

THE SOLDIER

HAL AMES



I was living in Butte, Montana. It was October of 1916. I had lost my job at the factory. The factory closed, and I was not able to find work. I went to every business in town, but I still could not find any work. The weather in our town that year was the coldest it had been for as long as many residents could remember.

My father had died two years earlier, and we weren't able to save our farm.

The year before my mother returned to Boston where her family lived. She moved to Montana with my father when he read about cheap land, but she never liked living here. I was alone and had nothing to lose by leaving Montana. I concluded that I wanted out of my life.

One day while I was sitting in the barbershop, waiting to get a much-needed haircut, I read in the newspaper that the Canadians were looking for Americans to volunteer to help fight the Germans. Everywhere we looked, the war in Europe was big news. In the movie theaters, before every show, they would run documentaries showing what was happening in the war. After watching those newsreels, I decided that I wanted to join the fight. It would be my ticket out of Butte.

The newspaper had a long story about what an adventure it would be to go to Europe and save the continent from the Kaiser. I read the instructions on how to join the Canadian army. It said that I needed to go to Montreal, Canada, and there I would be able to join up. It said that after passing the physical examination, I would sign papers to join the army and from there I would be transported by ship to England for basic training.

Upon completion of the training, I would then be sent to France where I would fight against the Germans.

I had no idea what the war was about, nor did I really care. It was an opportunity to get out of my boring town and have a grand adventure. There was nothing to lose.

I took all of my savings and purchased a ticket to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. After packing up the old house and saying goodbye to my friends and family, I boarded the train. It would take seven days to get to Montreal. It was hard to say goodbye to everyone I had known all my life.

During that time, I rested, read a book, and wrote letters to my mother in Boston to let her know what I was doing. I saw the scenery of my country as the train traveled along the tracks. I never knew that it was so beautiful. I passed through many cities I had only read about or seen pictures in magazines.

Sleeping on the train was not easy, especially since I didn't have enough money to pay for a sleeping berth, so I had to sleep on the hard seat. It was impossible to get comfortable even though I used my clothes to make the seat a little softer.

Before I arrived in Montreal, I was informed that most everyone spoke French. I had to buy a book so that I could understand the language.

A Canadian Lieutenant met me at the train station. He spoke English but with a strong French accent. He directed me to take a taxicab that would take me to the hotel. I was to meet him at the recruiting office around the corner from the hotel at 8:00 in the morning. He told me not to be late.

The hotel was beautiful. The lobby had glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The paintings on the walls were magnificent. I approached the counter to check in, and a lovely lady greeted me in French. When I didn't respond, she asked me if I spoke English. I told her I was an American.

“Are you here to join the army?” she asked.

“Yes ma'am. That is my plan.” I responded

She turned the large registry book around and pointed to where I was to put my

name. I signed the register. I wrote, Gordon Langston.

“Your room is 204. Go to the top of the stairs and turn right. The room will be on your left. Good luck,” she said pointing to the staircase on the right. “Shall we call your room in the morning to wake you?”

“OK, that would be nice,” I answered.

I went up the stairs and found my room. When I entered, I put my bag next to the bed and then went to the bathroom to wash up. The room was painted white, and all of the linens were white as well. The large window looked out over the street below where I saw people coming and going. It was a big difference from the lazy pace in my hometown. I was so tired, I laid down on the bed and fell asleep. I did not even undress.

Later, when it was dark, I woke up hungry. I left the room and went to the lobby desk to inquire where I might get something to eat.

The young woman behind the desk pointed to a doorway across from the desk.

“You had better hurry. They will be closing soon,” she informed me.

I didn’t have much money in my pocket. I looked at the menu and realized there was nothing I could afford.

The waiter came over to take my order.

He first spoke to me in French, but when he realized I didn’t understand he asked me in English, “What would you like to order?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have enough money to pay for a meal. I’m sorry.” I said as I started to get up from the table.

“Are you here to volunteer for the army?” he asked.

“Yes, tomorrow I will be going for my physical,” I replied.

“Sit down young man. I will bring you something from the kitchen that I am sure you will enjoy,” the waiter said as he turned to walk away before I could argue with him. Then he added, “The hotel will pay for your meal.”

He brought me a beautiful plate of chicken covered in a white sauce. On the side were fresh vegetables bathed in butter. He filled my glass with red wine, and he smiled at

me.

