



OVER THE TOP AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT ARTHUR GUY EMPEY MACHINE GUNNER, SERVING IN FRANCE

1917 BY ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

CHAPTER XX.

"Chats With Fritz."

We were swimming in money from the receipts of our theatrical venture, and had forgotten all about the war, when an order came through that our brigade would again take over their sector of the line.

The day that these orders were issued, our captain assembled the company and asked for volunteers to go to the Machine Gun school at St. Omar. I volunteered and was accepted.

Sixteen men from our brigade left for the course in machine gunnery. This course lasted two weeks and we rejoined our unit and were assigned to the brigade machine gun company. It almost broke my heart to leave my company mates.

The gun we used was the Vickers, Light .303, water cooled.

I was still a member of the Suicide club, having jumped from the frying pan into the fire. I was assigned to section 1, gun No. 2, and the first time "in" took position in the front-line trench.

During the day our gun would be dismantled on the fire step ready for instant use. We shared a dugout with the Lewis gunners. At "stand to" we would mount our gun on the parapet and go on watch beside it until "stand down" in the morning. Then the gun would be dismantled and again placed in readiness on the fire step.

We did eight days in the front-line trench without anything unusual happening outside of the ordinary trench routine. On the night that we were to "carry out," a bombing raid against the German lines was pulled off. This raiding party consisted of sixty company men, sixteen bombers, and four Lewis machine guns with their crews.

The raid took the Boches by surprise and was a complete success, the party bringing back twenty-one prisoners.

The Germans must have been awfully sore, because they turned loose a barrage of shrapnel, with a few "Minies" and "whizz bangs" intermixed. The shells were dropping into our front line like hailstones.

To get even, we could have left the prisoners in the fire trench, in charge of the men on guard and let them click Fritz's strafing but Tommy does not treat prisoners that way.

Five of them were brought into my dugout and turned over to me so that they would be safe from the German fire.

In the candlelight, they looked very much shaken, nerves gone and chalky faces, with the exception of one, a great big fellow. He looked very much at ease. I liked him from the start.

I got out the rum jar and gave each a nip and passed around some fags, the old reliable Woodbines. The other prisoners looked their gratitude, but the big fellow said in English, "Thank you, sir, the rum is excellent and I appreciate it, also your kindness."

He told me his name was Carl Schmidt, of the Sixty-sixth Bavarian Light Infantry; that he had lived six years in New York (knew the city better than I did), had been to Coney Island and many of our ball games. He was a regular fan. I couldn't make him believe that Hans Wagner wasn't the best ball player in the world.

From New York he had gone to London, where he worked as a waiter in the Hotel Russell. Just before the war he went home to Germany to see his parents, the war came and he was conscripted.

He told me he was very sorry to hear that London was in ruins from the Zeppelin raids. I could not convince him otherwise, for hadn't he seen moving pictures in one of the German cities of St. Paul's cathedral in ruins.

I changed the subject because he was so stubborn in his belief. It was my intention to try and pump him for information as to the methods of the German snipers, who had been causing us trouble in the last few days.

I broached the subject and he shut up like a clam. After a few minutes he very innocently said:

"German snipers get paid rewards for killing the English."

I eagerly asked, "What are they?"

He answered:

"For killing or wounding an English private, the sniper gets one mark. For killing or wounding an English officer he gets five marks, but if he kills a Red Cap or English general, the sniper gets twenty-one days tied to the wheel of a limber as punishment for his carelessness."

Then he paused, waiting for me to bite, I suppose.

I bit all right and asked him why the sniper was punished for killing an English general. With a smile he replied:

"Well, you see, if all the English generals were killed, there would be no one left to make costly mistakes."

I shut him up, he was getting too fresh for a prisoner. After a while he winked at me and I winked back, then the escort came to take the prisoners to the rear. I shook hands and wished him "The best of luck and a safe journey to Blighty."

