

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.

For weeks before the attack our air men were bringing in reports that the Germans were massing heavy bodies of fresh troops just in front of our position. All our transport trains went through the city, our men were billeted there, and one of our divisional headquarters had moved into the city.

The Germans still continued to bombard our positions in this vicinity, but they left the city itself severely alone. All winter it had been as safe to go through Ypres as it would be to go to church, consequently an order to go to Ypres did not bother anybody very much.

I was at the divisional headquarters in Ypres with a staff officer on the afternoon the bombardment started. We had gone to the city on horses, and we naturally expected to come back that way. I suppose it was about 2 o'clock when we arrived there, and I put the horses in the yard behind several buildings.

As I was still on duty, I didn't dare go very far away, for I didn't know at what moment the officer might show up. The first inkling I got of anything unpleasant was when I heard the scream of several shells coming through the air at once.

Right then I acted on the impulse that seizes every one at such a time and went through the nearest cellar window, where I landed on a pile of potatoes. I was content to stay there, too, until an orderly found me and told me that my officer wanted me. The Germans had been bombarding us about half an hour then, and there was no sign of any letting up yet.

The orderly told me that the shells were dropping in at the rate of forty-one to the minute, and I remember wondering who on earth would be fool enough to count the number of shells falling. I reported to my officer and found him as cool as a cucumber. He asked me where the horses were, and when I told him he said for me to leave them there and to go and find a car of some kind.

I knew it was mighty serious when he would abandon the horses, and I started out with the fear of God in my heart and wondering where in the dickens I would find a car in that inferno. As a matter of fact, I did find one, or at least it had been a car at some time or other. It was an ambulance which had had the body blown off, and some one had built a couple of little bucket seats out of empty bacon boxes.

Bacon boxes or not, it certainly looked like a million gold dollars to me at that moment, and I wasn't so slow about nabbing it. The engine was all right, so I decided to take a chance on the rest of it holding together until I got my officer through the city anyway. I pulled around in front of the headquarters, and the officer jumped in.

It seemed as though the whole city was being torn from its very foundations so terrible was the din. The

houses were falling down in every quarter and on the face of it it looked like pure madness to go through at all. Wagons, horses, autos, bicycles, were piled up everywhere. Men, women and children, soldiers and civilians were lying dead and dying in every street. I should say that about 50 per cent of the shells were landing in the Grand place, and the buildings were falling all around and practically covering up the road.

We had a straight run of about 200 yards before we got to the worst part of it, and I certainly saw to it that the old bus made the most of what she had. We were going at a pretty good pace when we hit the main square of the city, but it seemed to me that we were just crawling.

There is a sharp corner as one turns out of the square, and I knew it would be impossible to twist her around it at the pace we were going, so I tried a stunt I had read about racing drivers doing on the hairpin curves. I gave her more power, jammed on the brake and she skidded around on two wheels. We were between the devil and the deep sea, and I felt that no chances

we could take were too long considering the fix we were in.

The bacon boxes held together all right, and we got out of it without being touched, but it was more by pure luck than anything else. What got my goat was that during the whole thing the officer sat there with a cigar in his mouth and a monocle in his eye and didn't even look as though he was nervous.

When we got back to our own headquarters he said "Thank you" and remarked to another officer that "one d—d fool" had escaped wearing a wooden uniform that day "by the breadth of a gnat's eyelash." I presume he was referring to me, and I agree with him heartily. Believe me, that ride did me out of a year's growth.

I certainly pitted our transport men during this time as I never pitted them before. They could not help being nervous while waiting to go through the city, which they had to do, as there was no other way for them to go. The ambulances, too, suffered heavily.

All night the bombardment continued with unabated fury, yet our supplies went through the city to the men just the same.

The next morning I was ordered to report in my car to a young officer of the intelligence department. The officer told me that he had orders to go through Ypres to a little place called Potijze and to report himself to the divisional commander there.

There was absolutely no other way to get to Potijze except through Ypres, and you may be sure we were feeling none too pleasant about the prospects. We had to go slowly, even at the start, as the road was filled with all kinds of transports. After we got through the village of Vlamertinghe we found the going a little better, and we got along faster. The road from Vlamertinghe to Ypres is almost straight, and one can see right into the city before one comes within two kilometers of it.

As we swung into this straight stretch I noticed several German aeroplanes over the city, and it was plain to be seen that they were dropping bombs. This time they were dropping petrol bombs, and the instant they exploded they would spray petrol all over the place and a flame would shoot up into the air. In this way they were setting fire to the city.

