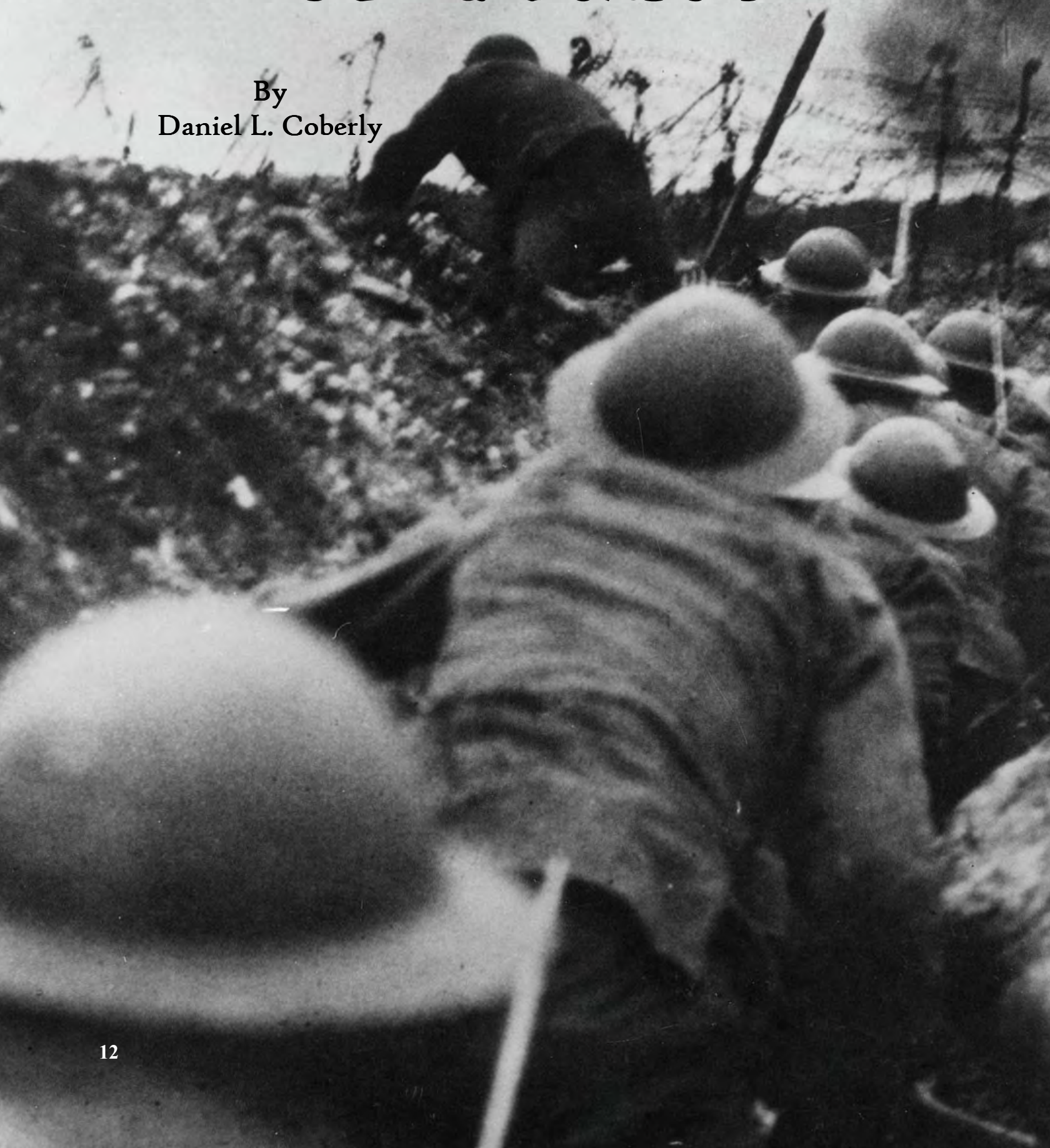


For a Few Feet of France

By
Daniel L. Coberly



The Great War-

the War to End all Wars; -- World War I-- was nothing more than a prelude to modern carnage that we cannot fully comprehend even by the gory standards of World War II, Vietnam or Iraq. World War I wounded the western world, and we have been limping ever since.

It was the first time since Napoleon fell that Europe went to war with each other. And it became the world's first mechanized, industrial war; a war that ushered in a new era of chemicals and machines at a time when most men still rode horses.

It was a war that no one said they wanted, and that everyone said no one could stop. Treaty after treaty prompted one country after another to declare war to support alliances with little regard for the righteousness of the cause. The cause was mainly an attack on the Hapsburg dynastic state. Ironically, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, also killed the best hope for peace. For, the Arch-

duke was already doing what he could to reduce war fever.

A month after his assassination, war plans were dusted off across Europe, reservists were called up, and huge armies were mobilized. At first, Germany and Austria formed one side with Serbia. France and Luxemburg seemed poised to form the other side. When Germany attacked neutral Belgium, England entered the arena. Then, Germany declared war on Russia.

