

# THE LIBERATOR

ONE WORLD WAR II SOLDIER'S  
500-DAY ODYSSEY



From the Beaches of  
Sicily to the Gates of Dachau

**ALEX KERSHAW**

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

On 10 July 1943, Felix Sparks arrived with the Allied forces in Italy, a captain in the 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Division - nicknamed the Thunderbirds. Just twenty-five years old, Sparks soon proved a leader of immense fortitude and stamina, participating in four amphibious invasions and leading his men through the mountains of Italy and France before enduring intense winter combat against the diehard SS on the Fatherland's borders. Sparks's entire company had been sacrificed to save the Allied beach-head at Anzio and, tragically, his rebuilt battalion soon found themselves surrounded and overcome in the dark forests of the Vosges.

Miraculously, despite numerous brushes with death, Sparks survived the long bloody march across Europe and in the last days of the Third Reich was selected to lead a final charge to Bavaria to hunt down Adolf Hitler. But what Sparks and his men would find as they finally reached the gates of Dachau, Hitler's first and most notorious concentration camp, would be a horror greater than any they had so far experienced. With victory within his grasp, Sparks had to confront the ultimate test of his humanity: after all he had faced, could he resist the urge to wreak vengeance on the men who had caused such untold suffering and misery?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Kershaw is the author of seven previous books, including the bestsellers *The Bedford Boys* and *The Longest Winter*. He has written for several British newspapers, including *the Guardian*, *Independent* and *Sunday Times*. Born in York, England, he now lives in America with his wife and son.

Also by Alex Kershaw

*The Envoy: The Epic Rescue of the Last Jews of Europe*

*Escape from the Deep: The Epic Story of a Legendary  
Submarine and Her Courageous Crew*

*The Few: The American "Knights of the Air" Who Risked  
Everything to Fight in the Battle of Britain*

*The Longest Winter: The Battle of the Bulge and the Epic  
Story of World War II's Most Decorated Platoon*

*The Bedford Boys*

*Blood and Champagne: The Life and Times of Robert Capa*

*Jack London: A Life*



*After five hundred days of combat, Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks fires his pistol into the air to stop his men slaughtering captured SS soldiers during the liberation of Dachau on April 29, 1945. [Courtesy David Israel]*

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THE  
**LIBERATOR**  
ALEX KERSHAW

ONE WORLD WAR II SOLDIER'S  
500-DAY ODYSSEY FROM THE BEACHES OF SICILY  
TO THE GATES OF DACHAU



HUTCHINSON  
LONDON



In memory of Jack Hallowell





*American casualty in Europe, 1944. [National Archives]*

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PROLOGUE

THE GRAVES

EUROPE, OCTOBER 1989

THEY LAY BENEATH perfect<sup>1</sup> rows of white graves that lined lush green lawns. He knew where they were buried. He had their names. Finding all of them meant walking back and forth, all across the graveyard, through avenues of thousands of white crosses. But he could manage the strain. His heart had given him problems for years, yet he still had the strength, the will, to search for his men. They had died near<sup>2</sup> here, at Anzio, the bloodiest piece of ground occupied by American and British forces during World War II. Seventy-two thousand men<sup>3</sup> lost in all—killed, wounded, sent insane, blown to shreds, missing, or captured, now a mere statistic in a history book.

The men he had commanded had achieved something of lasting greatness, something of permanence. They had defeated barbarism. He had seen it. He had been there, poisoned and heartbroken but somehow blessed, or rather damned, with the strength to fight on, to beat Hitler's most violent men.

Often he had questioned what kept his men going. The American Army was on the attack all the time in Europe. He had kept thinking: *Why do they go?* It was hard to<sup>4</sup> explain why his men had not hesitated. Many times he had

said: "Let's go!" Every time, they had<sup>5</sup> gone. Now that he was back in Europe, he marveled once more at the American spirit, as he called it, that had kept them advancing toward death or at best debilitating injury. It was this spirit<sup>6</sup> that had mattered so much when the odds had been even.

