

# **Letter from France**

by WOODROW WYATT



DEAR B.—Forgive me if I answer your letter publicly, but I've had several letters asking the same sort of questions and I haven't time to answer them all—and yours asking them the most bluntly.

"It does excite me your being in the front line," you say. "I want to know—what do you feel when you see people dead and above all what feelings do you have when you actually kill someone. . . . Tell me about the Germans, the expression on their faces. . . . I can't wait to hear some hundred per cent news on what is really happening, and who to believe: the reporters who say the French are sniping away like mad and resenting and hating your arrival and that the Germans have behaved very well *or* the ones who say that the French are in ecstasies over you boys at being liberated, but why having their homes blasted to hell should make them this way I can't follow. . . ."

You will think I'm rather a fraud because I'm not in the front line and never have been. Up till now I've been a staff officer with a vehicle made up as an office to work in and almost as comfortable as in England. I've always fed in a mess and had a shower when I wanted one and only for the first four or five weeks did I have to sleep in a slit trench — ever since I've had a tent. I've done no marching, no crawling in the fields. I didn't even land on D-Day but on D+6. All the same I suppose I know a little about the unpleasant side of war although I've never killed a German — only a very small number of people in this impersonal war can say they have. I think I've met two. In the front line you hardly ever see the Germans unless they have surrendered and there's no cold steel. If

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a party of Germans do show themselves you may see some fall when you fire at them but whose bullet-killed them no one ever knows. No it is a different process. Suppose there are a group of Germans in a wood. It is bombed and it is shelled. Then the infantry, with or without tanks, go forward. If all goes well the Germans withdraw and the only ones left are ready to give themselves up. If it goes badly the German automatic and small arms fire kills and wounds so many infantry that they have to stop. Maybe they go back to where they started or perhaps they try to get round behind the Germans. If they are lucky the Germans leave the wood or surrender. If they are unlucky the Germans make it too hot for them to advance any further. Sometimes it happens that our infantry takes the wood, and the Germans make a sudden counter-attack using the same methods, and the machinery is reversed. The only reason why either side ever leave a place is because they will be killed if they stay there and that is also the only reason why the other side don't go into it. It's got nothing to do with bayonet charges or man-to-man fighting. If you don't believe me go and look at Lebissey Wood just north of Caen after the war and see the shell and bomb holes every yard or so and then consider whether you would have stayed there waiting for someone to arrive with a bayonet.

I was surprised to find war both less and more frightening than I expected. It was less frightening because the shells and bombs didn't come directly at you very often and there were long periods when we were probably safer than London was with the flying bombs. It was more frightening because when they did fall near it was absolute terror. I crouched in a slit trench plotting the course of each whine and thinking this time it's a direct hit. The deadliest things are the anti-personnel bombs. They fall in clusters spattering shrapnel at all heights from nought to ten feet and the only protection is to be below ground.

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Another frightening thing is driving along a road that is being shelled. I did this a lot in the early period of our advance. It was amazing how the traffic blocks that the staffs had been moaning about for days disappeared whenever the shelling started. Then the only vehicles to be seen were single ones going very fast and one or two burning out on the side of the road. On a road like that there are always recognized shelling centres and it is unnerving to go through a village and see a wall suddenly collapse across the street a hundred yards ahead; to pass craters in the road still smoking from newly fallen shells and to hear them landing on either side just behind you.

But that kind of war is probably over for the staffs now. It was a freak period for the headquarters of Divisions and Corps to be three or four miles from the front line and within easy shelling range—caused by the lack of room in the tiny bridgehead. Now they are spaced out again and administrative units and rear echelons no longer jostle the forward troops like a crowd on the way to a football match.

