

“In the end, [this book] beautifully illustrates that all of us are shaped by our families, our struggles, and our demons—just as Hemingway was.”

Andrew Theising, Author, Hemingway's Saint Louis

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

In Search of the Real
Ernest Hemingway

CURTIS L. DeBERG



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Chapter 1



2024

Chapter 1 - The Train Ride



[Note to readers: This chapter is a literary genre known as historical fiction; it is based on historical facts. All dialog between Ernest Hemingway and his commanding officer, Captain James Gamble, is a creation of the author. Chapter 1 is consistent with the most plausible story of Hemingway's wounding in World War I, as described in Chapter 13.]

It was the smell. Of all the things I remembered about that interminable, suffocating journey was the smell. The offensive odor wasn't so bad when we first started out on that slow hospital train from Mestre, early on the morning of July 12, 1918. By noon the stench got to me. I made my own contribution and puked into a bucket. ¹

Among the wounded lying on their cots was eighteen-year-old Ernest Hemingway. I sat on a wobbly, wooden chair next to Ernest. Flies were everywhere. I kept shooing them off his hands and feet. His right leg was bandaged from toes to thigh. Occasionally, when the train rounded a curve or slowed to let some sheep or cattle pass, the catheters came undone and half-filled bedpans sloshed over onto the floor. The Italian nurses tried their best to clean up the malodorous deposits. The smell and the flies didn't seem to bother Ernest, though. In spite of his injuries—mostly minor wounds to his right leg—he seemed happy. The morphine helped. For me, the alcohol I'd bought in Mestre took the edge off, but it didn't help dull the smell.

My name is Gamble—Captain James Gamble, Field Inspector of the American Red Cross's Rolling Canteen Service. I was Ernest's commanding officer when he was assigned to take over Canteen Number 14. I liked him at once, despite his swashbuckling manner. He called me Chief or Capitano. At thirty-six years old, I was double his age. We developed an unusually close relationship from the get-go, as if I were his big brother. We had much in common despite his lack of worldly experiences. Both of us loved the arts: for me it was painting; for him, literature. I liked to play polo; he enjoyed boxing. We talked often about the women we fancied and admired. We both enjoyed fine wine and cognac. When the war was over, we both wanted to explore the world. He wanted to take me fishing on the Fox River in the eastern part of Michigan's upper peninsula, and I wanted to show him Taormina, my favorite city in Sicily. He was adventurous, the kind of fellow who'd be fun to travel with.

My family was from Pennsylvania, and we were comfortably well off. Not like the Gambles of the soap manufacturing giant from Cincinnati, Procter and Gamble. No relation. But we had our own wealth. My mother's family came from timber industry money. My sister and I had an easy life. I graduated from Yale in 1904, and then went on to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts for a couple of years. Most Red Cross volunteers were Ivy Leaguers,

from families with more wealth and sophistication than the Hemingways. Though Ernest was loud and cocky, most of the ambulance drivers and canteen workers liked him. As for higher education, I remember him saying, “Who needs a college education when you can get first-hand experience as a journalist?”

Captain Robert W. Bates had overseen both the ambulance drivers and canteen workers, a big job. To take the load off, Major Lowell switched him over to the ambulance sector and I was promoted to oversee the canteen workers. In a way, Captain Bates was really my boss. He wasn't as fond of Ernest as I was. I could see why he didn't like him, though. Ernest liked to command an audience with his tales about fishing and hunting. And he liked to brag about being a real ladies' man.

We knew differently, though. All bark, no bite, at least in that department. He was still just a puppy. He bragged that he owned a “peach” of a 12-gauge shotgun and claimed to be the most skilled fly-fisherman in Michigan. I liked his stories, but Captain Bates thought that Ernest was overbearing and self-indulgent.

“Excuse me, but that kid puts the b-s in bullshit,” said Bates, who was usually so prim and proper.

Bates walked the talk. There was nothing he wouldn't do to get the job done, even if it made him unpopular with the men. When Lt. Edward M. McKey was killed three weeks before Ernest was injured, it almost did the captain in. McKey and I were pretty tight, but Bates and McKey were best friends. I could see why. McKey was a straight arrow, just like Bates. And they both insisted on what an honor it was to serve in the Red Cross.

At the beginning, there were four sections of Red Cross volunteers in Italy. Ernest initially had been assigned to Section 4, in Schio, a scenic village east of Lake Garda. The nearest big city was Venice, about sixty miles east and due south. He told me that he hadn't liked it in Schio. Life was too easy. I couldn't deny that the men had it good there. Sections 1, 2, and 3 were kept plenty busy, but Section 4 was too far removed to see much action—the men jokingly referred to their comfortable quarters at the old wool factory as the Schio Country Club. They shot pool, swam in the creek, played baseball in the courtyard, enjoyed quality food served on tables with linen and silverware, and drank red wine. Ernest hadn't signed up with the Red Cross to be in a country club, though. Hell, most of their patients hadn't even been injured in combat; they were either sick with malaria or influenza, or their wounds were self-inflicted—anything to escape the hardship. They just wanted to be home with their families.

Ernest had only been in Schio for two weeks when he answered the call for canteen service. That's when we met. That was on June 22 or 23 I think. Ernest and three other Section 4 drivers showed up at my office in Vicenza. Two days later, I sent him to Fossalta di Piave, near where McKey had been stationed. When Ernest arrived, his rolling kitchen wasn't ready, so he was instructed to jump on a bike and head for the second-line trench.

