

PAUL ANDREWS

CHARLIE ONE, THE LAST CANNON

A Wartime Experiment, 1941-1945



A52146
Carriage

Photo of T93-C1
Photo of T93-C1

A TACOM HISTORY OFFICE PUBLICATION, 1996

Charlie One, the Last Cannon: A Wartime Experiment, 1941-1945

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Paul Andrews

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Preface

I WAS DRIVING DOWN HIGHWAY 101, ON MY WAY HOME FROM a business trip up in the San Francisco area. The green free-way sign read, "Camp Roberts, Main Gate, Next Exit." On impulse, I turned off and wheeled into the camp, now mostly empty and boarded up.

Among other things, I located the old barracks building where, half a hundred years ago, I completed my first assignment as latrine orderly, and the old mess hall where I pulled my first K.P.

Then it was on to the gun park. All I found was a desolate, vacant field. This was where I first learned the difference between the muzzle of a cannon and a hole in the ground.

Before leaving the camp, I stopped back near the main gate where some leftovers from the now empty gun park stood on display.

As I poked around these rusty relics, a young sergeant walked by. He stopped and turned in my direction. "Ghosts?"

"Yes," I said, "I've seen a few today."

He laughed. "People from your tour come by often. I can always tell."

We talked for a while and swapped a few stories. Predictably, the course of our conversation eventually led back to my experience with the big cannon, a "most biggest" ghost.

He listened intently, then commented, "Why don't you tell the story? I think we would like to hear it."

That was many months ago.

As I negotiated the last two hundred miles of freeway that afternoon, I began to feel kind of foolish. Oh, the barracks building and the mess hall were real, for sure. I had just seen them. But the big cannon, I couldn't even remember what it looked like!



1st Lt. Paul Andrews, 1945
784th Armored Field Artillery
Battalion

It was a grand wartime experiment that worked, thanks to some ordinary Americans doing extraordinary things.

Had I been laying an "old soldier" story on that young sergeant? I'd better find out about that old cannon!

Over the following months, I pulled the pieces of the story from the cobwebs of 1945. Many hills and dales and dusty trails later they all fell into place. No, it wasn't a ghost story.

For Charlie Battery, our surprise encounter with the big howitzer was very real, even though it had all come and gone in a brief interval of only fifteen days.

So as you march with Charlie One through the following pages, please keep in mind that this is a micro-fragment of history, with no special significance other than its intended part in the final Pacific operation. And that fateful event, miraculously, never took place.

*Paul Andrews
Mission Viejo, California*

Editor's Note:

Paul Andrews is too modest. While the T92 howitzer, developed at the Detroit Arsenal, didn't change the course of the twentieth century, it very easily could have. Mr. Andrews calls this story a "micro-fragment of history," but at the time it was much more than that. It was a grand wartime experiment that worked, thanks to some ordinary Americans doing extraordinary things. For that reason alone, it's a story worth the telling.

We at the Detroit Arsenal are honored to make Mr. Andrews's fascinating story available. Rarely is the story of a weapon system told from the "customer's" perspective. Paul Andrews has produced, entirely on his own, a valuable contribution to the Army's history. It is also an important piece of the Detroit Arsenal's rich past. But to me the most important thing is this: it's a good story, well told.

To contact Paul Andrews or to get more information about the T92, please call me at (810) 574-6583, write the address on the inside cover, or send email to prentisd@cc.tacom.army.mil.

-D.P.

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Cover Photo: The cannon that Mr. Andrews' crew tested, in full recoil. The original 8" gun had already been replaced by a 240mm howitzer. This photo was taken in September 1945, when some of the crew members had gone home. Sgt. Biggs stands on the rear platform, fingers in ears. The only such vehicle still intact is on display at the Detroit Arsenal in Warren, Michigan.

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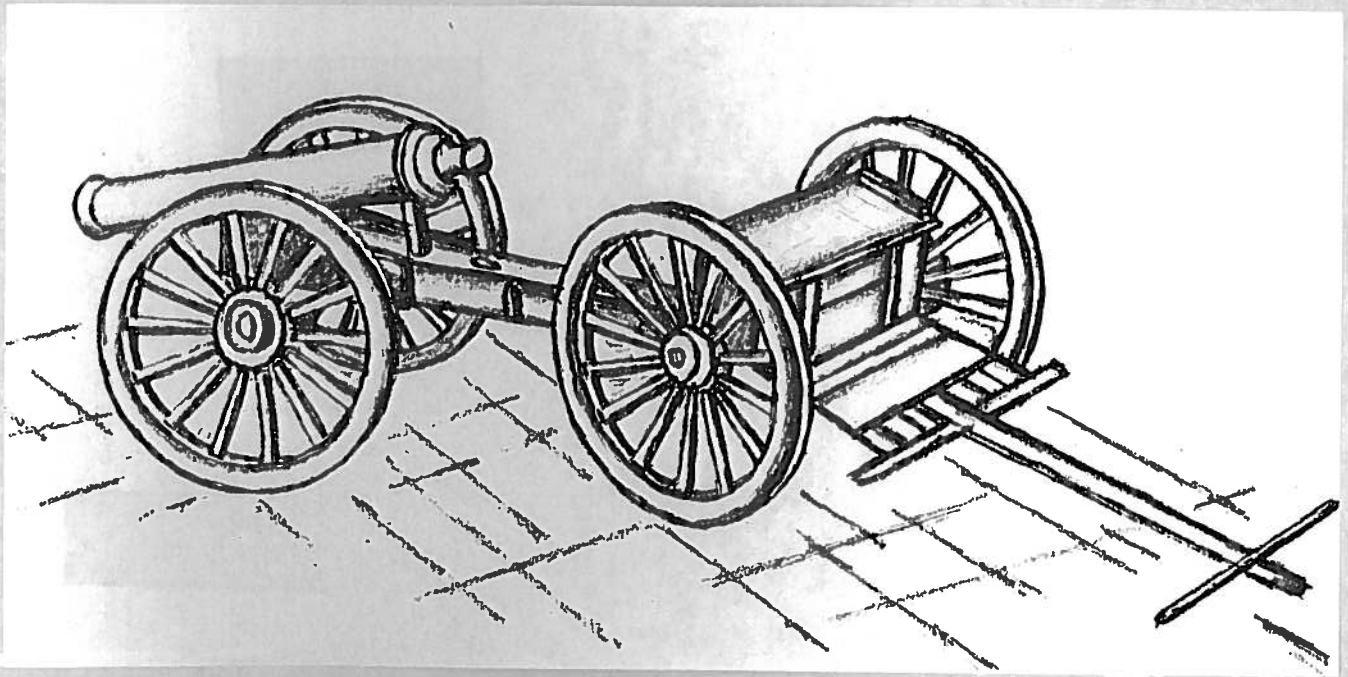
Prologue: Find a Way

*Over hill, over dale,
We have hit the dusty trail
And those caissons go rolling along. . . .*

*For it's "Hil Hil Heel!"
In the field artiller-e-e-e . . .*

WE MARCH TO THE DRUM OF THE CAISSON SONG ON every parade ground in the United States, but few of us even know what a caisson is—that odd little dolly fastened to the trail of the cannon and hitched to a team of horses. It's war lore from the distant past, now long gone and little remembered.

Little remembered, too, are the cannoneers of this war, World War II. Our storytellers have intrigued us with many tales of tankers, fliers, medics, riflemen, and submariners, but for all the drumming and recitation, the cannoneers are probably the most unsung arm of the services.



Caisson: a horse-drawn vehicle once used to carry ammunition.

It all happened in the preparation for a great battle—the battle that never was.

What's there to tell of trucks, tractors, stacks of ammunition and half hidden guns, hunched in obscure places, banging away at mysterious targets? What really goes on behind the big guns?

Surely, every gun section that ever hit the dusty trail must have its own singular experience to relate. If this story is worth the telling, it is because the whole affair was unique and the centerpiece, the big cannon, turned out to be one of a kind.

It all happened in the preparation for a great battle—the battle that never was.

Fire Team Charlie One was a small group of cannoneers, picked from the many thousands of yet uncommitted troops as the final days of the Pacific war approached.

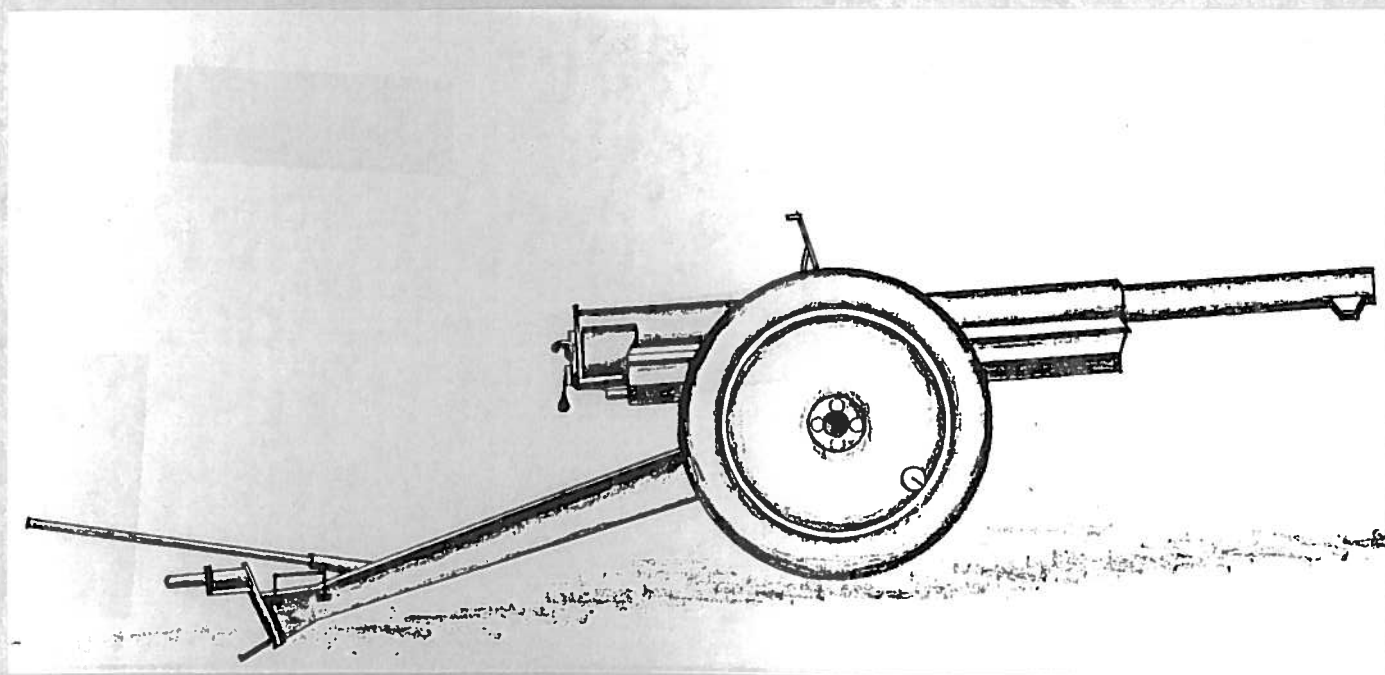
Fire Team Charlie One wasn't even our official name; it was a label we bestowed upon ourselves. We didn't have any field manuals or tech books. Just about everything we did was patched together from many other days behind many other guns. We even improvised much of our own tactics. Our orders were, "Find a way, time is short."

