

# AMERICA AT THE FRONT

BY REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

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THE first wonder to impress the civilian who visits the base of our naval effort in French waters is the good-feeling that obtains there between the French and the Americans. In a war where distinctive nationalities are allied against a common foe, there is nothing more important than a liaison, a common understanding, between the allies. It is all very well to tie two cats together, but if you throw the rope over a clothesline, the cats will not get on amicably. Our Navy has achieved harmony: the French naval officers and men respect and admire the men and officers of our Navy, and the population have as great an affection for our sailors as they have for their own.

That this state of things should exist in a city through which, during a few years, have passed armies French, British, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, Negro, and Cochinese, is due in part to the fact that, next to being a sailor and a patriot, the naval officer is by trade a traveler and a cosmopolitan. It is no less due, however, to the tact and courtesy of Admiral H. B. Wilson and his staff. In any military organization, the attitude toward a given subject on the part of his commander becomes, within twenty-four hours, the attitude toward that subject of the last man in the command.

On my arrival at the naval base, Admiral Wilson sent his aide to present me to the French Admiral: "It is the right thing to do," he said. A few days later he added: "This is a French city; Admiral Moreau is the French Admiral here; besides, his rank is higher than mine; I would not think of issuing an important order without first consulting him."

When the men of the American flagship gave a vaudeville performance in the local municipal theatre, they sent invitations to their French comrades and reserved for Admiral Moreau the same sort of box that they reserved for their own Admiral. During the performance, the two commanders exchanged visits, and as we went out after the final curtain had fallen, Admiral Wilson turned to his aide:

“Sellards,” said he—that aide, by the way, used to be a professor of French in a Pacific Coast university and had been found enlisted as a common seaman—“Sellards, say to Admiral Moreau that we all think it was mighty fine of him to come here.”

Ask any American sailor in our forces in France what he thinks of the French sailors; he will answer that they are the “real stuff.” What he thinks of most of the French children you do not have to ask him: nearly every man that gets shore-leave gives a regular portion of his time to playing with them. In the various ports, respectable bourgeois housewives have formed associations for the entertainment of our men and have thrown their houses open to them: if you know what French family-life used to be, you will understand what a social revolution this indicates. Where there is a country club, officers, in their scant leisure, play tennis or golf with the French members.

There was a somewhat carelessly worded Army-order to the effect that any American officer or enlisted man seen on the street with a French woman would be arrested by the American military police. The affront that this put upon the French populace was not repeated in the case of our Navy, and, indeed, the morale of all men in the base port is excellent. Offending houses have policemen stationed at their doors. When it was necessary to close one entire street, with French permission, the Admiral gave but brief attention to the naïve petition of its more than questionable female denizens, who pleaded that, their husbands and other male supporters being at the front, closure of the thoroughfare to Americans was ending their chief means of livelihood.

I recall the evening preceding the departure for America of an officer high in the French Navy. He was given, at the American Club, a dinner attended by practically every American Naval officer ashore; there were speeches, and, to a familiar naval air, there was a song with this refrain:

Though the bar's consigné and we've climbed up to stay  
To the very tip-top of the pole,  
Yet our drinks, short or tall, will be Wilson—that's all:  
He's the Chief of the Breton Patrol.

On the anniversary of America's entrance into the world-war, the French Naval officers gave a reception to the American. Admiral Wilson was called on to speak; he said that, since his arrival in France, Admiral Moreau had been a father to him—and he meant it. What the hosts said on their side reflected the same sort of family-feeling—a sort that I heard echoed among them when I went into their submarines or aboard their brave little submarine-chasers. The French Navy, at the outbreak of the present conflict, was in the poor condition, so far as material was concerned, in which three pacifistic administrations had left it; since then, with the means at hand, it has performed prodigies; yet it has, for our officers and men and for their infinitely superior equipment, no word of envy, no word of any kind but praise.

Comparisons are not always odious, but sometimes they are helpful in the prevention of future errors. I venture one now.

