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Wengler's 'Two Shots'

Richard Harding Davis Questions Story of Officer Who Shelled Rheims Cathedral

To the Editor of The New York Times:

I have just seen a letter in THE TIMES from a correspondent in the German trenches outside of Rheims. He reports a statement made to him by Lieut. Wengler of the heavy artillery, who claims he is the officer who shelled the cathedral, at which he fired two shots, and "only two."

Wengler says, "The French observer on the cathedral was first noticed on Sept. 13 ***the fellow continued 'on the job' quite shamelessly until the 18th, when I aimed two shots at the cathedral and only two. No more were needed to dislodge him. One from a 15-centimeter howitzer struck the top of the 'observation tower,' the other, from a 21-centimeter mortar, hit the roof and set it on fire. I wanted to dislodge the observer with the last possible damage to the fine old cathedral***the French also had a battery placed about 100 yards from the cathedral."

Editorially THE TIMES says such a statement may prove of "value as evidence." May I also, as evidence, tell what I saw? I arrived at the cathedral of 3 o'clock on the afternoon of the day Lieut. Wengler says he fired two shells, one of which hit the observation tower and one of which set fire to the roof. Up to the hour of 3 howitzers' shells had passed through the southern wall of the cathedral, killing two of the German wounded inside, had wrecked the Grand Hotel opposite the cathedral, knocked down four houses immediately facing it, and in a dozen places torn up immense holes in the cathedral square. Twenty-four hours after Lieut. Wengler claims he ceased firing shells set fire to the roof and utterly wrecked the chapel of the cathedral and the archbishop's palace, which joined to the cathedral by a yard no wider than Fifth Avenue, and in the direction of the German guns the two shells fired by Lieut. Wengler had already wrecked all that part of the city surrounding the cathedral for a quarter of a mile.

To get an idea of the destruction, suppose St. Patrick's Cathedral, on Fifth Avenue, to be the Rheims Cathedral, the Union Club, and the Vanderbilt houses, the chapel and archbishop's palace, and all the buildings running north from St. Patrick's Cathedral to Central Park and east and west to Madison Avenue and Sixth Avenue, that part of Rheims that was utterly wrecked.

That gives you some idea of the effectiveness of Lieut. Wengler's fire

"Father," he says, "I cannot tell a lie. I did it with only two shells!"

The statement of Lieut. Wengler that the French placed a battery a hundred yards from the cathedral also is interesting. The cathedral stands in a maze of twisting narrow lanes. From no spot within a quarter of a mile of it could you drive a golf ball without smashing a window a hundred feet distant. To place a battery of artillery a hundred yards from the Rheims Cathedral with the intent of firing upon the German position would be like placing a battery in Wall Street

with the idea of shelling Germans in the Bronx. Before your shells reached the Bronx you first would have to destroy all of northern New York.

Wengler says the only shells aimed at the cathedral were fired by him on the 18th, and that after that date neither he nor any other officer fired a shot. On the 22nd I was in the cathedral. It was then being shelled. I was with the Abbe Chinot Gerald Morgan of this city, Capt. Granville Fortescue of Washington, and on the steps of the cathedral was Robert Bacon, our ex-Ambassador to France.

The "evidence" of Lieut. Wengler is a question of veracity. It lies between him and these gentlemen. I am content to let it go at that.