

THE BATTLE IS THE DAY-OFF

By

Captain Ralph Ingersoll

"This war is a
war for keeps
... Battle is
what training
is for ..."



FIGHTING
FORCES
SERIES



THE INFANTRY JOURNAL

THE BATTLE IS THE PAY-OFF

By
CAPTAIN RALPH INGERSOLL

WASHINGTON
THE INFANTRY JOURNAL
1943

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FIGHTING FORCES EDITION

This is a special edition made available to the members of the Armed Services only, through the cooperation of the Author, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the original publishers, Harcourt, Brace & Company, as a contribution in the war effort.

Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

THE POWERS of careful observation and clear description of scenes and events have not been bestowed equally upon all of us; and but few of those so gifted or trained ever write of their experiences and observations.

Fortunately, Captain Ingersoll has those powers, and he has promptly written out what he so carefully observed. His description of the battle near El Guettar and the events both immediately before and after the battle make a living scene peopled by our own soldiers fighting against our principal enemies. It may be rather strong reading for some, but it must be remembered that a battle is not a game of ping-pong. It is a ferocious engagement and is met by thousands of our soldiers and of our allies every day in some part of the world.

Those at home and those who are about to enter a theater of operations—particularly the latter—will better do their part in this war if they realize more exactly what is going on at the final “business” end of the war structure. I do know, from my own experiences, that this is true for newly trained soldiers; and so I hope that some of them who may chance upon this book will read it carefully and benefit by the experiences described.

DANIEL NOCE,
Brigadier General, U. S. Army.

May 27, 1943

THE BATTLE IS THE PAY-OFF
was first published by
HARCOURT, BRACE & COMPANY IN 1943

This book is complete and unabridged. It is manufactured in conformity with government regulations for saving paper.

Author's Note

ALL THE CHARACTERS in the book are real persons. But since under the circumstances in which the book was written it was impossible to show them the manuscript, I have out of deference to them used fictitious names for everyone except a few general officers.

R. I.

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Introduction

WHEN I FIRST WENT into the army I was very unhappy. I was not permitted to enter the army as an anonymous draftee, which would have given me a sense of community with millions of other Americans. The atmosphere of public controversy which surrounded me as editor of the newspaper *PM* penetrated into the circumstances connected with my joining the armed forces. I was a newspaper man and I thought and still do think that newspaper publishing is an essential war occupation. But, after all, no one can shed completely one's own personal bias in such matters. I had to solve the tangle in my own way, and recalling the first World War, when I enlisted in the army at the age of seventeen, I threw off my personal bias by enlisting again and shedding my prejudice in favor of fighting this war as publisher and editor. I ceased to be unhappy.

The process by which I ceased to be unhappy was the process of absorption into that vast community which is the Army of the United States. To each man this process is personal, intimate, and individual. Even if I could entirely explain it, the explanation would be out of place here, but I feel I owe this much to those who may wonder what has become of the editor of *PM*.

In this book there is little, for instance, about what we are fighting for or about the political situation in Europe or even about what I think of the coming peace. These subjects are missing, not because I have lost interest in them—I am quite sure there is more thinking on what the war is all about in the army than in any other large group in our society—but because—well, I can put it best by going back to my thoughts and emotions in the first month or two of training.

I was then so tired physically that I could only get

through a day by using every five- or ten-minute breathing spell to lie flat on my back and luxuriate in my aches and pains. My friends had just begun coming to see me and their misguided way of showing their sympathy was to be indignant about "the way I was treated." They felt, in their good hearts, that this was something their enemies and mine, personified by Manhattan's Draft Board 44, were doing to me personally. Since I was low and dispirited, when they went away I found myself agreeing with them. I became so sorry for myself that I knew I would have to do something about it.

And these thoughts came to me—alone and in bull sessions on the bunks in the barracks and in ten-minute breaks in the field, talking with other men who, each in his own way, were going through an emotional experience something like my own:

Forget draft boards and legal or moral compulsions. Take the world as it is today. How would each one of us act if we were completely free agents? Would we still go to war or would we sit this one out?

We had been soldiers now for a month. That's long enough to know how tough it is for a soft civilian to march even five miles with nothing but a rifle on his shoulders and no pack, how uncomfortable it is to sleep on a hard and narrow cot. It is long enough, too, to know that, man for man, in the field, soldiers who could walk not five but twenty miles and to whom a cot was not a hardship but a luxury, would have very little difficulty killing us.

The military phrase for a soldier's mission is quite explicit. It is to impose one's will on the enemy. At the end of a month in the army we knew—and it was quite a startling bit of new knowledge—how weak we were, how easy it would be in a showdown for anyone to impose his will on us. If we were not yet disciplined, we already knew the value of discipline—for already we had been lost on marches, we had mock-fired in mock skirmishes on those who were supposed to be

our friends. We knew, all the big talk aside, how we stank.

We also knew, fresh in the morning, marching in solid columns, swinging out from camp with our new M-i's on our shoulders, just how tough an army that was good could be.

