

ONE SOLDIER ON "THREE SOLDIERS"

By HAROLD NORMAN DENNY

EVERY one now seems to have taken part in the discussion of John Dos Passos's brilliantly written novel of the American Expeditionary Force except those who know most intimately the material of which "Three Soldiers" professes to be made—the men who served in the ranks in the front line. When such a reader turns the last page of the book he finds himself wondering what could have been the war experience of the author that it could have taught him so much of the "inside stuff" of the army in France and yet have left him so totally ignorant of the psychology of the men in the fighting forces.

The man who has been under fire will recognize that Mr. Dos Passos must have been in uniform, but he will see also long before he finishes this embittered diatribe that he was not in the fighting. He is likely to picture the author "gold-bricking" his way through a service he did not like in some rear area in France, where he greedily treasured all the stories of filth and cowardice and injustice brought to that place by duty-dodgers from all over France.

It is a surprise, then, to find that Mr. Dos Passos's record was not that of a slacker, but was really quite creditable. But his record at the same time confirms the conviction that he was not of the line. I tried to learn from Mr. Dos Passos himself just what his services was, but found that he is in Europe. His publishers, however, furnish the information that he is a Harvard man who enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Volunteer Ambulance Service in 1916, serving with the Twenty-fifth Division of the French Army. In November, 1917, he joined the Italian Red Cross and drove an ambulance until the Summer of 1918. Then he returned to America and, despite defective sight, got into the American Ambulance Section and remained with that until the armistice. After that he was a member of the students' corps at the Sorbonne and was demobilized in 1919.

Mr. Dos Passos's war record would be of little concern to other servicemen if it were not that he frankly attempts to portray the youth of America, to quote the publisher's blurb on the cover, as "generous, open-minded, spiritually alive, coura-

geous idealists, caught and crushed in the stamping machine of war." Of course, this in itself, as every battlefield veteran knows, is arrant tommyrot. To prove his thesis Mr. Dos Passos has combed the army for every rotten incident that happened, could have happened, or could be imagined as having happened, and welded it into a compelling narrative.

of the book is that Mr. Dos Passos does not know what he is talking about. He was a non-combatant.

There is little doubt that as Mr. Dos Passos drove his ambulance back and forth between the rear areas and the front (applying the term "front" to the ambulance stations close to the fighting line, but still far enough back that the infan-

tryman has never walked across a wheat field, with his nearest neighbor five paces away, and tried to look nonchalant as machine-gun bullets buzzed past him; Mr. Dos Passos has never laid quivering for hours under a barrage, sweating and dribbling into his gas mask, with 1.55s jolting him from the ground and covering him with clods, with

two of his characters are infantrymen, Andrews and Chrisfield, his battle description is limited to the smallest space possible. But even with this precaution he makes breaks that cause those who were there to smile. For example, he has an American soldier pull the string of a grenade as he throws it. Even an ambulance driver should know,

however, that no American grenade had a string. Those were German grenades he was describing. He may have seen some on a salvage dump. There are several other slight but tell-tale errors, but these small flaws are not needed to brand the book the product of that worst kind of ignorance, the kind that is based on partial knowledge.

When Mr. Dos Passos describes the life in French towns back of the lines, however, where combat soldiers, by the way, spent precious little time, he is in his element, and one will find few more enjoyable and lifelike descriptions than his picture of a French café full of singing, roaring Americans. He knows his ground there.

For his principal actors the author chose three members of the army, all of them psychopathic. One was a homicidal maniac, whose climax was killing a wounded officer after months of premeditation. The second was a boot-licker, who got himself transferred to a "bulletproof" job behind the lines on the eve of his unit's entraining for the front. The third was John Andrews, a Harvard graduate with musical talent, an individualist, as Mr. Dos Passos tries to make him, who enlisted voluntarily, and then began immediately to rebel feebly and calfishly against army discipline. By going to a vast amount of trouble and resorting to phenomenal stupidity and obstinacy, he succeeded in being arrested for deserting and presumably was shot or sent to Leavenworth. The only flash of manhood he shows, this priggish

hero, who virtuously abandons a sweet, worth-while girl who has been good enough to give herself to him, is when he runs away from a labor battalion; and he finds the nerve to do this only after a boy of 17 has shown him the example.

Mr. Dos Passos has his characters, at the very beginning, grieving over having to pick up cigarette-butts, as if they had expected to have maid



"As if they had expected to have maid service."

He pictures this conglomeration as the army. This was not the army, of course, any more than a graphic description of Jefferson Market Police Court would do for a picture of New York.

"Three Soldiers" purports to be a description of the actions and reactions of men in the combat forces; even to describe them on the battlefield, and in so doing it makes them out abject or malignant. The offense

trymen regarded them as havens of rest), he heard shells burst not far away, and thus he can honestly assert that he was under fire.

But Mr. Dos Passos has never felt that sinking of the heart, with its thrill, too, which comes to an infantryman as he steps up to an ammunition cart and hangs his bandoliers of extra cartridges on his shoulders, and knows then that he is about to go into action; Mr. Dos

shrapnel yelling and "pching" overhead, and with tortured, shattered boys about him, boys he has come to love, begging and sobbing for stretcher bearers or just silently dying. Mr. Dos Passos has never done these things, and yet he pictures the men who have as mean, driven cowards.

