

Headnote by A. Scott Berg
Originally published in “*And They Thought We Wouldn’t Fight*” (1918).

Wounded—How It Feels to Be Shot

BATTLE OF BELLEAU WOOD: FRANCE, JUNE 1918

Floyd Gibbons

Erich Ludendorff, the de facto commander of the German army since August 1916, halted the first stage of the German spring offensive on April 5, short of the crucial railroad junction at Amiens. He then attacked the British in Flanders, beginning a three-week battle that failed to capture either Ypres or the major Allied supply center at Hazebrouck. The third German offensive, launched against the French along the Aisne on May 27, proved unexpectedly successful and resulted in an advance south toward the Marne. American troops helped the French defend Château-Thierry, while American soldiers and Marines nearby fought a prolonged battle for possession of Belleau Wood. Floyd Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* was another of the war’s star reporters, handsome and intrepid—on the ground in Mexico in 1916 when Pershing chased Pancho Villa and aboard the RMS *Laconia* in February 1917 when a U-boat off Ireland torpedoed it, killing twelve. On June 6, 1918, Gibbons entered Belleau Wood to report on the fighting; and in his efforts to rescue a wounded Marine officer, he was shot and lost an eye. In the years that followed, he would continue to cover wars and international crises wearing a signature white eye patch.

JUST HOW does it feel to be shot on the field of battle? Just what is the exact sensation when a bullet burns its way through your flesh or crashes through your bones?

I always wanted to know. As a police reporter I “covered” scores of shooting cases, but I could never learn from the victims what the precise feeling was as the piece of lead struck. For long years I had cherished an inordinate curiosity to know that sensation, if possible, without experiencing it. I was curious and eager for enlightenment just as I am still anxious to know how it is that some people willingly drink buttermilk when it isn’t compulsory.

I am still in the dark concerning the inexplicable taste for the sour, clotted product of a sweet, well-meaning cow and the buttery, but I have found out how it feels to be shot. I know it now by experience.

Three German bullets that violated my person left me as many scars and at the same time completely satisfied my curiosity. I think now if I can ever muster up enough courage to drink a glass of buttermilk, I shall have bereft myself of my last inquisitiveness.

It happened on June 6th just to the northwest of Château-Thierry in the Bois de Belleau. On the morning of that day I left Paris by motor for a rush to the front. The Germans were on that day within forty miles of the capital of France. On the night before, the citizens of Paris, in their homes and hotels, had heard the roll of the guns drawing ever nearer. Many had left the city.

But American divisions were in the line between the enemy and their goal, and the operation of these divisions was my object in hustling to the front. On the broad, paved highway from Paris to Meaux, my car passed miles and miles of loaded motor trucks bound frontward. Long lines of these carried thousands of Americans. Other long lines were loaded down with shells and cartridge boxes. On the right side of the road, bound for Paris and points back of the line, was an endless stream of ambulances and other motor trucks bringing back wounded. Dense clouds of dust hung like a pall over the length of the road. The day was hot, the dust was stifling.

From Meaux we proceeded along the straight highway that borders the south banks of the Marne to LaFerte, at which place we crossed the river and turned north to Montreuil, which was the newly occupied headquarters of the Second United States Army Division, General Omar Bundy commanding. On the day before, the two infantry brigades of that division, one composed of the 5th and 6th U. S. Marines, under command of Brigadier General Harbord, the other composed of the 9th and 23rd U. S. Infantry, had been thrown into the line which was just four miles to the north and east.

The fight had been hot during the morning. The Marines on the left flank of the divisional sector had been pushing their lines forward through triangle woods and the village of Lucyle-Bocage. The information of their advances was given to me by the Divisional Intelligence officer, who occupied a large room in the rear of the building that was used as Divisional Headquarters. The building was the village *Mairie*, which also

included the village school-house. Now the desks of the school children were being used by our staff officers and the walls and blackboards were covered with maps.