What impresses me most about the front line is not violence but the absence of it. When the battle was stationary for a while I often drove down to visit the forward units. The approach was always the same. The quick change from the hubbub and noise of the jumbled convoys in the back areas to roads deserted save for an occasional civilian walking very slowly. A few cattle in the fields grazing among the dead and swollen bodies of their fellows, but no farm workers. A complete silence—not even the sound of birds, a sense of being in an unreal world with no life, so that even the people in the villages timidly looking out of their shell-damaged houses don't seem alive. There is no reality because no one is doing his normal job. Even the war does not exist—until you see a notice 'You are in sight of the enemy now' and a little further on 'Drive slowly — dust causes shells,' and then a few steel-helmeted sol-

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some bushes or a wall and walk across to the Headquarters. There I would find the people I was looking for in a dugout or an armoured vehicle, oppressed by the same feelings as my own and talking quietly as though afraid the enemy across the fields or on the other slope of the hill opposite might overhear. The opening exchange of courtesies wasn't the weather but "How many times have you been shot up today?" followed by a visit to the latest shell or mortar holes, much as one might go and see how the sweet peas were coming on in a country garden. Sometimes, before I left, the stillness would be broken by the enemy's "Moaning Minnies" (multi-barrelled mortars) and we would scatter for the slit trenches, becoming aware of life again through the attempt to destroy it.

"What do you feel when you see people dead?"

Just an urgent desire to get by quickly and a feeling of revulsion which is greater or less according to the length of time the body has been dead. Rotting corpses, cattle or soldiers, distend and putrefy and their faces become liquescent flesh covered with crawling flies and maggots. There is no difference in appearance between decomposing men and decomposing animals and the same stench comes from both of them.

I feel worse when I see someone not physically but morally dead. In the last war it was called 'shell-shock'; now it is 'exhaustion case' or colloquially 'bomb happy.' It happens when a man can no longer stand the shells and bombs and the nearness of death. He loses control of his limbs, he surrenders everything to the torture of fear and his mind abdicates his body. I once gave one of them a lift. He was a tall man and I saw him being dragged along by two stretcher-bearers, his feet shuffling about while they held him up by his arms slung around their shoulders. They humped him into the front of the jeep where he lay twitching, gangling and pitiful, his head hanging loosely over the back of

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the seat. Every time a shell exploded in the distance the whole of his body contorted sharply, became almost rigid and upright, then went loose again. His face was blotched and unshaven, without characteristics, and his long arms and legs hung expressionlessly from his body. As we drove he groaned continuously and earthy non-human sounds came out of his dropped mouth. When we reached a first-aid post we pushed him out of the jeep and tried to lay him on the ground but he resisted, his legs and arms waved violently and he tried to sit up, groaning louder in panic. He was conscious of nothing — like a decapitated chicken which runs convulsively in the farmyard for a few minutes before it falls. Until he had slept and rested for a fortnight he would remain a whimpering heap and perhaps he will always start and jump at noise.

You ask me what the Germans look like. I don't know what they look like when they're fighting or sitting behind their lines, but I do know what they look like when they've been taken prisoner. You must remember that a large part of the German Army is made up of im-

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pressed men from occupied territory—Poles, Jugoslavs, Russians, Czechs. Sometimes there are as many as 30 per cent of these in the formations facing us. Naturally they tend to give themselves up soonest, and when they do they sit about the prisoner-of-war cage dazed and apprehensive. When they've been given something to eat and they realize they're not going to be treated unkindly they brighten considerably and laugh and chatter like children, jumping up eagerly whenever one of the guards gives them a job to do.

The Germans proper are in two categories—the ordinary conscript and the S.S. The former look similar to their alien comrades although a little cleaner and more intelligent. They don't talk much and seem apathetic and relieved to be out of the war after five years of it. They go on obeying orders and fighting, not from malice or perverseness, but because it is outside their comprehension and will to do otherwise.

