



The Confessions of a German Deserter

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

Copyright by Detroit Free Press

(Continued from Tuesday)

The distance between us and the retreating French became greater. Our soldiers became happier over the outcome of the battle and seemed to forget their past hardships. The corpses which filled the roads and ditches were forgotten amid the jokes and songs on every side. The men were already accustomed to the horrors of war to such an extent that they unconcernedly walked over the corpses, not even considering it necessary to make a slight detour.

At noon we halted and were served with dinner from the field kitchens. We were surely hungry enough and our canned soup was eaten with the utmost relish. Many soldiers set their dishes on the bodies of dead horses lying about and ate as gaily as if they were at home at their own tables. The few human corpses near our camp failed to disturb us. Only water was lacking, and after the dinner our thirst became very acute, even torturous.

We soon marched on, under a burning mid-day sun, the dust of the highway lying thick on our uniforms and skin. Now, no more cheerfulness was evident anywhere. Our thirst became more unbearable and we grew weaker from minute to minute. Many in our ranks fell, unable to go further. Nothing remained for our commander except to halt, as he did not wish to exhaust us all. As a result of this halt we were left considerably in the rear and lost our place among those pursuing the French.

About four o'clock we finally saw before us a village. In the certain expectation of getting water there we quickened our pace. Fugitives and empty munition columns passed us. Among them there was a farm wagon upon which were several civilian prisoners, apparently Franco-Belgians. A Catholic priest was among them. He, like the others, had his hands tied behind him with a rope. To our curious questions as to what he had done, we were told that he had incited the farmers to poison the water in the village.

Soon we reached the village and at the first well at which we might have satisfied our thirst we found a sentinel posted. He drove us away with a warning that the water was poisoned. Disappointed and terribly embittered, the soldiers cursed and gnashed

next well, but everywhere sentinels forbade our taking refreshment.

In an open space in the center of the village was a big well from which there came water clear as crystal that emptied into a big trough. Five soldiers stood guard here to see that no one drank. I was just about to proceed with my comrades when a large part of my company threw themselves like men possessed onto the well. The guards were completely overcome and, greedy as animals, all the men drank. They quenched their thirst, but not one became ill. The priest, as we learned later, was punished because, the officers said, the water in every village had been poisoned, and we were told that only by a happy chance had the lives of our soldiers been spared. The God of the Germans had kept true guard, it appeared, but the God of the Belgians was not there to protect his.

In most of the places we passed we were warned not to use the water. This, of course, had the effect of making the soldiers hate the people from whom they could expect only death. In this way the vicious instincts of our men were aroused.

The water, of course, was nowhere poisoned. These lies were told to arouse hatred of the Belgians among our soldiers.

In the evening, at dusk, we reached a village east of the Bertrix. There we found poisoned water also. In the middle of the village we halted and I could see through a front window of a house before which I stood. In a miserable home of a laborer we saw a woman. She clung to her children as if afraid they would be torn away from her. Suddenly a stone as large as a fist was thrown through the window into the room and a little girl was wounded on the right hand.

In this village we were billeted in a barn. With some comrades, I went to the village to buy food. We obtained ham, bread and wine at a farmhouse, but the people refused any payment because they considered us guests. They only asked that we should not hurt them. We paid them nevertheless for everything in German money. There, as everywhere else we went, we found the population in mortal terror of us. The people trembled whenever a German soldier entered their home.

CHAPTER III.

Four of us had formed a close friendship. We had promised to keep together and help one another in every danger. So we often visited the homes of citizens together and did our best to quiet the harassed people we met and talk them out of fear of our forces. Without exception we found these people friendly and quick to feel confidence in us when they learned that we really were their friends. If we wrote on their doors with chalk, "Here live good, honest people, please spare them," their gratitude knew no bounds. If so much bad blood existed and if so many things which led to the military execution of innumerable Belgians, it was because of the mistrust systematically nourished on the part of the German officers.

That night we marched on after being joined by a 21-centimeter mortar battery of the foot artillery regiment No. 9 recently arrived. Not only were we to act as an auxiliary for this battery, but we were also expected to help bring these immense cannon into action. These guns were in two sections, each transported on a wagon pulled by six horses. These horses, the only ones used by foot artillery, are supposed to be the finest and most powerful in the German army.

