

Returning Veteran

Little Rock, Arkansas

January 7 – February 16, 1946

On the gray, frigid Monday afternoon of January 7, while I was packing to leave Berlin, Rote was preparing for a furlough with Howy, hitchhiking on Army vehicles to Switzerland. Rote helped me carry my duffel and smaller bag down to the truck. We chatted until the sergeant bellowed, “Saddle up, you’re moving out!” Rote and I shook hands, urging the other to keep in touch by writing. He told me later that as I boarded the truck, he walked back into our billet with “a grenade-size lump” in his throat and watched me depart from his front window upstairs. Mother Leshak accompanied me to the train station.

Before leaving the apartment, I inserted Reginald Pasch’s gift, the Wannsee Lake watercolor, in a cardboard tube for Howy to mail to me. Carrying the watercolor on the train and ship would be awkward, and I trusted Howy to send it because he’d remain in Berlin for a few more months before going home.

Threatening to snow, the cloudy afternoon was so severely cold that I wore my wool Army topcoat and gloves, even though I had usually avoided them in Berlin’s clammy, intensely cold mist. But I was too excited about leaving for home for a heavy overcoat to hamper my movements. I didn’t notice the stiffness.

My single duffel held everything I owned except my sleeping hag. I hadn’t collected loot like so many soldiers. In the devastated cities I’d lived in, there were no souvenirs I wanted badly enough to carry home, especially foreign weapons, which many GIs were smuggling home against Army regulations. There were a few men on the train platform carrying a few pieces of luggage like me, but others were struggling with lots of bags and boxes of different sizes. They appeared to have goods enough to open curio shops back in the States.

We boarded the train’s passenger coach without any idea of where we were going, only that we were heading west. For once, ignorance of my next destination didn’t annoy me. All of us soldiers in our car appeared to have one thing in common, a sense of relief and happiness to be heading home, even though we didn’t know how long **it** would take. Doris Day’s hit song, which I had heard dozens of times a day over the American Forces Network, drifted into my mind: “Gonna take a sentimental journey, gonna set my heart at ease.” The melody played by Les Brown’s Band of Renown echoed in my head as the locomotive jerked the train to a start, and I waved goodbye through the frost-fogged window to Leshak.

The train chugged slowly through bleak ruins in parts of Berlin I'd never seen before, allowing a reflective farewell to the gray metropolis and the American zone, all totally surrounded by Russians. The sunless afternoon darkened as the train crawled through the forlorn outskirts into the countryside, and the scenes passing the car windows faded from sight.

Unable to watch anything more outside the window, I settled down in the cozy warmth of the car, talking about Berlin, the Army, and going home to the strangers in the seats opposite and beside me. Among the congenial fellows was Pat Smith, the son of the president of the American Container Company in New York City, who had been in Berlin for the same length of time I was. He recounted short stories he'd been writing and how much he wanted to be a playwright or novelist. I shared my theatrical ambitions with him, and we talked and smoked late into the night. The train plowed across and out of the Russian zone after we fell asleep, sitting up, thinking we'd wake at the port of embarkation.

In the British zone, the metronomic clacking on the track slowed down and waked us. The train stopped, probably at Goslar, and we heard shouts and a whistle. To our surprise and dismay, an NCO came into the coach and ordered us to grab all our luggage and get off. Standing in the dark beside the train, watching the vapor of our breath condensing in the frosty morning air, we asked each other, "What the hell is going on now?" We got the shocking answer: we were boarding boxcars for the trip through the British and American zones. The NCO in charge of our transfer said the standard-gauge tracks from Berlin had ended, and the train out of Goslar would be on narrow gauge. Although no one liked the change, we were so eager to reach our mysterious destination in the American zone that by Army standards we didn't bitch very much.

The old boxcars we climbed into were stripped. There were no heaters to warm us, no seats to sit on, no bunks to sleep in, and no toilet facilities. A thick bed of straw covering the floor was the only comfort. These travel facilities were no better than the ones we had during the fighting, except that now we had plenty of space to lie down and stretch out. This primitive transport, roomy as it was, was a lousy way to treat soldiers in a victorious Army who were heading home!

