

My Friend,

*From John Stiles*

I refer to my booklet in French and about my "war" I once gave you and which might have given you some problems of understanding. An official translation would have cost a lot of money and done by an amateur (dilletante) a lot of time.

A friend of mine agreed finally to make a succinct summary of my story.

You see, I am not a writer, but I got an idea, just like an impulse to relate with simple words what I had seen and experienced as a small boy.

Anyhow, from the moment you find some excitement to communicate your feelings, you also are expecting your reader to find the same pleasure in reading you.

I wonder if that will still happen now with my story told with other words and probably in another state of mind.

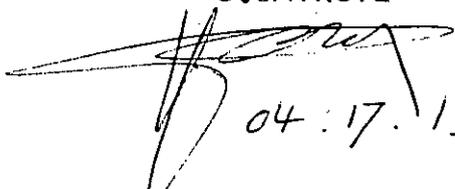
Anyway, up to now my booklet was of no use to you, I hope it will be a little more now.

One more thing - as I said before I am not a writer and I am not an historian either, just a simple story-teller, that means that some dates and some technical terms may not be absolutely accurate.

Happy reading...

Yours,

J. GAVROYE

  
04.17.1990



FOREWORD:

40 years are gone. I was 15 when started the VON RUNSTEDT offensive in the Ardennes - mid-December 1944 - My purpose is to describe these sad events as I lived them.

PRELUDE TO THE WAR.

As a young boy I found great pleasure in listening to the stories elder people told about the war 1914/18. About the occupation of Belgium by those hated Germans with their "pointed helmets"-their atrocities and the heroic resistance of our Belgian Army on the YSER river. The armistice and the capitulation of Germany.

Came the years of the thirties - The advent of Adolphe Hitler. Everybody knows what happened in Germany during those years: the expulsion and imprisonment of thousands of Jews - the concentration camps etc.etc.

1938 - European politicians finally got conscious that something very serious was going on in Germany. Sure they signed the MUNICH TREATY but it was already too late and a general mobilisation was proclaimed.

After all it was still a good time for a young boy - all those soldiers coming from all the parts of our small country-investing our villages and courting our girls.

1939 -Germany invaded Poland - France declared the war to Germany. Belgium was neutral and was supposed to defend its own borders. Trenches were digged- barricades built- bridges and roads were mined. Near my place, not far from the Baraque de Fraiture - the cross roads of Sankt Vith-La Roche-Liege-Bastogne fortifications were erected. Winter of 39/40 arrived. Everybody was waiting and nevertheless taking life in a good-humoured way.

LA GUERRE - THE WAR.

Spring 1940-.10th MAY. Preceded by the Luftwaffe Holland and Belgium got bombed and the German troops started the invasion of these countries. France and England tried to help but after exactly 18 days it was all over the Belgian army capitulated. I was 10 years old at that time but I could not help to notice the super-equipped Germans in comparison with our poor little Belgian boys. A bicycle against a tank- an elephant against a mouse.

People had fled mostly to France trying to escape the German bombs sowing death and destruction. But no escape was possible and soon they were overtaken by the teutonic hordes.

My father did not leave his house - mostly because all his children were not present - we were 13 -and also because he knew very well that it was no use to run away. And right he was !  
Soon, the civilians got back home to their villages and towns. Often to find them destroyed or plundered often by their own neighbors. Soldiers taken prisoner were taken to prison camps in Germany. Some were employed on farms which at least gave food for some time.

The occupation started and I must say the Germans were at the beginning not bad at all - at least in the eyes of a 10 year old boy.

## L'OCCUPATION = THE OCCUPATION

It took some time before getting back to normal life again when started the occupation : school - industrial and economical work - transport and revictualling - all those activities took time to get settled. Meantime the Germans were still polite and correct offering their place to elder people in trams and trains.

But with the months going on started also the first food scarcity. Villagers were generally better off than town's people who were most of the time starving and had to give up their savings and jewels to get food for their kids and themselves. No weight-wachers were necessary at that time.

The German superb of the first months of occupation had meanwhile received some blows on the Russian front. The Resistance gave them more and more head-aches and deportation to Germany and obligatory labor in German industries became a reality as from the end of 1942.

As from that time we saw more and more refractories (work-refuser) and shot-down allied aviators coming to hide and find refuge in the woods of our Ardennes.

