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HELLGATE MEMORIES  
— WORLD WAR II —

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# Through My Eyes

91st Infantry Division in the Italian  
Campaign 1942–1945

Leon Weckstein



**Hellgate Press**

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*Through My Eyes:  
91st Infantry Division in the Italian Campaign 1942–1945*

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*To those incredibly courageous dogfaces of the 91st Division, living and dead,  
with whom I had the distinct honor and privilege of serving, and  
to fighting infantrymen everywhere. They are a special breed.*



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# Foreword

Leon Weckstein and I both served with the 363rd Infantry Regiment, so the roads we traveled up the bloody boot of Italy were very much the same. Leon was an intelligence sergeant with 1st Battalion Headquarters; I was a Private First Class and served with a rifle platoon in Company E, 2nd Battalion. Except for the three weeks I spent in a field hospital recovering from wounds I received at the Arno River, I went the entire route with the 91st Division. We were two of those rare birds of World War II, soldiers who returned home with the same units they trained with in the States. We were survivors because Lady Luck rode on our shoulders all during the time we were in combat. As the late novelist James Jones put it, “It’s largely a matter of luck that decides whether or not you get killed. It doesn’t make any difference who you are, how nice a guy you might be, or how much you know, if you happen to be at a certain post, at a certain time, you get it.” Leon and I escaped that post and that time.

As this book shows us, it’s the infantryman who has to go in and face the rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire. The artillery can shell the valleys and the mountains, and the Air Force can bomb the roads and destroy the towns, but it’s the infantryman who must move through those valleys, climb the mountains, capture the towns, and stagger up the roads, forever pursuing the enemy.

## THROUGH MY EYES: 91st Infantry Division in the Italian Campaign 1942–1945

*Through My Eyes* chronicles the evolution of a soldier from a frightened young innocent to a seasoned veteran of war. As the book progresses, we follow these young draftees through basic training with all its absurd orders, through the final stages of overseas movement, and into the terrifying first days of battle. The 363rd Infantry spent ten months in combat, an absolute eternity to those men who had to endure the heat of summer, the rain, mud, and sleet of autumn, and the bitter snows of winter. When the war finally and mercifully ended, “we had waited and prayed for it so long that the remarkable news was accepted calmly and passively, with only a strange numbing relief as the prime emotion.” Only then did the nerves begin to calm down and the knots in the stomach slowly unravel.

At the top of Il Giogo Pass, where troops of the U.S. II Corps initially broke the Gothic Line, there’s a monument to the dead of the 363rd Infantry Regiment. It stands along State Road 503 just a few yards from a small restaurant with the ominous name, *l’uomo morto* (the dead man). On the monument are the names of over 500 young men who were cheated out of a life. The place is quiet now and the stillness extends even down into the valleys that are covered with a fifty-year growth of pines. To stand by the monument and look out over the mountains and hear the wind sigh through the grass and to remember these men is to feel a hurt that is beyond all healing.

This book tells us about those men, and it does it magnificently.

ROY LIVENGOOD

Historian, 91st Infantry Division Association

# Preface

**S**even A.M. The clock radio interrupted my sleep with the sound of somebody's damn horn concerto blaring harshly in my ears. How could the program director be so insensitive so early? Anything except horns at this hour would have been acceptable. I reached over faster than I should have and put an end to that insanity in a hurry. Ten, very brief, minutes later, I opened my eyes properly, slowly, as I felt for the elusive buttons of the TV remote that connect me to the morning's news. Obviously, I had pushed right. A bugler was in the midst of sweetly sounding taps as "Good Morning America" somberly reminded me that today was November 11, 1997, Veteran's Day.

It had become my habit for too many years to avoid the bittersweet memories, allowing myself only a few introspective seconds on that special holiday to smugly and selfishly meditate on how great it was to still be alive. Usually, I'd allot time for just one or two hastily derived thoughts of my old infantry comrades, those I had last seen in Italy before I was lucky enough to be shipped home, thoughts I could quickly fritter away with the last application of my shaving cream before they managed to get the better of me.

Maybe it was something in the dolefully compelling tones of the announcer on that particular day, but I found myself suddenly and unwillingly

caught up in the intended sentimentality. For some reason, I began to recall how many men I knew who still sleep permanently there beneath the sacred soil that had become a vast American graveyard near Florence and how many continue to haunt me even now as I attempt to brush aside this ephemeral sadness. They didn't make it; why did I? Was there any sense to it?

