

THE SOLDIER 1



My name is Gordon Langston and this is my story.

It was December of 1916. I was living in Butte, Montana. I had lost my job at the factory, and I was not able to find another job. I had gone to every business in town, but I still could not find a place to work. The weather in our town that year was the coldest it had been for as long as many residents could remember. I wanted out of my life.

My family lost our ranch because of the bad economy. My father died two years earlier, and we weren't able to save our home. My mother returned to Boston where her family lived. She never liked living in Montana. I was alone and had nothing to lose by leaving Montana.

I read in the newspaper that the British were looking for Americans to volunteer to fight the Germans. The war in Europe was big news. In the movie theaters before every show they would run documentaries showing what was happening in the war. After watching those newsreels I decided that I wanted to join the fight.

I bought a newspaper the next day and read the instructions on how to join the British army. It said that I needed to go to Montreal, Canada. It said that after I passed the physical examination, I would then sign papers to join the British army. From there I was to be transported by ship to France. Then I would fight against Germany.

I did not know what the war was about, nor did I really care. It was an opportunity to get out of my boring town and have a grand adventure.

I took all of my savings and purchased a ticket to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I said goodbye to my friends and family, then boarded the train. It would take several days to get to Montreal. During that time I rested, read a book and wrote letters to my family back

home.

I saw the scenery of my country as the train traveled along the tracks. I never knew that it was so beautiful.

Sleeping on a train is not easy. I didn't have enough money to pay for a sleeping berth so I had to sleep on the hard seat.

When I arrived in Montreal, I didn't know that most everyone speaks French. I had to buy a book so that I could understand the language. A French Lieutenant met me at the train station. He spoke English but with a strong accent. He directed me to take a taxi cab that would drive me to the hotel. I was to meet him at the recruiting office around the corner from the hotel at 8:00 in the morning.

The hotel was beautiful. The lobby had glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The paintings on the walls were magnificent. I approached the counter to check in, and a lovely lady greeted me in French. When I didn't respond she asked me if I spoke English. I told her I was an American. She smiled at me, gave me the key to my room and pointed me to the staircase on the right.

I went up the stairs, found my room and lay down on the bed; I did not even undress. I just dropped onto the soft warm bed and fell asleep. I awoke to the sound of a loud ringing sound. I looked around, and I saw a box on the wall. It was ringing. I picked up the black receiver. I heard a voice.

The voice said, "Allo."

I said, "Hello".

The voice told me it was time to eat breakfast.

I quickly freshened up and changed my clothes. I went to the lobby where I found to the dining hall. I had a breakfast of eggs, toast, and sausage. It was the best meal I had eaten in some time.

After I ate I went to the room and packed. I knew I would not be staying in a place like this again for a very long time.

I found the recruiting station. The Lieutenant met me at the door and welcomed me inside. A line of men were in front of me all of them who were doing the same thing. All of them were Canadians except for me. When I got to the table they had me fill out a form,

and then I had to sign the document. It said that I was volunteering for the British army and that if I should die they would pay my family one thousand Pound Sterling (English money). I had no idea how much that was. It sounded like a lot.

After I signed the form I took off my shirt and pants and waited to see a doctor. There were nurses who took our blood pressure and our temperature. After that the doctor looked into our eyes, down our throats and in our ears. Then they listened to our hearts with a stethoscope. We had to look at a chart at the end of the hallway and read the letters. I passed the physical exam.

After the physical exam we were then taken to a room where we were given our new uniforms, or at least they were new to us. They had holes in them and some of them looked very old. I found the one that fit me best and put it on. It looked OK. My boots were a little big, so I took an extra pair of socks. The sergeant told me to put them back, but when he wasn't looking I grabbed them again.

After we were all dressed we went to the gymnasium and told to stand in a line. We waited for a long time.

From a side door an important looking man walked into the room and stood in front of us. He didn't seem very impressed.

He told us that the next day we would go by train to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada to board a ship. From there we would go to England. After that we would transfer to the war in France.

The train ride to Halifax was worse than the train to Montreal. The train was crowded with soldiers headed to England. Most of the men on the train were from Canada, but there were a few like me from the United States. We were given a lesson book on French that we were to study on the train and then later on the ship.

It took two days to get to Halifax. We had a day in Halifax to relax before we boarded the RMS Mauretania which in turn would take us to Liverpool England.

Most of the men had a long night of drinking and singing at a small pub in Halifax. I chose to rest in my room. There were three other men assigned to my room, and all of them returned to the room very late. I slept so well I didn't hear them come in.

The next day most of the men were not feeling very well. They had not slept the

night before and had hangovers. I, on the other hand, felt rested and ready for the journey.