Yet these animals were seldom up to expectations, so that it was a common thing to detail from 10 to 20 men to assist in transporting these mortars, and long, heavy ropes were car-

ried for this purpose. This happened most frequently whenever the guns had to be taken off a highway and brought into a firing position.

Soon we arrived at the city of Bertrix. We found many houses at the right and left of us burning brightly. They had been set afire, we learned, because persons in them had fired on passing soldiers. In front of one of these houses was a half-burned man and woman with their fifteen or sixteen-year-old son. All were covered with straw. A little way farther on, three more civilians were lying dead in the same street.

As we were marching we suddenly received an order to surround a certain house at the left of us. Our captain declared that a shot fired from that house had killed a soldier. None of us had heard anything, however. The house from which the shot was alleged to have been fired was soon surrounded and hand grenades thrown into it through the windows. In a minute all the rooms were aflame. The air pressure from the exploding grenades was so great that doors in the house flew from their hinges and the walls of several rooms were crushed.

Almost at the same time five civilians ran into the streets with raised hands. They were seized at once and led before the officers, who constituted themselves immediately into a court-martial. Two minutes later sentence had been executed, and five men lay on the ground with eyes bandaged, riddled with bullets.

In each case six of our men were always called upon to execute one man's sentence. I am sorry to say that I was one of the thirty called upon at this occasion. The condemned man who it was our duty to shoot was about forty years old, tall and straight. He never blinked as the bandage was put on. He was led to the garden of the house near by and his back placed to the house. After our captain said to us that it was our duty to aim true and end the tragedy quickly, we took our positions six paces in front of the condemned man. The sergeant commanding us previously gave us instructions that we were to shoot the condemned men through the breast.

Now we formed into two rows, one behind the other. The order sounded to load and aim and we each put five



Riddled With Bullets.

cartridges into our rifles. "Prepare to fire"—the men in the first row knelt down and the second row took their places. Our guns were now held so that the barrels were forward and the butts were hip high. "Aim"—and slowly we aimed, holding our guns tightly with the butts against our shoulders and our fingers on the triggers.

The sergeant paused a half minute and then ordered us to fire. I do not know to this day whether our victim died at once, nor was there ever an opportunity to learn how many of the six bullets found their mark. All day I went around like a man in a trance, reproaching myself bitterly for having acted the part of executioner. For a long time I could not bear to speak about it to my comrades, for I felt guilty, and yet what could we soldiers do other than execute the orders given us?

In the evening we went into camp in an open field, pitching tents, and the next day continued our march.

The country through which we passed was uninteresting and offered nothing in the way of variety. The few tiny villages through which we passed had all been abandoned, and the poor-looking houses mostly destroyed. Long trains of fugitives passed us continually. These people

when the French army retreated and were returning now to find their homes destroyed by the rough hand of war.

After a long march, interrupted only by halts and short bivouacs, we approached the large Belgian-French border town of Sugny, located on the Belgian side of the border. It was about noon, and as the thunder of cannon constantly grew stronger, which indicated that a new battle was developing, we hoped to be able to remain in the town overnight. About one o'clock we entered and were billeted in a big barn. Most of the soldiers refused to eat from the field kitchens, and requisitioned eggs, chickens, geese and young pigs. Soon everybody was cooking. I am sorry to say that most of those who foraged had refused to pay for what they had taken.

Several soldiers now arrived with barrels of wine and also many bottles, which were instantly opened and emptied. The obvious result, and soon many noncommissioned officers and men were helplessly drunk. The owner of our barn had possessed three large hogs. One of the drunken noncommissioned officers tried to kill one of these hogs with a dull pocket knife. He had tortured the poor beast almost to death when the animal was mercifully killed by a bullet. A few minutes afterward the officer went to sleep. This was only an example and not the worst, for the inhabitants of the town had to endure much from our men who had become drunk. There were open and secret robberies of gardens, stables and houses here and no restrictions whatever were put on the soldiers. There was no improvement in their general conduct, despite many complaints. One family reported that the French had treated them very well, but that our highly trained soldiers plundered and stole. It was therefore not surprising that the population suffered want and hunger. I often shared my bread with these suffering people. With two comrades, one day, I gave my portion of meat, vegetables and preserves and also a bag of onions to a woman with eight children. Because the iron was missing in our blood, we three were sentenced to extra watch duty for a week for the offense of displaying a love of humanity.

