

The Evaders

By Ed Cosgrove

A true story of downed RCAF aircrews escaping during the second world war from Nazi held Europe

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Chapter Seven:

Violins of Autumn

On the first day of June 1944, after its regular newscast to the people of occupied France the B.B.C French service began broadcasting a series of messages and coded instructions to the French Resistance. Among them was the first phrase of "*Chanson d'automne*," a poem by Verlaine: *Les sanglots longs des violons de l'automne*.

It may be that no poetry-reading in history has had such a profound effect on its listeners, both French and German. By the former it was greeted with feelings of triumph, hope and the desire for vengeance; by the latter with uneasiness and fear.

On June 5th, following the regular nine-fifteen newscast of the French service, the B.B.C. thoughtfully provided the next phrase: "*Blessent mon coeur d'une langueur monotone*."

The line, repeated several times, was just one of a series of apparently meaningless phrases, such as "The tomatoes should be picked," "The dice are on the table," or "It is hot in Suez." But it was poetry which electrified the staff of the German monitoring station at Fifteenth Army headquarters at Tourcoing, in the Pas de Calais.

The colonel in charge knew what this pensive line was meant to convey to the French. Double agents working for the S.S. Intelligence service of Walter, Schellenburg had infiltrated the French Resistance and ferreted out the secret. It was the signal that the Allied invasion was imminent, as well as a call to arms for all Resistance groups in France.

A staff officer at Fifteenth Army headquarters found the idea, faintly ridiculous. "Eisenhower," he said, "isn't going to ask the B.B.C. to announce the invasion."

Besides, there was the weather. All through May it had been fine, and the German forces manning the At-

lantic Wall defences had remained in a state of almost constant alert. Early June was remarkable for strong winds, poor visibility; rough, seas and, raid squalls. The long-range forecast promised more of the same.

Some of the German defenders may have been reminded of a remark by Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, the commander of the Atlantic defences: "Don't think they will come on a clear day and notify you in advance. They'll suddenly drop from the sky in a flurry of wind and rain."

In the upper echelons of Army Group West, however, many discounted the opinions of Hitler's "boy general."

The Commander-in-Chief of all German forces in Western Europe, the shrewd, capable Field-Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, had often disagreed with Rommel and did so now, both on the possible time and place of the first Allied landings. After weeks of argument, Von Rundstedt was satisfied that he had finally shown Rommel the error of his ways and convinced him that the most logical and therefore most probable landing point was Fifteenth Army's sector, the heavily fortified Pas de Calais (rather than Rommel's choice of the Bay of the Seine and Normandy, separated from England by the widest section of the Channel).

After all, Von Rundstedt argued, Pas de Calais was the obvious military choice; it was the shortest distance across the water barrier, it was in range of Allied fighter fields in England and, as a final clincher, had it not been receiving the weight of the Allied bombing offensive in the past months?

Rommel was still proving vexatious. As commander of Army Group B, the main force expected to repel the Anglo-American landings, he insisted on mustering his main strength right on the beaches. He had placed top priority on building up static defences of the Atlantic Wall and now wanted to crowd his armoured divisions as close to the threatened points as possible.

This caused dismay at Army group West, for everyone knew the proper role of armour was to group it well in the rear, ready to exploit its mobility in, strong counter attacks once the enemy had moved off the beaches into

tank country. Rommel, however, had seen in North Africa how control of the air by the enemy could destroy a Panzer division's ability, to deploy in the accepted fashion. He harboured no illusions about the Luftwaffe's ability, with the weak forces it had in France, to control the air space above his Panzers. He wanted them "right in the shop window" ready to grapple with the invaders at close quarters, rather than forced to travel many miles over open roads, vulnerable to air attack.

His concern was even more valid on June 5th for just nine hours before the D-Day landings and several days after *Oberkommando Wehrmacht* had learned that the "violins of autumn" were sobbing on the B.B.C., German air defence was weakened even more when 124 of the remaining 160 fighter planes based in western France took off from their bases to move east, out of range of the invasion coast, to defend Germany against the Allied bomber offensive.

Across the English Channel that day, a fleet of 5,000 ships, crowded with men and material, went to flank speed and swung their bows purposefully towards the Bay of the Seine and the Normandy coast. At scores of air bases in England, crew chiefs were winding up their final engine checks on an armada of nearly 9,000 transport craft-American-built C-47s, the trusty Dakotas, and British Albemarle. D-Day, was, no secret to their crews. With their paratroop passengers they were sealed up on their bases, waiting for the green light.

At the bases of the big "heavies" of Bomber Command and the U.S.A.F.'s Eighth Air Force, the crews of the four-engine Lancasters and Halifaxes, the Fortresses and Liberators, were, being briefed on new targets, jotting down names like Caen, Lisieux, the Merville Battery and another pinpoint on the Normandy coast called Saint Marcouf where four 210 mm naval guns formed an important pivot for the defences along the east coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula.

At Tactical Air Support fields, pilots, bomb-aimers and gunners, of the twin-engine mediums and fighter bombers slept, played cards or wrote letters home. They too were sealed up, for they had missions to fly, at first light.

That night Field-Marshal Rommel was on his way to Germany it was his wife's birthday, but he also hoped to see Hitler at Berchtesgaden to plead his case personally for a new look at the coastal defences. Even if Pas de Calais were the target he still wanted to move two armoured divisions-Panzer Lehr, based at Nogent-le-Rotrou near Paris, and the 12th S.S. *Hitler Jugend* at Lisieux-closer to the base of Normandy's Cotentin Peninsula.

Also that night, hearing the second line of Verlaine's poem, men in every department of France vanished from their homes to meet, in secret places. Their main job was to complete the work of the Anglo-American air forces in destroying road and rail systems to isolate the Normandy beaches. All through that night, France would rock with, explosions, and the job would be done so well that in the department of Brittany on June 6th not a single train was running.

Two

Things did not go particularly well for the airborne spearhead of the invasion. Few of the objectives plotted so carefully for the two American and one British parachute divisions (the latter included the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion) had been achieved. The American divisions were badly scattered in the drop, with many men drowned when they landed in swamps or flooded areas. Others were butchered when they came down on German strong-points. In the British drop, zone east of the Orne River, while the paratroopers did manage to capture and blow up some of the bridges assigned as their objectives, their main contribution in those, early hours of D-Day was to confuse the Germans into believing that the main invasion effort was east of Caen and the Orne. As a result, a lot of armour and infantry which could have been used to repel the initial seaborne landings was at the critical moment heading towards the embattled British and Canadian paratroopers.

They put up a heroic fight. By the evening of D-Day they had beaten off countless attacks. But that night - a Tuesday - their situation was desperate. They needed food, ammunition, heavy weapons, more men and medical supplies. At ten thirty p.m. June 6th, thirty Dakotas were sent out on a resupply mission.

Flight-Lieutenant Enrol Semple of Quebec City was flying as copilot in the leading Dakota of the formation. He squinted as he peered through the oil-stained glass of the cabin, fascinated by the lurid flashes of gunfire that lit the horizon.

None of the men had any illusions about what awaited them once they crossed that dark coastline ahead. A storm of flak had greeted the armada of more than 1,000 planes flying the initial drop mission. Semple had been under fire before, his worst experience having been from the brunt of British guns which opened up on him when his aircraft had wandered into a restricted zone. Like everyone else, he was concerned about the possibility of running into more "friendly" fire on this mission.

