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"Over the Top"

By An American Soldier Who Went
ARTHUR GUY EMPY
Machine Gunner Serving in France.

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 "cooties."
CHAPTER III—Empey attends his first church services at the front while a German Pooker 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, no never worry."
CHAPTER VI—Back in rest billets, Empey gets his first experience as a mess orderly.
CHAPTER VII—Empey learns how the British soldiers are fed.
CHAPTER VIII—Back in the front-line trenches, Empey sees his first friend of the trenches "go West."
CHAPTER IX—Empey makes his first visit to a dugout in "Bulldog Ditch."
CHAPTER X—Empey learns what constitutes a "day's work" in the front-line trenches.
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 "side-slip" as the bombing squad is called.
CHAPTER XIII—Each Tommy gets an official bath.
CHAPTER XIV—Empey helps dig an advanced trench under German fire.
CHAPTER XV—On "waiting post" in No Man's Land.
CHAPTER XVI—Two artillerymen "put one over" on Old Pepper, their regimental commander.
CHAPTER XVII—Empey has narrow escape while on patrol duty in No Man's Land.
CHAPTER XVIII—Back in rest billets Empey writes and stages a farce comedy.
CHAPTER XIX—Soldiers have many ways to amuse themselves while "on their own."
CHAPTER XXIV.

The Firing Squad.

A few days later I had orders to report back to divisional headquarters, about thirty miles behind the line. I reported to the A. P. M. (assistant provost marshal). He told me to report to billet No. 78 for quarters and rations.

It was about eight o'clock at night and I was tired and soon fell asleep in the straw of the billet. It was a miserable night outside, cold, and a drizzly rain was falling.

About two in the morning I was awakened by some one shaking me by the shoulder. Opening my eyes I saw a regimental sergeant-major bending over me. He had a lighted lantern in his right hand. I started to ask him what was the matter, when he put his finger to his lips for silence and whispered:

"Get on your equipment and, without any noise, come with me."
This greatly mystified me, but I obeyed his order.

Outside of the billet, I asked him what was up, but he shut me up with: "Don't ask questions, it's against orders. I don't know myself."

It was raining like the mischievous. We splashed along a muddy road for about fifteen minutes, finally stopping at the entrance of what must have been an old barn. In the darkness, I could hear the snoring, as if they

had just been disturbed. In front of the door stood an officer in a mack (macintosh). The R. S. M. went up to him, whispered something, and then left. This officer called to me, asked my name, number and regiment, at the same time, in the light of a lantern he was holding, making a notation in a little book.

When he had finished writing, he whispered:

"Go into that billet and wait orders, and no talking. Understand?"

I stumbled into the barn and sat on the floor in the darkness. I could see no one, but could hear men breathing and moving; they seemed nervous and restless. I know I was.

During my wait, three other men entered. Then the officer poked his head in the door and ordered:

"Fall in, outside the billet, in single rank."

We fell in, standing at ease. Then he commanded:

"Squad—Shut! Number!"

There were twelve of us.

"Right—Turn! Left—Wheel! Quick—March!" And away we went. The rain was trickling down my back and I was shivering from the cold.

With the officer leading, we must have marched over an hour, plowing through the mud and occasionally stumbling into a shell hole in the road, when suddenly the officer made a left wheel, and we found ourselves in a sort of enclosed courtyard.

The dawn was breaking and the rain had ceased.

In front of us were four stacks of rifles, three to a stack.

The officer brought us to attention and gave the order to unpile arms. We each took a rifle. Giving us "Stand at ease," in a nervous and shaky voice, he informed:

"Men, you are here on a very solemn duty. You have been selected as a firing squad for the execution of a soldier, who, having been found guilty of a grievous crime against king and country, has been regularly and duly tried and sentenced to be shot at 3:25 a. m. this date. This sentence has been approved by the reviewing authority and ordered carried out. It is our duty to carry on with the sentence of the court."

"There are twelve rifles, one of which contains a blank cartridge, the other eleven containing ball cartridges. Every man is expected to do his duty and fire to kill. Take your orders from me. Squad—Shut!"

