



The Sinking of the Empire Javelin

December 1944

as told by Sgt. Frank J. Mueller, U.S. Army

of Chicago, Illinois

Left New York harbor November 13th, 1944 on the H.M.S. Aquitania. We had an uneventful voyage, a fairly calm sea. Arrived in the Firth of Clyde, Greenoch, Scotland the morning of the 28th (Thanksgiving Day). It was a clear, beautiful day and we could see the green hills of Scotland and the Village of Greenoch in the background. It was a very picturesque and beautiful scene. We docked that afternoon in Greenoch, Scotland and immediately boarded the train – the London, Midland and Scottish Railway. The coaches were very nice, but much smaller than ours in the States. There were six of us in a compartment. We passed through Glasgow, York and many other Scotch and English towns and arrived in the English town of Nantwich the next morning at about 8:00 a.m.

We then rode from the station in trucks to Doddington Hall, an old English estate dating back to the 9th Century where we were billeted. We had stone huts – about 20 of us to a hut and cots and straw mattresses. We thought it was terrible at first, but after getting used to it, it wasn't bad at all. We did not set up our headquarters there. It was merely a staging area. So, everybody from Master Sergeant to Private had to pull all the dirty details K.P., guard and the most hated of all garbage detail.

We did get a good opportunity to see a lot of England while we were stationed there, as we had passes usually every other day and could get them any night if we weren't on a detail. The nearby towns were Nantwich, which was about 6 miles away and Crewe which was about 10. The only transportation in were our own trucks and one bus which left at 5:00 p.m. from the Boar's Head Inn a typical old English hotel down the road from Doddington Hall.

The places I saw while in England were: Nantwich, Crewe, Chester, London and Southampton. Chester was the nicest of all the English towns and I was there three times. It was very picturesque and beautiful with old English architecture, narrow streets (all the English towns had narrow streets), a wall was built around the town dating back to the days of the Roman invasion and they had one of the most beautiful Cathedrals (Protestant) I've seen in England. I was in Chester one Sunday with Joe Little and we went to the Catholic Church – St. Thomas. It was small, but very beautiful. Went in quite a few pubs in Chester, also went in a couple in Crewe. They are very nice and comfortable. Usually have several rooms, one for couples, one for stag, etc. Hardly anybody stands up to the bar. In fact most of the pubs have only a service bar. However, you can stand there and drink if you wish. The beer (light and dark) is practically tasteless, but is powerful if you drink enough of it (which I never did).

The most interesting of all was my trip to London. I left Doddington in the morning (I forget the date), took a taxicab to Crewe (cost me 3 shillings – 60 cents), bought my ticket (round trip) to London (cost me a little over a pound \$4.00), and boarded the 12:55 train (London, Midland and Scottish Railway). At



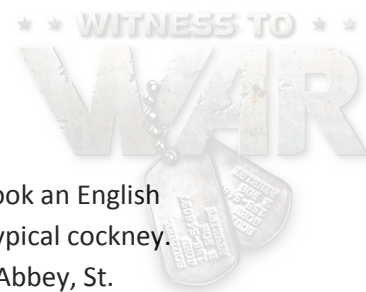
the time I was going, none of the gang from G-1 Section went, as we could only go one at a time, so I had a most boring trip to London in the same compartment with four British soldiers and a frozen faced old bitch. I was never so glad when that trip was over.

Arrived in London (Ruston Station) at 5:00 p.m. that night. I got off the train and went into the Subway Station and was thoroughly confused as to what to do next, as I saw several machines marked 4 pence, 2 pence, 3 pence, 1 pence and on the machines were given different destinations such as "Charing Cross, Picadilly, etc." The only thing I knew was that I wanted to go to Rainbow Corner – the American Red Cross – who arranged for our billeting for the 2 day stay in London, at Leicester Square and get off at Picadilly. I then took the "lift" (elevator) down to the subway level (about 3 or 4 stories under ground) and boarded the train for Leicester Square. The trains were very modern, streamlined and the inside was like a club car with soft cushioned seats.

I got off at Leicester Square and transferred to the Picadilly line. Got off at Picadilly Circus and took the escalator up to the ground level where I met a fellow named Sachs from our outfit. I was certainly glad to see somebody I knew, so we stuck together and proceeded across Picadilly Circus, down Regent Street to Rainbow Corner, where we received our billets for the 2 day stay in London. We were billeted at a Red Cross Club about a 20-minute ride from town. At Rainbow Corner we also met another fellow we knew – Harold Weinstein, so we all stuck together.

