

Dear Folks---Just a line to let you know that I'm OK

Hugh Lilevjen's letters* to his parents written during his service in WWII

Cannon Company, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division

Minnesota to Hitler's Eagles Nest

*Letters word-processed and family and war history narrative written by Karen Lilevjen LaBat, Hugh Lilevjen's daughter



Tech. Sgt. Hugh Lilevjen
Studio Portrait at end of War.

Chapter III. North Africa: French Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia

Nov. 1943-July 4, 1943

Atkinson (2002) states:

“Night would end, the tide would turn, and on that turning tide an army would wash ashore in Africa, ready to right a world gone wrong” (pg. 18).

Hugh's Spiral Notebook: Left U.S. for duty in Fr. Morocco from HRPE Newport News¹ on Oct. 24, 1942, Arr. Nov. 8, 1942.

Algeria, Fr. Morocco, 8-Nov. 42—12 Nov. 42

[Note Date Gap while traveling across North Africa]

Tunisia 30-Apr, 43—13 May 43

November 8: In Operation Torch, Allied troops land in North Africa, the first major Allied offensive in the western theaters of war: their commander is U.S. General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Atkinson (2002) states that two great armadas (carried more than 100,000 troops to the invasion beaches (pg. 22), three-quarters were American and the rest British (pg. 31). He further states that Roosevelt and Churchill's larger ambition was “complete control of North Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea” (pg. 22). And Hanson (2017) states that the British “envisioned the conquest of North Africa as a stepping-stone to knocking Fascist Italy out of the war and advancing through the so-called soft underbelly of Europe into Austria” (pg. 280).

Atkinson (2002) states “North Africa gave the European war its immense canvas and implied—through 70,000 Allied killed, wounded, and missing—the casualties to come” (pg. 3).

Regarding invasion of Morocco and into Casablanca:

Hindley (2017) describes the convoy of ships

“When Assembled, Task Force 34 covered a stretch of ocean twenty by thirty miles wide. Five lines of ships, organized into nine columns spaced 1,000 yards apart, formed the heart of the convoy . . . the convoy operated under radio silence and used the centuries-old method of communicating orders between ships using signal flags” (pg. 215).

The Americans (and British) would fight against the Vichy French who were under Hitler's control. The French were always thought of as allies, thus putting the Americans in a strange position. Patton issued a memo to troops in the convoy stating:

“Remember, the French are not Nazis or Japs.” He further declared that each soldier should remember his training and work without regard for sleep or food because the

¹ Hampton Roads Port of Embarkation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hampton_Roads_Port_of_Embarkation
Photo Section: HRPE Newport News.

world was watching stating, “You must succeed, for to retreat is as cowardly as it is fatal. Indeed, once landed, retreat is impossible” (Hindley, 2017, pg. 220).

Hugh’s 3rd Army landed at Fédala as part of the Center Attack Group directed by Patton (Hindley, 2017, pg. 221).

“A little after midnight on November 8, 165 miles up the coast from Safi [*150 miles south of Casablanca, the southern landing point*], the Center Attack Group moved into position eight miles off the coast of Fédala.” “The churning ocean swung the nets out from the sides of the ships, making it difficult for the men, their legs stiff from the long, confined voyage, to find the next rung down” (Hindley, 2017, pg. 239).

Hindley (2017) explains that BBC radio started announcing (in French and English) at 1:30am that the invasion was in process. On the radio, Eisenhower urged the French in Casablanca not to fight. They could signal their non-resistance by pointing their coastal searchlights into the sky and flying the French tricolor and American flags.

Casablanca was fairly intact, except the harbor that sustained damage. The French within Casablanca declared a ceasefire on November 11. (Hindley, 2017).

Before the war, there were fewer than 110 Americans in Morocco. With the invasion 33,000 American soldiers were now concentrated mostly between Casablanca and Rabat.

Every letter at this point was subjected to censorship typically by the Lieutenant in the unit. Smith (1993) who wrote about life in a Cannon Company said, “One of the most distasteful chores imposed on the officers was censoring all outgoing mail from our men. We had to read—or at least scan—every letter and they were numerous in deed. But we managed to read them in such a way that we could discover any breach of security without causing us to feel that we were intruding on our men’s privacy” (pg. 41).