1: Chopped Liver

THE TRAIL ISN'T DUSTY THIS TIME BUT THERE'S LOTS OF coal smoke and cinders. Neither are there any caissons and cannons rolling along. We left the guns behind in Texas yesterday. The 784th Battalion is marching again, this time with an old coal burner up front and thirteen rickety old chair cars strung out behind. We clanked out of Shreveport station about an hour ago.

This is the summer of 1945. The second battle of Europe ended two months ago. All faces are west now as millions of troops are redeploying to the Pacific. But the 784th is traveling east to Fort Bragg. Paradox is the story of our short existence.

The old locomotive chugs relentlessly eastward across the highlands of northern Louisiana. Through the half-open window to my right I see pine groves and meadows dance by, shimmering away in an endless river of heat waves. On this late July afternoon time stands still, and I see myself, four long years ago, in these very same fields and pine trees.



French 75mm cannon, model 1897.



Tech. Sgt. Paul Andrews, 1942

Days long absent from my memory come rippling back. It was the summer of 1941 and I was a "just drafted" civilian playing cannoneer to a French 75, model 1897. I wore an old "saucer" steel helmet left over from the "other" war. "U.S.A., 1917" was stamped on my pistol belt and leggins. Altogether we were, indeed, an antiquated caricature. The "civilized" world in Europe was blowing itself to smithereens and we were playing war games, now remembered as the Louisiana maneuvers. That was five months before Pearl Harbor.

And then there were no more games.

Off to my left, 150 miles over the horizon to the north, are the training fields of Camp Robinson where the 784th Battalion was activated ten months ago.

It had then been three years since the Louisiana games, and for me a long journey through the ranks. Twenty-seven days after Pearl, I was hustled aboard the stinking troopship, "John L. Clem." Destination: Panama. There, in the traces of the Panama Mobile Force, I plodded my way up through the stripes. Our mission: to fire and fall back and to be ultimately abandoned like Bataan and Singapore—just so much spit in the ocean.

Thanks to the guys at Midway, that did not happen.

In the spring of '43 it was back to the states, three months at the artillery school and a pair of brass bars. We were called "ninety-day wonders."

Then followed another year back at Camp Roberts, the very same training center where I first heard the bugle. Now I was a platoon leader. I taught new soldiers the many wonders I had discovered during the two years that separated us.

By the time I arrived at the 784th, I had to be the most over-trained second looie in the U.S. Army.

The 784th Battalion was a hodgepodge. Most of the officers, like myself, were leftovers from training centers, then phasing out instructor assignments. The enlisted personnel came from reclassified coast artillery out of Camp Pendleton, Virginia. Our can-

nons: more flotsam left over from the "other" war, the 155mm Schneider howitzer, another heirloom resurrected from French mothballs. (Schneider? This is French? Yup, that's right!)

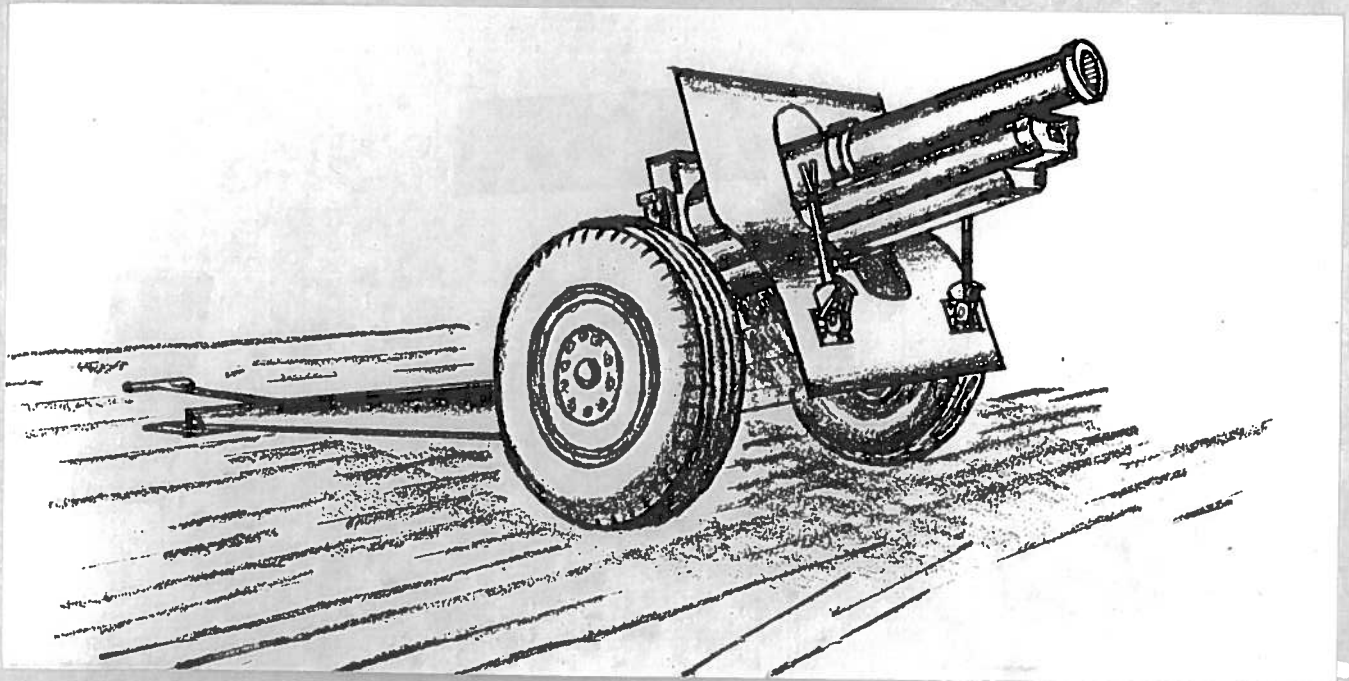
For me this was progress. In three years I had gained twenty model years in weapons. If we could make up thirty-seven more years, we would be up to date.

Maybe we were a new breed of lost battalion, lost in some Pentagon corporal's paperwork.

We could have been labeled the black sheep battalion but that distinction had already been taken. Maybe we were a new breed of lost battalion, lost in some Pentagon corporal's paperwork.

In all of this obscurity we began to practice with our newly acquired dinosaurs. I was assigned as executive officer, Charlie Battery. I ran the guns. Since I had basic training on the Schneider, it was easy for me to fault the old blunderbuss, but not so easy to explain its presence here at this late date. Pitting this relic against Panzers would be like sending up the Army Air Force in Spads and Nieuports to fight Messerschmitts.

I pitched the same baloney to the gun crews that had been fed to me three years before. If you can handle this antique you can manage any cannon in the arsenal. That much was the truth.



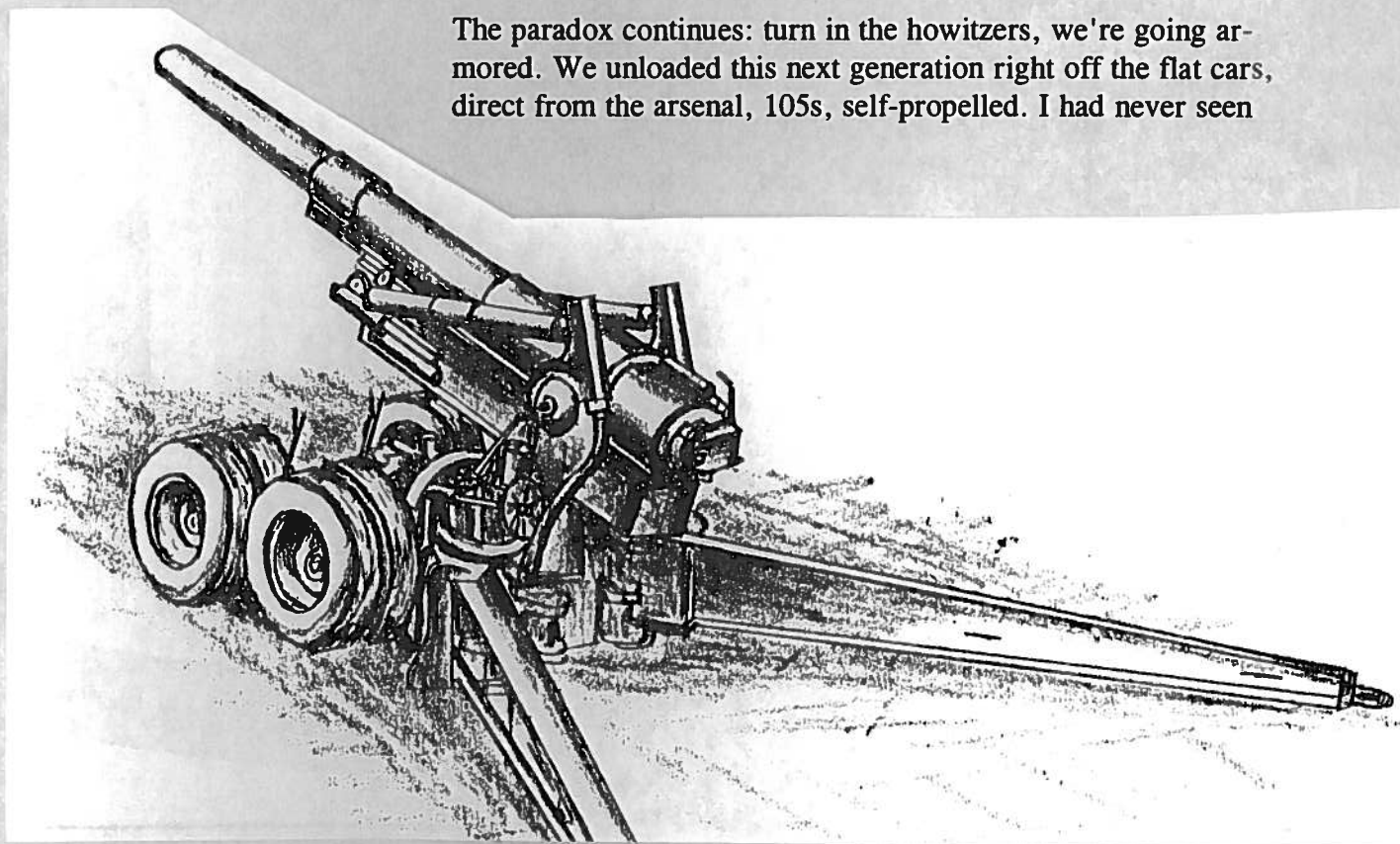
French 155mm Schneider howitzer.

Gun drill is called "cannoneers' hop" and we pursued the task with vengeance, some out of frustration, some out of boredom. In a few weeks we did the dance with some skill, and even a little pride.

Then, one fine day, we made up the thirty-seven years! Our orders: take these clunkers down to Ordnance and bring back twelve new eight-inch howitzers. Eight-inchers are real heavies, twice the slugger of the 155.

My baloney turned out to be good stuff and we made the change-over in days. We marched off to Texas with our new monsters and sailed through the firing tests, very cocky, and even pretty good.

