

The Liberation of Paris, 1944

As Allied forces broke through the German containment in the hedge row country beyond the Normandy beaches, Supreme Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower set his sights on a rush into Germany. Concerned that a battle for Paris would only bog down the advance, Eisenhower planned to by-pass the French capital. However, events on the ground would soon dictate a different course.

On August 15, news of the Allied advance and of a second Allied landing on the coast of southern France reached the French capital. As the Germans began their evacuation, the Paris police, postal workers and metro workers went on strike. Within four days, a spontaneous uprising erupted. Led by the underground French Resistance (FFI), Parisians attacked their German occupiers, barricaded streets and created as much havoc as possible. General Charles de Gaulle, commander of the Free French Forces called upon General Eisenhower to divert forces to the city and threatened to attack the city on his own if his request was denied. Consenting, Eisenhower ordered de Gaulle to enter the city and diverted a portion of the American forces to support the French.



Resistance fighters arm themselves as liberation troops approach Paris

Hitler ordered General Dietrich von Choltitz, military commander of Paris, to destroy the city. The city's bridges were mined and preparations made to follow Hitler's request. However, von Choltitz hesitated. On August 20 he agreed to a cease-fire with the Parisian insurgents. It was a fragile agreement as sporadic fighting continued throughout the city.

On August 24, leading elements of de Gaulle's forces (led by General Jacques Leclerc) made their way into the French capital. The remainder followed the next day. Confronting pockets of intense German fighting, the liberators proceeded through the city. French tanks surrounded von Choltitz's headquarters. The commander of Paris was taken prisoner without resistance and signed a formal surrender agreement. Although sporadic fighting continued, General de Gaulle entered the city in a triumphal procession on the 26th. After four years, Paris was free again.

"Germans were also shooting from Notre Dame and from nearby houses."

John Mac Vane was a NBC radio correspondent who accompanied the allied troops as they approached Paris. We join his story as the troops enter the city: :

"We reached Paris itself, the university, at just ten minutes past eight by my watch. I felt like pinching myself. It was hard to believe I was back in Paris once again.

Suddenly a fusillade of bullets spattered on the street. The whole column came to a quick stop. We leaped out and crouched beside the jeep. FFI men started blazing away at something over our heads. Men in the dozen vehicles ahead of us began firing at something the tower of the university.

Germans in the tower were firing on the column. I saw the stonework blasted off in white flakes as Leclerc's men kept it under continuous fire.

We were also being fired on from a nearby house. Some FFI men, with Leclerc's troops, got cover near the building, then rushed through the door and up the stairs. I heard the explosion of a grenade and the firing stopped.

After about half an hour the tower of the university fell silent, and the column moved on.

Twice again the column was held up in similar fashion. One moment the streets would be filled with people. At the first volley of shots they would scatter to the doorways. FFI men with ancient pistols and captured German rifles would start firing at what they thought was the source of the attack.

Whenever the trouble seemed serious, Leclerc's men would loose a few bursts of machine-gun fire from the weapons mounted on the trunks. Or a light tank would stop at a street comer and streams of tracers would spout out of it to cover our advance. We felt terribly unprotected in the jeep, and the noise of the bullets singing past us was most unpleasant.

Just as the column began moving again, a civilian in a black homburg jumped onto the jeep. I told him roughly to get off.

The civilian grinned and told me in good but accented English that he was an American ass agent who had been in Paris for three months preparing for our entry. He was French by birth but naturalized American. We let him ride with us down the boulevard Jourdain and through the porte d'Orleans. In the rue St.-Jacques he jumped off with a 'thanks very much,' smiled, and disappeared as mysteriously as he had come.

We passed across the bridge that led directly to the square between Notre Dame Cathedral and the Prefecture of Police. In the sunshine Paris had never looked more beautiful. It was then just a quarter to nine.

The vehicles just ahead of us rolled into the square and parked, and we parked the jeep with them. Kokoska switched off the motor. We looked up at the lovely towers of Notre Dame, and someone said, 'Well, that's that. The fight is all over now.'

As he finished speaking, the air crackled into life with bullets, hissing and whining all over the square. The French light tanks began firing over our heads at some Germans across the Seine. Germans were also shooting from Notre Dame and from nearby houses. For twenty-five minutes Wright, Jack Hansen, Kokoska, and I lay on our stomachs crouched beside the jeep. We could see no likely shelter of any kind. There was so much shooting that we could hardly hear one another speak. Guns, machine guns, rifles - everything was going off together in one great earsplitting, crackling inferno of sound.

The wounded were carried across the square by girls and doctors in Red Cross uniforms. They waved Red Cross flags.

The shooting sputtered, then died down, and finally burst out with new fury before it ceased. The air was strangely quiet. I could see the sun glint on the white marks where the bullets had struck Norte Dame..



A Parisian family seeks shelter from sniper bullets as liberation forces enter Paris

A new sound broke the hush of that Thursday morning the bells of Notre Dame. Someone began ringing them. They pealed over Paris as they had for so many hundreds of years, a song of triumph that Paris was once again free.

...There were some strange incidents in that square. Two men dressed in the helmets and uniforms of Paris firemen came up to me and, speaking in unmistakable American, said, 'Are you guys Americans?'

'Sure,' I replied, 'but what in hell are you guys doing in that getup?'

One of them, whose name I took down, reported to the authorities at his request, then promptly lost, said, 'He and I are Eighth Air Force. I'm a pilot. He's a navigator. We got shot down, and the French underground took charge of us. We been in Paris for a month attached to this fire department unit. We have a hell of a time at night, going around fighting fires and killing Germans when we get the chance. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.'

'Do you speak French?' I asked.

'Not a damn word,' said the bomber pilot. 'One of the firemen speaks a little English, and he does all the translating. We get into a house of some collaborator that is burning, and we bust up the whole inside before we put the fire out. Or maybe we just let it all bum down.'

When he left us, the pilot said, 'Hell of a thing to have to go back to flying-after all this fun.'

References:

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