

## *THE SOLDIER 2*



Our platoon was ordered to go over the top of the trench and attack the Germans head on. We had watched other squads try it, and they died, almost to the man.

We were at what later became known as the Battle of Arras. Our Canadian corps was responsible for the initial assault on the German lines.

I got the guys together. I told them that if we were going to do this we needed to do it differently than before. We were not just going to run across the field.

I told them about how the Native American Indians used to surprise the soldiers in my country. I demonstrated how to crawl on their belly under the wires and up to the German lines. We practiced the technique on the muddy floor of the trench. It made our uniforms darker, which would make it harder for the enemy to see us. We took mud and spread it on our faces and on our helmets. We looked filthy, but we would be harder to see.

When the officer came back, he was surprised at how dirty we were.

“What are you doing?” he asked for an explanation.

I told him to watch and learn.

When there was a lull in the gunfire, we went one by one over the edge of the trench. We spread out and crawled on our bellies toward the enemy lines. We went under the first row of wire, then the next. So far the Germans didn't know that we were coming.

When we went under the third wire, all we had between the enemy trench and us was dirt. The men did exactly as I had taught them. They stayed quiet and as we closed in on the edge of the trench we threw our grenades. Boom, boom, boom went the grenades. As soon as the grenades did their job, we rolled into the trench. No one was alive. We went around the corner and fired our guns down the trench. The enemy didn't have a

chance. We completely surprised them

Now we were in the enemy trench and nowhere to go. I heard gunfire and artillery. Other Australian and British troops who had followed us were dropping over the wall into the trench. The attack had been successful.

We made sure that all of the Germans were either captured or killed. We took their weapons, food, ammunition and anything else we could find.

We fortified our position and then sat and waited for the Germans to retaliate.

We held our position for several days. We made small advances against the enemy using the same tactics we used before. The Germans didn't understand what we were doing. The battle was one of the turning points in the war.

I spent nearly a year in the trenches. The army decided to put us on a on a four week rotation. We would spend one week at the front. Then the second week we would fall back to a support position just behind the front line. The third week we would fall back and become reserves. Then the fourth week we would have a kind of rest and relaxation, if you could call it that. We had to remain in the supply camp and help load and unload ammunition and supplies.

This was our routine unless the generals decided to make an attack. Then we were all at the front.

I hated being at the front lines the most. It was dangerous. We had been attacked with nerve gas more than once. Each time some of my buddies died. It is one of the most horrible ways to die. If we did not get our gas masks on quickly enough it was deadly.

While I was leaning against the wall, waiting for my turn to shoot at the Germans, an officer crawled into our section.

"Are you Langston?" he asked.

"Yeah, that would be me," I replied.

"Follow me; you are needed behind the lines. Bring your gear, you aren't coming back," the officer told me.

I did not argue. I followed him out of the trench to the rear lines. We had dug a connecting trench to the old trench, so we were able to move pretty quickly.

When we got the back line, another officer ordered me to follow him. There was

jeep waiting for me. They told me to get into the jeep and go with the driver. I ran as fast as I could to the jeep, jumped in, and then we sped off, away from the noise of the war.

As we drove down the road, we passed American soldiers. I asked the driver what was going on. He told me that America had declared war on the Germans and now they were coming to join the French and British in the battle.

I yelled, "God bless America!" as we drove past.

I was a mess. I was covered in dirt from head to toe. I smelled bad, but I did not notice, I was used to it.

The sergeant who had driven me to headquarters took me to the latrine to freshen up. I took the first shower in almost two months. The water was cold, but that didn't matter. When I left the shower, I found toiletries to shave my face and comb my hair. I looked in the mirror. My hair was long and my beard was ugly. It took a while to shave off the ugly beard. I combed my hair back to make it look as best as I could.

On a chair close by was a clean uniform. It was an American uniform and when I put it on I noticed another bar on the sleeve.

When the sergeant came to get me I asked him, "Why is there another bar on my sleeve? I'm not a corporal yet."

He replied, "You are now."

I followed him to the big tent. When I entered the room several officers sitting at a big table occupied it. I saluted and stood at attention.

"At ease, son. Take a seat," the general directed me to a chair on the other side of his desk. "We have some questions to ask you. You're Gordon Langston, of Helena, Montana, right?" he started the questions.

"That is correct sir," I replied

"How long have you been here in France?" he continued his questioning.

"About two months, sir," I gave my answer.

"As you may already know, the United States is now in this war. We have a lot of catching up to do on how this war is going. We're transferring you to the American army so that you can help us. You will have meetings with our top officers and advise them on the methods of war on the front lines. We've had very good reports about you." the general

finished.

“Is there anything else, sir,” I asked.

“You’re dismissed,” the general said, without looking up at me.

I stood up, saluted the general, and then walked out of the tent. I met up with the sergeant who had escorted me earlier as I left the tent.

He took me to the mess tent so that I could eat. The food was not very good but at least it was hot.

News of my arrival had traveled around the camp. One of the soldiers in the tent brought his tray to my table and sat down.

“Are you Langston?” He asked.

“Yeah, that’s me, why?” I asked him.

“There’re a lot of stories going around about you being a hero or something. They say you have killed a lot of Germans and that you took an entire trench by yourself,” The soldier said to me smiling.

The place went silent.

“That isn’t exactly how it happened,” I replied looking around at all of the people who were staring at me. I felt very uncomfortable, so I left.

Why did they think I was a hero? I was scared to death out there, and I was glad to be out of there alive.

I went to my tent and lay down on the hard cot they gave me. It was so quiet here. I could still hear the artillery, but it was in the distance. I had a canvas roof over my head. I never thought I could be comfortable in this situation. It wasn’t long before I fell asleep.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of a bugle playing Reveille.

