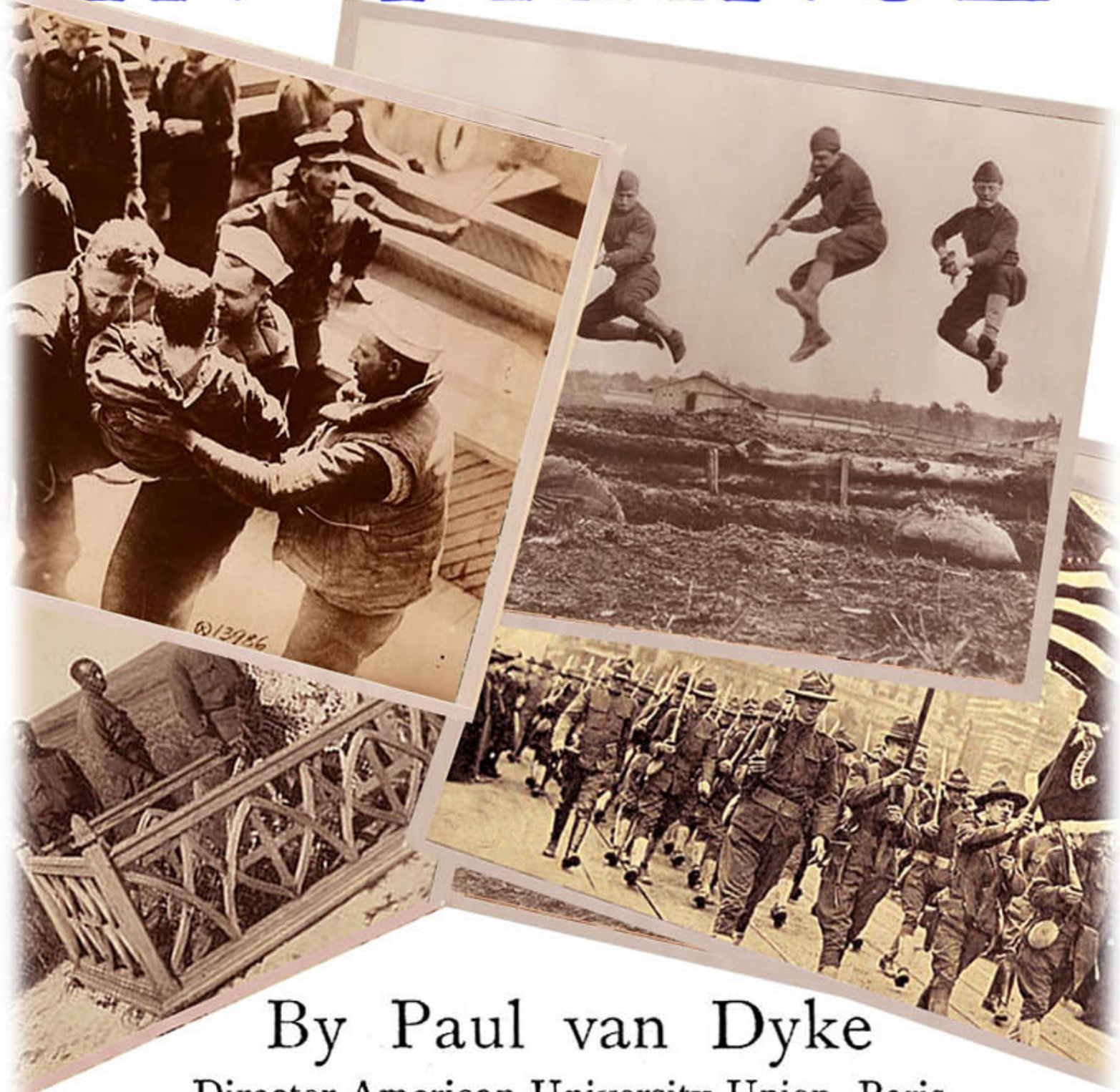


SNAP-SHOTS IN FRANCE



By Paul van Dyke

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LITTLE dining-room of the hotel in a city not far from the line—the building across the way disembowelled by a shell, the windows of the café boarded up or filled with muslin, four very young officers whose shoulder-bars were absolutely untarnished, dining at a table. Across the room two boys in khaki, without bars, dining together because discipline kept them from the others. After dinner, standing for an instant by the table as the officers pass out, “Hello, Jack! Hello, Bill! How goes it?” On the street outside a rigid salute, and “Yes, sir.”

