

From This Land to No-Man's-Land - War Like We Have Never Seen, Nor Will Ever See Again!

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In 1914, across America, folks could choose to marvel at all that was right about the world. And when other nations like Germany struggled to provide resources for its ravenous and antiquated military nobility, the U.S. instead found abundance.

Even the ancient symbol “cornucopia” had come to represent the lavishness of the newly legislated American holiday “Thanksgiving.”

- But, not all was right with the world. For the U.S., the Japanese peril loomed too close to the California coastline for Easterners and threatened shipping.
- Though the west had mostly been won, just to the south of the border Mexico wrangled with reoccurring revolution that regularly leaned more than heavy on the border states.
- And, clearly obvious to France and England, the German Kaiser even bragged about his worldwide spy network.



Young Wilhelm II

Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck

Practically raised by the powerful Prussian General Baron Otto Von Bismarck, the child Wilhelm, under Bismarck's influence, had grown to disdain his parent's trust of foreign powers, and fondness of all things British.

He also grew to distrust his English and Russian relatives. Since in fact, the German Kaiser, the Russian Czar, and the King of England all had the same grandmother, Queen Victoria.



Wilhelm II and his grandmother Queen Victoria of England

The forefathers of the related royals had hoped that family ties were strong enough to bind wealth and avoid war.

But, German Chancellor Bismarck had no reason to honor family connections. He had so influenced the young emperor that as Wilhelm grew, he adopted the baron's Anglophobia, as well as his fondness for espionage and the clandestine arts. After his father's death, Wilhelm II even boasted to the future British Prime Minister that, "Whenever war occurs in any part of the world, we in Germany sit down, and we make a plan."¹ The assertion was more a warning, than a declaration. It was made clear the new Kaiser was not his father.



Prussian General Baron Von Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II

Anarchy, intimidation, and saboteurs were key tools in Kaiser Wilhelm's kit of foreign affairs.

Germany had cause for its anxiety. On the birth-of-nations timeline, she was only decades old, having been drug together by Chancellor Bismarck with the formation of the German Empire from smaller nation states in 1871 during Wilhelm's grandfather's reign.

In 1884, Germany joined the colonial empires of the British, French, and Russians in foreign expansion in Africa and the Pacific, but by that time the rich colonial opportunities world-wide had already been acquired, leaving little room for an upstart to expand.



Kaiser Wilhelm II

But, Kaiser Wilhelm II was ambitious. Colonial policies officially became a matter of national prestige.

The Emperor's *Weltpolitik* foreign policy adopted in 1890 onwards demanded, "our own place in the sun." Its aims were to transform Germany into a global power through aggressive diplomacy, the acquisition of overseas colonies, and the development of a large navy.



“Bismarck & Wilhelm “Dropping the Pilot.”

This policy marked a decisive break with Bismarck’s previous defensive policy of *Realpolitik*, since Bismarck was wary of acquiring overseas colonies. A feud with Wilhelm led to his eventual resignation. It is plausible to imagine this discord between the two German leaders as the initial reason for the spark for WW1, since Bismarck’s plans were more localized, and his approach to foreign policy more diplomatic. In fact, the illustrious Baron predicted, **“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.”**



The Assassination of Archduke Franz Joseph of Austria & his wife Josephine

Thus it did, in the assassination of an inconsequential Austrian archduke by a nobody student. I say inconsequential since no descendants of Archduke Franz and his new wife could succeed to the throne. Likewise, without a pistol in hand the teenaged assassin, Gavrilo Princip was hardly of any political significance.

But, the Kaiser was not the only change agent for war. A significant paradigm shift had taken place that even the most astute European generals had missed. Technology had so rapidly advanced, that military leaders could not see the futility of such defenses as mighty, stone-walled fortresses.



Common Pre-war uniforms

Startling uniforms with fancy colors and plumes announcing how determined they were to wage war, and more important, that they had the wealth to do so, would soon come to mean nothing. Innovation was key, and:

- High-powered rifles with smokeless powder,
- more deadly and accurate artillery,
- machine guns,
- and balloon use, had only recently been introduced on prior battlefields, usually against untrained subjects from distant colonies.

But, during the Great War, for the first time both sides faced the most accomplished armies in the world. Unfortunately, this led to stalemate.



Weapons Development

The latest ideas in warfare, such as flame throwers and mechanization brought bedlam and confusion to the battle. Later in the war, further developments like tanks and chemical agents would only add to the chaos and mayhem. Once the Germans had settled in, forward movement and the taking of ground became rare in WW1 and what terrain was taken, was seldom held.



Tommy (ready to go "over the top"). "I SUPPOSE WE SHALL BE MAKING HISTORY IN A FEW MINUTES, SERGEANT?"
Sergeant. "HISTORY BE BLOWED! WHAT YOU'VE GOT TO MAKE IS GEOGRAPHY."

