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## The French Firing Line; Farming Amid the Shells

### The Watchers in the Trenches

By Ralph Pulitzer

(Editor-in-Chief of the New York World)

On the anniversary of the last day of the world's peace, the 365th day of the war, I stood in the darkness of a very advanced front trench.

The trench was nearly empty of men. But at the loophole nearest to me stood the rigid form of a soldier. His legs were invisible in the darkness. His body showed up vaguely. His face was brilliantly silhouetted by the thin blade of light through the rifle slit. He stood silent, motionless; his eyes intently focussed out into the sunlight. I looked through the next slit through a spider's web of barbed wire between stunted black posts across 200 yards of green grass and wild flowers, at another tangle of posts and barbed wire with a narrow furrow of white, chalky soil running along just behind it—the German trenches.

Not a living thing was in sight in the sunny loneliness. There was silence except for the crack, crack of striking bullets from inaudible German rifles. I look back at the face of the Guetteur—the watcher. His eyes fixed on the narrow white line were puckered with intentness, but his lips were parted in an easy good-humoured smile brightening a face young, clean-cut, alert, calm, and very patient.

Early that morning a young staff officer had shown me the great plain of Champagne stretching away to the low hills on the horizon. Across the green fields of the panorama over the swelling hills, disappearing into the dark woods, reappearing at the other end, I saw two tiny lines of white like aimless tracing of a child's slate pencil on a slate. They ran on across the landscape, now drawn boldly forward, now swerving with indecision, now zig-zagging with perplexity. Sometimes the child's pencil had slipped and made short little lines at right angles. Sometimes the pencil had made three or four short starts parallel with each other before it finally got under way. Sometimes it had made a regular little maze of lines. But always the two white scratchings on the slate were drawn on and on, till, wavering, but always close abreast, the trenches of the two armies disappeared in the far distance.

Through powerful glasses the officer showed me little puffs of smoke floating up from the sunny, silent, peaceful landscape. They were from the exploding shells. To the right I saw high clouds of smoke rising lazily into the air out of some woods. It was a house in the German lines fired by French shells. And though the little puffs of smoke were only here and there on the landscape, everywhere I could see through the glasses the microscopic figures of peasants working busily in their fields.

Many were soldiers helping out, but very many were old men, boys, and women. Again the scene seemed symbolical. Behind the soldier watching in the bombproof were the innumerable tiny, plodding figures, undaunted by the abrupt little puffs of smoke, doing their patient share towards bringing in the harvest.

### Within Range of German Guns

We got into two elephant-grey Army motors with Remington carbines slung on the dashboard and military chauffeurs and tore along a road in easy range of the German artillery, but for some reason never shelled. Finally after a few hours' run we stopped about a kilometre from a little village which must remain nameless.

Leaving our motors we walked a little farther along a road and then climbed down into a trench. This was about six feet deep and three feet wide, and the bottom and sides were of white chalky soil. It pursued a serpentine course, but there was a straight vista of trench leading towards the enemy which was a splendid hunting ground for bullets. We had not gone far when I heard a sound like a boy cracking a toy whip. "A bullet striking near us," explained the officer ahead of me. The guns, too,

were going off, but none of them very near us.

Before entering the village I stood in the road looking through my field glasses at a German captive war balloon to my left. "Come along, come along!" shouted one of the officers. "If you stand there you'll start the Germans shelling. You're in plain sight of them there!" Needless to say, I came along. We walked through the shattered village, which the Germans shelled religiously every day, until we came to the remains of the church.

Climbing in over the ruins we saw that there was one corner where, miraculously enough, a few yards of floor and a few yards of roof had both escaped being shelled to pieces. An altar had been set up there with about ten chairs in front of it. There Miss was still said every Sunday for the benefit of the 16 inhabitants who persisted in staying in the village. These must, indeed, be solemn little services, for the Germans are far from being Sabbatarians when it comes to shelling a church. Going on we stopped in front of what was a house for one storey and a skeleton from there up.

### Desolation of the Trenches

Following instruction I climbed up a long ladder, which led to two raters—sole survivors of the second floor. A few planks had been stretched between these, and from them another ladder ran up to small patch of attic floor, which, marvellously intact, nestled round three sides of a brick chimney under a fragment of roof.

