

# Rufus Wesson and the 337th Push to the Po



March, April, May 1945



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Rufus Wesson's last months in Europe during WWII, commanding the 337th Engineer Combat Battalion in northern Italy, including his wounding and capture by the Germans and the subsequent journey home.



Lt. Col. Rufus Wesson, 1945 or 1946

*Cover: Captain Rufus Wesson, 1942*

# A Family Affair



Captain Rufus Wesson and Lt. Col. Victor Wesson in the early years of the war. In May 1942, Victor was commissioned a lieutenant-colonel with the US Army ordnance department. He served for a time in Washington, DC and Fort Benning, GA, and then spent two years at Benicia Arsenal in California. In early 1944, he resigned his commission and returned to Palmer, MA.

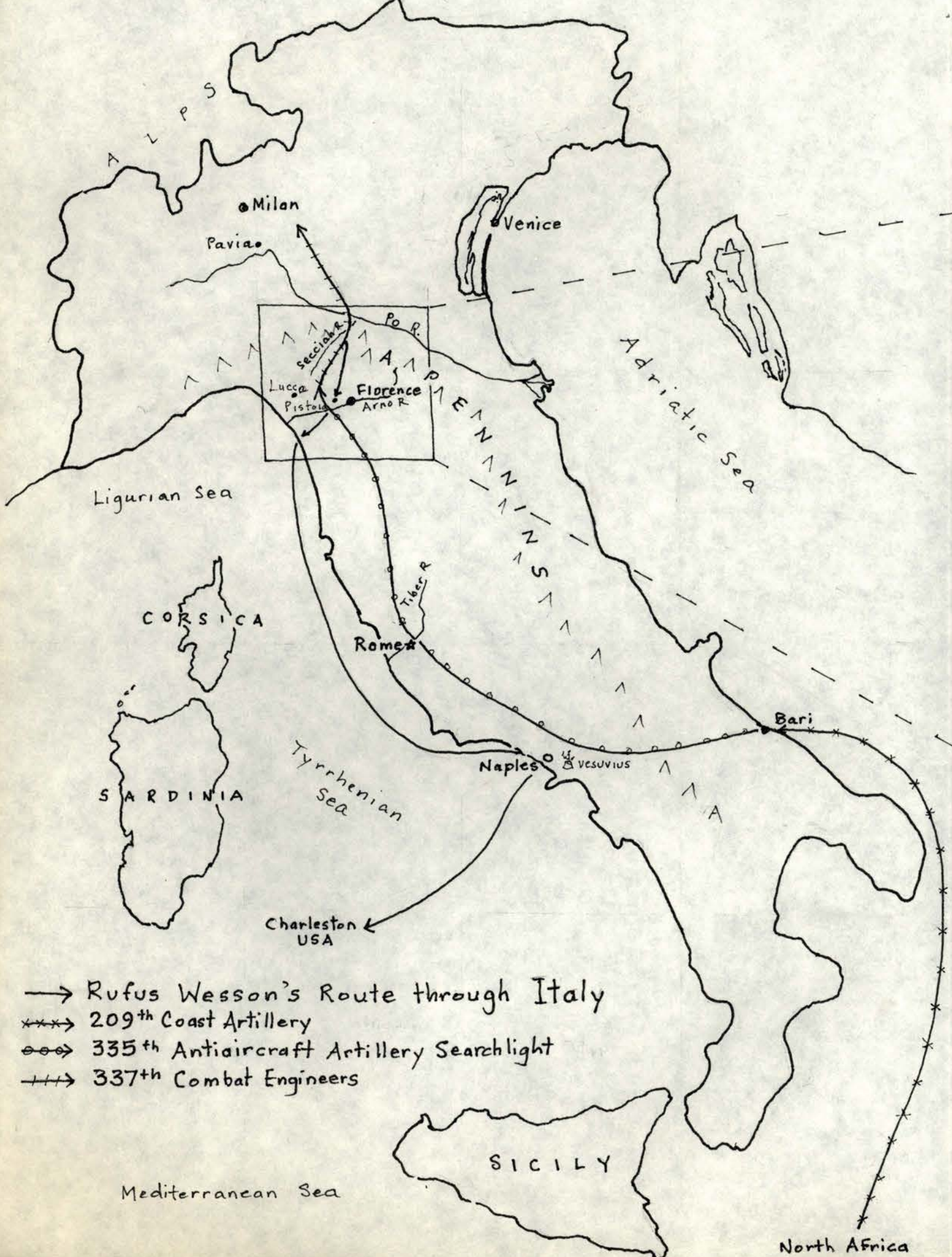
Rufus was commissioned a Captain in 1941, and spent time training at various forts in the US before shipping out to Ireland in July, 1942. He was in North Africa in 1943, and in Italy from 1944 to 1945.





Along with helping out with family, Bets made herself useful during the war in several volunteer roles, not to mention writing letters of encouragement and sending care packages to Rufus for three long years.

As a nurses' aide at Wesson Maternity Hospital she discovered that babies had personality from the get go. She worked for the Red Cross in the blood program (above photo), helping to provide blood for use at home and overseas and at Westover Field organizing nurses' aides in the hospital there. She even put in evenings at the Officers' Club chatting with officers and attending dances planned for men who were far from home and needing a break from the stresses of war.

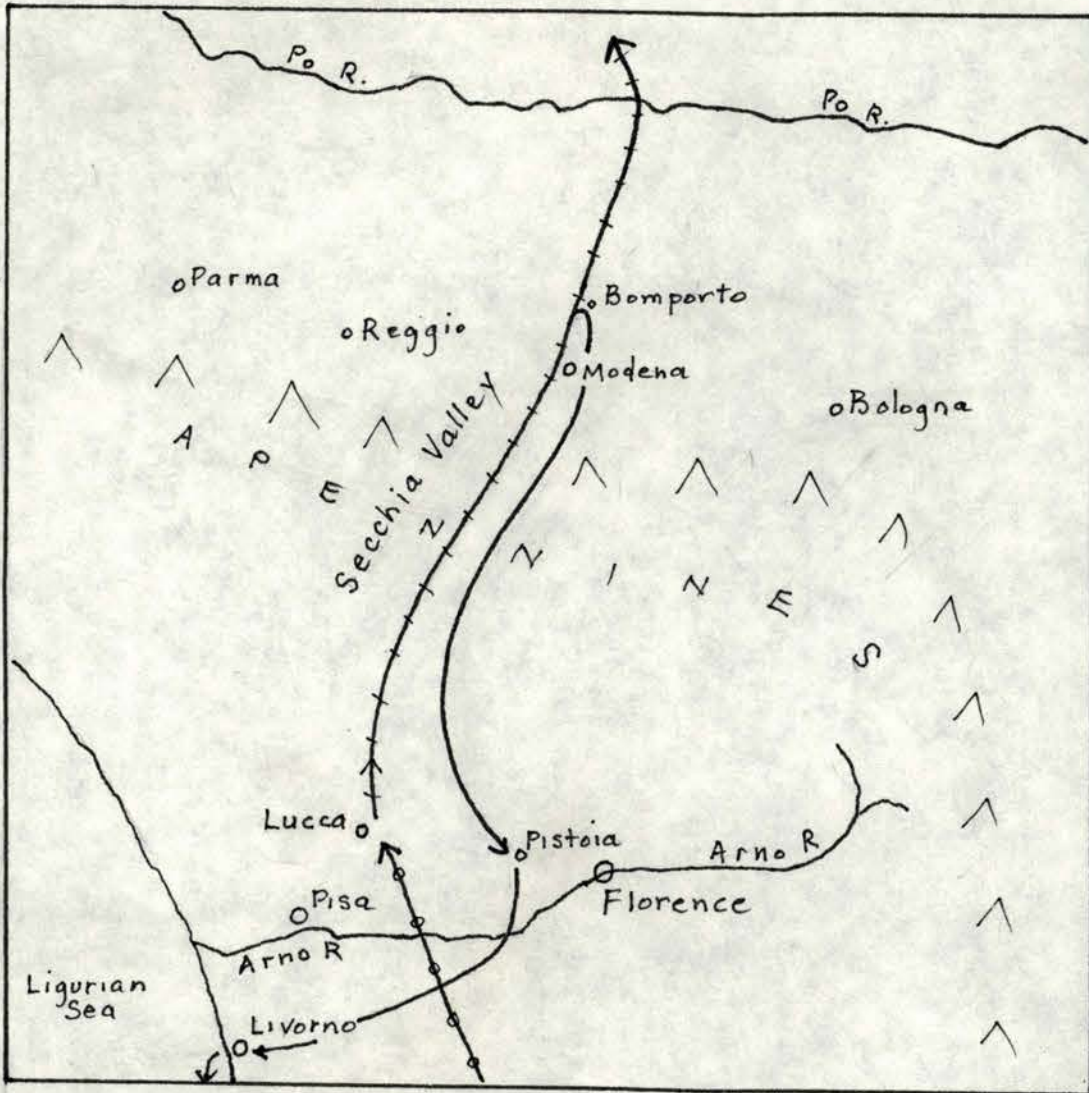


- Rufus Wesson's Route through Italy
- xxx 209<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery
- ↔ 335<sup>th</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Searchlight
- - - 337<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers

