

## *Chapter 2*

Paris, August 1944

All units are almost out of gasoline as we reach the Seine. General Eisenhower orders all units to halt until they are resupplied. Finally, our outfit stops in a green valley with a pristine creek, near Billancourt, 18 miles southwest of Paris. After determining that we won't move out soon, Chaplain Brown walks to our tent. "Hi, fellas," he smiles. "How would you like to go to Paris for a day?"

"We're almost out of gas," I say.

"Let me worry about that." He is quite sure of himself.

"I'm taking you three officers along to help me track down the bishop of the Episcopal church. I want to know where he's been during four years of German occupation, whether the church was open for worship during that time. We'll work in pairs and try to find out. Captain Faris will go with me. Lieutenants Michael and Hansen will be the other pair. Are you with me?"

## Witness to Barbarism

On the way, the chaplain pulls off on a shoulder on a high hill. “There it is,” he says. The Eiffel Tower gleams tall and stately amidst our breathtaking view of the city. I reach for the chaplain’s camera and walk ahead to a vantage point, then feel a tug on my sleeve.

“I honor you. God bless you!” a Frenchman says excitedly. “Got any cigarettes?”

“Do you know Paris?” I ask, then make a quick deal. For five packs of cigarettes (\$3.00 a pack) he becomes our willing guide and interpreter. There is so much to see. I will not remember it all.

De Gaulle was here three days earlier, on August 25, and the city is still flush with excitement. As we near the Arc de Triomphe, the profusion of color is dazzling—red, white, and blue bunting on the buildings, many shades of dresses, hats, shoes, and bicycles. Red-and-white awnings flank sidewalk cafes opening for the first time in four years.

A French soldier, appearing to be no older than 17, tells us in English: “The fighting is over except for a little sniping at night by Germans who apparently haven’t been told of the evacuation. The people are wearing their best clothes just to test the feel of it. They kept the clothes in hiding for the four years of German occupation.”

This is a good time for a visit to Paris. The city is off limits to troops, except for anti-aircraft (AA) guns and a few MPs and other small units. We enjoy more prominence with our letters of introduction than is deserving for an American group. Our MPs are not here in force, and the city is run by the maquis, who just can’t do enough for us.

We park the truck near the Arc de Triomphe to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The flame burning at its center has been alive

## Witness to Barbarism

through the years of occupation. Men walking by it remove their hats; we remove our helmets. A French gentleman, Maurice Cochet, obligingly takes snapshots of us, writes down our addresses, and plans to mail the prints to our homes. I give him a cigar.



In good English, he says, “I was an engineer for Westinghouse Electric Company before the war. When the war started, I wasn’t permitted to leave.”

“What happened to your family?”

“My two sons were taken by Germans, apparently for forced labor. My wife is living and well. I saved my automobile from seizure by hiding the wheels. I told the ‘pigs’ that they were stolen.”

We walk down the main street—Les Champs Elysées. The wide street is filled with bicycles, about three abreast, riding in both directions. The riders, mostly women, pedal gracefully. Imagine a model,

fresh out of Lord and Taylor's, riding a chrome, light blue, or lavender bicycle. Imagine many such women, each quite thin, probably for lack of food. Together they form a floating, billowy mass of color and tinkling bells. Some of the women in short skirts are prostitutes, I think.

Crossing the street is a major task. I can't take my eyes off the women, and their bicycles almost hit us. Three of the riders proposition us. The sidewalk is as wide as the street. It has two auto-park strips divided by two pedestrian walks. Joe and I find a vacant table at a sidewalk cafe and order two glasses of wine.

"What do you think of this?" I ask.

"Beats hell out of the army. Can't think of anything better."

We agree on the beauty of the Parisian women and try to analyze it. Joe says, "They have the right combination of complementary colors, short dresses, and a flattering shape to their hats. They never overdo their makeup. A homely woman can be made to look beautiful." But it isn't all eyewash. They are subtly, completely feminine, have a free, vivacious air and a fetching way of being absorbed in their male escorts, of which there are not many. The shortage of men is due to the newly formed French army, to the forced labor in Germany, and to membership in the maquis.

We notice too, in the stylish parade, a sprinkling of fancy, barbered pooches on leashes. The shops are showplaces, with the French taste for color and design evident. Red, pink, yellow, and blue are most prominent. The Germans have not touched the stores, which show a fair amount of women's clothing, almost nothing for men. Shoes are made mostly from cloth, with jointed-wood or rope soles. Toiletry and perfume shops are everywhere. The artistic displays are fascinating. Everything is expensive.

