

The Belgians of Dunkerque

by Georges Truffaut

Mr. Georges Truffaut, member of Parliament for Liege and Alderman of that city, was, at the time of the German aggression, one of the younger leaders of the Walloon Socialist Party. A reserve officer, he took part in the war with the rank of captain. He was at Dunkerque and crossed over again to France to continue to fight. After the French armistice, he managed to leave France for England to join the Belgian army there.

A RECENT issue of *Belgium* gave me quite a pleasant surprise. It contained a short article by a British officer on the epic of Dunkerque—and the Belgians whom he saw there sharing the fate and the hopes of their British and French comrades-in-arms. To my knowledge, this is the first time that public recognition has been given to the few hundred Belgian soldiers who, without orders or in violation of orders, made their way to the dunes of Dunkerque. Their eyes burnt with the fever of eighteen sleepless days and nights of desperate, hopeless combat. They still held on to their arms, but their ammunition was all but spent. Though these men acted on their own initiative and followed no pre-arranged plan, they got together all the same. While everything was crumbling around them, they did not stop long to think and calculate, but instinctively did what their country's future demanded and once more and tell this story—their story.

wonder, then, that there is no official record of their feat.

For my comrades at Dunkerque, I shall become a journalist once more and tell this story—their story.

Monday morning, May 27, 1940. I have just reached the headquarters of the 2nd group of the 16th Infantry Division and am acting as transport officer. We are located at Eeghem, some eleven miles south of Bruges.

It is not a large place: a few houses, a church tower and a crossroads. The crossroads has been spotted by the enemy artillery and is being shelled. The guns are out-of-date and we just let them fire away, hardly worrying about them at all. Unfortunately we have more than artillery to deal with: wave after wave of German planes, flying closely together in the dazzling sunshine, are constantly roaring past overhead. We know that the sky belongs to them, undisputed, and we also know—from bitter experience—what dive-bombing means.

I am lying on the bank of the road and watching Thielt burn. I have just come from Thielt. The fighting was fierce and they had to take it house by house. As I watch the flames, which show up clearly against the bright morning sky, I am not thinking about anything in particular.

Thank Heaven, I am not in on GHQ news and haven't the slightest idea of what the general situation is like. Like the rest of us, I have picked up the propaganda leaflets dropped by the German planes, featuring a map on which our armies are completely encircled. But like everyone else, I am confidently looking forward to the counter-offensive which will fill in the gap. The war, as far as I am concerned, is made up of a few elementary things to worry about and a few vivid scenes.

There is my column of trucks (whose armament at first consisted of my own revolver) which has to be brought to whatever point ordered, despite dive-bombers, traps laid by parachutists, advance enemy mechanized units, the difficulty of full-speed night driving through black-out darkness, and, above all, our own tiredness and exhaustion. I am so tired that at times I go to sleep at the wheel of my car, though I am singing at the top of my voice to stay awake.

Then there are also the quick scenes which I have memorized almost mechanically. The Grenadier regiment, for instance, which I saw at St. Trond, on the morning of May 11, as it was falling back from the Albert Canal, and the farmer fleeing on his bicycle, near Louvain. He was pedaling away furiously, while his old mother sat on the frame of his machine. She was a big woman, all dressed up in her Sunday black. A stray machine-gun bullet fired from some place overhead drove through the peasant woman's head. The son stood over her dumbfounded; he could not understand what had happened.

And the lunatics who had escaped from the asylum at Mortsels-lez-Anvers. They were excited but unafraid: just men in uniform, like all the others. And the retreat through the tunnel under the Scheldt, on May 16. The tunnel is pitch-black and thronged with troops and vehicles. The engines are all throbbing away; our vehicles advance inch by inch. Then, above the muffled sound of the engines, rises an ear-splitting noise, as if the tunnel had given way and the waters of the river above were roaring in. It is only the horses of a battery, who have suddenly gone wild and are galloping like mad through the darkness, pursued by the cursing drivers, while the wounded scream in terror. . . . And then the Germans into whose hands I almost fell, out of sheer stupidity, on that afternoon on May 22. I had stayed alone in the abandoned town and was looking around for the last petrol dumps to destroy. The population had warned me of the approach of enemy troops almost an hour earlier, but when at the turn of a street I suddenly found myself staring at some grey uniforms, I stood there flabbergasted as the bullets whizzed past me.

