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Negroes in Combat

When you're under battle conditions and it's a toss-up whose neck is next, there isn't any worrying about the differences in the color of your skins; at least that's what Negro GIs learned on two European fronts.

Pvt. Charlie Rattler of Jefferson, Tex., a fighter on the Western Front, strikes a pose with his bazooka.

In France

By Sgt. RALPH MARTIN
Stars & Stripes Correspondent

WITH THE SEVENTH ARMY, WESTERN FRONT—The generals had some medals to hand out, but not all of the guys could come. Some of them were still up in front digging in their three-inch guns, some of them were in the hospital, some of them were dead.

The six who were there stood stiffly at attention in their war-dirtied combat suits, their tired faces drained of feeling, their eyes staring straight ahead. The general was telling them why they were getting the medals.

They knew why. You don't forget things like Climbach.

Because you had to be crazy to move in on Climbach—everybody said so. You just don't try to position your guns in a flat valley when you've got big Kraut guns sitting smuggly on two rugged ridges flanking the town 300 yards away, and when you've got Nazi 88-gunners parked on the town's high ground right next to some Mark IV tanks, and when you've got the nearby woods lousy with mortars and machine-gun nests—and all of it, the whole German artillery book, zeroed

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in on a single road, waiting for you to come out so the Germans can start pulling lanyards.

But somebody had to do it. In this 103d Division sector, Climbach was the last Nazi strongpoint before the Siegfried Line. And the Nazis told everybody they liked Climbach; they planned to stay there for the winter.

So the 103d Division created Task Force Blackshear, consisting of a platoon of Engineers, a company of Infantry from the 411th Regiment, seven medium tanks and a platoon of towed three-inch TDs from the 614th. The tactic was for the TD platoon of four guns to keep all the German batteries occupied while the Infantry infiltrated into the town around the flanks.

Leading the task-force column through the woods was the CO of C Company of the TDs. He wasn't supposed to be there; he just wanted to be. Somebody said it was because he was self-conscious about being a Negro. But somebody else said it was just because he was that kind of a guy; because he had lots of guts.

It wasn't long before some of his guts were spilling into the sticky mud near the thin road. Not only did his vehicle run over a mine but it also got smacked square by an 88. Then a machine gun opened up on him. When his executive officer raced through this shellfire to evacuate him minutes later, he was still alive, somehow.

Down in the valley, the medics were soon just as busy as the gun crews.

Ten-man crews can't last long when they're sitting in an open field getting so much fire that nobody knows what's coming from where.

They didn't last.

Less than an hour later, single soldiers were doing full crews' work — loading, aiming, firing and then racing back to a half-track to hop behind a .50-caliber to cut down Krauts trying to sneak through the woods. One of those single soldiers was Platoon Sgt. William Tabron. (He got the Bronze Star.) Tabron kept going until a tank shell knocked out his gun. It wasn't until the next morning that he noticed his foot had been bloodied by shrapnel.

But Tabron was lucky; he's still alive.

Maybe 30 minutes later (nobody looks at his watch during a battle), there was only one gun still shooting. It was 75 yards from three other knocked-out guns, and the Krauts couldn't seem to get at it because it was in a slight draw. Shells kept plopping all around it, just missing. One near-miss blew up a half-track 25 yards away.

It was hot and close, and everybody kept wondering how much longer—who would be next? Still sweating it out was the gun commander, Sgt. Dillard Booker from the Bronx, N. Y. So was his CO, 1st Lt. Thomas Mitchell, and so were a couple of other boys. (Booker got the Bronze Star and Mitchell the Silver Star.) Mitchell was racing around as fast as he did when he broke the Alabama track record for the quarter-mile dash back in his days as a college athlete. He was helping shoot guns, evacuating wounded, pointing out enemy gun positions.

By dusk, all anyone could hear was the splattering of small-arms fire within the town itself. The stiffest fighting the doughfeet had was in the graveyard where the Germans had dug themselves in. When the short pitched battle was over the Germans were still in the graveyard, now waiting to be covered up.

If you asked the doughfeet about it, they'd tell you the TDs deserve credit for taking the town.

