

*Research file*

# ARMY

February, 1982

Bright Star II



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# ARMY

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**Soviet Weaponry: Simple, Rugged—and Redoubtable** Edwin W. Besch & Ronald E. Fischer 18

Rather than looking for the next high-technology "breakthrough," Soviet weapon design concentrates on evolutionary change, investing in incremental improvements that would not be deemed cost-effective in the West. Gaps in capability are often filled in by revised doctrine and training. The result is a vast production base for equipment that is conservative within the state of the art, yet durable and effective.

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# The Companies Of the Damned

By John M. Curran

CONFIDENTIAL—By Order of the  
Secretary of War  
19 May, 1942

In cases concerning enlisted personnel, whether citizen or alien, who are definitely suspected of subversive activity or disloyalty, *even though investigation has failed to uncover specific evidence in justification of this suspicion*, the subjects will be assigned to organizations . . . where duties of a harmless character will be given them . . . Arrangements are being made for the establishment of *specially formed organizations* to which may be transferred the potentially more dangerous individuals . . . *against whom the evidence of disloyalty or subversive activity is not of sufficient provability to justify court-martial*. The personnel constituting these organizations will be kept under strict control. (Italics added)

CONFIDENTIAL—By Order of the  
Secretary of War  
25 May, 1942

The organization of service units to accommodate a maximum of 4,000 individuals who, because of suspected disloyalty or suspected subversive activity, cannot be retained safely in combat or in service units has been directed . . . a current survey indicates that only about 1,500 may be expected within the next three months and that thereafter there will be a monthly rate of less than 50 men per month. This rate can be controlled to some degree. Of the 1,500 men thus far tentatively classified, approximately 1,000 are Germans, 150 are Japanese, and the remainder are miscellaneous, including Italians. The number of Negroes in this classification is negligible and no provisions need be made for them.





Swept up by the draft laws of 1940, hundreds of Axis aliens and others branded suspect in FBI files were organized into 'special' housekeeping units by an Army that didn't know what to do with them. Ignominious treatment at remote posts led to a 1944 mutiny that exposed only part of this little-known story of World War II.

CONFIDENTIAL—By Order of the  
Secretary of War  
31 July, 1942

Orders have been issued activating the first of the units referred to . . . It is to be organized as a Quartermaster Service Company, will be located at an isolated post in the Third Service Command, and will do the work formerly performed by the CCC company at the same post. It is contemplated that additional companies of a similar nature will be activated in your service command as the need therefor arises . . . Officer personnel and *loyal* enlisted cadre will be furnished by you. Enlisted fillers will be furnished by this office upon the recommendation of the assistant chief of staff, G-2, War Department General Staff. (Italics added)

\* \* \*

**A**s the train chugged slowly through the Black Hills of South Dakota, Pvt. Theophil J. Leonhard slumped wearily in his seat and paid no attention to the majestic snow-capped mountains lining both sides of the narrow railroad track. After four days and four nights in the smoky, uncomfortable day coach, Leonhard bore little resemblance to the smiling, immaculate young American soldiers pictured in the World War II recruiting posters.

His stocky figure, acne-pitted complexion, and unkempt dark blonde hair made him look older than his 28 years. Only his alert brown eyes, partially hidden by his

prominent brows, gave an indication that this very ordinary-appearing soldier would have received a Ph.D. in history if his draft board had only waited a few more weeks before ordering his induction in October, 1941.

Two weeks before when he left on furlough from Ft. Lewis, Wash., Leonhard's commanding officer had assured him that his many requests for assignment to a combat unit in the southwest Pacific would surely be approved, even though his applications for American citizenship had apparently been lost somewhere in the maze of Army paper work. But when he returned from furlough he was handed orders reducing him in rank from private first class to private and transferring him to the 620th Engineer General Service Co. at remote Ft. Meade, S.D.

Perplexed and angry, he had tried without success to learn why he had been demoted and why a qualified artilleryman would be transferred to a housekeeping unit of the Corps of Engineers far from the action he had requested. It had occurred to him that some of the foolish pro-German remarks he had made while showing off in college might have been reported to the Army, but surely no one could have taken him seriously.

After all, he had not attempted to avoid the draft, had kept his mouth closed while in the Army, had been a model soldier with a Good Conduct Medal and promoted to

PFC, and had twice applied for American citizenship.

