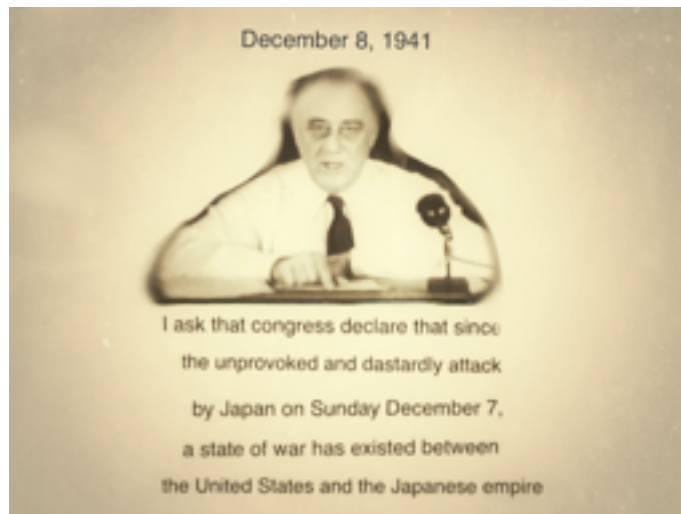


An Unbuttoned and Illustrated Story of Captain Walter Felson's
World War II Experiences
Judith Felson Duchan
July 7, 2015

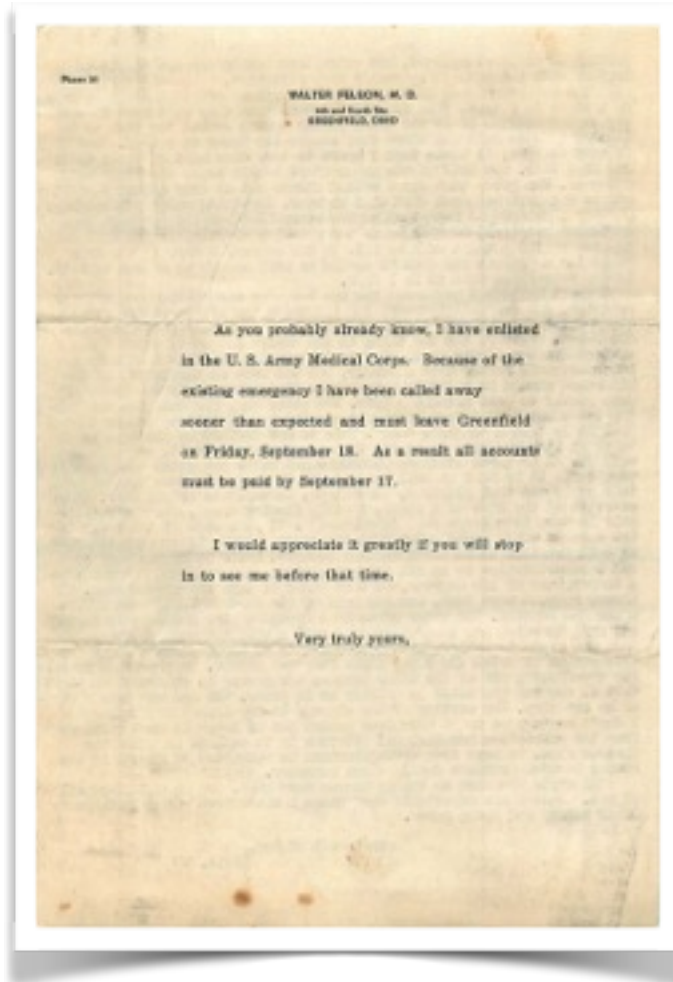
Late in 1942, Walter Felson left his fledgling medical practice in Greenfield, Ohio to join the US military's effort to stop Germany, Italy, and Japan from taking over the world.



It was nearly a year after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) and after the US had officially entered World War II. (The US declared war on Japan a day after the bombing.)



Walter Felson closed up shop and left Greenfield on September 18, 1942.



With him was his wife Roslyn Marcus Felson. Most called her Ros. It seemed like only yesterday when he proposed to her. But it wasn't just yesterday, it was 1926--seventeen years earlier! (They were married in November, 26, 1930.)



Camp Grant, September 1942 to January 1943

Walter and Roslyn also took their two young children, Judy (4 years old) and Elaine (2 ½) and a car full of their belongings. They headed for Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois. There is one letter from Walter to his brother Chippy about this period of his training. It was written on October 7, 1942. Here is the first paragraph:

Dear Chip:

They've really been keeping us busy here. We start school at 7:53 and end up at 17:00 with one hour off for lunch. That means 8 hours of lectures - one of these hours being drill. At the end of a day you know you've been to school. In addition to this we are also given home work to do almost every night which takes up at least one hour of time. It is a physical impossibility to absorb all that is thrown at us, but the instructors realize this and apparently are merely making sure that we are well exposed to the material, get a smattering of knowledge so that we'll be able to understand what we do after we leave here, and then expect us to continue in our quest for army knowledge after we leave here.

Camp Shelby, Hattiesburg, Mississippi

In January, 1943 the family headed to Hattiesburg, Mississippi and that it was near Hattiesburg, at Camp Shelby that Walter's training began in earnest.

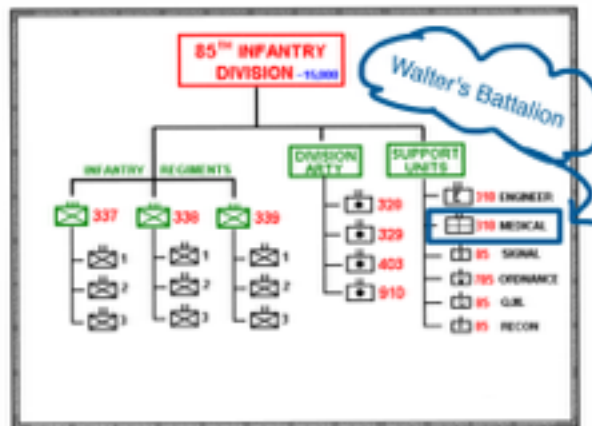
Camp Shelby was HUGE! Here is how it is depicted in Wikipedia.

