

EXCERPTS FROM LETTERS OF PHILIP C. WALTON TO ROBERT L. HAINES

Phil Walton, with his enthusiasm for life, his interest in everything about him, and his appreciation of the humorous, was like a breath of fresh air to those who knew him. The seriousness of his duties in the army stimulated these qualities so that his letters were filled with questions and observations about the surroundings he was in. The following extracts from letters I received from Phil, during the two years he was in the army, will not only afford his friends pleasure, but pass on to them some of his joy of living.

"July 4, 1942, Placeland, South Carolina. Now I am in South Carolina and attached to the Third Evacuation Hospital. The hospital is to be in the Placeland Gym. We are sleeping in pup tents pitched in a pine woods about a mile away. To get there you go up a little dirt road through a cotton patch, past a Negro shack—all very picturesque. I thoroughly enjoy tenting in the pines but most of the fellows don't. This morning I was on guard in our tent area. Since there was just one other guard around the place, I had a wonderful time looking around undisturbed. I found a nest in a horizontal fork of a branch of a pine tree stretching across a dirt road. The other guard boosted me up on his shoulders and I felt in the nest. I could feel some nestlings; they began to squeak and one of them took a finger in his mouth. I watched the nest and after while a Mockingbird came to it, so by accident I have found my first Mockingbird nest."

"July 9, Placeland, South Carolina. I have seen a new bird, the Black Vulture, and it was a surprise. My idea of a vulture is a bird with wonderful soaring powers, but the Black Vulture acts as if it is just learning to soar. It flaps and glides like an Accipiter, and its appearance is curious; it is all width and not much length. Its wing beats are loose and sloppy as if it were about to fall apart. Maybe there are times when this bird does soar: I have only seen it twice and shouldn't yet draw conclusions."

"August 12, Army Medical Center, Washington. The Army Medical Center is really a fine place and a very comfortable place to live. Best of all I like the band concerts that are frequently given in the evening. The bands are first rate and the music splendid. You sprawl out comfortably on the lawn and listen, and watch the birds. I was astonished to see that there was a harp in the band, and I don't mean an Irishman. What do they do with a harp in a parade? I think being the harp player in the Marine Band is one of the world's quaint occupations."

Shortly after Phil came to Washington, he developed jaundice.

"I am still in the hospital and enjoying myself greatly. When you have jaundice your blood serum turns brown and a measurement of the brownness gives an expression of how sick you are. This figure is the icteric index. Icteric comes from a Greek word meaning jaundice. The family of Black-

birds, Icteridae, comes from the same word. The tropical members of this family, Troupials and Orioles, are mostly yellow.

"Fort Devens, Massachusetts, December. Tomorrow we take a jaunt across the obstacle course; I hope to get through without breaking any bones. I am getting too old for such things. Today a fellow guessed I was 23. When I told him that I was 32 he said I was still 23, so maybe I can get over the obstacle course intact. Still I must be aging, because it was very recently that I had a hard time convincing people I was 21—the army must be doing it."

Just before being shipped with the 12th Evacuation Hospital, Phil was transferred to Chemical Warfare, and started officers' training at Edgewood Arsenal.

"Edgewood, January 17, 1943. It looks as if I am really in for something now. I'll soon know what a severely disciplined and regimented life is."

During his time at Edgewood, Phil was too busy to write, for his day started at 5.45 A.M. and ended at 10.30 P.M. After being commissioned Second Lieutenant, he was sent to Marfa, Texas, and from there to Florida.

