



WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

MY FOURTEEN MONTHS AT THE FRONT

An American Boy's Baptism of Fire

By WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

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The most graphic account of the great war that has yet been written comes from the pen of a twenty-two-year-old Boston boy, who has just returned from France, where as dragoon guardsman, dispatch rider and motor-car driver he served fourteen months under the British flag. Out of thirty-one motorcycle dispatch riders he was one of four survivors.

PREFACE.

Prior to my arrival in England the idea of participating in the great war had never entered my head. I went abroad on business, and I expected to return to this country as soon as my work was completed. It seemed, though, that fate decreed otherwise. I had been in England a good many times before, and in France and Belgium, too, for that matter. My father was a sea captain, and I was born aboard his ship. In fact, I lived the first six years of my life on shipboard. This last trip across the Atlantic made the twenty-third time for me, so I was quite at home in the British Isles. Almost before I knew it I had taken the step that was responsible for the most terrible yet wonderful experience that ever came to me.

In telling my story I have tried to take the important events and set them down in chronological order. I have endeavored also to link them together so as to make it possible for the reader to follow me through the principal happenings during my time of service. Many of the more sordid details of this great war I have been obliged to leave out. I have dwelt neither on the horrors of war nor yet on the glory, but I have tried to picture the daily routine of the fighting man's life as it really is.

CHAPTER I. Sent to the Front.

EXACTLY one week from a certain day when I landed in England from the United States I was notified that my job was gone, as the company that I represented was in the hands of receivers.

I was disappointed, of course, but tried to look at the thing philosophically and to make the best of it. I bought my ticket for home, but as the boat on which I intended sailing did not leave for several days I proceeded to enjoy the remainder of my stay in England.

Things were certainly moving at that time. Very soon I was as enthusiastic as any of them, and in London I made inquiries as to whether I could join the army.

I was told that I would have no difficulty at all, but on second thought I decided to let well enough alone. The day before I was to sail from Liverpool I hesitated again and talked it over with an army officer. He was so nice about explaining everything to me that I decided that I might do lots of worse things than to see a little of the biggest scrap the world had ever known.

That night I thought about the matter some more and came to the conclusion that if they would take me into a cavalry regiment I would have a try at it. The next morning I enlisted and was made a trooper in the Fifth Dragoon guards. That same afternoon I was on my way to Aldershot, but had I known what I was going to go through I don't think I would have been so light hearted as I was. In the evening I was fitted out with my entire kit and informed that from now on I was a soldier.

I was assigned to a bed in the barracks, and from that time my troubles commenced. I was in with a crowd of old soldiers, men who had served from two to twenty years in the army, and, while they were very decent chaps, they seemed to resent the fact that a "civvie" had been pushed in on them. I was at once christened "Yank," and I believe they found a few other things to call me too.

The next morning at 5 o'clock the sergeant came around and dug me out. He took me down to the stables and put me in with a bunch of rookies who weren't any happier than I was. We were then instructed in the gentle art of grooming a horse. I couldn't seem

Well, I didn't know whether I'd have the nerve to do it or not, but the more I thought about it the more I thought he might be right. I hadn't passed through the door to the barracks before the kidding started again, and I knew what would follow.

So I screwed up all the courage I had, and, seeing a big chap who was making a lot of talk, I swung as hard as I could and let him have it. I won't say anything about what happened to me, but the next afternoon I found I'd been unlucky, as usual. The man I had picked was a heavyweight champion of the British army in South Africa during the Boer war! Things were much better after that, though, and I made some mighty good friends among those fellows.

At first it amused me greatly to hear the men talk about the regiments they belonged to, but later I came to understand that their regiments meant more to them than anything else. In peace time when a man joins the army he is obliged to learn the history of the regiment he joins from the day it was formed to the present day. Tradition plays a great part in the life of a regular soldier, and if there is a delicate spot in the history of his regiment he is bound to hear of it from the men of other units, and if any derogatory remarks are passed he feels himself honored bound to fight the one who is responsible for the remark.

If you should chance to ask a Royal Horse artilleryman what regiment he belonged to he would immediately straighten up and answer you somewhat after this fashion:

"I belong to the Royal Horse artillery, the extreme right of the line and the pride of the British army." Then he would go on to tell when his regiment was formed, what it had accomplished, how many honors it has, how many Victoria crosses the men belonging to it have won, how many titled officers belong to it, and so on, almost indefinitely.

Nearly all the regiments have nicknames, and these names are very popular. The Royal Scots claim to be the oldest regiment in the British army, so they are popularly known as "Pontius Pilate's bodyguard." The Gloucester regiment is the only one in the British army entitled to wear cap badges in the back as well as in the front, and the reason this privilege has been granted them is that in some previous war the regiment became surrounded by the enemy, and, turning back to back, they fought until relief reached them.

Another regiment has the nickname of the "Cherry Pickers." In some war of long ago this regiment was ordered to make a charge through a cherry orchard, and while passing through they forgot their duty and stopped to pick the cherries. From that day to this they have been known as the "Cherry Pickers," and the trousers of their dress uniform are of cherry colored material.

There is a certain Scotch regiment which for some reason had its kilts taken away and now has to wear trousers made of the same kind of plaid that the kilts were made of. The men are working like Trojans in this war to win their kilts back again, and they will very probably be successful, as they have done some wonderful work.

