

## FRANCE AT WAR

### *Battle of Alsace Ends*

*With the liberation of Colmar and the elimination of the last German pockets to which the enemy had been clinging to contain the Allied advance toward the Rhine on the frontiers of the two French provinces, Alsace is once more French territory. In this long, hard battle, the French troops played a great part beside their comrades of the American Seventh Army. After the liberation of Alsace, General Devers, commander of the Sixth Army Group to which the French First Army under General Delattre de Tassigny is attached, said in a message to the French soldiers, "You have the right to be proud of the way in which you accomplished this difficult task."*

*Now that France is liberated, the soldiers of the French First Army are carrying forth their task with their comrades-in-arms of the American Seventh Army. They are launching their attack against fortress Germany, thus remaining faithful to the pledge made by all of them, those of Libya, Tunisia, Italy, those of the FFI, not to lay down their arms until the enemy has been vanquished, until the victims of the occupation, the martyrs of the Gestapo, the entire nation whose loyalty to the cause of liberty condemned her to fall in the front lines of the battle for liberty, have been avenged.*

### I—REPORTS FROM THE BATTLEFRONTS

#### *In Alsace*

*Attacks and counter-attacks in snow and in rain, in forests or against strongholds in the Vosges, high morale and Franco-American fraternity, such were the characteristics of the battle of Alsace. Below are some reports sent at various times and from various sectors which describe the life of the French soldiers at the front and of villages, which like men, were caught in the wake of war.*

*In the Hardt Forest* — (By war correspondent Michel Le Blanc) — In a sector not very far from Mulhouse, we went to see the Hardt Forest. All our speculations about the difficulties of forest-fighting were by far exceeded by the reality. . . .

I spent Sunday afternoon with a small unit, a North African unit, which since the beginning of the year had been engaged practically without respite on all the Allied fronts. Thousands of kilometers from home, under conditions which were more than precarious, at grips with water and cold, these men continued to hold this corner of Alsace despite bombs overhead and water underfoot. . . . The front was formed by a natural break which cut through the forest from West to East. For days on end, the soldiers remained dug in on the banks of the Huningue Canal without being able to lift their

heads. They had to await nightfall to get supplies to their advance posts, that is to say, to cover a few dozen meters.

At the CP we met the lieutenant commanding the sector. He described the situation, indicated with a resigned gesture the laughable rest stations and spoke of the two bitter enemies — not counting the Boche — who never surrender: the wet cold which causes dangerous frostbite and immobility. For days and nights the war was waged in this way in this sector. At times an impressive silence fell on the forest, soon to be broken by blasts which echoed through the underbrush. And the second lieutenant with whom I stood chatting in a muddy path, joked good-humoredly about a subject dear to all journalists, about the comfort that could be found in a neighboring village where nothing remained but ruins and into which shells continued to pour.

(COMBAT, Paris, December 24, 1944)

*Snow and Fire* — It is snowing in the Vosges. It is snowing on the pines and on the plain between the Ill and the Rhine. This winter is like many another, intended for the humble tasks of men, for peaceful evenings spent beside huge porcelain stoves. But today the cannonade makes the icy air vibrate over the houses with pink rafters where terrified women and children listen for the sinister screaming of the shells.

These are the cities, with their soft shadows and charm; Sarrebourg, Phalsbourg, Saverne, Haguenau, Bischwiller, Strasbourg. They are all still there, faithful to the imagery of our past, to our childhood dreams. Close to the line of fire, Hans, one of the villagers, still wears his fur cap. Catherine, his daughter, has not lost her rosy cheeks but her children cannot speak our language. Do you know how some Alsatian children greeted Leclerc's soldiers? They shouted in German, "Es Lebe Frankreich" (Long live France).

On January 3, thousands of the inhabitants of Strasbourg took to the roads because the Germans, using a canal along the Rhine, crossed over in rubber rafts and landed at Gamsheim, 10 kilometers from the city; and in Strasbourg Hitler's followers were already saying, "You can pull down your flags."