I had never been on a ship before. The RMS Mauretania was the biggest and fastest ship on the ocean. It was once an ocean liner carrying wealthy passengers across the ocean from Europe to the United States before the war. Now it carried soldiers from Canada to England.

It was exciting to be on such a big ship. As we climbed the gang plank to board the ship, the people on the dock were cheering for us, and there was a band playing music. It was a sensational feeling to hear the cheers of the people below on the pier.

It took a while for us to settle into our rooms. They rooms were small and had a small portal through which we could see the sea.

Once we left the protection of the harbor and out onto the ocean, the ship began to move up and down. My stomach began to feel funny. I ran to the upper deck, leaned over the railing and vomited. I had terrible seasickness. I was not alone. Almost all of the men got sick that way. The crew of the ship laughed at us. It would be two day before I felt better.

The crossing took six days. The RMS Mauretania was the fastest ship on the ocean at that time, but we had to be careful not to encounter enemy ships.

When we arrived in Liverpool the docks were empty. It was very different from when we left Halifax.

From Halifax we went by trucks to a training facility not far from London. Everything was different here. The mood of the people was very somber. They war was taking its toll on the people's spirit.

We spent a month at the English training camp learning fighting skills and military strategy. They assigned me to the First Battalion. I was learning French but not as fast as I wanted. I am not very good at learning languages, but I needed to survive.

After our initial training, my group transferred to another ship that took us to Normandy, France. From there we went by train to Paris where we got our orders for duty.

We started at a French training camp on the outskirts of Paris. This training was far more intense. They taught us how to shoot our army issued guns. They weren't very good guns. The rifle I had when I was boy was much better and more accurate. They taught us

to fight hand to hand in combat and survival skills.

The Germans were using chemical warfare on the French, so we were issued gasmasks and taught how to put them on quickly.

After our initial training we were given a day to relax before going to the front. Paris is beautiful, but we had no time see the sights. After being processed for our assignments at the French headquarters we were put onto trucks to replace troops in the trenches along the German border. The trip took two days. The closer we got to the trenches the more we heard the sound of artillery and gun fire. We saw airplanes flying in the skies above us. There was traffic going both ways. Most of the traffic leaving the front was by ambulance. Many of the men walking were injured. It scared us.

It was early spring by the time we were sent to the front. The war was not going well for the French. The German airplanes were knocking aircraft out of the sky faster than they could be replaced.

The British were planning to launch an offensive on Messines Ridge. Our battalion was part of the build up for that offensive attack.

The rain came and made the road difficult to pass. We were told to jump out of the truck and walk beside it. The ground was muddy from the rain that had been falling for the last few days. The wind was cold and strong, typical of early spring. I wished I had brought my deerskin jacket from home to keep me warm.

When we got to the headquarters we could hear the noise of bomb blasts ahead of us. We saw the injured on stretchers going to the hospital, some of them missing arms and legs. There was death in the air. I began to shake at the fear of this. I had never been frightened before. I was confused and disoriented.

After receiving our final orders we left the safety of the tents and walked toward the noise. It got louder the closer we got to the front

The truck stopped. The officer in charge motioned for us to follow him. Just ahead we could see the barbed wire and the row of trenches. We dropped to our bellies and crawled forward. Bullets zipped past our heads. Parts of the enforcements were missing. There were pieces of wood and metal all over the place. We had to be careful not injure ourselves on the debris that lay all around us.

There was lull in the artillery so we ran as fast as we could and jumped into the first trench we came to. Two of my squad members died before they got to the trench.

We leaned against the dirt wall of the trench. Overhead we heard bullets fly. Then we heard the occasional artillery shell go off, sometimes close and sometimes far away.

Our squad leader motioned for us to move forward. We stayed low and moved from one trench to another through a maze of tunnels and trenches, until we came to the one closest to the front lines. I looked at the scared faces of my comrades. We had our guns in our hands, bullets in the chambers and our bayonets attached to the muzzles of our rifles. We were ready, but we did not really know what to expect.

We stayed there motionless until it turned dark. The sky lit up with the glow of the shells bursting all around. I wondered if it would ever stop. I covered my ears to drown out the sound of the blasts. The noise was deafening and it never stopped. I looked in the faces of my buddies as we huddled together in the mud. Pieces of metal fell from the sky and splattered in the mud around us. This is not what I had expected when I signed up for this war. Nothing like this was shown on the newsreels back in Butte.

We looked up and saw a man crawling toward us. He had a pot with him. He gave each one of us a spoon and a cold cup of soup. He told us it was our dinner. It tasted terrible, but I drank it anyway.

I closed my eyes, but every time one of the shells blew up it startled me.

