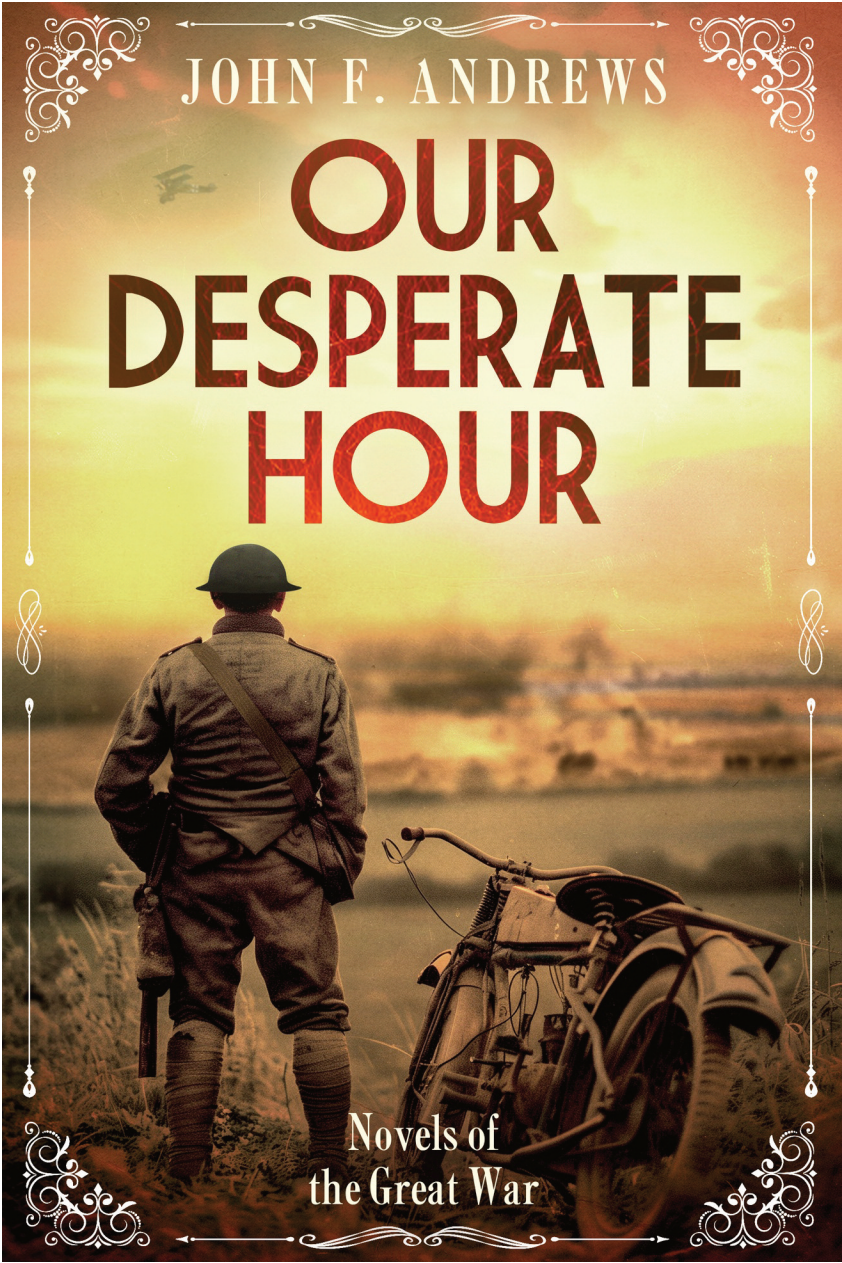


A sepia-toned photograph of a World War I soldier in a trench, viewed from behind. He is wearing a helmet and a uniform with a satchel. In the foreground, a vintage motorcycle is partially visible. The background shows a battlefield with smoke and a distant city under a dramatic, orange-hued sunset sky. The entire image is framed by ornate white decorative borders.

JOHN F. ANDREWS

OUR DESPERATE HOUR

Novels of
the Great War

*A father's search for his estranged son plunges US Army
Major Ab Johnson into a pivotal battle, the outcome of
which could determine the fate of Paris and the outcome of
the Great War.*

Ab Johnson has one last chance to reconcile with his son, Jack, a marine second lieutenant who is heading into the worst conflict in human history. Second lieutenants don't last long in the killing fields of France. Ab's quest leads him from the backrooms of Paris, through command posts, and to the front lines during the Battle of Belleau Wood. He confronts French petulance and American inexperience as he struggles to help organize an army medical system swamped with casualties during his desperate search.

Ab's story intertwines with those of an arrogant surgeon who sees war as opportunity, a navy corpsman searching for his place in the world, and a marine private full of fighting spirit and patriotism. They confront their destinies in a grueling fight filled with chaos and heart-stopping fear.

