

# *The Soldiers Wife*

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## 8

A feeling of relief came over Pito when she finally received a letter from Arthur. She and the children were staying in Eagle Pass with Nana in early July of 1944. Rose Lee was now almost six months old. Joe, Mary, and Mary's boys enjoyed playing with her and Jimmy. The weather was hot in Eagle Pass and Joe churned up some ice cream for the children as they used to do when he was a boy on the Hopedale farm. Nana had also received letters from Arthur and Oscar letting her know that they were okay. She worried often about her sons and it was good to have Pito and the children visiting.

In late June 1944, Charles enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He moved his wife and children to Eagle Pass to be close to family while he was away. For the moment he would be training in the States. Mary was working at the Post Exchange at the Eagle Pass Army Air Field where pilots received advanced training. Joe also had a job at the Air Field.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> ID had moved inland several miles as they cleared small towns of enemy forces. They were now facing a high ground held by the Germans known as Hill 192. The small fields in the proximity of Hill 192 were surrounded by hedgerows in which the Germans had dug in their fortifications. The ancient hedgerows, the *bocage*, were hard-packed mounds of earth from three to seven feet high. Held together by stone walls and entangled tree roots, the tops were overgrown with shrubs and thorny bushes. To the west of Hill 192 lay the town of St. Lo, another major German stronghold.



Elite Nazi troops of the 3rd Parachute Division



American soldiers fighting in the *bocage*

Because of the good observation the Germans had from Hill 192 it was imperative that it be taken so that U.S. Troops could break out of Normandy and into the inner regions of France. The attack on Hill 192 began on June 11. The task assigned to the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment was to take the high ground to the east of Hill 192 where they met strong enemy resistance at the village of St. Germain d'Elle. By June 16 the battle came to a standstill with the 2<sup>nd</sup> ID holding the line at about two miles from the Hill. The Division had suffered over 1,000 casualties in the battle thus far.

A second attack on Hill 192 was planned for July 10. The Americans took the lessons learned from the first attack to develop new and effective strategies. One lesson learned was that tanks from the supporting Tank Battalion were easily knocked out by the Germans as they attempted to advance over the top of hedgerows; exposing the tanks vulnerable underside. The solution was to mount blades on front of the tanks allowing them to plow through hedgerows; opening paths for the Infantry. For the second attack some of the Infantrymen would also be equipped with automatic weapons and carbines, which were more effective in the *bocage* than their M1 rifles.



U.S. Sherman tank with sawtooth plow



The front line Officers of K Company had recognized Arthur to be an excellent soldier in combat and promoted him to the rank of Sergeant on June 28, 1944. As a Sergeant Arthur had the responsibility of teaching and guiding less experienced soldiers in tactics used in combat. Leading squads of eight to twelve men, his goal was to keep them alive while accomplishing whatever mission they were ordered to do.

Holding the line to where the 2<sup>nd</sup> ID had advanced in the first attack on Hill 192 meant patrolling the area routinely. Being on patrol was the most hazardous duty for the Infantry. Most patrols were carried out under cover of darkness at night. The Germans had trip wires rigged that would send up flares which would expose the patrolling soldiers. The enemy would then open up with machine gun fire and mortars. The Germans also planted deadly anti-personnel mines that patrols had to be watchful for.

On the night of July 2 Arthur led a patrol across enemy lines in search of German machine gun and mortar emplacements. At times they were so close to the enemy that they could hear conversations among the German soldiers. On the following day Arthur was summoned to report to his Company Commanding Officer at field headquarters. Arthur had given his report from the patrol to his Lieutenant and was wondering why he was being called to headquarters.

The Officer greeted Arthur with sad news that was relayed from the Cannon Company...

*Your brother, Oscar was out on patrol last night and was killed by sniper fire at around 01:30 this morning. His body has already been transported to the rear with other casualties. I am very sorry. Dismissed.*

Arthur's heart sank in anguish as he headed back to his squad on the front. Indescribable feelings of helplessness and anger pressed deep within his chest; what could he have done to watch over his brother more closely; why Oscar, he was such a kind and gentle kid.

