

FROM DEADLOCK IN THE TRENCHES TO AMERICA

On Christmas Day at midnight the truce ended, and the tiresome vigil in trenches knee deep in icy water was resumed, with hundreds of victims of frostbite daily, and hospitals busy with amputations. The New Year started with the newspaper chatter of a great Allied offensive, which made those who knew reality smile. While the Allies had checked Germany's amazing preparation with a defined boundary, their successes had been chiefly defensive, at an appalling cost. With enough ammunition an enemy, numerically vastly inferior, can maintain a fortified line. The British had agreed to land an expeditionary force of 150,000 men. In six months their losses were almost double that number, and they were maintaining an army of 350,000 on a line short, if estimated by miles, but difficult and costly when we considered the exposed position in Flanders, and the operations which virtually entailed the siege of Lille. Many were scoffing at the delay in equipping Kitchener's new army. The first million rifles ordered from the United States were promised for delivery in nine months to a year. Tools necessary to make parts for machine guns could not be supplied before the summer. For some months nearly three million of the finest men in the British Isles were drilling with old rifles and sticks while government plants, working night and day, were just able to meet the wastage of weapons at the front and supply sufficient for effective target practice for the new army. Japanese rifles bridged one gap, but it needed a year to create factories to turn out an ample supply, and two years for adequate artillery and shells.



1st Jan 1915: Our departure for Birkenhead has been delayed for two days because of bad weather. Today, though, the mercury has settled a little and we left Portsmouth at dawn. Within an hour, we were gripped in the teeth of a tremendous storm

1st Jan 1915: Through distorted radio chatter, we hear that less than thirty miles away, H.M.S. "Formidable" has been sunk by a German submarine in the English Channel.

3rd Jan 1915: News that Joffre's II Corps has re-taken most of the lost ground in the Champagne region but the Germans have made four massive counter-attacks against the Fourth Army and disorganised the French offensive. The French used artillery-fire to keep pressure on the Germans but another counter-attack drove them back to a salient west of Perthes. Once again hundreds are dying in this to-and-fro madness.

5th Jan 1915: After docking at Birkenhead, I crossed the Mersey and made my way to Castle Street where I was pleased to find that the office of shipping agents, Elder, Dempster & Co. was still at the address that I had visited to arrange my first journey as a war correspondent, with Sir Francis Scott's expedition to Kumassi. Nothing was sailing to New York but I was able to book a passage to Philadelphia.

6th Jan 1915: With a day and a half to wait for my ship, I spent much of the time reflecting on my sorry journey from the trenches, bringing pictures to my mind of the young men dying today at Artois and Champagne

7th Jan 1915: Now aboard SS Haverford for Philadelphia - but my trials and challenges are nothing compared with those of the men at the front

8th Jan 1915: Shocked at the recent cessation of hostilities over Christmas, the German Army issues a general order prohibiting any further fraternisation

9th Jan 1915: News today that the Germans have forced a huge split in the French lines near Soissons and that Paris is once again threatened

12th Jan 1915: Four months ago I was with the French, taking Hill 132 at Soissons: now they flee the Germans: countless deaths with no gain.

12th Jan 1915: Amid reports of further slaughter at the front and gas attacks on the people of Paris, I am just two days from peace in America

13th Jan 1915: News that the British War Council has resolved that the Admiralty should prepare for a naval expedition in February against the Dardanelles

14th Jan 1915: Another German attack begins to the north of Soissons, on the route to Paris but the attack was made by only a small numbers of troops and the French defenders repulsed the attack

15th Jan 1915: Philadelphia: no bullets, no screaming, no killing, no fear - how do I convince myself that I should I be here?

15th Jan 1915: It is winter in the mountains - my favourite season of the year - and I will join Mary and Edwin there soon; now though, I must make my way to New York to see Roosevelt

16th Jan 1915: Arrived in New York to find that Roosevelt is on a three-day trip to Harvard; no matter, Beveridge has a briefing for me

16th Jan 1915: Despite the election crash of his Progressive Party, Roosevelt still thunders against President Wilson's stance of "Watchful Waiting" and is now opening direct communication with Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey

17th Jan 1915: Beveridge arranges an office for me and I begin to gather and organise my notes as information for a letter that Roosevelt is preparing to send to Sir Edward Grey. One of the critical issues that Roosevelt must raise is the Allies refusal to discuss anything with American war correspondents

19th Jan 1915: Roosevelt returns from his trip to Harvard today and I am both shocked and concerned. I have worked with "Teddy" for 14 years now but I have never seen him so haggard or tired; I fear he will never be re-elected

19th Jan 1915: News of an airship raid with two Zeppelins dropping bombs on Great Yarmouth, Sheringham, King's Lynn and the surrounding villages. Four people were killed and sixteen injured.

20th Jan 1915: Arguing for war and angry at Wilson's inaction, Roosevelt wants me back in Europe to feed him information on Germany's plans

21st Jan 1915: In composing his letter to Sir Edward Grey, Roosevelt adds a concluding sentence that crystallises the US position: "President Wilson is looking to his future and is certainly not desirous of war with anybody"

23rd Jan 1915: After some days with Roosevelt, neither of us believe that this war can be won unless America joins the allies, so I am with him and I will go back to Europe under cover

24th Jan 1915: Beveridge tells me that my passage to Southampton is booked on the SS Minneapolis leaving on 2nd February. Just a week to see my family

26th Jan 1915: Arrived at our mountain cabin with a mixed bag of emotions and expectations. Edwin is excited but Mary seems diffident, then sad, then angry when I tell her I must leave on Saturday

27th Jan 1915: I talk of the thousands of men, not much older than Edwin, dying in the trenches but, although she understands, Mary is still angry. She is right, of course

28th Jan 1915: Telegram from Beveridge reporting that British Government have confirmed that there will be a naval attack on the Dardanelles in February

29th Jan 1915: Making preparations to leave again for New York - I have to meet Beveridge on 1st February before sailing for Southampton on 2nd

30th Jan 1915: My mood becomes as black as Mary's as I realise that, within weeks, I will be back to the blood and slaughter of the trenches

