

## INFORMATIVE MOMENTS NEAR NO MAN'S LAND

By DEEMS TAYLOR

*If, Vaguely, You Wonder What War Sounds Are Like, This Is for You. It Is an Answer to Your Wondering; Your Own Story, as You Yourself Might Have Written It*

*Not the Views of a Soldier, or of a War Correspondent, Blasé from Many Battles: Merely the Account of "An Uninformed American, Up Against War for the First Time"*

UP TO the morning of December 8, 1916, I had never heard a cannon fired, except in salute; I had never seen a trench, or a barbed wire entanglement, or a hand grenade; I had never heard shells. By noon of that same day I had seen and heard all of those things on a section of the Somme front; and I found that although I had been reading about this war and looking at pictures of it for more than two years, I knew nothing at all about it. Of most of its details I had formed no conception whatever. What few I had formed were wrong. By no stretch of the imagination, therefore, can what follows be called war correspondence. A war correspondent is presumed to have some foreknowledge of what he is going to see. I had none. In this respect, at least, I think I was a fairly typical American.

It was the Germans, first of all, and not the French, who gave me my first realization of actual warfare. We had left Amiens early in the morning, six of us—four Americans, a Hollander and a Dane—together with Lieutenant d'A—, of the General Staff, and Lieutenant R—. Our three limousines—once private cars, but now painted army gray within and without and bearing stencilled numbers upon their hoods—had started down the long, straight road that used to lead from Amiens to Roye, but which now, if you followed it far enough, would take you straight into the trenches. I shared a car with the Danish and Dutch correspondents. Suddenly the Hollander, sitting up and peering out of the rain-misted window, exclaimed: "Voilà des Allemands!"

### There Were Some Contented Germans; They Were in France

I looked out. A squad of men, numbering perhaps a dozen, were repairing the road, guarded by a French soldier with a rifle over his shoulder. They wore heavy, cowhide boots that reached to their knees, and upon each man's head was a brownish-gray cap, vizorless, with a red band. Instead of overcoats they wore blankets over their shoulders, Indian fashion—blankets of that same brownish gray, and banded in black and red. So these were the Germans! Two months before, when I had left New York, men like these had been walking freely in the streets about me, sitting in restaurants, riding in the subways. And now, here were these—the very brothers of some of those that I had seen, perhaps—wearing the uniform of the Kaiser, mending roadways in the rain, prisoners of war in France. For the first time I really began to accept this war as an actuality. A fight does not become real until one has seen both combatants.

These men did not seem sullen and despairing, as I had always imagined war prisoners to be. On the contrary, they looked positively contented, and one of them, a boy of about nineteen, grinned at me as we flashed past. I thought that perhaps they were glad to be well out of it. Later I was sure they were.

### Unpleasant Suggestiveness of a Steel Helmet

And now we began to pass army camions, an endless stream of them; great gray motor trucks roofed over with colored canvas—a protection against aeroplane observers. Each one stencilled upon its side the symbol of its division, or squadron—a swan, an owl, the Gallic cock, a yacht in full sail, a silver comet, with a green star for a head. One group displayed a huge black question mark within a white circle.

On they came, jolting, splashing, thundering, hundreds of them, until one's eyes grew sick of them and one began to wonder if there were any more left in the world. And on we went, over stretches of road bordered by thin, straight rows of trees; past muddy beet fields whose harvest, heaped and turfed for the winter, looked for all the world like huge golf bunkers; past flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, with helmeted soldiers to tend them; through villages whose only inhabitants seemed to be the soldiers who lounged along their single streets and stared at us.

It was at the headquarters of General A— that they gave us helmets. I had known vaguely that we were to wear them, but actually to hold one in my hands was disquieting. The idea of wearing it carried such a sinister suggestion. As a piece of workmanship, this French casque is beautiful—steel rim and crown, perfectly smooth and painted "horizon blue," with a steel rib to stiffen the crown and a black leather lining to make the helmet sit more snugly and easily upon the head. Mine was too short and too wide, and an officer showed me how I could alter its shape by pressing it between my knees.

