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ROAD OUT OF TOWN

During the big German offensive, Allied traffic went both ways in Belgium—toward the front in TDs, tanks and half-tracks; toward the rear in anything that moves.

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SOMEWHERE IN BELGIUM—There is the same feeling about the evacuation of a town as there is about a wake: you go in, mumble some incoherency to bereaved relatives, take a brief, self-conscious look at the corpse and then tiptoe into another room to whisper with fellow mourners, even though you know you cannot possibly disturb the person you came to see.

A frightened Belgian woman here tearfully asks if the Americans are leaving the town to its fate before the advancing *Boche*. She does not understand that combat men are staying behind to fight, and that this whole evacuation is just a consolidation of the American lines to stop the German advance before it gains too much momentum. Rear echelons and consolidated lines and the wisdom of moving back to take advantage of natural defensive terrain mean nothing to her. She only remembers the four years the Nazis spent in her town and what their return will mean to her and her people.

It is hard to look at the clusters of old men and women and children standing silently on every street corner, watching the U.S. Army six-by-sixes, command cars and jeeps assembling in convoy for evacuation. They remind you of a bereaved family at its father's bier.

Then suddenly there is the sound of planes overhead and bombs being dropped on the convoy road that runs west of the town. On a street corner nearby, a little girl with blond curls buries her head in her mother's coat and cries. The mother pats the blond curls tenderly and keeps repeating: "*C'est fini. C'est fini.*" But there is no belief in her voice.

A little farther down the street is a U.S. Army hospital, formerly a Belgian schoolhouse, which was evacuated this morning. The wounded and sick who slept there last night are now in ambulances and trucks, bouncing over that road which has just been bombed. In the main corridor of the schoolhouse, a stoop-shouldered old man and his gray-haired wife patiently fill wooden boxes with cracked dinner plates, teacups without handles, books, magazines and other articles.

Across the street from the hospital are three trucks with Red Crosses painted on their sides. The drivers—Pfc. Harry R. Poss of Buffalo, N. Y.; Cpl. Stanley Smith of Trucksville, Pa., and Pvt. James Myers of Revere, Mass.—were captured by the Germans this morning in a town 15 miles east of here. Two SS lieutenants had roared into town on motorcycles, grabbed the unarmed med-

ics and forced them to wait at a crossroads while they baited the trap for more prisoners. Half an hour later an American counterattack forced the SS men to flee, leaving their prisoners behind. Now the three drivers with their truckloads of hospital supplies were looking for the field hospital that had been in this town. "First we get captured," said Poss, "then we lose our hospital."

THE whole population of the town seems to be lining the cobbled streets to watch the Americans leave. The men stand silently, but some of the women and young girls cry softly. Only very small children still smile and wave as their elders did a few short months ago when the Americans first came to town.

Out on the convoy road the traffic going west is already jammed. Stretched for miles ahead are the six-by-sixes, half-ton trucks, command cars, ambulances, jeeps, weapons carriers and heavy-ordnance vehicles linked in the moving chain of the bumper-to-bumper escape caravan.

Our jeep stalls beside a bomb crater on the right side of the road. Hanging on a fencepost is a pair of torn and muddy OD pants. Half buried in the mud below are the remains of a GI shirt, matted with blood and torn as if whoever took it off was in a great hurry. In the muddy crater are two American bodies and an abandoned stretcher. They have been pushed off the road so that the passing vehicles would not run them over. An Army blanket covers each corpse. Beside one body is a helmet with the medic's Red Cross painted on it. There is a hole drilled clean through it.

On the other side of the road, going east, is a long convoy of tanks, TDs and half-tracks of an armored unit moving up to the front. Our jeep passes slowly through a village, wedged between a weapons carrier and an ordnance truck, and the people of the village line both sides of the street, watching the movement of war. The people on our side are silent and grave, and their eyes have a mixed expression of dread and reproach. They look at our column without warmth, because it is going west. But on the other side there are young girls waving and laughing at the Americans in the tanks and half-tracks who are going east to meet the Germans. Older men and women smile behind their fears and give the V-salute to the men in crash helmets and smiles at everything. An old lady stands in the doorway of a house by the road, urging a little boy by her side to wave at the Yanks.

AT the edge of the village, still going west, are long lines of refugees, carrying suitcases and blankets and tablecloth packs, plodding slowly and painfully along the shoulders of the road. Some of the more fortunate ride bicycles with their packs balanced on the handlebars. Others push carts loaded with lamps and favorite chairs and loaves of bread and sacks of potatoes. A baby too young to walk sits on a sack of potatoes and smiles at everything.

There is a feeling of security along the road when it gets dark and there is no longer the fear of planes. The convoy travels blacked out, with only cat's-eyes and tail lights to mark its progress, and the drivers are very careful to avoid the tanks and half-tracks on the left and the long lines of civilians on the right. Suddenly there is a murmuring from the human line on the right. Everyone turns to the east. There is a low humming sound that grows gradually more ominous, and a long fiery streak flashes through the black sky. It is a German buzz bomb headed toward the Belgian cities to the west. Everyone breathes in half-takes until the flaming arrow has passed over the slow-moving convoy.

Finally the rolling country gives way to scattered black buildings, which can be sensed rather than seen. A city is coming up, far enough away from the lines to be a city of refuge. But it's not that now. Enemy planes are overhead; sirens are moaning and red and yellow and green antiaircraft tracers are reaching up through the blackness. They make you think of a giant Christmas tree in an enormous room, blacked out except for the red and yellow and green lights on the tree. The lights suddenly shoot up, spend their brilliance and then sink back into blackness.

Now you start to think about the people who said so confidently that the European war would be over by Christmas, and when you think about them you begin to laugh. You can laugh now—in spite of the ack-ack Christmas tree before you, the little blond girl who cries at the sound of bombs, the old men pushing rickety carts on a convoy road running west, the Americans in crash helmets and combat overalls who ride east, and the people of an evacuated town that gives you the same feeling you get at a wake.