At first glance, London looked like it had hardly been touched by the war. The first damage we saw was when we took the bus down Regent Street. A V-bomb had hit Selfridges Department Store (a very exclusive store) just a few days before and they were still clearing away the rubble from it. Several American soldiers had been killed when it hit as they were riding along Regent Street in a truck. The more we saw of London the more damage we noticed, although much of it is cleared away, hence it's not so noticeable. After getting settled in our rooms at the Red Cross Club, we went back to Picadilly Circus that night, ate at the Rainbow Corner and then decided to see a show. Since the shows (legitimate) all began at 6:15, we were too late. We inquired as to what other shows were in town and were told that there was a continuous revue (vaudeville) at the Windmill Theater. We went there, paid five shillings (\$1.00) for balcony seats and it stunk.

That night after coming out of the show and going up to the Red Cross for a bite to eat, we received our first taste of an air raid. We were sitting in the Red Cross eating pickled herring of all things (I was in good company for eating that) when the siren sounded. We all looked at each other and joked about it and over the loudspeaker came the words: "You're now experiencing an air raid, keep calm". We just sat there expecting something, but nothing happened. Finally, we decided it was time to go back to our rooms and go to sleep as we wanted to get up early in the morning to take the taxicab tour of London. We took the bus, got off at our stop, and then we heard another siren. Since we were on the street at that time, I made a dash for the club and they followed me. After a few minutes we went outside again and inquired of a 'Bobby' what it was. It was the all clear from the first raid - were our faces red. The rest of that evening was uneventful.



The next morning we got up about seven, got down to the Red Cross at about 8:30 and took an English cab with the top open, although it was raining slightly. Our guide was the cab driver – a typical cockney. We paid six shillings for the tour (\$1.00). Some of the things we saw were: Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, Tower of London, the Old Curiosity Shop, London Bridge, Houses of Parliament, the Thames River, Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, Number 10 Downing Street, War Department buildings and bombed out areas. This is when we saw the real bomb damage done in London. The places that suffered most were down near the docks. Whole blocks of houses and buildings were leveled, although everything was cleared away so well that it was hard to tell how much damage had really been done. The Tower of London, St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey had all been hit, but not demolished by any means. St. Paul's was hit only once and so was Westminster Abbey. Everything else around St. Paul's is completely leveled, so it was miraculous that it wasn't damaged more than it was.

The All Hallows' church near the Tower Bridge was completely ruined, all except for one room in it. We went inside of it merely for curiosity, as it was the church in which William Penn was baptized. The cab driver told us that this was a good chance for the government to rebuild London and make it a real modern city with wide streets, etc., but that probably the old regime would never do so. They still want to stick to the old tradition and probably will never change.

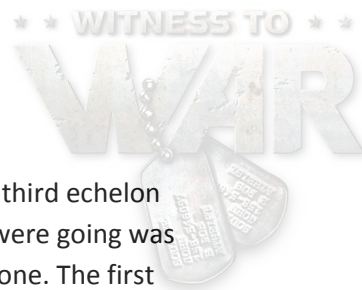
That afternoon we took a special tour of the Tower of London. It was very interesting. It has a long and bloody history. Catherine Boleyn (wife of Henry the VIII) and several other people of royal blood were imprisoned and beheaded there. The place is in marvelous condition and has hardly been rebuilt at all. It was also hit once during the blitz.

That night we got tickets for a musical show 'Jenny Jones' which was playing at the Hippodrome theater. We got our second taste of an air raid while in the theater. Again nothing happened – the air raid signs at the side of the stage just lit up red showing "Air Raid Alert". Incidentally, at the time the air raid was going on they were singing "Why Worry It May never Happen to You" on the stage – which was very appropriate. The show was very good.

After the show, we again went to the Red Cross and ate. Then we decided to go over to the Stage Door Canteen where the actors and actresses put on a show about 10:30. As we stepped out of the Red Cross building we noticed the whole sky was a bright red. We asked one of the Bobbys what was going on, but were told it was nothing. We imagined another V bomb had fallen somewhere nearby.

After seeing the show at the Stage Door Canteen, we took the bus back to our rooms at the Red Cross Club. It was about 11:00 p.m. As we were going up the stairs to our room we really got our first close shave (if you can call it that) experience with a V-bomb. One landed nearby and shook the whole building with a terrific force. We just stopped dead in our tracks and looked at each other waiting to see what would happen next, but nothing did, so continued on up to our rooms sort of weak-kneed. The rest of the night was uneventful.

