

Herman Bottcher, Summa Cum Laude

By Sgt. John Rossen

How far is it, please  
From Landsberg, Germany  
(Which the Red Army took  
    this morning)  
To a six-foot-plot  
Of the lush soil of Leyte Isle?  
How far from Southern California  
To Aragon and Castile?  
    We were there at the command  
    Post  
    On a hill near Caspe  
    When the CO asked for volunteers  
    Hardly a chance in ten to  
    make it, he said  
    And you and Jim Ruskin stepped forward  
How far from that blood-soaked Caspe road  
That gully of death at Pandols  
Those shell-torn vineyards before Gandesa  
Those waters of the Ebro in July 38  
And Sierre Caballs in September –  
From these how far  
To a foxhole facing Buna Mission?  
    At the bivouac near Falset  
    Gathered round an evening  
    campfire  
    You gave us a political pep-talk  
    Speaking of German anti-Nazis  
    And the world-struggle against  
    the Fascist beast  
    What you said filled minds and  
    hearts  
    With the iron solidarity of  
    humankind  
Herman Bottcher reckoned the distances  
    well  
And his is an “A” forever and ever  
In the subject of anti-Fascist  
    Geometry  
The Graduation Exercise  
Went off with a bang  
And he was the Honor Student of  
    the Class  
Graduating suddenly  
With the speed of shrapnel from a  
    Jap mortar  
At dawn of the last day of 1944)  
    When word of Munich reached us  
    Some cursed bitterly

And flung down their rifles  
Many sank to the ground  
As for you, Butch  
Only the muscles around mouth  
and eyes

Tightened and set  
And more grimly did you bend  
Over the pistol you were cleaning  
Yes, he passed his exam with flying colors;  
Now comes the test for us the living  
The Final Exam for us the undergrads  
Two billion students in a hundred million classrooms,  
Located in many places on the face of the Earth  
As for instance in the bitter cold of the Oder and Rhine Valleys  
And in the stinking heart of jungle islands  
In the ruins of Stalingrad and Warsaw  
And in the fine drawing rooms of Park Avenue  
And could not one go so far as to say  
There are classrooms, too, on Pennsylvania Avenue  
On Downing Street, and in the Kremlin Square?)  
We heard you say once to a frightened Spanish youngster  
“A real anti-Fascist must know how to die when necessary”  
You were a real anti-Fascist, Butch  
And you knew how to die when it became necessary.

Here's the problem:  
Compute the distance, militarily and politically  
Using the formula of Teheran)  
From Manila to Madrid  
Strasbourg to Stockholm  
Brussels to Buenos Aires  
Bern to Bombay  
Palestine to Puerto Rico  
\* \* \* \*

When the Graduation Day comes  
For all of humanity  
And all the distance have been rightly reckoned  
It would be well remembered  
What a great teacher of Geometry  
Was the anti-Fascist Herman Bottcher.

Camp Luna, New Mexico.  
16 September 1945