The first conflict among industrialized nations killed 10 million soldiers and mutilated 21 million more. A 60 percent casualty rate tore apart the British Expeditionary Force in the first three months of the war. There were 60,000 casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Before it ended, more than a million men were wounded or killed in the Somme. Only seven miles of territory had been gained by the allies during the four and a half month battle.

France lost more than 1.3 million during WWI. British dead totaled 723,000, including Australians, twice as many as in WWII. Two million German soldiers died. Canada lost 60,000. India sent a million men, 10,000 of which died. Even Jamaica sent men, 11,000 of them. Higher losses were suffered in Russia and Ottoman Turkey due to poor sanitary conditions.

The Meuse-Argonne, Belleau Wood, Cantigny, and Aisne, were the battles where most Americans fought. About 6,000 doughboys died at Aisne, nearly 200 at Cantigny, 26,000 died at Meuse-



Soldiers in gas masks operate a Vickers machinegun.





Argonne; there were nearly 10,000 casualties in Belleau Wood, with 1,811 killed in action. More than 110,000 Americans in uniform died, half of them to the Spanish Influenza. Yet the war signaled America's emergence as a strong global power.

Five million of the men who died in battle have no graves. Nothing was left but their names. No one has an accurate count of civilian deaths.

Most of the British dead came from the working class who largely comprised the enlisted ranks, a phenomenon common to all nations of the world since time immemorial. Similarly, officers were historically drawn from upper classes without due regard for their military training or experiences. The upper classes thus paid a high price; losing between 19-20 percent of members of the peerage, graduates of universities and boarding schools. Throughout Europe, an entire generation of nobility was lost. Such losses added to the economic chaos.

Civilians too suffered immense pain. Millions were displaced in their own countries. People today do not realize that the years 1914-18 saw internment camps throughout Europe to house civilians who were in the wrong country. More than a quarter of Belgium's civilian population became refugees, mostly due to poison gas. Minorities were sent to the front lines.

People today seem unaware that WWI saw the first aerial bombings of Britain. Zeppelins killed more than 500 Britons between 1914-15.

It was German sinking of civilian ocean liners, such as the British RMS Lusitania that brought neutral America into the war. On board were 1,959 passengers, 1,198 of them died when a U-boat sunk the ship. Of the 159 Americans on board, 128 were killed.

Modern chemical warfare was born in April 1915 on the battlefields of Belgium. One of every four shells fired was poison gas. Poison gas was later said to be used in the 1920s and 30s in Iraq, Manchuria, and Ethiopia. There are tales of gas used in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge. Today, Syria still has poison gas.

Britain felt it had to fight to maintain national independence as a great power. For, if Germany had ruled the continent, British power would have been severely diminished, which in turn would have destroyed the British Empire. Instead, defeat marked the decline of the German Empire. It would take World War II to effectively reduce the British Empire and to reboot Germany into a modern industrial nation of the type they had destroyed in Belgium. Economies, such as Belgium, took more than eighty years to return to pre-WWI levels of harmony.

As any combat veteran will tell you, minutes of maddening excitement traded places with hours of insane inactivity. There were hours of boredom interrupted by minutes in hell. Some men said that the carnage of war made them believe in God, while others said that man's inhumanity to man convinced them there was no God.

Living like moles in holes underground, they adapted against gas bombs, trench foot, lice, machine guns and sniper fire. Meanwhile, many worried parents across Europe sought news of their sons, not knowing that some of them had already become part of the Flemish landscape.

We salute them now, the mangled and maimed, but not then. Amistice Day for Americans is now called Veteran's Day, a holiday when WWI is nearly forgotten. For there are nearly no WWI veterans left.

We give little thought to the millions of instances of individual, quiet courage that climbed out of the trenches to race into the face of artillery and machine gun fire that meant nearly certain death. Prior to WWI, most soldiers were killed by swords, pistols, rifles or muskets. During WWI, seven of ten British or French soldiers were killed by artillery.

In WWI, such mad heroism was common valor for nearly every soldier, not just the ones who lived to be decorated for their bravery. Few actually were decorated, if only because none of the witnesses to their heroism survived to tell their story.

In my late mother's hometown of Verdun, so many shells rained down upon the earth that it looked like the surface of the moon. There was only dust or mud, several feet thick. Not a living thing could be seen except soldiers; there were no trees no twigs, no birds, no rabbits, nowhere to remember good green earth except in your mind.

One wonders how the citizens of Verdun survived two world wars and all the wars that preceded them. Sadly, it is the history of the world that holy places are made unholy as were the cemeteries in Verdun.

A side effect of the loss of so many men was the lack of husbands for the remaining women. More than 500,000 civilians are said to have died as a result of malnutrition. The German army shot 6,500 civilians in Belgium, in France, including civic resistance. Russians deported countless Jews whose fate remains unknown. More than a million Armenians were reported deported by the Ottoman Empire.



Soldiers said that at first the screams of men and horses coupled with the whistling and explosions of bombs were unbearable. After a few weeks, the ones who accepted their fate said the noise became to them unremarkable. Everyone prayed for the sounds of silence that meant peace.

Peace finally came with an Armistice on November, 11, 1919. The War to End all Wars was over. Yet, if we turn on the daily news we are constantly reminded that the peace did not last.