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The American Soldier

AMERICAN LITERATURE of the war has passed through several phases as marked as the phases of our interest and participation in the conflict itself. The outbreak of the war found us intellectually unprepared, and there followed a feverish eruption of explanation. Studies of national ambitions, trade rivalries, diplomatic backgrounds were quickly placed before the public. Then as our citizens became engaged in relief work, or sporadically as combatants, their immediate view of the phenomena of the war and personal experience in it became staple. As our neutrality wore thin and it became clear that we should be involved in the final phase as arbiter if not as contestant, there appeared forecasts of the settlement in which we must have a part. And when we became belligerent the literature of the war naturally turned to a record of our participation. These several phases have belonged to different classes of writers—the first to historians, publicists, and other informed persons; the second to adventurers; the third to social philosophers and economists; and only in the fourth has the war correspondent come distinctly into his own. Of this final phase two books, both by well-known correspondents, command attention—Frederick Palmer's *America in France* (Dodd, Mead; \$1.75) and Floyd Gibbons' *And They Thought We Wouldn't Fight* (George H. Doran; \$2).

The titles of these books correctly prophesy their contents, style, and general approach. Mr. Palmer writes as a historian—a plain unvarnished tale. From his position on General Pershing's staff as censor we may assume that his book is the result of the fullest information and of the highest discretion. It is in fact the first complete official view of America's part in the war. And with every allowance for reserve it is a convincing as well as an impressive one. Mr. Palmer writes as a historian; he also writes as a soldier, not only with an effacement of himself but also a modesty in regard to his fellow soldiers which is both engaging and inspiring. There is in his book little of the tone of personal reminiscence, little anecdote and illustration. The impression which emerges is that of a whole, a powerful and highly organized machine, in which the individual is not lost indeed, but multiplied until his personal record is an impertinence. Mr. Palmer does not disguise the fact that the machine did not work perfectly, that there were errors in direction, shortcomings in execution. What he im-

plies however is the superhuman effort, the extremity of toil and sacrifice, with which the individual member of the vast complex set himself to limit the area of mistake and make good the effects of shortage. It is easy to divine beneath the surface of his narrative of a successful army the vital contribution of the man, not only behind the gun, but behind the telephone receiver, the motor wheel, even the ledger and the counter.

And this is the view which America will be glad to take in the future—a view of the campaign in France as a national enterprise in which the qualities which had marked the geographical, industrial, and scientific expansion of the nation were directed to a single end, animated by miraculous energy, crowned by complete achievement, and glorified by heroic sacrifice.

Mr. Floyd Gibbons, of the Chicago Tribune, writes like a newspaper man. In reading his book one is reminded of his veteran predecessors, the correspondents of the Civil War, of Browne and Richardson, and of those classics, *Four Years in Secessia* and *The Field, The Dungeon, and The Escape*; and one recognizes how much journalism has gained in amplitude and richness and raciness by the intensive cultivation of "the story" at the hands of the humbler members of the craft. Mr. Gibbons has the closeness of contact with his material, the intimacy with his characters, the immediateness of style that mark the expert police or baseball reporter. His book is a succession of journalistic tours de force of which the first, the sinking of the *Laconia*, and the last, the wounding of the author during the taking of the Belleau Woods by the American marines, are masterpieces worthy of G. W. Steevens. Between these are lesser stories, the taking over of the first front-line sector by American troops, an inspection of the trenches, a raid into the enemy dugouts reported by telephone, a bombardment, and the rush of the Second Division into Picardy to stem the German offensive. Where Mr. Palmer is summary, Mr. Gibbons is detailed; where the former is literal and expository, the latter is picturesque and illustrative: America in France is detached and impersonal; individual traits and incidents are the essence of *And They Thought We Wouldn't Fight*.