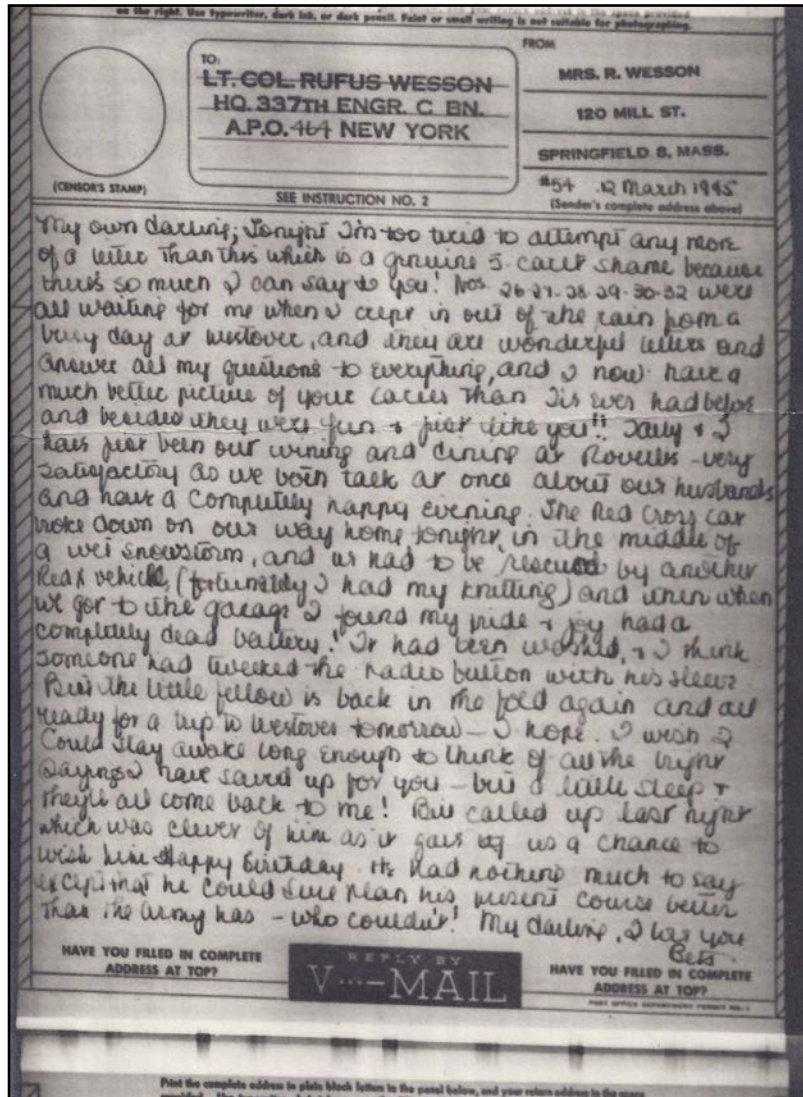
Mediterranean Sea

North Africa





# Wartime Communications



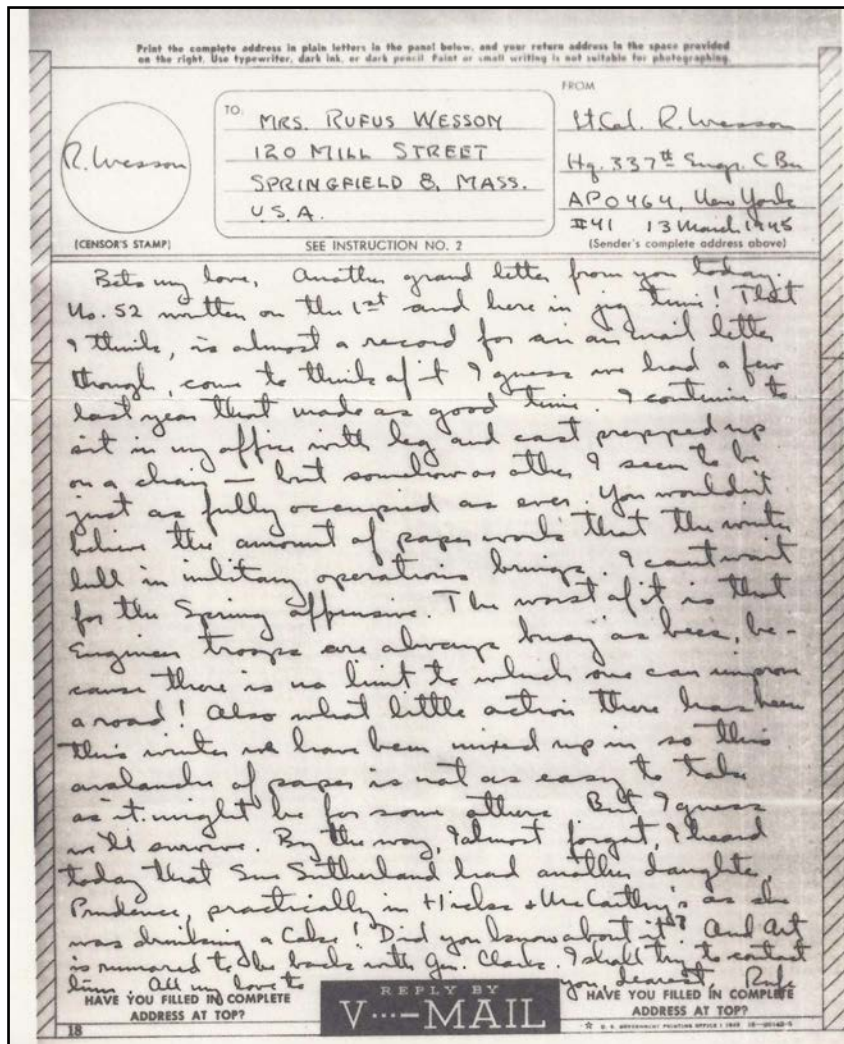
Few things mattered more to the men serving abroad than getting letters from home. "Mail as indispensable," one infantryman remembered. "It motivated us. We couldn't have won the war without it." At first, delivery was slow and erratic. Too bulky to be given precious space aboard aircraft, sacks of mail were loaded into the holds of cargo ships and often took more than a month to reach the front.

Then in the late spring of 1942, the military began encouraging Americans to use V-mail, a simple but ingenious space-saving system devised by the British - who called their version the airgraph. Letters were addressed and written on a special one-sided form, sent to Washington where they were opened



and read by army censors who blacked out anything they thought might give useful information to the enemy, then photographed onto a reel of 16-millimeter microfilm. The reels--each containing some 18,000 letters--were then flown overseas to receiving stations. There, each letter was printed onto a sheet of 4 1/4-by 5-inch photographic paper, slipped into an envelope, and bagged for delivery to the front.

A single mail sack could hold 150,000 one-page letters that would otherwise have required thirty-seven sacks and weighed 2,575 pounds. Between June 15, 1942 (when the first V-mail station began operation in North Africa), and the end of the war, anxious families sent more than 556 million pieces of V-mail to their sons overseas-- and received some 510 million in return.



# Life in Springfield

By 1945 Bets and “Henrietta Hound” (actually a Sealyham Terrier) were firmly ensconced at her mother’s house - 120 Mill Street in Springfield Massachusetts. Six nephews and one niece had arrived in the family since Rufus had been gone and many friends and family lived nearby.



After mother departed this morning, I dispatched myself to Westover to attend to some pressing little matters, mostly passes for the aides. Henrietta went along for the ride, and may I say that I was much admired? It was the debut of my beautiful new Red Cross overcoat - a standard garment which you probably see often. This little, or rather big like a tent, item is

waterproofed and has a bright red lining which buttons in and a hat to match. Oh I tell you I'm pretty hotsy totsy when I go to work now with my white gloves gleaming & my starched uniform billowing like a ballet skirt. Don't know why I didn't get the coat two years ago!

On my return from this mission I stopped to call on Posy [who has Baird & Seth] and on Eric & David [that's a total of four new nephews Rufus hasn't yet met] and then came home and mindful of my duty to the boys on Ward 15 tomorrow washed my hair. It's still wet but I'm leaving for Belchertown & the night at Tine's in a few minutes. Sally came to lunch and all in all I've had a very pleasant day off - except for hearing that my treasure was banged up. Your letter #34 came today which is pretty quick work (10 days) and makes the 10th from you already this week. **Oh I tell you everyone is getting extra backrubs and all the bedpans they want these days. I'm that affable.** Only I'm having such a good time re-reading your letters that there's no time left to answer them in!

*Bets to Rufus, March 15, 1945*

At Palmer for the morning again.

Lunch is now ready so I must off to eat .... Oh boy, succulent lamb & cauliflower with



hollandaise, only I'm probably mean to tell you about it. Ma gave Henrietta a bath, too, which was a major project as in addition to a month's worth of city grime she had added the delightful country veneer of the manure pit. Ma has three new beagles, just acquired & the last remnants of the Suffield foot beagles. And, my darling, this morning **your wonderful long letter to your family arrived and has them beaming and purring** and generally clicking their heels together and thinking you're pretty special - which you are!

Ma and I are leaving for town in a few minutes, Ma to get some feed & me to iron uniforms & go to a nurses aide lecture tonight. National Velvet is here & I shall see it tomorrow & tell you all about it. And Heather came home with tickets for me on the 18th to A Bell For Adano about which I'm very excited. I think I'll just go down for the day, buy some new shoes, see the play and return! Couldn't you make it home by the 18th? I might even stay over if you could!

*Bets to Rufus, March 29, 1945*

Rufe, my darling,

Well from the looks of the paper this last week you must be a very busy boy which probably makes you very happy! My views

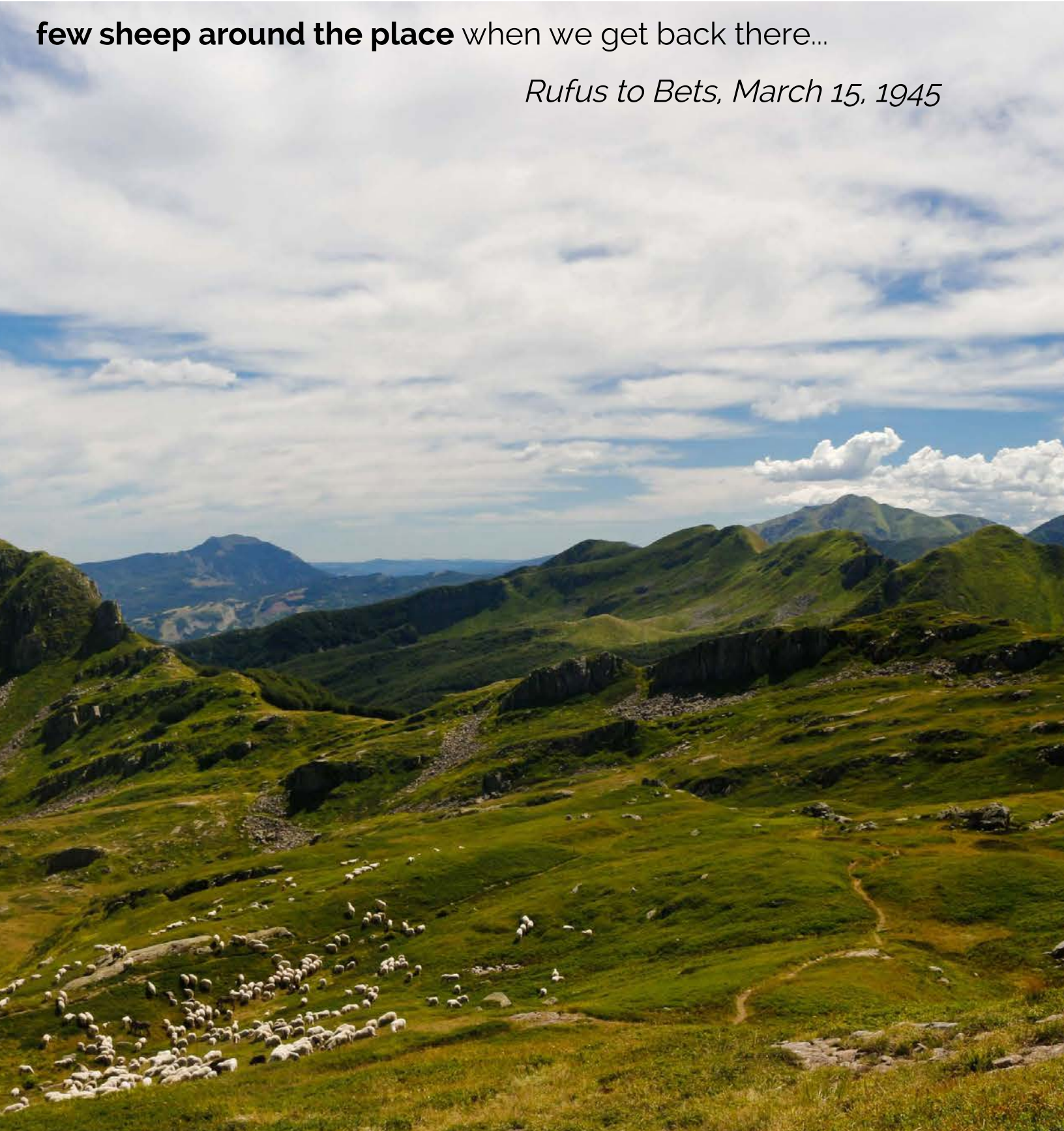
in the matter are naturally of the standard variety! It has been pretty much a monumental task to keep up with the news lately and I'm only just recovering from the long hours I put in reading all the details of President Roosevelt's demise and funeral. Did you grasp the important fact that Pres. Truman's favorite dish is steak and French fries? That plus **all the war news from all theaters has kept me frantically clawing my way out from behind one newspaper only to get trapped by a pile of fresh ones.** Time & Newsweek are here today and I just give up!