We came to attention. Then he left. My heart was of lead and my knees shook.

After standing at "attention" for what seemed a week, though in reality it could not have been over five minutes, we heard a low whispering in our rear and footsteps on the stone flagging of the courtyard.

Our officer reappeared and in a low, but firm voice, ordered:

"About—Turn!"

We turned about. In the gray light of dawn, a few yards in front of me, I could make out a brick wall. Against this wall was a dark form with a white square pinned on its breast. We were supposed to aim at this square.

To the right of the form I noticed a white spot on the wall. This would be my target. "Ready! Aim! Fire!"

The dark form sank into a huddled heap. My bullet sped on its way, and hit the whitish spot on the wall; I could see the splinters fly. Some one else had received the rifle containing the blank cartridge, but my mind was at ease, there was no blood of a Tommy on my hands.

"Order—Arms! About—Turn! Pile—Arms! Stand—Clear."

The stacks were re-formed.

"Quick—March! Right—Wheel!" And we left the scene of execution behind us.

It was now daylight. After marching about five minutes, we were dismissed with the following instructions from the officer in command:

"Return, alone, to your respective companies, and remember, no talking about this affair, or else it will go hard with the guilty ones."

We needed no urging to get away. I did not recognize any of the men on the firing squad; even the officer was a stranger to me.

The victim's relations and friends in Blighty will never know that he was executed; they will be under the impression that he died doing his bit for king and country.

In the public casualty lists his name will appear under the caption "Accidentally Killed," or "Died."

The day after the execution I received orders to report back to the line, and to keep a still tongue in my head.

Executions are a part of the day's work, but the part we hated most of all, I think—certainly the saddest. The British war department is thought by many people to be composed of rigid regulations all wound around with red tape. But it has a heart, and one of the evidences of this is the consideration way in which an execution is conducted and reported to the relative of the unfortunate man. They never know the truth. He is listed in the bulletins as among the "accidentally killed."

In the last ten years I have several times read stories in magazines of cowards chinking. In a charge, to be sure, I used to laugh at it. It seemed easy for story-writers, but I said, "Men aren't made that way." But over in France I learned once that the streak of yellow can turn all white. I picked up the story, bit by bit, from the captain of the company, the sentries who guarded the poor fellow, as well as from my own observations. At first I did not realize the whole of his story, but after a week of investigation it stood out as clear in my mind as the mountains of my native West in the spring sunshine. It impressed me so much that I wrote it all down in rest billets on scraps of odd paper. The incidents are, as I say, every bit true; the feelings of the man are true—I know from all I underwent in the fighting over in France.

We will call him Albert Lloyd. That wasn't his name, but it will do.

Albert Lloyd was what the world terms a coward.

In London they called him a coward. His country had been at war for nearly eighteen months, and still he was not in khaki.

He had no good reason for not enlisting, being alone in the world, having been educated in an orphan asylum, and there being no one dependent upon him for support. He had no good position to lose, and there was no sweetheart to tell him with her lips to go, while her eyes pleaded for him to stay.

Every time he saw a recruiting sergeant he'd sink around the corner out of sight, with a terrible fear gnawing at his heart. When passing the big recruiting posters, and on his way to business and back he passed many, he would pull down his cap and look the other way from that awful finger pointing at him, under the caption, "Your King and Country Need You," or the boring eyes of Kitchener, which burned into his very soul, causing him to shudder.

Then the Zeppelin raids—during them, he used to crouch in a corner of his boarding-house cellar, whimpering like a whipped puppy and calling upon the Lord to protect him.

Even his landlady despised him, although she had to admit that he was "good pay."

He very seldom read the papers, but one morning the landlady put the morning paper at his place before he came down to breakfast. Taking his seat he read the glaring headline, "Conscription Bill Passed," and nearly fainted. Excusing himself, he stumbled upstairs to his bedroom, with the horror of it gnawing into his vitals.

