

# Liberty

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# I SAW

# THE FRENCH ARMY

# COLLAPSE

**An Eye-Witness Story of the  
Military Tragedy of the Ages**



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**G**RAPES of wrath ripened with terrifying vengeance upon the rich vineyards of France.

Literally overnight, millions of French men, women, and children have turned into a tragic, and overwhelming counterpart of the "Okies," lining broad highways solid with misery. And today the backbone of France — the French bourgeois family — prefers to live under conditions of untold squalor along some roadside in "unoccupied" France rather than return home on the "Highway 66" which led them away from the ever-advancing German armies.

I witnessed the final tragic days of the great nation that once was France. It was a combination of hell and fool's paradise. Now, for the first time, free of the censorship which strangled her, it can be told how France was defeated not by her enemies but by her own politicians and generals.

I arrived from England on the last plane ever to reach there. It was like flying to the deathbed of an old friend.

Our camouflaged British air liner landed at the large military airport near Tours after a quick trip from a completely normal and placid London. The field was covered with French bombers and fighters. On the tarmac I met pilots and officials I had known in Paris. They told me how desperate the situation had become. Millions of refugees were fleeing south in

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automobiles, trucks, carts, and even bicycles, spreading panic and making it impossible for the army to rush reserves and supplies to the front. Sounding of air-raid sirens interrupted our conversation. One of the biggest raids of the war began. Squadron after squadron of Heinkels and Stukas roared low over the city. They systematically bombed the airport and the railway center.

I thought I had seen bombing in Finland. But it was just child's play compared with what happened in Tours.

Diving so steeply that often it seemed certain they had been shot down by aircraft batteries, the Germans swooped to within one hundred feet of the ground, dropped ton after ton of high explosive on planes, gasoline dumps, and hangars, then pulled up and climbed into formation for another round.

From a trench in one corner of the field I watched the ghastly fireworks for more than two hours. Many pilots braved the withering attack to run across to their planes. They were bombed as they attempted to take off. A few managed to get into the air, but before they could gain altitude they were shot down by bombers which sat on top of them.

There was not much left of that airport when the raid was over. More than two hundred people were killed, including many civilians. I helped to carry the limp bodies of several of my friends from the wreckage of their planes. It was too late for first aid. The double tragedy was that the result could have been so different had the system of air-raid warnings been more efficient and had fighter planes had time to get off the ground.

Tours, first seat of the government after leaving Paris, had become the focal point of refugees and military reserves. This clash of currents caused an unimaginable human maelstrom. Men, women, children, machines, and armaments threw up a dusty haze of emotion which the mind could not grasp. Courage, fear, patriotism, defeatism—above all, bewilderment.

**EVERYWHERE** were cars piled high with luggage—from 1918 Cadillacs, a faint reminder of the A. E. F. which helped save France in her darkest hour of that time, down to 1940 Rolls-Royces. But war had become the great leveler. Money no

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longer mattered—only official coupons which would procure more gasoline. As the distance from Paris increased, tens of thousands were gradually immobilized. The time had come for the weak to help the strong, and little Renaults towed Packards and Lincolns whose tanks had run dry.

That night I borrowed a car and set off north against an overwhelming stream of traffic to find the headquarters of the American field service. The road was jammed with cars moving slowly in darkness. Some showed a faint blue light on the off side, others just crawled along blindly. The night was filled with sound: clashing gears, scraping fenders, shouts, curses of drivers. One car in ten lay wrecked. Occasionally the sky swelled with the deafening roar of planes zooming overhead. At this rate it would take me many hours. I turned off the main highway from Tours to Paris and chanced a likely side road.

I don't know how far I drove—perhaps twenty miles, perhaps thirty—when suddenly I crashed into some sort of makeshift barricade.

I jammed on the brakes as the car bucked through a barbed-wire entanglement. The motor stalled, and for an instant there was complete silence. Then I heard the most unpleasant sound on earth—the click of a cartridge jumping from the magazine into the breach of a rifle. It sounds very loud and sinister when the muzzle of the rifle is but two inches from your ear.

