

Operation Cobra Source Packet: Source C

Ernie Pyle, "An Inhuman Tenseness," August 9-10, 1944 (excerpt)

Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches

Ernie Pyle was a popular war-correspondent who was embedded with military personnel for most of World War II. His writing often appeared in newspapers associated with the Scripps-Howard newspaper syndicate.

It is possible to become so enthralled by some of the spectacles of war that you are momentarily captivated away from your own danger.

That's what's happened to our little group of soldiers as we stood in a French farmyard, watching the mighty bombing of the German lines just before a breakthrough.

But that benign state didn't last long. As we watched, there crept into our consciousness a realization that windrows of exploding bombs were easing back toward us, flight by flight, instead of gradually forward, as the plan called for.

Then we were horrified by the suspicion that those machines, high in the sky and completely detached from us, were aiming their bombs at the smoke line on the ground - and a gentle breeze was drifting the smoke line back over us!

An indescribable kind of panic comes over you at such times. We stood tensed in muscle and frozen in intellect, watching each flight approach and pass over us, feeling trapped and completely helpless.

And then all of an instant the universe became filled with a gigantic rattling as of huge, dry seeds in a mammoth dry gourd. I doubt that any of us had ever heard that sound before, but instinct told us what it was. It was bombs by the hundred, hurtling down through the air above us.

Many times I've heard bombs with whistle or swish or rustle, but never before had I heard bombs rattle. I still don't know the explanation of it. But it is an awful sound.

We dived. Some got in a dugout. Others made foxholes and ditches and some got behind a garden wall - although which side would be "behind" was anybody's guess.

It was too late for the dugout. The nearest place was a wagon-shed which formed one end of the stone house. The rattle was right down upon us. I remember hitting the ground flat, all spread out like the cartoons of people flattened by steam rollers, and then squirming like an eel to get under one of the heavy wagons in the shed.

An officer whom I didn't know was wriggling beside me. We stopped at the same time, simultaneously feeling it was hopeless to move farther. The bombs were already crashing around us.

We lay with our heads slightly up -- like two snakes -- staring at each other. I know it was in both our minds and in our eyes, asking each other what to do. Neither of us knew. We said nothing.

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We just lay sprawled, gaping at each other in a futile appeal, our faces about a foot apart, until it was over.

There is no description of the sound and fury of those bombs except to say it was chaos, and waiting for darkness. The feeling of the blast was sensational. The air struck you in hundreds of continuing flutters. Your ears drummed and rang. You could feel quick little waves of concussions on your chest and in your eyes.

At last the sound it dies down and we looked at each other in disbelief. Gradually we left the fox holes and sprawling places, and came out to see what this guy had in store for us. As far as we could see, other waves were approaching from behind...

How many waves of heavy bombers we put over I have no idea. I had counted well beyond four hundred planes when my personal distraction obliterated any capacity or desire to count.

I only know that four hundred was just the beginning. There were supposed to be eighteen hundred planes that day, and I believe it was announced later that there were more than three thousand.

It seemed incredible to me that any German could come out of that bombardment with his sanity. When it was over it even I was grateful in a chastened way I have never experienced before, for just being alive.