The next morning we started back to camp very early, about 6:00 a.m.. We took the London, Midland and Scottish Railway back to Crewe, were picked up by trucks that afternoon and taken back to Doddington Hall. Our outfit left Doddington Hall for the Continent of Europe in three echelons, the first



one leaving the week before Christmas, the second one leaving the 21st of December and third echelon (which I was in) leaving the 24th of December. The only information we had of where we were going was that we were leaving England and were going to the Continent of Europe, and a combat zone. The first echelon had presumably arrived at our new destination by the time the third echelon left. The second echelon of men were sent to help set up the headquarters along with the first and we (the third) were to arrive when it was all set up.

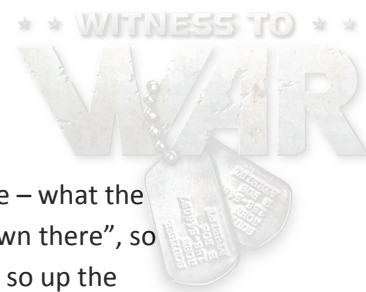
We had our Christmas dinner (turkey and all the other stuff) on the 24th which was Sunday and left Doddington Hall bag and baggage about 1:30 of the morning of the 25th (Christmas Day). We boarded the train at Nantwich and after a cold and hectic all night ride on which I had the G.I.'s (diarrhea) we arrived in Eastleigh, a small town near Southampton the afternoon of Christmas Day. There we boarded trucks again and were taken to Camp Eastleigh, which we nicknamed "Beastly" because it was a tent camp, and it was freezing cold out.

We had another Christmas dinner there, stayed overnight and departed on foot the next afternoon for the Southampton docks. We started out at about 2:00 in the afternoon. It was about a three mile hike with full packs and we were dead when we arrived finally at the docks. Southampton was the worst bombed English city I saw. Block after block of houses and buildings were leveled especially around the docks. There was hardly a part of Southampton that wasn't touched by the blitz. Incidentally, the city of Chester had never been bombed once up until just before we left, when we heard it was bombed the night before.

Finally, after hours of waiting we boarded the ship that was (supposedly) to take us to the Continent of Europe. It was the "S.S. Empire Javelin". A Henry Kaiser liberty ship, manned by an English crew. We docked in Southampton that night and all the next day and night (27 December). Finally, on the 28th at 12 noon, we pulled out of Southampton harbor and were on our way to Europe.

We had a fairly peaceful voyage the first two hours out. I was with Joe Cronin (from New York) and Bus Rosen (from St. Louis). We were roaming all over the ship with nothing particular to do and just shooting the breeze about everything from soup to nuts. About 2:15 we decided to go see some of the other boys from G-1 who were billeted in another section of the ship. We went down the stairs and found Bob Patterson, Joe Little and Roger McBride. We sat down and started to gab a little and joke. Joe Little mentioned that he was on KP in the officers' mess and that one of the crew told him that one of their men had missed the boat which meant bad luck. We laughed it off as superstition. Then one of the other fellows mentioned the rumor that the English Channel was loaded with submarines (German) and that six ships had been torpedoed during the last week. We also laughed that off as purely rumor. Then it happened, as we were sitting there talking, joking – a terrific explosion! The lights went out! We were all knocked off our feet: duffle bags, bunks, barracks bags, rifles – everything came tumbling down in our path. The whole ship shook like a giant had it in his hands. Finally after what seemed an eternity we regained our feet, felt to see if our life belts were on and waited for a second explosion – none came.

Somebody lit a match. Somebody else yelled "put that out". It was dangerous as we could smell the powder and gas and it might have started a fire. The next thing we thought of was getting up on deck.



Rosen started up the stairs we had come down, I started after him and Patterson after me – what the rest were doing I don't know. We got to the top of the stairs and someone yelled "get down there", so back down we went. After a few minutes the signal came for everyone to get up on deck, so up the stairs we went again. The first thing we saw when coming up on deck were three fellows sprawled out, their heads split open and blood gushing out. The medics and first aid men were working on them, but it looked like it was hopeless for one of the fellows. They had been standing under some steel beams when the explosion occurred and were thrown up and hit their heads on the beams. There were also several other casualties as we found out later. Also, as we came up on deck we saw the ship's crew lowering lifeboats – that was the first time that terror seemed to strike us. I looked at all of our gang who were together by this time and their faces were chalk white. They said mine was too.

