

Spanish Civil War Letters from American Volunteers

from CANUTE FRANKSON

Albacete, Spain
July 6, 1937

My Dear Friend:

I'm sure that by this time you are still waiting for a detailed explanation of what has this international struggle to do with my being here. Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult and abuse upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain today?

Because we are no longer an isolated minority group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant. Because, my dear, we have joined with, and become an active part of, a great progressive force, on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of saving human civilization from the planned destruction of a small group of degenerates gone mad in their lust for power. Because if we crush Fascism here we'll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler's Fascist heels.

All we have to do is to think of the lynching of our people. We can but look back at the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes; stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies ears, fingers, toes have been cut for souvenirs—living bodies into which red-hot poker have been thrust. All because of a hate created in the minds of men and women by their masters who keep us all under their heels while they suck our blood, while they live in their bed of ease by exploiting us.

But these people who howl like hungry wolves for our blood, must we hate them? Must we keep the flame which these masters kindled constantly fed? Are these men and women responsible for the programs of their masters, and the conditions which force them to such degraded depths? I think not. They are tools in the hands of unscrupulous masters. These same people are as hungry as we are. They live in dives and wear rags the same as we do. They, too, are robbed by the masters, and their faces kept down in the filth of a decayed system. They are our fellowmen. Soon, and very soon, they and we will understand. Soon, many Angelo Herndons will rise from among them, and from among us, and will lead us both against those who live by the stench of our burnt flesh. We will crush them. We will build us a new society--a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain.

Canute

Spanish Civil War Letters from American Volunteers

from JACK FREEMAN I

October 22, 1937

Dear Mom, Pop, and Herbie,

Six months after leaving home and almost five months after arriving in Spain, I've finally gotten to see some actual warfare. This morning marks my tenth day in the front line trenches and, altho this front is technically speaking pretty quiet at present, still we've managed to squeeze in quite a lot since we came up.

We moved into the trenches one morning before light and, as soon as dawn came, the crap began to fly. Then started my education. Some of the old-timers explained the various sounds to me. At first anytime anything whizzed, whistled, or buzzed, I would duck. Then I found out that any bullet which passes anywhere near you will whistle. Ricochets, that is, bullets which have already hit the ground or a rock or something and bounce off in a different direction, buzz when they go by. When bullets come very close they sound more like a whine than a whistle.

But the most important thing of all about these bullet sounds is never to worry about any bullet you hear. Bullets travel much faster than sound, strange as that may seem, and the bullet is way past you by the time you hear it. As it's put out here, "You'll never hear the slug that gets you."

Of course, it's pretty hard to control your instinctive tendency to duck when you hear a loud noise, but the only time it really pays to duck is when you hear a burst of machine gun fire and hear them come over you. You can't, of course, duck the first few if they're coming at you, but you can get out of the way of the rest of the burst.

The same thing goes for artillery too, except for trench mortars and very heavy stuff.

A trench mortar gun looks like a fat can between two wheels. The barrel points almost straight up and the shells go all the way up into the air and then almost drop. You can judge after a while if they're going to your right or left, but if they're coming in your general direction there's nothing to do but hope. Heavy artillery goes very slow and you can hear them coming, but they usually head for the rear lines anyway.

Well, the first morning I'm keeping low in the trench and not too much interested in the intricacies of military education, when these trench mortars start coming over. They whistle for a long time before they hit and that just increases the agony, waiting for them to land. When these things start coming the battle commander shouts "Everybody down in the trench." So I stick my nose six inches below the level of my heels and then the commander finishes his sentence, "That doesn't go for the observational staff. Locate that gun."

So I found out what observing under fire meant. Poor me has got to spend my time sticking my nose thru peep holes when it's much more comfortable two feet below, and my head and shoulders over the parapet half the night, and when the big bastards come over instead of dropping we've got to watch. It was pretty tough the first morning but I soon got used to it.

You see, after a while you get the feeling that what's going to happen to you, if anything, will happen pretty much in spite of anything you do. That doesn't mean we become dauntless heroes and walk out of our way to take risks because we like to watch the patterns the bullets kick up in the dust, but it does mean that we don't become nervous wrecks bobbing up and down every time a mosquito buzzes around your left ear. It's the only kind of defense mechanism you can adopt.

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Shortly after noon that first day we went over the top. For about three quarters of an hour after the beginning of the attack I didn't think I'd get a chance to climb over that hump. I was stationed next to the commander in a pretty exposed observation post keeping wise to how our boys were going, so that the attack could be properly directed. The commander, you understand, does not move up until the troops have taken up a position, even a temporary one, in advance of the original lines. But if you think that's safe, you're cock-eyed. He's got to keep calm and see everything that's going on when every instinct is pulling him down to a covered position.