Mr. Gibbons made it his business to know the American soldier, not as an unidentifiable factor in the grim unity of his formations, but as the individual, who accepts regimentation with the same humorous stoicism with which he accepts war. Mr. Gibbons constantly allows him to escape from his enforced into his real character, to appear as Big Moriarity, or Missouri Slim, or the dying Wop. From the multitude of incidents he disengages the American soldier as a type, distinct as the French *poilu* of Barbusse or the British Tommy of Captain

Beith—a national figure although racially of Italian, English, Celtic, Slavic, or Teutonic extraction. It would be impossible to recreate this figure in a critical summary, but some of his salient traits may be enumerated—his imperturbable coolness, his insolent courage, his disconcerting unexpectedness, his tolerant good nature, his humor that surmounts pain, and his irony that circumvents fate. And a few bits of his lively conversation may be quoted. The men in the tree-top lookout waiting for the German fire:

“Why in hell don't they come back at us?” Griffith asks. “I've had myself all tuned up for the last twenty minutes to have a leg blown off and be thankful. I hate this waiting stuff.”

“Keep your shirt on, Pete,” Stanton remarks. “Give 'em a chance to get their breath and come out of their holes. That barrage drove 'em down a couple hundred feet into the ground and they haven't any elevators to come up on.”

The wireless operator in the open summerhouse:

“Seems so peaceful here with the sun streaming down over these old walls,” he said.

“What do you hear out of the air?” I asked.

“Oh, we pick up a lot of junk,” he replied. “A few minutes ago I heard a German aeroplane signaling by wireless to a German battery and directing its fire. I could tell every time the aviator said the shot was short or over. It's kinder funny to sit back here in quiet and listen in on the war, isn't it?”

Dan Bailey, who had lost a leg at Cantigny:

“I know what I'm going to do when I get home,” he said. “I'm going to get a job as an instructor in a roller-skating rink.”

The record of the American soldier as revealed in both these books is a valuable comment on democracy in war. After all, the practical issue between democracy and autocracy turned on the question of relative efficiency in the test of survival in direct conflict of arms. It was the belief of autocracy in the essential military unfitness of democracy that gave it confidence in forcing the issues that inevitably added first England and later America to its enemies. It appeared to the best authorities that the complicated processes of modern warfare could not be learned by the ordinary citizen in less than two years of intensive training—that a system of instruction of such levies could not be maintained except by a military caste with a tradition of superiority to the body of citizens that reflected the autocracy of the state. Above all, the testing of armies in maneuver and the constant practice of the general staff in handling large bodies of men and material was deemed essential. It is true that America entered the war under tutelage—that our unpreparedness was in part at the expense of our allies. But granting the contribution of staff work and of instruction in major and minor tactics, which was so generously given, the attainment of the American officers and men gives ground for belief in the ability of democracy to take care of itself.

What part if any our high command played in the major strategy of the last months of the war may never be disclosed. Even the story of the American general who took personal responsibility for the counter-offensive at Chateau-Thierry may remain apocryphal. But the mastery of the art of war by field officers and men of the American forces is an achievement in education of which the example should not be lost. The result was brought about by an extraordinary spirit of cooperation between officers and men. Apart from a small number available for active service in the regular army and national guard, our officers were college boys summoned to turn their training to a field which they had never thought to enter. Their success was perhaps a surprise to the faculties which had trained them. They had to teach themselves, and each other, and their men. The men taught themselves and each other. The limited expert instruction provided was economized to the last degree, used as leaven in the whole effervescing mass. And as a result our army became an extraordinarily flexible and responsive instrument, preserving the best features of democratic organization. The officers could not send their men into battle in rigid formations, trained to mechanical exactness of maneuver at word of command, but they could lead them anywhere. The result was, it is true, in the American as in the English army, which was trained on essentially the same principle, a disproportionate loss of officers. That is the price which democracy must always pay for being—the sacrifice of its leaders. But that the individual maintained himself in spite of the draft and the training and the discipline—the whole process of regimentation—and will return personally the richer for his experience, no one who reads these volumes can doubt. In his justification of democracy as against autocracy in war the American soldier recalls the boast of Pericles to the Athenians: "Whereas the Spartans from early youth are always undergoing laborious exercises which are to make them brave, we live at ease yet are equally ready to face danger."

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