The miracle about the whole thing was that everyone was so calm and collected on the surface anyway. It helped morale 100%. I then decided to look over the side. I did and then I did get scared. The water was only about six feet from the railing and we were on the top deck. Also, the ship was splitting in two. The rail was already cracked and the deck was starting to split. We didn't know whether a mine or a torpedo had caused the explosion, but there was plenty of speculation. The end of the ship we were on, which was the aft, was where the explosion occurred. Our end was sinking fast and the fore end was rising. So we all decided to go to the fore end, as that was where everybody seemed to be gathering. There we rounded up practically everybody from G-1 and we all stood there talking and joking, trying to keep our wits about us. We still figured there was no particular danger, as we saw several ships around us, but just as I mentioned the fact that there were ships nearby I saw them all heading away from us as fast as they could go. We still figured help must be on the way. We were deciding what we would do if the order came to abandon ship. We decided we would all stick together and try to get on one of the lifeboats or rafts. They were lowering them all by this time.

Several of the fellows were going down in the compartments getting some of their personal belongings. Myself and several of the other fellow had only a field jacket on and it was getting chilly, so we asked Cronin, who decided to go down to our compartment to bring up several overcoats if he could find them. There was no particular danger in going down in our compartment, as it was at the fore end of the ship, but I still didn't care about taking a chance in case the order to abandon ship was given. Cronin came up with several overcoats and I grabbed my own as it just happened to be one of them that he had picked up, Just at that same moment we noticed a frigate or korvette heading toward our ship, but we still didn't know what the score was or what was cooking as no announcement of any kind had been made. We figured it was help coming.

One lifeboat containing the wounded had already been lowered and was bouncing around like a rubber balloon the ocean. It was beginning to get a little choppy. The boat that was heading our way pulled along side of us. We later found out the name of the boat was the Frigate L'Escarmouche, commanded by Captain De Lesquen du Pressis Easso, a French boat. So no announcement was made to abandon ship, so Cronin decided to go down and see what other stuff he could salvage. He no sooner got down when we saw a master sergeant frantically waving his arms to get us off the ship quickly. We all started to hurry to the other side of the boat still in a very orderly fashion. I grabbed my overcoat and helmet following Rosen and Patterson and we proceeded to the other end of the boat. We got there climbing



over duffle bags, barracks bags and bedding rolls and saw Major Walker and another officer helping the fellows across onto the French boat. In the meantime, Cronin had caught up to us – in fact he passed me on the way.

Both boats were rocking pretty much and it was a ticklelish proposition jumping from ours to the French boat. We had to wait until exactly the right moment – when the French boat was swaying downward and ours was going up. I took my overcoat and helmet and threw them onto the French boat, then proceeded to sit on the railing of our boat and put one foot on the railing of the French boat. I must have timed it right because I got across OK with the help of the Major and another officer. We were some of the last off the ship, which we didn't know at the time. After I was on the French boat, in my haste, I had picked up the wrong overcoat (a master sergeant's) and we were then told to go down to the hold of the French boat. We were all pretty shaky after we got down there. I didn't see Patterson again, but Rosen was down there. Nobody else from G-1 was in that particular part of the ship,

We were crowded in pretty badly down there and were still waiting for something else to happen when it did. We heard another terrific explosion. We later found out it was our boat going down. Supposedly another torpedo had struck. We were fortunate to have gotten off 15 minutes before it happened. I did not see the ship go down but the fellows that did said it just blew to smithereens. There were a few of our fellows (from the Headquarters) in the lower decks of the Empire, so it was hopeless for them. They had tried to get them out by using a blow torch, but it was only possible to save one fellow. He had managed to swim around inside the compartment until help came. The others had apparently drowned. After the explosion we were again called up on deck of the French boat and were told to board an L.S.T. which had pulled alongside. The L.S.T. being a much bigger boat, it was necessary to climb a rope ladder to get on, and I felt pretty shaky by that time. I and Rosen and a few others from G-1 didn't get on the L.S.T. as they were not able to take so many. We were informed that another boat was coming alongside to take us.

The sea was getting pretty choppy by that time, and they tried for about 2 hours to pull the other boat alongside of the French boat, but it was no use, as it kept ramming into the French boat and they were afraid it would ram a hole in the boat. So we all went down below deck again and were told we would stay on the French boat and that we were heading for Portsmouth, England.

