

# Their War Was Worse Than War

Yanks Return from Chaotic Russia Fed Up with Service & Seek New Words to Describe Their Unusual Experiences



*Home again and a Red Cross welcome.*

**W**AR? We haven't been to any war," scoffed a doughboy of the Twenty-seventh Infantry. "We've been to—" he paused and hesitated for the right word, then ended up in expressive triumph, "we've been to Russia!"

That's the way every man of the Twenty-seventh and Thirty-first Infantry would sum up his venture to Vladivostok. From midsummer of 1918 to the first of October these two regiments of American troops were on active duty with their British, French, Italian, and Japanese allies, standing off the Bolsheviki from the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The impressions they bring back with them are in truth not of a war. You come away from listening to them with the bewildered feeling of one who has been wandering with Alice through a very cold and wonderless Wonderland, for the Russian maelstrom has developed ways of doing things, even wars, that are novel and surprising to those who took part in a regular war.

To these Russian service veterans, however, it was neither novel nor dramatic. It was a hideously disagreeable business which had to be borne and which, therefore, was borne. It was sixteen months of long-drawn-out ennui and disgust. It is something to be escaped at any cost when the next family brawl disturbs the world's peace. It was as unlike the well-ordered and sane life to which the troops are returning as gloomy Siberia is unlike sunny California.

Cold it was, and lonesome, for the eyes of the United States were turned toward the fields of France more often than toward the steppes of Siberia; topsyturvy it all was, between the Bolsheviki and the forces of Kolchak and the Japanese and the Italians and the British and the Chinese and the Cossacks. And puzzling it was, which was worst of all. A man can stand up under a good deal of physical discomfort and mental misery if he knows he is getting somewhere by it; but when he sees no use in it at all, when all the other soldiers of America long since have returned to the States, when he can't even fight a decent battle now and then, when he has been torn from the current of world events and tossed into exile in foreign deserts—well, it takes



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a pretty good man to see it through. So it becomes easy to sympathize with the ecstatic doughboy who, surveying the bright shores of California as the *Great Northern* steamed up the Golden Gate, exclaimed: "It's got to be a new word that can tell what's in me now! So far there ain't any big enough word been invented."

Ten weeks ago these men thought they were never coming back to this country. Rumors, which are as necessary as cooties to successful military careers, hinted they would be starting any day; but experienced campaigners pointed out how little that meant when those Arctic days were six months long. Every now and then a bundle of American newspapers, months old, would drift into the camps, and the heartsick men would read stories of how transatlantic passenger records were being smashed by the rapid return of troops from France; yet the very reading would be interrupted by orders to go on guard duty over a pile of railroad ties in the swamps north of Irkutsk. And as the doughboy wrapped himself in his one blanket and poncho and made a soft couch in twenty-eight inches of the purest mud, he wondered, as he drifted off into fitful sleep, if his government hadn't perhaps forgotten about him.

**Q**UEER stories they bring back, these veterans. For example, there was a corporal in the American forces with more romance than loyalty in his make-up. Day by day he listened to the propaganda put out by the Bolsheviki to get the Americans to join the Red armies, and he found it good. So he went A. W. O. L. in the summer of 1918 and enlisted under the banner of the revolution. Recognizing the military genius natural to American corporals, the Bolsheviki made him a general. Men in the U. S. intelligence service are said to have seen him frequently through field glasses; but every effort to capture him was vain. As far as anyone knows, the corporal still is directing Red armies.



Neither the Reds nor the Kolchak forces measured up to particularly high standards in efficiency and knowledge of the art of war. When Corporal

Grant L. Johnson and his detail of eight men of the Twenty-seventh Infantry reached Irkutsk, the former capital of Kolchak's government, they found a lamentable state of military affairs.

"Kolchak," says Johnson, "had issued an order for the mobilization of all boys from fifteen years of age up. They were herded into a big corral and given cabbage and a cube of tea. After three weeks training on this diet they were sent to Perm, where they simplified matters by killing their officers and turning Bolsheviki. You never could tell what army they belonged to, because so many of them wore the British and Canadian uniforms which had been provided by the British government. In Perm, when these troops mutinied, there were 30,000 Czecho-Slovak troops, some of whom were being sniped off daily by German and Austrian prisoners. A fellow had to watch his step around there to know whom he was dealing with."