It would be untrue to deny that, in the past, we have from time to time made serious errors in our diplomatic policy, and the conduct of our military land forces, which injured, for a certain space, the excellent understanding which should have obtained between us and our Allies. It would be untrue and it would be unwise, because, now that those misunderstandings have been explained away, they should be made generally known at home in order that they be avoided for the future.

I have not been in Russia since the beginning of the war, but John R. Mott, General Secretary of the Y. M. C. A. and a member of our Russian war-mission, tells me that he is convinced that a proper American propaganda would have averted the Russian débacle. By direct contact, I was but imperfectly familiar with the state of affairs in Italy during the last winter; but Mr. Whitney Warren, who of all others should know, informs me that what would have saved the whole of Russia might have frustrated the Piave disaster. Early in the present year, at any rate, our ambassador in Rome, seeking an American to address the citizens of the Italian capital on America's military effort, selected a de-

feated candidate for Congress, who, speaking in the Coliseum, promised his audience that what the never-vanquished United States had done for little Cuba we would do for little Italy!

Of the feeling among the English and the French I may write directly. More than a year before the great German offensive of 1918 reached its height, we Americans, speaking as participants in the world-war, promised that we should have a battling army in France "before the snow flies." The rank and file of the English and French civil populations, seeing no more clearly than we did our transportation and other difficulties, understood this as meaning that, by October, 1917, we should be holding a place in the line. The result, however, proved that they were mistaken, and a certain degree of natural disappointment resulted.

The difficulties of a liaison with the English were two-fold. In the first place, there was the pernicious influence of the average text-book used as a history in our public schools, which had undoubtedly prejudiced many of our men against England, and, in the second, there were the English school-histories, which had tended to make the Englishman regard the United States as his country's unrepentant prodigal daughter. On both sides, these difficulties were being overcome by our entrance into the fight, when the British man-in-the-street began to ask where our promised land force could be hidden.

As long ago as the Summer of 1917, Sir Auckland Geddes, who was then General Campbell Geddes and is now head of the British Department of National Service, said, in a private conversation: "America will not be a fighting factor until 1919." But the man-in-the-street did not realize this. To him that "fighting army in France before the snow flies" was a vital promise, and so, as time dragged on, and the snow flew, and we, on shore, remained inconsiderable, he ceased to couple the name of President Wilson with that of President Lincoln. Even an Englishman in high political place inquired of an American correspondent, "Where are your people hiding General Leonard Wood?", and it was Lord Milner himself who, on leaving a meeting of the Versailles War Council, in the early Spring of 1918, remarked: "Before we Allies are what we should be, we must have in the north some such thing as has happened on the Piave."

In France, our difficulties, army and diplomatic, were manifold, and that of an alien tongue was not the least of them. Ambassador Sharp speaks little French, few of our army's officers and almost none of our men spoke any. "Picking up a language," which, to the average mind, means about as much as picking up a penny from the sidewalk, by no means implies learning it. The most absurd misunderstandings befell, and the most extravagant stories were current in our ranks. There was published a statement accredited to Secretary Baker, immediately after the German's Marne offensive, to the effect that "even if the French did not hold the line, the English and American forces would win the war"; certain material sent by Mr. George Creel's Committee on Public Information and published in the Paris *Matin*, the most widely circulated newspaper in France, was condemned by the French censor.

Some coolness was reported among the military. General Pétain was of the opinion, since justified by events, that it would be well for our new Army to learn its new trade from the veteran French Army, which had mastered the work of modern war through more than three years of hard trench-fighting, just as, were the French to have been involved in our brush at the Mexican border, they would have had to learn from us the style of combat there in vogue—and from this our High Command dissented. The French, moreover, had, like the English, a great admiration for General Leonard Wood, and were also disappointed at the refusal of Colonel Roosevelt's offer to bring a volunteer division to France.

"Ah," said a great French General when Leonard Wood's name was mentioned, "there is a first-rate soldier!"

We were not in the line—that was the trouble; and France, after three weary years of invasion—France, in which there is scarce a single family that has not lost one of its members—had been given to believe that we would be.