There was nothing we could do about the situation, so we didn't waste time complaining. Instead, half a dozen of us, seeking a way to bed down comfortably and warmly, pushed the unbroken bales of straw against the forward walls of the box car to cover the largest cracks and cushion our backs while we huddled side by side. We had all ridden boxcars before, but we still assumed that the front section of the car away from the doors was less drafty.

Even though we were strangers to each other, we lay close together in our overcoats as the train crossed toward western Germany. We still weren't warm enough. So we pulled our sleeping bags out and slipped into them, hoping we might hold enough body heat to make the trip to our next stop bearable.

We slept fitfully for the rest of a very long night before a dim sunrise pierced the cracks in the walls of our car. Lying around, half-in and half-out of our sleeping bags, we ate the K rations we'd been given the night before. To entertain ourselves the next day, we opened the boxcar doors and sat with our legs hanging out, watching what seemed like the entire countryside of the American zone of Germany.

After dark our train slowed, and we heard shouts up ahead alongside the cars that convinced us we'd reached our destination. Leaning out the open car door to check where we were and what was happening, I saw GIs and duffel bags tumbling from the boxcars in front of ours. A sergeant stopped beside our car and told us to grab our luggage and fall in beside the railroad tracks.

The locomotive had stopped beside a small railway station that had a few bare bulbs sparkling along its narrow platform. At the top of a high hill behind the station, I saw a few more strings of tiny lights. Waiting for someone to lead us away, I also made out in the dim moonlight that the twinkling lights at the top of the hill outlined the roof of a towering castle. To get to the castle's ramparts, we climbed up a narrow, steep path until we reached the heavy wooden doors at the front and gathered inside a high-ceilinged entryway.

Another sergeant greeted us and checked our names off his list. We followed him up a wide staircase that led to the several floors above. On the second landing, he stopped outside a room fifty feet square divided by several sections of low partitions. In the sections were canvas cots, most with men sleeping on them.

The sergeant said, "Take any empty bed you find and settle in for the night. If there are no vacant cots, try the next floor."

I found an empty cot against a wall below a high window. After only catnaps on the train for two days and nights, I slept soundly.

A clanging bell jarred us awake the next morning, and I followed men who seemed to know where they were going. They led me to a primitive washroom and latrine on our floor, just off the stairwell, where I washed and shaved with cold water, which was all there was. Then, with my mess kit in hand, I walked down to the basement. The long breakfast line stretched the full length of the wall next to the kitchen and mess hall.

While talking with GIs who had been at the castle for a few days, I noticed that the wall we were leaning against had a row of cast-iron doors about as high as our chests off the floor, which extended all the way to the kitchen, where they were serving. Flipping the latch, I opened one of the doors and exposed a long, cylindrical oven, its deep grate about the length of an average man's height. My nearest mates said they'd been told these were furnaces to cremate political prisoners and euthanasia victims, before and during the war.

What an irony that our way station to a seaport turned out to be the castle at Hadamar, which had been an infamous asylum, jail, and slaughterhouse throughout the Nazi reign. In the early years of the Third Reich, the Nazis used the castle as a euthanasia center for persons of all ages who were allegedly feeble-minded or insane, for the state didn't want to keep anyone alive who might corrupt pure Aryan genetics or fail to serve their purposes. At other times, the castle was a POW camp for officers and later a prison for POWs of any rank who escaped repeatedly. Near the war's end, the castle was once more an asylum for the insane. When the Nazi staff learned that an Allied army was advancing toward them, they turned the inmates loose in the countryside in freezing weather without proper clothing or caretakers. The staff doctors, nurses, and guards fled, escaping farther east into Germany.

Everyone I met at Hadamar was a stranger, even though many had served in Berlin at the same time I did. Soldiers, like me, being sent home separate from any organization had to be redeployed as members of a specific unit. The sergeant in charge called us individuals from Berlin "filler replacements" and assigned us to a tank destroyer (TD) battalion that had already gathered at Hadamar. The TD's regular members served together throughout the war and were going back to the States, where their unit would be disbanded and placed on the inactive list.

I spent a week killing time at Hadamar as a member of the tank destroyer battalion, which was more boring for me than for the regulars, who shared old times while playing cards or gambling. Neither pastime appealed to me, and writing letters home seemed redundant; I assumed I would be back in Arkansas within a few weeks. It was too cold to explore the countryside comfortably, so I stayed inside reading Victory paperbacks, taking regular naps, and discussing plays and playwriting with Pat Smith.