“What was I doing here? What was I expected to do? What had I gotten myself into?” These questions went through my mind.

When the sun came up in the morning, the noise stopped for a while. The silence hurt almost as much as the noise of the gun fire and the artillery that had lasted all night. They told us to stand up and look over the edge of the trench.

I stood up very slowly. I adjusted my helmet, and as I poked my head above the lip of the trench as shot rang out and my helmet went flying. I sank to the ground. I panicked. My heart was racing and I was so scared. I think I may have wet my pants.

One of the men brought me my helmet. There was a hole through the top of it. An inch lower and I would have been dead. I wanted to run, but where could I go? I put my took my helmet, with the hole in it, and put it back onto my head.

As the sun came up, the gun fire began again. Occasionally one of our guys would stand up and take a shot at the enemy lines. Then he would quickly drop to the floor; then another and another. Our squad leader told me it was my turn. I didn't want to, but I had to. I slowly peeked over the edge. I Put my gun on the dirt in front of me. I waited until I saw something move.

I learned to shoot a rifle when I was five years old. My father taught me to respect guns. I spent a lot of time with my father hunting for small animals like rabbits in the woods on our property. I knew to be patient to get the right shot. I knew what I was looking for.

I noticed something move. I aimed my gun at the spot. I waited until I saw it move again and then squeezed the trigger slow and easy, just as my father had taught me. The shot rang out, and a man popped up. Then I heard the scream of a man dying. He fell in a heap on the ground in front of his trench. I watched a little too long, because the others around him returned fire at me. I dropped quickly onto the floor.

"I think I got one," I said out loud to myself. I had never shot a man before.

This went on for several days. We were muddy, tired, smelly and hungry. I shot and killed at least twenty of the Germans during that time. One of the others in my squad took his knife and cut a notch on my gun every time I killed one of the Germans. We lost about ten men.

The next day an officer crawled to our location. He told us we needed to move to the left and join up with another group. There were new troops coming that would take our place. We picked up what little gear we had and crawled through the mud to the new position.

We joined up with another group of soldiers who had been in the trenches longer than we had. The men we saw there were in bad shape. They had been in the trench for over a month. Living in the trenches could be just as dangerous as standing out in the middle of no man's zone. If a bullet did not kill us the conditions in the trenches could.

A little while later an officer crawled into our space and told us that we were going to climb out of the trench, run across the no man's zone and capture the German line in front of us. He assured us that the artillery would provide us with enough cover that we

would be successful.

I asked him, “Are you crazy? It’s suicide to run across the no man’s zone.”

VOCABULARY (*Match the word to its definition*)

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|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. ranch _____ | a. long hole in the ground |
| 2. newsreel _____ | b. indoor place for sports |
| 3. transport _____ | c. documentary |
| 4. chandelier _____ | d. group, team |
| 5. gymnasium _____ | e. pull slowly |
| 6. trench _____ | f. method, procedure |
| 7. muzzle _____ | g. take someplace by a vehicle |
| 8. squad _____ | h. farm, place to raise cattle |
| 9. squeeze _____ | i. ornate ceiling lamp |
| 10. technique _____ | j. metal part of a gun |

TRUE / FALSE

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. I was a rancher. | T / F |
| 2. I lived in Butte, Montana. | T / F |
| 3. My father went to the war. | T / F |
| 4. I went to Washington D.C. | T / F |
| 5. I went to Germany. | T / F |
| 6. I was told to go to the war. | T / F |
| 7. I took a ship to France. | T / F |
| 8. I shot many Frenchmen. | T / F |
| 9. I was asked to train other soldiers. | T / F |
| 10. I was promoted to Sergeant Major. | T / F |

MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. Where did my mother go? _____
 - a) Chicago
 - b) New York
 - c) Boston
 - d) Montreal

2. Where did I see the newsreels?
 - a) theater
 - b) in the post office
 - c) on my ranch
 - d) at the bank

3. Where did I go to sign up for the war? _____
 - a) Paris, France
 - b) London, England
 - c) Montreal, Canada
 - d) Moscow, Russia

4. What happened to my ranch?
 - a) bank foreclosure
 - b) sold it
 - c) my mother took it
 - d) my brother moved to it

COMPREHENSION: *(Write a complete sentence to answer the question.)*

1. Where was I from?

2. In what country did I fight?

3. In what city did I do my training?

4. How old was I when I learned how to shoot a gun?

5. Who taught me how to shoot a gun?

6. Where did I learn about the fighting style I taught my squad?

7. What country joined the war with the French and British?

8. What was it like in the trenches?

9. What was my name?

10. To what rank was I promoted?
