

American Military History, Topic 7: World War I and Poetry from the American Field Service's Ambulance Drivers

Background: America's controversial entrance into the Great War (1914-1918)—the most destructive the world had known—won the conflict for the Allies (Britain, France, Russia, and Serbia, among others) and made the United States the most influential economic and political force in the world. Over the last three decades of the nineteenth century, America's industrial economy, which had been gaining momentum since the market revolution of the 1820s-1850s, had grown so dramatically that the U. S. stood at the forefront of the world's industrial powers, whose markets became inextricably tied together. Following Austro-Hungarian archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination by Bosnian nationalist Gavrilo Princip on 28 June 1914, European nationalism and great-power alliances, coupled with German aggression, pulled Europe's industrial powers into World War I. Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy (which would join the Allies in 1915), and the Ottoman Empire dragged each other to war against the Allied nations, and, within less than a year, almost every European nation and part of Asia were belligerents in the Great War. A local incident had become a savage global war, but, for the first three years of the conflict, President Woodrow Wilson worked to keep the United States "impartial in thought as well as deed" despite encouraging the nation—due to existing capitalist ties and an ideological kinship with Great Britain and France—to become the arsenal of the Allies, which created a trade in war supplies that led to one of the greatest economic booms in American history. Through submarine warfare that targeted any enemy ships—including passenger and merchant ships—Germany attempted to interrupt that trade, which sustained the Allied war effort, and, on 7 May 1915, even sunk the British passenger liner *Lusitania* (which secretly carried munitions for the Allies), which resulted in 128 American deaths. Wilson protested, and Germany ceased unrestricted submarine warfare until early 1916, when it attacked the French steamer *Sussex*, injuring several Americans. Again Wilson objected, and again Germany stopped its indiscriminate underwater warfare. Following his narrow victory in the 1916 election, Wilson created a cause for which he could justify belligerence, if given reason by Germany once more: a new world order based on self-determination for all nations, open diplomacy, freedom of trade and travel, and a permanent league of nations to maintain peace. In January 1917, Germany's renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare (which was part of a dramatic gamble of major assaults in France to bring the war to a close) threatened to starve Britain. By April, two events—the British interception of a German telegram (the so-called "Zimmerman Telegram", named for its author, German foreign minister Arthur Zimmerman, which urged Mexico to side with Germany against the Americans in order to regain the territory it had lost as a result of the Mexican-American War) and the torpedoing of seven American ships—gave Wilson the justification he desired to begin trying to make his dream of a progressive world order a reality. On 2 April, he requested a declaration of war to end America's armed neutrality. He urged Congress to allow the United States to fight for the "ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included: for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience." He declared that "the world must be made safe for democracy"

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and that the burden of leading that charge fell to America because of the “principles that gave her birth.”

Congress approved, and the American Expeditionary Force joined the “War to End All Wars”, bringing an end to a vicious European stalemate. The small number of Americans who had volunteered to help in the war in Europe since 1914 (including members of the American Field Service, who volunteered as ambulance drivers) knew that the AEF was entering an industrial nightmare: a bloody kaleidoscope of trenches, barbed wire, frontal assaults across no-man’s land, machine guns, poison gas, long-range artillery, tanks, flamethrowers, and airplanes that had accounted for more carnage than anything the world had ever known. Gigantic single battles saw men killed or wounded in horrific record numbers. At the Battle of Verdun in France (February-December 1916), German and French soldiers suffered 680,000 casualties; at the First Battle of the Somme River in France (July-November 1916), British, French, and German troops incurred 1.6 million casualties; and, during the Brusilov Offensive in present-day Ukraine (June-September 1916), Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman forces were decimated by as many as 2.2 million casualties. Americans had never seen anything like such wholesale slaughter (remember, Gettysburg, its bloodiest war’s bloodiest battle, had witnessed “only” 51,000 casualties). Nevertheless, in the name of democracy, Wilson passed the Selective Service Act in May 1917 and drafted three million men, who, along with two million who volunteered, formed the first substantial group of American soldiers to fight overseas for a lengthy period. For the first time in the nation’s history, women were allowed to enlist, and 400,000 African Americans served in segregated units. By the spring of 1918, the AEF, under General John Pershing, was ready to send large numbers of troops to battle, and, following eight months of American aid at Belleau Wood, Château-Thierry, Reims, the Argonne Forest, and other battlefields near the French-Belgian-German border, the Great War was over. Thirty eight million Europeans, including a large number of civilians, were killed or wounded. Americans suffered 300,000 casualties—almost all of them military.