We considered that very bad news, as it would mean crossing the Channel again and we didn't relish the idea after the experience we had. Rosen and I went down below where we met Joe Little who looked pretty ill (the small French boat was bouncing around like a rubber ball in the water). Rosen also started to get sick and I didn't feel too good myself. We found a place to lie down (on the floor of one of the bathrooms) and went to sleep for a few hours. About midnight we woke up and were told by one of the ship's crew (they were mostly French, but there were a few British) that we had changed our course and were heading for Le Havre, France. That was the best news we had and it helped our morale 100% to know we would not have to cross the Channel again.

We pulled into Le Havre harbor a little before dawn, transferred to an L.S.T. and were on land in about 15 minutes. It was a wonderful feeling to step on land, after the nightmare we had been through. Once



on land, the whole G-1 Section assembled and luckily no one was missing for which we were all thankful. We were then put on trucks and taken to an old hotel right outside of Le Havre. We were a sorry looking lot with absolutely no equipment and garbs of every description. Enlisted men had officers' coats on and vice versa. Rank was nil. You couldn't tell a Colonel from a Private. I had on my helmet, field jacket and master sergeant's overcoat. I never did find out whose coat I picked up.

As we traveled through Le Havre on our way to what we later called "New Monia Hotel", we took note of the terrific damage done to the city of Le Havre or I should say what was left of Le Havre. There wasn't one single building that I saw left standing. The rubble and damage was beyond imagination. I had never seen anything like it anywhere in England.

When we arrived at the New Monia Hotel it was the afternoon of the 29th. We were given C rations to eat. We managed to heat them with our heat units and they tasted marvelous probably because we hadn't eaten since noon of the 28th. Some of the French kids brought out wine (it tasted like vinegar) from home and we gave them cigarettes and candy from our C rations for it. We had no water to wash in and no soap or toilet articles for about 2 days. Finally, a mobile PX came along one day and we were able to buy soap, toothbrushes, razors, etc. and managed to get our first shave in about 3 days. We were told we would be issued new equipment and clothes in a few days.

Krivot, Rott, Weinstein, Rosen and myself were billeted in a room in the hotel. We had three cots and 2 of us had to sleep on the floor. The reason we called it New Monia Hotel was because there were no windows in it and it was damp and cold – no heat. We all had terrific colds. We stayed outside most of the day and built fires to heat our rations and keep warm. Krivot who can speak a little French acted as our interpreter and we made friends with a French family nearby. The man's name was Maurice. He and his wife, their daughter-in-law and her 5-year old daughter lived together. Their son, the father of the child, had been a prisoner of the Germans for five years. Maurice used to chop wood for us, bring us hot water and wine. In return we gave him cigarettes and C rations.

One night they invited all of us (including a lieutenant colonel who had come over by our fire to warm up) into their house to listen to the radio. They had a beautiful set and could get London very clearly. We listened to the news and a re-broadcast of an American program. The house was very beautiful. We all stayed in the kitchen which had a spotless tile floor. However, they had no heat in the house. They were probably saving the fuel for colder weather. The Madame served us coffee and wine. Then they brought out a bottle of anisette. It tastes something like licorice. The lieutenant colonel (I can't remember his name) also bought a bottle of anisette from them and we drank half of that. Krivot did most of the talking and got along quite well with motions, half French and half English. We also had an English-French dictionary and used that to converse with, pointing at what we wanted to say. They told us that the Germans did not treat them good. That there was an 8 o'clock curfew when the Germans were there and that the old lady was the only one who had a card to go into town. She showed it to us. It was written in German. She explained that every time she went to town she had to present this card to the sentry and she would receive it on her way back. If she was caught on the streets after 8 PM she would be thrown in jail.



The Germans also had searched their house and found an old pistol that Maurice had. They showed us the summons and all the papers the Germans had made out on it, but evidently from what we could make out Maurice beat the rap. The Germans also confiscated their radio, but they got it back when the Americans took over. We all dragged out pictures of our wives, girlfriends and families, passed them around and they “ood” and ‘aahd” over them. We stayed there about 3 hours that night. When we left we gave them some cigarettes and said “merci” – (thank you).

Sunday, the 30th, Cronin, Muth and I went to church. It was a little French church in a village on the side of a rather steep hill. It was quite a climb up there but it was worth it. It was a very picturesque little village and a small but very beautiful church.