But out of all this welter of words comes much more news of Italy than we've had for months. Did I ever tell you about the guide book? Well, Mother can't find her maps of the right part of Italy and finally tortured past endurance by some of the articles in the Stars & Stripes, she demanded a Baedeker. So I went prowling in Johnson's second hand bookstore and found a beautiful Northern Italy for her. But when I got it home we found out it was printed in 1898. I've assured her that the lakes and mountains are still the same, and the art treasures flown, and so all that's off are the train schedules & she isn't going anywhere but she doesn't seem to be convinced.

*Bets to Rufus, April 19, 1945*

Did I tell you about two cunning little lambs who live with us. The Italian kids take them out each day with other assorted sheep and goats to pasture. They play and gambol...just as Spring lambs should do. Makes me think **we should have a few sheep around the place** when we get back there...

*Rufus to Bets, March 15, 1945*



# Spring in the Appenines

We have had some real signs of spring now. The almonds are blossoming again, even up in the mountains.

...

You would get a great kick out of our establishment here. **We are living right in amongst the Italian country folk.** We just compress them up a bit and have taken over two or three rooms in each of several closely situated houses. There are hundreds of bambini and no end of grown up Italians milling around underfoot. But we get along amicably...

*Rufus to Bets, March 12, 1945*

You wouldn't believe the weather we're having over here! Not a cloud in the sky and barely a breath of wind today. ... There

is still snow on the northern slopes of the nearby hills and mountains but where the sun hits there is no longer any. The trees are beginning to bud...there is a bright yellow blossom on a tree part way down the valley but I'm sure I don't know what it is. It is even brighter than forsythia. Have also spotted a crocus or two and many other little yellow and white flowers. Your mother was very right about the season in Italy. There really is a spring which, unlike those in New England, lasts more than a few days. The harsh crack of artillery fire and the angry whine of our dive bombers gives the peaceful scene an odd twist, but **even they can't sound as angry as they would like to.**

*Rufus to Bets, March 14, 1945*



# Spring in Springfield

Had a fine day in Palmer yesterday - & a typical one! Ma said come to dinner, so I arrived a little after one in my usual starving noontime condition. We ate at 3:45 but by then I was past caring! John & Sylvia Peacock were there when I arrived and a very attractive couple they are. The house was all swept and garnished, and **the sun shone brightly & it was so warm that we sat out in front in our shirtsleeves**. I think I shall miss the big house in the summer, though - I always feel slightly shut in at the tavern in nice weather. About 2:30 Sister and children arrived. (Bob is in Detroit for a while) Sister, followed by her young on foot and in baskets and an odd beagle or two, descended from the car beautifully gotten up in a chic black silk dress and black fur coat, only she had no stockings & was wearing a pair of bright red fuzzy bedroom slippers! She's the same grand fun as ever, although she looks pretty tired to me, and tosses the babies around casually & competently. Merrily is the same only a little larger & and talking steadily. I think you'll have just as much trouble understanding her as you do me! Bobby is remarkable! He's as homely a child as you could look for and darling! Good as gold and beaming happily at everyone. He's really cute. After dinner Sis & Merrily & and I strolled up to the big house for some stuff, & then I came home.

*Bets to Rufus, March 19, 1945*



The tavern



Victor



Sitting out front in their shirtsleeves

# Daily Life of a Combat Engineer

As the German Luftwaffe presence in the Mediterranean waned during the last two years of the war, antiaircraft battalions were no longer needed. The 5th Army in Italy was also short engineers because of many units had left to join the 7th Army in Southern France in 1944. Thus, many antiaircraft battalions morphed into combat engineers units.

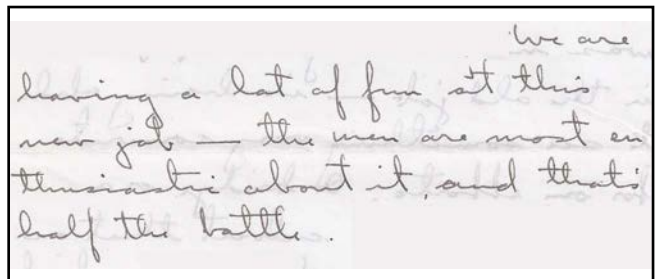


The 337th working in Italy, 1945

Rufus' 209th Coastal Artillery Antiaircraft had already turned into the 335th Antiaircraft Search Light. In December 1944, the 335th became the 337th Engineer Combat Battalion and Rufus officially became a combat engineer, and was put in command of the battalion.

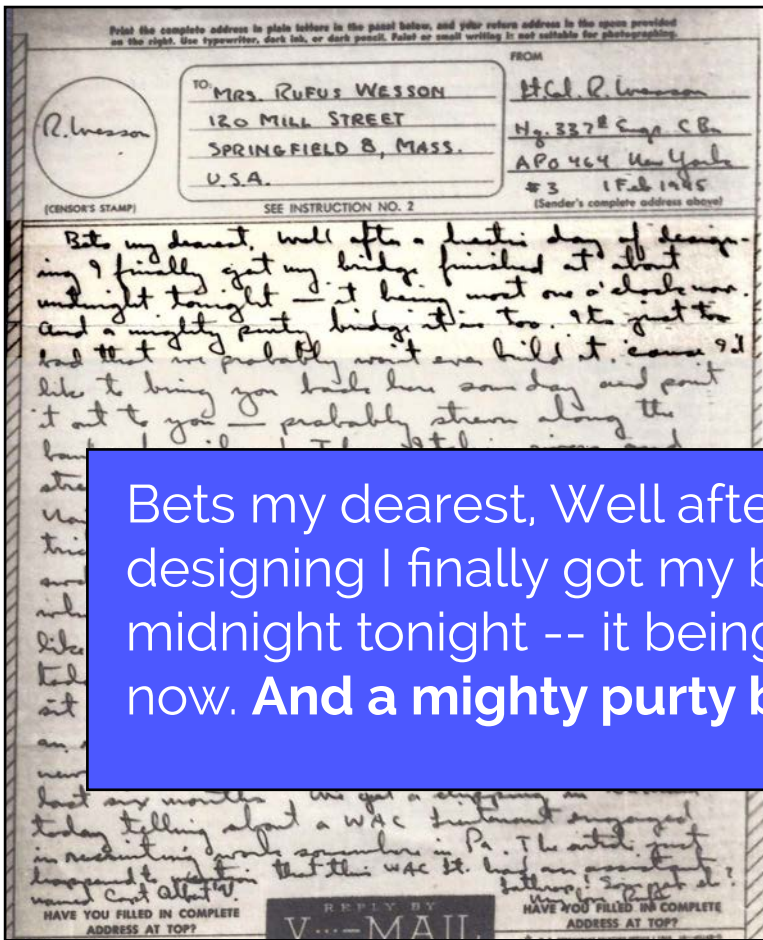
It was remarked that this new battalion was composed of "uniformly high caliber officers and enlisted men." They were given 30 days to train in building Bailey

bridges, roads, and culverts, and clearing mines. "Morale was high, enthusiasm for the fresh tasks burned brightly."



Rufus to Bets, January 5, 1945





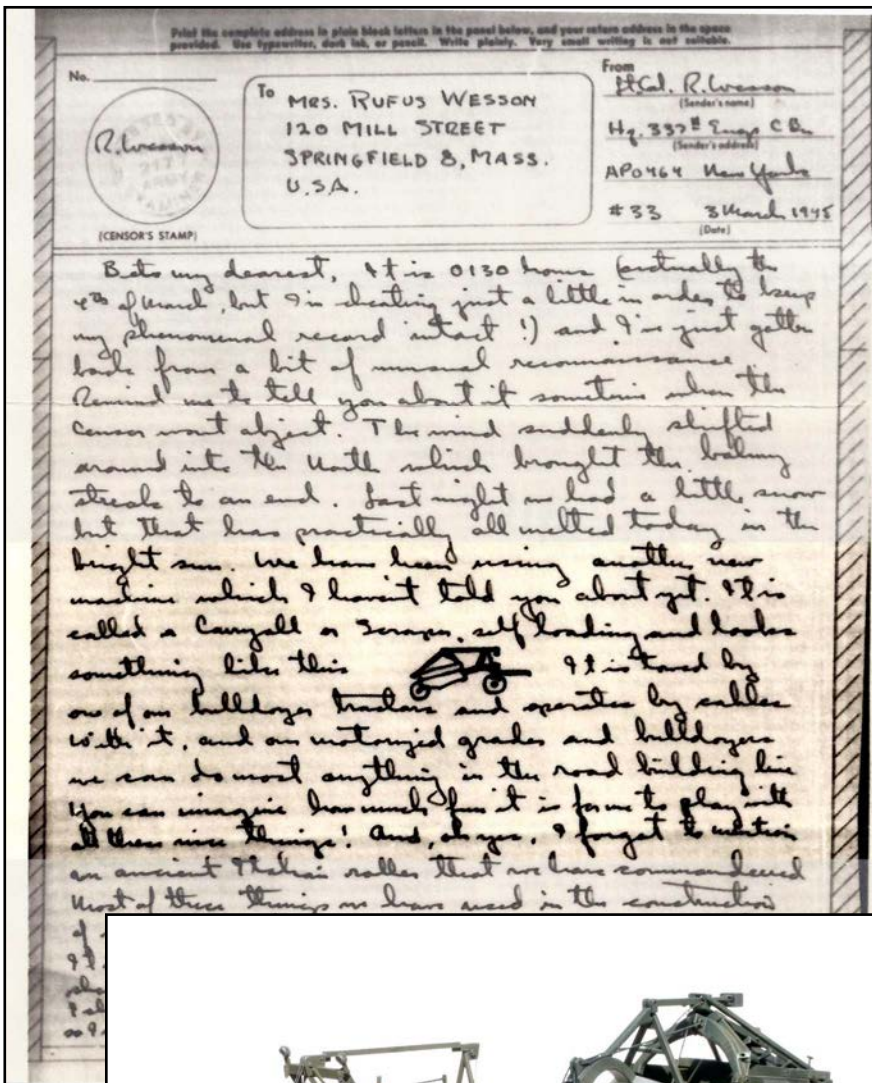
Bets my dearest, Well after a hectic day of designing I finally got my bridge finished at about midnight tonight -- it being most one o'clock now. **And a mighty purty bridge it is too.**