If you asked the TD's 3d Platoon, they tell you that they had more than 50 percent casualties. lost three guns, two half-tracks, an armored car and two jeeps.

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If you asked the 614th TD Battalion CO, Lt. Col. Frank Pritchard of Lansing, Mich., he'd tell you, "If you only knew how goddam proud I am of my boys." He was one of six white officers—all the rest were Negroes. In the last war, Pritchard was a buck sergeant.

They're all proud of the 614th, from the division CG down. The division CG is supposed to have said he'd fight like hell if anyone tried to take the 614th TD away from him.

THIS isn't just words. And it isn't just top brass. Hitler would have a hemorrhage if he could see the white boys of the 411th Infantry bull-sessioning, going out on mixed patrols, sleeping in the same bombed building, sweating out the same chow line with Negro GIs.

And the white boys of the 411th are mostly Southern boys.

The Negroes come from the South, too. Not only that, but the C Company CO, 1st Lt. Walter Smith, will be the first to tell you that his boys aren't specially picked as in some outfits, that most of them are uneducated farmhands from North Carolina.

He'll tell you, too, that a few of his boys are trouble-making screw-ups who drink too much, that lots of his boys were almost scared into constipation during their first baptism of shellfire when they fought in Germany alongside the 3d Cavalry Group. In other words, he'll tell you that his outfit is just like any other outfit. He's got a small percentage who were never meant to be soldiers, but most of the boys are good boys —and good soldiers, with plenty of guts.

"You get used to war," he said slowly. "You get used to everything."

He was no longer talking about Climbach and Germany; he was talking about back in Cherbourg. He was remembering all those Negro port-battalion boys who came to him and begged to be transferred into a fighting outfit. They were willing to take busts—anything. They didn't want to hear any more white soldiers ask why there weren't more Negro troops in the front lines.

"I thought every soldier knew that it's up to the Army to decide who goes where," said Smith.

"Maybe if people just didn't worry about us being something special." He was groping for words. "Maybe if somebody could come up here and see how we've been fighting and killing and dying, how it doesn't seem to matter a damn what your color is——."

Smith broke off quickly. There was a short, strained silence, and then he laughed. It was a warm, rich laugh. He remembered something that had happened only last week when the outfit was moving toward the front. He had noticed quite a liberal sprinkling of white soldiers in several of the trucks and asked the first sergeant if they were hitchhikers.

"No, sir," said the sergeant. "They're part of our gun crews."

After he finished the story, the lieutenant sat there quietly for a minute, with a wonderful wide smile on his face.

"You know," he said, "maybe we're just a bunch of battle virgins compared with some outfits, but we've sure been learning a hell of a lot of things about people."

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Negroes in Combat

Part II

In Italy

By Sgt. AUGUST LOEB
YANK Staff Correspondent

WITH THE 5TH ARMY, ITALY — Cpl. Charles Orrett, a 33-year-old artillery scout who describes his pre-service profession as "operator of duck and dodge games," ducked and dodged three German shells that hit his battery. There was a fourth shell he didn't see. That one got him in the lung and back.

After 30 days in a hospital in Leghorn, Cpl. Orrett had a choice of being reclassified or of going back to his old outfit. "That was easy to decide," he said. "My outfit is a Field Artillery battalion of the 92d Division, and I couldn't do better. I know what I'm talking about because I came to the 92d from another outfit. I've felt like a different man since I got into the 92d."

Orrett's outfit is the only division in Europe whose ranks are made up entirely of Negroes. Its Black Buffalo shoulder patch is envied by hundreds of other Negroes in other units. It was worn by the 92d Division of the first World War, also a Negro unit. Everybody else in the 92d agrees that Cpl. Orrett made the right decision back in that Leghorn hospital.

Pvt. Charles Bowden of Rocky Mount, N. C., a wireman in the same battalion, is one of the men who agrees. He and Orrett and most of their friends have been with the battalion since it was activated in November 1942 at Camp Breckinridge, Ky. He went to Arkansas and Arizona, and then on Louisiana maneuvers, and finally to Italy as part of the complete 92d Division under command of Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond.

"Our training back home was rough," said Bowden, "but now we know why. On this front a man must be in top shape. He's no good if he limps around. There's no way to catch a ride up here, and you might have to march 25 miles. If you've done it back home, it's a little easier here."

