to Dickie from where he lived to what he saw to what his thought on a vast range of topics. He discussed politics, international relations, literature, movies and social news with her. Dickie was a great friend to him before the war, and their friendship deepened during the war. Rich’s letters to her provide an intimate window into the psyche of a very young man in a war.

## **Chapter Two: A Note on Methodology-War Letters as Historical Documents**

This is a story constructed primarily from letters. It demands, therefore, a short discussion about war letters as reliable primary documents. A historical study based on war correspondence has all of the facets that must be considered in primary sources- bias, attribution, context, audience and purpose- combined with the overarching problem of censorship. Unlike peacetime correspondence, when the only filter on the author is self-imposed, war letters are edited after the author has set his or her words on paper; the author also does not know what has been removed from his letters until his correspondent tells him. To convey important information during a war, codes must be employed. To the intended reader, these strange phrases have meaning. To an unfamiliar reader, the connotations are much less clear. If the key for these secret phrases is lost, the information that they contain is lost also. In Rich's letters, a number of strange phrases reoccur at different times. Discussed in Chapter Three, the sentences "I'm glad that Uncle Ned is stronger. It was such a surprise to learn of his severe illness"<sup>1</sup> at first seem to be a non-sequitor. It comprises two sentences of a five sentence Vmail which indicates immediately that it must be important. Rich did not, however, have an Uncle Ned. It was only through Jack Rich that the code was revealed.

These secret codes make the letters seem very mysterious and exciting. They add a sense of importance to Rich's letters, which at points are downright mundane. Entire letters to Dominic and Helen Rich consist of deep reflection on who married whom, what to give Dickie as a graduation gift and whether there is any point in Helen Rich sending any more vitamin tablets. My thesis may make it seem that each letter was a spellbinding

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich. March 21, 1943 [Vmail]

account of daring deeds and fabulous travels. This is certainly not the case. The many of the letters read more like this

Dad's letters, 34, 35, 36, of November 13th, 23<sup>rd</sup> and December 3<sup>rd</sup>, Mary's letter of November 20<sup>th</sup>, and yours, Mother, of December 7<sup>th</sup>- all very much appreciated... The clippings were also of great interest. The Lt. Whitehead whom Mary-Ruth is engaged to, was Harvard '42 or '43 (I forget which) lived in Dunster. Harvey Thomas "discovered" him in Boyleston Reading Room, and, of course, their conversation turned to Wellesley. Harvey discovering that Norm knew M-R. It was with him that we drove into New York after the Yale game in New Haven.<sup>2</sup>

The correspondence can be read at random and with very few exceptions, there are paragraphs like this in every letter. A pattern like this does, however, draw attention to where the mundane is absent. In letters that were composed in a hurry, such as when Rich was about to be sent to the front lines, in letters from actual battlefields and during the stretch of correspondence that came out of Belsen, there is little discussion of routine topics.

Rich was never able to go back in a formal way and revise his letters for a memoir or other publication; if he had, these long passages of personal details would most likely have been omitted, though he personally may have enjoyed them. They truly capture the mindset of a twenty-one year old. They also allow the reader to see the development of Rich's ideas about a vast range of topics over a three year period. He started out a young college student who needed his parent's permission to join the A.F.S. and returned a worldly veteran who had fought on three continents. The ability of letters to capture the thoughts of a moment and record a continuum of evolving ideas is invaluable. Rich wrote his letters and then sent them. His ideas remain unchanged and, at points, unresolved.

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<sup>2</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich. January 4, 1944.

Rich also never filled in the gaps that the censor's rules and scissors had created in his narrative. The only contemporaneous assistance are Helen Rich's penciled notes on some letters about places she assumed he must be or other simple details she gleaned from outside sources. I have had to reconstruct certain parts of Rich's experience, especially the information about the Atlantic crossings, a time of particularly stringent censorship, from a variety of sources in an attempt to build a larger narrative. The published accounts of four different A.F.S. men who crossed at slightly different times give the most vivid picture of the scene as it slowly comes into focus. While all of the details may not be *exactly* accurate for the voyage that Rich himself made, many themes resound within all available accounts they convey what must have held true for Atlantic trips of the time. They also seem to echo the few sentiments Rich himself had about the voyage. Where Rich wrote about his experiences, even if long after they occurred, I have used his words. I have also preserved the character of the correspondence as best I could. When the letters contained irregularities in grammar and spelling, I have left them as Rich wrote them, unless a change was necessary for clarification.

From the first letter he wrote on the *Mauritania*, until he arrived back home in December of 1945, Rich had to watch what he wrote and what details he revealed. He therefore discussed relatively unimportant social events- those would not be censored. For Rich, they would have also formed a connection with his old, civilian life that went on while he was overseas. There was a major change in censorship regulations during the first months Rich was in North Africa. The A.F.S. decided to use the United States Army Post Office (APO) system instead of the cumbersome British one and A.F.S. men after January of 1943 found themselves under American censorship rules. *The Official History*

of the American Field Service recounted that the switch, “for a while caused considerable confusion...the American rules being much stricter and much slower to relax in reference to past events.”<sup>3</sup> Especially in the desert, where Rich would see a tremendous amount of action, this makes the full reconstruction of events difficult.

Rich constantly reminded his readers he was not at liberty to say all he wanted to. The issue of censorship remained a constant theme, wherever he was, during the war. He complained to Dickie about this rigid system, one of the few rules that A.F.S. had to follow, “my family is always hounding me to tell them more... I write as much as the prevailing censorship regulations permit but I see no sense in giving my Officer in Charge[OC] Lt. Red Murray the opportunity to use his shears.”<sup>4</sup> The lack of description in his letters must have particularly irritated his mother, because he wrote to her,

I regret that my letters do not describe more of towns and places I’ve been in and seen but the censors take a poor view of such things...when the ‘do’ is over in this part of the world, the censorship rules will probably be altered...so I can tell you where I’ve been, seen, done, what battles I’ve had a humble role in...so be patient.<sup>5</sup>

The pattern that emerged in the letters written from the *Mauritania* held true for the entire war. Brief mentions of “excitement” or a “to do” were causally made, but not until months afterwards explained, if at all. During certain parts of the war, especially when Rich was on the front lines, entire pages of his letters would be censored, if the letter was not completely destroyed.<sup>6</sup> In his very first war letter from the ship, Rich related, “I was

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<sup>3</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. New York: The Platen Press, 1956, p120.

<sup>4</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 23, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 20, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> There are dates where Rich’s unit was very close to the front lines in which his normal pattern of letter writing, two a week, each week, was interrupted. This was most likely caused by entire letters having been censored, destroying them totally. However, it is also possible that the letters were actually lost or shot down during a battle. Rich himself discussed this possibility. There is a third, more likely conclusion, that he did not write during these times because of the volume of work being done. The pattern of his biweekly

forced to tear up the last three pages and rewrite a good bit.”<sup>7</sup> Much to the frustration of his readers, Rich never really mastered the censorship rules. Right until the end of the war in the Pacific, names, phrases and paragraphs were routinely removed from his letters.

However, even with censorship, there was a way that Rich communicated what he did. First, he used the codes discussed above. Secondly, he wrote about newspaper and magazine articles that best covered the areas where he was. This gave his family some clue as to where he was and not what work he did. As shown above, the *New York Times* was fascinated with the A.F.S., though the newspaper did not track their movements in detail, due to the fact the A.F.S. volunteers were with a British army. The A.F.S. Headquarters in New York related the general whereabouts of its units during the war through the *A.F.S. Bulletin*, sent to families of men who were serving and donors of ambulances. These sources were not subject to censorship; they also were available in the States much faster than personal letters. Personal correspondence could sometimes take months to reach the homefront, dependent on the location of the unit.

This type of realization forces historians to ask how war letters should be read. We in the present age are already at a distinct disadvantage because letters are no longer a standard means of communication. The conventions of correspondence and the nuances of a written sentence instead of a spoken one are lost. We are not as sensitive to tone changes, emotional layers and reading between the lines. This problem is compounded by

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letters is so strong; but I would argue that especially in Italy, the twenty-hour days sometimes left Rich no time to write. The idea one or two letters may been lost is possible but less likely that a simple change in routine.

<sup>7</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942.

the fact that we read correspondence from World War Two totally out of context. While I have endeavored to recreate the context in which the letters were written as much as possible, I did not read the letters in ‘real time.’

Even though I endeavored to read the letters in chronological order to appreciate the sequence of events, I read three or four a day. This is historically inaccurate in every way; the Riches and Dickie Sayre could not have read them in the same way. They only had one letter at a time, and sometimes weeks went by without receiving a single one. The letters came through the slow and complex military mail system. When Rich wrote, he would have to wait until he returned to HQ to mail it and his letter would sit in a pile until a censor could read it over. Then it would be sent down to a base area and put on a ship, or an airplane with any luck, to be sent back to the United States. Once Stateside, the letter entered the regular U.S. mail system and was delivered. This process could take four to six weeks, sometimes longer, if Rich was at the front and he could not send his letter back to HQ immediately. The information in the letters was, therefore, out of date when it finally reached the intended recipient.

The original readers of these letters also lived during World War Two. Though it may seem inane to state that, it is hard to read war letters without a historical narrative in the background. When a letter dated ‘May 9, 1943’ appears, we instantly know that Tunis fell the day before, the North African campaign will end in the next twenty-four hours, and that the larger war will go on for another two years; Dickie and Rich’s parents did not. We now know what will happen in the next letter also. There is no suspense for us, no emotional angst. After he had written *John Adams*, a tremendous historical work that



deals with a huge body of correspondence, historian David McCollough made the crucial point

...Nobody lived in the past, if you stop to think about it...they didn't walk around saying, "Isn't this fascinating, living in the past?" They lived in the present[,] just as we do. The difference was it was their present, not ours. And just as we don't know how things are going to turn out for us, they didn't either.

The job of historians is to reconstruct the past, as best we can, so that there is a context for letters like Rich's. The better the historian does their job, the more connection the letters have with the present.

There was constant anxiety about Rich's safety and health. A.F.S. drivers were killed on the front lines and a number died of disease. There were also 36 drivers taken as POWs, five of whom were not released until the end of hostilities in Europe, despite their non-combatant status. The letters that seem to have the most historical relevance now, ones written at Cassino, Belsen, on V-E Day, may not have been the most important letters originally. To the people on the homefront, simple Vmails that he was safe must have been a relief. For Rich, the people he met and places he saw consumed a lot of his correspondence. He wrote equally long letters about his sightseeing tours and what he did with Section Six for entertainment as he did about the fall of Termoli or the horrors at Belsen.

This may not be due to the fact that he felt these civilian topics were more important. They may have been all he wanted to talk about. The horror that war produces on a daily basis has led historians who study war letters to conclude that letters were a way soldiers, and A.F.S. drivers, distanced themselves from the realities of what they saw. Martha Hanna, historian and author of a recent book about a correspondence

between a French couple entitled *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*, has observed “letter writing was the means by which soldiers maintained their civilian identity in the midst of war...it kept them in contact with the reassuring familiarity of home, [so] they turned to it eagerly and often.”<sup>8</sup> Though A.F.S. volunteers were able to keep their ‘civilian identity’ much more easily than any soldier, and did not face questions about the morality of killing other people, they were on the front lines; they dealt with death every day. Rich’s letters home that mention nothing about the war tell us as much about his state of mind as his clinical descriptions of battle.

The two military actions that Rich described in any detail were the advance on Tunis in late April 1943 and the battle for Termoli in early October of the same year. As related through the quotes in Chapters Two and Three, Rich wrote lengthy accounts of both these engagements to Dickie and his parents. They are, however, very clinical and factual. He never mentioned how he felt or whether he was afraid. There is also no indication that anyone died on either occasion. The sights must have been too real, too vivid for Rich to put into words. It is only through later memoirs and Rock’s secondhand account of the A.F.S.’s duties that we know men died in great numbers being transported during evacuation. Hanna reflects on this point also and her thoughts echo my own. She wrote

a profound cognitive divide separated those who fought, and thus knew the war firsthand, from those who did not and thus remained ignorant of its horrors...combatants rarely told civilians what the war was really like. Anxious not to overburden their wives [or girlfriends] and mothers with a knowledge that could only be distressing, they chose to remain silent.

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<sup>8</sup> Hanna, Martha. *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Page 9.

Rich seems to want to spare his mother and, to some extent, Dickie, the truth about what he saw.

Helen and Dominic Rich had both been involved with the medical services during World War One and had some idea of what their son experienced, though not exactly. Dominic Rich should have been especially sensitive to the horrors of war; his Field Service section had evacuated from the front lines at Verdun. The one time that the pattern of omission is broken was in April and May 1945. Belsen was something that Rich knew his parents and Dickie would never be able to comprehend. Images of mass graves and thousands of people sick with every imaginable virulent disease was too much for him to repress. He broke his silence on the horrors of war just that once, but this tells us there was something deeply unreal and totally new about what Rich saw there. He had already seen action in three different campaigns and had lived through many battles, but the unreality of Belsen still had the power to shock him. Through a reading of the entire correspondence, this becomes clear.

The entire correspondence tells a fabulous story, if at times the narrative is patchy or convoluted because the details are not related until much later letters when censorship relaxed. The particulars and events Rich omitted because of censorship seem to always have been filled in. It seems that whatever went unsaid in the letters is mainly due to Rich's own desire to leave certain aspects of his experience behind. The letters show that an intentional focus on the mundane and civilian aspects of life allowed Rich to create space between himself and the war. It also speaks to a subconscious yearning for a return to his life in peacetime. These letters are historically important because they capture moments in the mind of one young man whose experience was vastly different than most

other men of his generation during World War Two. He served as a volunteer and did not bear arms, and yet Rich saw the reason for the war first hand. His story as related through his letters is historically important because it is different.

Rich's story is also a very personal story. My belief that it is an important historical record, and my interest in the narrative, come from my proximity to the main characters. I have endeavored, however, to be as objective as possible in my representations of Rich and have not omitted anything to make his story seem more glorious than it was or make him seem any less flawed. The story of his service is what it is. And for the moment, it is of importance. As more and more men who served in World War Two die, their recollections are being lost. Historians and the Library of Congress are even now engaged in a monumental project to amass veterans' memories of the war and assemble collections of letters. We must ask if a hundred years from now historians will be interested in the common soldier's perspective on World War Two. What about in five hundred years? The stories of everyday people, and their struggles, are fascinating as long as we feel connected to them. This relationship comes from temporal proximity and personal interest. The truth of the matter is that history is pushed forward by men like Montgomery, Rommel and Eisenhower. Their actions are much more important and historically relevant.

Rich's letters do, however, provide historians with a microcosm. Some of the most important events of the war, especially the medical advances made, are recorded in detail. Rich's perception of the introduction of penicillin and air evacuations, discussed in Chapter 4, are prime examples. He also recorded cultural details that are of interest. Through Rich's letters we know what Harvard-educated men read and what magazines

they subscribed to. Historians must be very careful about making generalizations from specific cases, like one set of letters, but when confirmed with other correspondence series, they provide valuable information. If historical schools continue to be interested in tiny details of everyday life, war letters will remain of importance.

War letters, with their many layers of problems, are historical documents that have definite limitations. These limitations may cause them to become irrelevant or forgotten at some point. It has been my intention to prevent this from happening to my grandfather, in some small way. William Rich had a great tale to tell through his correspondence and, in the end, history is about stories.

### **Chapter Three: “Departing for the Ends of the Earth to do my Humble Part”<sup>1</sup>: October 1942- August 1943**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, 1942, Rich was called back to New York City from the Harvard-Penn football game in Cambridge; he was hustled down to the Staten Island shipyard at dusk. That night, he embarked for an unknown theatre of service aboard a converted luxury liner, the *Mauritania*. The journey was made in excellent time; the entire voyage took thirty-six days, “a phenomenally rapid sea journey.”<sup>2</sup> The ship proceeded down the coast of the United States, South America, across the South Atlantic to South Africa, up the east coast of Africa and through the Suez Canal to Egypt. Rich wrote to Dickie on the second day of the voyage, “I don’t know when I’ll ever be able to write you upon which ship we came,” and continued with heavy sarcasm, “every day we tell ourselves how exceptionally fortunate we were to obtain such speed and luxury...the most comfortable ship afloat.”<sup>3</sup>

The letters between Rich and Dickie remained much as they had before his departure. Long and chatty, the bulk of each one was taken up with accounts of social events and friends. What Rich revealed clearly in his first letters in what he actually wrote down, and what he left unsaid, was that “the censorship restrictions at present are so strict I can’t say very much,”<sup>4</sup> and that men overseas had been “forbidden to keep the journal which I started for fear that if I am captured vital information might be revealed to the enemy.”<sup>5</sup> Even innocuous information about the number of days the trip took was censored. It was not until 1944 that Rich was able to elaborate on the basic details of his

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942

<sup>2</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 1, 1944.

<sup>3</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 21, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 25, 1942.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942.

crossing. Only then would they learn the name of the troop carrier, and the fact there had been six thousand men aboard. Rich could not even tell them how many A.F.S. volunteers were en route with him.<sup>6</sup> What he did relate were the names of the other volunteers, their home towns and their respective colleges.

Rich's experiences aboard the *Mauritania* were fairly typical, so the dearth of information he provided himself can be recovered through the experience of other A.F.S. drivers who published memoirs afterwards. This chapter relies on a number of accounts from other A.F.S. men for this reason. All three were A.F.S. volunteers known to Rich, though he may not have served with them. Two of them, Andrew "Andy" Geer and Evan Thomas, actually published their own experiences in 1943, and were read widely within the A.F.S. community. The only thing that varied among the voyages was the number of A.F.S. volunteers on board. As George Rock wrote, "the voyage overseas was for each volunteer the beginning of the war and remained one of its most vivid experiences."<sup>7</sup> All accounts of crossings between 1940 and 1942 speak to the same discomforts and annoyances. It was the first time that volunteers like Rich got a real taste of life with the army. A.F.S. units coalesced during those days at sea, under the scrutiny of the other troops, the close living conditions and crossing the Atlantic in such an undignified manner.

The A.F.S. acted like a private gentlemen's club. Service with the organization was not to be the collegiate experience abroad the volunteers thought it to be; they would, however, try to make it resemble that at every turn. A.F.S. men were accustomed to

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<sup>6</sup> There were twenty-three.

<sup>7</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 64.



crossing the Atlantic on peacetime luxury liners. All of the troop transports that made the treacherous trans-Atlantic trip during the first years of World War Two were converted ocean liners. Many A.F.S. men knew these ships from before the war, and their comparisons were not positive. The volunteers were not asked, however, to pay for their own ocean passage, so they had to get on the ship they were assigned. The Atlantic transports were provided by the British, and later, American governments. In fact, A.F.S. personnel, along with their ambulances and medical supplies, were deemed to be part of Lend-Lease. On January 14, 1944, “an Administrative Arrangement between the United States and the United Kingdom for Mutual Aid in Providing Ocean Transportation for Certain Categories of Persons... [was] made retroactive for Lend-Lease Aid to March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1941.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, American Field Service men went abroad in the most economical way available: troop ships. Along with the GIs, the A.F.S. men would sleep 20 to a room made for two, eat standing up and perform all ship duties.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Edwards, an A.F.S. driver who has written a memoir of his experiences, quoted his friend ‘Jock’ who wrote about his officer’s stateroom, “we only have a room about half the size of our toilet at college for six guys.” Edwards himself was “unlucky” enough to be bunked on the enlisted men’s deck, with thirteen men in his room.<sup>10</sup>

Andrew Geer, in his acclaimed book *Mercy in Hell*, published in 1943, recalled his first conversation with his roommates:

“Christ Almighty! The bunks are triple-decked”...  
“Last time I went to Europe I had a bigger cabin than this to myself”...

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<sup>8</sup> “Foreign Economic Administration Office of the Administration, Washington 25, D.C.: Leo T. Crowley to the Secretary of War, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1944.” NARA Record Group 1-28/2946.

<sup>9</sup> Various sources all confirm the same information.

<sup>10</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

“Oh this isn’t too bad. I looked in on the Tommies next door. They’re as crowded...”

“They’re soldiers. We’re volunteers!”

“There isn’t even room to set up my bridge table.”<sup>11</sup>

This first shock about billets clearly exemplified some of the attitudes that A.F.S. men brought with them. Rich believed that Geer’s story may have been embellished, but many A.F.S. men did feel that they deserved special treatment because of their volunteer status.<sup>12</sup>

Even if, like Rich, they did not want to be treated radically differently than the GI soldier, the men of the A.F.S. stood out in the crowds of soldiers waiting to board in the Staten Island Shipyards. They displayed distinct lack of military discipline; any sense of the realities of war was dismissed by the mountains of baggage that accompanied A.F.S. men at every port of call. Along with a Dodge ambulance for every two A.F.S. volunteers, there were, among twenty men, “60 to 100 pieces of baggage.”<sup>13</sup> Edwards described the “duffle-bags into which we had carefully packed *all* the latest “doodads” that ambulance drivers in Africa were going to need.” What the A.F.S. volunteers considered necessities at the beginning of their wartime experiences included “boxes full of pajamas, sheets, extra books, underwear, extra socks, and stationery.”<sup>14</sup> When they reached their postings, however, A.F.S. drivers quickly learned what to get rid of; the life of a “desert rat” was one of bare necessities. The ambulances, which were *de facto* billets

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<sup>11</sup> Geer, Andrew. *Mercy in Hell: An American Ambulance Driver with the Eighth Army*. New York, Whittlesey House, 1943.

<sup>12</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 4, 1944.

<sup>13</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

for the volunteers, had very little extra space for unnecessary personal items.<sup>15</sup> A.F.S. mothers appeared to think they were sending their sons off to summer camps, not to live in ambulances and pup tents.

Once all of their personal possessions were stored in their state rooms and in the cargo hold, A.F.S. men started to get to know each other. Rich wrote that “all of the other fellows...prove to be swell.”<sup>16</sup> He described his fellow A.F.S. volunteers in brief sketches that contained their hometown and what schools they had attended. Rich crossed the Atlantic with A.F.S. Section 28; it included “a couple of damn Yale men and a couple from Princeton...the leader of our section was Kent ’34 and the leader of my squad<sup>17</sup> Kent ’35, just before my time. The whole section is a damned good bunch of fellows.”<sup>18</sup> Most of the men he met on the *Mauritania* would be friends of his throughout the war, even when some of them returned home or were transferred into different units within the A.F.S. The men, who would form the core of his section in the Middle East and North Africa were Art Bolte, Jim Briggs, Bob Massey, Thomas “Tom” Meredith and Mike Moran.<sup>19</sup> The nurses and doctors from the voyage would reappear later also, in an American hospital where Rich was sent with “sand-fly fever” in 1943.

Arthur “Art” Bolte, of Pelham, New York and Princeton served with Rich in the Middle East, where they traveled together extensively as tourists. In Italy, Art became a

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<sup>15</sup> This tendency of A.F.S. men to amass baggage actually caused quite a problem for the central A.F.S. headquarters and the main office in Cairo. Quite a few volunteers spent their days off buying artwork and other large items from civilians as well as German prisoners of war. Their personal treasures were housed in a large warehouse in Cairo, from which, at the end of the war, they had to be sent back to the United States at the cost of the A.F.S.

<sup>16</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 25, 1942.

<sup>17</sup> “Squad” is the American army term. The British army equivalent is a “section” which will be the word used by Rich, and therefore by myself, from here on.

<sup>18</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942.

<sup>19</sup> There were others, but they did not cross on the *Mauritania* with Rich and so are not mentioned in this section.

field cashier, a lieutenant, and was to be decorated by the British for valor. James “Jim” Briggs served with Rich through the end of the European war. Coming from Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York and a graduate of Dartmouth, Briggs was already a successful businessman when he joined the A.F.S.. At 40, he was one of the oldest men in Rich’s section and served as a father figure to the younger men. He would also be decorated by the British and American governments. Another older man, Mike Moran, a machine gunner from the First World War, hailed from Edgewater, New Jersey and Princeton. He would become a lieutenant in 1943. George “Bob” Massey, a friend of Rich’s from Harvard- they were both in Kirkland House- and New York, continued on the *Mauritania* to India, and eventually joined the American Army. By 1945, Massey became an officer in a bomber squad stationed in rural China.<sup>20</sup>

Rich corresponded with Massey, and other Harvard acquaintances, throughout the war. Rich’s other close friends during his A.F.S. service, William “Bill” Congdon, George Holton, Laurence “Larry” Toms, Harold “Blackie” Trainor, and Chester “Autie” Willits, were all in North Africa with him and would continue to be in his section until the end of the A.F.S.’s work in Europe.

The Atlantic crossing sections generally remained together throughout the North African campaign, deployed en masse after their training in Syria, and by choice after that. George Rock does note, however, that in North Africa, section changes could be made according to personal preference if requested. Aboard the troop carriers, A.F.S. units stuck together. The drivers got to know each other well because not only were they rooming together, but each day on the *Mauritania*, “first aid classes in the afternoon and

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<sup>20</sup> Discussed later, the switch from American Field Service to American Army was commonly made by men who could easily secure commissions in the Air Force, or other equally as glamorous services. Another place a number of former A.F.S. volunteers ended up was the OSS.

calisthenics in the morning help[ed] make the time not too slow...when we [finished] our first aid course, we [took] up maps and mechanics.”<sup>21</sup> Rich himself insisted on a vigorous hour of exercise each morning, which he organized for the first few weeks.<sup>22</sup>

Since “the average level of education was high,” among A.F.S. men, they were happy to take numerous classes on the voyage over to prepare them for the desert. They practiced their French with each other and attempted to learn Arabic. Charles Edwards, looking back on the lessons taught on the ship, remarked, “the only things we didn’t know how to do were to drive an ambulance, dig a slit trench, follow brigade, divisional, and corps signs marking out routes and points for medical evacuation or army advances.”<sup>23</sup> The lesson they did not learn was to adhere to the disciplined rhythm of military life, though some ambitious American military personnel did try to instill it.<sup>24</sup> Evan Thomas commented that military discipline was not necessary and that “our discipline as Ambulance Drivers was to accept individual responsibility within the framework of comradeship, and of mutual respect among fellows who do a job because they want to, not because they have to.”<sup>25</sup> Thomas highlighted the feeling of being different, of being above military life. This sense of privilege would become eroded as A.F.S. men saw more of the war though they never ceased to act like civilians and regarded themselves as such.

The relative freedom on the voyage made the beginning of the war seem like a holiday to many in the A.F.S.. Edwards remembered thinking that the crossing, “seemed

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<sup>21</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 25, 1942.

<sup>22</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

like a Caribbean cruise...thus far war was fun.”<sup>26</sup> There was no real sense of danger on the troop ship, though the Battle of the Atlantic was in full swing. Three ships carrying A.F.S. men to Africa were torpedoed on their journey to Egypt.<sup>27</sup> Rich’s letters do not mention any of the dangers leaving the harbor; he may have been unaware of them or unable to mention them because of censorship restrictions. Thomas remembered a friend remarking, “it’s a strange thing this war...with genial educated people around I find it hard to appreciate the horrors of war and the tragedy of it all.”<sup>28</sup> This feeling changed once the “horrors of war” and the truth of ambulance evacuations came into focus when Rich first saw action.

At the outset of the fighting in Africa between the British and Axis armies, General Sir Archibald Wavell commanded the British Army of the Nile. It split, subsequently, into the British Eighth and Ninth armies which were comprised of divisions from every corner of the Empire: Indians, New Zealanders, Australians, South Africans, Canadians, Scots, Free Poles, Free French, Arabs, and the occasional Kenyan. General Bernard Freyberg of New Zealand commanded the New Zealand divisions during the North African campaign. He and his ‘Kiwi’ soldiers found a special place in the hearts of A.F.S. volunteers; the respect was mutual.

At first, Wavell’s armies did well; they captured much of the Italian Army in North Africa before the end of February 1941.<sup>29</sup> However, British forces delayed in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Rock, George. *The History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 78.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>29</sup> Collier related these astounding figures: “In 10 weeks the Commonwealth force of two divisions advanced more than 1,126 km, and captured 130,000 prisoners, more than 380 tanks, 845 guns and well

March and Hitler sent his brilliant general, Edwin Rommel and the famed *Afrika Korps*, to defend Axis-held North Africa on February 11, 1941.

The fighting in the desert was harsh. The Germans pushed forward and besieged Tobruk on April 13. They continued to bombard the town until the siege was lifted on December 8, though fighting continued in the town for another five months. It was at Tobruk that the A.F.S. made its first impression on British commanders. A.F.S. volunteers remained in the town until it was finally surrendered to the Germans on June 21; all of the drivers were either wounded or captured, two were killed and the entire fleet of ambulances was destroyed. While Rommel pushed toward British-held Egypt, the Australian 7<sup>th</sup> Division struggled for control of Syria with the help of the Free French. Control of Syria was crucial to deny Hitler a clear route through which to march into the Caucasus Mountains and southern Russia. The 7<sup>th</sup> Division also tenuously held the vital oil supply lines of the British Empire that ran through the Middle East. After a short but costly offensive which lasted from June 8 to July 10, the entire Middle East rested firmly in British hands.

After six months of German victories, Rommel was finally defeated for the first time on December 7 at Bardia and Sollum, where he was forced to withdraw back to El Agheila; A.F.S. units assisted with evacuations from both battles. The cost to the British had been heavy; the men killed were trained veterans of desert warfare and thus not easily replaced. American Lend-Lease replaced much of the equipment lost by the British Eighth which allowed them to continue to fight. The summer of 1942 saw another strong *Panzarmee Afrika* offensive, culminating at the first Battle of El Alamein on July 26;

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over 3,000 vehicles at the relatively slight cost of 500 killed.” Collier, Paul. *The Second World War, Volume 4: The Mediterranean 1940-1945*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003. pg 31.



the Germans were supported by the arrival of seventeen thousand additional troops sent by a nervous Hitler who worried the loss of North Africa would make his entire European empire vulnerable.<sup>30</sup> It was at this nadir in British morale and strategy that Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery became the commander of the entire Eighth Army. In mid-August, he won his first victory against the *Panzarmee* at Alam Halfa.

Immediately, Montgomery began a six week campaign codenamed “Operation Lightfoot” to break the *Afrika Korps* in the East, which continued until November 4. It started at the second battle of El Alamein on October 23. Simultaneously, the American Fifth Army under General George Patton landed on November 8 and commenced “Operation Torch” with the objective to capture north-west Africa. Engaged in some of the most brutal fighting of the war, the British sustained thirteen thousand, five hundred casualties; still, eluding capture by British forces, Rommel retreated westward but had to abandon forty thousand Italian soldiers en route.