It was a sight that I shall never forget. The shells were falling just the same, and, what with the ground fairly trembling from the terrific explosions, the smoke from the bursting shells and burning houses, the flames and dust that filled the air, it made a scene that would need a Dante to describe and do it justice.

The thought that we were to attempt the passage through all this was terrifying. An awful fear, almost panic, seemed to grip me, and I longed to jump from that car and hide my face from the flaming hell which seemed to be stretching out its tentacles of fire to draw us into its gaping maw.

I felt weak all over and was wet with cold perspiration. I looked at the officer, almost praying that he would give the order to stop, but even as I looked I knew there was no chance of that. He was as white as death, but there was a look of determination on his face, and the clenched teeth and set jaws gave no promise of his backing down.

I think the bulldog grit that he was showing helped me, for I resolved that, while I might get so weak as to be unable to drive that car, I would stick by him as long as I could hold out. And he certainly showed that he was "white" clear through, for he told me to stop a moment. I did, and he got out of the car.

"Robinson," he said, "I've just been thinking that there won't be any need for you to come any further. It is a rotten business, and as there are ambulances going up all the time, I can get a lift in one and will stand just as much chance of getting through as though you were to take me. I don't believe in any one taking unnecessary risks, and in this case it would be risking an extra man and a car, too, and I don't mind going on in an ambulance the least bit."

I thought it was just about one of the finest things I had ever heard of a man doing, and I want to say right here that such things as this are typical of the true British officer. There are men holding commissions who couldn't do such a thing as this to save their necks, but they are the "pikers" found in every country, "temporary gentlemen," as they are called by the real men who are obliged to associate with them.

My officer's generosity did not help me any, but I appreciated it more than I can tell. I had orders to take him to Potijze and to bring him back, and if I stayed behind and anything happened to him I would be worse off than if I were lying beneath the ruins of Ypres.

I explained this to him and said that I would rather take him. God knows whether it was true or not, but I said it anyway. While we were talking another car passed us, and as my officer jumped in I resolved to follow the man who was now ahead of me.

I noticed as the car passed us that there were two officers in it. One, a major, was sitting beside the driver and the other, a colonel, was in the back. The car was about 200 yards ahead of us, and I let him keep about that much ahead all the way up to the outskirts of the city. As we got nearer the noise became deafening and the smoke began to bother us too.

Before one enters the city proper one must cross a double line of railroad tracks. The machine ahead of us had just crossed these when a big fifteen inch shell screamed over and burst just beside the car in front. From where we were it looked as if the car and its occupants must have been wiped off the face of the earth.

I stopped our car to wait until the smoke cleared away before going on. It seemed like hours before we saw the spot again, but when the smoke was finally gone you can imagine our surprise at seeing the car turned completely around and coming toward us.

The chauffeur was gathering speed all the time, and when he passed us his car was going at a fairly decent pace. We had time enough, though, to see one of the most horrible sights that I witnessed during the whole time I was at the front.

The car itself was in awful condition. The two rear doors were torn away, the body was full of jagged holes, the front and rear mud guards and the running board on one side were torn off and the wind screen had been swept away.

The major, who was sitting with the driver, had his head and the whole side



I Resolved to Follow the Man Who Was Now Ahead of Me.

of his body torn away, and the rest of him was leaning on the driver, who was being covered with the blood which was rushing from this awful thing beside him. The colonel, who had been sitting in the back of the car, was curled over on the seat, and his head and part of his shoulder were lying in a pool of blood in the bottom of the car. To me the most terrible part of it was the driver. He was as white as a ghost, and his eyes seemed to be sticking an inch out of their sockets. His teeth were bared, and his whole face was twisted into the most hellish expression one could imagine.

"Good God, he's gone mad!" cried my officer. And I was sure of it. The officer ordered me to turn around and follow him and to catch him if possible. The car was away down the road by the time I got turned around, but I set out after him for all I was worth. I gained on him, too, but as I went through Vlamertinghe he was just stopping in front of the field dressing station there.

The orderly rushed out when he heard the car, and I heard that driver say, "For God's sake take this thing away from me!"

It was horrible beyond description. I saw that poor fellow a couple of weeks later, and he was bad enough to look at even then. He was walking around alone all right except that his face was continually twisting and twitching horribly. His nerve was completely gone, and he was discharged almost at once. For all the shock he had his was a miraculous escape.

When we saw that the driver was being taken care of we started back to make our attempt to pass through the burning city.

As we got nearer the city I seemed to have lost all feeling of fear, and in fact I didn't have any feeling at all.