There is a certain poor Breton widow. She had three sons, one of whom, in 1912, came to this country, thrived, and sent home money to his mother's support. Early in 1915 he received a letter from her:

"Your two brothers have been killed in battle. My son, are you going to be a coward? Come home and die for France."

The boy came home and died.

To such people an American had to present himself in apologetic mood, had to explain early that our land forces were slow to move, but certain. They could not distinguish between our uniforms, and they mistook Y. M. C. A. workers in Paris for American soldiers enjoying themselves in the capital while Frenchmen were dying in the trenches. It was not to be wondered at that they glared in at the windows of tea-shops and grumbled at Americans drinking tea there—that they sometimes sneered at others as men that were “too proud to fight.” There came a time when the American officers and French officials must have feared the hour of the general awakening to the fact of our delay.

The admirable work of the American Red Cross among the French civilian population and for the French soldiers did something to bridge the chasm thus created. The *Paris Matin* aided by securing an able American journalist to write daily for it some account of America’s military effort. Influential Frenchmen, such as M. Herriot, the mayor of Lyons, inaugurated town-meetings at which they addressed their fellow-countrymen on our purposes and ideals. These all helped, but the situation remained critical.

Then came the end of March and the opening of the great German offensive.

At first we correspondents whose headquarters were then in Paris argued thus: Capitals are always critical, the strength of the opposition is inevitably bivouacked in the shadow of a Government; here an attitude of doubt is something to be expected—and yet we found surprisingly little. Even those persons whose temperaments impelled them to prepare for Hell could perceive nothing worse than Purgatory.

The air raids recommenced. Parisians watched a clear sunset with the certainty of a nocturnal attack. The sirens would utter their terrifying, long-drawn-out shrieks, and the population would make for its cellars. To be sure, it was only the soldiers home on leave, the “*permissionnaires*,” that would hurry. They, knowing from a longer experience just what bombardments mean, were the earliest to seek shelter, bringing their bedding with them and falling asleep before the first explosion of the barrage heralded the whirr of the French planes and the “pump-pump” of the Germans.

Civilians came underground with tables and candles and bits of carpet and playing-cards; here and there a housewife

complained because she had left the last course of the dinner on the fire; the children played hide-and-seek in the subterranean corridors, and there was one little lad of five who told me that, when he grew up, he would be "the man that sounded the siren." There was no complaint; but there was one unvarying refrain of regret:

"If only those 35,000 American aeroplanes had arrived, this would not have happened."

It was in those days that we discovered what is the most cheerful sound in the world. It is the bugle's merry "*Berlocq*"—the "all-clear" signal—which means that, for another night, death has been driven from the skies.

The long-distance gun, which the Parisians came at last to speak of as "*Bertha*," opened fire, and made day, for a while, as uncomfortable as darkness. At first everybody believed, and the official announcements declared, that its shots were bombs from aircraft at a great height. Nobody would grant, until the municipal bulletins said so, that there was indeed a gun at work, and even then the first comments were adverse.

"If that is so," said the boulevards, "the Germans are much nearer than the communiqués admit. Don't you remember 1914, when the official reports gave us good news, and the Germans were even then at our gates? Now is the moment when we need the army of the Americans."

Convinced at last, they were not displeased. Such a gun was worthy of Jules Verne. They liked to play with the idea, and they revelled in speculations.

"It is a triumph of mathematics," said a Sorbonne professor. "The world has never seen anything like it!"

A restaurant was blown to bits. A little girl, sent to the bakery, failed to return home after an explosion and was found, several hours later, alive and unhurt, in a broken drain, whither the concussion had blown her. Some people were killed. On Good Friday came the destruction of the church of which all the world has read, and the service of a congregation already in black was interrupted forever.

These things had some effect. The Germans had intended a blow at the Parisian morale, and it is idle to affirm that the blow was maladroit. When a husband left home in the morning, he told his wife where he would be at every hour of the day, so that he could be found or accounted for "if anything happened." The gun worked with a disquiet-

ing irregularity. Presently there were long lines before the railway stations; the advertising fell off in the papers; 800,000 persons left Paris.

