

For Whom the Ambulance Rolls

Remembrances of an American volunteer
ambulance driver 70 years after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)
drew to a bloody close

By James Neugass

In 1937 James Neugass, a promising 32-year-old poet and novelist who had been praised in *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, joined thousands of other young Americans who traveled to Spain to help that nation's duly elected Republican government put down a fascist rebellion. Neugass served as an ambulance driver during the crucial battles for the city of Teruel, and his nuanced and deeply lyrical memoir, *War Is Beautiful*, offers a rare frontline glimpse into one of history's most tragic military conflicts.

Jan. 6, 1938. Cuevas Labradas

Between the writing of the last line and this one I have seen many dead men...

We passed the rock pile once called the village of Perales and crept over the ice of the Teruel road. Don't know when it was that I had begun to hear The Sounds, but when my engine died out in front of the surgical hospital which the division had set up in a town called *Cuevas Labradas* ("Cavetown"), very distinct ripples of impolite machine-gun conversations came to us from somewhere up in the mountains that shadow the road.

"See," said Queen Annie, so called because she knows she is our most important nurse, "See, now we're at the front," with a contented, nervous little giggle...

Behind the blanketed windows of the villa in which we were simultaneously setting up surgical equipment and operating were the smell of the ether, the rush of many feet, soft groans coming from stretchers and blood on the floor, the stretchers, the stair, the aprons of the surgeons, and the blankets.

The need for sleep had dulled the edge of my memory. I know: I ought to be able to recall what I have seen and done. Phrases smooth as oil should roll off the end of my pencil. Something big and something terribly human. Pity and terror, mercy and pain, all between drawn lips. I am very tired, and there is much to do. Sleep has become more important than food.

I think I remember that Wild Bill Cody, stepping carefully between stretchers, one eye closed by a shrapnel fragment, said, "This is worse than Brunete." Brunete was worse than anything else. I asked him where the lines were. "Listen," he answered, waving toward the overhanging mounts, "don't ask me where the front is, just listen to it!"

...Two operating tables were going full blast. A door would open, with a vision of silent figures dressed in white, and naked bare skin and the bandaged stumps of arms and legs, rags floating in slop jars of reddish liquid. Stretchers went up and down the stairs, even while pickaxes were chipping at the plaster walls to make turning easier.

Why was it that nothing was being done to ease the occasional low whimpers that came from the figures under the blankets?

...Outside the doorway was a man on a stretcher, covered only with a sheet. I could see that he was naked. I ran back into the hospital and in a very agitated voice demanded blankets.

"That guy out there is dead," someone impatiently answered me. "There isn't enough room in here, so we lay them in the courtyard. Pull the sheet off of him and bring it to me. We're running out of linens. And while you're at it, take him into the woodshed. That's what we're using until we can dig a trench."

I stripped the sheet from the body. The face was dirtier than the skin. American?...French?...or English? The clay complexion of death is international. I took him to the shed where men lay like cordwood. What can you do? Go out and make more dead. I have reached the end of the road. Perhaps I am a pacifist.

Nights

The men I carry, mostly Americans, are very quiet. They talk with the gravity of people sitting in the waiting room of a railway



Neugass joined the American Medical Bureau, which provided medical and surgical care for U.S. volunteers, Republican soldiers and Spanish civilians.

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While Neugass and his fellow drivers didn't engage in direct combat, their vehicles were often the targets of fascist fire. This ambulance was hit while transporting wounded near Teruel.

station, about to set out on a long journey, of what happened during the day: how near the shells came, who was killed and who was wounded, and who had narrow escapes. No anger toward the enemy is apparent. The voices rise only when they touch, again and again, on the troubles of our riflemen and machine gunners to find targets. You can't shoot at shells and tanks and planes. Where are our artillery and our planes? They are coming soon. Our thinly strung batteries will soon be reinforced, and many hundreds of planes are being unloaded in Barcelona. Soon they will be with us. We must hold the lines and wait. Not one step back. Evacuate the trenches when They get the range, then

edge of the pitcher freezes the blood on the floor of my car into a kind of raspberry sherbet. I'll have to chip it out with an end wrench when I have time. Nobody minds blood, but ice is treacherous.

Everyone is very young and so interested in the brand-new-for-us science of fighting war in the modern way that our personal problems and political convictions are all forgotten. When I mention that I just came over from the States, the wounded ask for news. Who won the elections in New York? And what is the significance of the victory? How is the CIO doing (a very good part of the brigade volunteers still wear their union buttons); what are the chances for trade-union

and light wounded and men waiting for a lift on a camion, or thinly strung out companies waiting for orders to go up to the ridge, that you can be very sure, if no one is in sight, that the *avions* are on you. More and more and more of them. Flying fields at Berlin and Rome must be empty as a baseball park at night.

