

Footnote #148: Sam Caras' "My Experiences in My Third War."

Sam Caras My Experiences in My Third War

Agony of Argonne Recalled by Al Dory.

Sam Caras was the sort of a soldier John Pershing wished he had by the shipload.

Caras was young, tough and pretty much immune to the psychic ills that dog men in combat. He carried into war a minimum of vague fears and foolish fancies. He was unterrified by the unknown, and he had the good soldier's faculty of living today and letting tomorrow work out its own problems.

The Caras family in Missoula calls him "Grandpa Sam" today. But in yesteryears, when the Brothers Caras were probing the business climate here with pushcarts and confectionaries, Sam was lean, darkly good looking and a potential bomb in the lap of the Kaiser.

Sam followed his brother Jim to Missoula from Amalias, Greece, in 1909. After brief duty with the northern Pacific Railway, the boys tried their hand as retailers and restauranteurs. Then Sam shipped home to fight with the Greek Army in the Balkan Campaigns of 1912 and 1913.

For that first military venture, Sam wore a handlebar mustache of classic beauty. Five years later he was a clean-shaven American doughboy, and he had a fine pair of sea legs. He made his fourth Atlantic crossing as a private with headquarters company of the 364th Infantry, 91st "Wild West" Division.

Montana had a heavy investment in the White Star liner Olympic, which sailed for Southampton July 12m 1918. Not only was Pvt. Sam Caras aboard, but a strong contingent of his outfit wore the Treasure State brand, men Sam already knew like the Snyder brothers, Leo Germain, Tom Landergan, Gus Oleson and Jake Morga.

Is Third War For Sam Caras

Missoula Man Writes Story of Experiences With 91st Division.

In the Trench Mortar company.

Caras, Sam K. Helena. Army.

Hq Company 364th infantry. 91st Infantry Division Private 1st Class. Overseas July 12, 1918.

Born Greece Age 29 10/12 Years. Inducted Lewis & Clark County March 28, 1918. Residence Helena.

Sam Caras. Private 1st Class Headquarters Company 91st Wild West Division

Arrived in New York from France onboard *Kentuckian* then to Camp Kearney to be mustered out. Helena Independent April 3, 1919, p. 2

1. Whenever there is war Sam Caras brother of James Caras of this city, gets into it. Sam has been in three wars now and he is no longer an amateur. He took part I the first and second Balkan wars. In the second he was a lieutenant in the Greek army. Then the United States entered the biggest war of all and Caras went to Camp Lewis with a draft contingent from Helena. He went overseas with the famous 91st Division of "wild west" fighters. Caras is well

known in Missoula and lived here several years. He has written a story, entitled "My Experiences in My Third War." The story will be run in installments in The Missoulian.

The first installment follows"

By Sam Caras.

I guess, by this time, everybody knows that we left the States on July 12, 1918, on one of the biggest ships in the world, the "Olympic" of the White Star Line, 45,000 tons, and by 8 o'clock in the morning we were on our wonderful voyage across the seas (this was my fourth time crossing the same old waters that were full of danger from submarine and hostile raiders. Together with wearing a life belt at all times, drilling on deck, practice submarine alarms, standing inspection, and chasing up and down from "A" deck down to "G" deck (this boat had seven decks), we had some good times though, and entertainments such as singing, amateur theatricals, vaudeville, boxing and music as well as smiles from the Red Cross nurses who were crossing the pond for service in France the same as we were. But we didn't have much chance to talk to them, as the officers were on the job, as usual.

This was the best of the four trips that I have made and the only one that I really enjoyed. I was sick only once, but, oh, Boy, of all things the submarines would have been the most welcome visitor at that time. I don't know if any of you have ever been seasick, but if you haven't, you want to try one and you'll give everything you've got to be on the good old solid ground again, or so down to the bottom and have it over with.

Arrives in Southampton.

We arrived in Southampton, England, July 19. It was here that we received a stereotyped letter from King George V, extending us a welcome and of which I sent you a copy. From there we took a channel boat to Le Havre, France, and on that trip was our best chance to go down to the bottom and entertain the fish, but of course, we didn't realize it at the time. These waters were full of those fish devils they call submarines, but we finally landed in Le Havre, and from there to an English camp, and there, for the first time, we found out that we couldn't have all the water to drink that we wanted. I took my first steam bath in this camp. The water was as scarce as scotch whiskey in Seattle, where I had to pay \$12 a quart for it in those good old days. They piled us all in a small room and they turned the steam on us for about five minutes, and then we thought we heard somebody trying to tell us something. We listened. The man was telling us that as we go through the door we would receive a bath of cold water. I started to shiver, as I don't like cold showers, but I gathered up all my courage and went in line and waited for my torture. I was near the door when I saw an Englishman with a coffee cup in his hand and I was wondering if he was going to serve us with some famous English tea, never dreaming that this was the cold shower we were going to get. But I was thankful, at that.

From there we entrained for parts unknown in box cars, the ones that are marked 8 Cheveaux or 40 Hommes." (8 horses or 40 men). Now these cars are not as comfortable as the box cars at home. Put 40 full-grown men, 40 heavy packs 40 guns and 40 gas masks in a room 20x6 and you've got Norwegian sardines skinned a mile. You couldn't move an inch without someone hollering, "feet off!" We traveled that way for two days and nearly three nights. We landed in Andelot, Haute Marne, at 1:15 o'clock on the third night, where we stayed until the next afternoon, and then we proceeded by marching in full pack to Bourdons. That was indeed a memorable hike, as that was the very first time of any consequence with full packs, a distance of 11 miles; but, believe me, I thought it was 30 at that time, and no water available for drinking.