"If even I can bend the thing," I thought dismally. "What good would it be against a bullet?" But steel is tough, even if it be flexible; and I saw many a casque later whose helmet crown spoke eloquently of the bullet or shell fragment that it had turned. A new member now joined the party, Captain A—, who was to take us to the trenches,

a fourth car was added to the procession, and we moved off. For the ensuing few minutes I was too busy trying to make my casque fit to pay any attention to the road. Just as I got it adjusted to my satisfaction we stopped in a muddy field. Here we went underground to General A—'s battle headquarters, where he and his staff live, in close touch with the front, while an attack is in progress. It was an astonishing subterranean residence, one hundred metres long by about ten wide, dry and warm, with floors, walls and ceiling of timber, and containing offices, sleeping rooms and a telephone exchange. In the last were two soldier-operators, working as unconcernedly as though they had been in a hotel instead of under several metres of solid earth. On second thought, though, I think perhaps it was the thought of those several metres of solid earth that made them unconcerned.

It was when we emerged that I first heard the guns. Somewhere to the east a battery of French "75's" were firing intermittently, and they were my introduction to the sound of artillery in action. Almost every one who has ever written about war at all has tried his hand at describing the sounds of war. All my life I had been reading of the "boom" and "roar" and "thunder" of artillery. What I actually heard was a sort of distant metallic crash. I thought of a tin roof falling. But this was a more animal sound. Like a brazen dog barking. . . . Not that my description is any more accurate than any one else's; perhaps no two people ever hear alike, any more than they see alike.

