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Left for Dead

ROME, DEC., 1944, NEW YORK TIMES—Members of the House Military Affairs Committee who concluded their tour of European battlefields with a visit to the Italian front expressed shocked surprise at the rigors of the campaign in (northern) Italy. Nothing they had seen in France, they said, could compare with the terrible terrain of the Apennine (mountains), and nothing they had read at home prepared them for the inhuman conditions in which men of the Fifth Army have to fight. The burden of complaint was that they didn't know the Italian battlefield was one of the toughest in the world. They had no idea of the tremendous natural obstacles the G.I.s have to contend with in addition to the stubbornness of the enemy stand on the best defensive positions he holds in Europe....

Stories have been written and they have been printed.... (But) readers don't hear the scream of shells or the thunder of fallen rockets....

As to the (American soldiers) grinding their way up steep escarpments under enemy fire from on top, or slithering through muddy valleys in snow and rain... they display grim endurance and casual courage.

—*Anne O'Hare McCormick*

AT THE FRONT LINE IN ITALY, DEC. 1944, SCRIPPS-HOWARD—Our troops are living in a way almost inconceivable to you in the States. The fertile black valleys are knee deep in mud....It rains and it rains. Vehicles bog down and temporary bridges wash out....

> Thousands of the men have not been dry for weeks. Other thousands lie at night in the high mountains with the temperature below freezing and the thin snow sifting over them.
>
> They dig into the stones and sleep in little chasms and behind rocks and in half caves. They live like men of prehistoric times, and a club would become them more than a machine gun. How they survive the winter misery at all is beyond us who have the opportunity of drier beds in the warmer valleys.
>
> *—Ernie Pyle*

December 7, 1944, about 10:30, a frigid, gray Italian morning. Snow blanketed the trees and the mountains, a picturesque scene if not for the knowledge that German artillery forces—deadly mortar, machine-gun, and rifle emplacements—were embedded behind some of those lovely, white-laced pines and ridges. Several army trucks moved slowly on a twisting, rocky road through the Apennines, about 10 miles southwest of Bologna. Cpl. Leland Victor "Lou" Brissie, 20 years old, an infantry squad leader in G Company, 351st Infantry Regiment, 88th Infantry Division, Fifth Army, was riding in one of the seven canvas-covered trucks in the convoy.

He sat in the rear of the vehicle with the other members of his platoon. The outfit was returning from a portable shower unit where they had had a shower and a hot breakfast, the first such luxuries they had enjoyed in several weeks. Neither the cold nor the mountains were like anything Brissie had experienced growing up in the small town of Ware Shoals, South Carolina. Brissie wore two woolen shirts and long underwear under his olive drab combat jacket, and two pairs of woolen socks inside his mud-specked boots. A few of the other soldiers had cut off ends of blankets to wear as scarves, and some wore overcoats. Corporal Brissie wore neither. He found both too confining. His helmet was strapped, his M-1 rifle was held lightly between his long, lean legs—he was 6'4½", weighed 205 pounds, and was called "Slim" by his buddies.

As the truck jounced along the rough road, there was apprehension to be sure among the infantrymen. For every mountain you climbed, Brissie had learned, there was a higher one in front. The Germans had dropped back and knew the exact distance to place their guns so their shells reached where you were. The 88th Division had been in Italy for more than a year and to that point had about a 90 percent casualty rate, with some 6,000 men killed, wounded, or missing. The Germans, amply armed, had spent six months digging themselves into caves, wrecked buildings, and rocky ridges. It was treacherous going for the G.I.s—but still there were the lighter moments, the expressions of anticipation when one day—one day—they would return home.

Brissie didn't remember any specific conversation that morning in the back of the truck, but it most likely was little different from some of the exchanges he'd frequently had.

Just the day before, as a group of soldiers sat around cleaning their rifles in a tent, Brissie was asked, "What are you gonna do when this is over?"

"I have a deal with the Philadelphia Athletics to pitch," he replied.

"Do you play with 'em?"

"No, I haven't played with 'em. But I'm gonna play with 'em."

"Well, by God, I better get some tickets, I'll tell you that!" said one.

"When I come to see you, are you gonna let people know that you know me? Or are you gonna go big time on me?" another soldier said.

