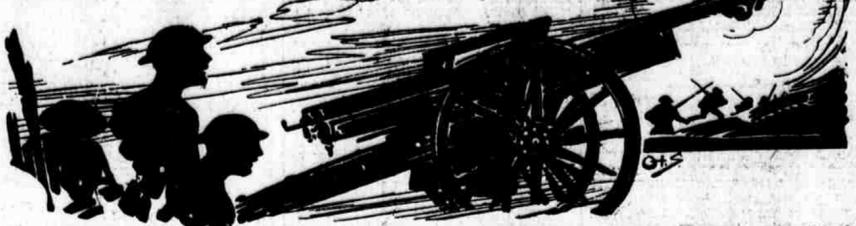


# The FIRST SHOT by Corporal Osborne De Varilla

## Battery C, Sixth U.S. Field Artillery who fired the first shot of the American Army



for the jokester, but he was wise enough to stay out of sight until I had cooled down. One of the brightest, brightest little personalities on the ship was our chaplain, the Rev. Dr. Dixon from Illinois. That fellow was just one human bottle of sunshine with the cork out so that the glad stuff could pour out and warm up the whole body.

Well, the chaplain sure did love that song "Uncle Sammy." Every time he found a bunch of us together, he would say with one of his blithe smiles:

"A cigarette for every boy who will sing 'Uncle Sammy.'"

He would obediently yelp all three verses of the song, and after we had roared forth the last stanza the little chaplain would deal out the cigarettes. We dubbed him "Cokeo," though he didn't look any more like Uncle Sam than the man in the moon.

He really looked like a pocket edition of Theodore Roosevelt, with his eyes, nose, mustache and gleaming teeth, which he displayed abundantly when he smiled.

It was the ambition of the chaplain to have us go ashore in France singing the "Marseillaise" in French, and he drilled us with this song every afternoon. There were a few in the outfit who had good voices, but the majority couldn't have qualified for the choir of the corner church in France.

And the way we slipped and slid over those French words would have worn the nap off any ordinary man's patience. The chaplain had patience that made Job's seem thin in comparison. He kept at it hammer and tongs until once in a while we made a direct hit on a French word. The chaplain would reward us with one of his Rooseveltian smiles and hand around the smoke.

The ship was abuzz with excitement on August 13 when we sighted a thin blue line on the horizon—the coast of France.

"Hip! hip! hurrah! France!" yelled a gunner, and we joined him in a deafening roar of cheering.

"Now for the Hun," I said to my buddy, the sergeant.

"Well, soon he'll be in his ballistics," he replied with a glad grin.

The Prophecy. "Then my buddy said something which I have thought of a good deal since that memorable day."

"Do you know, Reddy," he said, "I believe you are going to do well over here."

"Not any better than yourself or anybody else," I replied, trying to be modest.

"Oh, I don't know," he said with an air of seriousness. "I've a hunch you are going to do something big."

"Can that stuff, buddy," I observed, trying not to show my pleasure at his words.

On the day after I opened the war for Uncle Sam, my friend the sergeant grasped me by the hand and said:

"Didn't I tell you, old man, you were going to do something real over here?"

But this is getting ahead of my story. The excitement grew as our transport swept near the French coast. Soon we could make out dozens of neat little white houses with red tile roofs—all against a background of beautiful green. It was a sight good for sore eyes.

A warlike touch was given the scene as we neared the entrance of the harbor.

Two big French airplanes advanced to meet us, flying low and scanning the water closely for hostile submarines. It was a dangerous spot, the entrance of that harbor. Only the day before, we learned later, a German U-boat had sneaked close in and sunk a supply ship.

CHAPTER IV  
A Royal Welcome.

IT was evident that our approach had been well heralded, for the docks were demurely waiting for us, and on public buildings, dwellings and warehouses hundreds of American and French flags were snapping to the breeze.

Quaint little French fishing boats swarmed about the transport, and the occupants of these craft were the first to greet us.

These fishermen were very picturesque in their raiment, red tam-o'-shanters and corduroy trousers rolled up to the knee. They wore a red scarf about the waist and their feet were bare. The faces of these foreign-looking men were wreathed in smiles; they jabbered and gesticulated after the manner of the French, shrieking questions at us which we did not in the least understand.