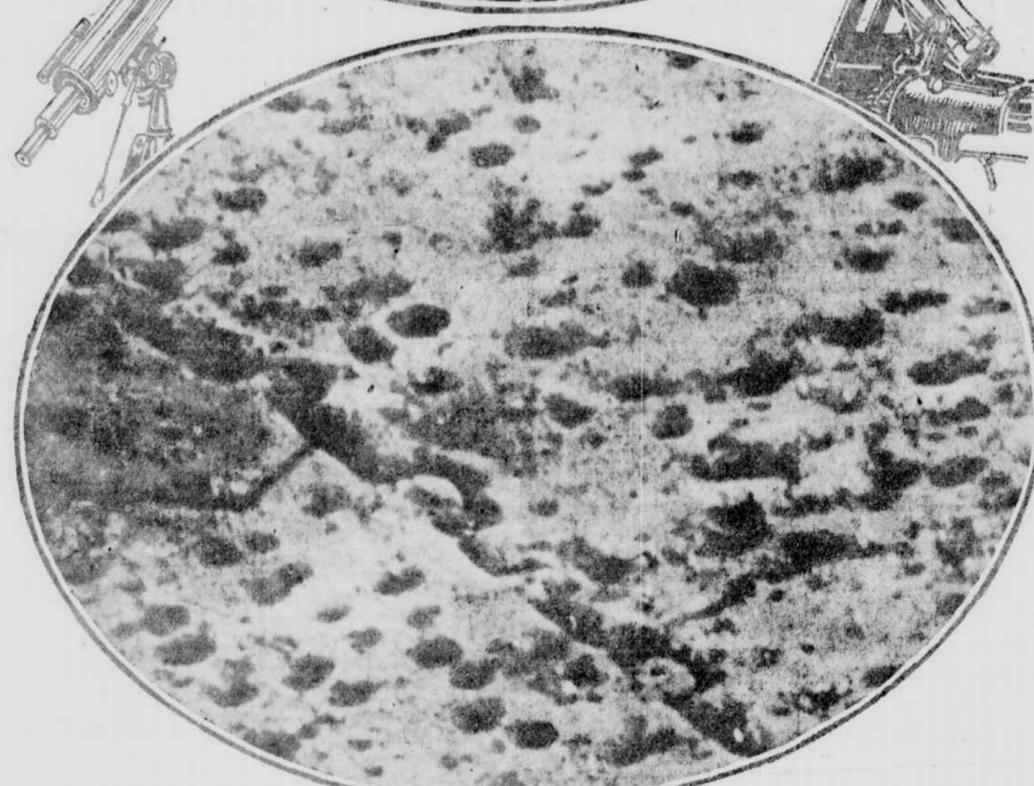
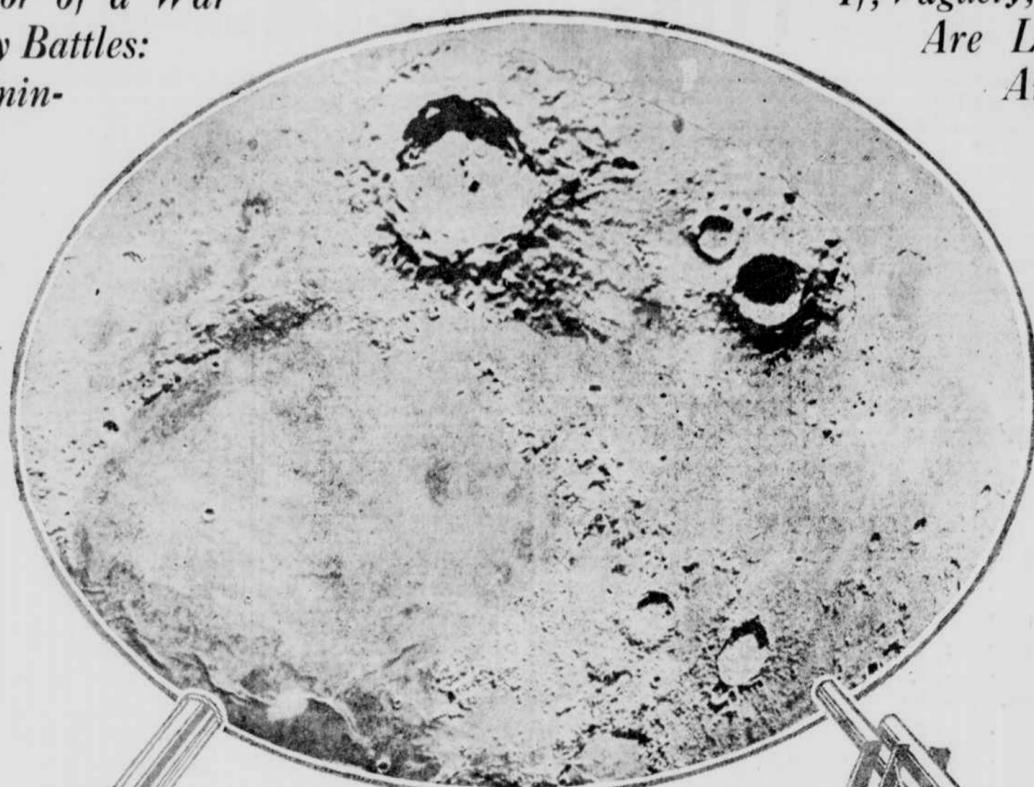
We started on again. There were no more camions on the road now. Once in a while, in a deserted field beyond a ditch, there would be a sudden irrational eruption of barbed wire entanglement—an acre or two of it, criss-crossed and gridironed among stubby wooden posts. But that was all. Everything else was mud, and rain, and mist, and loneliness—and always, to the east, the guns.

We came to a town. It was good to see houses again. But where were the people? The streets were empty, as were windows and doorways. I saw a shop, with the familiar "Tabac" sign over the door. But the doorway, hospitably open, showed a bare and tenantless interior.

### There Are No "Merry Villagers" in the Villages of the Somme

Suddenly I realized that something was wrong with the buildings. There was no glass in most of the windows, for one thing, and many of the roofs had tiles missing. We passed a garden wall. There was a jagged opening in it, through which one of our cars might have passed. One house had a clean, round hole in its side, about a metre in diameter, and when I looked through it I saw that the house was no more than a shell. There were no floors inside, no rooms, no furniture. Just rubbish. . . . a pile of rubbish neatly heaped against a chimney.

The car gave a sudden lurch as it struck a soft spot in the road, a spot newly mended. The white wall of the house we were passing was all peppered and scarred with black splashes—mud, I thought at first. These splashes went high up along the wall, and they reached almost to the ground. The wooden shutters over the windows were splashed, too.



