

The Great War – From Maine to France and (Somehow) Back Again Battles and Experiences of John M. Longley

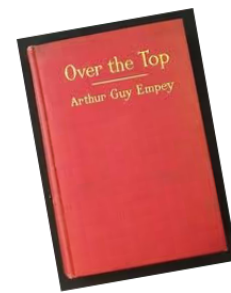
A new year, 1917, had started like so many before. Anson, Maine – a rural town just north of the 45th parallel – was crusted in layers of snow that wouldn't give up their grip until late April or early May. If we could listen in to conversations long forgotten, we might observe John M. Longley¹, a lean 19-year-old, overhearing a heated conversation between two fellow laborers.



“Wipe ‘em out, I tell yah,” piqued one older man, perhaps fifty years old. “Frigin’ Germans want to rule the world. First France, England, then a hop-skip-and-a-jump ‘cross the pond and then us.”

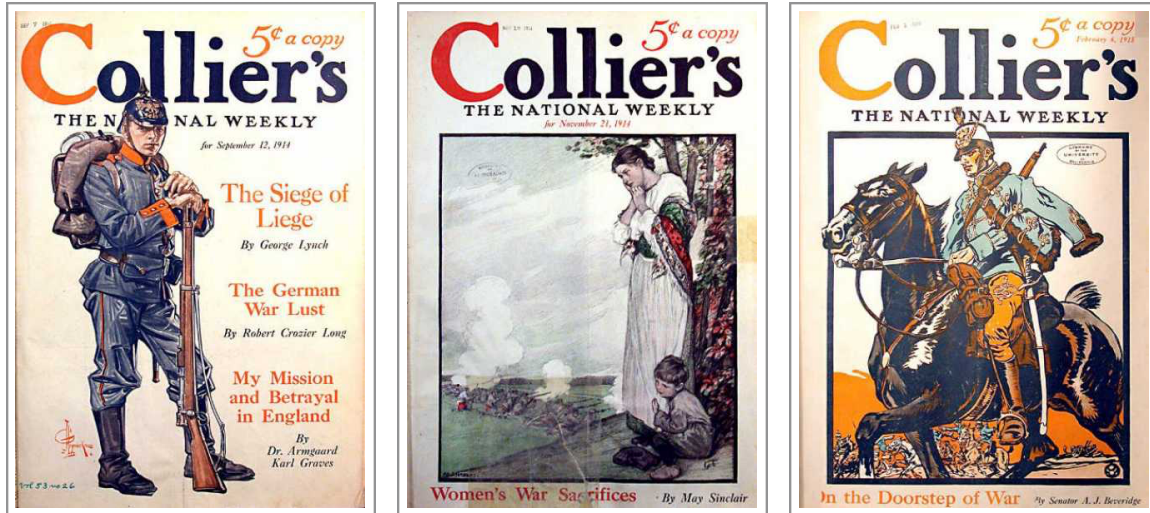
“Don’t ‘zaggerate,” came the retort. “Let Europe fight their own battles. We got all we can do to keep the Kennebec River from washing us down to Bath this spring.”

For John Longley, happy to have some work that kept him busy and away from a home that really wasn't a home, talk of German aggression seemed like a fable. Arthur Empey's book *Over the Top* boasted of first-hand experiences of fighting and being wounded with the British early in the war (Empey, 1917). The subtle propaganda fueled the invincible spirit of young men in an effort to tilt the American public toward war. Sure, Empey had shared some grim facts of life and death in the trenches, but could war really reach this far?



True, it was hard to ignore cover after cover of Collier's National Weekly on the news stands in town, a steady reminder of the siege going on in Europe, and sure, the few dramatic black and white photographs that John had seen seemed real enough. But weren't those deaths as unlucky as falling through the ice as John remembered his own brush with death as a young boy? He chuckled quietly to himself as he thought of the frigid Maine morning when he had carelessly fallen into a hole in the river as he watched

¹ John Moore Longley (12/9/1897 – 08/26/1995) was the son of David Webster Longley (1863-1927) from Solon, Maine and Elizabeth A. Perkins (Davis) (1877-1959) from New Brunswick, Canada.



his father and other men cutting ice, only saved by a quick fetch from a man before being sucked under by the strong Kennebec current. Death, even in war, was unlucky. Yet few men back in Maine knew what Shuster (2014) called the “terrible arithmetic of death”, for example that “more men had died at the fortress of Verdun as on all the battlefields of the Civil War” (Freidel, 1990, px).