Everyone we ask says there are no worship services anywhere in the city except in Catholic churches, which have a concordat with the Nazis. When we all meet again, Captain Faris wants to find a gift for his wife. After trying three places, we find a store on a side street that looks like a millionaire's home. Circular marble stairways, statuary, paintings, exquisite rugs, drapes, chandeliers, and graceful furniture enhance the establishment. No merchandise is on display. A gracious woman with a cultured English voice greets and seats us, saying, "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for a black negligé for my wife," Faris stammers.

"Certainly. One moment please." She goes to a back room, and in a few minutes, the parade begins—five gorgeous creatures dripping with silk and lace. Poor Faris! He is shown the nightclothes in detail, inside and out, at close range. The models are lightly clad, to say the least. He picks a black negligé trimmed with white lace (or, perhaps, the dream wearing it). The price is 12,000 francs (\$240.00). Joe asks, "Does the price include the blonde?" Faris is alarmed but pays the price. I guess the show is worth something, too.

A few things for sale tempt me but aren't worth the price. If we had American dollars instead of the army's print of francs, we would get four times the current rate of exchange—100 francs for two dollars. The Allies make their own francs as the Germans have counterfeited every kind of paper money. The French people had to turn in all their francs at one time. They can draw out a modest sum of the new print money each month. This is the only legal tender.

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Reluctantly we return to Billancourt. The chaplain has another thought on the way there. "Maybe the religions went underground

and have quiet services at places other than the church. I think it's worth asking about," he says. Now I know he wants to see more of Paris. We determine that our outfit will not be moving soon, and the next visit is longer—three days and two nights.

After quite a few inquiries about the church, we again devote our time to sightseeing. Outside the Arc de Triomphe, we are impressed by the Cathedral of Notre Dame, especially its architecture. Inside, it is dark and dreary. We also see Opéra Garnier (on Place de l'Opéra), where we learn the Germans poured gasoline and set the seats afire in retaliation for sniping. We visit Les Invalides, where Napoleon is buried, and the Grand Palais, a magnificent structure.

"This is something to see. I didn't know Napoleon was buried here," Joe says. "They sure do everything with elegance."

"Amen," says Chaplain Brown.

"I understand that no building can be higher than the monuments," Captain Faris says, looking all around.

"Now that you mention it, I haven't seen a building higher than those monuments. The tallest is eight stories," I remark.

There are also beautiful circles, like Place de la Concorde, with the Egyptian Obelisk of Luxor at its center. Some hotels are as luxurious as castles, with marble floors and walks, winding stairways, and crystal chandeliers. On every windowsill is a box with magnificent, many-colored flowers.

We see modern buildings, too, such as the Palais de Chaillot Hotel, which has an underground theater. It is neat and clean. A doorman with a colorful uniform stands in front. I wish I could stay at such an elegant hotel. Graceful statuary, lots of neatly cropped trees and shrubbery, and artistic bridges over the winding

Witness to Barbarism



*Opéra Garnier on Place de l'Opéra.*



*Obelisk of Luxor on Place de la Concorde.*

Seine River put the finishing touches on this most beautiful city. The place gives me a feeling of luxury. Only one thing mars the view. All the buildings are dirty on the outside, and they have a look of neglect.

But the more I see the French people, the more I admire them. Their zest, easy laughter, open emotions, and childlike curiosity are always evident. As we look at the statues around the outside of L'Opera, three young girls approach to hand us their calling cards for autographs. This starts a crowd that soon reaches into the street. Some insist on our addresses, and we will probably receive mail at our homes someday from people we won't remember. My indulgence of their wish for a kiss with each autograph doesn't hold the crowd down and apparently provides some entertainment. Our faces are red. This crowd is a beaner.

As we walk along, three girls wave at us from a corner window. We go inside and introduce ourselves. One has a pretty smile, and I ask her out for dinner. She is excited and wants to accept but says she'll have to go home first and get her parents for chaperones. I say I can't wait. She looks disappointed.

Later, at one end of a bridge over the Seine, we see two GIs sitting at a big AA gun, encircled by a pile of sandbags and a lot of people. Their eyes are glued to the one using the telephone. To a French civilian, he probably looks important, even heroic, with that big gun and the telephone. I stop and catch part of the bull session he shares with a buddy on the line, probably at another gun!

"I got a mob of Frogs [French civilians] round here gawking at me. Geez, don't those babes on the bikes drive ya nuts? I see one who has bare legs and a short dress. I bet she doesn't have panties on." The incongruity of those serious faces makes it all the more ridiculous.

