

Sergeant in Paris

The French paid more attention to his Croix de Guerre than they did to his Congressional Medal.

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PARIS—Paris in the spring is synonymous with *amour*, so it wasn't surprising that the sergeant who has killed more Germans than anyone else in the 35th Division had a made-moiselle with him when he turned up in the lobby of the Hotel Scribe.

"You can tell her I have to go away with you for a couple of hours," said the sergeant. "I don't parlay much French."

The lady accepted the explanation, and S/Sgt. Junior J. Spurrier and I went out among the crowds of combat soldiers on pass who always throng the streets around the Red Cross Rainbow Corner. Spurrier said we could talk about old times better where it was quiet, so we strolled through the bright sunshine to the Sportsman Bar on the Rue Boudreau.

Braggins, the French bartender who speaks English, took a long look at Spurrier's chest full of fruit salad. Spurrier said that after three days in Paris he was accustomed to having the French look at his medals. "It's the Croix de Guerre they go for," he said. "They don't pay much attention to my Congressional Medal of Honor."

The Congressional Medal was awarded Spurrier for his single-handed liberation of Achain, France. Achain is just about the size of Bluefield, W. Va., where Spurrier graduated from seventh grade and then went to work in the coal mines. He joined the Army at 17 and went overseas for the first time when he volunteered for a secret mission in the Pacific that never came off.

Now 22, Spurrier is long, lean and fair-haired, with a quiet manner that belies an explosive temper. He looked better than when I last saw him at Sarreguemines near the German border in Lorraine. At that time he was just back from the hospital where he had collected a cluster for his Purple Heart.

When the drinks came we talked about the outfit. Spurrier said things hadn't been so tough lately and that casualties had been light getting up to the Rhine. In view of all of his bitching, he added, it had been pretty nice of the colonel to send him to Paris.

"In one way this publicity deal I'm getting isn't such a good one, though," said Spurrier. "These press and radio people start on me in the afternoon and keep me tied up in the evening. And that's the time I want to take off."

I asked him if he had told them about Camp Croft or about the arguments with the captain on military strategy or about that party in Nancy.

"Hell, no," he said with a laugh. "That's between us GIs. Some newspapers try to make every guy who gets a medal a foul-up. Look at the things they wrote about Commando Kelly. A man does a few things that don't mean anything until they say he's a hero and then—blooey."

A French officer came in the bar with a pretty girl in a wine-colored hat. After they had ordered some drinks, the officer pointed out to the girl that the American was wearing the Croix de Guerre with a bronze star. Spurrier told Braggins, the bartender, to make ours the same.

I looked over Spurrier's publicity hand-out to see if it had all the details about the way he won the Croix de Guerre and the Distinguished Service Cross after we got out of Nancy. The hand-out told how Spurrier had manned a .50-caliber machine gun from a tank destroyer in a final assault on a high hill and killed enough Germans to break up a sudden flank attack: When the Germans retreated to fortified positions, Spurrier, his hands bleeding from bazooka-shell splinters, dashed up to the strongpoints and cleaned them out by tossing grenades in them.

"They left out about the seven FFI boys that I had on that hill," Spurrier said. "And did I have a time with them about not shooting Germans who wanted to give up. I'd just as soon've shot them myself, but you know how it is."

The French couple left, the officer pausing first



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to give an informal little salute, and the girl flashing a smile Spurrier's way. The bar was empty now except for us, and Spurrier looked at his watch and motioned for the bartender.

Braggins, the bartender, is a solidly built, gray-haired little man who has fought in two wars against the Germans. Before the occupation he tended a bar at Castiglione's, which was frequented by the American Embassy crowd in the days when it was easy to put Hitler in his place over the aperitifs. Braggins wanted to hear about Spurrier's medals, so I ran down the list, ending up with the Congressional Medal.

To take the town of Achain, and win the Congressional Medal, on November 13, 1944, Spurrier killed 25 Germans and captured 18 Jerries and two of their officers. He used an M1, a BAR, hand grenades and both German and American bazookas. When he couldn't get the Germans out, he set the buildings on fire. He finished off the job with a Hollywood touch by riding down the main street on a motorcycle, blazing away at the fleeing Germans.

That is the part of the story of Achain that has been told. There is another part that is probably of interest only to GIs. Spurrier started the engagement fighting mad because of the culmination of a long-standing argument he had been having about getting another stripe. Moreover there were some words about the tactics that were slated to be employed in taking the town. The result was that an officer delivered a pre-battle statement that went as follows: "We'll send a company in on one side and Spurrier in on the other side. He'll fight the way he wants to anyway, so let him do what he damn well pleases."

By the time the company got into Achain, Spurrier had taken it. But the fruits of victory didn't yield that other stripe. The colonel was so impressed with him as a one-man army that Spurrier now operates out of company headquarters on special missions only. And one-man armies aren't listed in an Infantry company's T/O.

The talk between Spurrier and the bartender had now gone back to the Croix de Guerre. Braggins said that his Croix de Guerre was the same grade as Spurrier's, and the sergeant asked him if he ever wore it.

"I will not wear it until the war is finished and France is well and strong again," he said.

Spurrier thought this over for a minute, and

then said: "Guys like you didn't have anything to do with the beating France took. Somebody on top fouled you up."

Braggins told us about the defective cartridges that caused continual misfires in the French rifles and other things that French soldiers had contended with. France, he said, had been like a *beau tableau, mal encadré*. "That means," he told us, "that France was like a painting that was badly framed. The painting was good and beautiful, but worms were eating up the frame."

Spurrier turned this thought over a couple of times, and then got excited about it. "That's the best way to explain about the French I ever heard," he said. "I never expected to hear it that way from a bartender. By God, you're all right."

THE two hours were up, and Spurrier made Braggins a little speech as we shook hands. "I'm feeling my oats a little," he said, standing very straight, "but this is the truth. We've got a grudge against those Germans just like you French have. It started back in the States when I was reading the papers. And don't worry about me losing that grudge—I've seen too much. I'm no Paris soldier."

"I know just how you feel," said the bartender. Outside the bar we joined the 90 percent of Paris that seemed to be on the streets. The sun was still hot, and a spring breeze floated down the street where the Germans had once seized 50 random hostages for execution because a bomb had been tossed into a cafe full of celebrating Nazis. The breeze tugged at the coiffures and skirts of whistle-provoking girls on bicycles and whipped at the vendors' newspapers, the headlines of which proclaimed that Patton was across the Rhine. As someone has probably said, there would be lovelier springs in Paris but not until next year.

"My aching back," said Spurrier. "Let's forget the war. I talk so much about it at the hotel that I sound off all the time. Why don't you go back to the hotel and parlay with that blonde for me?" I said I thought he could manage.

After we had parted a telephone call from the Hotel Scribe came for me at the office. Some correspondents, the French operator said, wanted to talk to Sgt. Spurrier, and could I help. All I could say, I told her, was that it was spring in Paris. She seemed to think that made sense.