“Bon apatite!” he said as he walked away.

After I finished my meal, I thanked the waiter who smiled at me while he bowed.

I returned to my room and read a book until I fell asleep. The bed was soft and comfortable.

I awoke to the sound of a loud ringing sound. I looked around and saw a box on the wall. I had seen one of them in the movies. It was ringing, so I picked up the black receiver, put it to my ear, and then I heard a voice.

The voice said, “Allo.”

I responded, “Hello?”

The voice said, “It is time to eat breakfast.”

I quickly freshened up and got dressed. I went to the lobby and then to the dining hall. Once again, I was told to sit down, and I would get a meal. There were maybe ten or twelve other men about my age sitting at other tables. I had a breakfast of eggs, toast, and sausage. It was the best meal I had eaten in some time.

After I ate, I went to the room and packed my things back into my bag. I knew I would not be staying in a place as nice as this again for a very long time.

The doorman helped me to find the recruiting station. The Canadian Lieutenant who had greeted me the day before, met me at the door and welcomed me inside.

The sergeant at the desk told me to get into a line of men who were standing in front of me. All of them were doing the same thing as I was doing. From what I could tell, all of them were Canadians except for me. When I got to the table where some papers were stacked, the men on the other side of the table told me to fill out a form, and then I had to sign the document.

He asked me if I wanted in English or French. I said, “English please.”

I read the document before I put my name to it. It said that I was volunteering for the British army and that if I should die, they would pay my family one thousand Pound Sterling (English money). I had no idea how much that was. It sounded like a lot.

After I signed the form, I went to another room where they told me to take off my shirt and pants and wait to see a doctor. There were nurses who took our blood pressure and our temperature.

The next thing I did was to see the doctor. The doctor looked into my eyes, down my throat and in my ears. Then he listened to my heart with a stethoscope. I had to look at a chart at the end of the hallway and read the letters. They told me immediately that I had passed the physical exam.

When it was finished, they took me to a room where I was shown where to select a uniform. They had holes in them and some of them looked very old. I found one that fit me best and put it on. It looked down at myself and felt that it was OK. My boots were a little big, so I took an extra pair of socks. The sergeant ordered me to put them back. I did as he told me, but when he wasn't looking, I grabbed them again.

After we were dressed, we went to a gymnasium and told to stand in a line. We stood there waiting for a long time.

We turned our heads when we heard the noise from a side door as an important looking man walked into the room and stood in front of us. He didn't seem very impressed.

A voice from behind us said, "Atten-SHUN!"

I followed what the guy next to me did. I put my feet together and looked straight ahead.

"This afternoon you will board a train for Halifax, Nova Scotia. From there you will go by ship to England where you will go through basic training. You are now soldiers in the British army, and you are expected to act like that. I wish you all the best of luck and God speed," the officer informed us.

We were dismissed after the officer left the room. A sign over the door directed us to get our packs and head toward the exit where a bus was waiting to take us to the train station. They were crowded, but fortunately the ride to the station was not very long.

The train ride to Halifax was worse than the train to Montreal. We were packed

into the cars. On each side were bunks stacked three high. I quickly jumped up onto an upper bunk. After I stowed my pack in a safe place, I spent most of the time on the train reading a book I had purchased before I left home.

The train was crowded with soldiers and the odor became almost intolerable since there were no showers. The windows were fixed closed since it was winter, most of the men on the train were from Canada, but there were a few like me from the United States, however we were separated and not able to talk. We were given a lesson book on French that we were to study on the train and then while we were on the ship.

It took two days to get to Halifax. We had a day in Halifax to relax before we boarded the RMS Mauretania, which in turn would take us to Liverpool England.

Most of the men had a long night of drinking and singing at a small pub in Halifax. I chose to rest in my tent in the encampment along the riverbank. There were three other men assigned to my shelter, and all of them returned to the room very late. I slept so well I didn't even hear them come in.

The next day most of the men were not feeling very well. They had not slept the night before because of the drinking, they had hangovers. I, on the other hand, felt rested and ready for the journey.

In the morning, the loud sound of a bugle awakened us. From now on, this was going to be the way we would be awoken every day. Even though it was cold in the tent, I was up quickly, but the others tried to roll over and get more sleep.