Our leader, Lieutenant of Reserve Elm, declared that such a thing as pity was insanity. He said if the woman had eight children that was her business. Then he concluded by saying with great emphasis: "In war everybody looks out for themselves, even if everything around him perishes." Another soldier was sentenced to serve 14 days at hard labor. He was bringing bread to a hungry family and had six small loaves in his arms, which he had gathered from among the soldiers. The same lieutenant met him, accompanied by several noncommissioned officers. To the question as to where he was going, he replied that he was on his way to assist a poor family which had actually suffered hunger. The lieutenant at once ordered him to return the bread to his company. Then he raged and raged at the soldier, calling him fool, idiot, Hottentot, etc. But the soldier nevertheless did not obey and when the lieutenant thundered a second command to halt, the soldier turned around and threw the bread before the lieutenant's feet. Then he said quietly, "I do not wish anybody any harm, but if you and your autocratic family, and the whole German nation had to endure what the poor Belgians are obliged to suffer, it would be a bitter but just lesson."

This man was sentenced to serve 14 days for talking back to his superior officer. It surprised us all that he was let off so easily. But bitterness in the ranks grew, and at last the many hard punishments that were pronounced created so much feeling that the soldiers refused to tie any of their comrades. We left Sugny the next morning and one hour later crossed the Franco-Belgian border. Here again we were ordered to give three cheers as we did when our troops first crossed Germany into Belgium. At noon we arrived at Vivier-Au-Court. We remained in the village until evening and were permitted to go about without restrictions. In the afternoon nine men of my company were arrested for assaulting a woman but were soon released. At this time there was a great scarcity of tobacco among our soldiers and I knew that a mark or more was paid for a cigarette whenever one was offered for sale. Here, in Vivier-Au-Court there was but one government tobacco stall. I have seen 100 men were forced by noncommissioned officers at the point of guns to give up their entire supply of tobacco for worthless requisition papers. These "gentlemen" later sold their tobacco at half a mark for small packets.

Toward evening we marched off and brought the howitzers to a new position, from where the enemy's defenses on the Meuse could be bombarded. After a short march we encountered and fought a French army northeast of Donchery. Only the enemy's rear guard was on our side of the Meuse. To it was given the duty of covering the crossing of the main body of the French armies over the Meuse, which was done near Donchery.

The few bridges left standing were not sufficient for the enemy to cross as speedily as he should have. As a result there developed in Donchery a terrible fight. The French made an enormous effort. There was a terrible slaughter as man fought against man. It was one of the most fearful battles I have ever witnessed. No one knew afterwards how many he had killed. Sometimes stronger men, then weaker ones attacked. The glare from burning houses turned into red the whites of the fighters' eyes and revealed men battling one another frothing at the mouth.

Without any headgear, unkempt hair, uniforms open or mostly torn, it was bayonetting, hitting, scratching and plunging like wild beasts for life or death. Everybody fought for his life. There was no quarter. Only moaning and gasping could be heard.

Each man thought only of his own life, of death or his home. Old memories raced through the mind, pursuing one another feverishly and yet men grew wilder, for they now battled a new enemy—exhaustion.

But there could not yet be any let-up. Again and again there is nothing to do but strike, stab, bite, fighting without guns or other weapons except those provided by nature for life or death.

The exertion becomes more superhuman. You bite and you are a victor. But victor only for a second, for the next antagonist is already upon you. He has just killed one of your comrades. You suddenly remember that you still have a dagger. After a hasty search you find it in its regular place. One, two, three and it sinks to the hilt in the breast of your enemy. On, on, where there are new enemies. You suddenly see your next antagonist before you. He is after your life. He bites, stabs, scratches, to get you down, to pierce your heart with his dagger and again you use yours. Thank God, he lies on the ground; you are saved. But stop; you must have that dagger back. You pull it from the breast of your late enemy. A stream of warm blood shoots from the open wound in your face. Human blood, warm human blood. You shudder, terrified only for a few seconds, for there is another adversary. It is again necessary for you to defend yourself. Again and again the murder commences anew. Always, and always again, through the whole night.

