

My grandfather, William Howard Michael wrote an article for the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings in 1934 about his experiences in France during WWI, titled 'Pleasure and Pain of 1918'. The article begins with the training of the Marine unit at Quantico, Virginia.

"The exhausting job of battalion surgeon is my lot. The flu, sore feet, frostbites, real pains incident to arduous past training and fake pains to avoid prospective marches, make sick call a veritable battalion muster. It was an ideal brigade that went to France. A third were old soldiers, with many of whom I had chased the Cacos about the hills of Haiti in 1915. The rest were men of culture and education who had enlisted before being threatened with the draft (a new concept in WWI). All honestly wanted to have their part in the war. Their hopes were realized. At Philadelphia we boarded the USS Henderson. Fifteen days drag by; watches, drills, false U boat alarms and those eternal life preservers hanging around our necks. A case of cerebrospinal fever furnishes one outstanding medical experience. Try a spinal puncture with the ship rolling 20 degrees and you will know what I mean. The case was a success. During the three day trip across France to the front, Chaplain Borsch tries to teach us his Canadian French, which serves us to no good. We learn also the art of bathing and shaving with a single canteen of water each. My status was a bit complicated being a navy doctor, attached to a Marine unit, serving with the Army, and usually under French command. I was retained as a possible spy once because an intelligence officer did not know that the combination existed.

I distribute two hospital corpsmen to each of the four companies, retaining the others for the routine ward work. The medical authorities attempt to have eight Marines detailed for each company to be stretcher bearers. We are told we are unreasonable. Four men are designated to carry stretchers after the fighting. When we actually get into fighting, 16 men

per company of 250 are clearly not sufficient. We are billeted at Chaumont-la-Ville for a month and a half. It was more strenuous than any similar period in France-strenuous and unstimulating. Long marches in the mud, hundreds of sore feet and colds. Far in the distance a faint rumble, and at night the dim glow of great shells bursting, remind us that there is a war going on and we are not doing our part.

No comforts, I was about to say, but there was one important one- my luxurious feather bed. My host's wife comes in the first night I am there and informs me that my bed is ready and my fiancée, in it. My French was sketchy. I am not sure I have understood but ask no questions. The good woman accompanies me, pulls back the covers, points to a well-wrapped brick, and says, "Voilà votre fiancée, elle va vous garder bien chaud." (There is your fiancée, she will keep you nice and warm.)

Orders come to leave for the front. Manning, my assistant, and I find them a bit inopportune. Our budding romances with the school teacher and her pretty sister are brutally nipped. The whole village of Chaumont-la Ville turns out to the last inhabitant to bid and kiss us goodbye. We, idiots, are all joy, they all tears. My old hostess is saddest of all. "You Americans are laughing as if you are going to a fete," she whimpers. She holds up her hand, the five fingers spread out. "Ah, I know what happens to you at the front. You go like this." Then she folds in the three fingers and kinks the fourth, "and you come back like this."

But the first month does not yet bear out her prediction. We are comparatively comfortable and quiet sector about ten kilometers south of Verdun. The trenches are well made, there is an excellent organization of dugouts, and soon our hearts were warmed by the first suspicions of spring. I envy a French second lieutenant, who shares my dugout. His orderly arrives noiselessly in the early morning, lays out his clothing, shines his leather, warms his camp bath, and prepares his breakfast. At

the psychological moment he announces, "Le bain de Monsieur le Lieutenant est pret." (the bath is ready) I eat regular "chow" and am fortunate enough to have a hospital corpsman knock the mud off my boots.

Malingering in the battalion is almost unknown. I only see the extreme cases. If they are walking, they are fighting. Meanwhile, the routine bombardment is negligible. The Germans sow only a hundred or so shells daily over our area. The French battery near my dugout makes a sort of game at shooting a 75mm at a bicyclist at a certain hour. Sometimes I go over to the artillery observation post to see the fun. All parties in the game seem to enjoy it.

Major Sibley and I make an almost daily inspection of the front during which I keep an eye on sanitary conditions. On the only company front where conditions are frankly disgusting, there is a medical officer on duty. The reason becomes evident when I attempt to have this doctor inspect with me. He is very uncomfortable outside of his dugout and far more interested in cracking shells than sanitation.