2. Period of training In France . . . [March 10, 1919] Caras in Trench Mortar Platoon

TRAINED UNTIL SEPTEMBER 2ND WERE ANXIOUS TO ENTER WAR.

Sam Caras Says Men of the “Wild West” Division Cheered News.

“This training went on until September 3rd, when we received orders that our time had come to show the world of what stuff the “Wild West” division was made of, and believe me, we were the happiest bunch of creatures in the world. I don't suppose you realize what it means to be in the army 12 months doing the same thing day after day. It gets so monotonous it drives men “bugs,” to hear the glorious deeds that the other doughboys were doing in the front, and feeling all the time that the war might be over and wouldn't have a chance to do something for which the folks at home might be proud of. . .

Started Out on September 3.

We started out on September 3rd, with full pack and this was the biggest pack I ever carried in all the three wars that I have been in. Can you imagine “yours truly” carrying 108 pounds? Well, it was all of that and if I was all alone I would never have made it, but feeling that I was not all alone, but that there were thousands of others carrying the same, I picked all my courage and dragged my feet along the road with the boys. If you don't realize what this means—well, take two sacks of flour and 12 pounds on top of that and see how far you can go with it, and besides, I had to carry my size 13 shoes, that weight six pounds alone. We marched to a little village by the name of Mandres. No water in town as usual, dead tired; but as this was our first march towards the front, hardly anybody kicked, but took it as cheerful as men can take it under the circumstances.

We stayed there two days and then we started out, but this time the commanding officers as good enough to take our overalls, extra pair of shoes and overcoats away from us to be carried in trucks. He, himself realized by this time that the men couldn't carry such a load without being half dead before they got to the front, as one of the French officers said to our captain two days before. ‘You will kill your men with that load before you get them to the front,’ and how true it was.

Men Were Soaked.

It was raining hard that day, but such trifles can't stand in the way, as the wheels have to go around just the same. We finally got to the railroad, about 16 miles. Holampont by name. We were oaked clear to the bone and nothing to eat all day (in this series of marches we never had any lunch), and breakfast consisted of a slice of bacon and hard bread and supper of stew. We pitched out little tents in wet ground (mud), but we were so tired and hungry we didn't mind a trifling thing like that, but the worst of it was that the truck that was carrying our kitchen, broke down and wouldn't be there until about 9 o'clock night. I scouted around to find something to eat and finally succeeded in the machine gun company. They had some of this famous “canned Willy” and “hard tack,” but believe me, I thought this was the best stuff I ever tasted in my life. [To Be Continued]

3. [Missoulia March 17, 1919]

The same day we boarded the “8 Cheveau or 40 Hommes” again and as they did not tell us where we were going (that was a military secret), we thought that surely we were going to the front. We forgot all of our previous troubles and were just as happy as a soldier in France who had been invited to a ‘ham and egg’ feed. I didn't say champagne, though there is plenty of it here, but ham and eggs. Oh, boy! You can't buy those things here even if you can't buy those

things here even if you offer them 500 francs, and this is a small fortune here. It is about \$100 in real money.

We went through Chaumont the American general headquarters, and there, among others were a few American nurses. Real American girls who could talk to us in our own language without all of these “polly-voos” and “wee-wee” stuff.

Anxious to Get to Front.

About 6 o'clock we reached Gondrecourt (where the officers' training school was) when we were ordered to get out and you want to see us then—all crazy mad, the men cussing up and down (you know those prayers that only the doughboys know how to deliver as we thought, and somebody well informed (there are plenty of these creatures in the army) told us that we were going direct to the front lines, and here we were, God only knows how far from the front lines. They told us we were 18 miles from the front, but that was strange to me, as I knew by experience that you can hear the sound of a cannon at least 40 miles away, and there were no sounds of cannon that I could hear. We quieted down in a few minutes and took our medicine, and you've got to do that in the army, if you want to get along with your big first sergeant, or else you will be on K. P. the rest of your life. . .

4. [Missoulia March 21, 1919]

From where we were we could see in the distance several Boche planes trying to cross the lines and visit us. But our anti-aircraft guns were on the job. Not once did a Boche plane come any closer than 15 miles from where we were situated. We were all excited that day as we watched the shells from the aircraft guns exploding on the train of the Hun planes, as none of us had witnessed an aerial bombardment before. When I was in the Balkan war of 1912, and again in 1913, we did not have such things, and as I found afterwards lots of other things, either. But that comes later

We judged that we were about 20 miles from the front line and we could hear the cannons roaring. This was on September 10, one day before the St. Mihiel drive started. That night, we started out and by 12 o'clock we were in Pagny, a little town about 10 miles from the front lines, and there for the first time in two weeks we had a dry place to sleep. I went into a barn with lots of hay. I thought that this was paradise. It didn't take me long to get into it and to my delight, it was about 15 inches deep. I covered myself with it (we were not allowed to take our blankets out of the rolls as the order stated that we might be called out at any time during the night. . .

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In reserve at the St. Mihiel drive.

While in Pagny, we were in the first reserve of the St. Mihiel drive. The real barrage started some time during the night and the boys went “over the top” in the early morning, and as we found out afterwards, there was not much resistance. Fritz was taken by surprise and gave himself up without much trouble. Our captain told us that they captured about 14,000 of them in one bunch, and they would be brought into the town on the same day. We were all anxious to see some German prisoners as we had never seen any before. That afternoon we saw the, but what a difference from what we thought they would be. There were some old men, over 50 I should judge, but the most of them were nothing but kids. They all seemed to be glad to be captured by the Americans. There was a major general also, an old man, about 65 or 70

5. [Missouliau April 7, 1919]

On the night of the 13th we marched out of the village and boarded some French cameons, driven by Japanese and we felt sure then that we were going to the front line and would be there in an hour or so. But one passed, then another and another, and as we looked around we saw that instead of going toward the front we were going away from it, but we had learned by this time not to kick and swear, but to take our medicine quietly let someone wlse do the worrying.

