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Troopship

A transport is many things: a moving van a tenement, a hospital, a fighting ship —and even more

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SOMEBODY ON our transport said that a transport ship was like a moving van. Somebody else said it was more like a freight car. But the Supply Officer, a short, skinny man who wrote poetry for the ship's daily paper, gave us the best description. He said a transport was like a tenement house. That, I think, was the best I heard that day. We were making the kind of comparisons men are always making between their ships and the things they knew back home. A transport is like a tenement house in many ways.

She is big and bulky. She has many decks, like floors. She carries thousands of people jammed together. These people eat inside of her. They sleep deep inside of her, or on the decks when the weather is hot, the way people sleep on tenement roofs. In her stores she carries everything to feed and clothe a man, and down in her holds, in her cellars, she can carry the big moving things of land warfare, tanks and trucks—like a garage in a tenement house.

They are alike in many ways and you can go on drawing parallels between the two, but you can't carry the comparison too far or you lose the point. A transport is tenement-like, all right, but she is many more things besides. When you begin to count those things you

begin to realize that it is impossible to compare a transport to anything else on land or sea. Most ships, like most buildings, are built to serve one specific purpose; a transport is many ships in one. On my transport, the last one I sailed on, we were known technically as an "APA." The initials stand for "Attack, Personnel, Auxiliary." The guns on her decks stood for "Attack." The thousands of troops she carried into battle were her "Personnel." The last "A" stands for "Auxiliary," but it might just as well stand for "Anything."

For eight days on the way into battle we were a tenement house, a moving van, a freight car. Then we reached the battle lines and we dropped the troops into tiny boats which took them into the beaches. And the transport, lightened of her load, her cargo, and her passengers, rose higher in the water. And then I saw a sort of miracle.

The transport—that big, awkward thing so recently full of young men eating, sleeping, playing — suddenly stopped being a moving van, freight car, tenement house, and became, almost before we knew it, a hospital.

That part of it is what I really want to tell you about.

Our transport arrived at the scene of battle at exactly 4:30 in the morning of D-Day. At H-Hour, which was 8:30, we went onto the beaches in the small boats.

From the beach I could see our ship out in the bay, and she was only one of many almost exactly like her.

I got back to her that night. I got back in one of the small boats which kept running between her and the beaches. There were seven wounded men in our small boat. Two of them were so badly wounded that when we drew up alongside the transport it was impossible to lift them out on stretchers and hoist them aboard with cables, which is the usual method. What they had to do was lift our small boat bodily out of the water, with all of us inside of it, ease us alongside the lower deck of the transport, and then gently lift the

wounded men onto the deck.

It was while this was happening that I saw a wounded Marine I had not noticed before. He was on a stretcher over in one corner of the small boat. He was lying flat on his back and he seemed to be fast asleep. There was no blood on him. All the other wounded men were covered with blood but the sleeping one was as clean as he could be. I couldn't see anything wrong with him.

When they came to the sleeping Marine, the clean one, he didn't even stir. His clothing didn't seem to be wrinkled. Somebody had placed his rifle next to him on the stretcher, straight along his side, and his left hand was locked over the barrel. He was breathing very gently and very regularly. I turned to one of the doctors standing there and I pointed. "He doesn't seem to be wounded," I said.

"Probably shock," the doctor said. "We've had lots of them today."

Now the transport sits offshore, perhaps a half mile away from the beach. On the beach the whole world is mud and coral and explosion and blood.

A transport has to be a clean ship, but on D-Day no ship in the world can stay clean. It isn't dirt that gets into everything: it's blood. All along the deck, the gangways, the passageways, there is the color and the smell of blood. Such things can't be helped, even on the cleanest ship.

I noticed this most strongly a little later when I had climbed three decks below to see the wounded. I walked down the passageway in the direction of what had been the Troop Officers' Mess. One of the dining rooms in the tenement house had been converted into an operating room.

You had to be careful not to slip in the puddles of blood. Even when a pharmacists mate came along and mopped up the blood, he left a slippery floor, and of course he couldn't mop up the smell.

I walked over to one of the tables where one of the doctors was bending over a wounded man. When I got close I could see that the wounded man was the sleeping

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Marine from the small boat.

The doctor was the one who had met us out on the deck. When he saw me he said, "It isn't shock. It's shrapnel. Passed right through both lungs. Piece no bigger than a pebble. One side right through to the other."

"What are you doing for him?" I asked.

"We're doing nothing," the doctor said. "We're waiting. He hasn't got a chance."

We stood there looking at the rising and falling of his chest—it was a fine chest, very smooth, very brown—and then somebody behind me yelled at me.

"Hey!"

I turned around and saw another Marine looking up at me. He was lying on the next table, on his stomach. He was older than the average run of Marines; he seemed to be about 35, although it is difficult to tell a man's age under such conditions. He was propped up on one arm and a doctor was working on the other arm. I didn't need more than one look at that other arm to know it was a mortar wound. A mortar wound looks like a big bite, as though some large animal, like a bear, had taken a bite out of a man's flesh. The doctor was working on the wound with a pair of scissors.

The Marine looked up at me and said, "You're a correspondent. You ever know Tregaskis?"

I had never met Tregaskis, but I nodded and said sure, I knew him well. The Marine said, "He was one hell of a swell guy. He was with us all through Guadalcanal."

