

The Sundowner

by H. W. Moss

"This is turning out to be no phony war," Edward Summit said as he ran alongside Enville. They heard the clanking rattle of small arms fire and bullets spattered puffs of dust in the dirt on the road ahead of where their feet pounded. That was enough to make them seek better cover and simultaneously, without missing a step, they jumped into a ditch that paralleled the road. More rounds whizzed overhead and they pulled their helmets tight to their skulls.

They were no longer targets. They slowed their pace and duck-walked a hundred meters further down the shallow muddy gully. A welcome silence persisted as they stopped to catch their breath.

"Can you tell me how the fort fell so quickly?" Enville asked with astonishment. "I was told it was impregnable."

"A fort's a fort. Any of them can be over run." Summit's statement was delivered with a studied insouciance he often employed to cover his true lack of knowledge. "Eben Emael was not prepared for an assault from all sides and the air, that is all."

In truth, the correct answer was considerably more complex. The German war machine had been preparing an assault on the fortresses surrounding Liège for more than a year. Paratroopers practiced on full-scale replicas of Belgium's strategic buildings and limestone citadels which German engineers recreated in life-sized detail right down to their crenelated walls.

The result of this meticulously planned year-long drill was an astonishingly precise attack that immediately overwhelmed King Leopold III's forces. When the time came,

gliders silently brought Nazi soldiers directly to Belgian bridges which were taken before they could be destroyed.

The most important of the strongholds around Liège was Fort Eben Emael which had 1,200 defenders including Enville and Summit. The entire complement was thrown into disorder when the concentrated attack began. Paratroopers landed on them from above just as ground troops began a frontal assault. The irony was the invulnerable fort on the Meuse with its huge number of defenders surrendered to a mere eighty German soldiers led by a sergeant.

Enville and Summit were outside the fort's walls when the early morning attack came. They were assigned to the commissary and were picking up supplies in town. At first they attempted to return to their company but found themselves on the fringes of an ever increasing enemy army. Rather than raise their hands when the garrison fell, they decided to take the provisions they had collected and a two-horse wagon team and head toward France. They sneaked out of town under the nose of the victorious German army, huddled in wool blankets to conceal their uniforms from any but the closest scrutiny.

They barely escaped with their lives. Less than two kilometers south, they were fired upon by a passing tank and had to abandon the wagon as too easy a target.

Now they found themselves on the run with no fixed goal other than to stay alive. The shallow trench would not be a good hiding place for long. Where the roadway made a gradual turn they flattened their bodies against the built up shoulder and heard but could not see troop transports rolling past. Both knew better than to lift their heads. They continued to waddle their way along the gutter dragging their rifle butts in the mud. Several German half-tracks passed without discovering them.

That night they crossed the Meuse in a stolen rowboat, a difficult feat since the river ran fast and deep. They were only slightly in front of the advancing German military machine. By the second sunset they felt safe enough to actually try to get some sleep and spelled each other on guard duty. They were surprised to find themselves alive when the sun rose. In the early morning hours they were discovered by an advance patrol of British Tommies, part of an Anglo-French force sent belatedly to assist their stricken neighbors across the Channel.

The two Belgians stumbled into camp and explained their predicament to a British officer. He spoke passable French and immediately wrote out a message based on the information they provided which was relayed to headquarters by courier. Then he gave them orders to bivouac and draw rations with the nearest platoon.

They ate hard bread and an unrecognizable type of pressed meat out of tin cans, found a shovel and traded turns digging. The British soldiers, along with the best fighting divisions France had to offer, formed a defensive line that stretched between Antwerp and Namur.

That evening Enville and Summit were seated around a small cook fire. They glumly ate their first hot meal in two days, compliments of the combined expeditionary forces, and tried to comprehend both their situation and the language.

"Don't worry, Froggie," a corporal said in a heavy English accent. "We have arrived to save your sorry arses."

The two soldiers knew theirs was very nearly a defeated country. Any consolation or hope no matter how rude was welcome.

"The Meuse will stop the Germans," one member of the company said confidently.