I was accompanied by Lieutenant Oscar Hartzell, formerly of the *New York Times* staff. We learned that orders from the French High Command called for a continuation of the Marine advance during the afternoon and evening, and this information made it possible for us to make our plans. Although the Germans were shelling roads immediately behind the front, Lieutenant Hartzell and I agreed to proceed by motor from Montreuil a mile or so to a place called La Voie du Chatel, which was the headquarters of Colonel Neveille of the 5th Marines. Reaching that place around four o'clock, we turned a despatch over to the driver of our staff car with instructions that he proceed with all haste to Paris and there submit it to the U. S. Press Bureau.

Lieutenant Hartzell and I announced our intentions of proceeding at once to the front line to Colonel Neveille.

"Go wherever you like," said the regimental commander, looking up from the outspread maps on the kitchen table in the low-ceilinged stone farm-house that he had adopted as headquarters. "Go as far as you like, but I want to tell you it's damn hot up there."

An hour later found us in the woods to the west of the village of Lucy le Bocage, in which German shells were continually falling. To the west and north another nameless cluster of farm dwellings was in flames. Huge clouds of smoke rolled up like a smudge against the background of blue sky.

The ground under the trees in the wood was covered with small bits of white paper. I could not account for their presence until I examined several of them and found that these were letters from American mothers and wives and sweethearts—letters—whole packages of them, which the tired, dog-weary Marines had been forced to remove from their packs and destroy in order to ease the straps that cut into aching grooves in their shoulders. Circumstances also forced the abandonment of much other material and equipment.

Occasional shells were dropping in the woods, which were also within range from a long distance, indirect machine gun fire from the enemy. Bits of lead, wobbling in their flight at the

end of their long trajectory, sung through the air above our heads and clipped leaves and twigs from the branches. On the edge of the woods we came upon a hastily dug out pit in which there were two American machine guns and their crews.

The field in front of the woods sloped gently down some two hundred yards to another cluster of trees. This cluster was almost as big as the one we were in. Part of it was occupied by the Germans. Our machine gunners maintained a continual fire into that part held by the enemy.

Five minutes before five o'clock, the order for the advance reached our pit. It was brought there by a second lieutenant, a platoon commander.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, looking at the green brassard and red "C" on my left arm.

"Looking for the big story," I said.

"If I were you I'd be about forty miles south of this place," said the Lieutenant, "but if you want to see the fun, stick around. We are going forward in five minutes."

That was the last I saw of him until days later, when both of us, wounded, met in the hospital. Of course, the first thing he said was, "I told you so."

We hurriedly finished the contents of the can of cold "Corned Willy" which one of the machine gunners and I were eating. The machine guns were taken down and the barrels, cradles and tripods were handed over to the members of the crew whose duties it was to carry them.

And then we went over. There are really no heroics about it. There is no bugle call, no sword waving, no dramatic enunciation of catchy commands, no theatricalism—it's just plain get up and go over. And it is done just the same as one would walk across a peaceful wheat field out in Iowa.

But with the appearance of our first line, as it stepped from the shelter of the woods into the open exposure of the flat field, the woods opposite began to cackle and rattle with the enemy machine gun fire. Our men advanced in open order, ten and twelve feet between men. Sometimes a squad would run forward fifty feet and drop. And as its members flattened on the ground for safety another squad would rise from the ground and make another rush.

They gained the woods. Then we could hear shouting. Then

we knew that work was being done with the bayonet. The machine gun fire continued in intensity and then died down completely. The wood had been won. Our men consolidated the position by moving forward in groups ever on the watch-out for snipers in the trees. A number of these were brought down by our crack pistol shots.

At different times during the advance runners had come through the woods inquiring for Major John Berry, the battalion commander. One of these runners attached himself to Lieutenant Hartzell and myself and together the three of us located the Major coming through the woods. He granted permission for Lieutenant Hartzell and me to accompany him and we started forward, in all a party of some fifteen, including ten runners attached to the battalion commander.

Owing to the continual evidences of German snipers in the trees, every one in our party carried a revolver ready in his hand, with the exception of myself. Correspondents, you will remember, are non-combatants and must be unarmed. I carried a notebook, but it was loaded. We made our way down the slope of the wooded hillside.

