

## Dining in the Pacific with Captain Bottcher

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On a trip to Australia in 1943, Eleanor Roosevelt said that she wanted to meet Capt. Herman Bottcher of the 32d Infantry Division. Mrs. Roosevelt finally found him eating ice cream at the Red Cross Club in Sydney. Meeting Capt. Bottcher, Eleanor said, "was one of the highlights of her trip."<sup>1</sup> Like many other soldiers, food preoccupied Herman Bottcher. Unlike most other U.S. soldiers during World War Two though, Bottcher was an anti-fascist leftist refugee from Germany who had fought in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War.

A short biography of Bottcher is probably in order: Bottcher was born in 1909 in Landsburg, Germany. In 1924 he joined the Young Communists and in 1925 and 1927 he was arrested and spent six months in jail for "demonstrating." Not surprisingly, Bottcher wanted to get out of Germany, emigrating to Australia for a time and later to San Francisco where his Uncle lived. Bottcher was a member of the Carpenters Union and attending College when he left for Spain. Wounded twice in Spain, he was promoted to Commissar of the Transmissions Company. In Spain Bottcher was wounded twice, commended for bravery on three occasions and promoted to Major. His repatriation file contains a paper evaluating his talents and strengths for future work in the U.S. Communist Party. Noting he was a "good worker" and "sound" politically, it stated ironically he "is not able to give leadership to others."<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances of Herman Bottcher's going to Spain are clouded by the fact that some recall him being a member of the so-called Debs Column, named after American Union and Socialist Party leader Eugene V. Debs.<sup>3</sup> The Debs Column was advertised by the Socialist Party of America as an alternative to those who did not want to join the Communist-organized Lincoln Battalion. Lincoln Battalion veteran, WWII B-26 Engineer and TASS (the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union) employee Harry Fisher remembered Bottcher as "not liking Stalin...but he did admire the works of Lenin."<sup>4</sup> Because Bottcher never became an American citizen before he left for Spain the American government nearly denied him entry when he returned. Luckily, immigration officials at Ellis Island did not believe that Bottcher was a threat to national security and allowed him to remain.<sup>5</sup> With the coming of WWII, Bottcher joined the U.S. Army and ended up in the 32d Division. The 32d Division made an epic march over the Owen Stanley Mountains to link up with Australian forces before the attack on Buna in Papua New Guinea. While rations for the 32d division typically consisted of spam, Vienna sausages, chocolate "D" rations, hardtack that, "when soaked in coffee...would blow up like a balloon," Australian-made "bully beef" - tinned beef consisting of "congealed fat with bits of ancient steer mixed in" - and occasionally, canned fruit.<sup>6</sup> In total contrast to the rations he received in Buna and Spain (i.e., olive-oil fried garbanzo beans, occasional horse or mule meat, oranges and wine), Bottcher noted the celebratory feast that the locals prepared for the 32d division after their grueling trek. "The natives gathered coconuts, green bananas, squash, taro roots, sugar cane, paws-paws, limes... We had an orgy of eating and they stayed up all night, dancing and beating on the tom-toms..."<sup>7</sup> On Buna, after every officer in his platoon was killed in a frontal assault on 5 December 1942, Bottcher took twelve men, and according to author Eric Bergerud, "wisely

neglected [participating in the frontal assault and instead] probed for a line through Japanese positions... the platoon broke through to the beach and set up a position. Japanese counterattacks failed, and Buna village, a good portion of the Japanese position in the south, was isolated,"<sup>8</sup> This action linked Buna beach with Buna village. It was estimated that his defense of what became known as "Bottcher's Corner" killed 121 Japanese soldiers and enabled the Allied forces to take Buna.<sup>9</sup> The exploit won Bottcher the first of two Distinguished Service Crosses, and a promotion from Sergeant to brevet Captain. As only American citizens can take commissions in the U.S. armed forces, the U.S. Congress passed a special act to make him a citizen.<sup>10</sup> His feat also made him deaf in one ear and got him wounded once again. He would go onto be wounded two more times while earning an oak leaf cluster for his DSC when he drew the fire of a Japanese position so his men could advance.<sup>11</sup>