"Sunday, May 9, 1943. Greetings to you from an embryo commando! It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But you can't tell what is going to happen next in the army. The train ride to Saint Louis was pleasant and uneventful. Birds seen were crows and a cock pheasant in Pennsylvania. The Mississippi River at St. Louis was disappointing. It isn't as wide as the Delaware and no birds on it. From there I took the train to San Antonio. When I got up next morning we were in Texas. We stopped at a place called Palestine where there was a flock of swifts flying around. It was plain to see that their chin and breast were a light color, so they were White-throated Swifts. Between Palestine and San Antonio I saw about eight Scissor-tailed Flycatchers, always around a farmhouse or some dwelling. When the train stopped at a place called Marathon there was a pair of them in a tree next to the railroad, building a nest. This was the first close up view that I had, and I could see the coral red under their wings. During this part of the trip I saw jack rabbits and prairie dogs. Fort Russell was a very pretty post. The climate there is wonderful, hot and dry during the day—no sweating—and cool at night. The first new bird I saw there was the House Finch. There was a pair of them around the house, and they could be seen or heard most any time. The male is a pretty bird, like the Purple Finch, but brighter. To me the song sounds like that of a Purple Finch. Also there was a pair of Cassin's Kingbirds around the house. Western Kingbirds were around too. Another new bird for me was the Lark Sparrow, found in the fields and open places around the post. Sand lizzards scampered all around.

"I expected to be sent to Louisiana but orders came for me to go directly to Camp Gordon Johnson. It is on the Gulf coast south of Tallahassee, and is the first of three camps where we go for amphibious training. It includes such quaint things as knife fighting, bayonet fighting, judo, grenade training, all sorts of swimming like swimming with clothes and a pack on, disrobing in

water, and swimming in water under burning gasoline. So far I have climbed down a net hung down the side of a 30 foot tower. This represents the side of a transport and we down climb it with a full pack and a rifle.

"I have had fine views of White Ibises, although not through the binoculars, since it was during the day when I was supposed to be working. They are the whitest of white birds and when they are high in the sky, which is so very blue down here, they really shine and their wings twinkle."

"May 11. Today I enjoyed three Nighthawks which were active until 1.00 P.M. They were flying, calling and diving. I have often read of these birds booming at the bottom of a dive, but had never heard it. Today I had plenty of opportunity to hear it and study it. In the first place it is not a boom; it is a tearing or dull ripping sound. The most interesting thing was the way they hold their wings when this noise is made. At the bottom of the dive they bow their wings stiffly and rather deeply, with the ends of the wings arched to a point below the bottom line of the body, and I think that I saw that the wing feathers were spread apart. I didn't have my binoculars and couldn't tell for sure. These dives were quite close to me and ended on a level with my eyes, and several times it looked as if their wing feathers were spread to make the noise. Their wings are outstretched and they dive like an airplane, then bending their wings into a nicely curved arch at the bottom of the dive, they zoom up again. One poor soldier was wandering alone around the grenade course when a Nighthawk dove right by him. He came running back to me very much surprised and bewildered, and said that a bird was dive bombing him.

"Give Potter my best regards and tell him that my life list is lengthening even if my life span is shortening."

"May 31. Sunday a week ago I went to Walkulla Springs—a natural wonder and a place of great beauty and of exceeding interest to me. It is a spring-fed pool of absolutely crystal clear water, 185 feet deep in the deepest place, and you can see bottom as if you were looking through plate glass. We took a trip in one of the glass bottomed boats. I haven't seen anything like it before; it was like looking into a new world. There were schools and schools of fish of several different species. The boat would stop at a certain spot and a crowd of big, old catfish would come out of the vegetation on the bottom and swim right up to the glass bottom of our boat. I don't know whether we were there to look at the catfish or to have the catfish look at us.

"A trip down the Walkulla River which runs out of the spring was the best part of all. Cypressess are along the river, and all the trees are hung with Spanish moss. Turtles were everywhere, crowded on logs stuck in the shallow water. Some of them were as big as dishpans. When we got into the little power boat and started down the river we passed about six Limpkins out in plain view. Then there were Water Turkeys all around, Florida Gallinules, a pair of Coots and a pair of Lesser Scaups which we passed so close that you could see the purple of the drakes head with the naked eye. Ospreys

were flying around and one was flying toward its nest carrying some Spanish moss that trailed out behind it. What interested me so much was that there were so many birds around and that they were so undisturbed by so many people and boats."