Wikipedia: The Camp Shelby of World War II contained 360,000 acres with an additional 400,000 acres leased for maneuver space. In all, over a thousand square miles were in use for training. Initially, troops using Camp Shelby were housed in tents (over 14,000), forming the largest tent city in the world.

Here is but one small part of the camp—the tents for one infantry regiment.



At Camp Shelby, Walter was inducted into the US fifth army's, 85th Infantry Division. The 85th Division, nicknamed the Custer Division, had lots of subdivisions, including the 310th Medical Battalion, which was Walter's group.



Walter was also given an army serial number—01693630. Oh, and there was one more way he was able to identify himself. He was given dog tags that were stamped with his name, social security number, blood type, and religion. His religion was shown as H. That stood for Hebrew, indicating that he was Jewish.



We don't know if or when he wore his dog tags, but we assume he wore them all the time he was at war. That was so they could identify him in case he got killed or wounded and he couldn't tell them his name, blood type, or religion. That's morbid, but that's the military for you.

The Custer Division was an unfortunate nickname for the 85th Infantry Division. It was named after General George Armstrong Custer, the one who took his last stand at Little Big Horn in the American Civil War. That is to say, Custer died while putting up a brave fight, but he died in battle nonetheless—not something soldiers assigned to the 85th Infantry Division would want to have happen to them.



A more appealing and affectionate nickname than Custer Division for those in the 85th Infantry Division was Polar Bears. Here is what Walter may have looked like in his newly assigned Polar Bear outfit.



Walter spent the next several months at Camp Shelby training to be a military man. He was happy to be able to go home to his family every night, except for the occasional overnight maneuvers and one three- week stint away. Even though it was a strenuous undertaking, things weren't so bad. He and Roslyn even took a trip to nearby New Orleans together during this time that he was stationed at Camp Shelby.

After a couple of months in Mississippi, the Polar Bears of the 85th Infantry Division were primed for even more intense training. In March, he was given a respite before his next training maneuver. He, Ros and the kids returned to their humble abode in Greenfield.



Their daughter Judy remembers making this trip with a pig in the car. Is this a fantasy? Maybe. Why would they bring a pig home? Where did they get it? What were they planning to do with it? It doesn't make sense. Must be a false memory. She must have imagined it.



During their leave, they had a family reunion in Cincinnati, Ohio. They took a picture of Walter, along with his three brothers, from left to right, Chip (Henry), Ben, Walter, Leo.



The Felson women (Sophie, Louise, and Edie) and brother Irv kept the home fires burning while their siblings were away, as did the wives and children of these four Felson patriots.

Camp Polk, Leesville Louisiana

After his leave, Walter headed for his new training site in the swamps of Louisiana—without the family. He was stationed at Camp Polk, near Leesville, Louisiana in the DeSoto National Forest. According to Walter, this was “one of the most god-forsaken spots on earth” (April 20, 1943)

The rigorous training involving war-like exercises (they were called “problems”) interspersed with a day or two of rest. The swamps were full of bugs, snakes, and now soldiers. Here is what Walter says about his buggy swamp experience:

The snakes and spiders down here are terrific. Last night I had to chase a tarantula out of my bedding roll before I could go to sleep. Today in one of our treatment tents I caught my first snake, a baby rattlesnake (May 16, 1943).



Camp Pilot Knob, Yuma, Arizona

In late May of 1943 Walter's 85th Division headed to a new training site on the west coast. Some traveled in a convoy of military vehicles, some went by train. Walter traveled through Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma in an army convoy, and then boarded a train for a three-day jaunt to Camp Pilot Knob located in the Mojave Desert near Yuma, Arizona.



In July of 1943 Walter flew home to get Ros and the kids. His plan was to drive them to California to be near him while he continued his military training. And he did. They all headed for Calexico, California, 60 miles west of Camp Pilot Knob. Calexico was near the border of California and Mexico. Ros and the kids stayed in a house they rented there, and Walter did too, when he could get away.



Walter spent the next two weeks training at Camp Pilot Knob. It was grueling. The heat was the main problem. Walter described other trials during his stay in the desert—crawling across terrain on his elbows, under live ammunition; getting lost without water on desert maneuvers (four soldiers died); and using latrines that sometimes exploded because of a chemical mixture put in them to lessen the stench. Shown below is a man burned from a latrine gas explosion.



Walter describes another latrine exploding incident:

...there were six men sitting on these holes at the time that one of them absent-mindedly threw a lighted cigarette butt into the hole next to him. A terrific explosion occurred resulting in throwing all of them off the openings, the box going quite some distance into the air. All of them ended up in the hospital with severely burned perineums. It would have been funny if it had not been so tragic (August 22, 1943).

Another desert hazard were FLOODS! Amazing! Floods in the desert?! Walter's vehicle got stuck in a small river one day during a flash flood. The river had just been a dry gully before the unexpected downpour. He made it out ok. Just.



Camp Coxcomb, Freda, California

On August 15, 1943 Walter and his battalion moved from Camp Pilot Knob to another training site 200 miles away--Camp Coxcomb, in Freda, California.