For weeks now, the pilots of 233 Squadron had been

talking about 'the big job that lay ahead. The veteran transport pilots who remembered the Sicily airborne landings had regaled them with stories of the tragic mistake that had cost the lives of hundreds of paratroopers, when the Allied fleet opened up on the transports, flying straight and level into the drop zone. Everyone prayed it would not happen again.

This time their orders were precise. They would fly an exact heading at 1,000 feet, arriving over the drop at 22:35 hours, with a margin of error of thirty seconds. Any deviation would mean a pasting from both German and British anti-aircraft guns.

The pilot, Squadron Leader, Wilbur Wright spoke quietly into the intercom. "French coast ahead-get ready."

Busy with his own duties, Semple glanced quickly back into the Dakota. Besides himself, the pilot and the navigator it, also carried a wireless operator and four British soldiers-Royal Army Service Corps men who acted as airborne cargo dispatchers. Semple was the only Canadian in the crew.

Orange and red tracers were suddenly blazing arcs the sky ahead as a small force of Luftwaffe bombers attacked the invasion fleet. The results, of the attack, were insignificant, but it was enough to put every anti-aircraft gunner in the ships on full alert,

The formation arrived over the anchorage scant seconds after the departure of, the German bombers, The brilliant tracery of anti-aircraft fire disappeared as the Dakotas approached their landfall, but only momentarily.

The leading flight was passing over the dark mass of ships standing off the coast. The roar of the sixty, engines at low level was too much for the already nervous naval gunners below, afraid of being caught off their guard by another Luftwaffe attack. As the rest of the Dakotas roared in at 1,000 feet on their established track, hundreds of "friendly" guns let loose. Their aim was excellent, for the slow-moving C 47's were sitting ducks.

The aircraft on either side exploded and plunged towards the sea, then Semple's own plane lurched. Gusts of flame poured from the starboard engine, but Wright managed to hold her level.

Semple had taken the precaution of spreading his flak jacket over his seat, since that was where most enemy fire was likely to come. It was a wise decision for he felt a sharp jolt and his right leg went numb. The suit had absorbed a piece of shrapnel which would otherwise have gutted him.

As the barrage continued, the cargo dispatchers back aft scrambled frantically on top of the cargo panniers, a dubious shelter when one considered that they held, for the most part, ammunition and explosives.

Flying Officer Bruce Cowie, the navigator, managed to ready a flare pistol and fire a recognition signal. The fire below slackened.

Wrestling with the controls Wright maintained his course. The huge flames billowing from the damaged engine acted like a beacon for the surviving Dakotas "strung" out behind them.

Now another curtain of flak rose to meet them, this time from German emplacements. Besides the streams of 20 and 40 mm. tracers, there were lurid flashes of air bursts from deadly '88s.

Their next hit may have saved their lives, for a heavy '88 shell blew the burning gasoline tank right out of the wing. The wing badly holed and sagging precariously was still on fire, but the danger of an explosion had been lessened.

They were over the drop zone now. "Get rid of the stuff," Semple shouted. It was no use. The panniers had been hit and the despatching gear damaged. They were losing altitude fast.

"Bale out," Wright shouted. There was no response from the rest of the crew. The intercom had been shot away. "Go back and tell them to abandon the aircraft," the pilot told Semple, frantically fighting the controls to preserve enough altitude for the jump.

The Canadian nodded and struggled out of his seat. He reached for his parachute, then discarded the idea. It would only get in the way in the crowded cargo section. Moving aft, he found the army men had already buckled on their parachutes, but a glance out the Cargo door revealed that they were already too low to jump.

Semple returned to the pilot's cabin. Wright, riding the controls with one hand, was already halfway out the escape hatch.

The altimeter registered 300 feet.

"We're too low," Semple shouted, grasping the pilot by the seat, of his pants with one hand and the control column with the other.

The landing was more or less a controlled crash. The right wing gouged into a small hill and sheared off, and the plane bounced into the air again on impact, spin-

ning around in a 180-degree turn and skidding across the ground tail-first. Semple could not have planned it better, for if they had bellied-in on their original, course, their first solid contact would have been an anti-glider pylon sunk in concrete and, no doubt, festooned with mines. The field was studded with the metal posts, designed to prevent glider landings and was well sprinkled with mines

Semple was hurled headfirst into the control panel, by the impact. Momentarily stunned, he was dimly aware of a frantic scramble as some of the crew stepped over his inert and apparently lifeless body to reach the escape hatch. The aircraft was now burning furiously and the searing heat restored him to consciousness.

Struggling out of the crumpled nose' section, he breathed cool night air gratefully. He remembered the cargo handlers, dashed back to the cargo door and thrust in his head. The fuselage was empty; the soldiers had been the first out and were already more than 100 yards from the wreck.

Hidden by a screen of brush, the crew reassembled and Watched as the Dakota's ammunition 'exploded with a crackling roar. They took stock, and found that they had escaped relatively lightly, the worst injury being a badly fractured arm suffered by Harold Ackley, one of the cargo handlers. Another soldier, "Sandy," had several broken ribs; the radio operator, Cliff Williams, had, painful, second-degree face burns. Semple's head was severely lacerated, while Wright, the pilot, had a gash over his left eye and had lost a shoe. The two other despatchers and Cowie had escaped with superficial burns.

With strips of cloth torn from their clothing, they tended each other's wounds. A rough sling was strung together for Ackley's arm. This first aid was performed in silence, for a German patrol was moving along a road a few yards away, looking for survivors.

When the danger had passed, the airmen held a council of war. Things looked bad for they knew they were well beyond the drop zone and in the vicinity of Caen, well within the German lines. The majority still favoured an attempt to break out.

Some distance away they could hear sound of heavy firing, mostly machine guns, interspersed with the popping of grenades and the dull, thudding of field pieces., "That'll be 6th Airborne," Wright said. "There's a good chance we could break out to them."

The others nodded. "No P.O.W. cages for me," one of the soldiers muttered.

"There are too many of us," Semple interjected. We've got to split up into smaller parties."

"Better wait to daylight before we move," someone suggested.

Semple shook his head. "I'm going now, while, it's dark. By morning this place will be crawling with Germans."

"I think your right, Semp," the wireless operator chimed in, rising to his feet. Three of the soldiers rose with him. "We'll come along too, if you don't mind," Ackley spoke for the other two.

Semple studied them. Besides Ackley, with his arm, there was Sandy with his broken ribs and another soldier named Jess, who had escaped injury. He was worried about the injured ones, but he nodded.

"Good luck," Wright whispered as the five men set out. Then, with Cowie and the remaining army despatcher, he settled down in the bracken to wait. It was their last few hours of freedom, for at daybreak they were spotted, and captured.

With the sound of firing to guide them, Semple and his party travelled across open fields until they came to what appeared to be a main road. Using the ditch running beside it for concealment, they moved as rapidly; as their injuries would allow, crouching, and at times crawling to avoid detection.

After about an hour they reached an apparently deserted Village. There were still several hours of darkness remaining, but Semple was aware that Williams and the two army men, severely handicapped by their injuries could not go much further without rest and food. Excitement and tension had left them all drained and weary.