Giving a full report and description of what our people endured during those four years of occupation would take numerous volumes.

Finally arrived June 1944 and the landing in Normandy.

## NOTRE PREMIERE LIBERATION - OUR FIRST LIBERATION

It took place in September - German troops fled precipitately to their partly destroyed country - The allied troops came in.

We had been hiding in a quarry because of the mortar fire that was exchanged between the Germans and our liberators. Our village had not suffered too much destruction and for the boy of 15 I was now these four years had not been too hard after all.

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Since our liberation in September 1944 we saw hundreds of American convoys going east. English troops were stationed not far from the Baraque Fraiture.

About mid-December something strange must be going on. More and more heavy-equipped American troops were now moving west

One day we saw small planes landing on a meadow - we tried to find out what was going on by questioning the pilots but they were very discreet.

Another day an American truck occupied by German soldiers in American uniforms crossed the village. They were followed by genuine Americans who in less than no time exploded the truck killing the occupants or taking them prisoner.

Nevertheless, all these movements were very worrying. Rumours got around and they seemed more and more accurate as we saw that strong army running ahead of the Germans, who were invading our country again.

A few days before Christmas I was helping my father in the fields when we heard heavy gunfire in direction to the south towards Houffalize.

We were once again listening to the noise of war. My father said my boy the Germans are coming back and right he was !!.

Coming back home we saw the English soldiers breaking up camp and burning all they could not take with them. We had not long to wait before serious events were to occur. Allied vehicules became scarcer and scarcer. German spies in American uniforms were signalled here and there. Civilians were controlled by American M.P.'s.

Morning of 24th December - Christmas eve - The apoteosis and masacre could start.

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Sunday morning 7 o'clock. German tanks moved slowly forward between the trees near our farm. We counted four and saw clearly the Nazi crosses on their flanks. No doubt was possible anymore as we saw at the same time American Infantry troops running in direction of the village.

The first salves were shot and time it was we took shelter. My father decided for the barn rather for the cellar. Fodder -he said- would better protect us against bullets whereas the cellar could become a grave if the house fell in.

From our observation post, we attended the first engagement.

The German tanks were hiding behind the houses. An American truck with 12 men came through the fields on the opposite side. The Germans fired a shell, The Americans tried to turn back but they got pinned to the ground by gunfire. All of them got killed but one. I shall refer, to him later on.

This had hardly happened as an American tank appeared and fired at close range at the German tank which caught fire. Two men came out they were wounded and taken prisoner.

It was a huge battle between tanks that was taking place and we were just in the middle of it. Shells were literally raining over the place and pieces of lead penetrated the walls. We were trembling with fear, the women cried and mother made us pray.

The uproar lasted until noon without any respite. We took profit of the lull that followed to try to find something to eat but anyway we were so much shaking that nothing could be swallowed. Except for my father who had baked himself some potatoes and as usual took the time for a nap.

Having a look outside we saw in the whole area houses on fire, vehicules still burning and destroyed tanks. Our house had suffered quite a lot- furniture had been destroyed and some of my beloved toys had been smashed. Later on we found our cat dead in the seat my father had been taking a nap a few minutes before.

And suddenly the fight started again. Tanks were tiring at each other at very close range. Artillery came joining in and American planes participated and dropped bombs on the German tanks but not always with the expected success. We learned afterwards that the Americans had launched a counter-attack to take back the village from the Germans and get their wounded soldiers and the civilians evacuated.

In the village itself many farms got bombed and a lot of people were killed in their cellars.

What was the atmosphere outside? Shells exploded here and there near to the house. The battle seemed to have moved to the north - direction Lierneux.

In the morning, two big German tanks - Tiger Royal- one towing the other stopped under the huge fur-trees near the farm which like an umbrella kept them out of sight of the American planes circling from time to time above the area. Five men alighted - One was an S/S recognizable by his black uniform and the dead-head on his cap. They took possession of one of our cellars. They did us no harm, on the contrary when we went outside they joined us and gave us their binoculars to have a better look on the battle-field farther down the hill. An American plane got touched by the DCA - parachutes opened in the sky.

