

GUTS AND GLORY

For a generation of American youth, World War I seemed like one grand adventure. Then they landed in the bloody trenches of Europe.

August 1914. The nations of Europe were facing off in what would be the bloodiest war up to that time. In Paris, a young American named Bert Hall met a friend to discuss joining the French Army. “We weren’t fooled into believing that the World War was invented by the Germans,” he recalled, “but simply knew we had to fight.”

By the end of the war, thousands of Americans had joined the effort. Some, like Bert Hall, couldn’t wait until the U.S. entered the war. Most held out until 1917, when they could go officially, as part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Pilot George Kenney remembered, “To American youth, World War I was the great adventure. Very few of them had ever been outside the United States; now they could visit France, England, Belgium.”

Most of them found out, however, that the war was no sightseeing tour. Whether they were fighting in the trenches, flying the first fighter planes, or trying to stitch other soldiers back together, the soldiers came back with some harrowing stories. The following are taken from their diaries, letters, and memoirs.

HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT

Bert Hall volunteered with the French Army, just after the war began.

With the first break of dawn, the Germans began to sweep our positions with

“Our life was mud, lice, German shells, trench raids, and grave digging,” recalled one soldier of his time on the front.



No Man’s Land, when, all of a sudden, we were cut off. It was a tense moment. We weren’t supposed to fire our rifles as we might shoot our own men. So the bayonet it was!

That was the first time I ever fought in close quarters, and the emotions I experienced are impossible to put on paper. We had been told to thrust and draw out quickly, as the falling body of our opponent would snap off our bayonets. For some reason, there seemed to be a pause before our melee

machine-gun fire. Our trenches were made safe from shell fire in an incredibly short time. We dug with everything we could find—mess pans, shovels, picks, German bayonets, our hands—I’ll tell you the dirt did fly.

By nightfall, we had our trenches well set. We had constructed dugouts and communication trenches. Everything was zigzagged so that the enemy couldn’t enter one end of a trench and [shoot] us with machine guns.

For the next eight days our life was mud, cooties [lice], German shells, trench raids, and grave digging. What a nightmare! And those trench raids and night patrols! The rules about how they should be carried on hadn’t been created. We blundered along the best we could and buried the ones who were hit.

One night, we foolishly penetrated into

An ever-present threat: poison-gas attacks, which could destroy a soldier’s lungs.

began. Then the next thing I knew, a towering German was coming at me. I could see that his curved butcher-knife bayonet was aimed at my midsection. I parried my thrust in an amateurish manner and let him have my three-cornered



LUPI/Corbis Bettmann



World War I was the first war to feature aerial bombing and dogfights in the sky. It also gave birth to a new hero: the daring fighter aces.

blade. He uttered a shrill cry and fortunately fell sideways; otherwise, I should have had a broken blade.

WAR IN THE AIR

After America's entry into the war, George Kenney joined the Army's Aviation Section. Disappointed to receive an assignment as a photographer, he still managed to get close to the action.

July 15, 1918 Same weather as yesterday. A Texas boy named Tobin got sick of not being able to get into combat with a German aviator, so the other day he took off by himself, flew across the front, and then on to the German air-drome. There he saw a plane flying around the field and promptly shot it down and returned home to be congratulated by the gang. Now he is being kidded by everyone, since the Germans dropped a note saying that it wasn't very sporting to shoot down a brand-

new pilot who was just practicing landings in an unarmed training plane.

July 16 Van Heuvel and Hirth took off at daybreak on a reconnaissance mission. They had just crossed the front, when four Fokkers [German planes] jumped them. At the opening of the attack, Hirth was shot through the heart and bullets creased Van Heuvel's head, knocking him unconscious. He came to at 1,000 meters in a nose-down, motor-full-on spin. He pulled out just at the treetops and made it back to the field. He taxied up to the line, got out, lifted Hirth out of his cockpit, threw him over his shoulder, and carried him in to Doc Gray's tent on the edge of the field.

"Take a look at him, will you, Doc?" he said. "I think he's dead."

Doc Gray took a look at Hirth's chest, where an explosive bullet had torn him apart. "He's dead all right."

Van took off his flying helmet. "Poor guy," he said, "they got him before he knew he was in a war."

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE

Bernard Gallagher joined the Medical Officers Reserve Corps and, with no training, was immediately sent to a French village at the front.

Before I was [there] 10 minutes, the Germans laid a heavy barrage on the village. We could hear the dull thud of the exploding shells above us. In a minute or two, an officer came running [into] the dugout and announced very excitedly that

the Germans had come "over the top" behind the barrage. Our men had left their positions in the trenches in front of the village and were retreating. The officers grabbed their pistols and made their exit.

Across the road, I could see dozens of English soldiers running in my direction, dropping behind a brick wall to fire

at the advancing Germans. I could see a couple of German machine guns smoking as they spit and sputtered their messages of singing lead in the direction of our retreating men.

