

**I**T HAPPENED during the war. About 30 days after D-Day I was on a Liberty ship creeping across the channel from England to France. There were about 1,000 men aboard, including my outfit. I was a civilian specialist in command of the combat loudspeaker trucks of the Third Army, part of the Psychological Warfare Division.

It was a rough trip; not weatherwise, but the channel was full of U-boats—and fog, which made it easier for the U-boats. None of us knew what awaited us on Omaha Beach. None of us had ever been to war before. The fog and the knowledge that the U-boats were there, all around us, preyed on the men's nerves.

Like men everywhere on their way to war, they were frightened. Like men everywhere who are frightened, they felt the need of God's help. On Saturday night word reached the commanding officer that the men wanted church services the next morning. Of course, the services would have to be nonsectarian for there were men of every faith and creed on board. But there was no chaplain. Because I had once been master of ceremonies of a network radio show, the commanding officer asked me to hold services.

**N**EVER WILL I FORGET that Sunday morning. We were at anchor somewhere in mid-channel. I was conducting the services from the bridge deck. As we finished the first hymn and then joined in the Lord's Prayer, we paused, and I said, "Now for a moment or two, let's each of us worship in silence, each according to his own faith."

The Christians among us knelt or bowed their heads; the Jewish men put on their helmets. I was deeply moved. After a few hymns, it was time for the sermon. I had never preached a sermon, nor even read the lesson in church. It did not matter because I spoke from the heart. At the end I spoke about fear—fear of battle and, worse, the fear of being afraid. I said in closing:

"You—none of you—need worry about fear. You don't need to be afraid because just as He builds the staunch oak tree with all the strength it needs to withstand the violence of the tempest, God has built into each of us the strength and the courage to do anything, to meet any test, to face any enemy that He may call upon us to face."

The next morning the ship was moving again, in fog so thick you couldn't see the bow from the bridge. We knew we were close to shore because ahead of us were the thud and crash of heavy gunfire. I was in the commanding officer's stateroom with two or three other men, drinking coffee. I think all of us were trying hard to pretend we were somewhere else—anywhere else. Suddenly the first mate burst into the room, moving fast and breathless. The C. O. was sitting on a big sea chest. The mate said, "Move, please, sir! I've got to get in there in a hurry!"

The C.O. got up. "What's going on here?" he asked. "Why the sweat?"

"Skipper thinks we got off course in the fog. Says we're heading smack into Le Havre." The Germans still held Le Havre.

The mate went on: "He's burned the ship's papers." He flung open the chest and began taking out guns. He's ordered me to arm the officers and some of the crew." He went to the doorway, sort of grinned, and said, "So long—soldiers."

# THE DAY WE SAILED WITH FEAR

By ERIC HATCH



I felt my stomach heave and my hands start to tremble. I was scared sick—literally. I didn't want any of these men, men I knew well, to know it. I wanted to be alone. I followed the mate out the door and made my way down the corridor to the deck and then down a companionway to the foredeck. Here little knots of enlisted men were standing around, trying to see through the fog. It didn't take much observation to know that what the skipper had told the mate had spread through the ship like a prairie fire. Nobody spoke. Except for the sighing sound of the ship slipping through the water and the distant thump and thud of the big guns, it was as still as—as still as death.

I went over and sat down on a corner of the main forward hatch. It's much easier not to show you're trembling if you're sitting down. For a few minutes I was alone. Then a boy named Sydney came up to me. His face was ashen.

"Say, Mr. Hatch," he said. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"You know all that courage you said I had in that sermon you preached yesterday?" I nodded. "Well, I've got news for you, sir. You were wrong, Mr. Hatch; I haven't got it. I'm scared ————" He used a highly descriptive word. "God may have given everybody else that built-in courage you talked about, but He left me out."

I blew a gasket. "You sit down here!"

**H**E DROPPED onto the hatch cover beside me. For 10 minutes straight without stopping, I lit into him, indignant, furious that he dared question not what I had said, but the very idea that God would create a man and leave him unequipped to do the things he must do. At the end of the 10 minutes, I wasn't quite certain that I had convinced Sydney, but my rage had gotten me over my fear—for the moment. He got up and said, "Thank you very much for trying to help me."

So I'd lost. He walked off and stood dejectedly by the rail. About an hour later the fog lifted and the sun came out and the ship turned hard a-starboard, in time to keep clear of Le Havre. That afternoon we landed on Omaha Beach. My moment of inspiration came a couple of months later when I was back in Paris on leave. I hadn't seen Sydney since we'd left Normandy. One day at the Crillon Hotel I bumped into one of the Psychological Warfare officers from First Army Group at lunch.

"Say," he said, "remember your friend Sydney?"

"You bet I do," I said. "A nice boy, but a little on the nervous side."

"Nervous?" said Ed. "He got decorated for bravery last week. Went into a patch of woods alone and flushed out a machine gunner. You know what, Eric? The little son of a gun's turned out to be one of those weird characters you find in a war—one of those guys who don't know what fear is."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. You can't talk about a miracle, even a small miracle, in a hotel dining room. Since that moment, in the war and afterward, whenever I have faced a crisis I have remembered this and found new strength. I don't have to be afraid. In truth, I can't be afraid for long. It would be letting Sydney down—and God.

*They were untested soldiers facing battle when this noted writer delivered a sermon that proved as sustaining in peace as in war*