

91st Armd F.A. Bn.
APO 251, New York City.
16 June 1943.

Mr. Amon G. Carter,
Fort Worth Star-Telegram,
Fort Worth, Texas.

Dear Mr. Carter:

Many thanks for your letter including the copies of Amon, Jr.'s letter and card to you. His letter threw considerable light on the mystery of his capture, and filled in many of the chinks of the story of the German break-through at Faid. Due to a change in censorship regulations I can now tell you most of the details of that action, and of subsequent operations participated in by "B" Battery. But to the Faid mess first.

"B" Battery was detached from the rest of the battalion and sent about six miles away to assist in the defense of a mountain surrounded by plains in the Faid sector on about February 4, 1943. Our position was in a deep wadi beyond which extended the plains to Faid, and to our left rear rose the steep heights of the mountain on which we established an observation post. At about 2300 hours, February 13, the Commanding Officer of the troops defending this rather vital terrain feature called a unit commanders meeting, at which time he notified us that information of the enemy indicated that Jerry might make an attack in the morning. The C.O. was Lt. Col. John Waters, son-in-law of General Patton. His plan of defense was a sound one: he ordered that the few tanks be placed out in front of our wadi, and that a small group of infantry be dug in about a half a mile in front of us. Also he placed what few tank destroyers he had well in front. On the mountain proper there was a relatively large force of infantry, and far out to the left flank and left front there were to be armored reconnaissance patrols. Listening posts were established near Faid, but we never heard from them.

Returning to the battery, I had Lt. Delaney, the Executive, dump a hundred rounds of ammunition at each howitzer, and made arrangements for the battery to be on the alert by 0530 hours the next morning. Frankly, the whole idea seemed sort of silly; we had spent a quiet ten days in our position; nothing had happened, except that "Photo Joe" frequently took our pictures. "Photo Joe" was a JU 88 that flew at a tremendous altitude, and always seemed to show up when our own planes (in those days so few!) weren't around. At any rate, the fact that the Germans would make an attack didn't seem possible, and I slept heartily. Amon, Jr. spent the night up at the observation post on top of the mountain; I called him before turning in to tell him what was to be expected in the morning.

At daybreak the next morning I went up on the ridge of the wadi in front of the battery, and all of a sudden things began to pop. First of all, a few shots were fired, and then all of a sudden all hell broke loose. Looking through my glasses I could see a tremendous force of tanks and infantry approaching us, not more than two thousand yards away. I couldn't believe my eyes! There were so many of them! My God, but they were the ugliest things in the world! Two Mark VI tanks, looking like huge, long-nosed crabs, waddled along side by side, one of them firing over at the tanks on our left front. Their guns made terrible scarlet and white flashes, for all the world like large fire crackers set off at night. Other smaller German tanks moved forward with the mark VI's, and soon the top of my ridge, on which I had set up a few machine gun posts, was under a heavy concentration of fire. The Germans ran right through the tank destroyers and infantry we had out in front, and then took care of our tanks. All during the fight out in front of us

This time it was in the form of German infantry. We reached a pinnacle of rock which I thought would be a grand place from which to look over the lay of the land. I had got about half way up, when bbbbrrrrrraatttttt-bbbbrrrrrraaaaatttttt! a German machine gun opened up at close quarters! And I was seperated from the rest of the men! I hugged the rock on a small ledge, and finally peeped through a small crevice. Across a small gulley was a ridge with three squads of German infantry in position. They had three machine guns, and were commanded by an officer who was looking my way through field glasses. They didn't fire again; the khaki color of my combat suit blended well with my background, and the rock in front of me hid me pretty well. After about ten minutes the German officer signalled a squad; this signal I interpreted as sending the squad, with their machine gun, around my right flank, which was completely exposed. And "the sweat was on". I had three distinct thoughts during all this: what a shame to be killed so early in the game; I thought of my wife, and that she'd be pretty unhappy if I didn't get back; and I was conscious of being damned scared. I was also pretty lonely, a feeling I always have when I get myself out on a limb with nobody to hold my hand.

The enveloping squad never showed up, and in a short time all the Germans disappeared. Rejoining my men, I found that they thought I had been killed; it was a happy reunion. We continued on our way, learning some pretty good infantry tricks from our infantryman-one Pvt. Junge, of German extraction. He was a cool customer and a fine soldier, although his physical appearance might lead one to think otherwise. He was small and skinny, with a friendly, aquiline face; he looked more like a bookkeeper than anything else. I would like to have him in the battery; I'd make him a sergeant. Well, after playing infantry for an hour or so, we at long last reached friendly troops.