The American soldiers under<sup>7</sup> his command had performed magnificently. He wanted to pay his respects to some of those who had fallen. That was why he was back. There had been no time during combat to stand over them and grieve, no time to say how he felt, to show his love other than by trying his best to keep them alive. At that, he had failed, over and over, and over again.

Never give up. That was what had counted most. He had never given up, not once in his entire life. He had fought since he could remember—to eat, to stay alive, to overcome everything a vengeful God could throw at him. He had survived, somehow, perhaps through grit and rage, perhaps because God took the good first and left the rotten until last.

He had never been afraid of God or any man. Fear had never thrown him off balance, but he had felt great anxiety, mostly about what was going to happen to his men. Thankfully, he had always been able to think and act fast. In fact, he had functioned extraordinarily well in combat, remaining for the most part calm and focused. He had some of the fighting Irish in him plus a lot of anger. It was in his blood. His great grandfather had<sup>8</sup> fought at the Alamo.

The graves of his men stretched across Europe, over two thousand miles. They had died in Sicily, in France, at the dark heart of Nazi Germany. There had been several hundred killed under his command, half of them buried in Europe. Near a crossing over the fast-flowing Moselle, he looked for Sergeant Vanderpool and Lieutenant Railsback's final resting places. Railsback had looked like a high school

valedictorian with his confident, easy smile and neatly cropped hair. He had been a hell of an officer, like Sparks at his age. As for Vanderpool—he should never have died. He should have ignored the fact that he wanted to stay with his brother and pulled him off the line, but he had left it too late.

On the German border,<sup>9</sup> near a small village, he traipsed along the ridge where he had been beaten just that one time, where in snow and ice the SS had humiliated him. His men's foxholes were<sup>10</sup> still there as well as their spent cartridges. He had never gotten<sup>11</sup> over their loss. How could anyone recover from losing so many men? Thirty platoon leaders<sup>12</sup> and six hundred warriors who had never hesitated to carry out his every command.

Then it was on into the dark forests where you could get lost after a hundred yards without a compass, a place of primeval fears, to the border of Germany and the Siegfried Line with its famous dragon's teeth, now decomposing concrete and rusted iron; across the swirling Rhine to a city on the banks of the Main River where a grateful mayor and townspeople honored him and left him beaming with pride; south toward the Alps and a pretty town where he pointedly reminded the good burghers that the German government had authorized the building of a center for the study of the Holocaust. Why hadn't it been<sup>13</sup> built? Much as they might want to forget, future generations should not.

He had never been able to forget that day. He could still picture the girl lying on top of all the bodies. It was as if she and others were looking at him with reproach, asking: "What took you so long?"

Why hadn't he been able to save them in time?

He had lost control here, in the outskirts of this town in Bavaria, in this place of evil, for perhaps as much as half an hour. It had been impossible to stop his men from going crazy. The horrors had robbed their minds of reason. He had never liked to see people killed unnecessarily, no

matter their color or nationality or whatever terrible things they had done. He had never allowed his men to kill without good reason. He had tried to take prisoners and treat them honorably. But at the end, with his back turned, near piles of dead, his men had killed unnecessarily.

Events that day,<sup>14</sup> one of more than five hundred at war, nagged at him like an old wound. The rumors festered still,<sup>15</sup> the published falsehoods. Just once, just that time, among thousands of emaciated, stinking corpses, he had failed to control his men when they had gone on the rampage. But he had then done the right thing. He had stopped the madness. It was painful to think people thought otherwise.

Time had not healed. It had not erased the memories. That fall of 1989, seventy-two-year-old General Felix Sparks wandered through towns he had set free, across battlefields, and through several graveyards. The white crosses were silent. The men who had died for him could not be resurrected. They could not be brought back. He knew one thing for certain. It didn't matter how well he had waged war. The cost had been<sup>16</sup> too great.

