

The arrival of fresh American troops and supplies lifted the morale of the British and French, who were exhausted after years of fighting in the trenches. The American Expeditionary Force fought in France from June 1917 to November 1918. In his wartime diary, soldier Norman Roberts described the terror of "going over the top" of the trenches to face the enemy's gunfire.

Norman Roberts
Warfare in the Trenches
"Going Over the Top"

Sept. 11, '18. Started for the front at 6 p.m. Raining and wind blowing. Very cold. All boys wet to the skin. Roads very muddy and all shot to pieces from the Germans' big guns. Very bad walking. Falling in holes to one's waist, these holes being full of water. Germans shelling this road as we advance. No one allowed to talk. All noise unnecessary prohibited. When near the woods the Germans dropped an H.E. shell near us and threw mud all over us. Believe me I was some frightened: after entering the woods the shelling was something terrible. Iron falling like hail.

Our major was there directing the placing of the men in the trenches. Dark as pitch except when a shell would explode. Some of the boys praying and some swearing. No place to swear. So dark each man had to take the other by the straps on his haversack to keep from getting lost. With that, the detail that I was with became lost but finally found the

trench which we had been allotted. Some mud. Over the knees. About 12 o'clock all were in the trenches waiting for the zero hour that we were to make our attack upon Fritz [the Germans]. At 1:30 a.m. 12th the barrage of our guns broke loose upon the first line trenches, and oh what a noise there was. . . . Then the Germans came back with their guns. Oh, me, what noise and not be allowed to talk. All of us were wet and cold and scared. The boy sitting next to me shot himself in the foot to keep from going over the top.

Sept. 12. At 5:00 a.m. the words came down the trench to get ready for attack. Over the top we are going after Fritz. I was the fourth man of my platoon to go over. A baptism of fire was my reception in my first battle and first all-American offensive. St. Mihiel drive. This sector had been the scene of many battles during the war by the French and English troops—to capture this would mean the straightening of the line of the Allies. But

both had failed to take same.

Day had not broke and you could hardly tell where to go. Bullets, millions of them, flying like raindrops. Rockets and flares in all directions. Shrapnel bursting the air and sending down its deadly iron. High explosives bursting in the ground and sending forth bricks, mud, and iron to the destruction of man. Oh, what a morning. Machine gun bullets flying past you as the wind. Whistling as a bird going its travel.

Dead and wounded all around you. Comrades falling directly in front and you not allowed to assist them. The command *onward*. Every minute looking for the next to be gone to the great beyond. A mad dash for fifty feet and then look for cover. A stop for a minute and then the barrage would lift to a farther point and then another mad rush. Always leaving some of your comrades cold in the face of death. Men crying for the Almighty God to have mercy upon them. Asking the men to shoot them and place them out of their

"If We Don't Lick the Huns Now"

A Soldier's Reasons for Fighting

Private Eldon Canright

Some pacifists argued that World War I soldiers had no idea what they were fighting for. But Private Eldon Canright, in a letter home, clearly believed that he was fighting to keep his loved ones safe.

You know I have actually seen what the Huns [Germans] have done to northern France and Belgium and know what horrors and sufferings the people who lived there have gone through, and when things are going hard and I am tired and discouraged, I like to think that I am here going through all these hardships to do my bit to keep you all from experiencing the same horrors that these unfortunate people have—that if we don't lick the Huns now, and lick them to a standstill, they might at some future time try to do the same thing in America. You can laugh at me if you want to, and say I'm foolish, but that thought gives me fresh determination to carry on. There is nothing I would not do to prevent you from going through even a part of what they have had to do.

misery. Oh, what a pleading before your very eyes for death. Men making all kinds of promises to God if he would only protect them at this time.

Airplanes sweeping down upon you and firing their guns almost in your face. Barbed wire in all directions. I became tangled in this and thought surely before I could free myself that I would be killed. We have supremacy of the air during this battle. Day breaks and oh, how pleased to welcome same.

"There Is No Armistice for Charley"

Nursing the Wounds of War

Shirley Millard

Shirley Millard was an American nurse at a French army hospital near the front lines. She experienced the effects of the worldwide epidemic in 1918 of influenza, a deadly disease that killed many soldiers. She also witnessed the horrible impact of a new weapon, poison gas. When peace finally came on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day in the eleventh month of 1918, Millard found herself unable to celebrate.



Army camps were hit hard by a worldwide flu epidemic that struck in 1918. More than 500,000 Americans died from the disease, about ten times as many as died in combat during World War I.

April 1
The big drive is over and the terrific rush has stopped, at least temporarily, but the hospital is still filled.

Most of the men are too badly wounded to be moved, although we need the space, for we are swamped with influenza cases. I thought influenza was a bad cold, something like the grippe, but this is much worse than that. These men run a high temperature, so high that we can't believe it's true, and often take it again to be sure. It is accompanied by vomiting and dysentery. When they die, as about half of them do, they turn a ghastly dark gray and are taken out at once and cremated.

November 8

More and more Americans in the death ward [for dying soldiers]. Gas cases are terrible. They cannot breathe lying down or sitting up. They just struggle for breath, but nothing can be done . . . their lungs are gone. . . . [Some are]

covered with first degree burns. We try to relieve them by pouring oil on them. They cannot be bandaged or even touched. We cover them with a tent of propped-up sheets. Gas burns must be agonizing because usually the other cases do not complain even with the worst of wounds. But gas cases invariably are beyond endurance, and they cannot help crying out. . . .

November 10

Charley [a paralyzed American sergeant] died this morning. I held his hand as he went and could not keep back the tears. Near the end he saw me crying and patted my hand with his two living fingers to comfort me. I cannot describe that boy's sweetness. He took part of my heart with him. Everybody around the place was in tears.

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!"

What a time and place to come in shouting about an armistice! I said: "Sh! Sh!"

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, it's over, 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 in the dining hall. I told her to get out.

Can't seem to pull myself together.