

“A Few Ragged Cheers”

Go on the Last Drive
with the First Division



THE weather was French and November, which, translated, means wet and cold. All day on the ninth we shivered in hiding in the Bois de Romagne, near Forsé. When darkness fell we took the road to Beaumont, 18 kilo-

meters away. **By**
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The First Division was a pretty tired outfit. It had seen eleven months of almost continuous fighting, with just time to pull out from one front, take on replacements and shove back in again. We had just had such a breathing spell and were back in the Argonne again. Rumors were around that there was to be an armistice, but few listened and none believed. We had been bunked before.

No one who has ever been on a road just behind the lines can ever forget it; no one who has never been there can ever imagine it. Two solid streams of traffic, one on the right going up, and one on the left going down. Ration carts, water wagons, rolling kitchens, artillery pieces, tractors, trucks, motor cycles, staff cars of every form and description, straining, snorting, jolting their way forward. On either side of the road, sometimes in the gutter, sometimes on the bank, always in the mud, slog the infantry, silent and miserable, without even the glow of a cigarette to light them on their way.

Companies, regiments, brigades, divisions, even, in column of files—miles of human beings, each with but a single thought: to keep up with the man in front.

The line contracts and elongates, stretches and expands, like a caterpillar crawling along the edge of the road. It moves forward ten paces and halts, scrambles on for fifty lively paces, slacks down for fifteen—and on through the night that seems endless.

Legs and bodies are numb with fatigue, minds stupid with it, yet those minds cling desperately to that one little thought:

“Keep up with the man in front of you.”

Keep up with him until he stops, for some time he will stop. He will stop when the man in front of him stops, who will stop when the man in front of him stops, and then you can fall down and sleep in the mud for a minute. The mud is not so bad to sleep in. It is soft. It is better than standing up on legs that won't hold you unless you are in motion. But the man in front has wallowed to his feet and is stumbling on. The mud is soft, it is nice—but you must

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keep up with the man in front.

WELL, you go over in the morning, you say to yourself. There is consolation in that. Maybe you won't have to go far. Maybe you'll get hit early, and it'll be a good one and they'll come and get you with a stretcher and you won't have to walk any more. You reckon you'll just drop off to sleep when you get on that stretcher—oh, boy!

What's the sergeant bawling at you for? Close up? The man in front is gaining on you? You can't think and keep up too, so you quit thinking and direct your entire consciousness to the task of keeping up with that back you see ahead of you.

Just before dawn the outfit pulled into Chehery. At daylight it went over and occupied the heights beyond. Tame work. You were digging in when the order came to withdraw. You fell back behind Chehery and dug in again. That afternoon you fell back again to the edge of Bois de Romaigne. Things were lively. Plenty of artillery. Tomorrow, you think, you're in for it certain. Sort of fluke, the attack today.

The artillery fire increased in the morning, and machine guns rattled. You were on outpost and you fired your rifle—just fired it at nothing in particular. Everybody was doing it. The din increased until at 11 o'clock it ended with a crash that startled you. A few ragged cheers were heard. The armistice? *Fini la guerre?* Probably not. Just another Boche trick.

But anyway, here was a chance to sleep. You tumbled over dead to the world.

You woke up with a start. The corporal was shaking you by the shoulder. And so it had been a dream after all, even up to the crash at 11 o'clock and the dead silence thereafter, and the kind of empty feeling all around. Sure it was a dream. The corporal was saying your relief was about to go on again.

Of course, you were wrong as it all turned out. It wasn't a dream and the war was over. It didn't seem possible.

IT WAS a different camp the First Division had in the Bois de Romaigne that night. Instead of crawling under a bush with your raincoat over your head to keep the water from your face, you shared a pup tent with your buddy. Maybe he was a replacement seeing war for the first time, maybe he was an old-timer who had gone through it all—Toul, Cantigny, Soissons, St. Mihiel, Argonne—but likely he wasn't. There weren't so many left. Ten or fifteen to a company, maybe.

You had your fire, and you dried your clothes a bit and your blanket and warmed your feet. Every squad had its fire, and myriads of them flickered in the forest and sent up spiral columns of white smoke. There was the echo of a song here and there, but mostly men were silent. They were thinking thoughts a soldier doesn't speak much about—thoughts of home and the folks.

Such was the armistice to an outfit of the First Division. It came as the climax of their lives, and meant, more than anything else, the lifting from each and every man a *personal* load of physical and mental fatigue.

