

JUST LIKE A TAXI

FRONTLINE AMBULANCE

ITALY 1944-45

“Artful Dodger”
Bill Cantrall

No one does anything from a single motive.

—**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

A la “Paper Doll,” with Passion and Pizzazz, Please

Finale

“Oh, the American Field Service is the best of all!

We answer each and every call

—*Just like a Taxi*—

We answer *each* and *every* call!”

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Front cover: Generalized rendering in color of an American Field Service ambulance, based on photographs from AFS Archives. Stranded 485-B ambulance carried away from S. Clemente ford (across the Sillaro) November '44, AFS Archives, photogs unknown. Ambulance on street, public domain.

Back cover: Author with Dodge WC54 by AFS photographer Irving Penn, and 60 some years later by Anne Royston.

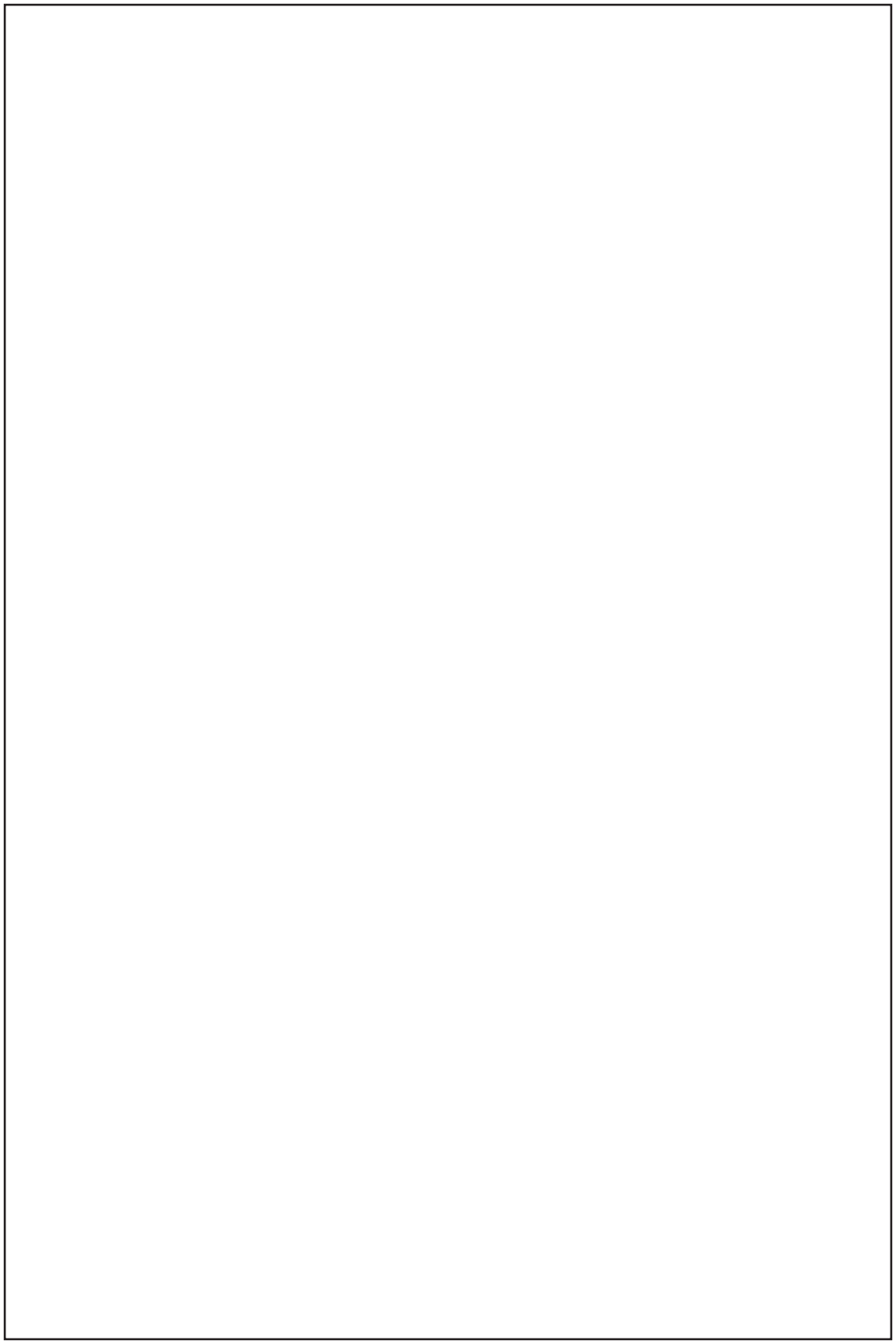
To American Field Service Volunteers

I saw them save lives at the risk of their own. Indeed the many fatalities in their own ranks provide an example of that heroism that helped to bring final allied victory.

