

The Confessions of a German Deserter

Written by a Prussian Officer Who Participated in the Ravaging and Pillaging of Belgium

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CHAPTER I.

I am a German soldier. Naturally at the time when the war started we did not know that there would be such a war as is being waged today.

Daily we soldiers were told that France and Russia wanted to attack us and that the Kaiser was doing everything possible for our protection. Already on July 20 we were armed to the teeth and prepared to march away. During these preparations, which showed us all that war had to come, 18 men of my company deserted.

The government published, during this time, bulletins almost hourly to prepare the people for the war, a subterfuge that succeeded perfectly. Consequently two days before war was declared, the people were overwhelmingly for war, but they were certain that it was only to be between Germany and France.

Of the intervention of Belgium, Russia, England and Italy, the country had as little thought as it did of any participation of the United States. All thought only of the promenade to Paris, which, to the disappointment of the people, and also, surely to the disappointment of the autocracy, has been longer drawn out than had been wished for.

In these days of uncertainty the soldiers, contrary to the cruel treatment which they had experienced before, were treated liberally with great quantities of supplies, delicacies and beer, so that most of the soldiers were so drunk continuously that they were unable to realize the seriousness of the situation.

And yet the majority of the soldiers could not be enthused over the war. They cheered and were enthusiastic because they knew it was the orders. On July 31, 1914, one day before the declaration of war, we left, after being brought to war strength, for our garrison at Mainz-am-Rheine.

Where the enemy toward which we were to point our bayonets was we had not the slightest idea. All we did know was that we had to be transported somewhere to protect the border.

There were stirring times as we started out. Tens of thousands of people threw flowers at us and all wanted to shake hands. All—even soldiers—cried! Many embraced their wives or young brides. The bands played farewell songs and people laughed and cried all at the same time. Strangers embraced and kissed each other. "A veritable witch's holiday" of emotion was loosened and engulfed the populace like a storm. No one, not even the strongest, could resist its powers. Yet even this was surpassed by the leave-taking at the depot, where last farewells had to be said. This scene will never leave me! How desperately many women clung to their men! Many had to be forcibly removed.

But this was at last done and then we were placed in cattle cars. Night came and we had no lights. The train went slowly toward the Rhine. It went smoothly enough. Our company, which had had days of great excitement, welcomed the rest that the journey afforded. Most of the soldiers slept with their knapsacks as pillows. Others looked dreamily into the future. Still others secretly pulled pictures from their breastpockets and only a very few killed time by discussion and comment on their possible destination.

"Where are we going?" Yes, where? No one knew. Then after endless hours, the train stopped. We were in Duren. What were we there for? We did not know. The officers only shrugged their shoulders at our questions.

After a brief pause we went ahead. On the evening of August 1 we reached a farmyard near Duren. Our company was billeted in a barn. No one knew what we had to do. Ignorant of the purpose of our being sent so near the Belgian border we laid down on our beds of straw. Something had to happen soon to rescue us from this uncertainty.

How few suspected that would be the last night for many of us on German ground. An alarm took us from our beds at 3 a. m. The company gathered and the captain demonstrated the war situation. As to the direction of the march he himself was ignorant.

Scarcely half an hour later 50 big trucks drove up and stopped on the road before our quarters. The drivers also were ignorant and waited for orders. Discussion of our destination started afresh. The orderlies who had been keeping their ears open said we would enter Belgium that day. Others contradicted them, no one knew for certainty.

But the order to march did not come and in the evening we went back to our straw. But the rest was

short. At 1 a. m. we were again aroused and honored by a speech from our captain. He said we were at war with Belgium. He told us to show ourselves brave, deserve the iron cross and bring honor to Germany. Then he continued:

"We only make war against the armed force, the Belgian army. Life and property of civilians are protected under international law. Yet you soldiers must not forget to keep your lives for the fatherland or sell them as



Honored by a Speech From Our Captain.

dearly as possible. Unnecessary shedding of blood we will prohibit to the civilian population. Yet I ask you to consider that too much consideration borders on cowardice and that will be punished very severely."

After this speech of our captain we were loaded on our autos and at 4 a. m. crossed the border into Belgium. In order to make this a historical occasion we were ordered to give three cheers. On the speedy autos we reached our goal at 10 a. m. It was a beautiful little rural village. Inhabitants of the villages we had passed looked at us in astonishment, so that we all got the impression that these country people never knew why we came to Belgium. They were frightened out of their sleep and looked out at us from their windows.

