

Introduction

II. THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR

WAR TRANSFORMS whomever it touches. Soldiers and civilians, women and men, adults and children—no one is immune. Even descendants may find their own lives altered by the ripples of their ancestors' wartime experiences, sometimes after the passage of multiple generations. The Americans who experienced combat in World War I were changed permanently. Memories, some traumatic and others joyful or even transcendent, imparted to them perspectives that their friends and relatives struggled to comprehend. Veterans in turn often failed to understand how war had also impacted the millions of Americans who never saw the front lines. Frictions among these competing viewpoints would permanently remold American society.

There is no such thing as a "typical" war experience. This holds true even for World War I on the Western Front, which is often portrayed solely as an unending stalemate fought in a vast network of indistinguishable shell-blasted and mud-choked trenches. In reality, each participant entered the conflict with unique outlooks and preconceptions, and each endured or enjoyed experiences specific to themselves. Some knew the crash of artillery from the giving or receiving end; others soared in aircraft above the mud and shellfire and prayed that they would not plummet in flames to the earth, or labored in the claustrophobic confines of rattletrap tanks. Many struggled to survive the squalid trenches, but not a few, including many Americans in 1918, marched and fought without ever entering what British soldiers called the "troglodyte world." The vast majority of those who served were never wounded, and most of those who did receive injuries were not sent to a hospital. Many thousands of Americans did suffer severe wounds, however, or cared for those who did as doctors, nurses, orderlies, and stretcher-bearers.

If each participant's experience was unique, the consequences were equally varied. Historians, assuming that all

soldiers reacted to war in more or less the same way, used to construct war narratives around themes of naiveté and disillusionment. Careful studies of diaries, memoirs, questionnaires, and oral histories have since demonstrated the essential fallacy of this construct. If many veterans were traumatized by their experiences and rejected in consequence the political and religious ideologies on which they had been raised, many also felt uplifted by their war experiences and believed that they confirmed their prewar beliefs. In most cases these perspectives emerged regardless of combat's intensity; some who barely saw the front felt disillusioned while others who endured long periods in the front lines considered themselves uplifted. The vast majority of veterans, however, fell into neither category. For them, war was a mixture of good and bad that left a legacy of ambivalence.

The four excerpts presented here reveal a mere fraction of what it meant to be an American soldier in World War I. Readers will encounter varying measures of thrill and terror, purpose and bafflement. What these testimonials share in common is their honesty. Although the accounts by Hall and Williams were edited by their authors for publication and the others were not, all four are authentic and—unlike the hundreds of “memoirs” published for propaganda purposes—unremittingly stark. While they only provide glimpses of, for example, the long periods of boredom or leisure that intervened between battles, or the comradeship that only veterans understand, they do open windows into the minds of men experiencing for the first time the full measure of war in all its fury and hate.

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“SOME SCARRED SLOPE”: FRANCE, WINTER 1916

Alan Seeger:
I Have a Rendezvous with Death

Seeger probably wrote this poem in early 1916, in anticipation of renewed fighting later that year. That Fourth of July, during the first week of the Anglo-French offensive along the Somme River, Seeger's regiment of the Foreign Legion attacked the village of Belloy-en-Santerre. Struck several times by machine-gun fire, Seeger reportedly cheered on his comrades in their successful advance before he died. His *Poems* were published posthumously in December 1916, and his *Letters and Diaries* appeared in May 1917; some reviewers compared him to the Romantic English poet Rupert Brooke, who had died from blood poisoning in 1915 while serving with the Royal Navy in the Aegean. American supporters of the Allies lauded Seeger as a hero; his brother, Charles, a prominent musicologist (and future father of the folksinger Pete Seeger), became an outspoken opponent of intervention.

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,

Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear . . .
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

THE "HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS" ATTACK:
FRANCE, SEPTEMBER 1918

Horace Pippin:
from "Autobiography, First World War"

A manual laborer with a love of drawing and little formal education, Horace Pippin had lived a hardscrabble life in upstate New York and New Jersey before enlisting in the 369th Infantry Regiment in 1917. During the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the "Harlem Hellfighters" were attached to the French 161st Division, and they fought in Champagne, apart from the main American army. On September 30, 1918, Pippin was shot in the shoulder, permanently disabling his right arm. After the war he learned to guide his wounded limb with his left hand and eventually became a widely exhibited painter. Pippin's unpublished manuscript from the 1920s includes this narrative of the fighting around Séchault.