After months of clerking in the message center and acting in theater productions, I was gripped by a kind of indolence at Hadamar. Although eager to leave and be on the way home, I sensed no urgency about getting there. But the day the sergeant announced that we were leaving the next morning for Bremerhaven to board a ship, I was relieved and eager to move again.

After breakfast, we packed our bags and walked down the steep path from the castle to the small train station. Expecting this leg of the trip to be as cold as the last, I wore long underwear, every wool item in my uniform, my old combat boots, and my overcoat. I carried my sleeping bag and duffel bag, which contained slacks, a pair of brogans, changes of underwear and socks, my raincoat, mess kit, and canteen cup. Walking down the hill, some fellows in the tank destroyer unit, like soldiers on the platform in Berlin, were loaded with souvenirs from the war. My mementos had no weight or awkward shapes because they were in my mind.

I suppose they had to transport us in boxcars because of the number of men the Army was sending to European ports at one time for shipment home. At least that's how I excused them for making me ride in another boxcar from Hadamar to Bremerhaven. The journey was considerably shorter than the one from Berlin, but we rode back into the British zone to reach the Bremen Enclave, which was U.S. territory.

At Bremerhaven, we received the disappointing news that we wouldn't be sailing right away but would be waiting for a ship. Our tank destroyer unit was joining the large contingent of men already on hand, bunking in a spacious barracks building near the docks. The well-furnished barracks and dock facilities had been a training station for German sailors, and the Allies had captured the naval complex intact, without attempting to destroy it.

The architectural arrangement of the barracks was unusual: a high-ceilinged lounge was set between adjoining dormitory barracks on each of its sides. Another oddity was the placement of windows in the walls of the bedrooms on both sides of the dormitory halls. Solid up to the height of a wainscot, the upper two-thirds of the walls were filled with glass panes, like those in window sashes, up to the ceiling. Although windows robbed the dorm rooms of privacy, the sleeping quarters were well lighted on overcast days.

Along with Pat Smith, I was assigned to one of the small bedrooms, which held three others, including Corporal Olson from Wisconsin and a master sergeant from New York City. Smith, Olson, and I were congenial, but the big, hairy master sergeant (whom I called Sergeant Grouch, in my mind) was garrulous, gruff, and profane. He monopolized everyone's time by telling incongruous stories about his fighting in the war or sailing in peacetime on Sheepshead Bay near his home in Flatbush. By an odd coincidence, Corporal Olson also owned a boat and sailed **it** on Lake Michigan. I suppose having that in common induced the NCOs liking for each other because their personalities were such opposites.

To escape their running conversation about boats and to enjoy the hot coffee, fresh doughnuts, and comfortable space in the lounge, Pat and I spent a lot of time on easy chairs and sofas talking about theater and books. But if an interesting conversation developed between GIs near us, we eavesdropped because Pat was trying to capture a sense of the rhythms of conversational speech for his playwriting, and he wrote what he heard in shorthand. Later he expanded his notes into dialogues and read the give-and-take to me, so we could study the characteristics of ordinary speech.

One night, we were so bored with the same routine that Smith, Olson, and I wandered over to the German naval training facilities at the edge of the pier. There, inside a multistoried building, the Germans had built mock-ups for training of the main parts of a ship's bridge, engine room, and gun emplacements. Like rambunctious boys, we played sailors, sliding down brass poles from one deck to another, ducking up and down the narrow companionways, and twirling the wheeled handles of the bulkhead doors, locking and unlocking them.

Before returning to the warm comfort of the barracks, we stood on the cold, windy deck of the fake bridge, enjoying the brisk salt air and watching the cresting waves of the North Sea, part of our watery pathway home.

On January 29, 1946, an icy wind was blowing off the heavy swells of the North Sea as we boarded a Liberty ship to cross the stormy North Atlantic. The vessel was obviously built for cargoes of inanimate materials, not men. Standing on the pier looking up at the *Aiken Victory*, I realized that, though larger than any of the three ships that previously carried me across the English Channel, she seemed much too small, compared to the *Queen Elizabeth*, to sail thousands of miles safely across the Atlantic during the winter storm season. The mighty passenger ship had carried us on a placid summer sea, with only the threat of the slower German submarines.

