

# INTRODUCTION



JOSHUA BROWN

Robert Pellissier was born in France in 1882 and came to the United States as a boy of fourteen to live with his sister Emélie Pellissier Alden, who was my great-grandmother. He studied first at Bridgewater Normal School, then at Harvard, and then taught for several years at Williston Academy in Northampton, Massachusetts. After completing his Ph.D. at Harvard, he taught at Stanford from 1911 to 1914 as assistant professor of romance languages.

When World War I broke out, he returned to France and volunteered as an enlisted man in the elite *chasseurs à pied*, the troops who occupied the Vosges mountains of Alsace. He wrote letters to his family in Brooklyn; to his fiancée in Auburn, Massachusetts; and to friends and colleagues all across the United States.

Robert Pellissier's letters are factual, filled with comments on European and American politics, notes about wartime prices and social conditions, observations on the French character, and the ribald opinions of his fellow soldiers. The letters are interspersed with selections from his diary, which give his own unglossed, private version of events, in contrast to the more cheerful letters he sent home to his young nieces in Brooklyn.

Like many of his contemporaries, Robert Pellissier was shocked by the invasion of Belgium and by the destruction of Belgian and French cities by Germany in the opening days of the war. Volunteering, for him, was a moral imperative—not just a defense of French soil but a defense of European

civilization. Along with most of the world, he hoped that the fighting would be over in a few weeks. He soon realized, however, that the conflict would turn into a bloody stalemate. He hated the senseless slaughter and the calculated cruelties of the new style of mechanized war. At the same time, he refused to give in to the propaganda caricatures of the Germans, and he distinguished clearly between German militarism and the mainstream of German culture.

In October, 1914, Robert Pellissier was stationed in the Vosges mountains of Alsace, overlooking the Rhine river valley. This area had been captured by the Germans during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and for over forty years the Germans had done their best to transform the local culture from French to German. The recapture of Alsace was a prime objective of French strategy before the war began.

The French tried to seize Alsace by pouring troops over the top of the Vosges and by invading up the valley from their base at Belfort toward Mulhausen. Although the Mulhausen campaign was a disaster, the Germans were unable to dislodge the French from the heights and the mountain passes. Holding onto the Vosges became a matter of national honor, as it was the only place where France was on the offensive.

Robert Pellissier was wounded in the shoulder in January, 1915, and was evacuated to a military hospital, where he stayed until May. His wound healed but left him unable to carry the heavy pack of a soldier, and so he applied for officer training. He spent the summer studying and entered the military academy at St.-Maixent in August, 1915. He was not commissioned as an officer—probably because of his age—but was made a sergeant at the end of the course and returned to the Vosges in January, 1916.

He was just in time for a battle, as the Germans tried to recapture the Hartmannweilerskopf, a mountain overlooking the Rhine valley. Although not as well-known today as major battles like Verdun and the Somme, the battle for the Hartmannweilerskopf was front-page news at the time. The constant bombardment made it impossible for the French troops to be relieved, and he stayed on the mountaintop for fifty-three days.

After a brief furlough in June, Robert Pellissier was moved slightly north, to the Munster/Colmar region of Alsace, where he spent five weeks. He was then transferred north again as part of the massive build-up of troops for the battle of the Somme, which began on July 1, 1916, with the attack of fifteen British and five French divisions against Germans who were dug into excellent defensive positions.

Robert Pellissier's unit was sent in on August 28, long after the battle had bogged down. The Somme lasted until November 13, 1916. By the time it

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ended, the British had suffered 400,000 dead and wounded; the French 200,000; and the Germans 450,000. This battle was surpassed only by Verdun, where 1,200,000 men on both sides were killed or wounded.

The original edition of the letters published by Robert Pellissier's sister Adeline was probably only a hundred copies or so—just enough for family and friends. Only a handful are still in existence. Most of the letters are long since lost; Adeline Pellissier presumably returned them to the original addressees or took them with her to Switzerland when she retired in the 1920s. I worked from my own copy of the original edition, now very battered and worn. I was also fortunate enough to find a few of the letters that he wrote to my grandmother, which she saved in a special box for more than fifty years after the war.

Many people have asked me why I undertook this project and why it has become so important to me. The short answer is simply that it is fascinating to rediscover the world that Robert Pellissier lived in. He was completely a man of his time—familiar with its events and its literature, analytical about its failings, dryly humorous about its incongruities. The world of 1914–18 was not just huge battles—it was the life that went on near the front, the events back home, the hopes and fears of daily living.

One kind of history writing eliminates details and uses broad brush strokes to sum up events. Another kind of history—the kind in this book—treasures details as a way of understanding the larger picture. In this second kind of history, the task is to learn about an era by studying people who are unknown and forgotten. Robert Pellissier's is the voice of an individual caught up in the biggest war the world had seen up to that time.

This book has also been an intensely personal project for me. When I was a little boy, I heard my grandmother and my great-aunt speak about “Uncle Robert” with reverence—his name always pronounced in the French way, *Roh-behr*, not the English or American *Rah-bert*. His pictures were in family albums. He was an icon for all that was good and wise and noble in their eyes. Some of their feelings might have been adolescent hero worship—though my grandmother was twenty-four when Robert Pellissier went to war—but there was still a hard core of fact that I never really grasped when I was a boy. I wanted to find out why he meant so much to my family, and this book is the answer.

A third reason—and one that is very relevant today—has to do with the nature of war and the way we respond to it. I grew up in the shadow of the wars of the twentieth century—World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, and the endless regional struggles in different parts of the world. When I was a teenager, my father took me on a tour of the battlefield of

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Verdun in France. Sixty years after the guns had fallen silent, Verdun still looked like the surface of the moon, with huge holes and craters blasted out of the earth, echoing and dripping fortresses, and unexploded ammunition in every field. We stood in the cemetery, and the line of grave markers reached out to the horizon. The enormous memorial building held the bones of over one hundred thousand unidentified soldiers. My father said very little about what we saw at Verdun—he didn't have to. The silence and scale of Verdun brought home the horror of war.

Robert Pellissier was not a pacifist, and he volunteered for the French Army, but he hated the insanity of war. His letters are a voice of reason in the midst of pointless orders and senseless, unending violence. He heaped scorn on the politicians and businessmen who jockeyed for power and profit during the war. He despised propaganda, and in his letters he tried to distinguish clearly and calmly among war hysteria, rumors, and hard fact. In his letters, he hoped for a world where nations would work together to prevent wars like the one he fought in.

In this new edition, I have divided the letters into chapters corresponding to the different periods of Robert Pellissier's service life. I have also added family photographs, a facsimile of one of the original letters, and a key to help identify many of the individuals to whom the letters were addressed. Maps have been added to orient the different events. At the back, there are appendices that include contemporary tributes from his sister and from colleagues and a chronology of events mentioned in the letters.

I have tried very carefully to keep Robert Pellissier's original spelling and punctuation throughout. Adeline Pellissier included a very few footnotes in the original edition, which assumes a good deal of fluency in French, a familiarity with the events and personalities of the day, and a wide-ranging acquaintance with French and classical literature. I have translated any words or phrases not in English inside square brackets [ ]. I have also tried to identify names and events and track down quotations, references, and allusions to authors when I could find them. This information appears in the notes at the end of the text.

It has been a moving, humbling, and enlightening experience to prepare *A Good Idea of Hell: Letters from a Chasseur à Pied* for today's readers. I hope that you will enjoy them as much as I have.