

# K.O.

## WHO WON THE WAR? THE U. S. NAVY'S 14-INCH GUNNERS STAKE OUT A CLAIM

# BY SAILOR GUNS

**Y**OU must have heard about the lush who weaved to a lean against a fairly stationary lamp-post, who finally managed after sundry difficulties to get a match out of his pocket, who struck it and almost jumped out of his skin when the house across the street promptly burst into flame!

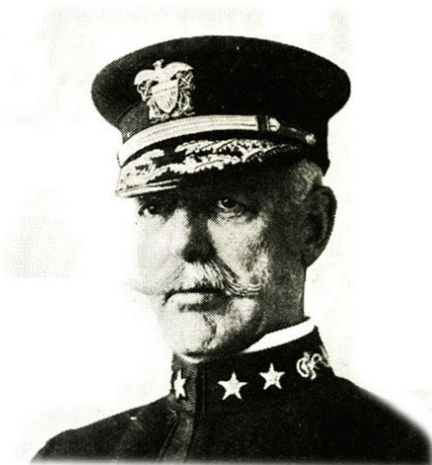
Although your correspondent has long since learned not to overmatch himself at the public pumps, and the ultimate result was slowburning rather than explosive, that's about the way it's been with this literary epic. What follows, hereinafter, started several months ago as a hilarious recollection of a really funny feud in France up close to the fighting lines between an over-military general and an under-military admiral, neither of whom could figure exactly which ranked the other, and both of whom were set down in the mud some five miles apart in command of two outfits supposed to be working together.

Most of it was to be spun purely from personal recollection as I, a tender young lieutenant just up from the ranks, was

right in the middle of where the heaviest cussing occurred. But the years have been long, and the world has been spinning.

Names, dates and Gallic diphthongs have a habit of slipping. Efforts to check lest the few involved should fall into print too utterly awry, led to a casual examination of such records as were easily available. These records led backwards and crosswise to others. Curiosity carried on where reportorial caution had begun, and gradually the realization dawned that instead of a private Punch and Judy show between a strutting stickler of a general and a lanky looking hayseed of an admiral, I had stumbled upon one of the truly great epics of American war history, and just possibly had found the positive answer to that unsettled and slightly razzberrious question that has been troubling the eldering relics of the late A. E. F. for more than twenty years, viz. and to wit, "WHO WON THE WAR?"

I've still got my funny story, but it belongs in the general pattern like a piccolo solo in the middle of a symphony. It's about as important in the whole of