It is not to be supposed that there was panic, or that the situation did not right itself, even under bombardment; for, in the end, many of the 800,000 returned to Paris to face it out. At the height of the drive, however, the atmosphere was electric. The police were ordered to sound the gun-warning by beating drums; they didn't know how to beat them, and had to give it up when small boys solemnly followed them about the streets tapping tin cans. Street workers returned to their tasks, because, they said, they "weren't going to allow the Boche to interfere with their commerce"; and the postmen were ordered to continue their deliveries whether the gun was active or not: didn't the soldiers continue their work under fire? But all that was a bit later; for a while, the city held its breath.

This was when the offensive was at its worst. Friends newly arrived from England said that, although the pacifist propaganda had been stopped and labor was propitiated, London was depressed, the man-in-the-street hugging the hope of American reinforcements. In Paris, people kept in their cellars from two to four o'clock in the morning and, sent scurrying by the cannon at seven, read the newspapers with nervous haste—and doubted all they read. The communiqués were true enough, but they were twenty-four hours late. The question everywhere was:

"What has happened meantime?"

Drivers of camions that passed through Paris and engineers of trains that transported troops told their friends the things they had seen with their own eyes and the rumors they heard—and always believed—from those with whom they came in contact.

No one who visited the Government offices in those days will forget what he saw there. Messengers came and went at all hours, dashing up in motor-cars that had darted through the streets at racing speed. Telephone receivers were never on the hook. Telegraph-instruments clicked incessantly. Day or night, many of the officials never left their offices—and then, in the midst of their frantic anxiety, commissions from America, unaware of the sudden seriousness of the situation, would have to be politely received and ceremoniously entertained.

There was the moment when some of us correspondents were told that the Germans had broken through at the point of juncture between the English and the French; the five days when the British Fifth Army fell back and back until disaster seemed inevitable; the hour when, in the highest quarters, the word was whispered to a few of us that the road to Paris was open.

Thanks to the dogged heroism of the French and the superb rally of the English, these things are over now, and we may speak of them. Then, however, we said nothing. Even many of the newspaper writers were in ignorance.

One Friday evening I came home with the knowledge that the French reserves would not be concentrated for action before Sunday, and that the outnumbered British might not be able to hold longer than Saturday night. Yet on the street that evening I met a correspondent usually well informed who said to me, with the utmost cheerfulness: "Well, they haven't got here. You see, there was nothing to worry about!"

There have been few such days of suspense as that which followed. Even the uninformed came to know that something was impending. The boulevard crowds were smaller than usual and more restless. People gathered in little knots and spoke in undertones. An American was more or less appealed to:

"Won't the General Pershing let your army come in at last? Surely he will let it come in now!"

The rank and file of the army were anxious to fight. Down at the Toul sector and in the American training-camps the men were like hounds at a hunt-meet, tugging at the leash. Our army's High Command did not feel that the time had yet arrived for changing its opinion against service under the French; but I may now make public the fact that Admiral Wilson, of our Navy, offered to the French a large unit of American sailors manning naval guns.

Meanwhile, in the Paris offices of the Government, officials waited in tense silence. They awaited what must either be a miracle or a catastrophe.

It was the miracle that happened.

The French performed it. Tired and harassed as they were, the war-weary army of that people whom we used to regard as merely mercurial said to itself: "We have to do it all over again"—and did it forthwith. The reserves that

“couldn't get up until Sunday” got there on Saturday. They halted the Boche; they stopped the first move of the German offensive.

In Paris the gossips said that it was arguments advanced by Clemenceau and Lloyd George which changed General Pershing's attitude. Those gossips point to this sequence of events, which, though possibly not true, is at least interesting:

The military situation was serious.

In London Secretary Baker was asked to a conference with the Premier.

Mr. Baker hurried to Paris, where he was seen by M. Clemenceau.

General Pershing was called to talk to Mr. Baker.

Then General Foch, appointed to the place of generalissimo on the north of the western front, was, as such, offered by General Pershing “all we have and all we are.”