Having saved up a few pounds, he decided not to leave the house, and to shun sickness, so he stayed in his room and had the landlady serve his meals there.

Every time there was a knock at the door he trembled all over, imagining it was a policeman who had come to take him away to the army.

One morning his fears were realized. Sure enough, there stood a policeman with the fatal paper. Taking it from his trembling hand he read that he, Albert Lloyd, was ordered to report himself to the nearest recruiting station for physical examination. He reported immediately, because he was afraid to disobey.

The doctor looked with approval upon Lloyd's six feet of physical perfection, and thought what a fine guardsman he would make, but examined his heart twice before he passed him as "physically fit"; it was beating so fast.

From the recruiting depot Lloyd was taken, with many others, in charge of a sergeant, to the training depot at Aldershot, where he was given an outfit of khaki, and drew his other equipment. He made a fine-looking soldier, except for the slight shrinking in his shoulders and the hunted look in his eyes.

At the training depot it does not take long to find out a man's character, and Lloyd was promptly dubbed "windy." In the English army "windy" means cowardly.

The smallest recruit in the barracks looked on him with contempt, and was not slow to show it in many ways.

Lloyd was a good soldier, learned quickly, obeyed every order promptly, never grumbled at the hardest fatigues. He was afraid to. He lived in deadly fear of the officers and "noncoms" over him. They also despised him.

One morning about three months after his enlistment Lloyd's company was paraded, and the names picked out for the next draft to France were read. When his name was called, he did not stop out smartly, two paces to the front, and answer cheerfully, "Here, sir," as the others did. He just faintly, in the ranks and was carried to barracks amid the sneers of the rest.

That night was an agony of misery to him. He could not sleep. Just cried and whimpered in his bunk, because on the morrow the draft was to sail for France, where he would see death on all sides, and perhaps he killed himself. On the steamer, crossing the channel, he would have jumped overboard to escape, but was afraid of drowning.

Arriving in France, he and the rest were lugged into cattle cars. On the side of each appeared in white letters, "Hommes 40 Chevaux 8." After hours of bumping over the uneven French roads they arrived at the training base of Rouen.

At this place they were put through a week's rigid training in trench warfare. On the morning of the eighth day they paraded at ten o'clock, and were inspected and passed by General H—, then were marched to the quartermaster's, to draw their gas helmets and trench equipment.

At four in the afternoon they were again lugged into cattle cars. This time the journey lasted two days. They disembarked at the town of Frevent and could hear a distant dull booming. With knees shaking, Lloyd asked the sergeant what the noise was, and nearly dropped when the sergeant replied in a somewhat bored tone:

"Oh, then's the guns up the line. We'll be up there in a couple of days or so. Don't worry, my lad, you'll see more of 'em than you want before you get 'em to Blighty again, that is, if you're lucky enough to get back. Now lend a hand there unloading them cars, and quit that everlasting shakin'. I believe yer scared." The last with a contemptuous sneer.

They marched ten kilos, full pack, to a little dilapidated village, and the sound of the guns grew louder, constantly louder.

The village was full of soldiers who turned out to inspect the new draft, the men who were shortly to be their mates in the trenches, for they were going "up the line" on the morrow, to "take over" their certain sector of trenches.

The draft was paraded in front of battalion headquarters and the men were assigned to companies.

Lloyd was the only man assigned to D company. Perhaps the officer in charge of the draft had something to do with it, for he called Lloyd aside and said:

"Lloyd, you are going to a new company. No one knows you. Your bed will be as you make it, so for God's sake, brace up and be a man. I think you have the stuff in you, my boy, so good-by and the best of luck to you."

The next day the battalion took over their part of the trenches. It happened to be a very quiet day. The artillery behind the lines was still, except for an occasional shell sent over to let the Germans know the gunners were not asleep.

In the darkness, in single file, the company slowly wended their way down the communication trench to the front line. No one noticed Lloyd's white and drawn face.

After they had relieved the company in the trenches, Lloyd, with two of the old company men, was put on guard in one of the traverses. Not a shot was fired from the German lines, and no one paid any attention to him crouched on the firing step.