6. [Missouliau April 21 1919]

7. [Missouliau

We started out about 10 o'clock and no sooner had we left than Fritz stated to pound away at the hill which we had left just shortly before. Evidently the Boche aviator had taken a picture in the afternoon of our locating, but this time we fooled him. We beat him to it. We were quite a distance from the place and when he decided to send over a few 77's but he found the nest empty.

Of course, he did not know this at the time and perhaps was congratulating himself on his cleverness. He thought he would catch us napping and dreaming of the land of the free, This was the first time we had heard the whirr of an enemy shell as it went sailing through the air over our heads.

We finally reached the Forest de Hess, about three hours later and were turned loose to find a place to sleep. The next day our captain gathered all the N.C.O's together and told them that we were not going to take over a quiet sector, but we were going "over the top." When the "D" day came as he stated, and that was not very far off and to lay low and wait,. We were not allowed to go out I the open and were cautioned at all costs not to be taken prisoners, as that would give away the whole show. Not ever officers were allowed to go down to the trenches in their uniforms. Everything had to be blue. The khaki had to lay low for awhile.

8th Installment. Go Into Battle for First Time Against German Soldiers. Night of the 25th: going over the top in the morning.

. . . The night of the 25th orders were received to turn in everything but our reserve rations for two days, and get ready to start out any minute and that we were going over the top in the morning.

We started out about 10 o'clock and marched to the rear of the French trenches, getting there about 1 o'clock in the morning. On the way I received my first sniff of sneezing gas. At first I did not know what it was, although of course, in our gas drills they had told us all about it, but I had never had a taste of it until my nose cut loose and sure thought I must have the Spanish "flue," when somebody next to me in the same fix said something about "sneezing gas." And you can just get your life it didn't take your Uncle Willie long to get my gas mask on.

As we were going over the hill jumping French trenches and barbed wire entanglements Fritz send a shell over that lit right in the middle of headquarters company, but it did not explode. It was a good thing it didn't. If that shell had exploded it would have wiped the whole platoon right off the map.

In a few minutes another one came over, this time falling short, and here was where "yours truly" thought it about time to duck and find a shell hole somewhere, and I finally landed in a trench that was half full of water. But I didn't mind a little thing like that when the whiz-bangs were coming over at the rate of one every second. Anything was better than a piece of shrapnel

in my body. No, siree, nothing like that. You see I promised the little girl that I left behind that I would come back to her safe and sound and I couldn't afford to take any chance.

9th: [Missoulian May 19, 1919] at 2:30 91st Division artillery barrage opened up.

10th: [Missoulian May 26, 1919] 5:30 time for us to go "over the top"

The dawn was breaking on a day that I shall never forget, a dreadful day and yet a glorious one for the "Wild West" was September 26th. I shall never forget in the years to come this day although I might forget the long hikes and hardships I underwent while in France and Belgium. It has some bitter and pleasant memories that will never be forgotten. Bitter memories (I don't think that is the word for it) to see the flower of American youth lying in all directions smashed and so cut up as to be unrecognizable. It was a pleasant memory to see the Hun going over the hills in the face of democracy, and to see that autocracy was finally beaten.

Hun Cuts Loose.

It was a foggy morning and one could hardly see further than 10 yards in front of him. Down the hill we went, onto a path not more than three yards wide. Here there was an awful congestion of machine guns, one pounders, "doughboys" and carts of all kinds, jammed up in one mass. A few yards further down was the general and colonel, waving their hands for the men to 'double time' and get through a channel as it was a very dangerous place if Fritz cut loose. And he sure did. The first shell that came over hit the top of a tree and on the side of the road there was an awful crash. All the men went down as quickly as they could under the circumstances, but hearing another shell coming, got up and started to double time, except our postoffice sergeant who got a piece of shrapnel in the leg and as I found afterwards, he died in the hospital from blood poisoning.

We did not go over 15 years when another one came over this time, bursting just across the road, shrapnel flew in all directions, but o one was hurt, except a mule from a machine gun company, went down, shot through the hip. We began to get nervous and although they weren't big shells, they were the first ones to burst as close as they did. We rushed ahead to get out of that trap, you might call it that, and get over in more open ground and spread out. Fritz had our number there and to have stayed there a few minutes longer would have spelled "finish" for most of us.

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[great action]

11: [greatest action] [Missoulian June 2, 1919] [Missoulian June 2, 1919:

On the way out, I saw a young fellow sitting by the side of the road with half of his nose cut off. A small piece of shrapnel was going by, and his nose happened to be in the way. We kept on, any by this tie were out of the road and in more open ground and there thousands of machine gun bullets greeted us, also the shells were coming over faster, but went over our heads. As we were advancing, somebody yelled, "Gas." We did not know if there was gas or not We did not take

any chances and put our gas masks on as quickly as we possibly could and flopped down, as we could not advance with those things on, through barbed wire entanglements. There came the word, "No gas; fix bayonets and charge." The order was not quite finished when there was a whistling and almost at once a terrible roar. A shell had exploded not more than ten yards away. I closed my eyes and when I opened them again there were in front of me, six bodies, three entirely unrecognizable and the others not so badly smashed, and a part of another man. His head was left and several different parts of his body. The rest of it was carried, God knows how far.

I tell you folks, I had been in this thing before and I have seen terrible sights in my experiences, but this thing took my breath away. I was shaking like a leaf. I was stunned. I couldn't move for the life of me. This was the worst sight I had ever seen. I don't know how long I stayed there, gazing away like a big idiot, when our lieutenant came over and patted me on the back and said: "Caras, isn't this an awful sight; let's get away from here; I can't stand it.