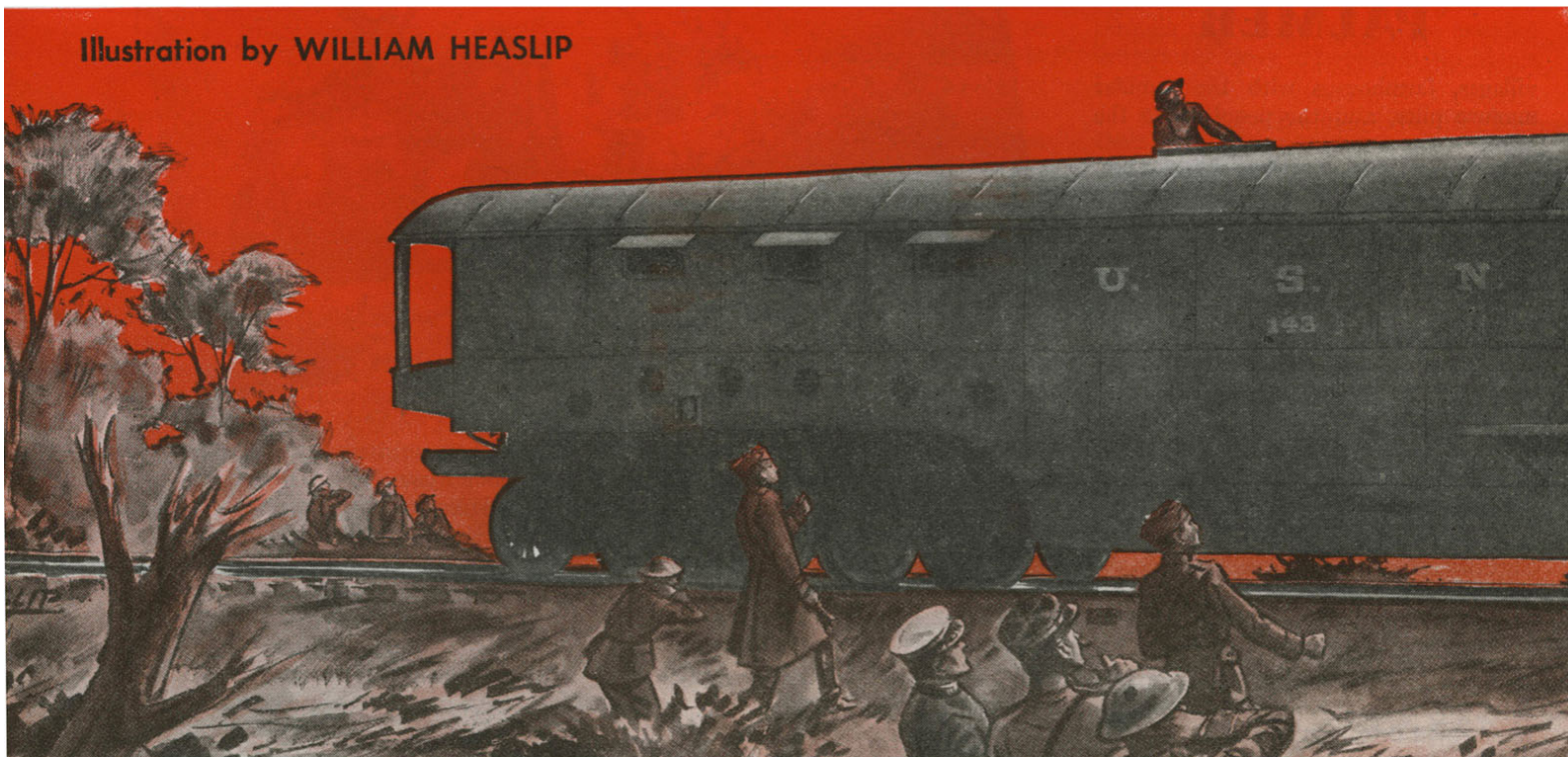


Admiral Plunkett

the tale as the pop of a wad of chewing gum in the midst of a naval engagement.

**F**ROM July '17 until the show closed down, there was an extra arm in France known officially as the Railway Artillery Reserve. We never knew what the "Reserve" part referred to unless it was that they were reserving us for the war that was to follow, for we never did get

Illustration by WILLIAM HEASLIP



any guns of our own. Long-range rifles of naval caliber on railway mounts were something this nation didn't have when it decided to fight, and the Armistice arrived before we got more than five made. Those—they are the five this article is about—and one eight-incher that arrived after the Armistice were the only railroad guns the U. S. ever made.

But we were an organization equipped to service and shoot same if any ever should arrive. And we did service and shoot some that were loaned us by the French. It was a French idea, anyhow. The United States had never done any of that kind of fighting, had nothing to do with it, and knew nothing about it. It was a French suggestion that we go in for land naval cannon, rolling the monstrous contraptions up close enough on railroad tracks, to fire from fifteen to twenty-five miles on rail heads, forts and other objectives, a job the modern dive-bombers seem to have inherited.

The American answer had been to take the Coast Artillery, the 5th, 6th and 7th provisional regiments of it, most of which came from the rock-ribbed coast of New England, but which included some batteries from as far south as New Jersey, and get it ready for the new line of work. To these elements were added various others until the command numbered several thousand men.

Geographically, the place was located in the town of Maily in the province of Aube up in north-central France, approximately 50 miles south of where the fighting was that last summer. The town was a permanent French artillery camp. Russian troops had previously been garrisoned there and had mutinied there. Pock marks in the walls of the

whitewashed French barracks were supposed to be souvenirs of an instance where their own officers turned machine guns on them in an effort to hold them in line. Maily had enjoyed no spectacular history in that particular war despite an occasional air raid that never amounted to much.

Local talk was that the Germans would have captured it and probably have destroyed it at one stage but for the fact that the Rainbow Division made a mistake and charged when the French had ordered a general retreat. But those Yanks apparently knocked the line back so far there was never any danger thereafter.