As Mr. Dos Passos wrote his book he evidently was aware that he was on unfamiliar ground, for though

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and janitor service. And the coarse blankets under which they sleep and the informal way in which their food is slopped into their messkits seem cruel hardships. It was one of the tragedies of the war, of course, that mahogany beds were not provided for the soldiers until after they got into Germany, and that the sergeants Mr. Dos Passos hates so intensely seldom stayed around after taps to hear the boys' prayers and kiss them good-night. I've seen privates from as cultivated homes as Mr. Dos Passos frequents who thought these little hardships, these unaccustomed menial tasks they had to do for themselves, were rather a joke. They were part of the game.

These three men, I think, are excellent character studies, even though one does decline to sympathize all the way through with John Andrews and gets sick of his constant whining about his soul. There must have been men much like them in that army of four million men. A story might have been written about these three neurotics that would have been conceivably true, if the writer had given them a background of soldiers as they were—not dreamy-eyed Sir Galahads and yet not the lustful-eyed illiterates Dos Passos draws, unable to accept a drink from a French harmaid without speculating urgently as to her tractability; not superlatively brave men, but average American youths screwing themselves up to a courage they never knew they had because they believed the people back home expected it of them; not cringing, obsequious slaves, nor yet loud-mouthed, defiant rowdies, but boys and men from every stratum of American life doing a hard job with their chins in the air and taking the gaff standing up.

But Mr. Dos Passos seems unable to draw a character that is not vicious or contemptible, at any rate he has filled his book with them, and one whose entire knowledge of the A. E. F. was gained from reading "Three Soldiers" would never guess that there was any other kind of men in the army. Thus, though his book may be well worth reading from many standpoints, it is glaringly untrue. He libels directly a million and a half men who fought their way through a hell that no one who was not in it can imagine; and he libels indirectly two million more men who would have acquitted themselves just about as well.

Never, in two years in the army, meeting intimately men from every division that saw the front, have I seen such unpleasant officers and non-coms. and such craven privates as are strewn through the novel and represented as typical. His officers almost invariably snarl or rasp, and his privates are obsequious and cringing and they salute servilely. These are Mr. Dos Passos's own words, reiterated all through his pages. Mr. Dos Passos apparently never discovered that the first thing a recruit was taught was self-respect, and that a salute was a matter of mutual dignity. Indeed, it was the fashion to glare at the officer one saluted, and it was particularly good form, at inspection, to glower so menacingly when the officer took your rifle that he would be frightened into passing it back without criticism. Just about as many officers were bullied by enlisted men as the reverse. There was far less obsequiousness in the army than in most business offices in New York. The discipline and the caste system which Mr. Dos Passos dislikes were largely amateur theatricals, and even the form of them was utterly abolished by combat troops in active service.

Mr. Dos Passos never could have written the book he did if he had been in the combatant forces. He would have written instead a book tremendously big, in which his gospel of individualism, which is the gospel of many other men who went

through a war experience more trying than the novelist's, would have sung instead of whined. He would have acquired an indefinable something which front-line men got, a new bearing, a new attitude. I don't mean anything like the old twaddle about spiritual regeneration and soul-salvation, which some writers used to prate about during the war from the security of a hut far behind the lines. But I do mean that the front did something definite to men and it was not making automatons of them either, as Mr. Dos Passos contends. In no function in life were men more alone and more dependent on their individual souls and their own wits than when they started off through the blasted wire toward a patch of woods that was spitting bullets. I cannot put into words what the front did to men, but it brought a feeling of brotherhood and a superb faith in human kind that the veterans have not altogether lost even in the wave of oppression and selfishness that has swept the country since the armistice and destroyed much of the victory that was won in the field. Men learned a philosophy deeper than Kant's in those months in the mud, and they discovered that there is hardly a man who is not inherently courageous and decent and unselfish.

But Mr. Dos Passos was not where he could learn these things, and so there is hardly a glimmer of the real American soldier in all his four hundred pages. No non-combatant ever could know the American soldier, and when Mr. Dos Passos wrote his book, though he wrote it skillfully, he spoke of things he knew nothing about.

If Mr. Dos Passos believed, as his book indicates again and again, that America was not fighting in a just or adequate cause, it is quite understandable that everything about the army—its phenomenal stupidities, its

interminable waiting in line, its promiscuity—would have been intolerable to him, as they became intolerable to very many soldiers after the armistice, when there no longer was any object in it for them. But even such a man would not whine about it, if he really were a man, and whining is what nearly all the characters supposed to represent Americans do throughout the story.

The author has attempted to write a drama of the individualist caught under the weight of the army machine and crushed into a slave—an automaton, "like a toad under a steam roller." But Mr. Dos Passos does not realize that there were thousands of men in the army, in the ranks, quite as well educated, quite as idealistic and as passionately individualistic as himself or his John Andrews, who seems to be his mouthpiece. But he does not seem to know that these very idealists and individualists entered the war eagerly because they recognized that the war finally had come to be a struggle in which Germany was threatening the destruction of individualism both in nations and in men. So, for the time, they gladly surrendered their personal individualism in the hope that they might help save that same principle for the world. Sometimes these men, in the restricted life of peace time, with all its necessary compromises of tangled ethics, its problems and difficulties, find themselves longing for the freedom of the soldier at the front, where there were no false values and nothing trivial mattered, and where there was but one problem to solve: whether a man played square with his comrades and his own soul. It was the nearest approach to emancipation that a real individualist could hope to find in this world.

Perhaps it is malicious to point it out, but the paper cover surrounding "Three Soldiers" is of an intense, passionate yellow.