

REPORTING WORLD WAR II

AMERICAN JOURNALISM 1938-1946



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

"THE WAR WASN'T OVER IN THIS SECTION":
ST. MALO, AUGUST 1944

The Siege of St. Malo

by Lee Miller

I THUMBED a ride on an L.S.T. to the Siege of St. Malo. I had brought my bed, I begged my board, and I was given a grandstand view of fortress warfare reminiscent of Crusader times. I arrived the 13th of August, and there were still armed marauders being dug out of cellars and cleared out of backyards in the mainland towns . . . snipers who lay in wait for the Brass or the unwitnessed or unwary . . . hoping to rejoin a fighting unit some place else, and not knowing how far behind the real line they were.

So the war wasn't over in this section, and the soldiers who were fighting assault battles, the artillery who were in their turn spotted and shelled by Hun counter-battery, the combat M.P.s who scraped the town for hidden enemies, the Civil Affairs team who aided bewildered civilians and kept them out of the hair of the Army, in fact, all of the Division wondered what they'd tell their grandchildren they'd done in the great war, since it was "all over" where they were still fighting on for weeks . . . bloody, heroic, tricky battles. . . . [*Censors just released that it was the 83rd Division, 329th Regiment at St. Malo.*]

The Germans called a truce from the Château in Old St. Malo, and asked that they be allowed to send out all the French people who were sheltering in the burning town. They chose the hour before darkness, typically, and the Civil Affairs sent scouts around quickly to organize hospitalization and food, to find local patriots who would recognize any conspirators or phonies in the lot . . . the *gendarmérie* to control the line. The military sent their counter-intelligence men, and ambulances were provided. From past experience with the Huns, we didn't dare risk sending trucks down to the causeway to meet the refugees, as it might have been a bait to get

all our transport concentrated. The shooting suddenly stopped again, and a long stream of people came out into view and passed down the causeway . . . the injured and ill first . . . then old women, with bundles and dazed eyes, little hand-holding groups of girls, stumbling along . . . couples with babies, prams piled with all they had saved of their possessions . . . boys, men shambling from shock . . . prim women, and nuns in immaculate white, and whores. A few were hoisted out of line by the police for their crimes, and a few trustworthy others kept at the bridgehead to help identify any possibly escaping Germans.

There were farewell scenes as the injured were separated and taken off in ambulances . . . and the mass moved on. There were twice the 600 the Germans had announced were on the way. There was no way to control them if they dropped off and went to their own houses, or scattered or got lost, but nearly all wanted the food stocks being given out at the school, and hoped for transport further behind the battle. There was some frigid division among the people, but no haircutting . . . all these people had shared the hardship of battle and were friends again. For the moment.

A couple of counter-intelligence characters came to the Civil Affairs villa, to pick up the prison warden who was there. They wanted to interview a woman they had (on the advice of the *Résistance* people) put in jail the night before. The counter-intelligence deals only with those who are dangerous to the military situation. All other collaborators and such are turned over to the civilian authorities. The jail had a big hole through it, but wasn't blasted at all. The woman and her three children were brought in to the warden's office and her own portfolio of papers put on the desk. Two of the little girls were dressed in blue velvet coats with white bunny collars, and the third was a toddler. The papers contained receipts for salary from the German labour "Todt" organization where she had had a secretarial position. Identity cards and ration books in order . . . and letters signed Heil Hitler, all swastika-ed. There were also some pornographic photographs, which for some strange reason she clung to. When any difficult question came along, she bent over the small child in her lap in madonna-like poses. The CIC man spoke

to her in much more halting French than I knew he knew, and with a Bing Crosby voice. It was like snake and bird hypnosis. She claimed that she had never turned in military information to the enemy, and that if her husband or nephew, the authors of the Nazi-minded letters had, she didn't know it, and anyway they had gone away she knew not where.

We parked her back in her cell. She made a pretty pose with her children when I wanted to photograph her. The kids are some coloured Life-Savers without tasting them, their big, sullen eyes glued to me. They were neither timid nor tough, but gloomy, and I felt like vomiting.

We dodged up to Parame, and found the house where she had lived. It was an ugly cobblestone and brick villa, with a detached shed-garage. We forced the shutters and climbed into a disorderly, slovenly room. Everything in it was sluttish . . . children's clothes and Nazi propaganda were strewn around together . . . unwashed dishes . . . laundry . . . sewing and pornography . . . empty booze bottles and suitcases. In the bathroom, the tub was full of water like all the houses in town, as the water plant had been turned off for a long time. The cupboard was full of men's clothes with the maker's address, "Kiel" inside.