As we halted and left our autos, the farmers came out and offered us coffee, bread, meat, etc. We were still without a field kitchen, so that we enjoyed the enemy's offerings more so since those of the better class of villagers refused any pay. They told us the Belgian soldiers had departed to some unknown destination.

After a short rest we marched on. The autos returned. Hardly had we marched an hour when we were overtaken by cavalry, dragoons and hussars, who reported that the Germans were marching all over the neighborhood on all roads. Right behind came the bicycle corps.

This was comforting. We no longer felt alone, isolated in a strange country. Another bicycle division overtook us and passed on. Angry words were now uttered by members of our company. The others could ride but we had to walk. What we had always taken for granted suddenly became great injustice. If it did no good our grumbling at least was a diversion from the weight of our packs.

The heat was oppressive. The sweat came from all pores. The new and stiff leather trappings rubbed us sore, especially upon our hips. It was a relief at 2 p. m. to halt at an abandoned farm and rest on the grass. We might have lain down about ten minutes when suddenly we heard firing. We jumped up like lightning and hurried to our guns. The firing which was about three kilometers away grew more lively. At once we were on the march again.

From the expressions on the faces of the soldiers we could read the minds of the men. Something took possession of them which they had never experienced before. As for myself I became very restless. Fright and curiosity lashed my brain. Everything whirled around in my head and my heart was beating wildly. But I strove to conceal my fright from my comrades. I am sure that I tried energetically. I don't know that I succeeded better than my companions.

Although I knew we would be in the fight in an hour, I tried to persuade myself that our interference would not be necessary. I clung tight-

ly to everything which might strengthen this hope.

The bicycles lying in the road indicated that the bicycle division was in the fight at this point. How strong the enemy was we did not know as we raced toward the firing line. Everybody crouched down as low as possible while jumping to the right and left. Before and behind us the bullets were flying continuously, yet we reached the firing line without losses. We were greeted joyously by our hard-pressed comrades. The bicycle regiment had not suffered any losses except for a few slightly wounded men who were still able to take part in the fight.

We were lying flat on the ground and firing in the direction ordered for all we were worth, even though we had not seen our enemies. That was apparently not interesting enough to some of our soldiers. They wanted to know how the people were looking whom they had to shoot at. They got up to a kneeling position. Two men of my company had to pay for their curiosity with their lives almost instantly. The first victim of our party went down without a sound. The second threw his arms high in the air and fell on his back. Both were dead instantly.

It is impossible for me to describe the feeling that overcame me in the first real volley as we advanced and came directly within the range of the fire. I no longer felt any fright, only an impulse to get into action as quickly as possible. Yet at the sight of the first corpse a terrible fear seized me. For minutes I was completely stunned, lost all self-control and was absolutely unable to think or do anything.

I pressed my face and hands close to the ground. I wanted to clutch my gun and shoot blindly. Presently I calmed down. I suddenly became contented with myself and conditions about me and when soon afterward the command was sounded along the whole line, "Spring out!" "Forward march!" I charged, as did everyone else like one possessed. The order to halt followed. Like wet bags we plumped to the ground. Firing had begun anew.

Our firing now became more lively momentarily and increased to a fearful loudness. If we had occasion to say anything to our comrades we had to shout so loudly in their ears that it hurt our throats.

Under the effect of our fire the enemy grew restless, the fire weakened and his line wavered. As only 500 meters separated us from them we could observe exactly what happened there. We saw about half the enemy retire in the following manner: Every other man quit the line, leaving his alternate in his place. Those remaining held on until the retiring party halted. We used this moment to inflict the most severe losses on the retreating enemy. As far as we could scan the horizon to the right and left we saw the Germans advancing in several sectors. Also for our detachments the order came to advance as the enemy retreated.

The task of clinging to the heels of the retreating enemy so tenaciously that no time would be allowed to make a new stand fell to us. We followed the Belgians, scarcely stopping to breathe on the way, in order to prevent their fortifying themselves in a village situated just ahead. We knew that a bloody house-to-house fight lay before us, yet the Belgians never attempted to establish themselves, but managed to escape with astonishing cleverness.