From Sarreguemines to Bitche, from Haguenau to Gamsheim, from Krafft to Sélestat, towns and villages were suddenly ablaze in a deluge of metal and fire. However, the names of these small Alsatian towns will live on in history. Everywhere, those who remained listened in their cellars to the din of war. Above them, at times, burning roofs would cave in. And they would emerge, running through the streets amidst the fire of flamethrowers. Hell was loose in this house-to-house battle; and on the roads, beside burning tanks, smashed trucks, overturned cannon, there was the strange procession of the dead, lying face down in the snow.



South of Strasbourg, the men of the French First Army were the ones to bear the brunt of the fighting. There, war was everywhere, in the woods, in the fields, along frozen rivers. At night machine guns fired in the snow while our tank destroyers patrolled attacking tremendous German tanks. These Frenchmen have not been relieved since 1940 but they are still holding.

One evening, after days of fighting in the snow, after nights of watch in foxholes on the endless white plain, men from North Africa came to sleep in a cellar near the front line. They built a fire, buried their frozen feet in the warm ashes and started to sing. They sang for their dead comrades, for those who would never again see the land of sunshine.

(*AMBIANCE, Paris, January 31, 1945*)

**A Night Beside the Rhine** — (By André Bourrillon) — "Here we are," suddenly said the liaison officer who was to lead me to the front lines. "It would be better for us to leave our jeep here, for the noise of the motor might give us away." We both got out and advanced in the snow. Some 50 meters away we saw a Maginot Line pillbox. A sentinel aimed his submachine gun at us and authoritatively demanded the password.

The lieutenant advanced and whispered it to him, the Moroccan infantryman relaxed, we were allowed to advance and enter the casemate where we were received by a young captain who, in the light of a small alcohol lamp, loomed suddenly before us like a huge spectre.

He offered his hand and said, "Make yourself at home."

How true! We were at home in this small Maginot Line fort, on this land of liberated Alsace, French one more, before the Rhine flowing four meters away, before the Rhine the German had hastily crossed under our pressure.

"Come," said the captain, "look through the gunpost, but above all do not move your head because you would be immediately spotted by the crack marksmen these gentlemen have posted opposite us. A bullet hits so fast."

I went over and gazed out. Opposite me was Germany, enemy territory only separated from us by some 150 meters of the Rhine, flowing its green and cold waters at our feet.

**Strange Impression** — Suddenly I thought of all the effort and sacrifice made that our soldiers might return and reoccupy these positions. I was lost in thought and the captain had to call me back to reality.

"Don't stay too long, come with me."

I visited the look-out turret, the munitions room; I spoke to the Moroccans who looked queer in their parkas. The atmosphere was strange.

**They Sang** — We advanced toward the sound and opened a door. They were there, a dozen men listening with a vacant look to a tune from their country which one of them was playing on a flute made of a curtain rod, while another beat out the rhythm on a gasoline container.

It was wonderful. They were dreaming, they were forgetting their hardships and in the semi-darkness of the

small fort they could see the mosques the sands of their far-away land.

Outside the cannon thundered, the machine gun spat its blasts and I fell asleep in an outlandish mingling of music and death.

(*RESISTANCE, Paris, February 20, 1945*)

### **French Wings With the Russians and the British**

**Normandie Squadron in East Prussia** — (By a *Pravda* war correspondent) — Beside Soviet aviators, the Normandie Squadron flyers actively support the ground forces advancing in East Prussia. The French airmen have engaged in many air battles and inflicted heavy losses on the Luftwaffe.

Recently, six Yaks, under the command of Major Delphinot, were ordered to cover Soviet units operating against an important German fortified stronghold. Flying over enemy territory at an altitude of 2,000 meters, the Normandie pilots sighted twelve Focke-Wulf 190's below them preparing to attack the Soviet troops. The commander gave the signal and the six pursuits, their tails to the sun, launched a lightning attack.

Swooping down to within 50 meters from the enemy, Major Delphinot fired two short volleys which struck the leader of the two Focke-Wulfs to the right of the German formation. The enemy plane exploded in mid-air.