Pushing, open the door of one of the houses, Semple ushered his charges in for a breather. They had barely settled themselves when the roar the engines of several low flying aircraft rattled the glass in the windows, Williams peered out.

"Mosquitoes-they're dropping target indicators. I think we're in for a pasting." The Pathfinders were marking Caen.

They lay down, keeping close to the walls, and listening to a swelling thunder of motors which soon drowned out even the sound of gunfire as a formation of Lancasters unloaded their bombs over the old Norman town.

The thudding concussion of heavy "block-busters" shook the house. They cowered on the floor sprinkled

with falling glass and plaster, and expected that any moment a badly aimed bomb would fall on the house.

Williams risked a look out the window and dropped to the floor again in alarm; a convoy of eight German vehicles halted in the street outside and a number of Germans were crouched against the wall of the house itself, sheltering themselves from the raid. The proximity of the Germans put an end to all conversation until the raid ended and the column moved off.

Their injuries required treatment. An old bed sheet and several slats of wood made an improvised splint for Ackley's shattered arm, and parts of the same sheet were used to bind Sandy's fractured ribs and Semple's head.

Jess volunteered to fetch some water as the bandaging proceeded. He left the house, only to rush in again breathlessly. "Someone's coming," he whispered; "a woman."

Semple and Williams rose and went to the door. A shadowy figure hesitated in the darkness.

"*Qui va là?*" a woman's voice demanded,

"*Aviateurs-Anglais,*" Semple replied. "We were shot down. We need help."

The woman approached cautiously. They could make out her face now, frightened yet curious. Then she turned and fled.

"What now?" Williams asked. The other men, thoroughly alarmed, were on their feet, ready to flee.

Semple held up a restraining hand. The woman was returning, accompanied by another. The newcomer wasted no time with questions. They could hide in her underground air raid shelter.

Once, they were safely inside her house, the woman's restraint vanished. She flung her arms around their necks and rained kisses on their cheeks, crying, "*Ah, les Anglais, vive les Anglais.*"

After she had calmed herself, she thought again about sheltering them in her own home. "I will take you to, a man who can help," she said.

She led them through the dark empty streets of the town to another house. "Knock there," she told them, and promptly faded into the night.

It took a certain amount of pounding with clenched fists before at last the door - was opened. A man studied them, warily. When they identified themselves, he allowed them to enter. A naturalized Pole, he was the baker of the village. This was Giberville, he told them

almost a suburb of Caen which was just across the Orne River. They were welcome to spend the night in a small lean-to in the courtyard of his house. As they made themselves comfortable in a pile of straw, the baker and, his wife provided them with bread and wine-the first food they had had since leaving England.

The next day, Wednesday, "D-Day-Plus-One," he spread a better table for the now-famished evaders, who quickly consumed a feast of spaghetti and beans, accompanied by bread, wine and chocolate - the latter a little mouldy as, it had been carefully hoarded since 1940. Even more welcome were several buckets of hot water to wash away their accumulated dirt, blood and grime.

Fortified, the evaders got down to the business of planning a break-out through the German lines. They saw two courses open to them. To the north and west, across the River Orne, lay the British and Canadian beachheads. However, news from that area was ominously sketchy. It had been expected that the Anglo-Canadian forces would require only a day, or two at the most, to cover the nine miles from the beaches to, the city of Caen, but all Semple could learn was that there was heavy fighting and Caen was still in German hands. In the end it took more than a month for the forces to cover those nine miles.

The second and simplest course seemed to be to stay on the east side of the Orne and try to link up with the airborne troops who had seized the high ground, overlooking Caen. It seemed to them it should be relatively easy if they moved with caution. They had no way of knowing then that with each hour that passed their position became more hazardous. German reinforcement were, pouring into the area, and 6th Airborne paratroopers and glider troops were fighting a battle of survival against strong counterattacks.

To the west, 21st Panzer had arrived on the scene the previous evening to launch an attack which carried them right into the British and Canadian zones. Panzer Grenadiers had actually reached the water's edge, driving a wedge between the 3rd British and 3rd Canadian Divisions on Sword and Juno Beaches. Now all that was needed to hurl the invaders back into the sea was a vigorous follow-up by German armour. This attack, however, was blown apart by Canadian anti-tank gunners.

Semple and his party were perhaps more fortunate. In their ignorance than German Seventh Army headquarters at Le Mans, who were reporting confidently to Von Rundstedt that the invasion had been shattered. The evaders remained hidden in the baker's house that day, listening to the constant rumble of motorised

transport moving through the town, as the tough, fanatic young storm 'troopers of the 12th S.S. *Hitler Jugend* arrived from their base at Lisieux. They passed through Giberville to take up positions in front of Caen, where they would launch themselves that same day against the Canadian positions.

To the left of the Hitler Youth, the massive Panther and Tiger tanks of the crack Panzer Lehr Division, those which survived the ceaseless fighter bomber attacks on the Normandy roads, were also rolling into position.

With such a concentration of Germans in the area, they would be unlikely to get far in their uniforms, and above all there was the problem of moving through unfamiliar territory. Without help, they would be bagged in a matter of minutes. Semple told the Polish baker they would have to make contact with the Resistance.

Their host soon produced the Giberville priest, who turned out to be more than just the spiritual leader of the community. Monsieur le Curé Leroyer de Giberville was also the local chief of the Interior Army of the Resistance. After hearing their story and examining their wounds, he promised to return after dark to lead them to a safer, hideout. They could not travel now, with so many Germans about, a lot of them angered by their losses under the continuous fighter-bomber attacks, and in an ugly mood.

The story, was already abroad of the massacre of twenty-three helpless Canadian prisoners by Kurt Meyer's S.S. men. To the evaders, the protective clauses of the Hague and Geneva conventions concerning the treatment of prisoners of war suddenly lost their aura of omnipotence.

Three

That night, when the priest returned for them, the pastor was gone and in his place stood a bold and determined partisan. Beneath his robes were concealed a pistol and a sheath knife. He was accompanied by several other men, similarly armed.

It was well after midnight before he judged it safe for them to leave. Through silent back streets they made their way to the church hall. There, with three armed men guarding the building, the evaders bedded down for the remainder of the night.

In the morning, June 8th the priest brought them two visitors, a doctor and the Mayor of the adjacent town of Colombelles, M. Lafond. While their injuries received the doctor's attention, they discussed with the Mayor

the feasibility of escape. It would be better, he advised, for them to remain where they were until more information men available on the location of the British troops. In the meantime, a medical attendant, Carmen Langlet, from the nearby factory at Le Plateau, just outside Giberville, would try to visit them daily to care for their wounds. Be of good cheer, he told them as he left; liberation was at hand.

The townsfolk of Giberville seemed to be of the same opinion and dug into their own scant and dwindling supplies of food and cigarettes to provide for their "guests." But by June 9th, the party of evaders was beginning to wonder if liberation was for them just a matter of waiting until the Allied forces broke through.

All through that day, they listened grimly to the cannonade north and west of the town. By late afternoon the barrage had reached a crescendo as Allied ships pounded the positions of Luftwaffe ground troops entrenched with their fast firing anti-aircraft weapons, around Le Plateau. From meagre reports filtering into the village, they heard of a tremendous tank battle in front of Caen.

