

BAND OF BROTHERS

In 1941, a trumpet player in the military band at West Point applied to the Army's music school for bandmasters at Fort Myer, Virginia. He earned the title of warrant officer and was authorized to organize a band. Starting early in 1942, he assembled a body of talented musicians into a unique group – one that became a band of brothers.

Olle Blomfelt, a Swedish immigrant, was a shrewd man, ambitious to settle for nothing less than the best. He visited or contacted top-level schools, such as Eastman Conservatory, Cincinnati Conservatory, Cleveland Institute, Oberlin, the Juilliard School in New York and other music centers. He snared 28 top-flight musicians by telling them they would become members of the post band at Plattsburgh Barracks, New York, for the duration of hostilities. It was an easy sell, and it was -- to say the least -- incorrect.

Colonel Paul Feldman commanded the 36th Engineers Regiment. He liked the band so much that he appropriated it, and took it along when the regiment was transferred to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. There the musicians, while playing in parades and concerts and USO shows, also took part in the field maneuvers and on the rifle range. They were armed with pistols. They understood that in a combat zone they were not expected to be front-line fighters, but would be exposed to fire as stretcher bearers.

After eight months at Fort Bragg, and then quick transfers in and out of three other camps, the regiment returned back north. On November 2nd, at Staten Island, the regiment boarded the S. S. Monterey, a 26,000-ton cruise ship bound for Casablanca. The musicians became one of the first bands to arrive in North Africa, the earliest arena for U.S. troops to meet Germans in battle. And there is where they met – and were kidnapped by – an aggressive and profane general named George S. Patton Jr.

The band, reinforced with seven additional musicians from replacement depots, was initially quartered in an abandoned sardine factory in Fedhala, some miles east of Casablanca, then was moved into pup tents. In his memoirs, drummer Robert Stuart described the band's introduction to George Patton: He said:

“The jeep that drove into our bivouac on a December morning carried a major and his driver. The major asked for the band, was escorted to Warrant Officer Blomfelt, and told him General Patton was looking for a band to play a concert and liberation parade. The concert was at the French Navy Yard in Casablanca on Sunday morning. It was followed by a lunch with plenty of wine and many toasts, which put us in great shape for the parade. We formed at the Shell Building, and with the general observing from a window, we warmed up with a few French marches. We were under an arcade that made our 35 pieces sound like 100. The square was jammed with hundreds of people shouting, singing, laughing, crying – an emotional demonstration we could never forget.

“In the weeks that followed we played many guards of honor as the general hosted most of the Allied VIPs in North Africa, including the Sultan of Morocco and Admiral Darlan, of the Vichy French, who only a few days later was killed by Free French soldiers. General Patton wanted good relations with everyone, especially the French and the Arabs. We played three times at the Casablanca Conference, the last being a review for President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

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“One night disaster overtook us in the form of an all-night downpour. All the pup tents collapsed, everything was soaked, no one slept, and sure enough, we got a call at 7:00 a.m. to be at the Shell Building by 9:00 a.m. There was not one decent uniform, and shoes and helmets were muddy.

“When we arrived, Major Olin was bent out of shape and jumped the band leader, who stood his ground and explained the situation. The next day in came a truck bearing a large wall tent, several gallons of paint for the helmets, and 35 new olive drab uniforms.

“Late in May, someone apparently mentioned to the general that the 36th Engineers Regiment was getting the band ready to be litter bearers. Patton said he needed that band, and that they should be detached from the regiment and billeted with his First Army Corps headquarters.

“He was told his headquarters was not entitled to a band. He replied not to bother him with regulations, but to write out an order and he would sign it, because that band WILL be with him tomorrow. And so it was.”

Drum major Henry Conlin, a pianist and guitarist, was a member of the band’s 15-man stage group which was created to play concerts of popular music in various settings. He described the circumstances surrounding one performance.

“We were awakened in the early morning hours by wild and eerie screams which seemed to come from all around us – echoing throughout the cavernous dormitory to which we had been assigned on our arrival at the U.S. Army General Hospital at Sidi bel Abbes, former home of the Foreign Legion. The previous morning we had left our elegant new bivouac with Patton’s First Army Corps at Mostaganem, traveling south in 2½-ton trucks to entertain the patients at General Hospital.