One sultry morning, the Germans treat us to several thousand gas shells, concentrating them in the low parts of our area. A company of another battalion camping in a valley behind the front receives the majority. Gas defense instruction has insisted disproportionately on the immediate effects and too little on the late effects of gas. The company takes to the high levels and remains there during the attack. Afterwards they foolishly return to the valley, where the gas still lingers, to cook and eat their dinner. Symptoms begin to appear in a few hours. Practically the whole company has to be sent to the hospital. About thirty die. I have no doubt some of that company are still breathing with difficulty on account of that blunder- or perhaps they are not breathing.

Attempting surgery that day almost costs me my job. French artillery ride through our sector and one man has his thigh broken by a shell fragment, which is lying visible in the

wound. I give him a whiff of ether and take it out. This is called major surgery under a general anesthetic and I am severely criticized.

Influenza appears and spreads through the company and when we move to Chemin-des-Dames it spreads through the rest of the battalion. Half of the personnel have the disease, including both of us medical officers.

The periods in the rest areas are delightful. To delouse, bathe, and shave after a long stay in the front line is an intense pleasure. At night there is the rapture of stretching out between clean linen sheets in a comfortable bed.

One fine day our 'holiday' is ended brusquely. We are among many units thrown together and rushed to stop the 'hernia' pushed through the allied lines when the British Fifth Army gave way at Chemin-des-Dames. We are ignorant of the details but when we see road stones marked Meaux 5K. Paris 60K, and hear firing not too far ahead, we know that something is radically wrong.

As we bump along in our camions we meet all France, it seems, in hopeless flight. Families perched high on great lumbering carts that carry the household wealth, women wheeling heavily loaded wheelbarrows with complaining wheels, feeble men staggering beneath the hottes, and children whose streaming tears are marked out by dust, all hurry by, their faces portraying utter discouragement.

We push on northeast of Meaux. The enemy are soon made out ahead and we know we are at the front. We take up positions under the cover of woods. The Germans neglect the open country. There are only a few shallow trenches. Bombardment becomes appalling. My medical unit is in a little woods upon which a battery concentrates its full attention. Four or five shells fall in a row at one end, then another row crashes down, and another, until the whole patch is covered.

Our artillery has not yet arrived to defend us, so the game goes on ad nauseam. We can tell to a second when the shells are

to burst in our part of the woods. Rapidly our trenches become deeper.

A marine sees his 'buddy' blown to nothing as the two walk single file. The boy is shaking like an aspen. He is my first 'shell shock' case. I march the poor fellow up and down where the shells are falling in considerable number. I have the fool idea that is a good treatment. At every detonation he goes into a fit of wild hysteria. I see the case is demoralizing the other men and I send him out.

Early the morning of June 6, our battalion medical department helps in the attack made by the 5th Regiment. Until noon several of us work at first aid in the open field. However, though the first aid work yields me a decoration, my greatest contribution is more military than medical. Having no designated stretcher bearers, the marines come back in droves carrying their wounded. In one case six bring in a wounded lieutenant. I make them drop the wounded and return to the attack. A combatant should receive a court martial, not a medal, for carrying the wounded during a fight. Alacrity of movement to the rear is instinct, not valor, and a wounded man on your back actually gives you the feeling of protection.

In the afternoon we go forward with our own battalion which captures most of the Bois de Belleau. Though both units with whom we attack that day lose about half of their men in killed and wounded, no hospital corpsman is wounded. I believe we are spared partly because of our Red Cross brassards. In both attacks, the fighting is at close quarters. A few of our wounded are dressed by the Germans and sent back to us.

Our mission is to move the wounded to the rear and deliver them to the hospital in as good condition as possible. Not always as quickly as possible, because morphine, rest and care will save many men who otherwise would die of shock during their trip to the rear.

Not until June 25 do we have complete possession of the Bois de Belleau. (Belleau Wood was one of the heaviest battles

in Marine annals, right in there with Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima, in WWII. The Germans first started calling Marines 'Devil Dogs' after this engagement and their aura as an elite fighting force really began at this point.) During the whole month June, the bombardment is continuous. Rifle and Machine gun fire is always banging away in the corner of the woods and the air has become fetid with the stench of the bodies that have lain unburied in dangerous places since the attack of June 6.