Since the war, I've chosen to subvert the worst memories of those many hideous war incidents and gradually shunt them to a more distant strata of my brain. But, it took many years and many nightmares to mitigate all that unforgettable butchery. Only during the last ten years have I even allowed myself to attend a war movie which, surprisingly enough, was too realistic for me. Titled *A Walk in the Sun*, it was about a platoon of infantry in Italy. Even that masterfully produced film conjured up too many unsettling memories.

I challenge the old cliché that time heals all wounds. I'd be infinitely more content to put the whole thing to rest once and for all, if only I could.

As I looked in the mirror that morning and saw that corrugated, seventy-seven-year-old face doing its best to conceal a brain that thinks it's still twenty-nine, a strong need impelled me to write something enlightening about those unsettled times. I especially wanted to convey the terribly savage part I witnessed as well as the more pleasing part the congenial Italians played during those never-to-be-forgotten years between 1942 and 1945.

So little has been written about the people, how they faced the immense tragedies inherent in their hunger, the almost daily demolition of their cities, the slaughter of their kin. All of this they stood up to with unbelievable spirit, humor, and remarkable stoicism. Examples of human dignity such as theirs requires a considerable amount of reporting, much more than the subject has been given to date and more than I personally could ever contribute. Yet I feel that what I have seen is extremely important and well worth adding to the, unfortunately, limited number of memoirs of this historic Italian era.

Certainly, it would be sinful to ignore the real-life drama of the infantryman's role during those traumatic years. For the main part, my chronicle is the honest truth as indelibly remembered from a span of more than half a century. It is easy enough to recall the delightful as well as the horrible situations of those turbulent times, so of necessity these memoirs will include just about everything, the sentimental, the sensual, and, sadly, the morbid. Names will be named, except where my narrative tends to deride or scandalize.

Much of the detail that helped me recall dates and locations was taken from the *History of the 363rd Infantry* compiled by Captain Ralph E. Strootman and published by the Washington Infantry Journal Press in 1947, for which I offer my sincere thanks. That portion of my memoir relating to my part in having possibly saved the famous Leaning Tower of Pisa from destruction is verifiable.

## Preface

There are valid documents of my actions as well as witnesses who are, hopefully, still alive.

I tried not to be redundant, but the stark drama and recollections I have attempted to convey can in no way come close to recapturing the entire story of bravery, humor, and hell instigated by this war, or any war I suppose. I ask the reader's forgiveness if I have found it too easy to get carried away with emotion.

It was the soul-shattering, life and death events that occurred near the crest of Monticelli during those decisive four days of the summer of 1944 that grow increasingly vulgar and more obscene as they continue to smolder in a very secret section of my mind — for as long as I will live. Nevertheless, I chose to dig deeply into my white-lipped memories of acts splendidly heroic as well as barbarously profane, so you could join me as an armchair witness to the furious battle for the Apennines as I saw them.

For lack of a camera at that time, only these printed words can serve to recreate those amazing experiences I've attempted to relate in this book. I clearly saw them through my eyes then and, I promise you, with only the tiniest sprinkle of self-indulgence and pride do I relate them now.

# Acknowledgments

**M**y greatest appreciation goes to my best friend, Mimi, who by an odd set of circumstances also happens to be my affectionate, loving wife. Without her patient reassurance, these pages would be blank, non-existent, since it was she who taught me to like myself enough to muster the chutzpah to dare write this wartime autobiography.

Without the technical support of my son-in-law, Barry Chass, and my stepson, Dennis Passovoy, computer wizards who helped me contend with a fearsome new word processor, I'd probably still be working on chapter two. Please, guys, accept my too often unexpressed but heartfelt gratitude.

Very special, sincere thanks go to Dan Striepeke, Ron Friedman, and Carole Kirschner for their advice, counsel, and encouragement when I needed it most. And I certainly owe a huge debt of gratitude to Gigi Orlando, owner of the very Italian Café Roma in Beverly Hills. He sparked my enthusiasm to begin my book because of his fiercely emotional accolades regarding the Pisa adventure.