Look as closely as one could, it was impossible to detect the slightest movement, and yet it was from this innocent looking line that the bullets were imitating toy whips. I wedged myself up into the chimney to get a view of another side, and then climbed down. We now left the village and walked into the open advanced trenches. The most remarkable thing was their utter desolation.

At regular intervals we passed the watches, some standing in covering trenches gazing through the slits, some lying out beyond the open trenches behind steel shields, some using periscopes, all depending on the location of the trench. Looking into such a periscope one would swear one was looking straight out through the loophole. There is not the slightest sign that one is looking at a reflection in a mirror. We walked, bent over, through an extremely long tunnel in a very advanced position, which some of the officers themselves had never been in, and then started back through the open trenches. Finally we got back to the village. I had asked how the 16 inhabitants made a living. An officer had replied, "By selling eggs and milk to the troops." Or I had asked how they produced milk. He had replied, "very certainly out of a cow."

### Milking Under Fire

As an answer to my polite scepticism I was now taken to see the cow. We walked down a little street where I was told the Germans were now directing most of their shells. They were fortunately napping while we walked through. Suddenly we turned into a gateway, and there in the middle of this wreck of a village was a barnyard with chickens clucking, a horse tied to a wall, and three cows standing placidly chewing their cud.

On a stool by one of the cows, making its milk hiss down into the tin pail, sat an aged woman. There she sat, with shells sailing to and fro over her head, with the "departs" booming and the "arrives" bursting. We left the old lady surrounded by what she evidently considered all the comforts of home, and a few steps farther were introduced to the Mayor of ———. He was a smiling, bland old man, who greeted us most genially. Apparently he had not a care in the world, as he stood continuously making conversation.

On our way back through the communication trenches we saw an attempt by the German guns to bring down a French airman who was flying above us.

Every time they went off their report was so violent that I could not help jumping. The airman was sailing around overhead and the German gunners were letting drive at him with what looked to us like pretty bad shots. I could see the aeroplane

wheeling in the air, hear the distant report of "departs," wait an appreciable time, and then see the bursts of white flame high up in the sky, followed by little puffs of smoke.

### Shots at an Aeroplane

"That's a wretched shot," said I as one shell burst over our heads far behind the aeroplane. "Yes, a bad shot for the aeroplane, but a good shot for us," replied one of my companions, I was standing with my head away back looking straight overhead. "Come, move on, move on, or you'll catch some of that on your face!" warned the officer who was my special mentor. I obediently moved on, and, sure enough, a couple of seconds later he picked up a piping fresh shrapnel ball which had just fallen into our trench out of the sky.

In the meantime the airman had corrected his guns, so that they were hitting whatever they were shooting at, and he sailed away to the rear, while his battery became really enthusiastic and went off with a series of tearing crashes which kept me jumping all the way to the end of the communication trench. There I climbed out, with my ears full of the seventy-fives' violent reports, the distant explosion of their shells, the distant reports of the enemy's guns, the clack, clack, clack of the rifle bullets, and the occasional sharp whistling of one overhead.

### DEEP SEA SALVAGE

The work of the submarine diver has always made a strong appeal to popular interest, and the hazards run have given an element of fascination to this field of human activity. In February of 1884, the Spanish liner Alphonso XIII foundered off the Canaries when bound for Cuba with a very valuable consignment of specie aboard. To be exact, she had a half million dollars in newly minted coin. She sank in twenty-six fathoms of water—a matter of 156 feet. The salvage operations covered an interval of thirteen months, and the only diver found capable of doing the work, a man named Lambert, made on average something like two descents a month. Even so, he suffered from the hydrostatic pressure to which he was subjected, and at times was completely played out when he reached the surface. Indeed, he paid the price of his venturesomeness and was paralyzed shortly after his dangerous task was finished.

From the specie room of the sunken Empress of Ireland, the Canadian Salvage Association has recovered the silver bullion and the purser's safe—not to mention the pouches of postal matter and the reclaiming of hundreds of bodies of the stricken passengers. To reach the specie room the divers had to descend to a depth of 150 feet; they had to break their way into the craft and to follow a devious passage and it was necessary for them to work in extremely cold water and amid a gloom that was well-nigh ink. Instead of only one diver being engaged there were twelve of them, and the circumstances of their operations must be made still plainer in order that the layman may grasp the really extraordinary nature of the undertaking.