Some young, attractive girls from down the street came in and levelled more accusations at the woman; said that a few nights before, two German officers had come in with suitcases and left in civilian clothes. Also that they had heard that the woman's husband, a Frenchman who organized labour for the Germans, was supposed to be in Rennes and was coming back to fetch her that night. In the garage were the Germans' clothes, also heaps of propaganda material, et cetera. That really clinched the job. It was only a question of picking up the husband. The two girls, by the way, had had a tough time. They were charming and intelligent, if venomous toward their neighbour. Both were students preparing for college, and one has spent 16 months in a concentration camp, accused, rightly, of sheltering and aiding de Gaullists. The other, who was younger, had just done four months for wearing the Cross of Lorraine under her lapel.

* * *

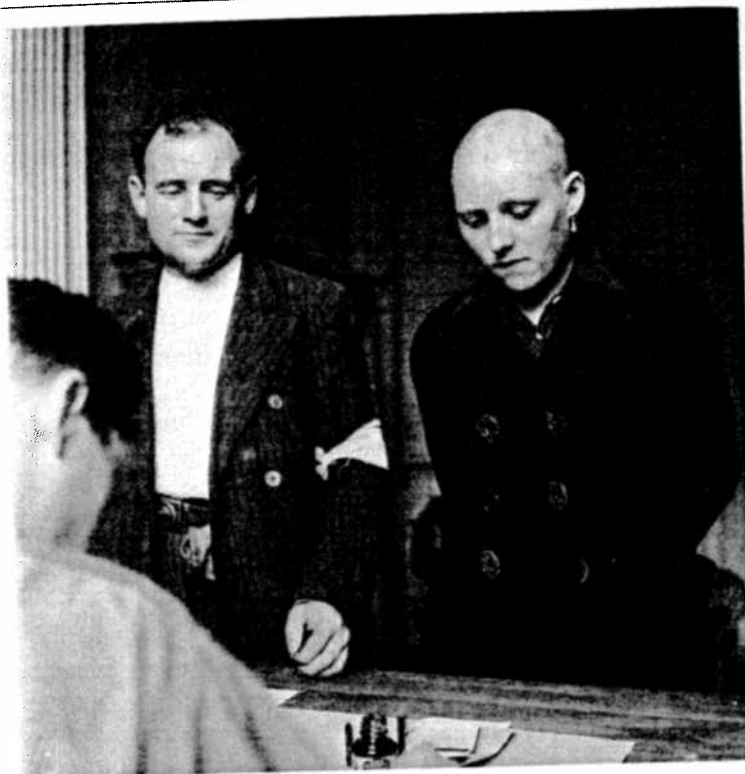


Photo by Lee Miller/© Lee Miller Archives

Interrogation of a Frenchwoman who has had her hair shaved for consorting with Germans. Note her earrings.

In the meantime, old St. Malo was busy organizing a surrender. I wasn't allowed to go, as the quai was still under close machine-gun fire, so I called in at the command post of the regiment to see what was cooking there. They seemed to have plenty on their minds, and Major Speedie, the battalion commander, took me on a tour of observation posts which he was setting up for an assault next day on the "Fort de la Cité," the famous Citadel, located on a promontory off St. Servan, and guarding the mouth of the Rance and the Port of St. Malo.

Since 1940 the Germans had been arming the Fort with pillboxes and secret weapons, digging galleries fifty feet into solid granite, building ventilation systems, food stores and 'phone connections to the other fortresses of Cap Frehel, Cézambre, and Grand Bey. When the land fighting of the mainland had driven the Germans to the water's edge, and to surrender, the "Mad Colonel," von Aulock, left his celebrated mistress behind, and decided to make a name for himself by holding out the impregnable "Cité." He had been military governor of the whole area and our people had a wholesome respect for him in a soldier's way. His mistress, a German beauty known for her past with certain Russian royalty, was registered as his secretary interpreter, and was well known by the people of St. Malo and St. Servan, who admire some of the things she did for them on the side, with humanity and discretion . . . for whatever reason she may have had.

The Colonel had now announced that he was going to hold out to the last man. Thus he put the seal of doom on the towns of St. Malo and St. Servan.

Some combat MPs told me of the exploits of various officers of the regiment whom I'd met that day. Captain David Gray, of Topeka, Kansas, had manoeuvred several risky exchanges of prisoner-wounded with Herr Doktor Weller, the interpreter medico of the Fortress. They were always putting up white flags, once to ask for medical supplies in exchange for our wounded prisoners from an unsuccessful night assault on the Fortress. Some of them were recognized truces by both sides, others were risky deals. Walking across the *digue* to meet Weller halfway, with machine-gun fire going on from

both sides . . . bargaining for our wounded, shrewdly and fairly . . . taking out Germans and Americans, also two women who had served various purposes in the Fortress.

