

LETTERS FROM FRANCE—Judge Fead writes Interesting Account of Red Cross Work—
Other Letters

Nantes, Base Hospital 34, Dec. 8, 1918

My dear Bill,

Thanks very much for your fulsome compliment regarding my soldierly appearance in uniform. I do not feel very military and the officers and soldiers here show their opinion of my soldierly qualities by calling me Judge, and constantly reminding me that it is most unmilitary to walk along with my hands in my pockets. I am in constant fear of court martial or reprimand for failure to salute some officer of higher rank than my own. One of our Red Cross men did get a most artistic tongue lashing for failure to salute in Paris while I was there and I have been looking for the same thing to happen to me.

When I came across, I had visions of a rough life at the front, with mud and rain and snow and “cooties” and all the other unpleasant things which go to make existence hard. But it was my fortune to be sent to one of the best hospitals in France, in a large city, where things are as comfortable as they can be in country. Of course there is no such thing as comfort in France, as we understand the term. The habitual attitude of the French man these days is half bent over with his shoulders almost meeting, rubbing his hands together, trying to get a little circulation started. My room could, without exaggeration or change, have been used as a refrigerator during a recent cold snap and until I committed the folly, unheard of to a Frenchman, of installing a gas stove. It is about as big as a minute and you can almost feel some of the heat from it. You can have no idea of the penetrating nature of the cold here. It is constantly damp, the lack of heat in the homes makes it impossible to get thoroughly warm except at the Hospital, and the cold is actually bone and marrow penetrating. When I had had a little experience with the living conditions in this city where, as I say, they are as comfortable as anywhere in France, I began to appreciate the unspeakable misery our men endured at the front where they were subjected to that kind of cold for days at a stretch, exposed to continual mist and rain and without any opportunity to get dry or warm. Add to that the constant danger, the impossibility of getting warm foods for a considerable time, the necessity of going without any food for a day or even more sometimes, lack of shelter, dirt and grime, and cooties and a multitude of other hardships and it may well be said that our boys went through a literal hell to save humanity. And that they did save the day is freely admitted by the people of France who say that the American Marines saved Paris last spring and the American soldiers saved France from destruction. At the time of the celebration of the signing of the armistice with Germany, everywhere in Nantes, the French and American flags were displayed together, often intertwined and wherever Americans went they were greeted with demonstrations of approval and gratitude.

This Hospital is one of the best and most comfortable in France. We occupy the Grand Seminarie, a school for priests, a fine building changed to make it admirably adapted to hospital work. In addition, a number of Huts have been built to take care of contagious cases, personnel, work rooms ect. The Red Cross has a beautiful hut which we just opened a couple of weeks ago.

The Hospital nurses, corps, and staff are handpicked, organized in Philadelphia and are an especially high grade hospital corps. The corps men are many of them college students or graduates. The staff has many specialists of national reputation and the nurses cannot be beaten for looks or efficiency. I had some difficulty getting acquainted with the Commanding officer, who is a regular army man, but we have gotten together better in the past few weeks and he is a splendid soldier. His whole desire is to give care to his patients under his charge and, in this connection; he has been of great help to me. Whenever I have presented a proposition which struck him as being of benefit to the sick and wounded, I have had his active cooperation to an extent that many of the things would have been possible if he had not come to my assistance. I have been very much pleased to find that the officers, practically all of whom are physicians, take an actual personal interest in their patients. I thought that the fact they had so much work to do and that the patients passed through their hands rapidly would cause them to consider their work as a matter of routine and be half hearted in it. But I do not think any private patients back home ever got more whole hearted and intense interest and attention than the soldiers who have come under the charge of the doctors in this institution. I have seen several of them all broken up because of the death of patients whom no one could save.

