
Study of a "Character"

Walter O. Carter

WHEN I USE the term "Character" in reference to this person, I am using it in the slang sense, to imply a person quite out of the ordinary. Bruce L. Hopin was his full name, but this was shortened to "Hoppie" by his intimates. He was the chief clerk of the G-2 section of Fifth Corps Headquarters. Our duty was divided into two twelve-hour shifts, and because we usually pulled duty together, we were also sack and foxhole companions. This relationship led to a very close friendship.

Hoppie was a short little fellow about thirty with dull yellow hair which he always kept cut very short so that it stood up about a half-inch all over his head. Because his eyes were bad, he wore very thick-lensed glasses. They were the G. I. type with metal rims and gave him a man-from-Mars appearance when he looked at you. He had worked as a typist all his life, which accounted for his stooped shoulders. He grew a mustache which, due to his nervous habit of pushing it up with his fingers, stuck straight out over his lip like an awning over a window. For some strange reason this mustache was red rather than the color of his hair.

Along with his strange appearance he loved to talk. He had at his command a wealth of conversational material which he generously colored with anecdotes and figures of speech. Nothing pleased him more than to acquire a new piece of information and make the rounds of all the other sections to give it proper dissemination. His talk was very rapid and constantly interrupted by short snorts due to an asthmatic condition. To hear him laugh was like hearing a horse neigh with its head in a rain barrel.

I often wondered what kept him from blowing his top, for he was so nervous he could not sit still. Three packs of cigarettes a day he would smoke or at least light and let burn, for he always had to be doing something. Whenever I ran into Hoppie, he was always hurrying somewhere or hurrying back. If there was ever action from artillery or bombs he would be the first in his foxhole no matter how far away he was.

I shall never forget one two-week period I spent on nights with him. We were just inside Germany, and there was an abundance of captured bottled goods around for which he acquired quite a taste. Hoppie had always claimed to be a connoisseur of the better alcoholic beverages, but I can not remember anything we ever had around that he refused to drink. Our working quarters comprised two tents, one the operations tent where Hoppie kept a constant journal of incoming and outgoing messages, and the other the administration tent where I carried on my duties as draftsman. These tents were connected at one end, and as soon as the midnight periodical report went in, he would open a bottle and take a "draw," as he would put it. He would set the bottle on the corner of my drafting table, snort a few times, make some favorable remark as to the rare bouquet of the contents, and "stomp off" to the other tent to take up his position again at his typewriter. From then on every five minutes, here came Hoppie stomping in, a stoop-shouldered, pot-bellied little man with thick glasses, snorting and pushing at his mustache, coming in to have another draw on the bottle. This would continue until the contents were gone. Night after night this would go on, but there was never any change in his actions or manner of speech. His nervous energy must have burned the alcohol as fast as he drank it.

He had a great interest in games that took a lot of concentration, like pinochle and chess, and proved himself an adept player. For days after a session he would replay his card hands or discuss his maneuvers on the chess board. Always he would do his best to win, but if he did not, he was a good loser.

There had been some unpleasantness in Hoppie's home life and because of it he tried to eliminate any expression of sentiment. He wanted to appear hardboiled, but any one he knew could get his shirt if he needed it. He had a great many friends and to my knowledge no enemies. It was a common truth, admitted by all that Hoppie was a "Character."