While we are having a Martell cognac at a sidewalk cafe, a silver-headed doctor accompanied by an attractive young woman leans toward us, states he has gasoline, and volunteers to drive us around. "I

admire you Americans,” he says. “All you need to do is motion to a girl, and she will come to you, even my wife here.” His wife, who is smiling at us, gives him a sharp elbow in the ribs. We pile into his blue Citroen for a whirlwind tour.

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Returning again to Billancourt, we check that the outfit will not be moving and then return to Paris, ostensibly to find some trace of the bishop. “I can’t believe he has just disappeared,” says the chaplain as he picks up the three of us. We are happy to go back, especially because the maquis have arranged a hotel for us.

The next day Chaplain Brown, Captain Faris, Lt. Joe Michael, and I make inquiries, then decide to go pursue our individual interests and meet later in the day. As I wander along the tree-lined Champs Elysées, my thoughts turn to the Vicomtesse de Puthod and her concern for her husband in Paris. I pat my pocket containing the letter and his address—55 Rue de Bellechasse—and try to find the place on foot.

After some wandering, I find the poorly marked street. The square brick building stands at the end of a cul-de-sac. In the lobby I find the vicomte’s name on the directory. He is on the second floor. I go up the steps and knock on the door. A woman, rather short, neatly dressed in gingham, lightly perfumed, and with her brown-gray hair pulled straight back in a bun, opens the door and asks me who I am.

I tell her, “I have a message for Vicomte de Puthod from his wife in Normandy.” Eyebrows raised, she smiles, steps aside, and motions me to an elderly gentleman sitting in a wingback chair by the window. He is thin and casually dressed in a sweater, baggy trousers, and slippers. When I tell him his family is safe and well in Normandy, his eyes

became moist and he grasps my hand, too overcome to speak. He turns to the woman, who is his sister, and quietly asks her in English to bring us tea. The air in the room is stale, and it smells old.

When he is satisfied that I have given him all the news, he says, "Will you write an account of all you have told me in your own words?" He gets out of his chair, shuffles over to a hard-cover guest book, and opens it for me. When I finish writing, he goes back to his chair, and I sit across from him. He lets me in on a secret.

"I have been in the Underground since the first day of the occupation," he says, running his fingers through his sparse gray hair. "One of the things I did was to print anti-Nazi slogans on small slips of paper that others secretly distributed and posted all over Paris. They must have been effective. The distributors constantly asked for more."

"How did you print them?"

"I did it with blocks of wood about three by eight inches, to which I glued slogans cut out from auto inner-tubes." He rises and asks me to follow him to another room, where he shows me his collection of print blocks. Entry to the small room is gained through a swiveling bookcase. I wonder, then reason that he *is* an architect. This room smells even more musty, probably for lack of windows.

He gives me two of the blocks dated September 1941 and a piece of white paper. "Go ahead. Stamp," he says, handing me an inkpad. I press the first stamp down. Translated it reads: "Collaboration Equals Treason. Death to Traitors." The other depicts a spiked club, marked USA, smashing a swastika: "Germany Shall Be Crushed."

"Didn't you put your neck out pretty far?"

"It was such a little thing," he replies.

"Tell me, how did you and your wife become separated?"

“We agreed that she and the children would take care of our summer chateau near Saint Lô, where it was relatively safe and food still plentiful, while I watch our properties here in Paris. We also agreed we would do all we could in the Underground. I didn’t realize that the Germans would cut telephone and postal service.”

The vicomte’s sister refills our cups with tea. “Our worst suffering,” she says, “has been lack of fuel last winter. German planes knocked out our electric plants and took almost all the coal in late August but left the rest of the city alone. Old Louise, our housekeeper, who has been with us for 70 years, stayed in bed most of the winter to keep warm, and *we* waited on *her*.”

“My sister, who lives in Paris, wants to return to America. We are so proud of her. She taught French history at Wellesley College for a short time.” She quietly sips her tea.

It is time to meet my army companions but hard to leave these new friends. I add their names to my well-worn address book.

As I walk away on the narrow, quiet street, a short, plump girl runs up to me. She hesitates a moment, then slips her arms around me, stands on her tiptoes, and places a kiss squarely on my mouth. “*Merci beaucoup*,” she says again and again. I look at my watch, finally release myself from her grasp, and walk away. As I glance back, she smiles and waves.



*The French Resistance parades “collaborators” with shaven heads through a French town on Bastille Day. The author witnesses a similar scene at Arronville.*