At last, toward four o'clock in the morning, the French retired across the Meuse with the Germans storming after them. When the bridge was full of German soldiers, it was blown up by the French and hundreds of Germans found their death in the Meuse.

CHAPTER IV.

The scene of the slaughter could now be surveyed at leisure. Dead and wounded were strewn all around, and over them clouds of smoke and flames made the air thick. But we were already too hardened to feel much pity. Humanity was thrown to the winds and the cries and begging of the wounded left everybody cold.

Some Catholic sisters lay dead in front of their convent. The only building that was spared in Donchery was the armory of the Twenty-third French dragons.

There was not much time in which to do anything, for at seven o'clock the French began to hurl shells into the village. We fortified ourselves behind a thick garden wall directly in front of the Meuse. The river bank at this point was flat, but on the opposite side it was steep. Here the French infantry had dug itself in and established three lines, one above the other. The artillery firing was too far. We did not come within its range, so that we were able to observe the effect of the shelling of our own artillery on the enemy infantry positions before us. The 21-centimeter shells raced by above our heads and burst with a fearful noise in the enemy's trenches.

The French could not resist this hail of shot very long. They soon abandoned all the heights on the river bank. They abandoned Boudan without a fight and it was left intact, which had not been the case with Donchery. Hardly a house had suffered.

(The next installment will appear in our Tuesday issue next week.)

KINGS VALLEY

Mr. Murphy killed a black bear in the valley Monday.

Mrs. D. E. Moore arrived in the valley Tuesday evening to visit with friends.

Mr. and Mrs. Herman Ayers went to Salem Saturday evening by auto.

Mrs. Ann Dunn is visiting with her son and family, T. J. Allen.

Andy Ayers returned home Saturday from Portland where he has been the past week. His grandson from Oregon City accompanied him home.

Mrs. H. C. Harter and Mrs. Harry Sullivan visited with Mrs. Della Miller Sunday.

There will be a Children's Day program at the church Sunday, June 9.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin Christianson visited Sunday with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Maxfield.

Mrs. Fred Woodside and Mrs. Herman Ayers went to Independence Monday.

The Red Cross of Dallas gave a show at the Odd Fellow's Hall Saturday evening and the Airline Red Cross sold a quilt and ice cream.

Born, to Mr. and Mrs. Julius Thorn a daughter, June 1.

Mr. and Mrs. David Ayers visited at the home of Andy Ayers Monday morning.

Mrs. D. E. Moore visited Saturday with Mrs. Fred Woodside.

The Christenson family were Salem visitors Saturday.

Jack Smith visited Monday afternoon with F. V. Miller.

Mr. and Mrs. Bud Alcorn of Corvallis were valley visitors Thursday.

WIGRICH ITEMS

Mrs. Ralph Porterfield and family spent Decoration Day with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Hartman, near Independence.

Mr. and Mrs. D. A. Hart and family of Newberg were visiting at the home of Mr. and Mrs. F. L. Chown on Decoration Day.

Mr. and Mrs. W. E. Bevens were week end visitors with his brother and wife, Mr. and Mrs. W. R. Bevens in Portland.

Mr. and Mrs. Walter Plant are sailing around these days in a new Ford.

Mr. and Mrs. Abe Porter moved the first of the week to Buena Vista.

Jesse Tann, late of Salem, and James Tann of Grants Pass visited their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jess Tann and their sister, Mrs. George DeForest on Sunday.

Mr. and Mrs. Will Robert accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. McComas and Will Rooney are spending several days sight seeing in Portland.

Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Porterfield and family were Sunday guests at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Turner.

No more week-end rates, so be good and stay at home. This will be rather tough on you who have the city habit, but after you get out of it, just think how you are getting even with Portland by saving this periodical car fare and keeping your money at home. Put this car fare into thrift stamps-Benton County Courier.

TWICE A WEEK

Post-\$1.50

ONLY ONE IN COUNTY



Curled and Gnashed Their Teeth. Their teeth. They hurried on to the