I liked that prisoner, he was a fine fellow, had an Iron Cross, too. I advised him to keep it out of sight, or some Tommy would be sending it home to his girl in Blighty as a souvenir.

One dark and rainy night while on guard we were looking over the top from the fire step of our front-line trench, when we heard a noise immediately in front of our barbed wire. The sentry next to me challenged, "Halt, who comes there?" and brought his rifle to the aim. His challenge was answered in German. A captain in the next traverse climbed upon the sand-bagged parapet to investigate—a brave but foolhardy deed—"Crack" went a bullet and he tumbled back into the trench with a hole through his stomach and died a few minutes later. A lance corporal in the next platoon was so enraged at the captain's death that he chucked a Mills bomb in the direction of the noise with the shouted warning to us: "Duck your nappers, my lucky lads." A sharp dynamite report, a flare in front of us, and then silence.

We immediately sent up two star shells, and in their light could see two dark forms lying on the ground close to our wire. A sergeant and four stretcher-bearers went out in front and soon returned, carrying two limp bodies. Down in the dugout, in the flickering light of three candles, we saw that they were two German officers, one a captain and the other an "unteroffizier," a rank one grade higher than a sergeant general, but below the grade of lieutenant.

The captain's face had been almost completely torn away by the bomb's explosion. The unteroffizier was alive,

breathing with difficulty. In a few minutes he opened his eyes and blinked in the glare of the candles.

The pair had evidently been drinking heavily, for the alcohol fumes were sickening and completely pervaded the dugout. I turned away in disgust, hating to see a man cross the Great Divide full of booze.

One of our officers could speak German and he questioned the dying man.

In a faint voice, interrupted by frequent hiccoughs, the unteroffizier told his story.

There had been a drinking bout among the officers in one of the German dugouts, the main beverage being champagne. With a drunken leer he informed us that champagne was plentiful on their side and that it did not cost them anything either. About seven that night the conversation had turned to the "contemptible" English, and the captain had made a wager that he would hang his cap on the English barbed wire to show his contempt for the English sentries. The wager was accepted. At eight o'clock the captain and he had crept out into No Man's Land to carry out this wager.

They had gotten about halfway across when the drink took effect and the captain fell asleep. After about two hours of vain attempts the unteroffizier had at last succeeded in waking the captain, reminded him of his bet, and warned him that he would be the laughing stock of the officers' mess if he did not accomplish his object, but the captain was trembling all over and insisted on returning to the German lines. In the darkness they lost their bearings and crawled toward the English trenches. They reached the barbed wire and were suddenly challenged by our sentry. Being too drunk to realize that the challenge was in English, the captain refused to crawl back. Finally the unteroffizier convinced his superior that they were in front of the English wire. Realizing this too late, the cap-



Dead Bodies Everywhere.

tain drew his revolver and with a muttered curse fired blindly toward our trench. His bullet no doubt killed our captain.

Then the bomb came over and there he was, dying—and a good job too, we thought. The captain dead? Well, his men wouldn't weep at the news.

Without giving us any further information the unteroffizier died.

We searched the bodies for identification disks but they had left everything behind before starting on their foolhardy errand.

Next afternoon we buried them in our little cemetery apart from the graves of the Tommies. If you ever go into that cemetery you will see two little wooden crosses in the corner of the cemetery set away from the rest.

They read:

Captain German Army Died — 1918 Unknown R. I. P.

Unteroffizier German Army Died — 1918 Unknown R. I. P.

CHAPTER XXI.

About Turn.

The next evening we were relieved by the —th brigade, and once again returned to rest billets. Upon arriving at these billets we were given twenty-four hours in which to clean up. I had just finished getting the mud from my uniform when the orderly sergeant informed me that my name was in orders to leave, and that I was to report to the orderly room in the morning for orders, transportation and rations.

I nearly had a fit, hustled about, packing up, filling my pack with souvenirs such as shell heads, dud bombs, nose caps, shrapnel balls, and a Prussian guardsman's helmet. In fact, before I turned in that night, I had everything ready to report at the orderly room at nine the next morning.

