

Captain Nagle

Writes from 12/1/44

Italian Theatre

Former Jasperite Tells of His Experiences in Africa and Italy; Americans There Need Milk

Captain Howard J. Nagle, who is at the Signal Center in Italy, writes the Press under date of November 5:

"Reading the latest issues of the Press, which arrive regularly six weeks after publication, prompt me to send you a few reminiscences in return for the comfort and interest derived from reading of the doings 'back home'. A lot has gone by since a kid bearing my name tooted a mean cornet (not meant as self-compliment) for the glories of old NCHS.

"Many of the old pals are carrying on the worthy effort at home. For one who has seen the unbelievable volume and potential results of the materiel from America there can be only praise for the working home front. During the earlier days of participation in this war our friends, the British, seriously questioned the fighting effectiveness of the then unexperienced Yank troops. They, however, from the beginning, held in high respect the supplies and equipment which supplemented their own, at times when weakened British industry was no longer adequate.

Friendly Rivalry

I find your column 'With the Colors' extremely interesting and am often amused by the friendly rivalry expressed between members of the various services in the different war theatres.

"Often, I believe, reading features counter misfortune. At any rate, it is probably true that I would not have the time to pen you this letter were it not that I am in a hospital, slowly recovering from recurrent headaches and nervous strain. Several officers friends are here, most suffering from certain deficiencies of the diet. Lack of milk has also had a very detrimental effect on the teeth of Americans who have been in the Mediterranean theatre for some length of time.

"Goats abound in Africa and provide the natives with milk; whereas the little donkey is the universal beast of burden. In Italy the cow family is used exclusively for pulling great two-wheeled wooden carts. I learned that no four-wheeled vehicles exist because of a vehicular tax levied on a basis of so much per wheel. Perhaps this is one reason why there are so many overgrown motorcycles, each with three wheels, bearing a body as large as the normal passenger auto. From observation of the stone houses and appearance of the clothing worn, one would think that the big wood cart, the equally sturdy ox and perhaps a couple of huge wine barrels comprise by value two-thirds of the Italian farmer's worldly possession.

Italy Lacks Materials

“Because the Italians in general lack suitable reinforcing materials and cement, the walls and other supporting members of buildings must be quite heavy and thick, and wide use is made of arches. The building in which I work has outer walls twelve feet thick and it was designed by the most famous architect of his time in Italy. Another noteworthy example of this man’s work is the rebuilding of the dome of St. Peter’s in Rome. Massive as this construction is, it crumbles easily as evidenced by the rubble of destruction left in the wake of our armies advancing northward through this country.

“On the roads one is always finding the carts piled to the highest with broken stone and concrete from wrecked buildings and military fortifications. One day while on a peep ride through the picturesque ancient-appearing Italian countryside I discovered the secret of the demand for this seemingly worthless material. An

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Italian farmer and family were busily engaged with a crude grinding contraption, pulverizing the stone into a powder form for reuse in building an addition to his moss-covered house.

"This same idea, of using over and over again of materials since ancient times, is manifest throughout Italy. To us Americans, such conservation, along with many other things comprising the heritage of the common man of Europe, appears as a shock at first. Having become acquainted with a young soldier of this defeated enemy country, a person no less innocent in the present cruel world conflict than myself, has impressed me of the priceless fortune of having been born of a nation of people who, largely through right, have always won—to continue life as they choose. Such an impression makes one resolved to maintain the basic American ideals to the utter exclusion of the petty weaknesses which have tainted the histories of most of the 'old' countries.

Lead a Simple Life

"Although the average Italian's life may encompass only the simple human glories—and a goodly amount of hard work—he blends religion, music and imagination to a degree probably unexceeded by any other people. Perhaps, this delving into the realm of unreality partially compensates the Italian for lack of many of the conveniences and good fortunes which we enjoy.

"It must have required unusual imaginative ability in the ancient times to create and believe in the existence of the gods, especially in such rustic and simple surroundings. Later, the people turned to religion. In each they have left most tangible evidence of this fervor and belief in the superb art, architecture, music and literature fashioned in the endeavor to preserve their best accomplishments for the future. The Italian of today is devoutly Christian, and religion plays an important part in his daily life. Amid home scenes of poverty and squalor he maintains beautiful churches of considerable material worth.

"For quite a long period I have been assigned to the Signal Center of Allied Force Headquarters. Under the command of General Eisenhower we followed the British Eighth army drive from El Alemein across North Africa, pushing the Germans from Tunisia, the invasion of Sicily, the clearing of the Mediterranean of German sea power and the Luftwaffe. Then came the invasion of the continent of Europe and the slow struggle upward through Italy and the collapse of that country.

Gained Experience

"It was then that we lost General Eisenhower, and General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson became supreme Allied commander of the Mediterranean. It was here in the Mediterranean that the great leaders of the Normandy invasion gained battle experience. The names of Eisenhower, Montgomery, Tedder, Spaatz, Cunningham and Patton are familiar to all of us.

"My present assignment is that of S-2 (intelligence officer) of the Signal Center. It would not be discreet for me to describe in detail the nature of my work. It does enable me to maintain a clear picture of the problems incidental to the handling of the great volume of traffic by AFHQ's complex system of wire, radio, cable and air communications.

"Although I have not had a leave of absence since before coming overseas, I have made the most of my few days off. I have seen much of North Africa, Sicily and Italy from both the air and ground. These include the spots immortalized in song and verse of Mount Etna, the isle of Capri, Sorrento, Naples, the beautiful bay of Naples and "Old Hellspout," Mount Vesuvius, the modern French city of Casablanca, and the Free French and old Barbary coast capital of Algiers. As yet, I have been unable to take off the necessary time to visit Rome, the jewel city of the world.

A Note of Sobriety

"Destruction such as that presented by the 'ghost city' of Cassino offers a note of sobriety characteristic of many places. Excepting the more progressive urban districts, if one were to ignore the mark of war on Italy, he would see a countryside with its people not greatly unlike that which existed here back through the centuries, a common people who accept labor and sing away their troubles. It will require a long time, however, for them to live down the results of the Fascist reign and collaboration with the Nazis.

"And while it rains almost ceaselessly on this late autumn day in 'Sunny Italy,' my interest in continuing this disseration abruptly ends. A ward boy (Italian) is bringing my tray of all important food."