PART ONE

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THE DUST BOWL



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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE WEST



*Corporal Felix Sparks, U.S. Army Coast Guard Artillery, Camp Kamehameha, 1936. [Courtesy the Sparks Family]*

MIAMI, ARIZONA, 1931

FELIX SPARKS WOKE early. It was getting light outside. He pulled on his<sup>1</sup> jacket, grabbed his shotgun, and headed out into the dusty canyon, past miners' shacks and mountains of tailings from the nearby mine, and into the red-rocked canyons, eyes darting here and there as he checked his traplines. The Tonto forest and mountains surrounding his home were full of bounty and menace: snapping lizards, tarantulas the size of his fist, and several deadly types of scorpion. It was important to tread carefully, avoiding porcupines beneath the Ponderosa pines and always being

alert for the raised hackles of the diamondback rattler and the quick slither of the sidewinder snake, with its cream and light brown blotches.

Each morning, he checked his traplines and hunted game, hoping to bag with just one shot a quail or a cottontailed rabbit or a Sonora dove. He couldn't afford to waste a single cartridge. As the sun started to warm the cold, still air in the base of canyons, he returned to the small frame house he shared with his younger brother, Earl, and three sisters, Ladelle, Frances, and Margaret. His mother, Martha, of English descent and raised in Mississippi, and his father, Felix, of Irish and German blood, counted themselves lucky to have running water. They had moved to Arizona a decade before to find work. But now there was none. Every animal their eldest son brought home was needed to feed the family.

The economic panic and failure that followed the October 1929 Wall Street crash had swept like a tsunami across America; more than nine thousand banks had failed, and unemployment had shot up tenfold, from around 1.5 million to 13 million, a quarter of the workforce. There was no stimulus spending, nothing done to stop the catastrophe enveloping the nation like one of the dust storms that buried entire towns in Oklahoma.

By 1931, the copper mines in Miami had closed down and a terrible silence had descended on the town that stood three thousand feet in the lee of Mount Webster. The rumble of machines far below, the distant growl made by their grinding and lifting, was gone. Over Christmas, at age fourteen, Sparks hiked far into the mountains with his father and Earl, laid traps and hunted for two full weeks, then skinned and dried pelts. They also fished for perch. But none of it<sup>2</sup> was enough.

When he was just sixteen, Sparks's mother and father sent him to live with his uncle Laurence in Glendale, Arizona. There were too many mouths to feed. It hurt to see

the anguish and guilt in his father's eyes as they said good-bye. In Glendale, he had to pay his way by doing chores, milking cows and working in his uncle's store on Saturdays.

When he returned to Miami a year later, in 1934, a government program had been set up, part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, to provide people with basic food requirements. Families in Miami were able to at least eat, even if there was no work. Once a week, he went down to the train depot in town and drew free groceries, staples such as flour, beans, and lard, salt pork, so many pounds per person, per family. Nothing was wasted. His mother was a<sup>3</sup> resourceful woman, cooking salt pork gravy and biscuits for breakfast, feeding her five children as best she could, making them clothes on an old sewing machine, and cutting their hair.

When he wasn't hunting or studying, he became a regular visitor to the public library in Miami. His passion was military<sup>4</sup> history: the Indian Wars, tales of the mighty Cherokee and Custer's Last Stand, and the heroics at the Alamo, where his great-grandfather, Stephen Franklin Sparks, had fought. He hoped someday<sup>5</sup> to go to college and become a lawyer. But he was also drawn toward the military and applied to the Citizens' Military Training Program. To his delight, he was one of just fifty young men from around the state accepted into the program. Those who completed it became second lieutenants in the U.S. infantry. Training took place every summer in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, a hundred and fifty miles from Miami, at an old cavalry post. He hitchhiked to the camp, saving his travel allowance until he had enough to order a new pair of corduroy trousers from the J. C. Penney catalog.

