

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

December 2, 1921: p. 7

So This Is a Shell Hole!

The "World's Best Job," as Seen by a Yank Who Went to France Twice

Illustrations by CHARLES BASKERVILLE, JR.



The principal of an American high school asked hopefully: "Wasn't that formerly a cathedral?"

METZ has the same population as Sioux City, Iowa.

A well-regulated shell hole should be eight feet, five inches across and three feet, eight inches deep.

There never was a German dugout yet that wasn't equipped with a grand piano and oil paintings.

I won't vouch for these statistics, but heaven knows they, as well as a lot of others equally interesting and equally unauthentic, have been dinned into my ears hundreds of times since I took the job with a tourist company of guiding inquisitive American tourists over those battlefields where, three years ago, other inquisitive Yanks were starting out to find just what Berlin really did look like.

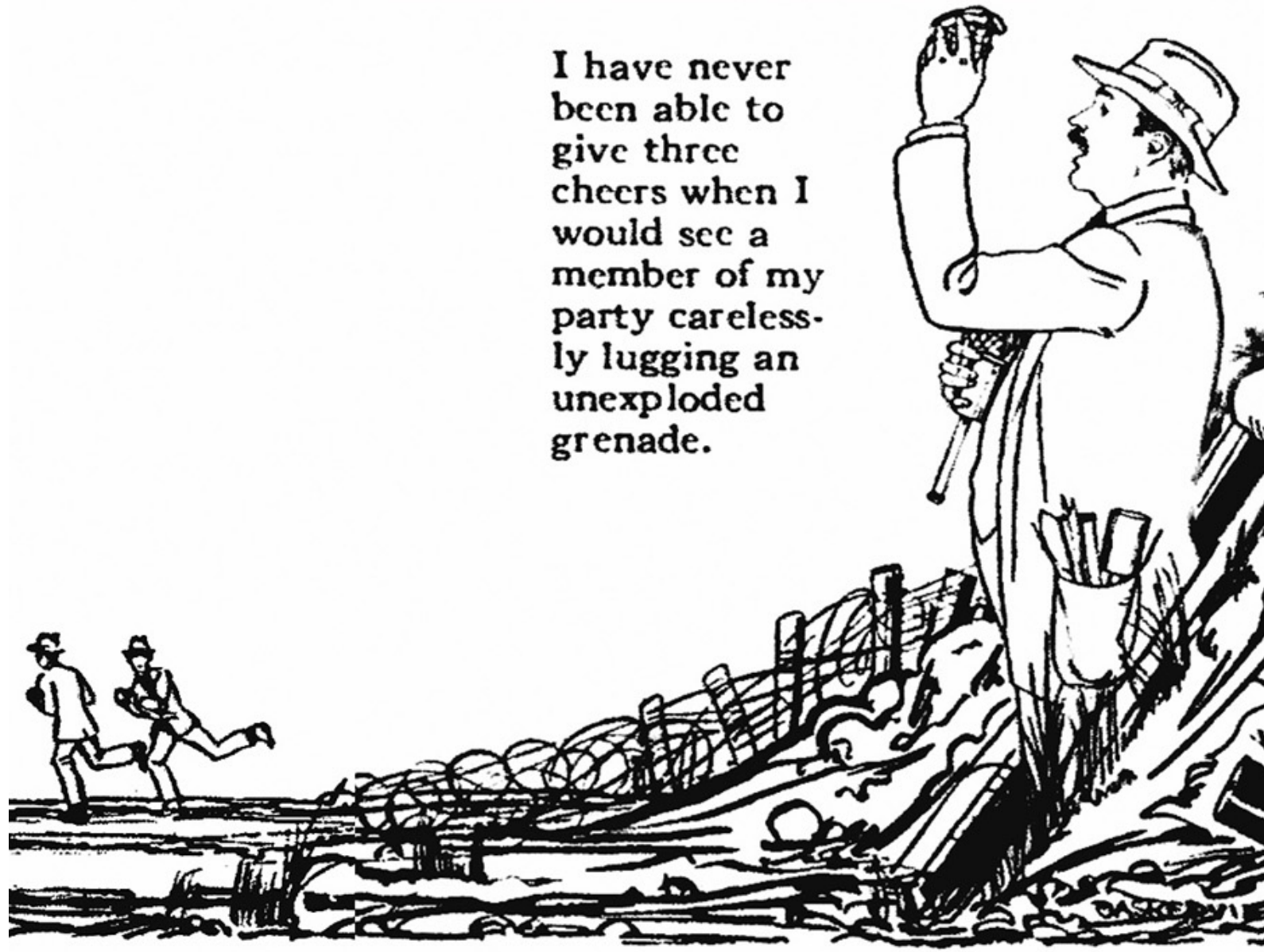
This job of mine was the softest thing in the world. I have been told so by so many comparatively veracious friends that I feel it must be true. Why, they argued, here I was getting paid—regular cash money—for running around and talking about war experiences while the rest of the former A. E. F. was doing the same thing absolutely gratis.

