

"Couldn't say I was scared"

The War Correspondence of Luther College's Student Soldiers

by Jon Richard Peterson

Into the quiet college town of Decorah, Iowa, came accounts of flushing out Japanese resistance in the South Pacific, liberating a concentration camp in Germany, holding the line in an Italian foxhole, and transporting troops during the Normandy invasion. Decorah was home to Luther College, a small Norwegian-Lutheran school of about 500 students at the start of World War II. By the 1943/44 school year, enrollment had plunged to half that. The war had pulled away all but 80 of Luther's male students. To boost the morale of the college's "student soldiers," history professor Chellis Evanson created a newsletter called *Scuttlebutt* for those transplanted from classroom to battlefield.

Evanson had had some experience with the military himself. He missed his own graduation ceremony from Luther College in 1918 because he had enlisted in the navy and was already aboard the USS *Pennsylvania*. Returning to Luther to teach history in 1919, he soon became head of the history department and, for a few years, dean of men. In 1928 he organized the college's news bureau and directed it for the next two decades as a sideline.

Former student Weston Noble described the history professor as "intelligent, brusque, yet compassionate." Always a navy man in his heart, when World War II began, Evanson knew that corresponding with soldiers was a way of helping with the war effort. He began writing letters to naval recruits. This evolved into *Scuttlebutt* and "gradually expanded until it was reaching everyone from Luther in the armed forces," writes Luther chronicler David T. Nelson. "It was a cheerful sheet with the typical Evanson touch, made possible by his singlehanded, devoted efforts." He updated war-

wear soldiers with news from the college and community. In turn, students wrote to Evanson reporting where they were and what they were doing (as the censors would allow). He then published this information in *Scuttlebutt*, encouraging his readers to watch for other Luther alumni stationed nearby.

Luther College's "student soldiers" sent Evanson honest and forthright accounts of the battles they fought, the countries they passed through, and the world changes they witnessed. Today these letters—a sampling of them follows—give voice again to young Iowa soldiers spread across the globe sixty years ago.

Perhaps I was a poor student of geography because I never knew that they had a real winter in Africa but I learned the hard way," Bud Eiden wrote Evanson from an air base in North Africa in November 1943. "I came over here without clothes for cold weather but now I'm spending my money for winter uniforms. . . . Lumber is more precious than gold over here. . . . I built myself a clothes locker out of ammunition boxes and it serves the purpose very well. . . . My engineer took a five-gallon oilcan and made us a stove for the tent. . . . We buy eggs from the Arabs for fifteen cents a piece and by carrying bread from the mess hall we usually manage to eat a couple of egg sandwiches before going to bed. It reminds me of our room up in Old Main [at Luther College] which was pretty much of a kitchen most of the time. . . . Most of the old pilots have finished up and have returned to the States so they made me a flight commander and on the next raid they have me scheduled to lead the Squadron. . . . I've seen a

lot of Europe from the air and I'll have a lot of interesting things to tell you when I get home. . . . I've come to the conclusion that this war isn't going to last an awfully lot longer. The news from the Russian front is very encouraging and I don't see how Germany will be able to stand up forever when the people can't even sleep at night. . . . I've seen the results of some of this bombing and I know what it is. I'm glad the bombs are dropping on Germany instead of on the United States."

Don Strom wrote Evanson in mid-March 1944. He was in a foxhole in Italy on the day after the bombing of Cassino had begun in earnest, and he painted a gritty, tense picture of the horrors of war. "I get used to the noise, but put that with the ground shaking and trembling and you really have something. I said I got used to the noise, that's about half true, you just don't get used to it I guess. . . . The one place the army has the navy beat and that's when I hear 'Whistling Joe' coming. I have many nice holes to jump into to be truthful I'm writing from one of those holes. . . . it's the same one I sleep in. I have really cut quite a figure around here running and jumping in these holes. . . . The only thing wrong with my setup in the hole is that it won't stop raining. So far I've managed to stay afloat, but I sure give the rain a good cussing out. . . . It's been raining ever since I came to 'Sunny Italy' last Nov. and it looks like it's never going to stop. . . . I have had a few shells land around me, but no harm was done. In fact I got so brave once I had to look out just to see where they were busting, I got the look but another 'Whistling Joe' told me to get back where I belong. Couldn't say I was scared, I guess I just stopped living for a while. I kept thinking of room 88 in Larsen [on Luther campus] and how nice it would be to be back there."

Evanson again heard from Strom two months later. Allied planes had dropped more than 2,000 bombs over Cassino, and victory there had propelled the Allies north toward Rome. Strom's unit was left behind to secure the area. "The boys picked up and left us a while back. Pulled out of here on the 'Rome special' I guess. . . . For the past three months I've been laying around holes sweating things out in general. Mostly working at night, as the guys up in the mountaintops didn't like to see us boys work during the day. . . . Things have changed in this writing though, I can go out and walk around when the mood hits me and nothing to worry about. The truth of the matter is it's too quiet for any good use. Been so used to having things whistling me to sleep, that now, being so quiet I find it rather hard to get any sleep at all."

