

Hilltop OP

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WITH U. S. FORCES IN FRANCE [By Cable]—We wanted to get a good look at things, and the G-2 officer recommended the view from a certain hill, so we drove out there in the afternoon.

Thick trees and bushes covered the base of the hill, and we had to struggle for 10 or 15 minutes through wet woods before we emerged into broad daylight again. We were halfway up the slope.

Just beyond the woods we came upon a couple of German corpses, laid out by their machine gun. There was nothing left of one Jerry from the waist down, but his wristwatch was still going. The other German was lying flat on his back, his left hand extended and the index finger pointing south in a curious gesture of authority.

When we reached the hilltop, the countryside opened out around us—lovely broad fields of yellow and green, alternating with other hills. On our right was a town, its church steeples poking into the sky. There were clouds of white smoke over the town, and the steady sound of gunfire came up to us. But somehow the battle seemed unconvincing—like a newsreel.

It was almost evening when we reached the bottom of the hill again, and I wandered off to a field where troops of the 82d Airborne Division were encamped. A group of them were opening up K rations and generally taking it easy.

One paratrooper had taken off his shoes and was slowly and luxuriously removing his socks. He told me he'd been wearing them for 10 days. The last chance he'd had to take them off, he'd been just about to wet his whistle on a quart of cognac when marching orders came. Along with his personal equipment, the paratrooper had to carry the 45-pound base plate of a gun, and he had no room for the liquor. So he used the cognac to wash his feet. "I thought the alcohol might dry up my footsores," he explained.

The airborne troops were dug into the very middle of the open field. A couple of days before, two of them had been lying in a foxhole right under a poplar when an airburst of shrapnel hit the tree and dropped straight down, killing one man and injuring the other. Since then, everybody had been digging in right out in the open, and only one man occupied a slit trench or foxhole at a time.

They had all been fighting since D Day. Compared with the obstacles at the beginning of their drive, the hill they had just taken was only a minor deal, but it was no push-over. "At some places," one paratrooper told me, "the fighting was so close the Krauts didn't even bother to throw their grenades—they just handed them over to us." Every road up the hill had been mined and booby-trapped. The favorite German trick was to stretch thin, barely visible wires across the path about the height of a man's ankle, with sticks of TNT tied at each end.

But the airborne troops had taken their objective, just as they had taken others in North Africa and Italy. As we sat around the fire, heating cups of cocoa over a grill made from the rods of ammunition packing cases, the men talked of their travels and their exploits. In the foxholes of Normandy these days there are no atheists—and no inferiority complexes either.