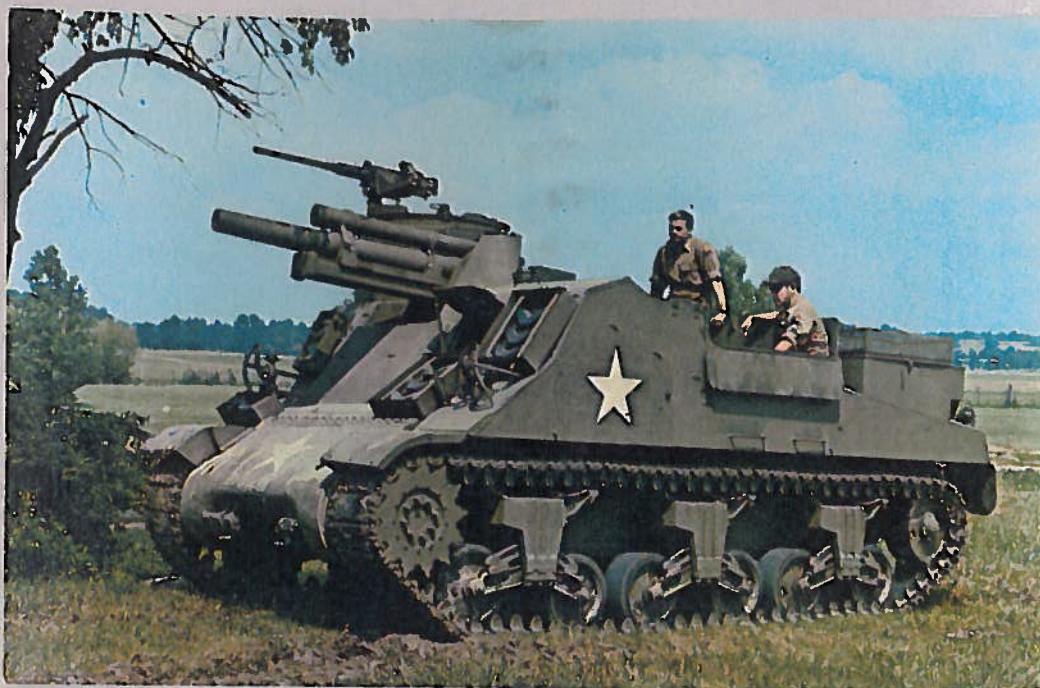
The paradox continues: turn in the howitzers, we're going armored. We unloaded this next generation right off the flat cars, direct from the arsenal, 105s, self-propelled. I had never seen



Eight-inch howitzer.

one before but the reputation of this ugly little devil was just plain "quick." It had been very effective in North Africa and

Europe. The cannon is mounted on a medium tank undercarriage—no more trucks, no more tractors, no more digging! We even tote our own ammo. Very nimble! We called it the M7.



U.S. M7 self-propelled 105mm howitzer.

Now I was able to resolve a question that had always nagged me. Artillery seemed so vulnerable in open ground action. If your position got too hot, you had to wait for the trucks, then hook up and run. You "ain't got" that much time! Now we would have a chance—hill to hill, tree to tree, load, shoot, move!

We raised a dust cloud over Texas that hasn't settled yet.

More orders: turn in the M7s, next stop Fort Bragg.

And here we are on this damned train—call it the revenge of the Pentagon corporal. The 784th is chopped liver. They'll feed us out as replacements.

I wonder why they call this bone shaker a "chair" car. The hard wicker seat is more like a park bench. Oh, well, I've slept on worse. Maybe I can catch a few winks.

2: Earmarked

L-O-O-O-TENANT!" THE VOICE IS FAMILIAR-SO IS THE patronizing tone. I crack my left eye, slightly, and look in the direction of my annoyance.

Standing over me, six foot plus, wide like a gorilla, is Betzy, our survey officer, a.k.a. scout, observer, liaison; officially, Lieutenant Betz.

To his left looms another hulk. This one is my assistant, Lieutenant Whitridge. We call him Whit, the professor, not long removed from Harvard, and only six grades removed from general. He ought to make it.

And next is Sergeant Biggs, our senior gun section chief. Not tall at all, Biggs qualifies by virtue of his circumference. They sure got his name right.

Betzy continues his patronage. "Sir, Major Price requests our presence in his august suite." He completes the proclamation with a slight bow and a flourishing gesture toward the car behind.

Betzy outranks me by seven days and revels in these small graces.

Gentlemen," he begins very formally, "we have orders." A better line was never written in Hollywood.

Major Price is sitting on a footlocker in the middle of the aisle, in the middle of the car. In front of him, another footlocker serves as a table. The seats adjacent are swung back in pairs to form a small conference area. He doesn't look up, just waves to the seats. A couple of other staff officers completes the group. Major Price is Battalion Operations.

"Gentlemen," he begins very formally, "we have orders." A better line was never written in Hollywood. "We will arrive in Bragg about noon tomorrow. Right after lunch, you people should go down to Building . . . ," he shuffles a few papers on his table, stringing out the dramatics, "uh, uh, 'G.'"

He pauses, as if he has just announced the end of the war. Then he looks up, his little black beady eyes drilling right into the middle of my nose. He's talking to me! "There will be an Ord-

Now you will understand why they jerked us around for ten months with all of this mixed-up training.

nance man there from Aberdeen who will fill you in on your new machinery."

The major begins to loosen up now. "You people can forget all the scuttle about being replacements. This battalion has been earmarked for months to man these new guns. Now you will understand why they jerked us around for ten months with all of this mixed-up training. Believe me, there was no mix up. They've just been wringing us out. You will see the first new gun tomorrow."

Still boring in on me, he said, "You will form a composite gun section for the purpose of establishing gun drill and firing procedures. Not later than next Saturday, you will conduct a training demonstration and shoot. Expect a lot of brass out to watch. We will be right under the nose of the Field Artillery Board. You should find your experience on eight-inch howitzers and self-propelled 105s very useful."

I wonder if he will ever tell us what we are in for, so I ask, "Sir, what kind of machinery are we looking at?"

"I'm coming to that," and he fiddles with his papers again. "This monster is self-propelled. The carriage is a modified Pershing heavy tank unit, longer, wider. It mounts a 240 millimeter howitzer."

Now he has said something.

Dead silence.

Gulp!

Most of us have never seen a 240, and don't really care to. Almost ten inches in bore, it's very heavy, very cumbersome, so big that it has to be transported in two sections, and it takes hours to emplace. It is the largest cannon in the U.S. Army. In fact, only battleship guns are greater caliber.

Betzy stammers a little, "Uh, uh, sir, how many parts, how does it travel?"

In his best Harvard grammar, "It ain't no big deal. The only hitch is loading."

"Well," says the major, "you guys can forget all that stuff you've seen in training films about 240s. This one travels in one piece. You should be able to emplace it in less than one minute. And that's exactly what you're going to do."

Betzy's getting wise now. "Sir, what's the mission?" Dumb question, he already knows the answer.

Major Price comes to his moment of truth, "Direct fire, point blank. Range? Maybe one thousand yards."

We don't need any more pictures. The Russians used big slug-gers like this all the way across Europe. We should have had them on Okinawa.

"Now," the major continues, "you people know as much as I do. Go on back to your cars and pass the word. That will end all the guessing. Think about how you're going to put this project together. We don't have much time. We'll meet again tomorrow afternoon when we have all had a chance to see the beast."

Seems like he's still talking to me, "By the way, Andy, since you've shot just about everything else in the arsenal in the course of your distinguished career," (I think I see a smirk on his face), "this will give you a grand slam. You're EXO. You people will report directly to the Field Artillery Board. You've got five days. Dig into the cobwebs, you'll need it."

"Thanks a bunch, sir," I muttered to myself.

Back in our car we sit in silence. Betzy, elbows on knees, hands on top of his head, thinking; Whit, big feet up on top of the next seat, staring at the ceiling, thinking; Biggs, hands clasped over his belt buckle, under which he claims to hide a beer barrel, thinking.

I look at this brain trust, wondering.

Whit is grinning. In his best Harvard grammar, "It ain't no big deal. The only hitch is loading."

The recoil from the 240 might rip him right out of his boots.

He digs into his barracks bag and pulls out a battered copy of "6-40," the cannoneer's handbook and bible. "It says here, the bullet weighs 360 pounds. We just add two more men on the loading tray, maybe two more men on the rammer. Depends on how far this critter is up off the ground."

"Anything else in there?" I ask.

"Max range, 25,000 yards, uh, fourteen miles."

"Haw! We won't need that!" I crack. "I'm more concerned with minimum range. If this thing is very far off the ground, we're thinking zero elevation. That might be tricky. The recoil from the 240 might rip him right out of his boots. Probably go with a low powder charge. What else?"

"That's it. See appropriate tech manuals," concludes the professor.

And that winds up our preliminary research.

3: Who Needs Bullets?

SERGEANT BIGGS HAS SCROUNGED UP A JEEP AND WE GO looking for Ordnance: D, E, F, G, last building at the end of the street.

We walk toward the open door. I'm looking at the middle button on the shirt of a very large M.P. who is holding a very loaded carbine at port arms in front of my nose.

Big Buster grunts at our I.D. I guess that means he's not going to shoot, so we proceed. Why guards, I mutter to myself? If this thing is as big as they say, what's there to hide, anyway?

This is not a machine, it's a monstrous, prehistoric beast, a huge one-eyed gargoyle.

Stepping through the doorway, from the glaring sunlight into the shade, it is suddenly dark. I remove my sunglasses to adjust to the inside light, but my mind is not adjusting to the giant in front of me. This is not a machine, it's a monstrous, prehistoric beast, a huge one-eyed gargoyle. The muzzle, projecting well forward from the body, is a single great eye, looking down contemptuously at us. The tracks look like snowshoes—must be two feet wide—and spread so far apart that this monster can probably straddle a Sherman tank. And, most grotesque of all, attached to the track links, and projecting out sideways about another six inches, are track extensions. These devices are, obviously, intended to create a wider footprint, but in appearance, they look like great claws, or talons—yes, that's it, talons—flared out in anger. Holy cow! Who needs bullets? Just parade this thing around and you'll scare people right out of their shorts!

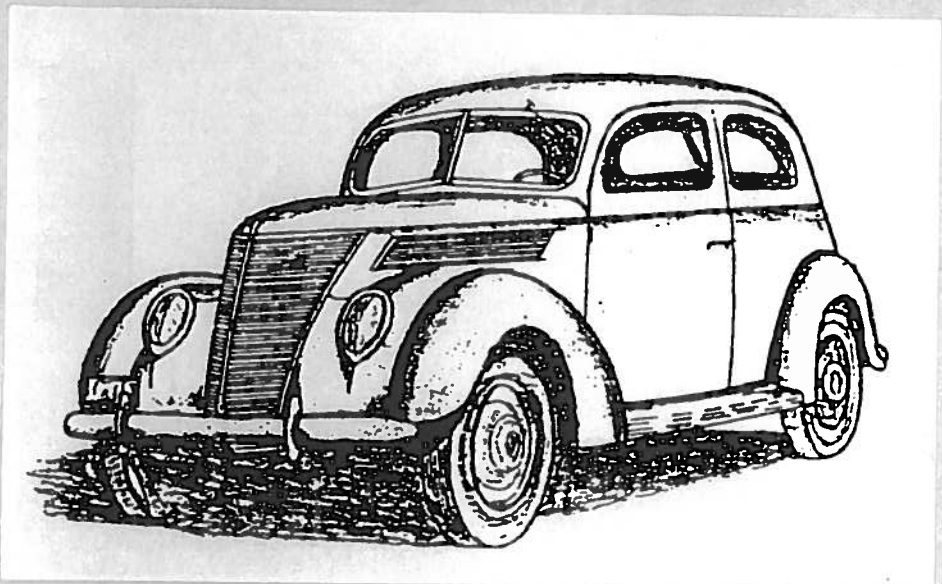
We walk around to the side. Seven bogie wheels run inside the long track, drive sprockets forward—the engine must be up under the front armor. The tube is supported in a yoke for traveling. This takes a lot of strain off the elevating gears.