Today, the retreating army is passing through the Eeghem crossroads: the roads are blocked with heavy guns, ammunition wagons and trucks of all descriptions. Disordered bands of infantrymen and isolated soldiers also appear upon the scene: they must be re-organized and sent back to the front. None of the officers present even thinks of holding the poor devils to account; they stand there bewildered, filthy, overpowered by fatigue, thirst and hunger. They are given a few biscuits and allowed to drink their fill from a nearby tap, after

which they turn back, without so much as a murmur, and march toward the front-lines. But does the front really still lie there?

At nightfall, we proceed to Rudeveoorde, a few miles to the north. My last memory of the day is the meeting of a friend of mine, a communications officer, who in civilian life taught at Brussels University. His voice is soft as a woman's, but no man needs a shave more badly than he.

He got killed while trying to recuperate his material, which he did not want to fall into enemy hands. He died with his eyes wide open, his thoughts far away. Still another memory of that day is my seeing a Belgian battery of 75's obstinately firing off its last shells almost point-blank at the advancing enemy tanks.

It was past midnight when I finally went to sleep in the great hall of the château at Rudeveoorde.

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I awake with a start. The lights are on in the General's office and people are moving about. It is 4:30 a.m.

"The army has capitulated."

"What?"

"The division officer attached to Corps HQ has just brought the order."

"Then I'm deserting."

And here I am in my car, on my way to Dunkerque. Shall

I take the main road or follow a roundabout route? I'll try the main road.

Along the road, the soldiers are already awake and whispering among themselves. They are making signs, but I drive on. Passing them, I hear several times, "Is it true?"

All is quiet at Bruges. As I drive through, I can hear the first trams peacefully clanging out of their depots. But at Ghistelle the roads are again jammed. I am used to the traffic, however, and my small bullet-riddled car, with flowers still stuck in the radiator cap, threads its way beautifully through the tangled columns.

Nieuport is deserted. I notice a few crumbled houses. From Nieuport-Bains to La Panne, the royal road lies open; bombs have dug a few holes here and there, and from time to time twisted wires from the tramline running along the highway lie across it. La Panne is crowded with busy but peaceful civilians, as if the summer season were in full swing. But toward Dunkerque, the road is strewn with an ever-increasing number of abandoned or broken down vehicles, which contain arms and munitions, petrol tanks and other material. At a French outpost, I come to a sudden stop. My friendly overtures as I step out of the car, are not well received. I am called a traitor, a coward and the lowest kind of scum. I am warned that they will start shooting if I insist on approaching. Of course I have my own gun, and a sub-machine gun besides, with plenty of ammunition. Should I start the shooting? However, I decide

Dunkerque is a mass of ruins and flames



to turn around and head for Lille. La Panne again, then Furnes and Ypres. As I leave Ypres behind me, I come upon some British troops, apparently from Poperinghe, who are heading in the opposite direction. They are marching in perfect order. Suddenly I am alone again. I fully realize what that implies—but I keep on all the same, as if driven on by my own impetus.

I drive out of Poperinghe by the Bailleul road. This time, I am not surprised to see a German mechanized column advancing toward me. More bullets riddle my car while I turn it back toward Poperinghe.

I shall now try the sea. La Panne for the third time. There are hardly any boats, one or two at most. I try to talk one of the fisherman into putting out to sea with me. But none are willing.

I move on to Coxyde. From the top of the dunes I can see the beach. A few trap ships are anchored off the coast. Boats loaded with British troops move to and fro in a business-like manner. My experience with the French at Dunkerque having taught me a lesson, I walk up to one of the sentries standing watch in faultless style. Their C.O. is pointed out to me. Greetings have been exchanged. I carefully explain that I am no traitor. "I am afraid it's impossible, Sir. Sorry." The sensation of being an outcast is even more burning than at Dunkerque.

On to Nieuport and, if necessary, Ostend. Nieuport is full

of Belgian soldiers. They have come on foot, on bicycles, on motor-cycles or in trucks. All are armed, and filled with rage. There are boats in the fairway. About ten of us, picked at random, get together to find a way out.

German planes are now overhead. A group of houses facing the tram station is ablaze and the fire is spreading. On the other side of the Yser, near the King Albert Monument, a Lewis gun opens fire. It is probably British.

Try as we may, we cannot get the engine of our little boat started. I decide to set off under sail, but the wind is against us and the boat difficult to handle. We can at least try to heave off with the boat-hooks—and hoist our colors at the same time. The flag is nothing but a dirty old rag, but we tie it tightly and heave off. It is 2 p.m. The going is slow; we push the boat along the pier, tugging at the pilcs with our own hands. Farther up the channel, we find a small boat equipped with a petrol motor. We start its engine and tie our own boat to it. We now head for the sea, the little dinghy valiantly tugging the larger boat. We move very slowly, for the wind and the sea are against us.