While standing on the pier watching the high North Sea swells surging strongly toward me, I sensed their virtual movement tip to and over me. Others with the same sensation feared they would get seasick. Having never been sick at sea and unaware of the early symptoms, I didn't worry.

The usual group of Red Cross workers were gathered on opposite sides at the foot of the gangway handing out goodies as we boarded the ship. A surprise among them was Ruth Opp, who with Patty Kelly had accompanied Marugo, Pulaski, and me to Hampton Court outside London in April of the previous year. In our brief moment, Ruth claimed she remembered our tour and gave me extra cigarettes for old times' sake,

Our single file crossed the top deck of the ship to a hatchway and descended narrow steps down to the number three hold, a low-ceilinged compartment lighted primarily by red and white emergency lamps. The dark hold was crammed from one bulkhead to the other with tiers of small canvas hammocks, tightly suspended on pipe frames, one above the other, with only about two feet between them. The narrow vertical space separating the hammocks made sitting upright impossible.

After we chose our hunks, the sergeant came down and forced everyone to take motion sickness pills, threatening to keep us below decks before sailing if we didn't swallow them. I told the sergeant I really didn't need any medication because I hadn't been sick on previous trips at sea, but he insisted. With the pills down, I hurried out of the smelly dark hold into the fresh air on deck to watch the crews on the pier and deck weighing anchor and getting the ship under way.

The North Sea on our way to the Atlantic churned and roiled around the ship's hull, even before we reached the choppy English Channel. When I felt slightly queasy, I went forward on deck to stand in the freshening breeze, hoping I would recover while looking across the fore deck in the direction we were sailing. But seeing the leaden waves rolling up higher and feeling them slapping against the ship's prow, each oncoming wave furling higher than the one before, stirred up my stomach, and bile rose in my throat. The choppy seas and the ship's rocking motion as it plowed into the open waters overwhelmed my sight and balance, making me sick at my stomach.

By the time I entered the head (latrine) on the main deck, I was shivering with nausea and had to run to the nearest basin. Dozens of men had beaten me to the head and were vomiting in the urinals and commodes and on the floor. After some relief, I still felt so sick in the pit of my stomach that I was afraid to leave, so I remained standing beside a basin holding onto the metal wall rail as more sick men came in.

Soon the sounds of gagging and the odor of vomit were so overwhelming that I decided I would be better off going below to lie down and recuperate. When I let go of the rail, the ship suddenly rose and struck the water a hammer blow, knocking me totally off balance. Sprawling on my elbow and one knee, I skidded in slick vomit across the deck and slammed into the bulkhead. I decided I would never be physically clean again, only to discover that the ship's evaporators couldn't supply sufficient fresh water for normal needs, and the showers and washbasins ran seawater. The special soap supplied by the Navy wouldn't lather in salt water either.

From the late afternoon of the first day on the *Aiken Victory*, I lay in my bunk for four days while the ship rolled, dived, and wallowed in one Atlantic storm after another. I was afraid that if I stood up I would throw up. Fortunately, I never fouled my canvas nest but reached the head in time to subdue my dry convulsions. There was one good outcome from my *mal de mer*; I didn't want to smoke.

Olson bunked next to me and insisted from the beginning that I go to the galley each morning because he said my nausea would end sooner if I ate part of every meal. With Olson's encouragement, I weakly rolled off my hammock each morning and climbed the stairs for breakfast in the galley. But before I could reach the steam table, the aromas of food wafting from the kitchen set my stomach roiling again. When I wanted to run back to my bunk, Oley would push me and my tray in front of him farther down the line, putting food on it at every stop. But before we came to the end of the line, I pulled out of his grasp and hurried back to my bunk.

The ship's motion must have stimulated Olson's appetite; at any rate, I suspect he was eating both our meals. Still, he led me to the galley every day, and after I escaped to my bunk brought me hardboiled eggs, encouraging me to peel and eat them to get well. Gradually, the eggs did stay down; I had recovered. One morning, I awoke with an appetite, eager to go to the galley even though the ship still bucked and rolled. Despite my eager willingness to die, I had survived *mal de mer*.

My challenge in the galley during boisterous weather was no longer physical health but manual dexterity—keeping my tray on the table, food on the tray, and a drink in my hand, all at the same time. The ship's deep rolls and shudders sent everything that wasn't held down skittering across or along the length of the tables onto the deck. In fact, keeping one's seat on the bench beside the table was chancy if the ship wallowed, reared up at a steep angle, and slapped the water coming down.