First, it was necessary to locate the position of the foundered ship in relation to the channel and then definitely to establish the manner in which she was resting on the bottom. The Canadian Government had planted wreck buoys after the Empress of Ireland went down, but these merely indicated in a general way the area in which she lay. Now, the St. Lawrence has a normal rise and fall of more than 14 feet where the liner sank, and this means a very strong current at the ebb and flow. Accordingly, only a brief interval of something like half an hour was available at the slack of the tide when diving operations could be carried out in comparatively still water. The first diver that went down to locate the wreck hit the bilge keel and then dropped off into deeper water where he hung without being able to tell anything. It was the red paint on his suit and his description of the projection that revealed the bilge keel and proved that the steamer lay turned over and flat upon her injured side.

The next problem was to find out how the hull lay in relation to the

sideway, and this was no easy task in the dark depths of the river. More than once the divers became bewildered as they groped their way over the upturned ship and tried to identify the different portions of her. To add to the gruesomeness of the job, they stumbled every now and then upon huddled groups of victims held in the open spaces between the promenade deck, and kindred fairways. It was in recovering some of these bodies that one of the divers lost his life—the only fatality that occurred during this extremely difficult and hazardous enterprise. That man's death taught an early and a very valuable lesson. He was a splendid physical specimen of manhood, a very careful liver, and an experienced under-water worker. While walking along the slimy side of the liner he slipped and dropped suddenly to a greater depth. Possibly he was frightened or more likely, stunned by the instantaneous "squeeze" of water pressure. Be that as it may, he instinctively tried to do what the emergency called for, i. e., to open wider his air supply valve and thus equalize the external pressure by air pressure within his suit.

Unhappily in his confusion he turned his valve the wrong way! He shut off his air instead of increasing the vital flow. He was very strong and by struggling more and more in the wrong direction he finally wrenched off the little wheel and thus sealed his fate. Before relief could be sent to him he was too far gone to be saved. The accident established the rule thereafter that the divers should work in pairs, and also led to a trifling modification in the equipment which justified itself several times afterwards. The valve was so arranged that it could not be completely closed and thus a sufficient leakage was insured, which would keep the man alive if, by chance or confusion, he repeated the unfortunate manoeuvre of his ill-fated associate. This simple expedient had not been thought of before, despite all of the years in which divers have toiled at their dangerous calling.

Possibly you do not know it, but a diver is guided to a great extent in dark or muddy waters by his sense of touch, and therefore his hands are commonly bare. The water about the wreck of the Empress of Ireland, however, was as cold that the men's hands became numb and their usefulness hampered proportionately. To overcome this difficulty they were finally provided with rubber mittens sufficiently thick to protect the hands and yet thin enough to permit of satisfactory tactile acuteness. Scores of pairs of these mittens were used up during the operations. Finally, when everything was in readiness, the divers went into the specie room and got out the ingot of silver and into the mail room where they recovered the pouches of postal matter, but the biggest problem was the removing of the purser's safe. The divers could not do any strenuous work themselves and the safe had to be pulled out of its resting place and then drawn through the succeeding doorways and along the passage leading to the cut in the side of the ship before it could be lifted directly surfaceward. The power had to come from the salvage steamer above, and a wire hawser was the connecting medium.

In the past it has been the uniform practice to supply the divers with air by means of hand-driven pumps. When working at moderate depths, this is not such a hard thing to do, but when the under-water workers are down 150 feet and more it takes the continual effort of four men at the cranks to supply enough air for two divers. Indeed the maintenance of the supply is a burdensome task, and the four men soon become exhausted by their labors. If the air should fail it is perfectly plain that the divers would be in grave peril unless they could be brought quickly to the surface or speedily succored by a renewed flow. To overcome this difficulty the Canadian Salvage Association availed itself of experiments made by the United States Navy.

Instead of using hand-driven pumps, steam compressors were employed which stored the needful air in two large tanks, and from this abundant source of supply the divers were fed. In this way all danger of either a failure of vital air or a sufficiency of it was obviated, and a material advance in the art of submarine operations effected.

Apart from the value of the present accomplishment, the task carried through by the Canadian Salvage Association on the sunken Empress of Ireland is of suggestive importance, because wrecks that have hitherto been abandoned without an effort could have been worked upon in the light of the state of the art today, and hundreds of vessels that may be lost under kindred conditions hereafter will be within the reach of the scientific salvor.—World's Advance

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