

Men Who Will Never Fight Again

In Their Hospital Wards Invalids of the Battle-Fields of France Turn From News of Ethiopia to the World Series—Mark Twain Looked Down the Years

A story on the aftermath of war, by Joseph Mitchell, staff-writer, was printed on October 7 by the New York World-Telegram. It follows:

The tall, red-haired Italian-American had only one arm; shrapnel in the Argonne tore off the other at the shoulder-joint. The little Negro was sightless, blind as a rock, and there were ugly pink scars on his brown face.

The man they called Jumpy had only one leg, and it appeared to pain him to get his breath because of a little bit of gas he inhaled one morning eighteen years ago in France. He said he believes that with one pull on a cigarette you can get more smoke in your mouth than he got gas, but it still hurts. He said it hurts him a lot worse than an aching tooth hurts, or a terrible headache, and sometimes it hurts for days, hours on end.

The Italian and the one-legged man were playing checkers in the convalescent ward at United States Veterans' Hospital No. 81, at 130 West Kingsbridge Road, in the upper Bronx [New York City]. The blind Negro sat on one of the iron beds with his head in his hands. He sits like that for hours on end, not moving a muscle. There were two newspapers on the bed, and both were turned to the sports-pages. The two checker-players stared at the board.

"Have you been reading much about the war in Ethiopia?" asked the reporter.



A Place in the Sun

—Hutton in the Philadelphia Inquirer

Takes No Interest

"We don't have no interest in that war," said the man who swallowed gas eighteen years ago in France.

"So far as I'm concerned they can blow Europe to hell. I feel sorry for those poor Italian dopes and those dopes in Ethiopia getting their guts shot out and their heads blown off so a bunch of rich guys can make more money. Poor dopes."

"In one day they killed 1,700 men, and they wounded 3,000 over there," said the Italian-American.

"Yeah," said the gassed man.

"Where is Ethiopia?" said the blind Negro.

"That is a lot of men to kill in one day," said the Italian-American, "but that is just the beginning. They just started now."

"We killed a lot more than that in one day in our war," said the blind Negro. "There was millions killed in our war. We bloodied up the whole world."

"Would you go to war again if you were able?" the reporter asked.

Through With War

"By God," said the one-legged man, "I would not go to war for nothing or nobody. They could come over here, even Japan, and take the whole damned country and I would not go out and get my head blowed off. It wouldn't be any worse than it is now anyway."

"It is better to be in the Army than starving to death without no job," said the Italian-American.

The one-legged man lit a cigarette for the Negro and handed it to him.

"A man that goes to war ain't quite bright," said the Negro. "He don't show good judgment."

Little Discussion

The men did not want their names in the paper. They said there is little discussion in the whole hospital about the war. The day fighting started everybody talked about it, but now they read about the World Series and hardly ever mention the war.

One night a man said something about "those damned Wops" and an Italian veteran heard it and picked up one of the cranks they use to raise and lower the hospital beds and said he would knock the man's brains out if he didn't take "Wop" back. The man did, and there was no fight.

There is more talk about the war in the wards where men are permanently confined to their beds. They lie in bed with radio head-phones on their heads, listening. Each bed in the hospital has a head-set attached to it.

"If you want to see the guys that know about war go upstairs to Ward 2-South," said the one-legged man. "They are the guys that don't leave here until they take them out in a box. Shell shock. And look in 4-South, where they got the guys with no jaws, and their eyes and ears eaten off,

WWI Invalids

and look at some of the guys with tuberculosis they got after gas burned up their lungs.

“Look at the T. B.’s and ask them if they would fight again.

“Those are the guys the public never sees. They never go out of the hospital. Every once in a while one of them goes off his nut, crazy as a bedbug, thinks he’s fighting again, and they transfer him to another hospital.

“Thousands of those guys lying in beds are still fighting in France.

What Public Sees

“All the public sees is a guy on crutches now and then. It don’t make no difference. They can drum up another war and young fellows will trot off with smiles on their faces to get themselves blowed to hell. It’s a lot of fun.”

The reporter was permitted to walk down the corridor in 2-South, but he was not allowed to ask questions. There was a man standing in the corridor in his bathrobe. He stared straight ahead, vacantly, and he was trembling all over. An orderly came up and guided him to his bed. A doctor said something to him. It took him long minutes to answer; the three or four words he said were uttered with great effort.

The doctor said his brain is sound, but his nerves will not obey its commands. There did not seem to be much reason to ask him what he thought of the Italo-Ethiopian War.

Some of the beds in the ward had sideboards on them so the men would not fall to the floor. They have no control over themselves. Some are able to make reed baskets. They have a room at the end of the corridor in which they sit and make the baskets.

Outside the leaves on the maples in the eighteen acres of hospital grounds were yellow and red, and on Kingsbridge Road kids were throwing a football about and yelling, and on the blue Hudson two young men were rowing a boat, and inside, huddled around the radiators, five middle-aged men whose nerves had been blasted out of coordination by screaming shells were struggling with reed baskets.

It takes them hours to do the work a child can do in no time. It made one furious watching them struggle with the lengths of reed, trembling and fumbling

Vacant Stares

Walking along the corridor one could see the men in their beds, staring vacantly at the ceiling. Their cheeks were sunken and pale. One man screamed and his hands reached up wildly.

One man was smiling, but his eyes were as startled as if he were watching a hand-grenade with the pin out.

“Hello, doctor,” he said, smiling.

The doctor patted the trembling man on the shoulder.

WWI Invalids

"You're looking better to-day," he said.

The man smiled. Later the doctor said that many of these men are discharged in the summer months, but when winter comes their old wounds begin bothering them again and they come back. There are men with great gaping wounds which never will heal. They will not close up.

There are men who have to be fed like little children. They have no control of their muscles.

In all, there are 836 men in the big hospital, and many will never go through its doors alive again.

"No," the doctor said, "I have heard very little talk about the war among the patients. They don't seem to want to talk about it."

The Wise Mark Twain

Three days before the story above appeared, the Editor of The World-Telegram thumbed through Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger," and reprinted the following paragraphs on the motive for war:

There has never been a just one, never an honorable one—on the part of the instigator of the war.

I can see a million years ahead, and this rule will never change in so many as half a dozen instances.

The loud little handful—as usual—will shout for the war. The pulpit will, warily and cautiously, object—at first; the great, big, dull bulk of the nation will rub its sleepy eyes and try to make out why there should be a war, and will say, earnestly and indignantly, "It is unjust and dishonorable, and there is no necessity for it."

Then the handful will shout louder. A few fair men on the other side will argue and reason against the war with speech and pen, and at first will have a hearing and be applauded; but it will not last long; those others will outshout them, and presently the antiwar audiences will thin out and lose popularity.

Speakers Stoned

Before long you will see this curious thing: the speakers stoned from the platform and free speech strangled by hordes of furious men who in their secret hearts are still at one with those stoned speakers—as earlier—but do not dare to say so.

And now the whole nation—pulpit and all—will take up the war-cry, and shout itself hoarse, and mob any honest man who ventures to open his mouth; and presently such mouths will cease to open.

Self-Deception

Next the statesmen will invent cheap lies, putting the blame upon the nation that is attacked, and every man will be glad of those conscience-soothing falsities, and will diligently study them, and refuse to examine any refutations of them; and thus he will by and by convince himself that the war is just, and will thank God for the better sleep he enjoys after this process of grotesque self-deception.