November 16, 1942

Postmarked: Postmark missing

Hand written lower left of envelope: censored, U.S. Examiner Lt. R. Berhe, 02342

Letterhead: No letterhead—on lined paper written in pencil

Dear Folks:

I imagine you wonder where I am and what I have been doing. Well I will try and answer that the best I can.

We are now at **[phrase of remaining sentence physically cut out]**, Morocco in Africa. We landed on the **[phrase of remaining sentence physically cut out]**² on November the eighth and went right into combat³. I was lucky and came out without a scratch on me. We landed in **[phrase of remaining sentence physically cut out]** and it sure was quite an experience going

² Hugh’s Division landed at Fédala, Morocco and fought their way toward Casa Blanca. The fighting lasted just over three days. See Photo Section.

³ Photo Section: Map of 3rd Division, TORCH, landing. Fédala

over the side of the boat and knowing that you were going into a fight as soon as you hit shore⁴. As far as the battle is concerned I won't say much as I am not sure just what we can say and I imagine that you can get a better account of it right in the newspapers and maybe the newsreels.

I am sure having a heck of a time trying to talk French to the people over here and get used to their money. An American dollar is worth from 43 to 75 francs, all depending on who changes it. Whatever you buy is cheap but there isn't much you can buy. We have plenty to eat and things are getting better in town but I guess the Germans really robbed this country of their food stuff while they were in control

Three of us kids were in town⁵ yesterday and looked the place over and we had a lot of fun. We met seven French sailors⁶ and we sure had fun trying to talk to each other but we didn't have much luck in understanding each other.

Our biggest trouble now is getting soap, writing paper, etc. and I sure will be glad if a P.X. catches up with us so we can buy some. I had to beg around for a half hour to get these four sheets and I lost my pen so I have to use a pencil.

I bought myself a swell billfold for 20 francs last night and when we get all straightened around I will try and send you folks some things from over here for souvenirs.

There is lots of oranges and fruit around here and they sure taste good coming right off the tree and you know how I like fruit.

I imagine that our mail will be catching up with us in a day or two and you most likely have my new address, if not just use the old one.

How is everything going back home? Is business holding up as good as ever? Have many more of the kids been going into the army and have you heard where most of them are? Say Hello to everybody back home and let Clarence know where I am at.

Love, Hugh

P.S. I will write a little on the back of these sheets and take a chance on the censors cutting it out.

[Back of first page]

⁴ "At Fédala, the first wave of twenty-six landing craft headed vaguely east just after five A.M." (Atkinson, 202, pg. 109). Atkinson also states that for neophyte troops, this first combat experience was revealing: "war was fought by ignorant armies on a darkling plain" (pg. 116).

⁵ Probably Casa Blanca (Hugh mentions in a later letter seeing the movie Casa Blanca to see if anything looks familiar).

⁶ Probably Vichy soldiers who had surrendered shortly after the Division entered Casa Blanca.

Just a few notes back here and a few questions.

How is Clarence's football team coming along or should I say how did it get along as the season is probably **[phrase of remaining sentence physically cut out]** did Minnesota come out in the Big 10 and who was National Champs?

Well I will close for now and write more when I get some more **[phrase of remaining sentence physically cut out]**

I am well and hope everyone at home is the same. Write and give me all the news.

Lots of Love, Hugh

Hindley (2017) describes the scene that Hugh probably saw (and heard):

Casablanca teemed with thousands of American soldiers and sailors with close-cropped hair, speaking English with accents that ranged from the flat cadence of the Midwest to the twang of Texas, from New England's dropped r's to the south's elongated vowels. The incessant slaughtering of the French language added to the cacophony as the Americans tried out the phonetic crib sheets they'd been given; for example:

Do you speak English? (Parlez-vous l'anglais?/ Pare lay voo lan glay)

I want this souvenir (je veux ce souvenir-ci/ Juh vuh suh suv near sea)

(pg. 323)

From the movie, Casablanca with Humphrey Bogart as Rick, an American expatriate struggling with his conscience and his heart in Vichy North Africa in 1941:

Capitaine Renault: What in heaven's name brought you to Casablanca?

Rick: My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters.

Renault: The waters? What waters? We're in the desert.

Rick: I was misinformed.