The focus for the generals was on territory acquisition, but you can't win a war if no one moves, so it became a stalemate to see who could outlast the other side. Human warfare had reached an impasse itself. In three years of fighting, the only real progress made was that of improving how effective weapons had become.



It had become a war of attrition.

To survive soldiers looked for the humor wherever it could be found. Some jokes told terrible truths, illuminating the nightmare in all its madness and horror. The grimmest of all may have been that performed by the French soldiers in April 1917 at the Chemin des Dames, in another doomed and appallingly costly offensive. As they marched towards the waiting German machine guns, the troops began bleating like sheep.

A new term had come to warfare.



No-Man's-Land

From 1914 to 1917 most Americans wanted nothing to do with the war in Europe.

"It's their war! Not ours!" became a common argument. Many, especially here in the west, saw the war as, "That family feud between those royal cousins!" But for most, even President Woodrow Wilson, the black holes that were the Western and Eastern Fronts were scorched into memory as those places where most who entered only vanished.

The most searing was in France. There, that place called No-Man's-Land, where nothing lived on the front that ran from the English channel and snaked hundreds of miles to Switzerland cemented the deadlock.

The Germans, who had based their knowledge of defense on studying the Russo-Japanese War, made a science out of designing and constructing defensive works in the lines that used the radical idea of



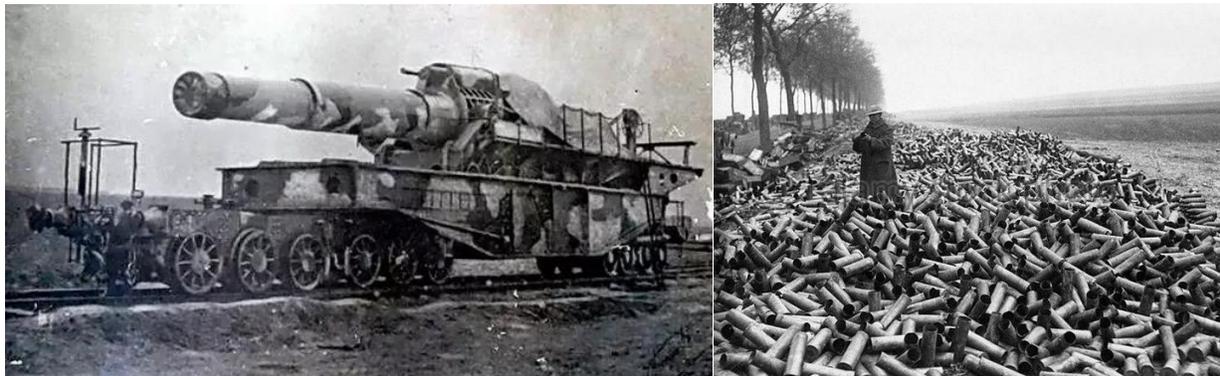
Reinforced concrete bunkers

reinforced concrete for deep, shell-proof, and ventilated dugouts with strategic strongpoints.

Applying the concept of "defense in depth", where the front stood hundreds of meters deep and contained a series of redoubts, they could provide supporting fire, rather than one continuous trench. Here, while attackers could advance between the redoubts, they were exposed to crushing enfilade fire from their flanks. Soon both sides adopted the model.

The Germans often prepared multiple redundant trench systems behind the front in the event of a retreat. This duplication made a decisive breakthrough virtually impossible. Again the Allies learned from the ingenious Germans.

Thus, frontal assaults, and their associated massive casualties, were unavoidable since the continuous trench lines offered no open flanks.



Now let's talk shell shock: At the Battle of the Somme in WW1, the attack was preceded by a week-long artillery bombardment. 1,738,000 shells were fired along a front of over fourteen miles.

But, casualties of the defenders could match those of the attackers when reserves were expended in costly counter-attacks or exposed to the attacking army's massed artillery. Most often the machine gun and artillery wrought massive costs to an attack, so the lines never moved very far. The war would be won by the side that was able to commit the last reserves to the front.

The standoff had allowed for more permanent accommodations of an intricate network of trenches that not only included well prepared defenses, but held even offices, storage depots, and individual resting nooks, or what the French called *Abris*, or shelters.

The Germans though, had constructed elaborate trenches, many with all the comforts of home.



In fact, in many of the less active places along the front, the war had settled into a daily routine. The morning procedure of accepted behavior might include one side delivering a brief reveille barrage, which was answered with a short artillery "Hello" from the enemy. Then nothing might be expected till lunch or even afternoon, but these gentlemen's arrangements were often intended to keep the enemy guessing. For the generals, it was all about out-thinking and trying to catch the other side off guard.

