



MORGAN O'BRIEN PRESTON

1936

Morgan Preston, in the first of three busy years at St. Paul's, edited a small magazine, progressive in its views, and helped found a new Fourth Form literary society, the *Curia*, which continued for some years as a rival of the *Propylaeon*. Before he was 16, he was an editor of the *Horae*. He twice won the *Horae's* Williamson Medal for the best article of the year, and he was also awarded the Keep Prize for the best essay on a subject in American History. An able speaker, he was chosen for the S.P.S. team that debated against Groton. He graduated *cum laude* in 1935, at the end of his Fifth Form year. Near-sighted and unathletic, he had nonetheless rowed and played football. But what distinguished him at St. Paul's, in addition to unusual quickness and vigor of mind, were the intensity and breadth of his interest in the state of the country and in its future. He was already a very intelligent citizen. In politics he held views contrary to those of most of the boys in school with him, views to which he gave clear and forceful expression in writing and in speech. His was a decidedly enlivening influence at St. Paul's.

At Harvard, Preston was an editor of the *Crimson* and was co-author of "Fair Enough," the Hasty Pudding Show of 1939. In the summer of 1936, secretary of "First Voters for Roosevelt" of New York City, he made a number of street speeches in favor of President Roosevelt's re-election. In 1939, he and August Heckscher, 2d, '32, took a motor trip through the West and South, spending some time in study of the T.V.A. installations at Muscle Shoals. Preston graduated from Harvard in 1939, *cum laude* in Economics, and from the

Yale Law School in January, 1942. The next two months, up to his induction, he was a clerk in the law offices of Davies, Auerbach, Cornell and Hardy, in New York.

Preston's near-sightedness caused him to be refused by the Navy and by the Marine Corps. On induction in April, 1942, he was assigned to the Military Police. Still hoping to get into a combat unit, he declined the M.P. commission offered him after training at Fort Riley, and applied for Infantry Officers' School. He was commissioned Second Lieutenant in January, 1943, at Fort Benning, applied for immediate overseas duty, and after several disappointing delays, was finally ordered to the Mediterranean, in January, 1944. He served in Italy in Company E, 15th Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division (Fifth Army).

Having landed at Anzio, Preston wrote in letters:

[Feb. 15] "I am well and dirty. I have some very good men. Life at present is not too uncomfortable. The front is noisy and dangerous but I am glad to be here." [March 6] "I have a cold and am in a hospital. It is very nice to get some dry sleep. . . . I'd like to put in a word for the front line medics. The litter squads are just as brave as the infantry, and they don't get much credit. Recently I had a group who used to go out and sit in a wet ditch at night. (Hence the cold.) Daytime we slept with some litter bearers. They dried our clothes for us and cooked our food without our asking." [March 12] "We are still on the beach head. I don't know how the N. Y. papers have been treating this operation, but I hear some news stories have been gloomy. Well, believe me, it would be almost impossible for the Germans to push us into the sea. This is a very, very strong position." [March 19, from Naples] "Well, I am in the hospital again, but with more honor. Some German threw a hand grenade at me and I forgot to duck. I have several slight wounds and one piece went through the calf of my left leg, tearing some of the muscles. [He was also temporarily deafened in one ear.] Meanwhile I am comfortable, bored and disgusted with the whole affair. I was running a raid on a house and if I had run it right there would have been no trouble."

The Army took a different view of Preston's running of the raid on the house and awarded him the Silver Star: "For gallantry in action. On the night of 17 March, 1944, north of Isola Bella, Italy, Second Lieutenant Preston, after putting the men of his combat patrol into a position as a base of fire to support him, crept more than 100 yards in the face of intense machine gun, machine pistol and rifle fire, to destroy three occupants [of the house] with his Tommy gun. With complete disregard for the bullets hitting within a foot of him, Second

Lieutenant Preston threw a hand grenade through the window of the house from which more of the enemy were firing, silencing the fire and capturing a German who ran out of the house after single-handedly overpowering him in hand to hand struggle."

On May 18, back at Anzio, he wrote in his last letter home: "I went back to duty on the 15th. . . . This place is a madhouse now. New faces, new jobs, new work and new ideas. I have been given an important and exciting assignment. There is some chance that it will work out well. There is not much I can say. Don't worry about me."

The drive from Anzio that took Rome June 4 began May 23. On June 1, at 11 P.M., Morgan Preston left his command post near Valmontone in charge of a battle patrol of thirteen men whose objective was a cross-roads in enemy territory east of Palestrina. At 3:30 on the morning of June 2, the greater part of its mission accomplished, the patrol emerged from a lightly wooded area it had been traversing into a large clearing, planted with wheat, then already high.

"It was awful dark that night," one of the enlisted men wrote later, "we were out on a patrol into Jerries' territory. We walked into an ambush that took us by surprise more or less. The Lt. was a very brave and calm man. He was leading the column ahead of his scouts. The Lt. was well liked in the patrol. He was just another one of the fellows."

The ambush in the wheat field consisted of about sixty German riflemen supported by three tanks and three machine-guns. The patrol attempted to get by unnoticed, but the Germans began to fire. Preston was heard to give the order "Open up" and immediately afterwards a burst of machine-gun fire was seen to strike near where he had been heard. There is no question now but what he was killed then, instantly. The sergeant took command, and, as he said afterwards, the patrol "decided to shoot it out." The field was lit up as bright as day by flares, and there would have been no chance of escape, had not two men, each later awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously, got up and attacked the German detachment with Tommy guns, inflicting a score of casualties and causing such confusion at the cost of their own lives, that the sergeant could withdraw what was left of the patrol.

Rome fell two days later, but it was three weeks before Preston's body was found, so bitter had been the fighting in this area and so numerous were the German mine-fields.