

Liberty

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I—a Woman— FOUGHT IN THE TRENCHES

An amazing chapter in the career of a woman who lived so adventurously they called her "Fiancée of Danger"

BY MARIE MARVINGT



Mlle. Marvingt, as "Beaulieu," in the trenches. Above: As war nurse at Nancy.

WELL, monsieur, did I ever tell you about the time I was—what you call him?—a doughboy?

In the Great War? Surely. I am always in the wars, great and small. I enlisted the very first day; went at once to my next-door neighbor, General Balfourier, and said to him: "I am at the disposal of France, to be used on foot or horseback, in auto, boat, or airplane."

Did he laugh? No. They do not laugh at me in Nancy. They know it is not for nothing that I am called the Fiancée of Danger. But at that moment General Balfourier knew no more about what would be required of him than I did. He would see what he could do.

That same morning I sent my enlistment as an aviator to General Hirschauer, Commandant of the Army of the Air. It was as an aviator that I chiefly wished to serve. I had already had five years' experience as a pilot.

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But everything in those days was confusion—red tape. Women aviators were not so well known then as they are now. They had no place.

While I waited endlessly I was not idle. My good friend Professor Gaston Michel needed a surgical assistant at the Hospital of the Good Shepherd. I had had several years of hospital training, so I volunteered. No one could say it wasn't active duty, those first weeks on the Nancy front. Doctors and nurses worked practically without sleep, doing every type of hospital work. And often I would go out at night with the stretcher bearers to pick up the wounded.

No one could say we weren't under fire, either. I shall never forget the first bombardment. It came at night, in the middle of a great storm. The first enemy shell—how many were to follow!—fell in the park just outside my window.

This was but a puny bombardment compared with what we later received from one of the enemy's giant 380s. And the bombardments from the air, monsieur, were even more terrifying. Perhaps you remember reading in your American papers how the first Zeppelin to fly over France dropped its first bomb one hundred yards from a hospital on Christmas night. It was true. I was there. And after that it was a dull night that saw no visiting Zep or plane dropping its calling cards on the inhabitants of Nancy.

When I could get time off I joined an entertainment troupe, which journeyed about to the near-by encampments and played for the poilus. It was these trips and the consequent mingling with the brave boys on duty which made me resolve to be put off no longer in my determination to serve my country as a man would serve her, in battle. My friend Lieutenant Brochet came to ask me to take part in an entertainment for the chasseurs in his battalion.

"Gladly," I answered. "But I am going to ask something of you in return. I want to serve as a chasseur in your battalion, too."

He was amazed. "You want to be a common soldier?"

"Yes, I want to be a poilu."

"But we are in the front line. We are continually under fire. I cannot permit it. Besides, it would be worth my commission if it were discovered."

But I pleaded with him until he said that he would take under consideration this "enormous thing" that I asked. Two weeks later I received this letter. At first there seemed some mistake. It was not addressed to me:

My dear Beaulieu:

It is under the above name you will come to the battalion. If you are wounded, I will fix it up with the doctor to have you evacuated. If you are killed, Beaulieu will be pronounced disappeared and, except for me, no one will know what has become of Marvingt; for it is necessary that all this remain a secret . . . and that you sign a statement to the effect that you go at your own risk and peril. Be at the doors of Toul at noon tomorrow, and two of my chasseurs will go there to take you in a conveyance.

(Signed) E. BROCHET.

For many years I have kept the secret. Even Marshal Foch, whom I knew well, died without knowing either the sector or the battalion in which I served. But Captain Brochet, one of the war's greatest heroes, is now dead; and during his last illness he released me from my obligation of silence by telling himself the adventure of the chasseur Beaulieu.

On the agreed day I left Nancy on my bicycle for Toul. Two chasseurs—light infantrymen—were waiting for me with a commissary wagon. They had the formal permission, made out in the name of the chasseur Beaulieu and signed by Lieutenant Brochet. They also had a large canvas bag containing the complete uniform and the helmet of the Forty-second Battalion of Chasseurs. Just outside a wood I transformed myself into a poilu by putting on the uniform. Then I pulled on my own big hobnailed mountain-climbing boots. In a moment we were on our way.

We had to pass through a lot of little posts. Every time a gendarme, armed with a lantern, inspected the inside of the wagon, I pretended to sleep. Luckily they asked me no questions, except once:

"Where are you from, Beaulieu?"

