

Iron Mountain

by David Ackley

In 1942 you're assigned to the 305th medical battallion of the 80th Infantry Division, for training at the desert warfare center, Camp Iron Mountain, California near Needles and Death Valley, where it's so hot the tents are too stifling at night and the men pull their cots outside to sleep in the open air. But the nights are cold and clear and the millions of stars in the clear desert sky wash everything with their light. At home Dad might step outside on the lawn to light his pipe and look up at these same stars. The desert heat is something fierce, men dropping from it even while just standing in formation.

At the camp you were, for the first time in your service, assigned to a fighting division, the 80th Infantry. Your previous postings to medical training, to surgical rooms and base clinics had sometimes set you apart from the real business of getting ready for war. That feeling like being held back in school was unpleasantly familiar. But that changed almost from the moment of your arrival; the 305th Medical Battallion was a functioning piece of the fighting division. Like the mechanics in the motor pool, you were in the repair business, to patch people up and refit them for their own jobs. Given limited supplies of men your unit was not just useful, but essential.

Sometimes it had been hard, knowing the world, or even a small part of it like Nashua, got along very well without any help from you. Especially with the example of Dad who kept an entire city alive and healthy by overseeing the source of all its life and activity, its water. And mother who'd raised all six of his children, and in turn cared for them and him, so he could carry on his important work. The question of what was your place always lay in some corner of your mind, almost until now. Like many you felt there was more of you that could be useful than living in your parents' home and being a night watchman in your brother's abandoned factory asked. Until now.

The 80th had fought famously on the Somme, in Eugene's war, establishing the division's motto "Always forward." There were among the officers and NCO's a few veterans of that war, quiet observant men with narrow knowledgeable eyes, and deep lines in their faces. The sergeants, unlike their younger peers, rarely shouted or carried on. They guided with a touch on the arm to reposition your rifle on the firing range, a few quiet words alerting you to some possible threat you hadn't seen, cutting through the screams and rants of the younger sergeants whose loud voices claimed the authority that experience hadn't earned.

Sharing the camp was the 3rd Armored Division, a collection of tanks and lighter armored vehicles under the command of Brigadier General George S. Patton, something of a legend for all down to the rawest recruit. He'd been in the Mexican campaign when the army chased Pancho Villa and his rebels deep into Mexico. Some said he'd shot or shot at Pancho Villa himself, others probably closer to the fact that he'd wounded with his own pistol three or so of the rebels. He'd been in the Great War too on the Western Front, and had commanded some of the first tanks used in warfare. They said he believed officers should lead from the front, and seeing him like the dusty head and torso of a centaur jutting above the turret of the first tank in a column showed he meant it.

In training, you crawled with the infantry under the knee high barbed wire of the obstacle courses, face in the dirt, sergeants stepping on your butt if it stuck up for a target and cursing you; you went out on the rifle range shooting for your Marksman's badge, your hunting days helping where your eyesight and damn glasses held down what you might have done... No white coats here, even on duty in the medical tent, you and the docs all worked in fatigues and combat boots. The desert heat fells men even standing in formation with heat stroke, which you treat in the aid tent along with fractures from jeep rollovers. Patton tells his troops it's a cakewalk compared to North Africa where they're headed and Rommel and his Desert Rats are waiting to roll them up and spit them out if they don't shape the hell up.

Both the training and your work in the aid tent absorbed you, where all your intelligence and thoughts settled into the working of your hands as you cleaned and stitched an open cut, one hand irrigating the other hooking the needle through the bloody separated sides and pulling them together into a tight seam then deftly tying a knot for each stitch. At night you washed up, joined the mess line and gabbed a little with the boys behind you, sat and ate, smoked your pipe and fell into an easy sleep looking up at the stars in the desert sky. But sometimes at a sound or stray wind, or rounds going off in a night firing exercise, you woke with a kind of ache or longing that was hard to name. And you found you were thinking of Nashua and the cedar shingled house on Columbia Avenue, and the lawn that needed mowing and your worried mother, your parents growing older without you and you not there to care for them and the parts of you were like the sides of that wound, with nothing to pull them together. You should be here, but you should be there. In Eugene's seeming lighthearted letter from the Western Front he wrote, "And when mother writes of all the things I spend half my time a-thinkin' of..." All those things...