Fortunately, my nausea had disappeared because the violent waters in the North Atlantic didn't. Thunderstorms came in series, the winds making the seas rise so powerfully high that our ship, riding the peaks of mountainous waves, crashed into the precipitous troughs that formed under them, sending deep shudders and creaks from one end of the vessel to the other. The tumultuous ocean waters and the blinding sheets of slashing rain caused the ship's captain to order GIs to stay below off the deck during squalls. Crew members had strung hemp lines across the decks and held onto them while crossing between hatchways. Without the ropes, some crew members would surely have been carried overboard by the waves. At the end of one storm, the voice on the PA announced that if the ship had keeled over a few more degrees at the height of the gale, it would have capsized.

There was no formal recreation on the ship, but soon after the voyage began, a ship's newspaper *My Aiken Back* rolled off the mimeograph machines and was distributed to everyone on board. These news sheets appeared to be a common amenity aboard a military ship, for the *Queen Elizabeth* had one too. I think members of the regular crew must have organized and produced the paper with the assistance of the troops en route home. *My Aiken Back* had general information about shipboard routines that we were to observe, schedules of daily events, unusual stories about soldiers on board, announcements of shipboard entertainments, and risqué jokes

After the sea quieted a bit, the crew showed moving pictures in one of the deepest, almost empty cargo holds of the ship. I went one night to see *The House on 92nd Street*, a suspense movie about wartime espionage. The projector was mounted on packing cases, and the screen was a sheet of canvas attached to a bulkhead. The audience members sat on top of the loaded crates and boxes of supplies that were scattered across the hold.

The most memorable movie was a short subject featuring Jack Benny and his troupe of Hollywood performers. The film had been shot on a tour of the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater of operations. King Farouk of Egypt entertained Benny and his troupe in Cairo with a company of buxom belly dancers. The soldier photographer captured not only the belly dancers but Benny's wide-eyed reactions to them. Our raunchy audience whooped and hollered at the muscular gyrations of the overweight ladies and at Benny's hand movements and facial expressions. We were loud enough to drown out the creaking and thundering of the ship's hull.

Not long after I recovered from seasickness, Sergeant Grouch put me on KP. I hauled supplies from frozen food lockers, rearranged foodstuffs in the wire-cage pantries, and emptied garbage over the ship's side after meals. In the first two duties, KPs had the privilege of eating as many ice cream bars as they wanted because the supply was insufficient for general distribution. My third duty offered no such reward, only an accidental penalty if it were not performed correctly. In discarding garbage, the cook's helper instructed me to check wind direction before tossing the bucket's contents over the ship's side. If it was mistakenly thrown into the wind, the slop plastered the garbage man and the deck.

After two rough weeks at sea, the *Aiken Victory* stood off the U.S. coast the night of February 12, 1946. We gathered on the cold deck to look at the brilliant lights of New York, silently sharing our awe not only of the luminous skyline but of being back home.

All of us stood silently, except Sergeant Grouch, who pointed ashore, repeating, "If I had a dinghy, I could row across Sheepshead Bay and be home in an hour."

We docked early the next morning and rode a train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. I was there a day or two before boarding a special Army car to Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, to be discharged.

The chair car I rode from New Jersey to Missouri had been converted to a sleeper for troops by adding rigid wooden hunks above the seats. I remember, as we traveled south, lying in the upper bunk at night, alternately sleeping and waking, listening to the clacking of the wheels on the rails, the clanging of crossing bells, and the rumble and swoosh of passing trains, and feeling the tug of times of the recent past pulling against thoughts of tomorrow.

The train trip took the better part of two days before arriving on the evening of February 16 at the Separation Center at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Although the train reached the center after 1700, we were assigned to a barracks and had a meal in the mess before reporting to a large hall.

The room was filled with clerks seated behind small tables with typewriters in front of them completing discharge forms for soldiers, who were instantly replaced by others from the crowded waiting lines. The loud clatter of typewriters and the gabble of voices filling the room made me wonder, as I took my seat, if the clerk would be able to hear my answers to his questions. My clerk-typist's weary manner and disinterested appearance led me to ask him what his status was. He had been recently drafted and confessed his torture in helping us get out while he still had his time in service to fulfill.