### "LUNAR LANDSCAPE"

That is what the French soldiers call a field scarred with shell-holes. Above is a real lunar landscape, a photographic view of the mysterious craters of the Moon. How far the French are justified in their metaphor may be determined by a comparison of the two pictures, the Moon and No Man's Land

And suddenly I realized that these spots were not mud at all. They were holes. I found myself wondering if they went clean through the shutters, and whether a man could crouch low enough to escape what had caused them.

We left the town behind. And now, in the fields alongside, sometimes on the edge of the road itself, I began to notice shallow pits. Some of these were very shallow, indeed, and only a yard or two across; other were deeper and much wider. All were quite round. Many were worn smooth by the rain and had tufts of grass growing in them; but others were raw and new. They had not been there long—perhaps only a day or two.

We stopped. At the left was a little wood, while on the right a shallow trench writhed out of sight across the fields. The cars were parked beside the wood. They could go no fur-

ther; we must walk the rest of the way. The ground was fairly solid underfoot, so we did not take to the trench at once, but set off beside it, through the open field.

Just then I heard the most unpleasant sound in the world. It was not a scream, and it was not a hiss. It started very faint and far away, and almost before my ears had caught the fact that there was a sound it was overhead, almost intolerable in volume. It was a sort of "SSSH!"—more like a rocket than anything else I can think of; but a bigger rocket than any one ever saw, and going so fast that it ripped apart the air through which it passed. From the wood across the road, about a hundred yards away, came a loud, flat BANG, and a fountain of mud and sticks spurted up among the trees.

"Four-inch H. E.," murmured one of the Americans, who was a West Point graduate.

Those who know Deems Taylor do not think of him as a war correspondent. But because they do not think of him as a war correspondent, they will be all the more eager this morning to read the kind of war correspondence which Deems Taylor sends. Let him speak for himself, quoting from the letter which accompanied his manuscript: "Inclosed is the story of the Somme trip. I tried to keep it as 'ignorant' as I could—to make it the story of an average uninformed American, up against war for the first time. That's exactly what I was, anyway. It was rather exciting. I came within an ace of being under that last shell. I didn't feel anything at the time, but I'm scared to death now."

But he did not have to tell me. I had never heard that sound in my life before, but I recognized it. Nor did Lieutenant R— need to tell me to "get down." I began to entertain a profound respect for the steel casque I was wearing. Its very weight was a reassurance.

That shell made me realize why nobody has ever quite succeeded in giving any adequate conception of the sounds of war. How can one? Some one once said that the most impossible task a man could attempt would be to try to describe an orange to an Esquimaux. You cannot describe the unknown except in terms of the known, and there are no terms of the known in which to describe war. I wish I could really convey the sound of that shell—just that one shell. But I can't.

"We must get into the boyau," said the captain. So down we clambered, and before we had gone many yards a second shell came overhead and burst almost where the first one had. I suppose every one wonders how he would behave under certain imagined conditions. I know I had. As we crouched to avoid possible splinters from the shell (there were none, of course; it was too far away, and the ground was wet) I remember thinking: "Well, well. I always did wonder what war would be like. And here I am in a communication trench, with shells bursting near by. And I'm not frightened a bit—only excited. How interesting!"

But interesting or not, it was disconcerting to have a third shell burst, not in back of us, but somewhere along the line of the boyau before us. The officers held a brief consultation, and decided to wait. "It is not a bombardment," they said. "It is too early in the day. Just random shells. It will stop."

It did stop. We waited a few minutes, and as no more shells came started again. The boyau, only waist deep at first, began to grow deeper as it went on. It was just wide enough to allow two men to squeeze past each other. To our right alongside ran a mass of telephone wires, looped and strung over anything that happened to be handy—projecting stones, twigs, roots, what not. It looked like a hopeless mass, and it would have reduced a lineman to tears; but I suppose it worked.

We walked upon a boardwalk made of narrow crosspieces nailed over parallel stringers, like a grating, and laid upon the floor of the trench in two-metre lengths. Under that were mud and water. I had never seen such mud—so soft, so sticky and so much of it. It was everywhere. Every few yards the mixture would be deep enough to float the boardwalk, so that when you stepped down the walk would slide away from you. Then you would plunge ankle deep into a sort of earthy cream, or fall up against the side of the trench and get muddled in a fresh place. In five minutes I was plastered to the knees. I got my hands full of the stuff, and everything I touched after that I smeared with it.