Across the rear is a firing spade, looking very much like an oversized bulldozer blade, with sharp teeth attached to the lower edge. In firing, the spade is lowered and the machine backs up, driving the blade into the ground to offset the force of recoil.

Cables raise the spade for traveling and it sticks up like the tail of a great scorpion.

A civilian in well-used coveralls walks over to greet us.

"Hi, I'm Jim Brockton—call me Brock-down from Aberdeen. I'm chief baby-sitter for this critter. You people going to crew the little beast?"



Ford V-8: power enough to haul a big gun?

We introduce ourselves around and respond, "Yes, sir, looks like we get the first shot."

Brock goes right ahead, anxious to share his information with us. "Let me fill you in on the specs—what we have, that is. This big gorilla weighs 69 tons, more than two-and-a-half times the 105s you had. (Oh yes, we know all about you guys.) With this weight, you'll have to avoid bridges, almost thirteen feet wide with the track extenders attached, and thirty-two feet long, muzzle to spade, about eleven feet high, rated at thirty miles per hour max speed—better figure twenty. Don't pivot! With this weight, he might just walk right out of his tracks. Loading will be tough. Elevate and you can get the breech down within reach, but then you'll be pushing the shell uphill. Elevating is power operated

with hand wheel for final set. Traverse is limited, as you can see. Most of your shooting will be low angle; we'll be watching the recoil very closely. Stay with a small powder charge, at least until we feel safe. The engine is a Ford V-8, 500 horsepower, automatic transmission."

Brock stops for breath, and I have to laugh. I left a Ford V-8 in my garage back home four years ago—small world!

He's breathing again now and goes on, "The gas tank holds 250 gallons, good for about fifty miles. Figure five gallons to the mile. Change the oil every thousand miles. It takes 197 quarts for the entire system, engine and power train. With good luck, maybe you won't ever have to change the oil.

Now Brock points to a rear corner of the shop, "Over here is your ammo for Saturday's test. You get three rounds, probably load charge one."

This critter left Detroit Arsenal only ten days ago. You people write the story as you go."

The shells are lying on a tarp. They remind me of fat beer kegs but a lot longer. The front cone is extremely long. The bullet will be almost four feet in length with fuse attached. Alongside are three round black cases containing the powder charges. They look like oversize stove pipes. The complete load with full powder charge (charge 4) must be almost eight feet long.

He's finally run down so I get in a word. "Brock, Major Price tells us there's no book yet on this machine. Don't you have any notes, charts, any poop at all?"

"Nope, not a scratch. This critter left Detroit Arsenal only ten days ago. You people write the story as you go."

I can't resist this last question, "How in hell did you transport this thing?"

He laughs, "Very carefully! We reinforced the flat car and laid fourteen foot planks crosswise. Even so, the load is very tippy—you're balancing the monster on rails that are only five feet apart. We move very slowly, with a clear track—both ways!"

"When will you complete your get-ready?" I ask.

"It's yours Wednesday morning."

"We were hoping to get started sooner," I reply. "Would we be able to bring the crew down here tomorrow so they can begin to visualize their assignments? Promise to stay out of your way."

Brock's answer is quick and reassuring, "By all means! Put it this way, Lieutenant; we will complete our work and stay out of *your* way. You people come first. Our team will be right beside you—all the way to Tokyo."

I think we have found a friend in Brock.

4: We're On Our Own

MAJOR PRICE HAS SET UP SHOP IN THE NEW BATTALION headquarters and our little group is gathered around his desk. All of us, now having seen the subject of our new assignment, are much more relaxed and casual as we renew the briefing.

And remember this: there has never before been a combined operation of this magnitude, not Normandy or any of the islands."

The major begins: "The artillery board hasn't given us a lot to go on. What we do know is that both the Germans and the Russians had some success with heavy assault guns. We're going to take their ideas and add a few tricks of our own. The 240 is bigger and more mobile than anything either of them put into the field. The battalion will still function as a unit, three gun batteries with two gun sections in each battery. But we will also train to split off one battery, or even one gun section, when needed, to operate as a component of an assault team. Infantry and heavy tanks are out front, scouting and probing. We have observers with them," he looks at Betzy; "you pick targets the tanks can't bust. We have lots of preparation from other artillery, air and navy before anybody moves. After all this hellfire and brimstone has been dumped, we come in close with our heavies, behind a lot of fire and smoke. Our first shot goes when the target shows. Second shot, get a bracket and adjust to line. Third shot, be there. Re-loading better be less than one minute. Counter-fire won't wait very long. We hope to have some engineers up there too with bulldozers. I don't think there will be one square foot of landscape that hasn't been turned over. And if the British come in with their Lancasters and eleven-ton bombs, I'm guessing some mountains are going to get moved. One other thing-sharpen up on your 'scatter' drill: Kamikazes."

Another one of those moments of silence.

Now he goes on: "And remember this: there has never before been a combined operation of this magnitude, not Normandy or any of the islands. We're not just throwing the book at them, we're going with the whole library. Maybe this time getting the engineers forward with their bulldozers to open the way will be the order of march. Now, you can put all this high-level strategy out of your heads. Give the generals something to do. You concentrate on one thing. Come Saturday, you roll that cannon

Do some arithmetic," he looks at Betzy. "Just be right the first time, sir."

into position, take your shot and get the hell out of there—fast! Understood?"

We nod. We know what to do.

"Sir, do we have any firing tables or other range information?" I ask.

"The tables on the 240 won't be much help," he replies, "they begin at 5500 yards. If this piece has ever been fired at range 1000, we don't have any data. We know it is extremely accurate at mid-range. In our case, we're right on top of the target. You should be able to take out a fly speck. Use your old tables from the eight-inch howitzer as a guide. The numbers are similar. Do some arithmetic," he looks at Betzy. "Just be right the first time, sir."

We're on our own. That much comes out pretty clear as we get up to leave the meeting.

"One other thing," adds Major Price. "We'll be getting a new type fuse before long, concrete piercing, CP for short. With this fuse one shot will punch a hole five feet deep in reinforced concrete. A good gunner can hit the same spot over and over. He should be able to drill a hole in anything, no matter how thick."

I'm muttering again. This thing is a glorified jackhammer-size, extra large. I'm getting goose bumps on the back of my neck.

Once outside, I turn to Biggs, "Sergeant, let's put all the section chiefs on the crew and all the gunners. Fill in the rest from volunteers, maybe twenty-four in all, and also your best driver. We'll have a short powwow right after chow at the gun park."

5: Volunteers—Several

BETZY AND I AND WHIT SIT IN THE MESS HALL OVER EXTRA mugs of coffee as we work out cannoneer duties. The place is strangely empty when we finally get up to leave. Guess the battery is busy getting set up in their new quarters.

It is a short walk up the battery street, across the quadrangle, and on to the gun park. We pass the corner of the last barracks and Betzy puts his elbow in my ribs, “L-o-o-o-tenant, I think you have a formation.”

I glance across the quad. Looks like we have some volunteers—several.

The first sergeant roars and men skitter into four ranks, section by section. So, showtime, huh? O.K., you guys want a Hollywood scene? You've got it!

I square my helmet liner and try to put on a military face as I walk up and take position facing the first sergeant.

He snaps, “Sir, Charlie Battery volunteers reporting as ordered!” with a sharp salute, eyes glazed straight ahead, large grin across his mouth.

Under my breath, without moving my lips: “Sergeant, you're a lousy actor.”

He doesn't flinch—strictly old school.

I look to my left where Sergeant Biggs, the perpetrator of this demonstration, is standing like a tree trunk—same eyes, same grin, no flinching here either—same school.

I move my gaze slowly down the formation, file by file, one hundred one men, full field uniform, steel helmets all cocked a little forward with the same set, West Point brace—gun sections, wire, service, motor. And down at the end, even the cooks, still in their kitchen whites—same eyes, same grin! If these people are reclassified coast artillery, let's hire some more.

Under my breath, without moving my lips: “Sergeant, you're a lousy actor.”

I mutter to myself one more time, “So, Sergeant Biggs, you've had your little joke. Now I'll have mine.”

“Sergeant Biggs, front and center!” I bark.

The sergeant steps forward with a snap and advances to the center of the formation, faces me and pops a very elegant salute. He knew this was coming.

I continue in a very loud voice for the benefit of the whole battery, “Sergeant, my instructions were twenty-four men in all. Who are all these people?”

The sergeant glares back at me but his eyes are dancing, “Sir, that's exactly what I told them but nobody would back off.”

“Sergeant, take your post!”

He pops another majestic salute, spins on his heel and struts back to his post position, spins again and resumes his self satisfied tree trunk posture.

Suddenly something strikes me as being hilariously funny. I think I'm going to double up and bust out laughing right in the middle of this whole trumped-up ceremony. But what's funny? Why am I standing out here in front of all these cannon jockeys and trying to tell them how to run a war?

We hold the formation rigidly for about ninety seconds as I bite my teeth and clench my fists.

I turn back to the first sergeant, “Sergeant, tell these Yankee Doodle cannoneers the U.S. Army appreciates their interest. Let's fall out and gather round. We'll talk for a bit.”

There's lots of hooting and joking as everybody plops down on the ground. Betzy and Whit come sidling up alongside and I get another elbow in the ribs. They're in on this shenanigan too.

I toss my helmet liner upside-down on the ground and take a seat, elbows on knees. I'm laughing so hard I can't see. The guys

Sergeant, tell these Yankee Doodle cannoneers the U.S. Army appreciates their interest.”

Now we're going into our fourth weapons system and it looks like the guys who don't make the first crew, we're going to have to beat them off with a stick.

start to chuckle. Now everybody's caught it. Why is laughing so contagious?

Sergeant Biggs is draped out over on my left, looking very much like a heap of discarded fatigue uniforms, clutching his beer barrel. He finally asks, "What's funny, Lieutenant?" What a con!

At last I get my breath and swipe my sleeves across my eyes, "Well, Sergeant, as we were all standing here just now, I happened to think back to that first formation we did out at Robinson last September. I remember walking back to my tent that afternoon hoping the war would end real soon because I didn't see one cannon soldier in the whole bunch—not a man who could tell a muzzle from a hole in the ground. Now we're going into our fourth weapons system and it looks like the guys who don't make the first crew, we're going to have to beat them off with a stick."

