

12-12-2014

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Recommended Citation

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In a Different Light:
The World Wars in the Experience of Adlai Stevenson Turner

Lana Rose

World at War

Dr. Bethany Hicks

December 12, 2014

The World Wars in the Experience of Adlai Stevenson Turner.

The events of World War I and World War II will always be remembered by people throughout the world. You didn't have to directly experience the wars to realize what a devastating impact they had on the history of mankind. The two world wars have continued to affect our world to this day. To explain why the wars affect us and how they do so would take many more pages than I have been given to write. What I can explain is the experience that one individual had in the war. This man's name was Adlai Stevenson Turner. Turner grew up in a small town in Arkansas and went to college at the University of Arkansas. As soon as he met Dorothy McNutt, he knew he wanted to get married to her. They were married in November of 1917. Turner registered for the Army reserves and commissioned as a 1st Lt. in August of 1917. He actively participated in both WWI and WWII as an officer in the Army and retired as a Colonel in 1950. During the war, Turner wrote letters back home to his wife and son. He addressed these letters "My Sweets" and "Sweetheart". His family was important to him and that meant staying in contact with them while he was at war was crucial. His experiences in war add a personal touch to the realities of the conflict. To gain a complete perspective of the two world wars, we must look at the battles and the individuals that fought in the battles. Through the letters that Turner wrote to his family we can gain a better perspective on the war through the eyes of a soldier and apply that to the greater events of both of the world wars.

During Adlai Turner's college years, the countries of Europe were involved in many complicated issues that eventually led to war breaking out. In the summer of 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist who wanted to end Austria-Hungary's rule over Bosnia. Austria-Hungary gave Serbia an ultimatum to be able to look into the assassination plot. In preparation for an upcoming conflict, Russia decided to strengthen their

borders. This helped hasten the coming conflict because Germany began to mobilize their forces as well. Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, 1914. This consequently brought France, Britain, and Austria-Hungary into the war.¹ Soon all the European powers were at war with one another as part of either the Triple Alliance or the Triple Entente.

World War I (WWI) was a two front war that involved most of the countries of Europe, and later the United States. The battle on the Western front relied heavily on trench warfare. This was a new kind of warfare that involved digging hundreds of miles of trenches. The trenches served to protect the troops from oncoming enemy fire. The problem with the trenches was that it was harder to actually gain ground, a process that is necessary in warfare. America begrudgingly joined the war on the side of the Entente on April 6, 1917. One reason why the United States chose to join the Entente forces was Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare. The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) would travel to France and assist in the fighting. The AEF distinguished themselves as fighting in the European Theater of Operations (or ETOUSA). The European Theater of Operations pertains to the area of Europe that war was waged during WWI and WWII. It had to do with the land and sea that was to be defended and invaded throughout the wars. It involved the army, military, air force, and navy departments of the respective countries in the conflict.²

WWI lasted another two years after the United States joined the conflict. It ended with an armistice and a peace treaty on June 28, 1919. All along, President Woodrow Wilson had plans in mind for a more peaceful Europe after the war ended. He had hopes of uniting the

¹ Strachan, Hew. *Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War: New Edition*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2014. 11.

² "The European Theater of Operations", United States Army in World War II: Reader's Guide. Center of Military History, United States Army. Washington, D.C., 1992. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/wwii/11-9/ETO.htm>. Accessed December 16, 2014.

nations of Europe in such a way that there would never be a world war again. President Wilson proposed his Fourteen Points as a part of the Treaty of Versailles. The Fourteen Points and the League of Nations created a European environment that was conducive to war once again, even though the intent was completely the opposite. The demand for German reparations for the war placed the blame of the entire war on the German nation. This led to a spark of German nationalism that Adolf Hitler would take and use to set off another war in Europe.

Before the start of World War II, the world was under an unprecedented depression. The Great Depression ravaged countless millions across the world, bringing about unrest and misery. At that time, Adolf Hitler began to mobilize the German forces and amass an army that could rival the surrounding European nations. Germany's Army, led by Adolf Hitler, invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. This opposed the League of Nations, and the European countries had to decide how they would react. They chose to leave Hitler alone for awhile and soon they had a growing problem on their hands and they responded with declaring war. WWII included not only Europe, but also Asia. Japan was mobilizing their army and air force to invade the Hawaiian naval base of Pearl Harbor. The attack came on December 7, 1941, and quickly brought America into the war in two different hemispheres. America fought mainly in the Pacific and European Theaters during WWII. Once the war ended, the world was left with destroyed cities and ravaged countrysides. The soldiers who had fought so bravely suffered from prolonged emotional stress, and were extremely happy to see their families on their return home.

