

AMERICAN AT FRONT FINDS TRENCH LIFE UNROMANTIC

Harvard Man Describes Perils of Life in Trenches

"Anything But Romantic," Says Alan Seeger of Foreign Legion, but "He Thrills With Sense of Filling Necessary Place in Conflict of Hosts."

CONTINUALLY UNDER FIRE, BUT NEVER SEES FOE

Special Correspondence to The Sun
PARIS, Dec. 28.—The Sun correspondent has received the following letter written to a friend by Alan Seeger, an American serving in the Foreign Legion of the front. Mr. Seeger came to the front not long after his graduation from Harvard University in 1910. He enlisted in the French army toward the end of August, and spent several weeks drilling at Rouen and Tonlouse before being sent to the front near Rheims. He is one of the group of twenty-five Americans serving in the Second Regiment of the Foreign Legion on service in France.

By ALAN SEEGER.

December 8, 1914.

This is our fourth period of service in the trenches since coming to the front a month ago. We left our camp in the woods down by the chateau before daylight this morning and marched up the hill in single file under the winter stars. Passing the second line trenches we walked for some time down a road, torn up here and there with shell holes and obstructed now and then with shattered trees. Through openings in the woods we could see that we were marching along a high ridge and on either hand vaporous depths and distances expanded, the darkness broken sometimes by a far light or the momentary glow of a magnesium rocket sent up from the German lines.

There is something fascinating if one is stationed on sentry duty immediately after arrival in watching the dawn slowly illumine one of these new landscapes from a position taken up under cover of darkness. The other section has been relieved and departs, we are given the consigne by the preceding sentry and are left alone behind a mound of dirt facing the north and the blank, perilous night. Slowly the gray light steals over the eastern hills. Like a photograph in the washing hills, light and shadows come gradually forth. The light splash in the foreground becomes a ruined chateau, the gray streak a demolished village.

Barbed Wire Protects Line.

The details come out on the hillside opposite, where the silent trenches of the enemy are hidden a few hundred meters away. We find ourselves in a woody, mountainous country, with broad horizons and streaks of mist in the valleys. Our position is excellent this time, a high crest, with open land sloping down from the trenches and plenty of barbed wire strung along immediately in front. It would be a hard task to carry such a line, and there is not much danger that the enemy will try.

With increasing daylight the sentry takes a sheltered position and surveys his new environment through little gaps where the mounds have been crenelated and covered with branches. Suddenly he starts as a metallic bang rings out from the woods immediately behind him. It is the unmistakable voice of a French 75 starting the day's artillery duel. By the time the sentry is relieved, in broad daylight, the cannonade is general all along the line. He surrenders his post to a comrade and crawls down into his bombproof dugout almost reluctantly for the long day of inactive waiting has commenced. Rather than imitate my comrades, who are filling the chamber with all the various noises of profound slumber, I shall try to write away some of its tedium by giving you a description of the life of a volunteer in the French army at one of the least exciting points of the present front—that is the mid-center.

After the brilliant French victory in the battle of the Marne, the Germans, defeated in their attack on Paris, fell back to a line about twenty miles from the capital and the frontier and entrenched themselves strongly along the crests well to the north of the River Aisne. The French, following the German lead, took up whatever positions they could find or win immediately behind and sat down no less strongly fortified along a line separated from that of the enemy by distances of usually only a few hundred meters. A deadlock ensued here, and the theatre of critical activity shifted to the north, where the issue still at stake is the result of a battle for the possession of the seaboard and the base for an enveloping movement which may be decisive. Toward the east the operations have become very much confined to the artillery, pending the result of the fighting in the north, which must be decided before an advance can be undertaken by either side on other points of the line.

True, occasionally a violent fusillade to the right or left of us shows that attacks are being made and any moment are likely to be made, but these are only local struggles for position, and in general the infantry on the centre are being utilized only to support the long line of batteries that all along this immense front are harrying each other at short distances across field and forest and vineyard.

Little Romance for the Private.
This style of warfare is extremely modern and for the artillerymen is doubtless very interesting, but for the poor common soldier it is anything but romantic. His role is simply to dig himself a hole in the ground and keep hidden in it as tightly as possible. Continually under the fire of the opposing batteries, he is yet never allowed to get a glimpse of the enemy. Exposed to all the dangers of war, but with none of its enthusiasms or splendid elan, he is condemned to sit like

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an animal in its burrow and hear the shells whistle over his head and take their little daily toll from his comrades. The winter morning dawns with gray skies and the hoar frost on the fields. His feet are numb, his canteen frozen, but he is not allowed to make a fire. The winter night falls, with its prospect of sentry duty and the continual apprehension of the hurried call to arms; he is not even permitted to light a candle, but must fold himself in his blanket and lie down cramped in the dirty straw to sleep as best he may. How different from the popular notion of the evening campfire, the songs and good cheer.

