PLANE RIDE HOME

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ON May 20, Capt. Joseph G. Stone, a big, red-headed doctor from Cicero, Ill., walked into the anteroom of the 6th Field Hospital at Prestwick, Scotland, carrying a little list of names. Another one of the smooth North Atlantic air passages that ATC had been providing for the wounded since June 1944 was getting under way.

Stone checked off the names, and T-4 John H. McKim of Elwood City, Pa. chalked up another departure on his blackboard.

Minutes later the big ramp was pulled up to the open bays of the C-54, and 20 men were carried aboard. Half an hour after Stone had read the names off his list, a wide-winged plane was climbing north out of Scotland.

Aboard as flight nurse for the first leg of the trip to Iceland was Lt. Sylvia Roth of Philadelphia, Pa. She had made five trips across the Atlantic and had earned lots of flight time flying over the Continent when we were moving wounded men from advanced fields behind the front lines to hospitals in the rear.

The 20 patients, comfortably set up in tiers of four litters, included a Ranger; a TD battalion lieutenant who had been shot three times at close range by a German soldier, and a 20-year-old platoon sergeant. Of the 20 patients aboard 16 had been prisoners of the Germans. All of them represented the tail-end of the war in Europe and they proved that the last bullets were as dangerous as the other ones. And on VE-Day they were in hospitals celebrating with thermometers and bedpans.

They had been hit with plenty of trouble in their service overseas. Most of them lay in their litters very quietly now as if not to break the spell of this magic that was taking them home. This day there was lots of sunlight over the broken clouds and bits of bleak water showing below. Lt. Roth spread a comforter on the floor and some of the men clambered down from the litters. The nurse and the soldiers played cards.

Lt. James Pollitt, who had commanded a platoon of tank destroyers in the 821st TD Battalion, wanted only to smoke, which was exactly the one thing he couldn't do aboard the plane. Outside of that he didn't mind talking. He was a tall, level-headed guy who didn't look like he'd ever feel sorry for himself. He had charged a Tiger tank in a jeep, not because he was looking for a posthumous Medal of Honor, "but what the hell could we do? You can't drive a jeep away from a Tiger tank so my driver and I just drove down to it, pulled up alongside and climbed on top. We had a carbine and a .45 between us. We banged on the turret until it opened and we had them prisoner."

"After that I yelled *Kummen raus* or some damn thing to every German who might be listening, and by God it seemed like hundreds of them came out of houses and woods. I told them there were lots of Americans around and to disarm. They kept looking at us but no other Americans came. Finally they had it figured out right, that there was just the two of us and they jumped us. This one guy grabbed my .45. He shot me three times from a distance of about 10 feet. The first time it was through the chest and I remember going down on one knee and saying to myself 'I'm never going home.'

"I was shot three times but I guess none of the shots hit anything important. The one through the chest didn't touch my lungs and just grazed a rib. The second one through the neck didn't touch the jugular vein. The last one smashed up my right arm a bit and that's about all that's bothering me now.

"See this," said Pollitt, flexing his fingers. He couldn't make a tight fist because the nerves in his upper right arm hadn't thoroughly healed yet. And he would carry his Purple Heart around with him the rest of his life in the form of a little white scar in his neck.

Lt. Roth, who was sitting at a window with the sun suddenly blazing through into the plane, tapped Pollitt on the shoulder and said, "You sit down here, and feel that sun on your back."

"No, you keep sitting there, it's all right," said Pollitt.

"You sit there, just sit down and feel that sun, it'll be wonderful on your back."

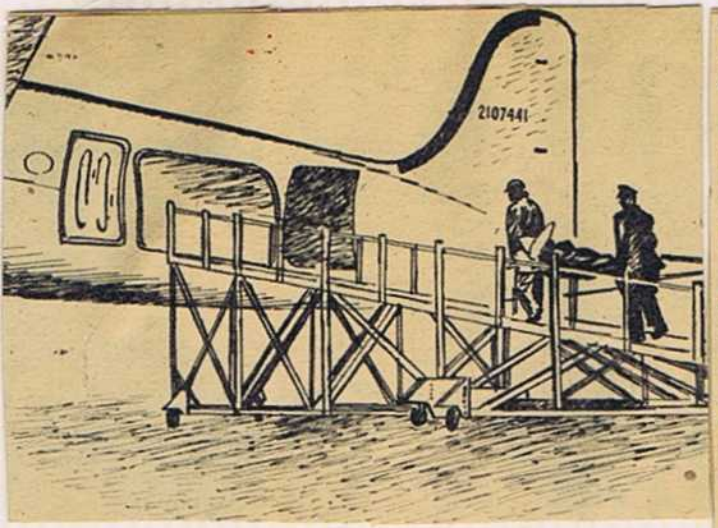
Pollitt sat down, rubbed his stubble of black beard, and gazed out on unbroken, fluffy white clouds that moved to the horizon. The clouds made a bed the size of the world. He said he was going home to Pawtucket, R. I., where he had a wife. Pollitt left the States before the baby was born, he said. The kid wasn't well at birth. Now he was coming home after his 5-month-old son, whom he'd never seen, had died.

