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WITH THE VICTORIOUS GERMAN ARMY:
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I First Saw the Ruins of Dunkerque

by John Fisher

Berlin (*by cable*)

OUR PARTY was whipped into shape with German precision and we set out from Cologne in seven high-powered Mercedes-Benz staff cars. Along the road to Aachen I saw kids playing soldiers with tin-pipe cannons and little helmets, emulating their fathers at the front. At Maastricht we crossed the Meuse. The Belgians had blown up the bridges but the German *pioniere* [sappers] had slapped up two new iron bridges within 24 hours. Here posters forbade citizens outside their homes after 10 p.m. lest they be shot by patrols.

Along the Meuse Valley we passed long lines of refugees plodding back to their homes after the vain flight, dodging German Army trucks which drove at top speed along the narrow road. In Liège bread was being rationed though food seemed sufficient. We were told to stock up as we were entering an area where food was scarce. On the road to Namur signs of heavy fighting increased. Mine traps, still charged, forced us off the highway. In Namur almost all houses in the northern section of town had been hit or shelled, bridges blown up and guts of houses scattered in the streets. Storekeepers were doing business in shops with their fronts blown out.

This war was fought along the roads. Messerschmitts swept low across the center of a road, machine-gunning Allied truck columns, but bombs were not dropped on the roads. For miles south of Namur I could see holes on either side of the road, about 150 ft. apart, where bombs had been dropped so as to scatter shrapnel over the road surface without tearing up the road itself. German officers informed us: "We would be foolish to demolish the roads since roadside bombings are just as efficient." Unfortunately for the Belgians, they build

marvelous roads for the German mechanized army which could speed along unhindered at 30 or 40 miles an hour.

I was amazed to see so few soldiers' graves along the roadside. Only here and there did a cross topped by a steel helmet mark the spot where a man fell. The Germans bury their dead within one hour. This is done to prevent an epidemic and to spare the soldiers the sight of their dead comrades.

Late in the afternoon we drove through the Maginot Line, marked by huge street barricades, barbed wire, deep lines of bunkers strong enough to resist 6-in. shelling. Bunkers were shoved out far ahead of the main fortification, which centered about Maubeuge.

The Germans concentrated strong tank and mechanized infantry forces upon this fortress, shelling and bombing the town itself for three days. On the last day 15 Stukas in 15 minutes gave it the death blow. Inside the town gates I saw with what efficiency Maubeuge had been shelled and bombed, precisely and systematically reducing the homes of 25,000 inhabitants to a heap of rubbish. Yet not one single street was hit or damaged except for refuse which was easily removable. Two old women salvaging bits of furniture from their little shack told me that some 50 civilians had been killed by a shell dropping on the church. Their bewildered expressions and wild gesticulations told adequately of the terrorizing effect of Stuka attacks, with whistling and howling bombs smashing everything within reach. The air was filled with the stench of dead, which German officers called the "perfume of battle."

At Catillon we happened upon 15,000 French and British prisoners taken at La Bassée on May 28. Among them was a platoon of Lancasters, its leader reporting 25% casualties. He said an attack of 300 tanks in combination with heavy trench mortars got them. He said: "It was the fault of our staff in getting orders jumbled. The correct order in the right place would have got us out of that hole." They had been marching for three days in the scorching sun with little food and water, since they had been caught fighting without their complete packs. Frenchmen, he said, had been taken with full equipment including tents.

He further said: "I never saw our own Air Force during all that time." He claimed that for three days straight he never

fired a single artillery shot and that when the opportunity arose to lambaste the German tanks a French officer forbade firing, mistrusting the British ability to fire over the French infantry. I asked him about the German Army. He answered: "It looks pretty wonderful and has us absolutely bamboozled. We were no match for it. I'd like to tell this to some officials back home." Grabbing an ax handle tightly and shaking it unmistakably, he said: "Politicians muffed the works!"

The Englishmen's spirits still seemed full of go and ready to fight. "Let me at them again," said the platoon sergeant. But the whole vast camp was a depressing sight. Men were begging for cigarets and asking for bread, since they got only one loaf for four men. They stood along a small river bank washing and shaving or clustered around small wood fires warming up what bits of canned food they had.

We passed through Arras, finding the railway station and the center of town destroyed, and sped on toward the coast at Boulogne. Along the road I saw hundreds of neatly stacked piles of 6-in. Allied shells. Columns of British trucks, now repainted, were carrying German supplies. In between them were motorcycle units with mounted machine guns, a field kitchen cooking on the run or trucks loaded with infantry—magnificent strapping fellows, with the look of conquerors.

Considering the 40-mile clip at which the German columns move, I was amazed at the small number of wrecked trucks. When I asked an officer "How come?" he looked surprised and said: "It is *verboten* to have collisions."

At Boulogne the docks were smashed to bits, warehouses burned to the ground and all around were great piles of Allied war matériel. In the harbor I saw hundreds of wine barrels that the French apparently always carry with them. We passed on up the coast through Calais and St.-Omer to Cassel, a hilltop town bristling with guns and jammed with trucks. Anti-aircraft guns, armored cars, equipment, wine bottles, canned food were lying about in heaps and piles. So well equipped were the British forces that even football shoes, dart-boards and other games were scattered among the rubbish.

Shortly before Bergues, last strong Dunkerque fortification, we had to leave our cars. Picking our way through a swamp,

we stopped to watch German Stukas trying to force their way through a barrage of French anti-aircraft fire. We could see the shells exploding close to their tails with little white puffs of smoke but never hitting them.

