

LOOK OUT BELOW!

By REV. (Lt. Col.) FRANCIS L. SAMPSON

To bring you up to date—Father Sampson, chaplain of the 101st Division U.S. Army paratroop corps, chuted into Normandy on D-Day. He stayed with wounded G.I.'s in a no-man's-land farmhouse, faced Nazi capture—but the tide of battle brought U.S. forces to his rescue.

Facing The Nazis

CHAPTER NINE

Thursday after D-Day, I went to headquarters to see how well we had accomplished our mission and found that we had done a one-hundred-per-cent job.

The regiment had done so well, in fact, that another mission was to be added. However, at this time only 950 men could be accounted for out of our jumping list of 2,100.

In the next few days a couple of hundred more men dribbled in, singly or in small groups.

One of our men told me that the mayor of the town would like to see me. He took me to him. The mayor's twelve-year-old son had been killed in the fighting in the town two days before.

Two Germans had used the boy as a shield, each holding one of his arms as they crossed the road. American machine-gun fire killed all three. The mayor was bitter only against the Germans.

The local priest was in a concentration camp for listening to a radio which he had not given up as was required by the Germans. The mayor wanted me to hold the funeral for his boy, held the funeral the following morning, and a large number of my own men attended as well as the villagers. The family could not express their gratitude enough.

I was never to see in the rest of France faith as strong as that of the people here. These simple peasant people were of deeply religious and fervent stock.

Friday evening the Germans bombed the division hospital, and did a very thorough job of it with just two giant bombs, at least two thousand pounds. The bombing was probably intended for the division headquarters, which was in another chateau just a few hundred yards away. One of the bombs landed in the corner of the hospital and the other about fifty yards away.

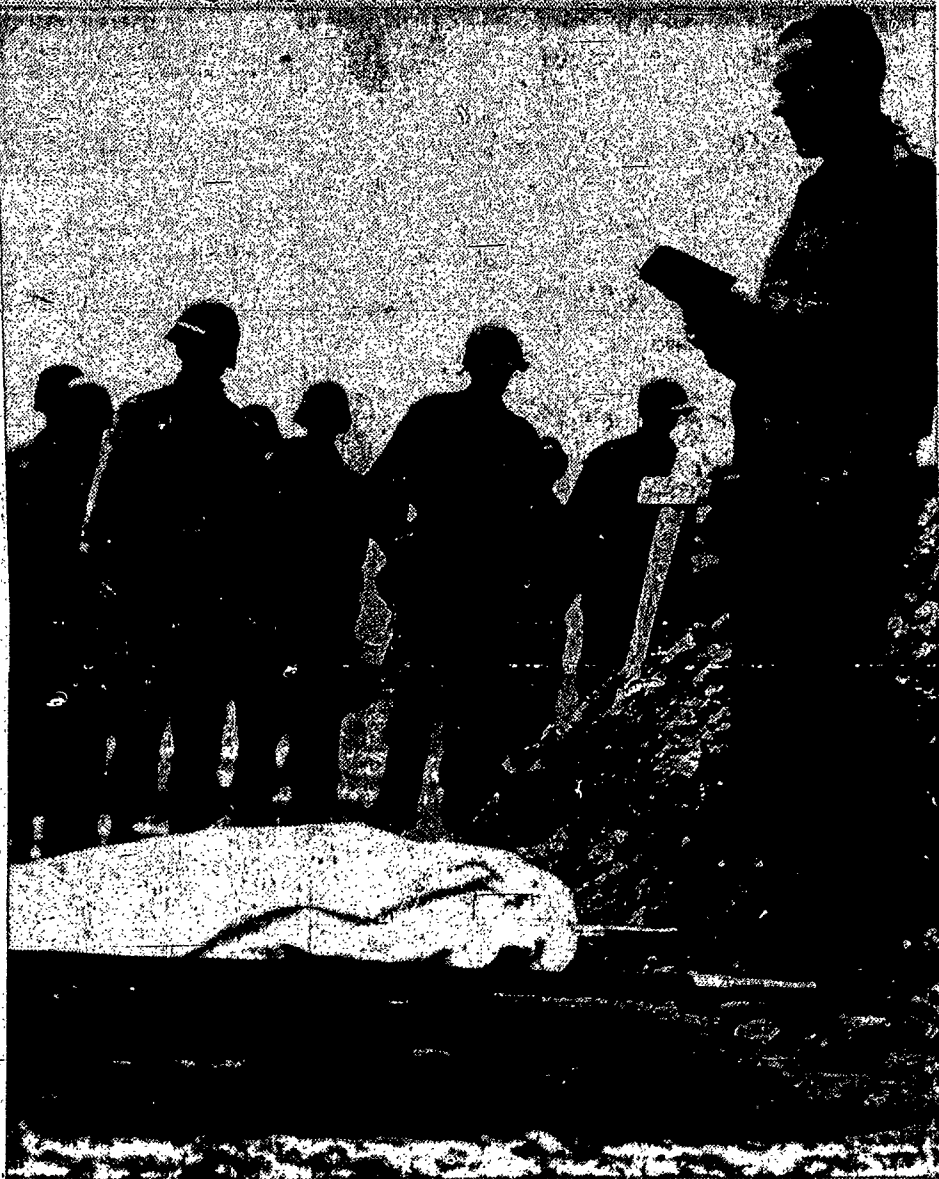
Fortunately nearly all the patients had been evacuated that afternoon. The seven American patients that remained were killed. Six medical aid men, one doctor, and five German wounded were killed. Father Durrew was lucky enough to escape serious injury. The bomb that landed in the field by the hospital dug a tremendous crater, about twenty feet deep and forty feet across.

