

# The Liberator: One World War II Soldier's 500-Day Odyssey from the Beaches of Sicily to the Gates of Dachau

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The untold story of the bloodiest and most dramatic march to victory of the Second World War.

Written with Alex Kershaw's trademark narrative drive and vivid immediacy, *The Liberator* traces the remarkable battlefield journey of maverick U.S. Army officer Felix Sparks through the Allied liberation of Europe—from the first landing in Italy to the final death throes of the Third Reich.

Over five hundred bloody days, Sparks and his infantry unit battled from the beaches of Sicily through the mountains of Italy and France, ultimately enduring bitter and desperate winter combat against the die-hard SS on the Fatherland's borders. Having miraculously survived the long, bloody march across Europe, Sparks was selected to lead a final charge to Bavaria, where he and his men experienced some of the most intense street fighting suffered by Americans in World War II.

And when he finally arrived at the gates of Dachau, Sparks confronted scenes that robbed the mind of reason—and put his humanity to the ultimate test.

ALEX KERSHAW is the New York Times bestselling author of several books on World War II, including *The Longest Winter* and *The Bedford Boys*. He lives in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

## The West

Miami, Arizona, 1931

Felix Sparks woke early. It was getting light outside. He pulled on his 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 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 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 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 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 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, 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."

"Are you kidding me, buddy?"

"No, I'm not kidding 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 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.

#### Other Books

WW II Duty, Honor, Country, DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY The eighty-four men and women who tell their stories exemplify these words. From the home front to the battlefield and from behind the lines, their words speak of loss, pain, fear, loneliness, selflessness, faith and hope. As one veteran said, "World War II caused me to understand that I served my country for a purpose greater than myself." Many of these soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines served in nearly every major battle in Europe and the Pacific including: Pearl Harbor, the invasion of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Their sacrifice for our country is a debt which cannot be repaid. They represent the best of "The Greatest Generation." "This book is a fitting tribute to those Hoosiers who gave their all for the cause of freedom during World War II. The personal stories of those who served offer a window into a time that should be remembered." -Ray Boomhower, Indiana historian and author "Hodgin and Hardwick have produced an interesting and informative compendium of World War II stories of veterans that should instill a sense of pride in students and adults of all ages. The book has a readable style of a period in our history that we would do well not to forget." John Shively, M.D., Author and WW II historian "A must read for both historians and those desiring to learn more about one of the most decisive periods in our nation's history. The authors have not only captured the veterans' stories but also the sights and sounds of what many were thinking when facing death, hardships and struggling to survive." J. Stewart Goodwin, Brig. Gen., USAF (Ret), Executive Director, Indiana War Memorials "This book is an absorbing collection of stories from the men and women of the "Greatest Generation." Their stories illustrate some of the pain and incredible atrocities they witnessed, and at the same time, the friendships and joys they experienced. A must read for every person who wants to know what it was really like during WW II." Charles "Tom" Applegate, Director, Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs ? ? ? ? ? . They represent the best of "The Greatest Generation." "This book is a fitting tribute to those Hoosiers who gave their all for the cause of freedom during World War II. The personal stories of those who served offer a window into a time ..."