

General Giraund Was Near To Execution By Firing Squad

[The author of this article, reprinted from the American magazine Life, was a motion-picture producer in Paris before the war. A member of the naval reserve, Michael Bernin was attached to the photographic division of the French navy. After serving as secretary to Admiral Abrial, commander of the northern squadron of the French fleet, Bernin became liaison interpreter for the French aboard the British escort ship Valentine. When the Valentine was sunk off the Dutch coast in May, 1940, he was among the 55 members of the crew who survived. After the battle of Dunkirk he fled to England, returned to Cherbourg just in time to be captured by the Nazis. After his release Bernin obtained an American visa and arrived in New York last March.]

HISTORIC SCENE

The Chateau of Tourlaville is just four and a-half kilometres from Cherbourg. When I saw it last on June 19, 1940, it was the setting for a historic scene which I and all French men hope will never be repeated. The French navy, at least that part of it which fought so bravely in the defence of Dunkirk, was preparing its surrender to a detachment of Germans who had captured Cherbourg without a struggle and were coming to get us in their own good time.

The Admirante Nord, charged with the defence of the north coast of France and lodged at Tourlaville, included in its high command some of the most gallant and venerated officers of the French navy. There was my admiral, Leclerc, his face already grey and shrunken. There were captains and commanders, lieutenants and ensigns, and sailors like myself.

Though the hall was full of people, no one spoke loudly. In a room off the hall I heard a phone ring. Cherbourg was phoning to say that a German colonel had just left with a few men to officiate at our surrender.

Admiral Abrial turned towards the officers of his staff, now all grouped around him, and nodded. He then drew his sword and tried to break it over his knee. It was too tough, so he trod on one end of it and bent the blade back from the hilt. The sword vibrated in a single shriek, and broke. Such other officers as had swords followed his example except my admiral, Leclerc, who had motioned to me. "Bernin," he ordered, "take this thing and break it. It's stupid of me, but I just can't do it." I took the sword out into the park of the chateau and buried it under a tree. I think that is what he wanted me to do. If I go back to France some day and if Admiral Leclerc has earned the right to wear his sword again, I shall tell him where it is.

When I slipped back into the chateau the Germans were already there. On the great outdoor stairway, Admiral Abrial was listening to the German officer read him the terms of surrender. The other officers stood behind him. We of the non-commissioned rank were being herded out into the road. After a while my name was called. Admiral Leclerc had asked for me, and the sentries passed me through to him.

"You know my orderly was killed some days ago," he said quietly. "I have not replaced him. The Germans allow me to take an orderly into captivity with me. This is not a command and you may feel better off with the boys, but would you like to come with me? I am as much a prisoner as you and can promise you nothing."

"I shall be glad to serve you, Admiral."

"Thank you, Bernin. Join the others."

Thus I became part of the convoy of prisoners to be sent to the fortress of Koenigstein, 25 miles from Dresden, in the German province of Saxony.

Our caravan set out. First went the car of the German officer in charge. Then six cars full of our admirals and their orderlies, plus several French generals who had been rounded up in the region. I was picked to drive Admirals Abrial and Leclerc, and our car was the last of the six. A German

scout car, full of guards, followed behind.

At the entrance to a military camp in Mainz we were ordered to stop. The officers, wearing by the long journey, anguished from the cars. There were already 30 of them and the number was increased on the arrival there of another group of prisoners. Among the latter was General Giraund, who had come from Berlin, where he had been held since his capture by the Germans. We were left alone for a few minutes while the officer in charge of the prisoners went to get his instructions regarding our future itinerary. He soon returned in the company of a German general.

CALL FOR GIRAUD

"Which of you is General Giraund," asked the latter. General Giraund, who was among a group of generals, presented himself.

"It is I."

"General, I have been ordered to place you before a firing squad."

With no emotion visible on his face, General Giraund replied: "I am a prisoner. All I can do is to protest against this flagrant violation of international law regarding prisoners of war."

"Not at all," interrupted the German. "You are accused of having given orders to kill two German civilians in northern France. This is assassination, for which you are criminally liable."

"It is perfectly true that I gave such an order," replied Giraund. "While military operations were in full course, two Germans wearing civilian clothes landed behind our lines with the evident intent of committing sabotage. If I had to do it again I should not hesitate."

"Very well," said the German general. "Please follow me." General Giraund shook hand with the other French generals and followed the German into his headquarters. We were stunned, but hardly had the two men disappeared when we received the order to continue our journey.

We set out again. The two admirals I accompanied maintained a deathly silence. I could observe them sitting there, their lips tightly closed, and with the same question written on the face of the two men. "Are the Germans going to assassinate the captured French generals on any flimsy sort of pretext? Will we all suffer Giraund's fate?"

AGREEABLE SURPRISE

Between steep rocks a single narrow and precipitous path leads up to the summit of Koenigstein. There is no other road in these mountains. As we climbed, at each turning we met a sentry who, with a rifle on his shoulder, stood as immobile as the rocks, watching us pass by.

With our arrival the number of superior officers imprisoned in Koenigstein rose to 120. But we had a very agreeable surprise. General Giraund suddenly reappeared. When questioned as to how he had escaped execution, he replied good humouredly:—

"Like a soldier. Faced by a court martial, instead of uttering a lengthy plea, I put the following question to the chief justice, a general: 'If you captured two Frenchmen in civilian clothes and you were certain that they had arrived by parachute behind the German lines with the purpose of spying and committing sabotage, would you, as a responsible officer, give orders for the execution of these two men?'"