November 20, 1942: Morocco, Africa

Envelope:

Return: P.F.C. Hugh Lilevjen

Cannon Company, 7 Inf.

A.P.O. #3

Camp Pickett, Virginia [*Letters still routed through Camp Pickett*]

To: Mr. Henry. Lilevjen, Appleton, Minnesota

Postmarked: Postmark missing

Stamped lower left of envelope: Passed by Army Examiner 02342

Letterhead: No letterhead—on lined paper written in pencil

Dear Folks:

The Red Cross gave us a kit of things and there was some writing paper in it so I can now write a few more lines.

Things are still going good over here and it is really a pretty nice country. The climate and all is just about the same as California and they have lots of flowers, orange groves, and grapes. Casa Blanca is quite a modern city with nice buildings and parks and some pretty swell homes. Then

you have the natives and their part of the city is mostly narrow streets and alleys and out in the country you see them plowing with a camel and a cow or a burro or something hitched up together and you see them sowing their grain by hand. The natives live in grass huts or any kind of old shack. You see the family going to town or some place and the man is riding a little burro about 3 feet high and the wife comes walking along behind with a baby strapped on her back and 2 or 3 kids running along behind.

Well it is getting too dark to write so I will have to finish tomorrow.

Well I skipped a day and here it is Sunday and I will try and finish this letter.

There hasn't been much doing here lately, we get up and drill in the morning and go on a hike in the afternoon and that along with guard about every 3rd day is all we do.

How is everything going back home? Is business still holding up as good as ever? How is to get things now, is it still hard to get gum, etc. and how is the sugar situation?

What do you hear from "Ham" and Johnny and some of those kids are they still in the States and where are they? Also what do you hear from the kids in Co. "M"⁷.

I was in town yesterday but there really isn't much to do once you get there. You can buy a lot of things pretty cheap in town such as billfolds, pocketbooks, shoes, and leather goods and some jewelry. When it gets so we can send things home I will send you some souvenirs.

We haven't got a regular P.X. set up over here yet but we can get things every so often off one of the navy ships that come in. We get our cigarettes for 55 cents a carton over here, tax free, and everything else is just as cheap as in the states, so we get by pretty good. Our wages are 10% higher over here too so I am making \$64.80 a month now and that is pretty high wages over here.

It seems funny that there isn't more to write about when you come this far but we haven't been around much over here yet and as far as the trip over it was just a lot of water.⁸ I didn't get a bit seasick coming over though, that was one good thing.

I suppose that our mail will catch up with us in a few days and then I should have a lot of reading.

Write and give me all the news, and I will write again soon.

Love, Hugh

⁷ Company M, 135th Regiment (Minnesota National Guard), WWII campaigns: Tunisia, Naples-Foggia, Anzio, Rome-Arno, North Apennines, Po Valley [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/135th_Infantry_Regiment_\(United_States\)#Lineage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/135th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States)#Lineage), retrieved July 25, 2020.

⁸ Photo Section: U.S. Landing at Fedala, National Museum of the US Navy. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U.S._landing_barges_speed_shoreward_during_landing_operations,_Fedala,_French_Morocco_\(27294151155\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:U.S._landing_barges_speed_shoreward_during_landing_operations,_Fedala,_French_Morocco_(27294151155).jpg) (retrieved July 25, 2020).

[Included in packet of letters—envelope addressed to Mr. and Mrs. H.A. Lilevjen, Appleton, Minnesota. From Lt. Lucy A. Wells⁹, U.M.C.; 154th Station Hospital; A.P.O. #??; c/o postmaster; San Francisco, California. Postmarked: Postal Service, Nov 31, 1942 A.M.; Censor stamp: USAFIA, Passed, Bursar Gary C. Gmard, Christmas card.]

The war department provided soldiers with a fifty-page pamphlet, which included warnings against entering mosques and offering a Muslim an alcoholic drink. The sternest language was used concerning interactions with women,

“Never stare at a Moslem woman. Never jostle her in a crowd. Never speak to her in public. Never try to remove the veil. This is most important” (Hindley, 2017, pg. 327).

After invading and conquering Morocco:

“They believed they had been blooded. They believed that overpowering the feeble French meant something. They believed in the righteousness of their cause, the inevitability of their victory, and the immortality of their young souls. And as they wheeled around to the east and pulled out their Michelin maps of Tunisia, they believed they had actually been to war” (Atkinson, 2002, pg. 16).