From the latter part of June until the early part of October, 1943, Phil was in Camp Pickett, Virginia, except for a week's manoeuvres in the mountains of West Virginia.

"The most interesting part of the manoeuvres was the instruction and practice we received in mountain climbing; scaling cliffs and going down them on ropes. I am now able to collect Duck Hawk's eggs."

In late October Phil's Company was shipped to England; the country he had hoped to be sent to from the time he first entered the army.

"I am so glad to be here and my emotions and imaginations are having a spree. The weather is most amazing and exasperating—within an hour it rains, snows, and then you have bright sunlight. The day before Thanksgiving the battalion received binoculars and I immediately demanded and got a pair—6 x 30, and good ones too. As a climax to my Thanksgiving I decided to get my first binocular view of English avifauna, so I set out merrily over hill and dale, field and hedgerow, fences and streams, roads and canals. The most abundant bird along streams and canals is the Moorhen, a gallinule. They aren't as secretive as ours, but walk around and forage on fields and pastures near streams, reminding me of chickens. Mute Swans are common. It is a stirring sight to see one of these huge white birds slowly flying along, low over a green meadow. Another surprise to me is the frequency of Magpies, at least one for every mile of a hike."

"March 21, 1944. Since this is the first day of spring, and the weather is more or less springlike, and since I am very much out-of-doors, next to nature, living like an animal and being trained to think and act like a predatory one, I am quite in the mood to write the letter which I should have written long ago—and the theme shall be birds. The bird, which for the past few days has been singing so incessantly and loudly on the wing, I suddenly realized was the Skylark. It starts to sing as it rises from the ground, and continues to sing as it goes on up. At the top of its ascent it hovers with fast wing beats, singing most lustily. For quite a few moments it will remain stationary in midair, suspended by short quick wing beats, giving a flood of song. Compared with this bird, our Horned Lark has an undeveloped, immature and plain song. The Sky Lark has an ecstatic rush of warbles and twitters, loud and bold. The most interesting part is the descent. The Lark drops slowly, straight down, with wings outstretched but not beating. Then it tips head downward, and goes into a groundward plunge.

"There is so much I could write about Rooks, Jackdaws, Magpies and Lapwings, all large and obvious birds, but my days are long and hard and I must get to bed."

"April 2. I am always pleased to watch Magpies. At this time of year

they are in pairs and you seldom see one without another near by. They are fine large birds, boldly patterned in black and white, but when you are close to them in a good light, you can see that their back isn't black, but a beautiful dark, steel blue. They seem to be the same as the American Magpies.

"I have found my first nest with eggs in England, a Mallard's nest. I flushed the female as I was aimlessly plodding across a field. The nest was in a depression in the turf, overhung with slender stems of sedges. It was thickly lined with gray down feathers that made a soft and warm bed for the eleven eggs that completely filled it. Most of this field was rutted, ridged and scarred by tracks of heavy military vehicles. The nest was between two deep ruts, and I hope the duck has the good fortune not to have her nest and eggs crushed. Eleven eggs on the 27th means that she started laying at the latest on the 16th of March. That would be early for the States, wouldn't it?

"I wish we had Lapwings at home. They are so large, conspicuously-patterned and noisy. The most unusual thing about the appearance of the bird is the several thin plumes that stick out from the top of its head. Sometimes these feathers are clumped together, making it look as if a single feather ornamented its scalp, like an Indian's. At this time of year the males make the biggest fools of themselves—quite human, aren't they? Much of their exuberance and amorousness is shown by the craziest flying you ever saw. They take off in an erratic flight which is one continuous display of agility on the wing. They twist on one side of the body, and then quickly twist to the other side; they will make a series of sharp turns, then dive and swoop back up into the air again. The bird seems absolutely out of control and insane. All their wonderful expenditure of energy is for the amusement and delectation of the female, who is more interested in poking about in the grass for bugs.

