



## With the Colors

May 22, 1945

In a letter to his wife at Newton, Thomas Marshall sent this description of a recent visit to Rome, while on leave from the Mediterranean fleet:

"Upon arriving at the Rest Camp we were amazed to find our quarters during our stay in Rome to be a group of the most modern buildings ever constructed. The driveway, commencing at the entrance and winding in and out of the many structures, was of huge marble slabs which afforded perfect riding. This camp, the Forum de Mussolini, was one of the former Italian dictator's realized dreams for modernistic architecture. Even the neighboring grounds were built up of homes and apartment houses of futuristic designs that marked this section of Rome as being set aside as a residential district.

"After our tiresome ride we jumped out of the truck and, for a few moments, just stood and looked about us trying to absorb all the oddities without missing any one thing. It was just about time for evening chow and although we were already informed by the little 'inner man' we were reminded by the dingling of mess kits of soldiers heading towards the dining room. After a hearty supper the feeling of fatigue seemed to just disappear and by the mumbling of the fellows herded around in groups of two and three it could be easily deduced that plans were being formulated for the night operations of the U. S. Navy for the advance into Rome.

"As we walked leisurely around we noticed the large tennis courts. These courts were not designed like the ones we are accustomed to. They were about thirty feet below the ground level and surrounded on all sides by many tiers of seats. This probably was the scene of many an international tournament, possibly under the very eyes of Il duce, whose personality could be seen throughout the forum as everything was of the finest. There were little paths, winding in and about the shrubbery and evergreens, which were studded left and right with statues and memorials of some nature. Probably each statue had a name and reason for being there but outside of the fact that we all agreed they were beautiful we did not fully realize their worth.

"Even before we ever thought of seeing Rome, the rumor had been passed from mouth to ear that the beauty to be found here was not only in landscape and historical art. We spent no time in establishing this fact. Venus de Milo surely spent some time or other in this section, operating a beauty parlor, because the general run of the fairer sex could be classified only as downright beautiful. Sparkling teeth, lustrous hair (kind of a dark black) and eyes, yes eyes.

"And now we shall turn our directions upon inspections of bars and merchants who make their living by dispensing the different liquid refreshments native to this section of Italy, ie, vino, vermouth, cognac and another drink which we could have sworn was shellac. In entering Leoni's, we saw what could easily pass for a night club in any of the finer sections of our state side cities. Red plush seats around a neatly set marble-topped table was shown to us by the waiter, who was wearing the usual 'gimme-tip-Joe' smile. The prices may have been just a little above normal but after drinking a few rounds of their 'liquid-dynamite,' we wondered if they made any profit at all.

"Someone mentioned the word 'sleep' or perhaps it was just some one 'burping'; nevertheless, the subject was dropped immediately. Sleep was the furthest thought in our mind and even so, we had all had a good night's sleep just forty-eight hours ago. Here, as in other cities we had visited, the curfew law on drinking establishments was early and also as in other cities we were faced with the common problem of finding some Joe who didn't read much about military curfews. This type of place was easily found, in the rear of a prospering flower shop, and the jovial proprietor did not seem to be losing money on his overtime work. So here we sit, four American sailors in an Italian cafe, trying painfully to order from a menu written in French. Shall we say, the end of an eventful day.

"I do not believe there is anyone who hasn't sometime or other experienced that glorious feeling when waking in the morning that this particular morning there is 'no work.' This morning I can just roll over, pull the covers over my head, and continue

on my ride on the dreamland special with no fear of being scared to death by the master at arms. But much as we would like to spend the rest of the day right there in the sack it soon dawns on us that this practice is not exactly our primary purpose in visiting Rome.

"A hasty breakfast and we are on our way for a scheduled meeting with the sergeant. A paratrooper friend, he volunteered to spend the day with us and pass on his knowledge of the highlights of the city. Johnny was a member of the first American troops to visit Rome but not under such enjoyable conditions as ourselves. In the performance of duty he came in the hard way, by parachuting from a plane near the city and, as misfortune would have it, was soon in the hands of the SS boys. This organization is not to be confused with any German Boy Scout troop in any way.

