

## Fourth of July in Paris 1917

**“The words came like an electric shock.”**

**- An American who was there.**

On the Fourth of July, 1917 all Paris was on tip-toe in the crowded streets, grouped at the windows, huddled together on balconies, and standing on house-tops to catch sight of the newly arrived American soldiers parading on their way to the tomb of Lafayette. They were cheered as “Sammies,” “Yankees,” or “Teddies.” That was a scene for every Parisian to gaze upon and long remember, for the vigorously marching Americans were the first of many thousands to follow, come to fight with the French, the British, and the Belgians against a common foe, the invading Prussian armies, even then but fifty miles away. These United States soldiers were the first ever to go out from their homeland to cross the Atlantic and take part in a European conflict. History was in the making.

To the French this novel scene meant in due time their weakening defense would be turned into a powerful offensive movement toward victory. The mere sight of these sturdy strangers from the new world in the west revived in them hope, faith, enthusiasm, and courage.

General Pershing perceived the significance and possible influence of our first appearance abroad in the World War, and he wanted it to have a favorable reception among the people of Paris. He believed it could and would go a long way toward lifting the flagging morale of the hard-pressed army in the trenches and of the anxious citizens on the home front of France.

For our part in the ceremonies, the General commanded Colonel W. H. Allaire to bring from the French west coast port, Saint Nazaire, where the American troops had debarked, a battalion of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry, equipped for parade. Although these troops were from a Regular regiment, about two-thirds of them were recent recruits. They were not sufficiently trained and

drilled to make much of an impression, from a military point of view by their appearance, but the mere fact of their presence was of inestimable value from the point of view of morale bolstering.

A purely military ceremony was held in the late forenoon in the Court of Honor at Les Invalides. A stand of our national colors was presented by the President of the Republic, M. Poincare, to the battalion and a pair of guidons to General Pershing. Marshall Joffre, other high government and military officers, and a group of French veterans of former wars were also in attendance.

There at the national shrine, sacred to the memory of the past glories of the French people, where the great Napoleon himself lies buried, the official welcome of France was formally extended, on our Independence Day, to the first contingent of United States troops.

Then as the hour of noon approached the unforgettable march across the city to the tomb of Lafayette began. As our soldiers almost forced their way through the densely crowded streets a French airplane flew overhead, acrobating and following the line of march for awhile, and disappeared in the distance. Hundreds of people left the sidewalks and rushed forward to shake the hands of the Americans, strangers but friends and brothers in arms. French soldiers on leave, still wearing trench uniforms stained and dingy with the grime of battle, joined the marching troops in each side in columns and continued for miles. Some of them wore bandages on their heads and others had their arms in slings, from recent wounds. Children ran forward throwing flowers in front of the marching men from over-seas. Flowers were tossed in from the sidewalks or came fluttering and floating down from balconies and windows. They were caught by the American soldiers, who stuck their gay colored petals in the steel gray muzzles of their rifles or tucked them in their belts. In the words of General Pershing: "The column looked like a moving

flower garden.” In concluding his detailed account of the scene in his two volumes of memoirs, he wrote:

“With only a semblance of military formation, the animated throng pushed its way through avenues of people to the martial strains of the French band and the still more thrilling music of cheering voices. By taking parallel streets, I was able to gain several successive vantage points from which to watch this unique procession pass. The humbler folk of Paris seemed to look upon these few hundred of our stalwart fighting men as their real deliverance. Many children dropped on their knees in reverence as the flag with the stars and stripes went by. These stirring scenes conveyed vividly the emotions of a people to whom the outcome of the war had seemed all but hopeless.”

The procession had left the Esplanade of the Invalides, crossed the Seine bridge that leads onto the Place de la Concorde, and marched on until it turned right into the Rue de Rivoli. This famous street they followed eastward until it merges into the Rue de St. Antoine. Passing by the site where once stood the hated prison, the Bastille, destroyed, at Lafayette’s orders, early in the Revolution, the soldiers swung along to the Place de la Nation. There the column left the boulevard and wound its way along the narrower Rue de Picpus to the little out-of-the way cemetery bearing the same name as the street.

At the entrance to the high-walled-in Picpus Cemetery where Lafayette is buried, the troops passed through the arched gateway of the old convent and rested in the garden. There was not room for them in the limited space of the cemetery. Within the walls of the adjoining burial area were gathered only three or four hundred persons, including prominent Americans and French citizens. For the speakers a small railed platform had been erected and hung with the red, white, and blue of the two republics. Lafayette, as an American general, had fought at Brandywine, Monmouth, and Yorktown under our stars and stripes. He himself had created the French tri-color in the early days of the French Revolution, by blending the red and blue of the standard of Paris with the traditional white of royal France upon which its golden lilies had been

displayed. This new flag he gave to his fellow countrymen with the prophecy that it would: “go round the world.”