Bowden ought to know what he's talking about because, according to Orrett and others, he has one of the riskiest jobs in the battalion—stringing wire under the eyes of the Germans. He has been out with forward observation parties several times and has stayed so long everybody felt certain he had been captured. He always came back though, guided, his friends think, by the smell of S/Sgt. Ezekiel Butt's cookery.

Cpl. B. C. McClain, a gunner from St. Louis, Mo., is another man who now knows the value of the endless drill they put him through back in the States. He now thinks automatically in the once-terrifying metric system. Sgt. Maurice Walker, a 23-year-old radio operator from Washington, D. C., said something in praise of the outfit's fire

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direction. McClain agreed and added: "And we can get ready to fire in 15 minutes or less."

Walker said he thought the outfit had been very lucky in getting the officers it did. "I think I speak for most of the men in saying that it doesn't matter to us whether the officers are white or Negro," he said. "Color means nothing at the front. Everybody has a rough life, and that does a lot to bring the men together. The important thing is not what color an officer is but whether he knows his job. If he does, he'll get the respect of his men. Most of our officers are regular."

The proportion of Negro officers in the 92d has been rising steadily. When Gen. Almond took command of the division all the officers were white. Now two-thirds are Negroes. There are three Negro lieutenant colonels, two of them in command of all-Negro Field Artillery battalions and the third the division chaplain.

The outfit's white CO, Lt. Col. Robert C. Ross of New York City, came in for a great deal of praise. Sgt. Walker said whether an officer came from the North or from the South has nothing to do with his effectiveness. The others agreed with him and mentioned Lt. Bradley of Mississippi, Lt. Kibbie of North Carolina and Lt. Davidson of Georgia as some of the Southern officers who have the respect of the men.

"The front," said Walker, "is a great leveling force. There's a great deal more actual democracy up there than in garrisons back in the States, where people have time to get into arguments about things like the seating arrangements on busses."

McClain frowned at the mention of busses. "I was on one in Alexandria, La., coming back from a furlough," he said. "There were no seats in the back part that was reserved for colored people, and two white soldiers up front made room for me. When I sat down, the driver stopped the bus and told me to go to the back. I couldn't squeeze through the crowd, but that made no difference; the driver thought it was something to argue about."

Cpl. Orrett compared his treatment at the Leghorn hospital with the situation at Fort Eustis, Va. "I was born in Toronto, of West Indian parents," he said, "and spent my early life in Jamaica, in the British West Indies. Then I went to New York with my parents and went to school and worked there. I never knew what discrimination meant until I went to Fort Eustis, where there were three big post movies, one for colored soldiers and two for white and colored. After the few rows reserved for us in the two mixed theaters were filled we couldn't get in.

"When I was being treated for my wounds in Leghorn, there was no such thing as white and colored. Everybody was alike. Fighting together and suffering together brings people closer. I think most people are too pessimistic about race relations after the war. The white American soldier has learned what artificial barriers of any sort mean and will be just as determined as the colored soldier to do away with them later. Of course, the demagogues may try to stir things up, but I don't think they'll get very far with the veterans of this war. The veterans will be smarter than the demagogues think."

MOST of the men have thought about what the future will bring them and how such plans as the GI Bill of Rights will affect them. "After the war," said Sgt. Walker, "I'd like to take an advanced course in radio under the Bill. I'd stand more of a chance then of getting a good job. I'd say that most of the men in this outfit are inter-