Back in my hut, I kick off my boots and flop down on my bunk. This outfit is the damndest, most unmilitary bunch of mongrels I've ever been mixed up with. Last September I wondered what the hell kind of a mess I had stumbled into. Every time we have refitted and retrained, I have wondered again. An outsider would swear they have no discipline. Not so! They cooked up that little demonstration this evening on their own. They can toe a very straight line when they get the notion. Come Saturday, they'll run off our little show standing on their heads.

6: Ponderously

CORPORAL ALVEREZ IS A TALL STRING BEAN OF A MEXICAN, long arms and legs, high cheek bones and square jaw of the Indian. Big white teeth flash behind an always present grin. Huge owlish goggles for eyes glare out from under a tanker's helmet, strapped down tight to complete the mask. I think this soldier is really having a good time. Alvarez will drive the monster.

He is visible only from the shoulders up as he sits in the left cockpit and checks out the controls. Yesterday he came down along with the rest of the crew, as we went over assignments, but so far we have not turned the key.

The co-driver is in the cockpit to his right. First and second gunners have taken positions on the firing platform along with cannoneers one and two. These people will travel with the cannon.

The other seventeen cannoneers have climbed aboard the tracked armored personnel carrier that will follow the cannon.

I stand in front of the muzzle and signal Alvarez to crank up. The uproar that follows verily rattles the rafters. There's got to be more than five hundred horses under that armor plate! And they must have left off the muffler—probably to save weight.

Slowly I pump my right arm up and down. The power rises as Alvarez presses the throttle. The big sprocket wheels dig into the giant tracks and the mountain begins to move. The machine squeezes narrowly through the shop door where the big M.P. blocked me out on Monday.

We must make a fairly tight right turn just outside on the concrete apron. Alvarez is very careful not to lock the right track. Let it drag a little! Dust and actual smoke curl up from under the snowshoe tracks as they grind into the surface of the concrete. The cannon moves forward and I walk around to the rear, curiously inspecting what is left of the concrete apron. The hard surface has been pulverized into dust.

On this bright summer morning every rank stops to stare as we clank past and make our way, ponderously.

We present a strange spectacle as we march down the tank trail—stay off the pavement! Betzy, Whit and I are in the jeep. Behind us the cannon wallows along, and trailing in the dust cloud is the personnel carrier with the rest of the gang. We will add several more vehicles to our column when the fire team is fully outfitted.

Fort Bragg people are probably the most jaded garrison soldiers in the U.S.A., after four years of exposure to all the war paraphernalia that this country can conjure up, but on this bright summer morning every rank stops to stare as we clank past and make our way, ponderously, along the two miles of trail en route to our gun park.

7: Four Sacks of Cement

THURSDAY AND FRIDAY ARE TWO TWELVE-HOUR DAYS OF gun drill. Over and over, we occupy position, simulate loading and firing, march order.

We don't have a dummy shell for practice so loading is not very realistic. It makes no sense for the tray men to lift the empty loading tray to shoulder height and up to the breech with no feeling of weight.

There is no better way to train than under the watchful eyes of your peers.

Whit is watching all this as he sits in the jeep with his size twelves perched on top of the windshield.

Suddenly, his big feet dropping to the floor boards and bolting him upright in the seat, he shouts, "Four sacks of cement!" He's onto an idea. "That's it! A sack of cement weighs ninety pounds. We stack four sacks on the tray, 360 pounds, same as the bullet!"

Twenty minutes later we've fetched the four bags from the Quartermaster and roped them down, two high, two long, on the loading tray.

Six cannoneers lift the tray to belt level and practice marching in short half steps around the gun position. Next, they hoist to shoulder height and march again.

Personnel from Able and Baker Batteries, as well as leftover Charlie people, are all out here at the gun park. Next week they too will have their turns to practice, and they watch the entire drill with keen interest and biting criticism. There is no better way to train than under the watchful eyes of your peers. Needless to say, the whooping and jeering is relentless. The tray men have been dubbed "pall bearers" and all hands are anxious to try out this new shuffle.

There are other watchful eyes upon us too. We are seldom removed from the scrutiny of various and assorted majors and colonels from the artillery board. Their interest is just as keen as the cannoneers, but they do not interfere. Just don't do something stupid!

8: The Grasp of a Fifth Grader

The international pastime of all soldiers is to speculate.

TWELVE HOURS OF GUN DRILL DOES NOT WRAP UP THE DAY now. After late chow, the cooks brew up fresh coffee and we sit around the mess hall. It's open forum. Betzy, Whit and I are joined by some of the crew.

The international pastime of all soldiers is to speculate. Our options are few enough and we know it. Fundamental to our training is map study and tactical movement. True enough, this is basically on a local scale, but it does not take much genius to broaden our view to the picture that is shaping up in the Pacific. Okinawa is now secure. This big island, less than four hundred miles from Japan, will be the staging area for the final show-down.

If our demonstration on Saturday is right, we may not even see another 240 on this side of the ocean. These monsters, with their special transportation considerations, will probably go directly to east coast ports and arrive thirty days later in Okinawa. And the 784th, along with many other artillery battalions, will be right behind. We will complete training over the very fields and ridges so recently paid for by the guys who went out ahead of us. Another four weeks will take us up to the middle of October. We figure final operations will begin about then. Like the major said, we don't have much time.

Thursday night Whit comes in a little late. He's been down to the Fayetteville public library and under his arm he carries a tattered old geography book. Yep, that's the professor.

We call our nightly sessions "The Little Pentagon," and Whit flips the book open to a chapter on Japan. This is not quite the reference available to the Chiefs of Staff, but it's written and illustrated for the grasp of a fifth grader.

Whit has already made his appraisal. "Look at this map," he points out. "I've got the battle plan."

We are looking at a surprisingly detailed contour map of Honshu, the main island. The lowlands are shown in green, higher eleva-

tions gradually changing to yellow, orange, red and white—same stuff we disdained back in fifth grade.

He goes on, “And listen to this, the coastline stretches for 15,000 miles, almost all of which is inaccessible from the sea. Only a few beaches are. One of the most prominent is along the south-easterly shore of Boso peninsula.” He puts the point of his pencil down authoritatively.

“Maybe thirty miles to Tokyo—all green.”

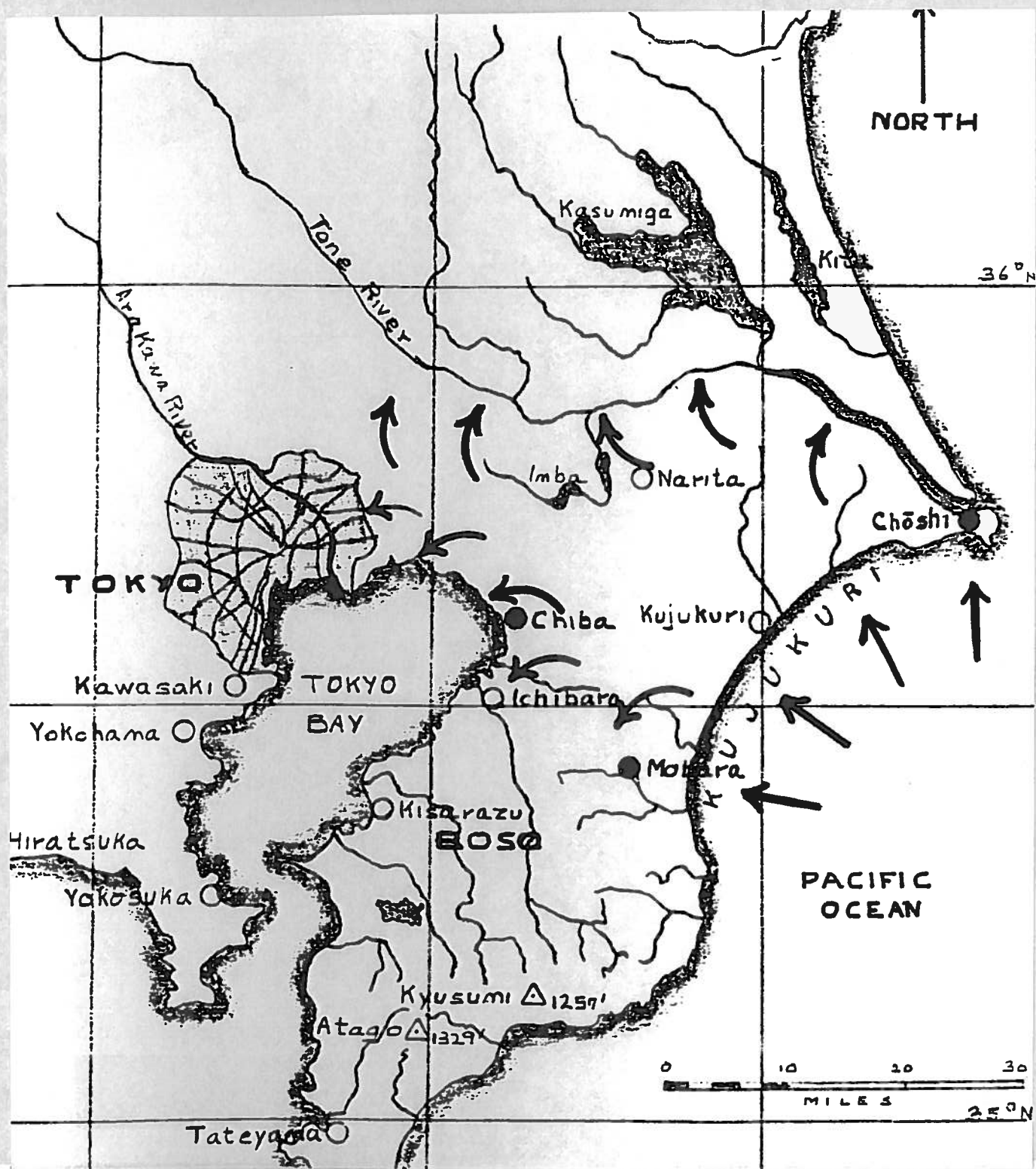
This is too simple. Even a fifth grader could figure it out. But a good battle plan is always simple. And, besides, where else can you go in without winding through miles of mountains? Besides, again, isn't the objective Tokyo? And don't you think the defenders haven't figured this out? This will be the Charge of the Light Brigade multiplied ten thousand times over. Hasn't the Twentieth Air Force tipped off the whole scheme with their relentless concentration on Tokyo? The road map lies there for all the world to read. You have only to have the grasp of a fifth grader.

I am fascinated by this simple map.

I am fascinated by this simple map. The Boso peninsula hangs down from the mainland of Honshu in a southerly direction. It scales about fifty miles long and thirty miles wide at the middle. The northerly part narrows to a neck seventeen miles across. To the west lies Tokyo Bay and the Pacific forms the easterly shoreline. The lower end appears to have some highlands rising up to two peaks about 1,300 feet in elevation. The neck area appears to be level lowlands. The beach is marked “Kujukuri” and stretches about thirty miles from Mobara on the south to Choshi on the north. This is where Whit had stuck his pencil.

The map doesn't show much in the way of roads but that won't matter. When the rototillers get done with their preparation, the only roads will be those we build from scratch. Be sure to order up plenty of bulldozers and planking. For sure, this cannon won't go anyplace through the rice paddies, and neither will the Pershings.

