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"Over the Top"

By An American Soldier Who Went

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY
Machine Gunner Serving in France

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Fired 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 "sooties."

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 VII—Empey learns how the British soldier is fed.

CHAPTER VIII—Back in the front-line trench, Empey sees his first friend of the trenches, "go West."

CHAPTER IX—Empey makes his first visit to a dugout in "Suicide Ditch."

CHAPTER X—Empey learns what constitutes a "day's work" in the front-line trench.

CHAPTER XI—Empey goes "over the top" for the first time in a charge on the German trenches and is wounded by a bayonet thrust.

CHAPTER XII—Empey joins the "out-side club" as the bombing squad is called.

CHAPTER XIII—Each Tommy gets an official bath.

CHAPTER XIV.

Picks and Shovels.

I had not slept long before the sweet voice of the sergeant informed that "No. 1 section had elicited for another blinking digging party." I smiled to myself with deep satisfaction. I had been promoted from a mere digger to a member of the Suicide club, and was exempt from all fatigues. Then came an awful shock. The sergeant looked over in my direction and said:

"Don't you bomb throwers think you are wearing top hats out here. 'Corblin' to orders you've been taken up on the strength of this section, and will have to do your bit with the pick and shovel, same as the rest of us."

I put up a howl on my way to get my shovel, but the only thing that resulted was a loss of good humor on my part.

We fell in at eight o'clock, outside of our billets, a sort of makeshift party. I was disguised as a common laborer, had a pick and shovel, and about one hundred empty sandbags. The rest, about two hundred in all, were equipped likewise: picks, shovels, sandbags, rifles and ammunition.

The party moved out in column of fours, taking the road leading to the trenches. Several times we had to string out in the ditch to let long columns of limbers, artillery and supplies get past.

The marching, under these conditions, was necessarily slow. Upon arrival at the entrance to the communication trench, I looked at my illuminated wrist watch—it was eleven o'clock.

Before entering this trench, word was passed down the line, "no talking or smoking, lead off in single file, covering party first."

This covering party consisted of 30 men, armed with rifles, bayonets, bombs, and two Lewis machine guns. They were to protect us and guard against a surprise attack while digging in No Man's Land.

The communication trench was about half a mile long, a zigzagging ditch, eight feet deep and three feet wide.

Now and again, German shrapnel would whistle overhead and burst in our vicinity. We would crouch against the earthen walls while the shell fragments "slapped" the ground above us. Once Fritz turned loose with a machine gun, the bullets from which "cracked" through the air and kicked up the dirt on the top, scattering sand and pebbles, which, hitting our steel helmets, sounded like hailstones.

Upon arrival in the fire trench an officer of the Royal Engineers gave us our instructions and acted as guide.

We were to dig an advanced trench two hundred yards from the Germans (the trenches at this point were six hundred yards apart).

Two winding lanes, five feet wide, had been cut through our barbed wire, for the passage of the diggers. From these lines white tape had been laid



Trench Digging.

on the ground to the point where we were to commence work. This in order that we would not get lost in the darkness. The proposed trench was also laid out with tape.

The covering party went out first. After a short wait, two scouts came back with information that the working party was to follow and "carry on" with their work.

In extended order, two yards apart, we noiselessly crept across No Man's Land. It was nervous work; every minute we expected a machine gun to open fire on us. Stray bullets "cracked" around us, or a ricochet sang overhead.

Arriving at the taped diagram of the trench, rifles slung around our shoulders, we lost no time in getting to work. We dug as quietly as possible but every now and then the noise of a pick or shovel striking a stone would send the cold shivers down our backs. Under our breaths we heartily cursed the offending Tommy.

At intervals a star shell would go up from the German lines and we would remain motionless until the glare of its white light died out.

When the trench had reached a depth of two feet we felt safer, because it would afford us cover in case we were discovered and fired on.

The digging had been in progress about two hours, when suddenly hell seemed to break loose in the form of machine-gun and rifle fire.