... I can now take a quick look at a bridge and tell you whether or not it is a good idea to go over it -- depends to a large extent on just what's on the other side! I feel that I could build a bridge or a road now with one hand tied behind my back! It's just too bad though, that **I'm getting no practical experience in grass cutting or snow shovelling.** That means simply that you will have to continue with these little details while I sit around smoking cigars and dreaming up new and more impractical bridges or super jeep trails complete with clover-leaf intersections and six lane traffic!

*Rufus to Bets, February 2, 1945*

...we have just finished building a magnificent water distributor (watering wagon to you) and expect to start using it tomorrow on some of our more dusty roads. All of the roads we are at present maintaining are dirt, and with the dry weather they dry up and pulverize away into nothing. **We are getting to be real expert at developing a good surfaced road out of nothing.** Having the heavy equipment -- dozers and water graders -- is what makes the difference. Some day I shall show you some of the roads we have hacked out of mountainsides and you better say your ohs and ahs...

*Rufus to Bets, April 8, 1945*



We have been using another new machine which I haven't told you about yet. It's called a Carryall, or Scraper, self loading, and looks something like this. It is towed by one of our bulldozer tractors and operates by cables with it, and our motorized graders and bulldozers we can do most anything in the road building line. **You can imagine how fun it is for me to play with all these nice things!**



US Army Engineers D7 Cat dozer and Le Tourneau Carry-all scraper.

It has been interesting work but I hate to see the thing slowing down again -- every time that happens the old "crust" of mines, booby traps, and artillery and mortar concentrations is established and it is mean breaking through it all again when another push comes along. The mines and booby traps we are becoming fairly proficient with but **the mortar fire and artillery fire are "no buono" as we say in the native tongue!**

*Rufus to Bets, March 9, 1945*

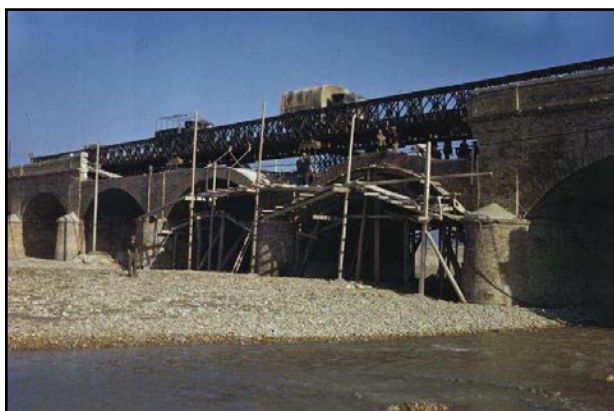
Bets my own, Another day spent at my desk, You wouldn't believe the amount of paperwork that goes on over here.

*Rufus to Bets, February 14, 1945*

I wish I could tell you all about what we are doing right but it just ain't possible right now! The jobs run all the way from constructing air strips for piper cub artillery OP planes to running cable tramways and even to clearing mine fields though we haven't had to do the latter yet -- under fire, at least. But in general you need have no worries because Corps Engineers do not usually spearhead any attacks!

Bailey bridge is the most fun because it goes up so easily and quickly and **one feels a great sense of accomplishment** in bridging some otherwise impassable gap within the course of a night. Without it the fighting in Italy just wouldn't have gotten anywhere.

*Rufus to Bets, February 28, 1945*



A Bailey Bridge constructed by Royal Engineers carries Allied military traffic over a river in Italy while Italian laborers repair the demolished bridge alongside. Courtesy Imperial War Museum.

Engineer removing roadside mines near Bologna, Italy on April 20, 1945.  
From the digital collections of the National WWII Museum.





# An Unsuccessful Argument

I have been very definitely grounded for the next week or ten days by **an unsuccessful argument between my jeep and another coming in the opposite direction!**

... And this is how it all happened. We had spent the whole night opening up a new road -- that was the night before last, and having completed the job at about 5 am yesterday, Maj. \_\_\_\_\_, Misewicz (my driver), and I were returning to Bn Hq. and bed. We were coming up the road minding our own business and going at a medium rate of speed on our own side of the road when there whipped by a jeep going in the opposite direction at a high rate of speed and in the middle of the road - or even a little bit on our side. It was just getting light and, of course, we were driving blackout. Furthermore the road was powerful dusty so this bloke was kicking up a hell of a smoke screen behind him. Right behind him came his buddy, another artilleryman bound for their O.P. [observation post] in a jeep and going just as fast. He couldn't see for all the dust being kicked up in front of him so had his jeep even more on our side of the road -- in fact, there was just about full overlap when we hit. My driver saw in the dim light what was about to happen and jammed on the brakes so we were about stopped when we hit. But not so the other gentleman -- he was still going at a good clip. I, in my usual manner, only more so after having been up for 24 hours, was asleep. The first thing I knew was that I had been very unduly deposited in the street and had gotten a good clip in the right knee in the process. Luckily, our windshield was down or I might have gotten cut up a bit.



...there is nothing distinctive about being hurt in a jeep accident -- everybody does it!

Lt. General Mark Clark's jeep driving along muddy road. November 28, 1944. Fifth Army, Radicosa, Italy. From the digital collections of the National WWII Museum.

So now I am reposing in bed with my right leg in a full length cast and muttering away under my breath in just the manner you can so readily imagine! Nothing broken, mind you, just a good smart bruise of the ligaments at the knee and the knee itself.

*Rufus to Bets, March 6, 1945*

You'll be interested to hear that I'm no longer bedridden. Got up this afternoon, dressed, and am now sitting in my office. My practice with the old crutches several years back is now coming in handy. I've taken to them like a duck to water and go listing around the place like a madman. **The great problem is returning salutes!** I am constructing a mechanical arm and hand on the right crutch and activated by a clever arrangement of levers and pull rods linking this saluting rod to my right thumb so that a slight pressure applied there does the trick!

*Rufus to Bets, March 9, 1945*

May even get a new jeep out of the accident--

15 March 1945

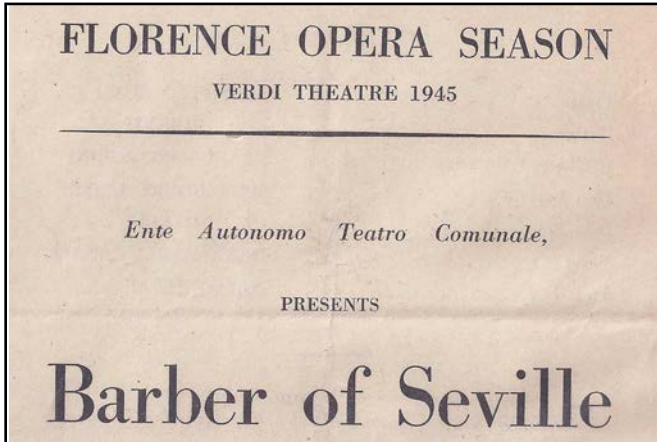
My darling,

Well, so you tangled with a jeep did you? And the little fellows all all angles and sharp corners and not at all the sort of car you should approach in such a casual way. Now, Rufie, if you can't stay in your jeep how do you expect to be able to ~~two~~ ride Christmas when you get home - let alone slip away? I'm just thankful, darling, that you didn't cream yourself in a worse way. Frankly I'm scared to death of the darn things. When I tell you to take care of yourself I mean jeeps! What

Got a new jeep today to replace the one what got busted and am setting off in it day after tomorrow for three days at an Officer's Rest Hotel not too far away...

# R&R in Florence

March 26, 1945



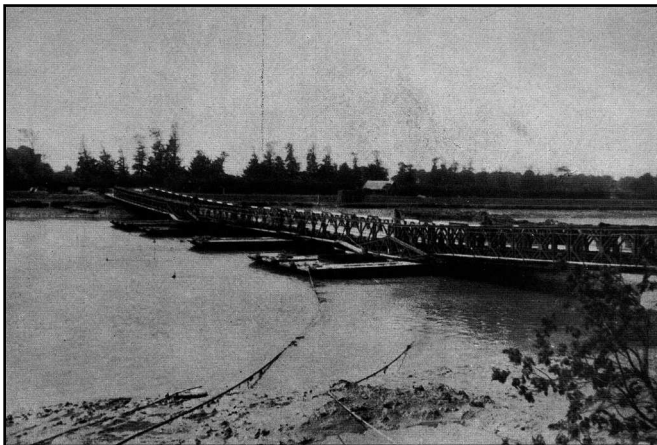
The Barber of Seville is light enough...to appeal to me and the voices and orchestra were excellent...Even the costumes were good, rich and colorful as anything. **It was hard to believe that it was going on in the very midst of war-torn Italy!**

March 27, 1945



**Tuesday morning I set out to see the sights.** And just like all the guide books say, I started out with the Piazza del Duomo - even climbed to the top of the Duomo itself, mainly to exercise the old knee, which, by the way, [is] coming along famously...

March 27, 1945



[The Duomo visit] took most of the morning and I just had time to take in a training film on floating Bailey Bridge before it was time to go back to the hotel for lunch.

[This had] started me off on a **tour of disappointments**, for I had a...list of things by Donatello, Giotto, Michelangelo...that...I could not afford to miss.

March 27, 1945



But, of course, most of these...had been stored in the cellars or in some outlying villa, or had been packed off by the Germans.

[At the] Palazzo Vecchio...all the most important furnishings and objets d'art were no longer around. **But the building itself was interesting** as well as the square on which it stands.



March 27, 1945



The Uffizi Galleries are, of course, closed very tightly so I didn't see them. There's **scarcely anything left in them now, anyway.** Some of the things they will be bringing back from places of hiding around Tuscany but many others probably will never be recovered from the German looters.