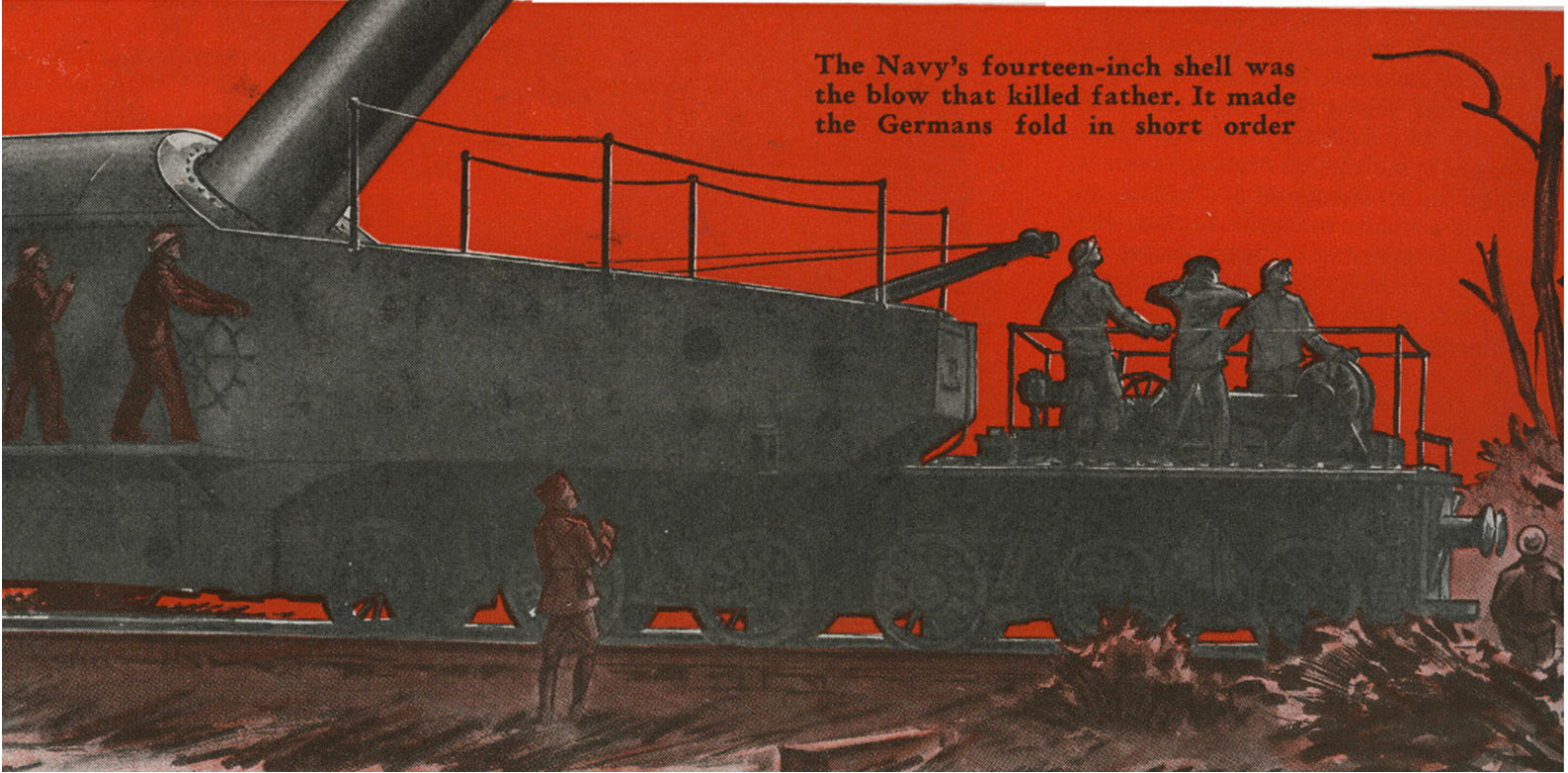
Life in the headquarters end of this business was really pretty dull. The various regiments, armed with French mounts of mostly ancient models—the standards being 24-G, Model 1876, and 32 c. m., Model 1870—were up on the various fronts firing most-

ly with the French, and hitting something occasionally, too, when the venerable tubing didn't explode. But mostly we were waiting for our own weapons to arrive and our own great division or corps or whatever it was to be to start functioning as the A. E. F.'s real heavyweight slugger.

Life in that post would have been prosaic to the point of stagnation if it hadn't been for the blistering presence of the gentleman who commanded the outfit, Brigadier General William Chamberlaine. I almost snap to rigid salute automatically from merely writing the name, here 22 years later. A West Pointer from the distinguished State of Virginia, suh! he was known as the most Prussian officer in the United States Army. He's the only man I ever saw in France, or anywhere else, who wore a double Sam Browne belt—a strap over each shoulder.

He was such a stickler for etiquette, and the rest of it, that he actually toured the cook shacks to see that the kitchen police wore their blouses with all buttons completely (Continued on page 42)

By **BILL CUNNINGHAM**



The Navy's fourteen-inch shell was the blow that killed father. It made the Germans fold in short order

# K. O. by Sailor Guns

-the third of seven pages-

policed while peeling the spuds and stirring the slum. Maybe you can imagine what it was like trying to work in his office. That was my portfolio at the time of this epic, the progression having been from the ranks to the Third Officers' Training Camp, to Saumur, to Angers, to the Railway Artillery, where instead of getting a gun to shoot after the Government had spent probably \$10,000 teaching me how to point her nose up and let 'er go, I was head office boy, chief errand runner and principal book fetcher to a gent who recited his general orders instead of grace before mess.

Maybe you think you had a tough war, soldier!