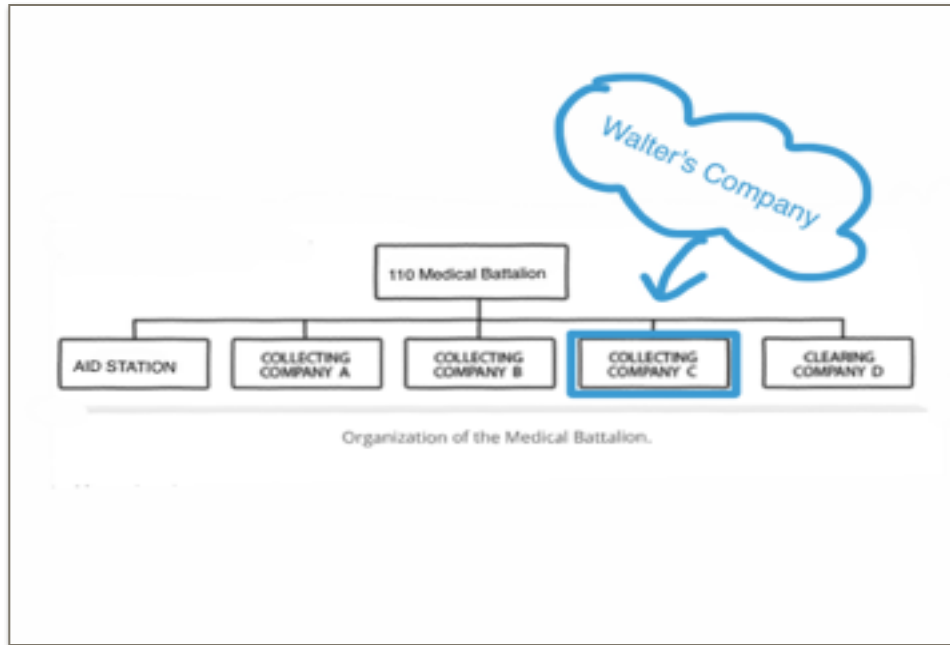
Calexico was quite a distance from Camp Coxcomb, so the family set out to find a new place to live, nearer Walter's new training base. They found a house in the hills of Beaumont, California just outside of Palm Springs. It was still a long drive for Walter. Camp Coxcomb and the Beaumont house were 150 miles apart.

Late in September, Walter Felson became Captain Walter Felson. Was he happy about this? After all, it was a promotion. Nooooo.

I have always said I would rather be a 1st Lt. in a clearing company than a captain elsewhere in an infantry division medical setup. It seems that luck has not been with me, for two days after I received my appointment as a captain I was transferred to the collecting company. As you know, this is the medical installation lying between the battalion aid station and the clearing company. Usually it means being about 3 miles behind the front line. It will entail much more moving and a much more tedious life than that in the clearing station, but still is very much better than a battalion aid station (September 1, 1943).

Collecting companies, like Walter's, provided emergency treatment of casualties being evacuated from the battlefield. They were transported from the aid station (see the diagram below). Casualties were treated either at the Seriously Wounded or Slightly Wounded stations in the Collecting Company. Gas Casualties were treated at some distance from other casualties in order to prevent possible contamination. After treatment, the wounded requiring further evacuation were sent to the Clearing Company (Walter refers to it as a station). The slightly wounded who were fit to return to duty, were directed back to their units at the front lines. Walter's job as captain was to organize and oversee the transport, sorting, and treatment of the soldiers injured in the front lines.

Here is a picture showing the different companies of the 310th Medical Battalion that Walter is referring to. He was assigned to be Captain of the guys in Collecting Company C. Sounds like a song title, doesn't it?



Fort Dix, Trenton, New Jersey

In October, 1943 the entire 85th Infantry Division was reassigned to the east coast, readying to sail overseas. The soldiers of the 85th Infantry Division, including those in Walter's Company C and his 310th Medical Battalion left Camp Coxcomb and traveled cross country to Fort Dix, in New Jersey—25 miles from Trenton.

Walter did not travel with his fellow soldiers. Instead he drove cross country with Ros and the kids. They were given two weeks to get to Fort Dix, so they took their time, stopping to visit relatives along the way.

They visited the Abramson family in Springfield, Missouri—Beth had just come home from the hospital after being born; the Ben Felson family in Indianapolis, Indiana (Steve and Nancy, only, the others weren't born yet) and the Henry (Chip) Felson family in Battle Creek, Michigan (Lois and Jane). The last of their family visits was in Cincinnati where they saw Irv and Rosalyn Felson (Nancy was about to be born), and Sophie, Phil, Bob and Alan Travis, and Edith (Edie) Felson. Too bad that Leo and his new bride Evy were so far away in Corpus Christi, Texas.

To Fort Dix, Trenton, NJ



Their last stop on the way to Trenton was for an overnight in their home town, Greenfield, OH. They said goodbye again to friends and patients who dropped by. Walter comments:

My patients have not yet forgotten me, and kept me busy dropping in on me and telephoning. It made me feel good and I'm more sure than ever that I'll return to that town to practice despite having seen most of the country (October 25, 1943).

The family continued on to Fort Dix, stopping to sightsee in Washington D. C. along the way. They arrived in the Trenton area on November 11, 1943. They found a seven-room house in Lakeland, NJ, a town with a strong Jewish community. They stayed there for a month, taking an occasional sightseeing trip to New York City.

Men in the 85th Infantry Division were scheduled to depart for overseas in late December. Ros was no longer allowed to travel with Walter, so she made arrangements to return to Greenfield with the kids. Irv Felson, Walter's brother, came to Trenton to drive with Ros and the kids back home. What a nice man! What a good brother! What a terrific uncle! What a sad time!!!

They all said their goodbyes and Irv, Ros, and Judy and Elaine headed back to Ohio, with tears in their eyes.



Walter spent the last days before shipping out getting his stuff together and doing captain-like jobs. One job was to read letters the men in his company wrote home. He served as censor to make sure the soldiers in his charge didn't give away military secrets.

Some of them wrote four or five almost identical love letters to different girls professing their unflinching devotion and hoping the girl will be true to them so that they can be married when he gets home. Several of them have mistresses, the prize one of whom is one with his wife and his mistress living together while he is away. The saddest case is the youngster who is in love with a girl who had a boyfriend before he met her, and who refuses to let him consider her as his girl...His heart is breaking (December, 20, 1943).

On December 24, Walter sailed for Casablanca, Morocco probably on the USS General William A. Mann, a ship built in 1943 to carry US troops in WWII. Operating out of Norfolk, Virginia, the ship delivered troops and supplies to North Africa making four successive round-trip voyages to Casablanca, Morocco and one to Oran, Algeria before mid-May 1944. The ship had a capacity of 5,000 plus men. It's likely that Walter Felson was on this ship on one of its trips. His voyage was one way though, not round-trip.