Our Red Cross Activities cover everything which may be for the benefit of the patients, personnel, nurses and officers of the institution. When I was sent here I was given a fund of 5000 francs (later raised to 10,000) with instruction to do anything I found necessary or advisable to help those attached to the hospital. I found that a large majority of the patients did not have even toothbrushes or handkerchiefs. I thought that an American soldier was at least entitled to clean his teeth and blow his nose like a man and the first thing I did was to buy handkerchiefs and tooth brushes and supply all the patients with them. Since then, we have bought nearly every conceivable thing and that the folks back home may know what is done with their money, I might say that the Red Cross rule is that when a patient expresses a desire for something and the doctor says he can have it, we get it for him if it can be bought. A great many people think the Red Cross confines its activities to furnishing bandages, and knit goods. But as an illustration of what we have done here, and it is typical of Red Cross activities where such things can be purchased, we have bought and furnished roasted pigeons, shrimps, lobsters, fruit, cheese, Jelly, sausage, steaks, chops, cookies, pie, corn cob pipes, mouth organs, chocolate and other candy, tobacco, and a multitude of other things. Every day, we furnish several freezers of ice cream to those patients who need it. We have Searchers and Visitors, American girls who go through the wards to find out what patients need and get it for them. One of them told me one day that the doctors had asked for a bottle of beer for a patient and asked me what to do. We bought the beer and I understand it made a considerable fuss in Paris when my report went in. I got a searching letter of inquiry but when I replied that the doctor told me our beer had saved the life of the patient, Paris, in true Red Cross style, took its hands off and told me to buy all the beer in France if it would save an American soldier. I have not yet found that necessary.

We have just opened a Hut where the boys congregate every day in large numbers and where we furnish them entertainment and amusement. We also run a canteen where we sell

designated articles at the same price as we pay the army for them, the Red Cross standing the loss of breakage, ect. We sell tobacco and all these other articles cheaper than they can be bought at home, some of them for about half the price. We separate our gift department from our sales and frequently give things away when we have none for sale. Today, several men came in wanting to purchase pipes but we had none for sale. I had scouted around and gotten some down town and we gave them the pipes for nothing. We are allowed to buy our sales articles from the army only but may buy our gift articles anywhere. The result is that we can give away a great many articles we cannot sell and are doing so. I was afraid the canteen would be liable to interfere with our gift department but, instead of its doing, it has stimulated it and we are giving away more things now than we did before. Personally I have no use for the canteen as I think the Red Cross should be purely an institution for giving. But I find that the canteen meets a need for the boys who cannot get around town to buy what they want and who would have to pay large prices outside and, inasmuch as we lose money on it all the time, I am a little more reconciled to it. It is really a gift affair in that we sell at cost and stand all expense, breakage, and waste ourselves.

It would take too long to give you details of what we do here. We will leave that until I get home. But I want to tell you about a military funeral I saw, principally for the benefit of those who have lost men in France and who picture them as lying in some bleak and desolate place, put there unceremoniously. Our cemetery is situated in a quiet and peaceful field in a beautiful part of the city... Just outside the gate, there is an old French woman who raises flowers and puts all she raises upon the graves of American soldiers in gratitude for them for saving her La Belle France. Were it not for the natural desire of the parents, especially the mothers, to want to visit the graves of their loved ones, it would be most fitting to leave the bodies there, sleeping peacefully and safely in the land where they and their comrades died and which they saved, as another evidence of the strong bond of blood friendship between America and France.

Thanksgiving day we had a real time at 34, as we call our Hospital. The girls had the hut decorated with jack lanterns, pumpkins, and all the fixings which go to make it look like an American Thanksgiving day affair. In the morning we gave the patients a band concert. The army gave them all a regular old fashioned Thanksgiving dinner, so far as they could procure the materials here. The Red Cross distributed cigars and chocolate to everyone. It cost several hundred dollars but was worth several thousand. In the afternoon, there was a show at the hut and while it was going on I went down town and bought a lot of apples, at about ten cents apiece for all the bed patients who could not attend the show. And in the evening, there was a dance for the whole hospital, except the officers to which the Red Cross girls from all over the city came and a number of French girls of fine families. It was one of the finest dances it has ever been my privilege to attend. We had had a show during the same week and in order to properly round out things, on the Saturday after Thanksgiving we produced a fine show under actual fire at the front. We are now all working on Christmas, and have bought a big tree for the Hut and a tree for each ward, and are trying to beg, borrow, or steal enough stuff so that each soldiers will get sufficient

tobacco and candy and other things to make him glad he was at 34 in France rather than at home at Christmas day 1918.

I get the news regularly and have been much grieved by the epidemic of influenza which as struck the town but am glad to see, by your later editions, it has subsided. With best regards to all the folks of the town and county and hoping you will repeat your performance and send me some more interesting letters, I am,

Yours Sincerely,
L.H. Fead.

Transcribed from a ripped newspaper clipping in Box 1 of the L. H. Fead Collection in the Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, MI by Erin McGlashen. The letter was written to and published in The Newberry News in Newberry, Michigan. Exact publication date unknown.

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