

Conversations in the Trenches

Their experiences and their viewpoint reveal the stuff of which the troops of the Washington and Lincoln battalions are made

By Herbert Kline

THE first thing I saw when I entered the American trenches at Morata was a film of blood on the rainwater underfoot. The second was an American volunteer in "international" ski-pants dancing beside his machine-gun, a black, mean-looking Maxim dating from 1915. Two Spanish comrades provided the music, clapping hands *jota* style.

"How do I match up with Fred Astaire?" the machine-gunner asked as he slowed down to a shuffling side step.

"You'll have Ginger Rogers in your arms yet," I answered, trying to keep my mind off the blood on that dirty rainwater.

"I'd trade that chance right now for a day's leave, pal. I'll tell the world I would. See if you can fix it up with General—I mean, Captain Johnson here."

"Always kidding the officers," Captain Johnson said. "I never could have gotten away with jiggling or wisecracking in the presence of a superior in the twenty years I put in in Uncle Sam's army."

"What paper you with?" the kid asked, standing still for the first time.

"NEW MASSES," I answered.

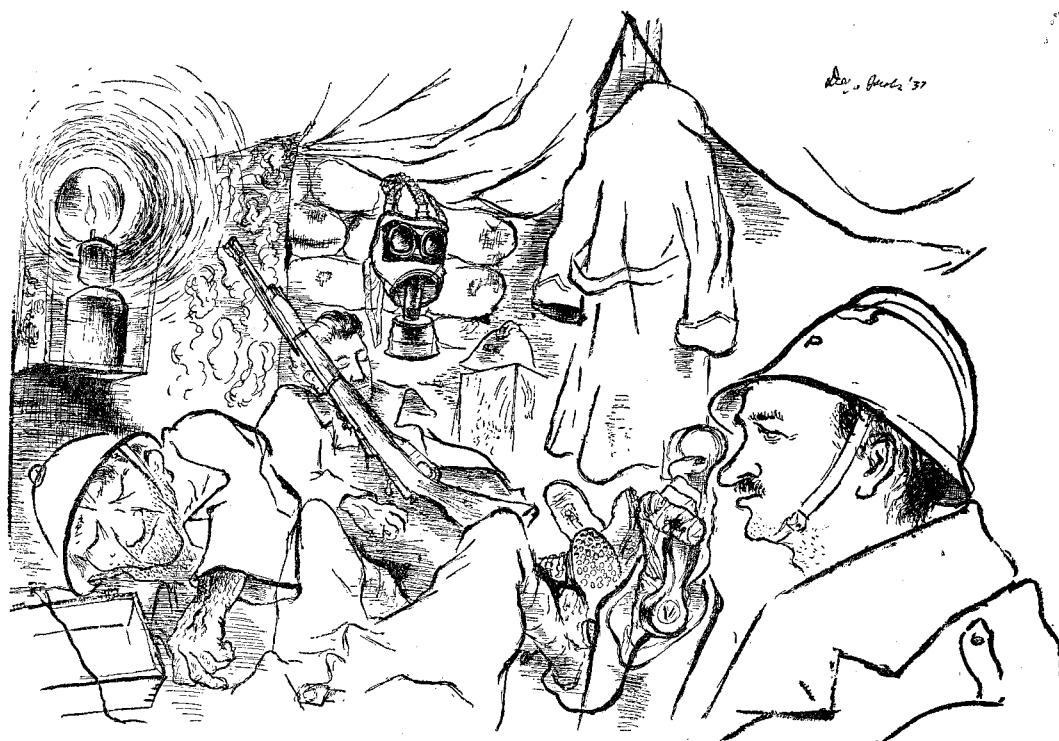
"NEW MASSES, huh? I wish to Christ those guys would send more copies through. Here I am, somewhere in Spain, missing everything that's going on in the world, including my regular loving. Do I know how the C.I.O. is doing? I do not. Do I know what Granville Hicks thinks of Ralph Bates's latest book? I do not. It's just like living in an ivory tower."