North Africa

On January 3 Walter arrived in Casablanca. He writes about his first impressions, mentioning the colorful dress, and the turbans, (and the dirtiness) of the Arabs, the red fez caps of the French soldiers, and, oh my, the herd of camels being driven by natives on small jackasses. He was amazed.

The company stayed in tents just outside of Casablanca at Camp Don B. Passage, named after the first American soldier killed in the invasion of North Africa. This was just a stopping off place on the way to the next camp in Algeria.

The 500 mile distance between the camp in Morocco and the training site in Algeria took three days by train. The cars in the train did not have passenger seats. Rather they were more like cattle cars, carrying 30 men in each. Here is Walter anticipating discomfort he may soon experience:

They are actually freight cars of the type used to transport cattle in the U S. only a bit more closed. They are the famous 40 and 8 of the last war, 40 being the capacity in men and 8 the capacity in horses, respectively. I am told that they put 30 men on each of these trains and make a trip which is moderately long. Since there are no latrines, it is necessary to stop every 5 hours and build latrines along the side of the track. These 30 men have to sleep in the car which really results in such crowded conditions that it is necessary for the men to sleep with their arms on their chest in a folded position, otherwise they can't lie down all at one time. I still can't see how even in this position it is possible for all of them to sleep at the same time. Then too, with these extremely cold nights I can't see how they can sleep because of the cold. One of these days it may be necessary for me to make a trip on one of these and I dread to think of the discomfort (January 4, 1944).



Walter's dread of sleeping in the cattle cars was unfounded. He and the men slept under roomy tents surrounded by adobe walls or huts to keep out the cold. He enjoyed taking in the sights of the interesting towns and people, and the beautiful countryside of North Africa, on his way to his new digs in Algeria. He didn't say anything about discomfort in those 40 and 8 cars that took him there.

Walter and the troops ended up three days later, January 6, 1944, in a camp, in St. Dennis-du-Sig, 60 miles south of Oran in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria. It was here that they prepared themselves for future battles to be waged in the mountains of Italy.

Three weeks later the troops were on the move again. On February 7, 1944 they moved from the mountains to the Mediterranean seacoast in Algeria. The new spot was Port-aux-Poules where they trained at the Invasion Training Center for six weeks. Here they learned the techniques of amphibious warfare in anticipation of a possible invasion of enemy-held territory on Italy's seacoast.

The varied training of the Custer Division was unusual. Later, their general John B. Coulter would say proudly of his 85th Infantry Division: "No division received a more intensive and progressive training for combat..."

The Gustav Line

On March 24, 1944 the 85th Infantry Division sailed in convoy from Mers-el-Kebir, Algeria to Naples, Italy. They landed in Naples three days later.

Naples at that time was under enemy fire as well as anti-aircraft retaliations. The Polar Bears were no longer in dress rehearsal--this was the war they had been preparing for over a year, some longer.



The 85th Infantry Division traveled north from Naples, meeting enemy gunfire and attacks along the way. The Polar Bears, along with others in the 5th Army and Canada's 8th Army, were headed toward what was called the Gustav line, a line of defense that the Germans had established across southern Italy. German fortresses were positioned along the rivers, creeks, and mountains across the whole of Italy. They set themselves up to battle the allies, defending themselves with all they had: foxholes, mountain command posts, gun pits, concrete bunkers, turreted machine-gun encampments, barbed-wire fences, and minefields.

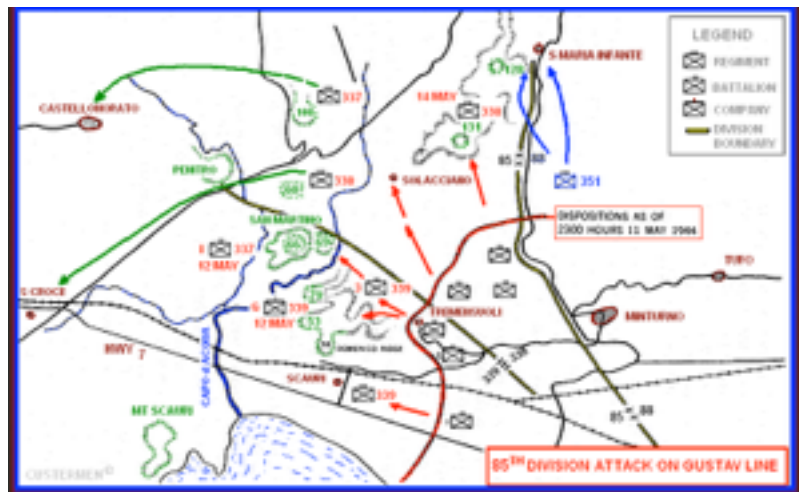


The approaching allies were attacked and battered for over a month all across the Gustav line. And they attacked back with all their might.

Those in the 85th Division were assigned to penetrate the Gustav line on the west coast of Italy, near the Tyrrhenian Sea. They were positioned around and in the cities of Minturno, Scauri, and the bombed out village of Tremensouli.

Northwest of Tremensouli was a winding creek, Capo d'Acqua. The hills just above the creek were covered with thousands of mines, concrete pillboxes, and reinforced

rifle bunkers manned by members of the German *94th Grenadier Division* of the *Fourteenth Panzer Corps*. The creek was precarious, to say the least.



Here is an article written in a USA newspaper by the correspondent James E Roper about the bloodbath in Capo d'Acqua creek where the Germans had free range from their position on the nearby hills to shoot the allies.

Walks on Dead to Reach Yanks Wounded in Italy James E. Roper

With the Fifth Army Italy (UP)

It was the first aid man's first case, and he had to walk on the dead to reach the living.

Sgt. John Hossle of Read Oak, Ia., the first aid man, was assigned to an American unit which had been cut down by German machine-gun fire as it attacked across a 14 foot wide stream called Capo d'Acqua. He heard the cries of the wounded as he crawled into the stream.

"When I reached the other shore, I found bodies piled up like the carcasses of hogs which used to die from cholera in Iowa a long time ago", he said. "I hesitated to move across the bodies, and a fellow on the other side yelled, "Walk on 'em; you can't hurt 'em now."