While participating in the Aitape-Wewak campaign in New Guinea as the newly installed Captain of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Division's Recon Troop, Bottcher happily compared the quality of the food on that campaign to the all-too-familiar field fare of K-rations, bully beef, C-rations, etc. Bottcher noted that the food he was now receiving was, "extraordinarily good... We hardly ever get bully beef, only twice a week C-ration[s]. The remaining meals consist of various canned or dehydrated vegetables, spam, hot dogs and twice-weekly fresh meat, (frozen of course). Yesterday we had delicious fresh tomatoes..."<sup>12</sup> The 32d division was ill-prepared for jungle warfare before New Guinea, but, as Bottcher noted, "with time we learn more and more about the jungle; whereas it was a formidable obstacle and a horrifying place for us last year, it has now become a friendly place with a beauty and charm all its own."<sup>13</sup> Captain Bottcher became so accustomed to life in the jungle that during his next campaign on Leyte in the Phillipines, his recon company spent months behind enemy lines, "liv[ing] mostly off the land, killing game for meat and getting vegetables and tuba (fermented coconut milk) from the natives."<sup>14</sup> Bottcher's men apparently only took, "salt, sugar and tea from supply depots."<sup>15</sup> When Bottcher was killed (while on point) by mortar fire behind Japanese lines on Leyte on 31 December 1944, his comrades mourned a man thought to be egalitarian and democratic to a fault. He always stayed with his comrades, led from the front, took the most dangerous duty and, in one instance, ignored one of his Distinguished Service Cross ceremonies to train with his comrades.<sup>16</sup> If he had lived Bottcher would have been promoted to Major, the same rank he had held in the Spanish Republican Army.<sup>17</sup> Amazingly, even near the end of his life his early idealism was still intact. In his last letter to the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade (the veterans organization of the American veterans of the International Brigades) Bottcher wrote, "the hardest battle for us will be to win the peace, to overcome discrimination, injustice, poverty, [and] insecurity."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 January 1945. For a picture of this event see the photo section of James Campbell, *The Ghost Mountain Boys: Their Epic March and the Terrifying Battle For New Guinea- The Forgotten War of the South Pacific* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007) photo insert b/w 202-203.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Bottcher File, Opis 6, File 866, doc's 88-106. International Brigade Files located in Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive (ALBA) collection at Tamiment Library/ Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

<sup>3</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 253; For anecdotes about Bottcher in Spain see Harry Fisher,

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*Comrades: Tales of a Brigadista in the Spanish Civil War* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998 ), 28-29, 180 n3.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Fisher interview with author, 28 April 2002.

<sup>5</sup> James Campbell, *The Ghost Mountain Boys: Their Epic March and the Terrifying Battle For New Guinea- The Forgotten War of the South Pacific* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2007), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Americal Division member Joe Salini on GI food in New Guinea from Eric Bergerud, *Touched With Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 480-481.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, *The Ghost Mountain Boys: Their Epic March and the Terrifying Battle For New Guinea- The Forgotten War of the South Pacific*, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Bergerud, *Touched With Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific*, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Johnston, George H., "The Toughest Fighting in the World", *TIME Magazine*, 20 September 1943. Can be accessed on the web at: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,774618-2,00.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 2 March 1945

<sup>11</sup> Murdock, T/4 Charles P. "The Red Arrow Pierced Every Line," *Saturday Evening Post*, 10 November 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Herman Bottcher to Harold E. Hantlemann, 1 January 1944. Herman Bottcher ALBA Vertical File, ALBA collection.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "From German to American," *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 2 March 1945.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 January 1945.

<sup>16</sup> For examples all of these attributes see Campbell, Fisher or Bottcher's obituaries in *Yank* or the *New York Herald Tribune*. Because Campbell mainly relies on oral testimony, Bottcher's exploits and death become exaggerated.

<sup>17</sup> *Yank: The Army Weekly*, 2 March 1945

<sup>18</sup> "The Hardest Battle," *Volunteer For Liberty* (Feb. 1944), 9.