"From the hospital at Toul," I tried to growl.

Satisfied, the gendarme handed me



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back my pass.

It was toward two o'clock in the morning that we arrived at the place appointed by Brochet.

"I confess I was uneasy about you," he confided, as he took us into a canteen and inspected the uniform of his new chasseur. "It's all right," he said at last. "I am on service in the front lines. You are going to follow us there."

Hardly had we left the sheltered retreat when the deserted plain was lit up by numerous rockets. Soon the terrible voice of the cannon rumbled deafeningly, without stopping. We entered a sunken trench with many signs indicating the numerous trenches leading off from it, forming a true labyrinth.

Suddenly a shell burst on the earthwork near our heads. My neighbor collapsed, uttering a sharp cry and pressing his right hand on his left shoulder. Our little group had received the baptism of blood!

The same thing could happen to me! . . . But I had faith in my star. Was I not the Fiancée of Danger?

After a long trek through the mud we arrived at an observation post in the front line. This was to be my place—here, under heavy fire, alone. Before leaving, the lieutenant started to explain to me the functioning and handling of the machine gun.

"Don't bother," I told him. "I know how to shoot it."

"Fine," he said. "But don't talk loud here. We are only sixty meters from the enemy's lines."

The machine guns were working opposite us. All night the noise was deafening on both sides. Finally, after interminable hours of rain and darkness, there dawned my first day at the front.

FOUR days and four nights I was on sentry duty behind the machine gun in this observation post. My lieutenant came at intervals to see what was happening to his young soldier. And finally, when it seemed that I could stand the noise and the loneliness no longer, we returned to the second line, to a dugout where there were four berths. After a quick meal washed down with a heavy Pinard wine, four of us pulled off our boots and stretched out.

This night the bombardment seemed less intense. Perhaps I was getting used to it. Besides, after those sleepless nights I would have slept if I had been at Verdun. At daybreak, when I opened my eyes, I was surprised to see one of my big hobnailed boots moving slowly toward a corner of the dugout. The three other berths were already empty. But I was not alone. An enormous rat, lured by the grease with which my sealskin shoelace was smeared, was towing my boot toward his hole. With a cry, I leaped down, and he abandoned his prey.

To the grim music of the great concert outdoors I stretched myself, and, between the four berths, did my physical-culture exercises—just as I did every day in my bedroom at home—until I had relieved some of the soreness caused by the hard pallet.

Once more we were back on our posts. Day succeeded day—always the same. I no longer knew what day it was. Many soldiers had disappeared

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since my arrival.

One morning when I was on guard duty a civilian, accompanied by two officers, came to make an inspection. I knew this man well. I had seen him many times in Lorraine, as well as at the Elysée Palace in Paris. In fact, I had presided over several dinner parties with him as the guest of honor on my right. He was M. Raymond Poincaré, President of the Republic.

Would he recognize me?

THE President stopped and spoke in a low voice to the captain who was at my side. My heart beat harder than it had under the explosion of the shells. But M. Poincaré did not suspect that under the muddy uniform—oh, how muddy!—of the little chasseur was the beating heart of one of his former dinner partners.

An experience of a very different sort is my most horrible war memory. After a day of rain I was groping my way back to the second line when, putting my foot on a slight elevation, I sank halfway up my legs in a swollen human body. . . .

When the time came, I was just as glad as the next poilu to get my first leave. By great good luck I spent it at a quiet little seaside town not far from St. Nazaire. I had no sooner resumed my feminine attire and started in hiking, swimming, fishing, and sailing, than the Henderson, a transport flying the American flag and carrying the first contingent of American soldiers to land in that region, was sighted off St. Nazaire.

Immediately I put out in a little sailing boat to greet them. As I was about to salute with my tiny flag, an immense jet of water rose between the big ship and the little boat. A torpedo had just missed us both.

The next day, however, I was most courteously received aboard the Henderson by her commander, and I still hold it as one of my proudest memories that I was the first woman of my beloved country to welcome these brave men from yours. "You are not unknown to me," he said, pointing to two covers of the journal *La Vie au Grand Air* which he had tacked on the wall of his cabin.

One of them bore the likeness of my devoted teacher, the late Hubert Latham. The other showed a face—which, I must say, bore a striking resemblance to that of Beaulieu—beneath which was the inscription:

"Mlle. Marie Marvingt, Fiancée of Danger!"

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