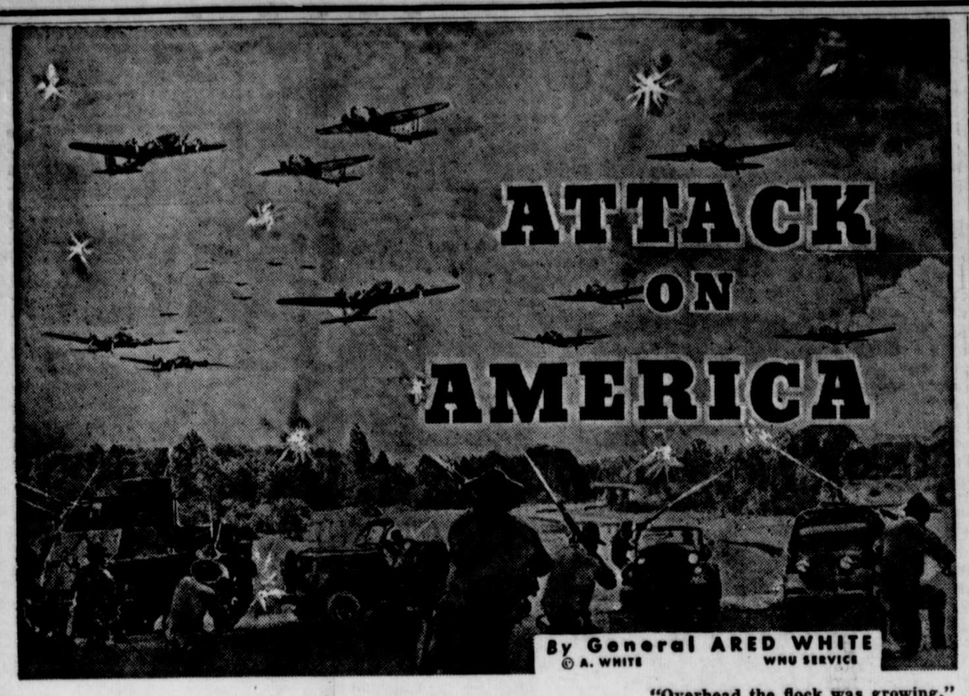

"Overhead the flock was growing."

THE STORY SO FAR: Intelligence Officer Benning learned in Mexico City that 200,000 foreign troops under Van Hassek were poised along the Rio Grande for an invasion of the United States. He succeeded in gaining the confidence of Fincke and Bravot, two enemy officers, before returning to Washington. Flagwill, acting chief of Military Intelligence, told him that forces were also reported massing in the Mediterranean and the Far East. Benning continued to pose as an enemy agent when Fincke later appeared in the capital. Without warning, four southern cities were attacked from the air. Washington was heavily bombed and the President killed in the assault. National forces were ordered mobilized, but the army was ill prepared to repulse the well trained and equipped enemy columns which were about to advance against them.

Now continue with the story.

INSTALLMENT EIGHT

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CHAPTER VIII

Captain Franklin Boll, in command of two outpost companies of th 11th United States Infantry in the vicinity of Laredo, had patrols along the Rio Grande watching for the first Van Hassek wave. Word had flashed through of the bombing of San Antonio and Boll knew that the land invasion must be shaping itself already for a vital blow at Texas when daylight came.

Colonel Denn had spent a fretful night, well knowing the tight pinch in which he might find his regiment at dawn. His regiment was at peace strength, rifle companies running as low as seventy, total strength 1,132 officers and men. No artillery support had been sent him from Fort Sam Houston, his only supporting weapons were the 37-millimeter and small mortars of his weapons companies. His ammunition supply was less than one day of fire.

Such a thing as interdicting suspected points of enemy river crossing was out of the question. He had given Boll, in outpost, eight machine guns and some light mortars.

Lightning flashed in the distance. A shrill screech came plowing through the night. High explosives crashed in to turn night into bedlam. Fragments found a victim who fell with a howl of pain. The crew of a machine gun was dropped. Men scattered, lay flat on their faces, helpless against this hurricane of destruction that howled down upon them across the Rio Grande.

All existence was now engulfed by the seething uproar of artillery. Boll saw that the regiment was claiming the fullest force of Van Hassek's rage.