Cramped quarters breed ill temper and disputes. The impossibility of the simplest kind of personal cleanliness makes vermin a universal ill, against which there is no remedy. Cold, dirt, discomfort, are the ever present conditions, and



FIGHTING IN AND AROUND THE TRENCHES IN NORTHERN FRANCE.

Above, a party of French chasseurs and bicycle scouts, firing at the Germans hiding behind the small house in the background. Below, a detachment of French infantry in the trenches near Soissons.

The soldier's life comes to mean to him simply the best of the most misery that the human organism can support. He longs for an attack, to face the barbed wire and the mitrailleuses, anything for a freedom and function for body and soul.

My comrade in arms is a young Serbian, who went through all the Balkan campaign until the war broke out with the Bulgarians. Then he deserted at Salonica, for he was unwilling to fight against his brother people, and his mother too was a Bulgarian. After the triumph of the campaign in Macedonia the present method of fighting is almost insupportable to him, and he frets pitifully under the forced inaction. In the Balkans there was no fighting behind earthworks, but all was in the open field and at the point of the bayonet, and seldom did the Turks await the fury of the shock.

In the evening there was no lying down in the cold and darkness, but around blazing campfires the soldiers sang the ancient victorious poems of their people and danced their national dances. Sometimes they would kindle a big bonfire at some distance from their camp and keep only a lot of little fires among themselves. The Turkish were not very fond of the big fire at night, but around the little ones the soldiers would be left in peace. In the sparsely and darkness of our subterranean quarters he tells us often of the glories of those days and of the wonderful exploits of his people—the onslaught at Kumanovo and the charge at Dibra, where he was shot through the body and laid up in hospital for a month and a half.

Ignoble Warfare, He Says.

It is ignoble, this style of warfare, he exclaims. Instead of bringing out all that is noble in a man it brings out only his worst self—meanings and greed and ill temper. These are not in fact, leading the life of men at all, but that of animals, living in holes in the ground and only showing our heads outside to fight and to feed.

Amid the monotony of this kind of existence the matter of eating assumes an importance altogether amusing to one who gives up all very secondary consideration in time of peace. It is in fact the supreme if not the only event of the day. In France the soldier is very well cared for in this respect. In cantonment and under all normal conditions he receives ordinarily coffee and an ample daily ration of good bread the first thing in the morning, the latter at 10 and is served with soup, meat and a vegetable, excellently cooked, coffee and wine, not to mention such little occasional luxuries as chocolate, condensed milk, and so on. In the trenches this programme is necessarily modified by the distance from the kitchens and the impossibility of passing back and forth in daylight on account of the artillery fire. When we first came to the trenches we made the mistake of having our kitchen too near in the woods. Whether it was the smoke that gave it away or one of the hostile aeroplanes that buzz continually over our heads the Germans soon found its range and with one man killed and half a dozen wounded the cooking brigade was forced to move back to the chateau and take up its quarters at a point in the woods at three or four kilometers from the line of the trenches.

Since then the matter of rationing is arranged as follows: every morning at 8 o'clock a squad of men leaves the trenches and returns before daylight with the day's provisions—bread and coffee, cheese and preserved foods such as cold meat, pates, sardines, &c. The ration is very small, but the nature of life in the trenches is not such as to sharpen one's appetite. In the evening another squad leaves immediately after sundown. Every one waits eagerly to hear the clink of the pails returning in the dark. It is a good meal, a soup, or stew of some kind, as hot as can be expected in view of the distance from the kitchen fires, coffee and wine, and we all gather about with our little tin for the distribution.

These nightly trips to the kitchen are sometimes a matter of considerable difficulty, for frequent changes of position often find us unfamiliar with the course of the paths through the woods, which are now so wet, impossibly muddy and ill defined. Notwithstanding the danger of going astray in swamp and thicket and the labor of bringing back a heavy

load in the dark it is considered a privilege to be assigned to this duty because it gives a little activity to relieve the day's tedium. Single file, with rifle strapped to shoulders, we founder on, wet to the ankles, the black forest all around, each man carrying half a dozen canteens besides his other burdens. Our water comes from a spring down by the chateau.

Rifle for a Jar of Jam.

To supplement the regular rations with little luxuries such as butter, cheese, preserves and especially chocolate is a matter that occupies more of the young soldier's thoughts than of the invisible enemy. Our corporal told us the other day that there wasn't a man in the squad who wouldn't exchange his rifle for a jar of jam. It is true that we think more about securing these trifles than we do about keeping our rifles clean. Nor is it an easy matter to get such things. The country where we are now has been thoroughly fought over, so that the poor inhabitants and their stocks of goods have suffered severely from the continual passing of troops in action. The countryside is stripped as a field by locusts.

In the village where we are billeted during our intervals of rest between peri-

ods in the trenches there is not a thing to be had for any price. Our pocket money is so much waste paper. By sending to remote towns, paying commissions and exorbitant prices, one can manage to get a few things. Once in the trenches these articles are precious beyond gold. In the course of bartering services are paid for in chocolate, for money is held as worthless for wages.