One of them became so excited that he forgot to steer his boat and the craft rammed another and was upset, throwing the fisherman into the water. We threw a line to the capsized man and pulled him dripping and gasping to the deck of the transport. We gave him a hilarious reception, slapping his damp back and shouting, "Good! Good!" He replied in a torrent of enthusiasm in his own language and a wide smile unfolded under his queer little eyebrow of a mustache when we filled his hands with American coins. He stayed on the boat until we docked and did not seem to worry in the least about the fate of his smack, which he had left open in the harbor.

In the meantime the French aircraft had wheeled about and were following the transport, serving as a sort of vanguard. The United States cruiser rode proudly ahead and the destroyers steamed behind.

It sounded pleasant and warlike to hear the buzzing of the motors aloft. We yelled greetings to the airman, and they peered at us through their goggles and waved happily. They were flying so low that we could almost talk to them.

Dense crowds were lined up on both banks as we passed through the first locks. There were quaintly dressed peasant women who made me think of the pictures of Puritan

dames in my history book back in Frisco. They wore prim white caps, exceedingly tight bodices, wide skirts and wooden shoes. The little girls wore pocket dresses of their mothers and big sisters.

A Colorful Reception. The men were attired in valiseen coats, corduroy trousers and sabots. The whole scene put me in mind of a grand opera had once attended in Frisco.

The populace, so to speak, went wild as we slipped through the locks, our band playing alternately the "Star Spangled Banner" and the "Marseillaise."

Men ripped their gaudy scarfs from their waists and waved them frantically, and the girls flattered their handkerchiefs, and American and French flags were in evidence everywhere.

One could easily gather by the actions of these good people that we were the heroes of things they had looked upon for a long time. There was something pathetic and childish about their joy. Many of them sobbed like children, and we should feel the welcome of what they had been through the last three years.

Some brothers and fathers from this city had died by the thousand on the front line along with other loyal Frenchmen. In the coming of the Americans these poor fellows saw a prospect of a turning of the tide against the invading boche.

Our fighting edge was sharpened when we glimpsed the depth of their welcome. We couldn't understand a single syllable of the language, but we were glad to see that we were granted that it was all complimentary and consoled them with good old United States.

"Take heart, you folks, for we're going to paste hell out of the boches," yelled an artilleryman.

"Uncle Sam is on the job now," cried another Yank.

We docked that night, but were not allowed to go ashore. But the Frenchies seemed determined that we should feel the welcome of France, even though we were paused up aboard ship. They swamped us with baskets of fruit and bouquets of flowers. Soon the old transport looked like a florid, rosy-cheeked consumptive until we were threatened with colic.

The Yankee spirit of exploration and adventure was in evidence in the boys that night, and they slid down ropes to the dock. Some of them were grabbed by the marine sentries and returned to the ship, but most of them penetrated into the city, returning before morning and bringing glowing reports of the hospitality of the French.

"Great place, this France," said one of the night prowlers, a little thickly upon his turn. "Folks in this burg wouldn't let me pay for a blamed thing; never saw so much wine in my life. It must rain booze in these parts."

The Landings. We landed the following day, August 14, 1917, and I shall never forget the event. At this same port, the first detachment of General Pershing's forces put ashore some months previous, on June 26, 1917, and they were received like a lot of gods. But the novelty of seeing Americans had not worn off, and the inhabitants of the port gave us quite as rousing a reception as they did the first arrivals.

It was a clear, beautiful morning as we marched down the gangplank, singing the "Marseillaise" with an ardor that nearly prostrated "Uncle Sammy," our chaplain, with pride and joy.

All, say, those Frenchies fairly moaned us. Shouting, "Vive l'Amérique," they made for us as if we were something even more precious than the gold of the Indies.

The first thing I knew, a middle-aged woman in peasant costume had swung her arms around my neck and was kissing me on the cheek. She had a look about her face as if she had never before thought I was a long-lost son. I tried to pry her loose, but she held on like a limo, and I had to grin and bear it until she let me go.