The long marches and drills in more than one-hundred-degree heat tested the hardest, and many youths did not return after the first summer, but Sparks enjoyed playing war with real weapons in the desert and nearby canyons. Aged eighteen, he was fully grown, around 140 pounds,

slim, and tall, as wiry as a mesquite tree, with a toothy smile, thick black hair, and a broad and handsome face.

In his last semester at high school, he won a nationwide essay competition and received a \$100 pocket watch. In June 1935, he graduated, the most gifted student in his senior year. He knew he had it in him to go far. Of one thing he was certain: He would never be a miner like his father. He would earn his living with his mind, not his hands. But he did not even have enough money to buy a suit for the graduation prom. Nor did he have a way to escape the poverty that had engulfed so much of America. There was not a spare dime for him to go to college, no loans to be had, and no jobs in Miami. He would have to leave home to find work of any kind.

Late that summer, his father borrowed \$18 from a friend and gave it all to his oldest child. It was a grubstake for a new life somewhere else. His mother, Martha, sewed a secret pocket in his trousers for the borrowed money, which would have to last him until he found a job. He had no clear plan other than to head east and maybe get a berth on a ship out of Corpus Christi, on the Gulf Coast. At least he might get to see some of the world he had read about.

One morning, he put a change of clothes and a toothbrush in a pack, slipped a small metal club he'd bought for a dollar into a pocket, said a wrenching good-bye to his family, and then got a ride from a friend to Tucson, where he was dropped off near some rail tracks. Other men were hanging around, waiting to "catch out." One of them pointed out a train due to go east, south of the Gila Mountains, through the Chiricahua Desert, toward El Paso, Texas. The hobo warned Sparks<sup>6</sup> to make sure he got off the train before it arrived in the rail yards in El Paso; otherwise he might be beaten or shot by railroad security men—"bulls"—armed with clubs and Winchester shotguns.

Sparks pulled himself up into a chest-high boxcar. There was the acrid odor of hot oil mixed with steam. He was suddenly aware of dark shapes in the recesses, movements in the shadows, other men. It was safer, he knew, to travel alone. He had bought the club just in case he had to defend himself. Instead of backing away, he moved to an empty corner and lay down.

“THE JUNGLES,” THE DUST BOWL, 1936

THE TRAIN JERKED to life, shuddering as it began to move. The shaking slowly became an almost comforting, rhythmic *click-clack* of iron wheels on rails. Then came the adrenaline rush. For the first time, Sparks felt the exhilaration and intense sense of freedom that came with all the dangers of riding the “rods.” It was like being on an iron horse, snaking back and forth through canyons, through the desert, headed east, toward the sea.

When the train built up speed, acting like a runaway colt, it was wise to stand up and brace oneself. When the boxcars slowed, it was possible to actually relax, to lie on one’s back with a pack as a pillow and gaze out of the open doors, watching the desert pass leisurely by: the brittle mesquite trees, the greasewood bushes, and the cactus that dotted the horizon.

He wanted to stay awake, in case he was jumped by the other hobos, but the sweet syncopation of the wheels on the tracks and the train’s rocking motion eventually sent him into a deep slumber.

“Kid! It’s time to get off.”

The train was approaching San Antonio, Texas, the city where he had been born on August 2, 1917. Its rail yards, patrolled by ruthless bulls, were up ahead.

“We got to get off here, buddy,” the hobo added. “If they catch you,<sup>2</sup> they put you on a chain gang or make you join

the army.”

When the train slowed, Sparks jumped down. He hiked into San Antonio, where he spent the night in a flophouse. In the morning, he walked to the other side of the city and hopped another train, bound for Corpus Christi. For several days, he watched what other bums did and copied them, learning how vital it was to carry a water jug and to hop freights with covered boxcars to protect him from sun, sandstorms, and rain. He adapted fast to the ways of the “jungles”—the rail-side camps—as did a quarter million other teenage boys during the height of the Depression, thousands of whom were killed in accidents or violent encounters with bulls or predatory older men.