As the train slowed to a stop at a small railroad station, the conductor hurried officiously down the aisle calling out, "Deadwood. Deadwood. Everybody for Ft. Meade get off here."

Buttoning up his heavy overcoat and throwing his duffel bag over his shoulder, Theophil got off the train and faced into the icy winds sweeping across the nearly deserted station platform. Approaching a military policeman huddled in an open jeep near the platform, Leonhard asked, "How do I get to Ft. Meade, corporal?"

"Let me see your orders, soldier." After glancing at them, the corporal said in a loud disdainful manner, "Humph. Another one of the God-damned Krauts for the 620th. If I had my way you'd all be in a concentration camp instead of disgracing that uniform."

Pointing to an olive-drab bus across the street, he added, "Get your butt on that bus, you Nazi bastard, and be damned quick about it!"

**T**ired and confused as he was, Leonhard bristled at the corporal's words and started to make an angry reply. He got only as far as, "Now wait a minute . . ." before being interrupted by the stern-visaged corporal who shouted, "Git going—NOW!"

A half-hour later the bus let Leonhard off at an old two-storied wooden barracks once used by the Civilian Conservation Corps, but now the headquarters of the 620th Engineer General Service Co. Coming to attention before the imposing figure of First Sergeant Robert Markoski, he extended a copy of his orders and said, "Pvt. Leonhard reporting for duty as ordered, sergeant."

After slowly reading Leonhard's orders, Markoski said, "From your name I suppose you're another Bundist. Or are you a communist or an anarchist?"

Suppressing his indignation, Leonhard hesitated for a moment, swallowed hard, and replied, "Sergeant, I don't know what you are talking about. I was born in Ger-



many, but I've been in the United States since I was nine years old and my citizenship papers should be coming through any day now. And I've never been a member of the German-American Bund or the Communist Party, either. And I sure as hell am not an anarchist!"

"I suppose you're just another patriotic American sent here by mistake?"

"I don't even know what you mean by 'here,'" replied Leonhard. "What sort of an outfit is this anyhow?"

"You'll find out soon enough. The War Department calls us a 'special organization,' but our more polite soldiers say we are a 'semi-concentration camp.' But enough of this bull—I'm busy. The clerk will take you over to your barracks. You report to Sgt. Izzie Stein. He'll show you where to bunk. Reveille is 0600 tomorrow and you have a bath and some clean clothes by then."

As Leonhard stood there irresolutely, Markoski barked at him, "Vamoose! Raus, you dummkopf!"

By June, 1943, three of these potentially

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*JOHN M. CURRAN, selected to become a confidential civilian special agent on the War Department general staff in 1940, was commissioned two years later as a first lieutenant in the Army Counter Intelligence Corps, working in civilian clothes and under several identities, investigating espionage and sabotage at Army installations. In 1944 he was the captain in charge of the treason and mutiny investigations at Camp Hale, Colo., and from 1945-46 was commander of the CIC Region IV, with headquarters in Munich, Germany. When the CIA was established in 1947, Mr. Curran transferred to its Office of Security as a civilian, remaining there until his retirement in 1966. Since then he has been an industrial security consultant and free-lance writer, presently working on his first full-length book.*

dangerous "special organizations" had been activated in the Army's Seventh Service Command, which consisted of nine Rocky Mountain and Middle Western states. These units were the 358th Quartermaster Service Co. at Camp Carson, Colo., the 525th Engineer General Service Co. at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., and the 620th Engineer General Service Co. at Ft. Meade, S.D.

Each of the units consisted of approximately 175 enlisted men classified by the War Department as "potentially subversive," supervised by a few loyal officers and non-commissioned officers. As in all other Army units of that period, intelligence authorities established secret informant networks to spy on and report subversive statements or acts.

Army regulations (TM 30-205) prescribed one "spy" for every 30 soldiers. These clandestine spies were quite effective in the Camp Carson and Ft. Leonard Wood "special organizations," but not in the Ft. Meade unit. It was later learned that one of their countersubversive informants, a WAC in the Signal Corps, had under the influence of love and liquor disclosed the network to her lover in the 620th.

About half of the enlisted men dubbed "potentially subversive" were enemy aliens, mostly German nationals. Some of these aliens such as

Theophil J. Leonhard had lived in the United States since childhood and were actively pro-German in the prewar period. Others, like Friedrich W. Siering, were German merchant seamen drafted unwillingly when they could not be repatriated to Germany.