"Don't you ever stop kidding?" I asked, thinking of the Moors, Germans, and Phalangists in the fascist trenches less than 150 meters away, my eyes still on the film of blood nearby.

"Sure," he answered, his eyes following mine. "Sometimes I stop. Then I feel bad. I think of my wife, and my friends, and the good guys who got it here, and I feel lousy. I've been in the line eighty-five days now. I don't mind telling you that I miss my wife like hell. We were married only three months when this thing came up. And here I am, at the business end of this Maxim, massaging the lousy fascists with these slugs every time Franco gets it into his head that he ought to be going after that Madrid-Valencia road again."

"How do we stand?"

"Not bad. We've got them good and stopped, comrade. But it cost plenty. I noticed you looking at the blood over there. That's from early morning. A nice young Spanish kid got it through the head from a



Drawn in Spain by Deyo Jacobs

bullet that ricocheted right through this firing hole. It hit the side of the gun, then smacked right into his head. It might have been me, instead. But what the hell! I knew what I was in for when I decided to come over and help give Hitler and Mussolini a run for their money."

"That's more'n I can say for some guys I know," a strangely familiar voice said.

It was Dave K., a young chap who had been active in a student New Theatre group back home.

"Hello, Dave! What did you say?" I asked, not understanding his remark.

"I said—what a break, your coming here. I heard you were somewhere in the lines and came running to find you. I'm writing a play, and you're just the guy I need to help. It's a one-acter, and maybe I'm no Cliff Odets, but it's the real stuff. It's about three guys who come to Spain and..."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, remembering something Captain Johnson had told me. "Aren't you one of the heroes Johnson was telling me about? And hadn't we better let the play-writing wait until I get the straight goods from you, so I can tell people back home about theater people in the trenches?"

"So Captain Johnson told you I'm a hero, did he?" He looked so crestfallen that I was sorry I hadn't asked to see his script immediately. "Well," he continued, "it's damn nice of Johnson to single me out for praise, but I

may as well tell you the whole truth. You get so you don't like half-truths and hokey about heroics when you know you're apt to get knocked off any time. All the boys are sore as hell about the way we've been described as a bunch of eager-for-death heroes, and some of us who've been thinking in terms of anti-war ideas for years don't like it one bit. I'll tell you what kind of hero I am, and I don't care who knows it.

"I came over with seven buddies. You know the guys: the same young kids you met on the boat. We had a rough idea of what we were in for when we volunteered. We were all kids who have been active in the student movement in the past, leading anti-war strikes, putting on plays against war, talking about the horrors of war, etc. But we didn't know what war was really like until we went over the top that terrible day, the twenty-seventh of February, the worst day the Americans have had in Spain. We saw two of our buddies killed before our eyes, riddled by machine-gun bullets. Another badly wounded—through the throat. Another disappeared. We didn't learn until yesterday that he had got mixed in somehow with the Franco-Belgian wounded without anyone having a record of him. The three of us who got back without being hit after five hours out in that hell were completely broken. Our buddies had been killed, wounded, or captured by the Moors. The charge seemed to our untrained eyes an im-

possible, senseless, careless sacrifice of men, which, of course, it wasn't.

"That night, we were really downhearted. It was the first major fighting any of us had seen. I'll tell you frankly what we did. The three of us talked it over. As I see it now, we were quite mad. We decided to run away. We went on past the second lines, pretending we were heading for the cook-house, and kept right on walking. We hustled along for eight miles, talking ourselves into the idea that we were right to leave, that we were only kids, that we hadn't been given the right training or a chance to learn the tricks of the bloody trade before being sent over the top. We walked and walked, justifying ourselves.

"'Christ,' one of the guys said all of a sudden. 'Want to know what we are? Just a bunch of lousy scabs! We walk out and leave our comrades on the line. We're scabs, strike-breakers, for all our talk and excuses. We're just mamma's little boys, trying to lie about being scared. What's all this shouting we've been doing for years about fighting against war and fascism? We're just plain deserters, war-scabs.'