Half an hour and Boll's casualties were twenty. Patrols had been sighted, an increasing number of skulkers were reported closing in. Boll saw that his position was becoming untenable.

He started his men slowly to the rear, with two squads covering his withdrawal. The enemy, suspicious of a possible trap in the night, followed cautiously. From this Boll guessed that only the first scattering bridgehead troops were in action. But, having guessed that the Americans were without benefit of artillery, the Van Hassek officers now would use the main bridge and move across the Rio Grande in force.

Boll had covered less than two hundred yards when a runner arrived from Colonel Denn.

"The colonel says get back as fast as you can" the messenger panted. "Regiment is pulling out right away for the Nueces."

Half an hour later, Boll panted into the regimental position. Captain March, assistant plans and training officer, came hurrying up from a vacated regimental position.

"Regiment pulled out twenty minutes ago," March reported to Boll. "You're to follow at once as rear guard. Trucks are ready behind this hill. Colonel Denn left you some baldoliers of extra ammunition, but we ought to get back of the Nueces before we fight. Second Division is taking position somewhere back there. Hurry your men along, Captain"

By jamming his men seventeen to the truck, Boll got his command on wheels. Two trucks went to the wounded, one to his three remaining machine guns. He studied the luminous dial of his watch, an anxious scowl on his face as his convoy made ready to pull out. The hour was a little past three o'clock.

A plane shot overhead, traveling high and fast. Its shrilling motors sent a chill down the captain's spine.

"It'll be just too bad for us if we're not at the Nueces by daylight," he muttered to Captain March. "And with light due in half an hour, I'm afraid we just can't make it!"

Major General Brill, area commander, kept his head through tangled hours whose crises might have put an officer of lesser mettle in a dizzy whirl.

Inventory disclosed that the Second Division had escaped the sudden storm with loss of forty-odd cargo trucks, seventeen men, five officers, and two pieces of artillery. Having given the Second its orders to assemble and march on Kirk, Brill set about his final tactical plans.

From time to time Brill and his staff were interrupted by reports of air disasters over New Orleans, Galveston, and Houston. Total losses there aggregated twelve hundred.

General Brill directed his senior aide to get General Hague at Washington on the long-distance. The hour was nearing three o'clock when the Chief of Staff of the Army reported ready to talk.

"My best judgment is to pull out of here," Brill said, after he had reported latest developments in Texas. "We're too thin to make a fight for San Antonio, but we can do some good delaying back of the Colorado and Brazos while you get troops enough into the Fort Worth country to make a stand."

The Hague voice responded with quiet firmness, "You'll proceed at once against the enemy, Brill, and make a stand in front of San Antonio with your Second Division."

Brill groaned. "But Hague, are you sure you understand the whole situation down here? It's simply inviting a lot of nasty losses to no purpose. I haven't force enough to—"

"Let's not debate the matter," General Hague interrupted stoutly. "Is that clear, Brill?"

"Perfectly, sir." There was neither remonstrance nor equivocation in the area commander's voice now.

In a calm voice Brill repeated the Hague decision to his staff. He offered no comment. Without speaking, the staff went to work on its new plan.

Circling to the south, Brill found the due-south road to Kirk, which was under military traffic control, and sped to the village, where he found General Mole, division commander. Mole was a thin bit of military hickory now nearing retirement age.

General Mole received his superior's battle orders with a monosyllable of acquiescence, as if to hoard his jaded energies, and promptly set to work with his staff. The division staff was familiar with the country and made prompt plans for organization of a defensive position. Orders were ready within half an hour, and since there was no enemy immediately in prospect, the regiments proceeded to their positions in their cargo trucks.

General Brill stood in the growing dawn gravely watching the Second pass out to its battle lines. A force of 10,837 enlisted men and two warrant officers, led by 546 officers.

As Captain Boll sprang into his station wagon with his lieutenants, and sped to the head of his truck column to set the pace, his eye caught the flash of light that turned the waning night into day some miles ahead of him.

"Step on her!" he barked at his driver. "They'll spot us in a minute—and we're still in artillery range."

Boll sat with hands gripping his knees while he observed the bursts. Luckily they were striking to the right and doing no damage. But shortly the firing ceased, the air observer roared by again with a flare, and rushed off to radio correction to the distant gunners.