But for the routine foot-soldiers who faced instant, rapid-fire, machine gun death daily, these behaviors only fostered rumors and bizarre superstitions deadly in the face of reality. British Tommies and French Poilu alike were quickly made aware of the omens, talismans, and good-luck behaviors that resisted the demon of death. At the edge of No-Man's-Land none dared tempt him by testing fate.

The U.S. Declares war



The Yanks are coming!

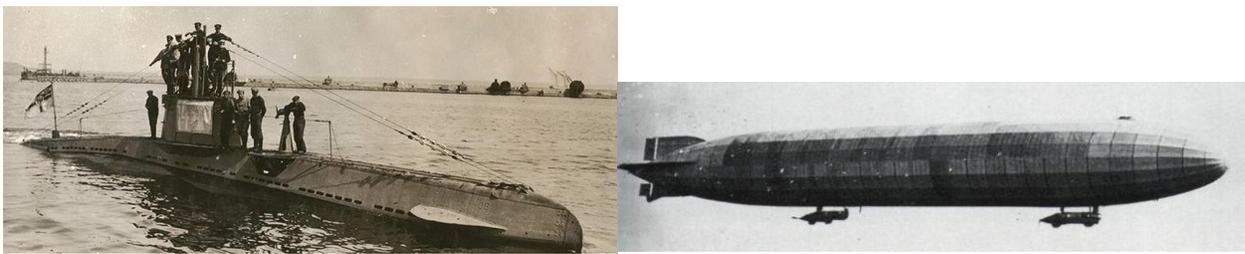
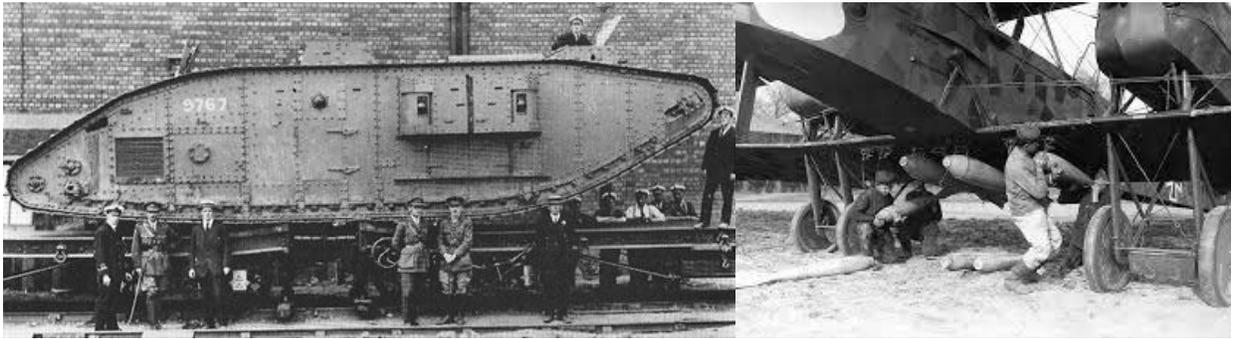
Once Americans learned of the German treachery in Mexico through the exposure of a plot to entice Mexico into a war with the U.S. to "keep America out of the war in Europe." The United States declared war, and the general consensus changed. Popular support came almost overnight, and along with it came the draft. Here is an example of a bit of supposed "real-life" humor printed in a pamphlet of the time and published by Donald G. Robertson of Northwestern University called *Wartime Laughs Stories, Verses, Pictures*.

Dear U.S. Army: My husband HAST me to write a RECOMMEND that he supports his family.

He cannot read,so.....don't tell him. JUS' TAKE HIM! He ain't done nothin' but play a fiddle an' drink lemon essence since I married him eight years ago! An' I got to feed seven of HIS kids!

Maybe you kin get him to carry a gun! He's good on squirrels - and' eatin'. Take him – an' WELCOME! I need the grub an' his bed for the kids. Don't tell him this, BUT take him!

Besides being fresh, the Americans, characteristically a progressive lot, could not 'cotton a logjam.' They did not tolerate the standstill for long. It astonished the French that these brash young "Yan-kee Doo-dells" wasted no time in breaking the calm of the standards by ignoring "trench rules" and taking potshots at the Germans during their frontline training in the peaceful areas even when told not to. Americans were just too impatient for that. "We came to fight," they argued. The unhappy French tutors had to explain that the German artillery response was their punishment for being so hot-headed.



War Like the World Had Never Seen

To understand how the war was an exercise in true terror, we must consider how truly terrifying the new weapons of the war were. Prior to this war, soldiers were trained to fight with rifles in lines of precision attacks called simultaneous volley firing that were deadly.