Those of us close to him got our share but only our share. The general poured it all over everything and everybody in camp. It was hard to decide if officers or men were his favorite victims. An officer with a spot on his belt or a knot in his boot lace would stand with frozen heels through a half hour of stinging oratory, but a corporal sighted on the public strand with his blouse unbuttoned and his shirt-tail out was a practical cinch for the guard-house.

Still it belongs in the records that the hair-splitting and whip-cracking general wasn't just a copy-book soldier. He was a practical artilleryman of the first muddy water. He brilliantly commanded the Second Field Artillery Brigade through the Champagne-Marne Offensive in the early summer of '18, and was really promoted into that big administrative job at Mailly le Camp, as it was officially called, which may have been why he was so sore. Maybe he too was itching to fight.

And although nothing much but General Chamberlaine was happening to us over there at the more or less front, plenty was happening with us in mind back here at home. As quickly as it could after war was declared, the Ordnance Department canvassed the country to see if there were any heavy guns available for inland service overseas. They discovered a total of 464 they felt could be spared from the seacoast defenses, the Navy, or could be commandeered from private ordnance plants where they were being manufactured for foreign governments. These were 12 seven-inch guns and 21 fourteen-inch rifles belonging to the Navy; 96 eight-inchers, 129 ten-inch guns, 49 twelve-inchers and 150 twelve-inch mortars of the seacoast defenses and six twelve-inch, fifty-caliber rifles being manufactured for the Chilean government.

But the mighty 14-inch, fifty-caliber rifles and 16-inch howitzers were what we were waiting for. The French had plenty of the smaller stuff, but there were none of the mightiest class that could be spared by either our Navy or the coastal defenses, although the Navy agreed to let the Army have certain of both grades they had on order and under construction. Railway mounts for 16



"There now, Pop—we're even!"

rifles were promptly ordered from the Baldwin Locomotive Works and a total of 30 fourteen-inch rifles and 61 sixteen-inch howitzers were in process of manufacture when the Armistice stopped it all.

In fact, the yellowing records seem to say that General Pershing had plans for a great American offensive completely worked out for 1919, and if things had gone along, we'd have had a grand total of 300 railway guns from the seven-inch, 45 calibers, to the mighty 16-inch howitzers to help blast a path before the infantry. The way later history has developed, it's too bad that drive didn't materialize. The current picture might be considerably different.

So the Navy was in this busy home-front picture prominently, but news travels slowly, or it did in that war, and to us about the third week in August came the first vague rumor that the Navy was bringing or sending some of its big guns to France, and that they were to be landed at St. Nazaire; but nobody knew any more than that and no orders concerning them came up to us.

It was on August 27 that a captain named Champion, who had charge of our garages, came tearing in as if his shirt tail were on fire, began saluting with

both hands and begged to report in that third person double-talk, that Barnum and Bailey's circus or something had just landed in our gun park in the village of Haussimont five miles away. There was an enormous gun, he said, and about 20 different sorts of cars, and the whole vicinity was overrun with a horde of new Americans wearing a kind of uniform he couldn't identify.

He was immediately detailed to take Lieutenant Edouard Boilot, a French lieutenant of Engineers, serving us as liaison officer, present the general's compliments, find out who the bounders were, and answer any sensible questions they might like to ask.

The French lieutenant's account of that visitation later was classic.

Taking one of the staff coughing bicycles with a sidecar, they jounced along the rutty road, arrived in due course and started looking for whoever seemed to be in command. The enlisted personnel was all over the place, and they were obviously sailors in olive drab uniforms with their naval insignia and hash stripes sewed onto their sleeves.

They kept walking along until they came to a sort of open-faced shed where, in plain view, but all alone, a tall elderly man sat in

his undershirt calmly eating a meal. He seemed convenient, unoccupied and old enough to know most of the answers, so Champion decided to ask him his burning questions.

The gentleman looked up pleasantly as the captain approached. He didn't arise, nor salute nor seem especially interested one way or the other. He merely asked, "What can I do for you, Bud?"

"I'm looking for the Commanding Officer of this detachment," explained Captain Champion.

"You're looking at him, Bud," said the gentleman. "Have a seat."

It was Champion then who snapped stiffly to salute. He'd just noticed for the first time, swinging limply from a corner of the back of the gentleman's chair, the jacket of a rear admiral of the United States Navy.

Thus it was that the Railway Artillery Reserve, A.E.F. met Rear Admiral Charles Peshall Plunkett. The French had been meeting him for a couple of weeks—and losing every decision! Tall, sea-goin' and just as plain, friendly and common-folksey as a man could conveniently be, this 54-year-old son of an English-born commissioned officer in the Union forces couldn't see any sense at all

# K. O. by Sailor Guns

-the fourth of seven pages-

to all the red tape and palaver that seemed to be characteristic of this army business he suddenly found himself in.