But my friends reckoned without the well-known human race. I maintain that guiding the average American over a battlefield is a job worthy of the tact of a prime minister and the patience of the permanent personnel at a port of embarkation.

OldMagazineArticles.com

“World’s Best Job”

I have never been able to give three cheers when I would see a member of my party carelessly lugging an unexploded grenade.



Before I actually started out in the Baedeker business things looked very rosy. They looked so rosy that all my friends promptly put themselves on the list of substitutes in case the grim reaper should page me, and, every time I caught a slight cold in the head they spoke hopefully of Denver and regaled me with anecdotes of acquaintances who had passed off just by letting a little thing like that go along without attention.

So, naturally, it was with implicit confidence in a rainbow future that I crossed the Atlantic and established myself in Paris, taking up the duties of incipient battlefield guide with that confident trustfulness that characterizes childish natures.

From everything I could see, nobody ever read a single official communiqué during the war and they might as well never have been written. But what my customers lacked in knowledge they made up in enthusiasm and when they had really convinced themselves of anything nothing in heaven or on earth or in the waters that are under the earth could dissuade them.

For instance, it was the prevalent understanding that all German dugouts were models of luxury and sumptuousness. I suppose the veterans themselves are responsible for this impression because statistics show that 97.5 percent of all the troops who came back to America brought back an anecdote about drinking champagne from Hindenburg's private cellar in the St. Mihiel sector and playing "Yankee Doodle" on Ludendorff's personal banjo in the Argonne. It appeared that in every instance of a German retreat Jerry had to pull out in such a hurry that the lights were still burning in the cut-glass chandelier and the water was still running in the porcelain bathtub.

Therefore, it was bound to come as a disappointment when some conscientious guide would inform his patrons that the average Jerry didn't really have the chance to change his socks every day and that some of them were addicts of the six-foot shelf of chemise classics, otherwise known as shirt-reading.

I remember, for example, one day when I brought some tourists to the Crown Prince's headquarters at Etain between Verdun and Metz. It wasn't much, just a small detached residence, encrusted with stone and steel on the Verdun side, the sort of a place that would rent at about forty dollars a month in Chicopee, Mass.

The visitors looked at it for some time in disappointed silence and then one, the principal of an American high school, asked hopefully:

"Wasn't that formerly a cathedral?"

The train of thought that led up to that question will go down as one of the unsolved mysteries of my life. But that man had a peculiar way of thinking. It was he who asked me:

"World's Best Job"

I maintain that guiding the average American over a battlefield is a job worthy of the tact of a prime minister.



"What size should a shell hole be?"

And he didn't seem to believe me when I told him that the H. E.'s were encouraged to use originality in order to relieve the monotony of what would otherwise be mile after mile of uniform and exchangeable shell holes.

We came close to chopping up the landscape a bit and creating a few personal shell holes of our own. I try to keep cool when under mental tension but I have never been able to give three heartfelt cheers when I would see a member of my party strolling along, carelessly lugging an unexploded grenade by its tail.

On the other hand they sometimes went to the other extreme. One man who had been poking around came up to me and, producing a small object, timidly asked me if I thought it would be safe to take it home so long as he was careful to keep it out of the hands of his children. I looked at the Portland, Oregon, label on the back and then told him that salmon was generally only dangerous when out of its can.