"Somehow, we began to see the horrors that we couldn't stand as just another manifestation of the same violence we had faced on picket lines back home. We could understand what we had done only in terms of our life back home. There's not much more to the story. We went back. And we're heroes!"

Later, from his fellow-soldiers and from Captain Johnson, I heard the full story.

They were really heroes, these three who had run away. They were among the ten men who had charged ahead one day when inexperienced Spanish soldiers, broken under terrific fire, had abandoned 300 meters of trenches. Ten men against a heavy charge of Moors, stopping Franco's fiercest troops until comrades could relieve them. And now, the three youngsters were considered to be among the bravest and steadiest fighters in the battalion. Dave had been selected for officer's training for his coolness under fire.

"I USED TO SELL THE NEW MASSES on the subways for a living," the comrade said. "I used to go right on the subways and sell them. I got a kick out of thinking that people who might have lived their lives out without knowing the truth might learn of the workers' struggle just through me."

We were sitting hunched together in a little dugout, two volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and myself.

"I used to give talks about the MASSES at our club on the South Side," the Negro said. "I used to tell the people they'd never learn what it was all about unless they'd read something serious sometime. It's kind of funny, the three of us squatting here in this hole in the ground, he a kid from New York who never had a steady job, you a fellow who works in the theater, and I, formerly of Swift & Co., Chicago. All three of us squatting here in this hole in the ground, somewhere in Spain, when only a few months ago we were

all living our lives, not knowing each other, not dreaming we'd meet here, nothing in common but our ideas."

"It's kind of funny," I agreed.

"When you write the MASSES gang, tell them we're okay here. Tell them we got it pretty bad the first few days, but that we've learned to fight," the ex-MASSES worker said.

"Anything else?"

"Yeh, one thing, and don't forget it. Tell the people back home to lay off all that super-heroic stuff that's being written about us. I've always hated war and uniforms. It's enough to put up with being soldiers, without people making it sound melodramatic and glorious. The boys are all sore about being described as the tin-Jesuses of the proletariat."

RUDY GOT TO SPAIN by lying about his age. This nineteen-year-old Jewish member of the battalion's Irish section had been active in the student anti-war movement for years. Then, when for all his intelligence and study he found work as a shipping boy for one of New York's large clothing houses, he became an organizer of the shipping boys' strike. Now, he's a veteran, one more American living what he preached about fighting war and fascism.

"Listen a minute, and don't get me wrong," Rudy said. "It isn't that I want to get away from this. Once you've been wounded and come back into the lines again nothing fazes you much, not even the thought that you'll be putting in month after month in a hell-hole like this, if you last that long. It's just a week I want—that's all, one week.

"Now you'll say you can't pull it off, but I figure as NEW MASSES correspondent you've got enough drag to swing it. It isn't that I'd be of much help to you, though I could lug the camera around and things like that. But it would mean everything to me, no matter what happens afterwards. You see, I've always dreamed of getting work in films. I'd see every good film by Pabst, or Lang, or Eisenstein, or good Hollywood men like Ford, and Milestone, and Capra, and Howard over and over again, figuring how it was done. Not a big shot job, à la Hollywood. But a job working on films like that Odets guy could write if he wanted to. I want to be a cutter—cutting and editing films, that's what I'd like to learn. Maybe I'll never get to cut a film. I don't even know how to stick the pieces together. Maybe I'll never get to see how my ideas on cutting would work out, but I'd like to watch you fellows work for a week. Just one week."

Needless to say I couldn't swing it for

Rudy. It was heartbreaking to stand there before this kid of nineteen whose life might be cut off before he had a chance to realize his dreams.

A week later I saw him again.

