



I Hope This Reaches You: An American Soldier's Account of World War I

by Hilary Connor.

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This book relates the experience of Pvt. Byron Field, an infantryman and litter bearer in the First Michigan Ambulance Company in World War I, in order to construct a larger story of his regiment and its role in several major battles of the war. The author, Hilary Connor, who has a family connection to the subject's descendants, draws on Field's letters to his "sweetheart" Estelle and his parents, as well as his wartime diaries and some accounts written after the war.¹ These materials tell a gripping story of the brutality of frontline life in 1917-18 within the larger context of the American contribution to the war.

The book is written for general readers interested in the American experience of the war, told from the perspective of an ordinary soldier. Working in an Ambulance Company involved driving ambulances under fire to convey wounded men from the frontline dressing stations to the base hospitals. Connor often relates Field's experience in his own words:

According to Byron's diary, while the battle raged he worked as a driver "all that night until the next morning," and after being "relieved went back to the hospital" in Miomandre where he "worked and drove some more that day, Tuesday, and the same that night." Throughout the ordeal, the ancient ruins of Attila the Hun's camp loomed like an augury on the outskirts of Miomandre, where Roman legions had stopped the barbarian horde two thousand years earlier. As later related by Byron in the "Champagne" chapter of *Iodine and Gasoline*, the ferocity of the ongoing battle was evident from its unprecedented carnage: "No picture of the shambles wrought by this battle can portray its gruesome actuality. In the wildest of Dante's dreams of inferno he did not picture such a scene; men piled in great heaps, the dying with the dead—legs, arms, heads and torsos; gray and blue, and khaki intermingled; blood, red and clotted black; torn, seared, crying flesh—all in a labyrinth of mutilated trenches as though old Mars himself had planned a scene that would shock the world for all eternity." (181-2)

Small wonder that Byron Field returned from the war a different man from the one who had set out so enthusiastically in 1917. Connor describes some of the psychological aspects of that return home:

On July 19 [1919], Byron finally set foot back in the United States. After returning to Jackson [Michigan] and reuniting with his parents, Byron became a local celebrity of sorts, often asked to offer his opinion on the war. It didn't take long for these requests to become tedious and for his rancor to surface. In an interview published in the *Jackson Patriot News* on August 5, 1919, Byron was especially scornful of the German people, anti-English dissidents in Ireland, and the treaty of Versailles. The intolerant tone of Byron statements made them border on imperious dicta. He seemed a far cry from the thoughtful young man who had left Jackson only two years before. The

1. Currently held by the University of Michigan.

harsh edge to Byron's thoughts was not an uncommon phenomenon among returning war veterans. (281)

The author's thorough detailing of historical context attests to prodigious research into, not only the individual soldier's experience, but the role of the Michigan Ambulance Company as well. However, one wishes Connor had included much more material from Field's letters and diaries. The opening section of the book, which details the discovery of those materials, leads the reader to expect they will figure more extensively in the narrative. Too often one feels that allowing Field to, as it were, speak for himself more often would have been more satisfying. Having access to so large a collection of letters and other personal accounts is a rare thing; thus, it is disappointing that they are insufficiently exploited. In addition, much of the book's lengthy "big history" will interest only a few readers.

The last few chapters detailing Field's postwar life are important and interesting; books like this often conclude with the end of the war. Commendably, Connor informs readers of Field's postwar life based on his writings and provides a well researched analysis of the legacy of war for its survivors.

Despite the shortcomings outlined above, *I Hope This Reaches You* is a valuable book. Few if any accounts of the First World War center on an individual soldier in an Ambulance Company. I hope that Hilary Connor will edit and publish a collection of Private Field's invaluable correspondence and memoirs.