His job seemed perfectly clear to him. The Navy had got five of those 14-inch, fifty-caliber rifles finally matched up with railway mounts and had decided to send him with enough sailors over to France to try 'em out up in the battle lines. They'd shipped the guns and carriages over knocked down. He was to assemble them at St. Nazaire, go up, attach himself to the Railway Artillery Reserve for a place to park and do the first shooting with these weapons the United States had ever tried on dry land. Against the Germans, naturally, when and if that could be arranged.

But you never saw such a course of sprouts as he ran into as soon as he landed. This one tried to give him orders. That one said he must do thus and so. He'd have to wait for this clearance and that permission. In the meantime he had his men putting his five guns together. That meant five trains of 13 cars each and a gun each, and another train for the staff.

"The French and Americans were apparently holding a sort of town meeting down there at Chaumont," he said, "to see whether we could go or not. They don't seem to know there's a war somewhere over here. We were sent over to find the war and to do a little shooting in it. So we just packed up and came on.

If they don't like it, and I think some of them don't, I guess they'll have to take it up with the Secretary of the Navy. He's the fellow who told us to come over."

That trip of his across France, it later developed, had been an epic. The weight of those trains, of course, was terrific. Each gun alone weighed 243 metric tons and a metric ton is 2005 pounds. The load at the muzzle end of the gun car was 20 tons per axle, and the flimsy French railroads weren't built to take that weight, nor even the weight of the huge Baldwin locomotives that pulled the massive trains. Furthermore, the French depots, sheds and other railway architecture didn't provide sufficient clearance, some of the French officials feared.

"But you've got a war over here, haven't you?" the admiral asked. "When the enemy's got a piece of your country, what's a spread rail or two?"

They waved the hands and yelled "Mais, non!" but he hitched up and came on. The records merely politely state for posterity that, after temporarily removing some armor plate and an air compressor, he reduced the weight sufficiently and made his way across France at a maximum speed of six miles per hour, and no damage was done except to some frogs (the railway term) and guard rails on the *Petite Ceinture* at Paris. But the truth of the matter is that he rode in the locomotive most of the

way, that the French tried several times to lock the switches ahead of his train, but he'd gravely alight with a cold chisel and hammer, cut himself loose and call "All aboard!"

Chamberlaine and Plunkett jammed from the first, which was the funny story this started out to be. Chamberlaine did most of the jamming; Plunkett most of the ignoring. The conflict was inevitable. One was a stickler for office detail and red tape, the other never bothered with either. One insisted that nothing be done that wasn't covered precisely with an order. The other made his own orders or even proceeded without any. Chamberlaine insisted that since he was the Commanding Officer of the Railway Artillery A.E.F. and since these naval guns were railway artillery, he'd say when, where and how they should be used. Plunkett sent him word—I carried it—to go plumb to hell, that he took his orders from the Secretary of the United States Navy and nobody else, and that so far as he could see all the Army was doing was playing tiddledewinks anyhow.