After the beachhead buildup we go straight across the neck to Chiba, probably holding on our left flank. On the right flank are many lakes and the Tone River. This flank will be virtually



Kujukuri Beach is where Whit had struck his pencil.

impassable due to flooding when the dikes and shorelines have been destroyed.

Seventeen miles to Chiba, four little words so easily said, so hopelessly understated. Nobody from Okinawa would put it that way. Better measure that trip in inches.

I'm thinking this big cannon "ain't going to do nothing" without one hell of a lot of help. I recall an obscure story I read in *Time* last spring (yeah, I still read *Time*). It related how RAF Lancasters had dropped 22,000 pound bombs on Bielefeld. They were set to explode one hundred feet below the surface. Some hole in the ground! That's what Major Price was talking about the other day.

I sure hope the British are coming.

From the Chiba area we can actually take Tokyo under fire with our own guns.

Four years ago, on another isthmus, the mission was fire and fall back-spit in the ocean. Now we will march to a different drum.

9: Hellfire

FIRE TEAM CHARLIE ONE IS MARCHING IN ATTACK formation for the first time, three days after its inception. Betzy is poking along up front in his jeep with driver and radioman, and I follow with my people. Corporal Alvarez runs next, setting the pace with his big cannon looming overhead and trailing a tall rooster tail of dust. The armored personnel carrier with the rest of the gun crew is back there someplace but I can't see them. Whit is bringing up the rear in a weapons carrier with the ammo. This is the nucleus of the fire team. We travel light. More trucks and ammunition would be on call if needed.

It's about ten miles from the gun park to the rendezvous area and we make the march, lickety-split, at a steady twelve miles per hour along the well-used tank trail. Dozens of jeeps, command cars and trucks pass on the road to our left. Much shouting, gesturing and highly animated conversation exchanges between our Charlie people and these many spectators on their way to the show. Even the passenger in the sedan flying the stars joins in the salute.

Dozens of jeeps, command cars and trucks pass on the road to our left.

Late yesterday afternoon, Betzy, Biggs, and I came out to the gun position to scout the area.

With the help of an old photo map we identified the target bunker and determined the range to be right at one thousand yards. When we had set the direction of fire, Biggs drove two stakes about thirty feet apart to guide in on when he brings the cannon into position. This is a little cheating to make the show look slick.

Our gunnery procedure will be very basic: put the vertical hair of the gunsight on the target, then working backwards from the available firing tables, convert the range to mils of elevation. We don't use degrees, the mil is a much smaller unit of measure. The shot will drift a little to the right due to the rotation of the shell. This deviation is easy to measure and simple to correct. Distance is more difficult. This we will correct by trial and error. That's what we mean by "getting a bracket."

We pull up in a pine grove where we will wait for the signal to go into position. I turn to Sergeant Biggs as we stand around the cannon. "I see you have come up with a name for the beast."

Someone has printed with chalk on the armor-plate, "Hellfire."

"Yes, sir, we picked that up from what Major Price said at the briefing last Monday."

"Then, I suppose, number two, when he arrives will be . . ."

"Brimstone," he answers.

Well, that combination won't ever qualify as an original. It's probably been posted a hundred times over the last four years.

But the shoe does seem to fit.

10: Heaven and Hell Collide

PRESENTLY WE GET A CRACKLE ON THE RADIO. MY OPERATOR looks at me with a slight nod. No more chatter, it's all business now. I signal to Betzy to roll, and the column moves out. We'll soon see if we have learned anything in the last three days.

We leave the dusty trail and go cross country this last half mile to the gun position, moving slowly and spaced thirty yards apart. Keep the dust down.

Biggs jerks his elbows downward like a cheerleader and the beast roars backward, driving the spade firmly into the ground.

Arriving at the position, Betzy stands up in his jeep and signals to me the direction of fire—showtime, for the benefit of the gallery.

Off to our left, maybe fifty yards, atop a low, grassy mound, are the spectators, standing, sitting, and squatting with their 'scopes and binocs—even a cameraman on the near edge with his tripod. Loud speakers have been set up and a phone line has been strung down to the gun position to relay the fire commands.

Betzy drives on through and will take up his position four hundred yards ahead. His grandstand seat will be six hundred yards short of the bunker. There, he will correct our fire. Good luck Betzy!

Biggs hops out of my jeep as we turn off to the right. His right arm high in the air, he leads the cannon carefully forward alongside the stakes. As Alvarez brings his left track into perfect alignment with the markers, Biggs faces the driver with both fists high in the air. Number two cannoneer drops the spade. Biggs jerks his elbows downward like a cheerleader and the beast roars backward, driving the spade firmly into the ground (we think).

Co-driver squirms up out of his cockpit and releases the traveling yoke over the tube, gunners check their sights and controls, and cannoneers one and two swing the huge breechblock downward into open position. Second gunner elevates the tube to 250 mils. The muzzle is now sticking up about six feet above level and the breech is down about twelve inches so as to be within better reach of the loaders.

Gentlemen,
proceed with the
demonstration."
Almost like
Indianapolis!

While all this is happening, the armored personnel carrier has pulled up and dropped the rest of the crew and their gear, and the ammo has been rolled off onto a tarp. The vehicles then quickly depart for the bushes to our right rear.

My operator reports to Major Price up on the hill, "Sir, Charlie One is ready."

Less than one minute has elapsed since we entered the gun position.

Major Price comes back on the phone (and the speakers) in a most solemn voice, "Gentlemen, proceed with the demonstration." Almost like Indianapolis!

Betzy is on the radio with fire commands which I relay to the gun crew. The first shot will be done in super slow motion so that everybody on the hill can follow in detail—also, because nobody has ever done this before!

"Charlie One, adjust." The crew springs to position just like a football team.

"Shell, H.E." (high explosive). Four cannoneers with double-handle tongs lift a shell to the loading tray. The nose plug is unscrewed.

"Charge one." Number three ties the correct powder charge together.

"Fuse, quick." Number four spins the fuse into the nose of the shell, tightens with a wrench and sets the fuse slot at "Q."

"Target: bunker, direct front; deflection, zero; range, one thousand." First gunner reports, "Target identified," sets gunsight at zero and cranks the tube so that the vertical hair of his sight lies just left of the target.

"Elevation, zero two niner." Second gunner sets his quadrant.

The elevation command is the order to load. Six men grasp the tray handles. The man on the right rear directs, "Read-e-e-e,

up." They lift to belt level. "Read-e-e-e, go." They move forward in funny little half steps, like keystone cops, to position just below the breech. "Read-e-e-e lift." They lift to shoulder height and set the lip of the tray inside the breech, at the same time bringing the tray into alignment with the tube. Don't anybody sneeze!

Right behind the tray men, eight cannoneers follow with the rammer staff. The tail-end rammer directs, "Read-e-e-e, p-u-u-u-sh." They press forward firmly against the base of the shell and slide the bullet up the hill in a steady motion. The shell is now out of sight, well up in the firing chamber. "Read-e-e-e, RAM!" The eight men lunge forward with one mighty stroke and slam the shell up into the seat-KA-THUNK!-where it sticks like a tight cork.

The fourteen cannoneers trot back to firing position with their gear.

Number three, standing to the left of the breechblock, lifts the forty-one pound powder charge (it looks like a very fat loaf of bread, two feet long) and shoves it into the firing chamber with his right fist. Keep those fingers tucked in!

Cannoneers one and two reach down and slam the breechblock closed, like closing the door of a safe (see what I mean about the fingers?). They clear the platform.

Number five runs up and screws the primer into the center of the breechblock. This little gadget, when hit by the hammer, will squirt fire through the center hole of the breechblock, blowing up the powder charge and sending the messenger on his way. Number five sets the safety bolt.

Second gunner lowers the tube, then brings it up a little bit to firing angle-last motion always up. The muzzle is now about eight inches above dead level. He calls, "Set," and jumps from the platform.

First gunner cranks the vertical hair to target-last motion always left to right-calls, "Ready," and he, too, clears the platform.

They move forward in funny little half steps, like keystone cops, to position just below the breech.

I slowly raise my right fist and report, "Sir, Charlie One is loaded and ready."

I walk slowly up to the breech with the long lanyard in my hand. We'll use the long rope on the first shot. Who knows what this thing will do? Number two takes one end of the lanyard and runs out twenty-five feet to the right rear, where he pulls it tight. "Slack," and he gives me a little rope. Standing carefully to the right of the breech—never stand behind a loaded gun, or in front, for that matter—I snap the lanyard to the hammer and release the safety bolt.

Number two is frozen at the end of his rope, feet planted well apart, both hands holding the lanyard. Only his eyeballs move as he follows me back to my firing position.

I slowly raise my right fist and report, "Sir, Charlie One is loaded and ready."

Major Price comes back, "Sir, proceed at your command." This fancy formality is not "book." He's just showing off like the rest of us. Actually, I think he would like to be on the end of that rope himself.

For an instant the world seems to stop on its axis. There is no sound! I check the gun position. Everybody is in place. I lock my eyes on number two cannoneer.

I drop my arm and call out, "FI - -!" The last half of the word is never heard. Number two gives a mighty yank on the rope, as if to help the shot along its way.

Heaven and hell collide as the giant cannon roars and rears back, sending his instrument of destruction shrieking off into the pristine morning sky! I can see the bullet clearly as it leaves the muzzle, first a black spot the size of a basketball, then quickly arching up and over, and shrinking to nothing more than a black golf ball, two seconds to impact!

Little dust devils spring up and dance all over the gun position as the vacuum from the blast sucks at the surface of the ground. The crack and ring that is so characteristic of the 75s and 105s is missing. Instead, a mighty concussion presses and pulls at my senses in quick succession. I get the "elevator" feeling and have to re-plant my feet to steady myself.

Betzy's voice seems a little faint. I think that second shot parted his hair.

I sure hope Betzy didn't figure the elevation low. If he did, he'll come back with a new hole in his head!

All of these sensations register on my subconscious mind in a micro-instant of time, to be recalled in minute detail many hours later. It beats me why I remember stuff like this.

Fortunately, the shot flies about thirty feet over Betzy's head. I'll bet that pooper really rang his bell! The professor had calculated the speed of the bullet at 1,023 miles per hour.

For a split second I can see the point of impact, just beyond the bunker and a little right, then all is obscured as the explosion flies in every direction.

The cannon has slammed backward another two feet. The recoil thrust at this low elevation is something like being hit by a Mack truck.

We stop action at this point while our Aberdeen friend, Brock, makes his inspection. Everything is in order, he indicates, as he walks back in my direction shaking his head. I think he got caught in the vacuum too.

Betzy is talking, "Left two, down five." We were six feet off line and a little bit long.

From here on we will go in real time, crewmen will stay on the platform, short lanyard.

I relay the fire commands again, "Left two, elevation, zero two four." All other commands remain the same. First gunner sets off two mils on his gunsight. When he brings the vertical hair back on target, the tube will actually be pointing to the left of the bunker. The cannoneers repeat their "hop" in quick step and call out their moves with a heavy helping of parade ground strut. Got to show off a little now!

The second shot lands line short.

"Up three," Betzy's voice seems a little faint. I think that second shot parted his hair.