But the thing was not over by any means. It now developed into a matter of taste. Turn. No sooner had the elderly woman finished her kiss than she had my arm flung around my collar, and I started to run, but I changed my mind when I got good look.

My buddy would have changed your mind if you had been in my place. The sweetest girl in France had annexed herself to my neck. My eyes told me that there could be no mistake in this business, and I knew her hair was as black as a crow's wing; her eyes were big and brown, and her red lips pouted up at me invitingly.

I am an American and things in a hurry I gave her a smack that must have been heard at the Battery in New York. She blushed and then kissed me on both cheeks and let go. I am frank to say I was sorry to see her go.

The next in the line-up was an excellent French-looking chap with a rooster and a pig on his chest, and he was making me my mind. I was glad to see him, and I was full steam up. I blocked his approach with a twist of my elbow, for I suspected his design.

"Nothing doing, Frenchy," I said. "Ours where we come from, men don't kiss each other."

He evidently didn't understand and tried to sneak in under my guard, but I shook a fist warningly in his face.

"Lay off, I yelled, 'or I'll soak you one. He was a real business man and showed his kissing offensive."

Of course I knew it was the custom of everybody in France to kiss, but I made up my mind to stick to my to-man strategy and other on the cheek.

That night we slept in an open shed on our blankets. It was bulky to feel your ground so hard, but I knew that we were close to the fighting zone.

We remained there a week, stretching our legs and resting from our voyage. Of course we were barely hot standing room, and I wanted to beat it to the front immediately and take a hand in the big game.

Off to Barracks. We were stationed at the end of the line, when we were loaded into funny little cars, which were about half the size of an American car. We were packed so tight that we barely had standing room, and we were in high spirits and were glad to be on the move.

We scrambled for the positions at the end of the line, and I was lucky enough to win a position in the open several times. Our first trip consisted of a long, hard ride through the back, and at some of the stations the route we received handouts of hot coffee.

We passed through a pretty rolling country, dotted with towns and villages. I saw very few young men, for most of them were at the front doing their bit against the Hun. The work on the farms was done mostly by old men, women and children. The inhabitants gathered at the station to see us pass through.

After traveling for three days we reached Frisco. The trucks to the best artillery positions in France. The trucks were piled high with mattresses and real pillows.

But, best of all, we were near the line and could hear the boom of the guns.

Every one of us felt a thrill when we realized that only a few miles away the batteries were putting away at the boches. We were able to see to it that our positions behind the French line were happily fat was not in store for us. I learned to our grief the next day that we would have to undergo many a day of grilling under the most exacting French artillery instructors before we would be able to pepper away at the hated boches.

### CHAPTER I I Join the Colors

SOME of my buddies have the superstitious belief that destiny picked me to fire the first gun for the United States in the war against the Hun.

Personally, I take very little stock in destiny, fate or any of those things of the occult, around which sentimental, half-baked novelists like to weave impossible yarns.

According to my understanding of the case, I was selected to send Uncle Sam's first shell-message to the Kaiser because I put in many weeks of hard training, and got to know every twist and wrinkle in the disposition and temperament of my French seventy-five.

But, just to give the romanticists a little consolation, I will concede that I come of a race of red-headed, freckled-faced fighters, and am proud of it.

My father, Walter de Varilla, was a United States cavalry scout in the early seventies, and helped to round up the Apaches in Arizona.

Dad was a red-head, and had freckles as big as copper cents. He was a fighter, and a good one, too, as United States army records will show. Heemed in by savages, while on one of his scouting expeditions, he cut his way out in a running fight, using two Colt's revolvers to excellent advantage. The Indians dubbed him "Red the Brave."

My grandfather on the paternal side fought for the Confederacy under General "Stonewall" Jackson; he had hair like burnished copper. My mother's father served the Union under Grant.

There was a red-haired De Varilla with "Mad Anthony" Wayne, when he stormed Stony Point, and a pair of sorrel-topped, lusty De Varillas delivered hammer-blows for democracy of the pioneer band in the French Revolution.

Every one of these fighting De Varillas had freckles as well as a red hair—God bless them all!

My mother was of Irish descent, and my father French.