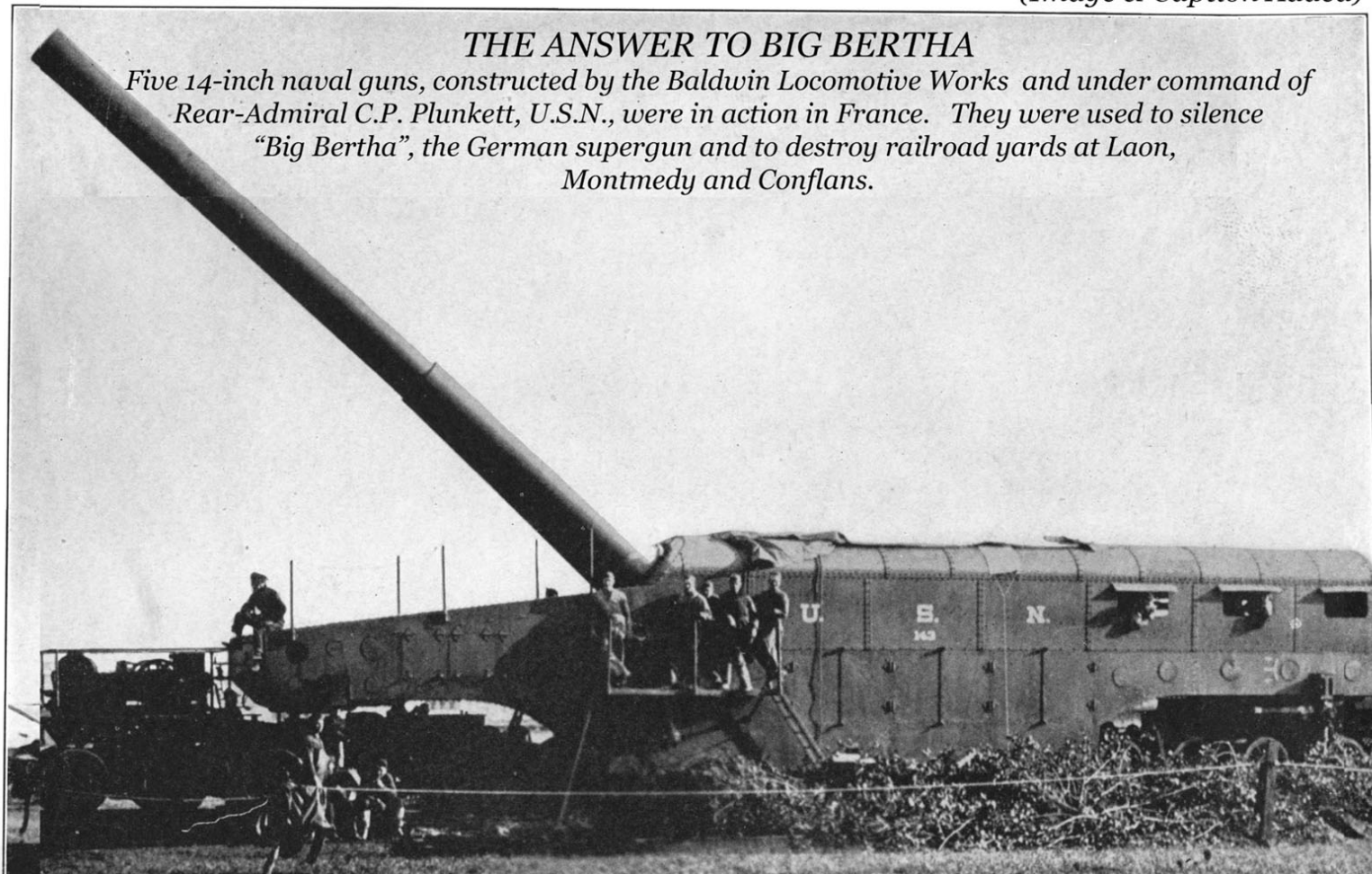
One main trouble was that neither really ranked the other. A brigadier general and a rear admiral just about level off and each had been promoted to his current rank on about the same date.

Furthermore, the admiral's idea of an army uniform completely outraged the sartorial sensibilities of the meticulous general, who had *(Continued on page 44)*

*(Image & Caption Added)*

## THE ANSWER TO BIG BERTHA

Five 14-inch naval guns, constructed by the Baldwin Locomotive Works and under command of Rear-Admiral C.P. Plunkett, U.S.N., were in action in France. They were used to silence "Big Bertha", the German supergun and to destroy railroad yards at Laon, Montmedy and Conflans.



# K. O. by Sailor Guns

-the fifth of seven pages-

his kitchen police practically maintaining full dress. The seagoing gentleman resembled an ambulating scarecrow.

The first time I ever saw him, he came moseying down the main stem of Milly. A man named Major Hermann and I stood conversing upon a corner.

"Holy Mother of Moses," the Major said slowly and fervently, "look at that apparition coming down the street. He must be a new Y.M.C.A. secretary from the States. If Chamberlaine sees him, he'll court martial him sure, or maybe he'll just shoot him on sight and get it over with."

I looked up to see a tall stranger approaching. He wore a pair of black—I said black—shoes beneath some badly rolled puttees. He didn't have on a blouse, but wore an enlisted man's rubber slicker open down the front, and badly rust-stained around the buckles. His battered campaign hat had no cord of any sort. He was strictly the least military object we'd seen in a couple of years—if ever.

He came strolling along as if he didn't have a care, and as he came up, he smiled pleasantly and said, "Nice day, isn't it, gentlemen?"

"Very nice," we said, without any particular warmth.

"By the way," he said, "my name's Plunkett. . . ."

Whack! went our heels, and up came those hands.

"Never mind that," he said. "I was just wondering if you fellows could tell me where I could find Colonel Gregg's office?"

That was the first time I saw him but far from the last, for I was generally the courier sent over to deliver the orders as to what he was to do. The general was always very positive about it. The admiral was equally explicit about what the general could do with his orders, the Army and whole A.E.F. He was always very calm about it, but he'd been in the Navy a long time and he knew all the words.

Trying to code the messages between this embattled pair into that "Sir, the lieutenant presents the general's (or the admiral's) compliments and reports that the general (or admiral) said . . ." business when what the general, and especially the admiral, really said wasn't anything even close to what was safe to repeat, called for some fancy translating.

I was only an understrapper and had no way of knowing, but I was always under the impression that he was just kidding my boss about where his orders came from. Major General E. F. McGlachlin, Jr., was the Chief of all Artillery. He must have had some say

about those naval guns. Plunkett was just making sure Chamberlaine didn't take him over. Things were really funny between them for quite a spell although they didn't seem highly humorous at the time to the human rubber ball they kept bouncing back and forth between them.