A sergeant opened the flap to our tent and yelled at the men who were still sleeping on their cots. They jumped up and out of the beds even though they didn't want to.

After getting dressed and washing up at the latrine, we were directed to go to the large tent in the middle of the camp. It was really cold and there was a lot of snow on the ground, so walking around outside was something I tried to avoid.

Breakfast was not very good. The food was cold, and the eggs were uncooked. The only thing that made it worthwhile was the coffee, but only because it was hot.

Soon after our breakfast was over, the sergeant ordered all of us to put our gear

together and meet at the main building where we were to fall into formation to get our orders for what was to happen next. We had one hour to get ready to leave.

The whole camp was busy preparing for our trip to England. I had to make sure I left my bunk exactly the way I found it the day before in order to pass inspection. Then, I made a mad dash to the place where we were to meet. When I got there, they gave me a yellow ribbon to tie onto my sleeve and told to find a yellow flag. That was now my platoon.

We had twenty men in our group including a lieutenant named le Beau, a French officer. We started to get to know one another when a loud voice shouted, “Attention!” We got into line and became silent.

An officer came out of the building and stood on the porch looking at us. We were new recruits, so we looked untrained. Our lines were not straight, and our uniforms were not according to regulations. That would all change once we were finished with basic training.

He walked down from the porch and proceeded to inspect each platoon. It was obvious that he was not impressed. We were told to salute him when he was in front of us, which we did.

After his inspection, he stood in front of us and gave us our orders.

“Good morning gentlemen and welcome to The Canadian Corps. You are officially the members of the 4th Canadian Division, and your responsibilities will be to reinforce the troops who are already in the fight. Many of you will not return. You will be giving the ultimate sacrifice for your country. For that we are very grateful.

“You will train here for four weeks and then you will leave by ship to England where you will finish your training.

“Good luck gentleman and God’s speed to you!” he finished, and then returned to the warmth of his office.

We were transferred to another camp by truck.

The next four weeks were the hardest of my life. We were up early every morning

and did drills until evening. We ran, climbed, and ran some more. We learned how to shoot and use our bayonets for hand-to-hand fighting. We marched for hours in the courtyard learning military discipline. It was the way the British trained their soldiers, and they were one of the best armies in the world.

Our training sergeant had a reputation of being one of the toughest in camp. He expected perfection, so our platoon worked harder and longer than any other unit did.

When it came time to leave, I was exhausted, but I knew we would be able to relax while on the ship to England.

The day came for us to leave. I packed my gear into my sack and returned my bunk to the way it was when I arrived. In a few days, another group of recruits would arrive and take our place.

Buses were lined up outside the gates of the camp. Our colors were on the buses, so we knew which one to board.

The trip to the harbor took about an hour. The men on our bus began to sing. I didn't know the songs, but I enjoyed them.

When we arrived at the harbor there was a large crowd gathered to wish us well. A brass band was playing patriotic songs, and people were waving flags and yelling, "God Bless England! God bless Canada!"

The ship was bigger than I could have ever imagined. It was long and tall, made of steel. The anchor hanging on its bow was as big as a house. Written across the bow was name RMS Mauretania.

I had never been on a ship before. At the time, the RMS Mauretania was the biggest and fastest ship on the ocean. Before the war, it was an ocean liner carrying wealthy passengers across the ocean from Europe to the United States. Now it carried soldiers from Canada to Liverpool, England.

It was exciting to be on such a big ship. As we climbed the gangplank to board the ship, the people on the dock cheered for us, and the band continued playing music. It was a sensational feeling to hear the cheers of the people below on the pier. It made me feel

proud to be going to war for them.

It took a while for us to settle into our rooms. They rooms were small and had a small portal through which we could see the sea. Each room had four beds, but I think that originally there had only been one.

Once we left the protection of the harbor and out onto the ocean, the ship began to move up and down. My stomach began to feel funny. I ran to the upper deck, leaned over the railing, and vomited. I had terrible seasickness, and I was not alone. Almost all of the men got sick that way. The crew of the ship laughed at us. It would be two days before I felt better.

The crossing took six days. Even though the RMS Mauretania was the fastest ship on the ocean at that time, the captain had to be careful not to encounter enemy ships. German submarines were prowling the seas looking for ships like ours. We heard stories of ships being sunk and it made us nervous.