At the very same moment, Second Lieutenant André, shot down another enemy plane. It went into a spin and crashed in a trail of smoke. A third Focke-Wulf, hit by Second Lieutenant Laurion, tried to escape. Making the best of his Lavochkin's speed, Laurion caught up with the German and a volley from his machine guns sent the plane crashing to the ground.

A few seconds later, Second Lieutenant André attacked another Focke-Wulf and scored a second victory. The enemy plane caught fire and exploded. Having lost two more planes hit by Lieutenant Costin, the Germans hastily withdrew.

During this battle, the Normandie Squadron flyers destroyed a total of six out of twelve German planes and kept the enemy from attacking the Soviet ground forces.

Commander Delphinot's plane was damaged during the attack but the experienced and daring pilot managed to return to his field.

(*FRANCE, London, February 2, 1945*)

**Guyenne and Tunisie Squadrons With the RAF on the Kiel Front** — (By Yves Pougnet) — We left that night carrying a full load and crossed the North Sea and Jutland to attack the strategic German military port of Kiel.

Rising slowly above the signal flares, our four-engine plane was swallowed in the night. Through the windshield I tried in vain to make out the ground, the horizon, or the sky above us, but not a shape, not a gleam, not a star disclosed by the passing of a cloud, could be distinguished. In that weather, with fog-banks trailing at several hundred feet, we were engulfed in space as





*French Press and Information Service*

*Moroccan soldier on Rhine front.*

black as the depths of the sea, with neither variation nor shape. On the panel, luminous indicators quivered, the only visible proof of our flight, of our safety, of our life.

Our navigator had set the course of our flight. Closed in his cabin without any view of the outside world, he was bending over his maps, manipulating his slide-rule, observing his instruments. Thanks to him and to the navigators of the other crews, 800 planes that night followed as accurate a course through space and time as trains on a railway line. In a few minutes we were to reach the objective, achieving despite the obscurity a concentration which would overwhelm the best organized defenses.

We then flew over the sea. Holding an altitude of several hundred meters to avoid the clouds, we met the last squadrons which were circling to leave and which soon joined the flight of bombers converging near the coast. The black space was soon sparkling with lights. Like a swarm of luminous insects whirling and dancing.

Sometimes a red light, then a green light would swing near us. We would watch them rapidly grow, we would distinguish the shadow of the cockpit and wings which they framed, then they would disappear in the night. We doubled our attention at our observation posts. Everyone scanned the night, signalled the lights which came too close. They were so numerous that we wondered whether we ever would avoid them all. In our

anxious watch, we could not help reliving what we had too often witnessed: the huge and gloomy mass of a plane emerging from a dead angle, the flames of a collision springing through the night.

Minutes and hours passed. Our route grew on the map, it swung more and more eastwardly over the sea. "Hello pilot, climb to six thousand meters—speed 160." Our navigator warned us that our course had brought us near the enemy defenses and that we should rise in order to fly above them. The roar of the engines increased. Our plane heaved its heavy load into the sky. All around us our invisible but close comrades also rose.

Visibility was nil. It stopped at the panes of the windshields, at the turrets. The dangerous proximity of a comrade could no longer be detected by a shadow. The jolting increased, the temperature fell, frost covered the wings; the climb was a long and painful one. Everyone tensely awaited its end. Finally, like a submarine surfacing, we emerged from the heavy bed of clouds. A few moments later, crests of waves brushed our wings like pale sprays, then we rose beneath the stars into a clear and icy sky.

We joyfully welcomed free space but the black, infinite and empty expanse increased our feeling of isolation. Nowhere could we detect a friendly presence, on the contrary, flak soon started to burst around us. We had seen the sky only to forget it in the approach of battle.



The enemy defenses were stiff. Searchlights killed the night. Flak filled the space with its lights and puffs. Close hits deafened us. Dead below I recognized the port. It was already covered with brilliant sheets of incendiary bombs spreading around red flares.

We dropped our bombs. For a few minutes longer we were tossed around in blazing space, and then, little by little, the night extinguished everything and swallowed us again.

Until we reached the coast, bursts of flak, rockets, tracers, still revealed battles. The crash of a blazing plane tore through the night and then darkness regained its supremacy. We flew into the clouds. At 6,000 meters, still completely blinded, we steadied our course into horizontal flight for the return trip.