Above the dull roar of exploding naval shells, they could hear the sharp reply of the dual-purpose flak guns, resisting stubbornly. The very air vibrated with the sound of battle as British and Canadian armour clashed with the elite units of Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich's 1st S.S. Panzer Corps. None of it sounded like the sweeping decisive drive from the sea into the heart of France, which they had expected.

In the early evening there was a diversion. Another fugitive joined the party, a Sergeant-Major Jones of the 6th Airborne. He was the sole survivor of, twenty-four men aboard another Dakota from Semple's squadron which had been shot down during the initial drop of D-Day, and had been hiding in Colombelles since the crash.

On the Saturday, June 10th, a member of the Resistance brought alarming news. A battle group of 1,000 Germans had moved into Giberville and were digging emplacements for artillery near the church hall.

It was decided they should move into the priest's house, for beside the danger of someone becoming curious about the trays of food being carried into the church hall, there was the more immediate hazard of the hall itself, a venerable and rickety structure, collapsing from the concussion of the nearby guns.

Living conditions in their new quarters, a small room at the rear of the house which was already full of civilian refugees were less than ideal.

There was one bed, two spare mattresses, and a pile of straw spread on the floor to be shared by seven men. (Their number had been increased by the arrival of Jean Rogers, a French youth of twenty, who hoped to reach the Allied lines to volunteer for service with the Free French of Charles de Gaulle.)

The next two days were comparatively quiet. The evaders divided their time between working in the priest's walled garden and watching the results of the Allied naval bombardment on the factory at Le Plateau.

The stout garden, walls also gave them a safe ring-side seat from which to watch a spectacular daylight raid by American Flying Fortresses. The flak guns of Le Plateau took their toll. Semple and his companions cursed softly as plane after plane plunged to earth, trailing smoke and flame. I didn't see any chutes," someone muttered.

"We're too far away," Semple replied reassuringly, hoping secretly that he was right.

On Monday, June 13th, the battle seemed to explode all around them. West of Caen, British and Canadian tanks attempted a flanking attack on the German positions and ran headlong into Panzer, Lehr and the S. S. divisions. Giberville itself came under a raking barrage of British 105-mm. guns, probing for the, German artillery batteries with anti-personnel shells. One series of these shells exploded in the street right outside the priest's house.

A number of women and children refugees in the house became hysterical as the counter-battery fire crept closer and splinters of steel whined through the shattered windows.

The evaders had their hands full trying to help the priest maintain a semblance of order. Then, during a slight lull in the barrage, they were astounded when the priest himself seemed to go berserk.

A column of four, light armoured vehicles was passing the front of the house. In a sudden burst of anger, the priest suddenly produced two hand grenades of ancient appearance and dashed towards the window with the obvious intent of lobbing them at the last German scout car in the column.

"Grab him," Semple shouted. After a brief struggle, the priest regained his normal calm composure. Semple balanced the grenades in his hands. They were covered with a greenish patina of age. The escapers decided privately had better keep a close watch over the priest, in case his emotions should again get the better of him.

Nevertheless, they felt a certain reassurance to know that the Resistance had a man of his mettle for a leader.

Late that afternoon the barrage lifted. Semple and Williams ventured outside to survey the damage. It was pod to get out of the house, away from sobbing women and the whimpering cries of frightened children.

The garden wall, eight feet high and of stone and mortar, had protected the house from serious damage. The wall itself had taken several direct hits and a fifteen-foot section, only two feet from the side of the house, had vanished completely. The church hall, their former shelter was a total ruin.

The town, itself had been severely damaged, its streets piled high with crumbled masonry and debris. Semple, along with Jean and another man, donned Red Cross arm bands and went into the streets to help the injured. In spite of the intensity of the bombardment, the thick walls of the Norman, house had effectively sheltered most of the population and the number of casualties-one killed and eleven wounded-was surprisingly light.

As he worked among the wounded, Semple noticed a large ammunition dump on the outskirts of the village near the German gun emplacements. The results, for Giberville, if that vast stockpile of high explosive had gone in one mighty blast, wore frightening to contemplate. During the nerve-shattering ordeal of the bombardment, with the cries of women and children all around them, some of the evaders had cursed the Allied gunners. Now they could see all around them the grim necessity for the barrage. Near the centre of town, on the main street, the Germans had established a repair depot for armoured vehicles, with a number of scout cars, and self-propelled guns waiting their turn with the mechanics.

Completing his search for wounded, Semple, returned to the first-aid centre which the, priest had set up. The clergyman took him to one side. "It would be best if you remain silent while, we help these People," he whispered. "Your French is good-but not that good, and after this bombardment not all the people are feeling very friendly towards the Allies."

Norman hospitality was strained further the following day. Just before noon, as Semple's party were helping the priest repair his garden wall, they heard the rising whine of aircraft engines going full out.

"Take cover," he shouted, diving for the door of the house. In an instant, a squadron of Spitfire fighter bombers swooped down on the village, raking the streets with 20-mm. cannon shells and dumping their bombs on the repair depot. Shells ripped through the upper storey: of the priest's house, but again the garden wall protected the ground floor rooms, where most of

the refugees were gathered.

Later that day there was ominous news. The German commandant of Giberville had ordered the evacuation of all civilians. Accompanied by the Mayor of Colombelles the priest called on him, and after argument, the German agreed to let the people remain in both towns. But he insisted on a strict curfew; no one would be allowed in the streets or the surrounding fields, except members of the German-administered *Défense Passive*, a, sort of civil defence organization supposed to be made up of German sympathizers, but in fact composed, of most of the, local Resistance men

On June 15th Flight-Lieutenant Errol Semple became a member of the *Défense Passive*; putting on the armband of that organization, and placing himself under the priest's orders. The Resistance had welcomed the German commandant's terms, for it meant that the Canadian equipped with a *carte d'identité* identifying him as farm labourer Louis Rourni, could roam the area during curfew without fear of betrayal (for the only others with such, a licence were trusted members of the underground). His identification papers were those of a thirty-nine-year-old man who had been killed shortly after, their party arrived. The discrepancy in ages-Semple was twenty-six-never, posed a problem, -for he was required to produce the card only once, The armband proved an effective passport and, he used the freedom it provided to scout the area for possible escape routes.

On June 16th the priest returned in a highly excited state, He had just heard the B.B.C.'s French Service broadcast a warning to the people living in the battle zone of a large-scale British offensive. Civilians were advised to dig themselves deep shelters to avoid injury from the shell fire.

Semple and the others listened gravely. They had their work cut out for them, since the shelter would have to house a total of twenty-six men; women and children now living in the priest's house. With spades and picks they began to dig immediately in a corner of the garden partly sheltered by the wall and the house.

For five days they laboured at the project. Bad weather had slowed the tempo of the fighting, but each time the sky cleared, formations of fighter-bombers and huge clusters of Flying Fortresses could be seen hammering away at the Luftwaffe positions around the factory. Again, a number of the big Fortresses were hit, some of them exploding while others dived into the ground at full power. And again, as far as the escapers could see, no parachutes

By June 22nd their shelter was finished, but on that

day the German commandant changed his mind. All civilians must be evacuated by six a.m. the following morning, and this time he would accept no arguments.