Entered Cuevas cutoff with heart in my throat because town had obviously just been bombed. More houses had gone, their viscera splayed into the street. Had the hospital been hit; and the major?

Four dead cavalrymen fully dressed and unspotted by blood lay on stretchers in the hospital courtyard. Saxton, blond tall young English doctor, knelt beside one of them. He had rolled a sleeve up past the elbow of a gray arm.

"What do you think you're doing, Saxton?" I asked, suddenly remembering that he was our blood-transfusion expert.

He did not answer.

Angry, I leaned over the doctor's shoulder. The single vampire tooth of a big glass syringe was slowly drawing the blood out of the vein inside of the dead cavalryman's forearm. The vessel filled and Saxton stood up.

"New Soviet technique," he said, holding the syringe between his squinting eye and the late winter sun. Purple lights shadowed the glistening bar of ruby.

"Seldom we get the chance. Most of them are pretty well empty when they go out. Those four over there were in one of those clay dugouts in the wall of the main street. No timbers on the roof. Direct hit. Asphyxiated, all of them. Their comrades dug them out before they were cold and brought them up here. Thought we could help. Their bad luck"—Saxton pointed to the four gray young faces with clay-stuffed mouths—"was our good luck. We're running short on donors, and the transfusion truck is too busy."

"Wait, you mean . . . that you're going to . . ."

"Well, first I'll have to type and then test it . . . why not? . . . have to hurry."

Next Morning. January 15, I Think

Since for a reason I did not yet understand I had not been sent out to pick up a load,



Neugass often had to drive through rubble-strewn streets, dodging snipers as he went.

run back into them with grenades and dynamite bombs when the tanks attack. A good day: two-thousand shells, God knows how much other stuff, and only four dead and eighteen wounded in the company. Reserves are in training at Tarazona and will soon fill up the gaps.

I drive as carefully as if I were carrying wet trinitrotoluene. I cannot very well crash my car when it is full of wounded. If I think I hear a plane, I hold hard on the wheel, say nothing and keep my eyes on the road. Whenever the temperature of my engine runs up slightly above normal, I immediately stop and fill my radiator. The water that keeps sloshing over the

unity? When will Joe Louis fight Schmeling? What has Roosevelt said about the [arms] embargo? Does the 15th get much publicity in the home newspapers?

January 14. Tortajada

You cannot see planes through the roof of the car, and engine noises are too loud for them to be heard through the windows. Keep eyes on the road looking for men. When you can't see anyone, either planes are overhead or all human beings are in ditches, culverts, bomb holes or the open fields, or up the cliff. Teruel-Perales highway is so full of road gangs

I helped in the cave... My job was to cut off clothing. This must be done because of the danger of infection and because we must find out very quickly all the places where a man has been hit. Very few of the wounded I saw last night or at any other time were hit in only one place. Modern shrapnel breaks into fine metal spray that spreads as efficiently as water over an expensively groomed lawn back in the States. The modern machine gun fires so fast that it seldom hits a man in a single place. You cannot pull off a man's clothing because this motion, however careful and slight, would grind the broken ends of his bones into his muscle... After the clothing comes off, the evacuation doctor makes an inspection. Fresh gauze and adhesive are applied. The case gets his anti-tetanus and gas gangrene. He is given stimulants or sedatives, a card with his name, rank, brigade and a description of injuries and medication, and then waits on a stretcher under as many blankets as we can give him until an ambulance pulls out for the rear.

Same Day. 10 p.m. Kitchen of Cuevas Hospital

Apology. If all of the drivers and infantrymen, nurses and doctors who appear in this account seem without individuality, that is because all but the strongest personalities have become submerged in the common urgency of our purpose in Spain. I have hundreds of friends, but I know few of their names and nothing of their backgrounds, lives and mental habits. No one talks about his former life or his hopes for the future. Almost without exception all of us want to return to our countries, unmutated if possible, but to our native lands. I had a notion, before I left, that I would make my future in the country for which I now fight, if you can call driving an ambulance fighting. But some day I hope to go home. We are in Spain strictly on business. The real fight is at home.

January 17. Tortajada

When you get "on the griddle," as the men say, pinned flat to the earth or inside it for hours while they let you have everything they've got, you begin



A Republican soldier races across an open plaza during the battle for the city of Teruel.

to curse yourself for ever having come to Spain. You think that you will desert the first minute you get a chance and not mind if you land over the French border unconscious and naked, just so long as you can get away from War.