—General Dwight D. Eisenhower

In battle, in forest, at the precipice in the mountains
On the dark great sea, in the midst of javelins and arrows,
In sleep, in confusion, in the depths of shame,
The good deeds a man has done before defend him.

—The Bhagavadgita



Just Like a Taxi: Frontline Ambulance
Italy 1944–45

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Preface

JUST LIKE A TAXI has been written to show what the life and times of a WWII American Field Service ambulance driver were “really like,” but with a saving lightness of touch. Nobody would *really* care to experience the misery or fear we were sometimes subject to, or even face the constant flow of ugly words that some of the troops we served could not communicate without. War could be thoroughly unpleasant, there’s no doubt about that, but I’m betting you’ll appreciate *this* story to the full despite a shiver here and there and occasional sympathetic pang, without losing a moment’s enjoyment. After all this time I find my younger self vastly amusing and usually forgivable. I believe you will too.

The many gaps in our wartime knowledge of what was happening even right in front of us have been filled in by research, starting with what Jody Brinton and I did in preparing the AFS Drivers’ Application for US Army Discharges. I was luckier than most to have lived with so many spectacularly different army units (from *seven* national armies!) and in witnessing 2 New Zealand Corps’ spearheading drive from Budrio across the Po to Trieste from the tip of the spear.

A few of my fellow drivers I call by name, but most other names and ranks are inventions and guesses. However, all of us in this account are perfectly real people, who didn’t always *behave* as perfectly as we might. But no worries, mate! Nobody has been singled out to be

embarrassed or demeaned. Finally, any views I have expressed or misstatements I may have made are *mine alone*, and should not be attributed as well to any other AFS driver or the organization we founded and support—AFS Intercultural Programs.

—Bill Cantrall
Spring 2011

Foreword

Bill Cantrall's keen observation gives a unique portrait of the Italian campaign in the latter part of the Second World War, saving lives under the terrible conditions of the weather, the terrain, and the battlefield. The problems and rewards of living and working within one culture after another are fascinating. While much may be learned from his knowledge of the people, the times, and the historical context, his very personal story is as absorbing, complete, and readable as a novel. Cantrall's infectious love for exploring the languages and cultures of those he meets leaves us with a better understanding and feeling of affection like his own. But it takes patience and fortitude to achieve cross-cultural understanding. His tales give life to an amazing variety of characters, ranging from the fun-loving Poles with their frightening practical jokes to the beautiful Nuci with whom he shares a deep affection. He's come looking for trouble, it's true, but more trouble finds him than he was hoping to find. Not everybody loves him. Angry colonels are rampant. Every day is a struggle, with almost more rules than ways to beat them. But there are friends to save him when he really needs it, and comrades to sustain him for life.

Though most Volunteers joined the AFS simply to do their part in the war, their unique experiences led them to a vision beyond war. As Cantrall describes so well, the AFS drivers had come to know the soldiers and people of a dozen nations as friends. Wishing to preserve the

rewards of good will and respect gained by people of differing cultures living and working together, and to perpetuate the humanitarian ideals embodied in their wartime service, they chose to continue as an organization dedicated to promoting international understanding through cross-cultural educational exchanges, with wartime enemies as well as allies. Under the leadership of Stephen Galatti, one-time drivers across the country sold the idea to their own localities and hosted many of the first students in their own homes. In 1947-48, 52 high-school students from 10 countries came to the United States; soon young Americans were being invited to live abroad.

Many of the former drivers have retained their interest in AFS Intercultural Programs, grown far beyond their dreams. In the “can do” tradition of the drivers, AFS has become a decentralized, community-based endeavor, with more than fifty AFS Partner organizations and programs in thirty more countries. *Volunteering* remains central to the modern AFS. Other programs have been added to the high-school student exchange, including programs for teachers and educators, vocational training programs and community service programs for young adults. Well over 300,000 individuals have traveled abroad on AFS exchanges over the past half century, with more than 10,000 taking part each year. AFSers in thousands of communities around the world are shaping the global community of the future. AFS impact can be seen in the success which former AFS participants have achieved as diplomats, educators, business executives, and deeply involved members of their communities. The skills and values that people develop from AFS exchanges stay with them for the rest of their lives, changing their lives for the better. AFS bridges the differences that separate people and teaches them to appreciate increasing global diversity. May we continue to heed this age-old advice, after the Sanskrit text, “Walk together, talk together, all ye peoples

of the earth; then and only then will ye find peace.” None of this would have been possible without the vision, determination and positive attitude of the ambulance drivers. In that sense, Cantrall’s fascinating story, as unique as it is, represents all drivers. I am sure you will enjoy *Just Like a Taxi* as much as I have. If you are concerned about the horrors of war and intrigued by his comments on cultures and languages, you might wish to learn more about AFS programs around the world. You are cordially invited to visit our website at www.afs.org.