In the meantime we received reinforcements. Our company was now pretty well scattered and fought with whatever unit was nearby. The body I joined had to remain in the village to search systematically for scattered soldiers. From this village we saw that the Germans had gained on all sides. Field artillery, machine gun detachments and other equipment arrived and we were all astonished at their coming so quickly.

But there was no time to be spent in speculation. With fixed bayonets we went from house to house, door to door, and while the results were negligible because we found no soldiers we did not come out quite empty-handed. We made the inhabitants deliver all guns and munitions and so forth in their possession. The mayor, accompanying the soldiers, explained to every citizen that all found with arms according to the rules of war and German rules of war in Belgium meant execution.

An hour might have passed when we were again aroused by the sound of artillery and gunfire. A new battle had begun. Whether the artillery was busy on both sides could not be judged from our village. The bombardment was tremendous. The ground shook from the growling and moaning that rolled backward and forward, always seeming to become stronger.

The ambulance columns now brought in the first wounded. Couriers sped by us. War had set in in all its phases. Darkness came over us before we had finished our house-to-house search. We dragged all the mattresses, straw sacks and feather beds that we could lay our hands on, to the community school and church to care for the wounded. They were made as comfortable as possible. From other surrounding villages now came the first fugitives. They may have been marching, for they looked tired and utterly exhausted.

Women, old men and children were huddled together in one mass. They had saved nothing except their bare lives. In baby buggies or on wheelbarrows these unfortunates carried whatever the rude force of war had

left them. In contrast to the fugitives, whom we had met before, these were extremely frightened, appearing to be in mortal terror of their enemy. Whenever they looked upon one of us German soldiers they cringed in terror.

How different these were from the inhabitants of the village where we had first stopped, who had met us in a friendly, even polite manner. We tried to learn the cause of this fright and discovered that the fugitives had witnessed in their village bitter street fighting. They had become acquainted with war—had seen their houses burning, had seen their little property destroyed and could not forget the sight of their streets filled with corpses and wounded.

It dawned upon us that not merely fear gave these people the appearance of hunted animals; there was also hatred toward the invaders who had fallen upon them and driven them from their homes by night.

In the evening we departed and tried to reach our own regiment. The Belgians had concentrated somewhere to the rear under cover of darkness. We were quite near the neighborhood of the fortified city of Liege. Many settlements through which we passed stood in flames; the inhabitants driven out, passed us in droves. Women, children and old men were buffeted about and seemed to be everywhere in the way. Without aims or plans, without a place on which to lay their heads these poor people dragged themselves by.

Again we reached a village, which to all appearances had been inhabited by contented people. Now indeed nothing but ruins could be seen. Wrecked houses and farms, dead soldiers, German and Belgian, and among them many civilians, who had been shot by military order.

Toward midnight we reached the German lines. The Germans had tried to take a village which lay within the fortified belt of Liege and was defended tenaciously by the Belgians. Here all forces had to be used in order to drive the enemy out, house by house and street by street. It was not very dark yet, so that we had to witness with all our senses the terrible fights which developed here. It was a man-to-man fight. With the butts of our guns, knives, fists, teeth we went against the enemy.

One of my best friends fought with a giant Belgian. The guns of both had fallen to the ground. They hammered one another with fists. I had just closed an account with a twenty-two-year-old Belgian and was going to assist my friend because his antagonist was of superior strength. My friend succeeded suddenly in biting the Belgian on the chin so deeply that he tore a piece of flesh out with his teeth. The Belgian's pain must have been terrible. He released my comrade and ran away with an insane cry of pain.

Everything developed by seconds. The blood of the Belgian ran out of my friend's mouth; a terrible nausea and indescribable loathing seized him. The taste of warm human blood brought him almost to the verge of insanity. In the course of this night battle I came in contact for the first time with the butt of a Belgian gun. During a hand-to-hand fight with a Belgian, a second enemy soldier struck me on the back of the head with the butt of his gun so hard that my helmet was forced down over my ears. The pain was fearful and I fainted.

When I revived, I was lying in a barn, with my head bandaged, among other wounded men. My wound was not severe. I only had a feeling as if my head was twice its normal size. The other wounded soldiers and the ambulance men said the Belgians had been forced back within the forts and that hard fighting was still in progress.