He saw that there was the first touch of gray in the air, dawn only a matter of minutes. It would be a miracle if he reached the Nueces with half of his men and trucks.

As the night thinned out, he caught the distant hum of this new menace.

Boll broke out the glass windows of his station wagon with the butt of his automatic. He thrust his head out and peered into the sky. Planes were circling overhead like so many mad wasps waiting the instant of better visibility. There was not long to wait. As night shed its last veil, the war falcons swooped one at a time to pluck the little caravan to bits with their talons of steel.

Men in the trucks opened fire with their rifles. But the attacking planes flew with the speed of the wind. They dashed low, pumping bullets from hot machine guns, releasing their fragmentation bombs, and in a twinkling were gone. Then back they came, one at a time at irregular intervals, to plaster the road with their fury.

Overhead the flock was growing. Fourteen planes, he estimated. Two squadrons, force enough to tear him to pieces bit by bit unless miracles of good fortune and bad marksmanship attended him along the red course to the Nueces. Inevitably, dropping down time after time without other hindrance than the random fire of his riflemen, the airmen would take their relentless toll.

A truck went out, the third one back from Boll. It cracked up across the road under impact of a bomb. The driver slumped dead in his seat. Men piled out and began scattering out of the storm. Boll stopped his car, ran back to straighten out the snarl.

Three planes zoomed down his column, knifing the road. He saw two of his men fall. He gave instructions to a sergeant and two corporals. They were to pass word down the column. Hereafter stricken trucks were to be shoved to the side of the road, survivors and wounded distributed to other trucks as they passed along. All were to act promptly on their own initiative.

Boll ran back to his station wagon, leaped in. The car was vibrating with the gentle motion of idling motors.

A shout went up from the men in Boll's truck. A plane crashed out of the sky and whanged into the gray earth. It burst instantly into flames. Boll's riflemen had claimed another bird in this unequal clash. But the next instant brought red retaliation. Another truck nosed off the road in a crush of wounded men and dead. Boll saw the survivors act promptly to extricate themselves, gather up the maimed and flag down succeeding vehicles.

The village of Encinal flashed by. Boll shook his head and swore bitterly. Encinal told him that he had little more than started on his long, desperate run. Next would come Artesia Wells, which would be little more than halfway to the Nueces.

He looked at his watch and saw the hour was short of six o'clock. He groaned and passed a tormented hand across his face. Misgivings struck him of making it through. His mind made a hasty calculation. At their rate of kill, those vultures would tear his column to pieces before he could run under the dubious cover ahead.

Decision snapped in his mind as he saw a new flight swarming into the fight. The birdmen were traveling high, but heading straight into the conflict.

More than twenty more planes he guessed in the daze of tragic discovery. His eye raced over the terrain. There were mesquite, juniper thickets, some rugged dwarf pine. Scattered, his men would have refuge until Van Hassek's columns wheeled up.

He roared an order to stop the truck and leaped to the ground. The unwounded men with him he instructed to keep up their rifle fire. Standing beside the road he signaled a halt, motioned the command to detruck.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

NEXT WEEK
Another Absorbing Installment

My Week

by Eleanor Roosevelt

WNU Service United Features

INDIAN AFFAIRS

I asked Mr. John Collier, of the office of Indian affairs, to come in to tell me something about the Navajo situation.

It appears that the land on the reservation, in 81 years, has completely changed because of overgrazing. What was once meadow land with plenty of water and beautiful grass, is now practically desert. The wooded slopes have disappeared, floods wash away the top soil and the grass no longer exists. It is quite evident that, in order to bring it back, there must be a drastic curtailment of cattle, wild horses, goats and sheep.

This means that a people, whose average cash income is only about $120 a year, must either go on relief, which they want at all costs to avoid, or starve to death. The only other solution seems to be the possibility of carrying through an irrigation project which will allow them to irrigate enough land so they can raise crops to feed their cattle at certain times, and also to grow some cash crop if the difficulty of transportation can be overcome.

The decision on the irrigation is, of course, up to congress. At the present time, I can quite understand the argument against putting money into anything which can be set aside to be done when the defense period is over. Still, if congress decides that this is necessary, it seems to me that they have a joint responsibility with the office of Indian affairs to devise some means by which these naturally independent American citizens can earn their living and not feel dependent upon the government for a chance merely to survive.