The Bolsheviki undoubtedly offered powerful lures to Kolchak's men, America's allies. It may have been because in their utter misery the forces of the admiral deemed any change an improvement, even a change to Bolshevism. The fact remains that Kolchak's armies were being depleted steadily by desertions. Up at Mysovaya, the most north-westerly point reached by the Americans, Company K of the Twenty-seventh was kept busy trying to prevent this wholesale change of allegiance. The American



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*That S on the shoulder will always remind them of Siberia, if they need any reminder.*

barracks were half a block from the Russians, and the Yanks were called out at all hours of the day and night to surround the Russian barracks and keep the Kolchak "soldiers" from moving out in a body and joining the enemy. When they met the American resistance, the Russians protested that they were getting only fifty cents a month, no clothes, food that would discourage a jackal, and no chances to wash. The last grievance was what gave them free entree with the Bolsheviki.

On the other hand, as soon as they deserted they were likely to be caught by the Cossacks and killed. The Cossacks had a fondness for killing everyone, especially Reds. One day the engineers on the Siberian railroad went on strike, demanding twelve dollars a month instead of the eight dollars they were getting.

"Bolsheviki!" explained the Cossacks as they took the whole gang out and slaughtered them. While they were at it, they added the strikers' wives and families.

**K**EEPING track of one's allies and enemies under such conditions at least provided some mental gymnastics for the Americans, but not even that much could be said for some of the conditions the men met outside military life.

"The sun works only when it feels like it," grieved Corporal C. B. Knight. "The moon isn't so particular; it works more often but less regularly. It comes up mostly backwards at any time of the day or night in any part of the sky. Then it gets lost and mopes around the sky and is still on the job the following evening.

"Say, it was cold there. The fellows in France didn't have anything on us in that line. Thirty below was hot, and if it ever got to as high as ten below, we'd all wear decollete. To milk the cows you had to build a fire under them. And ten minutes after you built the fire you'd have to dig it out of a ten-foot snow drift. I don't mind much what I have to do the rest of my life, but I sure hope they pick some other goat next time it comes to guarding the Northern Lights."

As far as quarters went, the Americans were well off; only they were rarely in quarters. Their food wasn't bad, either. By contrast to what the natives had, it was nectar. Now and then some adventurous Yank would go off on a shopping trip for a beefsteak. He would walk into a restaurant and say to the woman behind the counter:

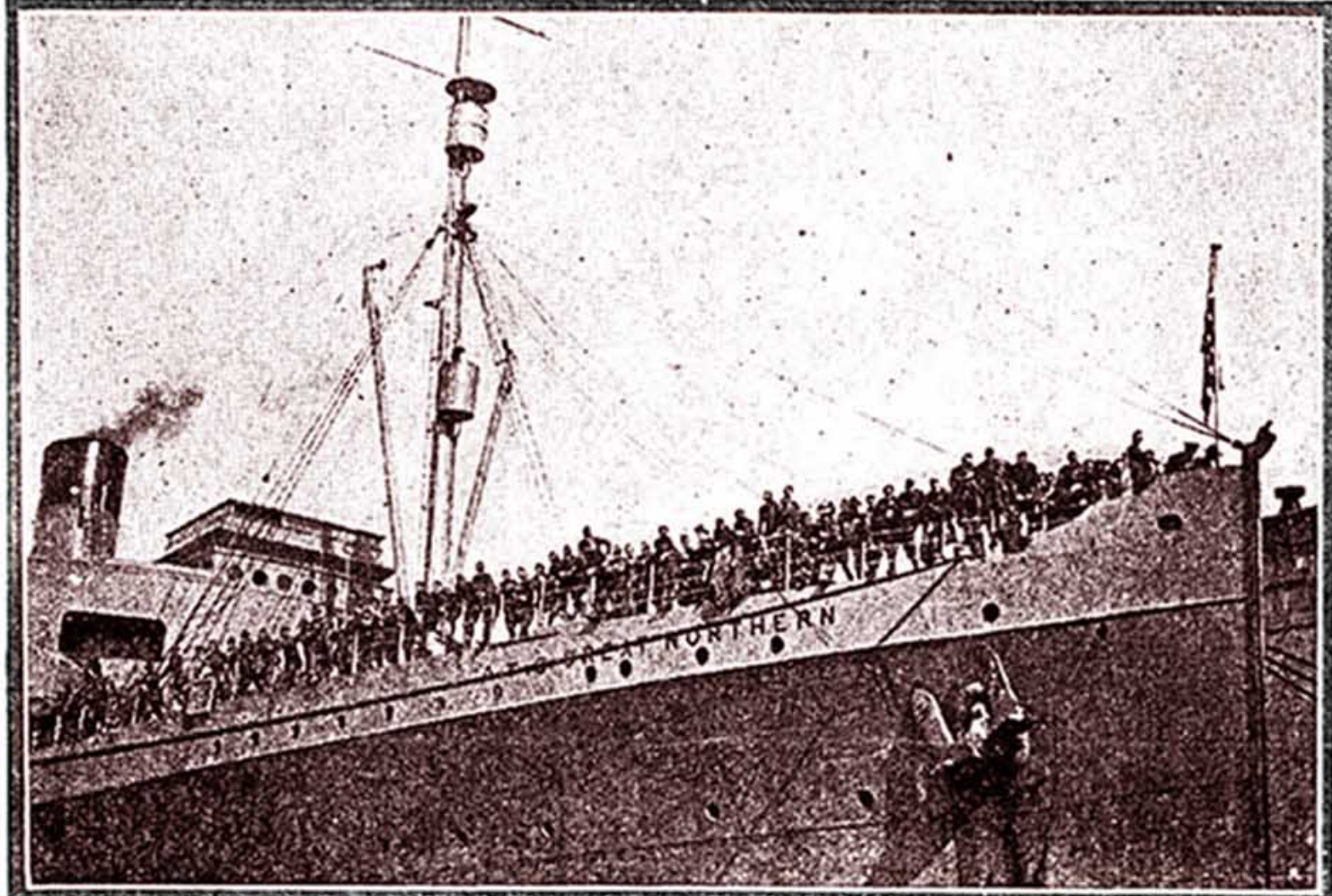
"Barishua, Zakajreetyeh bistek, pozhalysta," meaning "One order of beefsteak, please, madam." The woman would come back at him with: "Yah ochen sojalaylu, shto unaus nyet yestnik prepasov syechas," which, as you see, is a simple way of saying, "Why, I'm very sorry; but we haven't got a bit of food around today." By and by, after several similar attempts, the soldier would locate a sandwich and a cup of coffee, price-