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Our Desperate Hour

Novels of the Great War

John F Andrews



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, events, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogue concerning those people are fictionalized and are not intended to depict the actual persons, events, or change the entirely fictional nature of this novel. This novel is a creative work by the author; no artificial intelligence system was used to create this novel.

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From a Marine Father to his sons and their comrades.

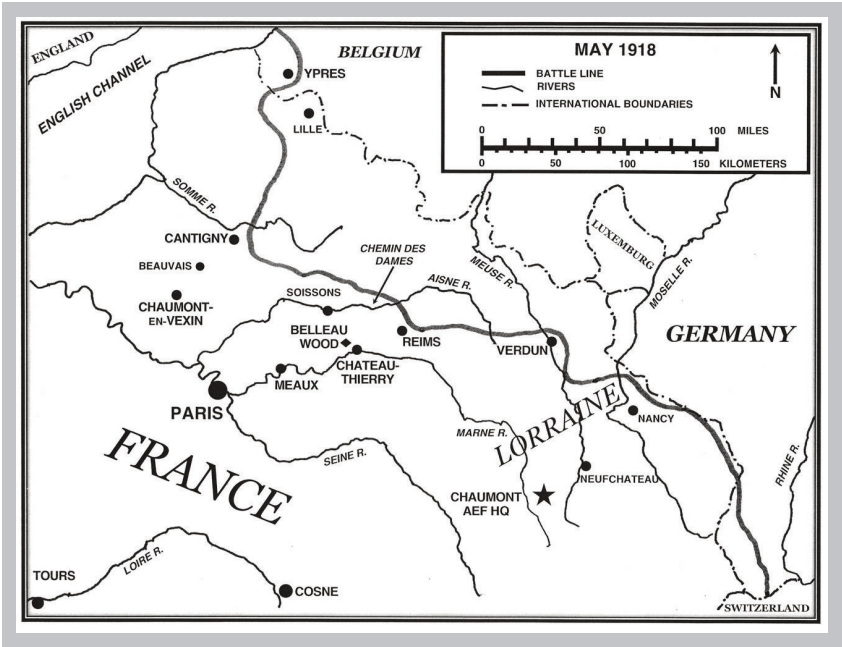
Semper Fidelis.

Foreword

This is a novel, not a history book. It is a work of love; an ode to Marines and to all the Americans who fought in World War One, their “docs”, and their families.

Map of France

Location of The Battle Front in May, 1918



Our Desperate Hour

Chapter One

Major Albert “Ab” Johnson, US Army Reserve

Paris, France

Thursday, May 30, 1918

The army lied to me. And I think it’s about to get worse.

My old friend Ira Cunningham—now Major Cunningham, US Army Reserve—charges toward me with a scowl that tells me my arrival is unwelcome. His fists are clenched. I overpay the cabbie who brought me from the train station to get him out of my hair.

Ira stops two feet from me. I face him and narrow my eyes. Do I extend a hand or duck?

“We’ve gotta to talk.” Ira glances back at the building behind him. “Now. Not here.”

I snatch my luggage and double-time it to keep up as he leads me into a café two doors down. Empty sidewalk tables and paper tape criss-crossing the windows to prevent them from becoming shrapnel flash a warning. The war is near.

Wary faces glare at us when we enter. The waiter frowns as he takes an order. The chef, wearing an immaculate white double-breasted chef’s coat, apron, and striped trousers hustles us to a window table away from

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the other patrons. I order two coffees, black, since Ira's French is embarrassing.

Ira's eyes don't stop moving. He's winding up.

Before Ira can say anything, the waiter sets two china cups of strong-smelling coffee in front of us.

My hearing goes haywire.

A thunderous explosion blasts the air from my chest.

Then—nothing.

Chapter Two

Major Ab Johnson

Pain pounds like a spear stuck between my nose and the back of my skull. Blood floods my throat. I'm choking and cough out a mouthful. The only smell is blood. Muffled shouts and screams barely make it through my ringing ears. The world is black. I try to open my eyes, but they're caked with something—sand, dust?

Where am I?

How did I get here?

What's all the yelling? I can't make out the words.

My head is trapped. I can't move. Something solid pushes my face into a flat, hard surface.

My arms and legs pulse with an electric current.

Each beat of my heart sends a new jolt through my head. Each shot of pain stops coherent thought.

It means I'm alive. But where?

The weight pushing my head down disappears. Hands grab under my arms and yank me up. I hazard a blink. No luck. I reach up to rub the dirt from my eyes. One touch to my nose launches another lance through my skull. I try blinking, but the world's a blur.

"Ab, can you stand? We gotta get out!" That's Ira's voice, as though he's shouting through a pillow.

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I reach up and try to brush off my eyes without touching my nose. I blink. The blur is less, but none of this makes sense.