When the Germans perfected the rapid-firing, bolt-action Mauser rifle, before the turn-of-the-century, this volley firing only accelerated, and the German riflemen only grew deadlier. Still, wave upon wave of attackers could eventually overwhelm a position, as was proven by the Americans in the war against the Spanish in Cuba two decades prior to WW1, where the Spanish were actually using Mauser rifles with smokeless powder. But, after that lesson, American ingenuity had improved upon the German design by 1917.



The American Springfield rifle

A Doughboy using the latest American made Springfield rifle could easily match or beat the speed and accuracy of the German using his Mauser, but two things changed the new rifle's advantage.

The first was the machine gun.

Past tactics calculated that if an attacking first wave of infantry was eliminated by rifle fire, surely the second wave right behind would be successful, and if the enemy were fast enough for the second, the third would certainly overrun the enemy position.



Machine gun

But, the introduction of the machine gun destroyed all that. When the rapid bursts came, before the first wave would hit the ground fatally wounded, the second just behind them was also killed, and the third was already in the machine gunner's sights. This one weapon was enough to send all professional tacticians into resounding defeat. Still, the most devastating was found to be the improvements made in the long-range artillery.

Without a doubt, the most unanticipated force generals on both sides faced in this new warfare were the tactics of the high-powered artillery companies and the extremely accurate barrages they could lay down. But, these relied upon accurate reports of enemy positions,



Observation Balloon

and that is where the balloon and airplane observers became important. Yes, we have all heard of the famous aces who felled many a pilot from the sky, and films and books have made them quite the romantic attraction.

But, the real important roll aircraft played was to keep the generals and their artillery abreast of enemy troop positions and movement. Here thousands of men depended upon information accuracy, as hundreds of photographs and reports mapped out the landscape, telling the critical story of enemy placement and movement.



The War to End All Wars was war like mankind had never before seen, but though it did not put an end to war, as was promised, it did mark the beginning of the end of war as we knew it. Advances during the war did change warfare, as well as the overall quality of life. For example, medical services were fairly primitive and antibiotics had not yet been discovered. Relatively minor injuries could prove fatal through onset of infection and gangrene

German records suggest that a sixth of leg wounds and a fourth of arm wounds resulted in death due to infection. It has been reported that nearly half of the American casualties who developed gangrene died.

CHEMICAL AGENTS



The terror chemical agents brought to the battlefield is incalculable, and the gas only grew more deadly as the war proceeded on. Plus, a gas mask didn't always insure protection from the effects of mustered gas especially if it settled in under your mask.

Seventy five percent of wounds came from artillery fire. A wound resulting from a shell fragment was usually more traumatic than a gunshot wound. Shell fragments would often deposit foreign debris, making it more likely that the wound would become infected. These factors meant a soldier was three times more likely to eventually die from a shell wound to the chest than from a gunshot wound. I can attest to this as my own grandfather,



Walter Sidner, c.1918

Pvt. Walter Sidner, of the Third “Rock of the Marne” Division, was shot through the chest and left for dead. The Germans threw him on the dead wagon bound for burial. There he came too, pushed his way off the wagon, escaped, and spent three days attempting to cross No-Man’s-Land to get back to his company. The French found him in a deserted German dugout where he had found a little food. Later in life, when he showed me his scars, I was shocked at the long spidery marks across his chest where the flesh was ripped apart by the exiting round. But, though he spent months in the hospital, he told me he was so much better off than those who met their fate in the path of a falling shell. Many made it to the hospital, but did not leave there.



U. S. Army Base Hospital Number 3, Vauclaire, France

Walter **HAD** also been gassed in that German dugout, but was more fortunate than many. The horrors of chemical warfare still exist, but WW1 proved that gassing the enemy was most ineffective in the long run, since its victims might not die from the attack until decades after the war, as happened to Jess Crow, my grandfather's cousin.

Weaponry technology has so advanced that it is likely that we will ever shudder again at the numbers of dead that attrition warfare stunned the world with in WW1. Civilization has also advanced so that leaders of the greater nations, around the world rarely ever look upon their own troops now as mere peasants, or chattel to heartlessly heave at the enemy until the enemy runs out of ammunition as the European nobility did in WW1.

Still, I recommend we heed the words of General John J. Pershing himself just prior to WW2, not yet even two decades after the signing of the Armistice ending WW1, when speaking to the American people in 1936.

Referring at that time to Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo he professed,



General John J. Pershing

“It is almost axiomatic to say that a people who complacently submit to unreasonable demands of a clamorous minority will certainly become the prey of a dictator.”

It is clear now in hindsight that Pershing was right. He was also right in his disagreement at the Allies signing an Armistice, insisting that they should have pressed on into Germany to demand an unconditional surrender, another lesson we should learn from WW1.

¹⁾ 22 November 1899 Kaiser William II stated this to the British statesman Arthur James Balfour