The S.S. are very different. They are usually young, not out of their 'teens. In appearance they are pale and thin with long hair brushed back from their foreheads. They are very dirty and smell—presumably because many of them have a code never to wash and they live up to it. While they don't look like Nietzsche's 'jubilant monsters' it is quite probable that they really have 'come from a ghastly bout of murder, arson, rape and torture.' Before they leave a town, if there is time, they ransack it. The details have been published often so I will only tell you a few of the things I have come across. At Messei they ran through the streets firing into the windows and pulling out the women—one woman there told me how she had lain under the table as they fired shots in the wall behind her and followed it by throwing in incendiary grenades. At Caen in the houses they had taken over they left their excreta smeared on the floors and sometimes on the linen and just before we went in they drove the

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people into the caves and went through the houses senselessly smashing the furniture and destroying anything of value. At Flen after the air raid on D-Day they set fire to any of the houses in the centre of the town that hadn't been hit. In one village, because somebody annoyed them they drove the thousand inhabitants into one building and burnt it down. When the S.S. are fighting they keep firing their weapons until they are surrounded—then they suddenly surrender before they can be killed. Once prisoners, they try to look unconcerned and to demonstrate, with a half sneer, that they are still the Herrenvolk. They don't mix with the other prisoners, but stand apart despising everything. They are the deliberately created 'Dead End Kids' who have had their vices encouraged and praised as virtues by the authorities, and it will be a remarkable reformatory that will ever persuade them of anything else.

About the French. For the first six weeks at least we were definitely unpopular in many parts of the newly liberated areas and in the regions immediately behind them. Understandably so. During the occupation the Germans *did* behave very well—especially in the coastal districts where they were anxious to avoid trouble from the civil population during invasion. They stayed in their camps and barracks and didn't obtrude into the life of the community. In all their contacts they were extremely polite and took great pains not to offend against local customs and pride. M. le Maire was respected. German soldiers didn't get drunk, didn't loot, didn't rape and demanded nothing. So long as the French didn't interfere with the activities of the Army they were secure and unmolested—it was only the members of the Resistance Movement who were caught who suffered. More than that—the Germans bought farm produce in large quantities and paid very well for it, and there was plenty of work to be had in the factories and with contractors working for the Germans. In the country there was prosperity and the

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prospect of it continuing — particularly as Germany deported little forced labor from among the farm workers. The country people, being materialistic, weren't discontented and it didn't matter who was in control while there was a good return for their work. Government for such people is a distant thing, a matter of names. They are concerned with the effects on them personally and these were good.

With our arrival this vanished. They were plunged into some of the greatest destruction of the war. Their villages and little towns were obliterated by air, sea and land. Their homes were destroyed, hundreds of them were killed, their cattle were slaughtered in the fields, their crops devastated, their orchards ruined, their roads torn up. They were driven away from their farms and their livelihood. Neither the big towns like Caen nor the Germans could buy what they had to sell even in those rare instances where they could go on producing it. Every big attack meant more huge bombardments with more mutilation of the property and land of a people highly endowed with the sense of property—and all day and night the noise of explosions was in their ears. At the beginning, too, there was some looting by soldiers and the digging up of potatoes and vegetable crops was common. It didn't compare favorably with the Germans and liberation was hardly preferable to occupation. As the mass of soldiers, equipment, vehicles, tanks, poured into a very small area the civilians felt enmeshed in a fearful military machine and they remembered the Anzio beach-head and other Allied invasions which had clung to the coast for several months before any general advance took place. The Germans had anticipated that feeling by sticking up posters just before the invasion showing a snail crawling up the map of Italy with a Union Jack in one nostril and a Star-Spangled Banner in the other and underneath the words: 'The speed of a snail is 0.9 km. a day.' They remem-



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bered, too, that before the Germans left they had been confident that the bridgehead couldn't be held and that in a very short time they would be back again.