His thoughts then turned to his mother.

Arthur didn't know how to tell the news to the loved ones back home, especially his mother. Sheltered in the foxhole back at the front he wrote a letter to Joe.....

4 July, 1944

*Somewhere in France*

*My dearest Brother*

*Joe, I know the way you are going to feel after you read this letter. As much as I hate to write you the bad news. You know I was never a good letter writer and it's very hard for me to explain to you, but I feel that it is my duty to tell you.*

*You remember when dad passed away; well just a few hours before he was gone he called for Charles and me. It was very hard for him to tell us, but he told me to take care of you, Oscar, Edward and Mother. I was much younger than you are now, and you and the boys were just kids. Joe as you well know that I have been doing my best to help you and my brothers. But honest, I promise you Joe, I couldn't do anything so I feel that it is my duty to tell you. Oscar is gone. He was killed at about 30 minutes past 1 O'clock July 3, 1944; may his sweet soul rest in peace.*

*I know that he is in heaven; he was so sweet to all of us and Mother loved him with all her heart. Please take your time when you tell Mother. My wife is with Mother and I know it's going to be very hard for you and all of them. You are the only one left with Mother so please take care of her.*

*How do you think I felt when they told me. I had been talking to him just a few days before. Joe, I wish I was there with Mother and you. I repeat again, take your time in telling Mother and do all you can for her. May God be with you all. Please write to me when you can. Enclosed is all my love to all.*

*Love, your Brother  
Arthur*

Getting mail out from the front line was slower than usual so Arthur tucked the letter into his shirt pocket where it remained as the next Mail Call didn't come soon enough.



The second attack on Hill 192 commenced on July 10 as planned. The battle began with heavy artillery fire into the German positions weakening their defenses. Infantry Regiments then moved in; this time they had interphone

communication with supporting tanks which greatly aided the coordination of the attack. Several small villages and farm houses, which were hideouts for the enemy, were situated on the slopes of the Hill. Over the next two days the Germans fought back desperately, even to the point of refusing to surrender.

By the end of day on July 12 the American Infantry had a stronghold on Hill 192 and control of the highway leading to St. Lo. The training for the attack during the lull after the first attack proved successful and there were fewer casualties. The elite Nazi Paratroopers now realized what a formidable force the Americans proved to be.

Arthur and the other brave soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ID had earned the Combat Infantry Badge. To Arthur the heroes were Oscar and the other soldiers who were killed in the battle; many who had become close as brothers.



The 2<sup>nd</sup> ID held their position at Hill 192 for a few days during which replacements would arrive; over 1,600 men had been lost in the previous attacks. Still encountering German machine gun fire in the hedgerows; they then moved forward and dug in at new positions in preparation for the planned Normandy breakthrough, code named Operation Cobra. The Division had secured the eastern flank of St. Lo so that the 29<sup>th</sup> Division would have little resistance from that sector in the attack on that German stronghold.

On July 25 the soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> ID saw the B-17 and B-24 heavy bombers of the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force as they flew overhead towards St. Lo to deliver their ordinance. On the following morning the 2<sup>nd</sup> ID would attack southward towards the small villages of Rouxeville and Vidouville. The 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment was successful at using .50 caliber machine guns as they moved forward from hedgerow to hedgerow. The enemy fought back with artillery, mortar, and small arms fire which continued through the night. It was an exhausting day of fighting and the GI's did not get much rest.



Bombed out ruins of St. Lo



The church still standing at St. Lo

The attack on St. Lo was one of the most savage fought battles in France. Arthur would be awarded the Bronze Star Medal for his meritorious action in combat. Unfortunately, a Captain whom Arthur was very fond of was killed in action along with many other of his comrades. The fighting continued for the next two days during which the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment met heavy enemy resistance but accomplished their task and seized the village of Rouxeville.

At 10:30 PM on the night of July 27 Arthur was wounded when the Regiment was being pounded by German artillery. Shrapnel from an exploding shell entered his forearm and ripped open the side of his abdomen. He was evacuated to the nearest aid station.

