

HAMMETT OF Alaska

The 51-year-old author joined the Army as an EM to fight fascism, but he had his battles with the brass.

YANK Staff Writer

SHORTLY after Samuel Dashiell Hammett exchanged his ODs for tweeds, he told New York newspapermen that the Aleutian Islands, where he had served two years as a GI, were actually beautiful and not hell holes. "The trouble is that the men up there don't lift their heads up long enough to see how nice the islands look," he was quoted as saying.

Civilians who read this were surprised, to say the least. They had come to believe, from servicemen's letters and magazine and newspaper articles, that the chain of islands strung across the North Pacific was the most forbidding in the world—foggy, wind-swept, storm-bound lava piles that ought to be given back to the natives as quickly as possible.

But Aleutian GIs, when they heard of Hammett's remarks, only laughed. They realized that readjustment for the 51-year-old author of "The Thin Man" and other mysteries wasn't going to be any problem. He sounded as screwy as an ex-GI as he did when he was a noncom up in the Aleutians and Alaska.

They recalled that when everyone was bitching about the move to Adak and the fact that the island was to be their home for a while, Hammett said, "I have a feeling that I wish I had been born here and was returning home." Adak is one of the bleakest islands in the chain.

Hammett was on Adak for 18 months and distinguished himself on two counts: He was unlike other EM in that he was always in good humor and maintained a genial disposition, and he seriously liked the Aleutian weather. In fact, he insists that his health improved during his Aleutian service. Other men say they have lost weight, teeth, hair and sense of humor.

Hammett came to Adak as a member of the Signal Corps, and his MOS was message-center chief. But fame caught up with him shortly after he hit the island, and the CG summoned him one day and asked him to put out a daily newspaper on the island. Hammett agreed, if enough men were assigned to help him. "I got into the Army to get away from writing," he said.

"How many men will you need?" the general asked.

"At least 10," Hammett said.

The unprecedented number of men for an Army newspaper was granted and so began one of the Army's most extraordinary publishing ventures. The four-page mimeographed—now multilithed—paper published chiefly world news and cartoons by three artists. Hammett, as editor, wrote occasional editorials, but soon became principally the buffer between the brass and the EM on the staff. Once the paper happened to use "God damn" in an article. The chaplain telephoned to complain. Hammett talked to him and told him, "with the paper shortage the way it is, it's lucky God gets his name in the paper in any manner."

Hammett soon settled into a simple daily routine. The paper was published at night, and Hammett usually got out of the sack around 9 P.M. He went to bed around 5 or 6 A.M. Sometimes when the weather was fairly good, he would wake up early and take a walk, and his tall, spare frame, topped by a bushy white mane, could be seen plodding up and down the mountains that ring the island. Though he had been a crack screen writer during his civilian days he went to only one movie in the Army. That was to see "Watch on the Rhine," which he had adapted for the screen.

None of the GIs with whom he worked and

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lived regarded him as a man of prominence. To them he was known as "Sam," not "Dashiell" or "Dash," as he is referred to by civilian friends. While dining with friends in a New York restaurant shortly after his discharge Hammett was approached by a couple of men who knew him as an enlisted man. He asked them to join his party for a drink, and they kept referring to him as "Sam" during the drink. One of Hammett's civilian friends, tiring of the name, at last appealed to the visitors to "please call him 'Dash'; I can't get used to 'Sam' at all."

The fact that he preferred "Sam" to "Dash," the fact that he "played it straight"—to quote him—as an enlisted man and that he didn't seek or accept any special privileges because of his age or prominence, the fact that he used the GI belt and razor issued him at Camp Upton, N. Y., when he joined up three years ago, and the fact that he shared the GI suspicion of brass made him extremely popular with fellow GIs.

Hammett's scorn of brass was legendary in Alaska and the Aleutians. Friends used to take joy in recalling the encounter the author once had with a major at Dutch Harbor. The major approached Hammett and said, "I've been doing a little bit of mystery writing myself, and I wonder if you would come over to my quarters this evening and share a steak with me. I'd like to show you my stuff." Hammett replied, "Certainly, if you've got enough for all of us," pointing to the four EM accompanying him. "Well, I don't know," stuttered the major.

"Oh well, some other time, sir," said Hammett, as he saluted and walked off.

The matter of a commission for himself was always a source of amusement to Hammett.

"Every time I was interviewed by some visiting newspaperman I was always asked why I turned down a commission," he used to say. "I always had to explain that no one ever offered me one, and I was damned if I was going to stand on my head to get one."

Hammett, like every other GI, sweated out T/O problems, and while the dough never interested him—he once went seven months without hitting the pay line—he desired ratings as much as anyone else. He was a sergeant in the Medics in the last war and came up to the Aleutians as a corporal, and for a time it appeared he was doomed to remain a corporal throughout the war. "That would have left only pfc in Ordnance for me in the next war," he complained. However, he made T-4 after a year on Adak and subsequently, when he was transferred to Anchorage, in the I&E section of Headquarters, Alaskan Department, he made T-3.

"Now I can buck the line in case I ever want to go to a movie," he said when the stripes came through.

Hammett spent the last six months of his overseas duty editing a monthly publication for the Alaskan Department's I&E section, but his superiors made one error with regard to the author last August. They sent him to Edmonton, Alberta—one of Canada's leading western cities—on temporary duty.

The writer checked into a downtown hotel in Edmonton, glanced out of the window and saw his first streetcar in two years, telephoned room service for food and headed for the bathroom and his first bath in a tub since he left Alaska.

Newspapers frontpaged his visit. He signed more autographs in one day than he had in three years. He was Dashiell Hammett, noted mystery writer, again.

Ten days later he returned to Anchorage, Alaska, and surprised everyone by putting in for his discharge on the age ruling. He had given no previous hint that he desired to quit.

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"That atomic bomb frightens me, even though it's on our side," he told one friend. Later he said he thought it was the streetcars he saw in Edmonton.

But, in a more serious mood, he confessed that he thought he had gone stale on his Army job and that he was of no more use to the Army. "And the Army was the steadiest job I ever had since the last war," he solemnly remarked.

The one mystery Hammett never quite cleared up to the satisfaction of a great many of his friends was the reason he joined the Army and why he volunteered for overseas duty when he had a good deal at Ft. Monmouth, N. J.—where he was assigned as a Signal Corps instructor.

Of course, many GIs were convinced Hammett had joined up to get material for a book. But the nearest thing to a book he ever wrote while up in Alaska and the Aleutians was "The Battle of the Aleutians," an Army-sponsored pamphlet.

However, Leonard Lyons, New York columnist, said recently that Hammett is preparing a book and quoted the author as saying, "It will not be about Alaska or the Aleutians. It's about a guy who comes back home and doesn't like his family." Which is the kind of twist that Hammett loves.

Actually, the reason Hammett joined up was that he regarded enlistment in the Army as part of his general personal campaign to fight fascism, a fight that he has been engaged in since 1936 and to which he has been devoting most of his time and money. As for applying for overseas duty, Hammett explains he didn't want to suffer the same fate as he did in the last war, when he never got any farther than 20 miles from his home in Baltimore.

Maintaining his unpredictable manner to the last, Hammett left his barracks bags full of GI clothing on the air-freight dock at Anchorage when he took off for the States and showed up with just his toilet kit and his sense of humor.

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