“What were those frightening sounds? Did they come from the souls of former Legionnaires who fought the savage Bedouins in the desert? Was this deserted corner haunted by the spiritual sons of Cambronne, the founder of the French Foreign Legion? Later we learned the macabre sounds were coming from seriously disturbed American soldiers, referred to in Army jargon as “Section 8” guys.” (End quote.)

Patton’s troops, now known as Seventh Army, invaded Sicily on July 10. Soon after, the headquarters personnel were landed on the southern coast of Sicily. The band was now designated as the 115th Army Ground Forces Band, unofficially called the Seventh Army Band. After the capture of Sicily, the band was transported to Palermo, the capital city, where it set up camp in La Favorita Park, a sports complex complete with a clubhouse and tennis courts – sheer luxury. Seventh Army headquarters was downtown in the Royal Palace.

From time to time the band lost a member owing to illness or other factors, and replacements had to be sought. One of those was a mild-mannered clarinet player named Aaron Baer. He was delighted to land such a berth after having survived not one but two rescues from torpedoed ships. At his first opportunity to meet his new fellow bandsmen he told them, very earnestly, “I’m glad to be here. In fact, I’m glad to be anywhere.”

Another was a Hoosier named Carl Henn who was abducted -- so to speak -- from his outfit into the band in Palermo. It happened because, when he attended a USO show, he innocently strolled over to speak to the soldiers who had provided the music,

When they learned that he knew how to play a trombone, they told him they needed a trombone player. He said, “You can’t get me because I’m in a technical unit, and when you learn your job they won’t turn you loose.” Hah! Within four days he was transferred from his outfit to Patton’s band.

He had been in a port battalion, organized to load and unload ships, and his new associates were treated to tales of some of his experiences. Unlike traveling in a convoy taking several weeks to cross the Atlantic, his battalion had made the sea voyage from New York to northern Scotland in only five days – incredibly quickly. They were transported in the biggest ship in the world at that time – the Queen Elizabeth.

The speedy trip was accomplished by traveling alone, meaning no escort and thus no protection. If a German submarine had happened upon this huge vessel in mid-ocean, the Queen Elizabeth could easily have been sent to the bottom, taking 14,000 military passengers with her.

The loading and unloading of ships was not an exciting way to pass the time, but for the men of the port battalion there were occasional moments of stress. One such occurred in the second hold down from the top deck. There, Henn’s crew was unloading 100-pound bombs, placing four on each pallet to be winched up and over to the dock.

One pallet had just reached deck level when the winch operator lost his steam and the pallet came hurtling back down and crashed. The reaction of every man in the crew was exactly the same – to duck, with a finger in each ear.

Soon after Henn was transferred to the band he was introduced to a different instrument. Band leader Olle Blomfelt put it delicately by saying: “I’ve known some wonderful trombonists, and you’re not one of them.” It turned out that he needed a tuba player, so the new man was destined to stagger about under a sousaphone for the duration of the stay in Europe.

On November 11, then still known as Armistice Day, the band was transported to a cemetery outside Palermo where American soldiers were buried. All present formed a semicircle facing a large cross.

A hymn, the seven-gun salute and the playing of Taps were followed by a tribute offered by the chaplain. He spoke feelingly of heroic soldiers who had given their lives in defending our nation. Then Patton stepped forward. The essence of what he said was heard many times: “I don’t call a soldier a hero just because he died for his country. To me, a hero is the soldier who makes the other bastard die for HIS country.” He continued on in that vein for several minutes, then walked over a slight rise to inspect the graves.

After a couple of minutes his aide came running to the band leader and said: “The general wants you to play quick time,” meaning play a march. Army regulations called for departure to the sound of muffled drums and nothing more, so the band leader was taken aback. Before he could react, Patton’s voice came from over the rise. “I said play quick time, god-dammit!” Johnny Reger, the quick-thinking principal trombone, called out “National Emblem March,” and off went the bandsmen, playing their hearts out.

That evening the band played a big birthday party for Patton at the Grand Hotel. At that time he was unhappily stranded in Sicily, commanding nothing more than a small peacekeeping force and the headquarters unit.

While visiting hospitalized soldiers he had come to a man not visibly wounded who was suffering battle fatigue. Patton had no use for such afflictions. He called the man a coward and slapped his face. When news of this became public in the U.S., General Eisenhower -- thinking it best to keep him out of action until the anti-Patton sentiments had dwindled – decided to park him for a couple of months.