He continued: "I was moping around in the dark this certain night in the middle of no place trying to dig a foxhole. Digging a foxhole in the pitch dark is really

something. . . . Just the same I spend most of the night sweating it out, as there was so much noise you couldn't tell for sure when they threw them back so I just sit out there in the middle of the hole just watching what was taking place before my eyes and then trying to believe it. Never heard so much noise in one place for so long a time in my life. I certainly thought that would bring out Jerry's air force, if he has any left. I don't see much of anything, except our planes and it wouldn't do to shoot one of them down. . . . I don't know if you have ever shot at something you can't see, but you know it's there."

Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion of France, set the tone for many of the letters written by Luther College servicemen stationed and fighting in France. Sailor R. G. Roalkvam, who wrote Evanson in late August 1944, looked back and considered himself lucky: "We had a part in the 'D' Day exercises; we took in the initial wave and then stayed a short distance off shore for 16 days. . . . There was plenty of stuff coming our way; but thank God! Neither men nor ship was ever scratched. . . . We have since then had a few days of rest and relaxation in England; but have been along the coast of France on various duties."

Writing from France in August, Norman Selness was impressed by the strong spirit there: "We've been here for some time taking part in the Brittany Campaign. France is a beautiful scenic country, with excellent roads, quite heavily wooded, rich agriculturally, and the larger towns have elaborate private and public buildings. . . . The French are much as I expected them to be, nationalistic and displaying much fervor and enthusiasm. . . . and are happy to be liberated and show it. . . . I'm mighty anxious to get back—have a nice soft bed, American meals and enjoy the niceties of home life again. . . . It will be a task to reorganize Europe to normal socially; economically it is awfully disorganized but the French have the spirit and determination to again become a great France."

"Things are moving rather rapidly these days," F. W. Moen wrote in August. "First thing I know I was in combat and still am. . . . Whoever said 'war is hell' and 'war is a constant state of confusion' certainly said a mouthful. One day the monotony of it all practically drives a man crazy and the next day you don't know whether you will live or die. At any rate, I have received my wish and won't have to tell my kids I sat out the war in the Quartermaster back in the States. . . . I like France much better than I did England. The people are exceptionally hospitable—that no doubt is due in part

to the fact that they are over-joyed at being liberated from the yoke of the Germans. When we go thru a city, they line the streets, throwing flowers, food, wine, etc. England was O.K. but I detested its climate—France's is much similar to Iowa's at least in the summer time."

Weston "Butch" Noble described his own impressions: "Landed in France—using one of the famous beaches of 'D' Day. Saw evidence of heavy fighting all the way to our camp someplace in Normandy. I witnessed the ruins of Valognes and Monteburg. . . . I was surprised to see Normandy as backward as it is, the house and barn being together in many places, and the houses which were all of stone were hundreds of years old. . . . The attitude of the French is rather 'cool' to Americans. We tore everything to pieces for them, and the Germans weren't too rough on them, as they have good country in Normandy. . . . As I progressed toward Paris it seemed as if one was coming back into civilization. . . . On our trip to Belgium, we passed through one sector of France on a Sunday afternoon and the reception we got from the people was most gratifying as they threw everything from grapes, apples, turnips, carrots, cookies to flowers at us. . . . We went through one town quite late in Belgium, the people getting out of bed to stand in the doorway in their nightclothes to wave us through. Very encouraging to say the least. Yet I was quite surprised to see the pro-Nazi element as strong as it is in some places."

From the Pacific Theater, Chellis Evanson received accounts that were grim and haunting. In November, John P. Halvorson described a land battle in the South Pacific: "Rode around in a landing craft for about five hours before landing watching the Navy bombard the beach. . . . Knocking out everything on the beach except those [enemy] which were dug way down and there always seem to be some that are. . . . And imagination plays so many tricks on you and every little noise is [the enemy]. Didn't sleep much—just lay in my foxhole and dozed. . . . Don't believe I ever hated to see night come so much in my life. . . . I really understand what those pockets of resistance are now. . . . They hold up in a natural bowl which had caves galore and crevices, pinnacles, trees, and have a weapon, ammunition or grenades they are satisfied as long as they can get plenty of men before they get killed or commit suicide. . . . The news is good to hear now with the Philippine campaign going well, the Navy running the [enemy] home (those that were left), and the European campaign still moving if slowly."

Okinawa was the last major land battle of World

War II. Harris Kaasa was in the 7th Division, which experienced some of the most savage fighting on the island. They faced heavy artillery in early April and early May, when he wrote to Evanson. "They stuck me in the 7th Division, an outfit with a real history (there's that word again) that runs from Attu to Kwajalein to Leyte and finally this rock, which is a rugged go in any man's language. . . . They say this island used to be the [enemy's] artillery training ground, and brother I know what they mean. We have ducked a few short barrages, and it's the most hellish thing I've ever seen. I don't think I'll ever forget the devilish screech of those whistlers as they came over they nicked me very slightly once, but it was too negligible to even be classed as a scratch. Don't guess I ever shook so hard or prayed so fast in my life. . . . Incidentally, I'd like to say right now that the doggies up here are great fighting men—you can see heroism written in every movement. . . . The boys in these line rifle companies really go in there and dig—when they trade grenades with Tojo at 25 paces, things get rough. . . . And when the shells aren't falling the green valleys have a queer sort of beauty unlike anything I ever saw in the Western World. . . . Nevertheless, the place is American—anywhere you see American men and equipment and hear English spoken is American. . . . Once again here's my vote for Uncle Sammy's foot soldiers . . . and the gallant medics who are always on the job."

