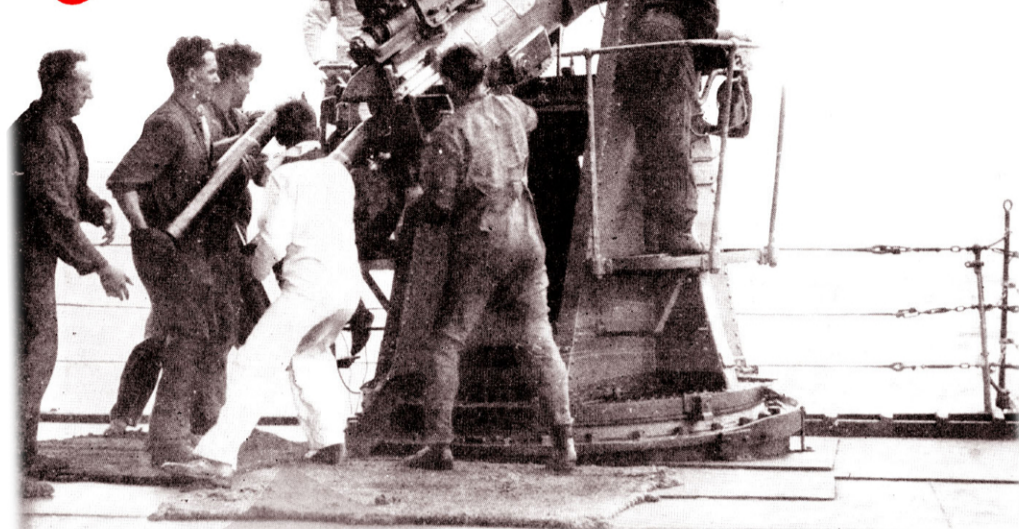


*I was there!*



British tars aboard the aircraft carrier Furious let go at a hostile plane

**A FAMOUS WAR CORRESPONDENT TELLS OF HIS EXPERIENCES WITH THE ALLIED ARMIES AND THE BRITISH FLEET**

*By*

**FREDERICK PALMER**

**N**O ONE can understand as well as you veterans of 1917-'18 what I have to tell. I was seeing with your eyes. You were there in the spirit of memory as I rode over the roads where we had marched and over our battlefields.

Over there—Then and Now. The Then to us had been the period from the training camps to the days when our drives clinched the victory. Some of us saw the Rhine. The Now for all of us is the tragedy of a world in which the sword has been unsheathed, and millions face conditions worse than death.

For my Now of this story I shall start with a column of marching French soldiers I saw out of a car window on my way from Rome to Paris late in February. They were swinging along just as we did some twenty-two years ago.

Possibly it would be a surprise to you that they were not in horizon blue, but in khaki. Except the air forces both the French and British armies were in khaki. Protective coloration is not important to the visible airdromes and the pilot in the visible plane. In their smart, trim light blue the aviation lot were the "candy boys" in what a well-dressed soldier would wear.

I shall not forget that first Sunday in Paris, the first Sunday of a belated spring. Many soldiers were on leave in the capital and throughout the land. In Paris they were walking the Boulevards and along the Seine with their sweethearts, wives and families, and sitting around café tables. You have the picture without further words.

Six months of war, and not a single bomb had been dropped on Paris—no great bombing raids by either army—just reconnaissance flights and the "dog-

## *I Was There!*

fights" in the air with which we were familiar. It was war, yet it was not war.

No such steady drain of casualties as the ambulances brought in from the trenches in the quietest periods all through the World War. A few trickled in from the clash of patrols in No Man's Land.

I spoke to a man in uniform who wore the World War ribbon, and, telling him I had been in France in our Army in 1918, I asked if I might join his group around the café table.

"Oui, oui, mon ami. This is my wife, this my uncle and his wife, and this my youngest son."

American soldiers had been billeted in his mother's house in Lorraine. She was very fond of one called Jim. But, without knowing Jim's family name, we agreed it was no use trying to identify him among all the Jims in the A. E. F.

"My oldest son, he is in a good place," said the veteran. "He is in the Maginot Line. That's the place to be, under thick roofs of cement—better than our old dugouts, *hein?*"

"And you?" I asked.

"I am in the reserve—guard duty. In case of a big battle I might be in it on the front line again. But the youngsters think we old fellows are back numbers. We had no Maginot Line. The youngsters are bored by marking time. I'm not. I know what real war is. I pray they may never know."



*A German tank "Somewhere in Belgium" detours around a dynamitted road.*

But they were to know—and how!

Ride out with me in a car, in those days when winter was drawing to a close, over familiar ground to our old Lorraine sector.

Ruined villages and towns long since rebuilt, but otherwise here was the France the A.E.F. knew in war time. The gates were lowered long before the train arrived at the crossings. Estaminets, villages, farmhouses with the familiar manure piles, and the people were the same.

