

GOOD ENOUGH

One Man's Memoir
on the Price of the Dream



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★ CHAPTER THREE ★

OVERSEAS DUTY

Late in September of 1944, we arrived in Taunton, Massachusetts. One week later, our unit, the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, sailed for England. Our troop ship landed at Liverpool, and from there we traveled by train to a small community called Fordingbridge, Hants. This would prove to be a welcome relief for me after the racism I had encountered in the United States. The people in this community received us with open arms. We had been in the community of Fordingbridge for only a few days when the community held a dance to welcome us to England. It was my good fortune to meet Diane Coleman, an attractive young woman. She had come to the dance with her family, who were the proprietors of a bakery and a butcher shop. Diane and I danced quite often during that evening. When the dance was over I thanked her for a lovely evening and said good night to her parents.

The following day was Sunday, and I was relaxing with some of my friends where we were billeted. We were

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all members of the battalion's intelligence reconnaissance section. I did not know that Captain Ellis, who was in charge of our section, had met Diane Coleman before I had. It became quite apparent that I had usurped his station with Diane at the dance. Nevertheless, he came to our billet that Sunday morning to tell me that I was invited to the Coleman's home for dinner for being so nice to their daughter. This white officer, from the state of Virginia, had to tell me, a black soldier, that I was to have dinner with a young white female. His face was red, but he delivered the invitation. This invitation for dinner became a weekly event, and I looked forward to being with my newfound friends.

Diane would spend the week in London where she attended secretarial school, but on the weekends she came home to be with her family. On weekends it was customary for some members of the community to visit the local pub to socialize. Diane and I would sometimes go there to play darts while her family sat and drank bitters.

On one occasion, I went to London to meet Diane. We had made plans to go to the Haymarket Theatre to see John Gielgud playing in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. After this excellent and exciting experience, we enjoyed dinner at a nearby restaurant. I accompanied Diane to the train taking her back home, and I took my train to return to Fordingbridge. Little did I know, I would never see her again. Our unit immediately received orders to go to France, and although Diane and I corresponded for a while, we soon lost touch.

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Early in December, our battalion left England from Southampton. We crossed the English Channel to La Havre, France. We parked on the side of a road outside of a small town where we were to wait for orders — orders that

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would tell us what our battalion's responsibility would be in fighting this war. It was now 1944 and close to the Christmas season. The weather was severe, snow was everywhere and the temperature was well below zero.

We were there only about a week before receiving our orders. The battalion had been attached to the Third Army under the leadership of General George Patton, and our mission was to go into Belgium to a small town called Martelange.

Upon our arrival in the town the captain and I, along with several other soldiers, were sent to reconnoiter the outskirts of the town. I was driving the vehicle, and all of the other soldiers were in the back of the truck, which had its canvas sides rolled down to keep out the cold. The only two people who could be seen in the truck were me and the captain, who was white.

We were quite a distance from the area when three figures, dressed all in white and armed with rifles, rose out of a snow bank. We were ordered to halt and to give the password, which we had not been given that day. Our captain was ordered to step out of the vehicle. One of the soldiers looked in the driver's side of our truck and saw me. He said, "Everything is okay; they are Americans." The captain said nothing, but I believe that this white southerner felt he was lucky, on this night, to be part of a battalion of black soldiers.

In the town of Martelange, there was a bridge that had been completely destroyed by the enemy, and our mission was to rebuild that bridge. We had to do this because up the highway about 15 kilometers, there was another small town called Bastogne in which there were American soldiers, some of whom were members of the 101st Airborne Division, who had been trapped in that town. Their lives were in jeopardy, and they had to be rescued. General Patton and other members of the allied forces began to prepare for a rescue mission.

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The Siege of Bastogne was one small portion of the Battle of Bulge, one of the most important and deadly battles of World War II. The Germans attempted to break through the Allied lines and reach the harbor at Antwerp, Belgium, seizing roadways throughout eastern Belgium. Because all seven main roads in the Ardennes mountain range converged on the town of Bastogne, its control was vital to the German attack. The siege of Bastogne lasted from December 20 to December 27.