We moved out and then he told me that this shell that had killed these men was nothing but a minnewefer. Judging by the sound of it, as he had had a little previous experience at school, and he was able to recognize it, and it was just the gun that we were after. We moved on through barbed wire entanglements. They were thick as flies in summer, and one can see these entanglements for miles around but our pioneers were on the job with those big shears of theirs, cutting them up and opening the way for us to go through after Fritz.

The 363rd was on the line that day and the 364th was supposed to be in support. But we didn't care who was on the line or who was in support. We were after our minenwerfer and we were determined to have it that day. By this time we knew that one was pretty close somewhere. They were sending shells over at the rate of 25 a minute. We kept on advancing. There were not only minenwerfers pounding away at us now, but thousands of machine guns and snipers in all directions were firing away at us. But the moral of the men was high, and all you could hear was jolly and cursing of troops. And the wild cry still rings in my ears "First aid" or "Stretcher bearers, forward." And that made us all the wilder to go after Fritz, with more force than ever before, when we knew that some one of our comrades paid with his life for democracy.

[To Be Continued]

[RP Oct 3, 2018] Greek immigrant Sam Caras with his Trench Mortar Battery joined in when the 91st Wild West Division went "over the top" at the beginning of the decisive Meuse-Argonne Offensive early on September 26. Since their own mortars had not been delivered, Caras's Battery fought forward like infantry, with their goal to capture a similar, but larger, German mortar, a 7.58cm Minenwefer, to turn on the retreating Germans. Private 1st Class Sam Caras continued his narrative of this dramatic action begun in the September 26 *River Press*:

RP Oct 2:

12: [Missoulian June 9, 1919]

YANKS GET GUN THEY WENT AFTER

Caras Tells of Experiences in Capturing Huns' Minenwerfer.

Behind us were the one-pounders firing away and now and then we saw a machine gun nest, crew and all, go sailing up in the clouds. We were on the slopes of a hill now (this part of No Man's Land was full of slopes, hills and forests. Most of you imagine as I did before I came over, that No Man's Land was nothing but level ground for miles around and not a tree to be seen. No, this was different land and if the Americans held this ground instead of the Huns, well, hell itself could not have taken it.)

We sat down for a little rest, when there came a Boche plane buzzing around, and when about 200 yards from us they threw an ash can (the kind that leaves the plane and breaks open, showing different colored lights) so that the enemy artillery observers could locate just about where our biggest bunch of men were, and for a minute I was glad it wasn't any closer to us than it was when it threw that devilish thing; but that lasted only a minute, as one man from our platoon, who didn't have a chance to use his rifle that morning and as nothing else was visible, he thought he would try at the Boche plane; but no soon had the gun gone off than the aeroplane turned sideways and after taking a good look at us the wasn't more than 200 feet high) when out went another can.

Won't Shoot Plan Again.

Then was the time to beat it out of there if we didn't want the 77s to open up on us as they did a few minutes afterwards, but we were quite away from there and my friend swore that he would not shoot again at an aeroplane as long as he lives. We were about 100 yards from the minenwerfer by this time, it was in the forest. We couldn't tell the exact spot where it was located, but judging by the sound we had a pretty clear idea of its probable location, when one of the men let out a yell, "There he is." He spotted him behind some high bushes. No sooner had he let out the shout than one of the men operating the gun (there were two of them) went down in a heap with a bullet in his brain, but the other kept on firing (as he told us afterwards, they had orders in fight to the last ditch), but he soon went down also with a bullet in his right arm, and our first act was performed according to schedule.

Capture Minenwerfer.

We captured what we were after, the minenwerfer and one man with it, an officer, we on our part losing five men from our platoon what were wounded and taken back. I don't know if they are still alive or not, I haven't heard from them since. We asked this man all kinds of questions about the gun, (one of our men could speak German) but he would not tell us anything about it, He volunteered to tell us that Germany could not be beaten. We fixed up his wound and left him there for the first aid men to pick up. However, before leaving him I got a picture of him which he had in his pocket.

13th: [Missoulian June 16th 1919] Cowboys Drive Germans' Best

We had a little trouble in putting the thing together, but we finally managed it and started off. Over the hill we went, and there looking through my field glasses, which I had bought while in the training area. I saw the famous Prussian guard going off across the hill about 2,000 yards away, just like a bunch of cattle, driven by Montana cowpunchers, and there were Montanans in the front line now, besides the 362nd which is half Montanan. There was the 348th machine gun battalion, which was practically all made up from men of the state. A few of our boys from Helena and Missoula were members of this battalion, Snider brothers, Leo Germain, Ton Landorgan, Gus Oleson, Jake Morgan and others who I don't know by name. We tried to take a shot at the Germans with our minenwerfer, but it wouldn't work. We didn't know the combination of the shell and although we were warned against using German ammunition as the Germans were pretty tricky in such things as some of our boys found out in previous battles. "Doctor" Ammunition.

The Germans, if they have sufficient time to doctor the ammunition that they leave behind in most cases they take out the timing fuse and in place of it put in instantaneous fuses the kind that burns 120 feet to the second, so that the shell explodes the instant it leaves the gun, and, of course, you can imagine the result if one of those shells that we were trying to use had been

doctored. I wouldn't be here today to write this story. But we were determined to use the gun at any cost and we were lucky the ammunition was not tampered with—Fritz had all he could do trying to get away, without fooling around with such trifles. We finally got disgusted with the thing, and the Germans began to disappear over the other side of the hill, we thought it better to use our rifles for the time being. And I guess we had some results judging from the bodies that we found laying there the next day.

