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Ranger Reconversion



Ranger Sgt. Lee M. Brown.

MARKT-GRAFING, GERMANY—The Rangers stood quietly in the streets of the quiet little town and talked small talk about big things.

This was the Fifth Ranger Battalion, a good outfit. They had hit the Normandy beaches on H-Hour, D-Day. They had traveled a long way since, and most of the miles had been hard to come by.

Within a few hours they would be heading home. So mostly they talked about home. They thought home would be pretty good.

These were all young men, many of them barely out of their teens. Most of them never had been to college. They had been too busy becoming post-graduates in all the more practical techniques of homicide.

As the hot sun slanted down on the little town, the Rangers huddled in the shade and talked casually about doing the things they had wanted to do for a long time—buying gaudy neckties and pin-striped suits; about malted milks and bourbon whisky; about getting jobs and getting girls.

The Rangers weren't sharing the fear of some people back in the States that it would be a long and painful process for combat soldiers to re-adjust themselves to civilian ways. Just give them that discharge paper and the chance to buy a blue suit. That was all. After that, the Rangers said, the process of becoming a civilian again would take them at least five minutes.

Had the war changed the Rangers? Had combat given them a tough, mean outlook? Had war—as some people back in the States feared—made soldiers like the Ranger ruthless and hard to get along with?

John Hodgson delivered special-delivery letters in Washington, D. C., before he came into the Rangers. Now he is a 25-year-old master sergeant with 88 points and an awful yen to get back to his wife named Burnlee. (Burnlee is one helluva name, says Sgt. Hodgson, so he calls her Sis.) Hodgson doesn't plan to go back to his old job. Instead he will become a mortician.



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The Rangers rib Hodgson about this. They think it is kind of funny that a guy trained in about four dozen ways of killing people should now start laying out dead people.

"My dad was a mortician for 25 years," says Hodgson. "Now he's dead, but my mother owns a mortuary at Rock Island, Ill. It's a good business. What I want is a quiet life. I don't want any trouble or any noise. I ask you: What's quieter than a mortuary?"

Hodgson, who was upped from platoon sergeant to first sergeant six days after the Normandy landings, believes the war has had an effect on most of the Rangers, but not in the way that some people in the States worry about.

"For one thing," he said, "we have learned how important it is to depend on the other guy. Teamwork is what counts. All the time I see soldiers helping one another. Any time our guys get a package of food from home, they divvy it up. When you're going along the road in a car and you see another soldier stranded without gas, you give him gas. And in combat helping one another is about five times as important as anywhere else. I think maybe the civilians can learn a few things from us about getting along together."

Hodgson made it clear that he figured some soldiers would come out of the war a little wild-eyed, but he thought those soldiers would be a mighty small fraction of the total.

"The Rangers will be all right," he said. "It may be that some of the younger guys will have a little trouble settling down, but most young guys have trouble that way. This outfit hasn't stayed in any one spot for longer than four weeks since D-Day. We have got pretty used to traveling, and some of the younger guys will come out with itchy feet. Some of them will start college and then drop out before too long. They will get a little bored, and their feet will get to itching. But, hell, there's nothing much wrong with that. As far as these guys going back to civilian life a bunch of toughs, as some people are afraid might happen, that's all crap."

SGT. James Mercer, a 21-year-old rifleman from Dupou, Ill., thinks he probably will go back to his old job as yard clerk with the Missouri Pacific Railroad at Dupou, maybe just long enough to save a little money.

"I may want to go to college," he said, "either the University of Illinois or Washington University at St. Louis. I won't know for a while yet."

Mercer hopes that people back home won't be so tired of the war that they will want to forget everything that happened in it.

Morris Mooberry, a 26-year-old master sergeant, has one major ambition when he gets out of the Army. He wants to sit down across the table from his wife, Opal, and eat as much of Opal's cooking as there is food on the table, and he wants plenty of food on the table, including big dishes of meat and potatoes, with ice cream for dessert.

He plans to take back his old job in the shops of the Caterpillar Tractor Company at Peoria, Ill. Maybe he will study diesel engineering on the side. He hasn't made up his mind about that yet. He belonged to the CIO union at the plant, and he believes in unions. He was against wartime strikes, and says he believes that most of the war time strikers should have been put in the Army.

Mooberry has had a belly-full of the Army, of excitement and of seeing the world. He is ready to settle down in Peoria, or maybe go back to his home town of Eureka, Ill., and not move out of Illinois for the rest of his life.

Mooberry believes that the people back home

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will forget within a week after he is home that he ever was in the Army.

"I hope they do," he says, "I don't believe it will do much good to talk about the war with civilians. I don't think war is something that anyone can know about unless they're actually in it. I would just rather forget I ever was in the Army except on those times when I get together with other guys from the outfit.

GIs of the 5th Ranger Battalion know what they want when they get home and out. Peace and quiet are high on their lists.

"The Fifth Ranger Battalion is talking about getting together once a year for a big blow-off, and I hope we can do it. We'll have a hell of a time. Probably we'll look back and get to thinking we actually liked the damned Army."

Alex Barker, a 20-year-old T-3 from Johnstown, Pa., is a medic who won the Distinguished Service Cross for taking a cart carrying four wounded men through heavy fire on D-plus-2. He wants to go to college and study medicine.

Roger Neighborgall, a 21-year-old staff sergeant from Huntington, W. Va., has had three years of medicine at the University of Indiana, and he plans to finish his studies and become a doctor.

S/Sgt. David Nelson, 21, who lives on a farm near Santa Cruz, Calif., plans to go to the University of California and learn forest and game conservation. "It's a quiet life," he says.

That's the way it is with most of the Rangers. The men who last February cut the Irsch-Zerf road and fought for nine days, cut off, behind enemy lines, are ready to take it easy. They have been good soldiers and good Rangers. They think being good civilians will be a lead-pipe cinch.