Enville had a college education but English was not his strong suit. He spoke somewhat better than he comprehended and did his best to translate for Summit all the while thinking how the strident British words were delivered with a bravado similar to his countryman Summit's supremely confident but ignorant style.

"Nothing can get across that water without getting blown to pieces by our boys," the soldier said. "And even if they somehow managed, the Boche would arrive with no backup. Nothing larger than a motorcycle can get through them Ardennes woods of yours. 'At's wot happened in the last war, anyways"

In addition to food, the Belgians were allowed to pick up bedding and enough ammunition to make them feel as if they could put up a fight. They had not fired a shot and carried only 20 rounds each in anticipation of returning to Eben Emael.

They were armed with long barreled Mausers, 8 mm bolt action five shot repeaters that had been in use by various armies since their introduction in 1889.

The section of the British Expeditionary force the two joined was camped a quarter mile south of the Meuse in expectation of an air attack rather than assault from the water. The generals had learned from King Leopold's experience with Hitler's war machine that troops can be landed almost anywhere. It was best not to be trapped with your back to the water.

The army occupied a series of hastily dug trenches in expectation of another war of attrition like the last one that had been fought there.

At first light, Summit and Enville were aroused by the cook banging a ladle against a fry pan calling them to breakfast. A spoonful of gruel to his lips, Enville stood on the

lower rung of a wooden step peering over the trench lip. He had an unobstructed view of the water. The morning fog lifted.

What was revealed raised the hair on the back of Enville's neck. German engineers had managed another incredible feat.

Quietly during the night, pontoon bridges had been laid in segments at several points north and south across the river. Already advancing along these were columns of Nazi soldiers, loping along with rifles and machine-guns at the ready. Equally incredible, a backlog of mechanized transports including Mark II tanks, half-track cargo and personnel carriers, trucks filled with troops and sidecar mounted machine-gun motorcycles waited impatiently to begin their approach.

Astounding as it seemed, an army of German Panzer tanks had also rolled through the Ardennes forest. Until then, it had been thought impassable by armored vehicles. The mass of gray wool clad foot-soldiers were the lead wave of another well planned and well organized blitzkrieg. Enville gave an urgent cry.

"Impossible," the Englishman who had been so cocksure the night before said with blinking eyes as he stared at the advancing troops. The soldier dropped his plate and picked up a rifle.

Small arms and the rapid reports of machine-pistols shattered the morning air as a howling whistle screamed in Enville's ears. The artillery shell exploded twenty feet to his left, knocked him off his feet and sent his food flying. He lifted his unprotected head from the ground as the ringing inside his brain subsided. He began to crawl toward his kit.

He found Summit already gathering his own supplies. Edward tied up his bedroll and slung it over one shoulder and stood in a time-honored soldier's stance. Then he pulled the bolt back on his rifle and slammed a five round clip into the breach. The bolt action Mausers were no match for the approaching overwhelming display of rapid-fire ordnance, but there was no other option.

Another artillery shell whistled its greeting and came to earth with a loud explosion not far away. The men instinctively flattened out on the floor of the trench. When they peeked over the dirt rim they saw the enemy army advancing with little or no hesitation. It was clear the defenders were already losing ground.

Enville never was certain if an actual retreat was ordered. He was sure that within minutes of the first fusillade he was out of his trough and, along with dozens of other men, found himself backing away from the aerial and ground onslaught. German forward spotters had their range which they radioed to artillery posts firing from at least a mile away. The barrage increased.

A gap in the Expeditionary Force's lines opened and German troops poured in. The men were sent running. Enville and Summit ran with them.

German infantry advanced alongside their tanks. Although the English had nothing that could penetrate the hide of a Mark II from a distance, it was possible to stand and pick off individual enemy soldiers next to them. Enville was an excellent marksman and did his share of damage.

The method of counterattack was to stop behind natural cover such as a boulder, a clump of trees or in a hedgerow, and fight a skirmish, take a few casualties then retreat

before the German big guns could range in on them. Enville managed to kill several Germans without getting shot himself.