Communication with the men out front is maintained by runners. Pretty soon we ran out of runners, so I got my chance. But the company I had been sent out to contact had had some tough going and was pretty well scattered and difficult to find. I went out, couldn't find the company commander nor anyone else who knew where he was. So I was in a fix. I didn't want to return until I had contacted them and I couldn't find them. I roamed around that god-damned no-man's land, sometimes running, sometimes crawling, sometimes snake-bellying, and holy cow, was that a time. I didn't of course know where in hell my men were and one time I crawled up to within fifty meters of the fascist lines before a sniper reminded me where I was.

The hardest thing out there is not keeping going once you're on the move, but starting once you've stopped. When you get down in between two furrows in a plowed field or behind a little ledge where you know you're about as safe as you will be, it sure is tough to get up and start going thru the air again, especially since you know there's plenty more stuff in that air besides you.

Another thing. This time they used trench-mortars against the attacking men. The thing to do when you hear them whistling at you is to drop so that you'll be out of the way of any shrapnel or flying bits of shell. Most of the time I could hear them whistling at me and then the sound would reach a high point, and from then on it was whistling away from me. That scares you, but once the whistle is behind you you know you're safe a little longer.

But of the six hours I spent out in between those lines the worst moments were three times when the whistle of the mortars approached, came overhead, and then, instead of receding, kept coming louder. There's very little time involved, but you think fast out there. Here's that damned shell falling at you, no place to move to, nothing to do. In that brief instant you get a horrible feeling--not of excitement or fear, but just resignation. You are a dead man aware of the fact--a body which is lifeless except that its mind knows it is lifeless. I don't know if you get that. And then, three separate times, those damn shells land within ten feet of me, and were duds! This isn't literary exaggeration, I'm not writing a phony adventure story. I could see where the shells hit and dropped dirt over me and failed to explode.

Get my point. We are in danger continually and it is not pleasant. But there is a gamble, a risk, a probability. However when there is no probability, when it's a certainty--it's coming at you and you know it--then you've got something. Try thinking what you'd think about if you had two seconds to think it in.

Well, I couldn't find the company and it was starting to get dark, so I decided to go back. But I found that wasn't so simple either. Dusk is always a dangerous time, so everybody is especially watchful. This day there had been an attack, so the fascists were especially jittery and there was a hell of a lot of fire. I waited for it to quiet and started back. This time I attracted fire from both sides because neither side knew what I was. It's a funny feeling to be fired on by your own men. I had a couple of more scary moments, but I finally got in.

In one or two days we'll be relieved and I'll write some more. I am still bodily and mentally unhurt.

Jack

Spanish Civil War Letters from American Volunteers

from JACK FREEMAN II

June 29, 1938

Hi Herb,

Last winter we had the coldest winter in about twenty years and now it seems, we're headed for the hottest summer in a long time. From eleven in the morning to 3 or 4 in the afternoon it is simply physically impossible to do anything. The slightest motion brings oceans of thick, stinking sweat rolling down your body. The civilians sleep their famous siesta, but for us, living in trenches or in open fields, even this is almost impossible. For along with the hot weather came the flies. Not flies like the delicate, frightened creatures we have in the states. Oh, no. Big, heavy, tough, persistent things that you can't shoo away. They swarm in thick clouds over every square inch of your body that's exposed, buzzing ferociously, creeping across your skin so heavily you can feel each individual footstep, biting so that you almost forget the lice. And when you swing at them, they don't scatter like properly civilized American flies. They merely fly off two or three inches and are back on you before your hand is at rest. If you lie uncovered they torment you to distraction and if you put even the most sheer piece of material over you, you drown in your own sweat. And the lice, thriving on the rich sweat, grow fat & bloated like well-fed pigs and dig fortifications in your skin.

Jack

from TOBY JENSKY (American nurse)

June 21, 1937

My Dears—

To-nite we had our first dance. We invited the boys of the Lincoln Battalion and a good time was had by all. I'm still on night duty, but I was relieved for a few hours so I did my bit of dancing. The dance was also successful in keeping the patients awake and now at 3 A.M. they're just about popping off. But what the hell. Among the boys were a few I knew from the Village, so we talked & talked about New York and I really feel much better now. During the full moon, you can sit outside and read it's so light. The only trouble is that it's also light for the fascist planes.

A little girl was brought in here yesterday—all shot full of holes—both her eyes blown out. It seems that she and a few others found a hand grenade and decided to play with it. Her brother died soon after he was brought in. 3 other kids were slightly hurt and she if she makes it will be blind and all scarred. It's a pretty horrible thing—she's got plenty of guts and certainly can take it—you never hear a whimper out of her. She's about 10 years old. It's the same sort of thing you see in places that have been bombed, only more of it. It's a stinking business. We still get very little news of what's doing. I still don't read Spanish, so there you are. I can speak a few more words. I wish I could make myself sit down for an hour a day and study, but there's always something more pleasant to do. Maybe some day soon—

I haven't written home for a while, so will you give them my love?

Here's hoping we beat the hell out of the fascists soon, so I can get back.

Keep on writing—

Saluda Comarado (the one & only salutation around here).

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from CECIL COLE I

October 22, 1937

Well hello everybody—

We've been here at the front for almost five weeks. It's not so healthy here. Too much "lead-poisoning" going on to be exactly comfortable.