Once in Corpus Christi, he searched without luck for a job. Hundreds of men with families waited in lines for just a few openings. The prospects were dire, so when he heard things were better out west he hopped another freight train and rode the high desert to Los Angeles, first glimpsing the Pacific from a rattling boxcar. But there again scores of men queued for every opportunity. Not knowing where else to go, he hung around for a few weeks, sleeping rough in parks, learning the feral habits of the urban homeless, getting by on just 25 cents a day: hotcakes for a dime in the morning, a candy bar for lunch, and a hamburger for dinner.

He decided to try his luck farther north, caught out again, and was soon watching the Sierra Nevada Mountains slip slowly by to the east. In San Francisco, he went to yet another hiring hall, this time on a dockside. There were jobs, but he would have to pay \$15 to join a union to get one. He was down to his last couple of dollars. Again he slept rough. Then he ran out of cash.

One morning, as he was walking along Market Street, hungry and penniless, he passed a man in uniform.

“Hey, buddy,” said the man. “Do you want to join the army?”

Sparks walked on.

*What the hell else have I got to do?*

He turned around.

“Yeah, I do.”<sup>8</sup>

“Are you kidding me, buddy?”

“No, I’m not kidding<sup>9</sup> you—I want to join the army.”

The recruiter gave him a token and pointed at a streetcar.

“Get on that streetcar. At two o’clock there will be a small boat coming in from Angel Island.”

He was soon heading across the bay to Angel Island. From his boat, on a clear day, he would have been able to see the infamous Alcatraz prison, built on a craggy rock that rose from the riptides like an obsolete battleship, and where Depression-era killers like Al Capone and “Machine Gun” Kelly were kept under maximum security. At the army post on Angel Island, he was sworn in and given a choice of wherever he wanted to serve. So it was that one fall day in 1936 he found himself on a troopship, passing beneath the cables and iron girders of the half-constructed Golden Gate Bridge. He went below to his assigned bunk amid hundreds of others stacked three high in the fetid hold. He couldn’t stand the crowding, so he grabbed his mattress and took it up on deck. The journey to Honolulu lasted a week. He slept every night under the stars and ate three square meals a day as he headed toward the land of lanais, perpetual sunshine, and coconut shell cocktails.

CAMP KAMEHAMEHA, HAWAII, 1936

THE BARRACKS WERE airy and spacious, with fans lazily circling on the high wooden ceilings. The palms shading the base, located at the mouth of a channel leading to Pearl Harbor, were taller than those back in Arizona, the air humid and the breezes warm. Sparks’s days began at 6 A.M.

with the sharp call of a bugle, followed by training in how to operate huge sixteen-inch guns.

Army life suited him. He didn't mind the routine and discipline, the hurry-up-and-wait bureaucracy and boring details, the endless hours mowing the grass and practicing drills on the parade ground surrounded by sugarcane fields. He was warm and well fed. There were no bums waiting to jump him in a boxcar or a rail-side jungle. His barracks had a library, a pool table, and a piano. His weekends were free and his days ended at 4:30 P.M., leaving him plenty of time to explore Honolulu, eight miles away.

One day, he bought a camera from a soldier for \$2 and photographed the base as well as other soldiers. Then he discovered that the only place he could develop his images of fellow artillerymen and nearby beaches was at an expensive camera shop in Honolulu. Some men saved money and time by developing their negatives in the barracks latrine, but the prints were crude and faded. He quickly saw an opportunity. In Honolulu, he bought a book about photography and then asked his company commander if he could get him an appointment with the Post Exchange Council, which operated a large store on the base. He told the council he was an experienced photographer and suggested they set up a shop where soldiers could drop off film to be developed. To his delight, the council agreed to loan him money and equipment to set up the print shop. A week later, he was in business, developing roll after roll by hand, bent over developing trays in a red-lit darkroom. Soon, he had to hire a fellow soldier to help him. Within a month, he was "rolling in money," he later recalled, earning more than the battery commander. He put it all<sup>10</sup> in a postal savings account that paid 2 percent interest.