* * *

AMUSING LUNCH

We had an amusing lunch one day. Dr. Floyd Reeves and Mr. Mark McCloskey were our only guests. We sat on the south portico looking across the White House lawn to the Jefferson Memorial. In passing, I should like to say that I hope in time the gleaming white dome of that memorial will weather to a little softer color.

At a little before six o'clock, Prince Bernhard and Princess Juliana arrived. He is as friendly and simple as she proved to be when she came on her first visit. I met them on the front portico and took them up to the President's study, where the President was waiting for them.

We had a small dinner and movie in the evening. The President had given me strict instructions that I was not to put over anything educational on them, that it was to be an evening of entertainment! In other words, he did not want me to use the occasion to show any of the government films. Therefore, our dinner guests are none the wiser as to our farm security program, our soil conservation work, the CCC, or any of the things which they might otherwise have seen!

When our dinner guests had left, the President sat and talked to our two young royal guests on European conditions until late in the night.

It was a joyful surprise just before dinner to get word from Bolling field that Elliott had flown in from one of our outpost camps now being built. He telephoned his wife and made the distressing discovery that his small son had had an accident to his eye.

Elliott told me something about this camp on which these regular army boys are working 18 hours a day to transform it into an airfield. The weather has been very trying and the boys who came up from Miami are finding it very difficult to adjust to it. Even letters take a long while to get there. Elliott says it is easy to think you have been forgotten by your family and friends as well as your government.

* * *

TO NEW ENGLAND

We spent one night in cabins just beyond Portsmouth, N. H., by-pass. Several detours, roads in the process of being mended, heavy traffic in and around Boston, and occasional showers of rain, made our trip really longer than it should have been.

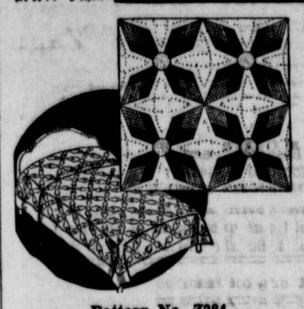
It is a lovely drive though, along winding Connecticut roads with many glimpses of small lakes and running brooks. Finally, when we were nearing Newburyport, I had my first good smell of the sea, which is always exhilarating.

I thought we would spend the night in Portsmouth at the old Rockingham hotel. My first surprise, however, was to find myself on the by-pass, which I do not remember having seen before. It is a good many years since I have taken this drive and it may not have been in existence when I came up last.

In any case, I missed the first road into Portsmouth, and then was lost after turning off further on. I finally reached the hotel, only to find that they had no room. They directed us elsewhere, but we decided to go on a little further and look for some attractive cabins.

As a matter of fact, I think I could almost have reached Portland, Maine, in the time I wandered around the outskirts of Portsmouth. But these little mistakes are all "luck of the road" and, if you like occasionally to wander, you must count on making mistakes.

Things for You to Make



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Just Jesting

Meanest Yet!

"I have found the meanest man at last."

"Why, what did he do?"

"He's deaf—and he never told his barber!"

Quick Shift

On his way to work, he stopped and turned against the wind to light his pipe.

He walked on, and soon, somewhat to his surprise, found he was home again.

"My!" he exclaimed, knocking out his pipe, "this day went fast."

Time is money, they say. But burglars prefer cash.

On Both Sides

"That girl is a regular phonograph."

"She's more—she's a two-faced record."

Cutting Remark

She was having a good old wifely nag, and hubby was losing his patience, although so far he hadn't answered a word. Perhaps that was why his wife suddenly burst out with:

"Nothing I ever say to you bears fruit!"

"It might if you pruned it a bit!" he retorted.

Recalling His Own

"I think we met at this restaurant last month. Your hat seems very familiar."

"But I didn't have it last month."

"No; but I did."

Thoughts of Conscience

It is often said that second thoughts are best. So they are in matters of judgment, but not in matters of conscience. In matters of duty, first thoughts are commonly best. They have more in them of the voice of God.—Cardinal Newman.

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Appreciation

I complained of having no shoes—until I saw a man with no feet.—Author unknown.

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on Independence Day began July 4, 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was signed. John Adams, a Signer, said: "the day should be observed with hilarity and the setting off of fireworks."
It's also a good American custom to relax on the Fourth of July (and every other day) with a man-sized, mild King Edward, America's most popular cigar.
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