Since I last wrote I've been advanced again. Now I am Chief of Brigade Scouts. That in itself is making life less sure. So far I've been beyond the Fascist lines twice and up to them six times. All at night of course. In fact we do most all of our work at night. We have to move very slowly to avoid being seen. Three times now I have been seen & shot at.

The first time I was about twenty meters from their line. They opened up on me with a machine gun & six or eight rifles. Believe me, I hugged the ground. They hit the heel of my left shoe at the seam several times and actually blew my shoe apart there. Five of the "slugs" passed thru the seat of my pants, one just burning my "fanny," but none closer. However my "fanny" is a little sore still to sit on. Needless to say, I was plenty scared.

The second time they caught two of us, myself and one of my sergeants, about 50 meters from one of their out-posts. It was pretty gruesome, as we hid behind two dead comrades who had gotten "it" in the attack a couple of days before. We lay there for three hours. Every time we moved, this damn sniper would put a shot along side of us. Finally, after the moon went down we got back. I had 3 holes in my coat to show for that patrol.

from CECIL COLE II

Jan. 29, 1938

Dear Jeff,

I was strafed one morning, when I was returning to the brigade, in a truck. There was the driver, three comrades against the cab, and myself against the back of the truck. The driver evidently saw them first and started to stop, turning off his motor and heading toward the bank. This was the first I noticed, then came the staccato crack of heavy machine gun and there was the 1st plane, not over 40 feet above us. It killed the driver instantly, taking off most of his face. The truck was then stopped against a high bank to the right of the road. I shouted something to the other three and jumped out. The only place I could see that offered any cover was between the motor and the bank. The planes were not coming head on, but from the side of the truck away from the bank. They dove three times one after the other, all seven of them, and finally went away. I was never so terrified in my life. You see, there was time between each plane's dive, to think, and the continual tightening up and letting down was horrible. It's not a very heroic nor pretty picture, but it's true. The fact is, I haven't yet gotten back on my feet--mentally--yet. It was the first time I had time to be afraid. The other times I was doing something and moving, but that helpless feeling of no place to go and just waiting--waiting, really got me.

Incidentally they also dropped hand bombs, but they all hit on the far side of the truck. If one had landed any place on my side I'd be so full of lead they wouldn't have to dig me a grave, I'd just naturally sink into the ground.

Cec

Spanish Civil War Letters from American Volunteers

from FREDERICK LUTZ

The Front
October 23, '37

Dear Shirley,

Another of your frequent and most welcome letters arrived today and this afternoon I find the time to answer it.

Heard Langston Hughes last night; he spoke at one of our nearby units--the Autoparque, which means the place where our Brigade trucks and cars are kept and repaired. It was a most astonishing meeting; he read a number of his poems; explained what he had in mind when he wrote each particular poem and asked for criticism. I thought to myself before the thing started "Good God how will anything like poetry go off with these hard-boiled chauffeurs and mechanics, and what sort of criticism can they offer?" Well it astonished me as I said. The most remarkable speeches on the subject of poetry were made by the comrades. And some said that they had never liked poetry before and had scorned the people who read it and wrote it but they had been moved by Hughes's reading. There was talk of "Love" and "Hate" and "Tears"; everyone was deeply affected and seemed to bare his heart at the meeting, and the most reticent (not including me) spoke of their innermost feelings. I suppose it was because the life of a soldier in wartime is so unnatural and emotionally starved that they were moved the way they were.

Fred

from SANDOR VOROS

Madrid, December 17, 1937

Sweetheart,

"The moon is very big tonight"--this sentence has been on my mind for days. It is a beautiful sentence, I can't stop rolling it off my lips. I came across it in a letter among my documents while searching for material for the book I am now working on.

A girl in New York started her letter off to her boyfriend in Spain with that--on the very night her boyfriend was killed. He died very bravely under that very big moon and that very big moon lit up the whole landscape, throwing a ghostlike silvery flame on No Man's Land, silhouetting the rescuing parties against the sky, and the fascists opened fire, wounding many of the brave volunteers who were risking their lives trying to bring in the body of that boy who was lying dead out in the field under the very big moon his girl was writing about in New York. She was very lonesome for him and so she was looking at the moon in New York and the moon was very big; it reached all the way to Spain. He never received the letter. I was the one who received it and I read it ten months later, a few days after I finished my chapter, on the night of the very big moon, and I never heard till then about the girl. But ever since I read that letter my heart went out to that girl. I keep on wondering whether she still notices the moon and hope she is proud of the boy who died a death worthy of his principles and his class. I want to raise a monument for that boy and girl under that very big moon, a monument of love and class struggle and of heroism and self-negation and sacrifice that shall be at the same time a monument of the struggle against fascism in Spain.

The moon has been very big a number of times and I hope the time will be soon here when it will shine on a free Spain and we, two, will walk arm in arm under that very big moon, thinking about that other boy and girl....Sanyi