For some time we were aware that someone was crying and shouting not far off and then we saw a soldier crawling on his on his back a few yards down on the meadow. My sisters got near to him - it was an American soldier, the only survivor of the truck that had been plown up by the Germans the day before. His leg was badly injured and he suffered quite a lot. He helped himself with a peg from a fence and with pieces of his own cloth. He had been 24 hours in the snow and the freezing night of Christmas. My sisters went to ask for help at a German field-hospital, but they were very reluctant to do something for an enemy when they had their hands full with their own wounded. Finally they came and took the man prisoner, they brought them in a nearby house and gave him some care. The Boy was very badly wounded, he had lost a lot of blood. The Germans were not willing to do more for this prisoner, who tried to stop the pain with some powder he had in his own out-fit.

After four days of horrible suffering we could do nothing about he became delirious- he took his rosary out of his pocket and started praying and asking for a priest.

My father had great pity with the poor boy and willing to do him the favor of getting a priest started for the next village FRAITURE under a rain of shells. He found the vicar in a cellar hiding with some of his parishers. It was not easy to persuade the man to get outside. Moreover that in the opinion of many people of the old times Americans did not believe in God and did not need a catholic priest. My father could convince of the contrary and when he was finally ready to come out of his shelter, his parishers did not want him to go and he remained in spite of the insistance of my father and his immense disappointment to come back empty-handed.

My father told us what he had seen on his way to the village and how often he had exposed his life to bring some comfort to one of his fellow-men. It had been in vain and he would never forget the cowardice of this clergyman.

The wounded was in a very bad state - he was raving all the time now. Finally a German ambulance came and picked him up to bring him to some unknown destination. They were furious on us because we had bothered so much about an American. The showed it clearly when they put the man in the ambulance. We never heard of him again and we were under such high pressure that we even forgot to ask his name and address - we could have informed his family afterwards. A pity but too late. This was a real experience of war and we learned at the same time what men are able to do to their own kind.

My father was a brave man - he had already given the proof of it a many times but he was also very practical.

The fighting was hardly away at some distance and already he started thinking of the damage done to the house and of getting the necessary material to take on the repairing.

Once again he left the house and got down to the village. He staid away a great part of the day. We were all very worried - mother cried - but about midnight, we heard a noise. It was father who came back but he was not alone. A German truck had picked him up on the road, it needed some repairs.

My father told us of all the atrocities he had seen and how young fanatic German soldiers drove deliberately their tanks over the bodies of American soldiers. A young soldier said to him mockingly in French " you see the great war is only starting now".

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The first days of this Re-Occupation and as soon as they were master again of the main road SALMCHATEAU/LA ROCHE more and more German troops arrived with their Tiger-Royal and Panther tanks. They were mostly young boys and it was astounding to see so many after 5 years of war.

My father had already started with the repairing of the house and we had to help him transporting the boards he had found at a carpenter's. While negotiating with that man a shell fell on the house and nearly killed all the inhabitants of which my father. More than once during the transportation we had to lie down and take cover when American planes fired on the German tanks and trucks. A truck completely burned out near to our farm got its dayly rain of bullets from those planes and became a real danger for the population living in this area. Many houses had been destroyed these last days and quite a lot of people had been killed. Those who had escaped were now looking for shelter in the houses still up-right.

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With the war going on the number of refugees increaded at the same time as the penury of food. Near to our hous was a field-kitchen and I must say that the men in charge were not too bad. More than once they took they took the meat out of the tubs to give it to us kids before serving their own men. We brought them the buckets of water we had taken in a small river after having broken the ice and we were rewarded with a piece of their gray bread. And from time to time we stole some behind their backs. It was necessary to survive.

The Germans did not fail to do the same. They often raided abandoned houses and came back with poultry which they ordered my sisters to pluck and prepare for them.

Among the S/S occupying part of our house was a young soldier who used to play with his revolver and went on threatening to kill us all if the Americans came back.

The promiscuousness created by living together in the same house made that I became a friend of a very young soldier, hardly a little bit older than me. We could not very well communicate together but he made me understand that I was a very lucky boy and that at my age - 15 years - he had already been enlisted for about 3 years - he was 18.

One day, he got permission to show me the inside of a Tiger Royal. It was quite an experience for a boy of my age. When we came out of the tank "my friend" had taken something in his hand and threw it away and then started running like a fool. I followed him in the same direction - seconds later a hand-grenade exploded. It was my luck to have reacted immediately and taken the same direction as he did. God knows what would have happened.