Midway down the slope, the hill was bisected by a sunken road which turned forward on the left. Lying in the road were a number of French bodies and several of our men who had been brought down but five minutes before. We crossed that road hurriedly knowing that it was covered from the left by German machine guns.

At the bottom of the slope there was a V-shaped field. The apex of the V was on the left. From left to right the field was some two hundred yards in width. The point where we came out of the woods was about one hundred yards from the apex. At that point the field was about one hundred yards across. It was perfectly flat and was covered with a young crop of oats between ten and fifteen inches high.

This V-shaped oat field was bordered on all sides by dense clusters of trees. In the trees on the side opposite the side on which we stood, were German machine guns. We could hear them. We could not see them but we knew that every leaf and piece of greenery there vibrated from their fire and the tops of the young oats waved and swayed with the streams of lead that swept across.

Major Berry gave orders for us to follow him at intervals of ten or fifteen yards. Then he started across the field alone at the head of the party. I followed. Behind me came Hartzell. Then the woods about us began to rattle fiercely. It was unusually close range. That lead travelled so fast that we could not hear it as it passed. We soon had visual demonstration of the hot place we were in when we began to see the dust puffs that the bullets kicked up in the dirt around our feet.

Major Berry had advanced well beyond the centre of the field when I saw him turn toward me and heard him shout:

“Get down everybody.”

We all fell on our faces. And then it began to come hot and fast. Perfectly withering volleys of lead swept the tops of the oats just over us. For some reason it did not seem to be coming from the trees hardly a hundred yards in front of us. It was coming from a new direction—from the left.

I was busily engaged flattening myself on the ground. Then I heard a shout in front of me. It came from Major Berry. I lifted my head cautiously and looked forward. The Major was making an effort to get to his feet. With his right hand he was savagely grasping his left wrist.

“My hand’s gone,” he shouted. One of the streams of lead from the left had found him. A ball had entered his left arm at the elbow, had travelled down the side of the bone, tearing away muscles and nerves of the forearm and lodging itself in the palm of his hand. His pain was excruciating.

“Get down. Flatten out, Major,” I shouted, and he dropped to the ground. I did not know the extent of his injuries at that time but I did know that he was courting death every minute he stood up.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” said the Major. “We’ve got to get forward. They’ll start shelling this open field in a few minutes.”

I lifted my head for another cautious look.

I judged that I was lying about thirty yards from the edge of the trees in front of us. The Major was about ten yards in front of me.

“You are twenty yards from the trees,” I shouted to the Major. “I am crawling over to you now. Wait until I get there and I’ll help you. Then we’ll get up and make a dash for it.”

“All right,” replied the Major, “hurry along.”

I started forward, keeping as flat on the ground as it was possible to do so and at the same time move. As far as was feasible, I pushed forward by digging in with my toes and elbows extended in front of me. It was my object to make as little movement in the oats as possible. I was not mistaken about the intensity of fire that swept the field. It was terrific.

And then it happened. The lighted end of a cigarette touched me in the fleshy part of my upper left arm. That was all. It just felt like a sudden burn and nothing worse. The burned part did not seem to be any larger in area than that part which could be burned by the lighted end of a cigarette.

At the time there was no feeling within the arm, that is, no feeling as to aches or pain. There was nothing to indicate that the bullet, as I learned several days later, had gone through the bicep muscle of the upper arm and had come out on the other side. The only sensation perceptible at the time was the burning touch at the spot where the bullet entered.

I glanced down at the sleeve of my uniformed coat and could not even see the hole where the bullet had entered. Neither was there any sudden flow of blood. At the time there was no stiffness or discomfort in the arm and I continued to use it to work my way forward.

Then the second one hit. It nicked the top of my left shoulder. And again came the burning sensation, only this time the area affected seemed larger. Hitting as it did in the meaty cap of the shoulder, I feared that there would be no further use for the arm until it had received attention, but again I was surprised when I found upon experiment that I could still use it. The bone seemed to be affected in no way.