To tarry at the mouth of that dugout meant death or capture, so I set out in the direction of the barrage, the same as the other men. It did not

seem possible that anyone could get through it, for so thick were the shells falling that the smoke and dirt thrown up made a black curtain. But any tendency to delay was dispelled by the machine gun and rifle bullets following from behind and picking off many a poor fellow.

In a few short moments I had reached the line of the barrage. I plunged wildly on, feeling that here indeed "he who hesitates is lost." With the curtain of smoke behind me, I could see another system of trenches, but there seemed to be no one in them except the retreating men, who, like myself, dropped in from the open field in front.

I went on a little further and came to a very big dugout which [another] doctor was using as an aid post. There was room for a couple of hundred men, but casualties were so heavy that the place was jammed. It was a difficult place to get



U.S. soldiers find a rare moment of peace to write to loved ones at home.



men in and out of, and often we would go up and look at the men in the trench and decide which should be brought down and which were so badly wounded that they could not live anyway. It seemed a brutal thing to turn away and leave a man in the trench to die, but at times it was necessary. My impression was that the whole thing was not worth the price men were paying in blood and anguish: that there must be some other way of settling disputes; and that if the men at the heads of all the warring governments had to spend a few hours in the hell-on-earth that was going on around there, the war would be over in short order. I had not then been in battle long enough to realize that human life is the cheapest thing in war.

SURROUNDED BY DEATH

Shirley Millard was an army nurse at a French army hospital on the front lines.

November 8, 1918 More and more Americans in the death ward. Gas cases are terrible. They cannot breathe lying down or sitting up. They struggle for breath, but nothing can be done. Their lungs are gone. Gas cases invariably are



Members of the hospital corps tend to wounded soldiers.

beyond endurance and they cannot help crying out.

November 10 Charley died this morning. I held his hand as he went and could not keep back tears. Near the end he saw me crying and patted my hand to comfort me. I cannot describe that boy's sweet-

ness. He took part of my heart with him.

Just after he went, someone came into the ward and said: "Armistice! The staff cars have just passed by the gate on their way to Senlis to sign an Armistice!"

There is no armistice for Charley or for any of the others in that ward. One of the boys began to sob. I went and talked soothingly to him, but what could I say, knowing he would die before night?

Well, it's over. I have to keep telling myself, it's over.

But there is still that letter to write to Charley's mother. I can hear commotion and shouting through the hospital as I write this. The chapel bell is ringing wildly.

I am glad it is over, but my heart is heavy as lead. Must write that letter.

One of the girls came looking for me. They have opened champagne for the staff. I told her to get out

Can't seem to pull myself together.

VICTORY PARADE

Arthur Little was captain of the 15th New York Volunteer Colored Infantry, known as Harlem's Hell Fighters. When his troops returned to the U.S., they still faced racism, but for a day, they got the respect they deserved.

On February 17, the 15th New York Infantry marched up Fifth Avenue to receive the plaudits of a million grateful New Yorkers, and then marched on through Harlem, to turn a quarter of a million [black] men, women, and children wild with a frenzy of pride and joy and love.

I doubt if any of us shall ever again be privileged to share in such emotions as were ours upon that day.

I marched at the head of the First Battalion, behind Jim Europe's Band of 60 pieces of brass and reed, and a field music section of 30 trumpets and drums. During the entire progress of that seven-mile march, I scarcely heard 10 consecutive bars of music—so great were the roars of cheers, the applause, and the shouts of greetings!

The multitude of fellow citizens who greeted us that day—the women who



A soldier from Harlem's Hell Fighters is welcomed home.

were, the men who cried "God bless you, boys!"—did not give us their welcome because ours was a regiment of colored soldiers. They did not give us their welcome in spite of ours being a regiment of colored soldiers. They greeted us from hearts filled with gratitude and with pride and with love, because ours was a regiment of men who had done the work of men.

On February 17, New York City knew no color line.

When we arrived at Harlem, mothers, and wives, and sisters, and sweethearts rushed out to embrace us.

It may not have been good military business, but it was great human business. And a nation of great, honest, human emotion is a great nation. ■

YOUR TURN

- ▶ Why did many young people in 1917 view fighting in Europe as a "great adventure"? Did U.S. participation in World War I change the way Americans saw their role in the world? How?
- ▶ Soldiers have been writing home as long as there has been war. In a library, find soldiers' letters home from World War II, Vietnam, or the Gulf War. Are their feelings similar to those in these letters?

Hand-to-Hand-Combat: Excerpted from *One Man's War* by Bert Hall and John J. Niles; Arno Press, 1980. War in the Air: Excerpted from *A Flier's Journal* © 1969 by George C. Kenney. Run for Your Life: Excerpted from "A Yank in the BEF", © *American Heritage Magazine*, June 1965. Surrounded by Death: Excerpted from *I Saw Them Die: The Diary and Recollections of Shirley Millard*, by Adele Comandini, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. Victory Parade: Excerpted from *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers* by Arthur W. Little © 1936 by Arthur W. Little, Covici Friede, Publishers.