One of the crew members told us on their last trip across the Atlantic, they had been fired upon, but the torpedo missed.

When we arrived in Liverpool, the docks were empty. It was very different from when we left Halifax. No one was there to greet us.

From the ship, we went by trucks to a training facility on the outskirts of Liverpool. Everything was different here. The mood of the people was very somber. The war was taking its toll on the people's spirit.

We spent a month at the English training camp learning fighting skills and military strategy. Once again, our days were full of activity, a change from the boredom on the ship.

They assigned our platoon to the Canadian Corps. I was learning French but not as fast as I wanted. I was never very good at learning languages, but I knew it might help me to survive.

Our platoon leader made sure we were the best of the best. We worked hard, and upon our graduation, our platoon was given a special citation.

After our initial training, my group was loaded onto another ship that took us to Le Havre, which is a port city along the coast of Normandy, France. From there we went by train to Paris where we got our orders for duty.

We started at a French training camp on the outskirts of Paris. This training was far more intense. They taught us how to shoot our army issued guns. They weren't very good guns. In fact, they were inferior to the guns we had used in Canada. The rifle I had when I was boy was much better and a lot more accurate. We practiced fighting hand-to-hand as well as survival skills.

The Germans were using chemical warfare in the trenches, so they issued us gasmasks and taught how to put them on quickly at the first sign of smoke.

After our training, we were given a day to relax before going to the front. Paris is beautiful, but we had little time see the sights. Some of my buddies went to the local pubs and got drunk. I preferred to sit and relax.

The next day, and after being processed for our assignments at the French headquarters, we were put onto trucks to replace troops in the trenches along the German border. The trip took two days. The closer we got to the fighting the more we could hear the sound of artillery and gun fire. We saw airplanes flying in the skies above us. There were trucks going both ways. Most of the vehicles leaving the front were ambulances. The trucks were carrying injured soldiers away from the front lines. Many of the men walking along the side of the road were also injured. It scared us. They didn't have anything to say to us. They were dirty and tired.

It was early spring. The war was not going well for the French. The German triplanes were knocking aircraft out of the sky faster than they could be replaced.

The British and French were planning to launch an offensive on Vimy Ridge, which had been in the planning stages for almost a year. Our battalion was part of the build up for that offensive attack.

It started to rain, which made the road difficult to pass. Eventually the truck got stuck in the mud. We had to jump out of the truck and walk beside it. The ground was

muddy from the rain that had been falling for the last few days. The wind was cold and strong, typical of early spring. I wished I had brought my deerskin jacket from home to keep me warm.

When we got to the headquarters, we could hear the noise of bomb blasts ahead of us. We saw the injured-on stretchers going to the hospital, some of them missing arms and legs. There was death in the air. I began to shake with the fear of this. I had never been frightened before, but now I was so scared that I became confused and disoriented.

We arrived at the rear headquarters. There was a hospital there and the sound of men yelling from surgery echoed across the field where our tents were.

We spent two days waiting to be told where we were going. After receiving our final orders, we left the safety of the tents and walked toward the trucks that waited to take us as close to the noise of guns and artillery as possible. We were going to the front lines. It got louder and louder the closer we got to the front.

When the truck stopped, the officer in charge motioned for us to follow him. Just ahead, we could see the barbed wire and the row of trenches. We ran as fast as we could as bullets zipped past our heads. Parts of the re-enforcements were missing. There were pieces of wood and metal all over the place. We had to be careful not to injure ourselves on the debris that lay all around us. I ran side to side in a zig-zag manner as fast as I could.

We came to a hole in the ground and jumped in. We sat with our backs to the front of the hole. I looked around. Not all of us made it. I didn't have time to take an inventory of exactly how many were missing, but I didn't see our lieutenant.

There was a lull in the artillery, so the orders came for us to jump out of the hole. Then we ran as fast as we could to the first trench we came to. I saw two of my squad members get shot before we jumped down into the trench.

We leaned against the dirt wall of the trench. Overhead we heard bullets fly. Then we heard the occasional artillery shell go off, sometimes close and sometimes far away. Most of the time I closed my eyes. I was so scared I just sat still. I think I may have wet my pants.

I heard a voice yell over to me, “Langston, get your butt moving. We are moving forward. Let’s go!”

