



"OVER THE TOP"

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT

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MACHINE GUNNER, SERVING IN FRANCE

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CHAPTER XXII.

Punishments and Machine-Gun Stunts.

Soon after my arrival in France; in fact, from my enlistment, I had found that in the British army discipline is very strict. One has to be very careful in order to stay on the narrow path of government virtue.

There are about seven million ways of breaking the king's regulations; to keep one you have to break another.

The worst punishment is death by a firing squad, or "up against the wall," as Tommy calls it.

This is for desertion, cowardice, mutiny, giving information to the enemy, looting, rape, robbing the dead, forcing a safeguard, striking a superior, etc.

Then comes the punishment of sixty-four days in the front-line trench without relief. During this time you have to engage in all raids, working parties in No Man's Land, and every hazardous undertaking that comes along. If you live through the sixty-four days you are indeed lucky.

This punishment is awarded where there is a doubt as to the willful guilt of a man who has committed an offense punishable by death.

Then comes the famous field punishment No. 1. Tommy has nicknamed it "crucifixion." It means that a man is spread-eagled on a limber wheel, two hours a day for twenty-one days. During this time he only gets water, bully beef and biscuits for his chow. You get "crucified" for repeated minor offenses.

Next in order is field punishment No. 2.

This is confinement in the "clink," without blankets, getting water, bully beef and biscuits for rations and doing all the dirty work that can be found. This may be for twenty-four hours or twenty days, according to the gravity of the offense.

Then comes "pack drill" or defaulters' parade. This consists of drilling, mostly at the double, for two hours with full equipment. Tommy hates this, because it is hard work. Sometimes he fills his pack with straw to lighten it, and sometimes he gets caught. If he gets caught, he grouses at everything in general for twenty-one days, from the vantage point of a limber wheel.

Next comes "C. B." meaning "confined to barracks." This consists of staying in billets or barracks for twenty-four hours to seven days. You also get an occasional defaulters' parade and dirty jobs around the quarters.

The sergeant major keeps what is known as the crime sheet. When a man commits an offense, he is "crimed," that is, his name, number and offense is entered on the crime sheet. Next day at 9 a. m. he goes to the "orderly room" before the captain, who either punishes him with "C. B." or sends him before the O. C. (officer commanding battalion). The captain of the company can only award "C. B." Tommy many a time has thanked the king for making that provision in his regulations.

To gain the title of a "smart soldier," Tommy has to keep clear of the crime sheet, and you have to be darned smart to do it.

I have been on it a few times, mostly for "Yankee Impudence."

During our stay of two weeks in rest billets our captain put us through a course of machine-gun drills, trying out new stunts and theories.

After parades were over, our guns crews got together and also tried out some theories of their own in reference to handling guns. These courses had nothing to do with the advancement of the war, consisted mostly of causing tricky jams in the gun, and then the rest of the crew would endeavor to locate as quickly as possible the cause of the stoppage. This amused them for a few days and then things came to a standstill.

One of the boys on my gun claimed that he could play a tune while the

gun was actually firing, and demonstrated this fact one day on the target range. We were very enthusiastic and decided to become musicians.

After constant practice I became quite expert in the tune entitled "All Conductors Have Big Feet."

When I had mastered this tune, our two weeks' rest came to an end, and once again we went up the line and took over the sector in front of G-wood.

At this point the German trenches ran around the base of a hill, on the top of which was a dense wood. This wood was infested with machine guns, which used to traverse our lines at will, and sweep the streets of a little village, where we were billeted while in reserve.

There was one gun in particular which used to get our goats, it had the exact range of our "elephant" dugout entrance, and every morning, about the time rations were being brought up, its bullets would knock up the dust on the road; more than one Tommy went West or to Blighty by running into them.

This gun got our nerves on edge, and Fritz seemed to know it, because

he never gave us an hour's rest. Our reputation as machine gunners was at stake; we tried various ruses to locate and put this gun out of action, but each one proved to be a failure, and Fritz became a worse nuisance than ever. He was getting fresher and more careless every day, took all kinds of liberties with us—thought he was invincible.