In order to get up to Bastogne, many of the soldiers would have to cross the bridge that we were going to build in Martelange. We worked on the bridge night and day. In spite of the weather we worked; in spite of shelling by the enemy's 88 howitzers we worked; in spite of the airplanes that came every night strafing machine gun bullets while trying to bomb the bridge we worked; in spite of the land mines that were everywhere, we worked on the bridge. We finished that bridge on time, in 5 days, and all the men, tanks, guns and ammunition crossed it. They went up to Bastogne and helped to rescue those men.

I lost a cousin in the Battle of the Bulge. He was in a red ball transportation unit. I knew he was stationed near where we were building our bridge. One day a friend of his came to me to tell me he had been killed. It was William Ray Weston, my mother's brother's son who had come to Philadelphia and lived with us for awhile before the war. Willy Ray's truck ran over a land mine while he was carrying a load of ammunition. They never found the body.

When I heard about his death I wrote a letter home to my mother and father telling them how sorry I was that I had joined the army. Willy Ray had died fighting for freedom and democracy for others when, at home, he didn't have those things himself. A black warrant officer came to me with the letter a few days after I had mailed it. Everything we mailed was read by the censors then, and they would cut out, with scissors, anything they thought

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could give information to the enemy or could be demoralizing at home. Because of the censors, the officers told me, my letter just couldn't be sent. I watched him as he tore it up.

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Building that bridge was a wonderful experience for the men in the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion. It was a glorious day in my life. This experience of our unit's participation in the Battle of the Bulge strengthened and confirmed our belief that we were good enough. But I soon found out that whenever you fight a war you pay a heavy price for glory. I realized this one day while standing alongside the road in the snow.

Several trucks were passing by. They were grave-registration trucks filled with the bodies of American soldiers piled high atop one another. As I looked at that scene, I said to myself, "Leon, why did you join the army? What are you doing in this place? You could end up that way." I pondered the many indignities I had experienced during the days of my basic training. I remembered the question I was asked by the platoon leader in Georgia, "Leon, what are you fighting for?"

That question became very real to me as I witnessed death and dying in Belgium. I remembered that I, a black soldier, could not get a drink of water at a public water fountain back home. I could not get a meal in a restaurant back home, and they would not let me have a seat on a bus back home. So what was I doing here? What was I fighting for? I didn't have all the answers to my questions. I was only 19 years old at the time. But I was an angry young black soldier. I was angry at my country because my country was using and abusing me. I was angry because my country was placing me in harm's way to fight and perhaps to die to preserve all those rights and privileges

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every American should enjoy, but at the same time, my country was letting me know, in so many different ways, that it thought I was not good enough to enjoy what I was fighting for.

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Plans for our battalion to leave the area were being made, but the reconnaissance section had to reconnoiter the area first. That day we discovered another bridge that had been destroyed by the enemy. I drove close to the bridge and knew there was no chance for our battalion to get across. I turned my vehicle around and backed it on each shoulder of the road. The next day I went back to see if any effort was being made to rebuild the bridge. Nothing had been done in that regard, but to my amazement, there were two trucks that had been blown apart by land mines placed on both sides of that road.

As I pondered the situation, I realized that my truck had made the same turns in that same area but without any mishap. I believe I was spared because the temperature was far below the freezing point when I was there the day before, and the temperature kept those land mines from exploding. However, on the day following my trip, there was a thaw, which allowed the mines to detonate and blow up those other two vehicles. I believe some higher force looked down on me with tender loving care and said, "It is not your time to die. I have work for you to do."

As we were driving our vehicles away from the town of Wiltz, toward Germany, we passed infantry soldiers walking in a long line on each side of the road. As I drove past them, one of the soldiers looked at me and yelled, "Fellas, look! We are winning the war because the niggers are here." This denigrating remark confirmed to me that the racism I was encountering in Europe was home-grown in America.

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