March 27, 1945



We arrived at [George's] magnificent quarters [a modern, completely furnished villa which used to be operated by an prominent fascist.] [We had] a wonderful dinner **served in nice china off a nice tablecloth and including butter!** I tell you, George is doing all right.

March 28, 1945



**...I set out on foot for the Ponte Vecchio and the Palazzo Pitti....** The Royal Apartments had been opened and they were beginning to bring the furniture back from the cellar.... After a quick tour, ... I wandered through the palace gardens for a while to exercise my leg. The gardens are not taking the war too well and have grown a little seedy in places.

March 28, 1945



Then on my walk back to the hotel for lunch, I purchased...1 kilo...of oranges with the idea of fixing up old fashioned for K. C. T....whom I set out to visit. [K.C.T, or Col. Kenneth Townson, was a Rochester man who commanded Rufus' original unit, the 209th Coast Artillery.] Had a pleasant visit with KCT, aided and abetted by the old fashioned **which we made with the bitters you sent.**

# Bets in NYC

When she took on more responsibilities at Westover, she was entitled to a larger ration of gas and used it to visit her in-laws in Palmer and cousin Christine Holland in Belchertown. Friends in Rochester had to settle for letters and calls as it was too far to drive for frivolous purposes. She often went to New York City by train to meet a friend, shop and see a play.



34th St. at Herald Square, NYC, 1945

I never did tell you about The Voice of the Turtle... First of all we had dinner at a French place sort of around the corner from Abercrombie's - and I think that it was where we went with Dick once but they all look so much alike, those long narrow spots with bowing head waiters, that I can't be sure - And then we tooted over to the theater arriving at just the right moment. Mother had gotten us the tickets through some friend of Mr. Halls and may I remark in passing that it's almost impossible now to get theater tickets. **So if you know what time in the next two years you're going to be home and want to see some plays, just tell me so I can start working on it now.**

*Bets to Rufus, March 24, 1945*

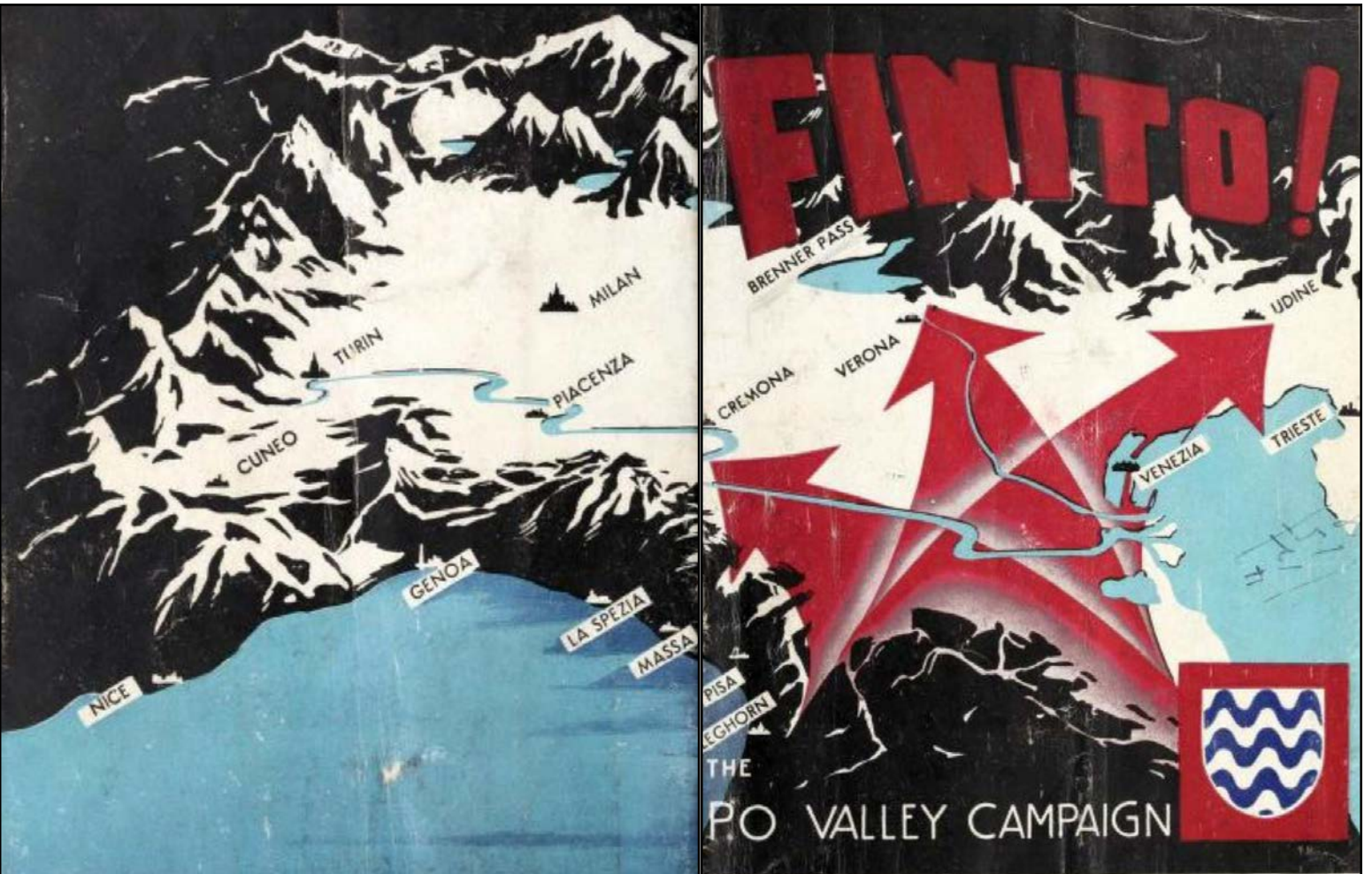
And now for me latest trip! Well, I climbed on the 6:30 AM train yesterday and repaired to the diner where I breakfasted somewhat sleepily until about Hartford when the steam came up and we were able to have coffee! By 9:30 I was trotting into the Biltmore & telephoning Dick, and by 10:15 Fisher had arrived. Clad in a grey suit & with a deplorable lack of lipstick, she looked just the same & we sat for a while talking both at once about nurses aide. Finally we decided we were hungry so we spent 40 minutes trying to extract a milkshake from an overcrowded counter. ...we sauntered off via Abercrombie's to Saks where after the proper deliberation and earnest consultation we each parted with a shoe coupon. My ground grippers (my feet have grown a size since you knew me, lover) are sturdy black leather to last me until the war is over, and I can change into all the bright red & purple shoes my heart desires. **One thing I really covet nowadays is shoes!**

Then I took off to 21 Club to meet Dick as excited as I've been in months. ... Dick soon arrived & after embracing each other fondly we repaired to a table & some drinks & started both talking at once. It seems odd that Dick who has always been at least ten steps ahead of me on every count should be asking me for news and having to be filled in on events and dates and the like! He said that they had pumped every new prisoner & had gotten quite a bit of information from the Germans, but he still had a lot of piecing together to do. He had heard a rumor about Morgan but didn't know for sure about him [killed at Guadalcanal in '43] until he got home last month. I was longing to ask him questions about prison camp, etc, but figured everyone must have been doing that steadily so I wouldn't. ... He's looking for a good army job where his German & experience could be used. **But the thing that really distressed me was when he confided that his marital relationships were definitely strained.** ... He says Sue's changed, & he figures probably he has & he hopes it will work out, but he didn't sound optimistic. Said he would hate to be discharged from the army as he guessed the best solution would be for him to go off again. Anyhow he seemed quite subdued & instead of going into great exclamations about his daughter said that while she was cute enough she was awfully spoiled! His is a situation that is arising all too painfully often now that men are coming home. Far too many of them got married in too much of a hurry, I'm afraid, have never had homes of their own, & don't have a chance to get off together to get acquainted as there is often a child or in-laws in the way, and having never had a chance to know each other in the beginning can't take the inevitable changes that war and the years bring about.... ]The Rossbachs stayed together.]

*Bets to Rufus, May 10, 1945*



# To the Po



The Allies had begun their invasion of the Italian mainland in early September 1943 with the promise of a quick drive north, up the "soft underbelly" of Europe and into the German heartland. Yet nineteen months later, after hard fighting up the rugged, mountainous spine of the Italian peninsula, they had not reached those goals.

By April 1945, the Allies still faced an organized and determined foe in Italy consisting of twenty-four German and five Italian fascist divisions.

Their first defensive line, along the northern Apennines, protected Bologna and blocked entry into the east-west Po Valley, about fifty miles farther north. The Axis generals planned to anchor their second defensive line along the Po River itself. From its source in northwestern Italy, the Po meandered east to the Adriatic Sea. The river varied in width from 130 to 500 yards and was often bordered by levees which served as nature fortifications made stronger by field works on both banks. As in northern Europe, the towns and villages along the river would provide natural

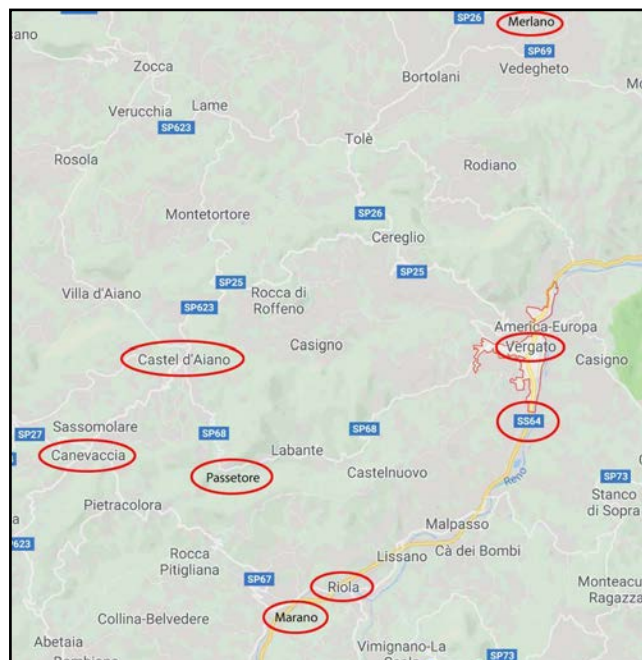
fortifications, while the more developed east-west road system would ease the resupply movements of the defenders.

The combat-hardened Allied 15th Army Group, a truly multinational force, consisted of the British 8th Army (including Polish, Indian, and New Zealander forces) and the American 5th Army (including Brazilian and South African forces). The Allies had an overwhelming superiority on the ground and in the air, while Axis forces had been worn down by years of combat on many fronts. They were also plagued by poor political leadership at the top as well as shortages of nearly everything needed to wage a successful defensive war.