While Montgomery and Patton slowly began to envelop Rommel’s *Afrika Korps*,. twenty-three A.F.S. volunteers disembarked the *Mauritania* and spent a few days leave in Cairo. The scene shocked every A.F.S. man who arrived in Egypt. Cairo was a town of “Austrians, Germans, French and a few English [all military personnel] as well as many Arabian Jews and Egyptians.”<sup>31</sup> Rich told his aunt, “camels and asses are not often seen upon the streets of New York [as they are in Cairo]...they still ride sidesaddle and wear

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<sup>30</sup> Collier, Paul. *The Second World War, Volume 4: The Mediterranean 1940-1945*. pg 52.

<sup>31</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 21, 1942.

biblical dress [here].”<sup>32</sup> After the initial shock of being somewhere other than New York or Cambridge, Massachusetts, Section 28 headed for A.F.S. training HQ in Lebanon.

Before he could get into the ‘excitement,’ Rich had to be transformed from a ‘Harvard Man’ into a desert-hardened ambulance driver. After they left the cosmopolis of Cairo, A.F.S. drivers went directly to a desert transfer camp at El Tahag, where they were issued the equipment they had not brought with them.<sup>33</sup> Rich remarked, “we have been issued our British battledress. In great coats and tin hats, we look exactly like characters from “All Quiet on the Western Front.” ”<sup>34</sup> In the spring of 1943, they would also be supplied with British khaki dress uniforms (K.D.) for the summer heat. The British Army issued the A.F.S. units with the military equipment they would need, as part of their agreement with the A.F.S. and the United States government. Each unit had a British support staff attached to it as well: a quarter master, three corporals to act as stretcher bearers, a staff of ‘batmen’ and six cooks.<sup>35</sup> The British also provided one cookhouse, one ration per man, one tin of petrol per man, one general stores per man and two water lorries with drivers.<sup>36</sup> The army did a great deal to get a hold of the Dodge ambulances that made the A.F.S. so valuable; the army simply could not afford to refuse an offer of hundreds of *free* ambulances and drivers for them. The drivers may not have been the

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<sup>32</sup> William A. Rich to Sally Gilbert, November 29, 1942.

<sup>33</sup> This included one uniform, “tin hats, respirators, boots, leggings” and other personal items. (List from Edwards, Charles). *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16..

<sup>34</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 21, 1942.

<sup>35</sup> A “batman” was a type of servant the A.F.S. men found waited on officers who were attached to units from British colonial holdings. Rich described, “these black men- one speaks English- bring us tea at various hours in the day, including before we get up in the AM, and do all the “housework” to be done in our quarters.” (William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 21, 1943.) Rich would encounter them in the Middle East, and again in India. The men of the A.F.S. were accustomed to domestic help, and would hire civilians throughout the war to cook and clean, but they never had such clear ‘servants’ travel with them.

<sup>36</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. p114.

most experienced when they first landed, but the British were so desperate for ambulances that they would take anyone to drive them.<sup>37</sup>

From El Tahag, they continued by train across the Sinai Desert to Haifa. They were transported by truck to A.F.S. Middle East Headquarters, described as old “unheated stone barracks” in Baalbek, Syria. The camp had a makeshift beer hall, which doubled as a concert hall, two old barns transformed into movie theatres and hot showers.<sup>38</sup> Though the accommodations seemed basic compared to what they were used to, even at school, this camp was the most permanent, and therefore most luxurious, they would stay at in the desert. The choice of location for this A.F.S. HQ was, as always, pragmatic: it was all that was offered by the army for their use. The austerity made the transition from civilian life to desert life even starker; it made living out of the back of an ambulance easier, though. It was in Baalbek A.F.S. volunteers became wartime ambulance drivers, and more importantly, accustomed to the harsh desert lifestyle with one pint of water per man per day.<sup>39</sup>

The condition that made the desert an absolute hell for a mechanized army was the sand. It collected in all the gears, mixed with motor oil, and ground down the moving parts of vehicles. It frequently had to be scrubbed out with toothbrushes.<sup>40</sup> In North Africa, armies moved and fought primarily in the desert, often away from any type of hard-packed road; the soft sand bogged down all types of transportation. For medical evacuation, this was *the* hurdle of the campaign. Speed was essential to patients’ survival in the heat of the desert sun- getting stuck cost lives. Before Dodge ambulances became

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<sup>37</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*, p 57.

<sup>38</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. p114.

<sup>39</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, March 18, 1944.

<sup>40</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

widely used during the war, the wounded were often evacuated to a Field Station near a road where an ambulance would be stationed. Camels, the ancient method of transport in the desert, were too slow for critically wounded men in the desert sun. The Dodge Ambulance was pioneered in the field by the American Field Service in North Africa; it would be adopted by the American Army as the gold standard in medical ground transport for any type of terrain or weather condition.<sup>41</sup> One Australian general said “the medical organization of the Eighth Army [which included the A.F.S.] made it possible for Australian soldiers to be cleared from the Front, to be resuscitated and treated in forward units, and to be admitted to Australian General Hospitals with utmost expedition.”<sup>42</sup> Four-wheel drive ambulances were one of a number of medical leaps that were made during the war and saved more men than previously imaginable.

In praising the work of the A.F.S., the *New York Times* highlighted the fitness of their equipment; the journalist proclaimed, “with their four-wheel drive and their chassis high off the ground, they [Dodge ambulances] are considered to be almost the perfect vehicle for the task allotted to them.”<sup>43</sup> To this bold statement of American motor power, Rich added in a letter to Dickie, “four wheel drive  $\frac{3}{4}$  ton Dodge trucks are the equipment we use- not very much more difficult to drive than a pleasure car.”<sup>44</sup> Charles Edwards remembered that “the nimble four-wheel drive Dodge ambulances which would become an extension of ourselves in the years ahead.” The profound impact of four-wheel drive ambulances in the desert was inescapable.<sup>45</sup> Mentioned by every A.F.S. driver to serve in

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<sup>41</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, George. *Medicine and Victory British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Page 127.

<sup>43</sup> “U.S. Hospital Unit Under Desert Fire: American Field Service Force at Front Line in Egypt with New Zealanders.” *New York Times*. July 23, 1944. Pg. 3.

<sup>44</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 21, 1942.

<sup>45</sup> It would become equally as important on the muddy mountain roads in Italy and India.

Africa without exception, four-wheel drive was the Dodge's most important feature and it gave American Field Service drivers a great advantage over all other vehicle operators.<sup>46</sup> The ability to drive through the sand and make good time picking up casualties was lost on no one, including British medical officers. One driver recalled in a letter to his family, "a surgeon began to operate...his only comment was to the effect that the man, as well as three others he had operated on that night, owed their lives to the speed of the American Field Service."<sup>47</sup>

Ambulances were often required to make fifty-mile runs to rear positions, one of the main medical dilemmas of mechanized warfare. Battlefronts and charges could move forward more quickly than ever before, leaving a trail of wounded and dying men in a swath miles long and miles wide.<sup>48</sup> From the battle, the evacuation route to a general field hospital was long; in the desert, it could be a one hundred-mile journey for some patients. To address this, a wounded soldier's trip was made in stages; how far back behind the lines he traveled depended on how seriously injured he was. The most serious patients were treated as close to the front as possible, then transported back to base hospitals when they were stable enough to be moved again.

Though part of each driver's job was to transport medical equipment and blood supplies to forward medical areas, A.F.S. ambulances were primarily for the transportation of the wounded. Edwards wrote, "we could carry up to ten men sitting on

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<sup>46</sup> With the exception of American Sherman tankmen who also had new four-wheel drive caterpillar treads specifically designed for war in the desert.

<sup>47</sup> *The American Field Service Overseas Volunteers Ambulance Units: France 1914-1917, France 1940, Middle East 1941-1943*. Cover page.

<sup>48</sup> Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pg. 109.

long benches...we could also carry four serious stretcher cases.”<sup>49</sup> For the men of the A.F.S., their ambulances also became their homes, especially on the forward lines where they were away from formal billets for weeks. The Dodges became caravans of sorts; some even had domestic effects strapped to the fenders. One A.F.S. man actually attached cages for chickens behind either door of the cab. Again and again, the volunteers wrote that “my place of residence is my ambulance- which serves as bedroom, library, dining room and guest room, also kitchen.”<sup>50</sup>

The ambulances came to symbolize the civilian mentality, independence and tenaciousness of the American Field Service. Drivers remembered their ambulances as mobile homes; they established small “bars” inside, held bridge games and deep conversations. In Italy, Rich and his section held a “coffee party” for the Polish nurses of their post inside two ambulances backed up against one another.<sup>51</sup> The A.F.S.’s ability to throw a good ambulance party was legendary, as was their independence. It was the Dodge’s mechanical agility that was respected most by other parts of the army, who were burdened with heavy weaponry, tanks and long supply trains. The toughness of the volunteers and the extent to which they could push their ambulances came from a strong mental attitude, and the rigorous maintenance they performed every day. The A.F.S. ambulances were reliable and allowed them to forge ahead with confidence. A.F.S. drivers trained extensively in the maintenance of their vehicles. There were ten aspects of their vehicles they inspected every day, including the tire pressure, engine oil level and amount of grit in the gears.

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<sup>49</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>50</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg 86.

<sup>51</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 29, 1944.

The shape of an ambulance and its ability to run smoothly for hundreds of miles was crucial. To address this situation, each A.F.S. platoon had forty Royal Army Service Corps (RASC) men attached to it.<sup>52</sup> A critical part of the A.F.S. operation, the men themselves were referred to as ‘workshops.’ They were the real mechanics in the A.F.S. and eventually became able to rebuild large portions of the Dodge ambulances from parts salvaged from other severely damaged vehicles. The volunteers did assist the workshops and tinker with their ambulances, but they never achieved the mechanical proficiency to make serious repairs, such as the instillation of a new engine. The workshops allowed the drivers to do their job.

The A.F.S. Dodge ambulances were extraordinarily versatile and reliable vehicles, but that did nothing to improve the comfort of the wounded men being carried in them. The patients felt every jolt from driving over a rock or shell-hole in the road. In addition, the Dodge ambulances could not protect the driver from the emotional exhaustion, not to mention physical drain, which came from transporting dying men eighteen to twenty hours a day. Allan Prince remembered that after fifteen months of A.F.S. service, “I was very tired and sick physically. [In Italy] I had spent five entire months within range of enemy fire.”<sup>53</sup>

Rich never wrote about the anguish he felt transporting patients and watching them die as he struggled to drive his ambulance over rocky terrain during evacuations. Even though there is no way to ever know his feelings, Rich omitted many of the

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<sup>52</sup> Rock George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg 73.

<sup>53</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince, Rutgers College Class of 1947. Conducted by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Greg Kupsy on July 1Eighth-19<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Transcript available online at [http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince\\_allan.html](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince_allan.html). Accessed on 7, July 2007.

unpleasant “war-like” parts of his job, including this one. If his parents had not received the *A.F.S. Bulletin* which told them Rich was in combat areas, they might never have known; the letters do not tell much about the human cost of the war. Evan Thomas’ *Ambulance in Africa* dwelt on the subject at length, however. Since Rich wrote to both his parents and to Dickie that “his attitude [Thomas’] very closely corresponds to mine,” we can trust that Rich shared Thomas’s revulsion at the loss of life. “I used to wonder just how badly he [the patient] was hit and how he’d stand the long hard ride that lay ahead,” reflected Thomas.<sup>54</sup> Allan Prince remembered after a battle, “it was [always] pretty gory, bleeding...all over the place. You did your best.”<sup>55</sup> Rich never wrote about these things, but he must have felt similar horror.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas also wrote about the battle fatigue that A.F.S. men suffered. After he experienced a patient die in his ambulance, “the most demoralizing experience of my life,” he felt, “closer to the breaking point that I care to think about.”<sup>57</sup> Week-long breaks behind the lines helped to combat this stress. The A.F.S. driver saw more mangled bodies than most soldiers. The volunteers were rarely at the front for long periods.<sup>58</sup> They moved from rear stations to forward ones and back with great regularity. While in the rear, the A.F.S. men had social lives comparable to those they had in the civilian world, only with fewer European or American women to mingle with. They traveled, saw movies, played sports, hosted parties and went to the beach. These activities took them away from the war, away from the carnage that they saw every day they were at the front.

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance In Africa*. Pg 60.

<sup>55</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince, Rutgers College Class of 1947.

<sup>56</sup> For continued discussion on this, see Chapter 6: A Note on Methodology.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance In Africa*. Pg 111.

<sup>58</sup> Allan Prince’s experience in Italy of five weeks within range of enemy fire is unusual.



The dichotomy between the two parts of their service could never be rectified in anyone's mind.

A.F.S. drivers got away from the war physically and mentally with travel. They stayed in at the type of hotels they were accustomed to- or even better a New Zealand Forces Club- and ate at the best restaurants. This connection with their former lives seemed to restore them. In the first year of being overseas, Rich took a trip to Beirut, two trips to Cairo, a tour of posh desert resorts in Libya and an extended beach trip to Tripoli and Algiers, not to mention his trips with Holton to see local ruins. In Cairo, Rich visited the pyramids, the Sphinx, and "found out where the European eating places and cinemas are."<sup>59</sup> In Beirut, he traveled with fellow A.F.S. driver Art Bolte; he told his parents "we have been eating at the best hotels in town which are quite stylishly marked "officers only."<sup>60</sup> The Libyan oasis of Gadames was five hundred miles into the desert, but once the A.F.S. arrived in eastern Libya, after a period of intense fighting, Rich and two friends planned a trip to see the famed oases. There were some unexpected aspects of this particular excursion, since there was a war being fought all around them. At each five-star hotel they stopped at, the three travelers were expected to provide the food for their meals, though "we hardly recognize [the rations] the Italian chef was so good."<sup>61</sup>

The men of the A.F.S. constantly went to see any movie available to break the monotony of desert life or to relieve the stress of combat; movies also served as a welcome connection with life on the home front. In forward areas, where A.F.S. drivers spent a fair amount of their time, there were few theatres or Red Cross clubs that showed movies. There was not much rest time either. In rear areas, American movies were all the

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<sup>59</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 16, 1943.

<sup>60</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 3, 1943.

<sup>61</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

rage, even with the British Army, though sometimes an English film with French subtitles was shown.<sup>62</sup> Sometimes, Rich would report that he had seen two or three movies in one evening.

On the whole, the movies were light. While in the Middle East and North Africa, Rich mentioned seeing movies such as “Twenty Mule Team,” “Pride of the Yanks,” “The Major and the Minor” and “My Favorite Blond.” Movies provided one of the primary sources of entertainment for troops of all nationalities. This common cultural thread connected Rich back to the homefront because his siblings and Dickie had also seen these movies. Officers and enlisted men went to the same movies.<sup>63</sup> Movies gave all the troops something to talk about, not only in their letters home but also with each other.

Rich and all who fought in the desert also enjoyed the opportunity to go to the beach. Rich loved to swim and sail. Sailing on the Mediterranean was one of the highlights of his time in Africa.<sup>64</sup> It reminded him of home and summers spent at Point O’Woods, Fire Island. Whenever he wrote home about the beach, he would make an inevitable comparison to Point O’Woods. Rich’s parallel between the Mediterranean and Fire Island was a way for him to relate what the environment was like. These constant references also reveal a horrible homesickness that Rich never mentioned and may not have wanted to acknowledge. The longing for something familiar, evidence of peacetime, of childhood, must have been very real to Rich. In fact, the feeling was shared by all soldiers as they witnessed or experienced horrors which they never could have imagined. For the most men of the A.F.S., the carefree, easygoing times in their lives were summers

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<sup>62</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 21, 1942.

<sup>63</sup> Once Rich arrived in Italy, he began to frequent the opera when in rear areas or on leave, again creating a gap between the A.F.S. men and enlisted men they served with. In the desert though, where army cohesion was crucial, I believe movies served an important social function.

<sup>64</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, September 27, 1943.

spent sailing and swimming. For Rich, this was Point O' Woods, Fire Island. For Edwards, it was Hyannisport on Cape Cod. Comparisons to summer houses and favorite beaches might seem banal in wartime letters, but it was in their ordinariness that held their appeal for the men overseas. Memories of happy summers and places far from the reaches of the war were a necessary escape, as well as another way to relate back to those on the homefront.

The A.F.S. preferred their drivers to be trained in Syria for a number of reasons. The first reason was that by 1942 there was relatively little actual fighting going on there, but there were still many patients, mostly civilian, who needed transportation. Rich wrote to his Aunt Sally,

you, and no doubt Mother, thought that I was on Montgomery's victorious march across Africa but I must serve months apprenticeship performing the menial ambulance tasks of an army of occupation up here in peaceful Syria before we may see any real fighting war.<sup>65</sup>

During these months of preparation, the American Field Service could identify the unreliable drivers *before* they got into battle. The early behavior of some volunteers, as mentioned in the introduction, made it imperative that the A.F.S. discover any potentially problematic men. The British command was especially firm on this point, having seen cavalier behavior in earlier A.F.S. units.<sup>66</sup> The drivers were eased into life with an army in the desert, away from the college clubs and fraternities of the United States. Though Rich would spend very little time in Syria or Lebanon as a result of the massing of forces in eastern Libya for the assault on Tunisia, many other A.F.S. volunteers spent a good deal of time there. These men filled in wherever there was a request for them.

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<sup>65</sup> William A. Rich to Sally Gilbert, November 29, 1942.

<sup>66</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service*. Pg 70-1.

There was never a lot to do, but A.F.S. men kept themselves busy; for entertainment, they recreated the institutions they were used to back in the States such as bars, comedy clubs, debate societies and sports teams.<sup>67</sup> In addition, all volunteers also spent a good part of their time in Syria and Lebanon as tourists. Rich and his good friend George Holton, who would eventually become an A.F.S. publicity photographer and work at *Life* after the war, took hundreds of pictures of the places they were. Rich seemed to have been particularly interested in the Greco-Roman ruins that dotted Lebanon and Syria. From the snapshots, Holton appeared to find the native peoples much more noteworthy. Rich kept the photos they took and eventually sent them home to his parents.

The men of the A.F.S. did do work of a more purposeful nature also. Some were tasked to work with the Spears Mobile Clinics, vaccinating the Bedouin; others assisted in the creation of accurate maps for unknown parts of Syria. There was a small group that did intelligence and reconnaissance work. Still others aided the Red Cross and did humanitarian work.<sup>68</sup> While occupied with these various activities, they practiced driving their ambulances over every type of terrain, especially the sand.

The second reason Syria was a great starting point for A.F.S. drivers was that the British Ninth Army was there. The volunteers could get accustomed to the conglomeration of nationalities that made up the British forces, as well as get used to British social order, which every one of the volunteers found fascinating. As upper-class Americans, they imagined themselves egalitarian. They also considered themselves

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<sup>67</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>68</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service*. Pg 73.

outside the military sphere of influence. They were volunteer civilians.<sup>69</sup> The vast majority of these men were, however, wealthy, college men. They all came from the same social circumstances to begin with, and could afford to be loose about ranking and hierarchy within the A.F.S. Who was in charge of whom was never made official nor was it desired to be so. The British left their hierarchy unspoken but everyone knew where they belonged and what persons were above and below them.

The British armies, made up of people from every social class from Indian untouchables to the Peerage, had to impose a structure of command upon its forces. Required of all armed services for practicality, strict imposition of ranking also occurred in the United States armies but the A.F.S. found it more pronounced in the Eighth and 9<sup>th</sup> armies because of the class system contained within the military hierarchy. Edwards remarked, “while we “volunteers” took a cavalier attitude toward rank and class, it was a major factor for the British.”<sup>70</sup> He continued later in his book, “we A.F.S. drivers were unique to the British Army cadre. We worked well with both British officers and other ranks. We learned to admire each.”<sup>71</sup> Rich continued to examine about the situation in a story he related to Dickie:

A 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant, the commanding officer of a private in the ward, just brought said private an apple pie which ...If a British officer brought a private an apple pie-well, it just wouldn't happen. There's no army like the American, nor a country like the good old USA.<sup>72</sup>

Rich was proud of British military achievements and felt that their armies were constantly underemphasized by the American press, but he would write more than once

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<sup>69</sup> This caused a great deal of bureaucratic friction in early 1942 as A.F.S. volunteers refused to be put under military rules or MP control. The A.F.S., however, did not have the resources to discipline its men. The volunteers eventually did come under military regulation for pragmatic reasons.

<sup>70</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html). Page 6 of 16.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 11, 1943.

“there is no army like the American Army!” This referred not so much to their fighting ability, but to their more familiar class system, endless supplies and superior food.<sup>73</sup>

Though the A.F.S. men were not highly trained like the American Army Medical Corps officers, they studied intently upon their arrival in Syria. Many lectures were given by experienced A.F.S. drivers to the new men at Baalbek. They included talks on: maintenance, layout of Syria (cultural and topographical), desert warfare strategy, British Army Systems/Routines, “How the Geneva Convention Protects You”, tire talks, convoy discipline, use of the prismatic compass, AFS “routines”, drills, and the history and politics of the Middle East.<sup>74</sup> The volunteers had a lot to learn, though it is notable that a great deal of the information they were taught had nothing do to with transportation of wounded soldiers. These talks, instead, continued the A.F.S. goal of promoting cultural education, a mission that had been established after World War One. An instructor for part of his time in the A.F.S., Evan Thomas also sought to teach new Field Service members what it meant to be a civilian volunteer in a military world:

Volunteer ambulance drivers ought to get over the idea that they are gentlemen soldiers of fortune at the earliest opportunity...neither the nature of the job nor the relative responsibility involved entitles the volunteer driver to look upon himself as a trick officer engaged in a glamorous special mission...our primary duty was to be prepared at any time of the day or night to proceed to any given point, pick up the sick or wounded, and carry them off in a car that was properly equipped and in good running order...[we should] cause a minimum of trouble for other people.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Uniforms were the only aspect Rich felt the British had a better handle on than the Americans. Used to having forces stationed in the desert at all times of the year, they knew it was cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. Many Americans envied the British K.D. which consisted of canvas shorts and a short sleeve shirt, as opposed to GI long pants.

<sup>74</sup> This list was compiled from all of the accounts read. Each author talked about different courses given to them.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance in Africa*. Pg. 125-6.

Despite their lack of recognizable class distinction or hierarchy, British soldiers and generals thought very highly of the American Field Service, which helped to improve relations on a larger, administrative scale. Originally very hesitant to let American “volunteers” join the British Army in combat situations, Churchill himself heard about, and publicly praised, the Field Service in March of 1942 for their “noble help.”<sup>76</sup> General Wavell, at that time Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in the Middle East, personally requested the A.F.S. to send companies of drivers as soon as they were available.<sup>77</sup>

Some members of the A.F.S., like Edwards, became Anglophiles after they served a year with the British and risked their lives together. Others, like Rich, appreciated the mentality of the British soldier, but remained staunch Americans. The proper culture and mentality of the British was too foreign, even if it was unmentioned. All A.F.S. men were taken aback at the clear colonial attitudes of some of their fellow British officers. They enjoyed, however, the perks of life with such an army, such as the staff of batman who waited on them.

The *New York Times* reported in January 1943 that, ““American [Field Service] drivers are participating in the most interesting and most dangerous phases of the current fighting, such as reconnaissance sorties by large patrols.”<sup>78</sup> There was no action for Rich though. He despaired of seeing action and wrote to Dickie, “of course, we all came out here with the idea of driving in the desert but I’ve become reconciled to the snow capped

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<sup>76</sup> “Field Service Force Hailed by Churchill.” *New York Times*. March 25, 1942, pg. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Benson, Stuart. “Comments on the American Field Service and the Middle East.” American Field Service Archives. Accessed on 6/7/2007 from <http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/SBenson.html>.

<sup>78</sup> “Field Service Men in Tripolitania Push: American Ambulances with the Eighth Army’s Advance Patrols.” *New York Times*. January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1943. Pg. 10.

peaks which rise on either side of us here [in Lebanon].”<sup>79</sup> Thomas wrote about his desire to get into battle in *Ambulance in Africa*, “The experience of being in an ambush, and the real danger of being anywhere near an army during a war was clear to the A.F.S. drivers when they finally got into battle- this was no beach picnic.”<sup>80</sup> Dickie received a postcard three weeks after the ‘snow capped peaks’ letter that simply read, “my work is getting more and more interesting although I can[‘]t say what or where.” Rich’s platoon had been moved up to the front as the British Eighth Army attacked the Mareth Line.

For the first months of 1943, Rommel held his ground behind the defensive Mareth Line, defeated the Americans at the Kasserine Pass and broke out of Tunisia for a last offensive. Despite this, on January 23, the British Eighth Army took Tripoli, having traveled 1,240 miles since the second Battle of El Alamein.<sup>81</sup> By March, the British Eighth had passed the Mareth Line and began to force the Germans back.

For Rich and his section of six other drivers, the war began to get very real mid-March. A cryptic Vmail sent on March 21, 1943 arrived at 21 St. Austin’s Place in mid-April. It read, “I’m glad to hear the Uncle Ned is stronger. It was such a surprise to learn of his severe illness.”<sup>82</sup> Another Vmail, equally short, arrived ten days later, on March 31, stating “I am sorry to hear of Aunt Minnie’s illness. Hope she is better now.”<sup>83</sup> Rich did not have an Uncle Ned or Aunt Minnie. Scribbled at the bottom of both Vmails, in pencil, was Helen Rich’s handwriting “*code that he has seen serious action.*” Without tipping off the censors, Rich related to his parents something about his whereabouts. He could not have communicated the specifics though, that he had been “on the epic making

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<sup>79</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 21, 1943.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance in Africa*. Pg. 99.

<sup>81</sup> Collier, Paul. *The Second World War, Volume 4: The Mediterranean 1940-1945*. pg 50

<sup>82</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 21, 1943.

<sup>83</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 31, 1943.



left hook that outflanked the Mareth Line. [Rich] was with the 1<sup>st</sup> LFA (light field ambulance), attached to the first armored division.”<sup>84</sup> Those details would have to wait.

The next three Vmails all have ‘*in the desert*’ written across the top by Helen Rich; she must have gotten her information from the *New York Times*. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, after the second mysterious Vmail, the *Times* ran an article that mentioned the Field Service. The first paragraph read

American Field Service volunteer ambulance drivers are working night and day with the main body of the British Eighth Army in the sweep toward Tunis. The only Americans with the ground forces of the Eighth Army, they have been in action with infantry sections throughout the Mareth Line battle.<sup>85</sup>

Rich’s mother must have been able to place where he was from the stories in the paper and the secret codes he was embedding in his letters, though there is no way that she could have known the specific location of his unit. On the April 20 and April 28 letters, all she knew was what she penciled in – ‘*in Tunisia*.’ Again, the *New York Times* would report on his activities before Rich could mention them himself. As the primary newspaper of the Rich family, Dominic and Helen would have known something of what was going on from the *Times*, but not the personal details. However, because of their close connection to the A.F.S. and Steve Galatti himself, they may have known more than some families.

Rich was involved in more continuous military movement and saw more action in the last part of the desert war than at any other point he was overseas. As he would write later in the summer of 1943, after the North African theatre had officially been closed and censorship loosened, “it was this dramatic battle for El Amman [March 18] that saw me

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<sup>84</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 14, 1943.

<sup>85</sup> “U.S. Ambulance Man Killed in Tunisia: Another is Wounded in Mareth Line Battle With Eighth Army.” *New York Times*. April 2, 1943. Pg 4.

involved more deeply in a tank battle than I had expected...[at one point] I decided it was high time to stop my ambulance, and hit the deck. Our officer's mess truck...burst into flames several yards ahead.”<sup>86</sup>

The real work of carrying the wounded “from burning tanks” had begun in earnest for A.F.S. drivers as the army pushed toward Tunis. Sleeping in “a slit trench for every night for two or three weeks,” Rich saw the real face of battle, moving 100 miles in a day on March 25 and 26, the 1 LFA raced over open terrain to connect with another LFA to evacuate casualties from the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF). This was Rich's first frontline work with the ‘Kiwis’ though he had worked with them in Lebanon and Syria.

Rich's original infatuation deepened into great respect when he saw the way the 2NZEF fought. One of the most highly decorated and fêted divisions in the entire Second World War, 2NZEF was the power behind the push across Tunisia to Tunis. The A.F.S. worked closely with the 2NZEF in North Africa, and later in Italy. Less constrained by social convention than the British or Americans, with Maori soldiers as officers, the “Kiwis” or “my great friends” found a place in the hearts of all A.F.S. men. In fact, they were thought to be “so like Americans.”<sup>87</sup> Thomas recalled, “[before Matruh] I had never served with the New Zealanders before and was consequently not equipped with a proper appreciation of that finest of all fighting divisions.”<sup>88</sup> The two groups formed a deep friendship and warm working relations, both on an organizational and individual level, with respect stemming from constant service together under British command.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service*. Pg 104.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance in Africa*. Pg 81.

This unreserved admiration manifest itself in every account of the work the A.F.S. did with the 'Kiwis,' whom Rich would often call "my greatest friends from down under." It started with the 2NZEF stationed at the most crucial, and deadly points, in the advance at Alam el Halfa. The American Field Service distinguished itself in support of those troops; the drivers transported a great number of wounded men with remarkable speed which became their hallmark. Colonel Ardagh of the 2NZEF wrote to the A.F.S. Colonel Ralph Richmond,

the two and a half months of this happy association were difficult and strenuous for all...the truest judges of worth are the soldiers themselves...and all officers and men of the New Zealand Medical Services, and most important of all, the wounded expressed nothing but admiration and praise for the A.F.S.<sup>89</sup>

Rich echoed this admiration, "my wish to be with those great people from down under has been satisfied ...the spirit of these grand people is always one of cheerfulness and helping each other."<sup>90</sup> A.F.S. men would always vie to be stationed with the New Zealand forces; they were the most sought-after assignments. In the treacherous desert conditions, the willingness of both groups to push harder than anyone else fostered mutual respect.

The morning of March 27, Rich's section was up again, and they pushed forward in an attempt to catch the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, with whom they were supposed to be travel. The volunteers drove into the night; at one point, they stopped to ask directions to 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored headquarters. Rich related to Dickie, "the last person [I] asked said, "Damned if I know where they are mate, but if you go 100 yards further you'd better ask

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<sup>89</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg. 108.

