

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Artikel in: The Star Weekly.

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1944-07-08

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Back From Battle

By ERIKA MANN

SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND
I HAD seen it often before; pilots sleeping on their cots in the background of the large room; others coming in, just having landed; still others saying, "We're off," and slipping into their lamb-fur-lined leather jackets.

For two powerful reasons, however, this was different. This was D-Day, the first of its colossal kind, and the opening of this particular show had met with unprecedented, almost incredible, success.

Out on the lawn a number of romantic-looking gipsy trailers formed what amounted to a small convoy of mobile intelligence offices. Covered with moss and a variety of greenish nets they might have been part of a stage set for a comic opera. Facing his superior officer and separated from him by a map table, a young lieutenant told his story.

"No, sir," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "No fighters, no flak, hardly any sign of German life. Only I'm sorry sir, French trees, quite a number of them." At least one too many of them. As he went hedgehopping toward his target, the lieutenant had grazed a tree and though he'd brought his ship back, the collision had not done it any good.

The major looked displeased. "If you boys go on like this," he observed gravely, "we shan't have any planes left."

He did not smile. "Any bridges?" "No, sir, I couldn't find any. If you don't mind, sir, there don't seem any left in this area. Except one, that is—right in here." He pointed it out on the map.

"Well?" "There's a hospital right next to it, sir, with Red Crosses painted all over it and I wasn't sure."

"The hospital is probably the German headquarters. But we'll have to get that bridge without hitting the clinic." Picture, please.

An officer who had been standing by disappeared only to return almost instantly. He carried a large phalanx of the locality in question, showing not only the whole town but precisely the part of it which constituted this particular problem. The major explained how by meticulous pin-point bombing we could get at the bridge.

The next to be questioned was flushed and breathless. He had just landed his machine with a live bomb dangling from its belly. Somehow the release mechanism had failed him and the pilot, eager to save his ship, had brought her in at great risk to himself.

"You should have bailed out," the major said him. "What if the thing had exploded? We'd have lost both you and the ship."

An Impressive Spectacle

PLANES were landing and taking off incessantly at this base, an advanced fighter station of the U.S. Ninth Air Force, which was one of the busiest in the United Kingdom. "Over there," a pilot told me, "the air is jammed with our traffic you'd better stick your hand out when you want to make a turn. It's different from anything I've seen before." And so it is all along the line. Never in history have troop carriers and gliders performed with such precision and on so huge a scale. The massed take-offs I witnessed that afternoon was but one of dozens. Yet I don't think I ever watched a more impressive and exhilarating spectacle.

American troops were marching out on the field as I descended. They were airborne infantrymen, their faces unlike those of paratroops since they were not blackened. Even so, however, they looked fantastic enough with their net-covered helmets and wrapped as they were in heavy equipment. They returned our greetings, waving at us "cheerfully" but they wouldn't talk. For seven days now they had been kept behind barbed wire, cut off not only from the outside world but also from their fellow units, about whose respective tasks they must know nothing. And while they had been most minutely briefed a week before they had not been told just when D-Day would dawn and H-Hour strike.

One hundred tow planes were lined up on the wide plain like so many giant soldiers. The place was thronged with people, ground crews, MP's and troops whose turn was yet to come. Jeeps, trucks and command cars lined the field which was swept by an enormous wind whipped up by the propellers and cloaked in the rattling symphony of noise composed of the roaring of the engines, the shouts of the ground personnel and the farewell cheers of us who had to stay behind.

There's something swift and joyful about the embarkation of airborne troops which you will find lacking elsewhere. It is true that seen from above, the channel, crowded with ships of every description, looks gay and festive enough. In the absence of enemy interference a regatta seems to be in progress all the way between Britain and France. In the ports, however, the picture is another.

The invasion harbor where I have just spent some days is one great bustling arsenal with unending rows of tanks, "ducks," lorries and giant "scrapers." The latter ready to turn mudfields into airfields, through the streets. Also there are ambulances, hundreds

Fliers' D-Day: "The air was so full of our traffic you had to put out your hand to make a turn"

of them, and it is mainly they which make the place look grim. Slowly, painfully, the convoys approach the docks. When they finally embark, the soldiers are cold, wet and dog-tired. Protected though they are against the rain, they can't keep the chilly dampness of it from creeping up their sleeves and down their necks under their helmets.

Where I stand and watch two ships are

The Canadian shakes his head. "Hardly," he says, adding: "There aren't many Germans inland on the beaches either."

As I step aboard, most of our injured have been removed so that I have no difficulty in spotting the Germans. Watched over by a young but bearded American with a machine-gun, they stand in front of a row of cots. They are members of a famous

This man is typical of the men who are attracted by the adventure of service with the paratroops. He is wearing the latest paratroop helmet with chin pad.



A British commando shakes hands with one of the W.A.A.F. nursing orderlies upon their arrival in France to aid in the evacuation of wounded soldiers to England.

one L.S.I. (landing ship infantry). Another about to come in is known to be laden with black boots, they would look slightly theatrical even if their bearing were less Napoleonic. In one particular, a major who was not visibly wounded, out-Nazi Eric von Stroheim at his worst.