Beyond Objective.

We went down to Very, which was captured a few minutes before that, and were trying to adjust the shell, when there came a wild cry from the top of the hill. "The Germans are counter-attacking with a strong force, all men with rifles on the top of the hill." As our gun was not adjusted yet, we went up the hill with our rifles and after we got there in a few minutes there was not a Fritz in sight. Company B from the 348th machine gun battalion did fine work when they cut loose on them. And not only beat them back, but advanced about a kilo, and as we were beyond our objective for the first day (seven kilos), outposts were established and we were prepared to stay there over night. It was now about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. We got back to our gun and took it up the hill and began to investigate the shell, took the gun apart from the wheels, laid it down on the ground ready for action, the next morning.

Towards night Fritz began to use some 77s and 115s. All those shells were filled with TNT, the highest explosive known. And believe me, they tear some hole when they land. I saw holes that would take a man two months to dig one in the hard ground, and some of them were big enough to bury 100 men in. They began to send more and more every minute, but as we were in dead ground, it didn't bother us very much. This ends the glorious 26th day of September in which the 91st division won its fame in its fight for freedom.

14th: [Missoulian June 23rd 1919]

We lay there and for the first time that day I found out that I was hungry, too much excitement had been going on through the day to think of anything to eat. I opened up my pack and took out a can of Willie. I ate part of it, I gave most of it away, as some of the boys liked it better than I did. I took out my little shovel and dug myself a grave and in it I went for the night. The boys started to make fun of me for digging a hole, but I told them to take my advice and do likewise. But they would not listen to me. I offered to bet them a hundred francs that in days to come I wouldn't be able to catch up with them as far as digging holes was concerned. And sure enough the days that followed they dug their holes and were in them even before I had my shovel off my pack.

Shovel a Soldier's Friend.

Some of the men in our platoon would not take my advice a few days before and hold on to their shovels, and they were sorry for it. They had to wait until one of us got through digging our holes before starting on theirs. The best friends a soldier has in the battle are his gas mask and shovel. The slope on which we were dug in on this night protected us from shells coming from the northwest, but toward 3 o'clock in the morning they opened up from the northeast the shells began to fall very close. One of them fell within 10 yards of me, injuring two of the men that were close when it exploded, but it never touched me (this high explosive shell had one fault, it split the shell in such small parts and threw them with such force that men were safer 10 yards from where they explore than he is within 300 yards, unless, of course, you get shell shock when your nerves are not strong enough, and I saw quite a few cases of shell shock.

The day that followed, the Germans used them more for the morale effect they had on the men than the killing part of it, and it sure makes a man shiver like a leaf when one of those things falls close, it doesn't matter how brave he might be, except a few pounds of dirt and rocks falling on men. It was time to leave. I went further down the hill and got into a ditch at the side of a wooden road, until 5 o'clock, when we were ordered to get up and prepare for action.

Fritz opened up a regular barrage on us about 5:30 and it seemed as though we were going to have a hard day's work to get them out of their holes. We went up a hill to where our gun was and waited for orders. In front of us the ground was level for about a thousand yards and at the end of it was a little village, Epinonville and a forest, where Fritz had stored away several hundred machine guns, minenwerfers and 77s. Their heavy artillery was farther back pounding at us with all their might. The commanding general, William H. Johnson, came up about 8 o'clock in his car, and that is more than most generals do. He made a few changes in the regiment, which I will not mention here. And, believe me, he is a brave soldier. He stood there while the shells and shrapnel were flying in all directions. Taking chances he did not have to take. But the morale of the men was kind of low that morning and somebody had to brace them up. And, believe me, it did brace us up to see our general sharing our danger; but that did not help us very much that morning; our artillery had not come up yet, except a few 75s, but a few were not enough to cover several miles of ground.

15th: [Missoulia June 30th 1919]

It was hard to pull up the heavy artillery as the roads were practically destroyed and that was what held us there until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. When we finally got them out of their holes, capturing the town of Epinonville, which was practically destroyed by previous bombardments. As we advanced we ran into our own barrage. Somebody must have forgot to notify the artillery that we were advancing, and then came the agonizing cry from the machine gun and line companies that were in the advanced line to "raise the artillery," it went back to the regimental P. C. through thousands of mouths but the artillery kept on.

It Was Murder.

Oh, but it was a murder, our own shells were exploding about 100 yards from where our platoon was, for fear that we might get killed by our own shells as several others did. There is nothing that can knock the morale of the men quicker than to run into and get killed by his own shells. The men were like wild animals by this time, some were ahead and some ran back, but everywhere they turned to shells, German and our own, were exploding in every direction. It was an awful mess. And instead of advancing we fell back and no doubt same Fritz quite a little trouble.

We were all mad wild. Cursing the men that made it possible for this mess. After working hard all day and losing a good many lives to get troops out of there and when we finally accomplished it, we abandoned it and got back to where we started. But now I know that no one was to blame we simply advanced too fast for the Signal Pioneers to keep in liaison with the artillery.

Germans Cleaned Up.

The Germans got wise to the fact and turned loose every cannon they had in that level and bare ground, and there was an awful slaughter while it lasted. We finally got behind the hill where we had started that morning. There was an American aeroplane over us at the time that we ran into our own barrage. It saw where our lines were, it saw that we were advancing and that our own artillery was shelling us and saw that something was wrong somewhere. Why didn't he notify the artillery we never were able to solve it up to this date.