I tried to think about what was going to happen to us, for it worried me that I didn't seem to have a nerve in my body. I kept telling myself that I was going to my death and that in a few minutes I would be lying somewhere in those smoking ruins. But it was no use. I didn't care one way or the other. Before one comes to the railway track just outside Ypres there is a road which branches off to the left and leads to the village of Elverdinghe. Before we came to where this road branches off the officer spoke.

"I think it would be worth while trying to get to the canal bank through Elverdinghe," he said, "and from there we would perhaps be able to leave the car, swim the canal and get through to Potijze on foot. It will take longer, of course, but the main thing for us to do is to get there safely, no matter if it takes a great deal longer. Let us try that way, anyway."

I was willing to try anything, and so we turned off the road and headed for Elverdinghe. It was only a few kilometres, and we didn't take long getting there, but when we arrived we found that we had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, for Elverdinghe was getting it hot and heavy from the German field batteries.

We rushed into the town, and as we swung into the village proper we came very near having one grand smashup. A field ambulance was moving out of the place, and the road was blocked by ambulances which were loading up with wounded. I jammed on the brakes and pulled over almost into the ditch, but the brakes stopped the car before we got clear in.

A sentry informed us that the road through the village was closed and that we would have to turn around and go back. I tried to back up, but my two front wheels were stuck away down in the ditch, and she wouldn't pull out under her own power.

I appealed to the driver of an empty ambulance to help me, and he quickly got his towrope around my back axle, and we came out with the first heave. I noticed while we were taking the towrope off that the car was a big six-cylinder American make.

I asked the driver how he liked a Yankee car, and from the way he replied I knew that he was an American himself. I asked him where he came from, and you can imagine my surprise when he said "Boston."

I never say him again, and when I left him he was in one hot little corner of the map. I hope he gets through all right.

CHAPTER IX.

The Fate of a Spy.

WE reached Elverdinghe as quickly as we could and got out without a scratch, which is more important than anything else. We went back along the road until we came to the turning which leads to the village of Boesinghe. This village is on the bank of the canal, but it is a mighty unhealthy place to visit, as it is in full view of part of the German lines. Our plan was to go as close to the village as we dared and then leave the car and try to get through on foot.

It was almost as dangerous as it would be to go through Ypres, but we figured that here we would at least have a fighting chance.

We left the car under some trees about half a mile from the village and set out on foot. We hadn't been going ten minutes when a sentry stopped us again and informed us that the road was closed and we would have to go back. The officer explained things to him and told him that it was absolutely imperative that we get through and that this was the only way it could be done. The sentry said that he was very sorry, but he had strict orders from the assistant provost marshal and he dared not let us pass. There was nothing left for us to do but to turn back.

We went straight to headquarters, and the officer explained that it was impossible for us to get through. He ordered me to report to him the next morning and we would try again. The next day they were bombarding just as heavily, and the city was still burning, so all I had to do was to stand by and hold myself in readiness all day long.

We saw a very exciting incident that day. There was a big ammunition column near our headquarters, and it was waiting there, all ready loaded, until sent for. It had been there several weeks then, and the chaps who belonged to it were having the softest time they ever had in their lives.

About 2 o'clock in the afternoon I was standing on a corner near this column when I saw one of the police go up and speak to a chap who was walking around it with a notebook in his hand. They talked for a few moments, and then a policeman sauntered down to where I was standing and came up and spoke to me.

"Go down to the guard room," he said, "and have the corporal call in two men and bring them up here as quick as God will let him. That fellow there by the column is getting all kinds of information and putting it in his book. Now, hurry, but take your time until you get out of sight of this place. I'll look after him until the guard comes."

I was naturally all excited, but I did as he said, and it wasn't many minutes before we were on our way back at the double. Our man was still there, but the minute he saw us he got started. Our policeman pulled his revolver and fired after him. He didn't stop for a second, but he pulled a couple of guns himself and every few seconds would send a shot back at us as he ran.

Fellows were joining in the chase all the time, and it was getting interesting. The end came very suddenly when two of our chaps with rifles appeared in the road ahead of the fugitive and ordered him to halt. He fired on them for an answer, so they raised their rifles and brought him down.

Examination showed that he was a German. He had on German service dress under the British uniform he was wearing. The little book our policeman referred to certainly was a gold mine of information. He had the name, location and strength of every unit in our vicinity and also the location of a good many of our batteries. He was a brave fellow, all right, and he played the game clear to the end.

The next day I reported myself as usual for the trip to Potijze, and we decided to make the try again. Even as we got near Ypres the fire seemed to slacken, and we rushed straight through without mishap.

Continued next week

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