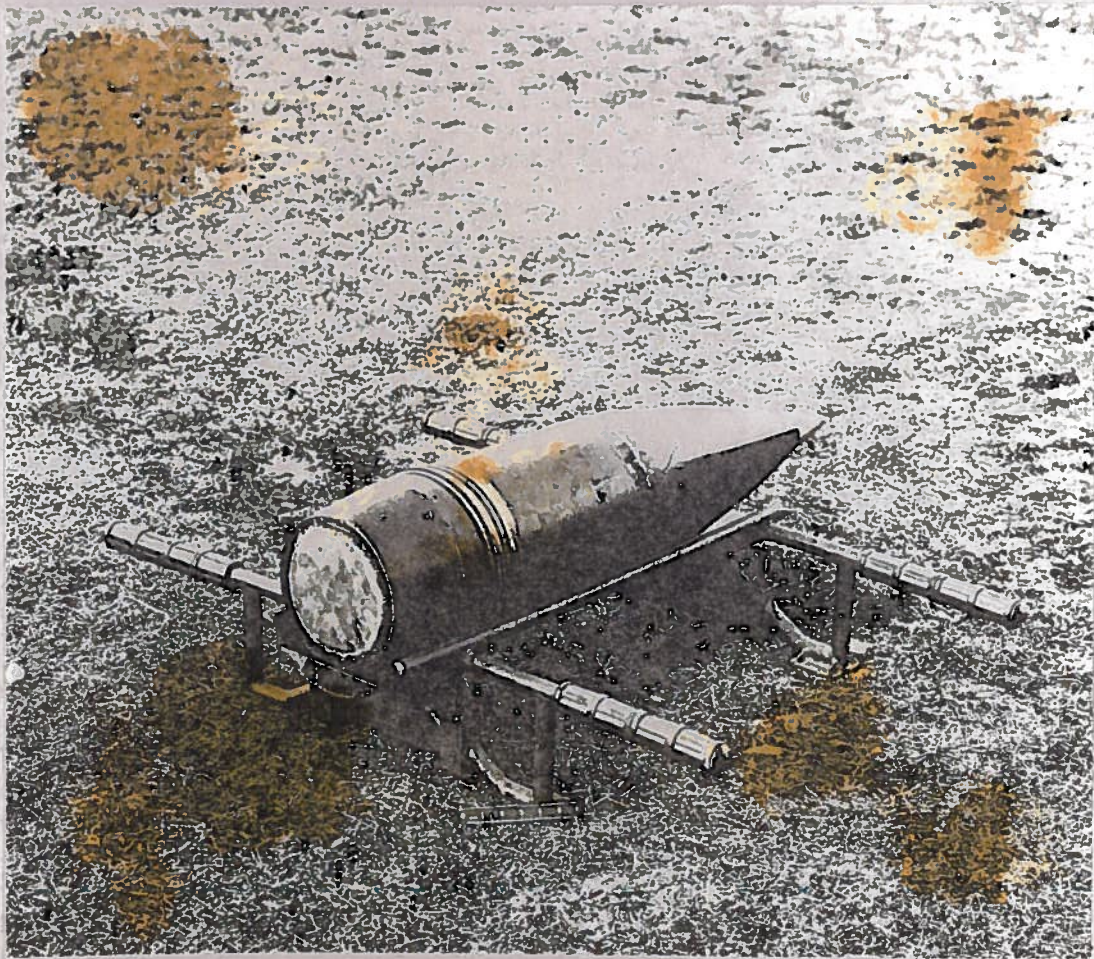
"Elevation, zero two seven."

Once more the cannoneers do their shuffle and the third shot is on the way. It looks to me like we put the cannonball right in the box!

Betzy has just two words, **"TARGET! SCRAM!"**

That's all we need to hear.

"MARCH ORDER! March order! March order!"



Carrying tray and high-explosive 240mm shell

11: The Maw of the Monster

THE COMMAND IS RELAYED BACK TO THE BUSHES BEHIND and in all other directions. Engines begin to crank but it's all drowned out when the big Ford V-8 roars to life.

Cannoneers one and two slam the breechblock shut, first gunner cranks the tube to center, second gunner lowers the tube to the traveling cradle. The drivers snap the yoke down and drop into their cockpits. Alvarez jams the throttle down. The monster wrenches his tail loose from the seat where he had wedged himself and lunges forward, dragging the spade behind. As number two winches up the blade, Alvarez begins a wide U-turn to the left, crashing away through the brush with the crewmen hanging on like coattails. He completes the half circle and comes flailing out of the bushes, tracks clawing at the ground like a mad bull, and heading dead on for the little hill, smoke still drifting from the muzzle, and dirt and brush flying from the tracks and exhaust behind.

He comes flailing out of the bushes, tracks clawing at the ground like a mad bull, and heading dead on for the little hill.

The gallery is looking squarely into the maw of the monster. Stars and bars and all ranks in between and below scatter. Never in military history has a left flank maneuver been carried out with more dispatch!

Alvarez kicks a little left and roars by between me and the little hill, pulling his cloud of dust along like a massive shroud. In all the commotion, I can see those big white teeth, now bare from ear to ear. His left fist is waving high above the cockpit. He wasn't going to overrun the hill after all!

While old Hellfire is executing his unchallenged exit, the armored personnel carrier churns up behind. Equipment is tossed aboard and the cannoneers clamber up. They charge off into the dust cloud and disappear right behind the raging bull.

My jeep is revving at my heels and I jump aboard, clicking the stop watch that I had punched on "March order"—fifty-six seconds.

I wonder if that will be good enough.

12: That Crazy Cannon Driver

You guys put
the watermelon
right in the slot!

OUR COLUMN IS DRAWN UP BACK AT THE RENDEZVOUS area. Cannoneers spill out all over the place, laughing and joking and slapping one another. The slapping by itself raises more dust as we are all caked and covered with the red stuff—a real mess! Everybody is feeling very cocky. They did it right and they know it. What a change from a week ago, aboard that old train.

Betzy finally catches up. Spitting and sputtering, he piles out of his jeep. He's lost his helmet in the wild getaway and his black bristle of hair is now a redhead. If the bullet made a crease, it's covered up now.

"You guys put the watermelon right in the slot!" we heard between the sputters. "The engineers are going to hate your guts. You tore up their favorite blockhouse. It's dust!"

I defend the crew, "You're in trouble too, Dingaling. You aimed it!"

Many of our gallery friends, now recomposed from their fright, are stopping off for a closer look at old Hellfire and to joust with the operators. Dixieland expletives know no equal in that unlettered world of human expression, and the expostulations that rise above the surrounding pine trees are distributed generously upon the 69-ton monster, with plenty of choice phrases left over for the crew. And the demise of the bunker carries this unique art of description to new heights, or depths, depending upon one's piousness.

Not the least of the drop-ins is the sedan with the stars. The general is a big guy. He strides over to where we are dusting off, followed by his aide and Major Price, trotting alongside and trying to keep up.

He heads off any formalities with a gesture, "Who the hell is that crazy cannon driver?"

I answer, "Sir, that's Corporal Alvarez."

Yes, sir!" And the new sergeant, still confused, tries to salute, those big teeth all over his face.

"I want to talk to that soldier," booms the general.

Sergeant Biggs wheels around and shouts across the clearing, "Corporal Alvarez!"

The corporal, stretched out on the grass, and in the midst of a long swig from his canteen, looks up in surprise. He's on his feet and those long legs bring him across the clearing, kangaroo-style.

The general turns to him sternly, "You the driver on that cannon, soldier?"

"Yes, sir."

"You scared the hell out of a lot of people out there today-sir!"

Alvarez is totally bewildered, "Yes, sir-uh, no, sir."

The general continues to glare but his words betray him, "Probably the best workout that bunch has had in years. Tell you what, Corporal, you show up at retreat formation today with a clean shirt-and put another stripe on it. Understood, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir!" And the new sergeant, still confused, tries to salute, those big teeth all over his face.

The general restrains him in mid-motion, "Let's shake on it!" And the two shake hands.

All the cannoneers are watching by now and the hooting and shouting become very boisterous.

The general turns back to us juniors, "I want this entire procedure written up exactly the way you people ran it off today. Have the report ready for drill by daylight, Monday morning."

Whit replies, "Sir, the report is ready now."

The general turns to Whit with that same stern look, "You're a cocksure second lieutenant, aren't you-sir?" And he holds out his right hand to Lieutenant Whitridge. But the professor doesn't come away with a promotion. I guess cannon drivers are special.

The two-star turns and walks off across the clearing in the direction of the cannoneers. He's going to visit with the guys who really deserve the credit.

13: We'll Be Marching

This is strictly front-line stuff.

YESTERDAY WE TOOK A BREAK EXCEPT FOR A POW-WOW with Able and Baker people. Six gun sections have been organized and the daylight this time of the year will allow each section two hours and twenty minutes on the cannon each day, starting at 5:30 in the morning and ending at 7:30 at night.

The rest of the time will be concentrated on physical fitness, small arms practice and infantry tactics. This is strictly front-line stuff. There isn't any doubt now as to where we will be located in that green corridor that Whit pinpointed on the old geography book map the other night.

And we'll sharpen up on our scatter drill.

This morning we were in the field right on schedule. We figure, now that the demonstration came off so well, that we will be marching—possibly in two weeks.

14: Buck Rogers Stories

HAVING JUST FINISHED LUNCH, I STOP BY THE ORDERLY room to check in. Today's *Fayetteville Observer* lies on the desk. Hundreds of B-29s range over the islands almost unopposed. Even their Mustang escorts join in the ground attack. By now we've become callous to the daily news reports.

But the headlines are talking about something else. Yesterday they dropped a bomb, one bomb, on some Japanese city. And they're claiming that the explosion from this one bomb had as much force as two thousand of those big blockbusters the Lancasters carry. They call it an "atomic bomb." Holy cow! I don't make much sense out of all this. Somebody must have gotten his numbers mixed up. I wonder what the hell is inside that thing! And I head back out to the gun park.

They shot off another atomic bomb. The radio is going crazy. The newspapers can't keep up. You don't suppose . . . ?

Tuesday's paper gives more space to the new type bomb—something to do with splitting the atom. And they're calling it a super weapon. Well, everybody picks up on Buck Rogers stories. *Time* and *Life* magazines were full of stories about splitting atoms way back in the thirties. We all know about buzz bombs and V-2 rockets and jet airplanes. Better get back to the gun park and our own little super weapon.

Tuesday night's radio is full of commentators who are full of rumors. These "radio generals" are going nuts. They say somebody in Tokyo wants to talk to somebody—somewhere. Where have we heard that before?

Up at the gun park on Wednesday we are beginning to wonder what all the rumors are all about. It seems like drill isn't going along with quite the same gusto that we were showing a couple of days ago.

Thursday's story is big. They shot off another atomic bomb. The radio is going crazy. The newspapers can't keep up. You don't suppose . . . ?

Aw, c'mon, soldier! Wake up! There's only one road home, straight across that beach and up Main Street, Tokyo. And there are five million Japanese soldiers waiting.

WEATHER REPORT
Cloudy tonight and Tuesday.
Thunderstorms, slightly higher
afternoon temperatures.