Our fathers with the experience they had of the previous war said "never trust a German he is a Boche and always will remain a Boche"

Anyway this ended our "friendship". The boy got killed by one of his own, probably the S/S guy, who got every day more excited with his revolver. His corpse was lying a few yards from the house and remained there for almost one month.

The excitement was due to the return of the Americans.

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We were living in our cellars mostly day and night. It was also the only way to stay alive under the deluge of fire and steel the American Artillery spread over the area. It was the only way they had to stop the German troops who considering their various movements must have great difficulties. My father had made himself a kind of shelter in the meadow and running the risk of losing his life by this special kind of courage could follow the movements down-hill and saw how the Germans started to withdraw.

He also still preferred the stables to the cellar. The only night that he had made an exception a rain of shells came down on the house and there were my father used to sleep 3 cows got killed. Poor cattle lucky father. We were often many days without news. Anyhow the noise of the battle came nearer and nearer and from the state the German soldiers were in we could imagine that they were not going through happy moments.

One day, a group of 10 German soldiers arrived at the house - they were 17 18 years old - frozen and starving. They ate some hard raw potatoes abandoned by the tank squadron. One of them took a box of canned fish out of his pocket and handed it to the officer, who gave some to each of them. And off they went again to killing and death. A little later we got a German artillery group near the house. They started immediately with the installation of a field-telephone. They sure had no scruples to nail the cables in the walls as well as in the furniture. All was hardly finished as the telephone rang. The officer took the communication and the cables got enrolled again - the nails remained in the furniture.

It was an order of retreat. They spread a map on the table and asked us to show them the nearest road to the village of PETITES-TAILLES - 1/2 mile south of REGNE. We tried to give them some false information but they found out that it was swamp area. They left without further comment.

The same day at night took place the gathering of a great number of German troops. High ranked officers studied maps and gave orders. The next day infantry-men arrived from LEIRNEUX in files of many miles. Some were carrying their gear on wheelbarrows and milk-cars. Boys and men from 15 to 60 years old with nothing left anymore of their haughtiness of a few weeks ago. At the end of the day when the passage of the infantry had stopped motorized groups arrived - preferring the dark to escape the American aviation. Some had taken white blankets from a nearby lunatic institute hoping to be better camouflaged with the snow covering the ground.

We were now at the beginning of January. Artillery fire came nearer and nearer. The allied forces had now started their counter-attack and the Germans were more and more retreating. We were very happy that this was probably leading to the end of our nightmare but from the other side we were fearing that the near presence of the German troops would concentrate the bombing on this area and our house. It was really unbelievable that anybody could ever escape from this hell of fire and explosions.

Unfortunately Germans were not the only targets - Civilians paid a large tribute. A small village like MANHAY counting about 10 houses received more than 6500 shells in one day. A real disaster but as they say "no omelette without breaking the eggs. (picture on page 23)

On the 6th of January we saw the first Feldgendarmes, they were looking for deserters.

The battle was now going on in the woods between FRAITURE and LIERNEUX and we could clearly make the distinction between the German and the American gunfire. We heard the mortar fire and even the automatic rifles. Snow tried to cover the landscape under a white coat but not for a long time fire - bombs - shells would soon blacken it with here and there red spots on it.

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### RETOUR DES AMERICAINS - THE AMERICANS CAME BACK

On the 7th of January we were awakened out of our light sleep by a hell of a cannonade. Probably what they called a curtain-fire. We kept very quite in our cellar. In spite of the horrible turmoil outside we heard pieces of lead beating the walls and break through the roof. What could we do else than pray wait and hope.

About 8 o'clock, the firing calmed down a little bit. We heard the noise of engines approaching the house. My father went upstairs to have a look, he told us that the German tanks had gone, that the Americans were not far away and that we could come out now of our shelter.

We were surprised that they were not coming nearer, but soon we knew why " they had seen the Tiger Royal under the trees near the house. My father tried to explain the best he could that this tank was completely harmless. They remained suspicious and only approached after a great deal of precautions.

They visited the whole house from cellar to the roof. In one room they found two soldiers who were very happy to be made prisoner. Two other soldiers came from another farm and surrendered with pleasure. Their rifles were smashed against the wall. My father would have liked to get one but he could not make himself understood.

Other prisoners were brought in - happy to have some rest in the straw and smoke an American cigarette.