Though modern warfare does not allow us to think more about eating than fighting, still we do not actually forget that we are on a battle line. Ever over our heads goes on the precise and scientific struggle of the artillery. Packed elbow to elbow in these obscure galleries one might be content to squat all day long, auditor of the magnificent orchestra of battle were it not that one becomes so soon habituated to it that it is no longer magnificent. We hear the voices of cannon of all calibres and at all distances. We learn to read the score and distinguish the instruments. Near us are field batteries; far away are siege guns. Over all there is the unmistakable, sharp, metallic twang of the French 75, the whistle of its shell and the lesser report of its explosion. When the German batteries answer the whistle and explosion outdistance the voice of the cannon. When one hears the stiffening the

danger has already passed. The shells which burst immediately overhead and rattle on the roof of our bombproof dugout come unheralded. Sometimes they come singly, sometimes in rapid salvos of two or three or four. Shrapnel's explosive report is followed by the whirr of the flying balls. Contact shells or "marmite" explode more impressively, so that the earth trembles. Shrapnel shatters trees and snags wood shed trunks as if they were twigs; contact shells dig holes eight or ten feet across all over fields. When lines are close, as ours are now, sniping goes on all the time, especially from the German side. At night sometimes a violent fusillade will bring us to arms; out of our burrows we tumble to find the blinding flashes with the Bengal lights from the German trenches, where our enemies are as alert and mystified and uneasy as we are.

None of these alarms has come to anything where we were, but we hear prolonged roars of rifle fire, punctuated with steady booming of artillery, from the line alongside us sometimes, which make us realize that a desperate attack is always possible.

Witness of War in Air.

In clear weather aeroplanes buzz overhead all day long. Both sides bombard at them with shrapnel, which makes a queer little whirr when it explodes high in the air. Never have I seen the lines bring an aim down, for the puffs of yellow smoke break too low, and high up in the clouds the machine goes humming on, contemptuously dropping its signal flares. A few days ago I did see a German aeroplane sent to the ground by a French monoplane.

We were in camp in the woods behind the lines when the familiar outline of a Taube against the winter sky drove us into hiding in our cabin. Suddenly, without having noticed its approach, I saw a French aeroplane close with its enemy. There was the popping volley of a mitrailleuse and the wounded German machine dipped abruptly and came down in a long volplane, but I could not see whether the pilot had height enough to make his own lines before his wheels struck the ground. It is toward evening that the cannonade is always fiercest. With darkness it almost completely subsides. Then the sleepy soldiers, cramped and dethawed, crawl out of their holes, rouse themselves, stretch their legs and take the air. Every-

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body turns out like factory workmen at 5 o'clock. The kitchen squad departs, others set to work repairing smashed defensive earthworks and the night's first sentinels go on.

Sentry duty, which may be all that is melancholy if the night is bad and the winter wind throats through the pipes, may bring moments of exaltation if the cloud banks roll back. If the moonlight breaks over the windless hills or the heavens blaze with the beauty of a night the moonlight flooding out of a frosty sky illumines all the wide landscape to its utmost horizons. In the hollow the white shell and chimneys of the ruined chateau stand out among the black pine groves on the crest opposite one can trace clear as in daylight the groves and walls and roadways along which wind the silent and deserted lines of the enemy's trenches.

Standing facing them from his ramparts the sentry has ample time for reflection. Alone under the stars, war in its cosmic rather than its moral aspect reveals itself to him. Regarded from this more abstract plane the question of right and wrong disappears. Peoples war because strife is the law of nature and forces the ultimate arbitrament among humanity no less than in the rest of the universe. He is on the side he is fighting for, not in the last analysis from ethical motives at all, but because destiny has set him in such a constellation. The sense of his responsibility is strong upon him. Playing a part in the life of nations he is taking part in the largest movement his planet allows him.

He thrills with the sense of filling an appointed necessary place in the conflict of hosts, and facing the enemy's crests above which the Great Bear wheels upward to the zenith, he feels with a sublimity of enthusiasm that he has never before known a kind of companionship with the stars.

Six Days in the Trenches.

Six days is the regular period for service in the trenches under normal conditions. Often enough it seems close to the limit of physical and moral strain which a man can bear. The last night the company packs up its belongings and other to the twilight of evening or dawn assemblies and waits for the shadowy arrival of the relieving sections, to whom the position is surrendered without regret.

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Hudson Seal (plain style)	\$300	\$150
Mole (novelty design)	\$350	\$150
Caracul (fox trim)	\$495	\$295
Caracul (Ermine trim)	\$595	\$300
Chinchilla Squatter (novelty)	\$750	\$350
Baby Caracul (fox trimming)	\$700	\$350
Caracul (full flare)	\$750	\$475
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