The author also gratefully acknowledges Bill Maulden and the Watkins/Loomis Agency for their permission to reprint select WWII cartoons featuring Willy and Joe, probably the world's most famous and popular pair of "dogface" infantrymen. They will forever remain every WWII GI's memory of guys he slept with, chowed down with, and fought alongside. "Maulden," as he was fondly known to the multitude of American fighting men, created more than a bit of sorely needed light to brighten many of our otherwise indescribably dark days. Thank you again, Bill Maulden.

# Drafted

“Let’s get married.” Hundreds of thousands of panicky youngsters tremulously whispered those supposedly consoling words, almost daring each other, while all around them a very anxious America watched the gathering clouds of war, which just about scared the hell out of everybody. I was no exception and also wed, having to say heavyhearted good-byes soon afterward to my wife of a few months at the urgent and irreversible request of the terrifying Selective Service Board.

It’s of passing interest to note that well over half of those quickie weddings ended in divorce later, beating the fifty-fifty odds.

I was drafted out of the then-Jewish section of Los Angeles in November of 1942, along with every other poor frightened Brooklyn Avenue shlep the fearsome Board could round up, including my forty-nine year-old, five-foot-one-inch father-in-law. We looked very much like an anxious and mangy Dirty Dozen. Each intimidated one of us carried to our unknown destiny a small dilapidated suitcase filled with toilet articles, sox, a change of underwear, and whatever else could make us feel that we hadn’t totally lost touch with what used to be reality. Almost everyone had a small paper bag that included the all important nosh lovingly created by mother or wife, a hard salami sandwich, kosher pickle, and slice of marble cake. God forbid we should go hungry!

It might have been easier on me than the others. I had spent several years in an orphanage as a kid and had been kicked around pretty good by that time. As I watched some of the others, I couldn't help but notice their frightened white faces, their moist eyes. It's not that I was a hell of a lot braver; I was probably almost as scared as they were. All I had going for me was my previous experience of early separation and, as a result, a bit less fear of the unknown.

Aware that the draft would get me sooner or later, I had first attempted to volunteer for service with the Navy, then the Coast Guard.

"Your eyesight is lousy!" they both reminded, rather than informed, me. "Go home and eat lots of carrots. Don't bother us again for at least six months." I wiped my glasses with a tissue and went home to wait. I didn't know for what, at the time.

I was really a very dumb twenty-one-year-old, going on sixteen socially, and sincerely believed that if they turned me down, so would the Army. They didn't. The incredibly ironic thing was that I ultimately became known in the 363rd Infantry Regiment as Eagle Eye Weckstein and was awarded one of our country's highest medals, the Legion of Merit, mainly for my unusual ability to see things others couldn't. Ultimately, I gained fame among the big brass for my curious talent to spot targets and direct fire at the enemy from perilous forward observation posts.

I took the Navy's advice and did eat a carrot or two, but what the generals of the 5th Army would later learn was that it wasn't necessarily my eyesight or corrective eighteen-dollar lenses that mattered. The simple fact was that I really did have unusual powers of observation, particularly a latent aptitude for discerning a camouflaged Panzer tank or a dug-in machine-gun position before anyone else could. Even as a child of eight, I could see a garter snake slither through the fall leaves long before the other kids did. There is no magic here. Some of us have it, but most don't.

A hundred or so of us sad sacks piled gloomily into the train headed for Fort Ord, California. I was about to learn a very valuable lesson from that first train ride to our staging area in Monterey. An imposing, official-looking sergeant rounded us up as we were about to depart the train station in Los Angeles. "Anybody here ever been in the Boy Scouts?" he yelled.

"I was!" My hand went up.

He had his pigeon. "What's your name?"

I told him, and he said "You're going to be the acting corporal for this group. See that they don't drink too much or get too rowdy. Make sure they stay on the train. We'll put it on your record."

Yeah, sure they would. Needless to say, I became a most despised official trying to uphold his orders. I couldn't see a way to back out gracefully and realized



too late that I'd been had. I would never again volunteer for anything. My typical, naïve reaction left me frustrated to the point of evaluating everything a bit more seriously from then on. It was just the beginning of my real-world education.

After a few days of being indoctrinated at Fort Ord, we received our first olive-drab uniforms and clumsy GI shoes from the hard-bitten quartermaster sergeant. Generally sized ridiculously wrong, these formidable trappings were unceremoniously selected and handed out to us by German prisoners of war (POWs), who probably took some solace in the illogical distribution.