His neighbor, a dash little fellow with a log injury, talks neither English nor German. He is Russian, the major explains, and a "volunteer" with the "Fuehrer's" army. So, he insists, are a number of Poles and Czechs, none of whom knows any language but his own and who listen to the major's assertion in uncomfortable silence.

"They were all eager to join us as soon as we had liberated their countries," he declares fluently. But when it was remarked that it appears odd for "Germans" to be accepted by the "herrenrasse" he has nothing to reply. Nor does he want to talk about conditions in his much-bombed home town, Duisburg, though he has been there quite recently on his way from the Russian to the western front.

I have seen quite a few of his captured countrymen. Out of 12 men only two were noticeably anti-Nazi, one a kid who said he was 19 but couldn't have been more than 16. He hadn't liked the Hitler Youth, which all-important organization had alienated him from his parents. The other, a Pole, resented having been forced into the German army. His brother has been forced, too, he said in German, although he was a prisoner of war and added that it "won't be long now. By Christmas it's bound to be over." I watched his neighbors, whose bleak and stolid faces did not betray their emotions. Had he been a loading, one L.S.T. (landing ship tank) and

ambulance drive up and stretcher-bearers group themselves behind high piles of stretchers. They are middle-aged, most of them, in their looks. Toughness and gentleness are curiously blended. Half an hour goes by before the ship finally anchors and all the while tanks keep pouring into the L.S.T. at her left and men into the L.S.I. at her right. Lingeringly, the newcomer—an L.S.T. turned into a hospital ship on her homeward passage—opens its huge mouth. A rough carpet is laid to keep stretcher-bearers from slipping on their wet and sloping path and quietly they file into the black opening.

The landed ship's crew has turned on the radio. "And now," shouts an incredibly heavy voice, "we'll hear a terrific arrangement of that well known favorite, 'Out of Nowhere.'"

The favorite begins while a silent procession of stretcher-bearers moves cautiously towards the ambulances. Motionless under their heavy blankets, the wounded men make you feel utterly ashamed of your own onlooker's position and there is something inexplicably moving about their little belongings, their shoes and hats which they can't use now but which they've brought along on their stretchers from out of nowhere.

Everything functions admirably, as indeed it must have over these that all these casualties can arrive here clean and bandaged, some of them in splints. It testifies to the efficiency of our first aid stations. Without delay the cases are sorted; only the badly injured (there are a few) remain in the field hospitals awaiting them here. The rest are moved to transit centers in the rear. The ship's crew is American but has a Canadian medical officer, who is in charge of embarkation and disembarkation of the wounded.

Any German casualties? "I wonder. 'Quin a few,'"

"Any Germans intact?"

member of the Nazi party, one of them was asked, an ugly fellow with an enormous mouth and a head shaped like a pear. He denied it. They laughed; but it was a quiet sort of laughter, mirroring and scornful.

The American ward next door was not in any physical way distinguished from the German. As to accommodation, food and medical attention, enemy casualties are treated like our own. Yet, all seemed different here.

Despite their injuries the boys, paratroops most of them, were in high and animated spirits. Each had his own adventure to tell, but they all agreed that when they had been hit help had arrived almost at once. Within

15 minutes an aid man had turned up; after an hour or so they found themselves at a first aid station; and a few hours later they had been on their way to England.

John C. Thierman of Columbus, Ohio, had been particularly lucky, or unlucky if you wish. While training in Britain the 27-year-old paratrooper had broken his collarbone, and though he had healed nicely special precautions had been taken on D-Day and Lieut. Thierman had journeyed to France by glider. "All was fine till we landed," he said, "landed, mind you, on the

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highest tree in the whole of France. Nothing much happened though, except that I broke my collarbone. Sure, the same I'd broken before, but then, what do you think I dived into as I jumped down from the tree—the prettiest first aid station I ever laid eyes on, all set and ready for me."

He laughed. His healthy sunburned face criss-crossed by scratches, he looked like a mischievous boy who had been playing with a cat. On the cot next to his a lieutenant from Pittsburgh shared his fun. The two had been pals for more than two years. Together they had jumped down on Sicily and Italy and together they had been brought back from France.

How, I wondered, did this new invasion compare with the two previous ones? They said it did not. There just was no comparison.

Everything had been so much better and smoother this time. "In Sicily," said John, "I landed 80 miles from my target. But in France I fell smack into it."

I wanted to know why this venture had been so much more successful; was there any explanation? Lots, I was told. A number of new devices had played their part in this show. Our superiority in the air had been overwhelming.

"And besides," one of them said, "we had learned our lessons. Recognition, signs and countersigns, everything functioned perfectly. And if this invasion goes on the way it started, Merry Christmas to Adolf!"

How gay they were. How pleasantly their laughter differed from the Nazi guffaw next door. And how clearly this small field hospital somewhere in England harbored two worlds. One was dark and unmistakably confounded, while the other, long though the night had been, lay bathed in the early dawn of victory.

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