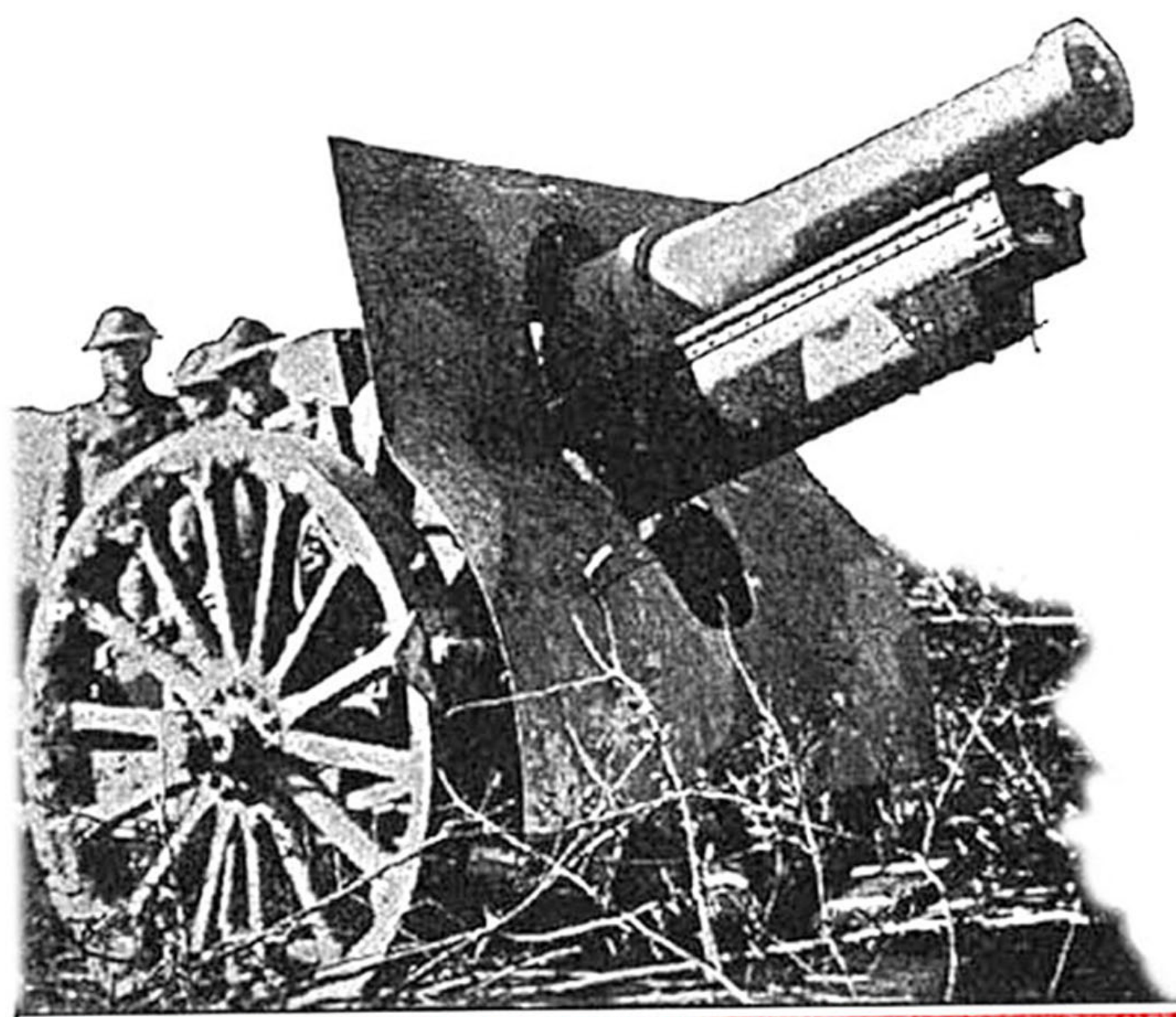
The only sign of outward enthusiasm was evoked by the passing of some French artillery. The men had been four years

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au front. They shouted and laughed as they passed. "La paix!" "La paix!" "Vive la paix!" "Vive l'Amérique!"

I doubt if a man's whole world could be changed in an instant any more than was the world of the First Division changed by the armistice. The change was reflected in the old queries of the minute, which are the truest indication of what's on the minds of an army: "When do we eat?" "When do we sleep?" "Where do we go from here?" Those were the cries of another world. Came now a new and unified demand: "When do we go home?"

THE LAST SHOT



A sergeant in the Sixth Field Artillery fired the first. He probably fired the last shot, too, but that is not so much to boast about. A few hundred thousand others chimed in and spoiled the distinction of it. Everybody in or near the line who could lay his hands on a gun, anything from a 14-inch naval to a Colt automatic, cut her loose about 10.59 o'clock on the morning of the 11th. Armistice Day meant different things to different people and different outfits. Captain Redfield tells what it meant to the First Division, which started an attack on armistice morning.

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