Wilson was determined to achieve a democratic postwar settlement, which would ultimately prove to be the most lasting American legacy of the war. On 8 January 1918, he presented the “Fourteen Points” for which he claimed America was fighting: points that attempted to implement the dream of the new, progressive world order, led by a league of nations, that he had begun articulating after the 1916 election. His idealistic vision of a democratic organization of world governance, charged with keeping global peace and fostering international cooperation, would give birth to the League of Nations (a precursor to the United Nations) with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which included a covenant to form the League, in 1919. But—despite Wilson’s grueling cross-country speaking tour to promote the Treaty and its League: a crusade that caused the president to collapse and remain an invalid for the rest of his time in office—the Senate failed to ratify the treaty, and the United States stayed out of the League. Nevertheless, Wilson’s idealism ignited a fire under American internationalists that would inspire the U. S. to become the leading member of the future

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United Nations, and his vision of America using its economic and human resources to champion democracy throughout the world has remained a controversial tenet of American foreign policy during most of the decades following World War I. As historian David M. Kennedy asserts, "Every American president since Wilson has embraced the core precepts of Wilsonianism.... Wilson forged the idea of 'making the world safe for democracy' in the furnace of the Great War. Nearly a century later his elusive dream is still the animating spirit that drives American foreign policy.... For better or worse, Wilsonianism remains an American inevitability."

Questions to Consider as You Read:

- According to "Night on the Front", what were conditions like on a World War I battlefield?
- What are the messages of "A Dying Soldier's Prayer"?
- How do the two American volunteers express their faith in God during such a challenging time?

Research: Two Poems from the American Field Service's Ambulance Drivers of SSU 17 (c.1914-1917)

- As you read, don't forget to mark and annotate main ideas, key terms, confusing concepts, unknown vocabulary, cause/effect relationships, examples, etc.

"Night on the Front"

Around me roars the fury of a night
Whose erstwhile tranquil summer skies are
overborne
And crimsoned by the ravage of the fight;
From whose nocturnal distances are torn
The myst'ries once so pregnant in the womb
Of its ethereal darkness. High and higher
Flare the star-shells, by whose light the
tomb
Of this last butchered day is bathed in fire.

Before me, outlined on the trembling hill,
The trench line lies like some huge, endless
snake
Whose serpentine convulsions now are still,
But who abides a crafty time to make
The sudden move that spreads his poison
far.
The rockets' glares are but his million eyes;

His hiss is in the speeding shells that mar
The green turf where his uncouth body lies.

The star-shells flare; night gapes another
wound
For each gun fired and each new signal
light;
These multiply; ere long the night has
swooned
Before the fair, false dazzle of the fight.
Brighter and yet brighter still it glows,
And night is day, but day made red with
strife,
While drunk with his achievement, on man
goes
Upon the mission that makes death of life ...

And then, his puny fury spent, he calls
His legions into silence, and the fight
Fades into distance, and a quiet falls,

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And man-made day is vanquished by a
night
As calm, unruffled as before the hour
When first a star-shell flared or first a gun
Belched forth the venom of its evil power
To summon mates to action, one by one.

And thus about me falls the tranquil night
While, rich in mystery, the summer skies
Bring forth the clear inimitable light
Of God's own stars—that are the patient
eyes
Of those we knew and loved once long ago,
And who are dead (or so we say) yet see
How little we poor humans live to know,
Since death is but life in Eternity.