Such inductions were permissible under the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, although prohibited by the Hague Convention of 1907, a still-binding treaty which prohibits the drafting of nationals to fight against their own countries.

The American citizens relegated to the "special organizations" were a diverse group from various backgrounds. Most of them were native-born citizens, some of German parentage, others of Anglo-Saxon ancestry dating back to the American Revolution.

Some of them came to the attention of the authorities because of membership in the German-American Bund, the America First Committee, the Communist Party (September, 1939, to June, 1941), and other groups opposed to the U.S. entry into World War II. A few of the men were of superior intelligence, who had read too much of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and considered themselves to be "supermen" destined to lead and rule the ignorant rabble.

All members of the "special organizations" had two things in common: there was no proof that they had committed any subversive acts *after* their induction, for if they had they would have been court-martialed; and, second, all of them had an intelligence field file alleging that they said or did something subversive *prior* to their induction.

In most instances these reports were extracts from the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Some allegations were serious and some were trivial; some had been thoroughly investigated and some were unconfirmed reports from informants of unknown or questionable reliability.

Unfortunately, the embryonic Army Counter Intelligence Corps lacked the capability to reinvestigate the allegations in the field files; matters such as the highly classified Manhattan Project, which was developing the atomic bomb, were given higher priority by the Military Intelligence Division.

In retrospect, it is easy to condemn as unfair the Army's practice of transferring soldiers to the "special organizations" without giving them an opportunity to explain or refute the allegations in their intelligence field files. But to do this would have been a violation of the "third agency rule," which prohibited a federal organization from disclosing information provided by another federal agency, and also could have compromised intelligence sources and methods. It is axiomatic that in time of war many individuals must suffer for the common good.

**I**n the months following, Pvt. Leonhard learned only too well that without even the semblance of a trial or a hearing he had been sentenced to spend the rest of the war in a "special organization"—the American equivalent of the notorious Nazi penal battalions. He and the other members of the 620th spent their days making camouflage netting, painting barracks and officers' clubs, planting trees and collecting garbage.

They received practically no military training, were issued no arms, and even when on night sentry duty they carried only billy clubs and flashlights.

The members of the 620th were free to leave Ft. Meade on off-duty hours but seldom did so as word had spread through the nearby civilian communities that they were "disloyal" and even "traitors." When they did venture into the bars and USO clubs in Deadwood and Rapid City, they traveled in groups for protection against belligerent or drunken soldiers or civilians. Even when they tried to attend the movies or enlisted men's clubs at Ft. Meade, fights and assaults were commonplace.

Early in the summer of 1943, Leonhard and other soldiers of the 620th received Army permission to rent a rustic lodge in Spearfish Canyon about 20 miles from the post, so they could hold weekend "beer busts" without the friction they encountered on the post or in the nearby communities. Fearing that this lodge would be used for plotting espionage and sabotage, the Army Counter Intelligence Corps installed several concealed microphones connected to a listening post in a nearby fishing shack.

All summer long, four CIC agents spent their weekends listening to about 20 members of the 620th drinking beer, singing German songs, and griping about their officers and noncoms. Two other CIC agents, posing as telephone company employees with money to spend and plenty of scarce bourbon, infiltrated the group of party-goers and attended many of the weekend parties until cold weather halted them in September, 1943.

After spending thousands of dollars and innumerable agent man-hours, all the Army had to show for its efforts was that two of the "subversives" had committed the heinous crime of catching trout by hand—a misdemeanor punishable under the South Dakota fish and game laws.

When Ft. Meade was closed in early December, 1943, the 620th Engineer General Service Co. was transferred to Camp Hale, Colo., the training base for the 10th Mountain Division. Located 18 miles north of Leadville, in a natural bowl 9,000 feet above sea level and surrounded by much higher mountains, the camp impressed everyone with its tranquil beauty. But the men of the 620th were soon to learn why even the hardened elite ski troopers referred to Camp Hale as "Camp Hell."

The bitter cold, thin air and heavy snows made even simple movements difficult. The smoke from hundreds of barracks stoves burning lignite coal settled in a dense fog seldom disturbed by any breeze. Most of the soldiers soon acquired a hacking cough or more serious respiratory ailments. The service clubs at Camp Hale were permitted to serve only a watery 3.2 beer and were

too remote for visits by USO entertainers.

Recreation, especially in the wintertime, was virtually nonexistent. The entire town of Leadville was "off limits" for military personnel due to venereal disease and uncontrolled gambling, but this order was later amended to apply to only certain sections of the town. As could be expected under these conditions, morale was low and tempers were short.