We got into the same holes that dug the night before and ate some corned “Willie” and hard tack. I was pretty tired and sleepy, we worked hard that day, we fired over three hundred rounds, and it takes quite a bit of work to handle the ammunition and move the position of the gun every half hour or so, as Fritz was trying his damndest to locate us with his 77s. We had only 14 men left in our platoon out of 26 men, the rest of them wounded or lost in the excitement. But we had the pleasure of knowing that we had done a good day’s work. We blew up over 15 machine gun nests that were hiding in the forest in front of us. This ends the second day of the great battle of the Argonne, on September 27.

16th: [Missoulian July 7, 1919] This ends the story of the second day of the great battle of the Argonne on September 27.

About 4 o’clock in the morning of the 28th, we were ordered to get up and out to where the gun was and proceed to Epinonville, as the intelligence report stated that there would be no resistance. The enemy was about one kilometer beyond that village. We proceeded to where our gun was, and there we found out that we had only five shells left. But we were in hopes of finding some in the village, when we got there an hour later we found that Fritz had moved all the ammunition on the other side of the hill, about 2,000 yards beyond the village. Being short of ammunition we lay down in a little ditch which afforded some protection from the enemy shells, and awaited developments from the front line which was about 500 yards further off.

Fritz, in the meantime, was busy with his artillery, peppering us with every cannon he had left in this position—we had captured quite a few the first two days of the battle. But that day we had a new enemy to fight—the famous snipers of the Prussian guard. There were hundreds of them hiding all around us, even behind our lines, and as they have a specially-made rifle that hardly makes any noise, it was hard to locate them. They were hiding in dugouts, farm-houses and trees that were plentiful around the village. We did not pay much attention to them the first two days, as there were only a few; but now they seemed to have increased in number and men could not hardly stick out their heads without hearing the familiar pish-zings as the bullets flew all directions. But good luck was that they appeared to be poor shots. They usually missed nine out of ten. One of them was right in front of us somewhere, and he had our number down pat. We couldn’t make a move without hearing from him. Some of the boys decided to have a little fun at his expense. So they stuck their helmets on the end of a rifle and raised it a couple of inches over the ridge. O sooner would the helmet to up than we heard him pounding away at it, but he missed every time.

“Kamerad Be Damned!”

He finally got our goat; we had to get rid of him some way, so Lieutenant Crawford suggested that we leave the gun there and scout around and see if we could get him. Finally one of our men discovered him in a top of a tree and took a shot at him, but missed. Fritz lost all his courage by this time and began to yell “Kamerad, Kamerad.”

“Kamerad be damned!” our men replied. They took good aim this time, and the bullet went through his breast. We had no pity for men who stayed behind our lines and would not give themselves up until they were out of ammunition or knew, or knew that they were cornered.

We advanced about 200 yards from the village and stayed until about 4 o’clock when our artillery pulled the same “boner: that it did the night previous. There came again the agonizing cry of “raise the artillery.” We had only five shells left, but we had to take a chance of finding more on the day down to support our men falling back to get our own barrage.

[River Press 17 Oct]

Caught in Same Kind of “Boner.”

The Germans knew our artillery was shelling our own men, and almost instantly (they had a wonderful line of communication) they opened up a terrible barrage on us which I went through. I will not try to describe it. I could not if I would. Such a thing cannot go on paper. There are no words for it. But to give you a little idea what it was like, I will tell you this men. We started out with 14 men and when we go there, there were left only five of us and the lieutenant. We did not know what became of the others. The regimental P.C. was caught in the same barrage. The colonel was wounded, two of our lieutenants from the regimental staff were killed, one Friend lieutenant attached to the regimental headquarters was wounded and shell-shocked, several enlisted men from the regimental headquarters lost their lives, not counting the men from the line companies in which the losses were heavy.

We finally got to the opposite hill where our 75s were still falling thick and fast. The men were very glad to see us at that particular moment, and gladly helped us to get the gun up to a good position, A couple of them rand down to the former German camp and brought some ammunition that we had seen a few moments previously while going through there.

Fritz was counter-attacking by this time, and somebody had to stop him. We determined to be the ones. We fought hard for that hill and we could not afford to lose it on account of the “boner” that our artillery had pulled. After firing about 50 rounds the French lieutenant that was in an observation point, informed us that we were very successful in our attempt, and that the enemy was balling back. As we were again getting short of ammunition we decided to cut down from rapid fire to one round every 10 minutes or so, just to let them know that we were still there.

It was then about 6 o’clock in the evening, and we decided that two of us should go for more ammunition and the other three men and the lieutenant stayed with the gun.

German Gott” Again on Job.

I went with another man and found all kinds of ammunition in a farm house. Around 6 o’clock rain began to fall on our tired and exhausted bodies. None of us had any slickers and some of the men in the midst of the battle threw their blouses away and now they were standing out in the open without any protection whatsoever against the biting blast of the howling wind. The German “Gott” was on the job again.

Well, I won’t try to explain here what of a night that was. This story is too long now as it is. But to give you an idea what it was like, I’ll mention one incident. One of the men, Sam Langford from Montana, lying next to me, went plumb off of his head about 1 o’clock, and although I was scarcely in a better fix myself. I took him to Epinonville, stopping under the broken roof of a partly destroyed home, finding it better than lying down in the open. We stayed there until 2:30, when Fritz began to shell the village, and it was time to move again. The man was somewhat better by this time, and out into the field we went again and stayed until daylight.

We stayed there all day on the 29th. The 348th machine gun battalion was on the line now and the 1st battalion of the 364th infantry. On our right was the 37th division and the 35th division on our left. But we could not advance; our heavy artillery had not moved up—we had gone to fast for them. We made about 15 kilo’s (10 miles) in those three days, and it was hard to move the monster guns 10 miles in such roads, although the engineers were doing their best, working day and night.

Another Hell-like Jam.

