

# PEACE BEFORE IT CAME

## The Premature Armistice of 1918

ON November 7, 1918, the United States celebrated the Armistice ending the World War four days before the actual signature of the Armistice terms. The fact that a premature announcement was also made of the termination of the present war makes it worth while asking how such things can happen. Here is the story of the "false armistice" of 1918 as told by Roy W. Howard, the man who sent the message on which celebrations were started. The circumstances surrounding the origin of the premature Armistice report and its transmission constituted one of the most remarkable incidents in newspaper history.

ON November 6 (1918), the day of my departure from Paris for Brest, a Berlin dispatch from Wolff (the official German news agency) had stated that the German delegates had left to meet the Allied commission. The dispatch did not state where they had left from, and left uncertain the time of their arrival. However, there was a constant interchange of messages going on across the lines and events were moving with great rapidity. There was every reason to believe that an announcement of the signing of a truce was but a matter of hours.

All of these facts were clearly in my mind when a few minutes after nine the next morning I stepped off the train at Brest under orders to report to General George H. Harries, Commander of the American Expeditionary Forces at Brest. Before I had time to make an inquiry, I was approached by a young man in mufti, who addressed me with the inquiry: "Mr. Howard?"

### "Grand News, Isn't It?"

Upon my acknowledgment of the identity, the young man introduced himself as a representative of the local I.O. (Intelligence Office), and said that he had been sent to conduct me to the office of Lieutenant Arthur Hornblow, Jun., Chief Intelligence Officer of General Harries' staff. As we got under way on foot, my escort remarked quite casually, "Well, it's grand news, isn't it?"

In answer to my inquiry as to the nature of the news, he replied that the Armistice had been signed. That was news to me. Furthermore, it was vitally important to me for two reasons. First, because Brest was the cable head and a dispatch filed at Brest was transmitted directly into the New York office of the cable company. Secondly, because, due to the notorious slowness and inefficiency of the French telegraph lines, news dispatches filed at the censor's office in Paris—even urgent messages—frequently required from three to seven hours in transmission over the land lines from Paris to Brest. Once in Brest, transmission to New York was a matter of but a few moments. If, by any chance, announcement of the Armistice had been released to the Press in Paris that morning, at any time within the preceding three to seven hours, a news dispatch filed directly through the cable office in Brest had a good chance of reaching New York, not merely minutes, but possibly hours, ahead of any Press dispatch filed in Paris.

Disappointingly, however, my escort in mufti explained that there had been no official announcement. The rumour, general throughout the base, was via the grapevine—the unofficial word-of-mouth

communication of the army, which often ran considerably ahead of official announcements.

### "A Pain in the Neck"

We hurried to the office of Lieutenant Hornblow, who was awaiting my arrival. He, too, had the rumour, but no official announcement. He did have an invitation for me to lunch with General Harries at 12 o'clock. After a check-up of my credentials and my travel order, Hornblow informed me that I was to return on the s.s. Great Northern. The time of sailing was to be communicated to me a few hours before the ship's departure. The lieutenant escorted me to the Hotel Continental, to which I had been assigned, and then, his own interest in the armistice rumour as keen as my own, suggested that we visit the headquarters of Admiral Henry B. Wilson, Commanding Officer of all the United States Naval Forces in France, to whom I carried a letter of introduction from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels.

Unfortunately, Admiral Wilson was not at his office. The sailor on desk duty had heard the armistice rumour, but so far as he knew the Admiral had received no official report. Admiral Wilson was not expected in his office until four o'clock that afternoon. Had Admiral Wilson been in his office at that time, I should have paid my courtesy call, been told that the armistice rumour was unconfirmed, and the dramatic developments resulting from my meeting with him later in the day would not have eventuated.

Our next call was at the headquarters of General Harries, whom we found in high spirits as a result of the rumours which had come to him and members of his staff. Prior to luncheon all hands had a drink "To the Armistice," but to me this unconfirmable rumour was rapidly becoming a severe pain in the neck. So long as the rumour was unofficial it was, under the rules of military censorship, not news and could not be filed as a dispatch. The rumour was much less valuable than no news.

