

YANKS FIRST IMPRESSIONS IN THE WORLD WAR ARE TOLD

BY JACK SHARPE.

(Formerly of the Machine Gun Company, 28th Infantry, 1st Division.)

"So you are just back from overseas? And I know that you are tickled to death to get back home again, aren't you? And were you at the front? Yes? You must have had some very thrilling experiences!"

Now, all the overseas, "dough-boy" needs in the ammunition line to answer a barrage like this is a handful of "Yes, ma'am." You'll get by! But what will you do when they start to outflank you with a question like this: "Tell me, please, what were your impressions?"

And that is just what I am going to try to tell—my impressions on the way up to the front line and under shellfire for the first time.

I left New York with the Forty-first (Savage) Division for overseas. This was in December of 1917. We landed Christmas Day at Liverpool, a few days later arriving at the port of Le Havre. My regiment was the

2nd Infantry, originally the old 1st Oregon.

Start for Front.

After a few months of general guard duty we were made into a casual outfit and were speedily shipped out to the several fighting divisions on the line. We were among the very first replacements of the big divisions.

With twenty-four other men I was ordered to a machine gun organization of the First United States Division, then operating at Catigny. We were augmented by about 350 infantrymen and, boarding a French troop train, we were soon under way—off in search of the big adventure.

It took us six days to locate the First Division. They had moved from Catigny to the Soissons sector, not so very far from Paris. This was in July, 1918, and the Germans were not very far from Paris, either. As I look back now I can recall the almost hopeless expressions of the French people. The outlook was certainly far from bright.

We reached the railroad of the line

at a small town called Crepy on the morning of July 18, arriving at dawn. After the command, "Unloading your equipment" was given my squad was detailed to go after water and on this mission I had the opportunity of looking about "in the first shell-wrecked town that I had seen."

Wounded Yanks "Game." Over to the left of our encampment I noticed a long hospital train drawn up on the siding. It was waiting to receive the wounded. The engine was loaded on the way it was shorting and wheezing gave me the idea that it was anxious to get under way and to bear the casualties to a place of safety and rest.

Before long ambulances, trucks and even farm wagons came rambling loaded down with wounded. It was somewhat a relief for me to see that there were other heads Americans among the injured. There were French and Moroccan soldiers and not a few "Boche." A passing glance at the enemy wounded showed me to my immense satisfaction that most of "Jerry's" wounds were on their square heads! As I look back now I remember that I got a good "kick" out of this discovery for I knew those "doughboys" were putting 'em over to count.

I talked to many of the boys while they were awaiting word to "load on." They were all undivided in their opinion that war was "hell all right," but were a game bunch. Not a whine did I hear. Although it was their first scrap they were "going fine until we were stopped," as one red-headed lad assured me.

The encouraging news that the wounded gas was just the medicine we needed for what may have been a slight slump in buckshot when we first saw these human results of the very battle that we were to take part in soon. Such is optimism.

The trucks did not come for us that day, and toward dark we were told that we were going to spend the night in a nearby forest. After a night camouflaged in the woods, we returned to the siding. The word was passed that the trucks would be there inside of an hour. The men were told to overhaul their equipment for probably the last time before going into action. As machine gunners carry no rifles, but automatic pistols instead, I had no Springfield to clean. I was also minus a pistol, as were we all, but that would be attended to at the front. Please remember this fact. I was on my way to the war without so much as a pocket knife.

Wants To Be Alone. So all I had to clean up was my gas mask. After this job was done I had nothing to do but think. Somehow or other I wanted to be all alone by myself.

Now, I did not want to die. To be sure I wanted to do my bit in battle, to suffer if necessary, but the other. No. Now, when you are brought face to face with impending disaster all thoughts of a trivial nature are banished. You think real thoughts.

I wanted protection and I realized that I had to go to a higher authority than my company commander, or to a higher official than my general I had ever seen. As I was wrestling with my thoughts I noticed a small dog not so far away. As I made my way in that direction I then knew to whom I was going to take my burden.

Just "Talked With God." So into the little hole in the ground I crawled. I was all alone with my Maker. Soon all my pent up and confused thoughts took proper form and I commenced to talk to the same Father to whom I had been as a child said my. Now I lay me down to sleep. I say I talked. Of course it was a prayer, but as I look back now it seems to me that it was more of a talk.

I explained to God that I wanted to go back home when the time was good. I told Him of mistakes I had

made in my past. I told Him of un-happiness I had caused. I promised to make good if I and the chance of the future.

Then came the call. Trucks soon came rolling up and without any unnecessary formality we piled aboard. Then with a bang and a jerk we were off. Out through the shell-wrecked town we sped, dodging debris here and there, slowing down occasionally as we rumbled over a hastily repaired bridge and out into the countryside that only a few days before had itself been the battlefield. We passed many ambulances bringing the wounded into the town we had just left and many empty Red Cross vehicles going back for more.