Early in 1944 Patton disappeared from Sicily. He had secretly been shipped back to England to take command of the Third Army and to prepare that unit for the cross-Channel invasion in June. When he met his troops he gave them a brief talk, the text of which never was officially released. However, a tech sergeant who had been a court reporter recorded the speech in shorthand. In pungent terms, here's what Patton said:

(Read Patton speech)

On March 19 the band boarded a Liberty ship headed back to Africa and the port of Oran. After a cold and miserable ride over the Atlas Mountains, the men found themselves at Bouzarea, just outside Algiers, and another headquarters. This time it was to serve the new commander of the Seventh Army, General Alexander Patch.

The Seventh Army was to lead the second Allied invasion, this one into the Riviera, the target that Winston Churchill had recommended as being Europe's "soft underbelly".

But not yet. So the band divided the waiting time between formal military assignments and a variety of troop entertainments and, when not otherwise busy, seeking the pleasures to be found in and around Algiers.

There was, for example, the Hotel Aletti, headquarters for a number of independent businesswomen offering their wares. The stairway to the hotel rose to a wide veranda which was occupied by the ladies sitting and waiting-- skirts high – to be chosen for business. The veranda was known as the Bridge of Thighs.

There was also entertainment of a higher order. It was in Palermo that many of the bandsmen had heard their first opera. This occurred on a cold January night in an opera house that had no heat. Listeners and orchestra wore their overcoats while the cast presented Puccini's *La Boheme*. Next, in Algiers, the bandsmen went to a movie theater converted to an opera house to hear a performance of *Lakme*, by Leo Delibes.

In Naples, location of the next stop, a number of operas were attended at San Carlo Theater. The band was quartered in pyramidal tents erected in a park on the Via Caracciola, a boulevard fronting on the bay. The Isle of Capri was visible, and an amiable Italian known as Joe was pleased to take bandsmen in his sailboat for a salt-water jaunt at a reasonable fee. It was a far cry from battle territory and a time to ponder and wonder what was to come next.

The reason for being parked in a park was to await the next step – the second invasion. And when it came in August, the band waded ashore on the Riviera, the southern coast of France. The headquarters unit, after being located in a wooded area near St. Tropez and St. Raphael, then began a series of moves northward.

First, in September, came Lons-le-Saunier, on the western edge of the Alps; then to the city of Vesoul, in November to Epinal in the Vosges mountains, and next to awaiting Christmas in Sarrebourg, in the Moselle region. There the weather was so cold, and the stable assigned to the band so drafty, that the men put up their tents indoors.

At Christmas time came the German counter-attack which became known as the Battle of the Bulge, and the conflict drew very near Seventh Army headquarters. The unit was strafed, shelled, and infiltrated, and became so endangered that General Patch ordered a retreat. On January 1 the unit moved to the French city of Luneville. There the band worked overtime, in February performing a total of 109 engagements for troop and hospital units.

In March the tide of battle carried the headquarters unit into Germany, first to the city of Kaiserslautern, then on to Darmstadt. There was hardly a roof left on the houses in that major city. The next move, in April, was to the farming village of Kitzingen, where the band was quartered in a stable previously occupied by slave laborers.

Someone in the group discovered that in the city of Wurzburg, not far away, there was a wine cellar below a mansion, and the bandsman was acquainted with the MP assigned to guard the cellar. The wine was, of course, off limits to enlisted men. Three bandsmen were chosen to go to Wurzburg on a wine raid.

Sure enough, the mansion was there and the wine was there and the MP was friendly. The men loaded several barracks bags with wine bottles and set out to return, only to realize when out of town that they had lost their way.

One of them spotted a jeep coming around a bend in the road and stepped out, hand held high, to ask directions. The jeep stopped. So did the truck that was following, and the truck behind that one, and the next truck, and so on. It was a convoy, and the major leading the convoy was not amused.

The bandsman stammered his request for help. The major looked at him for a long while, pondering which of the Articles of War could be invoked to justify a firing squad. He finally turned to his driver and snapped out, "Gimme that map!" He pointed the way to Kitzingen and asked, "Got that, soldier?" The reply, accompanied by many salutes, was, "Yes sir. Thank you, sir. Very good of you, sir. We appreciate it, sir." The major blew his whistle and off went the convoy.

From Kitzingen it was on to Schwabische-Gmund and then, on May 1, just before hostilities ceased, the band arrived at its last stop southward, the city of Augsburg. Once again the bandsmen were quartered in a stable, leading one to remark, "The treatment of musicians in the Army is somewhat similar to their treatment in civilian life."

