

A Hospital Under Shellfire

Excerpt from Chapter 4 of *The Aviator*. June 7th, 1915. Jim has just picked up wounded soldiers from the front lines and delivered them to a forward hospital in Pont-à-Mousson France. He wrote to his French girlfriend, Marcelle Guerin, to describe what happened.

“I had a man in my car just now that had come within the zone of effect of an asphyxiating, or however you spell it, shell. [The Germans began using gas warfare in April 1915.] He suffered in his breathing and at this moment one of the doctors came up to ask me where he could get ahold of Salisbury. [Head of the ambulance team] The doctor had just sat down next to me when we heard the tearing roar of a great shell overhead. It hit a house a hundred yards from us with a deafening explosion. We bent down to avoid the *éclats*. [shell splinters] I asked the doctor what message I could carry to Salisbury. Instead of replying he got up and said ‘Come in with me.’ We entered the long corridor. A few seconds afterwards, not more than three I estimate, I saw a small group of *brancardiers* [stretcher bearers] in the next entrance to the corridor from us, crouch swiftly down. They had heard the whistle. Immediately the air became crushing. I was bent over. There was an overpowering detonation and it became dark. Glass, wood and plaster pelted and fell on me. I remember wondering what was coming down next and then I heard terrible shrieks above the din of falling debris. I tried to look down the corridor through the dense smoke and saw a man waving his arms and yelling crazily totter towards me. He grabbed my shoulder and moaned. You have heard a child cry after some shock. It was like that but this was a man and it made it seem worse. The clouds of smoke and dust cleared and twenty yards from me I saw one of the *brancardiers* on the floor. A stream of red blood was feeling its way through the coating of dust on the floor. An *éclat* had passed thru his chest. He had been killed instantly. Others were wounded. I went out and saw the great hole where the *marmite* [shell] had struck twenty five yards from where I was standing . . . If it had been ten feet nearer it would have hit the corridor wall and bagged the whole bunch of us. I heard another coming and fell flat on my face . . . The men began hurrying towards the cave. [basement] . . . First I went back to get this letter that I had placed on a chair in the corridor when I entered and found it all covered with glass and

stones and plaster. I've cleaned it up as well as I can. The rough edges come from cramming it in my pocket. I'm sorry. Shells began coming at regular intervals. When it was time to go back to the *caserine* [ambulance center] I waited until a shell went off and then made a dash for it. Got to the main street and was tangled up in broken telephone lines. I got them off and hit it up across the town square. Two of our fellows who were looking out from a sandbag shelter there said I just got away in time to miss two shells. . . . There were a great many killed and several wounded. 60 casualties in all."

"We evacuated all the hospitals in Pont-à-Mousson last night and it was eleven before we finished . . . we could see part of the town burning from the bombardment and shrapnel bursting overhead to keep people from putting it out . . . I'm going up to a front line first aid post in an hour for an attack is in progress, and the wounded will be coming in from the trenches then. Shells are singing overhead and explosions are shaking my room but that doesn't bother us for it's only our artillery shooting and the Germans shooting back at the batteries. It's a fearful din tho."

A few days later Jim wrote to Paul Rockwell and said all the hospitals in Pont-à-Mousson had been closed because of the bombardments. They now had to evacuate wounded from the front lines to Dieulouard, about five miles farther. The extra distance was a problem at night because they had to creep along a road that was jammed with caissons and supply trains and they couldn't use lights. He described the shell that nearly killed him in the hospital and said that near miss was what caused the French to abandon the largest hospital in Pont-à-Mousson. The explosion was caused by a 210 mm [8-1/4"] shell which landed in the courtyard just short of the wall Jim was standing behind, "otherwise I wouldn't be here." His description of the blast was similar to what he wrote Marcelle, describing the concussion wave that caused him to double over as "suddenly the air turned into a crushing solid that took my breath away." He also said that the man who grabbed him, screaming like a child, hadn't been hit by anything. "It was the unnerving effect those big shells have."