

AN IMPROBABLE MACHINE-GUNNER

1. THE PAUSE, 1933 to 1937

1933: Two new leaders promise to remedy the great depression in their separate nations. In January, one is "appointed" as Chancellor of Germany. The other is inaugurated as President of the United States on March 4th, 1933. Each leader takes a different approach to the problem, and neither anticipates the coming conflict.

In Europe, the effects of the depression are multiplied by the crushing First World War reparations which siphon away Germany's capital, year after year, since 1919. Adolph Hitler leads The National Socialist party as it centralizes power, eliminates the constraints of the Reichstag, arrests labor leaders, breaks the unions, and blames the Jews. Hitler starts a massive road construction program and prepares Germany for war.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ("FDR" in the news headlines) moves quickly to break the grip of the worst economic chaos that had ever savaged his country. At home in Baltimore, we know about the depression. Jobs and taxes dry up; salaries are cut; my \$15 and my parents' savings both vanish when the bank closes. Friends and relatives are out of work. We move from our own home to a rented house after the city cuts the firemen's pay.

Unable to find work, Uncle Walter lives with my Mother's parents. Six days a week, Grandfather drives a bread truck to the towns northwest of Baltimore, and sometimes brings us day old bread, sweet rolls, or a rare treat; cheese cake.

On Sunday, after driving a truck for six days, Grandfather packs us in his car and drives "out to the country," - to a dairy farm owned, "as a hobby," by a local brewery tycoon. We wonder if the farm was bought with a bootlegger's profits during the recent prohibition, but we gratefully buy 5 gallons of cheap fresh milk, poured into our own jugs from the big milk cans in the spring house.

President Roosevelt starts a series of new and controversial programs to end the depression, - or, at least, to remedy some of its most paralyzing effects. In spite of setbacks in the Supreme Court and strong political opposition, thousands of Americans are helped by a series of programs known by their acronyms, notably; Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Public Works Administration (PWA), National Recovery Act (NRA), and Works Projects Administration (WPA). FDR has no way to know that actions by Hitler and Tojo will soon lead to the end the depression in the United States.

2. A LEGACY OF HEROISM

In this same year of 1933, my eight-year old world is suddenly clearer through new glasses. Reading is easier and fun.

I wonder at the adventures of Kipling's "Soldiers Three;" And "Ghunga Din." The audacity of Sergeant York and Admiral Farragut. I envy their boldness. We visit Fort McHenry, Gettysburg and Antietam. The battlefields bring to life Henry's doubts and fears in "The Red Badge of Courage."

Glasses seem to limit the future while they help me to read about other folk's adventures. One needs good vision to join the Army or Navy. The Marines, of course, are out of the question. Their football team from Quantico beat the Baltimore Fire Department team, after we boys ran around a block and through an alley so that we could see Dad twice as he marched with the firemen in the pre-game parade.

Still, I cherish the memory of the Marine's precision parade into the stadium; the long column moving as one man, all those khaki-clad arms and red stripes on blue trousers, swinging in unison like the drive rods on the wheels of a really long steam locomotive.

Soldier, sailor, streetcar motorman, fireman and fireman-machinist; Dad spent most of his life in uniform. His infantry training was completed in time for Armistice Day. Later, in the Navy, he trained and served as a machinist.

The Great Depression sweeps around our little island thanks to Dad's steady job as a fireman. His Engine Company No. 13 is a busy station in an old tenement section of downtown Baltimore. For Dad, these are 13 years of danger, of routine 12 hour (or longer) days, broken by 24 hours-on-or-off duty when the 2 shifts rotate every 10 days. He says little about rescues from fire ravaged tenements, but there are times when he will not eat meat. He is injured when a fire hose kicks over his ladder and again when ammonia fumes seep into his gas mask. We regard him rightfully as a hero.

Dad's Navy machinist mate training qualifies him for a transfer to the Fire Department's Repair Shop in 1938. Now he works only 44 hours a week; a reprieve from the grueling 12 hour shifts at "13 Engine." We think he is safer, but Mom has second thoughts a few weeks later when an emery grinding wheel blows up and wounds him in the shoulder and groin.

Both Honorable Discharges hang in frames in the parental bedroom. According to Dad; "Every young man owes his country a couple of years of service; a payment for the rights that are guaranteed by our Constitution." We take this seriously, but I wonder where one can serve while wearing glasses.

The shadows of the first World War extend beyond the two discharges on the bedroom wall. We play Dad's records; "Over There," "Keep Your Head Down Fritzzy Boy," Sousa marches; ragtime and ballads. Mostly peppy stuff. My brothers and I play them over and over, on the family's hand cranked record player. We drag out Dad's uniforms from his old foot locker; his Army campaign hat is piped in infantry blue, his Navy shirts are bracketed with machinist mate's stripes.

More books bring heroic tales of places with strange names; "Under Topsails and Tents," "The Charge of the Light Brigade." We learn of bold adventures and death "overseas;" - the Crimea, Belleau Woods, the Marne, Ypres, Gallipoli, and Verdun. Heroics by Americans at Chateau Thierry, and the traditions of the "Ladies from Hell," the Black Watch. Tales of Sgt. York and Blackjack Pershing.

History courses change our play. Toy soldiers drive a flanking maneuver behind the Shenandoah-Mountain-couch to amaze the Yankee defenders at Manassas or Gettysburg, - by the dining room door. In the backyard we dig little trenches and duel with artillery simulated by Erector-set axles sprung from suction-dart guns. The little armies threaten Paris, raze small towns, invade the Christmas garden houses and stop the yellow-orange American Flyer passenger train. Small soldiers ride in the mail car.

We advance to the World War (there is still only one) and the scale of it dwarfs our toy soldiers and our backyard battlefield. As teens, we spend less time at home, and give up imitating such carnage. We are sure that the War to End All Wars is the ultimate horror, never to be repeated. But it is only a prelude.