Now you need wonder no longer why I love to fight when the fighting is good. When you get a French and Irish combination, and breed it for several generations on the stimulating soil of the good old United States, you are bound to produce something that absolutely refuses to let "George do it" when there is a scrap on deck.

The Fighting List. I was fifteen years old when the Kaiser and his gang of international burglars set out to crack the safes of the nations of the world, and revive the chain-gang methods of the unholy old Roman Empire.

I wanted to get into it then, honest I did, although I had just blossomed out in my first suit of long trousers, and was proudly wearing my first dollar watch.

My hair always has a habit of bristling like a cat's tail when I scent a scrap, and when the Kaiser started to reach through the boche first-line trenches, they found the effect particularly startling one day, when, in the height of a battle, I put on my gas mask. After that, they called me "The Little Red Devil."

But that is pushing ahead of the yarn. As I started to say, I felt the old De Varilla fighting in me, and the German Emperor began to bias his way through Belgium, burning cities, blowing up villages, and killing women and children.

Maybe it was the bias of some of those French ancestors stirring in me and urging me to do something for France, but more likely it was that unbearable combination—American, Irish and French.

I stood it as long as I could, and then I told my mother I was going to Canada to enlist. I let her know I thought it was disgraceful for a fighting De Varilla to be wasting his time going to school while a bunch of hoodling Hunns were running loose over Belgium and France, and doing murder by the wholesale.

Mother's Wiles. I could see that she liked to hear me talk that way, for there were tears in her eyes, and she gave me one of those warm motherly smiles that make an American boy in his first long trousers feel that he has suddenly grown three inches taller and a man. But, of course, I did not realize then that no sensible mother is going to enlure very much about sending a fifteen-year-old son into the jaws of battle.

But she understood her boy all right, and didn't argue with me. She snaked a freshly baked mince pie out of the oven, and told me to scoot to the back steps and gorge myself. It was a mighty good pie of the mother-used-to-make kind, and in the eating, I almost forgot about the Kaiser and the Belgians.

A few months after mother had camouflaged the De Varilla fighting itch with mince pie, I was packed off to a prep school at Los Angeles.

I found the school a regular incubator for the war spirit.

There were a couple of English lads there who received frequent letters from relatives in the thick of the fighting in France. The Brits used to sneer at us American lads because Uncle Sam wouldn't get into the fight for civilization.

I was obliged to lick one of them to make him stop saying rotten things about Uncle Sammy. I have often wondered if the Englisher I pummeled knows that the Reddy de Varilla who blacked his eyes on that memorable day is the same De Varilla who fired the first shot for Uncle Sam against the boche.

If he does, maybe he has forgiven me for the licking I gave him. I am certain that by this time he has taken back all the unkind things he said about Uncle Sam.

I warmed up good and plenty when our

Uncle Sammy told the German Ambassador to pack up his duds and clear out of Germany. I couldn't concentrate on my studies after that. The print on my lesson books became blurred, and all I could see were marching troops and maneuvering battleships.

But the bottom dropped clean out of my education when Congress backed up to the occasion and declared the United States at war with the German Empire.

Wow! Every fighting De Varilla in the whole list of De Varillas seemed to rise up before me in spirit and announce:

"Now is the time to get in, my boy!" That settled me; I determined to get into the scrap while the getting was good. I was eighteen then, and big for my age. All I needed was my mother's signature to precipitate me into the biggest war in history. I packed my suitcase, went home and told my mother I was going to enlist in the United States army.

She was game and didn't even blink a tear. And why shouldn't she be game? She was Irish, her father had fought under Grant, and besides, she had married a De Varilla.

"You are a De Varilla," she said, "and I'd be ashamed of you if you didn't want to go. Your father and both your grandfathers went in when they were eight."

Her voice shook a little bit, and the next morning I noticed her eyes were a trifle red. I enlisted in Battery C, Sixth Field Artillery, U. S. A., April 25, 1917, nineteen days after the United States jumped into the war.

I was proud as a six-year-old boy just learning to whistle when the army doctors looked me over and decreed I was as sound as copper from head to toe.

buddies rushed into my tent one night, and said excitedly:

"Reddy, we're off for France tomorrow. I thought he was kidding me, but no, the news was buzzing over the camp, and the next morning we were 'entrained for parts unknown.'"

