

The American
LEGION

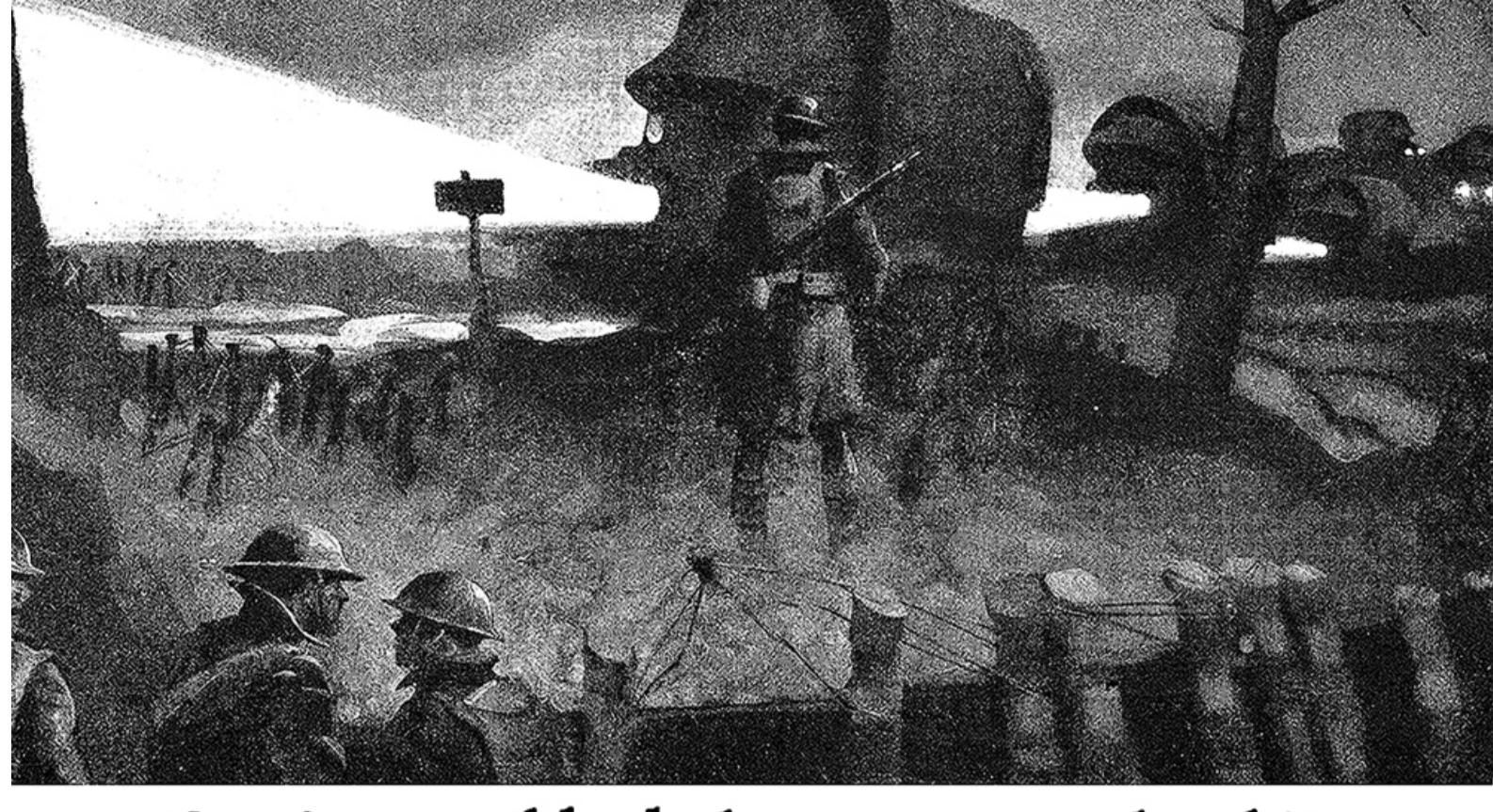
M A G A Z I N E

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By Amico J. Barone



Camions suddenly began to streak white beams down shell-smashed roads. Someone had ordered the drivers to turn on their headlights

LIGHTS!

The magic word sped like a tongue of flame racing through dry grass. Camions suddenly began to streak white beams down shell-smashed roads—roads whose only night light for years had been that shed by the moon and the stars and the angry, flashing mouths of guns.

We could hardly believe our eyes. Where but a moment before it had meant deadly danger to strike a match in the open, someone had now ordered truck drivers to turn on their headlights. This daring signal to the enemy was flaunted although the heavy rumble of artillery fire still rolled back from a front line but a few kilometers away.

There could be but one explanation. The armistice had come!

The place was Cunel, war-shattered Argonne village. The time was early evening of November 7, 1918. The outfit was the Ninth Field Signal Battalion of the Fifth (Red Diamond) Division.

With the switching on of the lights a frenzy swept over Cunel. Soldiers on all sides shouted: "The war's over!" Rifle and pistols were fired into the air to herald the end.