(FRANCE, London, February 2, 1945)

### *On the Atlantic Front*

*Below are some excerpts from a report published by Combat on the German resistance at the mouth of the Gironde and on the state of the port of Bordeaux:*

On either side of the Gironde, north of Royan and on the narrow strip of land at Pointe de Grave, 10,000 Germans are condemned to a very hard siege and to continuous bombings but are holding out in order to deprive France and her Allies of the only great French seaport which is almost undamaged. Forced hastily to evacuate Bordeaux, they had no time to blow up the large port installations but retreated along the coast and entrenched themselves in the many pillboxes which command the entrance to the estuary. These shelters, protected by a concrete sheathing two and a half meters thick, form a defense system which has the character of a powerful stronghold. The French aviators who are constantly harassing the Nazi positions say they feel they are dealing with a second Gibraltar.

However, the apparently impregnable entrenchments do not protect the Germans from suffering serious defeats. Thus a bombing deprived them of supplies stocked for a two and a half years' siege. The very same bombing destroyed seven to eight mine fields and three forts. Despite the powerful enemy AA defense, the French Atlantic Coast Command under General Corniglion-Molinier, is now relentlessly attacking the German positions of Royan. In Marennes, in Saujon, and on the other side of the Gironde from Lesparre to Medoc, in the marshes and on the ground, the former men of the Maquis, the brave FFI, with the French Forces of the West, await the moment when they will be able to cage the enemy and restore the Bordeaux harbor to life. These men fight everywhere with arms that are still inadequate in the face of the many cannon, mines and German pillboxes. They suffer from pulmonary ailments. In certain sectors of the front, such as La Grave, their rations are clearly insufficient. However, the morale of our volunteers is high and their discipline excellent.

The splendid port of Bordeaux is intact but unusable. The long line of wharfs borders the broad stream of

the Garonne. The famous concrete pen built by the Germans and the submarine base are henceforth useless. The stone bridge stands undamaged and far away, up to the shallow repair basins, draw-bridges, sheds, cranes, await but the arrival of ships to start running again. However, not satisfied with blocking the Gironde estuary at La Grave and Royan, the Germans sank in the roadstead north of Bordeaux a few large ships which completely block the channel: German, Italian, Greek or French ships loaded with minerals and filled with thousands of tons of sludge which hinder refloating. In order to repair the holes, divers are working in the sludge and dangerous currents. In the harbor itself, many ships of the Kriegsmarine scuttled themselves in order to hinder access to the wharfs. But despite its being blocked, despite the cranes at a standstill, despite the silence which has fallen on the docks, the harbor does not give the impression of desolation. Small river barges handling the local traffic give it some life. From time to time there is the sound of a German pillbox exploding, and the pumps refloating the ships keep on humming. Despite the scuttled ships and the mines, Bordeaux, the only undamaged French seaport and the least accessible, will be restored to traffic whenever the coasts and the estuary have been liberated. Unfortunately, complete clearing will take time since equipment is lacking, and there are 1,000 ships in France to be refloated.

(COMBAT, Paris, February 23, 1945)

## II—MILITARY NEWS

### *Eisenhower Praises French Troops*

At a press conference at Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force, on February 24 last, General Dwight D. Eisenhower asserted that the offensive on the Western front was expected "to destroy every German" in its path west of the Rhine and that if necessary to quell German resistance, the Allied Armies would drive on into the center of the Reich to meet the Russian Armies. . . .

His nearest approach to politics was to praise the fortitude with which the French populace endured its sufferings this winter and to state that: "I want more French divisions in the battle and the farther in Germany, the better I'll be pleased." He made this statement in response to a French journalist's question as to whether he would give the French Army a greater part in the fighting in Germany. . . .

(New York TIMES, February 25, 1945)

### *French Naval Activities*

The French Naval Ministry has issued the following communiqué: In the Mediterranean theater, French cruisers and destroyers are continuing to bombard enemy positions on the Italian Riviera. During the first two weeks in February French ships fired more than 1,000 rounds from heavy and medium caliber guns, inflicting