The door was yanked open. I was told to keep my hands up and get out of the car. With the rifle in my solar plexus and a flashlight in my face, I was searched by my captors, who were French local defense guards. They accused me of being a German parachutist. I replied I was an American newspaperman looking for the headquarters of the American field service. That just didn't matter. I spoke French with an accent. That didn't help, either. My explanation that I had arrived that day by airplane from England was almost my death warrant. For they misunderstood and leaped on it as an admission that I had just descended by parachute from a German plane.

These farmers turned "parashots" were all for shooting then and in-



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investigating some other time. For twenty minutes I explained, pleaded, cursed, and protested until finally they agreed to take me to the prefect of police, though with grim assurances that I wouldn't escape that way. Two miles across fields I marched, with rifles prodding me in back.

The captain of the guards had to be roused from his sleep. This almost finished me, because he was so bad-tempered at being disturbed that he told them he didn't give a damn whether they shot me or not. The fact that my papers were entirely in order only increased his suspicion. After a diabolical cross-examination which proved nothing, he was convinced more than ever that I was a spy. The odds were against me when a young French army officer who spoke English arrived. He persuaded them to release me. They did so with the greatest reluctance.

**I DROVE** back to Tours with the officer, and he told me the American field service had suffered heavy casualties at the front and its few remaining units had been forced to retire. "The only thing you would have found up that road if you had gone on far enough would have been enemy advance patrols," he added.

I returned to find the government had secretly evacuated Tours for Bordeaux, and in a few hours came the news that Paris had not been defended and that German troops were marching into the capital.

The frantic civilian exodus by car was resumed. And from then on the handwriting was on the wall.

The occupation of Paris without a battle left no symbol around which the stunned populace could rally. Had there been a heroic siege such as that of Madrid or Warsaw the whole course of history might have been changed. But as one sad *poilu* said to me, "Paris is more than just the biggest city in our country, It is the heart of France—and without heart, how can you fight?"

Meanwhile the final drama of the French army was being enacted. The greater part of this force had fought with superhuman courage and endurance, but the leadership of a hide-bound reactionary general staff had been so calamitous that even a great soldier like General Weygand found the task of reorganization impossible.

The weapon Hitler was wielding with such deadly effect—tank and dive bomber—was not new. They had seen it conquer Poland in one month. The Poles had warned them. But too many of the Supreme War Council were old men who still thought and planned in terms of 1914 if not before. Furthermore, nine months of inactivity had sown the seeds of unrest in certain sectors, so that when the sharp blade of the German attack probed the French line for an opening it found patches like rotted wood.

In Tours I ran into a French staff officer I had met on a trip to the Maginot Line in the quieter days of the war. It seemed incredible that then we had believed those fortifica-

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tions would render France invincible. As we waited in a traffic jam, he told me the real story of the Ninth Army, which held the section adjoining the end of the Maginot Line, and which broke with such disastrous results:

“For months we had been out of touch with headquarters. We hadn’t enough staff cars and the few telephone lines we had were cut by Fifth Columnists. Insufficient equipment—insufficient reserves—discipline lax because of prolonged inactivity. When the attack came on the all-important hinge of our lines, the part which should have been strongest of the whole French defense was weakest. Two divisions from Paris full of malcontents and Communists just laid down their arms, opening a huge gap—and after that, the deluge. Our casualties those first days were 100,000 prisoners,” he added bitterly.

The following morning waves of German bombers were again over the city as the German columns rumbled closer. So, with another American newspaperman, I started the trip down to Bordeaux.

**O**N the road was the whole story of the great debacle. There were sights which I shall never forget. There were troops who had laid down their arms because they believed rumors spread by Fifth Columnists that an armistice had been signed days before such a move was even discussed by the government; while in the opposite direction, from rest camps, other troops, with newly won Croix de Guerre pinned to their tunics and spirits high, headed for the front in little tanks gaily decorated with flowers on the turrets and affectionate nicknames scrawled in chalk on the armor-plated sides.

Only the peasants remained at their homes—the rest of France was on the move. Every car was overloaded with personal belongings, even down to bird cages. One car we passed miles inland was towing a motorboat on a trailer. All authority and organization seemed to have vanished. No one would take the responsibility of forcibly clearing the roads and stopping the panic, or else no one cared. Finally the drivers of military supply trucks and other vehicles gave up the struggle.