The afternoon of the next day (the 31st) we were all called together and a group of us (of which I was one) were selected to go on guard duty. The officer in charge told us that German paratroopers had been dropped in the vicinity and that we were to be the exterior guard and that it was our responsibility to see to the safety of the camp. We were to walk guard in pairs and our tour of duty would be from 5:00 PM that night until about 8:00 AM the next morning. About 4:30 PM we were issued pistols and ammunition and assigned our post. The Sergeant of the Guard at our post was Joe Rott. Patterson and I were to walk our post together. It was a 2-hour on, 4- hour off shift. Our post was through the tall weeds along the banks of the Seine canal. We walked in single file. We made it a policy for the one following behind to keep talking so we would be sure we weren't being followed by a Nazi.

On the second shift our post was changed to an open field which was practically a swamp. Our feet were soaked by the time the tour of duty was over. However, we had an uneventful and quiet night and encountered no paratroops. Neither did any of the other posts. It started to rain towards early morning and we were thoroughly miserable by the time 8:00 AM rolled around. Some nearby town shot off fireworks to celebrate New Year's Eve, and that was the extent of excitement.

About January 1st or 2nd we were issued some clothing and equipment and on the morning of the 3rd at about 5:30 AM left New Monia Hotel. We had an uneventful but cold trip and arrived at Camp de Division de Suippes at 5:00 PM the evening of the 3rd. It was a big improvement over our former place. It was a regular French Army camp that the Germans had occupied during their stay. The G-1 Section was billeted in one room and we had the inevitable straw mattresses again. The night we arrived we had our first hot bath in almost two weeks and it was like being in heaven after what we had been through. The headquarters was set up in Suippes and we had a fairly nice arrangement. The buildings were stone and we had stoves. The only problem was a shortage of fuel which wasn't too bad.

The largest nearby city was Reims. Since we were not able to get passes while at Suippes because we were to busy working, we figured we never would get to town. However, a notice came around that Katherine Cornell and Brian Aherne were playing in “The Barretts of Wimpole Street” in Reims and that everyone would get a chance to see it. Patterson, Rosen, Cronin, Little and I were among the first group to go in. We rode approximately 35 miles in trucks and were frozen when we arrived in Reims. As luck would have it, our group arrived too late, everything was all screwed up and we were not able to get in



the theater to see the play because all the seats were taken. They offered to take us to the movie, but most of us had seen "Our Hearts Were Young and Gay", so we decided to see what Reims looked like.

Naturally it was blacked out, but the snow on the ground helped us see our way a bit. First of all we stopped at a French bar and had about five drinks. We had wine first then finally ended up with Champagne. Each time we bought a drink the price went up. It went from 15 francs a glass (30 cents) for the wine to 25 francs a glass (50 cents) for the Champagne. After leaving the bar, we walked around the town and saw the outside of the Reims Cathedral. The doors were locked and there were sandbags in front of it to prevent damage from bombing. It was a tremendous looking structure from what we could see of it in the dark.

After that we went to the Red Cross, had coffee and doughnuts and listened to a French orchestra and singer that were entertaining there. We left Reims about 10:30 and got back at midnight, thoroughly frozen. The rest of our stay at Suippes was uneventful.

On February 15th, the 1st echelon of our headquarters left for our new destination which was to be the Chateau D'Ardennes near Dinant, Belgium. Dinant had been our original destination when we left England. The forward element of our headquarters had been there before, but had to evacuate during the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans came within four miles of Dinant at that time, but since had been driven back and our destination was again Dinant. I left the morning of the 16th with the 2nd echelon. We had a beautiful day for traveling and saw some of the most picturesque and beautiful scenery since our arrival on the Continent. All along the way French and Belgian people waved to us and we threw them candy and gum from our rations. We arrived in Dinant the afternoon of the 16th. It is a very picturesque and beautiful city on the Meuse River with hills and forests in the background. The Chateau D'Ardennes is about 8 miles from Dinant, up-grade all the way. It is in a very beautiful setting and was probably a swank resort place during peacetime. The officers were billeted in the Chateau which was as good as some of our American hotels. Our headquarters and our billets were in the annex which also wasn't bad. This is no doubt the best set-up we'll have over here. Central heating, beautiful big bathtubs and all the comforts of home except home. Patterson, Rosen, Simonette and I are in one room. We have canvas cots and Simonette's radio. We also have our laundry done by one of the French people that work in the hotel. The hotel manager still keeps a staff here to run the place and keep it in good condition.