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Capture of Cherbourg

German artillery hit back and the snipers were thick and persistent as our forces took the great port, their first major prize in France.

By Sgt. WALTER PETERS
YANK Staff Correspondent

WITH U. S. FORCES IN CHERBOURG, FRANCE [By Cable]—On our way to the front lines in the battle for Cherbourg, we stopped at a town not far away, where a large crowd of natives was gathered on the highest point facing the great harbor city. The artillery fire had stopped, and there was silence everywhere except for the barking of dogs. It was Thursday, four days before Cherbourg fell.

A gray-haired woman who spoke perfect English said we shouldn't go any farther without investigating a certain young woman whom she suspected of being a German spy. "I saw her with my own eyes," said the woman, "giving signals through the window last night. I warned one of your officers about her, but she's still free. I think something should be done about her pretty quick before she does serious harm."

A jeep came by with three MPs and stopped. "What house is she in?" asked one MP. The woman gave them the address and the MPs drove off. We followed them. They stopped in front of the local hotel and asked the cafe proprietor downstairs where they could find the suspected spy. The proprietor led the way upstairs to a room on the top floor and knocked on the door.

A brunette, about 25 years old, answered the knock, and we followed the MPs into the room. Three other women were sitting on the bed. The girl in the center was still very much undressed and screamed when she saw the MPs.

"Okay," said the shortest MP. "Which one speaks English?" One of the girls, another brunette who wore dark-rimmed glasses, asked the MPs in a mixture of French and English what they wanted. "We want the girl who flashes a signal light at night," said the MP. "Where's the light?"

The brunette with the glasses insisted they had no flashlight and never had any relations with the Germans except "business relations."

"We hate the Germans," she said. "They take what they want from us and never pay for it."

After 15 minutes of questioning, the MPs began to search the room. "What's this?" asked one MP as he lifted a German signal flashlight from a suitcase.

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The girl who'd been doing all the talking began to do plenty more. She had never seen the light before, she said; she didn't know how it got into the room, and even if she did, she didn't know how to use it.

"Okay, girls," said the short MP. "Get yourselves decent and let's get moving to somebody who can speak French better than me."

"I think three of these girls are honest whores," he said to me, "probably brought here by the Germans. But the one doing all the talking is a German, okay. I'll stake anything she's done more than just entertain the Jerries."

A group of natives in front of the hotel smiled their approval as the girls were led out. One man grabbed an MP's arm and said: "*Merci, merci.*"

THERE was a loud roar coming from the skies in the direction of Cherbourg, and people came from all over town to join those already on the hill. Word had gotten around that the Infantry was having trouble driving the Germans from their positions in the area of Mont du Roc, so the Air Force was coming in to bomb them out.

I stood on the roof of a chicken coop to get a better view of the bombing. The distance was too great and the planes were flying too high for us to see them clearly, but smoke columns caused by their bombs rose high over the hills and into the blue of the sky.

Later we learned that some of our more advanced troops were in the bombed area, but they had retreated several hundred yards so the bombs wouldn't hit them.

After we had watched the bombers for 30 minutes, an elderly Frenchman with a long white mustache invited me to his house. As I entered, he kissed my hand and offered me a drink of cognac. In sign language he explained that his daughter lived in Cherbourg and he was very happy the Americans were closing in on that city. He filled the glass again.

"*Vive l'Amerique,*" he said.

"*Vive la France,*" I said.

FIGHTER-BOMBERS of the Ninth Air Force were still attacking the German stronghold at Mont du Roc when we arrived at the regimental CP. Enemy flak was bursting all around the planes, and the infantrymen sweated out the flyers at every burst.

"The forward battalion's going in now," said the commanding general of the division after the last plane had dropped its bombs.

"If you're going down to the forward battalion," a young lieutenant warned me, "you'd better be on your guard for snipers. They got a couple of our men around here this morning. There are still a number in the area."

I piled into a jeep with three other correspondents—Bruce Grant of the Chicago *Times*, Tom Henry of the Washington *Star* and Cpl. Joe Cunningham, a YANK photographer—and we drove off. About 200 yards from the CP, there was the soft crack of a rifle.

We turned off at a junction into a road. Artillery fire had resumed soon after the Air Force completed its job, and the closer we approached the front lines, the louder the burst of the guns became. None of us had ever been over this road before, but it was evident that we were traveling in friendly territory. Here and there on either side of the road were the bodies of dead Germans, their equipment scattered around.

There was another rifle crack that seemed to come from the hill on our right. "Yep," said the driver, "that's a sniper. You can always tell the difference between a sniper's fire and our own carbines by the flat sound, like the sound of your

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knuckles beating against marble."

When we caught up with the tail end of the forward battalion, our driver parked the jeep under a tree and we proceeded on foot alongside the infantrymen. Our first stop was in an orchard where a heavy-weapons company was firing.

Cpl. Howard Hodgson of Calumet, Mich., the No. 1 man, was kneeling by a mortar while Sgt. Kongslie of Upham, N. Dak., relayed information he was receiving from the OP by walkie-talkie: "1200, fire for effect, six rounds." As he shouted, Pfc. Eugene Rossman of Ellwood City, Pa., assistant third gunner, pulled the pins out and took off increments from the shells. He and Pfc. George Evanoff of Hammond, Ind., the second gunner, loaded the mortar. Then Hodgson yelled back to Kongslie: "Six rounds ready."

"Okay," Kongslie replied. "On the way," Hodgson yelled again. Right after Hodgson fired the six rounds, there was a whining sound overhead. "Incoming mail," Rossman shouted. Everybody took cover in a foxhole. Jerry was hitting back.