Anyhow the fight was not finished yet. Shells still fell here and there in the near area. Great hopes we had now to be liberated a second time but doubts remained nevertheless and would soon forget what had happened just a fortnight before.

Could we trust this time our Allies who, in spite of their considerable armed forces had been obliged to abandon us in December 1944.

We were going to learn afterwards that the High Commandment had been forced to modify their strategy because of the suddenness of the Blitz-attack of the German Panzertroops until DINANT And the MEUSE through BASTOGNE and HOUFFALIZE.

Supreme Commander Eisenhower, at his staff meeting in VERDUN on the 19th of December had given the defense of the Northern flank to Montgomery. In the morning of 20th Dec. after an inspection of the ARDENNES, Montgomery decided against the will of the Americans to withdraw the troops from the region of St.VITH. This decision gave the Germans a free entrance to numerous villages and meant afterwards destruction and death to take them back in January 1945.

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NOTRE DEUXIEME LIBERATION - SECOND LIBERATION (The good one)

On the 7th of January we were liberated for the second time. I must say it was not quite the same as in September 1944. We had to get accustomed to other uniforms and new faces. We assisted to considerable movements of troops mostly coming from the front in Germany. But we also went on staying in the cellar as artillery shells continued falling here and there in the area. Naturally, we had less problems with food as the Americans generously share their K rations with us. The number of refugees increased every day as many farms had burned down.

Our liberation was not that enjoying as it was not going to be for all these young guys, who had come from so far over the ocean to get us free again. Before leaving the Germans had placed mines all around the place we were living. And the very first day a jeep with a commanding officer and a few men touched one of those mines. The explosion killed them all. But also the tanks got problems and some were immobilized on the spot.

Whereas the German Tiger Royal remained 14 days under the trees without being repaired, the American workshop did miracles.

More and more civilians came out of their shelter some to find their houses destroyed and still burning. Unfortunately some of them got killed while returning home. It was said that all this destruction was caused by one single German tank - It took some time to locate it and stopped it. The village of REGNE had been the target of this tank.

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Presently we seemed to be out of danger. The fight was moving more to the South-East. The Allied Forces needed one week to liberate a number of villages along the road SALMCHATEAU - BARAQUE FRAITURE.

The military losses were high very high on both sides - estimation runs about more than 3000 dead and wounded. Material losses were considerable too more than 300 tanks and a great number of vehicles were counted - all this in a very small area.

Many civilians got killed and wounded during the battle - but still more were going to lose their lives by the mines which the Germans had left behind; one of my best friends - my age - got killed that way.

Houses were destroyed - some completely - livestock had suffered severely - personally we had three cows killed. In other farms the spectacle was horrible. The dead animals, some in an advanced state of alteration, were taken out and put in a deep hole digged in the meadow.

Was it through contact or privation but some people got a disease - a sort skin disorder accompanied by itching and sometimes ulcerous wounds.

A sanitary team went from house to house to disinfect and everybody got smeared in with a kind of sulphur cream.

It had not stopped snowing for many days covering the landscape with a white carpet more than a foot big. It made the job of clearing the roads not easier for the engineers in spite of their gigantic bulldozers, and because they had also to be careful regarding the explosives covered by the snow. Many corpses of Belgian civilians and American and German soldiers are going to remain for more than a month in their white winding-sheet waiting together for the thaw to come.

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It took some time before people got their spirit back again and were able to think and act normally. But slowly the daily life was organized and the inventory of all the destruction and of all that was needed established. Food - wheat - sugar - corned-beef and all kind of victuals were provided. Clothes - shoes - coats - blankets and all kinds of furniture were distributed to those who had lost all. A great wave of solidarity generalized and villages which had suffered less of this last offensive adopted those which had been destroyed. There were no churches and no schools anymore but mass was said in the farms and we kids had not to wait very long before seeing our teachers again.

All this solidarity and all this loving of one's fellowmen however could not make us forget that the war was still going on and that the Winter was very hard this year in January. Some furniture was even used to make fire. When thaw finally arrived and the snow disappeared another horrible spectacle was offered to our eyes. Hundreds of corpses spread all over the meadows and the fields and between the trees in the woods: Americans and Germans together - some so near together that they could have given each other the hand before the killing. Yes, it were horrible scenes we were contemplating. Things started to settle slowly but surely. We could go out - carefully because of the mines - to look for things that could be useful as we had nothing left anymore. But like in most of the places all over the world, there are thieves and people without any scruples. Some did not hesitate to despoil cadavers from their belongings.

