

Elegy For An American

Pfc. Karl J. Shapiro

THE time to mourn is short that best becomes
The military dead. We lift and fold the flag,
Lay bare the coffin with its written tag
And march away. Behind, four others wait
To lift the box, the heaviest of loads.
The anesthetic afternoon benumbs,
Sickens our senses, forces back our talk.
We know that others on tomorrow's roads
Will fall, ourselves perhaps, the man beside,
Over the world the threatened, all who walk;
And could we mark the grave of him who died
We would write this beneath his name and date.

Epitaph

Under this wooden cross there lies
A Christian killed in battle. You who read
Remember that this stranger died in pain,
And passing here, if you can lift your eyes
Upon a peace kept by the human creed,
Know that one soldier has not died in vain.

Shapiro Chides the Long-Hairs

NEW GUINEA—At the height of the Arawe landing an LCT, fitted up as an amphibian medical unit to take wounded from shore, was hung up on the beach. The men aboard were protected somewhat by a Bofors that gave back as much as they received from strafing Jap planes, but, when night fell, the medics had to put the casualties in foxholes ashore, stand guard over them, and then go through the same routine the next day.

It was a tough spot for everybody. And a hell of a place to find a poet. Pfc. Karl J. Shapiro was there, and he's a poet.

To the average GI, poets are long-haired, lavender scented characters who woo their particular muse while surrounded with flowers and gushing women. Such a guy, according to Shapiro, may still exist, but he's probably way off base and would do better selling lingerie in

a bargain basement than trying to bunch words together so they form an honest piece of writing.

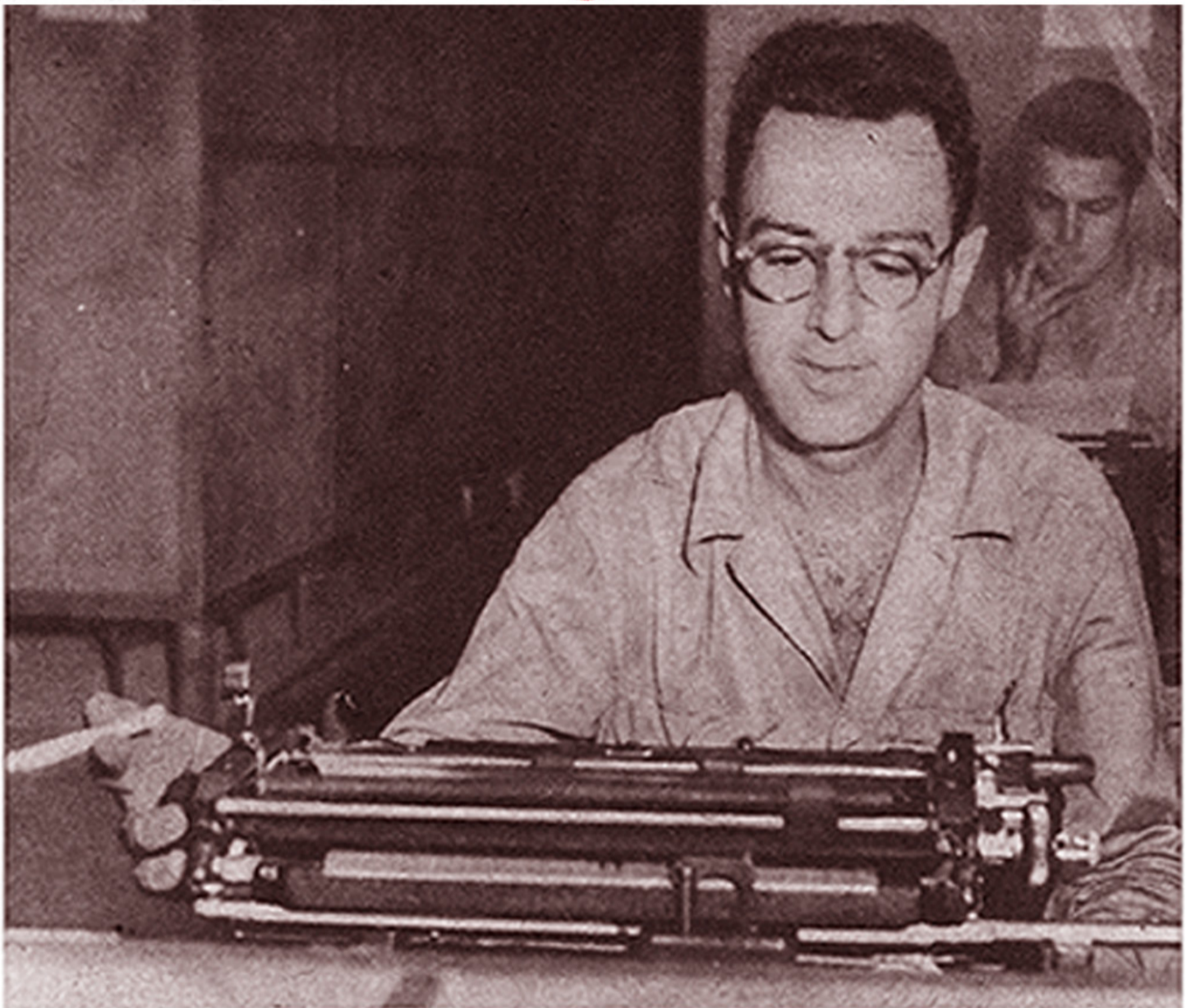
Shapiro ought to know. He's undeniably one of the finer young American poets, has won a Guggenheim Fellowship, an award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and numerous other literary prizes and magazine awards. "Contemporary poetry, or the kind a 'long-hair' might write," he holds, "is highly abstract and unnecessarily obscure. Those who write the stuff depend on ideas and tricks of language to such an extent that it's often impossible to extract any meaning from their poems."

A poem, in Shapiro's mind, should make easy reading for the ordinary guy who doesn't happen to be a brain trust. The reader should understand the piece and get enjoyment out of it. Otherwise, the poem would be better un-written.

Pfc. Shapiro left his home in Baltimore, Md., for the Army in March 1941, has been overseas for 28 months and has been in New Guinea since March 1943. Beside the Arawe landing, he has been with a medical unit at Saidor and Kiriwina. He feels that the Army, particularly during battle action, is of benefit to a writer.

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...the writer should feel pretty damn strongly," says Pfc. Shapiro.

"It packs a hell of a lot of experience into a short period of time," is the way he puts it.

Having taken his blast at the miasmatic abstractions of the long-hairs, Shapiro went on to give a little advice to novices at the game.

"To write a good poem, the writer should feel pretty damn strongly on the point he's trying to express. Give it everything, but use your own speech, your own idiom. This gives the piece

individuality and strength." As to the proper length of the poem, he said, "There's no 'proper length'. It should be complete, should present a whole, rounded idea. But keep in mind that the longer a poem is, the tougher it is to write and the harder it is to hold the reader's interest. In other words," he concluded, "brevity, in poetry, as in the time a guy has to spend getting shot at, is very desirable." —Cpl. BILL ALCINE

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