Of course, the great American souvenir mania was rampant. Rusty nails, horseshoes, chunks of rock that might have been dislodged by the fiery steed of the Kaiser himself and then again might not, even bits of glass, were picked up, treasured and lugged home. Or at least I suppose they were lugged home unless the tourists tired of them before they reached the ship. As indications of what the war was like they weren't worth anything more than relics would be if torn up from Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis. But altogether they formed a collection that would have gladdened the heart of a junk shop proprietor.

The prize exhibition of the lot was owned by a man who collected half a dozen French cigarette butts under the impression that they might have been left by Marshal Foch himself when he was directing operations on the front. I admit that the butt of a French cigarette is generally less objectionable than an entire French cigarette, but I have never been able to fathom the psychology that attributed to Marshal Foch indestructible cigarettes impervious to the storms of more than three years. Especially when the Marshal doesn't smoke cigarettes anyway.

The only ones who could be cured of picking up stray duds were those who happened to be near the spot when the French salvage men were blowing up unexploded shells. Those parties would regard them thoughtfully and then exhume their own ammunition from satchels and suitcases and park it in the vacantest spot they could find.

Some of the battlefields today are hardly recognizable, to such an extent has reconstruction and recultivation been carried. This applies particularly

“World’s Best Job”

to the Luneville and Baccarat sectors where scarcely any traces of warfare can be seen. On the other hand, around Rheims and Verdun the devastation is still excessive and there is far more opportunity for the visitor to picture in his mind the sort of thing that was going on there three years ago.

Even these fronts, however, laced as they still are with barbed wire and criss-crossed with trenches, have been softened by the new, post-war underbrush and grass, and whole towns, formerly in the front line, have been rebuilt. Grain crops now flourish in what was once a shell-pitted No Man’s Land.

But to go back to the tourists. The questions those people can and do ask!

For instance, one young woman asked me:

“What percentage of loss is sustained by the farmers on account of the poppies in their wheat?”

Guides are supposed to study up in order to be able to answer anything likely to be asked, but this was one I had never anticipated.

“I live in New York,” was all I could say, but if I’d lived in South Dakota I don’t know that I’d have had any more statistics ready to quote.

And distances! Why is it that the tourist has such an insatiable appetite for wanting to know how far it is from here to there?

“How far is it from Luxembourg to Metz?” someone would ask and I’d tell him, to the best of my ability. Then would come the exclamation:

“Why, how funnee-e-e-e! That’s just the same distance as from Akron to Ashtabula.” (Please don’t look up the figures.) I *must* tell the folks about it just as soon as I get back.”

I’ve often thought what a wonderful home-coming those people must have had, rushing up to the front door from the station and greeting all the relatives with the joyous cry:

“Did you know it’s just as far from Luxembourg to Metz as it is from Akron to Ashtabula? Isn’t that funnee-e-e-e?”

The saddest strain was translating kilometers into miles. It got on my mind so that I’d even go to sleep dividing things by eight and multiplying by five.

And populations. It gives a man a sort of proprietary interest in Metz to learn that it has the same number of inhabitants as Sioux City. (Again, please do not check up on this.) He can imagine the Grande Rue is Main Street and that every gendarme is an Iowa cop and that le Café Continental is the same as Ma Hicks’s boarding house—well, no, probably he can’t imagine that, but he can try.

Just one thing more. “People are sick of the war. They don’t want to hear any more about it. Lay off it.” Any theatrical manager or magazine editor will tell you that, and this in spite of the fact that one of the biggest selling and certainly the most praised and damned book of the year is a straight war story and nothing else.

But anyone who has been a battlefield guide can tell you that people aren’t sick of the war—not by a long way. Museums, cathedrals, art galleries, all the stock sights of Europe, are cheerfully passed by in order to get the chance to pick one’s way among the broken stones that litter the streets of Dun-sur-Meuse or gaze in awe at those piles of white, powder-like dust over which American engineers once put the road sign: “This WAS Fismes.”