One of his walks "into the jaws" was to insist on getting a wounded American who had been refused a time before, as too ill to travel. Weller showed the medical chart of his leg amputation, and the Hun marine doctor asked for the return of a captive surgeon we had. It was arranged that a report on the situation should be made under white flag next day at two o'clock, if we recognized their signal. However, Colonel Craibill decided that there should be "no more white flags except for surrender," and enough of this nonsense. Dr. Weller came down, however, on his own, without protection, and was met by Gray and Colonel Craibill who explained that he would not call off the planned aerial bombardment scheduled for one hour from then for just one man, but only for the whole garrison.

There was heavy fire again as the white flag was hauled down on the Fort, Colonel von Aulock having refused the terms. Dr. Gray walked up to the pillbox again to ask for his patient. The Colonel sent word to him that all negotiations were over and "thanks for the fair fighting." There were stories about Captain Boyd, who stamped up to a pillbox with a white flag unrecognized, to see if they'd changed their minds . . . and was waved back by a hand reaching out of the gunhole.

Major Speedie, Gray, and a volunteer named Rifferetti made a reconnaissance with their flag once to see if anyone was left . . . there was. It was confusing enough to catch up with the different exploits without being told that the MP who had been telling me was also guilty of having gone up bare-handed to meet a German white flag, to which we had refused recognition, on the excuse that a combat MP's duties include taking charge of prisoners, and there might have been some. He was an enormous and extraordinary character, and I'm glad he liked me. I take back everything that's been said about MPs . . . they are wonderful.

The next morning I hung around hoping to get into St. Malo proper, and ate breakfast with the MPs who managed

everything, including hot water which they boiled in the basement. Fires, like lights and outdoor cigarettes, were strictly forbidden as attracting snipers and enemy OPs, although casual French civilians lit everything, and since the refugees had come back there had been a lot of trouble with shooting at lights, and even some signalling to enemy posts, as well as a few cases of arson. Houses had been fired with German incendiary gadgets within two hours after the refugee truce. Undoubtedly the Huns had sent out saboteurs and soldiers in disguise along with the French, and had confused us also in our inspection by sending more than a thousand people instead of the announced 600.

A company of soldiers was filing out of St. Malo, ready to go into action, grenades hanging on their lapels like Cartier clips, menacing bunches of death. Everybody was leaving as if from the proverbial doomed ship, without even cleaning up the bodies which lay along the streets. War was their business, and they went on in a sloping march across the town of St. Servan, to a small square before the Mairie . . . a nice little square if it had been Bastille Day, but hell now, with its dug-out shelters and hand-grenades. I went on to the command post in the boys' school . . . the telephone exchange and the wireless reception were on the courtyard balcony just outside the major's office.

The blackboards were still chalked with German-French lessons and German tourist posters decorated the walls. In the next room it was French or German-English and the silly 1900 pictures of the "Famille Durand" with their cats, canaries, and crowded rooms were on the walls, with a long pointer for reaching to the sideburned gent "*ce monsieur est un soldat.*"

In Major Speedie's office, soldiers of all ranks came in and looked at maps and front elevations. There were sketches from prisoners' information . . . and drawings of mined areas given by deserters. At the end of the balcony a Captain was briefing his group.

There were flashes from delayed action bombs buried in the earthworks. The next wave was light incendiaries . . . a lot fell in the water to the right. Many hit the sloping earth towards us, and more into the fort. Our artillery started its



Photo by Lee Miller/© Lee Miller Archives

Major Speedie (later made Lt. Col.), who received St. Malo's surrender from Col. Von Aulock, in German ex-headquarters.

barrage . . . the soldiers had started moving down the streets with the last air bombs, assembling between the burning buildings at the approach to the fort. The dry, fast cough of our machine guns echoed ghost-like. The enemy's 20mm., 200-a-minute cannons made savage probes . . . our mortars and smokescreen . . . pounded and drifted—our heavy guns battered into the moat . . . on to the fortress and around the pillboxes . . . our soldiers were leaving the houses. I could see them next to the orange-tiled one creeping down to the rocks and moving single-file up the steep approach to the fort, while another platoon crept from the houses to the rocks, crouching, waiting their turn. It was a heavy climb . . . and they were earth-coloured like the burnt soil they were traversing.

I projected myself into their struggle, my arms and legs aching and cramped . . . the first man scrambled over the sharp edge, went along a bit, and turned back to give a hand in hauling up the others . . . on and on the men went up . . . veering off to the right . . . it was awesome and marrow-freezing.