Again there was no sudden flow of blood, nor stiffness. It seemed hard for me to believe at the time, but I had been shot twice, penetrated through by two bullets and was experiencing not any more pain than I had experienced once when I dropped a lighted cigarette on the back of my hand. I am certain that the pain in no way approached that sensation which the dentist provides when he drills into a tooth with a live nerve in it.

So I continued to move toward the Major. Occasionally I would shout something to him, although, at this time, I am unable to remember what it was. I only wanted to let him

know I was coming. I had fears, based on the one look that I had obtained of his pain-distorted face, that he had been mortally shot in the body.

And then the third one struck me. In order to keep as close to the ground as possible, I had swung my chin to the right so that I was pushing forward with my left cheek flat against the ground and in order to accommodate this position of the head, I had moved my steel helmet over so that it covered part of my face on the right.

Then there came a crash. It sounded to me like some one had dropped a glass bottle into a porcelain bathtub. A barrel of whitewash tipped over and it seemed that everything in the world turned white. That was the sensation. I did not recognise it because I have often been led to believe and often heard it said that when one receives a blow on the head everything turns black.

Maybe I am contrarily constructed, but in my case everything became pure white. I remember this distinctly because my years of newspaper training had been in but one direction—to sense and remember. So it was that, even without knowing it, my mind was making mental notes on every impression that my senses registered.

I did not know yet where I had been hit or what the bullet had done. I knew that I was still knowing things. I did not know whether I was alive or dead but I did know that my mind was still working. I was still mentally taking notes on every second.

The first recess in that note-taking came when I asked myself the following question:

“Am I dead?”

I didn't laugh or didn't even smile when I asked myself the question without putting it in words. I wanted to know. And wanting to know, I undertook to find out. I am not aware now that there was any appreciable passage of time during this mental progress. I feel certain, however, that I never lost consciousness.

How was I to find out if I was dead? The shock had lifted my head off the ground but I had immediately replaced it as close to the soil as possible. My twice punctured left arm was lying alongside my body. I decided to try and move my fingers on my left hand. I did so and they moved. I next moved my left foot. Then I knew I was alive.

Then I brought my right hand up toward my face and placed it to the left of my nose. My fingers rested on something soft and wet. I withdrew the hand and looked at it. It was covered with blood. As I looked at it, I was not aware that my entire vision was confined to my right eye, although there was considerable pain in the entire left side of my face.

This was sufficient to send me on another mental investigation. I closed my right eye and—all was dark. My first thought following this experiment was that my left eye was closed. So I again counselled with myself and tried to open my left eye—that is, tried to give the mental command that would cause the muscles of the left eye to open the lid and close it again.

I did this but could not feel or verify in any way whether the eyelid responded or not. I only knew that it remained dark on that side. This brought me to another conclusion and not a pessimistic one at that. I simply believed, in spite of the pain, that something had struck me in the eye and had closed it.

I did not know then, as I know now, that a bullet striking the ground immediately under my left cheek bone, had ricocheted upward, going completely through the left eye and then crashing out through my forehead, leaving the eyeball and upper eyelid completely halved, the lower eyelid torn away, and a compound fracture of the skull.

Further progress toward the Major was impossible. I must confess that I became so intensely interested in the weird sensations and subjective research, that I even neglected to call out and tell the wounded officer that I would not be able to continue to his assistance. I held this view in spite of the fact that my original intentions were strong. Lying there with my left cheek flat on the ground, I was able to observe some minutes later the wounded Major rise to his feet and in a perfect hail of lead rush forward and out of my line of vision.

It was several days later, in the hospital, that I learned that he reached the shelter of the woods beyond without being hit again, and in that place, although suffering intense pain, was able to shout back orders which resulted in the subsequent wiping out of the machine gun nest that had been our undoing. For this supreme effort, General Pershing decorated him with the Distinguished Service Cross.