On the first time in a new recruit is not required to stand with his head "over the top." He only "sits it out," while the older men keep watch.

At about ten o'clock, all of a sudden, he thought hell had broken loose, and crouched and shivered up against the parapet. Shells started bursting, as he imagined, right in their trench, when in fact they were landing about a hundred yards in rear of them, in the second lines.

One of the older men on guard, turning to his mate, said:

"There goes Fritz with those d—d trench mortars again. It's about time our artillery 'uped' them, and sent over a few. Well, I'll be d—d, where's that blighter of a draft man gone to? There's his rifle leaning against the parapet. He must have legged it. Just keep your eye peeled, Dick, while I report it to the sergeant. I wonder if the fool knows he can be shot for such tricks as leavin' his post?"

Lloyd had gone. When the trench mortars opened up, a maddening terror seized him and he wanted to run, to get away from that horrible din, anywhere to safety. So quietly sneaking around the traverse, he came to the entrance of a communication trench, and ran madly and blindly down it, running into traverses, stumbling into muddy holes, and falling full length over trench grids.

Groping blindly, with his arms stretched out in front of him, he at last came out of the trench into the village, or what used to be a village, before the German artillery razed it.

Mixed with his fear, he had a peculiar sort of cunning, which whispered to him to avoid all sentries, because if they saw him he would be sent back to that awful destruction in the front line, and perhaps he killed or maimed. The thought made him shudder, the cold sweat coming out in beads on his face.

On his left, in the darkness, he could make out the shadowy forms of trees; crawling on his hands and knees, stopping and crouching with fear at each shell-burst, he finally reached an old orchard and covered at the base of a shot-scrubbed apple tree.

He remained there all night, listening to the sound of the guns and ever praying, praying that his useless life would be spared.

As dawn began to break, he could discern little dark objects protruding from the ground all about him. Curiosity mastered his fear and he crawled to one of the objects, and there, in the uncertain light, he read on a little wooden cross:

"Pte. H. S. Wheaton, No. 1670, 1st London Regt. R. F. Killed in action, April 25, 1916. R. I. P." (Rest in Peace).

When it dawned on him that he had been hiding all night in a cemetery his reason seemed to leave him. In a mad desire to be free from it all, he ran like a mad dog, falling over little wooden crosses, smashing some and trampling others under his feet.

In his flight he came to an old French dugout, half caved in and partially filled with slimy and filthy water.

Like a fox being chased by the hounds, he ducked into this hole, and threw himself on a pile of old empty sandbags, wet and mildewed. Then—unconsciousness.

On the next day, he came to; distant voices sounded in his ears. Opening his eyes, in the entrance of the dugout he saw a corporal and two men with fixed bayonets.

The corporal was addressing him:

"Get up, you white-livered blighter! Curse you and the day you ever joined D company, spelling their fine record! It'll be you up against the wall, and a good job too. Get hold of him, men, and if he makes a break, give him the bayonet, and send it home, the cowardly sneak. Come on, you, move, we've been looking for you long enough."

Lloyd, trembling and weakened by his long fast, tottered out, assisted by a soldier on each side of him.

They took him before the captain, but could get nothing out of him but:

"For God's sake, sir, don't have me shot, don't have me shot!"

The captain, utterly disgusted with him, sent him under escort to division headquarters for trial by court-martial, charged with desertion under fire.

They shot deserters in France.

During his trial, Lloyd sat as one dazed, and could put nothing forward in his defense, only an occasional "Don't have me shot!"

His sentence was passed: "To be shot at 3:38 o'clock in the morning of May 18, 1918." This meant that he had only one more day to live.

He did not realize the awfulness of his sentence; his brain seemed paralyzed. He knew nothing of his trip, under guard, in a motor lorry to the sandbagged guardroom in the village, where he was dumped on the floor and left, while a sentry with a fixed bayonet paced up and down in front of the entrance.

(Continued on Page Six.)

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