<sup>90</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 26, 1943. [Vmail].

in German.”<sup>91</sup> For the next twenty-eight hours, Rich and 1 LFA stood still near El Hamma, trapped in a pocket of space created by advancing German panzer tanks. At 1pm on the 29<sup>th</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division finally broke through the German line at the back, and the ambulances were able to retreat back into the safety of their own lines. All that time they had been cut off, with ambulances full of patients.

The Eighth Army raced for Tunis, the last major Axis stronghold in North Africa, which fell May 8, 1943. The Axis surrendered two hundred and fifty thousand prisoners to the Eighth Army there, and the North African campaign drew to an official close on May 13, 1943. The letters that followed in late April and May told of the end of one of the major theatres of World War Two and the first widespread victory for Anglo-American forces. Attached to the 131 Field Ambulance, Rich spent two weeks outside of Kairouan before moving forward to an ADS where

In the dark the night 1<sup>st</sup> Indian div. (infantry) opened the gap for the 7<sup>th</sup> armored and the 6<sup>th</sup> armored (1<sup>st</sup> army novices) above Medjiz El Bab. This breakthrough resulted in the fall of Tunis the next afternoon and the surrender of the highly vaunted Afrika Korps...the people of Tunis said that it would be the Eighth army who would free them even after the Allied landing in North Africa.<sup>92</sup>

The advance and capture of Tunis was undoubtedly the most important battle sequence in which he took part; Rich wrote a detailed account of the lead-up and battle. By the time they reached the city “the American Field Service volunteer ambulance drivers [had] carried an estimated 20,000 casualties more than 500,000 miles from the front lines to safety.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg. 179.

<sup>92</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

<sup>93</sup> “Field Service Shifting: Volunteer Ambulance Drivers Now En Route to India.” *New York Times*. May 15, 1943. Pg 3.

Rich entered Tunis with the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division of the Eighth Army on May Eighth, 1943. His next letter home is the most joyous of the entire correspondence; it was the only point where he was in a location that allowed him to celebrate a major Allied victory.<sup>94</sup> The day after Tunis fell, “it is all over but the shouting,” wrote Rich. “The people are cheering us as we drive through the streets of the town...it certainly is great to be in a victorious army of liberation.”<sup>95</sup> Even more ebullient than those written on V-E Day or V-J Day, the letter of May 11 allowed Rich to express the joy of seeing what the Eighth Army had fought and died for was worth the price.

Rich enjoyed Tunis. The French-influenced city was in a full uproar over having the Allied forces there. To relate to Dickie what it was like to be part of a liberation army, Rich wrote, “the triumphal entry of the Eighth army into Tunis was all that it was cracked up to be. Women and children lined the streets for days ...I was invited into their homes...pretty girls got into the ambulance and insisted on being driven around town.”<sup>96</sup> After their offensive in the desert, A.F.S. volunteers relished their time in Tunis. They were fed most of the food left in the city and given wine in every house. What many citizens could not figure out was why there were American men with the British Eighth Army. “Of course, my being an American from New York rather confuses them, but I endeavor to explain to the grateful inhabitants my unique position,” Rich wrote home.

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<sup>94</sup> Rich was with the Fifth and Eighth Armies in Italy when D-Day occurred; the capture of Rome happened the same day and the men felt cheated of their glory. When Paris was captured, Rich was in hospital. V-E Day found Rich working at Belsen and he was in a tiny village in India when the Japanese surrendered in September 1945.

<sup>95</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 11, 1943.

<sup>96</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 14, 1943.

The freed peoples of North Africa were not the only ones to note that Rich was in a unique position. The men of the American Field Service answered questions in many different quarters about America and what the nation's role in the world would be after the war. The civilians the A.F.S. men encountered wanted to know when America was going to force the British colonialists out. Evan Thomas recalled similar encounters he had in Egypt and Syria,

those who could read were delighted to see the embroidered "American Field Service" on my arm...they thought America was the finest place in the world and usually wanted to know if it was true that American was going to take over from the English and give them a lot of food and money.<sup>97</sup>

They could not understand how America and Britain were allies.<sup>98</sup> The people of North Africa had seen, and been subjugated by, Europeans before. Americans were new; A.F.S. volunteers were minor celebrities in every town in which they were stationed. People wanted to know when Americans were going to reshape the colonial world, so they asked A.F.S. men to answer.<sup>99</sup>

Rich also had to answer a lot of questions from his parents during the spring of 1943. After the fall of Tunis, when the entire *Panzararmee Afrika* finally surrendered, Dickie and Rich's parents were very curious about the Germans. Rich related that some Germans spoke English and had lived in America; these were clearly not the Nazis that America was supposed to be fighting. In the first lines of his first letter to Dickie after having set sail, Rich showed some of the bravado expected from a nineteen year-old

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance in Africa*. Pg. 168.

<sup>98</sup> What civilians did not understand were the politics of the Alliance, especially between Churchill and FDR. FDR repeatedly pressed the British Prime Minister to let go of his empire so it could be opened to American goods, not for altruistic reasons.

<sup>99</sup> A.F.S. drivers, as Americans, would also be made very welcome in Italy. For a longer discussion of this, see Chapter 4.

going off to war. He boasted to her, “although I have taken a pledge not to bear arms while in the Field Service, I have promised several people German scalps so I may have to resort to a little extracurricular activity.”<sup>100</sup> This was a thought that could only have been voiced on the first voyage out. Rich never expressed a sentiment like that again. In fact, he never killed a single person. By the time he came face-to-face with German prisoners, Rich understood more about the true nature of war and what it cost in terms of human lives. He finally comprehended his role as a civilian ambulance driver, and how the professionalism of the *Afrika Korps* had protected him.

Under the leadership of Erwin Rommel, the German armies in North Africa respected the Red Cross and all non-combatant personnel’s neutrality.<sup>101</sup> The conduct of the North African war reflected this. Even inexperienced American Field Service volunteers observed a “degree of mutual respect and probity which did not always apply on other fronts.”<sup>102</sup> Rich wrote that “the highly vaunted *Afrika Korps* [was] a fine crowd of young men sadly led astray,” but he made it clear they were not the Nazi monsters he imagined.<sup>103</sup>

Rommel’s forces also demonstrated a clear respect for the neutrality of the Red Cross painted on the ambulances; this type of protection for medical vehicles could have resulted only from orders at the top.<sup>104</sup> It protected the A.F.S. from direct attack and

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<sup>100</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 14, 1942.

<sup>101</sup> Rommel held General Wavell, and his theories on generalship, in the highest regard. This regard, combined with Rommel’s professional attitude about warfare, protected the North African campaign from the brutality of other fronts. Though the fighting was intense, Rommel followed the Geneva conventions; he instructed his armies not to attack hospitals and medical aid posts. (Tute, Warren. *The North African War*. New York: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1976. pg 97.)

<sup>102</sup> Tute, Warren. *The North African War*. Forward, pg 6.

<sup>103</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, A.F.S. ambulances, despite being painted with the Red Cross, were *not* protected during World War One. There are numerous accounts of hospital units and evacuation posts being specifically targeted in France. With the advent of the air war, planes also made a specific point to hit medical facilities.

aerial bombing, though five volunteers were captured in battle and sent to Italy as prisoners of war.<sup>105</sup> If the volunteers were caught in the midst of an attack, they were vulnerable, but the *Luftwaffe* did not specifically target medical areas. Both Rich and Evan Thomas explicitly recalled their confidence in German professionalism. Rich told his parents, “I’ve the utmost confidence in Jerry’s respect for us. Ordinary highway accidents are what worry me most.”<sup>106</sup> Thomas related one instance where, “the [air] ‘raid’ had hardly begun before it was over. Apparently the German pilots had seen the mass of red crosses painted on the tops of our ambulances and had given up the project as a bad job.”<sup>107</sup> The A.F.S. worried more about the friendly-fire of inexperienced American bombers. Rich asked his father, who had flown a bomber in the First World War, “Dad, did you ever accidentally drop any “eggs” [bombs] on Allied troops? Did it happen much in the last war? The Yanks are really doing it. They are the greater menace.”<sup>108</sup>

Rich had seen men of both sides die in horrible ways and had transported the wounded of all sides to hospitals. He got to know the enemy through small interactions; he traded with prisoners for war souvenirs. In addition, A.F.S. men met the enemy as desperate groups of Italians and Germans surrendered to various A.F.S. personnel.<sup>109</sup> The Red Cross on the ambulances made them moving surrender stations for tired enemy combatants. The versatile A.F.S. ambulances were used at Tunis to transport prisoners to holding camps. On these rides, “it was rather startling talking to Jerry prisoners who know Brooklyn and Chicago better than we do. The Jerrys having lived there most of

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(Jones, Clitus. “Osborn and Rich Wounded”. *The History of the American Field Service in France: “Friends of France 1914-1917” as Told by Its Members*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920. Vol. II. Page 105.

<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 5 for extended discussion of A.F.S. prisoners of war and their treatment.

<sup>106</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 22, 1944.

<sup>107</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance in Africa*. Pg. 64.

<sup>108</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 18, 1944.

<sup>109</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Pg. 99.



their lives...their passports were stolen from them by the Gestapo [during trips back to Germany].”<sup>110</sup> In the desert, Rich discovered a professional German Army composed of men who wished to survive a war, just like everyone else. Rich’s opinion of Germans would remain heavily influenced by these “honorable though misguided” men in until the spring of 1945.

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<sup>110</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

#### **Chapter Four: “The Next Afternoon My Section Started Up Toward Termoli”: June 1943-May 1944**

“Tunisia,” wrote a war correspondent for the *New York Times*, “is clearly not the end- but the beginning... an outpost of the ‘European Fortresa’ has been eliminated; perhaps Sardinia or Crete, Pantelleria or Lampedusa is next.”<sup>1</sup> Speculations varied as to where the victorious forces would be sent next to fight. The southernmost coast of Sicily could almost be glimpsed from where A.F.S. drivers spent the summer of 1943. The termination of the North Africa campaign found them with an impeccable record of service, the recognition of the British Army general staff and a desire to be on the move again. Among the Allied powers, however, there were competing strategies for how to best approach the invasion of the European continent. The questions of grand strategy occupied the minds of the highest-ranking generals; when the beaches in Tripoli would be reopened was much more important to the A.F.S.; they wanted to go sailing.

The surrender of the *Panzararmee Afrika* on May 13, 1943 proved a period of rest for the entire army group in Africa, including the A.F.S. They had just moved faster and fought harder through the harsh North African desert than was deemed possible by most military planners. A.F.S. men felt the rest unnecessary, though. Rich wrote, “idleness, the tremendous waste of productivity, the loss of momentum, is the worst part of war,” it was necessary for the reassignment of troops and the reorganization of material for another major offensive.<sup>2</sup> By late May of 1943, plans had been made for the British Eighth Army and the American Fifth Army to become the 15 Army Group under

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<sup>1</sup> “The Tunisian Victory: Speed of Fall of Bizerte and Tunis Came as Surprise to Experts Here and in Africa.” *New York Times*. May 9, 1943. Page 32.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, July 18, 1943.

the joint command of General Sir Harold Alexander, General Mark Clark and General Sir Bernard Montgomery. They were to attack 'the soft underbelly of Europe,' Italy.

A.F.S. men like Rich may have felt a slight disappointment after the excitement of being on the front lines of an attacking army in Tunisia but they got used to a more uneventful lifestyle again. They were sent to Tripoli, which "except for sunken ships in the harbor...had the aspect of a seaside resort;"<sup>3</sup> this was where most of the Eighth Army had encamped to wait for orders. The drivers were assigned routine evacuations from general hospitals to hospital ships. Rich was finally able to report to his mother what a normal day was like:

breakfast is at 7:50 or 8- the wireless news from London at 8:15, then after shaving and brushing my teeth, I usually wash out a pair of socks, underwear, pajamas, a shirt or towel. Then I either write a letter or read a magazine or book...After a light lunch at 12:30, I usually go down to the beach on the 2 o'clock truck- sometimes to an afternoon movie if there is an exceptionally good one playing. There is a truck back from the beach and town at 5:30 getting us back to camp in time to see if any mail has come in before going to supper at 6. After supper often it's a movie at the Red Cross Club or the American hospital.<sup>4</sup>

The A.F.S. drivers in North Africa had returned to their old civilian habits after six weeks at a frantic military-regulated pace. In his first letter from Tripoli, Rich wrote his parents, "there isn't much to report because I haven't really been doing anything very exciting- or anything at all except going to the beach and to the movies."<sup>5</sup> In the summer of 1943, more routine work in rear areas emerged for the volunteers following the intense action at frontline posts; this steady pace continued once they reached Italy, which was where they

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<sup>3</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>4</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Rich, September 21, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 13, 1943.

would be headed in early October, though they did not know it. The fact that A.F.S. drivers had short periods of action followed by time away from the front allowed them to have the lifestyle they did- a mix of gentleman traveler and military medical officer.

Descriptions of A.F.S. accommodations in Tripoli worked their way into almost driver's correspondence, including Rich's, because of their exotic contrast to elsewhere in the desert. After months of living out of their Dodge ambulances and eating British army rations, which did not vary, the drivers found themselves parked in a Paradise.

Charles Edwards remembered,

our four 567 Platoons [which included Rich's section] were spread out over a large area taking advantage of the shade of the fruit trees in the lush gardens ... a veritable Eden of fruits, grapes, vegetables and flowers. The cool waters of [the irrigation] tank shaded within a grape arbor covered by flowering bougainvillea sustained us when the temperatures soared to 120 degrees F and more.<sup>6</sup>

Being able to procure any fresh food to supplement their inadequate diet was greatly welcomed by all, and "the army rations of our canteens and messes were readily supplemented by an abundance of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, poultry and fish."<sup>7</sup> The very abnormality of this led everyone to remark upon it. The constant diet of dry-tack biscuits and Spam-like tinned meat contributed to many 'desert rats' bad health at the end of the North African campaign and in the early push through Italy.

Many A.F.S. men suffered from disease in the desert due to unsanitary living conditions, poor diet, lack of hygiene and the general foreignness of the climate. They contracted every type of stomach ailment and affliction, as well as jaundice and malaria

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

with frequency. Their diseases were common to the entire army group in North Africa.<sup>8</sup> The heat also took its toll, “the temperatures here last few days have been over 115° in the shade...the medical thermometers in the American Field Hospital where I am, at present, have been breaking when the temperatures have gotten above 110°.”<sup>9</sup> In the desert though, it was the ‘sand-fly’ fever that plagued the army; Rich got ‘sand-fly fever’ in June 1943 and then contracted jaundice in Italy in October of the same year. When A.F.S. 567 Cov. finally encountered the Italian winters of 1943 and 1944, soldiers manifested jaundice (though most had contracted it in Africa), pneumonia and other severe respiratory ailments.

Rich, along with four other men from his section, would be brought back to Africa from Italy in November due to severe jaundice.<sup>10</sup> Though jaundice, more commonly known as hepatitis, is not related to diet, there were several theories during the war about how it was spread; it is now known to be spread through poor sanitation conditions. Poor sanitation contributed to the vast majority of sickness in the Eighth Army both in North Africa and Italy. In the desert, water was often conserved in unhygienic ways which contributed to the spread of jaundice; food and kitchen equipment was often improperly cleaned with contaminated water.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Harrison, George. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine during the Second World War*. Page 85.

<sup>9</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, July 4, 1943.

<sup>10</sup> Soldiers were evacuated from Italy back to Africa during the early phases of the Italian campaign because the General Hospitals in Africa were better established and the warm weather was thought to be better than the dampness of the Italian climate. Large base hospitals were eventually established in Bari and Naples. However, for long recovery periods, some patients continued to be evacuated back to Africa for the duration of the war.

<sup>11</sup> Jaundice was a huge issue for the armies in North Africa and early in the Italian campaign. Harrison reports that “in the last six months of 1943 ‘jaundice’ also became epidemic in Italy [where Rich may have contracted it], where admission rates in the British Army was equivalent to 120 cases per thousand troops per annum...those suffering from the disease could be hospitalized for from three weeks to six weeks During 1943 as many as 340,000 days were lost in the US Army in North Africa...the numerical equivalent

Food was a constant subject in correspondence. One of the most basic parts of everyday life, Rich, as with every other man involved in the war, focused on aspects of life that reminded them of home. A trope of war letters from every war, the struggle to eat satisfying meals challenged all. Rich's letters did not dwell on food, but they clearly revealed to the readers at home what the dining situation was- and was not. In North Africa, "the 'officer's mess' [was] a hole in the ground with a piece of canvas covering the top."<sup>12</sup> What was served at the British mess, no matter where, was "bully beef- canned corn beef... dished up with potatoes, sometimes cabbage and tinned fruit."<sup>13</sup> The best cooks that the A.F.S. men talked about were the ones who could disguise the bully beef and supplement their meals with other food stuffs 'scrounged' from the local populations.<sup>14</sup> Fresh animal products were especially welcome- and especially lacking from standard British rations. Eggs were very important, often bought to enhance the food provided by the army. Rich kept his parents abreast of what the egg prices were in each country he was in. There were few other food items that got as much coverage; eggs are mentioned no less than sixteen times over the course of the three years.

Though they ate at the best restaurants when in major cities sightseeing, A.F.S. drivers suffered in the lines at the front with everyone else. The ability to find different types of food was a highly refined skill. The price of eggs related to the state of the country Rich was in; the more expensive the eggs, the more devastated the land was. These additional rations most often came from the U.S. Army supplies or the civilian

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of the loss of a whole division for ten days." (Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine during the Second World War*, 132.)

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, Evan. *Ambulance In Africa*. page 68.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>14</sup> 'Scrounging' was a British term that meant 'begging or buying something from civilians.'

populations. The A.F.S. men relied on these two sources for variety of foodstuffs, especially in forward areas. They never were *without* sustenance, however much they complained about the *quality* of their ‘bully and beef.’ In southern Italy, food had become extremely scarce; by the time the A.F.S. arrived, the civilians asked for food from the soldiers in a strange reversal of roles. Allan Prince was in Naples and remembered:

There were these little Italian kids with large fruit cans. They put a little wire on them for a handle and wait at the end of the line. When you were though eating and you were scraping [out] your mess kit, with whatever food you didn’t want to eat, they’d get you to scrape it into their cans, rather than into the garbage.<sup>15</sup>

While they did not starve in any sense, the men of the A.F.S. felt that, compared to the food they were accustomed to, army cooking was objectionable. Rock wrote “the allure of a change of diet was always irresistible to those long accustomed, but not adjusted, to the austere repetition of British rations.”<sup>16</sup> The A.F.S. men never became accustomed to British Army food simply because the food was too foreign, like the ‘brew-ups’ which were so strange to Rich and his fellow drivers at first.<sup>17</sup> The American Army served American food, “fresh butter, coffee, fruit, fruit juice, peanut butter, etc.”<sup>18</sup> Since they were Americans, A.F.S. men were naturally more inclined to prefer what was familiar. There were some advantages to driver’s status in the British Army, however.

The volunteers had officer’s privileges and official Field Service records recall, “the British gave us [cigarettes and chocolate]...and honorary rank of warrant officer...that allowed us certain PX privileges...as an honorary warrant officer, [we] got

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<sup>15</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince, Rutgers College Class of 1947. Conducted by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Greg Kupsky on July 1Eighth-19<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Transcript available online at [http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince\\_allan.html](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince_allan.html). Accessed on 7, July 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 247.

<sup>17</sup> Discussion of what a ‘brew-up’ is follows on the next page.

<sup>18</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 18, 1944.

a bottle of scotch each month.”<sup>19</sup> Though that bottle of liquor was more than their American counterparts could have hoped for, the overall quality of the food in the American Army was better, in terms of variety, its ability to connect A.F.S. drivers with home and its perceived nutritional superiority. Rich wrote to his sister and mother, “you might send vitamin capsules as I am not on US Army rations, you know.”<sup>20</sup> American food production was much better and its output much higher than the British Isle’s ever could have been simply due to the physical size and geographic diversity of the United States. This was in addition to the fact that the American homeland and growing regions were out of the range of German bombers. Variety and freshness were luxuries the British homefront could not provide for its armies. Food was one of the main areas in which A.F.S. men made comparisons between the two Allied armies.

While in the American hospital, Rich came to the conclusion, which he wrote to his parents, that “the highest-paid, best-fed and best-treated army in the world is hardly a temptation to resist.”<sup>21</sup> The army he was referring to, of course, was the American Army. Until he got to Italy four months later and saw the A.F.S. would be doing there, Rich would write continuously about joining the U.S. Armed Forces. He became convinced that it was a much better outfit than the A.F.S. solely in terms of creature comforts.

The comparisons they made, however, were not entirely accurate. A.F.S. volunteers never ate with an U.S. Army in comparable frontline mess tents. Rich had American food when he was on leave in rear areas or in hospitals. The food American soldiers ate on the frontlines (Spam above all else) was just as hated as bully. Rich

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<sup>19</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince, Rutgers College Class of 1947. Conducted by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Greg Kupsy on July 18-19, 2001. Transcript available online at [http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince\\_allan.html](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince_allan.html). Accessed on 7, July 2007.

<sup>20</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Rich, September 21, 1943.

<sup>21</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, July 4, 1943.



acknowledged this; he wrote “[bully] can be fixed up in many more different ways than Spam and therefore you don’t get as tired of it as the Yanks are reputed to be of Spam.”<sup>22</sup> He also reported at length on the American food during his two hospital stays, especially the fruit juice, which was not part of the British Army meal plans.<sup>23,24</sup> To make up for the quality of the food, A.F.S. drivers tried to establish a refined, civilized dinning environment any place they stayed long enough to establish a permanent mess. The units would miraculously unpack tablecloths, china plates and flatware, find local people to serve the food and actively combated the idea that a mess could simply be a hole in the ground covered with a tarp. The A.F.S.’s true tendencies to think and act more like civilians than military personal came through in these small details.

When the army was on the move, however, the situation was different. There was no time to establish a proper dinning room and the volunteers ate bully beef and biscuits-dry- with tea, for days on end. The tea was made at a ‘brew-up’. This custom of the British Army, practiced mostly in the desert, charmed A.F.S. drivers. It consisted of stopping irrespective of where the section was and making tea in old petrol cans over a fire contained in a sand box build specifically for the purpose. No one ever had anything good to say about the tea, but it was a way to stay hydrated under the hot sun. While in Africa, Rich saw the movie *Desert Victory*, supposed to be the most accurate film depicting the war in North Africa to date. He reported, “there was a shot of Tommies brewing up tea...To be realistic, “Desert Victory” should have contained thousands of

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<sup>22</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, September 19, 1943.

<sup>23</sup> Why Rich was assigned to American hospitals is unclear. It might have to do with his status as a civilian or the fact that the British Army felt that the American taxpayer should take care of its. Issues of available beds and types of treatment offered at certain hospitals may also have been a factor.

<sup>24</sup> Fruit juice mentioned in letters of July 4, 1943, August 29, 1943, October 28, 1943, and March 18, 1944 among others.

feet [of film footage] of ‘brewing up.’”<sup>25</sup> This British mannerism came to mean a light snack to A.F.S. men and appeared throughout Rich’s letters for the rest of the war.

Rich and his fellow drivers kept small foodstuffs in their ambulances in case they got hungry while they were in convoy, when a ‘brew-up’ was out of the question, or when they missed meals because they were out on runs or to give small comfort to the wounded men in their ambulances. Rock recounted that, “at all times the collection of extra food was an important activity- private larders being essential both for the volunteers...when work was so timed that meals ...were impossible and also for the patients during delays or on long trips.”<sup>26</sup> A.F.S. men constantly received food from home which they supplemented with food bought off of local peoples. In his letters, Rich made reference to the various boxes of chocolates, fudge, “fruitcake, boned chicken, raisins, peanuts, etc.,” “vitamin capsules...fignewtons, the R&R boned chicken, Armored Star meat spread to say nothing of the salt and pepper” and “Spam, chicken, chocolate bars, toffee, soup, caramels and vitamin pills.”<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> Helen Rich and Dickie sent every imaginable item that could survive the transatlantic trip and then the three or four weeks the parcel would take to get to Rich’s platoon HQ. The food parcels, and the praise they received, show how limited the supply of food was and the level of variety A.F.S. drivers expected. Tripoli seemed to be able to supply more of what they wanted and what they were used to. The summer there gave the A.F.S. men time to eat well, travel and prepare

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<sup>25</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, September 7, 1943.

<sup>26</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 247.

<sup>27</sup> The lists of items sent are from letters “William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 2, 1945”, “William A. Rich to Mary Rich, January 10”, 1944 and “William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, January 25, 1944”, respectively.

<sup>28</sup> The emphasis on vitamin pills ran through all four years of correspondence between Rich and his parents (Dickie never sent any). The army diet was not high in vitamins, clearly evidenced by the very stuff it was made of and the incidence of jaundice among the troops. Helen Rich worried about this to an extreme however, as evidenced by Rich’s comment on March 9, 1944 “I don’t need any vitamin pills- thank you Mother; I should have enough for a year.”

themselves, however unknowingly, for what was to come over the course of the next eighteen months in Italy.

In addition to fresh food, Tripoli provided time for a full scale overhaul of the hardworking Dodge ambulances. The A.F.S. needed time off mostly because their ambulances were rundown. Though they did help to carry patients, to transport blood and “[paraded] for King George VI, on two occasions, to be exact...,”<sup>29</sup> the real reason for 567 Cov. to spend June 1 through October 1 in Tripoli was to repair the ambulances. The desert sand had taken its toll. While they had been on the offensive, A.F.S. drivers had been away from their workshops for weeks at a time. Edwards remembered the situation,

all of us by now were skilled in the 31 point maintenance check-list we had learned in training, but such thorough maintenance had not been possible during the advance to Tunis. At Tripoli we went to work with a will to complete and continue these maintenance requirements.<sup>30</sup>

Rich wrote home that he was “[doing] a few little jobs [each day] such as draining the petrol tank and cleaning out the lines- taking out a slight shimmy and fixing the lights.”<sup>31</sup> All of the training the A.F.S. had done at Baalbek came into use.

While the A.F.S. men fixed their ambulances and rested in anticipation of their next deployment, and Rich internally debated whether he would really be able to join the American Army, the Italian front opened. On July 10, the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily began. July 24 saw Palermo fall; the next day, Mussolini was ousted by King Victor Emmanuel II. By August 17, the Allied armies controlled Sicily. This symbolic

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<sup>29</sup> “We only had to march in position and then stood at attention while the king drove slowly by in an open car, General Alexander on his left and ‘Monty’ ...at the wheel.” William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

<sup>30</sup> Edwards, Charles P. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>31</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, September 19, 1943.

conquest allowed the Italian government to openly sue for peace. On September 8, the Italian armistice became public and official. The main body of the Italian armed forces switched sides and fought with the Allies. Arrayed against the Allied forces were the German Tenth and Fourteenth Armies, under the command of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring.

The British Eighth Army landed in Calabria on September 3 and began to cut a path up the Italian peninsula. They were followed on September 9 by the American Fifth Army which landed at Salerno, the second part of a two-prong attack designed to capture Rome. They took their ambulances from Tripoli and loaded onto special Landing Transport Ships provided by the U.S. Navy. The two companies of A.F.S. men landed in one of two locations: Bari or Anzio.<sup>32</sup> The trips took between three and four days and put the A.F.S. men ashore where they could rapidly continue onwards to meet up with the Field Ambulances to which they had been assigned. Rich and his Platoon reached Italy on October 1.

Once 'D' Platoon landed, it did not take them long to get to the front lines and to start driving night runs. On October 1, as the American Fifth Army took Naples, 'D' Platoon landed on the eastern coast of Italy and immediately reported to HQ at Foggia. Thirty A.F.S. ambulances with drivers arrived under the command of Lt. Red Murray. By the height of the Italian offensive, in the beginning of 1944, more than three hundred A.F.S. men were posted throughout Italy. By the end of April 1944, 'D' Platoon alone would have had three entire months without a single car on reserve, indicating the work

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<sup>32</sup> Edwards, Charles. Part 6: *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

load for the platoon.<sup>33</sup> Their Platoon statistics also reflect the titanic amount of work they completed: eleven thousand patients carried one hundred sixty-three thousand and six hundred seventy-one miles in less than six months. One ambulance had carried two hundred and sixty-nine front-line patients in one month, though that was the record, not the rule.<sup>34</sup> Despite all the hardships and the seemingly unmanageable conditions, the A.F.S. made a name for itself in Italy, just as it had in North Africa, driving more patients further over more impossible terrain than anyone else.

Because of this competence, the A.F.S. was well-known to the British military establishment. In fact, the high regard the British Brigadier Phillips, (DDMS Eighth Army<sup>35</sup>) had for the work of the A.F.S. resulted in the men of 'D' Platoon, and all following 567 Cov. platoons, receiving immediate postings at the front. This proved fortuitous, as Rich and his companions immediately saw action upon arrival in Italy, which partially convinced him to remain in the A.F.S. for another two years.

On the evening of October 3, Rich's section (he was now the non-commissioned officer (NCO) of his group) was ordered to Termoli.<sup>36</sup> A fierce battle had erupted there between British 78 Division and the German 16 Panzer Division, recently transferred from the Russian front to fight the Allies in Italy. The mud was so bad that the British Austin ambulances were useless. Heavy rain had fallen and continued to fall during the battle; the four-wheel drive Dodge ambulances were essential for casualty evacuations.

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<sup>33</sup> The A.F.S. liked to keep at least two ambulances in reserve for unforeseen work details or if a car was damaged too badly to be repaired. The fact that no cars were kept on reserve meant that every one was needed at a different forward position. This was quite unusual.

<sup>34</sup> D Platoon, 567 A.F.S. ACC Report of Activities from October 1, 1943- April 1, 1944. American Field Service Archives.

<sup>35</sup> Deputy Director of Medical Services

<sup>36</sup> This rank designation does not make sense since all A.F.S. men were unofficially officer in the British Army anyway, but in A.F.S. documents, that is how section command is indicated.