A boy of nineteen in a crowded room of a hospital, with a machine-gun bullet through both legs, propped up on pillows, smoking a cigarette while I sit on the edge of the cot. “Oh, those damned Germans can’t fight. Our platoon started out with sixty men in Belleau Wood. After a while there were only fifteen of us left, and our last officer got a bullet in the chest. ‘Boys,’ he said before he passed out, ‘get back to the second line the best way you can; I am done for.’ We started back, and suddenly thirty Germans rushed out of the woods in front of us. I thought it was all over with us until I saw they had no rifles, and their helmets off.

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They put up their hands, crying: '*Comrade.*' We thought we had better split up, so I took three with me. One of them could talk pretty good United States, and he said: 'I have been trying for more than a year to surrender, but this is the first good chance I have had.' When we came to the open field one of the other Germans jabbered to me, pointing off to the left and saying, 'Boom boom!' but I didn't know what he meant, and I wouldn't stop to listen to him, but started across. When we got out into the middle they opened on us with a machine-gun on the left. I got a bullet through the leg. It didn't hurt me much, but felt as if somebody had given me a kick in the shin. I kept on and got another kick in the other leg. Then I dropped down on my hands and knees and began to crawl toward the other side of the field, where I could see our boys lying down and shooting at the edge of the woods. The three Boches got on their hands and knees, too, and crawled along with me. When we got behind our line I tried to stand up—my legs hadn't begun to hurt yet—but I fell down, and our boys said to me, 'How are you going to get back to the dressing-station?' and I said: 'These Boches will take me back.' Our boys said, 'Can you trust them?' and I said: 'If they stood by me out in the field, they will stand by me now.' So one of them took me by each arm, and the other helped behind, and we made a couple of miles back to the dugout. My leg was hurting pretty bad by this time. When we got into it there was an American there, wounded and shell-shocked, and out of his head. He jumped up and tried to kill the Boches. I could not do anything, but the surgeon threw him down and sat on him until he got quiet. All the time the surgeon was fixing my legs one of the Boches helped me, and he kept looking at me as if he was sorry for me, for it hurt pretty bad, and then they put me into the ambulance and they all nodded good-by to me. I'd like to know what became of those Boches."

Three khaki uniforms meet under the shadow of a church. "Y. M. C. A., where is your joint here? We want to get something to eat."

"I don't know, boys; I just blew in last night, missed my connection, and got hung up overnight. I saw a good-looking restaurant just off the square back there."

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"Suppose we can find it? Why the devil do they build these streets so narrow and winding?"

There follows a three minutes' explanation of the effect of the existence of a circle of wall on the building of towns in the fifteenth century——

"Thank you, not much like Texarkana! But say, sir, that main place with the gilded iron gates at the four corners is some public square." (One of the most noted monuments in the world of the eighteenth century.)

"Yes, boys, not much like Texarkana, is it?"

"No, I guess Texarkana isn't in the same class—well, so long, sir, we got to find something to eat. Much obliged."

A military salute tempered by a smile, and the group of three disperses.

Here is one on papier jogle from the French machine which cannot be transferred to an English plate:

"J'ai rencontré hier mon ancien valet de chambre qui était en uniforme. Je lui ai dit: 'Eh bien, Jacques, il paraît que les Américains sont épatants.'

"'Mon Dieu! Oui, Monsieur, ils sont même plus épatants que nous!'"

Here is a little negative taken with a French machine and repeated on kodak paper: "I had a letter from my son the other day, overflowing with joy. He was next to an American battalion, just off the railroad, and attacked by the Boches. They couldn't stop the Boches by their fire, so when they were close to their lines he saw the American officers spring up and leap over the little breastwork behind which they were lying. The whole battalion was with them in an instant, and they ran forward into the open field to meet the Boches, man to man, with the bayonet. All that was left of the attacking force ran back to the woods like rabbits."

Here is a self-portrait of a gallant little gentleman who refused the chance of a commission and went into the ranks, "because he wanted to learn the game from the bottom up." He sleeps in a soldier's grave, but when he was in hospital, recovering from gas, he wrote: "I had a few burns on my body, and my eyes were very bad for a few days, but I feel fine now, and it is certainly a great relief to be where I can enjoy the beauty of

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France in the springtime, without crawling along like a worm and camouflaging myself like a Mexican sand-lizard—not to mention the joy of a real bath after nearly two months of Christian Science baths. You see, a canteen supply of water a day doesn't allow for many plunges."

The major lay on his back with his wounded leg arranged in an easy position. "Well, I never was much on prayer-meetings, but I led one about a week ago."

"How's that?"

