

May 11, 1919

Ross, the Man Who Edited A War

By Sergt. Alex Woolcott

Imagine the inner feelings of an American newspaperman who, at twenty-seven, found himself the managing editor of one of the most widely read, sworn at and sworn by journals in the world, and who, in the pauses between dashing off an editorial and rejecting 800 manuscripts, had a chance to reflect on the fact that a grateful republic paid him just \$33 a month and found for his services. There you have the ironic situation of Private Harold W. Ross, of Salt Lake City, San Francisco and Paris, who helped bring up "The Stars and Strips" in a way it should go and eventually took over its editorship.

This irony had its light and shades, however. For, while he knew he was the lowest form of human life in the A.E.F. he also knew that there were few generals who wielded half his influence and he must have derived some compensatory amusement from the process of filling his waste bucket with poems painfully composed by colonels or better in their candle-lit billets.

And after all, it was Ross's fault that his privacy remained undisturbed. The 18th Engineers, with which he crossed to France among the first 50,000 confidently sent him to the officers' training school, but he escaped from there wildly and, smelling printers' ink from afar, showed up at the office of the then hatching A.E.F. newspaper, which was destined within a year to reach a circulation of half a million.

Later, when he was asked if he could do his work more advantageously with a commission, he replied that, personally, even a corporal's chevrons would embarrass him painfully, and as for prinking up in Sam Browne belt, he believed that, while the doughboys were ploughing ahead through mud and wire and gas and hell generally, no decent man could feel comfortable who drew a desk job and a commission at the same time, a tactless reply which, by the way, rather disconcerted some of those present. Ross later became exceedingly thorny when he unearthed a plot to pin a decoration on him.

I remember encountering him one morning, sitting tired, dusty and disconsolate on the side of the road along which the wounded men of the 2d Division were being carried out from Belleau Woods. I thought it was cooties troubling him, but found that it was conscience. My inquiries on the subject provokes a flood of expert profanity.

Ross

"*****", he groaned, "at home I was always a non-producer and here, on the battlefield, I am a non-combatant."

Ross is occasionally embarrassed by being referred to as the father of the "Stars and Stripes" war orphans. His innocent connection with that bouncing young family of more than 3,000 French kinds, was, however, only that of founder, director and propagandist of the fund, to which all the ranks of the A.E.F. contributed within less than a year, more than 2,000,000 francs, a sum which tided many a French family over a bitter period. Companies took them for peasants, regiments adopted them by the dozen. General Pershing fathered two and there was many a doughboy that shelled out all his wad, depositing it with the company clerk to forward just before he shouldered his gun to go forward and over the top.

It seems certain that no one man in the A.E.F. had a greater influence on its thought and spirit and that is why certain biographical data are worth recording for future historians.

Harold Wallace Ross, then, worked on newspapers all the way from Hoboken to San Francisco, including such way stations as Atlanta, New Orleans, Paris and Salt Lake City. It is not true, as alleged, that he worked on seventy-eight different American journals, but it is true that, before the war, he was one of those itinerant reporters -- a type that is passing -- who, if he stayed with one city editor more than three months at a time, felt that he was getting into a rut.

He was born in Aspen, Col.

Not even an O. D. issue uniform could prevent his looking like a Bolshevik.

He pronounces annihilated as if it were annie-a-ayed.

His French was by all odds the worst in the American expeditionary forces. After eighteen months in France, it is true, he had acquired a vocabulary of seven distinct French words, but, unfortunately, only four of these were easily recognized by the natives when he spoke them. He never went to college and vaguely distrusts all who did.

He regards as illiterate all people who are not familiar with every line ever written by Herbert Spenser.

The men who worked with him on "The Stars and Stripes" considered him the salt of the earth.

He wears No. 11 shoes.