I began to make plans to get out of the exposed position in

which I was lying. Whereas the field when I started across it had seemed perfectly flat, now it impressed me as being convex and I was further impressed with the belief that I was lying on the very uppermost and most exposed curvature of it. There is no doubt that the continued stream of machine gun lead that swept the field superinduced this belief. I got as close to the ground as a piece of paper on top of a table. I remember regretting sincerely that the war had reached the stage of open movement and one consequence of which was that there wasn't a shell hole anywhere to crawl into.

This did not, however, eliminate the dangerous possibility of shelling. With the fatalism that one acquires along the fronts, I was ready to take my chances with the casual German shell that one might have expected, but I devoted much thought to a consideration of the French and American artillery some miles behind me. I considered the possibility of word having been sent back that our advancing waves at this point had been cut down by enemy machine gunners who were still in position preventing all progress at this place. I knew that such information, if sent back, would immediately be forwarded to our guns and then a devastating concentration of shells would be directed toward the location of the machine gun nests.

I knew that I was lying one hundred yards from one of those nests and I knew that I was well within the fatal bursting radius of any shells our gunners might direct against that German target. My fear was that myself and other American wounded lying in that field would die by American guns. That is what would have happened if that information had reached our artillery and it is what should have happened.

The lives of the wounded in that field were as nothing compared with the importance of wiping out that machine gun nest on our left which was holding up the entire advance.

I wanted to see what time it was and my watch was attached to my left wrist. In endeavouring to get a look at it, I found out that my left arm was stiff and racked with pain. Hartzell, I knew, had a watch, but I did not know where he was lying, so I called out.

He answered me from some distance away but I could not tell how far or in what direction. I could see dimly but only at

the expense of great pain. When he answered I shouted back to him:

“Are you hit?”

“No, are you?” he asked.

“Yes, what time is it?” I said.

“Are you hit badly?” he asked in reply.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “I think I’m all right.”

“Where are you hit?” he asked.

“In the head,” I said; “I think something hit my eye.”

“In the head, you damn fool,” he shouted louder with just a bit of anger and surprise in his voice. “How the hell can you be all right if you are hit in the head? Are you bleeding much?”

“No,” I said. “What time is it, will you tell me?”

“I’m coming over to get you,” shouted Hartzell.

“Don’t move, you damn fool, you want to kill both of us?” I hastened to shout back. “If you start moving, don’t move near me. I think they think I’m dead.”

“Well you can’t lie there and bleed to death,” Hartzell replied. “We’ve got to do something to get to hell out of here. What’ll we do?”

“Tell me what time it is and how long it will be before it’s dark,” I asked.

“It’s six o’clock now,” Hartzell said, “and it won’t be dark ’til nine; this is June. Do you think you can stick it out?”

I told him that I thought I could and we were silent for some time. Both of us had the feeling that other ears—ears working in conjunction with eyes trained along the barrels of those machine guns a hundred yards on our left—would be aroused to better marksmanship if we continued to talk.

I began to take stock of my condition. During my year or more along the fronts I had been through many hospitals and from my observations in those institutions I had cultivated a keen distaste for one thing—gas gangrene. I had learned from doctors its fatal and horrible results and I also had learned from them that it was caused by germs which exist in large quantities in any ground that has been under artificial cultivation for a long period.

Such was the character of the very field I was lying in and I came to the realisation that the wound in the left side of my face and head was resting flatly on the soil. With my right hand

I drew up my British box respirator or gas mask and placed this under my head. Thus I rested with more confidence, although the machine gun lead continued to pass in sheets through the tops of the oats not two or three inches above my head.

All of it was coming from the left,—coming from the German nests located in the trees at the apex of the V-shaped field. Those guns were not a hundred yards away and they seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. Twenty feet away on my left a wounded Marine was lying. Occasionally I would open my right eye for a painful look in his direction.

He was wounded and apparently unconscious. His pack, “the khaki doll,” was still strapped between his shoulders. Unconsciously he was doing that which all wounded men do—that is, to assume the position that is the most comfortable. He was trying to roll over on his back.

But the pack was on his back and every time he would roll over on this it would elevate his body into full view of the German gunners. Then a withering hail of lead would sweep the field. It so happened that I was lying immediately in line between those German guns and this unconscious moving target. As the Marine would roll over on top of the pack his chest would be exposed to the fire.