J. B. C., S. S. U. [Section Sanitaire USA] 17

“A Dying Soldier's Prayer”

The battle rolls away—as my life here
Must soon achieve an even greater sphere
Upon this yawning threshold, Lord, I view
In awe the change that draws me nearer
You.
Yours is the Hand to give, the Hand to take,
And yet I pray You this, for dear Christ's
sake:

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Notebook Questions: Reason and Record

- According to “Night on the Front”, what were conditions like on a World War I battlefield?
- What are the messages of “A Dying Soldier's Prayer”?

For my poor comrade here, whose labored
breath
Tears through his tortured throat, the peace
of death;
For these poor wounded writhing in
distress,
The utter balm of deep unconsciousness;
With speedy succor of their hurt, that lie
So wet, forlorn beneath the weeping sky.

Grant to the busy surgeons skill that they,
Though wearied, still can med this broken
clay;
And to the tired nurses give the strength
To toil through yet another hard day's
length;
With last, to nurse and surgeon both, the
deep
Contentment of a sweet restoring sleep.

And for my mother—God, allay her pain
With faith her gift has not been made in
vain;
Grant for her loneliness bright memories
Of the child who played about her knees;
And for her precious tears, if they should
flow,
Lord, give her this acceptance that I know.

J. B. C., S. S. U. 17

¹ SOURCE: *History of the American Field Service in France: "Friends of France," 1914-1917, Told by Its Members*, vol. 3. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920.

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- How do the two American volunteers express their faith in God during such a challenging time?

Notebook Questions: Relate and Record

- How do the documents relate to FACE Principle #4: “Conscience Is the Most Sacred of All Property”: “*God requires faithful stewardship of all His gifts, especially the internal property of our conscience, thoughts, and convictions.* This is a tool for self-government as each child learns the revelation of consent. Each individual governs his life through the voluntary consent to do right or wrong and is protected by laws established by the consent of the governed”?
- How do the documents relate to Doctrine and Covenants 42:45-47?

Record Activity: Multiple Choice Comprehension Check

1. Background: Which of the following are true about the fighting of World War I?
 - a. European nationalism and alliances, coupled with German aggression, made a local incident into a savage global war.
 - b. In 1917, after three years of armed neutrality, Woodrow Wilson urged the U. S. to join the Allies in order to “make the world safe for democracy”.
 - c. The terrible Battle of Gettysburg—the bloodiest battle of the American Civil War—saw almost as many casualties as the First Battle of the Somme in France.
 - d. The American Expeditionary Force entered an industrial nightmare: a bloody kaleidoscope of trenches, barbed wire, frontal assaults across no-man’s land, machine guns, poison gas, long-range artillery, tanks, flamethrowers, and

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- airplanes that had accounted for more carnage than anything the world had ever known.
- e. a and b
 - f. a and d
 - g. all but c
2. Background: All of the following are true about the effects of World War I except which ones?
- a. Americans bore the brunt of the fighting, suffering more casualties than Europeans.
 - b. In accordance with Wilson's goals, in 1919, the United States became the most powerful member of the League of Nations.
 - c. World War I took a heavy toll on the American economy, setting it back for decades.
 - d. The U. S. was the first nation to ratify the Treaty of Versailles.
 - e. Wilson's idealism ignited a fire under American internationalists that would inspire the U. S. to become the leading member of the future United Nations.
 - f. Wilson's vision of America using its economic and human resources to champion democracy throughout the world has remained a controversial tenet of American foreign policy during most of the decades following World War I.
 - g. A and b are not true.
 - h. E and f are not true.
 - i. A, b, and d are not true.
 - j. A, e, and f are not true.
 - k. A, b, c, and d are not true.
3. Sources: "Night on the Front" and "A Dying Soldier's Prayer" mention all of the following about conditions in World War I except which one?
- a. a scary artillery barrage
 - b. the snakelike meanderings of miles of trenches
 - c. the fury of a night on the front
 - d. the peace that faith in God brings
 - e. the pain of the wounded and dying
 - f. the tired efforts of surgeons and nurses
 - g. the heroic efforts of the American Expeditionary Force
 - h. the moving prayers of the dying