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### "Over the Top"

By An American Soldier Who Went

ARTHUR GUY EMPY  
Machine Gunner Serving in France

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—Piled by the news of the sinking of the Lusitania by a German submarine, Arthur Guy Empey, an American, leaves his office in Jersey City and goes to England where he enlists in the British army.

CHAPTER II.—After a period of training, Empey volunteers for immediate service and soon finds himself in rest billets "somewhere in France," where he first makes the acquaintance of the ever-present "cooties."

CHAPTER III.—Empey attends his first church services at the front while a German Fokker circles over the congregation.

CHAPTER IV.—Empey's command goes into the front-line trenches and is under fire for the first time.

CHAPTER V.—Empey learns to adopt the motto of the British Tommy, "If you are going to get it, you'll get it, so never worry."

CHAPTER VI.—Back in rest billets, Empey gets his first experience as a mess orderly.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### The Little Wooden Cross.

After remaining in rest billets for eight days, we received the unwelcome tidings that the next morning we would "go in" to "take over." At six in the morning our march started and, after a long march down the dusty road, we again arrived at reserve billets.

I was No. 1 in the leading set of fours. The man on my left was named "Pete Walling," a cheery sort of fellow. He laughed and joked all the way on the march, buoying up my drooping spirits. I could not figure out anything attractive in again occupying the front line, but Pete did not seem to mind, said it was all in a lifetime. My left heel was blistered from the rubbing of my heavy marching boot. Pete noticed that I was limping and offered to carry my rifle, but by this time I had learned the ethics of the march in the British army and courteously refused his offer.

We had gotten half-way through the communication trench, Pete in my immediate rear. He had his hand on my shoulder, as men in a communication trench have to do to keep in touch with each other. We had just climbed over a barbed-wire part of the trench when in our rear a man stepped over a loose signal wire, and let out an oath. As usual, Pete rushed to his help. To reach the fallen man he had to cross this barbed-wire part. A bullet cracked in the air and I ducked. Then a man from the rear, my heart stood still. I went back and Pete was lying on the ground. By the aid of my flashlight I saw that he had his hand pressed to his right breast. The fingers were covered with blood. I flashed the light on his face and in its glow a grayish-blue color was stealing over his countenance. Pete looked up at me and said: "Well, Yank, they've done me in. I can feel myself going West." His voice was getting fainter and I had to kneel down to get his words. Then he gave me a message to write home to his mother and his sweetheart, and I, like a great big boob, cried like a baby. I was losing my first friend of the trenches.

Word was passed to the rear for a stretcher. He died before it arrived. Two of us put the body on the stretcher and carried it to the nearest first-aid post, where the doctor took an official record of Pete's name, number, rank and regiment from his identity disk, this to be used in the casualty lists and notification to his family.

We left Pete there, but it broke our hearts to do so. The doctor informed us that we could bury him the next morning. That afternoon five of the boys of our section, myself included, went to the little ruined village in the rear and from the deserted gardens of the French chateaux gathered grass and flowers. From these we made a wreath.

While the boys were making this wreath, I sat under a shot-scarred apple tree and carved out the following verses on a little wooden shield which we nailed on Pete's cross.

True to his God, true to Britain,  
Doing his duty to the last,  
Just one more name to be written  
On the Roll of Honor of heroes passed—  
Passed to their God, enshrined in glory,  
Entering life of eternal rest.  
One more chapter in England's story  
Of her sons doing their best.

Rest, you soldier, mate so true,  
Never forgotten by us below;  
Know that we are thinking of you,  
Ere to our rest we are bladders to go.

Next morning the whole section went over to say good-bye to Pete, and laid him away to rest.

After each one had a look at the face of the dead, a corporal of the R. A. M. C. sewed up the remains in a blanket. Then placing two heavy ropes across the stretcher (to be used in lowering the body into the grave), we lifted Pete onto the stretcher, and reverently covered him with a large union jack, the flag he had died for.

The captain led the way, then came the officers of the section, followed by two of the men carrying a wreath. Immediately after came poor Pete on the flag-draped stretcher, carried by four soldiers. I was one of the four. Behind the stretcher, in column of fours, came the remainder of the section.

To get to the cemetery, we had to pass through the little shell-dotted village, where troops were hurrying to and fro.

As the funeral procession passed these troops came to the "attention" and smartly saluted the dead.