In this manner the British backed their way to the beaches at Dunkerque where a pitched battle began on May 26 that lasted until June 4. During those precious ten days it looked as if the British would lose every man. But a rare and courageous event occurred so that when Hitler finally did take Dunkerque, only 40,000 French troops remained behind to be captured.

King Leopold surrendered on May 28 without warning his allies and disappeared into a castle in Brussels just three weeks after the war began. When Leopold's army capitulated, the allied flank was completely exposed. German Panzer divisions punched at the defenders' lines and continued to push more British toward the Channel where they were cut off at this one remaining port.

Enville and Summit occupied the same hole on the beach. Their backs to the water, they were finally able to catch their breath. Both were convinced they were about to die.

Yet, in one of his more colossal blunders, on May 24 Hitler personally gave orders to halt the advancing German army. He preferred to allow the Luftwaffe the luxury of destroying what was left of the British troops from the air.

However, something quite unexpected occurred. Although nearly 340,000 men, what was left of the British Expeditionary Army, eventually became strafing and bombing targets for the Luftwaffe, they were not blown to oblivion. Instead, the sand on the beach was easy to dig in and absorbed explosions. Meanwhile, RAF planes stationed in England fended off attacking Stuka dive bombers as Churchill made plans to evacuate his men.

The British government asked every available civilian craft capable of rising to the call to cross the Channel. The people responded. A thousand hastily mustered ships, from French fishing boats to paddle steamers, English coal boats, pleasure craft and lifeboats off sunken ships, were manned by farmers and dentists, retired seamen, civil servants and Sea Scouts.

One among this strange armada was a sailing yacht named Sundowner under the command of retired Commander Charles Lightoller, his son and an 18 year old scout named Gerald. They made the Channel crossing on June 1.

Enville knew he would probably be hanged if the Germans caught him. His uniform was obviously not French which proved to be a blessing in disguise: The French were ordered to remain behind and defend the beach. What with the mix of British uniforms from around the globe including India, Canada, New Zealand and Scotland, as long as he and Summit kept their mouths shut they were able to blend in with potential evacuees.

They were at the quay, keeping their heads low as usual, when the Sundowner approached and nestled up next to a British destroyer, the Worcester, which was tied up at the pier. The war vessel was taking on men while its gunners fired at diving enemy aircraft.

The captain of the Sundowner had a brief yelling contest with the captain of the Worcester which was too distant for Enville to understand. The discussion must have been about how best to begin shepherding men onto the yacht. The problem turned out to be that the yacht had been built as a private pleasure craft and was more at home in sea level moorings along the Thames. It was unable to use the tall commercial pier.

At last a plan was worked out whereby the fleeing soldiers boarded the Worcester via a plank, ran across her bow and dropped over the side on rope ladders to land on the Sundowner.

Once aboard the yacht they were told to leave their weapons and equipment topside and climb below decks into the crew's quarters and galley. Within an hour the hold was too full to admit any more men and, at the captain's direction, men began filling the space on deck. Carefully, new arrivals picked their way around the gunwales to the aft and forward sections of the Sundowner. The craft, which had never before carried more than a dozen people including a crew of four, held at least fifty soldiers on deck, another eighty below.

That was when Enville and Summit decided to make their run.

They had discussed their situation and both preferred the relative safety of the big destroyer to the weaponless yacht. Besides, they were certain the yacht was already over full. Every available inch of deck space was taken up and men were practically sitting on top of one another waiting for the trip toward home and safety to begin.

The two Belgians hung back until it seemed the smaller wood vessel was about to cut loose. They bided their time, knew this was probably their last chance to get off the beach. They hoped to remain on the metal hulled Worcester with its big guns which could defend itself against Luftwaffe attack planes. But instead, after they scurried across the ramp and began to look around for a secure place to sit and wait out their passage, they were ordered in no uncertain terms to clamber over the side of the Worcester and join the rest of the men on board Sundowner.

Reluctantly, Summit and Enville jumped aboard. Lightoller gave the order to cast off and Sundowner began her return trip to England. The yacht had so far remained undamaged thanks to the Worcester whose anti-aircraft guns blazed away at attacking fighter planes and bombers throughout the embarkation process.