Once war in Europe had ceased, points were awarded for length of service abroad, particularly in areas of conflict. At least 85 points were needed to justify return to the U.S. and discharge, and all of the bandsmen had more than 100 points. They were sent to Camp Chicago, a vast redeployment center in Sissone, France. There they enjoyed leaves to such destinations as Paris and the south of France, or furloughs to England or Switzerland. They were still there in August, when the dropping of atomic bombs brought the war with Japan to an abrupt end, and the U.S. became their next destination.

During their time abroad, the bandsmen played not only for Roosevelt, Churchill, Admiral Darlan and the Sultan of Morocco, but for Generals Eisenhower, Clark and Patch, Lord Louis Montbatten, and French Generals Giraud and DeGaulle, and in smaller groups accompanied many USO entertainers, including Al Jolson, Martha Raye, Andre Baruch and Mickey Rooney.

While in Camp Chicago, drummer Robert “Pops” Keenan, oldest man in the unit, got permission to visit Nice, a city on the Riviera. On the return his train neared a city in Normandy bearing a name that American soldiers never learned to pronounce Frenchily. The approaching conductor was calling out “Raunce! Raunce!” When the conductor entered Pops’ car and saw that it was full of American soldiers, he hunched his shoulders, extended his hands palms up, and cried out, “Reems! Reems!”

By late 1945, all of the bandsmen were back in the U.S., had been discharged, and were determining their next steps. For most of them it was a return to higher education in order to get the degrees needed for top employment. And for many of these gifted men, musically speaking and otherwise, top employment it was.

Harold Fleig went to the Air Force Band, became a bandmaster and rose to be a captain in charge of all of the Air Force bands in occupied Japan. Charles King played in the Los Angeles Philharmonic and also for Xavier Cugat and Claude Thornhill. Clarinetist Stephen Kowalski joined the U.S. Army Band.

So did Robert Stuart, who before the war had played with the Dallas Symphony. Bob then transferred into the U.S. Marine Band and, by the time he retired, had played for eight U.S. presidents.

Master tubist Bill Barber played with the Kansas City Symphony and in New York for national broadcasts of the NBC Symphony under Arturo Toscanini, as well as making recordings with such famous musicians as Gil Evans, Miles Davis and Gerry Mulligan. A fellow New Yorker, hornist Bob Abernathy, played in the Bell Telephone Hour broadcasts and in theaters for such shows as *Shenandoa* and *My Fair Lady*.

Trombonist Ben Niles, from Indianapolis, played with Dr. Frank Simon’s Armco Band and then, after a career as high school band leader, music teacher, and theater accompanist, was named to the Indiana Bandmasters Hall of Fame.

Clarinetist Charles Paashaus played in New York for shows such as *South Pacific*, *Coco*, and *My Fair Lady*, was at Radio City Music Hall and in symphony orchestras in New York, Philadelphia and Dallas, then in the orchestra pit at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn, New Jersey, for more than 8,000 performances before his retirement.

There was no finer musician than John Ware, who left the Dallas Symphony to become principal trumpet for the New York Philharmonic and a legend to other trumpeters. Under Leonard Bernstein he demonstrated nerves of steel as balcony soloist in Mahler’s Third Symphony.

Conductor Zubin Mehta once stopped a rehearsal to ask John, “Why do you always play exactly on my downbeat? Nobody else does.” John replied, dryly, “How long should I wait?”

The band’s top sergeant, trumpeter Graydon Crawley, known as “Tex”, returned to Texas after discharge to enter banking, and eventually became a bank president. Of all the men, he demonstrated one of the most remarkable spirits of loyalty, concern and friendship for his former mates.

Tex’s love for music and regard for his fellow bandsmen led him to correspond with and visit many in what he called mini-reunions over the years. His correspondence and concern led to the creation of a quarterly newsletter that he published until 2006. In 1975 he organized the first of a number of big reunions.

These were held in various locations, the last of which took place in Baltimore in 2003. Such memorable meetings enabled the bandsmen to renew, again and again, the affection and camaraderie that marked their brotherhood in an organization that was remarkable for its professionalism and esprit.

Perhaps traces of their experiences and accomplishments may still remain these many years later. Henry Conlin told his mates that tourists in Casablanca who visit the Shell Building, now a historical monument, occasionally tell of hearing band music and seeing subdued reflections of light from what seem to be brass band instruments.