"The battlefield was a madhouse of bursting mortar bombs, the krunch of artillery and the rattle of machine-guns, and they were asking me to walk across the dead. I did it, and it was the most horrible feeling yet. When I reached the wounded man.

He was without a recognizable face. All I could do was sprinkle sulfa crystals on it and cover it with a handkerchief.”

That was only the beginning of a nightmarish night and day for Hossle, who was so busy he never had a chance to dig a foxhole for himself. He crawled back and forth to the front lines, aiding some 30 serious cases. When his supply of morphine and bandages was exhausted he tore up tent shelter halves and raincoats to hold splints in place. Some of the splints were foxhole shovels.

Walter responds to the journalist: “I know Sgt. Hossle, and I know that stream Capo d’ Acqua, and I eventually saw the man with his face shot away. There is no exaggeration in Hossle’s story. We didn’t slog our way thru anything, we fought our way thru, and it cost us plenty... (July 14, 1944)

The 85th and the 88th Infantry Divisions fought for three days from May 12 to 15 finally breaking through the Gustav Line. This was considered a major victory for the allies. Germans began leaving the area, withdrawing to the north, fighting the allies to their rear all along the way. The allies lost 3,000 men in the Gustav Line battles. The 85th Division lost 1,100 men. Three of the infantry battalions in the 85th Custer Division were awarded citations of merit for their fighting to push the enemy back from the Gustav Line. In Walter’s words: the Jerries are on the run. Here is more on what he says about his and his medical company’s role in pushing back the Germans at the Gustav Line.

Hello gene

Tuesday 26 May 44

Well, I finally feel like a real veteran because I have seen combat that is combat. We have been an important part of the Italian push, and don't minimize the importance of the medics in these pushes. Every infantryman has now developed a totally different aspect of the "pill rollers" whom he formerly scorned, and now thinks that our men are more heroic than any of the infantrymen. The feeling is mutual for we have all the respect in the world for those poor suckers who have to go up the hills in the face of enemy fire with a load of equipment that would weigh down the average civilian.

Things were terrifically exciting with the start of the push, and believe me the medics were not out of it. Our boys were up with the battalion aid stations carrying patients from the front lines back to the aid station. This is not the usual situation, for usually our duty is to carry patients from the aid station to our ambulances which then bring them back to the collecting station. However, the terrain was such that the infantry couldn't get by with their relatively limited medical detachment, and so we were asked to help them out, which we did without question. It was a pleasure to get the reports back as to how well my men were working up in those forward areas, going out after the wounded under shellfire, being the only ones visible above ground in many cases because the infantrymen would duck into slit trenches and digouts when the firing got heavy, but my boys just continued up the trail to the patients who were lying injured. Of course, they would drip to the ground when shells were coming close, but for the most part they continued with their work without paying too much attention to the shells. We have numerous instances where our men went out into no-man's-land to pick up wounded and the Jerries and our doughboys would direct their fire to another sector while our men were out there and then would continue their shooting after our men had pulled out with the patients. However, there are other instances where they fired over the heads of our men with their machine guns, in order to warn them to stay out of the field, and when this warning was ignored, began firing about 50 feet in front of them at the ground. Our boys didn't need anymore warning ~~than~~ than this and turned back to the aid station picking up wounded enroute. Some areas were totally inaccessible to our men for days because of heavy mortar fire en route. Only on one occasion did the Jerry deliberately shoot at our men, and that was a sniper behind our lines, who shot an aid man when he was only 500 yards from the aid station. When the infantrymen heard about that they sent out two squads who circled around the sniper and we weren't troubled with him any more. On another occasion 15 of my men were returning from a trip after wounded when a machine gunner must have decided to have some fun with them and began shooting, but his aim must have been bad because he came much too close for comfort and really scared hell out of my boys. In fact we had to send them back for a rest because of the nervous reaction to this. On another occasion a wounded man an aid man were captured by the Germans and they sent the wounded man back with the aid man along with a German aid man. Then both the American and German aid man returned to return some more wounded. However, after the second trip and return to the German aid station, neither of them returned, so that the American aid man ended up as a captive.

One of my men was a real hero. He went out to a hill which was still being fought for and started taking care of casualties. The fire got so heavy that he was pinned down and couldn't even raise his head. Finally he got the idea that everyone on the hill was dead and that the only reason the Jerries were still shelling the hill was to kill him. I find that this is a not uncommon notion that men who have been under fire for some time get. Finally the shells began to drop practically on the fox hole in which he was hiding, and he took a dive into a neighboring fox hole only to land right on top of a dead soldier. There he had to stay until the shelling stopped for a bit, and he hurried off the hill out of that area. As soon as he got away from there he ran across a wounded man who had had both legs amputated by a shell burst and he had to pick this man up and put him in the shade and make him comfortable while he went back for litter bearers to bring him in. All this totalled up to make a boy develop battle fatigue, and when I saw him at our company he was simply a new-voeg wreck. We had to send him further back for a rest, but he is coming along OK and will probably be back with us in a couple of days. We have had so many heroic things happen in our company that it would only bore you to tell you all of them. Everyone, from the General down, and I don't mean only our division general, has had a good word to say about the excellent way the medics performed their function in the first days of the push.

Actually, we were so busy back here in the station that I did not have my clothes off for five days, including my shoes. We even got additional help from a couple of the docs out of the other collecting companies which had not yet been committed. If it had not been then, none of us would have had any rest at all. The cot in my den was getting 24 hour service, with one officer or another using it constantly, trying to snag off a few hours at a time while three of us stayed on duty at all times.

It really has been a pleasure working on these wounded, in that we felt that we were really doing them some good. We used quite a bit of plasma and it is remarkable to see

respond to its use. There were some patients who came in to us in extremis and who responded so well to as many as 5 units (1250 cc) of plasma that there is no question that this saved their lives. Actually we have had no patient die in our station or in any of our ambulances during the present push. This would not have been the case were it not for plasma, because you can believe me when I say that we have seen some pretty horrible wounds. However, fortunately, these are in the great minority.