—Paul Shay
President, AFS Intercultural
Programs Inc.
1999-2003

“Thank you, Paul, and so say we all.”

—Tachi (Francisco) Cazal
President, AFS International
December 10, 2010



Route of 2 New Zealand Advance 9 April to 2 May 1945. (Image from the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre WH2-21BaPo39a.jpg.)

FUBAR! Thoroughly Bad Show

This was the farthest up the valley of the Sillaro I'd ever been. The sun had dropped below the mountains but enough sky light was left to show me where I was, hopefully without showing the Germans, too. Man, it felt good to be here. For the past two days, scenes of scaling Monte Grande after scores of wounded had kept running through my head, and I was eager for something new. Eager, but cautious about the particulars. An hour ago the long-awaited "word" had finally reached me and three other AFS ambulance drivers being held at the San Clemente Aid Station for "special assignment." This time it wasn't eenie, meenie, miney, mo. The spring push was *on*:

"Cantrall? You'll be on your own up this road at the 'farmhouse with two Sherman tanks.'" Reading it all from a sheet of paper. Who *is* this guy? Indian Army, pips on his shoulder, but so what?

"Wait. Are you talking about the old Nabha Akal post?"

"There's nobody there—they'll bring the wounded to you."

"Just a minute, sir. *Which* farmhouse with two Shermans? There's two of them up there. The nearest on the right, or the farthest on the left?"

"The farthest, the farthest! And *stay right there*, so they can find you."

"Yes, *sir*." I didn't care for his tone. "All night, *sir*?"

"Until relieved!" Getting a bit pissed. Good. All in a sacred cause, my bonnie behind.

Very interesting spot. There are the second two Shermans all right, right where they'd stopped last fall, this being the farthest up the long length of Italy the Allied Armies have ever been, too—on the Castel S. Pietro road just short of Route 9 and Bologna. I am leery of investigating too closely as this is No Man's Land, the narrow valley skirting Monte Grande on the south and east. The area is visited only by night patrols, theirs and ours, and no vehicle ever comes up here—nobody knows exactly where the mines begin. I pull off the road where the lane goes in to the farm. There's still light across the Sillaro, and I can make out the dread turnoff from the causeway onto the trail to the Ripiano aid post. If a smoke-screen is still being churned out back at the ford, it isn't reaching up here, but the shades of night have fallen fast enough to conceal my presence. I tidy up the ambulance for instant service, and sit in the front smoking, hiding the glow—German night glasses are that good—and watch the stars come out and the artificial moonglow come on behind me, illuminating the rear. After a bit of thought, I pull the ambulance a few feet farther on so it sits straddling a friendly ditch yet can be reversed into the farm lane instantly. Happy I had pinned down exactly where I was to be, I open the rear doors and lie down on a stretcher while I wait, maybe have a nap.

WHAM! WHAM! ZAM-ZAM-ZAM! Big, big Fifth Army shells are landing behind me, between me and the road to the ford. 105s, maybe 155s, fired from halfway back to Florence. I am out of the ambulance and under it in a flash, without thought. The shelling is being leisurely "walked" up both sides of the valley, and the ground is shaking responsively, me along with it as well as on my own. Something has gone awry in the Sillaro Valley beyond reason or conception, but I am getting very little use out of my foggy brain, pounded by concussions of this magnitude:

Awake! for Mars against the Shield of Night
Has hurled a Spear to shake the Stars with Fright!

As the bombardment moves on past me, I'm thinking of beating a retreat. Nobody *intends* for me to be a target. I didn't piss anybody off that bad. The idiot just sent me to the wrong farmhouse. But the US 155s have barely subsided before the German 88s reverse the whole process, starting at a distance and marching their KARUMPs right up to me and past. Artillery types are *obsessed* with these rituals. Then both sides are shooting. I'm getting pasted, basted, and wasted. This is way past SNAFU. (As far as my mother is concerned, that's "Situation Normal, All Fouled Up!") This is *FUBAR*, "Beyond All Recognition." When a lull finally occurs, I'm ready to holler Uncle. "Hey! Hey! There's nobody out here but me!"