We stayed there the night of the 28th, and on the morning of the 30th we moved up about 300 yards into a hollow a short distance from the front lines, where the 2nd battalion and a machine

gun battalion were. The battalion P.C. was in this hollow also. About 10 o'clock in the morning Hell broke loose. From all directions enemy machine guns, heavy and light artillery, trench mortars, minenwerfers and hand grenades were all peppering us from our left, right and front. We did not know what to think. We had through our left and right flanks protected by the other divisions. But it was not so, as we found out 20 minutes after when a runner from the 35th division ran into our P.C. and informed Major Gregory (battalion and regimental commander that day) that the 35th division was compelled to fall back. I will never forget his words to the runner from the 35th division. "Go back and tell them, that they can fall back if they want to, but we are not. We paid dearly for this ground and we are going to hold it, down to the last man." Almost instantly the field telephone rang and the major himself answered it. It was a message from the brigade P.C., informing him that the 37th division was falling back also; but to hold the line at any cost; that orders were given an hour before to get everything out of the way, ambulances and all, so to let the heavy artillery go through, and that we might hear from it at any moment.

The major put the receiver down smiling, no doubt, from the prospects of having help from the artillery. He was a brave man and I felt sorry for him when I saw him, the next day, going back, shell-shocked, supported by a private.

In a Trap.

The mystery was solved, we were flanked from both sides. Caught in a trap for the time being. Orders went up immediately to the company commanders of the 2nd battalion and machine gun battalion to hold the lines, and that help was coming up fast.

Oh, boy, you should have seen those machine gunners fight! They disregarded all personal danger; all they thought about at that time was to hold the lines that hundreds of their comrades gave their lives for.

The Germans were counter-attacking in strong force, but they soon found out that the "Wild West" was not as easy to handle as the others. And they fell back to their own lines after about four hours of fighting.

I don't intend to criticize the other two divisions here. Whatever they did, I am sure they did their duty as soldiers of the great republic; but the foregoing gives you an idea of what we were up against. These two divisions were immediately relieved that night and other divisions replaced them. We stayed there that night and all day of the 30th, waiting for our heavy artillery to come up and give us some assistance so that we could continue our advance. A few batteries moved up, but not enough. More of it was coming up, but under the circumstances it was humanly impossible to move any faster.

At noon of October 1st, Lieut. Crawford directed us to move about 200 yards to the rear and protect our troops the best we could with our little gun, as he said the men were exhausted and tired of waiting for the artillery, and they might have to fall back any time. But our gun was still in the hollow, 200 yards ahead of us, where we left it the night before, to get to a better place where we would be protected from the enemy shells which were coming thick and fast.

One of Six Volunteers.

Somebody had to go down and pull the gun out of there. The enemy artillery and machine guns were more active than ever before. In those three days that we were waiting there for our artillery, the enemy brought up hundreds of 77's and minenwerfers. The shells and bullets were

coming by thousands now, and it was sure suicide to stick your head out of your hole. But somebody had to go down, and if not possible to pull it out, to destroy it with hand grenades.

Lieut. Crawford called for six volunteers, I was one of them (and this was the act that later I was cited for). Somebody had to go and it might just as well be me as well as anybody else. My comrades were Californians; I was the only Montana man in the bunch. I wanted the state of which I am so proud to be represented. We got three hand-grenades, and with our lieutenant at the head of the line, we proceeded towards where our gun was, as fast as our feet could carry us. On the way down a piece of shrapnel hit my back and sent half way through, where I found it later. That was indeed a narrow escape. We decided not to destroy the gun after all the danger we had been in to get to it, so we started out with it. On the way back, a shell exploded a few yards in front of us. Two of the men went down. I don't know how badly hurt. A piece of shrapnel tore my legging and hit the ground a couple of feet from me. I took the trouble to pick it up and carry it with me. I have both those pieces of steel and I will show them to you when I get back home.

Only Four Left.

That left four of us to pull the gun, which weighed about 600 pounds, through two or three inches of mud, exhausted as we were. Not for a moment did it enter our minds to leave the gun and run for our lives. We were past that stage of fright. We considered ourselves as already dead when we took that chance, and that was all there was to it.

We finally got back without any further losses, and began to feel our bodies all over to see if any part of it was missing. It was hard to believe that we had got out of that inferno alive. Up to this moment I shiver when I think of that day. Then it was that we got our first cup of coffee since September 26. It wasn't very hot, but we did not mind that at that time. We stayed there constantly under heavy shell-fire until the night of October 3, when we were relieved by the 1st division. On October 2, I witnessed for the second time the fall of a German airplane in flames. It was about 2,000 feet above our heads when five allied planes got after him with their typewriters" and set him on fire.

The pilot jumped off, and it was a fine sight to see him whirling through the air, followed by his plane. In an ordinary case I would have been excited and felt sorry for the man, but as it was I was glad. They caused us quite a bit of trouble on previous days; there were plenty of them above us day and night, giving away our positions, dropping bombs and occasionally pounding away at us with their machine guns.

[End RP October 17]

Meets Lissner of Helena.

A few hours later I met Harry Lissner of Helena, the first boy I saw from home during the drive. How glad I was to see him! He was a member of the supply company, 363rd infantry, bringing up supplies to the men on the line. His wagon was half destroyed by a shell, but Harry didn't mind a little thing like that. The men had to have some canned "Willie" and someone had to bring it up.

[Major] General [William] Johnston came up a little later and handed us a piece of gum that he had in hand. One of the men asked him how he liked our behavior during the drive. The general's reply was one word: "Splendid." Then he got into his car and started to shave himself, paying no attention to the shells whatsoever.

We were proud of the "old boy." As I said before nothing raised the morale of the men more than to see their general sharing the dangers and hardships with them.