The two barracks assigned to the 620th Engineers were immediately adjacent to a prisoner-of-war compound housing about 400 of the most incorrigible enlisted men from Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps. A detachment of the Womens Army Corps was also quartered nearby. This explosive situation was probably an inadvertent mistake—as when the War Department transferred an entire carrier pigeon platoon to Camp Hale without realizing that these birds could not fly at such altitudes.

Unlike at Ft. Meade, the authorities at Camp Hale seemed to do everything possible to humiliate and make life miserable for the "subversives" of the 620th. Their mail and telephone calls were censored; passes and furloughs were curtailed; ownership of automobiles was prohibited; permission to live off base was limited to a few married soldiers. None of these restrictions was placed on the soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division.

**T**he members of the 620th also bitterly resented being issued blue fatigue uniforms identical to those given the prisoners of war, except for the white "POW" lettering. Other American units at Camp Hale wore green fatigues. On a few occasions military policemen fired on members of the 620th, mistaking them for escaping prisoners.

Many of the ski instructors at Camp Hale were Austrians who had fled their native land when it was invaded by the Nazis. These rabid anti-Nazis incited the soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division to harass and assault the men they considered to be Nazis, in spite of their American uniforms.

When the 620th Engineers first arrived at Camp Hale even the German prisoners of war would have nothing to do with them, although both groups often worked side by side. The prisoners of war had been told that the new arrivals were Germans who had fled from Germany to avoid military service for the Fatherland; they soon realized, however, that their compatriots in American uniforms were nearly as much prisoners as they were.

Illegal fraternization was, of course, inevitable. In a futile effort to discourage this,

the Camp Hale authorities prohibited the American soldiers from speaking German even among themselves, although many of them spoke practically no English.

The German POWs were quick to take advantage of this situation. They induced several members of the 620th to provide them with cigarettes, luxury food items, liquor, American uniforms and clothing, and even to mail uncensored letters to relatives of the POWs living in the United States.

The extent of their influence over the more susceptible members of the 620th can best be illustrated by the fact that they induced Leonhard and his friend Friedrich Siering to take one of the POWs on a New Year's holiday tour of western Colorado while clad in an American uniform. Siering was one of the very few soldiers in the 620th permitted to own an automobile so he could live with his wife in nearby Red Cliff, Colo.

The files of the Army Counter Intelligence Corps show how successful the German POWs were in playing on the sympathies of their compatriots in the 620th. The following are excerpts from some of their censored letters:

In Camp Hale we found a detachment of German prisoners of war. What would be more natural, Germans and outcasts that we are, than that we should talk to these men. But they mistrusted us because they had been told by their guards that we are renegades from Germany, who had left to escape military service. That hurt—even our own people regarding us with mistrust.

Dearest wife: You ask why I write so much about those German POWs. It is hard to explain my emotional reaction to them. When they marched by our barracks that first time, singing their German songs, almost all of us were outside to look at them. Many of the men in our company broke down and wept when they saw those men—our brothers and cousins—men of our blood and our way of life. Then came an order forbidding us to associate with the prisoners. When they marched by again and we fell out to watch them, we were chased back into our barracks by our sergeant like a bunch of mangy dogs!

Feeling in our barracks is running very high on account of that order not to talk with the POWs. Do they expect, the men ask, that we tear our hearts out? Why can't they see that we can't act any differently—that by a thousand strands of common background, common language and common ideals, we are tied to those men? If this is wrong there is only one answer: get our company away from Camp Hale before there is *real trouble*. It is simply an impossible situation . . . .

The day after we arrived at Camp Hale our CO (commanding officer) told us in the mess hall that we have to realize that we are members of a labor battalion and that he could make it either as hard or as easy on us as he liked . . . . One of the civilian

foremen in the Post Engineers on the first day we reported to him for work said, "All you men ought to be lined up and shot!"

Several members of the 620th drew up detailed plans for mutiny, seizing the arsenal at Camp Hale, freeing and arming the German prisoners of war, and then conducting a guerrilla warfare against the United States from hideouts in the Rocky Mountains. Their avowed purpose was to aid Germany by causing combat troops to be diverted to the Camp Hale area, and also to set up a "shuttle system" for returning freed German POWs to Germany.