I got up and put on my pants. I went to the latrine to wash up before breakfast. As I was returning to my tent an officer stopped me.

I came to attention and saluted him.

“Corporal Langston, you are to report to headquarters immediately after breakfast,” he said to me. Then he saluted and walked off.

I got dressed and went to the courtyard for the flag raising. We stood at attention and saluted the flag of the United States of America. It felt good to be saluting my own

flag.

After the flag raising I went to the mess hall to eat. The food wasn't any better than before. I sat by myself. There were so many eyes on me that I felt very uncomfortable. Why were they all staring at me? Maybe it was because I was the only one there with battle experience.

After breakfast I walked over to the main tent on the compound. I saluted the guards outside of the tent and went in. I took off my hat and went to the first desk. I stood at attention, saluted the officer behind the desk, and said, "Pri, I mean Corporal Langston reporting as ordered sir."

"Sit over there until we call for you," the lieutenant said as he pointed to a chair in the corner.

I sat down and waited, and waited and waited..... It seemed like an eternity.

Finally the lieutenant looked up, and said, "OK Langston you can go in now."

"Thank you sir," I replied, and then headed for the drapes behind him.

When I entered the room, there was a big table with several maps on it. Everyone was busy doing something. There was the dull sound of people talking to each other. I stood at attention and waited for orders. From the far side of the room a general said, "At ease soldier, come over here please."

I walked slowly past the busy people to the end of the table. "What can I do for you sir?" I asked.

"Langston, I want you to look at these maps. What do you think?" The general said as he pointed to a map in front of him.

"I'm not sure I understand sir," I replied.

"What do you think about the position of these maps, do they look correct to you?" the general continued.

"It's really hard to tell sir. I was in one trench after another, but I never knew exactly where I was," I replied.

"Thank you for your honesty soldier. What can you tell us about what it is like out there," The general asked.

"The easiest explanation is that it is Hell out there, sir. Every day we see death and

injury. I came very close to dying myself on more than one occasion,” I answered him. “I am thankful that I am out of there.”

“Here is what we have planned for you. We want you to train our new arrivals in the tactics of trench warfare. We understand that you used a new tactic to take out an entire line. The French and British generals have spoken very highly of you,” the general complimented me.

He continued, “We are promoting you to the rank of Master Sergeant. You will be in charge of all phases of training at the depot at Westminster.”

I wasn’t expecting a promotion, and I wasn’t ready to leave my buddies back on the lines.

“What about my buddies? Are they going to stay on the lines while I am transferred?” I asked.

“We have made arrangements for them to join you. We are creating a new training course where you and your men will be in charge. You will leave tomorrow morning. Good luck son. We need the best men we can find, and you’re one of them,” the general said as he put out his hand to shake mine.

I left the tent and returned to my sleeping quarters. It was hard to believe that I was promoted again and that I would be responsible for the training of the new recruits.

There was different feel to the war. People seemed a little more positive. With the United States now fighting for the Allies, the war seemed to be turning our way. The Germans are stubborn fighters and it would not be easy defeating them.

When I got to my tent I found a new American uniform with my new stripes already sewn on the shoulders. Under my bed was new pair of boots. On my bed were my orders. I sat down and read them.

I was to report to the training camp at Étampes, close to the French training facility. This place is located near the English Channel and had a dock where soldiers were brought from England and the United States.

Men supplies, ammunition and food came through this port.

I arrived by train to weeks later. I was taken to the commandant’s office.

“Hello Langston, we have been expecting you. We are glad that you are here. As

you know, we are all new to this war. You will be invaluable in helping us get the upper hand on the enemy. The American people are behind us and we want to put on a good showing.

“Do you have anything you can tell us?” the commandant finished his introduction.

“Not really sir, I am just glad to be here and be of service to you,” I replied.

I was taken to my quarters. As a Master Sergeant, I had a private room with an adjoin office. I had a corporal who sat at a desk and took care of my schedule. It felt pretty impressive.

The first day I was there I called a meeting of all of the training instructors.

“Gentleman. Welcome to Étaples. You are about to find out what is really happening out there on the front. Forget the training you had in the States. This is real war. You will learn everything from the beginning. Put what you know in the back of your mind. We have two weeks to prepare for the troops that are arriving. You will be ready!” I said in a serious tone.

There was a look of confusion on the faces of the training instructors.

“We will begin your training at oh six hundred tomorrow. You are all dismissed,” I said.

I walked out of the meeting hall to meet with the commandant again.

We discussed the plans for the training. He didn't agree with everything I said, but said he would watch and see if it worked or not.

The first day of training came. The new recruits were exhausted at the end of the day. The instructors came to me and asked why I was so hard on the men.

I told them that life on the front is hell. They had to be ready both physically and mentally. If not they would not survive.

The next day the men who had been in my platoon arrived. I assigned each one of them to an instructor to teach them the proper skills they would need to fight this war.

Two weeks later the first of the recruits were called to join the front. As they marched out of the camp I was proud of the hard work they had done.

Every week after that another group would arrive and one of the trained platoons would leave. This went on for about four months. The news from the front was that the

war was going badly for the Germans. The soldiers from our training camp were making a difference. Other training camps sent their instructors to our camp to learn our tactics. We were happy to share what we knew.

When the war finally came to a close I returned to Butte, Montana. I had many medals and stories, but no one really cared. To them I was just Gordon Langston.

**VOCABULARY** (*Match the word to its definition*)

- |                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 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?

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2. In what country did I fight?

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3. In what city did I do my training?

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

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5. Who taught me how to shoot a gun?

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

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

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8. What was it like in the trenches?

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9. What was my name?

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10. To what rank was I promoted?

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