

THE DIARIES



AUG – SEP 1914

GERMAN BATTLE STRATEGY CHECKED

As the first month of the war drew to a close, it became apparent to the world that the stupendous and complete mobilisation of the German army, and its concentration at every necessary point were feats beyond the range of conjecture. Three weeks of this war saw Belgium overwhelmed, and the German army, replete in detail from the siege trains down to liquorice to prevent patrols from coughing, with every preliminary finished, taking a vigorous offensive entirely on alien soil. Were it not for the help of the Belgians and British, the first German plan could not have failed. Von Kluck had four active and one reserve corps and special divisions of cavalry; von Buelow, the Guard Corps and two active and two reserve corps and siege trains; von Hausen, three corps, a total of 600,000 men and 2,000 guns. In the centre two armies with eight corps were closing in on open France east of Givet, and eight corps and special artillery were also over the Franco-German frontier. Three more weeks, however, and the Allies were striking back and, with simple strategy, beginning to unravel the German blueprint.



18th Aug 1914: Arrived in New York today from France. Mary is at our cabin so I have arranged a meeting with Roosevelt and his team for tomorrow

19th Aug 1914: Although I had worked with Teddy since our return from Cuba, I had not seen him for 3 years - his condition disturbed me. His spirit was as vital as ever, but he was weak and broken from his Amazon trip and I feared that his light was fading

20th Aug 1914: With Roosevelt at a meeting with President Wilson - Teddy denounced foreign policy as a failure regarding atrocities in Belgium, claimed strong national support for the Allies and demanded a harsher policy against Germany. Wilson remained unmoved

21st Aug 1914: Again, Teddy says that he wants me as part of his team in Europe. I tell him that I have decided that I will go back, but first I will spend time with Mary at Sunnapee. I leave New York for the trip to the mountains

24th Aug 1914: A message from Beveridge informing me of a signal from Europe stating that, after a heavy defeat at Mons, the British are retreating before the German onslaught but President Wilson still argues for neutrality, and also asking when I will be going back to Europe because Roosevelt wants to brief me in New York before I leave

25th Aug 1914: Heroes are dying and history is being made in Europe, while I am with Mary and Edwin in our cabin on Lake Sunnapee - frustrated. She is unhappy but understands and agrees that I should go

26th Aug 1914: I reply to Beveridge telling him that I am taking a few precious days with my family and will be back in New York within a week

29th Aug 1914: Mary will stay at our cabin and I have arranged for her cousin, Edwin LeButt, who lives less than eighty miles from Sunnapee, to visit her as much as he able while I am back in New York for briefing and updates for my trip back to Europe.

3rd Sep 1914: Back in New York but disappointed that Roosevelt can not see me - his doctor has confined him to bed-rest and ordered him to refrain from any form of work. I can do nothing but book my berth for the trip to England and on to France.

4th Sep 1914: Although I have not had any contact for some years - and have turned down a considerable number of commissions, I decide to visit the New York Times offices to see whether I can re-establish contact and generate an information source. To my surprise, I was warmly welcomed by the owner and editor, Albert Ochs, and spent a pleasant and highly informative afternoon.

6th Sep 1914: Meeting with Roosevelt - ever the far-sighted statesman, he urgently wants me in Europe and to report back to Beveridge all aspects of Germany's progress. He also tells me of his plans to raise four volunteer forces for Europe, each to repeat the outstanding success of his "Rough Riders" in Cuba

7th Sep 1914: Leaving from Hoboken for Tilbury, I read that the battle of Tannenberg has ended in total defeat for the Russians with over 250,000 casualties and that, seeking to match their victory on the Russian front, the Germans on the Western front are advancing and pushing the retreating Allies towards Paris

8th Sep 1914: I hear that Marshall Joffre has halted the French and British withdrawal at the Marne to attack the Germans all along the front and reports indicate that the French are holding back the German advance at Marne with an allied victory expected within days