On April 6, 1945, the offensive was launched, and by the end of the first two weeks of fighting, both sides realized that the end of the war in Italy was in sight, and that all the Allies needed to complete the destruction of Axis forces was the skillful application of overwhelming pressure, a feat largely accomplished within the next ten days. The Germans surrendered to the 15th Army Group; on May 3, ending WWII in the Mediterranean. Five days later, the Axis unconditionally surrendered to the Allies, ending the war in Europe.

*From U. S. Army Center for Military History Publication 72-33. "Finito" booklet published 1945 by Headquarters, Fifteenth Army Group, Collection of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.*

# 337th's Role



The first half of April, the 337th was doing roadwork and clearing mines in support of the 10th Mountain Division, west of Highway 64, in and around the circled towns.

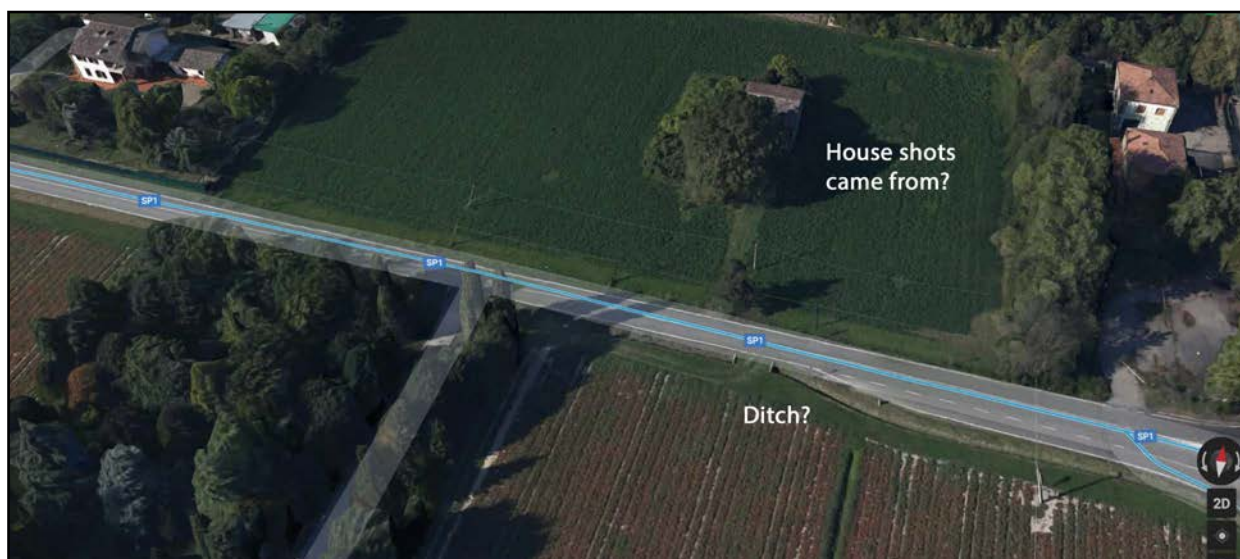
By April 21, they were assisting the 1st Armored Division in the Somoggia River Valley near Merlano.

On April 22, they were sent towards the Po Valley to support the 10th again, heading 50km north to Bomporto.



# "The situation was fluid..."

22 April found the battalion moving to the vicinity of Bomporto at L 670739, after being relieved of all road assignments, to follow up the 126th Mountain Engr Bn. Upon arrival at Bomporto, Lt. Col. Rufus Wesson, Commander of the battalion, and Capt. Wray, went on reconnaissance to view a possible Bailey bridge site. Turning left off Highway 12 at L 665857 and riding a short distance, they received small arms and machine gun fire from a group of houses and from the fields on both sides of the road. The three occupants of the vehicle, which included Tec 5 Misewicz, the driver, jumped into a ditch.







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APO 698, 7<sup>th</sup> Postmaster  
New York.  
26<sup>th</sup> April, 1945

Dearest Bets,

you mustn't let this letter  
spoil you, for it is written in  
the nice round hand of a Red  
Cross girl and this is why:

A few days ago, while involved  
in the recent 5<sup>th</sup> Army operations.

I very carelessly put myself  
in the way of a couple of German  
rifle bullets.

One other officer and my-  
self, and my driver, were  
pushing ahead to make a recon-  
naissance for a bridge

Transcription of full letter follows

Dearest Bets,

You mustn't let this letter spoil you, for it is written in the nice round hand of a Red Cross girl and this is why: a few days ago, while involved in the recent 5th Army operations **I very carelessly put myself in the way of a couple of German rifle bullets.**

One other officer and myself, and my driver, were rushing ahead to make a reconnaissance for a bridge. The situation was very fluid and, as it turned out, there was no possible way to tell where the German lines began, so we were well into them before we realized it. We had nearly reached the proposed bridge site when we had to come to a stop because of another jeep abandoned in the road ahead of us. Naturally this looked bad, but before we could even start to turn around and get out, about four or five German riflemen opened up on us from a house only about a hundred yards away. We hit the dirt, attempting to make our way through the low spots and ditches back in the direction of our own troops. But before we could go more than a few yards, both my driver, Misewicz, and I were hit. He got it in the leg, not too badly, and I got one in the mouth and one in the right shoulder. I still do not know what happened to the other officer. He was not one of those who you know, being temporarily attached to us.

After making our way for about fifty yards along a drainage ditch, I sent Misewicz on ahead to get help for us. He had not gone more than a hundred yards, when he was captured by another group of Germans. This group of Germans was surprised in turn by one of our patrols a short time later, and Misewicz was evacuated through our medical battalion.

I had been lying in the ditch for about fifteen minutes, when a German officer and four German soldiers approached with a blanket, placed me on it, and carried me back to the house from which they had so scurrilously fired upon us. This appeared to be a headquarters of about battalion size and I had not been there long when the German medical officer started to tend to my wounds. He did as well as he could, but it was obvious to see that their facilities are not nearly as good as ours. In a couple of hours' time, the Krauts apparently figured that it was not getting any healthier for them, so, tucking me in well in a bed, giving me a shot of morphine, and filling out an EMT tag on me, they folded their tents and silently stole away.

It was now about seven o'clock in the evening and as I lay there with my German EMT tag on my tummy, I began to wonder how I was going to get the much needed plasma or blood. I couldn't move, and as far as I could tell there was nobody for miles around. Of course, I was confident that our infantry would arrive on the scene sometime soon, so I wasn't greatly upset. At about eight o'clock, the Italians who owned the house came trooping in out of the hills. They were very good indeed to me, both the lady and the man of the household sat up all night with me, giving me short drinks of water and little sniffs of cognac. Just the same, it was about the

longest night I've ever put in. At eight in the morning one of the Italians announced that our troops were in the vicinity and he went out and got a medical officer to come and fix me up. **First, of course, came a couple of bottles of your old friend plasma, which had probably been drawn by your own lily-white hands.** Then they began the process of evacuation. First a clearing station, then a field hospital, an evacuation hospital, and finally a general hospital where this letter is being written. Along the line I have picked up a horrible face bandage, now well saturated with food, and a body cast to immobilize my right shoulder and arm.

And that, my dear, is the story of me latest adventures. Nothing to worry about. I am getting the very best of care and hope to be up and around before very long.

Please explain to the various members of the family that it is difficult for me to write under the present circumstances. So, if you will be good enough to pass on to all of them what little I can get off to you, I know they would appreciate it. I will not try to write them all for some time. (I don't write them often anyway, do I?)

All my love,  
Rufe

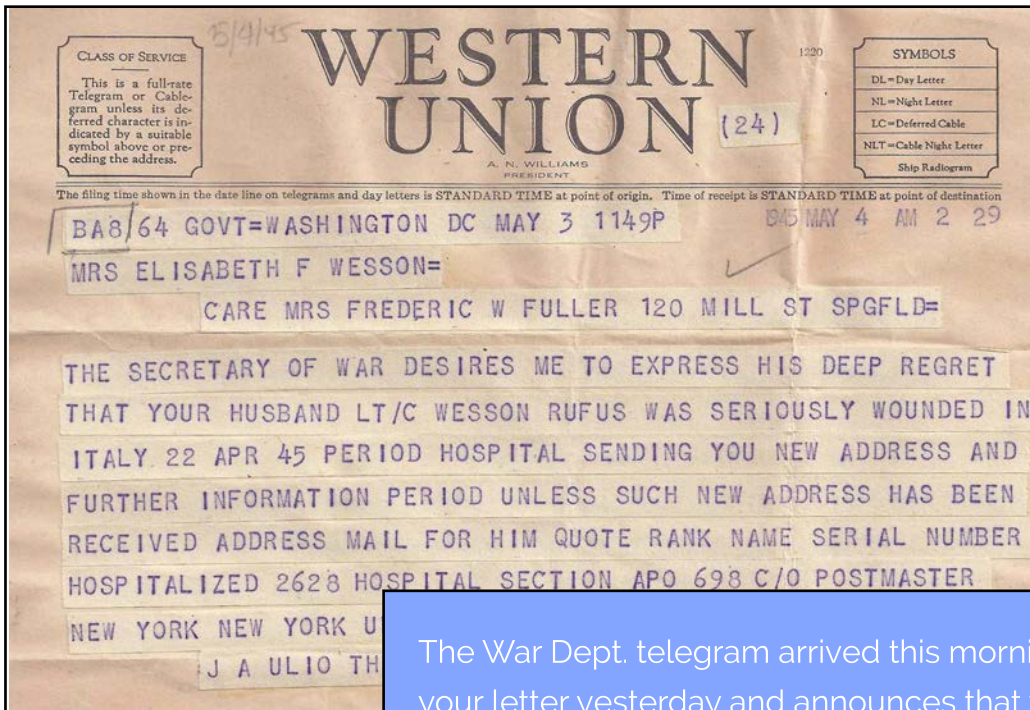


Plasma is the best known remedy for shock.

Most plasma is dried [by freezing]. Dried plasma looks like powdered milk and is...packed in a tin along with needles and tubing needed for transfusion. ... The needle...completes the chain...from your outstretched arm in the mobile unit to the outstretched arm of a wounded soldier thousands of miles away.