The bomb landed twenty feet or so from two men who were sleeping in a fox hole; they were not injured although they were entirely covered with shrapnel after being tossed several feet into the air by the concussion.

Saturday morning I went to the place where the division cemetery had been established.

None of the bodies had been buried yet, but there were several hundred lying side by side waiting to be buried, some already ready wrapped in a parachute. I was shocked to find so many of my faithful boys among the dead.

It didn't seem possible that these young men who had been so confident a week before, whose hands I had shaken before we boarded the planes, who had confessed and received Holy Communion on the eve of D-Day, who had wisecracked that "no Nazi bullet has my name on it"—it just didn't seem possible that they were dead.



A chaplain's sad duty included hasty burial of war's victims. Here Chaplain (Major) William J. Reiss says prayers for Captain Joseph Newman of the 101st Airborne Division at Giehn, Germany, in April, 1945.

of their own men back to safety. You can take care of yourself in any emergency, something happens to remind you that you are still mortal.

More often than not, soldiers on both sides would refuse to fire on any aid man with that sort of courage. This was one of the more humane aspects of the war against Germany. The finest example of the aid men made me more sure of myself, with the result that this was one of those rare occasions when I was not particularly afraid.

Sunday I had Mass for the regiment in the village church of Vierville. The church was quite small, a quaint old Norman building—several hundred years old. A few civilians had come early, for they had not had Mass in over two years, and the Americans packed the place, filling the sanctuary and the choir loft and even crowding up on the altar steps.

I am sure no Catholic who could possibly have made it missed Mass on that day. We all felt that we had escaped death only through God's providence. That afternoon I took Sergeant Bordet, who spoke fluent French, with me to dinner at the mayor's home. The head of the French underground for that area was a guest as well.

He and the mayor explained to us how the underground worked. Every German collaborator in his district had had been noted and would be taken care of.

Sunday evening I attached myself to our second battalion under command of Lt. Col. Ballard. We moved out toward Carantan to attack the German positions on the high ground just south of the city. The attack started at dawn. We had to cross a stream and an open swamp that made our men easy targets for Jerry snipers and mortar fire.

Our wounded casualties were extreme during the first hour. I kept very busy working with the aid men hauling wounded out of the swamp. There is something about the selfish task of an aid man that makes him even more courageous in exposing himself to save a soldier who lies helpless between the two opposing forces.

The German aid men were equally courageous, and I have often seen them come directly into the face of fire to pull one of their own men back to safety.

When it is over, one is sometimes disgusted with himself to realize how eager he was to play in this rotten kind of game. Only occasionally would I feel any emotion at the sight of a body, although I always stopped to say a prayer for the dead soldier whether he was German or American.

Once in a while the sight of a boy I knew especially well would choke me up; his expression in death would bear no resemblance to the normal happy-go-lucky manner that I remembered.

Confession and Communion are the greatest comfort to our men at the front, and non-Catholics observed with open envy our Catholics receiving the sacraments. Many Non-Catholic soldiers came to confession at the front, and not infrequently I discovered that they received Communion from me without my realizing who they were.

Of course a priest in combat hears confessions and celebrates Mass under every conceivable circumstance.

One Sunday Colonel Johnson told me that he thought it would be safe to hold Mass in the reserve battalion under a grove of trees. As a large number called out there, I started to say Mass, using my jeep as an altar. Some German artillery observers must have spotted us. The 88 shells began to fall all around us. At the elevation a shell three debris all over the jeep and altar.