Again I went to a little restaurant in a back street where Madame had served me when I had a billet nearby.

"My, but you have kept young," I said when I received the same old greet-

## *I Was There!*

ing.

"That was my mother."

The mother, a gray-haired likeness of the daughter, appeared in the doorway. Both laughed merrily at the joke.

They felt quite secure, as did all the people I met—secure behind the wonderful Maginot Line. The door was fast locked against the ancient enemy. It was Security, the most treasured word in the language.

The French might be given to holding to their old ways, but into that long rampart they had incorporated everything engineering skill and scientific defense could devise. It was called impregnable. It looked so—as much so as a sheer ten-foot stone wall with a top of broken glass against scaling by a small boy who wanted a ripe peach from the orchard it enclosed.

All the set guns in their fixed positions, all the fields of barbed wire and tank obstacles faced the Rhine to meet a frontal attack. Occasionally a sceptic whispered the question, "What if an invading army should get behind the Maginot Line?" which for the most part could fire in only one frontal direction.

And this was to happen.

From France I went to England, where even more than in France it was war and yet no war. It was still being called a phony war and a microphony war. The British were talking about the peace terms after the coming Allied victory. Some favored some kind of a "United States of Europe." Others were for leaving the peace terms to the French: They would fix the Germans so they could not make war again.

The British had their Maginot Line—the sea. They felt secure in the vastly superior power of their navy. At sea there was a grilling, ceaseless siege of war against mines and submarines.

Here was the only active front for an oldtimer to see. I was out on a mine-sweeping trawler and a submarine-hunting destroyer. I assure those of us who guarded the safe passage of our troops through the danger zone in 1917-18, that no way has been found to take the bucks lunges, tosses, plunges and rolls out of a destroyer in a corkscrew sea. Nor has any death ray yet been discovered which will shoot under the waves and burn a hole through a U-boat.

Next, this war tourist of a Legionnaire was back across the English Channel with the British Expeditionary Force in France—the B.E.F. The same British, though they looked strange in their baggy new-style uniform known as "battle

## *I Was There!*

dress" and "Belisha Bags."

They had gone in heavily for tanks and motorization of all kinds. No neigh of an army mule ever welcomed the dawn. No soldier had to walk. All soldiers rode in tanks or on trucks.

I had a look-in at the different types of tanks, at the anti-tank guns and anti-aircraft guns. The British had the last word in modern armament. I did not see much choice between being inside a tank in battle or inside a submarine under a bombardment of depth charges.

Just consider this kind of a war—that is, before war really began. On the British main front line I did not hear a single shot fired. Any soldier who fired one would have created as much commotion as though you shot off a revolver in the main street of your home town. There would have been a rush of M.P.'s to pinch the offender. He would have had time in the hoosegow to reflect on his error.

For no enemy was in front of the main British line, though up in the Saar British troops were between French divisions and did have patrol action. The main British line faced the Belgian frontier. Belgium was a neutral, (*Continued on page 37*) at peace. There were only Belgians to shoot at and if one bullet had hit a Belgian, it would have made an incident to show it was the Allies and not the Germans about to invade Belgium.

This was a strange enough situation, but I pass on to the big surprise. I had the idea, as had the rest of the world, that the mighty Maginot Line had been extended from the end of the French frontier all the way to the English Channel along the Belgian frontier.

But this was not so. The fact that it was not is one feature but not the great one which explains what happened. After the start of the war last September the Allies hastened to make a substitute in extension of the Maginot Line.

Some of us remember how concrete pill boxes for machine guns appeared in the later period of the World War. These were the forerunners of those being built along the Belgian frontier during last winter.

When the British soldiers were not drilling they became day laborers. The only cessation from the grind some had through the winter was when it was too cold to pour concrete to make little pill-boxes for the machine guns and bigger pill-boxes for the big guns of the artillery—hundreds and hundreds of pill boxes, many yet unfinished when the blitzkrieg came.

Other soldiers had a holiday when they got bronchitis, flu, pneumonia, rheumatism or lumbago in the course of the excavations for tank traps or in timbering them.

## *I Was There!*

These tank traps were not the concrete pyramids of the German Siegfried Line or the old railroad rails set perpendicularly in the earth of the Maginot Line. The enemy tank which approached the kind of trap the British were building went down the timbered slope on one side of the deep ditch and then against the perpendicular wall of timbering on the other side which seemed bound to stop it. There were miles upon miles of these timbered pits.

And all this costly, herculean effort was to be waste—utter waste.

Work and drill and life back of the fortified lines continued up to the end of the long lull before the breaking of the storm with the German invasion of Belgium and Holland. Never was there such a lull—never such a storm. Those who went over the top had a likeness in the lull before the lightning barrage and the shell and machine-gun fire they met in their advance.

