ACCOUNT OF ITALIAN FRONT

The Allies entered Naples on October 1; Rome was only 100 miles to the north, but it was to be eight more grueling months before the men of the Allied armies would reach the Eternal City. Of the correspondents who covered this phase of the war in Italy, the most famous and the best liked by the men he wrote about was Ernie Pyle. The following excerpt, from his book Brave Men, was an attempt to explain why the progress of the war in Italy was so slow.

Our troops were living in almost inconceivable misery. The fertile black valleys were knee-deep in mud. Thousands of the men had not been dry for weeks. Other thousands lay at night in the high mountains with the temperature below freezing and the thin snow sifting over them. They dug into the stones and slept in little chasms and behind rocks and in half-caves. They lived like men of prehistoric times, and a club would have become them more than a machine gun. How they survived the dreadful winter at all was beyond us who had the opportunity of drier beds in the warmer valleys.

You’ve heard of trench mouth and athlete’s foot, but still another occupational disease of warfare sprang up on both sides in the Italian war. It was called “trench foot,” and was well known in the last war.

Trench foot comes from a man’s feet being wet and cold for long periods and from not taking off his shoes often enough. In the mountains the soldiers sometimes went for two weeks or longer without ever having their shoes off or being able to get their feet dry. The tissues gradually seem to go dead, and sores break out. It is almost the same as circulation stopping and the flesh dying. In extreme cases gangrene occurs. We had cases where amputation was necessary. And in others soldiers couldn’t walk again for six months or more.

Sometimes the men let trench foot go so long without complaining that they were finally unable to walk and had to be taken down the mountain in litters. Others got down under their own power, agonizingly. One boy was a day and a half getting down the mountain on what would normally be a two-hour descent. He arrived at the bottom barefooted, carrying his shoes in his hand, his feet bleeding. He was in a kind of a daze from the pain.

The fighting on the mountaintop almost reached the caveman stage sometimes. Americans and Germans were frequently so close that they actually threw rocks at each other. Many more hand grenades were used than in any other phase of the Mediterranean war. And you have to be pretty close when you throw hand grenades.

Rocks played a big part in the mountain war. Men hid behind rocks, threw rocks, slept in rock crevices, and even were killed by flying rocks.

When an artillery shell bursts on a loose rock surface, rock fragments are thrown for many yards. In one battalion fifteen percent of the casualties were from flying rocks. Also, now and then an artillery burst from a steep hillside would loosen big boulders which went leaping and bounding down the mountainside for thousands of yards. The boys said such a rock sounded like a windstorm coming down the mountainside.

When soldiers came down the mountain out of battle they were dirty, grimy, unshaven and weary. They looked ten years older than they were. They didn’t smile.
much. But the human body and mind recover rapidly. After a couple of days down
below they began to pick up. It was a sight to see a bunch of combat soldiers after they
had shaved and washed up. As one said, “We all look sick after we’ve cleaned up, we’re
so white.”

It was funny to hear them talk. One night in our cowshed I heard one of them tell
how he was going to keep his son out of the next war. “As soon as I get home I’m going
to put ten-pound weights in his hands and make him jump off the garage roof to break
down his arches,” he said, “I’m going to feed him a little ground glass to give him a bad
stomach, and I’m going to make him read by candlelight all the time to ruin his eyes.
When I get through with him, he’ll be double-4 double-F.”

In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the
soldiers under them. But never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Captain
Henry T. Waskow, of Belton, Texas.

Captain Waskow was a company commander in the Thirty-Sixth Division. He
had led his company since long before it left the States. He was very young, only in his
middle twenties, but he carried in him a sincerity and a gentleness that made people want
to be guided by him.

“After my father, he came next,” a sergeant told me.
“He always looked after us,” a soldier said. “He’d go to bat for us every time.”
“I’ve never known him to do anything unfair,” another said.
I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Captain Waskow down.
The moon was nearly full, and you could see far up the trail . . .

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs
of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden packsaddles, their heads
hanging down on one side, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other,
bobbing up and down as the mules walked . . .

I don’t know who the first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men,
and you don’t ask silly questions.

They slid him down from the mule, and stood him on his feet for a moment. In
the half-light he might have been merely a sick man standing there leaning on the others.
Then they laid him on the ground in the shadow of the stone wall alongside the road. We
left him there beside the road, that first one, and we all went back into the cowshed and
sat on water cans or lay on the straw, waiting for the next batch of mules.

Somebody said the dead soldier had been dead for four days, and then nobody
said anything more about it. We talked soldier talk for an hour or more; the dead man lay
all alone, outside in the shadow of the wall.

Then a soldier came into the cowshed and said there were some more bodies
outside. We went out into the road. Four mules stood there in the moonlight, in the road
where the trail came down off the mountain. The soldiers who led them stood there
waiting.

“This one is Captain Waskow,” one of them said quietly.

Two men unlashed the body from the mule and lifted it off and laid it in the
shadow beside the stone wall. Other men took the other bodies off. Finally, there were
five lying end to end in a long row. You don’t cover up dead men in the combat zones.
They just lie there in the shadows until somebody comes after them.
The unburdened mules moved off to their olive grove. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually I could sense them moving, one by one, close to Captain Waskow’s body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, “God damn it!”
That’s all he said, and then he walked away.

Another one came, and he said, “God damn it to hell anyway!” He looked down for a few last moments and then turned and left.

Another man came. I think he was an officer. It was hard to tell officers from men in the dim light, for everybody was bearded and grimy. The man looked down into the dead captain’s face and then spoke directly to him, as though he were alive, “I’m sorry, old man.”

Then a soldier came and stood beside the officer and bent over, and he too spoke to his dead captain, not in a whisper but awfully tenderly, and he said, “I sure am sorry, sir.”

Then the first man squatted down, and he reached down and took the captain’s hand, and he sat there for a full five minutes holding the dead hand in his own and looking intently into the dead face. And he never uttered a sound all the time he sat there. Finally he put the hand down. He reached over and gently straightened the points of the captain’s shirt collar, and then he sort of rearranged the tattered edges of the uniform around the wound, and then he got up and walked away down the road in the moonlight, all alone.

The rest of us went back into the cowshed, leaving the five dead men lying in a line end to end in the shadow of the low stone wall. We lay down on the straw in the cowshed, and pretty soon we were all asleep.