



"OVER THE TOP"

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT

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MACHINE GUNNER, SERVING IN FRANCE

1917 BY ARTHUR GUY EMPY

CHAPTER I.

From Muffin to Khaki.

It was in an office in Jersey City. I was sitting at my desk talking to a lieutenant of the Jersey National Guard. On the wall was a big war map decorated with various colored little flags showing the position of the opposing armies on the western front in France. In front of me on the desk lay a New York paper with big flaring headlines:

LUSITANIA SUNK! AMERICAN LIVES LOST!

The windows were open and a feeling of spring pervaded the air. Through the open windows came the strains of a hurdy-rurdy playing in the street—"I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier."

"Lastin' Sunk! American Lives Lost!"—"I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier." To us these did not seem to jibe.

The lieutenant in silence opened one of the lower drawers of his desk and took from it an American flag which he solemnly draped over the war map on the wall. Then, turning to me with a grim face, said:

"How about it, sergeant? You had better get out the muster roll of the Mounted Scouts, as I think they will be needed in the course of a few days."

We busied ourselves till late in the evening writing out emergency telegrams for the men to report when the call should come from Washington. Then we went home.

I crossed over to New York, and as I went up Fulton street to take the subway to Brooklyn, the lights in the tall buildings of New York seemed to be burning brighter than usual, as if they, too, had read "Lusitania Sunk! American Lives Lost!" They seemed to be glowing with anger and righteous indignation, and their rays wiggled the message, "Repay!"

Months passed, the telegrams lying hands, but covered with dust. Then, one morning the lieutenant with a sigh of disgust removed the flag from the war map and returned



Guy Empey.

to his desk. I immediately followed this action by throwing the telegrams into the wastebasket. Then we looked at each other in silence. He was squinting in his chair and I felt depressed and lonely.

The telephone rang and I answered it. It was a business call for me, requesting my services for an out-of-town assignment. Business was not very good, so this was very welcome. After listening to the proposition I seemed to be swayed by a peculiarly strong force within me, and answered, "I am sorry that I cannot accept your offer, but I am leaving for England next week," and hung up the receiver. The lieutenant swung around in his chair, and stared at me in blank astonishment. A sinking sensation came over me, but I defiantly answered his look with, "Well, it's so. I'm going." And I went.

The trip across was uneventful. I landed at Tilbury, England, then got into a string of matchbox cars and proceeded to London, arriving there about 10 p. m. I took a room in a hotel near St. Pancras station for "five and six-five extra." The room was minus the fire, but the "extra" seemed to keep me warm. That night there was a Zeppelin raid, but I didn't see much of it, because the silt in the curtains was too small and I had no desire to make it larger. Next morning the telephone bell rang, and someone asked, "Are you there?" I was, hardly. Any way, I learned that the Zeps had returned to their fatherland, so I went out into the street expecting to see scenes of awful devastation and a howling populace, but everything was normal. People were calmly proceeding to their work. Crossing the street, I accosted a Dobbie with:

"Can you direct me to the place of damage?"

He asked me, "What damage?"

In surprise, I answered, "Why, the damage caused by the Zeps."

With a wink he replied:

"There was no damage; we missed them again."

After several fruitless inquiries of the passersby, I decided to go on my own in search of ruined buildings and scenes of destruction. I boarded a bus which carried me through Tottenham Court road. Recruiting posters were everywhere. The one that impressed me most was a life-size picture of Lord Kitchener with his finger pointing directly at me, under the caption of "Your King and Country Need You." No matter which way I turned, the accusing finger followed me. I was an American, in muffin, and had a little American flag in the lapel of my coat. I had no king, and my country had seen fit not to need me, but still that pointing finger made me feel small and ill at ease. I got off the bus to try to dissipate this feeling by mixing with the throng of the sidewalks.

Presently I came to a recruiting office. Inside, sitting at a desk was a lonely Tommy Atkins. I decided to interview him in regard to joining the British army. I opened the door. He looked up and greeted me with "I s'y, myste, want to tyke on?"

I looked at him and answered, "Well, whatever that is, I'll take a chance at it."

Without the aid of an interpreter, I found out that Tommy wanted to know if I cared to join the British army. He asked me: "Did you ever hear of the Royal Fusiliers?" Well, in London, you know, Yanks are supposed to know everything, so I was not going to appear ignorant and answered, "Sure."

