

A NEW VERDUN: French Veterans Commemorate Battle With Peace Bid to Forgiven Foes



Parades—military and civilian—commemorate Bastille Day every July 14 in Paris

Twenty years ago, 200,000 Frenchmen threw their mangled bodies across the Germans' path to Verdun. The cry of the dying—"Ils ne passeront pas!" ("They shall not pass!")—rang round the world. On July 14, 1916—Bastille Day, the Frenchman's Fourth—the armies of Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm, depleted by 300,000, were ready to cry "Kamerad."

This week, French veterans of that gory battle said "Comrade," stretched their hands across the Rhine, the Alps, the English Channel and the Atlantic to bid former allies and forgiven foemen to join in celebrating Bastille Day at Verdun. Veterans of all nations were to be the guests of the *Union Federal des Anciens Combattants*, French equivalent of the American Veterans of Foreign Wars.

The Plains of the Wœvre are no longer strewn with whitening bones; the bloated trench rats that scratched among the battered mess-tins and rusting bayonets on shell-scythed Dead Man's Hill are long since dead; Nature's healing salve of foliage has mended the scarred slopes of the Côte de Meuse; forgotten, save in the formal ceremonies of commemoration, are Joffre and von Falkenhayn, Petain, von Mackensen and Nivelle. The heroes of this week's *bistro* ballads are simple soldiers.

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Trivial Puppy—Among the guests, too, were expected Serb and Hungarian veterans who had forgotten the Siege of Belgrade, but remembered the Christmas they were permitted to pass through each other's lines to their families. And if any stalwarts of *Uncle Sam's* Second Division were there, they must have chatted over their beers, not of the bloody feud in Belleau Wood, but of their mascot puppy who, missing for an agonizing twenty-four hours, returned from the Prussian trenches festooned with sausages and propaganda post-cards. On such important trivialities a soldier's mind turns, when war is forgotten.

Sometimes the war was forgotten while it was still going on. The tragicomic devices by which enemies contrived to be friends whenever the big guns cooled between slaughtering salvos have been immortalized by Bruce Bairnsfather, the Scottish soldier-caricaturist who created *Old Bill*.

Christmas, 1914, on the Somme, homesick Yorkshiremen and sentimental Württembergers threw down their rifles and met in the strip of frozen mud between trenches to laugh and sing Yule carols, exchange souvenirs, cigarettes, pints of stout for liters of *Liebfraumilch*. The same spirit, French hosts hoped, would pervade the greatest mass get-together of veterans ever attempted.

Only one type of veteran was not welcome this week—the *pediculus vestimenti*. Cootie to doughboys, *laus* to Heinies, *toto* to *poilus*—the marauding, gray-backed trench louse served through every battle, fought on every front and behind the front, was never decorated but decorated the hides of millions.

Few of this week's gathering recalled that Harold Peat, the Canadian volunteer who wrote "Private Peat" and other soul-stirring essays, confessed to weeping when he first discovered that the seams of his pants, tunic, underwear and leggings were tenanted by voracious little beasts determined to rob him of his ultimate drop of blood. Or the somewhat more philosophic Scots Guard who, stooping to flick a cootie from his hairy shin, thereby dodged a sniper's bullet, and in gratitude returned the louse to its bony pasture.

But veterans of the American 35th Division, if any Kansas or Missouri Guardsmen were present, could well remember the night three members of the 137th U. S. Infantry's crack band scattered a thousand crawlers impartially through the luggage of an efficient but unloved staff officer. And the remnants of every regiment in the War could recount endless anecdotes of seam-hunting, delousing, sudden twinges that sent full mess-tins flying into the air, nights over flickering candles, popping the little varmints between deft thumb-nails, or frying them in hot tallow. No peace mission ever bridged the yawning chasm of misunderstanding between enemies as democratically as the cootie, which played no favorites between beer-fattened Rhinelanders and work-lean *Provençals*.

Called together at historic Fort Douaumont, captured and retaken a score of times during those dark days of 1916, to swear a solemn oath to work for peace, the disillusioned survivors of their fathers'

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folly found Verdun changed, yet unchanged and changeless.

Before the city itself, stone and concrete have perpetuated the serried trenches from which their comrades sallied forth to die for King, country and a few cents a day. Monuments here and there commemorate some gallant stand at arms.

The famed "Trench of Bayonets" is there, where, one ghastly night, a German shell-burst rent the sky, burying an entire French company in its trench till only the tips of the fixed bayonets showed above the fresh-dug grave

New Era—True, such trenches as remain are no longer half-filled with mud and water and reeking with the stench of unburied dead. The neat, even slats of duckboard over which dowagers and old men and children have tripped by tourist tens of thousands are a far cry from the poor make-shifts of *poilu* and Prussian Guard, who squatted in damp and shivering heaps over their charcoal fires, warming the "slum" that came, irregularly and always cold, from other mud-holes in the rear.

But under the newly planted trees, those who cared to scratch with their walking sticks could find belt buckles and chips of rotting leather that brought back memories of veterans who could not meet in 1936. Every foot of it, for them, the Road Back.

For the French, the road back began at Bar-le-Duc, famed now for its gooseberry jam, famed then as the southern terminus of that life-line of panting, reeling *camions* that kept the beleaguered *poilus* from starving. Meeting there last Saturday, the French veterans were carried by truck over the "Sacred Way" to Douaumont. Silent, forbidden even to smoke, the living mounted guard over the 12,000 dead beneath the tiny fort that was for France the locked door to Paris. For the quarter million nameless dead at Vaux, Le Mort-Homme and Hill 304, taps were sounded.

Less solemn was the entertainment to be had when veterans filed slowly back from the flood-lighted Douaumont Ossuary to the ancient Roman town on the heights of the placid Meuse. There, in numberless *zincs* and *estaminets*, one-time enemies were free to sample the *vin ordinaire* of the Department, or rout the July heat with beer or champagne. There they could have their fill of stories and jokes: the one about the practical Highlander who boasted of his prowess in trafficking for two eggs in the French language. "Ye juist say 'twa offs,' and the silly aud fule gies ye three, and ye gie her one back." More probable and more numerous, the lighter and lustier jests about the legion *Mesdemoiselles d'Armentières*.

And songs, too—"Da Kommt der Nürische Franzose" (There Come the Foolish Frenchmen), "Madelon," "Smile, Smile, Smile," "Cadet Roussel," "Ich Hab' Mein Herz in Heidelberg Verloren" and "Hinkey Dinkey Parley-Voo."

It was the first French Socialist Government's bid for peace, a counter-attack against the mounting tide of war talk by the generation that has not forgotten.