The building we were in and all the others which faced the Fort were being spat at now . . . ping, bang . . . hitting above our window . . . into the next . . . breaking on the balcony below . . . fast, rapid, queer noise . . . impact before the gun noise itself . . . following the same sound pattern . . . hundreds of rounds . . . crossing and recrossing where we were.

Machine-gun fire belched from the end pillbox . . . the men fell flat . . . stumbling and crawling into the shelter of shell-holes . . . some crept on, others sweeping back to the left of the guns' angle, one man reaching the top. He was enormous. A square-shouldered silhouette, black against the sky between the pillbox and the fort. He raised his arm. The gesture of a cavalry officer with sabre waving the others on . . . he was waving to death, and he fell with his hand against the Fort.

The men were flowing away from the path he had followed . . . moving toward the left . . . it was retreat. Singly and together they picked themselves up and threw themselves down into another hole, stooping, hunched . . . scrambling,

helping each other. There was silence—poised—desperate. I could hear yells from the slopes . . . orders . . . directions . . . with nightmare faintness. There was a great black explosion where the most forward men had been a minute before. Cézembre was firing on her sister fortress . . . shells which would not penetrate or injure the occupants but which could blast our men, who were oozing down the escarpment . . . and sliding down the path which they had so painfully climbed. Other bursts from Cézembre swept the sides of the Fort. They were directed by telephone, probably from the Cité . . . they followed with hideous knowledge. One burst hiding and shattering the men at the bottom . . . our mortar fire was peppering the pillboxes to keep them silent . . . smoke screens and artillery pummelled the fortress just above our men to keep the krauts from slaughtering them in retreat.

They got back among the houses . . . our machine guns keeping a steady tattoo . . . Cézembre bursts hunting angrily in the rocks, slopes and buildings, hungry for more of the withdrawing soldiers. The Cité guns could not reach them there and turned more attention to us . . . we separated to different rooms . . . everyone was sullen . . . silent . . . and aching, like a terrible hangover. The men came back into the square . . . the ambulance men had the wounded, the dead had been left.

Stricken lonely cats prowled. A swollen horse had not provided adequate shelter for the dead American behind it . . . flower-pots stood in roomless windows. Flies and wasps made tours in and out of underground vaults which stank with death and sour misery. Gunfire brought more stone blocks down into the street . . . I sheltered in a kraut dugout, squatting under the ramparts. My heel ground into a dead detached hand . . . and I cursed the Germans for the sordid ugly destruction they had conjured up in this once beautiful town. I wondered where my friends were . . . that I'd known here before the war . . . how many had been forced into disloyalty and degradation . . . how many had been shot, starved or what. I picked up the hand and hurled it across the street and ran back the way I'd come, bruising my feet and crashing in the unsteady piles of stone and slipping in blood. Christ, it was awful.

Everybody was busy making plans for a new assault on the Citadel in the afternoon. A low level attack—all oil bombs and incendiaries—barrage . . . men . . . that Cézembre should be attacked during the infantry assault to keep its guns silent . . . that St. Malo should be evacuated . . . that the civilians would, for heaven's sake, keep back of the bomblines . . . that the fat man in the white helmet refused to leave the bank and had to be taken from St. Malo by the force of civilian police, crying. Streams of refugees haunted the Civil Affairs, tracing families, begging to go into the town of St. Malo.

In the Hotel Victoria the telephone was on the bed, and Major Speedie kept going out too far on the balcony. His sergeant pulled him in by the belt. The attack was scheduled for three. It was nearly that now. There was no fire from the Fort. We weren't bothering either. Somebody thought they saw white flags way down on the left. If they were, they weren't in the agreed position. The wind was the wrong way and it certainly was white and it hadn't been there before. But it looked more like two white sticks, not very straight. Frantic phoning went on. The switchboards tried to break down. Other O.P.'s were contacted. Had they a better view? Could the air attack be called off? Was it a real surrender? A trick? The phones traced air command . . . a General. It couldn't be stopped. They were here . . . on their bomb run.

We could see Capt. Boyd now, running up to the left part of the Fort with his flag-bearer and interpreter. There were other people there. Germans. Somebody else. It was MacFarlane, racing up through the buildings toward them for warning. The planes were nearer. Boyd and his group backed up toward the buildings a few yards. Waving flags, spreading scarlet boundary markers to signal the P-38 pilots that the place was ours. The Major said, "Goddamit, those are my boys!" as a pair of bombs hurled from the first plane over their heads and into the opened belly of the Fort.