We dropped down on our bellies in the shallow trench, bullets knocking up the ground and snapping in the air. Then shrapnel rattled in. The music was hot and Tommy danced.

The covering party was having a rough time of it; they had no cover; just had to take their medicine.

Word was passed down the line to beat it for our trenches. We needed no urging; grabbing our tools and stooping low, we leaped it across No Man's Land. The covering party got away to a poor start but beat us in. They must have had wings because we lowered the record.

Panting and out of breath, we tumbled into our front-line trench. I tore my hands getting through our wire, but, at the time, didn't notice it; my journey was too urgent.

When the roll was called we found that we had gotten it in the nose for 63 casualties.

Our artillery put a barrage on Fritz' front-line and communication trenches and their machine-gun and rifle fire suddenly ceased.

Upon the cessation of this fire, stretcher bearers went out to look for killed and wounded. Next day we learned that 21 of our men had been killed and 47 wounded. Five men were missing; lost in the darkness, they must have wandered over into the German lines, where they were either killed or captured.

Speaking of stretcher bearers and wounded, it is very hard for the average civilian to comprehend the enormous cost of taking care of wounded and the war in general. He or she gets so accustomed to seeing billions of dollars in print that the significance of the amount is passed over without thought.

From an official statement published in one of the London papers, it is stated that it costs between six and seven thousand pounds (\$90,000 to \$35,000) to kill or wound a soldier. This result was attained by taking the cost of the war to date and dividing it by the killed and wounded.

It may sound heartless and inhuman but it is a fact, nevertheless, that from a military standpoint it is better for a man to be killed than wounded.

If a man is killed he is buried, and the responsibility of the government ceases, excepting for the fact that his people receive a pension. But if a man is wounded it takes three men from the firing line, the wounded man and two men to carry him to the rear to the advanced first-aid post. Here he is

attended by a doctor, perhaps assisted by two R. A. M. C. men. Then he is put into a motor ambulance, manned by a crew of two or three. At the field hospital, where he generally goes under an anesthetic, either to have his wounds cleaned or to be operated on, he requires the services of about three to five persons. From this point another ambulance ride impresses more men in his service, and then at the ambulance train, another corps of doctors, R. A. M. C. men, Red Cross nurses and the train's crew. From the train he enters the base hospital or casualty clearing station, where a good-sized corps of doctors, nurses, etc., are kept busy. Another ambulance journey is next in order—this time to the hospital ship. He crosses the channel, arrives in Blyth—more ambulances and perhaps a ride for five hours on an English Red Cross train with its crew of Red Cross workers, and at last he reaches the hospital. Generally he stays from two to six months, or longer, in this hospital. From here he is sent to a convalescent home for six weeks.

If by wounds he is unfitted for further service, he is discharged, given a pension, or committed to a soldiers' home for the rest of his life—and still the expense piles up. When you realize that all the ambulances, trains and ships, not to mention the man power, used in transporting a wounded man, could be used for supplies, ammunition and re-enforcements for the troops at the front, it will not appear strange that from a strictly military standpoint, a dead man is sometimes better than a live one (if wounded).

Not long after the first digging party, our general decided, after a careful tour of inspection of the communication trenches, upon "an ideal spot," as he termed it, for a machine-gun emplacement; took his map, made a dot on it, and as he was wont, wrote "dig here," and the next night we dug.

There were twenty in the party, myself included. Armed with picks, shovels and empty sandbags we arrived at the "ideal spot" and started digging. The moon was very bright, but we did not care as we were well out of sight of the German lines.

We had gotten about three feet down, when the fellow next to me, after a mighty stroke with his pick, let go of the handle, and plucked his nose with his thumb and forefinger, at the same time letting out the explosion, "Gott strafe me pink, I'm bloody well gassed, not 'alf I ain't." I quickly turned in his direction with an inquiring look, at the same instant reaching for my gas bag. I soon found out what was ailing him. One whiff was enough and I lost no time in also plucking my nose. The stench was awful. The rest of the digging party dropped their picks and shovels and beat it for the weather side of that solitary pick.