"He wasted no time in taking us just a short distance from the city to a guarded cave where, once we were inside, he could point the winding passageways by sight. This cave was well guarded and it was only through his connections through the office in which he worked that we were permitted to enter. It was in this cave that the SS herded their Anti-Facist suspects and as a matter of mere elimination took their lives by firing squads and, in the latter days when business became so good, the slow method of the firing squad gave way to the machine gun, which, when used as a human mowing machine, could clean up their day's work in short order.

"At the entrance of the cave we are faced with a scene of framed pictures, bouquets and wreaths in every direction. This section of the cave is set aside for the families and friends of the victims whose identity has been established. The job of identification is not easy. After killing these people they were piled, one on another, in one large pile and tar was poured over the whole group to prevent the establishing of their identity. However, specialists are steadily at work in a laboratory constructed right in the cave, painfully removing the tar, bit by bit, contacting the many families involved to collect items of information which may help them in their seemingly endless job of completing death certificates.

"To date, almost four hundred and fifty such cases are completed. Yes, they are all lying right there. As you walk through the endless tunnels, the white, roughly constructed coffins parallel the passage. Large stenciled numbers appear on the box and generally a cross. A star of David would appear, here and there, only showing that the killers were not choicy. This was really an experience which we had never planned on seeing. Minor details of this sight might continue a few more pages but there are many more pleasant sights which we would like to collect for our memoirs of Rome.

"We left this truly lethal chamber quite speechless. This cavern story probably will not be repeated very often but it is doubted if any of us will ever forget it.

"After seating ourselves comfortably in our chartered taxi, our next desire was to see the catacombs. This trip took us through the winding streets of the city past the immense memorial to King Vittorio Emanuele. Stopping here just for a moment, we noticed facing this memorial was the famous balcony which we all had seen many times in movie newsreels. But now its famous orator is not present. It is just a dull looking brown stone building with a small balcony extending from the fourth floor. From this balcony Mussolini, one time dictator of Italy, excited the countless listeners with world conquering dreams.

"Continuing on our way but a short distance we could see another famous sight, the coliseum. It was hard for us to believe we were standing beside this huge arena which, during its span of existence since the time of Christ, still remained as actual evidence of conditions of that era. To the local inhabitants who walked leisurely by, this meant nothing, but to us who have lived only in a twentieth century world, it was another highlight. As we rode on in this section, remains of the old Roman wall could be seen spotting the countryside, and in some places complete archways still stood, refusing to give way under the pressure of the elements.

"Directly ahead now could be seen the dome of St. Peter's cathedral. It was our misfortune, due to lack of time that we did not see more of the cathedral and Vatican city other than our view as we passed. Having our taxi, we were stopped by guards who informed us that we could walk around inside but could not drive. As it was getting late in the afternoon, we went directly to the site of the catacombs.

"Driving up a rough dirt road off

l the main road, we came to a small  
n chapel and another small building,  
n which we found to be the center for  
t souvenirs and information regarding  
t the catacombs. We were cheerfully  
e greeted by a priest whose duty it  
n was to guide visitors through a tour  
of the underground curio. We were  
n all given a small handmade candle,  
n which we lit as we started down the  
, steps to the first level. A musty  
n odor was present, which seemed to  
e lend a good deal to the whole atmos-  
a phere. Our guide, during our de-  
s scent, told us of the five men who  
- became lost while exploring these  
n caverns, and with this thought in  
n mind, there were no stragglers in  
t our group as we walked through.

e "The passageways were about four  
; feet wide and on each side martyrs  
n and saints of years back were en-  
tombbed, one over another, making  
five vaults in height. The marble  
slabs which encased the fronts of  
some vaults were missing and in the  
opening could easily be seen the re-  
mains of the deceased. It was the  
time when the Roman rulers were  
feeding the Christians to the lions at  
daily matinees in the coliseum that  
the faithful few secretly dug this  
place of solace.

"Many small chapels with their  
altars intact and candles burning  
were pointed out as we walked along.  
Here the early Christians worshipped  
and were buried. We saw only a  
small bit of the first and second  
levels. To date, five levels have been  
explored, with the possibility of sev-  
eral more at grater depths. The wind-  
ing tunnels of the first and second  
levels continue for forty miles. Our  
small candles were just about ex-  
hausted as we completed our tour of  
the catacombs of St. Callixtus and  
witnessed the happenings of the first  
century."