

What to Expect at the Front

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visible but the sky above and the banks of dirt on either side, it is hard to keep in mind where is the front and where is the rear.

In the trenches one meets soldiers that are calmly walking to their work, or returning, carrying ammunition or victuals. Shells may be passing overhead every minute or so, but these men appear perfectly calm, in fact absolutely bored. It is this calm, as well as the surrounding banks of dirt, that gives one a sense of security. The small arms bullets that whine overhead can do no harm. If they should drop into the trench their force would be spent, and a shell would have to drop straight from above to do any harm, that is to say any shell, except the very big one that blow up a whole trench system.

Of the artillery one sees surprisingly little. To be sure there is no lack of artillery crews hauling ammunition, or peering out of their dugouts, but one never sees any guns in action, one never sees them at all, even where they are known to be the thickest. They are hidden in the most ingenious fashion. I have heard guns go off within a small number of yards. I felt the earth rock, I have seen the flashes from the muzzles, I have heard their reports in all directions, but I have never yet seen a cannon recoil as it barks, the way guns do in the "movies". I have seen a battery of British howitzers work out in the open, have even stood in front of them so I could catch sight of the shells passing overhead and then see them disappear toward the horizon, but I have never yet seen at close range, a French gun fired, except on the experimenting field.

On parts of the front where great offensives have recently taken place, as at Verdun, the Craonne heights, the Somme and Flanders, the general appearance of the whole landscape has been changed, which is not true of the ordinary sections. At Verdun as I stood last fall on the edges of the old fort of Souville and looked down over the village Fleury at my feet and then up the ridges to Douaumont and Vaux, Pepper Hill and Thiaumont, I had the same impression of a sea of yellow dirt, which a furious storm had lashed into waves. As far as one could see there was not a sign of a house, a tree, or of a living thing, and this had formerly been a green

valley, filled with villages, farms, railroads, churches and factories. There was not a square yard of the earth's surface that had not been plowed up by shells, and the furrows were the regular waves left by the artillery tornado.

The plateau north of the Aisne, from Craonne to Cerny, has the same aspect. There are also certain peaks of the Vosges, such as the Hartmansvillerkopf, that have the same desolate air. The Champagne battlefields look grayish white, the subsoil being chalk, and the Somme front, where there was fighting a year ago, has now been grown over with weeds until it looks green as a tilled field. Under the network of wild morning glories lie open shell holes like treacherous pitfalls, sometimes concealing dangerous, unexploded shells. In the course of time these pits will be washed in, and in ten years everything will be as flat as before. It has been proposed to plant forests on these ravaged areas, as it will be too dangerous to cultivate them for many generations to come.

After all, the most impressive thing about the front are the numerous little cemeteries that one sees here and there on the hillsides. It is where repose the victims, and the lines of fresh mounds always terminate in open graves, waiting for the next to die.

For those who follow the war on the maps it is worth while remembering that areas that look very small on the paper, look quite different in reality; bigger battles than any delivered by Julius Caesar or Napoleon are fought in spaces that can be covered on the map by the head of a pin, and gains that can be covered on the largest scale maps with a pencil, are big gains that look really impressive to an eyewitness. The object of an attack is not a province that covers a big area on the map, but is in every case a section of the fortress to which siege is being laid, and the capture of a fortified place, even in the war parlor games, means as much as the conquest of a province.

"What do these offensives amount to?" I have heard newly arrived people demand. "You hear of a big successful battle, and yet the gains hardly show on the map."

That is the wrong way of looking at the front. The Allied armies may win this war and win it decisively and yet not move from where they are now much more than the width of a finger on the map. This war is a siege, pure and simple; a siege of a fortified place which, once it gives up, gives up completely.

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