In answering the barrage of questions, I said that I had no wish to serve in the Army Reserve or to apply to the Veterans Administration for a disability pension, but I did want to continue my National Service Life Insurance. The clerk told me I could choose the military unit I had served in that I preferred to have on the face of my discharge certificate. I chose the infantry. Although I had enjoyed my duties and friends in military government for almost as long, serving with the men of Company B in the 301st Infantry Regiment was not only my most climactic wartime experience but the one of which I was proudest. After completing and signing the forms, it was so late that I went to the barracks for a good night's sleep in the upper bunk I was assigned. I fell asleep thinking of the next day.

Two memories remain of my last day in the Army at Jefferson Barracks, one personal and the other official. The next morning, Feb-

ruary 17, the first drill was to turn in all of my Army clothing except the uniform I would wear home. After relinquishing my overcoat, cotton khakis, and other extras at the supply room, I kept my best pair of slacks, my favorite khaki shirt, the Eisenhower jacket, wool garrison cap, and barracks bag. Officially, the supply sergeant should have let us keep two khaki shirts, a pair of khaki trousers, both wool and cotton garrison caps, and the wool overcoat, but he seemed arbitrary and ill-tempered.

Back in the barracks, I put on the uniform and lay down to wait for the discharge ceremony. When the call came, I leaped from the edge of the top bunk to the floor without remembering that the barracks floor had been heavily oiled that morning. The hohnails on the soles of my brogans slipped on the oil, and I sprawled on the floor. My best slacks were so badly stained that I had to replace them.

The supply sergeant was impatient with my clumsiness and wouldn't allow me to search for the pants I had turned in less than an hour before. Instead, he thrust upon me a pair of brown slacks made from wool blanket material, which had no crease and wouldn't hold one. He insisted that was the best he could do. I appealed, reminding him that this was the only military uniform I had after my service and how much I wanted to look sharp going home. But he had no sympathy and wouldn't change his mind. Time ran out, and I had to run to reach the discharge ceremony promptly. After our two years apart, my parents would see me in a rumpled uniform,

The discharge ceremony was in a small auditorium that seated about two hundred men. The presiding officer congratulated us for service to our country and handed out discharge papers, mustering-out pay, and an honorable service lapel button, or "ruptured duck." We also received a printed letter from President Harry S Truman:

ALLIE C. HARRISON

To you who answered the call of your country and served in its Armed Forces to bring about the total defeat of the enemy, I extend the heartfelt thanks of a grateful Nation. As one of the Nation's finest, you undertook the most severe task one can be called upon to perform. Because you demonstrated the fortitude, resourcefulness and calm judgment necessary to carry out that task, we now look to you for leadership and example in further exalting our country in peace.

THE WHITE HOUSE

Harry S Truman

I took a train from Jefferson Barracks to Saint Louis and waited for another train in the gargantuan station, which must have had a hundred water closets or booths in the toilet. I boarded a Missouri Pacific train in the late afternoon.

We arrived at Union Station in Little Rock at midnight on February 17. The place was quieter than it was the time I was there when my group left for basic training at Fort Benning. Only a few servicemen had ridden in the chair car with me from Saint Louis, and none of them left the train, which was headed to Houston. With my duffel over my shoulder, I climbed the steep metal stairs to the huge platform high above the tracks.

Mother and Dad were waiting at the top of the steps. My mom hugged me so tight that she knocked her hat askew. Even at that late hour, she had to wear something on her head, Dad, standing as slender and erect as any soldier, smiled and shook my hand. They were the only ones to meet me because Tumpy, after graduating from the University of Arkansas, was working at Woodward and Lothrop's Department Store in Washington, D.C.

Dad drove us the short distance home in his old blue Chevy. He and Mother sat up front, and I scrounged up beside my duffel bag in the sample case area behind the seat, just as I had as a boy growing up

Dad parked in the backyard at 322 Spring, and we entered the screened back porch, passing through the kitchen and dining room to the living room. I could have walked through those rooms blindfolded without stumbling over anything. Every piece of furniture was located precisely where it was when I left three years before. And the questions the folks were asking and observations they were making were the same. Perhaps the only real changes were in me—three years older chronologically and an untold number of years psychologically

The soldier's life for me was at an end, and I could honestly claim, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

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