But when we were caught in the middle of one convoy during an air raid, I watched these same drivers jump from their trucks armed only with rifles, and stand their ground firing at the German planes which swept a long crowded highway with machine-gun bullets.

Ironically, only when these planes attacked the civil population, forcing them off the roads, could the French military forge ahead for a few miles before they were blocked once more.

After thirty hours of continuous driving we completed the 250-mile trip to Bordeaux—an average of eight miles an hour.

If Tours had been a nightmare, Bordeaux was even worse. A city of a quarter of a million people, it suddenly had an extra four million over-

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running its streets. For some reason, those in flight believed that safety lay with the government—but that idea was dispelled two nights later when a hundred German bombers raided the city for three hours.

**T**HE bewilderment of the people mounted hourly as the words “capitulation,” “surrender,” “armistice” began to pass from mouth to mouth. Had they not been told for years by their leaders that France was invincible? Even just a few weeks before, heard the solemn pledge that not one inch of French soil would ever be trampled by the jack boot of the invader again?

Small wonder they could not understand, for the deception of the politicians continued even at that late hour. For three days after the Germans had occupied Paris, no French newspaper carried the story on its pages. When the Reynaud Cabinet resigned and Pétain formed a new government, they believed that the war would now be waged with even greater vigor. But the truth was that the military clique had insisted on the armistice and forced Reynaud to resign because they would not agree to fight on even from the colonies if necessary. And finally they were promised an honorable peace, and what they received was the most shameful in history.

Probably never before has a country with three quarters of its army still intact and the majority of its civilian population untouched by war surrendered so completely. On my last day in Bordeaux I went to market for food, because restaurants were packed from morning to night. There was butter for sale in ten-pound tubs, cheeses stacked five feet high, enormous quantities of meat, vegetables, bread, and every delicacy so dear to the heart of the French, right down to sea gulls' eggs.

War had never really come to the greater part of France. She was defeated not by her enemies but by her own politicians and generals. And, like an aged prima donna on her



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deathbed, she gasped of future triumphs to the end.

The curtain of liberty was rung down that night. Next day we started back for England. The tender taking us out to a British merchantman offshore was just pulling away from the jetty when the first of a German farewell committee came over. Dawn was just breaking. As a dark mass of Dorniers spread out over the estuary, we could see them strewing mines in the path of refugee-laden ships getting under way. Despite the noise of anti-aircraft guns, we could hear the *plop, plop* of mines landing in the water. For an encore, the Dorniers swooped down and raked jetty and tender with machine-gun fire.

Then a terrific explosion almost bowled us over. One of the mines had done its work. We stood in stunned silence and saw a ship half a mile away go down in five minutes. There weren't many survivors.

What a prize our ship would have been for U-boat or bomber! On board were 1,400 weary souls—women, children, wounded soldiers, cardinals, diplomats, nuns, ex-millionaires—all sleeping on deck, all limited to one scant meal daily. The ship actually had accommodation for less than 200 passengers and lifeboat space for 380. The holds were packed solid with copper and manganese ore. One direct hit by torpedo or bomb, and we would have sunk like a rock.

Two more raids before we sailed, one when a reconnaissance plane came over and left a long smoke trail in the sky to guide bombers. They turned up half an hour later. But this time we had a sting in our tail. The anti-aircraft gun on the afterdeck, manned by the ordinary ship's crew, hit one Heinkel. It shot across the sky in a long flaming arc and crashed into the sea.

One of the stewards turned gunner passed me with a broad grin. "Blimey! We can hit more than just air with those popguns, after all! How about a nice cup of tea to celebrate?"

For three days we zigzagged north through the Bay of Biscay. One night while I was standing on submarine lookout duty U-boats were located in our vicinity by the delicate sounding apparatus of the destroyer escorting us part of the way. Five times in a few hours we changed course. Scanning the sea intently for hours on end, I reached a point where every whitecap seemed to be the wash of a periscope breaking surface. Suddenly I spotted one, and shouted a warning to the bridge. But back came the cool reply of the watch officer: "It's all right, old man. That's just Bishop's Rock. Looks like we've made it."

As we stepped ashore on English soil, we were met by a group of children who shouted, "Any souvenirs of France, mister?"

I couldn't answer.