After listening for one half-hour to Tommy's tale of their exploits on the firing line, I decided to join. Tommy took me to the recruiting headquarters, where I met a typical English captain. He asked my nationality. I immediately pulled out my American passport and showed it to him. It was signed by Lansing. After looking at the passport, he informed me that he was sorry but could not enlist me, as it would be a breach of neutrality. I insisted that I was not neutral, because to me it seemed that a real American could not be neutral when big things were in progress, but the captain would not enlist me.

With disgust in my heart I went out in the street. I had gone about a block when a recruiting sergeant who had followed me out of the office tapped me on the shoulder with his swagger stick and said: "S'y, I can get you in the army. We have 'def' tent down at the other office who can do anything. He has just come out of the O. T. C. (Officers' Training Corps) and does not know what neutrality is." I decided to take a chance, and accepted his invitation for an introduction to the lieutenant. I entered the office and went up to him, opened up my passport and said:

"Before going further I wish to state that I am an American, not too proud to fight, and want to join your army."

He looked at me in a nonchalant manner, and answered, "That's all right; we take anything over here."

I looked at him kind of hard and replied, "So I notice," and it went over his head.

He got out an enlistment blank, and placing his finger on a blank line said, "Sign here."

I answered, "Not on your tynotype." "I beg your pardon?"

Then I explained to him that I would not sign it without first reading it. I read it over and signed for duration of war. Some of the recruits were lucky. They signed for seven years only!

Then he asked me my birthplace. I answered, "Ogdun, Utah."

He said, "Oh yes, just outside of New York?"

With a smile, I replied, "Well, it's up the state a little."

Then I was taken before the doctor and passed as physically fit, and was issued a uniform. When I reported back to the lieutenant, he suggested that, being an American, I go on recruiting service and try to shame some of the shirkers into joining the army. "All you have to do," he said, "is go out on the street, and when you see a young fellow in muffin who looks physically fit, just stop him and give him this kind of a talk: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a Britisher, physically fit, and in muffin when your king and country need you? Don't you know that your country is at war and that the place for every young Briton is on the firing line? Here I am, an American, in khaki, who came four thousand miles to fight for your king and country, and you, as yet, have not enlisted. Why don't you join? Now is the time!'"

"This argument ought to get many recruits, Empey, so go out and see what you can do."

He then gave me a small rosette of red, white and blue ribbon, with three little streamers hanging down. This was the recruiting insignia and was to be worn on the left side of the cap. Armed with a swagger stick and my patriotic rosette, I went out into Tottenham Court road in quest of cannon fodder.

Two or three poorly dressed civilians passed me, and although they appeared physically fit, I said to myself, "They don't want to join the army; perhaps they have someone dependent

on them for support," so I did not accost them.

Coming down the street I saw a young dandy, top hat and all, with a fashionably dressed girl walking beside him. I muttered, "You are my meat," and when he came abreast of me I stepped directly in his path and stopped him with my swagger stick, saying:

"You would look fine in khaki; why not change that top hat for a steel helmet? Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a husky young chap like you in muffin when men are needed in the trenches? Here I am, an American,



Swearing in a Recruit.

came four thousand miles from Ogdun, Utah, just outside of New York, to fight for your king and country. Don't be a slacker, buck up and get into uniform; come over to the recruiting office and I'll have you enlisted."

He gawked and answered, "I don't care if you came forty thousand miles, no one asked you to," and he walked on. The girl gave me a sneering look; I was speechless.

I recruited for three weeks and nearly got one recruit.

This perhaps was not the greatest stunt in the world, but it got back at the officer who had told me, "Yes, we take anything over here." I had been spending a good lot of my recruiting time in the saloon bar of the Wheat Sheaf pub (there was a very attractive blonde barmaid, who helped kill time—I was not as serious in those days as I was a little later when I reached the front)—well, it was the sixth day and my recruiting report was blank. I was getting low in the pocket—barmaids haven't much use for anyone who cannot buy drinks—so I looked around for recruiting material. You know a man on recruiting service gets a "bob" or shilling for every recruit he entices into joining the army, the recruit is supposed to get this, but he would not be a recruit if he were wise to this fact, would he?

