

YANK

WELCOME HOME!

By Sgt. LEN ZINBERG

THE two soldiers sat deep in the soft luxury of their Pullman seat, staring at the American countryside racing by the train window. They had been looking out that window for nearly four days. The pfc said, "Joe, I'm getting a funny feeling in my guts, like before we go in the line. Think of it, in less than an hour I'll be home!"

The corporal smiled and said quietly, "It will be good to be home."

"Good?" The pfc laughed. "Brother, it will be sensational! You got to be overseas for a couple of years to learn what home really means. One more hour . . . think of me walking down the old street, the kids looking at my Combat Infantryman's Badge, my battle stars, my girl and my folks asking all sorts of silly questions. Of course, it won't be nothing to the welcome you'll get, Joe. They'll have the band out for you. Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart with cluster . . . you're a damn hero!"

"Yeah, some hero," Joe said, looking out the window again.

For awhile they were both quiet, then the pfc yelled. "Did you see that little white house we just passed, the one with the funny green shutters and fancy garden? That's like my house, only mine's bigger. I got my own room."

"I shared a room with my kid brother," Joe said. "Our house is a small brown bungalow. Got avocado and orange trees growing in the back, and a big garden. Some garden, my father sure liked to fuss in it. Funny the way a guy keeps thinking of things. At Anzio, in France, in the mountains before the Po Valley . . . I spent a bunch of time dreaming about that house."

"Your folks don't live there," the pfc said, hesitating. "I mean you told me. . . ."

The corporal said, "My folks are in Arizona. I want to see the house first, then I'll hitch a ride down to see my folks. Country sure is green around here."

"You bet, that's my country," the pfc said proudly.

As the train pulled into the neat little town, the pfc got his bags and shook hands with Joe and said nervously, "Well, after all the times it was supposed to be 'it,' this is really it. So long, pal. Glad I met you on the train. Take care of yourself, and don't forget and pull any of that 'Dove casa?' stuff over here!"

Joe laughed politely at the corny wisecrack, and they shook hands. When the train stopped, Joe watched the pfc jump off into the arms of a kindly, stout woman who hugged him and cried. A gray-haired man kissed him and tried not to cry. A pretty young blonde girl shook his hand awkwardly, then suddenly hugged and kissed him. All the time, a big clumsy dog tried to jump on the soldier, kept running around and around, his tail going like a propeller. Other people stepped forward, anxious to slap the pfc on the back, shake his hand.

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As the train pulled out, Joe caught a quick glimpse of the soldier's face—he was laughing and crying, trying to hug them all at once.

It took another 12 hours before the train crossed the California line. Joe sat in his seat nervously, leaving it only to go to the dining car or the men's room. People stared at him politely, coldly, noticing his blue Combat Infantryman's Badge, his two rows of brag ribbons.

The town was full of the afternoon heat when Joe got off. It was the kind of heat he liked, and he was glad to be walking once more instead of sitting. There was no one to meet him, the few men at the station merely stared at him and whispered to each other as he passed.

Every detail of the town was exactly as he had so often pictured it: the big high school where he had played basketball, Shaw's Bakery with its wonderful friendly odor of baking bread and cakes, the modernistic movie house, the fire house with the bright red engines and the men lounging by the door—even the spotted fire dog looked the same.

He passed the drugstore and saw Pop Anders still behind the soda fountain. Joe grinned as he thought of the great sundaes Pop could whip up. The old man looked at him and didn't smile. Joe walked faster. Down the main street and its stores, turn right, past the crowded fruit market where he had once worked—all new faces staring at him, nobody there he remembered. Another right turn, and down a street lined with trees and orderly white bungalows, service flags hanging in the windows, women busy in the kitchens. A tiny red-headed girl was playing house on one of the lawns. She looked up at him, then said shyly, "Hello, soldier."

Joe smiled. "Hello, kid." Must be a new family living there he thought. Pretty kid. Sure, they're new, that used to be Eddie's house. Eddie and his cute sister . . . wonder where she is now?

Joe turned another corner, his heart beating wildly. He stopped in front of his house. The small front lawn was full of weeds; somebody had chopped down the orange trees. The boarded-up windows had been smashed, the porch and steps were broken and burned, junk and ancient garbage had been hurled at the house leaving stains on the brown walls. In crude letters, some one had painted, "KEEP OUT! NO DAMN JAP RATS WANTED HERE!"

The corporal didn't even drop his barracks bag. He just stood there, staring at the house, sweat rolling down his yellow face. This wasn't the house he had dreamed of at Anzio. This house didn't have the warm happy air of the others, it looked haunted and desolate. This was the worst house he had ever seen, it looked even more miserable than the shelled stone houses of Italy.

Joe stared at the house for a long time, then he turned and went away, walking with slow, weary steps.

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