The elevation provided by the stand was necessary, for the listening audience could not gather close around to the speaker. In front of Lafayette’s tomb there is only a small open space of a few yards in a corner of the grounds near one end wall. The people present had to stand in the narrow passageways that extend the length of the cemetery, crossed by a few other paths at intervals.

Grouped below the stand were the members of the official party. In it along with General Pershing and our Ambassador William G. Sharp stood the French Minister of War, Painleve, Marshall Joffre, Premier Alexandre Ribot, and other high French officials of the State and of the Army. In a group of officers of the United State Army Forces were: Major General James G. Harbord, Colonel B. H. Alvord, Colonel W. H. Allaire, Colonel Wilson Margette (an aide to General Pershing), Major Edwin F. Ely, Major Ora Beazley, Colonel Harry S. Wilkins, Colonel Frederick T. Hill, Major Gustav Porges, along with other officers of the American Expeditionary Force.

The opening addresses were by the French Prime Minister, M. Alexandre Ribot, Mr. Brand Whitlock, on behalf of the Sons of the American Revolution, and the French Minister of War, M. Painleve, who was followed by General Pershing’s representative, Colonel Charles E. Stanton, of the Quartermaster Corps.

Colonel Stanton’s speech, delivered from his original manuscript that had been read and approved by General Pershing several days in advance, was as follows:

“I regret I cannot speak to the good people of France in the beautiful language of their own fair country.

The fact cannot be forgotten that your nation was our friend when America was struggling for existence, when a handful of brave and patriotic people were determined to uphold the rights their Creator gave them – that France in the person of Lafayette came to our aid in words and deed. It would be ingratitude not to remember this, and America defaults no obligations.

Today is the anniversary of the birth of the American nation, of a people whose declaration of rights affirms that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ It is celebrated at home with joy and thanksgiving, with bonfire and illuminations, because we feel that since our advent into the galaxy of nations, we have been borne the part of good citizens, respecting the law and living in the fear of God.

We are a people slow to anger but unyielding in the maintenance of our rights and national honor.

The patience, the forbearance, the patriotism of President Wilson, who tried every honorable means to avoid this conflict cannot be too highly praised, for he realized the dread consequences of a declaration of war, and the misery it would inevitably invoke. The arrogant, tyrannous representative of a Prussianized autocracy, has violated every law of civilization. He regarded the solemn Geneva treaty, to which his country was a signatory power, as a scrap of paper, deliberately made his preparations while the world slept in fancied security, and then declared war upon the allied powers.

The United States protested from time to time against his arbitrary acts, receiving from him promise upon promise that he would observe the rules and regulations of war, but every promise was broken, every agreement violated. At last patience ceased to be a virtue and our long suffering President, realizing to the full the responsibility that was his, declared a state of war existed with the German government.

This declaration was in behalf of more than one hundred millions of free men and women.

At once a debate was had in Congress as to the best method of recruiting an army which would worthily maintain our national honor.

A census was taken of the men between 21 and 31 years of age who could be spared, leaving enough to till the soil, to keep our industries speeded up to full production, to maintain law and order and produce revenue as under normal conditions.

To the eternal credit of America’s youth, more than ten million voluntarily signed this roll of honor. Thus it is that a handful of us are with you today, who have come to blaze the trail for those to follow.

We have pledged to General Pershing, our distinguished Commander-in-Chief, loyalty and absolute obedience. Under his direction each man will perform his allotted tasks to the end

that, upon arrival, American troops, fully equipped, can take their place side by side of those gallant allies who have borne the burden through three deadening years.

History will record the brilliant achievement of the men of France, and a soil ensanguined by their blood shall be the home of a free people forever. Never can be forgotten the fidelity, the courage, the loyalty of the women of France, who bore her sons uncomplainingly and gave them up unflinchingly. Their presence here, in the somber garments that denote the loss of loved ones, should cause the pulse to quicken, the arm to grow stronger while declaring their sacrifices were not made in vain, and they shall not be called upon again to endure them.

At some future time another genius of your fair country will compose an anthem, which will unite the moving cadences of the Marseillaise and the quickening warmth of the Star Spangled Banner. This Hosannah will be sung in martial strain with glad acclaim by a liberty loving people, the melody rising to a diapason sinister to tyrants, but soothing as a mother's lullaby to a people who cherish honor for itself and their posterity.

America has joined forces with the allied powers, and what we have of blood and treasure are yours. Therefore, it is with loving pride that we drape the colors in tribute of respect to this citizen of your great Republic, and here and now, in the shadow of the illustrious dead, we pledge our heart and our honor in carrying this war to a successful issue.

La Fayette, we are here!"