COMPANY A's OP was about 500 yards in front of the mortars. I found my way by following our communication wires. The OP was in a large hayfield, surrounded by trees and hedges. In the center of the field were wooden dummy guns, made by the Germans to fool our reconnaissance crews. Our men were dug in around the edges.

As I walked toward the advance section of the OP, a sergeant behind a machine gun told me to keep well under cover "or get your goddam head blown off." There were Jerry machine-gun nests and snipers in front and at the sides of the OP, and the Germans tried to pick off our men as they passed through open sections.

When I reached the advance section, I found Sgt. Frank Brusic of Passaic, N. J., a platoon leader, giving orders to cease firing. "Look out there on the hill," Brusic said. Through his

sistant third gunner, pulled the pins out and took off increments from the shells. He and Pfc. George Evanoff of Hammond, Ind., the second gunner, loaded the mortar. Then Hodgson yelled back to Kongslie: "Six rounds ready."

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binoculars I saw a Jerry waving a white flag. "That sonuvabitch has waved that flag for a half hour and he still isn't coming in," Brusic said.

Some of the men in the platoon started to yell. One yelled in Polish, another in German and a third in Russian. "Come here," they yelled, "come here." But the German just kept waving.

"We've stopped firing," Brusic said, "but they haven't. I'd send a man after him but it looks like the old Jerry trick. They shot my best friend

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in Italy by pulling that stunt." The next man asked Brusic whether his friend had died. "Hell, no," said Brusic. "He's an Irishman."

Right about then a shell whizzed by us, followed quickly by more. "Screaming Mimis," Brusic said. He picked up the phone and said: "Let's give them some incoming mail." When Brusic got the heavy-weapons company on the phone, he gave them fire directions. Then he corrected the fire as the first mortar shells hit.

ON FRIDAY morning, two rifle platoons advanced to the foot of the enemy hill. I went forward with a group of medics. The road from the OP advance section was wide open for snipers. We ran and ducked at 50-foot intervals. When we reached the forward medics, a private warned us to hug the roadside. Snipers were shooting at everybody in the center.

A couple of medics brought in a wounded man on a litter and laid him carefully on the ground. Then Capt. Edmund Torkelson of Seattle, Wash., came up and began cutting the wounded man's pants so he could administer first aid. "How do you feel?" the captain asked. "All right, I guess, sir," said the soldier. "What got you," asked the captain, "a machine gun?" "No, sir," said the soldier, "a sniper." The soldier had scarcely said that when a sniper's bullet passed over us. The captain ordered the litter to be moved back.

When the wounded man had been carried off, the captain looked at his hands. "I've washed them a dozen times today," he said. He looked at his hands again. They were stained with blood.

Another wounded man was brought in. "My God," said one of the medics. The man's face was half blown off, his chin hanging by a few threads of skin, his nose not visible. A 20-mm shell had hit him in the face, an infantryman said.

By the time the captain was ready to leave with the medics, Pvt. Frank Volpa of Fresno, Calif., came running up. "They got my lieutenant, sir," he said. "They got him with a machine gun right in the arm, and the bone is sticking out. We dragged him from the hills but we've got to get help to him in a hurry."

"What was it like on the way over?" the captain asked. "Many snipers?"

"Yes, sir," Volpa answered, "there are quite a few of them, but I think we can do it all right."

"Okay," said the captain, "let's go."

BY SATURDAY night there were reports all over the lines that a U. S. division had entered the eastern section of Cherbourg. Rumors can be wilder on the battle front than in any barracks latrine back in the States, but anyway I joined a well-known regiment moving up.

"There goes the Old Man," said Cpl. Thomas Donnelly Jr. of Jersey City, N. J., as the colonel passed by in a jeep. "He's the fightingest guy I've ever seen."

S/Sgt. Marvin Bogart of Lima, Ohio, commander of a half-track, told me he thought we might march into Cherbourg that night. "You can ride in my half-track," Bogart said. "I think all they're waiting for is to get rid of some more pillboxes and that 88 over there. Then in we go."

As if in answer to Bogart's crack, the 88 began to belch fire. Everybody took cover. A couple of shells hit across the road from us, and one of them split a tree. Another shell hit Bogart's half-track.

"Don't worry," Bogart said. "We'll have it ready so that we can ride into Cherbourg in the morning."

ON SUNDAY night I was with the same regiment in a town called Octeville, about two

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miles from Cherbourg. The colonel was standing in the church cemetery and around him were all his battalion liaison officers. He pointed a pencil at a map of the Cherbourg sector.

"If we get that far," he said, "there may be street fighting from then on. That's why I'm putting Tucker here." The colonel looked at one of his lieutenants. "Tucker's had special training in that."

"Yes, sir," Lt. Tucker said.

When the briefing was over, a soldier brought the colonel a canteen full of black coffee. Then another soldier poured in some sugar. "Who's going to split this coffee with me?" asked the colonel. He looked at a pfc, whose face was unshaven and whose eyes were tired from lack of sleep and from lying in foxholes.

"You'll split this coffee with me, won't you, son?" said the Old Man.

"Yes, sir," said the pfc.

The colonel lifted the cup to his lips. "To tomorrow," he said.

"Yes, sir," said the pfc. "To tomorrow."

The next day they both marched into Cherbourg.

'PUBLIC ENEMIES'

WITH THE U. S. FORCES IN FRANCE—Score one for the Nazi propaganda machine: German soldiers are convinced that American paratroopers, many of whom have close-shaved heads, are all lifers and convicts recruited from U. S. prisons.

This probably accounts for the violent fear and stubborn resistance of the average German soldier when he runs into a Yank paratrooper. It may also explain why a good many paratroopers have been found strung up on trees with their throats cut.

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