I could see the buttons fly from his tunic and one of the shoulder straps of the back pack part as the sprays of lead struck him. He would limply roll off the pack over on his side. I found myself wishing that he would lie still, as every movement of his brought those streams of bullets closer and closer to my head. I even considered the thickness of the box respirator on which I had elevated my head off the ground. It was about two inches thick.

I remembered my French gas mask hanging from my shoulder and recalled immediately that it was much flatter, being hardly half an inch in thickness. I forthwith drew up the French mask to my head, extracted the British one and rested my cheek closer to the ground on the French one. Thus, I lowered my head about an inch and a half—an inch and a half that represented worlds of satisfaction and some optimism to me.

Sometimes there were lulls in the firing. During those periods of comparative quiet, I could hear the occasional moan of other wounded on that field. Very few of them cried out and it

seemed to me that those who did were unconscious when they did it. One man in particular had a long, low groan. I could not see him, yet I felt he was lying somewhere close to me. In the quiet intervals, his unconscious expression of pain reminded me of the sound I had once heard made by a calf which had been tied by a short rope to a tree. The animal had strayed round and round the tree until its entanglements in the rope had left it a helpless prisoner. The groan of that unseen, unconscious wounded American who laid near me on the field that evening sounded exactly like the pitiful bawl of that calf.

Those three hours were long in passing. With the successive volleys that swept the field, I sometimes lost hope that I could ever survive it. It seemed to me that if three German bullets had found me within the space of fifteen minutes, I could hardly expect to spend three hours without receiving the fatal one. With such thoughts on my mind I reopened conversation with Hartzell.

“How’s it coming, old man?” I shouted.

“They’re coming damn close,” he said; “how is it with you? Are you losing much blood?”

“No, I’m all right as far as that goes,” I replied, “but I want you to communicate with my wife, if it’s ‘west’ for me.”

“What’s her address?” said Hartzell.

“It’s a long one,” I said. “Are you ready to take it?”

“Shoot,” said Hartzell.

“Mrs. Floyd Gibbons, No. 12 Bis, Rue de la Chevalier de la Barre, Dijon, Côte d’Or, France.” I said slowly.

“My God,” said Hartzell, “say it again.”

Back and forth we repeated the address correctly and incorrectly some ten or twelve times until Hartzell informed me that he knew it well enough to sing it. He also gave me his wife’s address. Then just to make conversation he would shout over, every fifteen minutes, and tell me that there was just that much less time that we would have to lie there.

I thought that hour between seven and eight o’clock dragged the most, but the one between eight and nine seemed interminable. The hours were so long, particularly when we considered that a German machine gun could fire three hundred shots a minute. Dusk approached slowly. And finally Hartzell called over:

"I don't think they can see us now," he said; "let's start to crawl back."

"Which way shall we crawl?" I asked.

"Into the woods," said Hartzell.

"Which woods?" I asked.

"The woods we came out of, you damn fool," he replied.

"Which direction are they in?" I said, "I've been moving around and I don't know which way I am heading. Are you on my left, or on my right?"

"I can't tell whether I'm on your left or your right," he replied. "How are you lying, on your face or on your back?"

"On my face," I said, "and your voice sounds like it comes from in back of me and on the left."

"If that's the case," said Hartzell, "your head is lying toward the wrong woods. Work around in a half circle and you'll be facing the right direction."

I did so and then heard Hartzell's voice on my right. I started moving toward him. Against my better judgment and expressed wishes, he crawled out toward me and met me half way. His voice close in front of me surprised me.

"Hold your head up a little," he said, "I want to see where it hit you."

"I don't think it looks very nice," I replied, lifting my head. I wanted to know how it looked myself, so I painfully opened the right eye and looked through the oats eighteen inches into Hartzell's face. I saw the look of horror on it as he looked into mine.

Twenty minutes later, after crawling painfully through the interminable yards of young oats, we reached the edge of the woods and safety.

That's how it feels to be shot.

From *"And They Thought We Wouldn't Fight"* (1918)