The doctor made a large cut with the scissors. The Marine jerked his chin upwards and gritted his teeth. When he came out of it he said, "Where did you last see Tregaskis?" I said, "I don't quite remember. Around, someplace."

"He was one hell of a swell guy," the Marine said, and he jerked his chin upwards again and shut his eyes tight.

The doctor looked over at me, over the rim of his glasses. He reached over with his free arm and held up a small syrette of morphine and winked at me. The syrette had been squeezed dry. The Marine

was full of the stuff.

He kept on talking. He was quite bald, and the top of his head was a brownish color that ended abruptly at the line of his forehead. He was keeping his eyes deliberately away from the wounded arm, and he kept on talking to me all through his pain, as though talking was giving him some relief.

The arm itself was a terrible thing to see. The fleshy part of the forearm had been hit and certain nerves were exposed, taut and dry. The doctor was simply cutting away the lacerated flesh, cleaning up around the edges, and trying to keep the scissors away from the nerves. The eyes of the Marine were getting very wet, and every time the doctor made a large cut the eyes closed and water oozed out of them. Still he kept on talking.

"I been in the Marines 15 years. I been through Guadal, and Saipan, and now this. I wonder where the hell I'll go next."

I looked at the arm again and at the doctor still cutting away. I said, "I think you've got a pretty good chance of getting home after this. They won't send you back to your outfit."

He looked up at me and opened his eyes wide.

"Why you say that?"

There was really only half an arm left and the doctor was still cutting away. "Oh," I said, "You've been through enough. Guadal, and Saipan, and now this, and 15 years in the Marines. I think maybe they'll give you a rest."

I was leaning on the table and our faces were only a few inches apart. I had to move up close to make myself heard, because the room was bedlam. There were five operations going on at once.

The Marine laughed at me. Then he shut his eyes tight again. When he opened them again he said, "That Tregaskis. A hell of a guy."

He turned and looked at the man on the table next to his, the man whose lungs had been punctured. "You know him?" he asked me. I said no, I did not know the Marine.

"Adams," he said, "A nice kid. With me on Saipan. What's the matter with him?"

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"Shrapnel," I said.

He laughed. "He'll get over it. You watch. Adams is a good kid."

Now the doctor was finished, and he poured the sulfa on the wound and started the elaborate process of bandaging. Now the Marine relaxed for the first time and put his face on the table. He seemed to be very sleepy. The doctor looked at me again, and winked again, and nodded at the empty syrette lying on the table.

They lifted him onto a stretcher when the bandaging was finished. His eyes were half shut but he was smiling. He turned to the doctor.

"Hey, Doc, after this one is all over you do me another favor, huh—?"

The doctor said, "Anything you say. What is it?"

His eyes were very sleepy. "You do a skin graft job for me. Put some hair on my head."

The doctor laughed and said he'd be delighted to do such a favor. The pharmacists mates started to carry the bald Marine out of the room. In the doorway he made them stop, and he turned and looked at me. "You know," he said, "I got my goddam scalp blowed off on Guadal. You'll come down to see me, huh?"

I said, "Sure. I'll be down later tonight."

Two hours later I went to look for him.

I went down below to the part of the ship that had been the troops' sleeping quarters just 16 hours before. I found him way over in a corner on one of the lower bunks, almost at floor level, lying on his side with his face to the wall. It was horribly hot down there and his back was covered with sweat. I could see that he wasn't sleeping, so I bent down and said, "How's it?"

Slowly, very slowly, he turned over to face me. He was in terrible pain.

"Hi ya," he said.

I started to stand up. "I'll let you get to sleep," I said.

"No," he said. "Stick around." He closed his eyes and took a long breath. When he opened his eyes the lids went only halfway up. He smiled and said, "How ya doin'?"

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I said, "Oh, I've had a helluva time, but I'll pull through. I'm tough. I'm rugged. How are you?"

He looked at the bandaged arm. Then he looked back at me and he looked for a long time before he opened his mouth. His face and body were ringing wet, so I reached for a towel and started to dry his face. He didn't move. The strange thing was that he didn't even close his eyes when I passed the towel over his forehead. He kept looking at me all the time. Then he spoke.

"You remember what you said about my going home?"

"Sure."

"You believe it?"

I put the towel down. "I'd lay money on it," I said.

"Oh Jesus," he said. "Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Then he closed his eyes and began to cry. There was hardly a sound, except for the creaking of the bed springs when his body began to heave. I sat there on my haunches watching him, and not knowing quite what to do. Finally I put my hand out and began to stroke his forehead, slowly, back and forth. He paid no attention to it. He kept on crying in that noiseless way.

Then it must have been the pain in the arm that brought him out of it, for in the midst of the crying he jerked his chin upwards.

"Adams," he said. "How's he?"

"Now take it easy," I said.

"What do you mean take it easy?"

"They just buried Adams. Burial at sea," I said.

The bald Marine never changed expression. He just closed his eyes.

So it was the Supply man who said that a transport was like a tenement house, and I thought it was the best of the comparisons we had been making that day. A transport is all the other things we said it was—a tenement, a moving van, a freight car, a garage, a fighting ship. But when I think of the things that happened aboard on D-Day, I realize that a transport is many more things besides. It is a hospital, for one thing. It is an ambulance. And it is one other thing that none of us thought

of that day we were making comparisons:

A transport is a hearse.