Then one of our crew got a brilliant idea and we were all enthusiastic to put it to the test.

Here was his scheme: When firing my gun, I was to play my tune, and Fritz, no doubt, would fall for it, try to imitate me as an added insult. This gunner and two others would try, by the sound, to locate Fritz and his gun. After having got the location, they would mount two machine guns in trees, in a little clump of woods to the left of our cemetery, and while Fritz was in the middle of his lesson, would open up and trust to luck. By our calculations, it would take at least a week to pull off the stunt.

If Fritz refused to swallow our bait, it would be impossible to locate his special gun, and that's the one we were after, because they all sound alike, a slow pup-pup-pup.

Our prestige was hanging by a thread. In the battalion we had to endure all kinds of insults and fresh remarks as to our ability in silencing Fritz. Even to the battalion that German gun was a sore spot.

Next day, Fritz opened up as usual. I let him fire away for a while and then butted in with my "pup-pup-pup-pup-pup." I kept this up quite a while, used two belts of ammunition. Fritz had stopped firing to listen. Then he started in; sure enough, he had fallen for our game, his gun was trying to imitate mine, but, at first he made a horrible mess of that tune. Again I butted in with a few bars and stopped. Then he tried to copy what I had played. He was a good sport all right, because his bullets were going away over our heads, must have been firing into the air. I commenced to feel friendly toward him.

This duet went on for five days. Fritz was a good pupil and learned rapidly, in fact, got better than his teacher. I commenced to feel jealous. When he had completely mastered the tune, he started sweeping the road again and we clicked it worse than ever. But he signed his death warrant by doing so, because my friendship turned to hate. Every time he fired he played that tune and we danced.

The boys in the battalion gave us the "Ha! Ha!" They weren't in on our little frame-up.

The originator of the ruse and the other two gunners had Fritz's location taped to the minute; they mounted their two guns, and also gave me the range. The next afternoon was set for the grand finale.

Our three guns, with different elevations, had their fire so arranged, that, opening up together, their bullets would suddenly drop on Fritz like a hailstorm.

About three the next day, Fritz started "pup-pupping" that tune. I blew a sharp blast on a whistle, it was the signal agreed upon; we turned loose and Fritz's gun suddenly stopped in the middle of a bar. We had cooked his goose, and our ruse had worked. After firing two belts each, to make sure of our job, we hurriedly dismounted our guns and took cover in the dugout. We knew what to expect soon. We didn't have to wait long, three salvos of "whizz-bangs" came over from Fritz's artillery, a further confirmation that we had sent that musical machine-gunner on his Westward-bound journey.

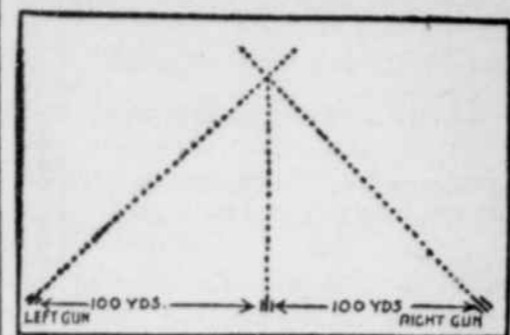
That gun never bothered us again. We were the heroes of the battalion, our captain congratulated us, said it

was a neat piece of work, and, consequently, we were all puffed up over the stunt.

There are several ways Tommy uses to disguise the location of his machine gun and get his range. Some of the most commonly used stunts are as follows:

At night, when he mounts his gun over the top of his trench and wants to get the range of Fritz's trench he adopts the method of what he terms "getting the sparks." This consists of firing bursts from his gun until the bullets hit the German barbed wire. He can tell when they are cutting the wire, because a bullet when it hits a wire throws out a blue electric spark. Machine-gun fire is very damaging to wire and causes many a wiring party to go out at night when it is quiet to repair the damage.

