

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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James Norman Hall: Damaged Trenches

On September 25, 1915, the French attacked in Champagne and the Artois while the British launched their largest offensive to date at Loos. All three offensives failed to break through the German defenses. By early November the French had lost 192,000 men killed, wounded, or missing, the British 50,000, and the Germans 135,000. Among those who survived was a pretender of sorts: James Norman Hall, a 1910 graduate of Grinnell College from Colfax, Iowa. He had worked in Boston as an agent for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children before vacationing in Britain in the summer of 1914. Swept away by the "spirit of adventure," Hall claimed to be Canadian so that he could enlist in the British army that August. Trained as a machine gunner, he served with the 9th Royal Fusiliers at Loos before being discharged in December 1915, when his true nationality was revealed. He returned to the United States, published his memoir, *Kitchener's Mob: The Adventures of an American in the British Army*, and then went back to France, where he would fly in the Lafayette Escadrille.

Death comes swiftly in war. One's life hangs by a thread. The most trivial circumstance saves or destroys. Mac came into the half-ruined dugout where the off-duty machine gunners were making tea over a fire of splintered logs.

"Jamie," he said, "take my place at sentry for a few minutes, will you? I've lost my water-bottle. It's 'ere in the dugout somew'ere. I'll be only a minute."

I went out to the gun position a few yards away, and immediately afterward the Germans began a bombardment of our line. One's ear becomes exact in distinguishing the size of shells by the sound which they make in traveling through the air; and it is possible to judge the direction and the probable place of their fall. Two of us stood by the machine gun. We heard at the same time the sound which we knew meant danger, possibly death. It was the awful whistling roar of a high explosive. We dropped to the floor of the trench at once. The explosion blackened our faces with lyddite and half-blinded us.

The dugout which I had left less than a moment ago was a mass of wreckage. Seven of our comrades were inside.

One of them crawled out, pulling himself along with one arm. The other arm was terribly crushed and one leg was hanging by a tendon and a few shreds of flesh.

“My God, boys! Look wot they did to me!”

He kept saying it over and over while we cut the cords from our bandoliers, tied them about his leg and arm and twisted them up to stop the flow of blood. He was a fine, healthy lad. A moment before he had been telling us what he was going to do when we went home on furlough. Now his face was the color of ashes, his voice grew weaker and weaker, and he died while we were working over him.

High explosive shells were bursting all along the line. Great masses of earth and chalk were blown in on top of men seeking protection where there was none. The ground rocked like so much pasteboard. I heard frantic cries for “Picks and shovels!” “Stretcher-bearers! Stretcher-bearers this way, for God’s sake!” The voices sounded as weak and futile as the squeaking of rats in a thunderstorm.

When the bombardment began, all off-duty men were ordered into the deepest of the shell-proof dugouts, where they were really quite safe. But those English lads were not cowards. Orders or no orders, they came out to the rescue of their comrades. They worked without a thought of their own danger. I felt actually happy, for I was witnessing splendid heroic things. It was an experience which gave one a new and unshakable faith in his fellows.

The sergeant and I rushed into the ruins of our machine-gun dugout. The roof still held in one place. There we found Mac, his head split in two as though it had been done with an axe. Gardner’s head was blown completely off, and his body was so terribly mangled that we did not know until later who he was. Preston was lying on his back with a great jagged, blood-stained hole through his tunic. Bert Powel was so badly hurt that we exhausted our supply of field dressings in bandaging him. We found little Charlie Harrison lying close to the side of the wall, gazing at his crushed foot with a look of incredulity and horror pitiful to see. One of the men gave him first aid with all the deftness and tenderness of a woman.

The rest of us dug hurriedly into a great heap of earth at the other end of the shelter. We quickly uncovered Walter, a lad who had kept us laughing at his drollery on many a rainy night. The earth had been heaped loosely on him and he was still conscious.

“Good old boys,” he said weakly; “I was about done for.”

In our haste we dislodged another heap of earth which completely buried him again, and it seemed a lifetime before we were able to remove it. I have never seen a finer display of pure grit than Walter’s.

“Easy now!” he said. “Can’t feel anything below me waist. I think I’m ’urt down there.”

We worked as swiftly and as carefully as we could. We knew that he was badly wounded, for the earth was soaked with blood; but when we saw, we turned away sick with horror. Fortunately, he lost consciousness while we were trying to disentangle him from the fallen timbers, and he died on the way to the field dressing-station. Of the seven lads in the dug-out, three were killed outright, three died within half an hour, and one escaped with a crushed foot which had to be amputated at the field hospital.

The worst of it was that we could not get away from the sight of the mangled bodies of our comrades. Arms and legs stuck out of the wreckage, and on every side we saw distorted human faces, the faces of men we had known, with whom we had lived and shared hardships and dangers for months past. Those who have never lived through experiences of this sort cannot possibly know the horror of them. It is not in the heat of battle that men lose their reason. Battle frenzy is, perhaps, a temporary madness. The real danger comes when the strain is relaxed. Men look about them and see the bodies of their comrades torn to pieces as though they had been hacked and butchered by fiends. One thinks of the human body as inviolate, a beautiful and sacred thing. The sight of it dismembered or disemboweled, trampled in the bottom of a trench, smeared with blood and filth, is so revolting as to be hardly endurable.

And yet, we had to endure it. We could not escape it. Whichever way we looked, there were the dead. Worse even

than the sight of dead men were the groans and entreaties of those lying wounded in the trenches waiting to be taken back to the dressing-stations.

"I'm shot through the stomach, matey! Can't you get me back to the ambulance? Ain't they *some* way you can get me back out o' this?"

"Stick it, old lad! You won't 'ave long to wite. They'll be some of the Red Cross along 'ere in a jiffy now."

"Give me a lift, boys, can't you? Look at my leg! Do you think it'll 'ave to come off? Maybe they could save it if I could get to 'ospital in time! Won't some of you give me a lift? I can 'obble along with a little 'elp."

"Don't you fret, sonny! You're a-go'n' to ride back in a stretcher presently. Keep yer courage up a little w'ile longer."

Some of the men, in their suffering, forgot every one but themselves, and it was not strange that they should. Others, with more iron in their natures, endured fearful agony in silence. During memorable half-hours, filled with danger and death, many of my gross misjudgments of character were made clear to me. Men whom no one had credited with heroic qualities revealed them. Others failed rather pitifully to live up to one's expectations. It seemed to me that there was strength or weakness in men, quite apart from their real selves, for which they were in no way responsible; but doubtless it had always been there, waiting to be called forth at just such crucial times.

During the afternoon I heard for the first time the hysterical cry of a man whose nerve had given way. He picked up an arm and threw it far out in front of the trenches, shouting as he did so in a way that made one's blood run cold. Then he sat down and started crying and moaning. He was taken back to the rear, one of the saddest of casualties in a war of inconceivable horrors. I heard of many instances of nervous breakdown, but I witnessed surprisingly few of them. Men were often badly shaken and trembled from head to foot. Usually they pulled themselves together under the taunts of their less susceptible comrades.

From *Kitchener's Mob* (1916)