He also taught himself how to take high-quality portraits and began snapping officers, their families, and the various tourist attractions. He scanned newspapers for details



about arrivals of Hollywood stars at the pink-hued Royal Hawaiian hotel in Honolulu, so he could capture them lounging under sunshades. The musical star Alice Faye, a twenty-two-year-old natural blonde, was one of several actresses who agreed to be photographed, despite the protests of a boyfriend. He promptly sold the pictures as pinups back at base. By the time his enlistment was up, he had saved \$3,000, more than enough to finance a college education.

He returned the same way he had arrived, by boat, passing beneath the now completed Golden Gate Bridge, which stretched 4,200 feet across the Pacific, making it the longest suspension bridge in the world. In San Francisco, he treated himself to his first suit, tailor-made for \$15. He then visited nearby Palo Alto, where he toured the campus of Stanford University. The facilities impressed him, but the cost of tuition was too much, even with three thousand in savings. So he took a bus home, back to Arizona, where he was joyfully reunited with his family. Soon after, he enrolled at the state university in Tucson. The fees for a semester were just \$25.

He studied hard and was popular with the other freshman students, almost all of them two years younger. Two students in his class were from his hometown of Miami: Mary and John Blair, brother and sister. Eighteen-year-old Mary was easygoing and studious, majoring in Business Administration. She had a slim, attractive figure and strawberry blond hair, and loved to dance to swing music. Mary had first set eyes on Sparks four years earlier outside Miami High School and had not been overly impressed. He'd been in a fistfight the principal had to break up. Now he was taller, his thick black hair swept back, and clearly ambitious, worldly compared to the callow freshmen her own age. He was going somewhere,<sup>11</sup> just like her. They began to date and soon fell in love. In a photograph Mary would always treasure, they pretended to

be characters in a great romance, she looking like Juliette, perched atop a boulder, he professing his love like Romeo, the Arizona desert as their backdrop.

At the end of his freshman year, Sparks returned to the summer training camp for prospective officers he'd attended during high school. After his time in Hawaii, he was quickly rated an outstanding cadet and received a much-coveted Pershing Award, which entitled him to an all-expenses-paid vacation to Washington, DC. In early 1940, he and eight others visited Congress and met George C. Marshall, army chief of staff, who pinned an award to the bespoke jacket Sparks had bought in San Francisco.

Over the next months, he followed events across the Atlantic with growing concern as Hitler's superbly equipped and highly mobile forces stormed through one democracy after another. By July 1940, most of Europe lay under brutal Nazi repression: France, Belgium, Holland, Poland, Norway, and Denmark. The British were holding out, but only just, thanks to the English Channel and the brave fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force. America began to re-arm in earnest and build up its military forces. That September, when he returned to college, he received a letter from the U.S. Army that began with the word "Greetings" and went on to inform him that he was being called back to service. He could finish his fall semester but would have to report for active duty for a full year before he could return to his studies. Instead of walking off a stage with a bachelor's degree, his dream of becoming a lawyer within reach, he found himself where he had started before college, back in a uniform.

He reported in January 1941 to Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where he would serve as a second lieutenant in the 157th Infantry Regiment of the 45th Infantry Division, a National Guard outfit that had been mobilized. The regiment's motto, he learned, was "Eager for Duty." He was willing to play his part but hardly eager.

Fort Sill was notable for being where the last great leader of the Apache, Geronimo, had died in 1909. It was easy to understand why the last of the great braves had been banished to this godforsaken corner of the Dust Bowl. Through the flaps of his tented barracks, Sparks could see nothing but yellowed grass, dusty brush, and ugly scrub for mile after mile. Local bars posted<sup>12</sup> NO MEXICANS AND INDIANS signs, much to the fury of the many hundreds of such men in the 45th “Thunderbird” Division, so named because of the shoulder patch each soldier wore showing the image of the mythical Thunderbird. It was a far cry from his last base in Hawaii.