THE navigator came back for a minute to say that we had a good tail wind and the flight would only be four hours today. Somebody asked the nurse if high-ranking officer patients acted any differently than the enlisted men on these flights. Lt. Roth thought about that one for a moment and then said, "I wouldn't know, they all seem the same in pajamas."

"Generals are usually the meekest and mildest of the lot," said Pfc. Donald Ackroyd, the flight and traffic clerk aboard. Ackroyd, whose home town is Webster, Mass., has been making these trans-Atlantic flights for nearly a year. "Tell a general that he's gotta stop smoking, and he almost breaks a leg putting out that cigarette."

Meeks Field was clean and bare and full of sunlight when the plane landed. It wasn't too cold in Iceland that day. The Forts on the field looked nice and peaceful with their guns sheathed in canvas, and the searchlights which used to watch for the big Focke Wolfe 200s that bombed long ago as far north as Iceland looked as if they hadn't been used for some time. May two years ago in Iceland saw the Forts and the B26s lined up nose by nose as if sniffing the cold grey skies for the take-offs to England and combat. But this May was VE month and even Iceland looked good.

When the gangplank was pulled alongside the plane, the fuselage became as busy as Grand Central but the movements up and down the gangplank were purposeful and efficient. Doctors, a new nurse, Red Cross girls, orderlies and another crew came aboard. There were tureens of hot food, fresh milk and ice cream. Pollitt and the young Ranger officer, Lt. Douglas C. Campbell of



Vallejo, Calif., who had been wounded on the Saar while with the 5th Ranger Battalion, went off the plane for a quick cigarette.

Lt. Roth and the new nurse took their hair down just before take-off and had a shop-talk powder-room conversation. They talked about the last pass in New York before grabbing an eastward flight and Lt. Roth thought her flight uniform at Prestwick would probably be out of the cleaners when she got back there.

Then Lt. Roth made a neat little good-by speech and the men looked at each other as if they were losing a very old friend.

The second leg from Iceland to Newfoundland was the long one, eight and a half hours and going from sunlight into darkness. The navigator came back for a moment, very satisfied with the flight. He talked about the trade winds, the old winds of Columbus and the clipper ships across the Atlantic, Men fell asleep.

THEY stirred on their litters and rubbed their eyes in the night over Newfoundland. It was a clear night. The mountains below showed streaks of snow and jagged edges but it was all remote from this hospital ward in the air. Landing in Newfoundland was to feel already the American current of life. Pollitt and Campbell went over to the terminal building and tried out their new currency in the nickels and dimes that could buy tomato juice, coffee and hamburgers. It was very interesting. All you had to do was to drop some of these little pieces of metal on the counter and say hamburgers and coffee and there they were in front of you. A copy of today's New York *Times* lay on a bench and you could look over yesterday's box score at the Polo Grounds.

On the plane itself they had run up a big canvas pipe which fed warm air into the waist of the plane while the doors remained open, another piece of American engineering.

The last leg of the flight from Newfoundland to Mitchel Field saw nobody daring to get openly restless at the idea of home. It was a conspiracy of silence like watching a no-hit, no-run game in the making. Four hours later the U. S. showed below us in enormous patches of electric light.

The black magic of this flight was coming to an end. The flaps came down for the last time, the plane turned off the base leg, the electric lights came up big and the landing was easy—routine magic to the very end. They lowered the litters from the plane by means of a portable lift powered by a motor that chugged up to the plane. The guy that had charged a Tiger tank with a Jeep because he had to; the gay and lively young Ranger; and the baby-faced platoon sergeant who was going to try out school again, came down on the lift and were carried over to waiting ambulances. It was 0400 in the United States of America at Mitchel Field, Long Island. Twenty wounded soldiers were home for whatever was in it. And there was a fine cool wind blowing the way you remember it used to be in New York City years ago—a cool night wind after a long hot day.