After the German rush swept over the Dutch and Belgian frontiers—then what? The British sped with tanks, guns and trucks across into Belgium, leaving their new defense line behind them. No longer diggers and concrete pourers, they were eager soldiers off the leash for action at last.

**N**OW, let's look the other side of the new defense line away from the fighting in Belgium which was to become the separate Battle of Flanders. We are at the hinge between the extension and the Maginot Line itself, at Montmédy on the Meuse River near Sedan. Here was the objective toward which we Yanks fought our way in 1918 yard by yard, in the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne. We reached the suburbs of Sedan first in our pursuit of the broken enemy, but left the honor of the entry to the French, since it meant so much to them in memory of the surrender of their army there in the Franco-Prussian War.

In 1940 the Germans had their turn to pay back in kind in the eternal European liquidation of racial and national grudges.

With the troops Hitler had rushed through the helpless little Duchy of Luxembourg he struck at the hinge in an avalanche of force. The French Ninth Army cracked in a rout after failing to destroy the bridges over the Meuse.

This German host had broken the hinge. It poured quickly through the breach it had made. What was before it? A stretch sixty miles in depth undefended too were running extremely short of food.

Then King Leopold surrendered and the weary British sought to fill the resultant gap under a hurricane of fire. For the British only one way out was

## *I Was There!*

left, and that was to leave their guns and tanks and equipment as booty for the enemy and evacuate all of their surviving soldiers they could back to Britain.

Thus two separate battles were raging at the same time, one north and one south of the defense line on which the British had labored through the winter.

The German sweep to the north soon had Arras, the British Army Headquarters town. G. H. Q. too was on the move not to be cut off from the army in Flanders. Telephone lines were broken. There was chaos.

Any attempt to see the battles was handicapped by the raiding tanks and planes. Hospitals which had few patients before the blitzkrieg broke, and were now overwhelmed with the red flood, fell into the enemy's hands. Hospital trains, which had rested idle on sidings through the winter, now with every stretcher occupied, were stalled. One battle was hopeless for the Allies. What of the other?

This the French must fight alone south of Paris. They still had immense numbers of troops in reserve. But could they form them up in time? By now the Maginot Line had been flanked. It was becoming as useless as the extension along the Belgian frontier. The French faced open warfare when all their plans had been made to hold fast in the Maginot Line.

There on the Somme-Aisne Line, where they made their first stand, they had no such trench system as we knew in the World War. The Germans swinging south, after the gap had been cut through to the coast, were pushing forward their infantry behind their tanks in processions of German and commandeered Belgian and Dutch trucks.

The French had time only to dig shallow trenches. They had no barbed wire, in face of the enemy's lightning barrages. They could not get enough reserves up to form or maintain an intact line. There were always gaps or weak points which gave an opening for a rush of tanks, supported by planes, to break through. And that was the story for the French army to the fatal conclusion.

From the start the Germans had the jump. They not only had speed and numbers, but they knew how and where to use the numbers. While the Allies were set for the defensive waiting for the blow, the Germans chose where they should strike blow on blow with their smashing concentrations. They applied the old principles of war with the most modern equipment.

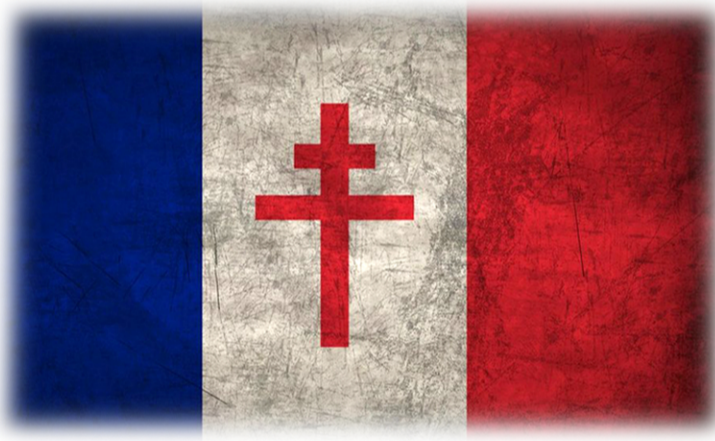
Generalissimo Gamelin gave them the wide-open opportunity to strike the Allied armies in the rear at the same time as in front. Allied soldiers were sacrificed by a blunder which ranks with that of the general who burned the bridges over a

## *I Was There!*

river before his own troops were across.

But what affected me most deeply was how one by one the German avalanche swept over the battle fields we had won and past our cemeteries. First it was Bony. Then it was Fêre-en-Tardenois and so on to the last.

But that does not lessen, it only makes more glowing, the honor we owe our dead and our pride in what we did. The message I bring home is that we have memories which strengthen us in knowing how to live and work for our country. The Now of today is that we have the greatest part to play since 1917-18.



[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)