Along railroad tracks, through a mine-infested wood, we entered Bergues in Indian file. Trucks, tanks, vehicles of all kinds had been hastily pushed together in a futile effort to barricade the road. The town gate was blocked by a huge American caterpillar snow plow, behind which a French machine-gunner had left an unfinished meal. I squeezed past and entered a scene of complete ruin. For four days German Stukas and artillery had rained a shower of steel upon the town leaving no house untouched. Flames were still licking their way among the debris, while charred wood and burning cloth filled the air with stifling smoke. One church had remained untouched while another had its tower completely demolished. German shells were whistling overhead. And underneath these sounds I could hear the rapid staccato bark of German machine guns, answered by the slower *tak tak* of French gunners. To the north we could see the billowing smoke clouds of burning Dunkerque.

As we walked through the streets I noticed people here and there creeping out of their cellars. Two thousand had remained through the six-day bombardment. A French tank car exploded while nearby horses leisurely grazed stray bits of grass surrounding a World War monument. Swallows were flying about the empty street looking for their homes. The war had swept across Bergues and in its wake left nothing but ruins. While the German advance was breaking French resistance barely a mile to the north, soldiers here were already emptying French warehouses. Cigarets, chocolate, millions of rounds of munitions and food supplies for six months were their booty. Allied trucks and motorbikes already were doing their bit for the German Army. Again I saw a litter of abandoned matériel, ping-pong sets and golf clubs among it.

We left Bergues, since the Germans were still pouring shells into Dunkerque, and started down towards Lille, passing an ancient fort which surrendered to a single German tank when the tank appeared in its courtyard. The outskirts of Lille were completely shattered and in ruins, while the center of the

town remained intact. The stench of dead horses, some in harness in front of carts, filled the air. Near Ath we passed thousands of French prisoners behind barbed-wire fences, guarded by one German soldier.

Late at night we came into Brussels, undamaged except for blown-up bridges and radio station. Sidewalk cafes were doing a booming business as German soldiers tasted good coffee. Food was excellent, trolleys and buses were still running. But German soldiers and foreign correspondents seemed to be getting a corner on the American cigaret supplies, which are getting scarcer every day. Bread has already been rationed but the people of Brussels are not complaining. Although they do not like the Germans commanding the streets, they admit that the conquerors treat them with consideration. They say this is far better than 1918. I noticed that a lot of young Germans had Belgian girl friends. Regarding the capitulation of the Belgian Army, Belgians confide: "To what our King has done our hearts say no but our minds say yes."

Next morning we headed north again and that evening I slept in the hotel at Ostend where the Belgian Government had stopped briefly. A small card on a door said: "Bureau of the Foreign Minister" and beneath was written "Pierlot."

We started back down the Channel coast toward Dunkerque, passing ever-longer returning German supply trains, which told us that the battle of Dunkerque was almost over. We drove along the Moères Canal, filled with burning barges, and passed a field where hundreds of Allied trucks stretched in lines as far as the eye could see. Equipment, supplies, coats, helmets were lying about in heaps and mounds—an immense booty for the Germans. The attack upon Dunkerque was mainly carried by infantry and artillery, not tanks, as retreating French had flooded the area by opening the sluices of the Moères Canal. German infantry, I was told, had to advance through water up to their necks. I saw many of them wearing Allied khaki uniforms until their own were dry again.

Before us lay Dunkerque resting at last after seven solid days of the most terrific bombardment by artillery and planes. A few hours after the 40,000 French defenders gave up, I entered this last foothold of the Allied army in Flanders. The

city was a pile of rubbish. Every building was destroyed, not a wall intact. Bricks and stones, many feet deep, jammed the streets. Flames were still crackling and smoke swirled through the town as fires spread unchecked. I stumbled through the smoke over twisted iron girders, dodged hanging wires still red hot, jumped across pools of molten tin and piles of glass, walked over boulders weighing hundreds of pounds. I saw a drunk who had blotted out his mind, perhaps to escape the terror of Stuka bombs. I saw a woman completely crazed running to the balcony of her shattered house, shouting an indistinguishable name over and over. I saw men and women with tears running down their dusty faces. But, despite the fact that the town had surrendered only a short time previously, refugees already were returning and people who had remained in their cellars were wandering dazedly about the streets.

André Noël, Assistant Police Commissar of Dunkerque, had lived with his wife in a cellar for two weeks. Oddly enough Noël, onetime German subject, had served in the German Army during the World War in the same regiment of the staff officer leading our party. When the officer said, "Now you can report back for duty," Noël replied unhesitatingly: "I am still a Frenchman after all."

At Dunkerque harbor Frenchmen lay where they fell, their bodies bloated, legs and arms blown off, guts hanging out. Sprawled in groups, they fell behind their machine guns, the gunner still holding the trigger. The horrid stench of the dead was overpoweringly nauseating. Rows of British trucks unable to be loaded aboard ship stood burned on a dock. Piles of bullets and munitions filled the path. At one of the smoldering docks a French tanker named *Salomé* caught fire, its smoke choking us within a few minutes. Distant oil tanks exploded, throwing flames 100 ft. into the air.

One could feel the air filled with plagues so we hastened to get away. Outside of Dunkerque long columns of German soldiers were marching southward. "The war is over up here," said a young infantryman to me. "We are now looking for new battlefields." Some 3,000 French cavalry horses wandered aimlessly in fields along the Moères Canal, unheedful of their dead comrades that lay about the meadows with broken

backs and shell-torn bodies. Many more were floating in the Canal. I saw horses standing in water up to their bellies, undecided what to do. The Canal waters were rising constantly as we drove over flooded roads, heading back toward Berlin.

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