We have been helped greatly by having had a large number of Italian soldiers used as litter bearers, attached to our company. If it hadn't been for them I don't think that my men would have ever been able to keep going up to the present time. These Italians could not work forward of the aid stations during the day, because the Germans don't respect the Red Cross when worn by the Ities, so during the day they would take care of the short haul from the aid station to the ambulance and at night they would go out almost to the front lines. They are indefatigable, and can't do enough to help us. We have had a group of them working around our station and they have made the work over so much lighter for my men. Almost before an ambulance with patients stops in the yard, they are out there with the back door open, unloading the patients and carrying them into the station. I swear I don't know what we would have done without them.

At the beginning of the push things were very tough and everyone was extremely upset by the fact that it seemed a hopeless task, but we slowly made progress and now it seems that we really might go places. It seems as soon as we got past a certain point, the Germans began to give up and it wasn't long before we were taking large numbers of prisoners. Some of the wounded prisoners came thru our station and they seemed to be kids for the most part and they really seemed glad that the war was over for them. Several of them told us that if they had known how they would be treated by the Americans, they would have given up a long time before. They really hate the Russians and hope that it will be the Americans and not the Russians that get into Germany first. They feel that the war is lost for the Germans. Of course, we were all interested in our Jerry prisoners. The rooms would crowd up with our boys and the Italian boys everytime a Jerry was brought in. At first the Italians resented carrying them on the litters and even were a bit rough in the handling of them, eg. dropping the litter onto the table instead of gently lowering it, but when they noted that we took care of the Jerries just the same as we did our own wounded, their attitude changed and soon changed to one of glad when they saw the numbers of Jerry wounded that were being brought in.

Yesterday and to-day, with the Jerries on the run, our casualties have decreased and as we were not busy everyone has had the opportunity to get refreshed. I had a haircut and shave by one of the Italian ~~Ities~~ soldiers, and we even have them cooking spaghetti and meat for our company for supper. I also took time out to have a bath and to sit for a pencil sketch which one of the Italians made of me, and I really think it is excellent. I'm hoping to send it to Mom. It only cost me two packs of cigarettes. Not bad pay (90¢) for 20 minutes work.

My company has been extremely fortunate as far as casualties is concerned. Despite all the moving that my men did in the front lines, only two of them were wounded, one only mildly and the other one with a brain injury but she is recovering. We did have an ambulance destroyed by a shell, but the men weren't in it at the time. A jeep was temporarily knocked out by a shell, while our driver was hiding underneath it, and altho the shells hit low on the jeep, they just missed the driver. Our station, which we thought would be a center of shelling because of harboring units, turned out to be the safest place in the entire area, and during all this push only three shells fell anywhere near enough to have been called alone. Actually, as far as excitement for me was concerned, aside from the patients, this was tamer than the previous trip up here.

Well, that's about all for now. I hope to have time to write regularly.

Love,
Walt.

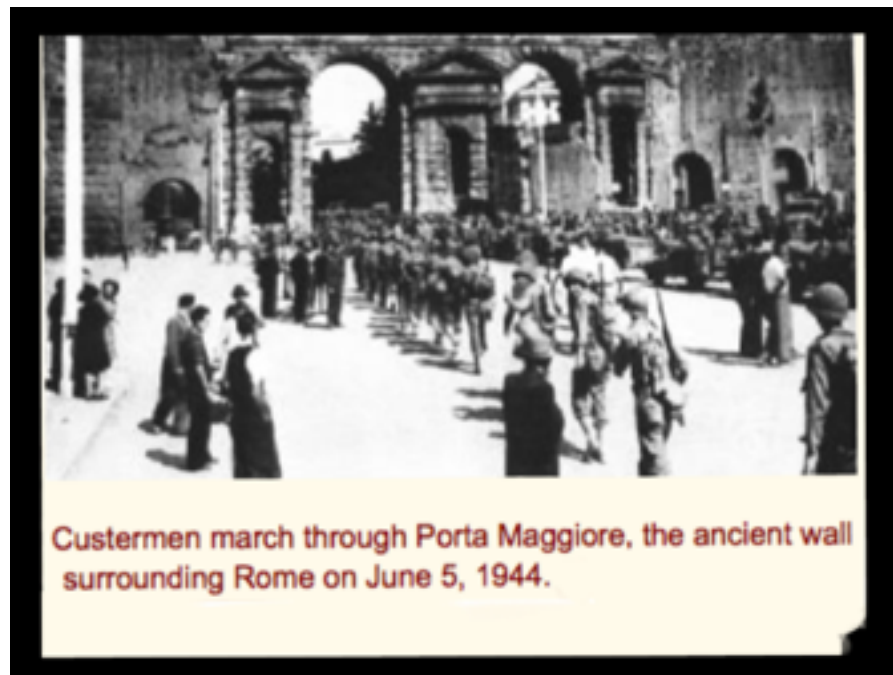
Following the Gustav line battles, the 85th Infantry Division moved on to an area north of the Gustav Line, toward the sea, shooting and being shot at all along the way. The short-term plan was to push the German's front line north, and eventually to take Rome.

The route north included the small town of Fondi, near the west coast of Italy, 78 miles south of Rome. It was there that the supply force of the 85th Infantry Division, including Walter's Medical Company C, was bombed by the Germans. Walter would later describe this air raid at Fondi as his most horrific wartime experience (September 22, 1944).

The German command was somehow informed of the location of the 85th Division's move and at 3:15, the morning of May 22, 1944, the Germans dropped bombs on the division's service vehicles, medical stations, supply and ammunition dumps, and division headquarters, as they approached Fondi. The attack lasted ½ hour and caused considerable damage. Equipment was destroyed, several men were killed (none from Walter's 110th medical Company C), and others were terrorized. In his later letters Walter referred to the Fondi bombing several times, indicating its significance to him.

Rome

On June 5, 1944, the 85th Infantry Division along with other Allied divisions who had been fighting in Italy, walked into Rome. The Germans had left the city shortly before. It was a significant signal to the soldiers themselves and to the world at large that the Allies were winning the war. On the next day Normandy was invaded by the Allies, later to be seen as another milestone that would be one of the historical high points in the military story of the war.