There was a burst of flame and billowing smoke, and the second plane veered off without bombing . . . and the third. They circled through the smoke at crazy angles, deprived of their prey, standing by to watch for trickery. We raced down

through the streets, up through the causeway buildings. The terrain was soft with shelling, and hard with broken stones, weapons, twisted track rails, scattered ties, unexploded German grenades, and mines to be stepped over. A large metal barrow blocked the narrow street which was still burning.

As we came out into the open we could see Boyd and MacFarlane and the others turning over the markers into some other signal pattern. They went down the back of the Fort to the tunnel entrance. Major Speedie made me stay at the markers, and they disappeared at the turn. A messenger went up, the walkie-talkie. A platoon disarmed themselves at the boundary, and carefully spaced out up the hill. It wasn't too late for the Cézembre guns to give us a swipe, and orders were passed back to keep well spread. An armed platoon went up . . . that must mean that the surrender was real and complete.

Captain Boyd had gone to the hole—shouted for a German, and disappeared inside, but I couldn't disobey the Major and had to stay. I caught sight of him escorting a tall figure, certainly not G.I., and preceded by a police dog. It was Colonel von Aulock. He wore a flapping camouflage coat, a battered peaked hat. I took a picture and stepped out in front. Seeing the camera he held a grey-gloved hand up in front of his face. He was pale, monocled. An iron cross and ribbon at his neck. He kept on walking, and obviously, recognized that I was a woman. He said "something Frau" in a loud voice and flushed little red spots in each cheek like rouge. I kept scrambling on in front, turning around to take another shot of him, stumbling, running. He wasted as much energy as I did, and ruined his dignified departure in hiding his face. He seemed awfully thin under his clothes, as he stood in the jeep and said farewell to the men who had carried his bags down. He shook them by the hand, waved the dog away, and was whisked up to headquarters.

I went back to the Citadel, and stood around with Major Speedie and Captain White, while droves of prisoners came down carrying suitcases and bundles. Some straggled, some lingered and had to be ordered to move faster. Some recognized me as a girl and set up conversation, which was forbidden. The German Captain Waller stood nearby. He told our



Photo by Lee Miller/© Lee Miller Archives

Col. Von Aulock (the Mad Colonel) waits for jeep after surrender. On left, Maj. Speedie; on right, Capt. White.

Captain, Dr. Gray, "You understand, that to me this scene is very unhappy." He gave assurances that the tunnels were not mined, that there were no booby traps in return for what they thought was our clean fighting. He picked out six German N. C. O.'s to return with our men into the Fort to act as guides and to keep the ventilation and lights going. Major General Macon raced up the hill like a gazelle and congratulated Major Speedie on having effected the surrender: the last of the hordes of Germans had passed, and the wounded came out.

It was difficult to get the litters out of the crumbled entrance to the tunnel. The bearers had to stoop and crawl, gently, because the first boy was the American prisoner who had been refused evacuation. There were other Americans, too. One, unwounded, who knew the works of the Fort by now, said the aerial bombardment hadn't upset anyone at all. . . . They just went into a deeper tunnel and waited . . . but that many of the gun turrets had been knocked out and could only be used by hand-fire, although that was effective too, and could have made our assault a costly affair. A Polish boy came out very ill. Our Polish-speaking soldiers sat next to him while he got used to the air. The Germans were surprised at the surrender. They had been asked to put all their small arms into a big bonfire of the commander's papers. There had been plenty of food, water, ammunition.

I went into the tunnel. A short, rough-hewn passage turned at an angle into a long higher tunnel. There were rails for a metal barrow, and electric lights at 50 foot intervals. Rooms opened off each side, lofty, rough, curved to the ceiling . . . double-decker bunks in disorder . . . bottles, clothes, photographs, letters, loot from French towns. There were store-rooms, offices, telephones, power plants, dumps of ammunition and cellars of wine, rum and bottled water. Our boys found plenty of souvenirs. The wounded were lying in litters up and down the main passage outside the hospital corridors.

The Hun Marine medical officer refused to be photographed and quoted the Geneva Convention at me through the interpreter. There was only one surgery. It was only "adequate" in equipment. Nothing like what I had seen in our

travelling advance field hospitals. They still had medical supplies of their own in spite of having begged ours in exchange for wounded.

I went back out into the light. There were crowds of people now. Reporters had gathered like vultures for the kill, all the way from Rennes. French people were already trying to move back into the houses. I didn't walk around the pillbox to see the man who had waved . . . and I put off going to the top and walking down where I had seen the little men crawl up. I never did go. Dr. Gray's American flag was waving on the top, and that was enough. The war left St. Malo and me—behind.

Vogue, October 1944