### The Author Ascertains Why the Boyau Is Never Straight

Even at its deepest the boyau was not quite over the heads of the tallest. It had been dug with such nice calculation that the tops of our helmets showed above it. We were safe enough, for the casques would deflect anything under a large shell fragment, and the

three or four inches of digging thus saved must have meant a total saving of hours of labor.

The boyau never remained straight for more than a few yards at a time, always twisting, turning, doubling upon itself. I soon lost all sense of direction. The trench was too deep to see out of by now, and I had no idea whether the road was behind us, at the side or before us. I had known vaguely that communication trenches zigzagged in this wise—the aeroplane photographs in the magazines had told me much. But why I never knew, and even now I could see no sense in it. Whatever the reason was, it must obviously be such an elementary principle of military engineering that I had always been ashamed to ask.

I found out almost at once, and all by myself. For as we turned into a corner—behold, the trench had disappeared. The third shell had fallen almost into it, so that in the ground beside us was a wide crater of blackened earth, while a great pile of earth, still warm, lay just where the trench had been. We had to climb over it to pass. And suddenly I divined that if a boyau were dug straight a shell bursting in or near it would scatter fragments for fifty or a hundred yards down its length. As boyaux actually are constructed any one who was not standing in the very section in which the shell burst would be safe. Thus one learns.

### Like Icebergs, a Wood Is Mostly Below the Surface

A little further on the stumps of big roots appeared in the walls of the boyau, and, looking up, I saw that we were passing through what had been a wood. But there was little left of it; just a splintered stump here and there across the skyline. We, who were walking underground past the tangled clusters of dead roots, were seeing more of those trees than one walking overhead would have seen. Soon the trench grew shallower, and at length, slanting abruptly upward, brought us to the surface by the side of a ruined road. We were on the main street of Lihons.

I knew it was Lihons, because I had looked it up beforehand on the map. You can find it on any fairly large map of France, a village almost due west of Chaunles, about three kilometres away. When the Somme offensive began, in July, and the French began to push the Germans back toward Chaunles, Lihons lay between the lines. When I saw it in December, therefore, it had been under shell fire for five months. I cannot describe the town. There is nothing left to describe. Of most of the things I saw that day I have a more or less vivid recollection; but Lihons remains almost a blank in my memory. . . . Part of a stone chimney and a bit of plaster wall. These, the road, down which a soldier was carrying two pails, and stuff lying on the ground. And I think there was smoke somewhere; a potlu cooking something in the ruins. That is all I remember of Lihons.

We crossed the road and reentered the boyau. Already we had begun to see soldiers, and now they met us at every turn. We would see them coming toward us around corners, pipe in mouth, carrying boards, or shovels, or beams. Except for their uniforms, they did not look like soldiers at all. They looked like laborers. At one point in our journey we passed a little traverse where a pick and three shovels were propped up against the side of the trench. Their owners were nowhere to be seen.

### America's Idea of a "Fighting Man" Is Out of Date

"Out to lunch," some one remarked, and we all laughed. It did look like it. Throughout the journey I don't remember seeing one man with a rifle in his hands. Most of them were small men, too. It was difficult to think of them as fighters. That, of course, is because the American conception of the "fighting man" is out of date. It is as obsolete as our submarines. There is not much opportunity in this war for the brawny giant who can lick his weight in wildcats. If there were the Russian army would be in Berlin. It's ammunition, brains and courage. These Frenchmen were fighting men of the bloodiest war in history, a war whose battles were lasting months instead of days. Now there was a lull. So they were repairing trenches, laying boardwalk, building dugouts and flattening themselves obligingly against muddy boyau walls to let us pass.

We were nearing the end of our journey. At one corner a neatly lettered signboard met us. It read: *Boyau Victor Hugo; Vers l'Avance.*

We passed this, turned to the left and entered a second line trench. It was deeper than the boyau and a little wider, and its sides sloped a little. Dugouts were hollowed in these sides, shored and timbered. Inside were groups of soldiers smoking and talking, cooking or playing cards. It all looked very snug and domestic, and I should have liked to visit one of the dugouts. But the captain began climbing