I hadn't intended to go into such a detailed description of that gloomy day; and as for writing of further experiences of the battery, that is out of the question in this letter. But I suppose it's poor business to leave the protagonists in a tough spot, so I'll get us out quickly. We remained stranded on the mountain until midnight, February 15, and then broke through to our own lines. That break through is quite a story, and, so far as I'm concerned, is dominated by the lank and towering figure of T/S Cunningham, who is about the guttiest man I've ever met. I have recommended him for decoration with the Distinguished Service Cross for his work in protecting the battery's left flank single handed. Cunningham, Morris, and I, with others, got back to the battalion late on the night, or rather early

I think I wrote you that during our stay on the mountain I went up to Amon, Jr.'s observation post. There were a few infantrymen there who said that he had left soon after the battery pulled out of position. His telephone was still there, but that was all. Apparantly he became seperated from his men, and then wandered in among the Arabs. In getting through the enemy lines we passed through several Arab settlements, but of course saw nothing of him. I stopped at one point to talk to some Arabs, but they made no mention of any other Americans. Anyway, the Arabs at that time were friendly to the Germans, because the latter were on the winning side. I can't blame the Arabs much. As a matter of fact, numerous Americans got out of that mess through the aid of the Arabs.

There is one thing that has been on my mind ever since Faid, and that is that I didn't tell Amon to stay where he was. There's no point crying over spilt milk, I know, but I have been kicking myself in the pants ever since.

Well, Mr. Carter, I'm afraid I'll have to end this letter now. I'd like to tell you of how the battery avenged their beating, and how the men developed from green American artillerymen into the finest artillerymen in the world - certainly far superior to the German artillerymen. But, as I say, that's all another story, and one that might be of as much interest to you as the Faid episode.

but finally I saw one of the howitzers, and a couple of men nearby. It proved to be Sgt. Morris's; the fuel lines had plugged up, and, as it looked as though the crew would have to abandon it, Lt. Burney and Sgt. Riter took the sights and most of the crew and followed the battery. However, Sgt. Morris, Cpl. Felton Davis, and Pfc. Alfred Hoeweler remained behind. We held a council of war, and decided to have a little fun if it was the last thing we ever did. We had a gun; we had field glasses (Cpl. Davis's); and we had a gun crew. I acted as observer and chief cook and bottle washer, Sgt. Morris was chief of section, Cpl. Davis was gunner, and Pfc. Hoeweler was number one cannoneer. We picked up an infantryman who acted as ammunition handler, cannoneer, loader, and general handy man. Everything was swell - even the fuel lines were clear again, so that we could move about.

We started our argosy in the direction that the battery had gone, but soon changed our minds. As we moved over a rise (always a bad policy, but we had to do it) we had a fine view of what was going on towards what had been our rear. There were 74 German tanks (we counted them), unnumbered German halftracks, all of whom seemed to be chasing "B" Battery. Our vehicles were trying to get to the Sbeitla road by way of a salt marsh, and the results were disastrous. I didn't see any of the howitzers; they had already been shot up. It was an awful sight to see those Germans, like a pack of mongrels, tearing after our relatively defenseless half tracks. Once in a while one of the half tracks would suddenly blossom out with red and black, like the first puff of fire in oil, and then seem to settle down like a sinking ship to some first class burning up. One or two of the ammunition tracts which were burning blew all to hell and gone when the fire reached the ammunition. However, I don't believe that many men lost their lives; for some reason or other, when a vehicle is hit men generally are able to get out. And that was the end of "B" Battery, except for our pick-up section.

Seeing that we were cut off, we decided to head for the mountain where I supposed Amos, Jr. still was. We thought that we might be able to find a spot where we might hide out with our howitzer, or at least from which we might do some shooting; we found the latter. We had gone as far as we could go; the steep sides of the mountain hemmed us in on two sides, a deep ditch on the third, and on the fourth side was a slight rise in the ground which afforded us hull defilade. Our biggest trouble initially was to pick out a target, there were so many of them. But we reasoned that we couldn't really hit anything with a gun without sights, so we decided to shoot at the front wave of enemy vehicles that were just completing their encirclement of the mountain. Sgt. Morris lined up the tube as best he could; I estimated a range, and our infantryman loaded the piece and we let fly. 'Way over. Another one, and this was better, but still over. A few more, and we finally got the range. And the Germans stopped! The whole kit and kaboodle of them just plain stopped! We thought we were pretty good, but in thinking it over I believe that they were just assembling for the next phase of their operations. During the shooting we were a bit perturbed, not to say scared to death, by the fact that a company of enemy tanks was slowly creeping up on us generally through the steep ditch. They were Mark III's. We prepared to abandon the howitzer, pouring gasoline over the equipment. When the men had cleared the piece I dropped a couple of thermite grenades down the muzzle, and we all took off into the hills, not a second too soon, for the leading tanks opened up on us with their 47's and machine guns. They missed. We got about a hundred yards up the hill side when the tanks came on our howitzer. We could see the tank commanders, in their Afrika Korps peaked and visored hats, standing up in their turrets looking for us. I had the field glasses, which made it all the worse, because for some insidious reason I kept looking at the Germans through them at that close range, which scared me blue. Finally the tanks moved away, and we started climbing. We knew that somewhere on this mountain there were our own infantry, and we were determined to get to them; it was much less lonely that way. After about a half-hours climb we had to go through hell again.