I was the envy of the whole section, swanking around, telling of the good time I was going to have, the places I would visit, and the real old English beer I intended to quaffle. Sort of rubbed it into them, because they all do it, and now that it was my turn, I took pains to get my own back.

At nine I reported to the captain, receiving my travel order and pass. He asked me how much money I wanted to draw. I glibly answered, "Three hundred francs, sir;" he just as glibly handed me one hundred.

Reporting at brigade headquarters, with my pack weighing a ton, I waited, with forty others, for the adjutant to inspect us. After an hour's wait, he came out; must have been sore because he wasn't going with us.

The quartermaster sergeant issued us two days' rations, in a little white canvas ration bag, which we tied to our belts.

Then two motor lorries came along and we piled in, laughing, joking, and in the best of spirits. We even loved the Germans, we were feeling so happy. Our journey to seven days' bliss in Blighty had commenced.

The ride in the lorry lasted about two hours; by this time we were covered with fine, white dust from the road, but didn't mind, even if we were nearly choking.

At the railroad station at F—we reported to an officer, who had a white band around his arm, which read "R. T. O." (Royal Transportation Officer). To us this officer was Santa Claus.

The sergeant in charge showed him our orders; he glanced through them and said: "Make yourselves comfortable on the platform and don't leave; the train is liable to be along in five minutes—or five hours."

It came in five hours, a string of eleven match boxes on big, high wheels, drawn by a dinky little engine with the "con." These match boxes were cattle cars, on the sides of which was painted the old familiar sign, "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8."

The R. T. O. stuck us all into one car. We didn't care; it was as good as a Pullman to us.

Two days we spent on that train, bumping, stopping, jerking ahead, and sometimes sliding back. At three stations we stopped long enough to make some tea, but were unable to wash, so when we arrived at B—, where we were to embark for Blighty, we were as black as Turcos and, with our unshaven faces, we looked like a lot of tramps. Though tired out, we were happy.

We had packed up, preparatory to detraining, when a R. T. O. held up his hand for us to stop where we were and came over. This is what he said: "Boys, I'm sorry, but orders have just been received cancelling all leave. If you had been three hours earlier you would have gotten away. Just stay in that train, as it is going back. Rations will be issued to you for your return journey to your respective stations. Beasty rotten, I know." Then he left.

A dead silence resulted. Then men started to curse, throw their rifles on the floor of the car; others said nothing, seemed to be stupefied, while some had the tears running down their cheeks. It was a bitter disappointment to all.

How we blinded at the engineer of that train; it was all his fault (so we reasoned); why hadn't he speeded up a little or been on time, then we would have gotten off before the order arrived? Now it was no Blighty for us.

That return journey was misery to us; I just can't describe it.

When we got back to rest billets, we found that our brigade was in the trenches (another agreeable surprise) and that an attack was contemplated.

Seventeen of the forty-one will never get another chance to go on leave; they were killed in the attack. Just

think if that train had been on time those seventeen would still be alive.

I hate to tell you how I was kidded by the boys when I got back, but it was good and plenty.

Our machine gun company took over their part of the line at seven o'clock, the night after I returned from my near leave.

At 3:30 the following morning three waves went over and captured the first and second German trenches. The machine gunners went over with the fourth wave to consolidate the captured line or "dig in," as Tommy calls it.

Crossing No Man's Land without clicking any casualties, we came to the German trench and mounted our guns on the paradises of same.

I never saw such a mess in my life—bunches of twisted barbed wire lying about, shell holes everywhere, trench all bashed in, parapets gone, and dead bodies, why, that ditch was full of them, theirs and ours. It was a regular morgue. Some were mangled horribly from our shell fire, while others were wholly or partly buried in the mud, the result of shell explosions caving in the walls of the trench. One dead German was lying on his back, with a rifle sticking straight up in the air, the bayonet of which was buried to the hilt in his chest. Across his feet lay a dead English soldier with a bullet hole in his forehead. This Tommy must have been killed just as he ran his bayonet through the German.

