

IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy Library of Congress
French ambulance

Cedar Rapids Editor Reports From Hell

“I am hating war and the conditions which make it possible more as each day goes by, and I hated it strongly before I even left America.”

Cedar Rapids Gazette editor Verne Marshall was writing from the front lines of France, where he drove ambulance for the American Ambulance Field Service in 1916. It was a long way from Iowa, and it started with lunch with an old friend.

In February Marshall joined a friend from Marion for lunch. The event was supposed to be a farewell for the friend who was leaving to drive ambulance in France during the days of World War I before the United States joined the conflict. Before the meeting was over, Marshall had decided to join his friend in the adventure. Within a week he had his passport, had passed the drivers' exam and was sailing from New York on the *Lafayette*.

Eight days later, he had arrived at Bordeaux and boarded a train to Paris. He hoped to spend a little time in the city in order to learn a little of the French language. Marshall knew not a

word of French but found himself almost immediately on his way to the front with a French guide who knew no English.

It was his job to drive an ambulance from a base hospital several miles to the front, where he picked up wounded and delivered them to the hospital. He drove only at night with no lights on roads that were constantly shelled by the Germans. Marshall said it was an experience he'd never forget.

At the Battle of Verdun he served three months transporting the wounded from Dead Man's Hill to the base hospital. His ambulance was one of 20 cars that made the journey every night. Marshall wrote about seeing more than 3,000 wounded assembled at one base hospital, waiting to be distributed to other nearby hospitals.

The dead were transported in American-made Packard trucks. They were buried "side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder" wrapped only in "bits of canvas," Marshall reported.

He wrote that in June he witnessed a cemetery where three trenches held 60 bodies each. Ten weeks later the same cemetery held 80 trenches with 60 bodies in each.

Marshall described meeting a wounded French soldier on his way back from the front. He asked Marshall for some bread and described how he had survived. He had lain beneath four dead men as protection for four days and five nights, using a knotted torn sleeve to staunch the flow of blood from his wound.

And there was the wounded 19-year-old French soldier who said he had just received a letter from his mother. She told him of the death of his brother, who had been killed in battle. She was heartbroken and terrified that her only surviving child would meet the same fate. As he was lifted from the ambulance, he cried, "Mere, mere!" "Mother, Mother!" Those were his final words.

"I used to think there was nothing worse than hell; now I am not sure," Marshall wrote. "At least I know that hell can be no worse than this war."

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Sources

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