German planes are watching us overhead. As the bombs fall harmlessly, they throw up huge columns of water and the back-wash tosses us around. We barely hear the machine-guns spattering over our heads. We are shooting away furiously ourselves. After several hours, we at least reach the end of the fairway and the open sea. A single plane, the last one draws near, circles above us, suddenly swoops down—but decides the

Nazi bombers blast the port of Dunkerque



quarry is not worth its while. We are not ashamed to admit that this one frightened us most of all. Some of us are beginning to feel sea-sick. From time to time, we draw along side the little tug and fill it up with petrol. It is raining hard and growing dark. This is the rain everyone has been hoping and praying for since the invasion began. It is raining for the first time since May 10. The rain and the deepening dark shroud us from sight.

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According to the best traditions of the ship-wrecked mariner, we vainly strove to attract the attention of passing ships by fixing rags imbued with petrol at the end of an oar and setting them afire. First a hospital-ship, then some French destroyers passed us by in spite of our frantic signals. Finally at 10 p.m. we were picked up by a British warship, a splendid vessel which was to make the Dunkerque-Dover crossing eight times during those fateful days.

Relations with our rescuers were rather strained at first. We got on board, unarmed, and were met by members of the crew revolver in hand. After we had been questioned, however, confidence was soon restored. We found out that we had been picked up in mid-Channel and that we were heading in the right direction (I feel not a little proud of this accomplishment). As for our rescuers, they were going the other way, toward Dunkerque. They were most interested in our motor boat, and asked us whether we felt equal to the task of arming it and helping to embark some of the stranded troops. Of course we felt equal to it.

The whole world now knows of those Dunkerque nights. When our ship had embarked all she could safely carry—and more—we sailed for Dover. As for our brave little dinghy, it came to a glorious end off the beaches of Dunkerque.

I shall never forget the Dover harbor station, through which I had so often passed, bound on business or pleasure. It was now chock-full of haggard, harassed, tattered troops, brought over by an endless chain of ships. A few Belgians could be recognized in each group. Every one of them had lived through the most extraordinary, the most desperate adventure of his life. Out of fear of being driven back from the rescue ships, many of them had torn off the distinguishing lion emblem from their helmet and kept their uniform hidden under the wide thin raincoats which I shall always associate with the memory of Dunkerque. Only a tiny minority of these fine fellows, all of whom were anxious to get back to the fighting and who did get back, was lucky enough to escape a second time. But their spirit still lives.

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I have always thought and said—despite the sarcasm with which my warnings were often met—that I did not feel the policy of neutrality would succeed in keeping Belgium out of war. I did my best, however, up to the very last moment, to go on with my work as if the whole future belonged to us. On May 9, 1940—the day before the invasion—together with my colleagues of the Department of Public Works, I visited the grounds of the Liège Exhibition in order to complete plans for their future development and use. The outbreak of the European war in September 1939 had shortened the life of the Exhibition, but its essential object had nevertheless been achieved: a large-scale urban development project, with vast grounds devoted to the education and happiness of the young, had been presented to the world.

The day will come when on those same grounds we shall again be planting trees and flowers—in the pursuit of happiness.



From the ground up

Educational Reconstruction as the Foundation of a Free World

by M. Huxley

Mr. Michael Huxley attended the meeting described below in his personal capacity as Editor of The Geographical Magazine, London, England.

"TO MAKE the World Safe for Democracy"—that is what the men who were killed in the last World War are often said to have been fighting for. Certainly, however, it would be absurd to suppose that a majority of the millions of Allied dead were killed in the belief that they were sacrificing themselves for any such purpose. A legend has been built up that "their sacrifice was in vain": the legend is false, for they were all fighting—yes, even the Americans—to defend their homes against an imminent menace; and the defense was successful.

Yet it is true that men in those days dreamed a dream, and that the dream was not fulfilled. Many reasons have been given for the failure of the last generation to make the world safe, or at least safer, for what Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick called the other day "the individualist-universalist philosophy" and for the system or systems of government which sought to put that philosophy into effect. One reason has seldom been given: the failure of education to play its full part and of governments to enable it to do so. While some children were being taught the virtues of tolerance and mutual respect, as