I was only 15 but if I may say it myself I was a clever boy. With a friend we had found a trick to get a lot of jerricanes full of fuel out of the Tiger Royal still standing under the trees near the house. Unfortunately we would not profit a long time of our discovery. Some strangers I had never seen before and who apparently were specialized in this kind of trade put an end to it. (picture page 31 a victim of the carnage)

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I would like to relate here an event that could have had a fatal and dramatic issue and annihilate the chance that had been ours up to now - the whole family to come out of the hell without injuries.

I forgot to tell you that I had 12 sisters . I was the only boy - the youngest of thirteen.

Since a few days we had in and around the house a company of soldiers - mostly colored - specialists in explosives and supposed to find the mines and make them inoffensive.

One day, we were all at table with one of my married sisters and her young child - a heavy detonation shook the whole house and a piece of the roof came down and fell just on the child.

Everybody got panicky - the child cried and my father already extremely nervous by those nearby explosions took a big kitchen-knife and rushed on the American, who was responsible of the explosion and who not quite knowing what was happening, ran promptly away. He came back afterwards with some of his comrades, they disarmed my father and as both parties were unable to understand each other, they placed my father against the wall and got ready to shoot him.

Fortunately at this very moment an officer (white) arrived on the spot and what more is he understood French, my father could explain to him the reason why he had lost his temper. The officer listened carefully, he let my father go and no more explosions took place near the house.

I think the time has come to make a slight reference to the opinion of these Ardennees villagers concerning the events of the last days, they compared facts that were not always valuable for everybody. In those very isolated villages the four years German occupation of our territory had passed almost unnoticed. The fields were ploughed, the cattle was cared and healthy and there was no lack of food which was not the case in other parts of the country. The German occupant did nothing wrong against the farms and the farms as long as they were not surprised hiding resistants and aviators.

And now, just in a few weeks all at once had changed, their houses were destroyed, their family and friends killed or wounded and a great deal of their live-stock decimated. And how and by what ? their answer was by American shells.

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Life in the village became a little bit better organized every day. The war was still going on and men got still killed but in farther away areas, nearer to Germany and soon inside Germany. People buried their dead, restored their houses and tried to go about their daily farm work.

We the youngsters of the village were prying around to find war trophies. For my part, I was very proud to parade through the village on a German bicycle and armed with a German machine-gun.

But this was not going to last for a very long time. Soon we received a requisition order for the return of all the military stuff.

As I had hidden the bike without my parents being aware of it, it was caught afterwards, my father was sentenced two years imprisonment with delay as being responsible for the deeds of his son.

It was also the proof that things got normal again, that a law was in place and had to be respected.

After having played a children's war games while sitting on a German bike and bearing proudly the German machine-gun, we started a more lucrative business.

Actually we got to dismount German trucks and tanks. We gathered the shells and tried to sell them to merchants, who generally came from the towns and who had established a whole trade of spare parts and all things that were available and very appreciated at a time that all was scarce and the cars stayed immobilized in the garages.

We also could do some little jobs for the Army, such as accompanying the military trucks the railroad station for loading and unloading supplies. It was also an opportunity to eat with the troops.

Owing to all this activity, I had acquired a jolly sum of money which as a loving son I handed truthfully over to my parents. It helped them to buy some furniture and a couple of cows.

It became more and more evident that the war was now going to an end. Night and day hundreds of planes passed on in the direction of Germany which was mercilessly destroyed and made to pay its debt to humanity. Finally arrived the 8th of May 1945, Germany capitulated after having sacrificed millions of people to the murderous craziness of one man. We, our family, our so numerous family had safely escaped from this blind torment. Very few were able to say so and at that moment we did not know anything of what had happened in Germany and in other countries with concentration camps and atrocities.

For most of the people in the Ardennes - simple folks - used to live in their isolated villages, more preoccupied by their family, their work in the fields than what was going on outside, the conviction persisted that they had been deliberately sacrificed to some strategic convenience and they were not far from accusing Marshal MONTGOMERY to be the very culprit when he decided on the 20th of December to withdraw the American troops on several miles.

Anyway, they will for ever keep the memory of the terrible Winter months of 1944.

THE END

J. GAVROYE