

The Great Loss of the Great War

Johnnie, get your gun, get your gun, get your gun. Take it on the run, on the run, on the run. Hear them calling, you and me, every son of liberty. Hurry right away, no delay, go today. Make your daddy glad to have had such a lad. Tell your sweetheart not to pine, to be proud her boy's in line.

Some may believe that standing, hand over heart, for "The Star-Spangled Banner" is a profoundly patriotic gesture, but as a measure of homage to homeland it out-and-out pales in comparison to the giddy excesses America--and the world--took when going off to war a hundred years ago.

A well-weathered American diplomat named Hugh Gibson, posted to Belgium in 1914, took note of the frenzy all around him, even though the early rumblings of a real world war were still an ocean and more away from the U.S. of A. Just ten days after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, he wrote in his journal: "Well, the roof has fallen in. War was declared this afternoon in Austria." And then this: "The town is seething with excitement."

It's almost unimaginable today, an entire nation salivating over the glorious possibilities of warfare. "Everybody seems to realize how near they are to the big stage," Gibson writes.

The horrors of trench warfare didn't appear in anyone's crystal ball. No one prophesied that "the big stage" would be bloodied into a killing field.

Just a few days later, Gibson documents the patriotic uproar unfurling all around him:

This afternoon I went around to the Rue Ducale to take a look at the French Legation. The tricolor was flying in the fresh breeze, and there was a big crowd outside cheering itself hoarse. It was made up of men who were called to the colors and were waiting to enroll themselves and get instructions as to where they should report for duty. The air was electric, and every now and then the military band struck up the Marseillaise and the crowd instantly became happily delirious. Some of them had been standing in the sun for hours waiting to get in and get their orders, but they were just as keenly responsive to the music and the mood of the crowd as anybody.

All that hoopla would eventually die a foul and muddied death, Belgium a battlefield, France an unimaginable nether world. More than a million Brits would die, a million and a half French; two and one-half million Germans. This country didn't get in until 1917, a century ago; but 117 thousand Doughboys would never return. Many of those who did were scarred.

The world was a wholly different place back then as the men and women looked toward war; we were a different people. *Downton Abbey* wouldn't be a television series without World War I, many of its crucial conflicts created in the wake of a war that didn't end all wars, and barely stumbled to its own.

A century later it's impossible to imagine the level of blind patriotism Gibson records in his journal: "The air was electric, and every now and then the military band struck up the Marseillaise and the crowd instantly became happily delirious." Could that happen anymore, anywhere in Siouland? anywhere in America? Would anyone sing the first verse of "Over There"?

Somewhere in France there's a cross in a cemetery bearing the name of my own great uncle, a young enlistee named Edgar Hartman. Was that war worth his life?

It's difficult for any of us to answer that question in a fashion that's "happily delirious."

Something in all of us died a century ago in that Great War.