After we were relieved we were taken to Cheppy Woods, about 10 miles from the line. There was where Joseph Timmons, the *Los Angeles Examiner* correspondent, took our picture with our little gun.

We stayed there two days before marching to Bussy. From Bussy we went by train to Flanders, where we had our second battle which I will not relate here as paper is scarce. We beat Fritz out of 11 miles of Belgian territory in less than 28 hours, capturing the big town of Oudenarde, where, for the first time, I saw Old Glory go up the church spire, while the shells were bursting in the air.

Here we were located until after the armistice was signed, leaving afterwards for Herzelee, France, where I first started to write of my experiences.
Hammers Fear of God Into Boche.

The "Wild West" put the fear of god into the Boches at the Argonne drive, judging by a special order that they put out the day before the attack in Belgium, which our intelligence men found on a wounded German officer. The following is an extract from it:

"Translation of a German document taken from a wounded officer by the 107th F.A.

"Headquarters, 30th October, 1918.

"Early tomorrow we must be ready to meet a hostile attack. It is therefore ordered that from 6 o'clock on, companies will be on the alert for action.

"Ammunitions may be got a K.T.K. (the distributing point) at any time.

"Opposite our sector lies the 91st American division. For each prisoner brought in, the division will be given 10 days' extra leave.

(Signed) "VON BEULOW."

I am about to close this story of my experiences in the great battle in which we were engaged for eight days and nine nights. In all that period we never slept more than 10 hours, we never drank more than five cups of coffee. We were exhausted. Every man in the division was sick with dysentery, yet we not only advanced under these trying conditions, but held every inch of our ground against the hostile attacks when the other divisions fell back.

The 91st Held Fast.

The following is a part of the 1st citation we got from the corps commander:

"The corps commander wishes you to understand that this relief results solely from a realization by higher command than your division has done its full share in the recent success and is entitled to a rest for reorganization.

"This especially as during the past three days it had incurred heavy casualties when circumstances would not permit of either advance or withdrawal. At a time when the divisions on its flanks were faltering, and even falling back, the 91st pushed ahead and steadfastly clung to every yard gained.

"In this, its initial performance, the division has established itself firmly on the list of the commander-in-chief's reliable units.

"Please extend to your officers and men my appreciation of their splendid behavior and my hearty congratulations on the brilliant record they have made."

EVERY REASON TO BE PROUD.

Montana, California, Oregon and Washington—be proud of your sons! They are men through and through; they fought like panthers. I have seen other armies fighting in the previous wars I was in, but nothing like the "Wild West." Every man was there doing his duty splendidly, from the doughboy up to the general.

Looking back now, I can see Regimental Sergeant-Major Oscar S. Pritchard, from Miles city, standing up there exposed to the enemy shells and bullet-fire, giving the colonel's orders and encouraging the men in every way. I can see Sergeant-Major A. J. Kelly, Sergeant Lester W. Brienhard and Sergeant Milton Bradford, the personnel force, all from Los Angeles, taking turns to go to the front lines to get their reports from the companies in lines, and occasionally taking a wounded man back with them, exposing themselves to a danger that it was not necessary for them to take.

Be proud of your sons, brothers, husbands and sweethearts, who were in the 91st Division. They proved themselves true Americans. Nothing should be too good for them when they get back. Nothing, absolutely nothing! They gave up everything, separated themselves from you, whom they loved so much. They left their beloved country to go 10,000 miles away, to a strange land; and "green" as they were, as none of them had heard before the weird whistling of a shell, they fought like veterans and gave their all for you
WE SHOULD PROVE OUR GRATITUDE.

Mothers, fathers, sister, wives and sweethearts—be proud of your dear ones that you so much love and who gave their lives up for Old Glory and you. They died like true Americans, facing the wild beast without fear. They are heroes. I saw them falling, and their last word to anybody who tried to help them was: "Go after them boys; don't mind me, I'll be all right," although knowing they were dying.

The ground of the Argonne forest and mountains is soaked with their blood and now it is your turn. What are you going to do for those that are coming back to you?

[Helena Independent April 6, 1919, p. 17]

PRIVATE CARAS' STORY.

To our way of thinking one of the best stories of the great war is being told in the letters which Private Sam Caras of Helena of the 91st "Wild Cat" [sic] division, has been writing to his brother here and which are appearing in the Sunday Independent.

There is little of technical military description in the letters of Caras—he tells in simple, straight-forward language what he saw during the fighting and it carries the punch.

Private Caras was born in Greece and before he became an American citizen he had served as a fighter in two wars in the old country. He had seen a lot of fighting and a lot of hardships, but he is free to admit that the sights he has seen on the battlefields of the world war, surpass anything he witnessed during Greece's fights in the Balkan campaigns of 1912 and 1913.

The power of description which this naturalized American possesses, especially as he is using English which he had to learn after he left the old country, is amazing. And his letters breathe the spirit of a freeman, one who is devoted to his adopted country. He was born under autocracy yet no stronger advocate of democracy may be imagined than he.

Private Caras has a sense of humor which lightens much of the gruesome details of the fighting. At the close of a tremendous battle during which he witnessed sights which turned him sick, he tells how he lay down in the mud of a shell hole which shrapnel burst overhead. He says:

"We lay there and for the first time that day I found that I was hungry—too much excitement had been going through the day to think of anything to eat. I opened up my pack and took out a can of 'willie' (by the way, if any of you folks mention 'canned willie' to me when I get back, you had better be prepared to meet your Maker) and some hard

tack. We used to have some in the store for sale, but you had better get rid of it before I get there. I hate the sight of it,. I ate some of it but gave most of it away as some of the boys liked it better than I did.”