On 8 January, 1944, representatives from the 620th Engineers met at the Shirley-Savoy Hotel in Denver, Colo., with representatives from the "special organization" at Camp Carson, the 358th Quartermaster Service Co., for the purpose of arranging a diversion at Camp Carson timed to coincide with the planned Camp Hale mutiny.

In the meantime, at the instigation of the POWs, other members of the 620th were making plans for some of the POWs to escape with them to Mexico, 600 miles south of Camp Hale. One of Leonhard's friends spent three days inside the POW compound disguised as a prisoner of war in order to complete these plans.

It is assumed that a POW must have joined the 620th in an American uniform during the same time, but this was never proved.

In mid-February, 1944, after weeks of planning and preparation, one native-born American member of the 620th fled from Camp Hale accompanied by two German prisoners of war in a surreptitiously purchased automobile. They were apprehended a few days later three miles south of the Mexican border and were returned to military control.

An intensive investigation at Camp Hale by the Army Counter Intelligence Corps resulted in the arrest of Leonhard and two other members of the 620th who had assisted in the escape plans. Other American soldiers were ar-



rested for planning sabotage and the aborted mutiny.

Even four members of the WAC were arrested by the CIC and convicted by summary courts-martial for being unduly friendly with the German POWs, which the Army described as "conduct prejudicial to good military order"—a violation of the 96th Article of War. The WACs were all sentenced to terms of from four to six months in the WAC stockade at Ft. Des Moines, Iowa.

After the brief initial publicity reporting the arrests, the secretary of war imposed a blanket security classification of "secret" on the entire matter. The reason for invoking this high security classification is not

documented in now-existing Army records, but the Army investigators were told that there must be no publicity disclosing the existence of the many "special organizations" scattered throughout the United States.

Leonhard, Siering and two other members of the 620th were charged with "aiding and relieving the enemy"—the military equivalent of the civilian crime of treason. Both Leonhard and Siering managed to delay their trials until 1946 by filing *habeas corpus* petitions in federal courts, claiming that as German aliens they were illegally inducted into the U.S. Army and, therefore, not subject to military law.

Theophil Leonhard was eventually tried

by general court-martial, convicted and sentenced to ten years' confinement in the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kan. With credit for the two years spent in confinement awaiting trial and the "good time" earned in Leavenworth, he was released in September, 1951. He died of cancer in Texas in 1966.

Friedrich Siering, who was convicted only on the charge that he took the German POW on a New Year's holiday in an American uniform, was sentenced to ten years' confinement in an Army rehabilitation center at Ft. Knox, Ky. A few years later, he was paroled and turned over to the U.S. Immigration Service for deportation to Germany. Oddly enough, the trials of both Leonhard and Siering were classified "secret" even though held after World War II had ended.

The principal defendant was, of course, the American soldier who was apprehended in Mexico with the two escaped German prisoners of war. He was a native-born American citizen who enlisted voluntarily in the Army, so he had no grounds for challenging the Army's jurisdiction over him. He was promptly tried by a secret general court-martial presided over by a senior major general.

The court was closed; newsmen and the general public were barred, and even the defendant's parents were not permitted to attend his trial or be furnished with a copy of the charges. This soldier, a Harvard graduate of superior intelligence, did not dispute the facts, but claimed that he was motivated by his mistreatment and by his desire to expose the "special organizations."

He had hoped that by a public trial the Swiss government, the protector of German interests in the United States during World War II, could be induced to demand the abolishment of the "special organizations" under threat that the German government would subject American citizens remaining in Germany to similar treatment.

It is interesting to note that the Army neither admitted nor denied that they had intercepted and destroyed the numerous letters of complaint written by members of the 620th to the Swiss Embassy in Washington, D.C.

**T**he principal defendant was kept in confinement at the U.S. Disciplinary Barracks at Ft. Leavenworth for seven months after his court-martial while his case was being reviewed. In that time, neither he nor his attorney could learn the outcome of his trial or his sentence; they were told only that the findings were secret and would be disclosed when the War De-



partment deemed it to be appropriate.

In December, 1944, he was finally transferred to the civilian penitentiary in Leavenworth and told that he had been sentenced to death by hanging for "aiding and relieving the enemy," but that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had commuted his sentence to life imprisonment at hard labor. His sentence was eventually reduced to ten years and he was released from prison in 1950.