When I turned around to tell the men to scatter, I discovered that they could finish hearing the Mass in the vicinity of that city for a couple of weeks. On the way up there we stopped at Sainte-Mere-Eglise where all those who had died in the invasion had been moved and reburied in three tremendous cemeteries.

I said two Requiem Masses there, one for my men and one for Father Maternowski, O.P.M. Conv., the chaplain for the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, who was killed on D-Day while he was helping a group of men out of a glider that was under machine-gun fire.

Father Maternowski, a tough and energetic little Pole, had been a great priest who had been extremely well liked and respected by the men of his regiment. On more than one occasion he had volunteered to put the gloves on with officers who interfered with his work, tried to wisecrack about the Church, or made smart-remarks about confession.

To the best of my knowledge no one ever took him up on the invitation, but even so, the fact that he sometimes had difficulties respected him. His method of straightening things out was very effective, even though a bit unconventional. His men would never forget Father Maty and would therefore be better men for having known a priest who had deliberately given his life for his men.

The French people of the little city of Sainte-Mere-Eglise had arranged that each family should take a couple of flowers on Sundays and Holy Days they be decked them with flowers, promising always to remember these soldiers in their prayers.

This promise still holds good. American visitors to the cemetery are always moved by the sight of a French family placing fresh flowers on a grave or kneeling there offering their prayers for the soul of an adopted son or brother whom they had never seen in life.

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On the way to Cherbourg we passed through a town where the Free French were having a riotous time shaving the heads of women collaborators and marching them through the streets.

A French priest who had spent considerable time in a German concentration camp told me that the very ones leading the demonstration had themselves been very friendly and helpful to the Germans. In fact, our forces were captured and wounded and died by the "patriotic" populace.

But our men who had been captured by the Germans and marched through to prison camps a couple of months before had been spat upon, kicked, and hooded at by people in these same cities.

When the regiment was bivouacked near Utah beach waiting for the boats to take us back to England, a young soldier by the name of Fritz Nyland came to me. He was very troubled in mind. The company commander of his brother, who was with the 508th Regiment, told Fritz that this brother had been killed and was buried in Sainte-Mere-Eglise cemetery.

We jumped in my jeep and drove the twenty miles back to that town. In checking the cemetery roster I couldn't find the boy's name.

"There's no William Nyland listed here, Fritz," I said indignantly, "though there is a Roland Nyland listed."

"Father... that's my brother, too. He was a lieutenant in the Nineteenth Division." The happy boy tried to choke back the tears. After saying a few prayers at the grave, we went to another cemetery just a few blocks away where we found the grave we were looking for originally. A third brother had

Friday, April 3, 1959

Parishioners Build Church

Anderson, Calif. (NC) — The newly dedicated Church of the Sacred Heart here is a special church building for parishioners.

For almost four years members of the parish labored by the sweat of their brows and the skill of their hands to construct the church themselves. The completed building is 80 per cent parishioner-built.

Every Thursday night since June 1955 members of the St. Joseph's Men's Club have met under the direction of Father Walter Albrecht, pastor, to work on the 400-seat building.

While men of the parish did the heavy work, women parishioners helped too. Besides preparing food for the laborers they worked for seven months in a barn on the parish property making almost 10,000 tiles for the church roof.

Bp. Wright Jams Pittsburgh Traffic

Pittsburgh (NC) — When Pittsburgh's new Bishop announced informally that he would be "at home" to anyone who cared to call, some 25,000 people took him at his word.

More than 20,000 people flocked to a public reception for the Bishop, the Most Rev. John J. Wright. About 15,000 others were unable to get through the traffic jam, extending for two miles.

For nearly seven hours, Bishop Wright stood in Duquesne University's Rockwell Hall and greeted each caller. To each he spoke a "God bless you" or requested prayer.

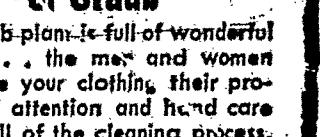
Chaplain Engel did the same for the Protestant men. However, we were both only partially successful, and most of the letters sounded very much alike. After all, how many ways are there to tell a mother and father you're sorry their son is dead? I could assure the parents, nevertheless, that their prayers were successful, and sacraments just before we went into Normandy, and this was their greatest comfort.

Rome College

Rome (NC) — The College of St. Peter Apostle for native priests of mission territories is to be enlarged in order to add 40 students to its present enrollment of 100.

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