Once the firing lets up and you are able to get a little sleep or coffee, you think that you won't desert, but that you will somehow find a soft job at the rear. But a few hours later, especially if you have gone back from the front, you have forgotten even shame and hope like hell to get back into the fighting, fast. Life, much less war, would not be possible if it were not for this wonderful and terrible resilience which lies in us and is our greatest treasure.

January 25. Valdecebro

What has surprised me about the war in Spain and the Battle of Teruel is that the war ceases every night. Artillery observers cannot see through the darkness, nor can aviators. ... M-gunners, unable to see their front sights at night, use tracers. All but snipers and trench mortars are silent. The mortar loves darkness. Their missiles fly half a mile into the air and drop into trenches not more than 300 or 400 yards distant. Observers sent out into shell holes report accuracy with field

telephones. This weapon is very deadly. Our hatred of it is almost as strong as our desire for mortars of our own.

... There is no quiet so intense and so alive as that of battlefields at night. Dark figures move along the roads and fields, voices speak and fade fast. Sounds of truck and tank engines are heard. A single rifleman gets nervous. He is answered by an M-gunner who is interested but does not wish to waste many rounds. A member of a bombing party then heaves a grenade at a shadow. Both sides now open up with everything they have. After a few minutes... the possession of the night air reverts to the sharpshooter and his telescope sight.

... This is being written on my favorite desk—Major B.'s operating table. Operating rooms are the cleanest, driest, warmest, best lit, altogether most pleasant places I have found in Spain—but not the most fragrant.

January 25. Alcorisa, and I Hope This Town Will Not Be Assassinated

The first load arrived soon after dark. Usual hour for their arrival...

One of the wounded was a head case. He came in gray, cold, nose visibly stopped

by blood, bloodstained bandage behind ear. Arms flopped down from stretcher as we unloaded him. Pulse hard to find. We put him in kitchen, head near fire, lower end of stretcher propped by water jug, and threw so much wood on the chimneyless flames that the lieutenant had to hold handkerchief over his nose while using stethoscope. Robust, healthy young guy. Looked like a born wisecracker. When he pushed on his chest, the lips bubbled. Didn't warm up in half an hour, so we took papers out of pocket, carried him outside, opened up two feet of earth with shovel and pickax, one of us holding candle and the others standing about, miserably cold. Nothing fancy. No songs or speeches. Not a single word. We were cold hungry and tired. We hurried.

January 29? My birthday? Valverde

The new, dark and well-cemented interior of the sheepfold in which I have for the

the two small blanket-stuffed openings in the heavy stone walls.

Two more frontline [ambulance drivers] have been killed, I hear. One, speared to the road by the planes, burned to death. The other tried to rub noses with a truck at night. Headlights were off.

I'm just about coming back to earth after a 48-hour stay in fever-hell. Dreamed that I was back in the States, trying to decide to leave my job and come to Spain.

Jack now drives my car. She couldn't be in better hands and feet, but this is the first time that my sweetheart has gone out without me, and I'm lonesome for her... The fighting has let up a great deal in the past two days. The war can't go on without me.

The wards are full of dirt fever and pneumonia, with suspicions of typhoid. The men have been sleeping on the ground for the past 29 days. The temperature didn't rise above zero, Fahrenheit, during the first week.

February 1. Valverde

I feel entirely cured this morning. Did the whole thing myself, unassisted by so much as 20 grains of aspirin. Drugs have been running short and must be saved for the wounded. I am now sitting up in bed. Wait for B. to tell me that I can get up.

The ward is a rough place. Enough blankets, nurses, urinals, attention and beans. Diets out of the question. The wards of every frontline hospital are intended only to rest postoperative cases until they can be moved. Men don't eat for quite some time after they come out of the ether. Reason why this ward is so congested is that one building of the Mora railhead hospital was bombed, along with a hospital train. The last load we sent out was returned to us.

Throughout the entire system for the handling of the wounded and the sick there runs the following main purpose: to get the disabled to the main base hospitals far back of the lines as quickly as possible. It is only in permanent establishments that real treatment is given. Between the trenches and the base hospitals much surgery but little medicine is practiced. Many lives depend on our doctor's ability to diagnose correctly... The caliber of the doctors of the 35th Division is high. The lower levels of the staff are not quite so uniformly good. It was very hard to judge human fiber in the States, or in Albacete. War, especially at the front, is an extreme test of character. Peculiar things have happened. Again and again, *personnel* and the training of *personnel* of every type, fit to undertake constantly greater and greater responsibilities, are decisive conditions necessary for the conduct of the war.