WWI and WWII were the backdrop to Turner's career as a soldier. Adlai Turner joined the Army Reserves as a 1st Lieutenant on June 5, 1917, and was stationed in San Francisco, California. He married his love, Dorothy, on November 29, 1917. In the summer of 1918, he went to France with the American Expeditionary Force. He began the war as a Battery

Commander of Battalion C in the 1st Army. There were fifty-seven men under his command at the start of the war. As an officer, Turner was ranked above even the highest ranks of enlisted men. On his trip to France, he recounts that there were thousands of people on the boat with him and that his boat was surrounded by battleships and cruisers.³ He arrived in France on September 14, 1918 and he was immediately thrown into an atmosphere of war. He arrived two days after the Battle of St. Mihiel started. St. Mihiel was a salient, which meant the frontline was a projecting angle.⁴ The St. Mihiel salient extended from Port-sur-Seille to Watronville, France. It was twenty-five miles wide, and the frontline had been relatively unchanged for four years. It extended East of the Meuse River. The German troops had an advantage from the hills of Loupmont and Montsec. These were natural defenses that let them look over behind the Allies front line. The German line was strengthened by barbed wire and concrete shelters, which protected their stronghold of Metz. Germany didn't want to lose Metz and they wanted to keep the Paris-Nancy Railroad and the Verdun-Toul Railroad cut off from the Entente troops.⁵

The French had made several unsuccessful attempts to overcome the German troops at St. Mihiel. This would be the first independent American offensive of the war. The American advantage was that all the American troops were working together in a concentrated area. Another benefit for the Americans was the British and French Air Force. Their Air Forces together comprised 1481 planes. The Germans expected an attack to come a few weeks later. The American attack came on September 12, 1918. The AEF had advantages in the battle; however, the offensive placed a new strain on the First Army because two out of the three corps

³ Turner, Adlai S. Letter to Dorothy Turner, August 31, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

⁴ "Salient", dictionary.com

⁵ "American Operations in the St. Mihiel Region". The American Battle Monument Commission, American Armies and Battlefields in Europe. 1938. 105-114.

had never seen combat before. Turner's corps was one of those that had not been in combat yet. Despite Germany's supposed overall advantage, they would lose the battle. In the end, the Americans gained back two hundred square miles, captured 15,000 German prisoners, and secured 450 cannons.⁶ The railroads could now be used and the surrounding threat had been taken care of. Germany's western front no longer seemed impregnable.

During the battle of St. Mihiel, the cannons would keep Turner up at night and he said that it sounded like a continuous roll of thunder. The constant noise of the cannons surprised him. He said that the front is, "A good many miles from here...even though we can hear the roar so very easily."⁷ Turner was often vague when he related things to his family, because as a soldier he couldn't give details of where he was. The details were considered secret and confidential. He never mentioned the battles by names, and usually he would give a general area of where he was, such as "Somewhere in France".⁸ According to Turner, there were constantly air fights and raids. Turner also said that there were no supplies at the base where he was, but they were brought from a base nearby. There was a lot of confusion about what was going on at the front, and Turner was eager to move forward with his men. His battalion was a good distance behind the front line in France. They began to run low on food and ammunition so he wanted to get some more supplies to their position. By October 21, 1918, Turner had already informed his wife about the details of how to send his Christmas present. The Christmas package (limited to one) had to be 3x4x9 inches. In the same letter, he told his wife that there were endless lines of

⁶ McEntee, Girard Lindsley, Military History of the World War. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. 1937. 525-527.