The 157th Infantry Regiment was no instant infantry, cobbled from draftees. It was drawn from Colorado and had a storied past, having fought with distinction in the Indian Wars and in the Spanish American War of 1898, when it had stormed the beaches near Manila and then raised the first American flag above the walled city. It had then clashed with Pancho Villa’s raiders in 1916 on the Arizona-Mexico border and served in the trenches in World War I. In September 1940,<sup>13</sup> the regiment had become part of the 45th Division and had then been mustered into service at Fort Sill.

Sparks loathed Fort Sill but quickly came to admire his regiment’s commander, a straight-backed and extremely strict Washington, DC, native called Colonel Charles Ankcorn, who had seen combat in World War I. Everyone on the base seemed to be afraid of Ankcorn, who rarely spoke to him other than to issue crisp, short orders. One day, Sparks learned that he was to be in charge of training 60mm mortar crews. In silence, Ankcorn watched as he put trainees through drills. Sparks wondered if he had done a good job; Ankcorn gave no indication. But several weeks later Ankcorn announced suddenly that Sparks was now his adjutant, responsible for the organization, administration, and discipline of the regiment. He simply showed him a

desk and told him to get on with it, having also promoted him to captain. It was clear that Ankcorn's silence over the months had been a way of testing and teaching him to think for himself and act decisively. In the heat of battle, there would be precious little time for consultation. On the killing fields<sup>14</sup> of Flanders in 1918, Ankcorn himself had learned that lesson fast.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# OFF TO WAR



*Felix Sparks and his future wife, Mary, in the desert near Tucson, Arizona, 1939. [Courtesy of Mary Sparks]*

CAMP KAMEHAMEHA, HAWAII, DECEMBER 7, 1941

THE NAVY ZEROS zoomed low, spitting bullets, dropping bombs, ending peace, the red suns on their fuselages, soon to be known as “meatballs,” flashing by in the early Sunday morning light above Pearl Harbor. The massive sixteen-inch artillery guns that Sparks had operated for two years were utterly useless as the Japanese bombed and strafed, sinking four battleships and two destroyers and killing more than two thousand men. The surprise attack on Hawaii had come not from the sea but the air.

Just four days later, on December 11, in an eighty-eight-minute-speech before the Reichstag, Adolf Hitler dramatically announced that the Third Reich was also going to wage war on the United States. Sparks was only a few days from completing his year's call-up to active duty. There was no way now he would be able to go back to school. Like others serving, he would have to stay in the army until the war was lost or won. He soon received yet more bad news, this time from a college friend: Mary Blair was socializing with other men. He called her immediately. She was at a party. It was a bad line. All he could hear was young men's voices, swing music, and laughter. She was clearly having a good time. He couldn't bear to lose her.

"Let's get married."<sup>1</sup>

What was he saying? Mary couldn't hear him properly. Annoyed she had not<sup>2</sup> immediately agreed, he asked again.

They tied the knot at the end of her junior year, on June 17, 1942, in front of their families and some of their college professors in Tucson, and then shared a car with another couple, driving west to the Pacific, and honeymooned in San Diego for a few days. They had made a deal. He knew how much finishing college meant to her, and how hard she had worked, so he insisted she complete her degree, then join him at whatever base he was on.

In September 1942, having finished college, Mary arrived in Massachusetts in time to experience a spectacular New England fall. Gold and orange leaves piled up in front of white clapboard houses and churches while Sparks and his regiment practiced landing on the pristine beaches of Cape Cod. Like many other young wives who had joined their husbands that autumn, Mary became pregnant. But then, in November,<sup>3</sup> the relative idyll ended and the division moved to Pine Camp in upstate New York, where it encountered its first blast of a true New England winter: four feet of snow and a temperature of minus fifty-four degrees. The men had not been issued winter gear,