This was alarming news for Semple. It seemed to him that if he and his men joined the refugees they would be pushed away-from the front, while running at the same time the risk of discovery by some inadvertent slip of the tongue or minor mistake at a checkpoint. He suggested that the military refugees remain hidden in the house. The priest was opposed, however, and the majority voted with him.

Before leaving his house, the priest was determined, to leave behind no valuables for the Germans. Those he had buried in graves in the church cemetery. One grave was completely filled with his cherished stock of wines and liqueurs. To the priest it bordered on sacrilege even to consider leaving for German gullets the vaunted produce of the Calvados country. His precious hoard, he told them, was being saved for the celebration when the British arrived.

They had barely tossed the last shovelful of sod into the grave when the first cluster of anti-personnel shells dropped around them-the prelude to the bombardment preceding the British attack.

There was now no time to lose. The rate, of fire was increasing into firing position down a slight slope leading from the entrance. While it rolled out easily enough, it took a number of men to wheel the heavy, tracked gun carriage back up the slope.

Shortly after his arrival, Semple watched with interest as the gun crew swung into action to fire at a section of spitfires making a steadily. A number of the very young and old had already been evacuated, but there were still a number of people in the village reluctant to leave their homes.

The evaders had to subordinate their own plans how to help save the innocent civilians caught between two opposing armies. Semple could not help admiring the way in which the priest exercised authority over his flock. He was a born leader. He had organized a shuttle service of farm, carts driven by the young men to carry the old, infirm and the children to safety. Citizens were organized into teams, each with its area of responsibility and assigned task.

The priest himself was everywhere, making sure families were provisioned, shouting orders, directing traffic and instructing the wagon-drivers on the route. At each salvo of shells, the terror and urgency of the evacuation increased.

One cart, which had pulled up in a courtyard near the church was hit directly. Its driver, only twenty-one, had already made a number of trips that day, carrying people and their belongings to safety beyond the range of

the guns. With the living in danger, there was no time for the dead. His weeping mother was pushed into another cart and his body was left lying in the wreckage of his wagon.

Semple and his crew of evaders were recruited as, herdsmen for the village livestock. Loaded down with bundles of the personal belongings, of those who had sheltered them, they joined the stream of refugees heading south.

The road was crowded with German military traffic heading in the opposite direction and, they were repeatedly forced into the ditches on either side by the columns of troops, tanks, assault guns and ammunition lorries. It took most of the afternoon and evening for the straggling column of refugees to cover the five miles to the village of Bourquebus, southeast of Caen. Semple and his group of amateur drovers indulged themselves in petty sabotage along the way, deliberately driving their assortment of cattle, sheep, goats and pigs into the road, forcing German transport to a halt and hiding their grins as furious officers, screamed abuse, at them.

A team of signalmen, laying telephone cables between German headquarters and forward command posts provided them with a more satisfying target. A few hundred yards past the signals team, Semple and Williams cut through the cables and tied the loose ends to their ankles, dragging them several miles. It would be several hours before that particular signals crew could, trace down the break and mend it.

At Bourquebus the refugees were billeted in a large barn. Semple found himself a small stall and collapsed into the straw, ignoring the plaintive squalls of the occupant, an orphan calf which bawled for its mother as it licked the weary flier's face. A German flak unit had also set up housekeeping in the barn, and used the building both as a billet and a screen for their gun from roving fight-bombers. When it was needed, the weapon was rolled low-level firing pass over the area. He 'was turning back into the barn when, he heard someone shout at him. One of the gunners made a beckoning gesture. They wanted his help to roll back the gun carriage.

Outright defiance could lead to trouble, so he patted one leg, then, affecting an elaborate limp, hobbled back into the barn.

He awoke just after dawn to the sound of scurrying feet, excited voices and close at hand-the thudding concussion of shellfire. A tremendous bombardment had erupted at first light and for a time it seemed that Bourquebus itself was the target. In fact the fighting was 'a few thousand yards to the north and west. This was the day on which the British captured

Ste.-Honorine.

Some of the braver souls in the barn, including the evaders, ventured into the narrow streets to try and locate the fighting. Pausing at the mouth of an alley, Semple watched the shells kick up fountains of dirt and smoke in the distance. An elderly Frenchman stopped beside him and struck up a conversation.

"Will they come today, do you think?"

Semple shrugged, "Who knows?"

"When Tommy comes it will be *Kamerad* straight off, for us." Semple turned. The speaker was a German sergeant, who had come up behind them.

Two enlisted men with him appeared very excited. The signs of approaching battle were evidently not to their liking. The sergeant apparently felt the need to try to identify with the local populace. He chatted freely about the Impending battle as though he were, like them, merely a spectator.

Semple remained silent, allowing the Frenchman to carry on the conversation. He preferred not to air his accent. If "Tommy" did not arrive, 'this N.C.O. might' remember his duty to the Third Reich.

The sergeant glanced at Semple, a number of times as he talked. Then, without warning, he addressed himself directly to the Canadian. "You," he said, sharply. "You look like an Englishman to me."

Hiding his alarm under feigned anger, Semple glared at the German. "Moi, Anglais? Mais non," he said vehemently, spitting on the ground to lend weight to his denial. The German laughed and Semple, pretending to see the joke, joined in. But the conversation had taken a dangerous turn. Semple excused himself and headed back to the barn, trying not to hurry. He felt the German's eyes follow him.

Towards noon the firing died down and the refugees took to the road again for the village of Compagne-de-Tillie, their original destination. But the Mayoress had bad news for the, tired, frightened company. Their cisterns and water pumping station had been badly damaged by- bombs and there was an acute water shortage. They would have to move on south, to St. Sylvan.

The Mayoress threw open her barn to allow the column to rest and prepare food before going on. When it came time to leave, Semple dug, in his heels. He was through, running.

He had formed a poor opinion of the majority of German forces he had seen, composed for the most part of the so-called "White Bread" Division, the 70th, made up of dyspeptics on a strict diet, or members of the Ost Division, Russian prisoners of war who had volunteered to serve in the Wehrmacht in exchange for a square meal. The commander of the fortress troops at Cherbourg, General von Schlieben, correctly assessed

the fighting potential of the twenty-three Russian battalions in Normandy: "It seems doubtful that Russians' can be made to fight in France, for Germany, against Americans and Englishmen."

Semple and his crew had heard the Intelligence assessment of the garrisons of Atlantic Wall fortifications--stories of over-age gunners and politically-dubious conscripts from, conquered, countries. The troops he had seen in this particular zone fitted that description and he was certain they would prove no barrier to determined men.

The priest was horrified, and assured them that it would, mean certain death. The Germans in the front-line zone were executing everyone they found who could not give a good account of himself or produce proper travel papers. Sergeant-Major. Jones, and Jess, the cargo despatcher, were persuaded. They would stay with the column. Ackley hesitated; his arm, he ventured, would only slow them down.

That evening around seven, after helping with last minute preparations, Semple, Williams and Sandy waved good-bye from the roadside as the refugee column moved out, towards St. Sylvan. They had each been left a bag of food. The mother of the boy killed by the shell in Giberville, her eyes bright with tears, begged them to see that her son received a proper burial if they returned there.