One night as we are leaving the front for a turn in reserve, we witness an extraordinary display. Just far enough to the rear to relax from the stimulation, which makes everyone walk on the heels of the man ahead, we sit down to rest. Shells thud in the direction of Paris and hundreds of searchlights shoot up into the sky. Many colored star shells illuminate the heavens. From time to time a plane is caught in a ray of light and followed, while shrapnel bursts around it. Somehow, at this distance, only the beauty of the thing impresses us and we sit for an hour drinking in its magnificence. (Airplanes in this time period were a 'new' sight in daytime, I can only imagine the glory of night flight.)

At Meaux, a few kilometers in the rear, we are able to obtain some food and drink to break the monotony of 'monkey meat' (supposedly Argentine beef), which has been our piece de resistance since the latter part of May. The town proves an excellent market, especially so because the merchants there look upon the Marines, as all that stood between them and capture by the Germans. Among the purchases are a few bottles of Chateau Y'quem. (a wine of very high regard)

Major Sibley appreciates wines, so I attempt a trick. The crown stamped cork of the Chateau Y'quem is drawn and replaced with a simple one, a Haut Grave label is substituted for the original and the bottle is put on the table. During dinner the Major pours out a glass and raises it to his lips. As he tastes it his face brightens into a beautiful smile, "Grave hell," he

exclaims, examining the label and eyeing me suspiciously, "that's Chateau Y'quem."

One night the German guns burst forth again on our right. With the equipment we can carry, and only emergency rations, we are bounced for thirty hours across France. Why do we leave nothing between the Germans and Paris but the 26th division? And why do we go away from the firing? We scratch our heads over a map and guess correctly. We are to do a surgical operation on the German lines by reducing the 'hernia' between Rheims and Villery-Cotterets, which the 'Boche' pushed through in May.

In Villery-Cotterets woods, on the evening of July 17, we drag our stiffened bodies from the camions. Under cover of the vast woods the allies are assembled in all their variety. French cavalry, infantry, artillery, tanks, Moroccans, Algerians, Canadians, English, Anzacs, and us yanks. All mingle in a marvelous disorder. But by a miracle, out of that chaos comes the attack of July 18, the turning point of the war, the Second Battle of the Marne.

The 5th regiment attacks first, We remain in support. I spend most of the day at a hunting lodge situated at the convergence of several roads from the advancing front. Naturally it has become the clearing station for wounded. They are evacuated by returning ammunition trucks. Stretched out on the grass, several hundred soldiers await their turn. Here is one with a great hole in the place of one eye, another, his thigh shattered, another with a great abdominal wound held together with a dressing.

The first aid work goes on rapidly in the lodge. Soon I find I assumed the direction of the evacuation. The good humor that prevails is astonishing. Sometimes it is difficult to persuade those with abdominal wounds to take precedence over over their comrades. In palatine cockney, in nasal Yankee, in the drawl of our southland, or in the jerky monosyllables of North African French, each proclaims the triviality of his own wounds.

The sunshine of the beautiful summer day seems to pervade even the disposition of the wounded. All is optimism.

The enemy is completely surprised and thrown back a dozen kilometers in a vital part of the front. Soup is found simmering on the stoves, unfinished meals, clothing and weapons in eloquent disorder, airplanes and great cannon abandoned, and on the ground, his body sprawled upon his unfinished game of solitaire, lies a man dead.

It is a different story the next day when our battalion attacks. We attempt to advance beyond Verzy. On our left, French cavalry, carrying lances as in the days of Napoleon, make a charge which is as beautiful as it is suicidal. Our losses, too, are terrible. We can advance hardly two kilometers. An enormous cave in the town of Verzy becomes the shelter for the wounded from the area. A German dugout serves as my battalion aid station. In the evening I visit the cave because we have trouble having our stretchers and blankets returned.

