

**World War I****PRIMARY SOURCE READING****A Journal of the Great War**

After the United States entered World War I, General John J. Pershing appointed Charles Dawes to head the General Purchasing Board of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in September 1917. After the war Dawes remained in Europe to serve on the AEF's Advisory Settlement Board. The following selection is an excerpt from a letter Dawes wrote to his mother in October 1917. In the letter he describes a car trip to the front lines in Belgium that he made with Aloys Van de Vyvere, the Belgian minister of finance. As you read the selection, consider the danger that Belgian citizens and Allied soldiers faced on the front lines.

MY DEAR MOTHER:

I realize that my letters to you have been brief and unsatisfactory, which arises not out of any lack of affection or consideration for you, to whom I owe in every way so much, but from the fact that during my whole life my training in correspondence [writing letters] has been to eliminate what has from a business standpoint seemed to be non-essential. . . .

Dunkirk is the town which, sometimes at noon and sometimes at seven o'clock in the evening, practically each day, there is received a German shell fired from a gun about thirty-three miles distant. Signals are given from the flash at the gun from points far ahead and the inhabitants [residents] have about one minute from the time of receiving the signal to seek shelter in the cellars. The town is, of course, considerably damaged. We passed through this town a little after seven o'clock in the evening. As the entire section is under more or less bombardment, especially from the airplanes, we ran with no lights at a comparatively [somewhat] slow pace. Just after we had passed the town a siren sounded and Mr. Van de Vyvere announced that an airplane raid was in progress. This first raid had but a comparatively mild interest for us, since the bombs struck at a considerable distance. We could hear the anti-aircraft guns and saw the searchlights seeking the hostile airplane. We had not proceeded, however, more than half an hour when we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by great shafts of white light directed toward a spot above us in the sky, which, of course, we could not see through the top of our limousine. We were proceeding slowly in the dark very near a factory used for making shells, to destroy which was the evident purpose of the hostile airplanes. Around us on all sides the anti-aircraft guns were firing at airplanes. It seemed to us even then that we had a center seat for an interesting performance. Suddenly to the right of the road occurred about four great crashes, each one of them sounding like a ten-story sky-scraper falling down, and then, a few seconds later, three more tremendous crashes occurred on the other side of the road. If the Germans had been aiming for our automobile instead of the munition factory,

they would have been considered extremely good marksmen, for two days later when we came past this spot on our return we paced the distance from the nearest crater to the point on the road where our automobile stood . . . and the distance was about one hundred and forty yards—only a little over four hundred feet. In the crater formed by this bomb a small-sized house could be comfortably placed. Our safety consisted somewhat, no doubt, in the fact that the nearest bomb struck a soft, swampy field instead of rocks or hard earth. When the bomb struck I did not notice that it gave off any light, but only sparks such as would be caused by striking red-hot iron with a hammer in a blacksmith shop. There were not very many sparks after that. . . .

[W]e stopped and left the automobiles and proceeded on foot along the road which at that time was not bombarded, but which at night, when supplies are brought forward over it, is subjected to constant bombardment and machine-gun fire. We spent a time in the second trenches and then went forward to the first trenches, walking about forty feet apart so as not to attract special attention. We reached the front-line trenches and spent quite a time talking with the major commanding the battalion there. At that time the artillery firing from the Germans and the Belgians was quite light and we decided to go still further to the most advanced posts from which we could get a better view of all the proceedings. We reached these points by going behind a rampart [barrier] part of the way and then through a narrow lane of sandbags arched over at intervals with iron. . . . On the way I was taken to an observation post which was hidden halfway up a ruin of a farmhouse. I climbed the ladder to the observation station and with the glasses [binoculars] of the soldier who was there looked at the German line which was about four to five hundred yards further on.

About this time the firing became more general between the Belgian and German lines. The shells would pass over our heads. Some of them sounded almost like a railroad train; some of them whined, and others made a sound similar to the firing of a sky-rocket. The airplanes were very active. Whenever the French or Belgian airplanes would come near the line, the German guns would open upon them and we could see the shells bursting around them. The Germans would also fire at them with machine guns. A machine gun sounds a good deal like a . . . hammer on a sky-scraper which is being built, but since . . . you probably have not heard one I will bring you to a realization of it by stating that when in our childhood we boys used to run along the pavement in front of the house holding a stick hard against the pickets of the old fence the resultant noise sounded like an infant machine gun. Finally a German airplane directly above my head was engaged by four Allied machines. I counted eight or ten shells bursting at one time around the Allied machines. Machine guns also were firing from the German lines, from the airplanes themselves, and from a little Belgian who was in the trench where we were. The engagement ended by the German airplane flying back to its lines with apparently no casualties on either side. All this time, while an intermittent [occasional] firing was going on around us, there was a dull and monotonous [repeating] roar to the east. It was an inspiring sound, like the roar of distant thunder.

From *A Journal of the Great War* by Charles G. Dawes, 1921.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Why did the residents of Dunkirk have up to one minute to seek shelter from the German artillery shells?

2. What prevented the bomb that fell near the car from injuring or killing Dawes and Van de Vyvere?

3. Why did the Germans bomb the road to the trenches at night?

4. What was the “dull and monotonous roar” that Dawes mentions at the end of the selection?

ACTIVITY

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short newspaper article describing General Dawes’s visit to the Belgian front lines.