"We're figuring on attacking in a few days again," he said. "I want you to do me a favor." (Jesus, if I could only get him a day off to work with us!) "It isn't much of a favor I'm asking this time. Not the same kind. I know I can't expect them to let me off, even for a day. That's okay. I came over to fight. Didn't dream I'd get this close to movie-making. What I want is easy. I got six hundred pesetas, see. More than I can spend. I thought I'd give them to the Red Aid like I did with my last roll. But I heard you fellows were working on a small budget, and I want you to take these six hundred pesetas and use them for your film. It'll pay for something—take them. I guess that you don't want to, but please realize what this means to me."

THESE ARE the sort of men you meet in the trenches at Morata. Men like Captain Johnson with decades of experience behind their fighting and thinking; youths like Dave, Rudy, and the dancing machine-gunner who learned their fighting after they were in the front lines of the fight against fascism; young men who have shown exceptional qualities for leadership, and who command the respect of their men at the same time that they retain their friendship as comrades.

These are no ordinary soldiers. These "Yanks" are different! Besides the guns and grenades, they have minds and hearts for the job they have undertaken. Mingled with discussions about military matters, you hear discussions on literature, economics, poetry. Men whose ideas have been nourished by the writings of Strachey, Palme Dutt, Forsythe, Gold, and Dos Passos do not lose themselves in the heart of a struggle like the one going on at the Jarama today. Their fighting in Spain is but an extension of their lives back home.

Each man fights on, thinking of the better world that must come from all this blood and sacrifice. Each man lives on in the work he has just given up to take up the fight in Spain. Each man questions you eagerly about his union, the C.I.O., whatever phase of the struggle he took part in back home. Each man thinks of the future, the work to be done "as soon as this show is over." They are probably the greatest soldiers in history, these men of the International Brigades. "We would rather die standing than live on our knees," Passionaria has said, and her words speak for these men. But, somehow, Rudy's plea for "just one week, comrade," summarizes their spirit for me. For all of these men who are facing death constantly in the trenches of loyalist Spain think primarily in terms of life and work. Like Rudy, they're willing to die that fascism shall not pass, but they want one more fling at life, a chance to carry out their work as men who have in them the stuff of which the future is made.



From an Irish War Widow

This is what she wrote in answer to news of her husband's death while fighting for the loyalists

A Letter to a Comrade in Spain

I NEVER really believed that my poor Billy would be killed. From the moment we parted I have lived for the time we would meet again, and the news of his death has fairly broken my heart. The most awful thing about it is that I shall never see him any more, and, when I think of this, I feel that I shall never be able to hold up my head again. We were such pals that I cannot visualize the future without him. However, I will try to be brave. I have asked myself how Billy would have wished me to behave in the event of his death, and I know that he would have said, "Be brave and carry on with the struggle to the end," and that's what I shall do.

I am pleased to be able to say that it was through working in the movement that we first met. It was at an Easter week commemoration in 1933, and the friendship, based as it was chiefly on a similarity of ideals, grew steadily until I went over to Belfast the following year, since when we've been inseparable comrades through good times and bad. I am also pleased to recall that it was from Billy I got my first appreciation of the working-class struggle. Prior to that my whole life had been devoted to the cause of Ireland's freedom from British oppression and the reclaiming of her national culture, but Billy taught me that the economic struggle is by far the most urgent. When he expressed the wish to go to Spain last December, I was human enough to be a bit downcast at first at the thought of parting with him, but in the end my better self triumphed, and I gave him the encouragement I had previously withheld. At the same time, I begged him to take me with him, reminding him of our mutual resolve that we would always stick together, but although he believed in the equality of the sexes, etc., he was inconsistent enough always to make exceptions where I was concerned. He refused to consider such an idea, and nothing I could say would shake his resolve. On his stating that he could give himself wholeheartedly to the Spanish struggle only if he knew I was safe at home, I gave in, not wishing to do anything to stand in his way. Happy in the knowledge that we were doing what was right, we left Belfast on the eleventh of December; and Billy brought me back to my people here in Liverpool from where he left on the fourteenth for his last journey.