Rich reported the '35-mile Salvation Run' to his parents in full on April 27, 1944, when censorship finally relaxed:

...A few words on the battle for Termoli. It was our second day in Italy, I guess, that Howard Terrell's section and mine proceeded up the Adriatic coast<sup>37</sup>....my section [was] at the MDS evacuating the rain that night. The next afternoon my section started up toward Termoli.<sup>38</sup> We were put off the road after going a few miles because of the traffic. While in this field, dispersed, peacefully enjoying some American canned pineapple, fruit juice and graham crackers with strawberry jam (all of which we had brought along from Africa), several German's dived down on the road....we heard a couple of bombs drop further up the road so we "got mobile" in a hurry. An officer limping down the road said there were many casualties up there, "I don't know where". Proceeding slowly because of all the traffic, we proceeded about 25 mi. though several towns...We crossed several Bailey Bridges and had to detour though deep mud, down slopes to get around 7 or 8 bigger bridges which Jerry had carefully blown. Finally after passing under a blown railway bridge we could see big fires (tanks) ahead on the hill and weren't sure whether we were in no man's land. Sighting an RAP sign I stopped to enquire. The road was being mortared two or three miles up and it was not possible to get into it- so more food was in order as it was after 7.

About 8 someone said the road was open so I was loaded with three bad casualties and followed some other ambulances that knew the way. I'll admit I didn't feel too happy about it all at the point where George Holton's ambulance was immobile off the road...I got out and happened to overhear some officers saying that they didn't know where the regiment they were replacing was or where Jerry was. I got the impression that the line wasn't far from the road. Behind us was the Adriatic. A blazing ammunitions truck on one side of the road, a knocked Bren carrier on the other...burning merrily as were Sherman and German tanks up on the hill. In the DMS in T[ermoli] I was anxious to load such casualties as there were and be off. Our guns were firing nearby and German shells were dropping into town...my one thought was to get an orderly who wasn't shell happy to help me though the muddy diversions in the pitch blackness of the night. At 11 o'clock I reached the MDS a wicked 35 miles back.

At midnight, we were on the road again, I following Dick who was driving the first car.<sup>39</sup> Tiny convoy lights were the only ones we were allowed to use. I don't see how I stayed on the road...At 2:30, we pulled into T[ermoli]. The town was to be abandoned at 3:30, according to rumor...surgical equipment was loaded in my ambulance but Dickson did

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<sup>37</sup> Rich was mistaken, it was not his second day, which would have been October 2. The correct date to which he referred was October 3.

<sup>38</sup> The date was October 4.

<sup>39</sup> It was now October 5.

not let me leave until 5.<sup>40</sup> Of course, tanks had started to come in and I was going to be caught in the middle of a tank battle, for sure... I followed the road around to the right. In the first half light of dawn, I realized my mistake. Continuing a thousand yards further, I would have had breakfast with Jerry, if I were very lucky... we reached the MDS again about 7 just in time for breakfast... That afternoon I think we went to Termoli again and made another evacuation to this MDS... There wasn't too much more to the Battle of Termoli.

By October 7, the fighting stopped. Rich's section had "worked for 48 hours straight to evacuate wounded...they carried about 300 patients in their four-place ambulances."<sup>41</sup>

All Rich could communicate to his parents in the immediate aftermath of the battle was their secret code: "so sorry to hear of Uncle Ned's illness. Hope he is better now."<sup>42</sup> He wanted to signal Dickie about where he had seen action exactly; his next letter to her contained the following hint, "the three sections of A.F.S. ambulances (15 cars in all) were mentioned in official dispatches to army upon their great work. I, at present, am NCO of one of these sections."<sup>43</sup>

'D' Platoon won high praise for their work at Termoli. George Holton earned special mention because he pulled all four patients out of his burning ambulance and secured another vehicle for them in the middle of a tank battle. Another of Rich's good friends, Art Bolte, demonstrated both why evacuations in the dark were dangerous and what made the A.F.S. excellent for their assignments. With typical A.F.S. bravado, Bolte had decided to use an evacuation route not yet declared open for traffic since it ran parallel to the forward tank line. When he arrived, there was a tank battle in full swing.

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<sup>40</sup> "It was expected that Termoli would [be retaken by the enemy] unless a bridge some miles to the south could be finished in time to get tanks across the plain."

Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 237)

<sup>41</sup> Wackernagel, Fred, Jr. "Termoli as Seen by the American Field Service: With the American Field Service in Italy, October 11<sup>th</sup> [1943]." AP, delayed. Accessed from [www.warlinks.com/pages/afs.html](http://www.warlinks.com/pages/afs.html) on June 7, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 10, 1943.

<sup>43</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 21, 1943.

He failed to return from his run and his section feared for the worst. In fact, he had had an accident. Rich told Dickie “Bolte’s car hung on its side over a ravine, saved from loss by a tree.” Bolte seemed unfazed by the experience. He had learned from the British to be totally unflappable in the worst situations and so he simply “removed everything he could from the car, and was found next morning sitting on his battery at the end of a nearly lined up row of equipment on the side of the road.”<sup>44</sup>

The men of Rich’s section had also learned from their British counterparts how to ‘get through.’ Three days after Termoli, Rich, Larry Bigelow, Dick Dickson and Howard Terrell were evacuated back to Africa with severe jaundice. They had driven casualties for 48 hours, without sleep, in this state. The unsanitary conditions of North Africa finally took its toll. Rich wrote “like many other veterans of our battle-tested platoon, I finally succumbed to jaundice and have been evacuated through about six stagings,<sup>45</sup> after a plane ride I ended up at an American station hospital. I reported sick a week ago...”<sup>46</sup> Rich was not discharged until the middle of November, “rest and diet [being] about the only thing that can be done to cure jaundice.”<sup>47</sup> After his release, Rich took some extra time coming back to Italy. He did not return to ‘D’ Platoon HQ until December 23. Rich toured more of the North African coast before he flew back to Italy illegally on a U.S. Air Force jet piloted by a Harvard classmate he encountered in a restaurant in Tripoli. While he traveled, his platoon was covering the front lines evacuation routes for the Canadian divisions of the Eighth Army in Eastern Italy. Despite constant work near enemy fire, very little ‘excitement’ occurred for ‘D’ Platoon. Rich

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<sup>44</sup> D Platoon, 567 A.F.S. ACC Report of Activities from October 1, 1943- April 1, 1944. American Field Service Archives.

<sup>45</sup> British and Canadian medical units (CCSs, general hospitals and field ambulances)

<sup>46</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 28, 1943.

<sup>47</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 31, 1943.



missed nothing except driving through muddy villages in the mountains and the evacuation of hundreds of wounded men as the 78 Division slowly advanced through southern Italy.

At the Gothic Line and Cassino, as for most of their other assignments in forward situations, D Platoon was stationed with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Polish Carpathian Division. 'D' Platoon did most of their early work in Italy with the Free Poles. The men of the A.F.S. confronted two difficulties in their new posts. One was simply the matter of language. The other concerned a more deep-seated, cultural prejudice. Rich wrote, "although very few speak English or French, we get along somehow on a common smattering of Italian and Arabic. It's a bit awkward though."<sup>48</sup> As to the matter of Arabic being a common language to the two groups, Rich addressed this in a letter to Dickie

To clear up the complications that seem to be surrounding a certain set of facts in your mind. All soldiers inevitably learn a few words of the language spoken in the country in which they are stationed, whether that be Italian, Arabic or French. Arabic seems to be the universal language of the Eighth army with the possible exception of the Canadians- they don't seem to *compre*.<sup>49</sup>

The exception was Polish. Rich never wrote home that he learned a word of the language though he spent such a good part of his time in Italy with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Division. He may have picked some up because there were two and three week stretches where "men on isolated posts lacked people who could speak their own language...they had no one with whom to talk English."<sup>50</sup> Rock suggested that "as they did with the

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<sup>48</sup> William A. Rich to Jack Rich, February 27, 1944.

<sup>49</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, April 20, 1944.

<sup>50</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 299.

Indian troops, [A.F.S. men] fell back on Italian as a sort of *lingua franca*.”<sup>51</sup> Italian was very clearly much easier for the classically trained, Western minds of A.F.S. drivers. With their backgrounds in Latin and French, Italian was a much simpler language to pick up than Cyrillic-based Polish. This is proved by the fact that, unlike the French and Italian words sprinkled through Rich’s letters, not a single Polish phrase ever appeared.

There was also great relief expressed in his letters when he returned from these postings to his A.F.S. friends. There seemed to be something about Polish that was less acceptable, less cultured. In a particularly revealing sentence to his parents, Rich wrote, “we are now confronted with another language.”<sup>52</sup> I’m not sure Harvard has a course in it for me to get credit.”<sup>53</sup> Not only did this sentence give Helen and Dominic Rich a clue about his posting, it gave a small sense of the American upper-class cultural attitude toward the Polish. Though he never said anything negative about his Polish comrades-in-arms, there was a sense that he thought they were more foreign than any other group he interacted with. Though the men of the A.F.S. also had some ethnic stereotypes about the Italians, “no doubt about it, they’re [the Italians] hot operators...fugitives from Brooklyn turn up everywhere,”<sup>54</sup> there seemed to be less of a cultural bias than with the Poles.

The A.F.S. volunteers suffered not only in social situations with the Poles but the language barrier made military communication very difficult. Unlike when they were with English speaking allies, there was no way for the Polish officers to brief the A.F.S. men on the situation or upcoming movements. More figuratively, it was hard for the

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<sup>51</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 387.

<sup>52</sup> (*again, we think Polish*)- HGR. This was a note penciled onto the letter by Helen Rich when it arrived. Because he could not write about where he was other than ‘somewhere in Italy’ due to incredibly strict censorship rules, Rich had to come up with some means of telling his parents where and with whom he was. This could be the only meaning of the sentence, but it is not likely.

<sup>53</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 22, 1944.

<sup>54</sup> “Griff Talk” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5, December 1943- January 1944. Available online at <http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/AFSletters/AFSB5.html>, accessed on 31 October, 2007.

Americans of the A.F.S. to relate culturally to the Poles. Different priorities and values between the two groups became clear to Rich and he related those findings home, both to his parents and to Dickie. Rich wrote that “not having any home or family to return to, our comrades-in-arms tend to regard life less highly than we who have the USA to think about. This disturbs us a bit in that we don’t care to get killed with them.”<sup>55</sup> Unlike his unabashed praise for British and Kiwi soldiers, the Poles seemed too foreign and too driven to Rich; in fact, they seemed reckless. This was perhaps more of a class-based stereotype than a personal prejudice.

In the end, Rich came to have a great respect for his Polish companions, “having been in concentration camps for months and being exposed to extreme cold, they don’t mind the weather or going without a meal or two.”<sup>56</sup> Rich gave the 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Division praise after their work at Cassino; they accomplished where American and British divisions had failed. D Platoon of the A.F.S. saw a great deal of action with the Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Division and nowhere is it recorded that any driver failed to carry any soldier, Polish or otherwise, when called upon to do so, whatever their personal biases or language barriers.

The need to find a *lingua franca* followed Rich throughout Italy. Though he eventually learned passable Italian and spoke fluent French, there were times when he resorted to English, especially with the Italians themselves. Rich reported to his father that he did not speak as much French as he had in the desert, or as much as his parents expected him to, because “it is more than likely that he [an Italian] speaks broken

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<sup>55</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 28, 1944.

<sup>56</sup> William A. Rich to Peter Rich, February 27, 1944.

English, either having been to America himself or having brothers, cousins or uncles in the United States.”<sup>57</sup>

The use of English was not always reliable, however, and most A.F.S. drivers learned to speak Italian so as to be able to communicate in social situations. Rich joked with Dickie that “a signorina is certainly an inspiration [to learn Italian].”<sup>58</sup> After a slow start with French and English as crutches, “my Italian is so *pocco* that I conversed in French with a young school-teaching signorina,” Rich worked to speak more Italian. By November of 1944, “my smattering of Italian has come in handy...explaining to civilians whose houses we are billeted in, that we wont carry off their blankets and other belongings.”<sup>59</sup> This ability to communicate was vastly important to Rich on a personal level, but also to A.F.S. men in general because they were frequently billeted in civilian houses, as seen above, when on the front lines.

Rich made friends with many of the people he lived with. Undoubtedly, this was not due entirely to his ability to speak Italian: he was an American ambulance driver who was friendly and brought the family some extra food now and again. However, his extroverted personality required interaction with people and so Rich was able to learn more and practice with the people he lived with. He wrote to his parents, “thanks to the Bellisari family and other Italian friends who I visited in company with soldier comrades, I was able to practice my Italian.”<sup>60</sup> Living with the Italians, Rich’s linguistic experiences showed him something remarkable about the way language bridged gaps in war:

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<sup>57</sup> William A. Rich to Mrs. Love (identity otherwise unknown), January 25, 1944.

<sup>58</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 13, 1944.

<sup>59</sup> “William A. Rich to Peter Rich, December 26, 1943” and “William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 21, 1944,” respectively.

<sup>60</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, April 13, 1944. The Bellisari were a family that Rich lived with for some time in March and April of 1944. He developed a strong friendship with their five children.

‘Momma’s’<sup>61</sup> son Hugo, usually sits around the fire with us- he was in the Italian army and fought in Russia. I talk with him in French; our comrade-in-arms [a Pole] who speaks a little English converses with Hugo in Russian which they both learned while there, on different sides of the line. It certainly is a funny war.

For Rich, one of the most rewarding parts of his time overseas was the ability to interact with so many different kinds of people. He wanted to learn to speak to people because he enjoyed the social interactions so much.

By late December, bogged down for the first of two very long, deadly winters in the muddy mountains on the Gothic Line, the British command structure was reorganized and General Sir Oliver Leese became commander of the Eighth Army; Field Marshall Montgomery was transferred back to England in order to be part of the coming D-Day invasions. January of 1944 brought more bad conditions for evacuation. Field Service drivers worked with the 11 Field Ambulance attached to the 78 Division; they handled all front line evacuations in their sectors. Six days after his return from sick leave, Rich and ‘D’ Platoon got sent to the rear for rest; he reported little military activity for the rest of the month. He wrote, “our platoon is fortunate to have steady work to do...mostly routine evacuations of the wounded and sick.” The A.F.S. still performed long evacuations each day, despite these being mainly for civilian patients. A feeling of routine set in but “life here is much more interesting than was physically possible in the sands of the desert. When we first encountered the mud on this side of the Med, we swore we’d rather have the sand, but in the long run a civilized country is definitely

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<sup>61</sup> Many of the older Italian women Rich lived with wished to be called ‘Mamma’ as an endearment.

preferable.”<sup>62</sup> Though less militarily relevant, the work the A.F.S. did for Italian citizens was of equal humanitarian importance.

‘D’ Platoon postings changed again in late January when the 78 Division was pulled away from the front and the Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian Division took over. The Poles had eleven ambulances for their entire division, so the A.F.S. again was put into perpetual motion.<sup>63</sup> Work with the Polish Division brought action back to the A.F.S. Rich’s first assignment with his new comrades was at a RAP. This was the most forward evacuation point he had been at since the push toward Tunis and he enjoyed the variety. He told his parents, “at present I’m stationed with a Reccee outfit<sup>64</sup> - very interesting for a change. The MO has an armored car for an ambulance.”<sup>65</sup>

The only American on post, Rich evacuated men down to another hillside town where his good friend Jim Briggs worked. A week of blizzard conditions stopped all driving; a good number of A.F.S. men were stranded at their posts. Unable to make runs, even with their trusty Dodges, the volunteers waited for food drops and bulldozers to arrive to evacuate *them*. As Rock stated, “February was probably the worst of the 6 months [of the winter] for all drivers...Snow kept J[im] Briggs in Capracotta for 30 days; there and at Agnone<sup>66</sup> food had to be dropped by plane.”<sup>67</sup> Though the situation seemed dire, Rich was fortunate. He told the story of what happened that month for his parents:

If it had not been for the courtesy of the Italians in preparing us spaghetti and chicken dinners when I was snowbound... life would not have been one half so enjoyable in as much as the cookhouse was reduced to emergency rations...Jim Briggs has been snowbound for the past week.

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<sup>62</sup> William A. Rich to Mrs. Love, January 25, 1944.

<sup>63</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 299.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Reccee’ was the British Army shorthand for ‘reconnaissance’

<sup>65</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, January 27, 1944.

<sup>66</sup> The town Rich was in.

<sup>67</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 299.

He replaced Larry Toms who had been in the same situation. Larry came down with a Sun Valley tan having skied the whole time.<sup>68</sup>

A.F.S. men never missed a chance to have civilian fun if the opportunity presented itself; sometimes in the course of Rich's letters, it is hard to remember the reason he was in Italy was to assist an army. In fact, Rich saw and conducted himself like a civilian for the entire war. Like Rich taking off from his sick-leave in Africa to tour North Africa, very few men felt the need to be 'on duty' when not required to be. The volunteers entertained themselves in the same manner they would have in America. The American Field Service was not a military organization; A.F.S. drivers saw that it did not feel like one. But the fact was that a war was going on around them, no matter how much they pretended it was not at times. When they were in the field, however, the A.F.S. acquitted themselves brilliantly precisely because they were eager to prove they belonged on the frontlines, civilians or not.

While Rich and 'D' Platoon were stranded by snow in the mountains, 'B' and 'C' Platoons of 567 Cov. dashed toward Cassino. Covering two hundred and fifty miles in three days, a record speed given the aforementioned conditions of roads in the winter of 1943-4, B and C Platoons arrived at Cassino on February 8 in time to assist in the evacuations that took place during the worst of the fighting, from February 15-18. They joined A Platoon and the entire 485 Cov. who were already there. 485 Cov. had been given the unusual assignment of evacuating American soldiers at the Anzio beachhead when the Fifth Army landed there. They continued to work with the Americans until the end of the battle of Cassino, where in A.F.S. fashion, they garnered praise from their superior officers for excellent work and extreme bravery under fire.

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<sup>68</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 22, 1944.

Far from the battle, D Platoon was still in the eastern half of Italy in late March, slowly advancing from town to town with the Poles. However, on March 26, the New Zealand Division at Cassino was disbanded, the different regiments sent to fight elsewhere; a replacement division had to be found to hold a crucial piece of the Allied line at Cassino. The Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian, as part of 13 Corps, was selected, and taking their A.F.S. drivers with them, moved toward Cassino at the beginning of May. Between March and May, Rich continued to write home about the civilians he lived with and his daily routine. His letters convey a contentment with a simple, easy life and a little ‘excitement’ every now and again. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, Rich must have been engaged in some type of action because his letters to his parents and to Dickie of that date had been heavily censored with entire pages missing. The only fragment of what he saw and did existed in this last line to Dickie,

[censored] I’ll take the artillery over the infantry any night, thank you. They at least have canvas or tin overhead to keep the rain and snow off. A few nights later I was awakened rudely from a none-too-sober sleep at 4:30am. I had to [multiple pages censored] ...my orderly was more concerned than I.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, there was still fighting in the mountains, but the volunteers still threw their cocktail parties and social gatherings, just as they have done at the colleges they came from. The petty engagements in the hills were nothing compared to what ‘D’ Platoon would see at Cassino, their first major engagement since the fall of Tunis.

However, ‘D’ Platoon did not get to Cassino before they had a very important, and controversial guest. Director General of the American Field Service Steve Galatti, a close personal friend of Dominic Rich’s from the First World War, made a tour of all Field Service units on duty during the last week of April. The way that 60 Beaver Street

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<sup>69</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, March 29, 1944.



had handled certain parts of the A.F.S. experience had grated on Rich. In one letter, he told Dominic Rich, “Steve Galatti cannot be convinced that the Field Service and the conditions it has been operating in are not the same as France and Paris 25 years ago. Steve ought to have flown out here long ago and had a look so that he’d know what he’s running from 60 Beaver.”<sup>70</sup> He expressed his displeasure often to his father, who, as an A.F.S. veteran, had his own ‘misconceptions’ about what the conditions were.

The conflict between the two generations of A.F.S. men was clear at times. Both Steve Galatti and Dominic Rich had served in some of the worst parts of the French lines during World War One. They definitely had some idea of what it meant to be an ambulance driver. However, the A.F.S. spent less than a year total in France during the Second World War. Galatti wrote Dominic Rich to say,

Tell Bill it is the same thing here as it was with us- same kind of work, same conditions, same A.F.S., same talk, same things concern everybody, same knocked-down villages, same billets, same everything. Except more day work at very exposed posts due to this being definitely safer...the ambulances are not shot at when recognized.<sup>71</sup>

While the older generation thought they understood, Rich and his young A.F.S. friends, knew they did not. After they had grown up on the stories of glory and bravery in France, of medals awarded and long periods of intense action, the A.F.S. of World War Two found itself knee-deep in Italian mud. It was not that they longed for easy glory; Rich simply wanted his father to tell ‘60 Beaver Street’ that some of the decisions they made from across the Atlantic made no sense in actuality.

This one overarching authority in the A.F.S. chaffed at the volunteers and infringed on the supposed autonomy they were supposed to have. They were not the

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<sup>70</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, September 21, 1943.

<sup>71</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 312.

army; the A.F.S. should not have had to deal with bad decisions made far away by old men who had fought in World War One and thought this new war was the same thing all over again. Rich took it upon himself to remind them of that. He wrote Dickie, “I’ve been trying to convince them [Dominic Rich and 60 Beaver Street] that this is a tough war- you’ll be forced to concede, yourself, that the Libyan Desert and Paris are two separate worlds- having nothing in common.”<sup>72</sup> In addition, for A.F.S. drivers who were college-aged and wanted to assert their own independence, the New York headquarters seemed too much parental. “We feel that 60 Beaver rather overdoes its paternalistic approach to the checkbook,” Rich said to his father.<sup>73</sup> Steve Galatti’s review of the A.F.S. men was anticipated, though Rich and his friends jokingly wondered how ‘costumed’ the Director-General would be.

The Battle of Cassino, one of the most destructive and deadly of the Italian campaign, began on January 3 and would continue until the Polish Carpathian Division captured the last objective, Monastery Hill, five months later. Rich was still in the mountains in the first week of May, though the snow had been replaced by thick mud again. ‘A’ Platoon took over ‘D’ Platoon’s duties with the Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> Carpathian, so the latter could have a rest before they moved to Cassino. Rich wrote, “we are now back in the field again- to be more correct, on a muddy hillside The easy life at the platoon HQ villa... is a thing of the past, I fear, for some time to come.”<sup>74</sup> D Platoon advanced quickly to Venafro, a small hill town near Cassino, where Rich’s section distinguished itself yet again.

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<sup>72</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, April 28, 1945.

<sup>73</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic Rich, March 11, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, April 28, 1945.

On May 9, ten ambulances were sent to evacuate the Polish 5<sup>th</sup> Kresowa Division from the front lines. Five more were sent out on May 13 to continue the evacuation of the growing numbers of wounded soldiers from the final push to take Monte Cassino itself. Rich was again the NCO of his section, which consisted of five ambulances and six drivers. They evacuated two hundred casualties in their first thirty-six hours at Cassino over a route known as the 'Infernal Track' - a twenty-mile run through a narrow valley under constant enemy fire; the average trip took six hours. At Venafrò, 'D' Platoon showed the power of an A.F.S. unit, bringing more than a thousand wounded men back to the main MDS in Venafrò.<sup>75</sup>

Rich saw a great deal of action at Cassino; it became apparent in the content and the censorship of his letters. Two written May 14 both have entire pages censored. Rich could never fully get a handle on the censorship rules enacted during battles. Most often, when Rich wrote to both his parents and Dickie on the same day, as was the case on May 14, he had been involved in a major battlefield operation and wrote to assure everyone he was still alive. Both letters invariably contained similar information, often identical paragraphs; they include the sentence leading up the beginning of the censored pages. He wrote, "If this letter appears a bit incoherent, it may possibly be because I was up all last night- finally managed to catch 2 hours sleep... [censored]."<sup>76</sup> Given the dates on which the letters were written, Rich was at Cassino during this time. He expressed some of his most philosophical thoughts on the nature of warfare in these two letters.

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<sup>75</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 323.

<sup>76</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 14, 1944.

He reflected on the carnage at Cassino, the fact that the five ambulances under his command evacuated two hundred serious casualties in the first thirty-six hours caused him to pause and seemed to jerk him out of his normal ebullient demeanor. He wrote,

the dawn was ushered in by the twittering of birds in the trees overhead. Just for a moment I forgot that there was a war raging nearby. The hot summer weather brings back memories of happy days spent at P.O.W. [Point O' Woods] when war was never conceived of. It seems too bad that men should have to go out and die on days like these.<sup>77</sup>

The war weariness of these thoughts, and a clear longing for the familiar places of home, illustrated how men like Rich coped with the battlefield scenes around them. They removed themselves for moments into other, peacetime places, and wrote home. Men could leave the reality of the present and live in a dream-world without war through letters.

Not surprisingly, Rich was much more honest and realistic when he wrote to Dickie than when he wrote to his parents, especially during battles like Cassino; it is here in this short letter from Cassino that fact becomes most apparent. While he closes his letter to his parents with thoughts about his sister Betty's graduation gift, Dickie's letter closes with a more realistic thought, "I saw Larry last night...this noon he managed to pick up a few bits of shrapnel [in his back]...the noise [from the guns] is such that it is impossible to think so I must stop."<sup>78</sup>

The evacuation routes A.F.S. men drove were directly under the observation of the German guns. Rich was never in the town of Cassino but he got fairly close to the German guns all the same. "Herb Longnecker and I made up Highway 6 to within 2 miles of the town. A couple of Kiwis (New Zealanders) advised us not to proceed any further

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<sup>77</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1944.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

unless we had to, as Jerry had the road taped with mortar fire. We didn't!"<sup>79</sup> Rich reported to his parents. In light of this, it was not surprising that the A.F.S. suffered casualties at Cassino. At some points, since night evacuations alone could not keep up with the huge number of men needing evacuation; daytime smokescreens were employed to shield the routes so ambulances could make runs in relative safety. It was not so much that the *Wehrmacht* targeted the ambulances, as A.F.S. drivers should avoid crossfire if the German gunners could not see the road at all. The other reason for the round-the-clock evacuations was the correlating survival of the wounded to the amount of time they had to wait for treatment. As Kiwi medic J. B. McKinney explained

[the wounded] would usually arrive at the MDSs about 11pm after having been held in Cassino, and this was often 12 to 16 hours after they had been wounded. The few abdominal cases which occurred were affected by this delay. Walking wounded were sometimes so exhausted that they could not speak.<sup>80</sup>

Given the intensity of the fighting when the fighting tapered off, the safest runs were those made at night; it was preferable to evacuation in the middle of daytime battles.

The time that Rich spent at Cassino was undoubtedly some of the most intense shelling he endured. The continual pounding of the guns, day and night, became legendary among all the troops that served there. The MDS at Verafro was also a rewarding post for Rich. He felt that, though "this MDS hasn't been the world's quietest spot this morning[,] it's encouraging; makes you feel like you're really getting on with the war out here."<sup>81</sup> He had not shown this type of enthusiasm about the progress of the war since Tunis. The low-level activity in the mountains had taken its toll on A.F.S.

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<sup>79</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 22, 1944.

<sup>80</sup> McKinney, J.B. *Medical Units of the 2 NZEF in the Middle East and Italy*. 1952. Accessed from [www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed10.html](http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed10.html) on October 1st, 2007.

<sup>81</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 17, 1944.

morale, and the work at Cassino restored the idea that they could aid the Allied cause in a meaningful way. Again, as always, the Dodge ambulance proved an invaluable vehicle.

In correspondence with his parents, Rich wrote,

We have been working quite steadily the last four or five days- three nights we were shuttling back and forth the few miles to the other MDS... There are 15 of our ambulances here so you can see for yourself that we've carried casualties as never before. Our [D]odge ambulances are about the ambulances that can make the trip over the steep track.<sup>82</sup>

The reliability of A.F.S. drivers to get the job done was constant, even in the most dangerous conditions.

For Rich and his companions in the AFS, aspects of the Italian campaign were very different, the same or an amalgamation of old elements from the desert. One of the latter was the composition of the army to which the A.F.S. found itself attached to. The Eighth was composed of "Free French, Free Poles, Sikhs, Gurkas, South Africans, Canadians, Scots, Englishmen... [and] New Zealanders... while the Australians went back home to fight the Japanese."<sup>83</sup> The British Eighth Army in Italy was even more diverse than it had been in North Africa, though A.F.S. units had already served with some of the divisions that were in Italy, such as the 2NZEF. Aside from their position on a new continent, with a new terrain, and a totally new language to learn, the two newest parts of the Italian campaign were the actual organizational structure of the A.F.S. and their assignment with Free Poles. Rich and his platoon, 'D' of 567 Cov., would spend the most time with the Poles of any A.F.S. unit in Italy.

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<sup>82</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 17, 1944.

<sup>83</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince, Rutgers College Class of 1947. Conducted by Sandra Stewart Holyoak and Greg Kupsy on July 18-19, 2001. Transcript available online at [http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince\\_allan.html](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince_allan.html). Accessed on 7, July 2007.

The new organizational structure of the A.F.S. was necessitated by the character of the campaign and the terrain. In Africa, because of the nature of the fighting, the lack of work to do, and the fact the A.F.S. had no service record with the British, the internal structure of the A.F.S. had been loose. Men were assigned to sections, but the sections were constantly being changed because of personal request or situational demands. There were also few enough drivers that the A.F.S. could be relaxed in its overall organizational shape. Colonel Fred Hoeing and Steve Galatti personally knew all of the volunteers- there was no anonymity in the first years of the A.F.S... When the organization moved to Italy, the sheer number of drivers now operating under the A.F.S. banner required a different style of organization; it remained, however, an organization without strict hierarchy, a characteristic of which the volunteers were very proud and wished to preserve.

The growing size of A.F.S. companies was the reason for the division of the North African 567 Cov. into Central Mediterranean (CM) 567 Cov. and CM 485 Cov., each composed of four platoons. 485 Cov. was mainly new men coming over to Africa after the end of the campaign; Rich and his friends remained part of 567 Cov. as they had originally been. The splitting of each Cov. into four platoons, A, B, C, and D, was done by grouping sections together. Each platoon acted almost as a separate unit, since there was rarely enough work in one place for all four.<sup>84</sup> In fact, there was rarely a time when an entire platoon would be together. In the case of D platoon, they were dispersed, one or two drivers to a post, for most of 1943-44. Rich was put into D Platoon, as were most of his section buddies, which made him happy. He never remarked on the change in

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<sup>84</sup> During the definitive battles of the Italian campaign, American Fifth and British Eighth worked as one unit, most notably at Cassino and in the offensive from Florence north to the Gothic Line. At these times, both A.F.S. companies served in the same areas, sometimes in direct correlation with each other.

organization; therefore from an individual driver's perspective, the effect must have been minimal. He remained in Section Six, 'D' Platoon, 567 Cov. until the cessation of hostilities in Europe.