To disguise the flare of his gun at night when firing, Tommy uses what is called a flare protector. This is a stove-pipe arrangement which fits over the barrel casing of the gun and screens the sparks from the right and left, but not from the front. So Tommy, always resourceful, adopts this scheme: About three feet or less in front of the gun he



Showing How Fritz is Fooled.

drives two stakes into the ground, about five feet apart. Across these stakes he stretches a curtain made out of empty sandbags ripped open. He soaks this curtain in water and fires through it. The water prevents it catching fire and effectively screens the flare of the firing gun from the enemy.

Sound is a valuable asset in locating a machine gun, but Tommy surmounts this obstacle by placing two machine guns about one hundred to one hundred and fifty yards apart. The gun on the right to cover with its fire the sector of the left gun and the gun on the left to cover that of the right gun. This makes their fire cross; they are fired simultaneously.

By this method it sounds like one gun firing and gives the Germans the impression that the gun is firing from a point midway between the guns which are actually firing, and they accordingly shell that particular spot. The machine gunners chuckle and say, "Fritz is a brainy boy, not 'alf he ain't."

But the men in our lines at the spot being shelled curse Fritz for his ignorance and pass a few pert remarks down the line in reference to the machine gunners being "windy" and afraid to take their medicine.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Gas Attacks and Spies.

Three days after we had silenced Fritz, the Germans sent over gas. It did not catch us unawares, because the wind had been made to order, that is, it was blowing from the German trenches toward ours at the rate of about five miles per hour.

Warnings had been passed down the trench to keep a sharp lookout for gas. We had a new man at the periscope, on this afternoon in question; I was sitting on the fire step, cleaning my rifle, when he called out to me:

"There's a sort of greenish, yellow cloud rolling along the ground out in front, it's coming—"

But I waited for no more, grabbing my bayonet, which was detached from the rifle, I gave the alarm by banging an empty shell case, which was hanging near the periscope. At the same instant, gongs started ringing down the trench, the signal for Tommy to don his respirator, or smoke helmet, as we call it.

Gas travels quickly, so you must not lose any time; you generally have about eighteen or twenty seconds in which to adjust your gas helmet.

A gas helmet is made of cloth, treated with chemicals. There are two windows, or glass eyes, in it, through which you can see. Inside there is a rubber-covered tube, which goes in the mouth. You breathe through your nose; the gas, passing through the cloth helmet, is neutralized by the action of the chemicals. The foul air is exhaled through the tube in the mouth, this tube being so constructed that it prevents the inhaling of the outside air or gas. One helmet is good for five hours of the strongest gas. Each Tommy carries two of them slung around his shoulder in a waterproof canvas bag. He must wear this bag at all times, even while sleeping. To change a defective helmet, you take out the new one, hold your breath, pull the old one off, placing the new one over your head, tucking in the loose ends under the collar of your tunic.

For a minute, pandemonium reigned in our trench—Tommy adjusting their helmets, bombers running here and there, and men turning out of the dugouts with fixed bayonets, to man the fire step.

Re-enforcements were pouring out of the communication trenches.

Our gun's crew were busy mounting the machine gun on the parapet and bringing up extra ammunition from the dugout.

German gas is heavier than air and soon fills the trenches and dugouts, where it has been known to lurk for two or three days, until the air is purified by means of large chemical sprayers.

We had to work quickly, as Fritz generally follows the gas with an infantry attack.

A company man on our right was too slow in getting on his helmet; he sank to the ground, clutching at his throat, and after a few spasmodic twistings went West (died). It was horrible to see him die, but we were powerless to help him. In the corner of a traverse, a little, muddy cur dog, one of the company's pets, was lying dead, with his paws over his nose.

It's the animals that suffer the most—the horses, mules, cattle, dogs, cats and rats—they having no helmets to save them. Tommy does not sympathize with rats in a gas attack.