The three evaders set up temporary camp in a thick clump of briars outside the village, but as darkness fell the weather turned chill and they wandered into the town looking for better accommodation. One of the refugees had given them the name of a farmer who might help. But his house already sheltered thirty-five people 'left homeless by the battle, and the farmer refused to jeopardise so many lives by taking the risk of harbouring three Allied servicemen. After some pleading, they persuaded him to let them occupy a small shed used for storing wheat. The sheaves proved poor protection against the cold of that night. They spent most of it pacing the floor to keep warm.

The next morning, red-eyed and weary, they retraced their steps to the barn where the column had rested the previous night. The priest had not told the Mayoress about the evaders in his party. Since he spoke French, Semple was the natural choice to approach her for help.

When he asked permission to stay in the barn, his accent betrayed him.

"Are you evacuees?" Madame asked dubiously. Semple nodded, but she was not convinced. Beckoning him to enter, she closed the door and smiled. "You are English, aren't you?" Her abruptness caught him off guard. He saw that a denial would be worse than useless. Besides, she appeared sympathetic. He found himself

blurting out the whole story of the crash and their attempts to get back to their own lines.

When he had finished, she frowned thoughtfully. "It would be too dangerous for all of us if you remained here," she explained. "The Germans visit the farm almost every day for eggs, milk and water."

Semple turned to leave, but she held out a hand. "Wait. I have a small house in the centre of town. It's empty and you could use that."

Her son led them there. It was, as she had said, small, but it was comfortably furnished and after nights of sleeping in barns, sheds and crowded rooms, it was luxurious to their eyes.

The farm provided them with fresh milk, butter, eggs and bread, and that night while they feasted they discussed their change of luck. Now at last they seemed to be heading in the right direction and, to judge by their surroundings, travelling in style. One other factor seemed to improve their prospects, three men would stand a much better chance than six of slipping undetected through the German lines.

But that situation changed suddenly when Sergeant-Major Jones, Jess and Ackley arrived. They had changed their minds and had left the column after it reached St. Sylvan. That town had been taken over as a German headquarters and was crowded with enemy soldiers, so the refugee column had been ordered to move on. The three soldiers had come to realize that they were only, moving further and further into occupied France with their chance of escape becoming more remote with every step.

Moreover, the three soldiers had brought with them three French youths which tripled the number of strangers to attract the notice of the townsfolk of Compagne-Tillie. They would have to make their move sooner than planned.

The three newcomers were Jean Rogers, a courageous young man named Gaston Bresson who was wanted by the Gestapo for his work with the Resistance and Bernard, a boy of seventeen. All three were determined to enlist with the Free French now fighting beside the Anglo-American force in Normandy.

It was decided that Semple should continue as leader, with Williams as his deputy, a necessary measure now that the party had become so large. It was also agreed that they would intensify their reconnaissance missions. Semple would handle this job as he spoke French and must, as leader, make the final assessment of their chances. He would use the French lads in this work because of their knowledge of the terrain and also a cultural camouflage if he should be stopped.

FOUR

Early the next day, June 25th, Semple, Jean, and Gaston set out in the direction of Giberville to scout their escape route. They had provided themselves with an empty Red Cross box to back up their story, that they were on their way to the first-aid post at Mundeville, a nearby community, for medical supplies.

The rail line seemed to be the safest route to travel, since the roads were heavily patrolled by German military police. They had not gone far, however, before they were challenged by a sentry. The Germans were not allowing civilians to wander at will through their defence zones. After hearing their story, the N.C.O. in charge of the sentry, post allowed them to proceed.

The journey was a revelation for Semple. The line which led to the factory at Le Plateau, bristled with cleverly camouflaged flak emplacements, with the guns, sited so that they could be used either in their conventional anti-aircraft role or as anti-tank weapons. At Le Plateau and Mundeville they visited several homes in an unsuccessful attempt to learn the exact location of the British lines, before trudging on towards Giberville. At the level crossing just outside the town they encountered a more serious setback.

"*Halt*" The command caught them by surprise, for even Semple had failed to notice the camouflaged observation Post lying beside their line of march. Turning, they found themselves staring into the muzzles of a half dozen rifles and sub-machine guns, in the bands of an equal number of stern-faced Germans.

These were Luftwaffe paratroopers, considered one of the finest bodies of troops the Germans had in Normandy. The officer in charge spoke excellent French, and Semple decided that it would be wiser to let his companions do the talking. Since they had already passed through Mundeville, their cover story was useless, but Jean and, Gaston were equal to the situation. They wanted to enter Giberville, they explained, to bury a friend who had been killed by British artillery fire during the evacuation. The officer shook his head. "It is forbidden," he said. "This entire area is restricted, I don't know how you got this far."

But the French boys were not about to give up. With a subtlety that surprised Semple, they managed to-work an anti-British theme into their plea, playing at the same time on the officer's vanity and sympathy. Finally, after glancing at his sergeant, who shrugged, he waved them on. Giberville was a town of empty houses and hushed streets. The only inhabitants now were detachments of German soldiers, busy-setting up strong-points. The only sounds were the ever-present thunder of guns and the occasional throaty sigh of a

heavy-calibre naval shell heading for some target far inland.

The priest's house was intact and empty. A few yards further along the debris-choked street they found the courtyard where the young Frenchman's body lay. A bathtub from one of the bombed-out houses, served as a coffin with a lid of boards and burlap. They dug a grave in the apple orchard adjoining the courtyard, and fashioned a rude cross from pieces of planking. A note stating that the burial had been carried out by an R.C. A.F. pilot and two residents of the village was signed by all three, and then tacked to the cross.

They returned to Compagne-de-Tillie by the highway. As they had expected, they were eyed suspiciously, but a cheerful *Bonjour, Monsieur,* seemed to turn aside all questions.

That evening, the entire party left Compagne-de-Tillie and moved back to the priest's house in Giberville. Barely inside, they heard the tramp of heavy boots in the courtyard and exchanged looks of alarm. But it was only a detachment of Germans heading for the abandoned church where their regimental padre was holding services for those killed.

The demonstrated proximity of enemy soldiers convinced them that they would have to maintain a strict security system to, guard against more unpleasant surprises. Two-man teams stood two-hour watches round the clock.

That night a tremendous barrage began. "Cor, listen to that," one of the, soldiers breathed. "We may be out of this sooner than we think." For the past three days British and Canadian armour had been conducting an all-out attack across the Odon River towards Caen, in an attempt to envelop the, positions of Panzer Lehr and the 12th S.S. The spirited attack was so far blunted and broken by the tenacity of the defenders. The evaders clustered by the windows, watching the lurid display of bursting shells in the darkness. It was only near morning, when the firing died down, that they finally crept to their beds.

In the next three days, Jean and Semple visited Le Plateau again, but all they could learn was that Cherbourg had fallen to the Americans, It was cheering news, but victories so far to the west did little to help their situation.

They lived well on fresh eggs, potatoes, strawberries and poultry, the latter foraged from the abandoned farms. Friends of the French boys at Le Plateau did their cooking for them, for they had to be careful about smoke issuing from the chimney of a supposedly abandoned house.

The sorties for food were not without risk. At one farm, while Gaston was trying to capture a duck in the

barn yard, two German soldiers entered the lane where Semple was picking strawberries. The Canadian dodged into the house and ran to a front window. From the window, he could see Gaston hiding in the barn. The boy made frantic signals to him to remain hidden. The two Germans had entered the yard. Semple dashed up the stairs as the front door opened.