In Italy, the British asked the A.F.S. to perform the same services it had reliably supplied in North Africa: to drive through impassable conditions with the speed to save critically wounded soldiers. The A.F.S. found a dark humor in this mission, and in the Herculean tasks they were asked to perform. In the *A.F.S. Bulletin*, this description of a tongue-in-cheek A.F.S. reunion that fused the conditions in North Africa and Italy into a cocktail party appeared:

...after the preliminary alcohol bath provided by a series of intimate cocktail parties, one will arrive...the locale will doubtless be the Waldorf ballroom...the room will be divided in the center, and on one side the parquetry will be heaped with dirty sand, while the other will be axel-deep in very viscous mud. To lend verisimilitude to the occasion, natives will have been imported from Africa, though the Eyeties will have been borrowed from Cherry Street. The room will be ringed with Egyptian and Eyetie dwellings, realistically perfumed. Sundry livestock will mix with the guests...the guests will be seated in ambulances badly dispersed...[dinner will be] washed down with tea made from vintage dishwater...[as] favors for our wives- 'S' mines to plant in the garden...the evening will feature...Art Howe, Fred Hoeing and the Colonel [singing] "We Got You to Italy, and Then You Got Jaundice." Festivities will conclude with a mass evacuation by stretcher.<sup>85</sup>

What was most salient in the first four months in Italy comes through in this passage, the mud and the mines, to say nothing of the way civilians lived. The sand that had slowed down ambulances in the desert morphed into the mud of Italy. In fact, this small sketch included all of the salient details about driving and living in Italy. Evacuating through every type of terrain except desert sands, the A.F.S. experienced all of the worst of Italy.

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<sup>85</sup> "Griff Talk" *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.



They dealt with the booby-trapped villages, the muddy, snowy mountains, the flooded valleys lacking intact bridges and the impassible roads that were supposed to connect all of these geographic features. A.F.S. volunteers drove through two of the harshest winters on record, which did nothing to aid the omnipresent mud and the oppressive cold. No account of the war, personal or published, failed to mention the mud numerous times. It was the defining feature of the Italian campaign whether the soldier was on foot or drove a vehicle.

Mud was the ultimate impediment for an ambulance when out on a run. Even if all the bridges were still intact and there was no other traffic on the road and the road was passable by four-wheel drive, there was the mud. On every run, it got in the way, coming up to the axles of the ambulances and the shins of the drivers. The Italian mud became an adversary in its own right for A.F.S. drivers and was described by one as follows:

the mud itself [was] magnificent mud: rich, brown, sticky, clinging, bogging mud. You had to admire the stuff. It was the essence of that which good mud should be. Day and night, vehicles plowed into it, bucked through, got bogged, were dug, winched and manhandled out. BBC described the country as ‘unfit for man, beast or mechanized vehicle.’<sup>86</sup>

Great numbers of heavy vehicles driving continuously over unpaved roads for days without stop undoubtedly created mud, but the weather also factored into the total destruction of the roads. Just as it made the rivers flood, the feet of rain that fell compounded an already bad situation. The weather became too bitter a subject for the A.F.S. men; the phrase ‘Sunny Italy’ became a dark joke for all involved in the Italian campaign. With this phrase in mind, Rich wrote to a friend’s mother, “we believe the Italian Chamber of Commerce runs a close second to California’s...The weeks following our landing saw it rain steadily. Since my return from jaundice [in December], it has been

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<sup>86</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 249.

cold and snowy.”<sup>87</sup> The winter weather ensured that each run was brutal, especially since the evacuation routes that Rich drove which took fourteen hours roundtrip to complete.

The terrain of Italy would have been difficult to move a mechanized army through if there had been dry, paved roads from Salerno to Milan. The peninsula is a maze of jagged mountains and deep ravine-like valleys, dominated by rivers of every size; Italy was not suited for the type of offensive the Allied High Command had planned. The roads, where there were roads at all, wound up and down the mountains along cliff faces. George Rock points out, “it should be borne in mind that these roads...were never intended to accommodate the huge numbers of heavy military vehicles,” or even large convoys of motorized vehicles in general.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes, they were nothing more than glorified goat tracks barely able to accommodate vehicles single-file; there was no need to try and imagine two vehicles passing each other.

These conditions made carrying patients quickly almost impossible, especially from combat areas in the mountains. Traffic jams were routine. In areas where congestion was predictable, the medical evacuation chain was reconfigured to use as little mechanized transport as possible. J.B. McKinney, a Kiwi medic in Italy, recalled “as a result of a warning that tanks might have to use the [evacuation] track in the advance...thus totally blocking the evacuation route, two surgical teams, the HQ team and 8 British Field Surgical Unit were attached directly to the ADS,” where A.F.S. ambulances brought patients directly from the field.<sup>89</sup> This type of drastic, and

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<sup>87</sup> William A. Rich to Mrs. Love, January 25, 1944.

<sup>88</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 385.

<sup>89</sup> McKinney, J.B. *Medical Units of the 2 NZEF in the Middle East and Italy*. 1952. Accessed on 10/7/2007 from [www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed10.html](http://www.ourstory.info/library/4-ww2/NZmed10.html).

unconventional, measure to cut out any unnecessary time en route demonstrated the seriousness of the traffic flow problems.

Runs between stations took inordinate amounts of time because there was normally one road for going out from 'post' and another for returning to the MDS or CCS. Many places the soldiers fought just could not be reached by even the four-wheel drive Dodge ambulances, which yet again proved their worth in Italy.<sup>90</sup> Donkeys and human stretcher-bearers carried wounded soldiers down from the remote battles to staging areas accessible by vehicles.<sup>91,92</sup> This took time, and A.F.S. drivers knew that meant speed was even more important for the injured men if they were to live. Drivers wanted to proceed quickly but, "there is hardly a chance for the ambulance to go along in the highest gear for fear of running off the side. The roads themselves are terrible ...when you add the intense slipperiness to this, you really have something!"<sup>93</sup> There was no way to go any faster because the surface conditions of the roads were unpredictable at best.

The other unknown that haunted A.F.S. drivers in forward areas were the minefields created by the retreating German armies. The mines posed a great danger to the lives of the A.F.S. men, their ambulances, and their patients, but also "a maze of mines made progress through the vacated land both difficult and slow" for the army to

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<sup>90</sup> There did come a time when the Dodge ambulances were truly worn out and too damaged for repair. 'D' Platoon reached this point in the summer of 1944. The A.F.S. wanted to switch to Ford ambulances which were again being manufactured in Europe and would save the hassle of shipping each car from the United States. The switchover was halted midway, however, as A.F.S. drivers expressed their distaste for the Fords and they were found to be less suitable vehicles for Italy. The A.F.S. would again attempt to make the switch in early 1945.

<sup>91</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 382.

<sup>92</sup> Ernie Pyle related the situation as graphic detail, "dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed to the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden packsaddles, their heads hanging down on one side, their stiffened legs sticking out from the other, bobbing up and down as the mule walked." (Pyle, Ernie. *Brave Men*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1943. Page 106.)

<sup>93</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 270.

move forward.<sup>94</sup> The A.F.S. sustained seven deaths and over thirty serious casualties because of mines that exploded under ambulances. Rich wrote home, “there were quite a few close shaves with mines...Earl Denmore put his right rear wheel on a mine of some description. The blast disintegrated the wheel needless to say...” and Denmore himself was blown out of the car, though survived with few injuries.<sup>95</sup> Livingston L. Biddle, another A.F.S. driver, wrote a serious article for the *A.F.S. Bulletin*. He described the conditions: “there were deep craters in the muddy road surface...where moss-covered stone bridges crossed wooded gorges the center spans had been nearly removed by demolition charges. And there were mines underneath the mud...”<sup>96</sup> Clearly, the author of the parodied cocktail party article in the *A.F.S. Bulletin* found mines a eminently suitable party favor for the reunion for this reason.

The mines took a toll on soldiers, A.F.S. volunteers and the local population alike. The mines hurt civilians and destroyed their villages. Rich described an evacuation from a town where, “there [was] a 15 year old Italian boy who had his left arm amputated at the shoulder...also an Italian woman her right arm amputated near the shoulder- [both] a mine accident.”<sup>97</sup> The Germans practiced a scorched earth policy in Italy that included all civilian dwellings- which the men of A.F.S. drivers found barbaric.<sup>98</sup> Many accounts of villages razed then mined by the fleeing armies found their way into letters home. Rich himself wrote home, “the poor Italian civilians suffer having their homes as well as roads,

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid. Page 252.

<sup>95</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 10, 1945.

<sup>96</sup> Biddle, Livingston L. “First Assignment in Italy.” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.

<sup>97</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 18, 1944.

<sup>98</sup> Why there was not more wanton, non-military destruction of villages and towns in North Africa remains unclear. It could be any of the following possibilities: A.F.S. drivers did not see it, did not feel as strongly about Arab villages being destroyed, there were no villages of permanent structures to destroy or Rommel had instructed his armies that only targets of military relevance were to be targeted. The latter is most probable in my mind, but I have no evidence to support this.

railroads and bridges mined or blown up by the retreating enemy.”<sup>99</sup> George Rock continued “the enemy left booby-traps and mines in profusion and carried out as extensive demolition as there was opportunity for- even on occasion leaving time-bombs in private houses.”<sup>100</sup> Neither went quite as far as Biddle though, in his condemnation of the German Army. Like Rich, Biddle served first in North Africa and saw the professionalism of the *Afrika Korps*; he was outraged by the flagrant waste:

...the village was a hollow shell...It was the worst example of the Nazi scorched earth policy I’ve seen, and for the most part it was meaningless sadistic work. The village had no military significance, and the road, almost impassable as it was, ended completely five kilo[meters] beyond.<sup>101</sup>

The policy destruction during retreat was the A.F.S.’s first encounter with the brutality of the Nazi political units within the Germany Army and the free reign allowed the SS in combat zones.

Leaving aside the wanton devastation of insignificant villages, the destruction in Italy was militarily justifiable. Italy is cut by rivers and deep valleys; the demolition of the bridges at every crossing slowed Allied progress greatly. It allowed the Germans time to pull back and fortify their next defensive positions. The weather seemed to favor the Germans strategy in 1943 and 1944, as record amounts of rain, then snow, fell making bridges a necessity to cross even small streams. In those two years, “conditions became increasingly unpleasant...driving rain made the crowded roads treacherous. Swollen streams and rivers frequently washed away bridges,” if the Germans had not destroyed

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<sup>99</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 17, 1944.

<sup>100</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 336.

<sup>101</sup> Biddle, Livingston L. “First Assignment in Italy.” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.

them.<sup>102</sup> For A.F.S. volunteers who had to carry patients swiftly back to rear positions, the destruction of bridges was especially maddening. Sometimes in the course of a battle, a single bridge would be destroyed, rebuilt and destroyed again multiple times.<sup>103</sup> This made the routes for evacuation unreliable and slow. At times, patients could simply not be reached and A.F.S. ambulances sat idle while the drivers waited for conditions to improve. Rich recalled to his parents one such experience, “Mort left after breakfast this morning...he hasn’t returned yet- probably didn’t get through [because of a blown bridge]. Dunk Rowe and I were to make an evacuation this afternoon but it had to be canceled because it didn’t seem feasible [due to impassible roads].”<sup>104</sup> As the rivers returned to their banks, the snow came, mixing with the mud and freezing it.

The A.F.S. drove patients through the mud and over the available bridges mostly at night, another factor in the length of each drive. Sometimes the distances between posts were significant and it took time to navigate the fluctuating conditions when the only illumination was moonlight. The reason for doing evacuations after dark was two-fold, though neither had to do with protection from the Germans. At night, the Red Crosses painted on the tops of the ambulances were not visible; if the lights were seen, German planes would take a shot at them “not because they [the Germans] didn’t respect the Red Cross, but, you often got mixed up with other kinds of traffic, like trucks bringing ammunition up, which were legitimate targets.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, driving at night created more dangerous situations for the A.F.S. than the Germans. Rich told his parents in a letter, “I’ve the utmost confidence in Jerry’s respect for us. Ordinary highway

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<sup>102</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 377.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. Page 376.

<sup>104</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, January 1, 1944.

<sup>105</sup> Oral Interview with Allan B. Prince. Transcript available online at [http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince\\_allan.html](http://oralhistory.rutgers.edu/Interviews/prince_allan.html)

accidents are what worry me the most.”<sup>106</sup> This sentiment was echoed by many drivers and proved fateful for Rich, himself, involved in a nighttime accident in August of 1944.

The drivers were ordered to evacuate by night in order to circumvent battle action since many ambulances got caught in crossfire. The damage to the A.F.S.’s precious ambulances increased greatly when they drove through battles and many were riddled with bullet holes by the time they were scrapped.<sup>107</sup> The nighttime evacuations also eased the inevitable daytime traffic snarls on all roads in Italy. While the drivers appreciated the American Field Service’s attempt to make conditions safer and more time efficient, the realities of driving in total darkness with mud smeared on the windshield to prevent reflection were not optimal. While they did not have to deal with traffic often, “collisions have been numerous due to no-light, no-moon driving... [and] a few cars bear the mark of Jerry shrapnel.”<sup>108</sup> Despite the clear dangers of driving without lights when other vehicles were doing the same thing, the evacuation runs continued to be done mostly at night for the entirety of the campaign.

A.F.S. volunteers drove at night in unfamiliar places with shifting routes. These constant uncertainties had one predictable outcome for the A.F.S.: they were continually lost. While the drivers spent a good deal of time in the desert driving in the wrong country, on the wrong road in the incorrect direction, or on the wrong side of the fighting, as happened to Rich just before the fall of Tunis, Italy made the desert seem easy to navigate. Rich recalled for his parents the numerous occasions he was lost. He never

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<sup>106</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 22, 1944.

<sup>107</sup> This can be seen in multiple photos taken by drivers of their ambulances before they were dismantled for parts. The men of the A.F.S. got very attached to their ambulances and some went so far as to name them. Similar things occurred in tank units and to fighter pilots.

<sup>108</sup> “Griff Talk” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.

reported that his lack of direction had caused the death of a patient, but once, “in the fog I took the wrong turn for the CCS and by the time I’d rectified my error one of the patients was dripping blood onto the stretcher below. I wasn’t as calm as I might have been, I fear....”<sup>109</sup> He seemed to make more wrong turns when under pressure, because faced with another stressful situation, the possibility of a ‘taxi-cab delivery’, he got lost again “going over a wrong bridge and a mile up the wrong road (in my excitement I turned left from force of habit).”<sup>110</sup> This lack of direction was inexcusable, but George Rock made the point that A.F.S. men were assigned different posts so often that they had little time to learn their way around, even in daylight.<sup>111</sup>

The experience of a lost ambulance was more serious when the enemy line was involved. The A.F.S. often established its most forward medical posts close to the German lines. The fronts in Italy shifted back and forth continually and because of this, the drivers had a hard time telling who was where when. Some unlucky drivers’ close wrong turns resulted in their capture. Though they were officially civilians and carried Geneva Cards, ten drivers were taken as German prisoners-of-war until they could be exchanged, or in the case of three, until the war ended.<sup>112</sup> An additional danger of working in forward areas, Rock noted “it was a miracle that all the A.F.S. drivers engaged in forward work did not end up working for the other side.”<sup>113</sup> Brushes with the enemy were not unique to Italy as Rich’s experience in North Africa showed but were more frequent in Italy because of the nighttime driving and the short time spent in each

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<sup>109</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 27, 1945.

<sup>110</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, January 24, 1944.

<sup>111</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 344.

<sup>112</sup> “Prisoners of War, 1939-1945,” *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*.” Page 618.

<sup>113</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 344.



location. Rich had his second very close encounter with the German Army in his first week in Italy at the Battle of Termoli.<sup>114</sup>

The pattern of fighting in Italy for Rich and D Platoon had come full circle in the aftermath of Cassino. A.F.S. volunteers had again been invaluable in the heat of battle. They had found that some things had changed since the desert. There was no more sand; there was only mud and all that went along with the Italian countryside. The drivers retained their work ethic and gained high praise. General Scattini, the commanding general of Gruppo Friuli, with whom 567 Cov. worked, showed his gratitude “the brotherhood and precious collaboration of your platoon show in the evacuation of the Group’s wounded...with rare skill...your men have always carried out their delicate voluntary mission, giving constant proof of their serene contempt for danger and of their profound humanitarian sense.”<sup>115</sup> D Platoon specifically was extolled by the Poles “all our men have expressed the highest appreciation for their services throughout, and the success of our scheme of evacuation was in no small way due to their efforts.”<sup>116</sup> ‘D’ Platoon and the A.F.S. as a whole continued to earn accolades in Italy where they spent another fall, winter and spring; they combated the elements and drove their undefeatable Dodges steadily north.

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<sup>114</sup> The issue of getting lost during battles is entirely separate because of the chaos of the battlefield, the closing of roads due to battles occurring on them and the movement of the lines. One moment an evacuation route could have been on Allied ground and an A.F.S. driver would return to find the entire road full of German vehicles because the road had been lost. The medical aid posts also were continually shuffled from place to place to allow them access to the front lines without being in too much danger. On a long run during a battle, a driver might come back to find his post had been moved to another part of the battlefield area.

<sup>115</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1921-1955*. Page 385.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. Page 325.

## **Chapter Five: “God, I hope this war doesn’t take too damned much longer.”<sup>1</sup> June 1944- March 1945**

Of all the theatres for World War Two, William Rich was in Italy for the longest. Among the first wave of A.F.S. men to land, he remained there until March of 1945, with only a month’s leave back in the United States to break up the seventeen months of evacuations. Because of this, and because of the nature of the fighting, Rich recounted a great deal about Italy and the Italian people in his letters home. He also wrote extensively on his evacuation work and general rumors about a quick end to the war. After the first intense months in Italy, with their work at Termoli, the Gustav Lines and Cassino Section 6, ‘D’ Platoon received time away from the front. Rich’s platoon began to change as one-year leaves came up and volunteers went back to the United States, some permanently. There were also changes in the way that the A.F.S. took care of the wounded soldiers it transported as the Italian campaign went on. Billets changed, the names of the cities the drivers stayed in changed, but the civilian nature of the A.F.S. and its commitment to excellent service did not.

The men of the A.F.S. continued to behave like civilians in uniform; they took long sightseeing trips, enjoyed the best lifestyle they could in a war zone and kept a sense of humor about the hardships they were forced to endure. The weather was the worst enemy A.F.S. drivers could envision. There was no joy in the idea of a second winter in Italy. In fact, “the winter [of 1944-45] had become an endurance contest...the ambulances had to be towed before they would start.”<sup>2</sup> Rich himself wrote that “winter in

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 7, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 386.

the line with the infantry is not the most pleasant experience.”<sup>3</sup> This was a masterpiece of understatement.

A depression and longing for the war to be over, which had been present before, became prevalent. Even with their short, one-year contracts and relatively pleasant accommodations, A.F.S. volunteers began to wonder at the length of the Italian campaign; it dragged on and on as other armies rushed toward the glory of capturing Berlin. As spring came, some optimism returned. But before they could reach the spring of 1945, Italy had to be retaken, one hill at a time.

On May 18, 1944, Cassino finally fell when the most storied hill in the city was taken by the Polish Division after a costly final assault. After that, the American-led Fifth and British-commanded Eighth Armies began to move toward Rome. As the British Eighth moved steadily toward the city, American General Mark Clark abandoned his assignment to outflank the retreating German 10 Army to the west of Rome and pushed through the weakened *Wehrmacht* rear to the city itself. On June 4, Clark and the American Fifth entered the city with little resistance to find that the Germans had escaped to the north. The British command, and Clark’s subordinate generals, never forgave this bold break; they foresaw the consequences of it, beyond the glory and the cheering Roman crowds. Clark had allowed the Germans to slip out of a carefully laid trap where they could have been crushed. Fate, however, stole the glory Clark had desired for himself. On June 6, the day Clark entered Rome, the Allies opened a second front at the Normandy beachhead; the world was rocked that week, not by the liberation of Rome, but by D-Day. Despite this awesome offensive in the North, the Italian theatre remained

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<sup>3</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 2, 1945.

active. Rich and 'D' Platoon of the A.F.S. were on the outskirts of Rome by June 10, with GHQ established inside the liberated city itself.

Three days after Rome was taken, British Field Marshal Harold Alexander commanded that the Allies pursue the retreating Germans with all possible haste up the Italian peninsula. After their escape from Rome, the German Army began immediately to regroup and refortify their positions on the Gothic line.<sup>4</sup> The British Eighth Army was to push toward Florence while the American Fifth would move toward Pisa. The 15 Army Group set in motion a full German retreat with the capture of Rome; Alexander wanted to keep the Germans from establishing another defensive line like the Gustav Line. He therefore ordered both armies "to take extreme risks if necessary to reach their assigned goals before the German armies could recover their balance."<sup>5</sup>

They were too late. German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring's strategy of destroying bridges, roads and rail lines slowed down the advance in central Italy as it had in the south. The retreating *Wehrmacht* constructed the Gothic Line as it marched back toward Florence.<sup>6</sup> By June 20, when the Eighth Army again engaged the Germans, it was two hundred miles from its railhead; supply and evacuation lines were long and arduous.<sup>7</sup> Rich and his platoon were about as close to the fighting as they had gotten at this point, but were still about fifty miles behind the front lines. On both June 16 and June 20 he reported that Section Six exclusively carried casualties from the front, some of whom were German. Rich's own account reflected how far his section was from the next

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<sup>4</sup> Hoyt, Edwin R. *Backwater War: The Allied Campaign in Italy, 1943-1945*. London: Praeger, 2002. Page 163-5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Page 186.

<sup>6</sup> The Gothic Line was a defensive German fortification of "trenches, anti-tank barriers and concrete pillboxes at both ends and *in* the passes." (Michel, *The Second World War*, page 601) It was later called the "Trasimeno Line" by the Allies because of its proximity to Lake Trasimeno.

<sup>7</sup> Hoyt, Edwin R. *Backwater War: The Allied Campaign in Italy, 1943-1945*. Page 170.

medical post- each evacuation run he made was from one CCS to another thirty-five miles away. These were some of the longest runs his section would make during their time in Italy. He also noted that “we’re getting further and further away from the APO.”<sup>8</sup> This meant that his letters took longer to be sent and it took mail from home longer to reach him.

Physical distance was not the only factor that slowed down the mail. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corps, consisting of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry and 78 Infantry Divisions, which Rich was attached to, had moved north to the most intense fighting around Orvieto on June 16. On June 24, Rich’s platoon moved to join them and assist the 8 South African CCS with their evacuations. ‘D’ Platoon moved their billets to Castiglione del Lago on July 8 as the Allies again sprinted forward toward Florence. Kesselring had abandoned the Trasimeno Line and fallen back behind his next set of defenses around Arezzo. Arezzo fell on June 16 as the Germans continued their delaying tactics of holding a town for as long as they could and then escaping by night to establish their next set of obstacles.<sup>9</sup>

By August 4, the Germans had been pushed north of the Arno. Eleven days later they abandoned Florence; they left the city after they had engaged the Allies in intense fighting from Orvieto to Perugia to Arezzo. Again, an Eighth Army victory was overshadowed by another- the landing of General Alexander Patch’s three divisions in Southern France. The capture of Florence, however, did not mean rest for the A.F.S. and the units they served with. On August 21, the entire 567 Cov. went west with the Eighth to be part of a push through the Gothic Line near Pesaro in an attempt to capture Bologna.

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<sup>8</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 20, 1944.

<sup>9</sup> Hoyt, Edwin R. *Backwater War: The Allied Campaign in Italy, 1943-1945*. Page 170.

It was at this point in the campaign that a dramatic shift in Allied strategy occurred. It was decided that the American-led Fifth Army would continue up the center and western part of Italy under the command of General Mark Clark. The British Eighth would turn east toward the Adriatic. Field Marshal Alexander maintained that an attack up the Adriatic Coast was unexpected and advantageous. The Polish Division, with whom Rich had spent the fall and winter of 1943, had slowly made their way up the coast, and the British Eighth turned east near Bologna to join them. 567 Cov. went with them.

Rich did not take part in this movement personally. On August 14, he was involved in a serious jeep accident on his way back from a sightseeing trip in Assisi. He spent the next three weeks in hospital, not returning to his unit until September 8. By that point, his platoon completed their transfer. A.F.S. drivers had evacuated men from the fighting at Ancona and Pesaro. Rich did arrive back at HQ in time to evacuate wounded soldiers from the battles at Rimini during the week of September 19. This was a period of very little rest, as the Eighth Army was incurring around a thousand casualties a day.<sup>10</sup> Fourteen thousand Allied soldiers from the Eighth Army were killed in the fighting that culminated at Rimini.<sup>11</sup> The town was finally taken on September 25, and Rich's letter of October 1 to his parents was heavily censored, so he must have seen serious action again there.

With the rush of casualties over for the moment, 'D' Platoon got a rest in the town of Pesaro. However, on October 15, 'B' and 'D' platoons replaced 'A' and 'C' platoons at the front lines of the Eighth Army as part of the advance on Faenza, where

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Page 178.

<sup>11</sup> Keegan, John. *The Second World War*. Penguin Books: New York, 1989. Page 367.

“halves of both platoons were forward with the RAPs and Field Ambulance ADSs and MDSs, while the rest, with part of the Reserve or HQ group, stayed at the advance CCS... ‘D’ Platoon was assigned to 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division... ‘D’ Platoon had the major share of the excitement and its accompanying unpleasantness.”<sup>12</sup> During the week of October 21, Cesena and Forlimpopoli were captured. Rich wrote that there was much exciting work to be done in the ten days following, though he was beginning to anticipate his month’s leave back home in New York.

The Eighth Army finally reached the Po Valley in early November. It turned out to be a series of impassable swamps and muddy fields surrounded by rivers with no bridges, mined roads, all encircled by steep mountains and passes, fortified by the Germans.<sup>13</sup> The Eighth Army was back where it had been twelve months before: it was looking at another long winter stalemate in mud and forbidding mountains.

After the war-torn landscape around Cassino, the approach towards Rome was a shock for A.F.S. drivers and their Eighth Army companions. The Roman countryside was “flatter, greener and more fertile. [Sergeant Richard] Dickson thinks he distinguishes the dome of St. Peter’s. I’m not sure.”<sup>14</sup> The city was declared ‘open’ in early June, so Rich and his fellow volunteers were able to resume their favorite pastime, sightseeing. He was in need of some civilization again, as he related to Dickie. On June 10 he told her, “I’ve

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<sup>12</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 366.

<sup>13</sup> This type of description of the Po Valley was found in a number of sources, including the letters of various A.F.S. soldiers. Also, Hoyt, *Backwater War*,

<sup>14</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 10, 1944.

been wearing just shorts except on duty, when I put a shirt on. Out in the country, I definitely prefer to go native. In the big city, it will be a different story.”<sup>15</sup>

At this point, Section Six also occupied some of their most rustic billets. In one letter, Rich wrote, “ours is our honest-to-God paddock... Half a dozen mares with their young colts graze among our dispersed ambulances. The stallion... prefers the grass right where one section has its bedding rolls laid out [and] also around “Red Top”, the table and chairs which make up our section’s mobile café.”<sup>16</sup> Rich got his chance to enjoy more urbane and refined activities soon afterwards. He related that

The clean, wide, tree-shaded drives and boulevards; the modern buildings, department stores, hotels and apartments- the pretty, well-dressed girls on the sidewalks all reminiscent of American cities make one long for home. That first afternoon I just wandered around much impressed.<sup>17</sup>

This description of Rome echoed the feelings of a young man homesick for the familiarity of American civilian life. At first, the foreignness of everything had been wonderful and the Middle East had been magic. After almost two years away from home, however, Rich began to grow weary of being abroad and started to talk about his upcoming two-year leave. The people Rich encountered in his travels seemed to be something of a salve for his loneliness though. Encountering other civilians, whose lives seemed more normal, was a partial remedy to the emotions generated by the psychological conflict of being civilians on the front lines of an army.

In Rome, Rich continued to meet many people and practice his Italian, as he had done elsewhere. Rich’s ability to make friends easily was as much a sign of his innate

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<sup>15</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 10, 1944.

<sup>16</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 10, 1944.

<sup>17</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 20, 1944.



ability to set anyone at ease, no matter what the situation, as a quality of life in a war zone. As he related to his parents,

The other day I drove an American doctor in, with an Italian Patriot who had a leg amputated. When I enquired a restaurant where I might possibly get something to eat, the doctor invited me up to his apartment. After a sumptuous spaghetti meal, his brother-in-law of about 48 accompanied by his 11 year old daughter (the Doctor's) showed me the piazzas, churches, etc., which every world or Mediterranean traveler sees. We drove around in my ambulance, getting out to inspect more closely. None of the Doctor's family spoke English.<sup>18</sup>

This encounter was only one of dozens that Rich reported during his time in Italy when interactions with 'native' civilians took his thoughts away from the war and drew him into vignettes of everyday life, an amazing relief in the middle of the fighting. The *A.F.S. Bulletin* of December 1943 made a joking remark about Italy that echoed through all the volunteers' letters. In the regular column "Griff Talk", the author dryly remarked, "one item you can't overlook in any trip to Italy. That's the Italians."<sup>19</sup> Some A.F.S. drivers found them to be too much, too emotional; Rich enjoyed the Italians' easy company.<sup>20</sup>

Italy was a theatre where a huge number of civilians were caught directly in the crosshairs of both armies. Unlike North Africa, where many battles were fought in the open desert, every battle in Italy was fought through the streets of another hilltop town or coastal city. And despite the constant stream of refugees who moved from one region of Italy to another to avoid the fighting, many could not escape the two armies as the fighting enveloped the length and breadth of the country. Overlaid on the horror of life in an active war zone was the fact that Italy was engaged in a civil war; many places that

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<sup>18</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 20, 1944.

<sup>19</sup> "Griff Talk" *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Rich spent most of his time in Italy socializing with people of his own class, which may have put him more at ease than if it had been otherwise. The Italians he talked about in his letters were very 'American' in their values and habits.

had not yet become embroiled in Allied-Axis fighting by early 1944 experienced the Fascists and Partisans conflict. Without other options, many less affluent Italians stayed in their homes; Rich interacted with a great number of them as he drove through Italy. A.F.S. volunteers and Italians lived between armies, causing a bond to form between the two civilian groups.