At times gas has been known to travel, with dire results, fifteen miles behind the lines.

A gas, or smoke helmet, as it is called, at the best is a vile-smelling thing, and it is not long before one gets a violent headache from wearing it.

Our eighteen-pounders were bursting in No Man's Land, in an effort, by the artillery, to disperse the gas clouds.

The fire step was lined with crouching men, bayonets fixed, and bombs near at hand to repel the expected attack.

Our artillery had put a barrage of curtain fire on the German lines, to try and break up their attack and keep back re-enforcements.

I trained my machine gun on their trench and its bullets were raking the parapet.

Then over they came, bayonets glistening. In their respirators, which have a large snout in front, they looked like some horrible nightmare.

All along our trench, rifles and machine guns spoke, our shrapnel was bursting over their heads. They went down in heaps, but new ones took the places of the fallen. Nothing could stop that mad rush. The Germans reached our barbed wire, which had previously been demolished by their shells, then it was bomb against bomb, and the devil for all.

Suddenly my head seemed to burst from a loud "crack" in my ear. Then my head began to swim, throat got dry, and a heavy pressure on the lungs warned me that my helmet was leaking. Turning by gun over to No. 2, I changed helmets.

The trench started to wind like a snake, and sandbags appeared to be floating in the air. The noise was horrible; I sank onto the fire step, needles seemed to be pricking my flesh, then blackness.

I was awakened by one of my mates removing my smoke helmet. How delicious that cool, fresh air felt in my lungs.

A strong wind had arisen and dispersed the gas.

They told me that I had been "out" for three hours; they thought I was dead.

The attack had been repulsed after a hard fight. Twice the Germans had gained a foothold in our trench, but had been driven out by counter-attacks. The trench was filled with their dead and ours. Through a periscope I counted eighteen dead Germans in our wire; they were a ghastly sight in their horrible-looking respirators.

I examined my first smoke helmet. A bullet had gone through it on the left side, just grazing my ear. The gas had penetrated through the hole made in the cloth.

Out of our crew of six we lost two killed and two wounded.

That night we buried all of the dead, excepting those in No Man's Land. In death there is not much distinction; friend and foe are treated alike.

After the wind had dispersed the gas the R. A. M. C. got busy with their chemical sprayers, spraying out the dugouts and low parts of the trenches to dissipate any fumes of the German gas which may have been lurking in same.

Two days after the gas attack I was sent to division headquarters, in answer to an order requesting that captains of units should detail a man whom they thought capable of passing an examination for the divisional intelligence department.

Before leaving for this assignment I went along the front-line trench saying good-by to my mates and lording it over them, telling them that I had



A Gas Helmet.

clicked a cushy job behind the lines, and how sorry I felt that they had to stay in the front line and argue out the war with Fritz. They were envious but still good-natured, and as I left the trench to go to the rear they shouted after me:

"Good luck, Yank, old boy; don't forget to send up a few fags to your old mates."

I promised to do this and left.

I reported at headquarters with sixteen others and passed the required examination. Out of the sixteen applicants four were selected.

I was highly elated because I was, I thought, in for a cushy job back at the base.

The next morning the four reported

to division headquarters for instructions. Two of the men were sent to large towns in the rear of the lines with an easy job. When it came our turn the officer told us we were good men and had passed a very creditable examination.

My tin hat began to get too small for me, and I noted that the other man, Atwell by name, was sticking his chest out more than usual.

The officer continued: "I think I can use you two men to great advantage in the front line. Here are your orders and instructions, also the pass which gives you full authority as special M. P. detailed on intelligence work. Report at the front line according to your instructions. It is risky work and I wish you both the best of luck."

My heart dropped to zero and Atwell's face was a study. We saluted and left.

That wishing us the "best of luck" sounded very ominous in our ears; if he had said "I wish you both a swift and painless death" it would have been more to the point.

When we had read our instructions we knew we were in for it good and plenty.