Whatever the facts that led up to it, nothing could have had a better moral effect than that offer. In the eyes of our Allies, we were going to do our duty; in the eyes of our splendid enlisted men, we were giving them the big chance for which they had been so long hungry. How fully that chance was almost immediately taken advantage of there is now no need to tell any reader, English, French, American—or German.

To sum up:

What has happened in England has happened in France. The French are a people one of whose many virtues is a vast capacity for forgiveness; they can even—and this is the test of all forgiveness—forget. By the time I left France, they had renewed their faith in our War Department. On the one hand, even our enlisted men have been learning a little of the French language with characteristic cleverness—“*tout de suite*,” for instance, is soldiers' slang these days—and have gone a full half way to meet their Gallic allies. On the other hand, a French waitress said to me:

“Does monsieur see that French General eating with an American officer over there? I have been waiting on them, and when one waits one listens. *Eh bien*, I heard the French general say: ‘I have seen your Americans at the front; they fight like the lions!’”

More to the point, the French enlisted man says the same thing of our enlisted men. No longer occupying only

a "quiet sector," but fighting shoulder to shoulder with their French comrades in the hell of the German offensive and of our counter-attacks, our boys have made good in the manner in which we have always expected and the French once hoped—and now know. There is one regiment of American artillery, manning French guns, the members of which no French soldier ever fails to salute—"and," a poilu told me, "so soon as your men get here to the front in force, I know we shall feel thus toward them all."

Our greatest danger has been only that of not realizing all that we planned and promised and that, when it was announced, our Allies hoped of us and believed. With the arrival of every regiment of American troops in France—not laundry-men or lens-grinders only, however necessary these may be; but fighting men in fighting trim—that danger has diminished. Now it has almost entirely disappeared—thanks largely to the fact that we have at last a fighting army—a splendidly fighting army—in France. It was the American Navy that made this possible, and the American Navy did it without once straining the friendship of our Allies or threatening their faith in our forces afloat.

I have before me a copy of a letter recently written by a famous English Admiral. It was addressed to that fleet of destroyers which was our first fighting aid to England, and which, on being asked, as it arrived, when it would be ready to fight, replied: "We are ready now!"

Queenstown, 4th May, 1918.

On the anniversary of the arrival of the first United States men-of-war at Queenstown, I wish to express my deep gratitude to the United States officers and ratings for the skill, energy and unfailing good nature which they have all consistently shown, and which qualities have so materially assisted the war by enabling the ships of the Allied Powers to cross the ocean in comparative freedom.

To command you is an honour, to work with you is a pleasure, and to know you is to know the best traits of the Anglo-Saxon race.

LEWIS BAYLY, Admiral,  
Commander-in-Chief.

REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN.

# WITH THE CONVOY

BY HENRY B. BESTON

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## THE ARMED GUARD

WHEN the Germans began to sink our unarmed merchant vessels, and announced that they intended to continue that course of action, it was immediately seen that the only possible military answer to this infamous policy lay in arming every ship. There were obstacles, however, to this defensive program. We were at the time engaged in what was essentially a legal controversy with the Germans, a controversy in which the case of America and civilization was stated with a clarity, a sincerity, and a spirit of idealism which perhaps only the future can justly appreciate. We could not afford to weaken our case by involving in doubt the legal status of the merchantman. The enemy, driven brilliantly point by point from the pseudo-legal defenses of an outrageous campaign, had taken refuge in quibbling—"the ship was armed," "a gun was seen," "such vessels must be considered as war vessels." We all know the sorry story. For a while our hands were tied. Then came our declaration of war, which left our Navy free to take protective measures. The merchantmen were fitted with guns and given crews of Navy gunners. This service devoted to the protection of the merchant ship is known as "the Armed Guard."

It was not long before tanker and tramp, big merchantman and grimy collier sailed from our ports fully equipped. Vessels whose helplessness before the submarine had been extreme, the helplessness of a wretched sparrow gripped in the talons of a hawk, became fighting units which the submarine encountered at her peril. Moreover, finding it no