"Oh, when I got hit I knew I was knocked out. So I dragged myself under a tree and lay flat behind the trunk, to get some shelter from the machine-guns that were sweeping the ground like a dozen brooms. After a good while a man crawled up to me and tried to stop the bleeding, and he wouldn't keep down flat, no matter what I said, and then he got it through the chest, and fell on top of me, and after a little while he rolled off and lay beside me. I couldn't bandage him, and so I got over on my side, put my arm across him, and kept the hand pressed against his wound to stop the blood anyway. The shells were falling all around us like hailstones in a storm. He was a very young lad and he began to quiver all over, and he called out, 'Oh, major, major, what shall we do?' and I said: 'Boy, we can't do much. Pray to God, boy, pray like you never prayed before.' And he said, 'Major, I ain't used to praying,' and so I began to say the Lord's Prayer, and he said it after me, and we just lay there saying the Lord's Prayer together while I was trying to hold his wound with my hand and stop the blood. I don't know exactly what happened after that, but I kept hearing the shells going over us and hitting the branches of the tree. We lay there, I guess, all day. It must have been nearly night when the stretcher-bearers came up and got us both. I never heard whether he lived or died, but he must have been pretty nearly gone by that time, for I was pretty nearly gone myself.

A captain walking about among the flower-beds of a hospital court. He limped on a stick held in his left hand, and his right arm, in a wire cage, hung in a sling. It had been many days since he had shaved, but the beard on his chin was not very heavy.

"Well, captain, you got it pretty bad.

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What was it, shell or machine-gun?"

"Both."

"What regiment?"

"—— Infantry. We fought with the Marines in Belleau Wood."

"How did you take your company forward? In skirmish line, I suppose."

"Yes, at five-yard intervals, and it was hard to keep the line because we ran into very thick brush, and the men often had to lump up and form again on the other side of the thickets. Some of them wanted to go ahead too fast, but considering the difficult circumstances, they dressed pretty well on me in the centre, and my lieutenants and sergeants were on the job. The Boches had a lot of repeating rifles up in the trees, worked by two men, but as soon as we got behind them they were ready to climb down, because they couldn't swing all the way around."

"How about the food?"

"Pretty tough. They gave us two days' emergency rations, bacon and hard bread, and we went ahead so fast we had to make it last four days. We ate our bacon raw. We didn't dare to make a fire, because if we did the Germans would shell the smoke. The worst was the water. We sent a man back with a bunch of canteens swung on a pole, but he got into shell-fire, and came back to us with a lot of canteens half-filled, and a lot of them lost. But we cleaned up the woods in our front and licked the Germans, and we can do it again."

It was a beautiful summer day when I left the hot air of the highroad, filled with the fine white dust ground up by unnumbered three-ton trucks, for the beautiful beech-woods behind the headquarters of the —— division. Deeper and deeper I plunged into the coolness, watching the sunlight that filtered through the green roof, high above my head, to dapple the purple shadows with golden spots, or to bring out the dull red of the slim, straight trunks of the plantations of pine. The hours passed in a half-dream of rest and beauty, thousands of miles from my past life and a universe away from the terrible present. And then suddenly I awoke to realize that the crash of an occasional gun was nearer than it ought to be to a man who had no business in the front line, and no order to enter it. So I started back. But which way? I knew the lines curved around me in a horseshoe, but which way was the opening between the heels? An hour passed and I could

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only guess where I was, for now even the occasional guns were silent. Suddenly there rose over the top of the hill a khaki cap. I ran around the shoulder and saw an American officer riding slowly along a wood road. A waving of the arms and a shout and he halted. When I got up to him I asked: "Which way do I go for ——?"

"Back along this road," he said, eyeing me the while intently and curiously. My coat was off so that he could not see what I was, and my appearance there certainly demanded explanation. "I am Doctor Paul van Dyke, of Princeton University, and"—the captain was springing from the saddle on the side away from me, and I had visions of a revolver coming around the horse's head, with an order to show my papers. Instead it was an outstretched hand. "Well, this is luck. Ever since you came over the hill I have been wondering where I had seen your face before. I used to be in your class eight years ago. It's a long way to Princeton. How in thunder did you get here, alone, close to the lines and just behind my battery?"

A snap-shot taken by a non-com. A company marching by files on each side of the road not far from the Marne. A mounted French officer appears around the turn and rides up to the captain, who checks the advance of his patrols and his column by signals. In somewhat broken English the French officer says: "Why do you go ahead on this road? You are going toward death."

"Well, I guess that is what we came to meet, wasn't it?"

"But there is a strong line ahead of you, and it is the Prussian Guard."

"The Prussian Guard? What the hell is that?"

A salute, a wave or two of the arm, and the column moves on.