### Visit to the Admiral

At approximately ten minutes past four in the afternoon Major Cook, now of General Harries' staff but formerly news editor of the *Washington Star*, and I again climbed the five flights of stairs to Admiral Wilson's office overlooking the Place du President Wilson, the city's large public square. The day was balmy for November, a bright sun was shining, and the Navy band was giving a concert in the centre of the square, surrounded by a throng of civilians and of French and American soldiers and sailors. As we entered the Admiral's office we were greeted by Ensign James Sellards, Admiral Wilson's personal aide, secretary, and interpreter. Sellards immediately ushered us into

the inner office, where Admiral Wilson was standing by his desk holding in his hand a sheaf of carbon copies of a message. The bluff old sailor's greeting to Major Cook, even before I could be introduced, was: "By God, Major, this is news, isn't it?" and, without waiting for a reply or giving Cook an opportunity to make an introduction, the Admiral barked at a young orderly who had followed us into the room:

"Here, take this to the editor of *La Depeche* and tell him that he can publish it—and tell him to put it on his bulletin board. And here, take this copy to that bandmaster; tell him to read it to the crowd—both in English and French—and then tell him to put some life into that music!"

As the sailor saluted, reached for the copies of the dispatch, and started for the door with a single movement, the Admiral called after him, "And tell the lieutenant on duty to break out the biggest flag we have across the front of the building."

### Set to Music

With this the Admiral turned to me with an outstretched hand, as Cook made the somewhat delayed introduction, followed by an inquiry as to what the big news was.

"The Armistice has been signed," replied the Admiral, as he handed a copy of the dispatch to Cook.

"Is this official?" inquired the Major. "Howard and I have been chasing this rumour all day, but haven't been able to get anything that was authoritative."

"Official, hell," snorted the Admiral. "I should say it is official. I just received this over my direct wire from the Embassy—from Jackson. It's the official announcement. I've given it to *Depeche*, and told the bandmaster to—he's evidently done it."

At this instant a roar came up from the packed square five stories below, a dozen lorry motors started backfiring, and the Navy band broke into "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

# The Sun

## EXTRA

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1918.

# HOSTILITIES CEASE

## ARMISTICE SIGNED.

## GERMANY ACCEPTS ALLIES' TERMS

### Fighting Ended Yesterday Afternoon

By Cable.—Press Association.—Copyright  
Extraordinary

(A. & N.Z.)

NEW YORK, November 7

The German armistice was signed at 11 o'clock on Thursday morning.

Hostilities ceased at 2 p.m.

GHENT EVACUATED BY THE ENEMY

(High Commissioner.) (Rec. November 8, 9 a.m.) LONDON, Nov 7  
Ghent has been evacuated.

Printed by David Davidson, of 12 Nassy Street, Christchurch, Printer, and published by Sidney Roger Ellison, of 47 Worcester Street, Christchurch, Publisher, at the Registered Printing Office of the Canterbury Publishing Company, Limited, 47 Worcester Street, Christchurch, New Zealand. Friday, November 8, 1918.

"I beg your pardon, Admiral," I inquired, "but if this is official and you've announced it to the base and have given it to the local newspaper for publication, have you any objection to my filing it to the United Press?"

"Hell, no," replied the Admiral, "this is official. It is direct from G.H.Q., via the Embassy. It's signed by Captain Jackson, our Naval Attaché at Paris. Here's a copy of what I have just sent to *Depeche*. Go to it. By the way, unless your French is okay, perhaps I'd better—Here, Ensign Sellards, I'd like to have you take Mr. Howard over to the cable office. See that he gets this message cleared through the censorship."

"Thanks, Admiral," I replied. "If this is quite okay with you, I'm going to take it on the run, and I'll be seeing you a little later."

"Okay; come back when you get through, and, Sellards, stay with Mr. Howard until he gets his message through, then bring him back here."

### The Cable to New York

Down the five flights of stairs Sellards and I took it on the run, crossing the Place du President Wilson to the cable office, and stopping at the office of *La Depeche*, which was a client of the United Press. It was my intention to retype the message, addressing it to the United Press in New York on the regular form of cable blank, and making a carbon copy for my own files. But at the office of *Depeche* I was unable to find a typewriter with a standard keyboard. In my difficulty the telegraph

(continued on next page)