What Atwell said is not fit for publication, but I strongly seconded his opinion of the war, army and divisional headquarters in general.

After a bit our spirits rose. We were full-fledged spy-catchers, because our instructions and orders, said so.

We immediately reported to the nearest French estaminet and had several glasses of muddy water, which they called beer. After drinking our beer we left the estaminet and hailed an empty ambulance.

After showing the driver our passes we got in. The driver was going to the part of the line where we had to report.

How the wounded ever survived a ride in that ambulance was inexplicable to me. It was worse than riding on a gun carriage over a rock road.

The driver of the ambulance was a corporal of the R. A. M. C., and he had the "wind up," that is, he had an aversion to being under fire.

I was riding on the seat with him while Atwell was sitting in the ambulance, with his legs hanging out of the back.

As we passed through a shell-destroyed village a mounted military policeman stopped us and informed the driver to be very careful when we got out on the open road, as it was very dangerous, because the Germans lately had acquired the habit of shelling it.

The corporal asked the trooper if there was any other way around, and was informed that there was not. Upon this he got very nervous and wanted to turn back, but we insisted that he proceed and explained to him that he would get into serious trouble with his commanding officer if he returned without orders; we wanted to ride, not walk.

From his conversation we learned that he had recently come from England with a draft and had never been under fire, hence his nervousness.

We convinced him that there was not much danger, and he appeared greatly relieved.

When we at last turned into the open road we were not so confident. On each side there had been a line of trees, but now, all that was left of them were torn and battered stumps. The fields on each side of the road were dotted with recent shell holes, and we passed several in the road itself. We had gone about half a mile when a shell came whistling through the air and burst in a field about three hundred yards to our right. Another soon followed this one and burst on the edge of the road about four hundred yards in front of us.

I told the driver to throw in his speed clutch, as we must be in sight of the Germans. I knew the signs; that battery was ranging for us, and the quicker we got out of its zone of fire the better. The driver was trembling like a leaf, and every minute I expected him to pile us up in the ditch. I preferred the German fire.

In the back Atwell was holding onto the straps for dear life, and was singing at the top of his voice:

We beat you at the Marne,
We beat you at the Aisne,
We gave you hell at Neuve Chapelle,
And here we are again.

Just then we hit a small shell hole and nearly capsized. Upon a loud yell from the rear I looked behind, and there was Atwell sitting in the middle of the road, shaking his fist at us. His equipment, which he had taken off upon getting into the ambulance, was strung out on the ground, and his rifle was in the ditch.

I shouted to the driver to stop, and in his nervousness he put on the brakes. We nearly pitched out head-first. But the applying of those brakes saved our lives. The next instant there was a blinding flash and a deafening report. All that I remember is that I was flying through the air, and wondering if I would land in a soft spot. Then the lights went out.

When I came to, Atwell was pouring water on my head out of his bottle. On the other side of the road the corporal was sitting, rubbing a lump on his forehead with his left hand, while his right arm was bound up in a blood-soaked bandage. He was moaning very loudly. I had an awful headache and the skin on the left side of my face was full of gravel and the blood was trickling from my nose.

But that ambulance was turned over in the ditch and was perforated with holes from fragments of the shell. One of the front wheels was slowly revolving, so I could not have been "out" for a long period.

The shells were still screaming overhead, but the battery had raised its fire and they were bursting in a little wood about half a mile from us.

Atwell spoke up. "I wish that

cer man't wished us the best of luck. Then he commenced swearing. I couldn't help laughing, though my head was nigh to bursting.

Slowly rising to my feet I felt myself all over to make sure that there were no broken bones. But outside of a few bruises and scratches I was all right. The corporal was still moaning, but more from shock than pain. A shell splinter had gone through the flesh of his right forearm. Atwell and I, from our first-aid pouches, put a tourniquet on his arm to stop the bleeding and then gathered up our equipment.