February 2. Valverde

Stories still come in about snipers in Teruel. They hide all day in the intricate and half-ruined tunnels, take to windows and rooftops at night. It is five weeks since Teruel has been completely ours! A sniper got Fred Mowbray of New Orleans in the base of the spine. The major operated. Paralyzed from the waist down, urine accumulating in the kidneys, he begged to be catheterized. Once we were to do this, Fred's ureter would remain inert, and



Neugass captured this image of Spanish civilians killed during a fascist air raid on Cuevas.

past twenty-four hours lain in bed with dirt fever seems like the empty hold of a ship. The winter wind roars above me like a gale at sea.

I write by candlelight, although it is daytime. The hospital carpenter has been too busy to rig windowpanes into

When will the brigades go on rest? We're wearing out. Our equipment is wearing out. Hardly a watch left with which to take a pulse. Most of the thermometers have broken. But so long as the rifling in the barrels of the guns don't wear out, nothing much matters.

he would always have to be artificially relieved. He begged for morphine, which could not be given him. Crying all the more pitifully because he was not delirious, Fred was carried out of the ward and evacuated this morning. I hear that spine cases, sooner or later, all die.

...Why are we such good troops? Why are we a match for any body of men the military preoccupation of Europe can produce? Whenever I look at the men, I wonder how this can be true. We look like any subway careful or movieful of men, slight as to physique rather than husky. The only answer I can find for the excellence with which even Franco credits us is that the ability of troops to undergo the modern conditions of war depends not so much on their training and their command, but their understanding of why the war is being fought and what they stand to lose or gain by the outcome... No officer's pistol can fire fast enough to make men stay in their trenches unless they are given something better to fight for than "making the world safe for democracy," "for race, for blood and honor," or "for God and Country," or "for the Fatherland."

"For a New World"? Yes. We will not run from the trenches if we know we are making a new world. We will hold our ground, to share in the wealth with which the world is ever more overflowing. That poverty amidst plenty should cease, we will bear against the full weight of mechanical death-machines bought by men who think that poverty amidst plenty is the natural and immortal principle of life laid down by the essential foulness of what they call "human nature."

There will be a new world. Who likes this one?

March 22. Barcelona

The major and I have shared, for the past week, half of the home of a lawyer in the former residential district, far above the city. As soon as my passport and International brigade papers are ready, I will leave Spain.

I am very lucky. My lungs occasionally throw up blood into my throat, I have a hernia, the weakness of my legs is probably due to small pieces of metal that remain in or near my spinal column,

and I carry various shrapnel scars on my left leg and my scalp. I am very lucky.

"What do you want to do?" the major asked me. "Stay here and drive my car or go back to the States and write that book?"

omelet after omelet, but *il manqué de la volunte. No tengo gusto*. Do not know what is the matter.

Goodbye to Spain and the Spanish. I am afraid that many, many more of



Neugass and other members of the American Medical Bureau enjoy a rare moment of calm.

I told him that I would rather go back to the States and write what I had seen in Spain.

"O.K., I'll send you out. But who the hell is going to send me out?"

March 24. Cerbère, France. 8 a.m.

I sit at a table in the buffet of a French railroad station near enough to Spain to hear bombs fall on Port Bou.

Ten minutes ago I passed through the last passport, the last customs formality. My good luck had held to the end... This is a great moment. This is the instant at which everything has become safe and healthy and peaceful.

...The four of us who sit at this table—a tank driver and a machine gunner from the Luxembourg, a Czech aircraft mechanic and myself—wait for an omelet. The waiter just put a bottle of wine and a large loaf of bread, made of wheat and baked with yeast, on the table.

...The letdown has come. I should be drinking bottles of wine and eating

them are going to be killed. They lack planes, guns and skill. The Spanish are too young at war to stand off, unaided, German and Italian experts.

...A long time after I have forgotten everything else about these months in Spain—if I am able to forget about any part or instant of them—I will remember the time when I mistook the sound of my own lips puffing on a cigarette for the sound of a falling bomb; and the spectacle my headlights picked out one cold night miles from the nearest lines, of a very old woman hobbling back to the rear, alone, on a cane.

We have finished the omelet the waiter brought us, and the bottle of wine. My three comrades sit silent and taciturn about the table. No one speaks of ordering more food.

The heel of the loaf we ate fell to the floor. Four hands reached out to pick it up. Suddenly realizing that we were in France and not in Spain, in peace and not in war, we smiled foolishly at each other, leaned back in our chairs and again were silent. MH