And someone else piped up, "Yeah, sure, and I'm gonna pitch for the Yankees." It got a good laugh.

"We all have a dream or a hope," Brissie wrote home to his wife, Dot, which was short for Dorothy. They were married in April 1944, just two months before he was shipped out for combat duty, and both were 19 years old. "We all seemed to respect the other guys' dreams," he would recall. "But you always got the typical G.I. comments."

However, a few of his fellow soldiers smiled knowingly when he talked about pitching for the A's. They had seen him throw a baseball with uncommon strength and accuracy at the reception center in Naples where troops from the States landed. He was a left-handed pitcher who had spectacular success in semipro leagues, in college ball,

and in organized military ballgames back home, after having enlisted following his freshman year at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. A week after he graduated from high school, Brissie, to his great pleasure and apprehension, was invited up to Shibe Park in Philadelphia to throw for Connie Mack, the legendary manager and owner of the A's. Mack had owned and managed the A's since the American League was founded in 1901, leading them to nine American League championships. "Imagine," he thought to himself, "Me in an A's uniform, me pitching against DiMaggio and Williams, pitching against Feller and Ruffing." It was the kind of reverie he embraced since he was a little boy at home in Ware Shoals playing catch in the park with his uncle Robert.

Brissie was a pitching sensation from the time he was 14 years old, when he starred for the Riegel Textile Mill team in the fast and popular factory league. In his very first game for Riegel against the Greenwood Textile Mill—he was the only teenager on his team—he struck out 17 of the first 19 batters he faced. Later, on a good Camp Croft team against other army teams that fielded some major league players, Brissie, before being shipped out in the summer of 1944, compiled a 25–1 record with Camp Croft, averaged 20 strikeouts a game, and the Camp Croft team won the camp army tournament. (It was from his learning of those games that Connie Mack decided that Brissie's future, if there was to be one, lay as a pitcher and not as a first baseman, a position he also played at Presbyterian. Brissie said that it was his clear impression that Mack's view was "when you're able, or think you're able, I'll see that you get an opportunity to pitch for the A's." Brissie said that Mack "never guaranteed me anything. But that was certainly fair enough.")

Tall, lean, soft-spoken, and one of the most respected men in baseball—almost everyone called him "Mr. Mack"—Cornelius Alexander Mack (born McGillicuddy), then 78 and nearing his 60th year in professional baseball as player and manager, still wore a dark suit, the high, starched collar in turn-of-the-century fashion, and a straw hat even on the bench as he managed his teams. He rarely left the dugout during games, wigwagged signals with his scorecard to move his fielders into

position, and always sent one of his coaches to the mound when making a pitching change.

Brissie, who had turned 17 the week before that first appearance in Shibe Park, was awed to be in his presence, yet he impressed Mack with his crackling fastball and sharp breaking pitches and poise. Brissie's trip to Philadelphia was the only time he had been out of South Carolina, until he was shipped to Italy. Brissie now carried with him on the front lines of the war in Italy a hand-written letter that Mack had sent to his father, on letterhead that read, "American Base Ball Club of Philadelphia, Office of the President," a letter that Brissie had nearly memorized:

> *Aug 24th 1944*
>
> *Dear Mr. Brissie Sr.*
>
> *Many thanks for your nice letter and I will be more than pleased to write your dear son whom you and Mrs. Brissie should be so proud of. Was nice to have those two trophies presented for his splendid work. As things are looking so good at present time our hopes are that our club can have your son with us next season. It looks also at this time that our club will be greatly improved over this season.*
>
> *With kind regards, Sincerely yours, Connie Mack, president.*

Shortly after that, Brissie, sitting in a foxhole when the guns were silent, wrote a letter to Mack. In it he said that his ambition had always been to be a big-league pitcher for the A's. He told Mack that it looked like the war "could be over this year...." This was when Gen. George Patton, commander of the Third Army, "was going flat out across France," as Brissie expressed it. Like many of his fellow soldiers, he thought that they would be home by Christmas.

The "deal" that Brissie referred to in his earlier conversation with another G.I. was that Mack had agreed to pay for Brissie's three years in college (long enough to get a degree, at that time), and then he would join the A's organization after that, in 1945.

