

# As Armistice Approached, War's Engine Roared

Robert J. Casey: from *The Cannoneers Have Hairy Ears*

In cities and towns around the nation, Armistice Day was a joy. In France, the engine of war was difficult to slow or stop. Robert J. Casey remembered exactly—almost to the minute—how the armistice went on the battlefield.

And this is the end of it. In three hours the war will be over. It seems incredible even as I write it. I suppose I ought to be thrilled and cheering. I am merely apathetic and incredulous.

We got the word about 5:30 this morning amid a scene of great anticlimax.

The little wooden shack [where we took shelter] was silent—or at least as silent as it could be with shells, friendly and hostile, just clearing the roof. The hillside along the east wall cut off most of the light of dawn and the tenants, undisturbed by daylight, were sleeping like dead men.

A telephone switchboard had been installed at one end of the old brick stove. Before it an operator was fighting to stay awake. Near by, the adjutant lay in a chicken wire cot. Beyond the board partition four lieutenants of the regimental staff lay draped on tables that had once been part of the [German] officers' mess.

The officers did not stir in their sleep as the 77s cracked down on the road, or even when the shells of the 11th, the F. A.'s 155s started over toward the roads behind. . .with detonations that jarred choking dust from the rafters. . .

Then the big scene:

The telephone clicks.

The adjutant snores.

The operator hesitates.

A second click.

The operator plugs in:

“Hello, Yes, hello, radio!”

I sat up. . .

“He’s asleep. I’ll take the message. . . .”

Delay. . . Rustling of paper.

“An armistice has been signed and becomes effective on the eleventh of November at 11 o’clock.”

I rolled out of my blankets.

“At that hour hostilities and advances are to cease. Hold the line attained and give exact information as to the line attained at that hour. No communication nor fraternizing will take place with the enemy. . . Signed. . . Pershing”

“That all? . . Sure, of course, it’s enough. . .

I jumped over and grabbed the message.

The adjutant sat up in his cot.

“What’s that?”

“Armistice signed,” I reported. “Cease firing at 11:00. . . Radio from Eiffel.”

The adjutant: “Good! Now all we have to do is stay alive until eleven. I know where there’s a culvert half a kilo down the road. You’ll find me under it if I’m wanted.” Rolls up his blankets. “Wish they could have decided this thing before we had to dope out that barrage.” He goes out in a hurry.

The medical officer [says] “Quit the noise and let a fellow sleep.”

The medical officer seemed to have the right idea. We all crawled back into our blankets again and stayed there until the smell of frying bacon awakened us.

Nine a.m.—The German's have some ammunition to dispose of. He’s dropping 150s on the road, not hitting anything so far.

Nine-fifteen: Order from General Hall to lessen rate of fire and cease firing in thirty minutes. Runners sent out to spread the glad tidings.

Nine forty-five: Sporadic shots. Distant shelling and machine gun chatter.

Ambulances still going forward. Nobody on the road who doesn’t have to be there.

Ten: Whiz-bang just burst at the bridge over the creek. From the doorway. . .one can count seven bodies in a stack at the side of the road.

Ten thirty-seven: Heavies. . .are dumping everything they've got. G. I. cans are tearing up the road. The sector has become another [bombed out] Romagne. . .

A shell just lit the old sawmill. Men are . . .running madly about, [some] staggering out of the wreck and dropping. . . Ambulances have been stopped and litter bearers are on their way across the clearing.

There is a tinkling note, somehow familiar and yet like something out of a life we can barely remember: moisture is dropping from the eaves.

The pontoon engineers are swinging down the road to the crossing singing: "and we'll all go back 'cause it's over, over here." Maybe they're right.

There is some cheering across the river—occasional bursts of it as news is carried to the advanced lines. For the most part, though, we are in silence. The air is full of half-forgotten sounds: the rustling of dead leaves, the organ tone of wind in the tree tops, whispers through the underbrush, lazy echoes of voices in the road.

With all is a feeling that it can't be true. For months we have slept under the guns. For months, the smash of the 75, the boom of the 155. . .has been a part of our lives. We cannot comprehend stillness.

That's how Robert Casey remembered it.

That very day, in London, New York, and Paris, millions swarmed into the streets to celebrate. But at the fronts, 3000 men died as the War to End All Wars drew bloodily to a close.

One hundred years ago, the war, the Great War, was over.