Our squad leader motioned for us to move forward. We stayed low and moved from one trench to another through the maze of tunnels and trenches, until we came to the one closest to the front lines. I looked at the scared faces of my comrades. We had our guns in our hands, bullets in the chambers and our bayonets attached to the muzzles of our rifles. We were ready, but we had no idea what to expect. This had not been part of the training.

We stayed there motionless until it turned dark, too scared to move. None of us was prepared for what was happening. Even our sergeant was panicked. The sky continuously lit up with the glow of shells bursting all around. I wondered if it would ever stop. I covered my ears to drown out the sound of the blasts. The noise was deafening, and it never stopped. I looked in the faces of my comrades as we huddled together in the mud and the expressions on their faces were the same as mine. Pieces of metal fell from the sky and splattered in the mud around us. This was not what I had expected when I signed up for this war. Nothing like this was on the newsreels back in Butte.

From within the darkness of the trench, a light came toward us, and when we looked up, we saw a man crawling. He had a pot with him. He poured each one of us a ladle of cold soup into our tin bowls. He told us it was our dinner. It tasted terrible, but I drank it anyway.

I closed my eyes, but every time one of the shells blew up it startled me.

“What was I doing here? What was I expected to do? What had I gotten myself into?”

These questions went through my mind. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? There was no place safe.

The sun came up in the morning, and to our surprise the noise stopped for a while. The silence hurt my ears almost as much as the noise of the gunfire and the artillery that

had lasted all night.

Our sergeant ordered us to stand up and look over the edge of the trench to look for targets to shoot. I stood up very slowly. I adjusted my helmet back slightly to see better, and just as I poked my head above the lip of the trench, a shot rang out, and my helmet went flying. I sank to the ground. I was panicked. My heart was racing. It was hard to know since if any of us had been shot since we were so wet and covered in mud

One of the men tossed me my helmet. I looked at it and saw there was a hole through the top of it. Less than an inch lower and I would have been dead. I wanted to run, but where could I go?

I took my helmet, with the hole in it, and put it back onto my head. I got a new nickname that day. It was 'Birdbrain'.

As the sun came up, the gunfire began again. Occasionally, one of our guys would stand up and take a shot at the enemy lines. Then he would quickly drop to the floor; then another and another. Our squad leader told me it was my turn. I didn't want to, but I had to. Cautiously, I slowly peeked over the edge. I placed my gun on the dirt in front of me and waited until I saw something move.

My father taught how to shoot and to respect guns. I spent a lot of time with my father hunting for small animals like rabbits in the woods on our property. I knew I had to be patient to get the right shot. I waited until I saw what I was looking for.

Something moved. I aimed my gun at the spot. I waited until I saw it move again and then squeezed the trigger slow and easy, just as my father had taught me. The shot rang out, and a man popped up. Then I heard the scream of a man dying. He fell in a heap on the ground in front of his trench. I watched a little too long because they returned fire at me. I dropped quickly onto the floor.

"I think I got one," I said out loud to myself.

I had never shot a man before.

This went on for several days. We were muddy, tired, smelly, and hungry. I shot and killed at least twenty of the Germans during that time. One of the others in my squad

took his knife and cut a notch on my gun every time I killed one of the Germans. We lost about ten men. The worst part was the sickness that was spreading throughout the trenches, mostly bad diarrhea. The sanitary conditions were also far from being desirable.

The next day an officer crawled to our location. He told us we needed to move to the left and join another group. There were new troops coming who would take our place. We picked up what little gear we had and crawled through the mud to the new position.

We joined up with another group of soldiers who had been in the trenches even longer than we had. The men we saw there were in bad shape. They had been in the trench for over a month. Living in the trenches could be just as dangerous as standing out in the middle of no man's zone. If a bullet did not kill us, the conditions in the trenches could.

Twice, while I was in the trenches, a yellow cloud began to fill our space. We knew we needed to put our masks on quickly. Even so, the yellow gas caused our skin to burn. Many men were too slow to put on the masks and screamed in pain as they breathed in the gas. If they did not die, they had permanent damage to their lungs.

A little while later an officer crawled into our space and told us that we were going to climb out of the trench, run across the no man's zone and capture the German line in front of us. He assured us that the artillery would provide us with enough cover that we would be successful.

I yelled at him, "Are you crazy? It's suicide to run across the no man's zone."