But the true majesty of the Plunkett picture starts to grow when you realize what a pioneering job he and his men were up against. He had five of these great guns staffed by something less than 1000 sailors. No gun of this description had ever been fired on dry land before by any American unit. None had ever been fired from map range. He had to experiment before he took them into action. He received precious little cooperation and no actual help. He wanted some army aviators, for instance, to serve as observers regulating his fire. None would go up. They wanted no part of getting in front of those terrific guns, nor over any target. They were afraid the mammoth blasts would tear the propellers off their machines. He likewise had some trouble getting a firing range.

But he went. And he fired. They fire those big guns with a magneto after the fashion of men blasting rock with dynamite. Some of our officers managed to get over to where he was shooting in time to be in at the baptism. They couldn't see the target, of course, for it was more than twenty miles away, but they saw an unusual incident they always after remembered. Just as the command "Fire" was given the first big piece, a crow flew across in the air possibly a

couple of hundred feet above the up-turned muzzle of the fifty-eight-foot, 4-inch tube. As it chanced, he wasn't in the path of the projectile, but the force of the blast ripped every feather from him until he was as naked as a chicken picked and singed, and dropped him as dead as if he'd been hit with a shotgun. Maybe those aviators knew what they were doing, concussion being almost as damaging to a plane as a direct hit.

That first shot and three others that followed it were the only practice shots the guns ever made. When the first four shells from Battery No. 1 were deposited within a stone's throw of a target some twenty miles away from the proving ground at Nuisement, the French general called off the test and sent the battery to Soissons to bombard the railroad yards at Laon.

But between the landing at St. Nazaire of the miscellaneous material which was assembled into the six locomotives and seventy-two cars of the five batteries and the staff train, and the firing of those practice shots was concentrated such a sustained effort of vigorous, intelligent and ingenious accomplishment as I venture to say has never been equaled any time, anywhere. By some sort of mix-up no blue prints were available for putting together the vast store of material. When the first box marked "rivets" was broke open it was found to contain stove bolts. All the boxes of "rivets" held stove bolts. Thousands of rivets were needed, for the smallest of the seventy-eight cars required 500 of them. When French rivets were finally secured it was

found that due to metric-system measurements they just wouldn't fit. But these Yanks couldn't be stopped!—they heated and hammered and drew the damn things until they just had to fit. The gobs worked from sun-up to sundown and to such good purpose that a month and three days after the first material reached St. Nazaire the first battery was ready to move to the front.

Battery No. 1, Lieutenant James A. Martin, U.S.N., commanding, was hauled up close to Laon where it fired 199 rounds on railroads and garages east and west of the city from September 10th to October 24th, then it was hauled out and stationed in the Forest Champenoux, backing up the French Eighth Army for an offensive that never materialized, due to the Armistice.

Battery No. 2, Lieutenant\* E. D. Duckett commanding, fired 43 rounds on the railroad yard at Mortiers, and then on October 24th joined the first American Army near Verdun, where it

\* Junior grade.



"You're in a tough spot now, buddy—it fell into that hole under that flag!"

belted 55 enormous shells into the city of Montmédy. It then pulled out and took position near Lunéville in preparation for the contemplated offensive which never came off.

Battery No. 3, Lieutenant William G. Smith commanding, fired 49 rounds on Longuyon and Mangiennes from Oct. 12th to November 3d, then moved over to Charny and whanged 187 rounds into Louppy, Rémoiville and the outskirts of Montmédy, with particular attention to the upper and lower garages and the bridge.

Battery No. 4, Lieutenant J. R. Hayden commanding, fired 11 rounds into Longuyon and Mangiennes, moved over to Charny and whaled 86 rounds into the railroad yards, tunnel and bridge at Montmédy, the cross roads at Louppy and a garage between Louppy and Rémoiville. They had some trouble with this gun when the forward edge of the firing platform sank some sixteen inches, tipping the jacks supporting the seat of the mount at a dangerous angle, so it was taken out of action on November 3d.

Battery No. 5 fired 112 rounds into Longuyon and Mangiennes between Oct. 13th and the hour of the Armistice. Lieutenant\* R. S. Savin and Lieutenant Commander J. L. Rogers were its Battery Commanders through this period.

This terrific strafing of Montmédy probably comes as close to being what hung the actual knockout on the whiskers of the kaiser as any one single act that can be named. No less a personage than the ex-Crown Prince himself told me in Berlin at the Olympics in 1936 that "three terrific cannon shot in succession hurled into Montmédy really ended the war." Many more were fired, he said, but the first three were enough. He ought to know. That was his headquarters at the time.