Twice a day he'd stuff chocolate, cigarettes, and postcards into his haversack and hand them out to the Italian troops. He'd only done this for a few days, but already the Italian soldiers loved him. Who wouldn't? He always wore a big smile and greeted the weary men with his newly acquired Italian vocabulary.

Ernest had asked for this assignment at Fossalta. McKey had seen action here, and Ernest said he wanted to play ball on the same playing field as McKey. I told him I was no damn football coach. Ernest liked his sports analogies.

Most Red Cross volunteers saw their service as a line item on their resumes. Wouldn't it be darby, as Ernest would say, to spend the summer abroad driving ambulances that were safely

tucked behind the front line? They could practice their one or two semesters' worth of Italian, pocket 500 lire each month, perhaps meet a few *signorinas*, and return home to tell their girls what heroes they were.

But I hadn't expected this. First, McKey bit it on June 16; he was done in by artillery fire. And now, Ernest had got hit by an ash can. That's what we call a mortar bomb. It was filled with all sorts of shit—steel rod fragments, screws, nuts, bolts, and nails.

McKey didn't care about medals. He was the exception. Unlike other volunteers, he was much more mature, about my age. Like I said, it was his honor to serve. Most of the volunteers were in their late teens or a bit older, and they were enamored with winning a medal. Ernest wanted one, too.

Ernest found the action he was looking for on July 8. He caught lots of mortar fragments in his right leg and ended up spending four or five nights in a field hospital near Treviso. From his hospital bed at the field hospital, he told me the dumbest thing: that the only real heroes are the ones who die—they're the lucky ones. I don't think he would have minded dying that night. The heroes made a royal flush, he said. We both laughed. Poker was one of our favorite pastimes.

Ernest had been lucky, too. Deep down, he knew it. He may not have made a royal flush, but he had made a full house. That should be good enough to win the silver medal.

Before we left for the second half of our two-day journey, my sinuses were still burning from the smell. We laid over for a few hours at Verona where I mercifully disembarked, cleared my head, and grabbed a cup of coffee. I brought a cup back for Ernest, too.

"Damn, this is good," he said.

"Yeah, they made it the right way," I said. "They brought the water to a boil before inserting the coffee grounds."

We were expected in Milan early on the morning of July 14, and I knew that Ted Brumback would be waiting for Ernest. Brumback was an ambulance driver stationed in Schio. He and Ernest had met in Kansas City and become friends. Captain Bates had sent word to Brumback that he should greet his friend at the train station in Milan. The captain also reminded me to give Ted a message: make sure Ernest sends a telegram to his parents. It was of paramount importance that Ernest himself reassured his parents that he was out of danger.

When I told Ernest that we needed to wire his parents, I wrote down what he told me to say: "Wounded in legs by trench mortar; not serious; will receive valor medal; will walk in about ten days." I tucked the paper into my shirt pocket, making a mental note to give it to Brumback.

That was the short story. And it was true. He was hit by mortar fragments, and not machine-gun bullets—which sounds far more dramatic. He wasn't seriously injured, although we later found out he had ten "fairly serious" wounds. And he would, eventually, receive the coveted silver medal. He would have been up and walking in a couple of weeks, but his surgeon decided to wait before operating on the two most serious wounds: a piece of shrapnel embedded behind his patella, and another behind his big toe. These two wounds required surgery after some time had passed to lessen the chance of infection from the surgery.

Ernest and I both knew the short story wasn't the real story. The real medal winner should have been the Italian soldier who died in the front-line trench with Ernest that moonless night. He deserved the silver. No one knows for sure if the soldier intentionally put himself between Ernest and the exploding bomb. If he did, he deserved the gold. I don't think Ernest really believed that the only heroes are those who died. Ernest didn't die, but he sure wanted to be a hero. To confirm his heroism, he needed the silver medal.²

But what did Ernest do in the front-line trench, closest to the enemy, right next to the Piave River? Did he do anything valorous? Or was he the reason that the Italian soldier died?



Front-line trench on the West Bank of the Piave River. Note that the photo is dated June 20, 1918, just three weeks before Hemingway was wounded. Photo courtesy of Italian war historian Bruno Marcuzzo.

Notes

¹ This chapter is historical fiction, envisioning what might have happened when Captain James Gamble accompanied Hemingway on the train to Milan. Gamble, one of Hemingway's closest friends in Italy, was Hemingway's immediate commanding officer in charge of the American Red Cross rolling canteens. He was one of the first two Americans to hear, directly from Hemingway, of Hemingway's account of his wounding. The other was Lieutenant Theodore "Ted" Brumback, a fellow Red Cross volunteer. Chapter 1 is consistent with the most plausible story of Hemingway's wounding, as described in Chapter 13. All direct quotations are hypothetical.

² According to Hemingway's love interest in the Milan hospital, Agnes von Kurowsky, she said: "Oh, for heaven's sake, he was no hero! He got the injuries because he did something that was against orders... There was a big explosion and he saw a soldier he knew fall, and he jumped over a fence and got a lot of shrapnel in the legs." (See Brian, pp. 19–20). See Chapter 13 for a more detailed discussion.