Well, the German army was that good—as good as we felt in the early morning, as good as the best of our day-dreams about ourselves.

All right, so that's the German army and maybe the Japanese army too, and even the Italians must be better than we were. And there are all these armies in the world, our sworn enemies—our sworn enemies whether we were Republicans or Democrats, bright or stupid, skilled or unskilled.

So now, thinking it over, talking it over, what would we do—today—if there were no draft boards, no sudden impulses to enlist? Well, this was the choice that we now understood: that either we accepted the will imposed by armies made up of stronger, tougher, better soldiers than we, or else we—first individually and then collectively—would have to create an army that was even tougher.

Those of us who had been soldiers for a month now *knew* there was no middle ground whatever. There was no space left for political debate. The nigger-lyncher and the editor of *PM* had to march side by side for a while. With the first personal understanding of the power, the sheer physical might, of an organized army you knew you either had to be submissive to the will of an enemy with such an army or else you had to help create an organization strong enough to oppose it.

And now it came home to each of us that the only way to create such an organization was by sweat. Thought alone would not produce an army, nor would resolutions, or trades previously mastered. The new trade of killing must be learned from the hard ground

up. The complete absorption of each one of us was required, physical and mental.

All our faith was needed, too. Now that our turn had come, we did not know, any one of us, whether we would be up to the rôle that history was giving us. We knew we would not know until we met the men in German gray-green or Japanese light khaki on something we could as yet only imagine, something called a battlefield.

I said we used to talk about what we would do if we were free agents. Most of us felt, some of us knew, that we were still free to accept or reject the ultimate challenge. We were not really committed yet. Very few of us would ever fight. The army, we saw, was plenty big enough to carry any given individual or group of individuals who chose to remain noncombatant throughout the war. The combatant idea was not dependent upon whether one became an infantryman with an assignment to a combat regiment but on whether one accepted personally the challenge to submerge oneself into the army and live wholly to make it stronger. There would be men—we could already spot some of them in our midst—who were only in the army for the ride and would always be passengers.

These were the thoughts that I and many others had and talked about in the summer of 1942, in the training battalion of the 533rd Engineer Shore Regiment at Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. They frightened me because I did not know how it would come out with me and also because I wondered, looking about me—and back upon my friends who were still civilians, and thinking of the women I knew, and of my relatives and of my associates on the paper and of my enemies, in politics and out—whether we as a nation, as a people, would understand the inexorability of the choice. Would enough of us choose to resist rather than to submit? Were we really committed?

It was painfully obvious to the most casual observer in the summer of 1942 that Americans did not then understand. The pace of the army's training, the controversies in the papers, the crowds at the USO, the ceaseless murmuring tide of talk, talk, talk, from one continental coast to the other, the silly nonsense on the advertising billboards, the bad taste of the speeches to raise money for war bonds—everywhere one turned, there were the symptoms. The whole American world seemed unconscious of what were the only realities to us in camp. The hardness of the ground when you threw yourself on it making mimic charges—that was real. The hard ground symbolized the truth that only the hardness and discipline and self-consecration of millions could produce an army that could impose its will on the enemy who was attempting to impose his will on us.

Aching on the ground, I thought of the softness of a bed. Hungry on the cook's bad day, I thought of the dinner that I had the money to buy if I were somewhere else. And I understood the appeaser for the first time. The appeaser, I thought, was simply a more imaginative man than I. He was simply a man who could look ahead and see the price he would have to pay for opposing the will of the armed enemy. Feeling the softness of his bed and the cool caress of the sheets and the peace that comes only with the full belly, he knew he would be content to submit to the conqueror just to be allowed to stay where he was. He understood the bargain he was making; he was prepared to rely on his wits to see that the enemy lived up to his end of it. I understood how he felt and I wished sometimes that I felt the same way.

I remembered the old soldier's story about the private in Stonewall Jackson's army. The old private had marched his feet off. He was sore and hungry and miserable and barely able to keep up with the column, when Stonewall Jackson rode alongside and asked him how he felt. The old soldier trudged in silence for a

moment, then he said soberly: "I'm all right, General. But God damn my soul if I ever love another country."

There in the training battalion I could go back over my whole life and everything I had loved and what had given me satisfaction and what had made me unhappy, uncomfortable, or depressed. On the one side of the ledger there was the way of life that was gone, but on the other there was everything else. There was love and work and faith and the hope for the future of man that alone makes the terror of the present livable. There was everything except physical comfort, which grew suddenly insignificant. There was no way back out of the army, or even into a soft job in the army. At forty-two years of age, I might never fire a rifle, but there was only one way, now that I was in the army, and that was towards becoming the best soldier—with all my long inventory of limitations—that the army and I could make of me.

With these thoughts, and with the gradual hardening of muscles and the acclimatization to or acceptance of the army, or whatever the process should be called, I ceased being unhappy. I also ceased being the editor of *PM*, ceased being a journalist. I became one-four-millionth or one-seven-millionth or one-eight-millionth part of the Army of the United States—for the duration.