Rich was constantly in contact with civilians in Italy, by nature of the A.F.S.'s non-military duties. He lived with them, bought food from them, took care of them and transported them to hospitals. There were some A.F.S. men who fraternized more with Italians than others. Rich's letters indicate that he kept a respectable distance, though he did attend a number of parties thrown by the A.F.S. in which female companionship of the most platonic sort was provided by 'Italian signorinas.' That statement, and a few others like it, alarmed Helen Rich a great extent. Much to her added distress, more than one A.F.S. man married an Italian woman while stationed there; one man was in Rich's section and his good friend from Harvard. Helen Rich must have written to her son that he should not consider such a decision because he wrote back, "don't worry about my getting married, Mother, I haven't learned Italian well enough for that!...So far [Charles 'Dunc' Rowe] has been the only A.F.S. man rash enough to actually get married."<sup>21</sup> Clearly marriage was very much on Rich's mind, however. Throughout the entire war, with the exception of food, no topic comes up more often than which of his friends and acquaintances were getting married and to whom. It stands to reason that Helen Rich sent him the *New York Times* wedding section with regularity because he seemed to always know the news of which friend or acquaintance had been wed.

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<sup>21</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 22, 1944.

There is no indication that Rich ever had an Italian girlfriend though was always in the company of Italians.<sup>22</sup> As an American *and* ambulance driver, he was doubly welcome in most homes. A.F.S. drivers found that their status among the villagers was high. The Italians were very generous and good-natured toward Americans especially because many of them had lived in America themselves, or had family who lived there. Rich and every other person associated with any army in Italy had to rely in some part on the goodwill of their Italian hosts for billets and extra food among other things. In one letter to Dickie, Rich observed that

The last hill town I was stationed in, the old farmer who had lived in the States several years ago, extended “open house” to a select few of us. Whenever we go there seems to be an Italian who welcomes us- either he has a relative in America or has been there himself.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between the Italian peasants and A.F.S. men was not solely an altruistic relationship. The Italians did not forget that when drivers did not have wounded soldiers to transport, American Field Service ambulances and British medicine were employed to aid civilians, nor could they ignore the volunteer’s access to certain goods which were unavailable to the general population.

The Eighth Army attracted bombers and German fire to wherever they were but they also brought medical attention to people who had never had it. During the winter of 1944 in particular, while there was very little fighting going on, Rich was assigned to drive for a British medical orderly, George ‘Toni’ Duffy. Duffy was not a doctor, “only a Trooper (Private),” but since all the certified doctors were attached to forward surgery

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<sup>22</sup> This is hard to be totally certain about however, for two reasons. The first is that, as evidenced by the quotes above, he never would have told his parents if he had dated an Italian woman. Also, he would not have written about her to Dickie, his American girlfriend. These are the types of details that are lost when the author of a set of letters dies without being able to flesh out the story themselves.

<sup>23</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 14, 1944.

units or field hospitals, he had learned to perform a great many basic medical procedures. In the spirit of any army used to being a colonial power, Rich told his parents, “the Royal Army Medical Corp generously assumes responsibility, as much as it can, for the health of these poor Italian peasants. They seem to appreciate us more.”<sup>24</sup> To the Italian civilians he treated, Duffy might as well have been a true physician.

Rich wrote an extremely long letter to Dickie in February of that winter about the work he did with ‘Toni’. The letter is one of the most detailed accounts of what he did when not at the front. He began by telling her

...due to the fact that Italian doctors do no charity work “Toni” and I have been making the rounds of this little hilltop town taking care... burns, infections, colic, sprained ankles, chest colds, wounds- in short, everything ...Toni’s reputation has spread so that he can’t go out on the street without being stopped. A man just asked him to pull a tooth.<sup>25</sup>

A more graphic and illuminating example of this emerged later in the same letter. An eleven-year-old boy had been brought in because he had crushed three fingers in a door. ‘Toni’ treated him and the three A.F.S. men posted in the town took turns sitting up with the child to ensure he did not hemorrhage during the night. In the morning, the mother returned to sweep the billets and medical inspection room, located in “a big, well to do mansion”.<sup>26</sup>

After taking him home “to his squalid 1 room ‘house’ [where] I questioned whether he would be warm enough,” Rich retreated to the villa where he was billeted, but could not get the young boy and his mother out of his thoughts. He was especially touched by the fact that the Italian woman continued to try and repay them, despite having nothing for her own family. Rich drove all types of casualties and picked up dead

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<sup>24</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 5, 1944.

<sup>25</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 9, 1944.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

bodies from both battles and village bombings, always empathetic towards the people he was stationed around. He expressed the opinion of so many A.F.S. drivers that, “civilian casualties, usually children, always seem so unnecessary.”<sup>27</sup>

Rich seemed to have a special affinity for civilians and the local populations at his various posts within the A.F.S. Clearly some prejudice did exist, however, in Rich’s mind, but it seemed to be more class-based than ethnic. He was a little bit uncomfortable with the idea of the desperately poor trying to pay for medical services the British felt it their duty to provide. From his letters, Rich made it seem as though, despite talking to every type of person he encountered to practice his Italian, he was more at ease with those of his own class.

Many in the A.F.S. were inclined to brush the Italian population off with slightly derisive jokes and not to become more involved than they had to be in their host’s lives. The December 1943 edition of the *A.F.S. Bulletin* stated that “[some people believe] all the world is decidedly to be loved. The Egyptian and the Eyetie are just as good as we- they just haven’t had our advantages- and all they need to come right into our parlors is a little Pet milk and some vitamin tablets.”<sup>28</sup> Rich may have laughed at some of the jokes run in the *Bulletin*, but in his private letters home, he related that most were very pleasant and he got along especially well with the ‘less Italian’ families. That phrase was shorthand for more liberal, more Western, wealthy families who did not ‘look’ Southern European. Rich stayed with one such family, the Bellisari, who made him a part of their family, took him to mass and entertained him during the evenings. Senior Bellisari had

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<sup>27</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 31, 1943.

<sup>28</sup> “Griff Talk.” *A.F.S. Bulletin*. Vol. II, no. 5. December 1943-January 1944. Accessed at the American Field Service Archives.

been an industrialist before the war but “he doesn’t seem like an Italian to me- doesn’t look like one- neither does his wife or 5 children.”<sup>29</sup> When he was reposted, Rich hated to leave them. He told his parents “Senor and Senora kissed me when I left. I gave them all useful presents such as soap, shaving cream, toothpaste and cigarettes.”<sup>30</sup>

A.F.S. drivers spent an equal amount of time in Italy sleeping in luxurious billets and in their ambulances in convoy. Where there was any housing to be had, they had the best. Most often they roomed in hotels or villas, though there were certain parts of the campaign where they were boarded with Italian families who were still in residence in their own homes, like Rich’s stay with the Bellisari. Wherever they were living, A.F.S. drivers made the best of it. They had a love of little luxuries and an “A.F.S. characteristic was its everlasting consideration of creature comforts whenever this was possible- and even when it was barely so.”<sup>31</sup> Rich reported to his parents that in Naples, “the [A.F.S.] clubhouse is a villa...more like a castle in its architecture.”<sup>32</sup> Good billets seem to raise the morale of the drivers. At the same Naples clubhouse, another driver related, “there is a magnificent view from the balcony and the war seems far away.”<sup>33</sup> In keeping with the grand A.F.S. traditions from World War One, where each section was housed in a chateau with a staff, the billets in Italy were comfortable. In March of 1944, “Section Six [was] established in luxury at the hotel [in town].”<sup>34</sup> They lived in a villa in Florence, at a “ritzy boarding school for the daughters of high Fascist officials” outside Orvieto, and with numerous well to-do families.<sup>35</sup> Every time the section moved, Rich told his parents

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<sup>29</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 14, 1944.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*.

<sup>32</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, December 5, 1943.

<sup>33</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 250.

<sup>34</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 9, 1944.

<sup>35</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, June 30, 1944.

what his new accommodations were like. It gave them a sense of the places he encountered but did not reveal too many details. In short, it was one of the few acceptable topics of conversation and comparison in his correspondence with people on the homefront.

In the most forward areas, there were many times when billets were not available. A.F.S drivers returned to sleeping in their ambulances at this point; the dry floor of the ambulance was much preferable to the muddy ground in a tent.<sup>36</sup> In March, Rich moved from a hotel to a RAP where “there are no billets, not even a cell available. I sleep in my ambulance.”<sup>37</sup> There were also towns Rich lived in where he complained, “there was a lack of modern conveniences...the water supply and electrical power have yet to be restored...we live in a small high ceilinged room with a small stove.”<sup>38</sup> On the whole though, the living accommodations for A.F.S. volunteers were much better than those for the regular soldiers. Rich discovered this on an extended trip he took to see friends after the fall of Rome.

Rich relished his first official leave in two years. Between July 19 and July 29, 1944, it was “officially ten days long. [His] first official leave of more than 40 hrs in 22 months. Sick leave [didn’t] count.”<sup>39</sup> Rich made the most of his time: he returned to Rome, then visited the Naples A.F.S. clubhouse for a few days. He spent the second part of his trip searching out an American friend serving with the American Fifth Army. In

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<sup>36</sup> In fact, the A.F.S. never slept in tents in Europe until they reached Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp. The reason for their billets being tents there was a purely pragmatic one- every bed was needed for dying inmates from the camp itself.

<sup>37</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Rich, March 28, 1944.

<sup>38</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 2, 1945.

<sup>39</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 8, 1944.

going to visit his friend, 'Monty,' Rich saw the other half of the Italian campaign, the other half of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army Group, and how the other half of the army lived. He returned to his post in Tuscany via Sienna and tried to stop in a city codenamed 'Cousin Flo' though it was deemed less than safe for an American in late July 1944.

Many of the old 'desert rats' in the A.F.S. got extended leave like Rich in the summer of 1944 because they had been in service with the A.F.S. for at least two years and official time off was due to them. The volunteers' contracts had begun to expire by spring of 1944 and some decided not to resign. The war in Italy was grinding on and, for a number of A.F.S. men, U.S. Army regulations had relaxed enough to allow them entry into the American armed forces. Rich wrote to Dickie "with the arrival of 10 rookies...I was at long last able to get an 'extended leave.'"<sup>40</sup> Gone were the days of the North African campaign and that first winter in Italy where there had been more ambulances than drivers, and every A.F.S. volunteer was needed every day to do two drivers' jobs. In the United States, more men turned eighteen each day and some looked for an alternative to the Armed Services. Because of this, and because of much favorable press in national newspapers, the applicant pool for the A.F.S. swelled. As the war continued, the American Field Service continued to enlist volunteers at a steady rate and these new recruits relieved the strain on the men already in field, allowing them to have stateside and extended in-theatre leaves. They also replaced a number of the older men who had joined in 1941 but by the summer of 1944 wished to return home.

These changes in personnel changed the dynamic that had grown up among the many sections that had been together since landing in Italy, or even before, in North Africa and the Middle East. Though Rich did not serve in the same section as anyone he

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<sup>40</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, July 29, 1944.



crossed the Atlantic with in 1942, many of his friends remained in the same platoon. He wrote to his parents, “Bill Congdon decided not to go home, after all...Jim Briggs and I, the old ‘desert rats’...hate to see our old Inddies from the desert leave us.”<sup>41</sup> Clearly, the *esprit de corps* between A.F.S. drivers was very high and most volunteered to sign on for yet another year in 1944.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the year before, Rich signed on to stay with very little hesitation.

It was an auspicious trip from the start. His extended leave contributed to his feelings of being well rested and ready for another year of being an ambulance driver. Rich left HQ and began to hitchhike south. On the road to Rome,

I was lucky to get a ride most of the way in the Jeep of an English Brigadier (general)... he asked if I’d come up through the Desert with the Eighth Army, I was proud to be able to answer in the affirmative. He enquired if we had been awarded the African Star (El Alamein to Tunis). “I’m so glad” was his comment.<sup>43</sup>

Upon arrival, he secured lodgings on the outskirts of Rome, since the city did not allow troops to stay within the limits overnight. He ate at the New Zealand Officer’s Club, where the only exceptions to the “Kiwi Officers Only” rule were A.F.S. drivers and Royal Australian Air Force officers. While in Rome he attended ENSA “concert parties” and spent time with “Franca an attractive (needless to say) blond of very good family (also needless to say).”<sup>44</sup> After his sojourn in Rome, Rich hitchhiked down to Naples where most A.F.S. men were sent to await shipment home. He spent four days at the A.F.S. club with his old friends ‘Red’ Murray, Perry Cully and ‘Blackie’ Trainor, all of

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<sup>41</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, January 17, 1944.

<sup>42</sup> There is another reason for the young men’s decision to stay. Though it does not apply to the older generation of A.F.S. drivers, men under thirty-five were still eligible for the American draft if they left the A.F.S. and went home. They received no official credit, or ‘points,’ for their service with the American Field Service. If they did not want to go home to join the American Armed Services, they basically had to remain in the A.F.S. to stay out of violation of the draft.

<sup>43</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, July 29, 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

whom were headed back to the States. He attended three operas, including *Tosca*, at the San Carlo Opera House, “the only thing worth recounting.”<sup>45</sup> Rich also went to look for the grave of a friend who had been killed near Anzio on June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

In the last few days of his leave, Rich decided to search out a family friend he knew was also in Italy, ‘Monty’ Montgomery. ‘Monty’ had been Dominic Rich’s secretary at D. W. Rich and Co. before the war broke out and had joined the American Army as an infantryman in the 338 Infantry, something that Rich could never understand, since he could have qualified for 4-F status and stayed in the States, or become an officer.<sup>46</sup> He had tried to see his friend a number of times since he had first heard from Dominic Rich that they were in the same country, and his extended leave provided a good opportunity.

Rich found an unauthorized seat on an airplane headed up for a Fifth Army airstrip. Upon arrival, he enquired where Monty’s unit, the 338 Infantry was stationed. After a quick bite of good American food in the mess, “and after much hitchhiking and hiking, at 11pm I landed at an ack-ack outfit in the mountains.”<sup>47</sup> As he related to Dickie, Rich was dumbstruck when he finally found his friend

GI helmet and unshaven (there were no razor blades available; so I gave him a pack). Surprisingly enough, he seemed to be enjoying life with the GI Josephs of the US infantry. Only college man in his *company*, the lieutenant included. An extremely Selective Service Division, you know. Spent the rest of the day with Monty...it was a new and most interesting experience seeing how the US infantry fares in the field- something I’ve been wanting to do for a long time. I learned a lot, comparing everything with the Eighth Army. Monty only had battle order “backpack” plus one

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<sup>45</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 9, 1944.

<sup>46</sup> This information is contained in a short paragraph about the staff changes occurring at D. W. Rich and Co. because of the draft and the War Board’s reallocation of all available labor. Dominic Rich also lost his longtime secretary Miss Walley. William A. Rich to Dominic Rich, August 6, 1943. V-mail.

<sup>47</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 9, 1944.

blanket and shelter half (bivouac). Being out of action the kitchen was with them- good American food once again.

Rich finally got to see the life he had wanted to be part of so desperately less than a year ago in North Africa as he pleaded with his father, his friend's fathers and the Draft Board to let him into the American Army. He noted additionally to his parents about his trip to visit Monty

He's already been in more battles than I've seen in two years. Walked a hell of a long way, too. The good old infantry still must proceed on foot even though everyone else is roaring past them at 35 mph in trucks. The ack-ack boys I stayed with were sleeping on cots right next to Monty with one blanket on the ground.<sup>48</sup>

This encounter with his friend has a different tone than any other letter. Rich made many comparisons in his correspondence both with Dickie and with his parents, but none ever seemed to be so conscious of the easy existence of the A.F.S... They always had a shave, even in the desert where water was very scarce. A.F.S. drivers had trucks full of personal accoutrements that they hauled from one location to the next. They had the company of people who were their social equals. They always had beds or ambulances in which to sleep. After this trip, little aspects of Rich's everyday experience which irked him before, like cold dinners and long nights, no longer take up such a lot of his letters. The knowledge of how the American infantry lived, of how enlisted soldiers really lived, gave Rich a new perspective on the war. Rich told his parents that "all told, a most interesting and informative leave. Especially the latter half."<sup>49</sup>

However much the experience caused Rich to change his conception of life in the army, it did not stop him from continuing his pleasurable sightseeing tour of Tuscany on the way back to A.F.S. HQ. He stopped to see some Kiwi friends and "tried to see Flo but

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<sup>48</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 10, 1944.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

a bit inadvisable still.”<sup>50</sup> So he contented himself with a visit to recently liberated Sienna before he returned to his post.

Dickie must have written him at this time, and asked why “[A.F.S. drivers] carry battle casualties when there are no guns sounding.”<sup>51</sup> Rich wrote back an indignant reply. He dryly asked her, “what do you think happens to the wounded...just left to die by the roadside?”<sup>52</sup> Though the small battles on the approach Florence were greatly overshadowed by the constant flood of news from Northern France as the Allies pushed the *Wehrmacht* back steadily toward Germany, there was still a campaign going on in Italy. Men were still dying every day he reminded her.

The fighting went on and the job of the A.F.S. continued to demand energy and stamina. According to Rock, “the general assignment, which lasted the whole of the pursuit, was to evacuate CCSs back down the line- a steady grind ... This called for skill and endurance and in its way was every bit as trying as forward work.”<sup>53</sup> One driver remembered the work in the rear during the summer of 1944, “was the hardest job we have ever done...we work day and night...the cases have been very bad and we have to drive at a torturous rate.”<sup>54</sup> The ambulances were not only used to evacuate patients but also to move all manner of medical supplies around central Italy. Rich told Dickie, “a short while ago, I rushed some penicillin and whole blood up to a field hospital where a field team was working [at the front].”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Flo’ or ‘Cousin Flo’ is a code for Florence.

<sup>51</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 9, 1944.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 337.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Page 342.

<sup>55</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 9, 1944.

As discussed at length before, Italy was a campaign of intense forward fighting and that fact necessitated tiring, dangerous evacuations. The situation occupied the minds of A.F.S. drivers every moment however and therefore should be mentioned again. In the latter half of the Italian fighting, there were three notable changes in evacuations and in the treatment given to men in their ambulances before they arrived at the dressing stations. The first was a new stop on the 'evac' route- the 'Car Post.' The use of airplanes to transport wounded men back to base hospitals was also fully put into effect in Italy. A third development, one which rocked the entire medical world, was the introduction of penicillin. All three of these new factors helped save more lives, and lessen the effects of fighting in an unforgiving environment. Their effect was so marked that Rich noted all three of them as soon as he was introduced to them.

After Rome, during the press toward Florence and then in the drive toward the Gothic Line, the Allies fought for every hill. A.F.S. drivers were often loading patients into their cars who had been brought down from the hills on foot.<sup>56</sup> Rich alluded to this when he talked about a post he occupied at an infantry RAP in October 1944. He wrote to Dickie, "only the barest minimum of equipment could be taken because it had to be backpacked in."<sup>57</sup> Rich continued to his parents in a separate letter from the same day, "the nature of the operations have largely precluded the use of vehicles...the 1500 eight trucks belonging to the MO and the Padre must be left behind at A "Echelon" [rear area]."<sup>58</sup>

In a way, the need for men to be carried out on stretchers to the first place a Dodge 4-wheel drive ambulance could be driven was not new. The A.F.S. had been

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<sup>56</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 254.

<sup>57</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, October 22, 1944.

<sup>58</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 22, 1944.

equally crucial in the desert where their ambulances could transverse the sand without getting stuck. What the newly implemented 'Car-Post' did was to make the evacuation process more efficient. George Rock described the 'Car-Post'

as a point on the run from the various RAPs to the next medical aid post—either the ADS, or when this had not been set up, the MDS...when evacuating, the car from the RAP stopped to report at the Car Post, where there were reserve ambulances, one of which was then sent forward to cover the RAP until the return of the regular car.<sup>59</sup>

This type of organization ensured that there were always ambulances available, even if some of them were engaged in the time consuming process of evacuations from remote sites.

The constant need for ambulances in every imaginable direction, along bad roads that wound along mountainsides made the job of the A.F.S. men exhausting. G. B. Schley III, another A.F.S. driver, described the hours he kept in a forward area, "the hours we kept made the work pretty tiring...for instance, I had a run at 6 in the morning, about 16 miles; then another one at 1; and then again at 10 at night. I got to bed at around 12 and was wakened by the orderly at 5 the next morning for still another run."<sup>60</sup>

An army constantly on the offensive necessitated this type of schedule. Mechanized warfare allowed the front lines to continually advance faster than the rear support groups, like field hospitals. As evacuation lines got longer, and more miles had to be driven before patients could be delivered to hospital trains, medical staff planners began to see traffic jams again. They had thought that the use of airplanes for evacuation

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<sup>59</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 252.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Page 263.

would alleviate these issues, but for an army on the move, airfields could not be established quickly enough to make air transport an option for the forward lines.<sup>61</sup>

When there was an airstrip, however, it was hugely effective. At the Anzio beachhead, the A.F.S. men of 485 Cov. saw the power of ‘air-evac’ firsthand. A report from the RAMC reported that during the Battle for Rome, four thousand, six hundred and seventy casualties were evacuated by air and it took them just forty minutes to reach their final destination at the base hospital in Naples.<sup>62</sup> In situations when time was the deciding factor in whether a soldier would live or die, this was a crucial development. Platoons from both 485 and 567 Cov. engaged in transporting seriously wounded men to airstrips. After Cassino, Rich did not see forward action again until October; his platoon spent the summer driving back and forth between CCSs to take patients to waiting airplanes. Rich wrote to his sister Mary in late June, “still haven’t heard a gun go off since the fall of Cassino. We’re doing routine, behind-the-lines evacuations at present- not very exciting, but quite necessary.”<sup>63</sup> About a month later, he reiterated this, “just to reassure Mother, I haven’t heard a gun go off since Cassino.”<sup>64</sup> Though he was always excited to be doing something new, Rich never bemoaned the fact that he was not at the front once he found out what ‘action’ really meant for an ambulance driver. He was always contented to be doing *something* of use for the war effort.

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<sup>61</sup> This problem was not remedied until Korea when the first helicopters were introduced for medical evacuation from forward areas. Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine During the Second World War*. Page 165.

<sup>62</sup> Harrison, Mark. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine During the Second World War*. Page 165.

<sup>63</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Rich, June 24, 1944.

<sup>64</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, July 10, 1944.

Driving patients to waiting airplanes was productive and helpful. At Castiglione del Lago, outside of Rome, Rich's platoon was in charge of the air evacuations. One of the other A.F.S. men described the process of air evacuations

at 7:30 [am] our bike courier comes back from the CCS to report how many vehicles are needed for the early morning air evac...we have priority loads: head, chest and spinal fracture cases...the port we are using is just 6.5 miles away...at the airport we check in...find out the destination of our patients, and wait until a plane arrives...in the afternoon we very possibly make an air evac run similar to that of the morning. It differs, however, in that the patients, worn out from the day, are more pained and difficult to handle.<sup>65</sup>

Rich found air evacuation to be a huge improvement, when it could be used. He had driven so many wounded men, had them die in his ambulance, that anything to speed up the process of transport was a miracle. With unhidden approval, Rich told Dickie,

"air evac." - evacuation of the wounded by air- is, for my money, one of the greatest things that has come out of this war. A seriously wounded man can arrive at a base area General Hospital a couple of hours after being operated on in a field hospital. Formerly it took two or more days jolting over rough roads in an ambulance.<sup>66</sup>

A.F.S. drivers knew they had a hard job to do and that they were the best in the Eighth Army. They took pride in this but, as in the desert, men were haunted by the inability to convey the soldiers without a great deal of pain. Rich wrote to Dickie and his family about the many humorous incidents that took place, the times he got lost, but in the end Livingston Ludlow Biddle Jr., another A.F.S. driver, summed up the experience best, "there are adventures you laugh about...remember with pleasure. But at the time there is no amusement- no pleasure...your feelings at the time are never fully recaptured in memory."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 361-2.

<sup>66</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 24, 1944.

<sup>67</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 334.



What caught the attention of A.F.S. volunteers, doctors, medical staff planners and generals alike was the advent of penicillin on the battlefield. Before penicillin, sulphonamide drugs ('sulpha') were favored to treat infection in all types of battlefield wounds. 'Sulpha' had some drawbacks though, all of which penicillin addressed. Penicillin "was less toxic, and it was effective against a number of micro-organisms- including streptococci...even well-established wound infections could be eradicated."<sup>68</sup> In the most literal terms, penicillin was a 'miracle.' It was effective- it killed all types of infections. It could be used for a vast number of injuries from split ear drums to compound fractures to gangrene. After being tested carefully at the end of the North African campaign, it was deemed ideal for battlefield medicine.

Rich noticed as soon as penicillin started being used on a large scale. In a letter to his parents in late August 1944, he wrote, "it seems that penicillin is being used for just about everything." Before late 1943, the only drawback about the new 'miracle' drug was its very limited supply. By late 1944 though, "the plentiful supply of penicillin to the Allied armies constituted one of the chief differences between [Allied and Axis hospitals]...whereas German hospitals were found to be full of cases of chronic sepsis, Allied surgeons recorded almost 'miraculous' results using penicillin to prevent wound infections."<sup>69</sup> The sudden appearance of penicillin around this time in Rich's letters coincided with a breakthrough in American production of the drug, and his being treated with it himself.

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<sup>68</sup> Harrison, George. *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War*. Page 156.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. Page 156.

About two weeks after he returned from his extended leave, Rich was injured while driving back to HQ from Assisi in a Jeep after dark on August 12. All his worries about the traffic and roads in Italy being more dangerous than the Germans proved to be correct; Italy had proved a dangerous place to drive. A bombed out bridge had been replaced very quickly and the rough interface between a bad road and the temporary bridge caused the accident. Dickie's family blamed her, since she had taught Rich how to drive in the first place. Rich wrote his parents from his hospital bed

It was after dark- we only had dim headlights- there was no light on this temporary bridge we encountered. I got away with a bump on my forehead and one on the back of my head. A gash in my left knee and shin is what's kept me here.<sup>70</sup>

To Rich's great surprise and delight, the surgical team at the CCS he was taken to consisted of the same men that Rich had been with at Cassino. He also was in a ward with a Kiwi officer, Harvey Rice, whom "I knew on the beach at Tripoli last summer...Harvey lost a leg in an unexpected shelling."<sup>71</sup>

Along with feeling lucky to have so few injuries, Rich saw point of irony in the situation, which he related to Dickie. He told her "the engineers...said a South African major (white) as well as two other vehicles had come to grief in the same manner in the past three days. So you can see it's no reflection on your driving instructions."<sup>72</sup> Another side of the story was not so humorous: two British soldiers had also been in the Jeep, one of whom broke his leg- the other was thrown clear from the Jeep. There was an official "Court of Inquiry" hearing into the matter, during which Rich was cleared of any wrongdoing. The only lasting effect of his accident was he was forced to stay in the

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<sup>70</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 15, 1944.

<sup>71</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 27, 1944.

<sup>72</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 15, 1944.

American hospital near Naples for three weeks. While there, he attended a number of operas after days spent on the beach.

While Rich was in hospital, two events of great import occurred. The first had worldwide importance. The Allies reached and liberated Paris. This led to the second event, one of a much more personal nature- Rich decided to serve another year with the American Field Service; he did this for two reasons. First was his desire to get stateside leave for a month, for which the United States Selective Service Board required an active A.F.S. contract. The second sprung from the events of the last few months in France. With the capture of Paris, Rich began to voice hopes that the war would soon end. To this effect, he told his mother and father, “several days ago I signed a 1 year re-enlistment...the war will undoubtedly be over by then- in fact, it looks now as if we might be “out of the trenches by Christmas” at the very latest.”<sup>73</sup>

The news during the late summer and early fall of 1944 emboldened the Allied powers. For five weeks, from mid-August until the end of September, every letter Rich wrote contained hopeful thoughts. He wrote to Dickie on August 24, “with Paris and Marseilles having been liberated...the German army in northern France all captured or bombed to hell- god, I’d like to be in France- the end can’t be far off now.”<sup>74</sup> On September 16 he told her, “today’s “Eighth army news” reports the landings 300 miles from the Philippines makes one optimistic about the finish of the Jap war.”<sup>75</sup>

Despite all the optimism about the end of the fighting, Rich was still realistic at most moments; he tried to not get his hopes up too much. In one of his more pragmatic

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<sup>73</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, August 27, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, August 25, 1944.

<sup>75</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, September 16, 1944.

letters, he reminded Dickie, who may have been naively confident herself about the war's end, "I know the news from France is likely to give one the impression "the war is over"- but actually we've got some more fighting to do."<sup>76</sup> While Rich may simply have been playing the older, more worldly boyfriend for Dickie's sake, he realized that when he came home on leave, it might not be to stay. As soon as he had signed his A.F.S. contract for 1944-1945, he told his parents he would be home soon.

In August, he was sure he would be home by the end of September. By mid-September, he had "missed the boat for New York" and would not make it back to the US until the middle of October. On October 10 he wrote his mother, "still with the platoon in the field. Don't know for sure how much longer I will be...like Bernie [Curley], I wonder, sometimes, if 30 days in the States is worth all the trouble you must go through."<sup>77</sup> He also revealed that his contract's terms had been changed. Instead of service for one calendar year from the date of signing or until the end of the war, whichever came first, the British Army insisted on new terms, including: "1 ½ [years] from date of departure from America [after two year leave], to serve out that time either in Italy or elsewhere doing whatever the British want us to regardless of the end of the European war."<sup>78</sup> It was at this moment that Rich began to realize the possibility of his being sent to 'CBI', China-Burma-India, after a victory in Europe.

Rich was not hugely upset about staying in Italy a while longer. He rejoined his section on the east coast of Italy. He wrote to Dickie, "there is a chance I might still be home for Christmas. I'm in no great hurry now, as our work is getting more interesting." The excitement he saw was almost certainly at Rimini. His platoon was stationed with an

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<sup>76</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, September 7, 1944.

<sup>77</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 10, 1944.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

infantry battalion there and the fighting was some of the most intense of the campaign, in terms of the number of Eighth Army soldiers wounded. His letter to Dickie dated October 1 had three entire pages censored from it, suggesting that his section had been involved in the type of fighting they saw at Termoli. He hinted at some type of serious action though to his mother,

this is the first opportunity in the two years in the A.F.S. that I've had to be with an infantry battalion in action- my only other RAP experience having been with [censored] reccee regiment...and with the Poles holding the line at Castel di Sangro ...I've been seeing and learning many new things regarding the nature of warfare... [though] no particularly exciting incidences for me because the nature of the operation has largely precluded the use of vehicles as yet.