Wounded men were brought in continuously and they told us that the Germans had already stormed several forts and had taken a number of main and auxiliary defenses, but could not hold them because they had not been sufficiently supported by artillery. The defenses inside the forts and their garrisons were still intact. The situation was not ripe for a storming attack, so the Germans had to retire with enormous losses. The reports we received were contradictory. It was impossible to get a clear picture. In the meantime the artillery bombardment had become so intense that it horrified even the German soldiers. The heaviest artillery was brought into action against the steel and concrete defenses.

No soldier so far knew anything of the existence of the 42-centimeter mortars. Long after Liege was in German hands these soldiers could not understand how it was possible that the defenses, which consisted of double six-meter walls of steel and concrete, were reduced after only a few hours' bombardment.

I myself could not take part in these operations, being wounded, but my comrades told me later how the capture of the several forts came about. Artillery of all caliber was trained on the forts, but it was the 21-centimeter mortars and the 42s which performed the real work.

From a distance the 42-centimeter projectiles were heard to arrive, to the accompaniment of a fearful hissing that sounded like a long drawn-out screech which filled the whole atmosphere. Wherever it fell, everything was destroyed within a radius of several hundred meters. The air pressure which the bursting of the projectile produced was so terrible that it made breathing difficult for those of us who were holding the advanced positions.

To make this witches' holiday complete, the Zeppelins appeared during

the night to participate in the work of destruction. The soldiers suddenly heard above their heads the whirling of propellers and the noise of the motors. The Zeppelins came nearer. They were not discovered by the enemy until they were close to the forts, which immediately played all the



Played the Searchlight on Them.

searchlights at their disposal on them, bunting the firmament for the flying foe. The whirling of the propellers of the airships stopped suddenly. Instead, high in the air a brilliant light appeared, the searchlight of the Zeppelin, which, for a moment, illuminated the entire landscape.

Suddenly all became dark again. A few moments later powerful detonations revealed the fact that the Zeppelin had thrown off "ballast." That went on a long while. Explosion followed explosion. These were followed by clouds of fire. In the air, exploding shrapnel which the Belgian artillery fired at the airships could be observed. The whirling of the propellers started up again, directly above our heads. It became quieter and quieter, until the powerful shepher of the air disappeared from our vicinity.

Thus the forts were leveled. Thousands of Belgians lay behind the walls and under the fortifications, dead and buried. A general storming attack followed. Liege was in the hands of the Germans, who had paid, in dead alone in this battle, 28,000 men.

CHAPTER II.

I went to Aix-la-Chapelle to a hospital. I met many more wounded men who had fought in Belgium. All were of the opinion that the Belgian dead numbered as many civilians as soldiers. Even if the German soldiers who fought in Belgium do not admit the cruelties committed against the Belgians, it cannot be denied that at least 80 per cent of the cruelties known to the world to have been committed in Belgium were only too true.

A young soldier who lay next to me in the hospital told me that his company, during a street fight in Liege, was given orders to kill everybody without discrimination. Systematically, one house after another was set on fire. The inhabitants either fell in the flames or became the victims in the streets to the gun barrels of the German kultur-bearers.

At the time I doubted the words of my neighbor, even though I had seen what German warfare meant. After a few days I was released from the hospital and again restored to my detachment. Partly by auto, partly by foot, I reached my detachment by ten o'clock in the evening. Our transport moved this time over Trier to Luxembourg. The little grand duchy of Luxembourg was overrun entirely by German soldiers. The Germans who had made their homes in Luxembourg had everything taken away from them, especially the farmers, all food, without thought of payment, so that in Luxembourg at this time there was a shortage of food. The people here as well as in Belgium were very friendly, yet they harbored a terrible bitterness against the German government, which had looted its troops like a band of robbers and murderers over their peaceful country.

Belgium and Luxembourg, the two first unhappy victims of the damnable German politics and its drunkenness with power!

That the Luxembourg citizens detested Germany an incident showed me which happened in the village of Mar-moth. We were in a friendly conversation with a Luxembourg farmer. Two officers approached and listened. One officer, a captain, asked the Luxembourg farmer, "What do you think of the war, and of the quickness of Germany? There is only one Germany, isn't there?"

"Yes," replied the farmer. "Thank the Lord."

