Camions suddenly began to streak white beams down shell-slammed roads. Someone had ordered the drivers to turn on their headlights.

L

TIGHTS!

The magic word spied like a tongue of flame racing through dry grass. Camions suddenly began to streak white beams down shell-slammed roads—roads whose only night light for years had been that shed by the moon and the stars and the angry flashing mouths of guns.

We suddenly review our eyes Where but a moment before it had meant deadly danger to strike a match in the open, someone had now ordered the truck drivers to turn on their headlights This daring signal to the enemy was flaunted although the heavy rumble of artillery fire still rolled back from the front line but a few kilometers away.

There could be but one explanation The armistice had come!

The place was Cunel, war-shattered Argonne village. The time was early evening of November 7, 1918. The outfit was the Ninth Field Signal Battalion of the Fifth (Red Diamond) Division With the switching on of the lights frenzy swept over Cunel. Soldiers on all sides shouted: “The war’s over!” Rifles and pistols were fired into the air to herald the end.

But the war wasn’t over. It was simply the greatest rumble of them all sweeping to the very front. Flashed to all corners of the earth, it aroused mankind to wild outbursts. It brought relief to countless parents, wives and sweethearts and carried a hope of escape to those men in arms who had thus far eluded death.

It was not surprising that the civilian populace, particularly in America, should have been fooled into a premature celebration since the armistice had sowed an eager and natural channel for the swift dissemination of the false report. What was surprising, however, was that the rumor not only spread up to the front through the unbridled tongues of the public, but that it also influenced someone in authority to issue so radical an order as that which caused those camion head-lights to be turned on on that heart-breaking night.

The other day, going through a bundle of wartime letters, I came across one which brought back a sharp memory of that remarkable incident of twenty years ago. Sitting in the wrecked remains of a French village’s home, I had tapped out to my mother on the rattly portable company typewriter a letter which I thought was filled with momentous news. But the letter was never mailed. Soon
November 7

After writing it I slipped it into my diary, and so it found its way to America with me after the war.

The letter, written in Cuneo on the evening of November 7, 1918, gives an idea how a weary Yank reacted to the news, fake news, which rocked the world.

Here it is:

France, November 7, 1918
7:10 P.M.

Dear Mother:

About an hour ago I heard enough commotion to make one think that the war was over. There was no knowing about what had happened. For the first time in more than four years the order was given them to turn in their guns. Automobile drivers did not realize at first what had happened. It was hard to believe that you could really have lights turned on, and that it was possible, that everybody was yelling and laughing and shooting off revolvers and rifles and acting as if they were crazy. We were more or less prepared for the news at the radio office here. We have not at this moment learned anything definite yet, but there must be a terrific armistice on at least. We (Continued on page 52) know that the German mission has gone across the line to either accept or reject the armistice. We do not know till we accept is practically assured or they would not even come over. They must realize that our terms will be very severe.

It seems queer to think that tomorrow the war will be over. No more carrying guns, no more cafeterias, no more lights out at night for fear of air raids, no more looking for dugouts when we were anxious to leave, no more a worry except as to when we are going home. Can you imagine that—going home! but suppose we wake up tomorrow and find a German soldier in our front yard and say terms? Poor Germany—she certainly will get beat up proper then, for we will be a very vindictive people.

Tomorrow we move up—we are ever on the move. The Germans are certainly doing a double time rearward. Their communiqués yesterday said that they had made a great movement followed by the French.

It's only been half past seven but I guess I'll go to sleep. Breakfast is at 6:15 so you see we are rather early birds. I guess we get flagjacks for breakfast, unless we get back on our own bottom, front, eh? You'll have to make a lot of those for me when I get back. Love to you and Pa and Dolly.

As it turned out, of course, we woke up the next morning and found there was still a war going on. As a matter of fact, not many minutes after this letter was finished the lights went out and in guffawing candle we realized it was all a hoax. Officers were careening in sidecar motorcycles along muddy and pitted roads to blast the news to the rear and order them to put out toot sweet the blanket light blinds.

Along with the letter to my mother which I never sent I found two wireless messages written on the backs of very message blunks in the precise handwriting-

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ING of our crack operator—a sturdy Middle-Westerner of German descent. They are not dated, but I recall, and I can tell from their contents, that he picked them out of the air during the first week of November, 1918, when the negotiations began which led to the real Armistice.

One was addressed to Allied G. H. Q. and was picked up from the German headquarters. Its contents follow:

The German artillery, in the sector on both sides of the Fourmies-La Capelle road, had orders to cease firing. Evidently the fire of the ammunition dump near Fourmies, which caused irregular explosions, appeared to be artillery fire.

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Evidently the Allies had made some protest to the Germans concerning these explosions. This was doubtless at the time when German plenipotentiaries came through the lines for the discussion of the Armistice terms and there was to be no firing on that section of the front.

The other message is in French and is signed Erzberger. It was he who headed the German group which came through the lines to prepare for the Armistice. The message was apparently sent while he was still behind our lines at the conference. Translated it reads:

German plenipotentiaries to the German high command, to the Chancellor of the Empire and to the naval high command: Before making any decision, beg to awaiting the telegraphic communication in code completing Heldorf’s message of this morning.

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Picking these messages out of the air, we of the radio group knew that steps definitely pointing toward an Armistice were being taken. That is why we were in a frame of mind to accept the rumor as genuine when the false report spread up to us. On the other hand, all our hopes were not blasted when the “lights out” order came on the evening of the 7th because we knew that negotiations were in progress.

The next three days we were constantly on the move—forward. The night of the 20th was a horror. The boys on the other side seemed to be trying to get rid of as much ammunition as possible in the last hours of the war. Everything came back—including box cars. But at last we had something for which to thank the Lord, for also through the air came the real message of hope. Firing would cease at 12 the next morning.

The night passed. Dawn brought a dull gray day—typical Argonne weather. The big moment came as the rumble of the guns died away—this time for keeps.

Well, here is hoping it will