

Collier's

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*"One of our cameras
is missing"*

Joe Dearing was assigned to get pictures of the Battle of France, and he got them. But, as described in this article, the Germans interfered with this getting them out. So he cabled these word pictures to replace the photographs he couldn't send...



"Our sergeant found the snipers cleverly hidden under a parachute. He routed them out"

BY JOE DEARING

BY RADIO FROM LONDON

THERE was a good picture on the battlefield in Northern France and I'm a photographer. Amidst the unbelievable chaos of wrecked equipment, dead Germans and Americans, smashed bodies, blood, gunfire and the huge boom of shells and bombs, there was a stockade of tangled German barbed wire which had been made to hold the Nazi prisoners who came in on foot and by truck.

This particular truck, loaded with officers, ground to a stop, and from it stepped a tall, striking woman with short black hair. She was wearing a white fur coat. A group of German officers solicitously helped her to the ground, and as she stepped down I could see she wore smart high-heeled shoes and sheer silk stockings. She exuded waves of a spicy perfume.

"What the hell!" muttered a Yank at the stockade gate as, head high, she strode regally past. "Are dames working this place already?"

"Naw," said a guard who had brought her to the beach. "They found her with them German officers. She's probably something important. One of our intelligentsia said he thought she was one of those high-class strumpets—whatever that is."

Hours later when the Nazi prisoners were being loaded onto landing craft for shipment to England, I saw her again. The prisoners had to wade out into about four feet of water to board the craft. The Nazi officers had lost all their solicitude for her. The only one who helped her was a G.I., who waded chest-deep beside her and held, high above the water, her white fur coat, her high-heeled shoes and those priceless stockings.

INSIDE the stockade, there was a striking contrast between the enlisted men and the officers. The men were disheveled, dirty, dead weary, small, and either very young or very old. The officers were neat, ramrod-stiff, full of Prussian arrogance and they kept together in exclusive little circles.

One sputtering lieutenant stalked up to a group of his men and ordered them to build a shelter for him and the other officers. The weary soldiers started to comply, but a tall American MP stopped them. He turned to the lieutenant—

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ant and drawled in a species of German, but in no uncertain terms, that if the officer wanted a shelter, he could build it himself. The soldiers grinned wryly. The lieutenant, white-faced and nearly popping with rage, stomped back to his unsheltered corner.



“He looked into the sky and replied, ‘Yeah. The people back home are sure missing a lot’ ”

WHEN we got inland everyone warned us against snipers.

“They’re everywhere—in trees, barns, in ditches and haystacks,” announced a wounded private who was awaiting transportation to a field hospital. He pointed up the road with his good arm. “In case you want to look, the bodies of three gals are lying in the ditch just in front of that wrecked stone house back there. Some G.I.s are fixin’ to bury them now.”

“What happened to them?” we asked.

“They were shootin’ at us from a drainage ditch,” the private said, “and we let ’em have it with mortar fire. The sixth shell got ’em all. But they kept pourin’ lead right to the finish with their Jerry rifles. Nicked some of us, too. Got me here in the shoulder. Course we didn’t know they were dames till we reached their bodies. Shocked some of the boys pretty bad. Don’t look like Frenchies to me—more like Germans. One of ’em—the prettiest—has some kind of Nazi medal hangin’ ’round her neck. Probably her boy friend’s.”

WE WERE getting within earshot of front-line fighting when we came to a pasture where mottled green combat parachutes were lying, barely distinguishable on the grass. A corporal who was toting a mortar base plate he had previously described as heavier than his fat aunt with thyroid trouble said, “These chutes make good scarfs. All the paratroopers’ girl friends back in England have them. Say, we can—”

There was a sharp report from our rear, and the clanging sound of a bull’s-eye in a shooting gallery. The corporal staggered forward, then fell back on his rump.