We realized that we were in a dangerous spot. At any minute a shell might drop on the road and finish us off. The village we had left was not very far, so we told the corporal he had better get back to it and get his arm dressed, and then report the fact of the destruction of the ambulance to the military police. He was well able to walk, so he set off in the direction of the village, while Atwell and I continued our way on foot.

Without further mishap we arrived at our destination, and reported to brigade headquarters for rations and billets.

That night we slept in the battalion sergeant major's dugout. The next morning I went to a first-aid post and had the gravel picked out of my face.

The instructions we received from division headquarters read that we were out to catch spies, patrol trenches, search German dead, reconnoiter in No Man's Land, and take part in trench raids and prevent the robbing of the dead.

I had a pass which would allow me to go anywhere at any time in the sector of the line held by our division. It gave me authority to stop and search ambulances, motor lorries, wagons and even officers and soldiers, whenever my suspicions deemed it necessary. Atwell and I were allowed to work together or singly—it was left to our judgment. We decided to team up.

Atwell was a good companion and very entertaining. He had an utter contempt for danger, but was not foolhardy. At swearing he was a wonder. A cavalry regiment would have been proud of him. Though born in England, he had spent several years in New York. He was about six feet one, and as strong as an ox.

We took up our quarters in a large dugout of the royal engineers, and mapped out our future actions. This dugout was on the edge of a large cemetery, and several times at night in returning to it, we got many a fall stumbling over the graves of English, French and Germans. Atwell on these occasions never indulged in swearing, though at any other time, at the least stumble, he would turn the air blue.

A certain section of our trenches was held by the Royal Irish rifles. For several days a very strong rumor went the rounds that a German spy was in our midst. This spy was supposed to be dressed in the uniform of a British staff officer. Several stories had been told about an officer wearing a red band around his cap, who patrolled the front-line and communication trenches asking suspicious questions as to location of batteries, machine-gun emplacements, and trench mortars. If a shell dropped in a battery, on a machine gun or even near a dugout, this spy was blamed.

The rumor gained such strength that an order was issued for all troops to immediately place under arrest anyone answering to the description of the spy.

Atwell and I were on the qui vive. We constantly patrolled the trenches at night, and even in the day, but the spy always eluded us.

One day while in a communication trench, we were horrified to see our brigadier general, Old Pepper, being brought down by a big private of the Royal Irish rifles. The general was walking in front, and the private with fixed bayonet was following in the rear.

We saluted as the general passed us. The Irishman had a broad grin on his face and we could scarcely believe our eyes—the general was under arrest. After passing a few feet beyond us, the general turned, and said in a wrathful voice to Atwell:

"Tell this d—n fool who I am. He's arrested me as a spy."

Atwell was speechless. The sentry butted in with:

"None o' that gassin' out o' you. Back to headquarters you goes, Mr. Fritz. Open that face o' yours again, an' I'll dent in your napper with the butt o' me rifle."

The general's face was a sight to behold. He was fairly boiling over with rage, but he shut up.

Atwell tried to get in front of the sentry to explain to him that it really was the general he had under arrest, but the sentry threatened to run his bayonet through him, and would have done it, too. So Atwell stepped aside, and remained silent. I was nearly bursting with suppressed laughter. One word, and I would have exploded. It is not exactly diplomatic to laugh at your general in such a predicament.

The sentry and his prisoner arrived at brigade headquarters with disastrous results to the sentry.

The joke was that the general had personally issued the order for the spy's arrest. It was a habit of the general to walk through the trenches on rounds of inspection, unattended by any of his staff. The Irishman, being new in the regiment, had never seen the general before, so when he came across him alone in a communication trench, he promptly put him under arrest. Brigadier generals wear a red band around their caps.

Next day we passed the Irishman tied to the wheel of a limber, the beginning of his sentence of twenty-one days, field punishment No. 1. Never before have I seen such a woebegone expression on a man's face.

REPORT

all the news happenings that come to your attention to this office. It will be appreciated for every piece of news will make the paper more interesting for you as well as others. We want and with your help will print all

THE NEWS