Nine days later, Kaasa wrote again. Fighting had temporarily flowed away from his division, and his mood had shifted. "It's quite a relief not to be jumping every few minutes. I was getting to the point where I would dive headfirst into a hole if a shell hit half a mile away. That sounds silly and looked silly as hell but brother, I take no chances because sometimes they give you no warning, zeroing in on the first round. . . . The insect situation in the Rhyukus is absolutely un-American. Mosquitoes, eyes glowing with an eerie, inhuman light poke their head into your tent and you dive for your rifle, thinking it is an infiltrating [Japanese]. The fleas, on the other hand, are so minute that you cannot detect them."

Back in Europe, Allied forces swept through Germany. In March 1945, Charles Hegtvedt described for Evanson what he saw: "We passed through many former German cities and towns. I say 'former' for these former cities and towns are now reduced to mere monstrous piles of rubble, ruin and trash; allied bombings over a period of many months, and recent shell and small arms fire has been most effective. . . . The non-fraternization policy is strictly enforced over here so we have no contact with German civilians other than in the

line of duty. . . . Due to the obvious shortage of manpower most of the field work is being done by women of all ages."

The final obstacle in the defeat of Nazi Germany was to cross the last natural boundary into greater Germany, the Rhine. Soldier Adolph Fossum described his crossing: "Our division made the Rhine crossing via glider and parachute and gave the Krauts a very sound beating, making up for some of the pushing around it got in the Bulge. Airborne operations remind you of the [Luther College] Norsemen after they get inspired by [Coach] 'Pip' Qualley and they really know how to fight. The best part is that after we have accomplished our mission we are usually relieved by the infantry and don't have to stay in the line too long although our casualties are quite heavy during our operations."

Writing in late June from Germany, Weston Noble tried to explain to Evanson his thoughts about what he saw in the Nordhausen Concentration Camp, which he had helped liberate. "Many women and children as well as men had met their death in this place. We made the citizens of the town take each body individually, carry it about 1.5 to 2 miles, and then bury it. When we could not stand it anymore, we made them continue on regardless. . . . We can readily see just what was going on here in Germany. The majority of the civilians deny any knowledge of such. . . . The Army of Occupation is not too good for the average GI. First of all the present younger generation of the German race is not at all high as far as morals are concerned because of Hitler's teachings, etc. The American soldiers with idle minds and nothing to do after hours are falling 'prey' to this, and that plus the excessive drinking is going to ruin many American soldiers."

Norman Selness's July letter revealed a young man attempting to analyze the momentous world-changing and life-changing events that he had witnessed. "From reports Central Berlin is horrible. Complete destruction," he wrote. "We hope some good developments will come of the Potsdam Conference. . . . American policy is too negative especially politically for Europe. Russia has taken the lead in matters and from evidence is very likeable and an amazing fact about Russia's foreign policies, but of course it is to win peoples and countries to her side. Our policy is too economic and military suppressive giving the people little to change their voices or attitudes except what they catch from contact with the American Soldier."

Selness concluded: "Germany youth is healthy and

handsome and even after their defeat Germany cannot be ignored as a force in Europe in future years. They take great pride in their work. . . . No doubt, since the time of German unification she has made vast strides in modern and industrial developments, national unity and some respects almost have to admire it. I have seen a few factories and they are almost models of cleanliness and efficiency. But it is along political and behavioral lines that Germans fall far behind the Western world. Her treatment and utter disregard for other nationalities is perhaps the most unjustifiable part of the whole system and all thought was held down here too. . . . Hitler got in on the hate of the people—it was much because of economic conditions and political eyewash and promises and Germany being so industrialized face conditions similar to the US in 1933. . . . Russians are breaking up the estates which should be a good step."

After the war, Chellis Evanson continued teaching until retirement in 1966, ending a 47-year career at Luther College. Stories still abound of his colorful and unorthodox teaching style, and, in the Luther College Archives, the letters still exist from the "student soldiers" who wrote to him during World War II. Wrestling with homesickness and culture shock, and pondering America's place in the world, they told him what war was like—frightening, dull, frustrating, and at all times educating, as they learned about life, the world, and themselves. ❖

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NOTE ON SOURCES

The quotations are from letters in the Chellis Evanson Papers in the Luther College Archives. For more on the history of Luther College, see David Theodore Nelson, *Luther College, 1861–1961* (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1961), and Leigh D. Jordahl and Harris E. Kaasa, *Stability and Change: Luther College in Its Second Century* (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1986).