Walter writes to his brothers and sisters about his march through Rome.

Hello gang:

It's been an eventful week. I know how much you have read about us in the papers so there is no real reason for me to go into details about what our triumphant march thru Rome was like. Needless to say, nothing which the newspapers wrote could possibly exaggerate the actual occurrences which we experienced. The people were wild with joy, and since our group was one of the very first thru the town they really climbed all over us. I'll bet half of the troops were almost drunk with the wine that the Italians were offering to us as we drove by slowly thru the very heart of the city...Practically every man in the company was kissed by some girl or other, even this old man being threatened with it (June 7, 1944).

For the next few weeks, Walter's company was at rest and stationed outside Rome (King's Forest, Lido di Roma). He spent a good amount of time sightseeing in Rome and falling in love with the city.

Volterra

Arrivaderci Roma. Walter and his company left Rome on July 10, moving even more northward. The first destination was a camp ground north of Volterra, a 250 mile trip from Rome. The army was regrouping and retraining in preparation for another push, this time in Northern Italy, in the Apennine Mountains. And the city of Volterra was along the way.

Volterra is a medieval town known for its artisan culture, specifically for its alabaster and marble artisans. Just after his arrival at his new camp, Walter took a ride to explore Volterra and find a sculptor's shop that had been recommended to him. He bought a number of gifts for Ros and the kids. It was then that he first got the idea of having sculpted busts made of Ros, Judy and Elaine. He visited the sculptor again the next day and showed him pictures of the family.



And, after several weeks of work by the sculptor, Pietro Costaglio, and revisions suggested by Walter (Elaine's cheeks "not quite full enough"), the busts were carved and arrangements were made by Walter to have them paid for and sent home.



Gothic Line

On Sept 14, Walter's company headed north, once again, this time toward a new German defense line across Italy. The Gothic Line, as it was called, was located in the Apennine Mountains just north of the Arno River. The 85th Division approached the Gothic Line in the region of Florence. The aim was to take over the mountains where the German fortresses were located.

Walter described the new action on September 14:

Well, I'm at it again. Right now I'm typing to the symphony of airplane motors and exploding of the bombs which they are dropping on Jerry, only a mile or two away...It was really interesting to be able to look up into the mountains ahead of us and realize that the Germans were there looking down on us. We would hear our guns go off and then after a moment see the explosion of shells up in the mountains...

...I went up to visit the regiment surgeon yesterday, and on my return to our building I ran into a bit of excitement. Macri and I were walking back and just as we reached the front of our building, only 10 yards from the door, we heard a Jerry shell coming directly toward us. Needless to say, I dropped right where I was. Macri took one more step and dove to the ground behind an ambulance. The shell passed over our heads and struck a few hundred yards to our rear. By that time I heard a second one coming in, and this one struck 200 yards in front of us.

...Some of my boys were on a hill looking for some casualties which had been reported there when the Germans counterattacked. From the reports I have from my men, they broke world sprint records getting out of there. That is no place for my medics. In fact, this business of them working my boys in front of the aid stations is very irregular, since they are supposed to work to the rear of the stations. I spoke to the infantry about it, and have had arrangements made whereby the additional litter

bearers will be gotten from the infantry companies and my men will do the work which they are supposed to do... (September 14, 1944).

And so it went. By September 22 they had taken the Mount Altuzzo, the mountain that a few days before had all those Germans looking down on them. The US artillery forces had bombed everything to devastation. The weather conditions, the devastation from the bombing, the shelling from the mountains, and the steep mountain terrain created situations that made navigation very difficult—for several weeks. By October, there was some sense that the company was accomplishing its mission, but Walter cautions against optimism.

One would think that this life would be getting easier and more pleasant with the breaking of the Gothic line and the gradual nearing of the end of the war, but in this business there is always another hill in front of you which must be taken, no matter how many hills you may have taken before, always another shell to dodge—just as deadly as all the others which have been thrown in your direction previously, death is still as final as it was in the early days of the campaign—so really, whether it is late in the war or not, war is still hell (October 1, 1944).

And he was right. Things continued, with the weather getting even worse, attacks still as punishing, and conditions just as difficult. Walter was depressed.

And then he began to feel that the war was nearly over.

Good afternoon, my sweet:

So this is armistice day! Well, you can't tell it around here. The guns still shake our building when they go off. The planes still fill the sky with their roaring as they come out of their dives over the Jerry lines, with the crump of their bombs or the staccato notes of their strafing guns accentuating the sounds. The murmur of distant trucks gradually increase to a whining purr as they plow their way thru the mud called a road which passes by our building as they bring up the never diminishing list of supplies needed to keep an army at war or return to the rear for further loading. There is the "emulsion-cracking" sound of the vehicles as the tires pull away protestingly from the mud that tries to adhere to it, a sound surprisingly enough louder even than the motor of the vehicles. All this and heaven too... This is a day which to me possessed a symbolic significance and I was hoping, against my more logical judgment, that it might result in the end of the second world war. Of course that is merely wishful thinking, and although it is one of the things which help to keep up our morale, nevertheless we do not allow it to become too realistic and thus we do not suffer disappointments" (November 1, 1944).

The troops moved across the Apennines and by end of November things had quieted down. Walter's stamina and continued service during this time were recognized by the military's powers that be. He was awarded a Bronze Star Medal for his service between September 13 to November 20 of 1944. It reads:

AWARD OF BRONZE STAR MEDAL

WALTER FELSON, 01693630, Captain, Medical Corps, Company "C", 510th Medical Battalion, United States Army. For meritorious service in combat during the period 13 September to 20 November 1944, in Italy. As commanding officer of a medical collecting company, Captain FELSON displayed exceptional ingenuity, technical skill, and devotion to duty in surmounting numerous difficulties imposed by weather and terrain during a difficult campaign. When rain swollen streams and washed out roads threatened to interrupt the evacuation of casualties, making it necessary for part of his company to serve as a clearing station, Captain FELSON speedily and efficiently devised measures to meet the increased burden, providing maximum comfort for the sick and wounded until movement to the rear was again possible. Entered the military service from Greenfield, Ohio.