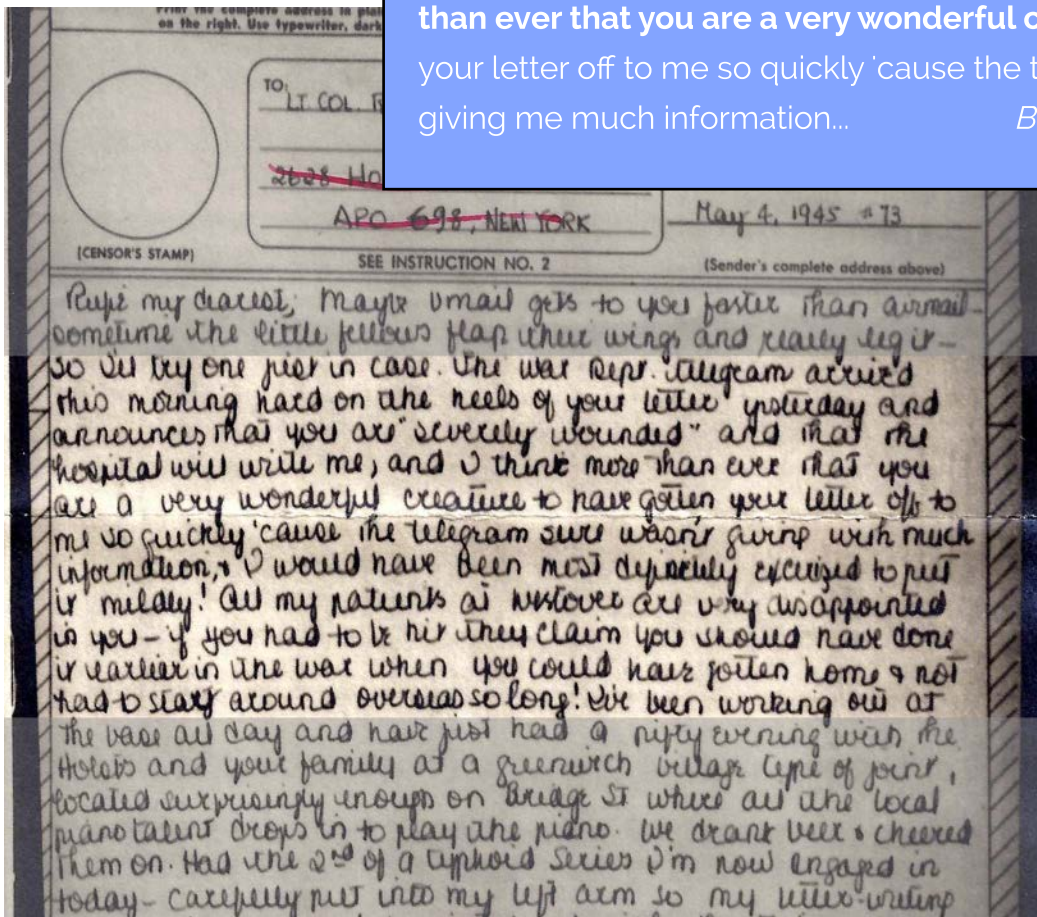


# Hearing the News



The War Dept. telegram arrived this morning hard on the heels of your letter yesterday and announces that you are "severely wounded" and that the hospital would write me, and **I think more than ever that you are a very wonderful creature** to have gotten your letter off to me so quickly 'cause the telegram sure wasn't giving me much information...

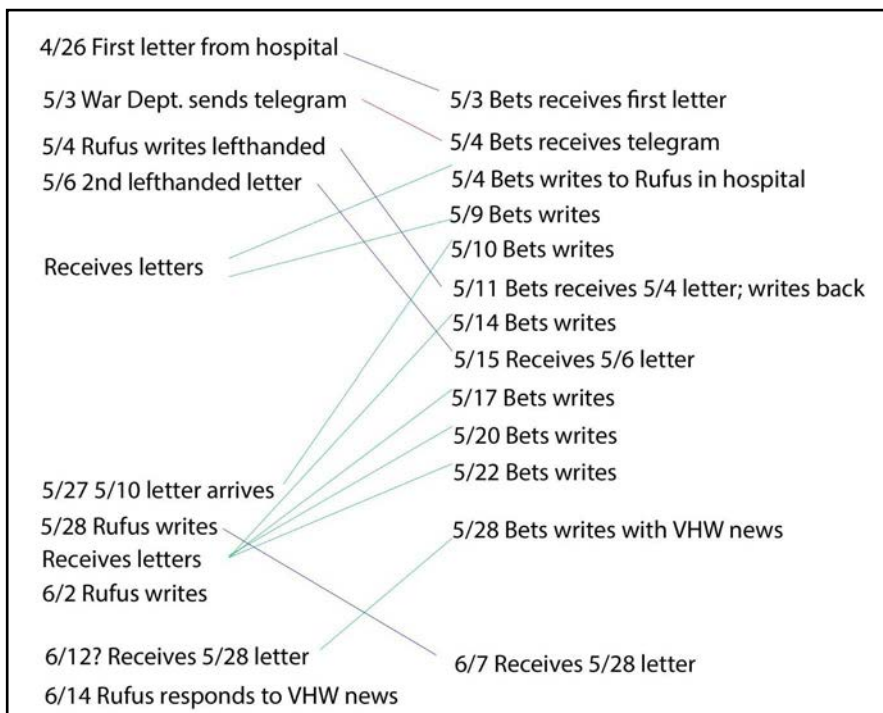
*Bets to Rufus, May 4, 1945*



On May 3rd, Bets and her mother were having lunch at the Colony Club in downtown Springfield. They were subdued because she had received Rufus' letter describing his harrowing day and night on April 22. But the ladies at a close-by table were celebrating and toasting what was now anticipated to be an imminent victory in Europe. They had just raised their glasses and voices again when the manager approached Grandbets' table to let Bets know that a telegram had just arrived at home and the housekeeper though they should be told. They hastily folded their napkins and rushed home fearing more bad news. But it was just the Army's belated confirmation of Rufus' wounding on April 22nd. Later they learned that one of the young women at the next table at lunch had subsequently received a telegram informing her of her husband's death in those last days of war in Europe.



### Timing of Letters



One of two articles about the incident in *The Springfield Republican*.



# Hospital Correspondence

# 70  
4 May 1945

Dearest Bets

I shall be greatly surprised if you are able to read ~~or~~ much of this but I intend to write it anyway mainly for the practice of using my left hand.

My right hand is in another cast now and probably will be for many weeks so I might as well get used to using the old left!

Not many items to report except that I'm ~~now~~ getting my mouth cleaned up so that they can get my jaws set. The lower jaw is badly busted up, no teeth left except 1 in my lower jaw! But they all seem to be good doctors and surgeons and I promise you that I shall be as good as new when they all get through with me!

All my love dearest  
Rube



My darling,

...First of all, when I got home last night, there was waiting for me a nasty little postcard from General Hosp No 70 which said that 1) you are making normal improvement, and 2) you have wounds of the right shoulder and jaw and fracture of the right leg. Now, sweetie, if you

haven't already done so will you please summon your blonde or whatever she is and dictate to me a brief but complete summary of every recent dent made in your magnificent physique. You can leave out all the old scars 'cause I know all about them, but just please give me a blow by blow description of all breaks, bruises, contusions and scratches. You may send working drawings of all x-rays and a chemical analysis of your cast if you wish, but **give, toots, give!**

70th General Hospital (US)  
APO 421, % POSTMASTER  
New York, NY

DEAR Madam:

I am pleased to inform you that on 27 April 1945 your  
Wesson, Rufus W. (Date) O-541835 Lt. Col.  
husband, 337th Combat Engineers  
(Relationship) (Grade, name, Army serial number)

was \* making normal improvement.

Diagnosis † Wounds of right shoulder and jaw, Fracture of right leg.

\* Enter present status as—  
Making normal improvement.  
Convalescing.

† Must be written in nontechnical language.

Very truly yours,  
M. C. EVANS  
2nd Lt., MAC, Asst Registrar

W. D., A. G. O. Form 234  
9 November 1944  
2628 Hospital Section, APO 628, c/o Postmaster, N. Y., N. Y.

*Bets to Rufus, May 10, 1945*

...**Let me set you straight here and now about the extent of my injuries.** Most emphatically, I do not have a fractured leg, right or left, and if your little postcards and the War Dept. or anybody else is telling you that I do, then all I can say is that they know not whereof they speak. Once again: I have a fractured jaw, which is now practically repaired, and a fractured right arm, which is also nicely knit at this point, and a somewhat shattered right shoulder. The cast is now off my right arm and I am getting physical therapy treatments in order to improve the motion in the arm and shoulder. This may be my most permanent defect. They say I will never have the original amount of motion in my shoulder but that I should regain a considerable amount of it. My shoulder wounds are still draining, but very slightly. Within a couple of weeks they should be completely closed.

You asked for it, so I'll give you a detailed description of my jaw situation also. Ten days

ago they decided that the open-bite split, of which I told you, was not producing the desired results, so they operated and by means of an external reduction, or incision from the outside, they managed to get ahold of the fragment of jawbone which was floating around loose. They put this back in place, finding that one end matched very nicely and that the other required a little bit of planing and sand-papering to make it fit. They drilled the whole works full of holes and wired it back together in very expert fashion. ... This means that when I sit up, I drool and when I eat, I don't really eat at all, but have liquid injected with a syringe, one mouthful at a time! This process is carried on while I lie flat on my back so I won't drool it all out.

...I am feeling quite fit. I've been getting up to walk about and am regaining my strength at a rapid rate.

*Rufus to Bets, May 28, 1945*

# "It's your father..."

Print the complete address in plain letters in the panel below, and your return address in the space provided on the right. Use typewriter, dark ink, or dark pencil. Faint or small writing is not suitable for photographing.



(CENSOR'S STAMP)

TO: LT. COL. RUFUS WESSON  
 O-341835 HOSPITALIZED  
 2628 HOSP. SEC.  
 APO 698, NEW YORK

SEE INSTRUCTION NO. 2

FROM

Mrs. Rufus Wesson  
 120 Hill St., Springfield, 8 Mass.  
 #85, May 28, 1945 Mon.

(Sender's complete address above)

Rufie my dearest; I hope that letter No 84 has reached you and that you have a chance to read it before this mail, but as this stuff may be faster I'm writing this, too. For this is very bad news, dearest, and will be a very terrible shock to you as it is to us all. It's your father, sweetheart, that I must tell you about - he died very suddenly, within about half an hour, of coronary thrombosis on Saturday night. The family along with the Peacocks and Hobbs had been to an ice show in Brookfield and shortly after they got home, late and there was no one home. Ma came in early Sunday for the funeral Tuesday out here since very late. Bob got here last night had a very happy evening had called Friday that cheered Pop immensely. Mother is the sport. But, my darling, I am and hoping that you be together; and in the remember that I love make a break in your us. All my love, my

HAVE YOU FILLED IN COMPLETE ADDRESS AT TOP?

#84

May 28, 1945  
 Palmer

Rufie my own darling.