The nightly war council was meeting in Room No. —, of Ward X, of Red Cross Hospital No. —. The West Point major, with a bullet through his knee, lay flat. The ex-lawyer major of the O. R. C., whose scalp was cut to pieces by shell fragments, sat up in the other bed with his head propped against the pillows and his brilliant eyes shining out under the heavy white bandages. The lieutenant, with a downy mustache and one arm in a sling, perched on the table; the school-teacher captain, from Idaho, reclined

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across the foot of the major's bed, with his heavily wrapped foot resting comfortably on his stacked crutches, and the Y. M. C. A. man, who was trying to get over trench dysentery, lounged across the chair. The turbaned major was speaking in his deliberate, judicial way. "My men didn't take many prisoners between the Marne and the Vesle. You see the first day we got into the fight there was a machine-gun in a little patch of woods that was off by itself. It got a good many of us before we found out where it was. But I had some pretty good shots in my battalion, and not long after we had spotted it they crept around a bit and one of them climbed up into a tree, and the machine-gun stopped firing altogether. Soon after two Germans dashed out of the woods, one after the other, the first one waving a red flag. They ran across a piece of open field into the thicket where the machine-gun was, and came out carrying a wounded man. Then they went back and brought another. My men didn't fire a shot at them, and they cheered the end of the second trip. But the next day when our advance was over we were counter-attacked in the afternoon, and had to fall back from the German line we had taken. Toward evening our chaplain came to me and said: 'Major, I hear there are twelve wounded men in a dugout up there where we fell back. Give me stretchers and bearers, and I will go and get them.' So I said: 'If you heard there were twelve there will be more before you get there. I will give you fifteen stretchers and thirty bearers.'

"He worked around a long way through the woods and found fourteen wounded men in the dugout. He formed a line of his stretcher-bearers and started back across the field. As soon as he got well out into the open the Germans opened on him with all they had, and I didn't expect a man to escape, but they came in on the run and got off with a couple more slightly wounded. After that I noticed my men didn't bring in prisoners; perhaps the Boches quit surrendering."

The West Point major said: "Humph!" The Y. M. C. A. man said: "Perhaps!" The young lieutenant had opened his mouth for some less vague remarks when the night nurse shoved open the door. "It is nearly ten o'clock," she said, and the war council broke up.

Taken by a Red Cross nurse from the

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lower Mississippi, with an accent as soft and smooth as the current of the great river on whose banks she was born.

“Well, boy” (this to a six-foot colored infantryman), “what you doing here so far from home?”

A sudden gleam of ivory which seemed to run all the way around his head.

“Well, ma’am, you see, this fool n****r always did have more curiosity than good sense.”

The captain was a very ardent trout-fisherman, and even amid the hardships and horrors of war he was always talking about the pleasures of following the brooks of Vermont and New Hampshire in springtime. He was standing by the roadside after the Argonne drive, watching some detachments of prisoners go by. First came a stalwart little bunch of powerfully built Bavarians, and after them crawled feebly a file of worn-out old men of the Landwehr and slender, white-faced lads of the last class called to the colors. The captain watched a moment in silence, then his lip curled in scorn, and as he swung on his heel to walk away: “Oh, hell,” he said, “they ought to throw them back under six inches.”

We could see the shells breaking into thin wisps of brown smoke above the top of the high ridge in front when we got out of our car and started along and across the little depression between us and its rather steep back slope. We got up onto it and moved along the lines of our supporting infantry, crouched in little holes they had scratched into the bank close to the top. As we passed along behind them they turned and looked at us with a very active curiosity. None of them spoke a word, but every eye said: “What the hell are you doing here?” This passing curiosity was quite evidently a much stronger force in their minds than the prospect of going forward in a short time under a possible German barrage. We climbed the steep bank and passed in front of them till we came up level with our foremost guns, a battery of 75’s. One of the staff-officers with me said to the other, “It is just as well not to stay too close to these guns,” and we moved ahead and to the right, some three hundred yards each way. Just where the other slope of the hill began to lead down from the top of the long flat ridge there was a convenient hole about four feet deep, evidently dug for an observer’s post.

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We got into it and waited. The two men on either side of me attentively consulted their wrist-watches and bade me watch the opposite hills across the Vesle, where the German guns were. I heard the distant whirring of motors and turned to see three aeroplanes moving toward us on the right. "Are those Germans?" I asked. "Perhaps," said my comrades as they crouched into the hole until their steel helmets were level with the top. Just at this moment a bird rose into the air from the grass close beside us, and as it climbed straight upward I recognized that it was a skylark. "The show is beginning," said the major, and the lark began to sing almost above our heads. The next instant the battery of 75's on our left opened, and a shell from a heavier battery half a mile behind us went screaming over us, but the brave little songster kept on singing, and while from all around us the great chorus of our guns grew and swelled, I could hear his clear, tinkling notes ringing through the enormous din as the vibrant voice of the soprano carries through the orchestra and the great chorus. Nor did he sink down into silence until the crash of guns seemed almost to rock the very sky.

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