Our platoon was ordered to go over the top of the trench and attack the Germans head on. We had watched other squads try it, and they died, almost to the man.

We were at what later became known as the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Our Canadian Corps was to be responsible for the initial assault on the German lines. We were divided into four divisions. My platoon was assigned to the first division. If we were successful in pushing the Germans back, we would push on to Arras and join the British who were coming from the south.

I got the guys together. I told them that if we were going to do this, we needed to

do it differently than before. I wasn't prepared to die, and we weren't just going to run across the field.

I told them about how the Native American Indians used to surprise the soldiers in my country. I demonstrated how to crawl on their belly under the wires and up to the German lines. We practiced the technique on the muddy floor of the trench. It made our uniforms darker, which we found out made it harder for the enemy to see us. We took mud and spread it on our faces and on our helmets. We were filthy, but we would be harder to see.

When the officer came back, he was surprised at how dirty we were.

"What are you doing?" he asked for an explanation.

I told him to watch and learn.

When there was a lull in the gunfire, we went one by one over the edge of the trench. We were the first division over the top. Long lines of soldiers waited behind us. Then our artillery began to fire. Portable canons moved forward with us supplying us with enough distraction that we were able to move slowly toward the enemy lines.

We spread out and crawled on our bellies. We went under the first row of wire, then the next. So far, the Germans didn't know that we were coming. They were expecting us to come running at them in a line. If we had done that, they would have picked us off one by one.

After we went under the third wire, all we had between the enemy trench and us was dirt. The men did exactly as I had taught them. They stayed quiet and as we closed in on the edge of the trench, we threw our grenades. Boom, boom, boom went the grenades. As soon as the grenades did their job, we rolled into the trench. No one was alive. We went around the corner and fired our guns down the trench. The enemy didn't have a chance. We had completely surprised them

We made sure that all of the Germans were either captured or killed. We took their weapons, food, ammunition, and anything else we could find. It was one of the bloodiest battles of the war. There were casualties on both sides, but the Germans got the worst of

it.

Now we were in the enemy's trench and nowhere to go. Following behind us, more and more men rolled over the edge of the trench to join us.

I heard more gunfire and artillery. Australian and British troops who had followed us were dropping over the wall into the trench as well. The attack had been successful.

It wasn't long until we were on the move again. This time our goal was to take Aras, which was the main objective of the assault. We had done our part by eliminating the threat from the north. Now we were part of the assault on the German stronghold.

We used the same tactics at Aras as we had at Vimy Ridge. We were able to push the Germans back and secured the ridge for our forces.

We fortified our position and then sat and waited for the Germans to retaliate.

We held our position for several days and during that time we made small advances against the enemy using the same tactics we used before. It took a long time for the Germans to understand what we were doing, so we continued to be successful. The battle was one of the turning points in the war, although it would be more than two years before it would be over.

Even though we had made progress into the German lines, we were once again entrenched and waiting for the next offensive.

I had spent three months in the trenches. This was our routine unless the generals decided to make an attack. Then we were all at the front.

I hated being at the front lines the most. It was dangerous. We had been attacked with nerve gas more than once. Each time some of my buddies died. It is the most horrible way to die. If we did not get our gas masks on quickly enough it was deadly. I was one of only three soldiers who were still in the battalion. The others either had died or been injured.

While I was in the trenches, waiting for my turn to shoot at the Germans, an officer crawled into our section.

"Are you Langston?" he asked.

“Yeah, that would be me,” I replied.

“Follow me; you are needed behind the lines. Bring your gear, you aren’t coming back,” the officer told me.

I did not argue. I followed him through the trenches to the rear lines.

When we got to the back line, another officer ordered me to follow him. There was a jeep waiting for me. They told me to get into the jeep and go with the driver. I ran as fast as I could to the jeep, jumped in, and then we sped off, away from the noise of the war.

As we drove down the road, we passed American soldiers who were marching toward the front. I asked the driver what was going on. He told me that America had declared war on the Germans and now they were coming to join the French and British in the battle.

I yelled, “God bless America!” as we drove past.

I was a mess. I was covered in dirt from head to toe, and my beard was tangled. I smelled bad, but I did not notice, I was used to it.