Mack responded to Corporal Brissie's letter:

> *Our club is still in need of a left hand pitcher, only hope you will be where you can still do a little work so that when you join our club the fans will forget such pitchers as Rube Waddell, Eddie Plank, and Grove.*
>
> *Note what you say about that fine Infantry you are connected with, only hope you will all survive the war in as good condition as you are now.*

To Brissie, Mack's comments about him and three of the greatest pitchers the A's ever had, came as "a shock." "I never knew I was that kind of prospect," he said.

Whether Mack just meant to lift the soldier's spirits or really meant what he said, there it was in black-and-white for Brissie to read in his foxhole—by now he had experienced numerous encounters with the enemy, often able to make out the outline of the German soldiers in the night by the flash of fire from their weapons.

But by the end of October the weather had gotten so cold, Brissie wrote home that, "they established what they called 'The Winter Line.'" The Americans had stopped trying to push ahead because the cold and the snow and the mud were so bad. At one point, they just couldn't move anything. Only mules could climb the mountains to bring provisions up to the soldiers and take the dead and wounded back down.

In November, Brissie wrote Mack the forlorn news: "Looks like we won't be getting home all that soon."

He wrote that "we were bogged down in France and Belgium. We were stuck for the winter. And after they stopped us in Italy in late October, we knew that there wasn't any way until spring that they were going to make any kind of push into the Po Valley and north." He added that there was no way that he would be getting back "in time for spring training, and getting back to baseball."

In the killing fields, Brissie, along with many of his fellow soldiers, looked forward to receiving the *Stars and Stripes,* the armed forces

newspaper. "And the first thing I'd do when I got the paper was to see if it had a Bill Mauldin cartoon," Brissie recalled. "Most of us did the same."

Brissie said that Mauldin, who became particularly known among the troops for his "Willie and Joe" renderings of disheveled but determined G.I.s, "brought the reality of the war, along with a much-needed sense of humor. He knew what it was like. We might be laughing at them as we sat in a water-filled foxhole with rain soaking the paper."

Indeed, Mauldin, in his early 20s but with the youthful face of a teenager, in his army fatigues and steel helmet and drawing pad, traveled with combat infantry troops as they battled their way from Northern Africa, into Sicily, Italy, and France.

Brissie recalled several cartoons that made an impact on him, including one with Willie and Joe, seated among scraggly weeds, helmeted, rifles at rest, unshaven, wearing boots, their feet in mud, and Willie's arm tenderly tossed around Joe's shoulder, with Joe looking morose. "Joe," read the caption, "yestiddy ya saved my life an' I swore I'd pay ya back. Here's my last pair o' dry socks."

Brissie recalled: "Yes, dry socks were a premium. If your feet were wet for an extended period of time, you could get trench foot. In real cold weather, your feet would freeze. It could virtually paralyze you. I never had it, but I saw guys who did. Mauldin caught that reality of guys on the front line. It struck a chord of the harshness of war, but at the same time he was able to bring a smile to your face. He was a great gift to the World War II G.I. He made life more tolerable for every one of us in combat."

Brissie compared Mauldin to Ernie Pyle, the famed war correspondent. "Both of them were there with the troops, every step of the way. Both of them captured the essence of war."

In the first week of November 1944, Brissie and his unit were pulled back from the front for hot meals and a shower in a rest area near Montecatina. After three days, with replacements, they were returned to the front.

One squad out of each platoon in the 351st was sent ahead as what was called “a listening post,” a buffer between the main body of troops and the German combat patrol unit.

Whatever reveries or small talk they had in the back of that truck, or existed in the several other trucks in the little convoy that wound its way through the resplendent, snowy Apennines on that December morning, they were suddenly interrupted by the numbing boom of a 170-millimeter artillery volley—the troops called them “bombs,” for they were as lethal—and the instantaneous blaze of explosives.

The drivers slammed on their breaks. “Run for cover,” Brissie shouted to his men.

They all leaped out of the truck. His group ran to one side of the road; others fled to the opposite side. They knew that that first shell was just to gauge the distance to the target; there was surely going to be another such volley.