Another American member of the 620th was convicted of assisting the principal defendant to desert, as he accompanied him when the escape automobile was purchased from a Salida, Colo., used-car dealer. His sentence of 25 years was eventually reduced to eight and he was paroled from Leavenworth penitentiary on 15 February, 1947.

The Judge Advocate General's Office decided not to prosecute any of the defendants for planning the mutiny, as no overt acts in furtherance of the conspiracy could be proved. It was also felt that the plan for a handful of disaffected soldiers to mutiny in the vicinity of a full division of crack mountain troopers was too ridiculous to present to a court-martial.

The principal planner of the "mutiny" did not, however, escape scot-free—he was sentenced to six months' confinement for "conduct prejudicial to good military order": using a false name when registering at the Denver hotel to meet with the Camp Carson representatives.

In late February, 1944, the War Department converted the three "special organizations" in the Midwest to the 1800th Engineer General Service Battalion and transferred them to a remote location bearing the improbable name of Bell Buckle, Tenn.

The 620th Engineers became Co. "A" in that battalion; the 358th Quartermaster unit from Camp Carson became Co. "C"; the 525th Engineer General Service Co., a predominately Japanese "special organization" at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., became Co. "B." At war's end most of the members of that battalion were given blue discharges to signify that they were unacceptable for further service in the armed forces.

During World War II, all information regarding the "special organizations" was classified and held on a strict "need to know" basis. Even today, the Department of the Army is reluctant to admit that there were more than the three "special organizations" exposed through the Camp Hale incidents. There were, however, undoubtedly at least eight and possibly as many as 20 such service companies formed from the 1,500 to 4,000 "subversives" mentioned in the War Department classified directive of 25 May, 1942, quoted here.



In fairness to the War Department it should be pointed out that it was faced with an impossible situation created by the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 and the amendments thereto. This act authorized exempting from induction public officials, employees in essential industries, ministers, divinity students, college students, persons physically or mentally unqualified and the like.

No provision was made, however, for exempting and/or interning persons of questionable loyalty or lacking in sympathy for the Allies. It apparently was the intent of Congress to induct into the armed forces

enemy aliens, disaffected Americans and potential subversives, and then leave it up to the armed forces to decide what to do with them.

Whether or not the War Department chose the best method for dealing with potential subversives is open to question. Many Army officials now admit that concentrating potentially subversive soldiers into the "special organizations" was a mistake. The truly dedicated subversives soon took over the leadership in such units and incited their weaker or more wavering fellow soldiers to acts contrary to the best interests of the United States.

During World War II when feelings ran high, some Army officials felt that American soldiers with pro-German or pro-Italian leanings should be formed into front-line combat units and sent to face the Japanese in the southwest Pacific, and that the few pro-Japanese American soldiers be similarly assigned to combat units in Europe. A few officials contended that it was a mistake to concentrate potential subversives into units of any kind and that they should have been scattered individually throughout the Army.

This was based on the assumption that if a soldier made any questionable statements while assigned to a normal unit of loyal Americans, his fellow soldiers would cause him to regret his indiscretion.

## Sun Stroke

Whenever I read about solar power I am returned to 1943 in Algiers—dusty, sweltering hot, parching—where our hospital was set up in the tent-city fashion of World War II.

Our two dentists shared a corner tent, separated by sanded walkways from the tents nearby. Two standard cots with bedroll coverings, two duffel bags and the few necessary accoutrements of life in a field unit were the sole furnishings of the tent.

The day was still. There was not the least breeze and the tropical heat was heavy. Everything was as dry as desert soil under the blazing African sun.

The two dentists were sauntering back from their noontime turn at the makeshift shower a few hundred yards from the living area. The twosome was halfway back when their tent suddenly burst into flames.

The fire crackled to a pitch of fury and, as spontaneously as it had erupted, almost immediately subsided—

leaving absolutely nothing of the dentists' meager belongings. All they now possessed they wore (khaki shorts) or carried (a couple of GI towels).

The miracle, of course, was that the whole tent complex hadn't been demolished nor a soul hurt.

What had happened?

The blackened evidence was found in the ruins: one of the two dentists had left his shaving mirror on his cot. The tent flaps were open. The powerful rays of the African noontime sun had reflected from the magnifying side of the small mirror to the bone-dry canvas of the slanted tent side a couple of inches or so above the cot.

In the desert atmosphere, solar power caused instant destruction in a never-to-be-forgotten drama for those who saw it happen—including two clean but semi-naked, shocked dentists and at least one indelibly impressed nurse.

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