Rifles and equipment were scattered about, and occasionally a steel helmet could be seen sticking out of the mud.

At one point, just in the entrance to a communication trench, was a stretcher. On this stretcher a German was lying with a white bandage around his knee, near to him lay one of the stretcher-bearers, the red cross on his arm covered with mud and his helmet filled with blood and brains. Close by, sitting up against the wall of the trench, with head resting on his chest, was the other stretcher-bearer. He seemed to be alive, the posture was so natural and easy; but when I got closer I could see a large, jagged hole in his temple. The three must have been killed by the same shell-burst.

The dugouts were all smashed in and knocked about, big square-cut timbers splintered into bits, walls caved in and entrances choked.

Tommy, after taking a trench, learns to his sorrow that the hardest part of the work is to hold it.

In our case this proved to be so. The German artillery and machine guns had us taped (ranged) for fair; it was worth your life to expose yourself an instant.

Don't think for a minute that the Germans were the only sufferers; we were clicking casualties so fast that you needed an adding machine to keep track of them.

Did you ever see one of the steam shovels at work on the Panama canal? Well, it would look like a hen scratching alongside of a Tommy "digging in" while under fire. You couldn't see daylight through the clouds of dirt from his shovel.

After losing three out of six men of our crew we managed to set up our machine gun. One of the legs of the tripod was resting on the chest of a half-buried body. When the gun was firing, it gave the impression that the body was breathing. This was caused by the excessive vibration.

Three or four feet down the trench, about three feet from the ground, a foot was protruding from the earth. We knew it was a German by the black leather boot. One of our crew used that foot to hang extra bandoliers of ammunition on. This man always was a handy fellow; made use of little points that the ordinary person would overlook.

The Germans made three counter-attacks, which we repulsed, but not without heavy loss on our side. They also suffered severely from our shell and machine-gun fire. The ground was spotted with their dead and dying.

The next day things were somewhat quieter, but not quiet enough to bury the dead.

We lived, ate and slept in that trench with the unburied dead for six days. It was awful to watch their faces become swollen and discolored. Towards the last the stench was fierce.

What got on my nerves the most was that foot sticking out of the dirt. It seemed to me, at night, in the moonlight, to be trying to twist around. Several times this impression was so strong that I went to it and grasped it in both hands, to see if I could feel a movement.

I told this to the man who had used it for a hatrack just before I lay down for a little nap, as things were quiet, and I needed a rest pretty badly. When I woke up the foot was gone. He had cut it off with our chain saw out of the spare parts' box, and had plastered the stump over with mud.

During the next two or three days, before we were relieved, I missed that foot dreadfully; seemed as if I had suddenly lost a chum.

I think the worst thing of all was to watch the rats, at night, and sometimes in the day, run over and play about among the dead.

Near our gun, right across the parapet, could be seen the body of a German lieutenant, the head and arms of which were hanging into our trench. The man who had cut off the foot used to sit and carry on a one-sided conversation with this officer, used to argue and point out why Germany was in the wrong. During all of this monologue I never heard him say anything out of the way—anything that would have hurt the officer's feelings had he been alive. He was square all right; wouldn't even take advantage of a dead man in an argument.

To civilians this must seem dreadful, but out here one gets so used to

awful sights that it makes no impression. In passing a butcher shop you are not shocked by seeing a dead turkey hanging from a hook. Well, in France, a dead body is looked upon from the same angle.

But, nevertheless, when our six days were up, we were tickled to death to be relieved.

Our machine gun company lost seventeen killed and thirty-one wounded in that little local affair of "straightening the line," while the other companies clicked in worse than we did.

After the attack we went into reserve billets for six days, and on the seventh once again we were in rest billets.

(To Be Continued.)

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