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marked about \$7.50. So he contented himself with thoughts of Thanksgiving at home and hiked back for army mess.

No soldier, after he had been around Vladivostok for a while, ever took a street car. It is an inflexible custom in



*The "Great Northern," on which the return trip was made*

gallon milk cans, a market basket or two, and a bag of smoked herring, in order that he may get his money's worth out of the fifty-kopec ride. Also, it makes the atmosphere of the car more homelike for the other passengers. Fish and fish oil are prominent in the life of the peasants. If you saw an American walking down the street with his face turned to

the sky, it would be wrong to conclude he was proud; he probably had just got his shirt back from the wash-woman, who used fish oil instead of soap on it.

"They don't think a shirt is clean unless it smells good and strong of fish oil," reminisced one veteran. "I took mine to a woman one day and asked her to leave out the odor for once. She said she had no soap, and if I wanted it so fancy I should bring some American soap myself. I hoofed it back to the barracks, got some soap, and brought it to the

wash-woman. It was the first she'd seen for so long she gave her kids a bath with it and washed my shirt in fish oil again. The kids didn't like it any more than I did."

Being real Americans, these veterans joke about it all now. Did you ever know a company or a crew of Yanks that was perfectly serious and downcast in adversity? By the same token, did you ever know a time when the adversity wouldn't have justified any pessimism? So it was in Russia. These men, many of them, had been on duty in the Philippines, and for six months after they reached Vladivostok they had no clothes other than their tropical outfits. Try lying down in a puddle of water when you are wearing your summer duds; lie there five minutes till the water freezes around you; then get up and sleep standing up in a wind that whistles over a frozen river like the Twentieth Century Limited passing Podunk. And then crack a joke and tell your buddy you always did appreciate Siberian expeditions. The Czar's old government used to send its enemies to Siberia, to exile; Uncle Sam's government sent its own men there to guard a railroad. those railroad it was and what it was there for and why Americans should be taken away from a perfectly good war in France and stationed up here to take care of it—surely you can answer all these questions. If you can't, don't go to any of the veterans of the Siberian Expeditionary Force, because they won't give you very coherent answers. They think the whole trip was a post-season special, staged especially for their benefit.



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Little by little, as the years pass, the echoes of the war will die away. But many years will pass before the men who campaigned in Siberia forget what they went through—to guard a railroad.

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