But the war wasn't over. It was simply the greatest rumor of them all sweeping up to the very front. Flashed to all corners of the earth, it aroused mankind to wild outbursts. It brought relief to countless parents, wives and sweethearts and carried a hope of escape to those men in arms who had thus far eluded death.

It was not surprising that the civilian populace, particularly in America, should have been fooled into a premature celebration, since the press formed an eager and natural channel for the swift dissemination of the false report. What was surprising, however, was that the rumor not only sped up to the front through the unofficial network of communication but that it also influenced someone in authority to issue so radical an order as that which caused those camion headlights to be turned on on that heart-breaking night.

The other day, going through a bundle of wartime letters, I came across one which brought back a sharp memory of that remarkable incident of twenty years ago. Sitting in the wrecked remains of a French villager's home, I had tapped out to my mother on the rattly portable company typewriter a letter which I thought was filled with momentous news. But the letter was never mailed. Soon

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after writing it I slipped it into a diary, and so it found its way to America with me after the war.

The letter, written in Cunel on the evening of November 7, 1918, gives an idea how a weary Yank reacted to the news, fake news, which rocked the world. Here it is:

France, November 7, 1918

7:10 P. M.

Dear Mother:

About an hour ago I heard enough commotion to make one think that the war was over. And that was just about what had happened. For the first time in more than four years the order was given to turn on lights. Automobile drivers did not realize at first what had happened. It was hard to believe that you could really have lights turned on, and especially at the front here. Everybody was yelling and laughing and shooting off revolvers and rifles and acting as if they were crazy. We were more or less prepared for the news at the radio office here. We have not at this moment learned anything definite yet, but there must be a temporary armistice on at least. We *(Continued on page 52)* know that the German mission has gone across the line to either accept or reject the terms. That they will accept is practically assured or they would not even come over. They must realize that our terms will be very severe.

It seems queer to think that tomorrow the war will be over. No more carrying gas masks around, no more turning the lights out at night for fear of air raids, no more looking for dugouts when we move anywhere; in fact no more worry except as to when we are going home. Can you imagine that—going home! But suppose we wake up tomorrow and find out that Germany will not accept the terms? Poor Germany—she certainly will get beat up proper then, for we will be a mad crowd of Yanks.

Tomorrow we move up—we are ever on the move. The Germans are certainly doing a double time rearward. Their communiqué yesterday said that they had made a great movement followed by the French.

It's only about half past seven but I guess I'll go to sleep. Breakfast is at 6:15 so you see we are rather early birds. I guess we get flapjacks for breakfast—not bad for the front, eh? You'll have to make a lot of those for me when I get back.

I don't know when I can get this letter off to you. When you do get it probably everything will be over but the shouting. You may be interested to know that I am company clerk now, the chap that did have the place having been wounded. Hope that he will be back soon for he was a fine fellow and knew his business.

Well, here is hoping it will be over tomorrow.

Love to you and Pa and Delly.

As it turned out, of course, we woke up the next morning and found there was still a war going on. As a matter of fact, not many minutes after this letter was finished by the light of a sputtering candle we realized it was all a hoax. Officers came careening in sidecar motorcycles along muddy and pitted roads to blast out the befuddled truck drivers and order them to put out toot sweet the blankety blank lights.

Along with the letter to my mother which I never sent I found two wireless messages written on the backs of French message blanks in the precise handwrit-

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ing of our crack operator—a sturdy Middle-Westerner of German descent. They are not dated, but I recall, and I can tell from their contents, that he picked them out of the air during the first week of November, 1918, when the negotiations began which led to the real Armistice.

One was addressed to Allied G. H. Q. and was picked up from the German headquarters. Its contents follow:

The German artillery, in the sector on both sides of the Fourmies-La Capelle road, had orders to cease firing. Evidently the fire of the ammunition dump near Fourmies, which caused irregular explosions, appeared to be artillery fire.

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Evidently the Allies had made some protest to the Germans concerning these explosions. This was doubtless at the time when German plenipotentiaries came through the lines for the discussion of Armistice terms and there was to be no firing on that section of the front.

The other message is in French and is signed Erzberger. It was he who headed the German group which came through the lines to prepare for the Armistice. The message was apparently sent while he was still behind our lines at the conference. Translated it reads:

German plenipotentiaries to the German high command, to the Chancellor of the Empire and to the naval high command: Before making any decision, beg to await the telegraphic communication in code completing Helldorf's message of this morning.

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Picking these messages out of the air, we of the radio group knew that steps definitely pointing toward an Armistice were being taken. That is why we were in a frame of mind to accept the rumor as genuine when the false report spread up to us. On the other hand, all our hopes were not blasted when the "lights out" order came on the evening of the 7th because we knew that negotiations were in progress.

The next three days we were constantly on the move—forward. The night of the 10th was a horror. The boys on the other side seemed to be trying to get rid of as much ammunition as possible in the last hours of the war. Everything came over—including box cars. But at last we had something for which to thank the Lord, for also through the air came the real message of hope. Firing would cease at 11 the next morning.

The night passed. Dawn brought a dull gray day—typical Argonne weather. The big moment came and the rumble of the guns died away—this time for keeps.

Well, here is hoping it will