The Worcester kept the Stukas at bay until Sundowner was at the mouth of the harbor. But by leaving the Worcester's side, the Sundowner became vulnerable as soon as she was in the clear. Moments into their voyage and Enville froze where he stood on the fantail as a German fighter plane swooped out of the sky 200 meters away from him. As it began its approach, a long gliding dive, it became obvious the pilot planned to rake the deck with his twin guns.

There was nowhere to run. The men would be slaughtered. Death was but seconds away.

But the captain of the Sundowner was a cool customer. Enville admired the remarkable restraint the man exhibited. The captain watched the German plane come out of its dive and elevate its nose in preparation to bringing its guns to bear. That's when he gave the order: "Hard a-port."

These English words were forever impressed in Enville's brain.

The enemy guns opened up but the bullets missed their mark as the yacht quickly turned. She could do 180 degrees in her own length, approximately 60 feet.

Along with "Hard a-port," Enville that day learned the phrase, "Stand by," as the German pilot turned and began another pass. Precisely when the plane was about to open up again, the captain again gave another order: "Hard a-starboard."

Once more, the bullets fell harmlessly in the sea.

Eventually the fighter broke off its attack and the Sundowner crossed the Channel without further incident.

At the harbor in Ramsgate, Captain Lightoller was told at first to "lie off" and not bother the port authorities with his relatively small contingent of rescued men. They could disembark on their own in due time. But when Lightoller informed them by megaphone he had nearly 130 survivors aboard, a skeptical harbor master gave him permission to come in.

Lightoller put his ship alongside a trawler lying at the quay and immediately all the men seated topside began to rise. Those in the hold must have done much the same thing and their combined weight caused the ship to list to one side. Lightoller picked up his megaphone and commanded them to sit tight until an orderly exit could be arranged.

The two Belgians were among the first on the boat to set foot in England but they had nowhere to go. They were men without a country and the British could neither deport them nor figure out how to use them. They were assisted by the Red Cross, eventually found separate living quarters and Enville lost track of Summit in London.

Having something of a head start with a college degree, Enville studied English and volunteered to be a translator. He was given propaganda documents which he transcribed and read for the Free French radio.

The German war machine gathered momentum and no country seemed capable of stopping it until it picked a fight with Russia. The winters of 1941 and '42 finally put an end to Hitler's drive east.

During his second year in England, Enville enlisted in the British Army. He again went through basic training and bootcamp, was assigned to intelligence and in early '44 was picked for a surprising assignment.

"New orders, Enville," the sergeant handed him a folded sheet of paper. "Yer being seconded to the Yanks."

After two weeks at sea in a convoy harassed by German submarines, he set foot in America where he was given the rank of second lieutenant as a language officer. He wore an unfamiliar olive green uniform, was taught a new style of fighting and was issued a new gun, the M-1 Gerand carbine, probably the best all purpose military weapon in the world.

"I was born August 4, 1914, the day the war to end all wars began," Enville was fond of telling his American hosts. "And I was there in Belgium on that fateful day when the Second World War began."

It was not until much later that Enville learned why the captain of the Sundowner, Retired Commander Lightoller, was so calm and experienced a seaman: Lightoller was the senior surviving officer from the Titanic and had been a prime witness during the inquiry into that disaster.

Three days after his 30th birthday, Rene Enville landed at Omaha beach at approximately 10:00 a.m., three and a half hours after the first Allied soldiers came ashore in a hail of bullets.

He landed at one of the hottest spots on the beach. Aerial bomb attacks should have knocked out the German shore defenses but fell too far inland to do much good at Omaha.

As Navy ships ranged their gunfire on the German defenders, Enville once more kept his head low, his helmet tight and his magazine full. Then he began his long walk back to Belgium.

(Note: This story is adapted from Chapter 16 of “Windows for Remy” copyright 2010)

(Note: From a review of “Dunkirk” the movie by Anthony Lane, The New Yorker, August 7 & 14, page 11: “Mark Rylance, dourly determined, plays the skipper of the Moonstone, one of the innumerable ‘Little Ships’ that went to the aid of those who were trapped on the beaches.”)