He never wrote a full account of Rimini, if that is indeed where he was, because in late November of 1944, Rich boarded a troopship home to New York. He must have told his parents and Dickie the story in person.<sup>79</sup>

After a quick trip to Florence, Rich sailed for home. He had been impressed by the city, though “unfortunately, much of the Florentine art is still covered up or put away for safe-keeping. The cathedral, the chapel in the Medici palace as well as a most impressive ceiling painting in the same palace are to be seen, however.”<sup>80</sup> He returned to the States to find the A.F.S. well regarded and well represented. Not only were the

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<sup>79</sup> The details Rich spared his correspondents were ones about how dangerous the autumn campaign of the Eighth army really was, though she would have known something about the A.F.S. drivers killed through the *A.F.S. Bulletin*. His Jeep accident actually caused one of the first casualties in his platoon. They had been spared any fatalities so far for the entire war, as “our platoon seems to have been the safe one. I can’t recall it has ever had a causality of any sort, even in Africa... [but] I knew most of the fellows who have been killed or wounded in Italy- some better than others.”<sup>79</sup> However, by October, this had changed. The continuous runs ‘D’ platoon, and the entire 567 Cov., made took their toll. Rock reported, “the first 6 weeks of the autumn offensive brought strenuous work under rugged conditions and heavy casualties- 2 [drivers] killed, 4 wounded and 1 taken prisoner.” (Rock, *The Official History of the American Field Service*. Page 357.

<sup>80</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, November 15, 1944.

society pages of the *New York Times* filled with wedding announcements in which many of the grooms listed themselves “of the American Field Service,” but a large article entitled “Two Nations Cite Ambulance Corps: England and France to Honor American Field Service at Ceremony Here,” appeared in the paper the week Rich sailed for home.<sup>81</sup> The article reported that “President Roosevelt, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery sent messages commending the A.F.S.” It continued that “five A.F.S. men have received the Order of the British Empire [to that date], twelve have won the British Empire Medal for Gallantry... [it noted] that the A.F.S. was the only civilian organization to serve in the front lines.”<sup>82</sup>

In addition to the accolades earned from the highest civilian and military sources, the A.F.S. received praise in unlikely places. Abercrombie and Fitch ran an advertisement a few days before the article cited above. The first of two paragraphs read

Intrepid Volunteers

We pay tribute to the men of the American Field Service who as unpaid volunteers have dedicated themselves to driving ambulances into the front lines of advancing troops to carry the wounded back to the safety of medical areas.

Rich returned home to this atmosphere of appreciation and public recognition.

Rich had misgivings about going home, despite the length of time he had been away and the great praise the A.F.S. had received from all quarters. A number of his close friends and ‘section six fellows’ had been sent home for their ‘two-year’ leave,

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<sup>81</sup> Wedding announcement references, *New York Times* archive. See years 1940-1945, all dates. “Two Nations Cite Ambulance Corps,” *New York Times*. November 6, 1944. Page 7.

<sup>82</sup> “Two Nations Cite Ambulance Corps,” *New York Times*. November 6, 1944. Page 7.

including Bill Congdon and Jim Briggs.<sup>83</sup> They had mixed feelings about home leave, especially the civilian attitudes towards the war. Many felt that people on the homefront did not take the war seriously enough or lacked an understanding of what was really being sacrificed for them. Before leaving Italy, Rich wrote to Dickie

[Bill] Congdon arrived back several evenings ago...He was only in the States 3 weeks- enough for him- then 5 days at Patrick Henry [an embarkation camp on the East Coast] with all the army rigmarole...After 2 years at the “front” this nonsense would drive you mad. Like Bernie [Curley], I wonder, sometimes if 30 days in the States is worth all trouble you must go through. Bill Congdon said it’s difficult getting use to the civilian attitude and life again. Jim said he wouldn’t have missed his 30 days for anything.<sup>84</sup>

Along with the inevitable homesickness and stress of separating from his family again, Rich was skeptical about life on the homefront and whether he could put up with it.

In one letter, Dickie must have written to him about the fact that Point O’ Woods teenagers were banned from setting bonfires on the beach for fear of giving aid to German submarines. He replied to her,

What is this about not being allowed on the beach at night- no beach parties?... If I after two years in Africa and Italy was prevented from walking down the beach at night, I’d bloody well demand what we’re fighting for over here. It is little things like this that would drive me mad if I had to spend any length of time in the USA while the war is still on.<sup>85</sup>

Rich and his fellow A.F.S. men, who were volunteering on the front when they could have had comfortable desk jobs, were also rather cynical about the receptions given to departing soldiers. A.F.S. drivers knew the conditions American soldiers were being sent off to face. Though Rich never confided in his parents about this, he told Dickie, “getting off the boat coming home, I said to myself, this is what Congdon warned me about, when

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<sup>83</sup> ‘Two-year’ leave refers to the amount of time a man had been in the A.F.S. overseas, *not* the amount of time he had to spend at home.

<sup>84</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, October 10, 1944.

<sup>85</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, August 18, 1944.

the band was playing. This all sounds a bit silly I guess, but we overseas had heard a lot about civilian thinking and I was prepared to be a bit cynical. Red Cross ladies were on hand with coffee and doughnuts to wish us “bon voyage” [for the trip home].”<sup>86</sup> After he had experienced men die in his ambulance and witnessed the carnage of Cassino, the absurdity of this gesture must have been hard to take. Though Rich did not write about his homecoming after his part in the liberation of Belsen concentration camp, he must have had an even more cynical opinion of those who had not seen the war like he had.

Rich’s political views and social attitudes were also wrapped up in this cynical view of the ‘civilian’ population in the States. While many A.F.S. men expressed a lack of respect for the men of their class who dodged the draft, Rich did not look favorably on any part of the American population that did not support the war effort completely. He was a staunch Republican as well, and these two sentiments fused when he wrote to Dickie about political situations in the States. On the subject of labor strikes, Rich asked her, “the things that really burns us up out here is the G. damned strikes of J. I. Lewis’ that you people somehow tolerate. What kind of a government have you got back there? It certainly is no kind of backing to give those who are really fighting this bloody war.”<sup>87</sup> He felt that the soldiers should get all the support they needed.

Dickie was a Democrat and it caused some amusing tension in their letters. For Christmas of 1944, Rich received a year-long subscription to the *Nation* from Dickie. He wrote her,

I’ve received three or four issues of the “Nation” and read said with much interest. Of course, some of it is pretty hard to take, in view of my “un-

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<sup>86</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, January 24, 1944.

<sup>87</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, July 18, 1943. [Vmail]



iconoclast”, “always look at the bright side of things” upbringing; if you get what I mean. Of course, it’s very “broadening”-bull.<sup>88</sup> He had told her in a letter of Christmas Eve 1943, “the Yank has very little notion of what he’s fighting for- not “to make the world safe for democracy,””<sup>89</sup> and so the articles printed in the *Nation* were a little much for him to take, especially in the grim winter of 1944-45. He gave his father, a Republican as well, what he really thought of Dickie’s gift in a letter of March 9, 1945:

The redoubtable Mary Dixon gave me a subscription to “The Nation” as a Christmas present. Valuable as a source of toilet paper- don’t tell her. Over here it’s pretty touchy reading iconoclastic criticism of the government and goings on in the States. I just won’t read it- that’s all.<sup>90</sup> These passages are some of the most interesting of the letters and show the political and ideological development of a generation that, would for the most part, would to support the government’s actions during the Vietnam War. The men of the World War Two generation believed that the American population should support their troops overseas.

From November 15, 1944 until January 1, 1945, there are no letters. Rich was back in the United States for about a month after three weeks in transit back home. He spent the majority of his month’s leave in New York but managed to fit in a visit to Dickie in Columbus, Ohio. He constantly referred to this visit until the end of the war, because as he told Dickie on January 1, “you know, as much as I do, Dickie, that I won’t forget it [the visit]. Back in dirty old Italia it will be a memory of a different world.”<sup>91</sup> Rich had not seen her or his family in two years; as he left the United States to return to Italy, there was no way he could know how long it would be until he got home again.

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<sup>88</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, February 28, 1944.

<sup>89</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, March 9, 1944. Rich reported what he told Dickie to his parents in this letter.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayer, January 1, 1945.

The war raged on when Rich was called up to return to the embarkation camp “somewhere on the East Coast” with a number of other A.F.S. men bound back to Italy. Rich arrived at the camp on January 3, 1945 to find the embarkation process had changed a great deal since his departure from Staten Island in 1942. The ship sailed sometime around January 11, though Rich could not write what date exactly he left the States. What he could tell his parents was that he arrived safely at GHQ in Italy on January 26. The trip was much faster than Rich’s first Atlantic crossing, since they could sail directly across the ocean and into the Mediterranean by 1945, instead of having to go around the southern tip of Africa and through the Suez Canal. The trip, while quick, was no means luxurious, as Dickie found out. Rich told her “we’ve had some beautiful days at sea, but war time crossings, or shall we say life aboard ship, isn’t what it is in peacetime...I’m not complaining in the least. I’m just remarking that it’s more pleasant to have room to sit down on deck”<sup>92</sup> The trip back to 567 Cov. HQ was not any more comfortable: “3 rainy cold days in the back of a three ton truck.”<sup>93</sup>

Once back with his section, though the personnel had changed a good deal, with many of the more experienced A.F.S. men being assigned to administrative duties at GHQ or gone home, Rich resigned himself to another long winter stalemate. There was nothing to look forward to. Rich wrote to Dickie before he even left the embarkment camp, “God I hope this war doesn’t take too damned much longer.”<sup>94</sup> His earlier optimism about the end of the war was gone. While sitting in cold billets with no light bulbs, even if there had been electricity, Rich and his section mates debated whether or not they would go on to CBI after the war in Europe ended. He had learned from Fred

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<sup>92</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 24, 1945.

<sup>93</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 2, 1945.

<sup>94</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 7, 1945.

Hoening, an A.F.S. commander, that the contract he signed while in hospital did indeed oblige him to go to India “if there is enough time left (in the contract) to make it worthwhile shipping us out there.”<sup>95</sup> Not thrilled with the idea at all, Rich told Dickie,

I might be talked into CBI I suppose, if enough of my friends are going out there. It’s a pretty grim thought. I don’t like to see these best years of my life just going to waste. That is the worst part of being overseas in a lousy old war like this, bar death and being wounded, of course.<sup>96</sup>

The boyish enthusiasm he had in Egypt and even upon arriving in Italy was gone.

Depressed resignation was the only emotion Rich seemed to feel in the winter of 1945; many A.F.S. men and other soldiers in Italy shared his sentiments.

It might have been experienced A.F.S. drivers knew what the Italian winter would hold. It might have been life in the most brutal Italian winter weather on record. It might have been the fact that ambulances had to be pushed to start and the cold froze the fluids in the lines of every vehicle. It might have been the crushing feeling that the war would not end. Whatever the cause, a depression set over the entire Eighth Army, at least in part because of the absolute waste of life and resources on a campaign that was dragging on but would not decide the outcome of the war. Even as early as September, while he recovered from his accident, Rich voiced the opinion that the Eighth Army was being left behind in a campaign that would mean nothing. In a gloomy moment, but one where he still thought the war would be over by Christmas, he confided in Dickie

it hardly seems right that the “Jonny Come Latelys” who’ve sweated out the war in England should be getting all the glory for liberating Paris-Brussels-Berlin. The Kiwi in the bed opposite me was in Greece, Crete, the Desert campaigns, Cassino and Florence. Several of the Tommys in our workshops were in “Waverell’s 30, 000,” the western desert forces back in 1939. In Siena, there are signs “Lalamain-Berlino” indicating the

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<sup>95</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, February 2, 1945.

<sup>96</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 24, 1945.

route north through the city. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like the Eighth will get to Berlin at all at the rate the various invasion armies are going.<sup>97</sup>

There seemed to be no reward for slogging up every hill in Italy.

A depression like this had never set in during the North African campaign because, despite the long periods of waiting and boredom, there had never been a feeling of senseless siege in that theatre, where the front did not move for weeks. The *esprit de corps* that had sustained the A.F.S. and the Eighth Army as a whole remained, but it was all that held the units together as morale plunged. Allen Y. Davis, a fellow Harvard man and A.F.S. driver, wrote

fighting up one side [of the mountains] and down the other is as heartbreaking this year as it was last. Everyone has the faint hope... it's a knowledge that RAPs are a misery of greasy mess tins, poor food, mud, dark night evacuations, and the whole feeling that they are tired of war and blood and pain...It's the going back in, seeing the same pale faces and the same dirty bandages, that not only negates civilization but forcibly combats it.<sup>98</sup>

The only thing Rich found to combat the hopelessness of that winter was Dickie's baked goods, of which he pleaded her to send more. He wrote to her, "I'm embarrassed writing to you these requests for cookies and other packages. Anything in the line of eatables is always a great boon...when off in some cold, dreary, muddy, snowy or other god forsaken spot."<sup>99</sup> This loss of morale combined with a feeling that the war would drag on forever, and this made the situation in Italy seem even worse. Rich's faith in the power of the Allies was shaken, and he wrote, "one must not underestimate the German's stubborn will to counterattack [again]."<sup>100</sup> The one bright hope in the entire European theatre was the Red Army slowly pushing the Germans back towards Berlin. Rich dismissed this

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<sup>97</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, September 7, 1945.

<sup>98</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 378.

<sup>99</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, January 7, 1945.

<sup>100</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 2, 1945.

huge offensive cynically, telling Dickie and his parents in separate letters, “having seen such waves [of optimism] come and go, I fail to get excited.”<sup>101</sup>

Since there was very little work of a military nature for A.F.S. volunteers to do, they either sat around in their billets, traveled around Italy or were given special assignments from the AMG<sup>102</sup>. Many of the A.F.S. drivers had skills from their civilian lives that could be employed in Italy. Some were trained as artists or musicians and began to bring culture back to the ruins of eastern Italy; they established studios and they conducted orchestras. Bill Congdon, one of Rich’s best friends from the beginning of his A.F.S. days, did huge amounts of relief work. He brought the sick from the surrounding areas and tried to reunite them with their families. Rock wrote, “later he assisted the Red Cross... [he] interviewed scores of citizens each day and worked with civilian doctors to re-establish the local hospitals.”<sup>103</sup> Rich managed to keep himself busy with an ambulance run or two each day. The patients were mainly Italian peasants. He also discovered the surgical team stationed near his billets at the CCS was the same group from Cassino and who had operated on his leg in August of the previous year; he began to assist them in the operating room as an orderly.<sup>104</sup> And day by day, the winter passed. Like any respite after a harsh, bitter time, the spring of 1945 brought renewed morale to the Eighth Army and A.F.S. drivers.

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<sup>101</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, February 2, 1945.

<sup>102</sup> Allied Military Government.

<sup>103</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 392.

<sup>104</sup> Rich does note in the letter though that the lead surgeon, his friend Major Latchmoore had been promoted to Lt. Colonial and was no longer with the team.

## Chapter Six: “Are You to Blame Every German?”<sup>1</sup> March 1945-June 1945

The tireless work of A.F.S. drivers in Italy did not go unrecognized. On March 21, 1945, 567 Cov. was reviewed by Major General Richard McCreery, commanding general of the Eighth Army, at Forlimpopoli; six A.F.S. drivers received the British Empire Medal that afternoon. Rich found the entire processes of being ‘reviewed’ rather exhilarating. In Tripoli, his platoon had been reviewed twice; King George and Field Marshal Montgomery had been at both parades and “I got a pretty good view of his majesty as I was in the front rank, standing on the pavement not three feet from him.”<sup>2</sup> As he related to Dickie, “I believe we almost did justice to the honor- didn’t think the A.F.S. could look so much like soldiers; we were fairly uniformly dressed for once. It was rather good fun, as a matter of fact.”<sup>3,4</sup> After McCreery left, orders were given to wash the ambulances, strip them of all regimental markings, and prepare for convoy. Great secrecy surrounded the company’s final destination.

March 25 found ‘D’ Platoon moving rapidly west across Italy, over the Apennines, through Florence and to the Ligurian coast near Pisa, with a final destination of Leghorn. As one driver observed, “in a little over two hours, the entire convoy, the whole Company, passed through most of the battlefields its various platoons had fought over for the past 7 months. It was a sunny, bright morning, cool, invigorating and exciting as all hell.”<sup>5</sup> They left a much diminished Fifth Army Group to continue fighting up toward the Po River, on the heels of the retreating Germans. On April 23, a month

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<sup>1</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 3, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 27, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, March 22, 1945.

<sup>4</sup> As discussed in the introduction, A.F.S. volunteers did not have a set uniform. Since they were required to provide their own clothes, which included a dress uniform, the men wore any number of combinations of Allied battledress. The Kiwi officer’s uniform was preferred by many who had been in the desert, but it was left up to personal discretion.

<sup>5</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 415.

after 567 Cov. departed Forlimpopoli, the Allies crossed the Po River and Italian partisans seized control of several major northern Italian cities, effectively ending German control in the country. The Italian theatre officially closed on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

While the other A.F.S. group in Italy, 485 Cov. continued to evacuate a steady stream of casualties from Northern Italy, 567 Cov. waited in Leghorn. The drivers were anxious to be off to their next assignment, but warm weather had finally returned to Italy. The drivers enjoyed the rest in true A.F.S. fashion with sightseeing and collegial tournaments. Rich and his section climbed the Leaning Tower of Pisa and took in Easter Mass at the Cathedral. There was a company-wide softball tournament, which D Platoon won, and a track meet where Rich “ran for the platoon in the half mile, failing to place.”<sup>6</sup> The wait dragged on for two weeks, but on April 10, embarkation began for Marseilles.

It took two days for 567 Cov. to reach France- a relatively swift crossing. In keeping with the secrecy of their destination, Rich’s first letter from France was heavily censored. Rich attempted to say where he was directly, but the place name was removed. He had, however, a unique way to communicate to his parents his new posting. He wrote, “not much I can say at present...I can say that while on leave a while ago with my section, I visited [censored]... Speaking of May 17<sup>th</sup> and your anniversary reminds me of my “leave”. How sorry I was at having to rush so rapidly through that wonderful town where you first met. I really saw very little of it, you know.”<sup>7</sup> His parents had met near

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<sup>6</sup> These activities are described in both Rich and Rich’s letters of March 29, March 31, April 2 and April 4. The quote above comes from William A. Rich’s letter to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 10, 1945.

<sup>7</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 22, 1945.

Aix-en-Provence during World War One, where Helen Gilbert worked as a Red Cross nurse.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Rich had little time to take in Aix was no surprise. 567 Cov. was expected to drive 700 miles up the Rhône valley in less than a week. They followed a military routing pattern from Italy to Northwest Europe codenamed ‘Goldflake.’<sup>9</sup> The company was to join the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, commanded by Field Marshall Montgomery.<sup>10</sup> ‘Goldflake’ led north from Marseilles through Aix en Provence, Avignon, Charlon sur Saone, Dijon, Les Laumes, Paris and Cambrai. The trip took six days and on that last day, the Company arrived at the Belgian border and in the town of Waregem, near Flanders, where they discovered a town full of civilian luxuries and untouched by bombing. After their time in war-torn Italy, this was quite a shock. In the twenty-four hours they spent in Waregm, Rich observed, “steak dinners, ice cream Sundays, jewelry, refrigerators, hardware and clothing were all readily obtainable.”<sup>11</sup> Another day saw them to Brussels, where 567 Cov. HQ was established.<sup>12</sup> They had driven without stop each day, and to ensure that each volunteer was accounted for at first light, “security kept the convoy all but locked into camp at each night’s staging point and

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<sup>8</sup> What exactly he was doing in the south of France, when he was supposed to be near Paris, is still unclear. The most likely answer is sightseeing, though he may have been given a special assignment that has been lost.

<sup>9</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 416.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Page 417. The 21 Army Group consisted of the British Second and Canadian First Armies. Rock further relates that the A.F.S. found units in this larger grouping that they had served with before, as well as high-level commanders, such as Montgomery and General Sir Edward Phillips, who knew the A.F.S.’s excellent record and put them straight to work.

<sup>11</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 8, 1945. George Rock reported that the men of 567 Cov. spent about \$7,000 in the twenty-four hours they were there; they bought up goods that had not been available to them since the war began, ate at the finest restaurants and purchased art from the locals. Also, many took a side-trip to see Flanders Fields.

<sup>12</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 417.



there was no way of indulging in the usual A.F.S. tourism.”<sup>13</sup> This additionally explained why Rich could not even spare a couple of hours to see the town of Aix-en-Provence.

The breakneck pace of the convoy is not mentioned by Rich directly, but it becomes clear through the dates of the letters. Driving over a hundred miles a day, the company made excellent, but exhausting time. There was not a spare moment. As in times when he was nearest the front, twelve days passed without a single letter to Dickie or his parents. Though letters written during this time could have been lost or destroyed by censors, it is unlikely. The most plausible explanation for the lack of correspondence was the pace at which 567 Cov. traveled through France to Belgium for assignment. In their rush to Brussels, Rich and his fellow volunteers hardly had time to absorb some of the most shocking news of the war, let alone catch up on correspondence. Upon arrival in Marseilles on April 13<sup>th</sup>, unexpected news met the drivers. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died. Rich told Dickie, “when at 7am on the morning of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, a Tommy asked me in the head (latrine), if I’d heard Roosevelt was dead, I just plain didn’t believe him...so many people throughout the world, put their hopes for the future [in him].”<sup>14</sup>

In mid-April as the Reich collapsed between the Allied armies converging on Berlin, there was a great amount of work for the A.F.S. to do. ‘A’ Platoon received RAP postings upon arrival with 4<sup>th</sup> Commandos and various artillery postings at the front along the Maas. ‘B’ and ‘C’ Platoons were sent to 1 Canadian General Hospital near Nijmegen. ‘C’ Platoon was quickly sent further forward to Sulingen where the 84

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<sup>13</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 416.

<sup>14</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 3, 1945. Rich was a staunch Republican and viewed FDR’s domestic policies as uninformed. Dickie, a firm Democrat, was always trying to gauge what the reaction of the men overseas was during her correspondence with Rich. This political undercurrent runs throughout Rich’s letters with her as they disagree on political matters throughout the war.

General Hospital needed ambulances; they were the first A.F.S. group to actually enter Germany.

‘D’ Platoon still had no assignment on April 20. Unbeknownst to them, a desperate cry had gone out from 63 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, British Liberation Army (BLA), for any medical personnel, transportation, supplies or help that could be sent immediately. As Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. Gonin, Commanding Officer 11 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC, remembered:

I received a signal that at the special request of the DDMS [Deputy Director of Medical Services] 2<sup>nd</sup> Army the unit was required to move... Special requests were not usually made at Army level so, realizing the honour, we ‘up sticks’ and moved. I knew no more than someone had found a concentration camp and that they thought there was typhus in it.<sup>15</sup>

What he found upon arrival was a situation that had reached a ‘catastrophic’ categorization months before. It was Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.<sup>16</sup>

Belsen did not start out the ‘horror camp’ it became; within the Nazi’s vast, complex system of concentration camps, Belsen was originally a camp for ‘exchange Jews’- international Jewish persons who could be traded for imprisoned German citizens during the war. When the BLA arrived it had become the ‘dumping ground for sick and emaciated camp prisoners,” from all over the Reich.<sup>17</sup> Internees included “Poles, Russians, Dutch, Czechs, Belgians, French, Italians as well as Germans.”<sup>18</sup>

The camp was administered without excessive cruelty until early December 1944 when SS *Hauptsturmführer* Joseph Kramer replaced the existing commander and Belsen

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<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. Gonin, Commanding Officer 11 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC. Imperial War Museum. *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 10.

<sup>16</sup> Hereafter, the camp will be referred to only as ‘Belsen.’

<sup>17</sup> Flanagan, Ben and Donald Bloxham. *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses Record the Liberation*. London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2005. Page 5.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.

[http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultural.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

was re-designated as an extermination camp.<sup>19</sup> As the Allies advanced on Germany, inmates from other concentration camps began to be shipped there. Official German records show the camp's population to be twenty-two thousand in February 1945.<sup>20</sup> By March, there were over forty-one thousand internees, eighteen thousand of whom would die within the month. Typhus, typhoid, diphtheria, dysentery and pneumonia cases began to reach epidemic proportions.<sup>21</sup>

In April, the medical situation of the camp continued to deteriorate as an additional thirty thousand inmates arrived and concurrent epidemics continued unchecked. The camp eventually contained an estimated sixty thousand prisoners, but a final count was never possible, as they continued to die every week; an estimated nine thousand died between April 1 and April 15. When the BLA arrived, the area around Belsen on April 12, "a forty-eight square kilometer zone around the camp into which only medical units associated with relief work will be allowed to enter," was established at German request.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Imperial War Museum. *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 6.

<sup>20</sup> It is here that an important point about the following figures and statistics must be made. There are no definite 'numbers' for how many people were at Belsen after January 1945 or how many died. Just as there are a vast range of estimates for how many people perished in the entire concentration camp system during the Nazi Reich, there are an equally wide range of estimates for Belsen. There are two primary reasons for this, other than the political motivations of different authors who use varying figures to prove their own interpretations. The records for Belsen were supposed to be surrendered to the British but were destroyed by the SS before the BLA could take full control of the camp. In addition, the official records were not kept current in the last months of the camp's existence as inmates from every part of the Reich poured to Belsen for extermination. (Doherty, Muriel Knox. Judith Cornell and R. Lynette Russell. *Letters from Belsen 1945: An Australian Nurse's Experience with the Survivors of War*. London, Allen & Unwin, 2000. Page 44) The chaos and typhus that reigned the camp in the last months make any actual numbers very hard to agree on. Where letters or eyewitness accounts give actual figures, I have used those, because they are representative of what the authors believed to be correct. After that, however, unless specifically noted otherwise, I will rely on the statistics given by the Imperial War Museum, London, in their book, *Relief of Belsen, April 1945: Eyewitness Accounts*. .

<sup>21</sup> List of diseases comes from BBC war correspondent Richard Dimbleby's account of Belsen. Imperial War Museum. *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 11.

<sup>22</sup> The Germans were in fact terrified of the thought of typhus spreading into the general German population, or worse, to the *Wehrmacht*. This is believed to be the main reason that so many prisoners were

On April 15, the situation at Belsen finally came to light. The British had no idea of the appalling condition of the Belsen camp; their discovery of the camp complex was unintended and the group which supervised the handover of Belsen was totally unequipped to begin the relief of the camp. Immediate requests for RAMC units were sent to London and by April 17 arrived, which was when Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. Gonin, Commanding Officer, 11 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC received the commands related above. The 11 Light Field Ambulance, 32 Casualty Clearing Station and 30 Field Hygiene Sections arrived on that day to begin the triage of fifty thousand people, twenty-eight thousand of whom would die *after* the Liberation as a direct result of their internment. When the 11 Field Ambulance reached Belsen, there were over ten thousand unburied corpses in the camp, which the SS had hastily tried to dispose of in mass graves and overflowing crematoria. The medical doctors who arrived faced a horrific task. They “marked on the foreheads of each patient a cross to indicate to the bearers that this patient would be moved [out of the camp]... [it amounted to telling hundreds of poor wretches that they were being left to die.]”<sup>23</sup> Gonin enumerated the problems at Belsen succinctly for his superiors:

The problems were:

1. To stop the typhus spreading.
2. To bury the dead before the hot summer started cholera.
3. To feed the sick in the Horror Camp who were dying of starvation more rapidly than of their illness.
4. To remove from the Horror Camp those who might live with some form of systemized feeding and nursing...

What we had therefore was...at least 20,000 sick, suffering from the most virulent diseases known to man, all of whom required urgent hospital treatment and 30,000 men, women and children who might not die if they

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left at Belsen; they were simply too dangerous, on a medical basis, to be transported anywhere else. Imperial War Museum. *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 6.

<sup>23</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. Gonin, Commanding Officer 11 Light Field Ambulance, RAMC. Imperial War Museum. *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 22.

were not doctored but who would most certainly die if they were not removed from the Horror Camp.<sup>24</sup>

Gonin immediately called for additional medical support in any form. Six British Red Cross teams were sent, along with ninety-six medical students from London and every German nurse or doctor under Allied command. Immediately, Gonin realized more personnel with medical equipment were vitally important. 'D' Platoon was put into action on April 26, sent on a unexplained mission to transport a complete General Hospital and its entire staff as fast as possible into Germany. In Venray, "the entire platoon (in all about 32 ambulances including reserves) was ordered to report to 9 British General Hospital. They were loaded with blankets, stretchers, and about half the staff of the hospital- nurses called 'sisters'- orderlies, doctors."<sup>25</sup> They set out for Belsen, completely unaware what type of work awaited them.

Rich and the men of his section knew that something unexpected had happened, but they had no frame of reference for what they would find at Belsen. Before his arrival at Belsen, Rich was a little upset to still be behind the front lines, as his letter to Dickie suggested. He wrote

Yesterday when the radio brought word of Himmler's asking Britain and the US for an armistice, it found "D" platoon further east. That is a doubtful distinction, however, as we aren't very near the front. In fact, we've added another feature to this traveling circus [of 'D' Platoon in convoy] for the entertainment of all nationalities, civilians and military, allied and enemy, alike- women. Yes, we've found ourselves transporting Sisters.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Page 14.

<sup>25</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>26</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, April 28, 1945.

Clearly, no one had told the members of D Platoon why the 9 General Hospital had to be moved forward or why so many nurses were needed. Rich discovered the reason on April 29, when he arrived at Belsen with the advanced part of 9 General Hospital.<sup>27</sup>

It was decided that the entire camp had to be emptied and eleven hundred people a day were moved into nearby German Panzer Korps barracks, transformed by the British into hospitals, between April 21 and May 9. Each section of 'D' Platoon, aided by an additional section from 'C', had worked without break for three weeks. In the first fourteen-day period, each section carried an average of two thousand, two hundred and twenty-five patients, and according to one company diary, "only 29 were sitting;" the rest left Camp 1 at Belsen on stretchers.<sup>28</sup> To understand what he was doing, Rich wrote his parents and Dickie almost identical letters as soon as censorship allowed at the end of May. He told them

...April 26<sup>th</sup> saw our platoon cross the Rhine near Cleve and pass through the Siegfried forest. We were on the road two days transporting the nurses and medical officers of a British general hospital from Venray, Holland to Belsen Concentration Camp. We returned to Holland for another load...