We all knew what that meant—we were going to France, going overseas to put the Yankee punch into the fight against the Hun.

CHAPTER II  
Off for France

WE were boiling over with the fight spirit as we slid over the rails toward the east coast.

The weeks of training in the dry, bracing air of Arizona had plated our constitutions and lifted our morale to the twentieth story. Every fiber of our bodies ached for a try at the Hun; we felt then that our regiment was equal to any capable of turning the tide against the boche.

We gave our pals husky blows across the back and told what we were going to do when we bored our way into Berlin.

"When I get to Berlin town," said a giant artilleryman from Montana, "I'm going to drop everything else and put in my time hunting for the Kaiser. Remember now, he's my meat. I'm going to settle with that bloody old boy, and I don't want any interference."

"You've got a monopoly on this Kaiser-killing job," retorted a gunner from Kansas. "You've got to walk fast if you beat this buddy out looking for his royal highness, the chief butcherer of the Hun."

This sort of talk may sound foolish, but it showed the excellence of our spirits. We were ready for anything—the rougher, the better. I believe we were about as reckless as an outfit of artillery constabulars as ever moved toward a battlefield.

The trip overland was one continuous ovation from Douglas to the Atlantic coast, even at the tank stations, enthusiastic Yankies pulled the hero stunt on us, flowing into our trains and overwhelping us with fruit and candy.

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At a clock one morning we piled off our trains in an Atlantic port, and marched on to a transport. The ship pulled down the channel and anchored.

We remained there for two days, and they were blamed tiresome days. We couldn't see any sense in this delay at getting a whack at the Hun. I growled with the best of them, but the boys who had taken a heavy grip on me. In me was a deep-seated feeling that I would not be content until I had planted both feet on French soil.

I had always noticed that a worthy soldier was destined pulling me on to fire the first gun for liberty. I'll confess that I did have a feeling I had a responsibility on the other side, help start the ball a-rolling.

Off at Last. Every mother's son of our lusty crew of look-alikes gave the ear-ringing yell of joy when, at sunset on the second day, the transport weighed anchor and steamed slowly out of the harbor.

This sort of light-country, it seemed almost too bulky good to be true. I felt like kicking myself to see if it wasn't all a dream from which I would soon awaken and find myself in that rather dull prep school in Los Angeles.

Most of us were a trifle glum as we saw the coastline of Yankee-land fade away in the distance. The boys who had taken a heavy grip on me. Out of the cast stiff, salty breezes brought to us a smell of adventure that lacked up our spirits like a dose of quinine.

Here at last, I thought, I am afloat in the sea of mystery and danger—the sea which for three years had been the theatre of events which had vibrated the world.

Hundreds of miles to the eastward, I knew that destroyers prowled about on the alert for the treacherous submarine, while cruiser and battleship fleets patrolled wide waters areas, off actually bottling up the battle squadrons of the Kaiser.

I was supremely content as I hunk over the rail and watched the foam churn over the bow. About a mile ahead, a United States cruiser of the latest model rode the seas majestically, while on our flanks Yankee destroyers sauntered plowed the waves peacefully.

"Uncle Sam is on the job," I said enthusiastically to my buddy, Sergeant Pasquale Attilio, a young, intelligent New York Italian, one of the best artillerymen in the battery.

"You can bet your bottom dollar Uncle Sam is on the job, Reddy," he replied. "Mr. Submarine has about as much chance of poking in our game as a Jersey mosquito in the teeth of a porpoise."

I was mighty lucky to have the respect for my buddy, for, aside from being one of the best chaps that ever rode an artillery caisson, he was a competent man, and it was largely through his instruction that I was promoted to corporal after the regiment landed in France.

Our New Americans. This war has opened my eyes to the fact that the sons of our immigrants have the makings of absolutely top-notch Americans. This is being demonstrated every day in the western battlefield in Europe, where they are fighting and dying in the cause of Liberty. And before this war is over we are going to take off our hats many times to the lads who, in ante-bellum days, we rather contemptuously classed as foreigners.