As may be learned from the opening sentences of Colonel Stanton's speech, he did not try to speak in French, but confined himself to English. In some way, however, the meaning of the salutation in the last four words found an immediate response from the crowd. Of course all Americans present at once caught the fine feeling and the full import of the words as they fell from the lips of the soldiers drawn up to erect at salute before uttering them. French citizens who understood the English words immediately translated their meaning into their own language. It was almost as though a bomb had been hurled into the cemetery and had exploded.

Among the Americans who were at the cemetery was a New England woman, an artist from Boston, Miss Clara Greenleaf Perry. In relating her experience she said: "I was not far from Colonel Stanton as he spoke and when he said: 'Lafayette, we are here!' I was thrilled. The words came like an electric shock. I felt distinctly a quivering of my whole body as though it had been suddenly struck by some powerful force. It was just like a lightning stroke. Many

people turned and gazed in amazement at one another for a moment and then burst into applause. I went home and recorded my impressions in a diary kept by me. I am sure Colonel Stanton spoke the words entirely in English.”

A French writer, M. Gaston Rion, who heard the speech, was so impressed by it that before the year was out he had written a pamphlet and had it published by Libraire Hachette et Cie, under the title, “Lafayette, Nous Voila.” In it he quoted from Mr. Brand Whitlock’s speech and said of Colonel Stanton’s effort: “Then there burst forth an ovation formidable” (This French word is difficult to translate, but it implies something forceful, almost to the extent of terrifying by its suddenness and power.) “It was Colonel Stanton, speaking in the name of General Pershing and ten million American soldiers, who proclaimed with pride: ‘France came to our aid when America was fighting to assure our independence. We have not forgotten. ‘La Fayette, nous voila!’ One cannot express the emotion produced by this invocation pronounced in a tone of such virile energy.” That is how it seemed to a typical listener.

One American reporter on that day failed to pick the winner among the speakers. Charles H. Grasty, leading correspondent in France for “The New York Times,” cabled at once to his paper a complete account of the pilgrimage to Lafayette’s tomb. In it he said: “There was a tremendous press inside the cemetery. Many of the women were carrying babies, and the men, holding floral pieces above their heads. Brand Whitlock’s address was a classic, and his characterization of German Kultur as the ‘camouflage of civilization’ should live.”

About Pershing’s remark he commented: “General Pershing made his usual soldierly address.” The best Mr. Grasty could say of Stanton’s speech was: “Colonel Stanton gave us twenty minutes of old-fashioned Fourth of July eloquence.” He misjudged the address both in quantity and quality, for it was less than ten minutes long and becomes grandiloquent only in one

paragraph near the close, the one dealing with a new international hymn uniting the “Marseillaise” and the “Star Spangled Banner.” Mr. Grasty failed to mention the closing vital, enduring phrase, the one that has lived.

Mayor Puy Mouilhave concluded the ceremonies at the grave by reciting an original poem on General Lafayette. What a day of rejoicing and fraternizing! What a frenzied kindling of hopes!

In talking over the event a year later in 1918 with Mr. J. H. McGrath of “The San Francisco Examiner,” the Colonel narrated an interesting incident of the after-effects of his talk. “When the exercises were over,” he said, “and the crowd started to leave, the dignitaries on the platform went with the crowd. But I remained on the platform, thinking that I could get out from behind and avoid the crush. With me I had a box of smoking tobacco, one of two boxes that I had brought over, and which, I think, were the only two boxes of that brand in Paris. To me they were worth their weight in gold.

“As I took out my box of tobacco and began to roll a cigarette, I noticed that fully a hundred or more people did not go with the crowd, but remained standing in front of me. I did not immediately connect their waiting with myself. Among them I noticed Elinor Glyn, the authoress. Having finished rolling my cigarette, I descended from the platform. Immediately the crowd rushed me. I was so completely taken by surprise that I did not know what to do. I stood helpless receiving the embraces, until I saw an old fellow with a great shock of whiskers coming for me. The sight of those whiskers seemed to bring me to my senses. I threw off those who were clinging to me and fled.

“When I reached a place of safety and had recovered my breath and wits, I again reached for my box of tobacco to roll a cigarette which would soothe my nerves. The box was gone. I



had lost it in the mix-up. You cannot imagine what that loss meant to me. I was disconsolate for days.”

At the close of Stanton’s speech General Pershing was so moved by the wave of enthusiasm that he was persuaded to speak. What he said appears in the next chapter.

The well remembered phrase soon made its way throughout France. It crossed the trenches and “No Man’s Land” into French territory occupied by the Germans. A member of an American artillery section, Professor William N. Brigance, of the faculty of Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana, has told me how he found the words current among the subject French people freed by the Allied victory in 1918. In writing of the expression he said: “This short sentence became the password of ‘rapprochement’ between France and her new American ally. To the Americans at home it sounded like a soldier’s talk. To the French it touched off a Gallic imagination. To those on French soil overrun by Germany – and to whom it quickly filtered through the German lines – it brought a new hope and promise. Through the phrase the French learned that the Americans had arrived.”