He slipped into the first room at the top of the stairs, a bedroom, littered with abandoned clothing. On impulse, he snatched up two mismatched and badly-worn socks with, a vague notion this would give him the appearance of belonging in the house. He could hear heavy footfalls on the ground floor. Moving as silently as possible, he opened the window, lowered himself to the ground, leaped over, a hedge into the lane at the side of the house and met the two Germans face to face. They had just left the house by the rear door.

It would be difficult to say who was the more astonished. The Germans were both youngsters and aside from a sheath knife worn by one of them and a pistol, safely strapped in its holster, they were unarmed. They were apparently on a foraging expedition of their own. "What are you doing, here?" the older of the two demanded, in fluent French.

Semple grinned weakly and, he hoped disarmingly. "This is my home," he replied, hoping his accent would pass undetected. "I came back for food and clothing." He realized that he was still holding the wretched pair of socks, and held them out as proof.

The two soldiers looked at each other. "This area was evacuated and you shouldn't be here," the German said "You must leave immediately."

Semple, nodded dumbly and their faces softened. The one who spoke French spread his hands helplessly. "*C'est la guerre*," he said. Semple's eye caught a flicker of movement at the side of the barn. He quickly averted his eyes and looked at the Germans. "*C'est la guerre*," he agreed, sighing with relief as the two soldiers turned and walked away. When they had gone; Gaston emerged from his hiding place at the corner of the barn. He was brandishing a short, heavy piece of wood. If things had gone differently, Semple realized he would have been able to count on Gaston for help. On the next trip to Le Plateau, Semple had another more serious brush with the Germans. This time it was his penchant for spying out enemy fortifications and riot just his lust for strawberries which provoked the confrontation.

He had left Jean Rogers at the home of some friends and set-out to investigate some unusual activity around the ruins of the factory, the target of so many air attacks.

As all roads leading to it were heavily guarded, Semple decided, once more to follow the rail line. He set out across open fields and found the spur line which led through a tunnel to the factory. Passing through this tunnel, he found himself at one of the factory's main gates. Held by a Luftwaffe field division, this was one of the, principal fortresses in the defence of Caen. From where the Canadian stood, he could see a number of the dreaded 88-mm guns used with such deadly effect against Allied tanks.

Later, Harold Ackley would have an even closer look at the place: "We had the shock of our lives, for we found that it was a fully established H.Q., with a telephone switchboard and a lookout post manned by officers which commanded a good view of Caen. It seemed strange to think we had lived so near to that without detection." Semple was just as astonished to realize that this forbidding complex of men and weapons had existed without their knowledge a scant few hundred yards from their hideout. A considerable number of lighter automatic flak guns, were visible. Semple could see that the interior of the buildings had been reinforced with concrete thick enough to withstand all but the heaviest shells.

Some of the bloodiest fighting around Caen would occur in this area. The Luftwaffe gunners fought with a tenacity and courage rivalling that of the Hitler Jugend, their neighbours in the line, resisting with spades and rifle butts in bloody hand-to-hand combat when their ammunition ran out.

He had almost a full minute to survey the scene before he was spotted.

"*Halt! Was wollen Sie?*"

Semple turned to run, but it was too late. A squad of soldiers their weapons levelled, advanced towards him. "You've used up all your luck old son Semple told himself. But he decided that he had to bluff it out. He had no choice.

"I'm trying to get to my home." His simulated confusion seemed to work, for the weapons were lowered. Surprisingly, they did not ask to see his identification papers. They were too angry for that.

"*Verflucht!*" the squad leader growled. "*Französischen Dummkopf!*"

Another spun him around and pointed back the way he had come. "*Gehen Sie hinaus!*" He accompanied the words with a shove.

Semple's knowledge of German was scanty, but he took meaning. Smiling apologetically he backed into the railway arch, raised a limp arm and blurted a feeble "*Heil Hitler!*" Turning, he fled back along the tracks, aware of the guffaws behind him.

On June 28th, Semple and his French guides visited

Mundeville to see Carmen Langlet, the medical assistant who had treated their injuries after the crash. This time they were lucky. Langlet was a mine of information, thanks to an alert ambulance driver employed at the medical centre who kept his eyes open on his trips through the district.

The first-aid man unfolded a map. "The British are here" he told them, stabbing a finger at the chart, "at Longueval."

Semple studied the map. It looked good. Longueval was on their side of the Orne. But where was the German front line?

Again Langlet had the answer. With a pencil he traced a route, which he assured them would lead them safely past the German strong-points.

"With luck," he shrugged "you should make it in a few hours."

Later that afternoon, another council of war was held, at the priest's house.

"I say we try tonight," Semple told the others. "We don't know how long this information will be valid."

He looked at the others. They nodded. Right then," he snapped. "We'll move out after dark, in two sections I'll take the lead, with Williams here and Gaston, since he knows the ground. The rest of you follow at an interval of fifteen yards; that way if we run into trouble you'll have a chance to get clear."

He paused. The second group should have a leader. He glanced at the circle of faces. His first impulse was to choose Ackley, but the man's arm ruled him out. The paratroop sergeant-major did not speak French. It would have to be one of the French lads.

He nodded at Jean Rogers. "You take the point in the second group-just follow our lead and do what we do. If we get nabbed-well, you know the country,"

The first order of business was to eat up their stockpile of food. This they did with a will. Finally there was nothing left but a box of sugar cubes.

After dark they left the house and crept through a small apple orchard to the road. A target appeared right away in six small German scout Cars, laagered for the night at the side of the road. The sugar cubes were dumped into the gasoline tanks of four of the "recce" wagons.

The remaining two were spared only when the saboteurs almost fell over the blanket-shrouded forms of the drivers on the ground.

Back at the house, they completed their final preparations for the breakout. Light-coloured clothing was discarded and replaced with darker garments. Soot from the stove was used to blacken their faces and hands. Heavy stockings and rags wrapped around their shoes to deaden the sound of their footsteps.

Just after three a.m. they ventured into the night. They travelled in single file, moving slowly to avoid making any noise and also to spare the two injured soldiers. They were obliged to slow their pace even more as they neared the front, dropping flat innumerable times to avoid detection in the light cast by the frequent flares. It was the nervous period just before dawn, a time usually selected for attacks and raids, and the sentries along this section of the line were taking no chances.

In spite of their caution, they were spotted about an hour after they had set out. They had just entered a field of oats outside Courville and Semple was casting worried looks to the east, where he could make out the first grey tinge of sunrise. Suddenly a shot rang out and a bullet whispered through the tall stalks of grain.

"Down," Semple whispered, uselessly, for his companions, had already buried their faces in the turf. A regular curtain of fire burst from the German positions. They were using tracers and as the volume of fire increased, Semple realized that they must be only a few yards from the enemy foxholes. He could even hear the sharp metallic clatter of rifle-bolts above the chatter of the machine gun.

They had been travelling along a slightly sunken path that traversed the grain field and this minor indentation shielded them effectively from the shower of bullets.

"We'll have to crawl," Semple hissed. "Move fast, and keep your heads down."

They had not gone far when it came to him that the second party was not following. Leaving Williams and, Gaston, he doubled back.

The firing had diminished slightly by the time, he reached the place where he had last seen Jean's group. Semple called their names in a hoarse whisper. There was no reply. The eastern sky was getting lighter now and there was no time to lose. He did not relish the thought of 'being caught in the open field in broad daylight. He crawled down the sunken path another, forty yards and called again, more loudly this time.