"When I first came to England the Black-headed Gull was in its winter plumage: white head with black spot behind the eye. Now they are in their breeding plumage, with a dark head. There is a bright white blaze on the fore edge of the wing among the outer primaries. This shows at all seasons, and is a convenient identification mark. Previously, to me, gulls were water front birds; but here they are all over the land, and in winter fields are full of them."

"April 24. The Magpie fascinates me. It is such a magnet for my eyes; such a striking bird to watch. I wish I had time to give it close observation for a length of time. Since the middle of April there has been a vast increase in small birds. Many are the European Warblers, very plain birds reminding me of vireos. I have been delighted with the song of the Wren. To my crude ears it is an accomplished singer and I am always pleased to listen to it. In several places I have watched the buteo of this country, called a Buzzard. It reminds me in actions and shape of a Red-tail. For a while I was able to watch a pair of Kestrels. They look and act so much like Sparrow Hawks, and are exceedingly graceful and adroit on the wing."

"May 22. It is quite late and I should go to bed, for I have been busy and tired lately, but I have an ungovernable urge to start a letter to you. I like your experience with the Screech Owls. This country is quite an owly place. Several times I have seen Barn Owls and heard them at night. Also Tawny Owls are here and there. In a zoo I visited there was a Tawny Owl perched in a cage of Night Herons. The owl wasn't an exhibit—it could get in and out. About two weeks ago I was coming along a main road in a jeep. I had been riding most of the day, mile after mile, and I was looking at nothing in particular, when suddenly I noticed near the top of a spike ladder on a telephone pole alongside the road, a round, brown bunch of something. As I passed by I saw that it was a Tawny Owl roosting complacently out in the open, with not a bit of cover and an enormous amount of heavy road traffic passing continuously beneath it. It was as undisturbed as if it were in the thickest pine tree.

"For a day or two I was able to watch, for a few minutes at a time, a small pond in a barnyard. Along its edges there was aquatic vegetation, and in one place on its bank were some bushes. When I first approached the pond I saw some black things running through the grass which I first thought were rats, but they turned out to be young Moorhens—three of them, jet black and downy. They could streak through the vegetation like a snake. Moorhens have interested me. They have changed with the changing of the country, and adapted themselves to live by tiny patches of water, in scant cover. It amazes me how intensively the wet places are exploited by these birds. Give them a speck of permanent water, and a few blades of grass, and they will call it home. Around this same farm yard pond was a pair of Pied Wagtails, the common member of this group and the only ones I have seen. It is a bird I am ever glad to watch. They walk, not hop, and twitch their longish tails up and down. They are a friendly bird, and if your house is near a bit of marsh or water, a pair of Wagtails will be around your yard."

"May 26. The beauty of rural England still impresses and delights me. There are such quantities of wild flowers. I was recently in a narrow lane running between two walls that were thickly grown with bushes and grass. On the sloping sides and tops of the walls there was an abundance of blue bells, primroses and a species of pink. In the bright sunshine and against the green of the grass, all these flowers made this lane a beautiful place. The countryside is carefully kept and its beauty maintained. Every house and cottage has its garden that seems always to have something in bloom. There is a continuous growing season, and vegetation is found in the queerest places. I have seen large oaks with limbs that were covered with growing ferns. Then I came upon a stone wall in a city which had a crack in the corner of it, and a vertical line of ferns were growing from this crack. Old roofs have a layer of algae, mosses and lichens on them. Some thatched roofs have ferns sprouting from them. Cuckoos call all around, but as yet I haven't been able to go looking for one. There is a woodpecker yodeling near by. Surprisingly

close there is a hen Pheasant on a nest, with eleven eggs. From time to time the cock crows. I like to watch Jackdaws. It never fails to surprise me to see a crow that has the back of its head and neck gray.

“It probably will be a long time before you get this letter. Keep me informed about Street. I am particularly concerned about him. Give my best wishes to everyone.

Phil

On D Day, June 6, 1944, Phil was killed in action on the Normandy Beach.