we fired continuously, first using charge 7 (maximum), then charge 5, and finally charge 3. The howitzers sounded curiously impotent shooting charge 3 - short of a little pop when they went off, and the tubes hardly recoiled. I have to hand it to the gun crews; it was obvious that the enemy was too damned close for comfort but those men just stayed right in there and shot. This business of the green American artillery being overrun without firing a shot is so much baloney; certainly we were green, and we were scared, but those men stuck to their guns in spite of it. I turned over the observing job to Lt. Docton, who had shown up in the middle of the mess in his tank, and went down to the phone to talk to Amon, Jr. He reported that a very large force of enemy tanks and armored infantry was circling around the mountain around our left flank. Then I called up Col. Waters, and asked permission to displace the battery to another position I had reconnoitered previously, because the Germans were so close that our fire couldn't clear the crest in front of us to hit them. He okayed the plan, and I gave march order, at the same time telling Delaney to send two guns out on the right flank to protect the withdrawal. Before I could get back to the phone the wires had been ripped out, and that was the end of communication with Amon, Jr.

The withdrawal was poorly executed, although the fault was not that of the officers. Both Lt. Delaney and Lt. Burney did a beautiful job, and it was greatly due to their efforts that most of the battery got out of that position. Lt. Burney and S/Sgt. Hiter, the motor sergeant, met each other going down the wadi on foot, and Sgt. Hiter later told me that Lt. Burney acted as though he were out on a morning stroll. Lt. Burney said, later on, that he was darned if he would be scared if Sgt. Hiter could be so calm. Sort of a mutual support society. The battery finally got out of the position, and Lt. Delaney led it to the alternate position and prepared to shoot some more.

From now on the story is mostly my own. I remained behind to see if anyone else was there, and to see if I couldn't get one of the howitzers out. I couldn't; something wrong with the motor. I finally took the last remaining vehicle, an ammunition track, and the driver and I scooted out just as a couple of German tanks stuck their ugly snouts over the crest. Why they hadn't got there a lot sooner I couldn't understand, but later I learned that it was the superb work of T/5 Wirt P. Cunningham who single handed had manned his anti-tank gun in protecting our left flank. He knocked out two tanks before he was forced to move out. I examined his gun shield later and found it pretty thoroughly spattered with machine gun bullets. Sgt. Goodner and Sgt. Morris held our right flank, with their howitzers.

That ride in the ammunition track was one for the books. I drove, and the driver manned the machine gun in the rear. To make things more difficult, we were towing a trailer full of ammunition, and the motor didn't seem just right - perhaps that was because the muffler was off. We sounded like a rusty farm machine as we dragged over the foot hills; I was sure that we were attracting the attention of the whole German army to us by our noise. And then we got stuck; we uncoupled the trailer and moved on, eventually running into Col. Waters in his half track. I sent the ammunition track on, and went to Col. Waters, who was giving all the dope to higher headquarters over the radio, and trying to contact various elements of his own force. I told him that the battery was in position behind him, and that we would open fire as soon as possible. At which point German tanks started shooting at the colonel's half track, although they did no damage. I started back on foot, only to run into another cheerful incident.

I felt pretty lonely, trudging over those hills. I had lost my helmet, my field glasses, and apparently my battery. The sun came up, warming the air so that my combat suit became almost unbearably hot. And, to add to my misery, my feet began to hurt from the Irish shoes I was wearing. How long I wandered I don't remember,

Next time you write to Amon, Jr., give him my very best wishes, and tell him that old Baker Battery will be right in there to get him out.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) W. Bruce Pirnie, Jr.
W. Bruce Pirnie, Jr.
Capt., 91st Armd F.A. Bn.

P.S. Lt. Col. Brewster of Fort Worth, came around to see me today. We didn't have time for more than a hello, but I certainly did enjoy meeting him, and hope to see him again soon. He said that you told him to look me up, for which I thank you. WBP JR.

C O P Y