The bombing of the towns was hard for them to understand. When a town with only twenty-five Germans in it has been flattened and many French people killed it is difficult to explain that the object was not in fact to kill them, but to stop the Germans bringing reinforcements through it for a vital forty-eight hours. An English woman living inland told me that after some of the raids people would say, 'When they come we won't welcome them—we'll spit in their faces.' And the German poster displayed everywhere, showing Joan of Arc, her hands manacled, burning at the stake with blazing Rouen Cathedral in the background and the caption 'The Assassins always return to the scene of their crime' may have had some effect. If bitterness is not to continue after the war and be a hindrance to Anglo-French relations it should be explained clearly and frequently, as it can be, why it was necessary 'for their homes to be blasted to hell,' as you say in your letter, and why it was an inevitable part of Allied strategy that they should be.

Not every one felt this way, probably not the the majority, and from the first there was much friendliness and pleasure that we had landed. And when it became clear that we weren't going to be driven into the sea, that the great break-through was succeeding, the whole atmosphere altered. Men and women stood on the sides of the road laughing and waving and making the 'V' sign at passing columns. At every newly captured village there was tremendous enthusiasm. The people came out on the street, smothered the soldiers with kisses and embraces, gave them wine, shouted 'Bravo,' cheered and clapped, threw flowers and sometimes almost impeded the advance in their excitement. Even in Caen the inhabitants were wild with happiness for several days after we went in and I didn't

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see a single house that hadn't been damaged in some way. For the most part the streets and houses were brickdust and rubble. At the moment of success the fear that the whole of France was destined to be a battleground, over which the machinery of war would slowly tear its way for months, disappeared. Now, the emotions you would expect from a people just freed from an invader were displayed without reservation and with all the appearances of being genuine—the farther inland, the greater the display. This doesn't mean that the French changed overnight — it is natural to applaud success and I have no doubt that illwill still exists in many places, particularly in the country.

I have never found any corroboration for stories about French snipers. There may be some among the followers of Doriot and Déat but they are more likely to shoot other Frenchmen than Allies. It is a pity all collaborationists don't take to sniping, then the solution to the problem of dealing with them would be the simple one of shooting back. As it is, the problem of deciding when a patriot ceases to be a patriot and becomes a collaborationist is beyond solution. In 1940 the people were bewildered and frightened, England was nearly beaten and it looked as though the Germans had come for ever. It was useless to go on, they thought, they must make the best of it. They had to live, and how could they help it if their work was useful to the Germans? What good would it do anyone if they starved or went to prison? Was Pétain, whom many thought sincerely did what he could for France, and even said 'No' to Hitler sometimes, a collaborationist? It was only the men with the strength to be fanatics who joined the Resistance Movement and carried on the fight direct, and they are a fairly small number in any community. Most of the others passively acquiesced to the new régime in varying degrees—usually just enough to get by. A few of the women lived with German soldiers, perhaps because their husbands