Jokes Forgotten. As we went along I looked about me. Faces were set in masks of resignation, changing occasionally to a painful little smile. No one wanted to be "killed" at this time and no one seemed to be in the humor for joking. It seemed that everyone was perfectly aware that something very serious was happening up there ahead and I have an idea that many silent prayers were prayed on that memorable and wild dash to the front lines.

The noise from the heavens was by now almost deafening. Over on our left as we rushed along I could see great flashes and I knew it was from the big guns. At one point we had to pass directly in front of a big French battery and it gave me the "creeps" even though I knew that the projectiles were going way over our heads.

We followed the exact trail of the grenades engaged the day before. We crossed trench after trench, trenches Germans built and occupied later by the Allied troops. Every trench told its own story. Here and there an abandoned potato masher, grenade (German) and rifles, bayonets, equipment and the usual battle field salvage. * * * And of human bodies there were many and they were not all enemy bodies either.

Tornado of Death.

We had advanced about half way to our destination when all of a sudden it started to rain shrapnel and high explosive. Fritz was on hand to give us a grand reception. All of this came to us as a bolt from a clear sky. It certainly brought us up with a start. Shells were bursting all around us and I saw several boys go down. And what a place we were in!

There was not so much as a plowed furrow, much less a trench, anywhere near, and no time to dig in. It would have been suicide to stop there. So the only thing that we could do was to make a run for the sheltered side of a hill 500 yards or so distant. Our lieutenant gave the word and run for it we sure did.

But we didn't leave our wounded behind. Each squad cared for its own injured men and we finally made the shelter with safety. When we reached our objective, believe me, for a bunch of green recruits, that bunch sure did dig in! All this time we were being subjected to a most terrific shelling and the enemy had a fair range on us, too, but we suffered no more casualties.

Just how long we lay there under partial cover I don't know. But I do know one thing. Fritz would have scored a bunch of direct hits had he kept up the firing—his aim was getting better all the time and he was bunching them, but all of a sudden the bombardment ceased as suddenly as it had begun. For awhile we lay just as still as when we were being "shot up," but as darkness was coming on and we had to reach the front line as soon as possible, we were soon on the march again.

The going was slow as we had to creep along in plain view of several "boche" observation balloons.

"Made the Grade."

I never well understand why those balloons were allowed to remain up there getting an eyeful of our every movement, but they stayed put. And, mind you, whether we were of any importance or not, we were going up as replacements, to take the places of the fallen on the line. Well, anyhow, as one of the boys afterwards said, "we made the grade in spite of Fritz and his blasted war bags."

It was dark when we dragged ourselves into the little wreck of a barn where regimental headquarters was stationed. The location of what had been a town named Miesey just on the edge of the Paris-Soissons road. "You recall, there were only some odd of us without rifles. Well, we seemed to have arrived at a rather critical point in the battle. Fritz had been on the run all this time and now the word came that he was going to make a stand. The machine gun organization to which we were to be assigned was too far up for us to reach that night in safety, a lieutenant told us, and he said that we would have to dig up a rifle and bayonet as best we could. He said also something about "making it snappy."

There was a salvage pile near and from this pile we took something like ten good rifles and six bayonets. Well, the emergency had to be met, so we started out—the rest of us—to prow the battlefields for rifles and bayonets. We finally found what we needed, but, of course, you realize that we had to take them from their late owners.

Ammunition was plentiful and we were issued two bandoliers each and a beltful also. Three of the boys in our bunch had never had so much as a day's experience with a rifle, and they were going into battle! Of course, the fact that these men were ignorant of a rifle may not have been known to the commanding officer, but there was one officer that knew and was powerless to help. I remember thanking my stars for the little infantry drill that I had had and I was determined to use that knowledge to the very best advantage possible.

After this we "dug in" for the night. We were told to prepare "combat packs" and to be ready to start at a moment's notice.

We remained here for four days in support. Three different times we were ordered to join the men in the front line, but each time the order was countermanded. But we were far from a place of safety. All during the day the enemy was treating us to a fierce shell fire. And during the night also. Then, too, air raids more than I can remember. The strain was telling on us, too, for we could not get back. All we could do was to lie down and keep out of sight. I would much rather have been where there was something to shoot back at than to lie there under that dreadful and almost unceasing grueling haunted us by a desperate enemy.

We were relieved the next night by a Scottish division, the Gordon Highlanders, and joined the First American Division about a kilometer down the road under cover of an inky darkness. And I want to say that all hands were very grateful for the darkness.

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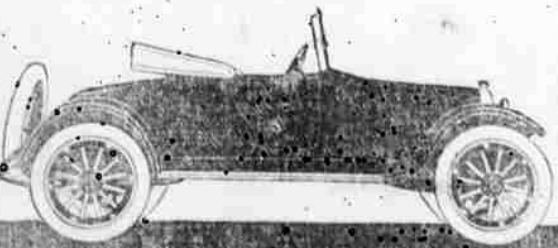
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