I want you to know, Comrade, that I am unspeakably proud of the way my man died. As you are probably aware, he did not believe there was any life after this, and that makes his sacrifice greater. For myself, I only wish I could believe in a hereafter that I might

look forward to being with Billy again, but I'm afraid the possibility does not appeal to my reason. The sentiments you expressed regarding the question of religion are more or less my own. Never definitely as atheistic as Billy, I merely hold the conviction that I do not know. Without God and a hereafter, life becomes a farce, and yet the God I have been taught to believe in does not exist for me, at least as a just God, for he is the God of the wealthy and the oppressors; rather than serve him I prefer to follow my own conscience, and take my chance when my time comes with whatever comes after.

Billy, an atheist, is an example to any Christian, and he died in the noblest way a man could, the system being the rotten one it is. Not only am I proud of the manner in which he met his end, but glad, too, for the simple reason that it was the way he told me he wanted to go: suddenly, while fighting in defense of his class, the class for which he had striven all his life. I do not regret his having gone to Spain because it was the right thing to do, but naturally I regret that he did not survive the struggle to see the victory of which he definitely assured me in his letters. I regret also that I could not have been with him when the end came, but I have the consolation of knowing I did as he wished by staying home.

As you say, Comrade, there has been a lot of shameful slander about you boys, but it is not so prevalent now, thanks to the exposures by the *Daily Worker* [England]. We women get our fair share of the slanders too. They jeer at us, and tell us our men wouldn't have left us if they had cared for us, and why don't they fight for their own country, etc. It is useless trying to explain that our men are fighting for *our class*, and as for them leaving us to be rid of us, for my part I can confidently say that there was only one thing Billy held dearer than me, and that was the cause for which he gave his life.

I mustn't forget to thank you, Comrade, for undertaking to break the awful news to me. I appreciate how distasteful a task it was, as you are probably aware of the extent to which Billy and I were related. It came hard, following as it did on the death of my beloved father only a couple of months ago, but even my father's death fades into insignificance compared to Billy's, as the latter was dearer to me than any other being.

I would like very much to have the pictures you mention or anything that you think would be appropriate for me to have belonging to him. I have in my trunk quite a number of little presents which he bought me on various

occasions during the last four years, but I would dearly love to have some little keepsake from him that he had on him when the end came. He spoke in one letter of having collected some presents for me from Spain, but, if they were not amongst his things, he had probably sent them to me, and they have been lost in the post. I know that's what happened to a pretty little bracelet he sent me.

I suppose it is useless to ask if Billy gave you any message for me in the event of his being killed; it's a habit among soldiers, I'm told, but maybe he believed he would survive the war, poor boy. His letters were so full of plans, but then that was probably just to keep me up; he must have been aware of the possibilities. Would you give me the details of how he met his death—I can bear it—and if you know, just where in Spain. Could I trouble you also for a description of the spot where he is buried? It's so unsatisfying merely to imagine. I would like to think he was thinking of me at the last, but for his sake I'm glad it was the way you described, for I couldn't tolerate the thought of his being in pain. Maybe some day, after all this is over, we women who are left can go out there and see the place where our men fought and died.

I shall be delighted to send you chaps the *Daily Worker* and to write to you also as long you wish it, and I'm pleased to associate myself with anyone who was a comrade of my Billy. Later on I will send you a photo of him. I have a splendid one of him which I made him take the day he left Liverpool, and I intend to get copies taken for his family and friends. I have written to his mother and family, and I am sorry to have had to give them the bad news, for though they and he did not understand each other very well, it's only natural that they will feel it. As it is, they blame him for going and blame me for letting him go, but I am proud of him and have no regrets. There are a lot of people in Belfast who will deplore his passing for he was well liked and respected for his quiet, unassuming manner and deep sincerity. . . .

Well, I have his photo here before me now, and all I can say is, "I salute you, old pal, and every time I think of you I shall be inspired to carry on to help build a system that will prove you did not die in vain."

I will close now, Comrade, with every good wish for you and the boys.

Yours in unity, KATHLEEN.

P. S. There's one thing you chaps must bear in mind: no matter who may slander you, *we, the workers*, believe in you.