We're in a room. Ceiling collapsed. My face was pinned to a table in a pool of blood, coffee, and plaster dust. There are chairs, fractured coffee cups. I glance to my side and see two unmoving legs wearing striped trousers protruding from beneath a collapsed ceiling beam. The chef.

The café. Having coffee. With Ira.

"Get out!" Ira shouts.

A woman moans, clutching a screaming child. A man limps away from his table, holding a napkin to his bleeding head.

I grab a napkin and brush the dust off my eyes and then place it ever so gingerly beneath my nose. A gob of blood chokes me, and I spit it out. Ira pulls me through the shattered doorway toward an intact building stoop.

"We should go back, help the others," I shout above the ringing in my ears.

"All you'll do is bleed on them. Come on."

"What was that?" My hearing is returning, but my ears still ring.

Ira leads, picking our way over debris and shattered glass. My brain's never felt this way—thoughts dull, slow, uncertain. Ira pulls a chair over to the stoop leading into an intact building and guides me into it. It looks like a Parisian café chair. I glance back and see toppled chairs and tables in front of the former café now buried in debris. How the hell did we get out of there?

Things are making a little more sense. I blink and take in the surroundings. The buildings along the street—Paris. To my right, where we were, is a rubble pile with the remnants of walls around a smoldering crater in the center. Stones, bricks, plaster, and glass extend onto the street. A chunk of blasted wall crushed the roof of a cab. The cabbie's beret sits on a head turned at an unsurvivable angle.

I tip my head back. Everything spins.

Bile mixes with the blood in my throat, my brain too numb to be anything more than a bystander. I spit out another mouthful of blood. It's as if I'm watching through a dusty looking glass.

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“Close your eyes. Let me clean up your face,” Ira shouts, his voice now clearer.

I hold the napkin under my nose while Ira wipes off my face. I try squeezing the nose to staunch the bleeding. A shot of pain stops me.

Ira’s face is in front of me, inspecting me with a frown. I’ve seen that expression before. Where? Chicago. When one of our friends, a fellow reporter, was tortured by the Mob and dumped, barely alive, in front of the Tribune Tower.

Okay. I’m Ab Johnson and this is Ira Cunningham, and we’re in Paris. Got that much. The way he’s looking at me tells me I look like hell.

I can see better now. I’m hurt, a building has blown up, Ira’s in an army uniform—a major. I blink.

Uniformed army soldiers and officers erupt from the building to my left like bats from a cave. One small man in a navy uniform shoots past into the rubble to stand by a man cradling a young girl in his arms. I know that officer but can’t remember his name. A scarlet stain surrounding a void on the center of the girl’s pink-and-white-striped pinafore brings bile into my throat. A little girl torn apart by shrapnel, held by a man who must be her father.

“Trudy, here!” Ira shouts.

What’s she doing here? Ira’s daughter, Trudy, cute as ever, petite, porcelain skin and black hair, wearing an Army Nursing Corps uniform and cap. She inspects my face and takes over holding the napkin to my nose.

The navy officer stoops down and touches the child’s neck while saying something to the distraught father, shakes his head, and shouts, “She’s dead.” His name’s Arthur. A navy surgeon. Where did I meet him? The man holding the girl pleads in French and grabs Arthur’s left leg. Arthur jerks his leg free. “She’s dead—there’s nothing I can do,” he shouts. The father continues to beg for help as Arthur rushes away.

A woman I recognize—Alice Simmons—picks her way through the rubble with an army captain. Taller than most of the men around her, slender, with auburn hair in a loose bun, Alice is Trudy’s best friend from Minneapolis. A journalist with an RN. My son Jack’s friend from college. They kneel next to a woman whose right arm is a mangled mess,

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blood spurting. A colonel joins them and squeezes the woman's arm with both hands.

Arthur rushes over, shoves the colonel away, and grabs the arm above the elbow. The colonel nearly trips as he staggers back, his face red with rage. The captain gives Alice his belt. Alice encircles the arm with it and pulls it tight, speaking with Arthur, nodding. The captain uses a short board to support the shattered wrist.

There's a little less fuzz in my ringing ears. I blink. I must look terrible—I see it in Trudy's eyes. She's been Jack's chum since childhood.

Jack. *Jack*. That's who I need to find. But he's not here. With the goddamned Marines—somewhere. This isn't the place I'll find him. But how do I know that?

I lean back in the chair, Trudy holding the napkin to my nose. Ira steadies me with a hand on each shoulder. I'm a bystander. One of the wounded. A casualty before I can even report for duty. Useless.

My fog is clearing a little.

Bells clang, engines roar, and hoofbeats echo as emergency vehicles approach. A horse-drawn fire engine pulls to a stop. The crew pulls a hose as they wade through debris toward the smoking center of the ruin. A motor ambulance screeches to a halt, followed by two more. One crew takes away the man still holding the child, pleading, crying. Another crew loads the woman onto a stretcher and hurries her away, followed by Alice. Arthur—what the devil is his last name?—and a captain approach. It seems to take Arthur a moment before recognition dawns on his face. "Let me look at you, Major Johnson."