Morocco to Tunisia was a slow overland trek by road and rail while seaborne forces paralleled the movement along the Mediterranean coast. On November 12 the first wave of Allied soldiers were only 185 road miles from Bizerte (Atkinson, 2002, pg. 175).

Some units used tanks to cross the desert—U.S. troops in Africa used Stuart tanks and Sherman tanks (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanks_of_the_United_States#M3_Lee). Hanson (2017) concerning Sherman tanks. “Of more than six thousand Sherman tanks in the European theater of operations that were knocked out, on average one of the five crewmen was killed, one wounded, and the other three (60 percent) were unscathed. Later applications of ad hoc armor and improved escape hatches likely increased survivability” (pg. 373).

Code Names:

Bizerte = Dizzy

Tunis = Incur

Dec. 6, 1942

Envelope:

Return: P.F.C. Hugh Lilevjen

Cannon Company, 7th Inf.

A.P.O. #3

c/o Postmaster, New York, New York

To: Mr. Henry. Lilevjen, Appleton, Minnesota

Postmarked: U.S. Army Postal Service, A.P.O, Dec. 14 AM 1942

Stamped lower left of envelope: Passed by Army Examiner 02342

Letterhead: No letterhead—on lined paper written in pencil

⁹ Photo Section: *Appleton Press* article on Lt. Lucy Wells, army nurse, stationed in Australia

Dear Folks:

Just a note to let you know that I am O.K.

There isn't much that we can write and say anymore so I will have to wait until I get home to give you the news.

This is a pretty nice country over here and if it was only back in the U.S. it would compare with the good parts of California. The towns are nice appearing and the streets are wide and have nice big boulevards and lots of flowers on them. The homes and buildings are mostly concrete and stuccoed and are modernistic design and most of them are pretty small. Of course they have their Arab and native districts and I guess they aren't so nice.

They have a few cars over here mostly American makes, but they have a gas shortage so most of them are equipped with charcoal or wood burners. The main methods of transportation are train, horse, burro, or the regular little jackass. Their trains are electric and the best cars are smaller and look worse than the old wooden coaches they use for section crews back home. Most of the cars are small about the size of a caboose and the freight cars are about a third as big as ours and they only have four wheels instead of four on each end like ours.

It sure seems funny though to see modern buildings and places and then go a half a mile and see natives living in grass huts.

We get the world news here every day so we can keep up with the war news O.K. and it sure sounds good. Maybe it won't be so long and we will be coming home. What I miss most is the regular home news and the sports news as we don't get them.

One thing I do feel bad about is the fact that my barracks bag was lost and the prayer book the church gave me and the toilet kit the kids gave me was in it and were lost. I didn't mind losing the other things but I sure hated that.

How is everything going at home? Is business still holding up as good as ever? I will bet that it is a job figuring out all of the blanks now for oil, sugar, other things, and then there is Social Security and income tax coming up, more headaches. Maybe it was lucky to be in the army at that and get out of all those things.

I got a few of your letters and I imagine they will be coming regular now.

I will put the clippings on Clar's football team¹⁰ in this letter and send them back to you as you may want to save them.

Well as I said before we are all O.K., get plenty to eat, have good clothes and a place to sleep and plenty of chances for fun, in fact I am going out and playing a little volleyball now.

¹⁰ Photo Section: Clippings of Clar's football team in Belle Fourche

This should reach you just about at Christmas so I had better say Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you and I will be there in plenty of time to say it in person next year. It sure will seem funny missing Christmas Eve supper down to Grandpa's and Grandma's this year, you know it is the first I will have missed, but I will be thinking of you all. Say hello and Merry Christmas to everyone. I only wish I had time and paper enough to write to everyone but stationery is kind of a problem so far.

As I have said before if you are all getting along as good at home as we are here you are doing plenty O.K., so don't worry about us.

Well here I am rambling on and on and if I don't quit soon I won't have anything to write about next time and if you are like me you would rather get a small letter often than a large letter seldom, so I will sign off.

Loads of Love, Hugh

Dec. 13, 1942

V-mail written in pencil

References used by Karen LaBat to provide context for letters her father wrote to his parents during WWII

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