Then, after the cursory physical exams which consisted mainly of bending over with pants ridiculously draped at half-mast and coughing to test for hernias, we were once again stacked onto a train headed north to Camp White near Medford, Oregon, some seven or eight hours away. This time I was more than happy to be rid of my silly title of acting corporal as well as the attending reference to me as Corporal Chickenshit. I swore that, from now on, it would be the real thing or nothing.

Looking around that melancholy, smoke-filled train compartment, I realized that the over-animated expressions and loutish clowning around I had noticed a few days before had now begun to turn dour, moody. Bottles of cheap bourbon were being passed around freely, quickly making glassy-eyed buddies out of complete strangers.

Who could blame them? We were all going off into the vast unknown, urgently missing home already, and wondering if we would ever again see our loved ones. The unsettling matter of where and how we'd wind up was terribly unnerving.

I recall that the prime sensation that gripped me was one of loneliness. My father-in-law had been routed to a medical unit because someone finally took note of his age, which was funny as the man couldn't stand the sight of blood, so he was put in another compartment in a different part of the train, and now the feeling of total abandonment was complete.

Soon a real honest-to-god corporal passed through the train when we reached the Oregon border, calling off each man's official designation and naming the company he would be attached to once we arrived at Camp White. I found that I was now assigned to 1st Battalion, Headquarters Company, of the 363rd Infantry Regiment, 91st Infantry Division, destined to be a clerk-typist, of all things. That post seemed logical since I had taken a year of typing in high school. But wow! That word *infantry* was scary. The only saving grace were the words *headquarters* and *clerk-typist*. Weren't those guys always behind the lines? How in the hell could you type anything with bullets flying past you?

I would find the surprising answer to these questions during the a year-and-a-half journey down the long, muddy road that would lead from here to the

killing fields, those rutted, mine-laden olive groves and craggy, snow-covered mountains awaiting us in Italy. Of course, we had no knowledge at that time of just where we'd wind up.

Military trucks carried us from the train to our barracks in a pouring rain that must have been specially ordered by the Army to start the punitive process of turning us into desolate, wretched recruits since the deluge didn't let up for over sixty soggy days.

To this day, I can't help thinking that our company commander at that time, Captain Glen C. Long, took the gung-ho infantryman's usual pleasure in watching us pale-faced weaklings squirm in misery as we lined up in the oozing mud at company formation before dawn, shivering, soaking wet, and feeling terribly sorry for ourselves on that first dreary morning. As it turned out, this would be the ritual we'd be forced to start with every day. This method of attempting to make men out of us continued for months to come as we didn't have the pleasure of seeing the sun begin to shine again until January.

We soon learned that the cadre sent to Camp White in advance of our arrival to whip us into shape were previously rough-and-tumble 1st Cavalry non-commissioned officers and commissioned officers, most of whom had come out of Fort Bliss, Texas. That bit of alarming news quickly began to sink in when those seasoned roughnecks began to put us through our paces.

First Sergeant Joseph Higdon from Waco, Texas, usually ran the show with firmness and a no-bullshit attitude. As a pusillanimous tenderfoot, I was forced to both despise and respect his professional, soldierly temperament for the next year and a half, until he was transferred to a rifle company. Later he was killed while gallantly attempting to be a one-man army trying to destroy well dug-in enemy positions at the dreaded Gothic Line. From what I had witnessed and will relate in the pertinent chapter, he went down bravely shooting from the hip John Wayne style before he was cut down.

With all his gruffness, he was always fair in his treatment of me, the so-called Jew-boy in his outfit. Most of the other Southern-bred, hill-country non-coms referred to men of my faith in much more derogatory terms. Fortunately, that attitude changed rapidly after the real shooting began eighteen months later, but that's another chapter.

For the next few years, I was unwittingly to become thoroughly educated in Americana. Fresh out of Los Angeles' Belmont High in 1938, I could never have guessed that what I had often wondered at, or seen on the magic movie screen, was real. One might call them hillbillies, horse soldiers, or Li'l Abners, even rednecks, but I was learning from these men that the United States of America was made up of a very broad range of citizens, not necessarily at all like me.