⁷ Turner, Adlai S. Letter to Dorothy Turner, October 6, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

⁸ Turner, Adlai S. "In My Dugout Somewhere in France", Letter to Dorothy Turner. October 20, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

trucks on the road, and only a few horses because it was hard to protect the horses from gas attacks. He also saw an observation balloon get shot down by a German plane.⁹ Turner most likely remained in the region of St. Mihiel during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. The Battle of St. Mihiel was important to the war because it was the first attack that comprised of the AEF. The Entente victory at St. Mihiel was an influential factor in the upcoming larger scale offensive in the area.

The Battle of St. Mihiel was intended to be a precursor to the much larger offensive known as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. One of the objectives was to gain access to the German railroads in the area. This offensive started two weeks after the Battle of St. Mihiel began. It was being planned and organized while maintaining the fighting in the St. Mihiel area. The attack was planned for September 26, 1918, and was led by General Pershing of the United States and General Petain of France.¹⁰ It was planned without the enemy knowing, up until the very last minute. This was a great accomplishment especially because of the size of the offensive. Entente troops would move and gather under cover of darkness. Once all the AEF troops were in place, the battle was ready to begin. The Germans started gathering reinforcements to the region as soon as the attack came. The plan was to force the Germans to surrender the Argonne Forest. The Argonne Forest was on the West side of the Meuse River, close to Verdun. As the Allies recovered territory (formerly no man's land), roads had to be rebuilt for essential transportation and communication purposes. Most of the roads had been destroyed by the occupation of the German Army. After forty seven days of continuous fighting, the American First Army received

⁹ Turner, Adlai. Letter to Dorothy Turner, October 21, 1918. Box 1, Folder 6. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

¹⁰ "American Operations in the Meuse-Argonne Region." The American Battle Monument Commission, American Armies and Battlefields in Europe. 1938. 167-192.

word on November 11 of the armistice agreement that ended the war.¹¹ Turner had been a part of the biggest battle in American history up to that point. There were 900,000 American soldiers and 100,000 French soldiers who fought in the Battle of Meuse-Argonne.¹²

On October 20, 1918, Turner wrote to his wife that he was in a dugout in France. He specifically described the kitchen where he slept for his wife so she could picture it. It was made of corrugated steel. He said that it was underground and the dimensions were ten by twelve feet.¹³ He drew a small outline of his dugout as well. Three walls of the kitchen dugout were made of steel and the fourth had a canvas covering the opening. It rained all the time, so a lot of water would get in through the canvas. The specifics of material and size that he included make sense because he was studying to be an engineer before he joined the Army. All the buildings were underground, Turner related, unless they were very well camouflaged. Turner had just moved to a new dugout that had a log wall and an arcing steel ceiling. The new dugout had a floor and a door, and he described it as "comfortable".¹⁴ The soldiers had constant and insistent visitors (rats) that would come at night and eat their candles, shoes, gloves, and coats. Turner reports that he and his men were not close to the front during the Battle of Meuse-Argonne so they must have been in one of the reserve forces for the AEF. They were not too far away from the action, however. Turner said that a bomb hit the ground two hundred yards from his dugout

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "American Operations in the Meuse-Argonne Region." The American Battle Monument Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*. 1938. 167-192.

¹³ Turner, Adlai S. "In My Dugout Somewhere in France", Letter to Dorothy Turner. October 20, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and sent shrapnel all around. It made a twelve foot diameter hole in the dugout and he saved a piece of it for a souvenir.¹⁵

In the same letter of October 20, Turner mentioned that paper would soon become a rare commodity for the soldiers. Another officer had given him the paper that he was currently writing with. The paper for this letter was smaller in size than the paper he normally used. Turner mentioned in a previous letter that the Allies had sent a request for an armistice agreement with Germany. He was excited about that prospect, but he tried not to get his hopes up. He never failed to tell Dorothy how much she meant to him and how much he loved her. Writing to her was one of the things that would clear his head. He liked to tell her good news. In a letter from November 1918, Turner related to his wife that the soldiers had heard that Germany had accepted the terms of the armistice agreement. At that time, the soldiers couldn't hear firing from any direction. When the armistice was signed, the armies started preparing for their return journey home.