He got an answer, but, not the one he wanted. The machine gun opened up again with a long, searching, burst which showered him with clods of dirt. Gritting his teeth, he waited until the firing had stopped, and called the names of the missing men again. The only reply was another storm of bullets.

He waited another five minutes before giving up. Returning to Williams and Gaston, he shook his head in response to their questioning looks.

It was three months before Semple learned from Harold Ackley, in an English military hospital, what had happened. "When the machine guns opened fire I just dropped flat where I was as you told us to" he wrote.

Jean and Bernard apparently panicked and bolted. Ackley started crawling towards the edge of the field and soon met up with the two other despatchers and Sergeant-Major Jones.

When they reached the border of the field an argument developed over which direction to take. The paratrooper pulled rank and took charge. "We were about a dozen yards from a macadam road and we had to climb a bank to reach it. We stood up and had a look around when about eight Jerries opened fire on us at point blank range with rifles and Schmeissers. I just rolled back down the bank and lay with my back to the Jerries and set myself to receive the shots I felt sure must hit me."

His companions tried to make a break through the field of grain, but more shots brought them to a halt. They raised their hands and shouted, "*Kamerad!*"

"The Jerries kept on firing until Sand waved a white cloth and then it ceased. We had no chance of evading them for it was quite light, but they must have been wretched shots or else I wouldn't be here to write this.

Only Sandy and myself were taken prisoners and we were both convinced that Jess and S/M Jones had got away. But there had been no word of them from that day this and I now feel that they must have lost their lives, poor devils.

"At first the Jerries were going to shoot us as Frenchmen until we proved we were British soldiers, and then they treated us like heroes. They gave us breakfast and left one man to guard us and when he thought nobody else could hear he said, 'me Pole-me help you escape.'" The Polish conscript never had the chance to help them.

They were taken first to the fortress at Le Plateau, then loaded into motorcycle sidecars for interrogation at army headquarters. On the Giberville-Bourquebus road they passed Bernard, legging it as fast as he could in the direction of St. Sylvan.

At headquarters, a chateau in the woods, the two soldiers were given an intensive grilling but refused to admit that anyone had helped them since the crash, saying instead that they had stolen their food and clothing from abandoned farms. The morning after their capture Jean was brought in. After a day of hiding in the grain field, had been caught when trying to escape that night.

He told the interrogator he was a French-Canadian flyer who had been shot down, but it was quite obvious what he was and they soon tore his explanation to shreds and told him that he would be shot as a Resistance man.

'It nearly broke my heart for we could do nothing to help him. If we had stepped in; they would have soon

connected us with the people of Giberville and we were determined to die before betraying people like them.

After two days spent "under filthy conditions" the two soldiers were moved out. As they were leaving, Typhoons attacked the chateau with rockets and bombs. 'It sure was hot, while it lasted and we were thankful to get a way.' Jean stayed behind. Some time later he was taken from his cell and executed. On November 21st, 1946, his family at last found out what had happened to him when body was discovered in a common grave along with other German victims.

His photograph was sent to Semple after the war. "Jean Rogers," reads the inscription on the back. "Disappeared while attempting to cross to the British lines-end of June 1944. Found Nov. 21st, 1946, in a charnel house-St.-Pierre-du-Jouguet. Assassinated by the Gestapo."

The three survivors, continued undetected through the fields. The capture of the others and the diversion they created had drawn the Germans off. At the edge of the field they drew to a halt, and regarded the terrain ahead with dismay. It consisted of about 100 yards of bare ground, devoid of any sort of cover. They crawled on their bellies. It was rough, for the ground was dry and hard. Stones cut into their hands and knees. By the time they reached another stand of grain their breath was coming in strangled gasps and their hands were chafed raw.

The sun was still beneath the horizon, but it was quite light now. They pushed through the waving stalks of grain, and more open ground loomed ahead.

"Don't ask me to crawl-I'm beat," Williams panted.

Semple was in the same condition. "We'll cross this one, on our feet but move fast. Ready?" The others nodded "Let's go," he said, breaking into a run.

This area had seen heavy fighting. The ground was honeycombed with shell craters and foxholes and littered with smashed and abandoned equipment. Beyond, another field of grain offered more concealment.

They were halfway through the third grain field when something on the ground caught Semple's eye. Squatting, he carefully brushed away the loose earth with his fingers. Metal gleamed under the early morning sun. The others drew in their breath sharply. They were in the middle of a mine field.

"We'd better go back," Williams spoke quietly. "And watch where you put your feet." As though treading on eggs, they retraced their steps to the edge of the field.

"Over there-something moving," "Gaston Pointed. Beyond the mine field, they could make out figures-beyond a dark line of hedge.

"Ours-or theirs?" Williams whispered; Semple shook

his head, "Can't make them out. It's still too dark in the shadows. We'll wait until the sun gets higher before we make a move."

But they had already been, spotted. "Hoy!" The two airmen stared at each other with incredulous smiles- there was no mistaking that salutation. They had heard it too often in London.

Leaping to their feet, they waved the strips of white cloth they had brought along for just such a purpose shouting, "English! English!" "Awright, Hinglish, come on over 'ere and let's 'ave a look at you. And nothing funny mind!" the sentry shouted back.

"But there's a mine field out there," Semple replied.

"Strewh!" They could detect a note of disgust in the sentries' voice. "Them's anti-tank mines. No danger unless you and y'r ruddy mytes appen to wye, a couple of ruddy tons.

But the evaders, having come so far, were taking no chances and refused to budge, much to the added disgust of the sentry who, cursing all the way, crossed the field and guided them to the British position.

"The 51st Seaforth Highlanders welcomes you." A tall and smiling colonel in a dusty combat jacket greeted them at the command post. "You must be famished. Tea and biscuits all right? 'Fraid it's all we have at the moment."

A jeep whisked them away to regimental headquarters, where a conference of officers listened intently as Semple indicated German strong-points on the map of the sector. His knowledge of the fortifications at Le Plateau caused some excitement. All in all, the two airmen were a windfall for Combat Intelligence.

At this point they said farewell to Gaston, who was bound for a different destination to see French-Intelligence officers. They would not have the opportunity to see him again.

After Corps Intelligence got through with them, it was the turn of 21st Army Group. On June 30, a jeep carried them to General Montgomery's Bayeux headquarters where No. 9 Military Intelligence unit put them through the wringer with a grilling which lasted well into the next day.

Finally on July 3rd they were loaded aboard one of the transport planes already flying a shuttle supply service to front-line landing strips, and were flown back to England to rejoin their squadron and give Air Intelligence a turn in the question -and-answer game.

With a step-up in rank, Semple returned to operations with 437 Squadron of the R.C.A.F., as skipper of his own aircraft. He was just in time to take part in the big air borne operation at Arnhem in September 1944. It was D-Day all over again, with a vengeance. Of the

eight planes in his flight making a supply drop to the embattled, paratroopers his was the only one to return.

After that came the "Battle of the Bulge" in December and again Air Transport Command's Dakotas carried supplies to the surrounded Americans at Bastogne.

The war was almost over when Squadron Leader Errol Semple was summoned to Buckingham Palace and presented with an M.B.E.