TEMPERATURES
Temperature at 8 a. m. 73
Temperature at 2 p. m. 79

The Fayetteville Observer

"North Carolina's Oldest Newspaper—Established 1837"

SHOW YOUR GOODS, TELL THE WORLD, AND YOU'LL SELL

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ATOMIC BOMB EQUIVALENT TO 20,000 TONS TNT HITS JAPAN

Superforts Set Fire To 4 More Japanese Cities

One Of The 580 Superfortresses Fails To Return From Destructive Mission: Mustangs Strike Terror In Tokyo Area; Industrial Area Of Tokyo Totally Destroyed In Raid of August 2

GUAN, Aug. 5. (AP)—Four more Japanese cities were left in a mass of flames by 249 Superfortresses today as the U. S. Army Air Corps reported certain returning crews had destroyed the industrial area of Tokyo.

Local Unions For Germans
REITLIN, Aug. 5. (AP)—German workers are being organized into local unions by the U. S. Army Air Corps.

Storm-Battered Hornet



Crippled Ship Rides Typhoon

Premium For
Jap Generals'

WASHINGTON, Aug. 5. (AP)—The Hornet, named for the typhoon that battered it, was seen today riding the waves of a typhoon.

Five Die In Fire At Detroit

DETROIT, Aug. 5. (AP)—Five persons, including two children, were killed and another injured in a fire that broke out in a building here today.

More than 100 other persons were injured in the fire, which broke out in a building that was used as a warehouse for the Detroit Police Department.

New Bomb Hailed As Greatest Achievement Of Organized Science

It is Also Hailed as The Most Terrible Destructive Force in History: Japanese Army Base on Hiroshima Was First Target of Giant Explosive

WASHINGTON, Aug. 6. (AP)—An atomic bomb, hailed as the most terrible destructive force in history and as the greatest achievement of organized science, has been used today to destroy the Japanese army base on Hiroshima.

President Truman disclosed in a White House statement today that the first use of the bomb—containing more power than 20,000 tons of TNT and producing more than 2,000 times the blast of the most powerful bomb ever dropped before—was made 16 hours earlier on Hiroshima, Japanese army base.

The headlines are talking about something else... Holy cow! I don't make much sense out of all this...

Our guys are going to march up Main Street without another shot!

We have completed a week of drill now since the shoot last Saturday. A feeling of complete unreality pervades the gun park and the training fields. But what is real? Is it the endless cannoneering that has made robots out of all of us, or is it the vague prospect—dare we say it—that there will be an end to this kind of life? Will we, indeed, return to that other reality that most of us can scarcely remember?

The radio and the newspapers say it is over. Our guys are going to march up Main Street without another shot! It was only fifteen days ago that we walked into Building G and came face to face with the cannon. I was completely convinced that we were going to march that monster up the green corridor that Whit had pointed out in the old geography book.

15: The War is Over

I SAW THE WORDS IN BLACK AND WHITE THIS AFTERNOON ON the front page of the paper. We sat in the mess hall for a long time this evening with our coffee mugs. Words were few. We all seemed to be preoccupied with a vague uneasiness that I cannot identify.

I'm standing at the upper end of the battery street now, just across the quadrangle from where the Charlie "volunteers" put on their little show a few days ago. It's quiet here too, no celebrating, no whooping, no shouting. This should be joy to the world. Why isn't anybody singing? I don't feel any joy. I don't feel anything.

We worked hard and now we will never prove anything.

Or do I? What is this strange mixture that is banging around in my head? I've taken a bite out of the headlines and am trying to chew it up, but I don't know whether to swallow or spit.

Charlie Battery was ready to go. I knew that when I confronted the volunteers right over there the other night. I saw it more clearly when I listened to them joust with the general after the shoot.

We were beginning to call it "The Honshu Beach Party"—very unfunny! And we were all scared together. And we said these goofy things. And we pretended to be tough. And I didn't want to go to the party. And neither did they. But we were all going to go, want to or not. That's how I knew we were ready.

Ready? That's dumb. Nobody is really ready-ever. How can you be? You just go.

Now, two atom bombs, seventy-five hours apart, after four years of pounding, and the whole damned trip is cancelled. We worked hard and now we will never prove anything. What a wonderful disappointment. Instead of a one-way ticket to the beach party, we get a one-way ticket home—and the rest of our lives. It was all bought and paid for by the guys who went out ahead of us.

How do you say thanks?

God, it's quiet! Is this what life sounds like? I can still hear the drumming cadence of the Caisson Song and the whack of the old French 75 and the thunder of the big 240. When will this ringing in my ears ever stop?

I feel like I was strapped in the electric chair—and somebody pulled the plug!

16: He Sits There Alone

THE *STARS AND STRIPES* HAS PUBLISHED A POINT SYSTEM. The more points you have, the sooner you go home, based on length of service and many odd complications. It will take a while to pack up fourteen million people. Everybody is counting points. We live in a total vacuum. I can't even remember what I did yesterday.

After many weeks of suspended animation, I sign all the papers. I am now a civilian in soldier's clothing. My jeep driver—no, he's not my driver anymore, he's now a good friend—has offered to drive me to the airstrip where I will catch a transport for home.

Home? It still sounds funny.

It's not exactly a coincidence that our route takes us past the gun park. The big cannon still sits exactly where we last drilled, all those weeks ago. The fall rains have streaked the chalk marking but I can still make out "Hellfire," faintly showing on the side of the armor-plate. Sitting on uneven ground, the muzzle seems to be slightly depressed. Even the talons appear less fearsome. He appears to be resigned to this solitary state.

"Brimstone" never arrived, neither did the other four cannons. The production line must have been stopped right in its tracks—literally.

We drive slowly past. Hellfire shrinks away behind me, now only a small object no larger than a black golf ball in my memory.

He sits there alone in the somber gray light of this early morning, a single, silent sentinel—Charlie One, the last cannon.

He sits there alone in the somber gray light of this early morning, a single, silent sentinel—Charlie One, the last cannon.

Epilogue: Final Mission

IN THE SUMMER OF 1945 IT WOULD HAVE BEEN WELL NIGH impossible for any one individual to comprehend the magnitude of the force that was converging on the home islands of Japan.

The atom bombs were not a factor in this force. They were still only a theory until one shot tested positive on July 16. And even after that one test, the very few people who were in on the project did not put that much stock in the finality of the bomb's effect.

Some thought Japanese fanaticism would survive the blast. Anyone who could stick a sword into his own guts or ram an airplane into a target could not be expected to be intimidated by such an explosion.

Others argued, what if Little Boy or Fat Man turn out to be duds? Then we end up with less than nothing. Our secret weapon does not work. The finished product is in the hands of the enemy, no more secret, only proof of nothing. It will be months before another bomb is ready and we don't even know what went wrong. And we can't find out.

So the massive convergence of men and weapons proceeded with unrelenting determination, absorbing in the process the many lessons from Guadalcanal to Normandy to Okinawa, and all the beaches in between.

The T-92 (that was the official designation of our big howitzer) was one weapons system in the grand plan. It was to be deployed as an element of a "Heavyweight Combat Team." Each team would include a screen of Pershing heavy tanks, various supporting arms, and, of course, infantry.

216 of these big guns were in the works, enough to outfit thirty-six battalions like the 784th. With these numbers, I still wonder if such a force would have long remained in obscurity. Lieutenant Whitridge, with his ever present pencil and calculating brain, did not think so. His arithmetic: one B-29, flying out of Tinian, could deliver an 18,000-pound bombload every two days.

One 240mm howitzer, firing at a sustained rate of one round every two minutes, could deliver the same weight in one hour and forty minutes. And at short range, the precision of the howitzer fire could be measured in inches.

After back-plotting a cold and dusty trail, by way of Fort Sill and Aberdeen Proving Ground, I found the big brute at Detroit Arsenal.

The Little Pentagon, with its coffee mugs and old geography book, was not far off target with its "Battle Plan." The official plan called for "Operation Olympic" to launch against Kyushu, the southern island, in mid-October—right on time, wrong on place. "Operation Coronet" was to launch on Honshu, the main island, across the Kanto Plain (the green corridor) the following March—wrong on time, right on place. The 784th, along with our infantry cousins and the big Pershing tanks, would have been there, if by then the bunch of us were not too full of holes.

Of the 216 cannons in the works when the shooting suddenly stopped, seven were actually completed. Old Hellfire was the first, and the last, T-92 delivered to a tactical battalion before the war ended. Two of the cannons were eventually shipped to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. They were used in various firepower demonstrations up into the early fifties. Both units performed under the stage name "King Kong." Five cannons are presumed to have been scrapped, maybe melted down and beaten into new Ford V-8s. Perhaps you have driven one.

A sixth T-92 stood on display for many years in the median of Maryland Avenue, one of the access roads entering Aberdeen Proving Ground, in Maryland. In 1986 it was removed and taken back into the shop area where it was dismantled in preparation for restoration. It languishes there today, in ordnance purgatory, a victim of the higher priorities of more recent wars. Another reason it was removed was that it seemed to be sinking into the ground—that figures.

I learned that a seventh cannon was still very much intact and I was intent on tracking it down. After back-plotting a cold and dusty trail, by way of Fort Sill and Aberdeen Proving Ground, I found the big brute at Detroit Arsenal. Well, I didn't really "find" him. He had been sitting right there under our collective nose for over forty years. Besides, something of that size would have a hard time getting lost.

This seventh cannon probably never left Detroit Arsenal, where he first saw the light of day.

However, the story of how he got there seems to have gotten lost. I am not at all surprised by this circumstance. As I finally complete the long odyssey of the T-92, I discern a vein of mystery surrounding the entire project from the day it came off the drawing board back in 1944. With so many other weapons systems in the works, another cannon with a bigger boom and a bit more hustle just didn't cut any special mustard.

This seventh cannon probably never left Detroit Arsenal, where he first saw the light of day. He carries no registration number and most likely never fired a shot. Standing atop a prominent concrete pedestal, with his muzzle high in the air, he marks the Van Dyke Street entrance to the arsenal.

Nearby, still screening the position, and on a similar pedestal, stands a T-30 heavy tank, an upgraded version of the original Pershing tank.

Old-timers suggest that these two giants may have been placed out there all those years ago simply as mute monuments to the many monsters of war that have been spawned behind the walls of the arsenal. If this was the intent of their final mission, the role is, indeed, well cast.



Epitaph: A Ripple, Lost

ON A COLD AND BLUSTERY OCTOBER MORNING I AT LAST closed in on my quarry. I walked out to the pedestal and stood alongside this hulking howitzer, my shoulder level to the top of the fender, and listened.

Once again, days long absent from my memory came rippling back:

My mind is not adjusting to the giant in front of me! . . .
“Sergeant, who are all these people?” . . . The uproar rattles the rafters. . . . “Charlie One, adjust.” . . . “FIRE!” . . . Heaven and hell collide. . . . A mighty concussion presses and pulls at my senses. . . . “TARGET! SCRAM!” . . . “that crazy cannon driver?” . . . The whole damned trip is cancelled. . . . We will never prove anything. . . . What a wonderful disappointment. . . . How do you say thanks? . . .

Charlie One, a ripple, lost in the midst of a tidal wave, war lore from the distant past, now long gone and little remembered.

*For it's “Hi! Hi! Heel!”
In the field artiller-e-e-e . . .*

Following pages: The author with the surviving T-92, at Detroit Arsenal in October 1993.