Henry said American Express people have reported hearing the same observations from tourists in Palermo, Sicily, who visit the Royal Palace.

One lady said she had seen an elderly gentleman dressed in uniform standing erect on the very edge of the esplanade and facing the palace. He seemed to be in tears. Strains of “Roll Out the Barrel” and “Colonel Bogey” have echoed in the late afternoon when the dark shadows cast by the building’s façade begin to make figures seem obscure, and conflicting sounds to reflect from the palace walls.

Even at the remote Ecole Normal in Mostaganem, near Oran, visitors have noted hearing from the courtyard subdued commands and the muttering of marching feet. In the deep shadows of late afternoon, a man has been seen standing under the plantain trees with his head bowed, apparently listening intently to music.

Long years ago, Henry said, great leaders agonized there over grave decisions involving life or death for thousands of young men – decisions which eventually brought victory to the Allies. Perhaps some trace of the spirit lingers in those places to bear witness to what passed there. But as the years go by, eventually this will fade, and only silence will remain in mute testimony to the past.

GENERAL GOERGE S. "BLOOD AND GUTS" PATTON'S SPEECH TO HIS MEN
IN THE U.S. THIRD ARMY

Men, this stuff some sources sling around about America wanting to stay out of the war and not wanting to fight is a lot of god damned baloney; Americans love to fight, traditionally. All real Americans love the sting and clash of battle. America loves a winner. America will not tolerate a loser. Americans despise a coward, Americans play to win. That's why America has never lost and will never lose a war, for the very thought of losing is hateful to an American.

You are not all going to die. Only two per cent of you, right here today, would be killed in a major battle. Death must not be feared. Death in time comes to all of us and every man is scared in his first action. If he says he's not, he's a goddam liar. Some men are cowards, yes, but they fight just the same, or get the hell slammed out of them. The real hero is the man who fights even tho he's scared. Some get over their fright in a minute, under fire, others take an hour; for some, it takes days, but a real man will never let the fear of death overpower his honor, his sense of duty to his country or his manhood.

All through your Army careers, you have been bitching about what you call "chickenshit drill". That, like everything else in the Army, has a definite purpose. That purpose is instant obedience to orders and to create and maintain constant alertness. This must be bred into every soldier. A man must be alert at all times if he expects to stay alive. If not, some goddam German son-of-a-bitch will sneak up behind him with a sock full of shit. There are four hundred neatly marked graves somewhere in Sicily, all because one man went to sleep on his job, but they are German graves, because we caught the bastards asleep. An army is a team-lives, sleeps, fights and eats as a team. This individual hero stuff is a lot of goddam horseshit. The bilious bastards who write that kind of stuff for the Saturday Evening Post don't know any more about real fighting than they know about fucking.

Every single man in the Army plays a vital role. Every man has his job to do, and must do it. What if every truck driver decided he didn't like the whine of a shell overhead, ~~was~~ turned yellow and jumped headlong into a ditch? Where in hell would we be now? Where would our country, our loved ones, our homes, even the world be? No, thank God, Americans don't think like that. Every man does his job, serves the whole. Ordnance men supply and maintain the guns and vast machinery of this war to keep us rolling. Quartermasters bring up clothes and food for where we're going, there isn't a hell of a lot to steal. Every man on KP has a job to do, even the guy who boils the water to keep us from getting the GI shits.

Remember, men, you don't know I'm here. No mention isto be made in any letters. The USA is supposed to be wondering what the hell has happened to me. I'm not supposed to be commanding this Army. I'm not even supposed to be in England. Let the first goddam bastards to find out be the goddam Germans. I want them to look up and howl, "Ach, it's the GODDAM THIRD ARMY AND THAT SON OF A BITCH PATTON AGAIN". We want to get this thing over and get the hell out of here, and get at those purple-pissing Japanese. The shortest road home is through Berlin and Tokyo. We'll win this war, but we'll win it only by showing the enemy we have more guts than they have or ever will have. There's one great thing that you men can say when it's all over and you're home once more. You can thank God that twenty years from now, when you're sitting around the fireside with your grandson on your knee, and he asks what you did in the war, you won't have to shift him to the other knee, cough and say, "I shoveled shit in Louisiana".

(Recorded in shorthand by a technical sergeant, who was formerly a court reporter before the war. Patton had no knowledge that his talk was being recorded.)