Down at the end of the bar was a young fellow in muffin who was very patriotic—he had about four "Old Six" aces aboard. He asked me if he could join, showed me his left hand, two fingers were missing, but I said that did not matter as "we take anything over here." The left hand is the side hand and the piece is carried at the elbow on the left shoulder. Nearly everything in England is "by the left," even general traffic keeps to the port side.

I took the applicant over to headquarters, where he was hurriedly examined. Recruiting surgeons were busy in those days and did not have much time for thorough physical examinations. My recruit was passed at "fit" by the doctor and turned over to a corporal to make note of his scars. I was mystified. Suddenly the corporal burst out with, "Blimey, me, two of his fingers are gone." Turning to me he said, "You certainly have your nerve with you, not 'alf you ain't, 'e being this beggar in."

The doctor came over and exploded, "What do you mean by bringing in a man in this condition?"

Looking out of the corner of my eye I noticed that the officer who had recruited me had joined the group, and I could not help answering, "Well, sir, I was told that you took anything over here."

I think they called it "Yankee impudence," anyhow it ended my recruiting.

CHAPTER II.

Blighty to Rest Blights.

The next morning the captain sent for me and informed me: "Empey, as a recruiting sergeant you are a wash-out," and sent me to a training depot.

After arriving at this place, I was hustled to the quartermaster stores and received an awful shock. The quartermaster sergeant stood a valet-proof sheet on the ground and commenced throwing a miscellaneous assortment of straps, buckles and other paraphernalia into it. I thought he would never stop, but when the pile reached to my knees he paused long enough to say, "Next, No. 5217, 'Arise, B company.'" I gazed in bewilderment at the pile of junk in front of me, and then my eyes wandered around looking for the wagon which was to carry it to barracks. I was rudely brought to earth by the "quarter" exclaiming, "Bro, you, 'op it; tyke it aw'y; blimey my eyes, 'is looking for 'is barman to 'elp 'im carry it!"

Struggling under the load, with frequent pauses for rest, I reached our barracks (large ear barns), and my platoon leader came to the rescue. It was a marvel to me how quickly he assembled the equipment. After he had completed the task, he showed me how to adjust it on my person. Pretty soon I stood before him a proper Tommy Atkins in heavy marching order, feeling like an overloaded camel.

On my foot were heavy-soled boots,

studded with hobnails, the toes and heels of which were re-enforced by steel half-moons. My legs were encased in woolen puttees, olive drab in color, with my trousers overlapping them at the top. Then a woolen khaki tunic, under which was a bluish gray woolen shirt, minus a collar; beneath this shirt a woolen belly band about six inches wide, held in place by the strings of white tape. On my head was a heavy woolen trench cap, with huge earflaps buttoned over the top. Then the equipment: A canvas belt, with ammunition pockets, and two wide canvas straps like suspenders, called "D" straps, fastened to the belt in front, passing over each shoulder, crossing in the middle of my back, and attached by buckles to the rear of the belt. On the right side of the belt hung a water bottle, covered with felt; on the left side was my bayonet and scabbard, and trenching tool handle, this handle strapped to the bayonet scabbard. In the rear was my trenching tool, carried in a canvas case. This tool was a combination pick and spade. A canvas haversack, fast strapped to the left side of the belt, while on my back was the pack, also of canvas, held in place by two canvas straps over the shoulders; suspended on the bottom of the pack was my mess tin or canteen in a neat little canvas case. My waterproof sheet, looking like a jelly roll, was strapped on top of the pack, with a wooden stick for cleaning the breach of the rifle projecting from each end. On a lanyard around my waist hung a huge jack-knife with a can-opener attachment. The pack contained my overcoat, an extra pair of socks, change of underwear, hold all (containing knife, fork, spoon, comb, toothbrush, lather brush, shaving soap, and a razor made of tin, with "Made in England" stamped on the blade; when trying to shave with this it made you wish that you were at war with Patagonia, so that you could have a "hollow ground" stamped "Made in Germany"); then your housewife, button-cleaning outfit, consisting of a brass button stick, two stiff brushes, and a box of "Soldiers' Friend" paste; then a shoe brush and a box of dubbin, a whiting pad, fiddle pencil, envelopes, and pay book, and personal belongings, such as a small mirror, a decent razor and a sheaf of unanswered letters, and fags. In your haversack you carry your iron rations, meaning a tin of bully beef, four biscuits and a can containing ten, sugar and Oxo cubes; a couple of pipes and a pack of shag, a tin of rifle oil, and a pull-through. Tommy generally carries the oil with his rations; it gives the cheese a sort of sardine taste.