He must have been proud. Yea Walter! This is what his medal looked like:



But Walter's war story doesn't end there. There was more to do on the other side of the Apennine Mountains.

The Po Valley

The 85th Division rested and retooled in Montecatini, Terme, a beautiful resort area. They began another attack on the Germans in April of 1945. The so-called spring offensive or Po Valley Campaign began around Bologna in Northern Italy. The troops crossed the Po River and pushed on to the Alps. Like the battles breaking through the Gustav and Gothic lines, the effort was painstaking. Walter comments that it is easier here though, because his men do not have to transport themselves and their supplies over mountains.



Walter's letters about the war in this area are mostly about the German prisoners and German debris left behind. He also talks about the grueling business of burying dead Germans. More positively, he is heartened by how the Italians cheered the American soldiers as they passed through the small towns. And, happily, there is little about his need to take care of wounded Americans. The Po Valley Campaign lasted about a month.

On May 4, the 85th Infantry Division worked with other parts of the Allied forces, especially the bombers to dismantle the Brenner Path. The path, providing a passage through the Alps, was coveted by the Germans as a way to transport supplies through the Alps from Austria to Italy and vice versa. In these last moments in the war, the pass served as an escape route for Germans fleeing from the Allied onslaught. It was the last campaign of the 85th Infantry Division, and became a significant marker of the end of the war.

Victory was declared in Europe on the V-E Day, May 8, 1945.

V-E Day

In the USA everyone celebrated in the streets. Judy remembers going to the town square in Greenfield, and hitting pots and pans with sticks.



Walter's feelings were more mixed:

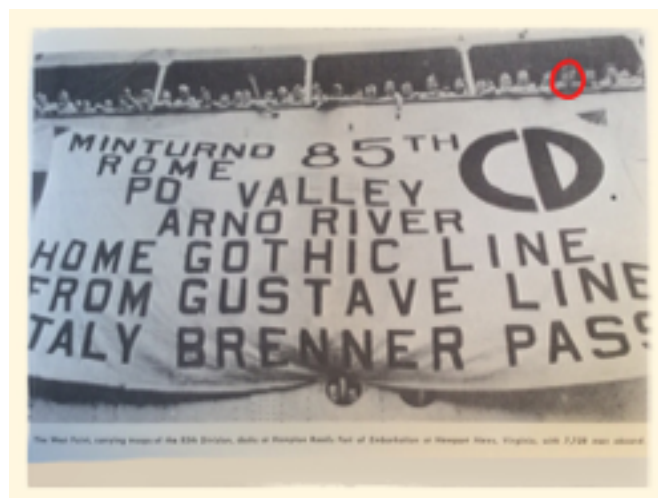
So the war in Europe is over! I am surprised at my lack of excitement over it. The change that it has wrought in my life up to now, except for the close contact with numerous German soldiers, has been so slight over the life that I have lived since October that there seems to have been no difference at all. Even my hopes for getting home quickly have not skyrocketed. I have no idea what lies in store for me and the division, but I have never been lucky in the draw so that I don't imagine that I will get home any sooner than the division itself does. This lack of excitement is not limited to myself, it seems to involve everyone with whom I have come in contact. In fact, when I listened to the radio broadcasting the celebrations of the folks back home I began to feel uncomfortable. My thoughts ran more or less: Who are they, to celebrate, when we, the fellows who have gone through the whole mess didn't particularly feel like celebrating. Then, in trying to analyze why we weren't more jubilant about the whole thing I came to the conclusion that it was probably due to the fact that it came as no surprise to us and that probably in the subconscious of each and every one of us was a sober thought best expressed by one of the fellows in a simple toast, just a few simple words, 'To those we leave behind.' (May 9, 1945).

Winding down

The army took its good old time deploying its soldiers after the war. Walter didn't even leave Italy until August 1945. That gave Walter plenty of time to say his goodbyes to his army buddies. He even traveled a bit to see more of Italy and to find and bid adieu to those in his company who had been redeployed to other places in Italy. On May 8 he returned for another respite at Montecatini Terme, on July 1 he visited Milan. On his way back to his outfit in Corunda, he traveled by jeep for 1,684 miles stopping off to see his men and experience the country anew, free from the dangers of war.

Homecoming

The ship carrying the West Point left Naples on August 16, 1945 and took the troops of the 85th Division back to the USA. On August 25, 1945 it docked at Hampton Roads, Port of Embarkation of Newport News, Virginia, with 7,728 men aboard. Below is a picture of the West Point arriving in port. Was Walter Felson among them? The guy fourth (or is it fifth?) from the right, leaning forward, looks just like him!



But it isn't! He didn't leave with "his boys." Instead, he was redeployed and remained in Italy after his division left. It is not clear from the letters when he returned to the states.

He finally did make it back to Greenfield, though, and he and his family were reunited. See how happy they are!



After the war

Walter and Ros stayed in Greenfield, Ohio, living there for the rest of their lives. Walter built up his medical practice, Ros raised the kids including a third child they added to the family, Jerry.

Walter didn't forget his war buddies, his "boys." He kept in touch with them by visiting them after the war and by organizing occasional reunions. He even created a newsletter, the Snafu Times (Situation normal, all fouled up) with articles and new items about the postwar lives of the men of Collection Company C, 310th Medical Battalion, 85th Infantry Division, 5th Army of the USA.

In 1957 Walter returned to Italy with his young family, visiting some of the places he had written home about. Judy remembers seeing Rome and Venice, but not much else. In fact, she doesn't remember much about Walter's war experiences, until now when at 75 years, she resurrected his letters, read them for the first time, and realized how wonderful and terrible and significant those war experiences were to Walter and Ros.

Wish you were here, Walter, to fill in the gaps and answer questions about you and the war that I never asked when you were alive. Thanks for those precious letters that have allowed me to recreate and relive your war experiences--finally.



Walter Felsen 1908 - 1980



North Africa

1. → Camp Don B. Passage
2. → St. Dennis-du-Sig, Algeria
3. → Port-aux-Poules, Algeria