The first shot, he said, blew a hole seventy feet wide in the center of the town and "deep enough to put a church in." The second obliterated his headquarters, he said, which was all right, because nobody was in it. But the third was the one that really did the business. It scored a direct hit on the Mézières-Sedan railroad, not only wrecking the track but blowing out a huge piece of fill.

That was the blow that killed father, for that was the last supply line the Germans had. With that gone, there was nothing to do but surrender. The shelling continued, he said, but the rest was superfluous. I didn't know who owned the guns until I began delving into these records.

From this notable testimony, it thus veritably appears that the only unit of the United States Navy that ever fought on dry land is the answer to that time-honored facer, "WHO WON THE WAR?"

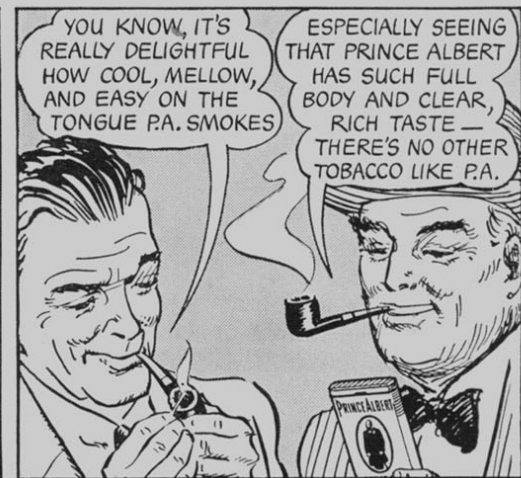
# OL' JUDGE ROBBINS



IN RECENT LABORATORY "SMOKING BOWL" TESTS, PRINCE ALBERT BURNED

## 86 DEGREES COOLER

THAN THE AVERAGE OF THE 30 OTHER OF THE LARGEST-SELLING BRANDS TESTED— COOLEST OF ALL!



## GET IN THE SWIM WITH COOLER, MILDER SMOKING

YOU BET PRINCE ALBERT IS MILDER— IT BURNS COOLER— AND IT DRAWS EASY, EVEN!

MEET THE RICH BODY AND AROMA OF P.A.'S CHOICE TOBACCO! IT'S NO-BITE TREATED!

ROLL-YOUR-OWNERS! P.A. IS CRIMP CUT FOR FAST ROLLING, TOO — MILD, TASTY FOR 'MAKIN'S SMOKES

PRINCE ALBERT CRIMP CUT LONG BURNING PIPE AND CIGARETTE TOBACCO

THE 50 pipefuls of

# K.O. by Sailor Guns

-the last of seven pages-

eleven days after the Armistice, on November 22d, with a great puffing and huffing, his entire five trains rolled proudly back from the front to our gun park, dropped anchor and their heroes debarked. Over came the admiral looking for our G-1, Major Harry Goodier.

"Major," said he, "we're pulling out in a week, and I want to give my boys a blow-out. I need a little music and I'd like to hire a hall."

Goodier was his man. He arranged for the admiral to rent the local theatre, and he took over his own regimental band, which happened to be a corker, to play for the sailors.

The admiral, at length, got up before his men. He was all officer now, immaculately groomed, serious, dignified and impressive. Carefully he sketched the history of their outfit from the first to the last and the compliments he showered

upon them were truly magnificent. He said in the name of the nation and the Navy, he officially thanked them for as fine and gallant a job as fighting men ever did.

"And as for myself," he concluded, "I can only thank you for the privilege of having been associated not as commander, but as shipmate, with the greatest group of sailors that ever wore the Navy Blue. God bless you. That's all."

"No, it isn't," shouted a young C.P.O. who leaped upon the stage, "We've got something we want to say, too!"

Then, for the men of the command, he gave it right back to the admiral, saying there wasn't an enlisted man in the entire five batteries who wouldn't remember Old Cy Plunkett affectionately, proudly and respectfully to the end of his days, who wasn't richer for having known him, who didn't regard him as a

personal friend and a leader of the sort men never forget.

Then from under a blanket, they produced an enormous loving cup inscribed to Old Cy from his soldiering sailors.

He stood there uncertainly for perhaps a minute.

His eyes filled.

He swallowed once or twice and then said, "Boys, we'll christen this God damned thing in Paris. Every man in the outfit has two days' leave. If any of you needs money, see me. Dismissed!"

The admiral, like the general, was gathered to his fathers several years ago, but both research and retrospect seem to attest that the unique A.E.F. chapter he wrote with those massive 14-inch rifles is not only unparalleled in all our history of arms, but is the real bravura passage of the war we won—only to lose the peace that succeeded it.

AUGUST, 1940

## The American LEGION MAGAZINE

VOL. 29, No. 2



OldMagazineArticles.com