"The general pronounced the court-martial adjourned and withdrew. I heard him telephoning in the adjoining room, obviously asking for instructions. When he came back, accompanied by all his assistants, he brought with him my acquittal—a cancellation by the general staff of the order he had given for my execution."

After a pause General Giraund added: "It was truly a miracle that I escaped the firing squad. I have often faced death, but never had I felt with such certainty that I had only a few minutes to live."

Things We Want to Know

Did the M.O. think there was an air raid last Saturday night? Did the Padre hear him?

Which Div. Sig. N.C.O. said "She's respectable"?

Who is SCARVO?

Which Div. Sigs were in Greece and Libya with Sid and Bob?

Which R.H.Q. Sgt. wears his hair like Alf Alfa?

Who made the water boil quickly? And how? and why?

Does our Fish and Chip S/M believe in selling his wares around the huts in the early hours?

If anyone wants to know who hit Nev on the nose the answer is—Tugboat.

Which B.C. stalked a hedgehog for half an hour thinking it was R.H.Q.? Sir, you should know that R.H.Q. are experts at camouflaging themselves, even IN camp.

Are sleepers to be provided on local leave trains?

Which officer had the grace to blush when he got the answer, "Not for that there reason"?

Why did Sgt. Short blush when Sgt. McKenzie gave him a message?

Who let someone else take his girl friend home?

Do ducks swim of their own accord, or do they need assistance particularly to get out of the water?

Did the R.S.M. go to the Regent to see the film last week-end?

Who wants to visit the Masonic Hotel, Gisborne? Is she nice, Buck?

Does Shorty carry the measurement in his hand?

If Murray is the Fat Boy, who is the Thin Man?

Why do the flies hang round Keith Clapps' hut?

Is it customary for Duty Sgts. to wear lipstick at 0900?

Which R.H.Q. officer thinks he is making a profit when paying 10/3 for one dollar?

Did Santa Claus give L/Bdr. Robertson and Sgm. Scott a rattle or a tin trumpet?

Which now Sgt. had a "Ta Ta party under false impressions?"

Who WAS the R.H.Q. Orderly runner on Tuesday?

Was there a three ringed circus on Tuesday with all three rings going all the time with non-stop variety?

Which Officer in 4 thinks that callipers O.P. are used for measuring the size of the O.P.?

The only time some of these politicians make their weight felt is when they stand on somebody's foot.

Then there was the wrestler who was nick-named 'Boarding-house Steak' because he was so tough his opponents couldn't get their teeth into him.

Then there was the patriotic old soul who wanted the architect to design her a house with Free French windows.

"A rich manufacturer has left his entire factory to his employees," says paper. This is giving them the works.

They've altered the old expression to: "When in Rome do as the Germans do!"

The 1941 girl knows a man's no good when he just keeps driving and never runs out of petrol.

It is reported that Hess expected to be given petrol and maps in Scotland for his return trip to Germany. The poor fellow should have known that in Scotland one is never given anything.

Rookie: "How long do I have to wait for a shave?" Barber (after close look): "About six months, I guess."

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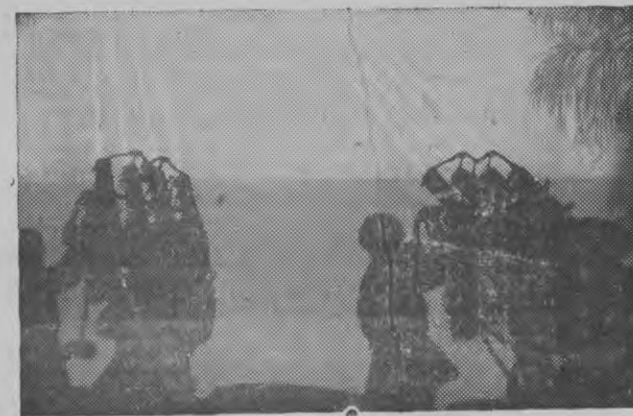
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British artillery officer at a control post directing gunfire to where it will hurt the enemy most: a battle of Egypt picture.



Soviet 4-Barrel A.A. Guns Spit Death at Enemy Night Raiders: These deadly 4-barrel guns are known to British naval gunners as "Chicago pianos."

BETWIXT HEAVEN AND EARTH.

"Padres arriving with parachute battalions pass through the same course as the men, and one of the classic remarks which will always be remembered at my school is one attributed to a padre. He is reputed to have said, on the occasion of his first jump, that although all his life he had put his faith in God, it wavered for a few seconds in favour of a W.A.A.F. parachute packer," records Wing Commander M. A. Newnham, D.F.C., in a talk on parachute training.

At the conclusion of a meeting of an urban district council, members linked hands and sang "Auld Lang Syne." It seems to be perfectly true that a sinister spirit of whoopee is menacing our municipal life.

He sat by the cradle and he crooned a song of cheer. But he didn't rock the cradle, for 'twas there he kept his beer.

American Sailor: That ship of ours goes so fast that we often have to stop to cool off the propeller.

English Tar: That's nothing. Our destroyers go so fast that we have to stop to pick up wireless messages.

Head Cook: "Didn't I tell you to notice when the soup boiled over?" Assistant: "I did. It was half past ten."

The man who tried to grow bananas with zip-fasteners on them.

Russian place names suggest that telegrams are sent along barbed wire.

Father (to son). What do you mean, You'll be good for a penny? — You should be like me, m'lud; good for nothing!"

"Frequent water drinking," said the advising sergeant, "prevents becoming stiff in the joints."

"Yeah," replied the rookie, "some joints don't serve water."