The sergeant who had driven me to headquarters took me to the latrine to freshen up. I took my first shower in almost four months. The water was cold, but that didn’t matter. When I left the shower, I found toiletries to shave my face and comb my hair. I looked in the mirror. My hair was long, and my beard was ugly. It took a while to shave it off. I combed my hair back to make it look as best as I could.

On a chair close by was a clean uniform. It was an American uniform and when I put it on, I noticed a bar on the collar.

When the sergeant came to get me, I asked him, “Why is there a bar on my collar? I’m not a lieutenant.”

He replied, “You are now.”

I followed him to the big tent. When I entered the room, I passed by the desk clerk who stood up and saluted me. I had never been saluted at before. Several officers were sitting at a big table. I saluted and stood at attention. I was surprised to see that the

officers were Americans.

“At ease, son. Take a seat,” the general directed me to a chair on the other side of his desk. “We have some questions to ask you. You’re Gordon Langston, of Butte, Montana, right?” he started the questions.

“That is correct, sir,” I replied

“How long have you been here in France?” he continued his questioning.

“About four months, sir,” I gave my answer.

“As you may already know, the United States is now in this war. We have a lot of catching up to do on how this war is going. You’ve been transferred to the American army so you can help us. You’ll have meetings with our top officers and advise them on the methods of war on the front lines. We’ve had very good reports about you.” the general finished.

“Is there anything else, sir,” I asked.

“You’re dismissed,” the general said, without looking up at me.

I stood up, saluted the general, and then walked out of the tent. I met up with the sergeant who had escorted me earlier as I left the tent.

He took me to the mess tent so I could get something to eat. The food was not very good but at least it was hot and tastier than what I was used to in the trench.

News of my arrival had traveled around the camp. One of the soldiers in the tent brought his tray to my table and sat down.

“Are you Langston?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s me, why?” I asked him.

“There’re a lot of stories going around about you being a hero or something. They say you have killed a lot of Germans and that you took an entire trench by yourself,” the soldier asked me, smiling.

The place went silent.

“That isn’t exactly how it happened,” I replied looking around at all of the people who were staring at me. I felt very uncomfortable, so I left.

Why did they think I was a hero? I had been scared to death, and I was glad to be out of there alive.

I went to my tent and lay down on the hard cot they gave me. It was so quiet here. I could still hear the artillery, but it was in the distance. I had a canvass roof over my head. I never thought I could be comfortable in this situation. It wasn't long before I fell asleep.

The next morning, I awoke to the sound of a bugle playing Reveille.

I got up and put on my pants. I went to the latrine to wash up before breakfast. As I was returning to my tent, a young soldier stopped me.

He came to attention and saluted me.

"Lieutenant Langston, you are to report to headquarters immediately after breakfast," he said to me.

Then he saluted me again and walked off.

I got dressed and went to the courtyard for the flag raising. We stood at attention and saluted the flag of the United States of America. It felt good to be saluting my own flag.

After the flag raising, I went to the mess hall to eat. The food wasn't any better than before. I sat by myself. There were so many eyes on me that I felt very uncomfortable. Why were they all staring at me? Maybe it was because I was the only one there with battle experience.

After breakfast, I walked over to the main tent on the compound. I saluted the guards outside of the tent and went in. I took off my hat and went to the first desk. I stood at attention, and said, "Corporal, I mean Lieutenant Langston reporting as ordered sir."

"Sit over there until we call for you," the desk clerk said as he pointed to a chair in the corner.

I sat down and waited and waited and waited..... It seemed like an eternity.

Finally, the desk clerk looked up, and said, "OK Lieutenant Langston you can go in now."

"Thank you," I replied, and then headed for the drapes behind him.

When I entered the room, there was a big table with several maps on it. Everyone was busy doing something. There was the dull sound of people talking to each other. I stood at attention and waited for orders.

From the far side of the room a general said, "At ease soldier, come over here please."

I walked slowly past the busy people to the end of the table. "What can I do for you sir?" I asked.

"Langston, I want you to look at these maps. What do you think?" the general said as he pointed to a map in front of him.

"I'm not sure I understand sir," I replied.

"What do you think about the position of these maps, do they look correct to you?" the general continued.

"It's really hard to tell sir. I was in one trench after another, but I never knew exactly where I was," I replied.

"Thank you for your honesty soldier. What can you tell us about what it is like out there?" the general asked.