But wait a minute! I'm on the 35-yard line for the biggest attack of the Italian Campaign. What an opportunity! Then I hear the creaks and clanks of tank tracks across the river down by the ford. *They are coming!* What can I do but cheer like a maniac! Now our own 25-pounders at San Clemente, where I've just come from, begin a rolling barrage ahead of them. But the Germans have already picked up the sound of the tanks and start blasting away over there and then on my side of the river before I even catch the sound of Shermans coming up behind me. Big white stars. They roar by close enough to reach out and touch, and the shells come pouring in. The Jerries can see the tanks in the light of their flares and are throwing everything they have at them and me. I cower quaking under my tin-can of an ambulance cursing the wanky Yank that told the flighty Eye-tie that told the flamin' Limey that told the punctilious Pukka Sahib that had told stupid me the exact spot I was to wait for wounded this night. Like a litany, I blame each in turn for this cockup, this thoroughly bad show.

Then for a time all of the guns on both sides are firing, though not so much at me. The sound of the engines and tracks and firing moves away gradually and then it too is gone. And I never

see a single tank blow up, if that's who I was here for. I'm back on my feet now looking and listening. This push is going through.

I slide a stretcher out under the stars and lie on it in wonder, about the attack, the battle around me, the fact that we're getting out of the mountains, and why weird things keep happening to me, which stirs up my fury again at being sent "a farmhouse too far" in the first place.

"Why go *looking* for trouble?" grumbled Pop, when I told him about joining the AFS. The way he said it, I knew what was coming: "*It will find you soon enough.*" How could he have been so right? I'd just eaten dirt in a ditch in the dark, in an army where everybody "spoke" Italian and nobody understood it, and where our various brands of English had become mutually unintelligible, which is how I came to be the only living creature in the Sillaro Valley with all hell breaking loose around me. At least *I* knew where I was, if nobody else did, but I didn't know who I had been assigned to. It could be Gurkha Rifles, 4/11 Sikhs, Highland Light Infantry, Reggimento San Marino, 6 South African tankers, almost anybody. Even if *I had* known, I still couldn't have said whether officially at the moment I belonged to the nominally American Fifth Army or the nominally British Eighth Army, since units got switched back and forth without notice. Both armies were complete hodgepodes as well, of individually unique military units from all over the world, many of which had made me for the moment their own. Lying here alone now, more than ever before I can't help wishing I were somewhere more meaningful to the war, and with comrades in arms about me.

As a "swing" driver in the American Field Service, which supplied volunteer ambulance drivers to front-line posts in both Allied armies, I had an unmatched opportunity to serve beside—and exchange culture shock with—an extraordinary variety of men. Our differences guaranteed interesting relationships but not necessarily instant brotherhood. If I found them funny, they found me hilarious. Where their behavior was puzzling, foolish, and improper, mine was incomprehensible, idiotic, and outra-

geous, and yet, soldiering together, comrades we became. Bless them all, if I misuse and abuse them yet again here—never worse than myself—it is truly meant in appreciation.

Even more of a culture shock for total amateurs was being completely subject to military law and discipline. Any Allied officer could and did give us orders, quite frequently in conflict with our sense of duty, common sense, and moral code. If records were kept I would claim first place both for dodging orders and for getting nailed at it. As a result, this account sometimes seems more like a picaresque novel than anything else, more Tom Jones than Tom Brown. I'm determinedly seeking opportunities to justify my personal participation in the war, but the obstacles are so great, the diversions so unavoidable, and the fallout so ruinous, it's hard to tell. So call it a *beau geste*, a tale of war and adventure. A military history told from a unique perspective, that of an AFS ambulance volunteer struggling to serve and survive as well as he can in one strange army after another, which is what makes this history entirely new: Nobody knows the trouble *I've* seen. Like right now. There's not a soul, not a sound. Trouble. *Where's* the war? It can't just bloody go off and leave me, not after all I've gone through to get here!

We didn't see it coming back in long-A Athens, Illinois, not for a minute. But, peaceful as the place was, I was already learning something about war at the age of three. There were "war veterans" to be seen or heard of who lacked arms, legs, eyes, or the power to breathe or think normally, or do much at all. "Shell-shocked," "gassed," "machine-gunned" reached my ears along with "never right since." "War veteran" was never used for men who had "come out all right." My greatest excitement for the next three years was "doughboys" in ten-year-old uniforms firing a volley over a fallen comrade's grave, a comrade of the spirit who might have served in the Spanish-American War or even the Civil War instead of "Over There." The Fourth of July was a *big* day, with veterans of all three wars, parades, ceremonies, speeches, prayers, songs, and flags everywhere. We sang, "By thy rivers gently flowing, Illinois, Illinois..." and