Never have I imagined such horrors. The air is heavy with the pungent odor of blood and sweat, and from time to time the nauseating sweetish smell of mustard gas, the flickering dim glow of candles which light faces greenish and deathlike, the continual groans of hundreds of wounded and dying, the pools of slippery blood, create a hideous inferno which dwarfs the imagination of Dante. Outside a barrage makes the evacuation of the wounded impossible. The streets of the town, below the level of the cave, are flooded with poison gas. In spite of gas and shells, a distinct feeling of relief comes over me as I slip on my mask and hurry through the night back to my little aid station.

In all the hell of those two days there is one hopeful sign. The spirit of the enemy is broken. The prisoners come in by the hundreds. They have lost the cockiness of those we took a month ago at the Bois de Belleau. These know they are losing the war.

I ask for and am granted a job with the John Hopkins Unit at the hospital in Bazeilles.

My feelings were curious chaos when I left the battalion. Only four of the original officers who marched out of Chaumont de Ville, still remained. For us the prophesy of my old hostess had more than come true. Three times, I had seen half my unit become casualties. Yet I felt a sympathy toward my battalion which was almost personal. In the front line there was the gratification of feeling that you are doing all you can. I was a little ashamed when I told the French family with whom I was billeted that I was going to a hospital. "Ah," they said, "you are lucky, you're going a l'ambuscade." Ambuscade is argot, not French, for a place where shells do not fall.

Nevertheless my real medical experience began at Bazeilles. Now I had a chance to treat patients as a member of an excellent medical organization. When a drive was on, the hospital staff was divided into two equal teams. One worked from noon to midnight, the other from midnight to noon. During these strenuous periods, six tables in the operating room worked continuously. The center could handle 4,000 a day the first day of a drive and 1,000 a day afterwards.

Our X-ray man, "Pop" Miley, was a wonder at locating shell fragments. Finding and removal of foreign bodies and debridement- a careful cleaning of the wound with the removal of all dead tissue- was the usual operation. Ether was our universal anesthetic. The wounds were packed open to avoid gas bacillus infection and Dakin's solution irrigations begun after the bleeding was arrested.

That dreaded infection, the gas bacillus, was at first always treated with amputation. My first case was a youngster, who had found the war too hard. He had shot a bullet through his own hand. Gas bacillus infection followed. We amputated at the shoulder. In later cases debridement plus extensive separation of the muscles with peroxide dressings gave as high a percentage of recoveries. The serum now (1934) recommended had not yet been developed.

When the rush of a drive subsided, we had many experiences with secondary closures, skin grafting, and even orthopedic surgery. One orthopedic case especially impressed me. He was a marine. A 1 pounder had taken off the corner of his shoulder. His left arm was dangling by the brachial plexus and the great blood vessels. A debridement was done and the arm supported until the wound was clean. The denuded corocoid process of the scapula and the broken end of the humerus were now brought together. The arm was immobilized in the correct position. Bony union followed and the result was a very useful arm.

Autumn came. The pegs swept forward on our great war map. I learned of my promotion to lieutenant commander, the highest rank in the Hopkins unit and logically in command. A Navy doctor in command of an Army hospital? I would be transferred the same day. I wished to stay. I was having an agreeable opportunity to serve with the younger instructors of my medical school days.

One day we looked at each other with blank expressions and exclaimed, "It's true, the war is over. What shall we do now?" There was a brief celebration and a frantic rush for the states. I deserted the shrine of Mars for that of Venus. I wrote home, "looking back I have begun to realize that from my own selfish point of view, it has been a very successful war."

With the boisterous Yankee Division aboard, the USS *Agamemnon* sailed from Brest March 30, 1919. Among the "casuals" was my new bride. Now when I think of the war, these living pictures stand out in my memory:

The marines joyously entraining at Quantico as if for a picnic; my good old friend at Chaumont de Ville dramatically and prophetically bidding us farewell; the bloody slaughter at the Bois de Belleau; the gorgeous beauty of the aerial raid over Paris; the "damn the eye" of Major Sibley, his beautiful smile as he recognized the Chateau Y'quem; the inferno in the cave at Verzy; the exhaustive operating surgery at Bazeilles sur Meuse;

and shivering by my side in the icy church of the little village of
Rouceux, a cherished flower of France.

by Commander William Howard Michael Medical Corps US Navy
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