“Down!” someone yelled. But all of us had thrown ourselves to the grass and were hugging the moist, sweet stuff. Suddenly the corporal scrambled to his feet. He reeled in a drunken circle, then, fully regaining his senses, plunged forward on his belly. He unstrapped the mortar plate. Grinning broadly, he twisted his body slightly, and it slid from his back. With eyes closed in loving tenderness, he held it before his beaming face and kissed the dent a sniper’s bullet had made. Our sergeant found the snipers cleverly hidden under one of the parachutes. He routed them out and turned them over to the MPs.

WE ENTERED the shambles immediately behind our forward positions. Knocked-out tanks lay dead where they had been hit. Holed and charred trucks, their loads unsalvaged, studded the roads and lanes. Even dead birds and jack rabbits were seen. Slit trenches scarred the earth. Farmhouses and barns where enemy snipers had held out lay in smoking ruins. Telephone and telegraph wires hung in tangled festoons from splintered poles and leafless trees.

You felt an atmosphere of tension, quiet speed and wariness. Men either hurried about their grim chores or rested. Most of these Yanks were seeing action for the first time, but they kept to cover and rested whenever possible. Here, tightly fitted into a shell hole, were four hefty boys, their bodies turned and bent, as alike as gingerbread men in a baking pan. They slept the sleep of complete relaxation.

WE MADE our way to where tanks and troops were grouping in a tree-hemmed swale. We learned an att-

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“The officers were neat, full of Prussian arrogance; they kept together in exclusive little circles”

ack was about to be launched against enemy positions fifteen hundred yards ahead. After a while, when the tanks and troops were moving to the attack, I decided it would be a good time to make some notes. I reached for a pad and pencil in my knapsack, but never made it.

A thrashing, screaming roar, mixed with a sharp tattoo of rapid gunfire, swept over the ridge. Four strafing Me.-109s bore down on the tanks. In a split second the hail of orange tracers and unseen bullets ripped into us. Branches from near-by trees cracked and spun crazily into the air.

As I ran for cover, my camera bag was torn from my hand and whirled away. I felt a sharp, heavy blow on my left arm and I was flung violently around and down. As the planes shot overhead, hot air gushed against the back of my neck. I glanced at my numbed arm, expecting the worst, but I had been hit only in the wrist. I could move my fingers, so I thought it must be all right.

About ten yards away lay my camera bag. It was torn to shreds. Parts of a smashed camera glittered in the grass. Packs of undeveloped film upon which had been recorded practically all I had seen during the past several days were strewn around, broken open, exposed to ruinous light.

I started gathering up the camera, but that terrible noise dawned again in the distance. The strafers were coming back. We scurried for cover, and I slammed myself behind a truck, huddled tight against a great, fat wheel. I saw a soldier standing upright. He was firing his puny rifle at the onrushing planes. He was cursing. He didn't realize that the German fliers were after the tank column and not us. He was inviting their wrath.

They were upon us with the crashing roar of an express train crossing a trestle just over your head. The soldier kept firing his rifle. Chunks of grassy soil jumped up on both sides of him as the planes streaked past. His mother's prayers were answered then and there; he wasn't touched.

An order was given for all those who had been hit to proceed to the ditch that ran through the bottom of the swale. Medical Corps men arrived. They dressed our wounds and gave two of the more painfully injured morphia. They then made certain the casualties still in the grass were beyond help. We were loaded into jeep stretcher carriers.

Being the least hurt and liking the idea of having my legs under me, I sat beside one of the drivers. We began a slow, careful journey back to a field hospital. We passed the artillery belt, edged through horribly mutilated little villages, past more machines of war, more supplies, more men, more and more of everything moving to the front.

The boy resting on the top stretcher directly behind me asked for a cigarette. Handing him a lighted one, I told him he would now get the Purple Heart.

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He sucked in a deep drag, wheezed out the smoke through bloodstained lips and, looking into the sky, replied, "Yeah. The people back home are sure missing a lot, aren't they?"

THE END

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM VON RIEGEN

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