Another thing that Turner tells about in a letter was taking a walk on an old battleground. He remembers taking walks during the day. Once with another officer named Captain Smith, he walked to a hill that he said was, "One of the best known hills in Northern France".¹⁶ He said that he couldn't describe the emotions that he felt as he stood on the hill. According to him, the hill was the sight of the most fatal battle for French soldiers. This could have been the battleground of Verdun, which was a battle at the beginning of the war. This battle began before the United

¹⁵ Turner, Adlai S. Letter to Dorothy Turner. October 28, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

¹⁶ Turner, Adlai S. Letter to Dorothy Turner. October 27, 1918. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

States joined the war. Even though Turner received a campaign star from the Battle of Verdun, he didn't actually fight in it.

The French saw the Verdun region as pivotal to the whole line of defense, and it was of great value to them. The Battle over Verdun began early in the war, on February 21, 1916. The French underestimated the German's intent for Verdun, thinking that they would simply use Verdun as a diversion to another battle. The German Air Force attacked with explosives and gas shells. Their aim was to defeat the French with a heavy layer of artillery fire. The French plan of defense was to use mobile military units that gained support from the numerous forts in the area.¹⁷ Even the artillery was moved out of the forts and set up with the mobile battalions. This could have been the reason why there were multiple small fronts throughout the region of Verdun. Each mobile unit would have fought on a smaller front, as opposed to one long line of defense. It is interesting to note that the war on the Western front started out with small mobile units and turned into a deadlock for both sides. The Battle of Verdun ended in December of 1916 after many small offensive and counter offensive battles.¹⁸ In the end, the Battle of Verdun set the stage for the Battle of the Somme.

While awaiting return orders home, Turner was placed in several different positions. First of all, Turner was appointed Town Major of Villier sur Marne. He was appointed Town Major in the place of 2nd Lt. E.E. Voss.¹⁹ In a letter from Villiers Sur Marne, France, Turner says he has been busy and is tired. He is the only officer in charge of one hundred men, the town major, and

¹⁷ McEntee, Girard Lindsley, Military History of the World War. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. 1937. 271-284.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Turner, Adlai. Col. Tobin to Adlai Turner. Box 1, Folder 66. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

the officer in charge of the school. The school was for any who were illiterate in the AEF.²⁰ On March 8, 1919 Turner received a Special Order to be the Athletic Officer of his command. An Athletic Officer would work with the YMCA to create sports related activities for soldiers awaiting their return home. The idea behind it was to keep the soldiers active and their minds busy. Besides being the Athletic Officer and the Town Major, Turner also served on the board of a court martial trial on March 19, 1919. The official end to World War I came on June 28, 1919. The Armistice had been agreed upon by November 11, 1918. Turner was already back in the United States by the time the war officially ended because he had been honorably discharged on May 21, 1919. He was discharged because his service was no longer needed. Because of his contribution to WWI, he received three campaign stars. A campaign star is an award or medal given to soldiers who participated in a specific campaign or campaign phase. The stars could be bronze or silver and are 3/16 inches in diameter. A silver star is worn in place of five bronze campaign stars.²¹ Adlai Turner earned campaign stars for the Battle of Verdun, the Battle of St. Mihiel, and the Battle of Meuse-Argonne.

Though Turner was not always specific about where he was, from the dates we can have a good idea of where he was and what battle he was a part of at the time. His individual experiences have aided in making World War I more personal. It is easier to look at war through the eyes of a single person because they can share their struggles and small details (like rats eating shoes). By looking at Turner's war letters, which were personal because they were

²⁰ Turner, Adlai. Dorothy Turner from Adlai Turner. Box 1, Folder 67. Turner Papers located in the Riley-Hickingbotham Library, Ouachita Baptist University.

²¹ Manual of Military Decorations and Awards, Department of Defense. 1348.33, Volume 3. November 31, 2013. 55. <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/134833vol3.pdf>. Accessed December 9, 2014.

between him and his wife, we remember that the war was not only brought about by strategy, but also by people's sacrifice. The three battles that Turner received campaign stars for were important to the outcome of the war. They each represent an Allied victory and the fact that Adlai Turner participated in these battles is worth taking note of. The view of the war that Turner gives us is not complete, but his unique experiences throughout the war have given a little bit of a glimpse into what it was like for a soldier. At the same time, it has allowed us to study three battles of WWI as a whole.

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Appendix



Adlai S. Turner
Back row, 2nd from right



Adlai S. Turner
Last on the right

