

TOTRUE TALES

**WORLD WAR I
HEROES**

By Allan Zullo

SCHOLASTIC INC.

To my dear friends Stanley and Toby Cohen, who
make life a lot more fun when they are around.

— A.Z.

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THE GREAT WAR

World War I — or the Great War, as it was known back then — turned into one of the largest and deadliest conflicts in all of human history.

More than 65 million military personnel fought in Europe from July 28, 1914, to November 11, 1918, resulting in the deaths of about 8.5 million combatants and 6.8 million civilians. More than 21 million combatants were wounded. Of the more than 4 million Americans who served in the war, 116,516 were killed and 204,002 were wounded.

The war was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the empire of Austria-Hungary, and his wife, Sophie, on June 28, 1914. They were shot in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, by Gavrilo Princip, a member of the Black Hand, a secret military organization in the country of Serbia.

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A month later, Austria-Hungary retaliated by invading Serbia, which ignited already long-standing hostile relations among the major powers of Europe. As a result, the Allies — mainly France, Belgium, the British Empire (including Canada), Russia, Romania, Serbia, and eventually the United States, Japan, and Italy — waged war against the Central Powers, made up of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and later the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), and Bulgaria.

In the early days of the war, Germany invaded the neutral countries of Belgium and Luxembourg before attacking France, which led Great Britain to declare war on Germany. At the same time, Germany also struck against Russia.

At the outbreak of the war, the United States pursued a policy of avoiding any military action and instead tried to broker a peace agreement, but to no avail.

For the first three years in France, the war was fought mainly along the Western Front, which extended from the Swiss border, along the western border of Germany, and into northeastern France to the North Sea. The Eastern Front stretched through much of the Ukraine from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea, a line nearly one thousand miles long.

Throughout the war, both sides fought from elaborate trench and dugout systems opposite each other. The fully exposed area between the opposing trench lines was called No Man's Land. When soldiers went "over the top" (leaping out of their trenches to attack), they often were mowed down

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by their foes long before they reached the others' trenches, which were often protected by barbed wire and other obstacles.

Because antibiotics hadn't been discovered yet and first aid was limited, relatively minor wounds often were fatal from infections and gangrene. One of the biggest killers was disease caused by poor sanitary conditions and hygiene. Many soldiers suffered from dysentery, typhus, cholera, and, in the winter, exposure from the cold and wet. Adding to their miseries, the trenches were infested with rats and also lice, which transmitted trench fever, a serious disease that caused high fever and muscle pain.

For soldiers who were on the move, they were forced to run through killing zones laced with machine gun fire and bursting with artillery. Often, the soldiers advanced far beyond their support units, causing them to go without food and water for days at a time.

As casualties mounted into the millions, all sides were employing new warfare technology, including faster-shooting machine guns, long-range artillery, poisonous mustard gas and phosgene gas, and armored tanks. For the first time in a major war, airplanes battled each other in the skies in dog-fights, carried out photographic reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines, and dropped bombs.

German submarines, known as U-boats, prowled the Atlantic, sinking five thousand merchant ships that were bringing supplies to Great Britain and France. In 1915, a

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U-boat torpedoed and sank the luxury ocean liner RMS *Lusitania*, killing 1,198 passengers, including 128 Americans. Following international condemnation, Germany promised it wouldn't target passenger ships. It went back on its word two years later.

After the sinking of seven American merchant ships by U-boats and the interception of a secret German telegram promising money to Mexico if it would fight against the United States, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for "a war to end all wars." On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany.

Because America's military forces were relatively small in size, the federal government instituted a draft, requiring all males ages twenty-one to thirty to register for military service. (It was later expanded to males from ages eighteen to forty-five.) More than 2.8 million men were drafted and an additional 2 million volunteered for various military branches that made up the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

In 1918, Germany launched its Spring Offensive and pushed to within seventy-five miles of Paris, the French capital. But bolstered by the firepower and manpower of the AEF, the Allies halted the enemy assault. On August 8, the Allies countered with the Hundred Days Offensive, which sent the German Army reeling in retreat. In less than two months, the Central Powers collapsed. Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire surrendered, and the Austria-Hungary

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Army gave up. Then it was Germany's turn to sign an armistice.

On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month — 11 A.M. on November 11, 1918 — a cease-fire took effect, finally putting an end to the Great War.