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World War I

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When the Shells Stop Falling

For a soldier fighting in the Great War, November 11, 1918 should have been a day of jubilation. After years of brutal slaughter, deplorable conditions, and extreme mental and physical stress, the War was over. People should have gone crazy. Somewhat surprisingly, firsthand accounts of Armistice Day show that this is not the case. Far from the jubilation and excitement one would expect, one account, diary of Carroll Crosby, merely mentions the day in passing. At first, Crosby's blasé attitude is puzzling, and readers today cannot help but wonder why he seems to care so little about the end of the War. However, his attitude makes a bit more sense when one compares Crosby's story to the larger body of World War I literature. Carroll Crosby's diary tells the story of a man who has a fairly standard experience with the war; after enthusiastically entering the war and dealing with death, malnutrition, and sickness, disillusionment sets in. Far from feeling triumph and joy at the end of the War, Crosby and many other soldiers are left feeling empty, lonely, forever scarred by their experiences.

A bit of background on Carroll Crosby is necessary to get a more complete picture of this man, this diary, and his attitude toward the War. Carroll Crosby was born in 1896. Before enlisting in the War, he lived in Osterville, Massachusetts, a tiny town on Cape Cod that lies approximately 70 miles southeast of Boston. (United States of America, *Sixteenth Census*). He seems to have received this diary as a gift from Alta, probably his older sister. Her name appears

on the inside cover with the message, “A Very Merry Xmas.” Apparently, this diary was a Christmas gift.

On the facing page, Crosby wrote “101st U.S. Engineers American Expeditionary Division 26.” This group of men, commonly termed the 26th “Yankee” Division was comprised of men from all the New England states, and included some groups that had existed since the American Revolution. Additionally, the Yankee Division was one of the first to reach Europe after the United States declared war in 1917 (“History”). So, even though the United States did not enter the war until 1917, twenty-two year old Crosby was one of the first troops to land in France. Like many of the young men in Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*, Crosby apparently hopped at the chance to serve his country. Though Crosby does not begin writing until January of 1918, and it is therefore difficult to know exactly when he arrived in France, both historical reports written about the 26th Division and Crosby’s personal diary assure readers that he saw quite a bit of action while he was overseas.

It would be easy to explain Crosby’s attitude on November 11 if he had not experienced any hardships during the War. But he most definitely did. July 1918, in particular, was a rough month for Carroll Crosby and his fellow soldiers. To begin, the weather was miserable. In a rather dejected entry from July 14, Crosby writes, “Rainy. Our tent leaks like a sieve... Out again at 9:P.M. Raining like the devil.” He also writes about the food he ate each day, which, very often, was not much. A combination of these factors led to Crosby falling ill. All throughout July, Crosby complains of not feeling well, and by July 24, he writes, “4:30 a.m. Every body up. I am to see the doctor so don’t go out. Coughed all night, didn’t sleep a wink. 9: am, saw the

doctor & he gave me some pills etc. I know what it is alright. Bronchittis.”¹ The very next day, Carroll Crosby was shipped off to a hospital, where he stayed for the remainder of the war.

Prior to falling ill, Crosby dealt with far more than unpleasant conditions and an empty stomach. He witnessed the horrors of trench warfare, gas attacks, and the many other infamous aspects of World War I. Crosby first saw major bloodshed starting in July 1918. On July 12, he writes, “Out to work at 9 P.M. Got as far as the ravine & they started shelling us. One shell hit in the ravine & Fr. Co. got her first casualties (Killed Cork, St. Lawrence, Private Shaw, Private Shirley).” Worth notice is the fact that Crosby exhibits no emotion in his diary. Though he never makes mention of these men as close friends, one would think that he would show some sorrow at their deaths. Instead, he just gives the straight facts. One can infer that the next day, July 13, was also rough. The only writing in that space is the time “12:30 a.m.,” making it the sole empty day in nearly a year of meticulous recordings. Perhaps this blank entry makes up for the lack of emotion in his July 12 entry. This anomalous empty page could be an example of shock. On the other hand, maybe he was simply too busy to write.