Within moments there was: this shell burst with a shriek, the noise shattering to the ear, the earth erupting as if it had been dynamited. Brissie was slammed to the ground by the impact, his helmet knocked off, every button on his jacket sent flying. His clothes and boots were in tatters and in an instant his entire body felt as if it had just been struck with a jolt of electricity. Another howling shell exploded, and another. He couldn’t move his left leg—he could see through the ripped pants that it had been nearly shredded from the knee to the ankle—but he had to move out of the line of fire. His only thought was not to be hit again.

He dragged his body along the snow-covered ground some 20 yards to a nearby creek, where the sloping bank gave him some protection. Blood was streaming from his nose and ears. He fought off the terrible pain as he forced his body down the bank and attempted to slosh through the shallow stream. Then he blacked out. He awoke after a period—he didn’t know how long. (“My watch stopped at 10:50 AM; I still have it,” Brissie recalled.) He crawled some more, and nearly made it out of the creek, but got no farther. He lay facedown in the mud and snow, his upper body on the bed of the creek but his legs still in the shallow creek. He turned and looked down and saw his

right boot sticking out of the water, caked with blood and saw nothing of his left foot. He didn't know if the foot had been blown off. "It's hard to describe the feeling of turning over and not seeing your foot," Brissie recalled. He said a prayer for the foot not to be gone and began to hallucinate. He thought about being at his grandparents' home for a holiday dinner, one of the most pleasant memories of his childhood, and everyone in the family sitting around the table, with one empty chair. Everyone, in this dream, was looking at him to take his seat. Then he blacked out again.

He lay there like that for some eight hours.

When the German mortar onslaught finally subsided, medical corpsmen went through the area looking to see what help they could offer. The dead were strewn along the road and the mountainside. In the fading light, several corpsmen, part of what was called a "graves registration team," carrying folded stretchers to the scene and then unfolding them to carry the bodies away, passed a sprawled body lying halfway in the creek, and moved on, leaving it for dead. One medic, however, double-checking, retracing his steps, now noticed something unusual among the bodies. "Hey," he shouted, "this one moved." It was the one half-submerged in the creek.

They carried Corporal Brissie, half-conscious, onto a stretcher, placed the stretcher across the hood of a jeep, and rushed him back for emergency treatment to a battalion aid station about a mile away.

On the road back, however, the jeep was a target of more of the powerful, 88-millimeter German mortar strikes. The air bursts exploded, scattering shrapnel 360 degrees. One of those bursts detonated at the front of the jeep, making the driver swerve off the road and throwing Brissie from the stretcher into a snow bank. He hit the back of his head on a rock, bruised his neck, fractured a vertebrae, and suffered more shrapnel wounds in his right shoulder.

The medics pulled Brissie back on the stretcher, again placed him across the hood of the jeep, and raced to the safety of the aid station.

Brissie went in and out of consciousness. He remembered waking up in the aid station. It was close to dark and a chaplain was kneeling over him. With a Bible in his hand, the chaplain was praying. Brissie

was shaken. “I didn’t know if he was saying the last rites, or what he was doing,” recalled Brissie.

Brissie didn’t have time to ask. Doctors appeared and immediately administered blood transfusions. The medical report on his injuries stated that he had been hit with 21 mortar fragments: “Left leg broken between knee and ankle; both feet broken; left ankle broken; contusions in right thigh bone and left thigh bone; shrapnel in each hand and shoulder; concussion.”

Then several doctors looked over his left leg with the gaping wound and suspected it was already infested with bacteria. While Brissie had clawed his way to the creek, his leg had become caked with dirt and mud.

“Immediate resuscitation and blood plasma followed by transport to field hospital facilities provided ligatures to the most serious bleed vessels,” a field doctor wrote in a monograph. “In the entire history of warfare prior to WWII, this type off massive injury which Brissie sustained at his leg was invariably managed by surgical amputation.”

Gangrene, Brissie was told, would likely set in. As he lay on the makeshift operating table, intravenous tubes connected to his arms, the doctors agreed on the decision: The leg could not be saved. Amputation was necessary.

The surgeon broke the news to him.

“No,” Brissie protested. “You can’t take my leg off. I’m a ballplayer. I can’t play on one leg.”

“You will die if we don’t.”

“Doc,” he said quietly, “I’ll take my chances.”