May 6<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> we worked directly in "Camp #1", "the horror camp". In lieu of properly protected stretcher bearers, Gene and I had to carry in our arms the feeble, near-starved bodies (stripped of all clothing and wrapped in a blanket) from their cots in the shacks to the stretchers outside. It was pathetic how light most of them were. A British medical student had to explain (in German) to the Polish nurse interpreter that the patients must take off their lice ridden clothing before going to the "Human Laundry". There hardworking German nurses scrub the horribly emaciated bodies with soap and hot water: then dust them with A-L-63 (an anti-lice powder) [DDT] before they are moved to the hospital blocks,

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<sup>27</sup> In one of the only published references to the A.F.S. outside of George Rock's book, Muriel K. Doherty, an Australian nurse sent by UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), talked about the transport of her friend by the A.F.S. "Fauna Campbell...arrived at Belsen with the advance party of the 9<sup>th</sup> British General Hospital on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> April. The American Field Service, a voluntary body attached to the British Army, transported this group from Holland to Belsen and remained some weeks assisting with the evacuation of the Horror Camp." Doherty, Muriel Knox. Judith Cornell and R. Lynette Russell. *Letters from Belsen 1945: An Australian Nurse's Experience with the Survivors of War*. London, Allen & Unwin, 2000. Page 34.

<sup>28</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 423.

As they cleared the camp, the A.F.S. drivers were billeted in tents for the first time during the war. They were not allowed to sleep in their ambulances for fear they too would contract typhus.<sup>31</sup>

While the internees were being removed, captured SS men dug burial pits for the huge, and growing, number of dead; sickness and the effects of starvation still claimed about five hundred people a day. By May 4, two entire Field Hospitals had arrived at Belsen and were working around the clock to save as many former internees as possible.

<sup>32</sup> As the month progressed, mortality rates fell gradually as the multiple epidemics were brought under control and people removed from the filthy conditions of Camp 1. May 8, V-E Day, was a cause for celebration everywhere in the world except Belsen, where work continued on at a frantic pace. Rich himself noted glumly, “the signing of the Peace of Reims leaves us “Somewhere in Germany”, not knowing what to expect in the future. There has been little exaltation, or even feeling of relief here- the war may be over but we of this generation have no illusions about having fought a war to “save the world for democracy.”<sup>33</sup> On May 19 the entire camp had been evacuated and the last huts were

burned on May 21 in an effort to prevent typhus from spreading to the general population

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<sup>29</sup> These German nurses were invaluable as assistants. Even Gonin remarked, “Those girls (the German nurses) worked like slaves, they went down with typhus and died but others took their place, they grew thin and they grew pale but they worked and they toiled from eight in the morning till six at night. They earned our respect.” (Gonin, *The Relief of Belsen: Eyewitness Accounts*. London, Imperial War Museum, 1991. Page 24.) Even Rich mentioned the German nurses with a favorable account. He told Dickie, “If there is work to be done at a hospital, German girls have the intelligence and initiative to do it. They are a thousand times more helpful than our Latin cobelligerents.” William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 18, 1945.

<sup>30</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 30, 1945.

<sup>31</sup> William A. Rich to Elizabeth Rich, May 8, 1945.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).

<sup>33</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 9, 1945.

surrounding Belsen. The A.F.S. drivers of D Platoon were at Belsen the day the last hut was burned. Rich himself captured the burning of the huts with a camera that he had bought to take 'snaps' of the French countryside.

Luckily, none of the A.F.S.'s volunteers contracted any of the virulent diseases from Belsen. What they did suffer was a dramatic change in attitude toward the Germans. As Rich traveled through the various theatres the A.F.S. went to, a constant refrain in his correspondence was the respectfulness of the German Army. Before Belsen, he mentioned both to his parents and Dickie that the German people and the Nazis should be kept distinct from one another. Charles Edwards, who also worked at Belsen, wrote in his memoir, "in Africa and even in Italy all of us had made a distinction in our minds between the Nazis and the German people...as the first waves of such cruelly broken humanity became a flood [at Belsen], so did the hatred for the Germans in the hearts and minds of all those of A.F.S. who witnessed it at first hand."<sup>34</sup> The hatred Edwards felt was intemperate, as a diatribe about the horrors of genocide following the above excerpt revealed.

Rich's reaction was more moderate and less mediated, because, unlike Edwards, he never could go back to revise his letters. What was recorded on the day he wrote Dickie or his parents was what he really felt at that moment. Because of this, his ideas about what he had seen, how the Germans should be treated and what should be done, are very poorly defined; his thoughts jumbled. They revealed a twenty-three year old trying to grapple with one of the most pressing moral quandaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The letters

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<sup>34</sup> Edwards, Charles. *An A.F.S. Driver Remembers*.  
[http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles\\_edwards/fox02.html](http://www.intercultura.it/p03.001/chisiasmo/charles_edwards/fox02.html).



from Belsen showed that his observation of the devastation, in real time with real people, made moral questions less answerable. Rich had much clearer opinions about the other salient ethical question of World War Two, whether the atomic bomb should have been used at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He had not seen the cataclysmic scene in the aftermath of a nuclear attack.

Rich's reaction did not deny the horrors of what he had seen. For the first time in his letters, he wrote "any stories you may hear regarding such camps can't possibly convey the full horrible picture."<sup>35</sup> He always assured his mother and Dickie that the news reports were not accurate, that the war correspondents blew events out of proportion. Belsen was the first place where he seemed to be overwhelmed by what he saw. He had driven, and carried, people starved to death because there was no other way to dispose of them. And still, Rich did not want to condemn the German people outright. His rage was not the same emotional reaction as Edwards. If he felt rage at the Nazis, he never expressed it in his letters. One of the ninety-six medical students who assisted the RAMC at Belsen, D. C. Bradford, thought, "I think that if one had been more mature- I think if one had to face it now and realize that these people...were somebody's mothers and fathers, and sons and so on and so forth, I don't think one could have borne it. But as it was, they were almost unrecognizable as human beings."<sup>36</sup> Though Rich could never totally isolate himself from the effects of working at Belsen, his youthful perspective may have insulated him, as it did Bradford.

This unintentional barrier Rich subconsciously erected became evident in the way he approached the question looming over the end of the war in Europe: how should the

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<sup>35</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 3, 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Flanagan, Ben and Donald Bloxham. *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses Record the Liberation*. London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2005. Page 53.

Germans be punished? The editors of *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses Remember the Liberation* made an interesting historiographical observation which holds true for Rich's letters. They noticed

As time went on, the main camp was cleared of people... we see a change in the emphasis of written eyewitness accounts. Through the letters and memoirs of soldiers and medical personnel we are able to gain an insight not only into the medical priorities and practices in the camp but also into the psychological and moral issues that challenged all who lived and worked in Belsen.<sup>37</sup>

Though he continued to write little phrases about what he saw, as a way of contextualizing his reflections, Rich also became less interested in the actuality and more philosophical. He rhetorically asked Dickie, "are you to blame every German? It's hard not to feel sorry for the clean, blond children you see standing out in front of their houses...and I'm usually hard-hearted towards kids. You wonder if their fathers are still alive."<sup>38</sup> He explored a similar philosophical question in a letter to his parents: "you wonder what manner of men the German people are. To what extent are the ordinary individuals to be held responsible for the actions of their government?"<sup>39</sup> At Belsen, there were two mindsets about what should happen after the war ended. Rich reported to Dickie, "standing looking at the pit grave which contains hundreds of bodies, emaciated beyond belief through starvation in a concentration camp, a major advocates [to me], in no uncertain terms [censored] for the whole German race. The opposing school of thought insists...we must not lower ourselves to the German's level by retaliating in

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<sup>37</sup> Flanagan, Ben and Donald Bloxham. *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses Record the Liberation*. London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2005. Page 61.

<sup>38</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 3, 1945.

<sup>39</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, May 8, 1945.

kind.”<sup>40</sup> These types of questions ran through Rich’s head as he moved bodies and drove former inmates out of the ‘Horror Camp’ at Belsen.

In the entire body of the correspondence, these philosophical musings are salient and unique. On the whole, Rich’s letters from 1942 until his arrival at Belsen, as has been shown in the previous chapters, were full of travelogues and narratives about what the A.F.S. volunteers had gotten involved in to stay busy. He also kept up to date with his parents and Dickie about the social doings of his acquaintances at home. There was very little sense that a war was going on all around him. Not only were the descriptions of Belsen unusually graphic for Rich’s letters: the piles of dead bodies, the hundreds dying despite every effort made; there was, for the first time, a sense of irrational evil in the world. Before, Rich had seemed to accept almost everything he saw as part of a massive, but understandable, war. In May 1945, Rich claimed that “back in 1940 the bombing of Rotterdam was enough to make me realize that this war is not one of power politics alone. [Now] these concentration camps make one know for sure that there is something wrong with a portion of the German population.”<sup>41</sup> He never once mentioned this belief about the Germans before, however, and so it must be concluded that at Belsen he was finally able to piece together incongruous, illogical events during the war that had seemed to fall outside the box of acceptable wartime practices.

There is also a total lack of humor in the letters, even the dark political humor in which Rich found comfort during the winter of 1944 in Italy. Though there was clearly *nothing* humorous at Belsen, the A.F.S. was famous for its ability to find some quip for every situation. “Griff Talk” and other columns in the *A.F.S. Bulletin* demonstrated this

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<sup>40</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 9, 1945.

<sup>41</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic and Helen Rich, April 29, 1945.

over and over. By the time Camp 1 was finally cleared, and the last hut burned to the ground, however, some of Rich's former attitude had returned. He worried to Dickie "one alarming aspect of the German people is that they are apparently lacking in a sense of guilt...they don't blame Hitler... [they] merely say he was ill advised starting a two-front war. Lord knows who counseled him to; the Russian officer class couldn't have."<sup>42</sup> He was still deeply preoccupied by the question of what to do with the German people, but the little jab at the Russians in the last line signaled a slow retreat from the horrors of Belsen. Rich, who acknowledged that "I don't mean to be a pessimist, because Richs really aren't that way,"<sup>43</sup> slowly took every memory of Belsen and sealed it away. After he left Belsen, he never referred to it again, nor did he write about Germany after he left. Unlike most of his letters, which are full of memories of other places, Belsen never again appeared in his correspondence, though the horrors of Belsen and Buchenwald continued to be highlighted in major Allied newspapers and magazines. In fact, in contrast to his father, Dominic Rich, who told many stories about the glorious time he had with the A.F.S. during World War One, William Rich *never* talked about his experiences. Though from the letters it was clear that the majority of his war experience was more than livable, Belsen changed his view on abstract rationales for the war.

Rich finally came to some peace with what he had seen by the end of May. Like many other testimonies from A.F.S. drivers who were at Belsen, Rich had realized that, "our work...is of a nature that makes on vividly aware, if anything can, why we are fighting this war against Germany."<sup>44</sup> He wrote a calm letter to Mrs. Sayre, Dickie's

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<sup>42</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 18, 1945.

<sup>43</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 9, 1945.

<sup>44</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 3, 1945.

mother that encompassed a clear sense of purpose, a world view that could absorb the horror of Belsen. He simply said

It is quite fitting that our long battling journey from Syria and El Alamein through Libya, Tunisia and Italy should see us at the close of hostilities tending the oppressed and persecuted of all European nationalities, for whom this war was fought... Is it a good thing that at the end of this European conflict in which men from all over the world have been involved, one should still possess an idealistic approach to the matter, or is it symptomatic of ignorance regarding the realistic causes of war[?] Our small part in cleaning up the horrible mess that was Belsen Concentration Camp is about completed. The thousands of skeletal bodies, dead from starvation, typhus, dysentery and TB among other things, have been buried by Germans at rifle point. The living have been put through the "Human Laundry" ... before being moved to the SS barracks, converted into hospitals. The shacks in "the Horror camp", which defied description, have been burnt to the ground. Those internees who are well enough have been started on their way homeward.<sup>45</sup>

But he was not homeward bound, despite the official surrender of the Reich and the *Wehrmacht*.

As the work at Belsen lightened by the middle of May, A.F.S. volunteers were reminded of another war, fought in the East. HQ in Brussels and 60 Beaver Street- A.F.S. shorthand for A.F.S. HQ in New York City- tried to find out how many men would to sign contracts to go on and serve in the Pacific. The question of whether or not they would go on to the South-East Asia Command (SEAC), also known as China-Burma-India (CBI), loomed in everyone's mind. For Rich, the question was not so much about what they would do, as *who* would go. Rich told his father, "many old timers in the platoon are applying for [repatriation]... Shelly "Pop" Waterman is trying to get our whole section to go to CBI. ... I [am] tempted both ways. If I knew more definitely what sort of a platoon we could get together, who would be officer and sergeant; I'd be more

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<sup>45</sup> William A. Rich to Mrs. Sayre, May 30, 1945.

certain.”<sup>46</sup> For him, the joy of the A.F.S., what made the otherwise boring and brutal job bearable, was the other drivers. And, as the platoon packed up its tents and drove away from Belsen, there was still no consensus. Though the question of who would go to CBI had been probed during the winter of 1944-45 in Italy, there was no way of knowing then when the war in Europe would really be over. Now it was and the question needed an answer.

On May 27, back at HQ in Brussels, 567 Cov. was officially disbanded. Many of the drivers, especially the ones who had been with Rich in North Africa in 1942-43, were going home. Rich decided to go on to SEAC with most of the younger men from his section. He told Dickie, “as I’ve said so many times before, I can’t face it [the return to Harvard] until after the war is over everywhere. Wanderlust and the spirit of adventure lure me to CBI.”<sup>47</sup> Rock related the problem of deciding who would go to CBI especially well, “the habit of traveling, provoked a small number of old hands to join the party. But there were great indecisions and soul-searchings and many last minute changes of plan before the lists were closed.”<sup>48</sup> As they parted, and their faithful Dodge ambulances were sent off to Burma, the company met one more time. Rich told Dickie,

Today Red [Murray] spoke “a few well chosen words”, as [Jim] Briggs put it, thanking us for all the cooperation (?) we’ve given him. It really gave me a heavy heart to think of the platoon breaking up. Of course, only 4 or 5 of us have been with it since the desert days...Chet Willets, Gib Hazard, George Holton and others who have been on so many moves and big A.F.S. acts. We have a definite platoon ‘esprit de corps’- what would a platoon convoy be without Red taking us up at least one wrong road.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> William A. Rich to Dominic Rich, May 16, 1945.

<sup>47</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, May 9, 1945.

<sup>48</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 427.

<sup>49</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, June 12, 1945.

The A.F.S. took with them a great number of honors, campaign ribbons, awards and letters of praise to SEAC. Over two hundred and fifty of the volunteers had been decorated by the British, French, Polish and American governments for their dedicated, and courageous, service. Field Marshall Montgomery personally wrote to Colonel Fred Hoeing of the A.F.S., “I have known the American Field Service since I took command of the Eight Army in 1942...this fine volunteer Service has throughout done a first-class job of work, of which you can all be justly proud.”<sup>50</sup>

Following a ten-day leave in Paris, where Rich again enjoyed the life of the traveling A.F.S. gentleman, he reconnected with ninety-seven men from 567 Cov. in Liverpool, England, where on July 10, after a couple of trips to London, he embarked for India. The trip was quick, and in contrast to his trip to Egypt in October 1942, over Allied-controlled seas. By August 3, he was in Bombay. Twelve days later, on August 15, he wrote his father, “this war out here certainly has surprised everyone by its whirlwind finish thanks to the atomic bomb.” The war was over everywhere.

In a fitting tribute to all the places he’d fought in, and to the technological changes that the war had created, Rich flew back to England from India by way of Tripoli, seeing the North African coast from the air. The plane then flew over part of Italy and France; they landed on the west coast of Wales on October 16, 1945. After another round of sightseeing in rural England, time spent in London and a trip out to Henley-on-Thames, Rich boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* for home. He arrived back in New York on Thanksgiving Evening 1945 with the idea of “[tomorrow] proceeding to Cambridge to discuss my future education with the Deans. As Harvard is again on a regular peace time basis, I shall resume my regular academic career after midterms... [I shall] possibly bum

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<sup>50</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 426.

down to Florida for a few weeks...Father somehow doesn't appreciate this approach to life."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> William A. Rich to Mary Dixon Sayre, November 25, 1945.



### *Epilogue:*

William Rich returned to Harvard in January of 1946 and graduated in May of 1947; he went to work in New York in advertising. In September of 1953, he married Sheila MacNamara. They had three children, Lauri-Annis, Timothy and David; the Rich family eventually moved to Fairfield, Connecticut. In 1965, Dominic Rich died and Helen Rich died twenty years later in 1985. After his retirement, Bill Rich continued to indulge his love of traveling. In fact, he revisited many of the places where he had served as an A.F.S. driver, including Lebanon, Egypt, Italy and France. He never returned to the town of Belsen. His wife, Sheila, died in 1993 after a prolonged battle with early-onset Alzheimer's. A year later, in September of 1994, Rich was killed in a car accident in northern Spain. He was survived by his four siblings, his three children and three grandchildren.

Mary Dixon "Dickie" Sayre, who was known after the war as Dixie, married Tony Miller in 1947. The couple continued to live in Columbus, Ohio where they raised four children. In 1955, the Millers bought a castle in Scotland where the family spent many summers. After the death of her husband in 1973, Dixie spent more and more of the year there. She was known for her house parties at Keiss Castle and became good friends with the Queen Mother. In the mid-1990's, Dixie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and returned to the United States to live near her family. She will be eighty-six this year.

Everyone at Point O'Woods was shocked when Bill and Dickie chose not to get engaged after the war. The exact reasons will never be known, but it is likely that the couple had too many differences to be reconciled. Dickie was a nonconformist and a Democrat; Bill was a traditional, Harvard-educated Republican. Dickie may have known

that the Rich family, especially Helen Rich, would stifle her free-spirited nature. She had known the Riches for her whole life, and been privy to the inner machinations of the family- Dickie may have realized that she would not fit in easily. She may also have wanted to get away from the closed, tight-knit society of New York and Point O' Woods. What is clear is that Dickie stopped the engagement from happening. Whatever her reasons, she had been a faithful correspondent during the war and gave Bill Rich a confidant his own age to confide in.

Though their offices have expanded and moved from 60 Beaver Street, the American Field Service exists to this day. The A.F.S. are now a renowned cultural exchange program for high school students. In the spirit of internationalism that characterized the A.F.S.- their American drivers had, after all, served with French, British and Polish armies during World War Two- Steve Galatti decided that American and European students should visit each others' homes and countries in order to gain a better understanding of the world in which they lived. In the first decade after the war ended, two thousand, two hundred students came from Europe for extended summer stays with prominent American families, most of them in New York City; seven hundred and nine came from Germany alone.<sup>1</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote, "despite their great contribution in the winning of two world wars, I feel that the peacetime job that [the A.F.S.] have voluntarily undertaken is the most important one of all."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rock, George. *The Official History of the American Field Service: 1920-1955*. Page 701.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Page 589.

## Appendix A: 'Are You Happy In the Service?'

This article written by an A.F.S. volunteer gives a vivid picture of the social sensibilities of the A.F.S. as well as the types of people who served.

### Are You Happy In the Service or How to Find Your Own Sewing Circle ANONYMOUS

*(ED. NOTE: The following article is an attempt, we are told, to help the fledgling ambulance driver over the uncomfortable and often embarrassing period between his arrival in the field and his entry into the "right sort" of section. True a number of ugly stories have reached us concerning St. Paul's School alumni who have been coaxed into unsuitable sections by radicals posing as good Episcopalians and respectable Republicans.)*

To be happy in the Service, you must find your own type, the right section. As a guide, in brief form, look for one of these four, general categories: 1) The Intellectual, 2) The Socialite, 3) The Good Fella, and 4) The Budding Officer.

**THE INTELLECTUAL** is sharply divided into two warring factions, The Precious Intellectual and The Earthy Intellectual. To qualify for the former, you need little equipment and a modicum of imagination.

a) Books --- are indispensable. You need not go to the extreme of reading them, but they should be strewn about in quantity. Prefer Joyce. Proust, Coward, and the Sitwells.

Anything obscure, symbolical, or shatteringly sophisticated. Art editions of love lyrics by obscure poets are also advantageous. If challenged, to hit back with a broad, imposing statement, such as: "Stein's resounding periods roll against our ears like the voices of the living Spring." If that, doesn't get them, try: "Stein is above criticism. That in general is that. A little practice and you get the hang of it.

b) Background --- should be mysterious, but hinting at the requisite near-aristocratic birth, intense emotional suffering, and wide travel. A European background is an absolute must, as is an easy familiarity with the Côte d'Azur. -Remember, the "mot" is more shattering in French. The Theatre and the Ballet are pretty corny but are still doing service. Refer to a famous actor by his Christian name, or nickname (if he has a cosy one). Warning: don't try a Southern background; the market's flooded.

c) Mannerisms --- are limited to expressions of boredom, an occasional high, piercing scream, intermittent moaning or simply a series of sour expressions. Good thundering burps are useful in establishing your independence of middle class social tenets. Use such phrases as "sheer heaven!", "divine!", and "right out of this world!"

d) Pastimes --- Complaining, bathing, and sunbathing.

e) Clothes --- Chic and very British. Issue clothing should naturally be avoided like a social disease.

f) Equipment --- A few suggestions: Egyptian cigarettes (the kind as big as fountain pens), bouillon cubes, fly swish (useful in establishing kosher boredom), bed-linen (monogrammed if possible), elaborate toilette cases, and assortments of dusting powders.

Unlike the Precious Intellectual, **THE EARTHY INTELLECTUAL** calls for a hell of a lot of mental sweating and the rewards are few, if any.

a) Books --- fall into two classes: Scholarly and Humanitarian. The first includes deep journals with ugly covers and six-volume tomes in Middle High German, Early Polish and Medieval Lett. Fluency in the Classical Languages is naturally requisite. The Humanitarian reading is less imposing. To hell with the literary-merit, as long as there is TRUTH.

b) Opinions --- are definite and rigidly prescribed and you'd better endorse them. They are:

1) The New Deal and The New Republic are basically reactionary, but what else is there?

2) One good man-of-the-people or unwashed native is worth a dozen college students.

3) All the world is decidedly to be loved. The Egyptian and the Eyetye are just as good as we---they just haven't had our advantages---and all they need to come right into our parlour is a little Pet milk and some vitamin tablets.

4) Imagination is a bad thing and ought to be suppressed.

5) Sex is here to stay. The REAL THING, however, is experienced only in the South Seas, as civilization has robbed us of our Basic Masculinity and the result is a third-rate thrill.

c) Pastimes --- Chatty tea parties with natives and choral societies are in high favor. There's nothing like Gregorian Chanting after one's dinner, or a really fetching gigue, catch, rondel, madrigal, or dirge before bed.

d) Clothes --- Anything will do. Styles are rugged and careless. Let "Q" be your Brooks Brothers.

e) Equipment --- an ancient duffle, a few battered brew tins, a crud-caked pipe, and a supply of lethal tobacco.

**THE SOCIALITE** is clearly the AFS blue plate, and anybody who says he isn't is a DIRTYRED. We really should confine this group to the sons of fruity iron-pipe, steel, or toothpaste fortunes. However, with the fine spirit of liberalism generated by comradeship in the Forces, we include the heirs of highly respectable professional people with incomes above twenty-five thousand. They must, nevertheless, be regarded by orthodox Millionaire-Drivers as distinctly hangers-on and tolerated only when their behavior is exemplary.

a) Heritage --- You need a name built up over one or two generations by some pretty expensive national advertising. You have a good address, have attended the RIGHT schools, and have married---or are just about to marry the RIGHT (\$50,000 a year and a place in old Locust Valley) girl. And now you are doing your duty in the AFS. To be sure you don't want to be snobbish but you've got to watch being imposed upon. Don't let the riff-raff entertain false ideas of equality and take advantage of the artificial proximity,

b) Conduct and Protocol --- Here are a few warnings:

1) Never express enthusiasm for anything; enthusiasm is vulgar and indicates that you are not sure of yourself.

- 2) Don't put yourself out; only climbers do.
- 3) Take your time; this emphasises your importance, that you are used to being waited on.
- 4) Contrive to let your officers know that your present subordinate position is highly irregular and temporary and that in normal times the most they may hope from you is a nod on the street in passing.
- c) Schools --- are terribly important; for how else would you know whether a man was the right sort? That is what schools are for. Relations with graduates of any but the Ivy League preps and colleges should be confined to only the most general amenities. You should know that Beethoven was a composer of symphonies and be able to name a play by Shakespeare. Armed with these tidbits you'll do all right, provided you don't run too seriously afoul of grammar.
- d) Opinions --- None of your own. When in doubt, ask Dad.
- e) Reading Matter --- Esquire, Life, and (heavy) The Reader's Digest. The New Yorker may be thumbed through for the cartoons, but the stories are liable to be pinko or difficult or both.
- f) Clothes --- should be as well-cut as possible ---products of an officers' shop; good materials but not too prissily neat.
- g) Pastimes --- Ordinarily you'd have lots of latitude here, but war is hard and so you will have to confine yourself to Bridge, Backgammon, liquor (when you can find it), and an occasional and not too strenuous game of gentlemanly soft-ball.
- h) Equipment --- a few expensive and useless nicknacks from Abercrombie just for atmosphere.
- i) Workshops --- Don't worry about maintenance; a bottle of gin will get you through inspections.

Though others may flaunt fancier plumage, **THE GOOD FELLA** or **GI GUY** is the real wheelhorse of the organization. And what a rootin'-tootin', wheatieseatin', hundredpercentamerican boy he is!!!

- a) Mannerisms and Mores --- What the Good Fella lacks in finesse he makes up in enthusiasm. In fact he's a veritable bonanza of uncontrollable, extraverted joy, which he generously shares with one and all by yelling, screaming, or howling every joke or prurient ballad that comes his way. Most Good Fellas take quite kindly to Seagram's joy juice, and thus fortified, sometimes manage single-handed to generate enough joy to keep an entire Amb Coy awake all night.
- b) Equipment --- Scrounging is their forte. Sorry, indeed, the GI's car that isn't a jackdaw's nest of gadgets, small arms, Thompson Guns, and sundry ammo, to say nothing of the cases of food he spirits from unsuspecting American cooks with his homespun charm and native guile.
- c) Clothes --- GI and Tommie in about equal admixture which combines the worst features of both. Headgear is fancy and varied and beards are worn long.
- d) Dialect --- Monosyllabic, leaning heavily on pungent nouns. All slang is excruciatingly funny and is assimilated, practiced and re practiced for the edification of all.
- e) Pastimes --- Maintenance, honestinjun baseball, poker, and serious sex talk.
- f) Artistic Taste --- The finer canvases of Varga.

g) Reading Matter --- Popular Mechanics, Renfrew of the Mounties, Sam, a Collie, and other classics.

If you can't be a Socialite-Driver, the next best thing to be is a **BUDDING OFFICER**. The process is long and wearisome, but you should make it if you keep your eye on the ball.

a) Helpful Hints and Useful Habits ---

- 1) Avoid too intimate association with any of the above.
- 2) Never express a positive opinion about anything except the excellence of your superiors. Laughter makes the officer uncomfortable, unless it be the hearty accolade to one of his jokes, and even then he isn't sure about it.
- 3) Hang around HQ. Don't get in the way, but be ready with a handy hurrah.
- 4) Don't be a malcontent. Malcontents are very unattractive and are suspected of just about everything.
- 5) Don't be hurt when officers are curt and answer your questions with condescending, mystical evasions. That's part of the business.
- 6) Deny any ambitions vehemently. Later, if your pips lead you behind a desk, you will refer to the great sacrifice made in leaving the field, and you will invariably remind drivers in from the field to recuperate from wounds that "there is a WAR on,"
- 7) Silence is still golden and indicates firmness of character, resourcefulness, and reliability.
- 8) Don't complain about the food, or the extra privileges of the Workshops personnel.
- 9) Don't ask embarrassing questions about the Cairo Office.
- 10) If you are naturally bright, don't let it get around.

b) Reading --- None. You haven't time.

c) Clothes --- Wash but don't dress too well.

d) Dialect --- British if heading for a liaison job, Otherwise everyday American; it inspires confidence.

e) Equipment --- None; it might attract attention.

f) Pastimes --- Dreaming of the day when, pip up, you can forget all these rules and do what you want.

If none of these categories intrigue you, cheer up! You've only signed on for a year.

*Taken from The A.F.S. Bulletin, December-January 1944. American Field Service Archives.*

## *Appendix B: 'Letter Requesting'*

This 'letter,' reprinted in *The A.F.S. Bulletin* of September 1943, illustrates the gripes and grievances of A.F.S. volunteers with the organization. Rich himself had similar complaints to this writer, especially about the lack of available funds, time it took to get home leave and how slowly mail arrived from GHQ.

### Letter Requesting

*(This is not fiction; it is an actual letter written by an AFS man and received by Art Howe. --ED.)*

To: Major Art Howe  
American Field Service,  
567 ACC, B.M.E.F. –

Dear Art:

I am thinking of enlisting for another 6 months. I have come to the conclusion that, because I have been a faithful Yard-Bird during the past year, I should be granted certain favors and advantages over other members of 567 ACC.

The following are the provisions of my re-enlistment for 6 months:

1. I must be granted no leave until 1944.
2. All my letters and packages (incoming) must be kept from me---even if it is necessary to sending them up to Syria and back---for the duration.
3. My car must be taken away from me and I must be spare driver with Frank Cochrane (or batman for "Flash" O'Neil).
4. I must be allowed to do all maintenance.
5. When the invasion comes, I desire to be put on the first barge to land---in the position of stretcher bearer.
6. After landing I must be sent where I can catch the most buckets of (BLANK) per minute.
7. My \$ 50 per month allowance is not to be given to me. It is to go to the canteen, so that the other boys may have more free beers.  
A.) Money from home is to be (BLANKED) up via the usual financial (BLANKING) uppers. [Field Cashiers]
8. I am to be guaranteed the position of waterboy in all soft-ball games.  
A.) In a game where sides are to be chosen ---I am to play left out (along with O'Neil, Dick, and Jim).
9. All my letters must be censored by Manning Field.
10. Frank, with me as spare driver, must be put in either of the following sections:  
A.) "Kindergarden Kids,"  
B.) "Fairy Command."

If you see fit to accept my re-enlistment with these provisions, please contact me thru my platoon Lieutenant.

Sincerely,  
YARD BIRD

*Taken from The A.F.S. Bulletin, September 1943. American Field Service Archives.*



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