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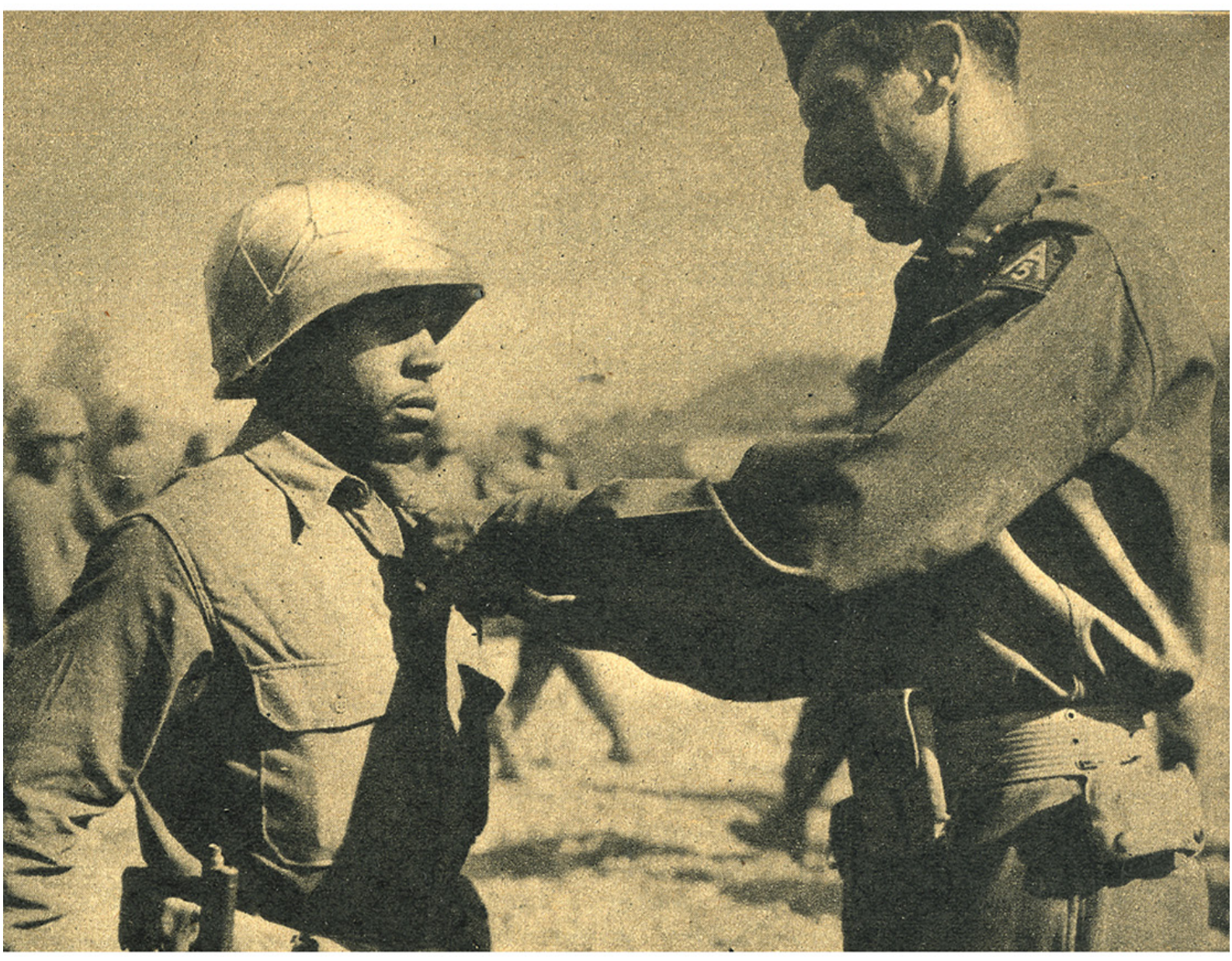
ested in learning a trade, so they won't be thrown on the unskilled labor market for sale to the lowest bidder."

Cpl. Orrett, with a wife, an 11-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter back in Harlem, has similar plans. He wants to study and become a radio repairman in Harlem, where "everybody knows me, including the people who lost."

Orrett was talking about his days as a policy collector. "It was so lucrative, so bright, so enticing," he said, sighing, "that I never thought much about making an honest living. It was an easy life—sometimes $80 a day for doing nothing."

The men in the outfit have had privileges in Italy they never had back in the States. But that hasn't lessened their feeling of homesickness.

"It isn't just wanting to get back to our families," said Cpl. Orrett. "It's because we feel more than ever that the U.S.A. is the best place in the world for us to live."



In Italy, Lt. Gen. Mark Clark pins a Combat Infantryman Badge on Sgt. Nolan J. Reed of St. Louis, Mo., a member of the Fifth Army's 92d Division.

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