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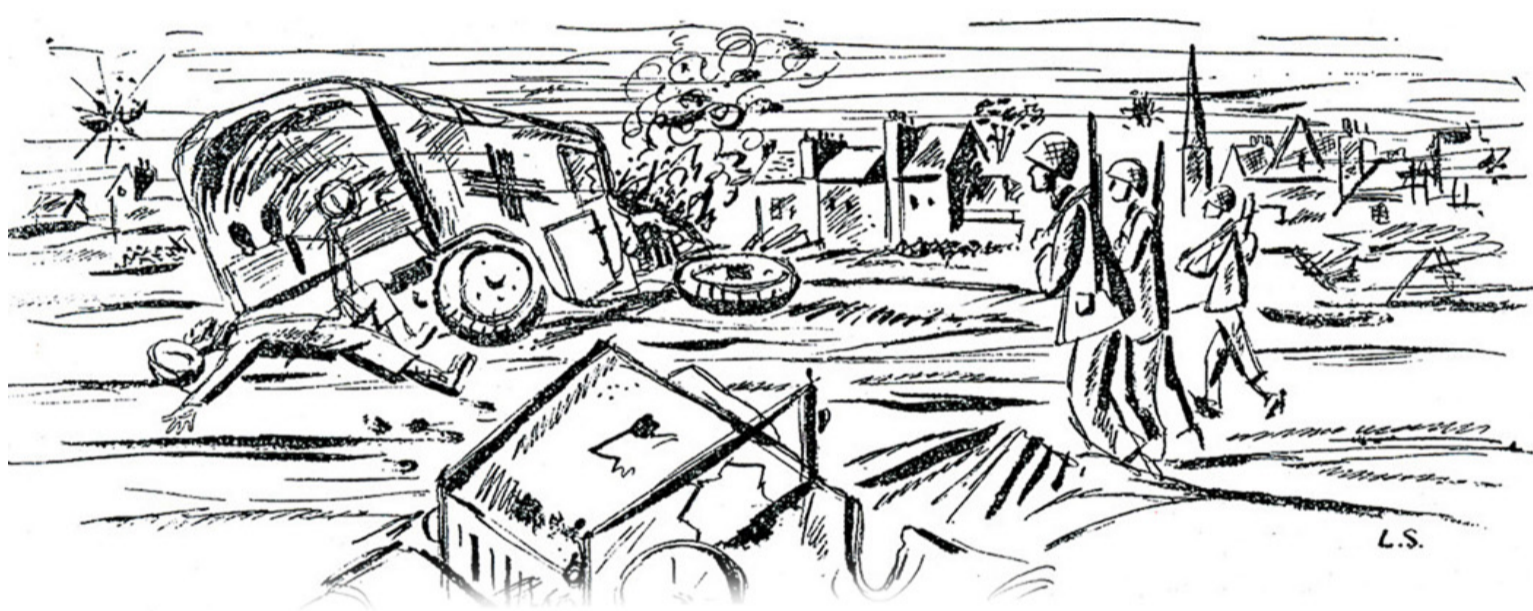
were prisoners of war or there weren't enough men to go round or because they had no money. That is simple, and the French have shaved their heads. You don't see them about much because they're staying in their homes until their hair grows again, but when you do you feel that everyone is degraded by the insult and that it is futile. But, what is to be done with a man like this? He was a contractor in a very large way in Paris. At the end of 1940 a collaborationist visited him and asked him if he would be willing to build aerodromes and other military works for the Germans. He said he didn't know, he would think about it. The emissary returned in a few days and told him that if he wouldn't do it he would be imprisoned and someone else would be made head of the firm. Whatever he did, he thought, the work would be done just the same so it might as well be he who did it. The job was fantastically profitable and after a while he came to the man who told me this story and said: 'I'm making 50,000 francs profit a day. I've never made so much money before. I don't know what to do with it.' 'I do,' said my friend, and the contractor regularly gave him milliards of francs which he used for the purposes of the Resistance Movement. Later he gave him opportunities to photograph the blue prints of his constructions, to see the latest types of planes, and helped him get other valuable information. Then he asked how he could sabotage the runways, and was told instead to build them as strongly as possible because the Allies would soon be needing them. Everyone in Paris knowing what his firm was doing and seeing him about with the Germans, thought him an arch-collaborationist. There are hundreds like this man. Immediate action will no doubt have to be taken against the most obvious traitors, but for the rest there should be an interval so that all the evidence can be sifted and events examined without prejudice.

I'm sorry to be so disappointing about the glamour of the front line and war in

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liberated countries but it just isn't that way. In a Staff job it can be exciting and occasionally frightening but on the whole it's very undramatic. And with slightly more intensity and a great deal more discomfort I think it's much the same in a unit that's actually fighting. I'm due to go to an infantry battalion soon so I shall find out. In the meanwhile try and agitate for the Ministry of Information to write and distribute in France a simple booklet explaining the reasons for the sinking of the fleet at Oran, the occupation of Syria and North Africa, and the wilderness in Normandy, the bombing of the towns. It is needed and it will do as much good as foodstuffs and the rehabilitation of industry.

Yours ever,  
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