The officer came over and inquired why the work had suddenly ceased, holding our noses, we simply pointed in the direction of the smell. He went over to the pick, immediately clapped his hand over his nose, made an "about turn" and came back. Just then our captain came along and investigated, but after about a minute said we had better carry on with the digging, that he did not see why we should have stopped as the odor was very faint, but if necessary he would allow us our gas helmets while digging. He would stay and see the thing through, but he had to report back to brigade headquarters immediately. We wished that we were captains and also had a date at brigade headquarters. With our gas helmets on we again attacked that hole and uncovered the decomposed body of a German; the pick was sticking in his chest. One of the men fainting. I was that one. Upon this our lieutenant halted proceedings and sent word back to headquarters and word came back

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that after we filled in the hole we could knock off for the night. This was welcome tidings to us, because—

Next day the general changed the dot on his map and another emplacement was completed the following night.

The odor from the dug-up, decomposed human body has an effect which is hard to describe. It first produces a nauseating feeling, which, especially after eating, causes vomiting. This relieves you temporarily, but soon a weakening sensation follows, which leaves you limp as a dishrag. Your spirits are at their lowest ebb and you feel a sort of hopelessness and a mad desire to escape it all, to get to the open fields and the perfume of the flowers in Blighty. There is a sharp, prickling sensation in the nostrils, which reminds one of breathing coal gas through a radiator in the floor, and you want to sneeze, but cannot. This was the effect on me, surmounted by a vague horror of the awfulness of the thing and an ever-recurring reflection that, perhaps I, sooner or later, would be in such a state and be brought to light by the blow of a pick in the hands of some Tommy on a digging party.

Several times I have experienced this odor, but never could get used to it; the enervating sensation was always present. It made me hate war and wonder why such things were countenanced by civilization, and all the spice and glory of the conflict would disappear, leaving the grim reality. But after leaving the spot and filling your lungs with deep breaths of pure, fresh air, you forget and once again want to be "up and at them."

CHAPTER XV.

Listening Post.

It was six in the morning when we arrived at our rest billets, and we were allowed to sleep until noon; that is, if we wanted to go without our breakfast. For sixteen days we remained



Entrance to a Dugout.

In rest billets, digging roads, drilling, and other fatigues, and then back into the front-line trench.

Nothing happened that night, but the next afternoon I found out that a bomber general utility man in a section.

About five o'clock in the afternoon our lieutenant came down the trench and stopping in front of a bunch of us on the fire step, with a broad grin on his face, asked:

"Who is going to volunteer for listening post tonight? I need two men."

It is needless to say no one volunteered, because it is anything but a

cushy job. I began to feel uncomfortable as I knew it was getting around for my turn. Sure enough, with another grin, he said:

"Empey, you and Wheeler are due, so come down into my dugout for instructions at six o'clock."

Just as he left and was going around a traverse, Fritz turned loose with a machine gun and the bullets ripped the sandbags right over his head. It gave me great pleasure to see him duck against the parapet. He was getting a taste of what we would get later out in front.

Then, of course, it began to rain. I knew it was the forerunner of a miserable night for us. Every time I had to go out in front, it just naturally rained. Old Jupiter Pluvius must have had it in for me.

At six we reported for instructions. They were simple and easy. All we had to do was to crawl out into No Man's Land, lie on our bellies with our ears to the ground and listen for the tap, tap of the German engineers or sappers who might be tunnelling under No Man's Land to establish a mine-head beneath our trench.

Of course, in our orders we were told not to be captured by German patrols or reconnoitering parties. Lots of breath is wasted on the western front giving silly cautions.

As soon as it was dark, Wheeler and I crawled to our post which was about halfway between the lines. It was raining bucketfuls, the ground was a sea of sticky mud and clung to us like glue.

We took turns in listening with our ears to the ground. I would listen for twenty minutes while Wheeler would be on the qui vive for German patrols.

We each wore a wristwatch, and believe me, neither one of us did over twenty minutes. The rain soaked us to the skin and our ears were full of mud.

(Continued on Page Eight.)

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