Poor Pete was receiving the only salute a private is entitled to "somewhere in France."

laid the stretcher beside it. For a moment a hollow square around the opening of the grave, the chaplain read the burial service.

German machine-gun bullets were "cracking" in the air above us, but Pete didn't mind, and neither did we. When the body was lowered into the grave the flag having been removed, we clicked our heels together and came to the salute.

I left before the grave was filled in. I could not bear to see the dirt thrown on the blanket-covered face of my comrade. On the western front there are no coffins, and you are lucky to get a blanket to protect you from the wet and the worms. Several of the section stayed and decorated the grave with white stones.

That night, in the light of a lonely candle in the machine gunner's dugout of the front-line trench I wrote two letters. One to Pete's mother, the other to his sweetheart. While doing this I cursed the Prussian war god with all my heart, and I think that St. Peter noted same.

The machine gunners in the dugout were laughing and joking. To them Pete was unknown. Pretty soon, in the warmth of their merriment, my blues disappeared. One soon forgets on the western front.

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### Suicide Annex.

I was in my first dugout and looked around curiously. Over the door of same was a little sign reading "Suicide Annex." One of the boys told me that this particular front trench was called "Suicide Ditch." Later on I learned that machine gunners and bombers are known as the "Suicide Club."

That dugout was muddy. The men slept in mud, washed in mud, ate mud, and dreamed mud. I had never before realized that so much discomfort and misery could be contained in those three little letters, M U D. The floor of the dugout was an inch deep in water. Outside it was raining cats and dogs, and rain rivulets were trickling down the steps. From the air shaft immediately above me came a drip, drip, drip. Suicide Annex was a hole eight feet wide, ten feet long and six feet high. It was about twenty feet below the fire trench; at least there were twenty steps leading down to it. These steps were cut into the earth, but at that time were muddy and slippery. A man had to be very careful or else he would "shoot the chutes." The air was foul, and you could cut the smoke from Tommy's fags with a knife. It was cold. The walls and roof were supported with heavy square-cut timbers, while the entrance was strengthened with sandbags. Nails had been driven into these timbers. On each nail hung a miscellaneous assortment of equipment. The lighting arrangements were superb—one candle in a reflector made from an ammunition tin. My teeth were chattering from the cold, and the drip from the shaft did not help matters much. While I was sitting, bemoaning my fate and wishing for the fireside at home, the fellow next to me, who was writing a letter, looked up and innocently asked, "Say, Yank, how do you spell 'conflagration'?"

I looked at him in contempt and answered that I did not know.

From the darkness in one of the corners came a thin, piping voice singing one of the popular trench ditties entitled:

"Pack up your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile."  
Every now and then the singer would stop to cough, cough, but it was a good illustration of Tommy's cheerfulness under such conditions.

A machine-gun officer entered the dugout and gave me a hard look. I sneaked past him, sliding and slipping, and reached my section of the front-line trench, where I was greeted by the sergeant, who asked me, "Where in—'ave you been?"

I made no answer, but sat on the muddy fire step, shivering with the cold and with the rain beating in my face. About half an hour later I teamed up with another fellow and went on guard with my head sticking over the top. At ten o'clock I was relieved and resumed my sitting position on the fire step. The rain suddenly stopped and we all breathed a sigh of relief. We prayed for the morning and the rain issue.

#### CHAPTER X.

##### "The Day's Work."

I was fast learning that there is a regular routine about the work of the trenches, although it is badly upset at times by the Germans.

The real work in the fire trench commences at sundown. Tommy is like a burglar, he works at night.

Just as it begins to get dark the word "stand to" is passed from traverse to traverse, and the men get busy. The first relief, consisting of two men to a traverse, mount the fire step, one man looking over the top, while the other sits at his feet, ready to carry messages or to inform the platoon officer of any report made by the sentry as to his observations in No Man's Land. The sentry is not allowed to relax his watch for a second. If he is questioned from the trench or asked his orders, he replies without turning around or taking his eyes from the exposure of dirt in front of him. The remainder of the occupants of his traverse either sit on the fire step, with bayonets fixed, ready for any emergency, or if lucky, and a dugout happens to be in the near vicinity of the traverse, and if the night is quiet, they are permitted to go to same and try and snatch a few winks of sleep. Little sleeping is done; generally the men sit around, smoking fags and seeing who can tell the biggest lie. Some of them, perhaps with their feet in water, would write home sympathizing with the "governor" because he was laid up with a cold, contracted by getting his feet wet on his way to work in Woodwick around. If a man should manage to doze off, likely as not he would wake with a start as the clammy, cold feet

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of a rat passed over his face, or the next relief stepped on his stomach while stumbling on their way to relieve the sentries in the trench.