Trudy eases the napkin away from my nose. Arthur and the captain inspect my face, telling me to blink, move my eyes, open and close my mouth. "Nose is broken," Arthur says. "You'll have to get to a hospital."

I once watched a doctor *fix* the broken nose of a union leader who had been roughed up by mine goons back home in Butte, Montana. I want no part of that. "I'm sure I'll be okay. Just need a washcloth and some aspirin." I try to pop my ears—sound is still muffled.

"No. It has to be fixed. That's an order," Arthur says.

"Lieutenant, I'm not sure you can order a major anything other than a drink at the officers' club," I say.

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“But I can,” a voice next to us says—the colonel Arthur shoved away from the woman. “Local hospitals’ll be jammed.” The colonel turns to the captain. “Take him to the American Hospital in Neuilly.” The colonel glares at Arthur. “Lieutenant, Junior Grade, do you make a habit of interfering with fellow physicians in the middle of life-threatening events? *Never* do that again.” Arthur’s face is red; I’m guessing more in anger than embarrassment.

The captain returns. Ira and Trudy help me to an idling Dodge staff car. I keep the napkin to my face to catch the blood. My head feels full as I bend down to get into the rear seat.

Ira slides in next to me. “What would Helen say if she could see you now?”

ABOUT JOHN F. ANDREWS

John F. Andrews is the award-winning author of the *Novels of the Great War Series*, including *Our Desperate Hour*, *An American Nurse in Paris*, and *Dogs Don't Cry*. He writes from the perspective of a service family member and critical care physician to craft unique stories based on real events. His characters struggle shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the real heroes of WWI as well as showing the plight of civilians caught in one of the most horrible conflicts in human history. His novels are stories of struggle, survival, hope, resilience, and love.



ALSO BY JOHN F. ANDREWS

An American Nurse In Paris - Novels of the Great War

Medical journalist Alice Simmons has one last chance to stay alive in this story of courage, humility, determination, compassion, and hope during the last year of World War One.

Medical journalist Alice Simmons's quest to become a war correspondent careens headlong into a wall of sexism and deceit after her arrival in Paris in 1918. The suave officer in charge of the American Army press office refuses to let Alice leave Paris while her male counterparts scramble to the Front during the German spring offensive. One evening, his misogyny escalates to a drunken assault. Alice manages to fight back, but then her attacker begins a campaign of false accusations to cover his crime.

A nursing position in an American Red Cross military hospital is Alice's only hope to remain in France. It turns into the best scoop of her career. Wounded marines and soldiers from the Battle of Belleau Wood flood her ward. A tragic death amid the human wreckage of war unlocks Alice's compassion and her capacity to love, both long-buried after a childhood tragedy. Her patients' courage inspires Alice's fight to restore her honor and open her heart.

Dogs Don't Cry - Novels of the Great War

A dog's devotion, courage, and intelligence stand between two French teens and despair. Love and determination sustain the threesome as they flee the tidal wave of war. A story of hardship, peril, resilience, and hope.

Abby is the Durand family dog, a companion for fifteen-year-old Marcel and his sister, Geneviève. Marcel is plagued by doubts about his courage as he approaches military age. Geneviève has severe pneumonia and is convinced she will soon die. Evacuation is ordered as the German army barrels toward their home village. The doctor tending to Geneviève warns their mother that the rigors of evacuation will kill the young girl on the eve of her thirteenth birthday. Their mother waits until the last moment to leave their home in search of shelter.

A disastrous escape leaves them orphaned and alone.

Marcel and Geneviève must find a distant relative, Cousin Henri, who lives near Paris. However, they have never met him, are not sure of his last name, and don't know his address. Abby is the key—Henri is her former owner, though she begs to differ on the “owner” concept. If anyone can find him, she can. The teens confront their worst fears while seeking refuge amid the chaos of war, armed only with their faith in Abby.

A Dog's Gift - Novels of the Great War

What would happen if a corrupt judge sent two teenage WWI French orphans and their dog to the wrong home?

Thirteen-year-old Geneviève Durand and her fifteen-year-old brother, Marcel, fled a war zone with their dog, Abby, in June 1918. They find refuge with distant cousins in Paris who apply for temporary guardianship of the teens for the upcoming school year. A judge with a grudge against the cousins shatters their plan when he awards custody to an estranged aunt and her husband.

Geneviève, Marcel, and Abby struggle to survive in a war-damaged house with dysfunctional guardians in a village the French army declared unfit for human habitation. Will Abby's ability to help people through grief and loss be enough to restore hope as the Christmas season of 1918 approaches?