"The easiest explanation is that it is Hell out there, sir. Every day we see death and injury. I came very close to dying myself on more than one occasion," I answered him. "I must say I'm thankful that I'm out of there."

"Here is what we have planned for you. We want you to train our new arrivals in the tactics of trench warfare. We understand that you used a new tactic to take out the German's. The French and British generals have spoken very highly of you," the general complimented me.

He continued, "You've been promoted to the rank of Captain. You will be in charge of all phases of training at the depot at Westminster."

I wasn't expecting another promotion, and I wasn't ready to leave my buddies back on the lines.

"What about my buddies? Are they going to stay on the lines while I am

transferred?” I asked.

“We have made arrangements for them to join you. They will be in camp this afternoon. We are creating a new training course where you and your men will be in charge. You’ll leave tomorrow morning. Good luck son. We need the best men we can find, and you’re one of them,” the general said as he put out his hand to shake mine.

I left the tent and returned to my sleeping quarters. It was hard to believe that I was promoted again and that I would be responsible for the training of the new recruits.

When I got to my tent, I found a new American uniform with my new silver bars already on the collars. Under my bed was new pair of boots. On my bed were my orders. I sat down and read them.

I was to report to the training camp at Étapes, close to the French training facility. This place was located close the English Channel and had a dock where soldiers were brought over from England and the United States. Men, supplies, ammunition and food came through this port and then transported to the men fighting at the front. It was a very busy place.

I arrived by train two days later. I was taken to the commandant’s office.

“Hello Langston, we have been expecting you. We are glad that you are here. As you know, we are all new to this war. You will be invaluable in helping us get the upper hand on the enemy. The American people are behind us and we want to put on a good showing. Do you have anything you can tell us?” the general finished his introduction.

“Not really sir, I am just glad to be here and to be of service to you,” I replied.

I was taken to my quarters. I had a private room with an adjoining office. I had a corporal who sat at a desk who took care of my schedule. It felt pretty impressive.

That evening, I called a meeting of all the training instructors.

“Gentleman. Welcome to Étapes. You are about to find out what’s really happening out there on the front. Forget the training you had in the States. This is real war. You will learn everything from the beginning. Put what you know in the back of your mind. We have two days to prepare for the new troops that are arriving. You *will* be

ready!” I said in a serious tone.

There was a look of confusion on the faces of the training instructors.

“We’ll begin your training at zero six hundred tomorrow. You are all dismissed,” I said.

I walked out of the meeting hall to meet with the general again.

We discussed the plans for the training. He didn’t agree with everything I said but said he would watch and see if it worked or not.

For the next two days the instructors followed what I was showing them. They asked many questions about why I was changing the format so much. I told them the reality of the war was very different from what they had been told back in the States. Even though they did not believe everything I said, they followed orders and at the end of the two days, I knew they were ready.

The first day of training came. The new recruits were exhausted at the end of the day. The instructors came to me and asked why I was so hard on the men.

I told them that life on the front is Hell. They had to be ready both physically and mentally. If not, they would not survive. I was using many of the same discipline tactics used by my instructor in France. Like him, I expected the best.

The next day, the men who had been in my platoon arrived. I assigned each one of them to an instructor to teach them the proper skills they would need to fight this war.

Two weeks later the first of the recruits were called to join the front. As they marched out of the camp, I was proud of the hard work they had done. They were ready in record time. We needed to get as many trained soldiers as possible to the front as soon as we could. It was not only for the good of the war, but also for the morale of the soldiers already on the front.

There was a different feel to the war. People seemed a little more positive. With the United States now fighting with the Allies, the war seemed to be turning our way. The Germans were stubborn fighters, and it would not be easy defeating them.

Every week after that, another group would arrive and then one of the trained

platoons would leave. This went on for about four months. The news from the front was that the war was going badly for the Germans. The soldiers from our training camp were making a difference. Other training camps sent their instructors to our camp to learn our tactics. We were happy to share what we knew.

As a result, I was promoted again to the rank of Major.

When the war finally came to a close, I left the army and returned to Butte, Montana. I don't know why, there were so many other places I could go.

Had I stayed in the army, I may have made a career of it, but that is not what I wanted. I guess it just felt like I needed to go home. I have many medals and stories, but no one really cares. To them I was just Gordon Langston, the boy from Butte.