Just try to sleep with a belt full of ammunition around you, your rifle bolt biting into your ribs, intrenching tool handle sticking into the small of your back, with a tin hat for a pillow and feeling very damp and cold, with "cooties" boring for oil in your armpits, the air foul from the stench of grimy human bodies and smoke from a juicy pipe being whiffed into your nostrils, then you will not wonder why Tommy occasionally takes a turn in the trench for a rest.

While in a front-line trench orders forbid Tommy from removing his boots, puttees, clothing or equipment. The "cooties" take advantage of this order and mobilize their forces, and Tommy swears vengeance on them and mutters to himself, "Just wait until I hit rest billets and am able to get my own back."

Just before daylight the men "turn to" and tumble out of the dugouts, into the fire step until it gets light, or the welcome order "stand down" is given. Sometimes before "stand down" is ordered, the command "five rounds rapid" is passed along the trench. This means that each man must rest his rifle on the top and fire as rapidly as possible five shots aimed toward the German trenches, and then duck (with the emphasis on the "duck"). There is great rivalry between the opposing forces to get their rapid fire all off first, because the early bird, in this instance, catches the worm—sort of gets the jump on the other fellow, tching him unawares.

We had a sergeant in our battalion named Warren. He was on duty with his platoon in the fire trench one after

noon when order came up from the rear that he had been granted seven days' leave for England, and would be relieved at five o'clock to proceed to England.

He was tickled to death at these welcome tidings and regarded his more or less envious mates beside him on the fire step with the good times in store for him. He figured it out that in two days' time he would arrive at Waterloo station, London, and thence seven days' bliss!

At about five minutes to five he started to fidget with his rifle, and then suddenly springing up on the fire step with a muttered, "I'll send over a couple of souvenirs to Fritz so that he'll miss me when I leave," he stuck his rifle over the top and fired two shots when "crack" went a bullet and he

tumbled off the step, fell into the mud at the bottom of the trench, and lay still in a huddled heap with a bullet hole in his forehead.

At about the time he expected to arrive at Waterloo station he was laid to rest in a little cemetery behind the lines. He had gone to Blighty.

In the trenches one can never tell—it is not safe to plan very far ahead. After "stand down" the men sit on the fire step or repair to their respective dugouts and wait for the "rum issue" to materialize. Immediately following the rum comes breakfast, brought up from the rear. Sleeping is then in order unless some special work turns up.

Around 12:30 dinner shows up. When this is eaten the men try to amuse themselves until "tea" appears at about four o'clock, then "stand to" and they carry on as before.

While in rest billets Tommy gets up about six in the morning, washes up, answers roll call, is inspected by his platoon officer, and has breakfast. At 8:45 he parades (drills) with his company or goes on fatigue according to the orders which have been read out

by the orderly sergeant the night previous.

Between 11:30 and noon he is dismissed, has his dinner and is "on his own" for the remainder of the day, unless he has elected for a digging or working party, and so it goes on from day to day, always "looping the loop" and looking forward to peace and Blighty.

Sometimes, while engaged in a "cootie" hunt, you think, "Strange to say, but it is a fact, while Tommy is searching his shirt serious thoughts come to him. Many a time, when performing this operation, I have tried to figure out the outcome of the war and what will happen to me.

My thoughts generally ran in this channel:

Will I emerge safely from the next attack? If I do will I skin through the following one, and so on? While your mind is wandering into the future it is likely to be rudely brought to earth by a Tommy interrupting with, "What's good for rheumatism?"

Then you have something else to think of. Will you come out of this war crippled and tied into knots with rheumatism, caused by the wet and mud of trenches and dugouts? You give it up as a bad job and generally saunter over to the nearest estaminet to drown your moody forebodings in a glass of sickening French beer or to try your luck at the always present game of "horse." You can hear the sing-song voice of a Tommy droning out the numbers as he extracts the little squares of cardboard from the bag between his feet.

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