For those four words the farmer was arrested at once and transported to Germany as a court prisoner. I could never learn what became of him.

The same evening we were transported in automobiles and on the evening of August 20, 1914, we reached our detachment, which was about 35 miles from the Belgian city of Neuve Chateau. The regiment to which I belonged did not take part in any operations after the fall of Liege, but was transported to this part of Belgium. Now I learn for the first time how heavy was the loss in my company in

the Liege fighting. We lost 187 men in dead and wounded.

This night we slept in an open field. At five o'clock the next morning we marched again until four o'clock in the afternoon, when we were given a rest.

It was about ten o'clock in the evening when we received orders to advance. We were all ready to proceed when another order came for us to remain at our bivouac overnight. During the night we heard thundering of cannon which became more violent. The battle of Neuve Chateau, which had continued from August 22 to August 24, 1914, had begun.

At four o'clock on the morning of August 22 we resumed our march. At Neuve Chateau the French army had encountered the Fourth German army. First there was, as always, minor outpost and patrol fighting. By and by larger masses of troops participated, and as we took our part in the battle on the evening of August 22, the fight had developed into one of the most sanguinary of the world war.

When we arrived the French occupied almost three-quarters of the town. The artillery had set the main part of Neuve Chateau on fire and only the beautiful residence section in the western part of the city escaped at that time. All night long the house-to-house fighting continued, but when at noon of August 23 the city was in German hands the enormous cost to the Germans could finally be determined.

Residences, cellars, streets and sidewalks were heaped with dead and wounded. The houses were in ruins—empty shells, in which hardly anything remained undamaged that was of any real value. Thousands became beggars in one terrible night. Women and children, soldiers and citizens were lying where the pitiless shells and bullets had hurled them from life into death's dark void. True impartiality reigned in the killing. There was a Belgian woman lying next to a Belgian baby which she had borne from house to street. Close by lay a man of uncertain years before an empty house. Both his legs were burned to the knees. His wife lay on his breast and sobbed so pitifully that her grief could not be endured. Most of the dead were entirely or partly burned. The cries of agony of the animals fighting incineration were mixed with the groans and sobbing of the wounded.

But no one had time to bother with them. The French were making another stand outside the city in an open field. As the enemy vacated the town the Germans made an error which cost them hundreds of lives. They had occupied the entire town so quickly that the German artillery which shelled a part of the city did not know of the change in the situation and threw shells into the tanks of the infantry. Finally our soldiers were compelled to give up some of their gains by the pressure of our own as well as the French fire, but regained this ground afterwards. Strangely enough, the residence section previously mentioned had not suffered seriously. All the houses flew the Red Cross and were used as temporary hospitals.

Here it was reported that Belgians mutilated German soldiers. Whether this were true, or only a rumor, similar to others being constantly started by German soldiers, I cannot say, but I do know that on August 24, after the French had retired, it was made known through an army order that German soldiers had been murdered there, and that the German army could not leave the scene of these outrages without first avenging the victims.

It was ordered by the commander of the army to level the remainder of the city and to show no mercy. As we took a short rest from our pursuit of the enemy and looked backward clouds of smoke to the eastward showed that the order had been executed. A remaining battery of artillery had reduced the city to ashes.

The French had made a stand outside the city and resisted to the utmost, but they were outnumbered. It was simply impossible to resist the pressure of the German war machine. When the German columns, with fixed bayonets, attacked to the accompaniment of their blood-curdling yells which, like their steel, penetrated to the bone, they resembled in every respect American Indians going into action, flinging themselves with blood-curdling yells upon their enemies. After a three-hour fight many Frenchmen gave themselves up as prisoners. With uplifted hands they sought mercy.

At last, on the night of August 23 and 24, the enemy's ranks were thrown into confusion and they retired slowly. I was in the first detachment which pursued them. To the right and left of the road, in the field and ditches, were dead and wounded.

The red pantaloons of the French showed brightly on the ground. The field gray of the Germans could hardly be discerned.

(Continued Friday.)

HUGH MILLER SEES PLACES HISTORICALLY FAMOUS

(Continued from Page 1.)

"sparks" I ever have worn. I expect to wear many more before I finish. Tell Grace she may keep them.

I would like to walk in on you about chicken flying time. Here it is one big rush from week to week.

HUGH MILLER.

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