

Secret

Lester C. Nagley, Jr.

For weeks we have been sitting here in this position. The camouflage nets have been draped over each vehicle, looking like a nightmare out of the Arabian Nights, for weeks now. Everything has a harried, slovenly look, but maybe it's because this is a "secret" position. When we were ordered up here, it was under the heaviest cloak of secrecy. All identification was removed from the trucks, each man was inspected for any signs of which outfit he belonged to; they went through our clothing for addresses or cards. This was big, we had been told. We were to cross the Ruhr River and then it shouldn't be too long before the Germans caught onto how useless it was to try to keep on fighting.

We moved up under the cover of darkness and there were fairly decent roads most of the way. But even as we moved through the cool night, we couldn't help but think how peaceful it was back there in that little town in Holland where we had billeted while getting instructions for the river crossing.

It was peaceful in Herleen, and not unlike the States in many ways. We saw a lot of modernistic houses and metropolitan districts on our way across the continent. Yes, Europe was a lot like home; but gosh, how far away that seems now. The people even reminded us of our countrymen; they had met us with open arms, tried their best to make us comfortable, and had even pulled out their cherished whiskies to drink a toast to us and to a short war.

But now, with all this war about us, the question came again. Why are we over here? Of course, something had

happened, but my gosh, there had been only a few people involved in that and now, here were millions of men, men who had never seen each other before, thrown against one another on the field of battle and told to kill Germans. We have been shoved around from one place to another, we have slept in everything from mud to a count's master bedroom in Castle Rhiecenstien, we have been crammed into tanks, trying to get some rest as we roll along, tired, not caring what we had to do to get it over with. We weren't asking questions other than, "What do we have to do next, and where do we have to go to do it?" This time we had drawn the mission to cross a river; we were hoping it would work and that this would be the beginning of the end. Our minds were filled with other thoughts, too. "Will I get through this one, who will get it this time, on this last drive, will I be lost?" Yes, we have been sitting here for weeks looking at pictures, pictures that had been thumbled, crumpled, made dirty by the mud on our hands. We have been re-reading letters, punching the guy next to us, telling him to "listen to this." Many of the men have held small brown books that the chaplain had given to them, and their lips moved slightly.

We had moved up that night with a bit of moonlight deepened by the searchlights that played upon the low-hanging clouds. It was too bright to suit us, but the drivers were glad for the light—they made better time than usual. Even with the light, it seemed as if we were crawling. We didn't like the flame that belched from the exhausts of the tank in front of us. It made us into a beautiful target,

spotlighting us with flame. The Krauts could sure pick us off if they wanted to. The loud, powerful motors of our tanks, the huge, roaring, powerful motors that move forty tons along with ease, seemed to race with a dangerous groan. Nothing seemed to be going right; those darned tanks creaking and clanking, the light... couldn't we ever make a silent approach?

Then we went off the highway and dust began to whirl about, kicked up by the tracks. The greasy smell of the fumes from the exhausts blinded us. Then we really began to crawl. It shouldn't be too far now. All at once the darkness was penetrated by the small red light on the radio panel on the tank. "Button up, keep a watch out on the right, snipers." "A" Battery answered, "Roger, Able." The battalion executive officer said, "Roger, Baker."

It was really dark when you had only a thin slot to look out of, and five people sat in the large tin can where the sides were cold, four inches of cold steel, to protect you from the small arms fire that might be waiting out there somewhere. "Were the Krauts waiting with a panzer-

faust?"

I sat there realizing that a certain amount of sureness had left me when I saw that one go through Mac's tank, blinding him and crippling Harrison. I tried not to think of that, I tried to think of the other night when the rations came in and what a beautiful sight that Haig and Haig was and how quickly it was gone when it was passed around the circle of fellows. I wanted a nip right then. I tried to think of anything . . . what my wife was doing right then, what time it would be at home, if she would be going to work. Oh well, we were both going to work!

Then we slowed up and someone yelled. I threw open the hatch. The fresh air was sweet and cool. I strained my eyes to make out the figure of the "old man." He told us to stop for the night, to sleep close to the tank so that we could move out in a hurry.

That was the night we came up here. Now we sit and wait and complain. Nothing ever goes right, the guys up the line of brass sure goofed off this time. Maybe we'll never cross that river.

Purple Patch

Even as mother bakes into her prize-winning pies something of the charm of a hazy autumn day, with its frosty shock of corn and its cider barrel, so grandfather introduced into his recipe for friendship a binding quality of reliability, stalwart yet hinting of the warmth and understanding of autumn.

Donald H. Emrick in
BLUE RIBBON FRIENDSHIP.