9th Sep 1914: The realities of war: press report that Joffre has been reinforced by 10000 infantry reserves ferried from Paris yesterday in a fleet of taxicabs requisitioned by Gen Gallieni

10th Sep 1914: Landing soon and when on the ground in France I will no longer have to write my reports from rumour - Roosevelt's eyes will soon be seeing the reality

11th Sep 1914: Reports indicate that the German armies are retreating on the East and West fronts at Marne, with the French in pursuit. I read that after defeat at Marne, Chief of Staff Moltke has suffered a breakdown and told Kaiser Wilhelm that the war is lost

12th Sep 1914: With just a few hours steaming left before we reach Tilbury, there is great excitement aboard over the Allied victory at Marne. We docked at 7 am and I am now leaving for Folkestone to see my family for the first time in five years, then on to Calais for Paris

13th Sep 1914: Winston Churchill, my friend from the Boer War, said yesterday that the British Army will exceed in merit any army in the world

14th Sep 1914: Unconfirmed reports that the British Expeditionary Force have suffered dreadful casualties trying to cross the Aisne – and that the German retreat from Marne has halted and they have turned to face the Allies on the banks and cliffs along the River Aisne.

15th Sep 1914: Familiar face in the crowd at Charing Cross - John Atkin Black who I last spoke to on Spion Kop is now Assistant Editor at the Spectator. He believes that pursuit and defeat of the Germans after their retreat from Marne is an opportunity for victory within weeks and his enthusiasm encourages me to forego Folkestone and instead take the next train for Dover. At 9.20pm I will be in Calais

16th Sep 1914: All transport from Calais to Paris is commandeered so I join a convoy of BEF reserves going directly to the front at Aisne. We are

stopped ten miles from Calais and diverted to Boulogne. Nobody knows why but it seems that the chaos of war is a constant

17th Sep 1914: Clarity from confusion - our diversion to Boulogne now makes sense because Churchill is visiting troops in all the French ports. I have no press commission to be here, so I will try to meet him and use our friendship to get some form of authorisation

18th Sep 1914: I did not manage to meet Churchill but, still without authorisation, I have now reached the Coucy-Noyon road, held by the French

19th Sep 1914: After three weeks of stalemate and slaughter, French persuades Joffre to allow the BEF to lead the allies to the channel ports

20th Sep 1914: The German front is now solid and the battle of the Aisne has degenerated into a dead-locked front of definite siege warfare

21st Sep 1914: The Germans are equipped for entrenchment, we are not. This advantage will allow von Kluck to reinforce and strengthen his lines

22nd Sep 1914: We are told to dig head-deep, protective trenches, but we lie like frightened rabbits in scrapings in the obstinate earth. While we are trapped, the Germans consolidate by moving west from Verdun to Rheims and cutting the Verdun to Paris railway

23rd Sep 1914: For three days, I have been with British troops desperately begging, borrowing (and stealing) tools for digging trenches. We are cruelly exposed and diabolical wounds from shell fire, indescribably terrible in effect, are becoming commonplace. A shell explodes in a trench just yards away from ours. Seven are killed and the one survivor sits cradling his blown-off leg.

24th Sep 1914: The front is moving north-west as the Germans and the Allies seek to outflank each other. I have to leave to follow the action

25th Sep 1914: The Germans have shelled Rheims and destroyed the Cathedral with many dead including a group of nuns, nurses and wounded

26th Sep 1914: I join a rider heading through the fighting at Noyon with despatches for Marshall Joffre who has reached the town of Albert

27th Sep 1914: Roosevelt is waiting for my reports but it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a location from where contact can be made

28th Sep 1914: From Albert, I am able to send a telegram with news to Beveridge but his reply concerns me - Roosevelt is once again bedridden. He also tells me that Roosevelt's daughter Edith (who calls me Uncle George) and her husband Dr. Richard Derby are to nurse the wounded in Paris hospital

29th Sep 1914: After a failed attack by Belgian troops from Antwerp, the Germans are now attempting to destroy the city with heavy artillery

