

António's Diary: An Azorean Emigrant's Epic Poem About World War I
by António da Silva Melo
Translation and notes by Katharine F. Baker and Emanuel Melo

The Great War. The War to End All Wars. A century ago this autumn – at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month – the Armistice ended combat in World War I. An Azorean emigrant who served in the United States Army had kept a journal of his American life, including combat service, all of which he turned into an epic poem of 374 quatrains (nearly 1,500 lines). But in 1911 – almost 22 years after his birth in Almagreira, Santa Maria – when António da Silva Melo arrived in California, he worked at first on farms in the Richmond/San Pablo region of the San Francisco East Bay area. He was inept at milking and it caused his hands excruciating pain, so he switched to other hard labor, including cutting grass with a scythe and herding hogs into town.

1 I met my friend
While working on a ranch.
His job was herding cows into a corral
In order to be milked.

8 From the outset
I detested
The job of milking cows.
I knew I'd never get used to it.

10 You can say whatever you like,
But I didn't want to milk cows.
I'd rather find other work
To do on a ranch

30 That very morning
I went to speak with the bossman
So he'd pay me what I was owed,
Because I wanted to quit.

31 He was a rascal.
Who nobody ever heard speak.
He asked me if I was so rich that
I didn't need to work.

Although the foreman offered him a \$10 raise to \$35 a month to stay, António quit, and headed for his uncle's home. He then went to live with a man from Pico, whom he found nosy, so he left to live on his own. During this period he worked as a riveter for Standard Oil (likely in Richmond). Although war had broken out in Europe in 1914, the United States remained neutral; in fact, President Woodrow Wilson won a narrow reelection in 1916 with the campaign slogan "He kept us out of war." But soon thereafter, German submarines sank seven US merchant ships – and the Germans secretly tried to incite Mexico to invade the United States.

On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany. Two months later, 27-year-old António duly registered for the US military draft. Four months after that, he rode the train to Washington to report for duty at Camp Lewis near Tacoma. After being examined, then kitted as a soldier, he was stationed at Camp Kearny (now Miramar) near San Diego, where for nine months he learned to dig trenches like those used in the European war. For such hard labor in the heat, the men were fed beans and paid \$1 a day.

60 I thought my life was going well.
Then it took a turn for the worse
When the bad news arrived,
That I had to register for the military

65 I ate and drank.
And for three weeks rested up
Until October 7th
When I went to report for military duty.

66 At nine in the evening
I caught the steam train.
It was the 12th of that month
When I arrived at Camp Lewis.

69 On October 27th
That I boarded the steam train.
For California,
Near San Diego

77 On July 18th
I left that camp
With all my pockets
Turned inside out.

After spending most of his pay wooing a girl in San Diego, António, too penniless to buy even cigarettes, and other soldiers sailed to England. Two weeks later they left for France aboard the *Queen Alexandra*, crossing waters filled with German U-boats. Upon arrival they traveled to their camp, sometimes in vehicles, other times by foot. After three more weeks of training, they left for the front lines. António adopted a fatalistic attitude about the war.

The men labored hard building roads near the front lines, so that US artillery could pass. They stood guard at night, too, even in foul weather; António wrote how he was always afraid. The troops moved from site to site, and were perpetually cold, wet, tired and underfed. They slept in bomb craters, even atop corpses. António resented that officers' horses sometimes received better accommodations than enlisted men. And he yearned for his home church on Santa Maria.

78 I traveled to France.
By Our Lord's accounting

With sixty-five lousy cents
As my entire net worth

115 But by God's grace
I had no complaints.
After five weeks at the front
Without a single shot hitting me.

144 How many, many times
The dead were dug up,
And right on top of them
A man would lie down.

174 Our Lady of Bom Despacho
Sprang immediately to mind,
As I heard a voice say,
God will take you when your time comes.

After five weeks they left for battle in armored vehicles. António's luck ran out when he experienced the horrors of warfare first-hand, cannons blazing all around. One night he saw eight horses and five men killed instantly on a road. – reporting in stanza 222, "It was hell." And then:

224 It was just one bomb
But it made me shudder,
Because it struck so close
That it almost killed me.

225 I was leaning against the barricade
When the bomb fell.
The earth that it blew up
Almost buried me

242 Others were so badly mutilated
That it was hard to recognize them
And fire was still
Burning those bodies.

245 It was the only thing
They would always say:
When you hear bombs,
Try to take cover.

246 But I didn't need anyone
To remind me of this
Because instinctively
I knew how to protect myself.

255 Believe me,
It cost me dearly to see
Those bodies in pieces,
With their blood still flowing.

266 Many, many times
I wanted to kill myself
Buried in so much misery
That I wanted to escape this world

The soldiers had to be deloused nightly, they were covered in mud, and the water was poisonous to the touch, so couldn't be used even for washing, let alone consumption. German mustard gas burned their lungs, and the stench of death was everywhere. António blessed the date of November 11, 1918, when the Armistice took effect at 11 AM. And he couldn't wait to leave France. The soldiers traveled near Belgium, where locals poured into the streets and shouted "Long live the Americans!" to their liberators. Finally, on December 12 the men crossed a bridge at 9 PM and entered Germany, where they stayed for a month. Upon reaching the Rhine (amid snow and cold), he gave thanks; the next day was a feast day, with supper at noon.

Back in America, now age 30, António seized the opportunity as a military veteran to obtain expedited naturalized citizenship, almost a year to the day after the Armistice. Yet just 11 months after that, he sailed aboard the *Roma* from Providence, RI., back to his native Santa Maria, where less than four months later he wed Luisa da Assunção. They had two children: Maria (born 1922) and José (born 1927). António da Silva Melo died in 1935 at age 46.

354 I was so glad
To get out of France
That cursed land
Where I'd left behind years of my life.

373 I am indebted to God
For showing me compassion,
Because I am a human being
Created with a good heart

374 These are all stories
To pass the time
If I don't brag about myself
Who will?

THE END

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Wikimedia Commons, for the postcard image.

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