Add to this a first-aid pouch and a long, ungainly rifle patterned after the Daniel Boone rifle, and you have an idea of a British soldier in Blighty. Before leaving for France, this rifle is taken from him and he is issued with a Lee-Enfield short trench rifle and a ration bag.

In France he receives two gas helmets, a sheepskin coat, rubber mackintosh, steel helmet, two blankets, tear-shed goggles, a balaclava helmet, gloves and a tin of antifriction grease which is excellent for greasing the boots. Add to this the weight of his rations, and can you blame Tommy for growling at a twenty-kilo ration march?

Having served as sergeant major in the United States cavalry, I tried to tell the English drill sergeants their business, but it did not work. They immediately put me as batman in their mess. Many a grumpy dish of stew was accidentally spilled over them.

I would sooner fight than be a waiter, so when the order came through from headquarters calling for a draft of 250 re-enforcements for France, I volunteered.

Then we went before the M. O. (medical officer) for another physical examination. This was very brief. He asked our names and numbers and said "Fit," and we went out to fight.

We were put into troop trains and sent to Southampton, where we were trained, and had our trench rifles issued to us. Then in columns of twos we went up the gangplank of a little steamer lying alongside the dock.

At the head of the gangplank there was an old sergeant, who directed that we line ourselves along both rails of the ship. Then he ordered us to take life belts from the racks overhead and put them on. I have crossed the ocean several times and knew I was not senile, but when I looked on that life belt I had a sensation of sickness.

After we got out into the stream all I could think of was that there were a million German submarines with a torpedo on each, across the warhead of which was inscribed my name and address.

After five hours we came alongside a pier and disembarked. I had attained another one of my ambitions. I was "somewhere in France."

We slept in the open that night on the side of the road. About six the next morning we were ordered to entrain. I looked around for the passenger coaches, but all I could see on the sliding were cattle cars. We climbed into those. On the side of each car was a sign reading "Homes 40, Chevenix 5." When we got inside of the cars, we thought that perhaps the sign painter had reversed the order of things. After 48 hours in these trucks we detrained at Rome. At this place we went through an intensive training for ten days.

The training consisted of the rudiments of trench warfare. Trenches had been dug, with barbed wire entanglements, bombing saps, dugouts, observation posts and machine gun emplacements. We were given a smattering of trench cooking, sanitation, bomb throwing, reconnaissance, listening posts, constructing and repairing barbed wire, "carrying in" parties, methods used in attack and defense, wiring parties, mass formation, and the procedure for poison-gas attacks.

On the tenth day we again met our friends "Homes 40, Chevenix 5." Thirty-six hours more of misery, and we arrived at the town of F—.

After unloading our rations and

equipment, we lined up on the road in columns of fours waiting for the order to march.

A dull rumbling could be heard. The sun was shining. I turned to the man on my left and asked, "What's the noise, Bill?" He did not know, but his face was of a pea-green color. Jim, on my right, also did not know, but suggested that I "ask" the sergeant.

Coming towards us was an old grizzled sergeant, properly fed up with the war, so I "asked" him.

"Think it's going to rain, sergeant?" He looked at me in contempt, and grunted, "Ow's it a-zoin' ter rain with the bloomin' sun a-shinin'?" I looked guilty.

"Them's the guns up the line, me lad, and you'll get enough of 'em before you gets back to Blighty."

My knees seemed to wobble, and I squeaked out a weak "Oh!"

Then we started our march up to the line in ten-kilo treks. After the first day's march we arrived at our rest billets, because while in them Tommy works seven days a week and on the eighth day of the week he is given twenty-four hours "on his own."

Our billet was a spacious affair, a large barn on the left side of the road, which had one hundred entrances, ninety-nine for shells, rats, wind and rain, and the hundredth one for Tommy.