This is going to be a very dreadful letter, dear, and I would give anything if I could see you instead of your having to get this, but I know that you would want me to tell you at once the bad news instead of waiting. Rufie, your homecoming isn't going to be cheerful. It's your father - he died suddenly, dear, Saturday night of coronary thrombosis. There was no warning of any illness and it was all over within about half an hour. It has been so hard for us who are here to believe that I know you won't be able to grasp it either for a while either, and I just pray that you'll be on your way home soon so that we can be together with this.

To write you first of Murg and now of Pop seems the cruelest thing I have ever



## Dies Suddenly



LIEUT-COL VICTOR H. WESSON

### LIEUT-COL WESSON VICTIM OF SUDDEN CORONARY ATTACK

Former Longmeadow Resident Dies at Palmer Home  
— Had Resigned Army  
Commission Year Ago

Palmer, May 27 — Lieut-Col Victor H. Wesson, for many years an official of the Smith & Wesson company, and a former well-known Longmeadow resident, died suddenly at his home on Baptist hill here early this morning. Col and Mrs Wesson were entertaining weekend guests and had been out for the evening. Col Wesson was apparently in his normal health at that time, but a short time later, when he and one of his guests took one of the farm trucks to go after fireplace wood at his summer home a quarter of a mile away, he suffered a seizure and fell from the open seat of the vehicle to the roadway near his home. He was immediately taken into the house and medical aid summoned, but death occurred within a few minutes. Medical Examiner Sidney R. Carsley

(Continued on Sixth Page)

Republican May 28

Both of your letters talking of father's death arrived the other day and you will be relieved to know that was the first news I had had. **Naturally it was a tremendous shock to me and something which was most unexpected.** I still haven't gotten used to the idea. As long as he had to go, however, it is just as well that it came suddenly. I wrote Mother the day after your letter arrived and she has probably gotten the letter by the time you receive this. I only wish that I could have written as good a letter to her as you wrote to me.

I'm certainly very proud of the way you stepped in and ran things for Mother when things were most difficult.

...

I can't tell you how anxious I am to get started on the homeward trip. It is going to be hard to believe that I am really home after three years of looking forward to it.

All my love, dearest  
Rufe

*Rufus to Bets, June 14, 1945*



# Hospital Life

**Patient transportation** Jeeps were often used to transport wounded soldiers further to the rear. Rugged and maneuverable, they could cover terrain inaccessible to ambulances. Ambulances were used to transport patients, usually from an aid, clearing, or collecting station to a field hospital, or for transport further to the rear.

**Clearing station** - About four to ten miles from the front. Here they treated shock and minor wounds, and grouped patients in ambulance loads for transport to field hospitals.

**Field hospital** - Within thirty miles of clearing station. Ideally, the wounded arrived within one hour of injury. Surgery was performed for the most severe cases.

**Evacuation hospital** - Treated illnesses and less urgent surgical cases. Patients could be reconditioned here to return to the front.

Field hospitals (400 beds) and evacuation hospitals (400 or 750 beds) arrived within a few days of an invasion and followed the army, staying about thirty miles behind the front. They were close enough to treat patients quickly and send them back to the front quickly as well. These hospitals relied on mobility. They usually used canvas tents, but also used schools, barracks, hospital buildings, hotels, Mediterranean villas, and even an Italian stadium.

**General hospital** - Large facilities where patients received long-term treatment, sometimes grouped in large complexes.

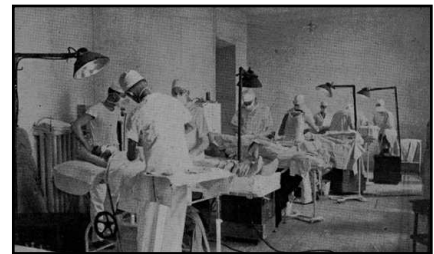
*From SarahSundin.com*



Administering plasma in a jeep ambulance, Italy, 1944 (US Army Medical Dept.)



Dodge WC9 1/2 ton ambulance, 15 May 1941 (US National Archives)



OR of the 33d General Hospital, Rome, 1944 (WW2 US Med. Research Ctr.)



Partial view of the largest ward of the 33d General Hospital, Rome, 1944 (WW2 US Med. Research Ctr.)



Patient's mess at the 300th General Hospital, Naples (WW2 US Med. Research Ctr.)



Physiotherapy Section of the 33d General Hospital, Livorno, 1945 (WW2 US Med. Research Ctr.)

# " by heroic or meritorious achievement or service..."



The other morning I was lieing [sic] here indulging, in my usual manner, when suddenly I had the feeling that there was someone else in the room. Cracking one eye open, I discovered that the room was absolutely full of officers -- most of them from the battalion. Col. Jones, the new group commander, whipped out a bronze star medal and hung it on me as one of his staff officers read the citation which I am enclosing in this letter. **Of course I was tickled to get the award and tickled even more to have so many of the battalion and group officers come over to make the presentation.**

*Rufus to Bets, June 14, 1945*

Rufus was also awarded  
a Purple Heart.



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The Bronze Star Medal is awarded to any person who, after December 6, 1941, while serving in any capacity with the Armed Forces of the United States, distinguishes himself or herself by heroic or meritorious achievement or service, not involving participation in aerial flight.

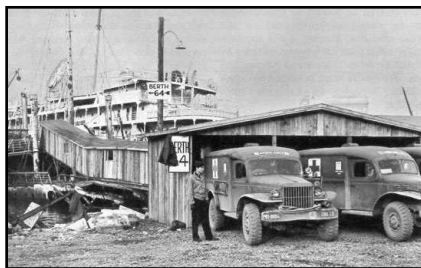
The Purple Heart is awarded to those wounded or killed while serving, on or after April 5, 1917, with the U. S. military. With its forerunner, the Badge of Military Merit, a heart made of purple cloth, the Purple Heart is the oldest military award still given to U. S. military members. It was established by George Washington in 1782.

# Wending His Way Home



Rufus had been at the **70th General Hospital in Pistoria** since late April, finally leaving for evacuation to the US on June 20.

He takes a hospital train to the **33rd General Hospital in Leghorn** (the port at Livorno), arriving June 22.



He is transported via **hospital ship** to Naples, arriving June 27. (Covered ramp to a waiting hospital ship at Leghorn, 1944)

On July 1, from the **300th General Hospital in Naples**, Rufus writes his last letter from Europe, noting that he's unsure when he'll sail for the US.



On July 3, the War Dept. notifies Bets that Rufus has been evacuated. He sails on the **USAHS Seminole to Charleston**. (Litters ready to receive patients in Charleston)

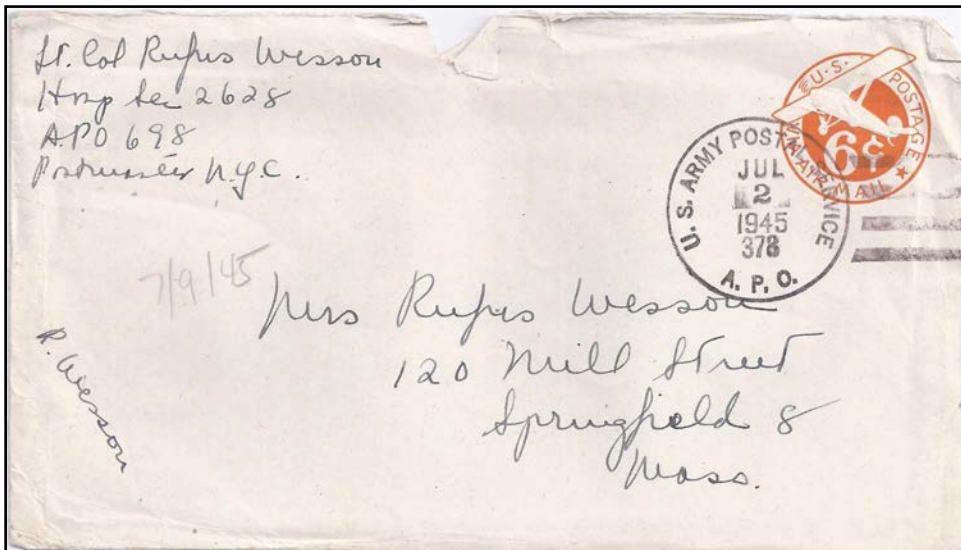
July 23, Bets receives notice from the War Dept. that Rufus has been moved to **Cushing General Hospital in Framingham**, just 70 miles from Springfield.





Rufus to Bets,  
June 22, 1945

cause me to miss  
I'm almost frantic with  
expectation at the prospect of  
getting back to you, however, delay  
or no delay! I love you, dearest,  
more than the whole world!  
Rufus



Rufus' last letter to Bets  
after more than three  
years in Europe, July 1,  
1945

HEADQUARTERS  
30th General Hospital (US)  
APO 378 % POSTMASTER  
New York, New York

DEAR Mrs Wesson :

I am pleased to inform you that on July 3, 1945 (Date) 337th Engr Com Bn YOUR

Husband Wesson, Rufus W., O-341835, Lt. Col. (Relationship) (Grade, name, Army serial number)

was Evacuated to USA for further hospitalization therefore  
this is a final report from this theatre.

Diagnosis Wound of right shoulder and jaw and fracture of  
right leg.

Very truly yours, Robert D. Blum Jr.  
ROBERT D. BLUM JR.  
Capt. Med. Adm C

W. D., A. G. O. Form 234  
9 November 1944

Note: For prompt delivery address mail to:  
6225 Hospital Section, APO 698, c/o Postmaster, N. Y., N. Y.

Notification of Rufus' evacuation on July 3,  
1945. The War Department still thinks he has  
a fractured leg.



US Army Hospital Ship Seminole

# Convalescing

After months of treatment and therapy at Cushing Hospital, Rufus called home excitedly one December day. “Bets! They’ve given me two weeks leave with pay! Let’s go up to Stowe and ski!” One presumes his skis and boots had been shipped back from Italy (where he never had a chance to use them), so they packed their gear and headed north to Vermont. After two days of this long-awaited vacation together, however, Rufus took the fatal “last run” and crashed, breaking his right shoulder again. When they sheepishly presented themselves back at Cushing, Rufus apologized to his doctors, who surprised him by saying. “Oh no, Colonel Wesson, this is great! We really didn’t like the way it had set, but we didn’t have the heart to rebreak it. Now you have done it for us. Good job!” And they slapped him back into a body cast for the rest of the winter and into the spring.

At last by summer of 1946, Rufus and Bets were able to return to their “little nest” in Mendon and settle down again to civilian life and to building additions and fences and barns. For all this, Rufus had to make do with a Model N Ford tractor, having left all his nice machines in Italy.



The single chairlift at Stowe, circa 1940s. From [NewEnglandSkiHistory.com](http://NewEnglandSkiHistory.com).







Victor Hawes Wesson  
October 6, 1890 - May 25, 1945