Believe me, they are proving themselves Yankies of the first water, every one of them. Some of them are wabbly in their English, but they are backing up the spirit of Washington and Lafayette just as if their ancestors had played heavy parts in the American Revolution. When we have the Kaiser

interred in Sing Sing prison, and the nations of the world have returned to peaceful pursuits, we are going to show our appreciation for what these lads have done for their adopted country, or I'm a poor prophet.

There was only one fly in our ointment on the trip over, and that was the chow, which, for the first few days was about the worst ever dished out of a ship's kitchen. It smelled to the heavens, did that chow, and before we were two days out, a third of the outfit were sprawling in their bunks with dysentery and other ailments of the digestive organs.

We belted low and loud to the head chef, a big, fat dork, who didn't know as much about cookery as a longshoreman. We might just as well have complained to the ship's anchor or the keel of the transport. The chow grew worse and more of the boys went to the mat.

I have a stomach as vigorous as a blast furnace, but it balked at the kind of stuff that was being served up in the messroom. I saw I would have to do something to keep out of the sick bay, so I decided upon a little strategy.

I was on pretty good terms with an under-cook by the name of Sam, and for two bits a day he supplied me with chow from the officers' mess. I let my buddy, the sergeant, in on the graft, and a little before mealtime we would steal away to the boiler room and eat the food which had been cached there by Sam.

The best in stables on the ship was purchased for us by the ebony rascal, and my buddy and I waxed fat and comfortable while our comrades howled in increasing volume at the steady decline of the chow.

Of course the sergeant and I had to yelp and complain with the rest so as not to excite suspicion. If the bunch had discovered our little game they would have nobled us. We felt like a pair of Judases at first, but under the influence of that good food our consciences became covered with rawhide. I saw I would have to do something to keep out of the sick bay, so I decided upon a little strategy.

Things came to a ripping climax on the third day when the rascally chef served a concoction which he labeled "Irish stew." The stuff was an insult to the Irish race. Several of the boys gagged and beat it to the deck rail the minute they got a whiff

of the steaming, stinking mess, while down-right murder, and nothing else, gelled in the eyes of other artillery buddies.

As for me, wretch that I was, I pummeled on the mess table and yelled:

"Boys, this thing has gone far enough. I'm willing to die for my country on the field of battle, but I'll be blamed if any lump-headed, fumbling jackass of a nigger cook is going to shuffle me off with a kettle full of pomaine bugs."

All for Murder. If the lads had known that only ten minutes before I had polished off a good square meal in the seclusion of the boiler-room, they would have lynched me. But they didn't know it.

My words had an immediate effect, for they were ripe for murder, pillage and everything else in the category of lawlessness.

"Right you are, Reddy," yelled a buddy from Michigan. "I move we hang that rotten cook to the yardarm. He's out to get a sea funeral for all of us, and he'll accomplish his purpose if we don't get him first."

"There ain't any yardarm on this ship," observed an old artilleryman, "but boys, we can lift him to the crow's nest and drop him off into the brine."

"To the crow's nest with the black beggar," chorused the desperate crew, and the rush was on into the galley.

The big chap from Michigan led the band. He was a ferocious-looking object as he jabbed viciously at the air with a pair of table forks.

But the chef heard the uproar and the rush of feet down the stairs. He must have come up cannon-ball express, for he scrambled up another companionway and gained the deck. So great was his haste that he took along with him a great wooden ladle from which hung threads of dough.

The boys were hot on the trail and they reached the deck just in time to see the chef disappearing around a corner of the chart-house. The chase was now on in earnest. Up and down companionways, through the main saloon, down the deck, the chef ran for his life with the pack of enraged artillerymen at his heels.

Finally, exhausted, the terrified negro plunged head first into the cabin of the commanding officer, following:

"Save me, for de Lord's sake, save me!" "What does this mean?" asked the colonel sternly as he surveyed the panting, perspiring artilleryman gathered about his door.

The First Victory. "It means just this, colonel," spoke up a gunner who had just arrived from the messroom. "The chap stepped forward with a bowl of stuff that had been served as stew."

"Just take a whiff of this, colonel," he said. "It's the kind of chow that black rascal has been serving up ever since we left

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