I do not yet feel I know the answer to how good an army we are or will be. I admit, however, to a faith in us I did not have when I was in training and which I acquired slowly and only after many doubts. We are still not as good an army as the Russian or the British or the Chinese—let alone the German. We are probably better now than the Italian. I have no first-hand knowledge of the Japanese. But anyone who has been in the army for nearly a year will have felt at one time or another what, coming back from Africa, I felt most strongly—that as an army we are alive and growing. We grow in strength and perception because we

are young and healthy. And we are big physically and can lose much blood without our wounds being mortal—terrible as is the sight of that blood flowing away.

This book is written in that faith in the American army that I have just confessed. It is also written with love and admiration.

PART I

Theater of War

1

THE ORDERS CAME at 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

I was sitting in the sun outside the battalion headquarters and I was bored.

Battalion headquarters were in the last of a row of one-story mud houses. In front of the houses was a row of withered and dusty trees. The lowest branches were just high enough to let the half-tracks get under them. The half-track crews had the guns out and were cleaning them on the ground. Long belts of ammunition hung down from the branches and the parts of several guns were laid out neatly on canvas shelter halves (pup tents) on the ground. The men were sitting cross-legged or were sprawled out, working on the guns with grease-blackened toothbrushes and bits of rag.

The houses and the trees were on the edge of the big square in Gafsa, right where the road from Feriana came into it and turned left. From there the road wound down through the town and across the wadi where the flood had wrecked the field kitchen and where the rusting skeleton of the drowned Italian tank still stood in the now dried riverbed. Beyond the wadi, the road curled between the mud walls that once enclosed the palm and olive groves. Most of the walls were flat now, trampled down by the engineers' big bulldozers to make way for the vehicles which had taken shelter in the precious shade beyond. All the olive and the palm groves in the oasis of Gafsa were now chockablock with vehicles. The mud which had mired them down after the rain of the week before had dried and turned to dust except in the deep hollows that were still chocolate-colored and full of cracks.

Beyond the groves that were full of men and machines, the road went out into the naked desert and forked north and east. And to the north and to the east the enemy waited.

Ten feet from where I lay, an MP in a white helmet stood directing traffic along this road. The traffic was inconsequential now. The armor had followed the infantry and now both divisions were on the far side of Gafsa, in the groves and scattered over the plains and deserts beyond.

The Free French had come and gone—from Lake Chad across the desert, some men said. They traveled in battered old tanks and lorries that looked as if they were falling apart. They were supposed to have gone on out to protect our right flank. Some of them were big, bearded men in greenish skirts which were pinned between their knees so that from one angle they looked as if they wore hobble skirts and from another pantaloons. Their rifles were very long. The doughboys did not know how to take them and looked in silence when they marched or rode past.

The first few days had been a scramble. No one had had time to more than gape hurriedly, whether at the Free French or the ruins of the old fortress that had been blown up because there was an enemy ammunition dump in it, or even down the mysterious, twisting sidestreets of the Arab village. There was only time to pluck the lemons from the trees and drive on to find a place to bivouac or a site for a gun or a water-point or someone else's command post. All had been confusion and haste, for no one had known when the counterattack might come. Then finally there was a little order in the chaos. Men began to know who and what outfits were where. And the wire was in and sometimes you could raise someone on the field telephone. And the blankets were almost dry.

The only sign of the enemy all this time was the sight of the reconnaissance planes making their leisurely circuits of the skies, morning and afternoon.

They flew haughtily past with all the countryside belching fire and smoke up at them, not even swerving from the path they had chosen for themselves.

On that afternoon, I sat in the sun and was bored because I wanted to be out with A company. A company was reconnoitering the site for another mine field. I enjoyed reconnoitering and all my friends were in A company. But instead of being with them, I was sitting there in front of the battalion headquarters because the colonel had sent for me but had been away when I got there—and that was now four hours ago. I was still sitting on my can and I was tired of watching the MP or the men cleaning the guns or the puppies that played in the dirt by the door. The headquarters inside was a table and a field telephone and a box full of papers that a discouraged-looking sergeant was wearily reading and sorting. The adjutant, who was a busy little captain, breezed in and out with an air of making work for himself. Now and then he paused to reassure me that the colonel would be back soon.

There was a first-class rumor around that afternoon. This rumor had it that having taken over Gafsa and “consolidated the position,” we were going to be pulled out of the line and sent north. If you had not heard the rumor, you could have felt it in the way men moved, known it from the tone of their voices and from what they were doing. The Gafsa show was over. It had been a “dry run.” On the rifle range, a dry run is a drill in loading and aiming with no shooting. It is a rehearsal, a sham, not the real thing. There had been no enemy in Gafsa to meet the attack that had been so carefully planned. The artillery had fired its barrage, the combat teams had gone forward on foot, the Rangers had scaled the big mountains to the south to take a gun position on the summit and the light bombers had gone over in sheets—with their bombs falling like wind-driven hail. But the only enemy counteraction had been a single, thunderous