Each regiment finds something to boast about, and the men never miss an opportunity. The Seventeenth Lancers are known as the "Death or Glory Boys," as their regimental badge is the skull and crossed bones and "Death or Glory" is their motto.

The Royal Engineers have more Victoria crosses than any other regiment in the British army, and it is no wonder, for theirs is a very dangerous work and affords plenty of opportunities for men to distinguish themselves. The first Victoria cross awarded in the present war was won by a driver of an automobile, a member of the Army Service corps.

Two days later word came around that the regiment was going to the front within the week. By that time I was covered with saddle sores and was in agony the whole time. Although it requires nine months' training to turn out a full fledged cavalryman, I decided to try to go with the regiment somehow, and I didn't care how I went. Anything to get out of that riding school. So I went to a captain and told him the whole story, and I begged him to take me. He was certainly mighty nice about it, and in the end he attached me to his personal staff and took me that way.

Up to this time I hadn't thought much about what was going to happen when we reached the front, but what we got just before we sailed certainly made me do some tall thinking. We were issued identity disks first. These are hung around the neck, and on them are stamped the soldier's name, regimental number and his religion. Then we were given our pay books and told to make our wills in the back of them. The chaplain next addressed us and prayed over us.

When this was all over I was so scared I was beginning to think that the riding school might have its advantages. And all the way over on the transport I was feeling mighty blue, and I was certain that I was never going to see England again, let alone the old U. S. A.

Crossing the channel, we landed at Ostend at 4 o'clock in the morning on the eighth day of October, 1914. We had had nothing but bullybeef and



The Germans Were in There at 6 the Same Night.

hard biscuits all the way over, so the first place we sought when off duty was a restaurant.

I had chummed up with a fellow named Harry McGarrow and also with the heavyweight. The latter was an old soldier and had served more than twenty years in the army. Nine years of his service had been done in India, so he knew the ropes pretty well.

As soon as we were off duty we three made for the nearest estaminet (or small cafe) in the Flemish town. We were just putting away some bread and eggs and coffee when the general commanding the division walked in with two of his officers. Of course we jumped to attention and were about to withdraw, but he told us to finish our meal.

We were the only British troops to land at Ostend, and, being the first the Belgians in that part had ever seen, we attracted a great deal of attention. Our horses and equipment seemed to amaze them. They would come up and handle the saddlery and ask, "officer?" When we would tell them that it was just a trooper's equipment and that all the others were the same they could not seem to get over it.

Although it was after 4 o'clock in the morning, everybody seemed to be up and at work. The Belgian peasant has no interest in the eight hour law. He works from before daylight until long after dark. The peasants seem to be very poor, and a franc means more to them than several dollars would to our farmers.

We left Ostend about 9 o'clock in a hurry. No one seemed to know where we were going, and all sorts of wild rumors were flying. As a matter of fact, we left at 9 and the Germans were in there at 6 the same night, but we didn't know this until long afterward. The Belgians were most kind to us. They would bring us bread, eggs, wine, etc., and would not take any pay for the things. They were kindness itself and couldn't seem to do enough for us.

We did most of our traveling at night, and it wasn't much fun. We were not allowed to show a light of any kind and were even forbidden to smoke. As I said before, we hadn't any idea where we were going, but we were all sure we were on our way to meet the Germans, and there was a great deal of speculation as to when the meeting would come.

On the morning of the third day we came to the town of Roulers. A halt was called, and we went about making ourselves comfortable. The people were extremely cordial, too, and there was nothing that was too much trouble for them to do for us. I got into a house where the man spoke English. He had been in the shipping business in Antwerp and knew a great many of the firms my father had dealt with. I really felt quite at home.

They asked me if I thought they had better move or whether the Germans would ever get as far as Roulers. I'll never forget how I scorned the idea and assured them that they were as safe there as they would be in England.

CHAPTER II.

First Time Under Fire.

THAT afternoon about 4 o'clock shells began to drop into the town, and we made a quick exit. It was my first time under fire, and it was far from being agreeable. I had very often wondered whether I would be scared or not. Well, I found out then, and I certainly was scared. Since then I have often wondered about that family and what they would think of me for advising them that they were in no danger.

It didn't take us long to move, and it is a good thing it didn't, for as we were leaving the town we could see the Germans coming over the hill about four miles away. We wondered why we didn't go to meet them, but apparently our time was not yet.

My duties were very light. Attached to Captain Colvin, I had the care of his horse and saddlery and had to ride behind him wherever he went when mounted. That is about all I had to do. Of course when the regiment went into action my duty would be to follow the captain.

Eventually we arrived at a little place called Zillebeke, and it was here that we joined up with the Seventh infantry division. There was very little doing, and nobody seemed to know just what we were going to do. Our chaps went out on patrols every day, and occasionally they would run into a German patrol, and there would be a scrap.

During our stay at Zillebeke it was decided that all untrained men were to be returned to England to finish their training, and it looked very much as if I was going to land back in that riding school after all. While the matter was still undecided the driver of General Byng's car was killed, so I went to the captain and told him I could drive a car, and I offered my services. He put in a word for me, and I was given the car, but only until a regular driver could be secured.

It was while I was driving this car that I saw the city of Ypres for the first time. There had not been a shell in the place yet, and it certainly was a fine old town.

One afternoon I was waiting in the car for some staff officer in the Grand place when I heard a lot of shooting and shouting. I looked over in the

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