

Jim Loses his Temper

Excerpt from Chapter 4 of *The Aviator*. A major battle is underway. Jim and his fellow ambulance drivers have been working nonstop evacuating wounded soldiers, as well as civilians wounded in the bombardments of towns near the battle. It was not unusual for Jim to work 36 hours straight while a battle was underway. This excerpt begins on July 8th, 1915.

The fighting went on for several days. The soldiers were tired. The ambulance drivers were tired. The doctors, nurses, and stretcher bearers at the forward hospitals were tired. Jim came back from night duty at the first aid post to find a letter from Marcelle waiting for him. He wrote back before sleeping, and the strain of the nonstop work showed. He described returning from a run to a hospital, trying to fall asleep on a stretcher, and hearing the phone ring as another call came in:

“*‘Monsieur Américain, un blessé urgent à C___’* You get up and go out to the car and whirr up a long hill to a place in the woods. The poor, hard worked men at the *poste de secours* [first aid post] are waiting. In the light of the illuminating rockets you see a much bandaged figure on a stretcher and between the reports of artillery you get instructions to go carefully but swiftly. That’s hard, that two kilometers down into the town and you figure on every little bump or hole. Sometimes there’s a new shell hole and you hit it. The poor fellow shrieks and you would give anything to have avoided the bump. We get so that we know the easiest way to take all the turns and what sides of the road are smoothest, but every second is a strain as we nurse the car down to the forward hospital where the man will be operated on and evacuated the next morning. The cobblestone streets are the hardest proposition and then comes the hospital. You stop and go to the back of the car. The wounded man is groaning softly. You hurry into the hospital to wake up the attendant. *‘Un couché gravement blessé.’* [A seriously injured stretcher case.] The man slowly gets up mumbling about the toughness of the war and slowly ambles back into the building. Minutes pass. You go out to the car and try and explain the delay to the wounded man. One *brancardier* [stretcher bearer] comes

out. When will the other come, you wonder. He's careless about that and wants to know if there are many more wounded. Finally you lose all patience. I know I do and think of the other *brancardier* still sleeping. Finally he comes out. The man is taken into the operating room and examined in a superficial way. They wake up a surgeon. He takes his time and after a short look turns away saying it's no use trying to operate and goes back to bed. The man is carried to a side of the room and the *brancardiers* go out. Oh, that hurts so after you have tried so hard to get the poor fellow down as easily as possible and hoped you could save his life. To have that indifference shown is very aggravating. You go up again after using up all your matches trying to pick out a *brancard* [stretcher] that isn't too bloody or broken and find a load waiting. Three *couches* [stretcher cases] and two *assis*. [sitting wounded] Down the hill you go again and then there's the same fight to wake up the hospital. (I am taking parts from last night's work for it's fresh in my memory and typical of other nights.) I took the two *assis* in with me while I went to rout out the *brancardiers*. In the corner of the room the poor fellow I had brought before was making hideous noises. He seemed pitiful dying there all alone, and when I lit a match the two *assis* looked at him in a shocked sort of way. I went out to my *couches*. There was a long delay getting the men out. One was a trepan case [skull wound] and I said I'd take him down eight kilometers where a young doctor in a second evacuation hospital would take care of him all right. 'Oh, we do all that here' said a *brancardier* and disappeared with the jolting stretcher. They didn't return for a long time. The remaining man and I passed the time cussing the gang out. 'Here we go and get all shot to pieces and then they treat us like *cochon*.' [pigs] he said. When the *brancardiers* came out he handed them a bit of his mind. 'Remember you're not the only one,' they said, and that got me furious. 'You g--- - d---- bunch of *embusqués*. [Literally "ambushers," often used in WW1 to mean slackers.] You sit around here all day and raise h---- when a wounded man is the cause of some work, just as if you blamed him for it. I hope to heavens you all get sent up and get a taste of it yourself.' I said all that in English, but from the tone and the word *embusqués* they got my meaning perfectly and for the rest of the night things went better."

Jim wrote to Paul Rockwell the same day, saying he hadn't slept for a couple of days and would be on call again that night. Calls came in throughout their Fourth of July celebration, so drivers were coming and going throughout the festivities. "The wounds are frightful these days and a good many die before we get them to the surgeons. The only consolation lies in the fact that the Boches are getting it just as badly. The damn swine are using gas and as an extra barbarism they throw petrol jets [flame throwers] on the choking soldiers."