The Author's Identification Disk.

my. I was tired out, and using my shrapnel-proof helmet (shrapnel-proof until a piece of shrapnel hits it), or tin hat, for a pillow, lay down in the straw, and was soon fast asleep. I must have slept about two hours, when I awoke with a pricking sensation all over me. As I thought, the straw had worked through my uniform. I woke up the fellow lying on my left, who had been up the line before, and asked him:

"Does the straw bother you, mate? It's worked through my uniform and I can't sleep."

In a sleepy voice he answered, "That ain't straw, them's cooties."

From that time on my friends the "cooties" were constantly with me.

"Cooties," or body lice, are the bane of Tommy's existence.

The aristocracy of the trenches very seldom call them "cooties," they speak of them as fleas.

To an American flea means a small insect armed with a bayonet, who is sent to job it into you and then hop-skip and jump to the next place to be attacked. There is an advantage in having fleas on you instead of "cooties" in that in one of his extended jumps

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Yours Very Truly,

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said flea is liable to land on the fellow next to you; he has the typical energy and push of the American, while the "cootie" has the bulldog tenacity of the Englishman; he holds on and consolidates or digs in until his ideal is finished.

There is no way to get rid of them permanently. No matter how often you bathe, and that is not very often, or how many times you change your underwear, your friends the "cooties" are always in evidence. The billets are infested with them, especially so if there is straw on the floor.

I have taken a bath and put on brand-new underwear; in fact, a complete change of uniform, and then turned in for the night. The next morning my shirt would be full of them. It is a common sight to see eight or ten soldiers sitting under a tree with their shirts over their knees engaging in a "shirt hunt."

At night about half an hour before "lights out," you can see the Tommies grouped around a candle, trying in its dim light, to rid their underwear of the vermin. A popular and very quick method is to take your shirt and drawers, and run the seams back and forward in the flame from a candle and burn them out. This practice is dangerous, because you are liable to burn holes in the garments if you are not careful.

Recruits generally sent to Blighty for a brand of insect powder advertised as "Good for body lice." The advertisement is quite right; the powder is good for "cooties," they simply thrive on it.

The older men of our battalion were wiser and made scratches out of wood. These were rubbed smooth with a bit of stone or sand to prevent splinters. They were about eighteen inches long, and Tommy guarantees that a scratcher of this length will reach any part of the body which may be attacked. Some of the fellows were lazy and only made their scratchers twelve inches, but many a night when on guard, looking over the top from the fire step of the front-line trench, they would have given a thousand "quid" for the other six inches.

Once while we were in rest billets an Irish Hunsar regiment camped in an open field opposite our billet. After they had picketed and fed their horses, a general shirt hunt took place. The troopers ignored the call "Dinner up," and kept on with their search for big game. They had a curious method of procedure. They hung their shirts over

a hedge and bent them with their entrenching tool handles.

I asked one of them why they didn't pick them off by hand, and he answered, "We haven't had a bath for nine weeks or a change of clothes. If I tried to pick the 'cooties' off my shirt, I would be here for duration of war."

After taking a close look at his shirt, I agreed with him; it was alive.

The greatest shock a recruit gets when he arrives at his battalion in France is to see the men engaging in a "cootie" hunt. With an air of contempt and disgust he avoids the company of the older men, until a couple of days later, in a torment of itching, he also has to resort to a shirt hunt, or spend many a sleepless night of misery. During these hunts there are lots of pertinent remarks handed back and forth among the explorers, such as, "Say, Bill, I'll swap you two little ones for a big one," or, "I've got a black one here that looks like Kaiser Bill."

One sunny day in the front-line trench, I saw three officers sitting outside of their dugout ("cooties" are no respecters of rank; I have even noticed a suspicious uneasiness about a certain well-known general), one of them was

a major, two of them were exploring their shirts, paying no attention to the occasional shells which passed overhead. The major was writing a letter; every now and then he would lay aside his writing-pad, search his shirt for a few minutes, get an inspiration, and then resume writing. At last he finished his letter and gave it to his runner. "I was curious to see whether he was writing to an insect firm, so when the runner passed me I engaged him in conversation and got a glimpse at the address on the envelope. It was addressed to Miss Alice Somebody, in London. The runner informed me that Miss Somebody was the major's sweetheart and that he wrote to her every day. Just imagine it, writing a love letter during a 'cootie' hunt; but such is the creed of the trenches.

(To Be Continued.)

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