AT ONE O clock the artillery were in thir Position and Began to fire. The Germens air plaines were after us good and strong the end of this Day we got 14 machine guns 500 prisners and a town. Then we hel the line for the artillery to move up. Prisners were comeing throu our line. Goeine Back and every one were happy. That they were out of it. For they knew that, they would see home a gan some time. We onley hell the line that night. The machine guns were thick they kepted spiteing Bullets a cross our line on till the artillery came up, then that morneing. I got in, with Co I. I had notheing to eait for 3 Days. The Germens line were strong. And shells dropeing every where. Yet we were advancing sloyly. I were in shell holes that were smokeing, and they were hot, the machine guns were in trees as well as in Bushess and in Housess and any thing they could get a machine gun in. They had it there. Wimens as well as men, ueseing a machine gun we were facing a nother hill. The snipers were thick all so, I seen a machine gun nest I got him. My Budy and I were after a nother one. Both of us were in the same shell hole. I were lookeing for a nother hole that would put me in [] of him. After I seen

one. I said to my comrad, you go one way, and Ill go the other, and one of us can get him. For we could not see him, from where we were at. For he were Back of a Rock. Now it were to get him in sight and to do that we hat to take a chance of one to get it. Both of us left the shell hole, at the same time, I got near the shell hole that I had pecked out. When he let me have it. I went Down in the shell hole. He clipped my neck and got me throu my shoulder and right arm. Yet I had notheing to eat yet and I onley had a little water in my canteen. I Began to plug up my wounds when my Budy came to me and did what he could for me. Then he tole me that he got the Germen and the gun. I were leyeing on my Back. I thought I could get up But I could not do so. I shook hands with him and I never seen him cents. Now the shells were comeing close to me. Piceses of shell would come in near me some times. Then the Germen sniper kepted after me all Day. His Bullets would clep the shell hole that hell me this were 8 o clock in the morning. Some time that after noon some French swipers came By. They look for Germen that is left Back so he seen me layeing there. When he did so. He stoped to say sometheing to me. But he never got it out for just then a Bullet past throu his head. And he sank on me. I seen him comeing on But I could not move. I were just that weeke. So I hat to take him. I were glad to get his water and all so Bread. I took my left hand and I got some coffee. After some hird time geteing it from him, after that I felt good and I trided to get up a gan. But I were to week to do so. Night were comeing on. And it Began to Rain. Then I tried to get the Blanked from my Dead comrad. That I could not do. And I could not get him of off me. The Rain came more and more ontill I were in water yet I were groweing weaker and weaker all the time and I went to sleep. I cant say how long I slep. But two Boyes came and I woke up. They took the French men of off me and then took me out of the shell hole for some Distens where there were more wonded ones. I were left there the Rest of the night. Every time I would get in a sleep I would Be woken up By the French troops goeing to the line. On tell near morning four French took me in to a Dugout and then to a nother on till they found a Dr. Then he did somtheing, I do not no aney more that night. When I woke up, it were Day. Then I were caryed out

of the Dugout I seen then that it were full of shot up men like my self some wirst then I. I layed out there for some time in the Rain waiteing for my tirn to be taken Down to the Road to the amblance. Over the hell came some Germen prisners with a French officer and they took me to the Road. It were all they could do, were to stand up under me goeing Down the hell. They had me over thir heads. And I thought that I would Roal of. A shell or two came close to us. But they made the Road. I seen the artillery were Hobe to Hobe and all at work. I were shoved in the amblance with 5 others made 6 in all and shells foloed us ontell we got to the feel Hospital. When I got there it were all I could do, to tell them ho I were. So I pointed to my shirt I had Riten down like this 101127 Horace Pippin Co. K. 369. Inf, I new no more. On tell I were taken to the table to see what were Rong with me. They gave me some dop and that did put me a way for good. I cant say how long I were in it. After I came out of it I were not there long. They took me to a nother Hospital Bace I in leon.