Crosby’s experience in the trenches continued to worsen throughout the weeks leading up to him falling ill. On July 16, he writes, “Went down to 3rd line and started digging with our bayonets and mess covers... 3 got down about a foot and Fritz² got a line on us. Some of us got out & some of them stayed. Any way we got 21 casualties... Everybody had to leave their packs and there was mustard gas. Got home about 4 a.m. Slept till 12 p.m. Feel rotten.” Here, Crosby further reveals his experience with death in the trenches. However, even after this intense occurrence, he exhibits very little emotion. He shows neither sorrow for his dead comrades, nor

¹ Due to the large number of grammatical and spelling mistakes present in the original diary, I have omitted inline indications to avoid unnecessary clutter.

² A slang term for the German forces.

any fear of being the next casualty. In fact, his only internal insight is “Feel rotten,” a statement which seems to refer more to physical exhaustion than emotional turmoil.

Finally, on July 22, Crosby exhibits a bit more emotion. He writes that “we were supposed to go over the top, but we didn’t go over,” and that he “expect[s] to try and take town near her some time this aftern.” The final, most telling phase of this entry is “God be with us.” Nowhere else has Crosby prayed in his diary, a fact that makes this entry significant. On the day when he learns that he was spared from going over the top but might still be in enormous danger, he lets his guard down a tiny bit and admits some fear. However, after this entry, he returns to his stoic writing style.

After this July 22 entry, the only major emotions Crosby conveys are boredom and loneliness. He spends months in various hospitals and recovery barracks, often without much company. He falls into a bleak routine of waking up, occasionally making it down to breakfast, possibly going on a walk or to a movie in the afternoon, and reading in the evenings. Sometimes he will meet up with some friends or talk with other demobilized soldiers. However, one particularly dreary day, Crosby spends the majority of his waking hours alone in his room playing solitaire. Crosby’s bored, lonely routines have similarities with those of the characters in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. Jake, Brett, and the gang follow a cycle of partying all night, getting drunk, possibly getting a little sleep, and repeating the next day. Though Crosby’s daily routine does not have the same self-destructive qualities as those of Hemingway’s characters, he, too, falls victim to the War’s tendency to suck meaning out of life.

The loneliness that Crosby experiences in the hospital does not end after his recovery, or even at the end of the war. Much like Jake Barnes, Crosby has lasting experiences of disillusionment and estrangement from the world. His final diary entry, written on December 27,

depicts this perfectly. At this point, he is in the process of returning to the United States, but does not know for sure exactly where or when the military will send him. In an attitude shared by many World War I veterans, Crosby writes, "Gee! But it sure is lonesome here. Am getting sick of it." Out of all the violent, stressful, crazy experiences, Crosby is left with a feeling of abject solitude.

Crosby's feelings and experiences really do not diverge that much from other figures in World War I literature. However, one of the most striking comparisons is with Vera Brittain's account of the end of the War. In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain speaks about November 11, 1918 in this manner: "The men and women... did not cry jubilantly, 'We've won the War!' They only said: 'The War is over.'" (460). Just as Crosby only mentions Armistice in passing, Brittain makes it clear that the War's end does not hold much significance. Neither speaks of joyful celebration, because both writers understand that Armistice does not signify an end to their experiences. For these writers, the War will live on, long after the troops go home.

Though Crosby's diary can be vague and sometimes illegible, it tells an important story that gives individuality to the overall World War I narrative. In diaries and other personal accounts, today's readers can see past the mechanized weaponry and casualty statistics, and into World War I as a personal event that profoundly affected the lives of countless individuals. These narratives tell similar stories of bloodshed, depression, and disillusionment, but they each tell the story uniquely. Ultimately though, they do reach a similar conclusion. Though the War has ended, the trauma that resulted from it lives on in the human psyche for future generations.

Works Cited

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