

"Over the Top"

By An American Soldier
Who Went

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY
Machine Gunner Serving in France

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pile of fragments of shell, shrapnel balls, bits of iron, nails, etc.—anything that was hard enough to send over to Fritz; he would scoop up a handful of this junk and put it in the bomb. Perhaps one of the platoon would ask him what he did this for, and he would explain that when the bomb exploded these bits would fly about and kill or wound any German hit by same; the questioner would immediately pull a button off his tunic and hand it to the bomb maker with, "Well, blame me, send this over as a souvenir," or another Tommy would volunteer an old rusty and broken jackknife; both would be accepted and inserted.

Then the professor would take another handful of mud and fill the tin, after which he would punch a hole in the lid of the tin and put it over the top of the bomb, the fuse sticking out. Then perhaps he would tightly wrap wire around the outside of the tin, and the bomb was ready to send over to Fritz with Tommy's compliments.

A piece of wood about four inches wide had been issued. This was to be strapped on the left forearm by means of two leather straps and was like the side of a match box; it was called a "cushy." There was a tin like the

head of a match on the ruse of the bomb. To ignite the fuse, you had to rub it on the "striker," just the same as striking a match. The fuse was timed to five seconds or longer. Some of the fuses issued in those days would burn down in a second or two, while others would "sizz" for a week before exploding. Back in Blighty the munition workers weren't quite up to snuff, the way they are now. If the fuse took a notion to burn too quickly they generally buried the bomb maker next day. So making bombs could not be called a "cushy" or safe job.

After making several bombs the professor instructs the platoon in throwing them. He takes a "jam tin" from the fire step, trembling a little, because it is nervous work, especially when new at it, lights the fuse on his striker. The fuse begins to "sizz" and sputter and a spiral of smoke, like that from a smoldering fag, rises from it. The platoon splits in two and ducks around the traverse nearest to them. They don't like the looks and sound of the burning fuse. When that fuse begins to smoke and "sizz" you want to say good-by to it as soon as possible, so Tommy with all his might chuck it over the top and crouches against the parapet, waiting for the explosion.

Lots of times in bombing the "jam tin" would be picked up by the Germans, before it exploded, and thrown back at Tommy with dire results.

After a lot of men went West in this manner an order was issued, reading something like this:

"To all ranks in the British army: After igniting the fuse and before throwing the jam-tin bomb, count slowly one! two! three!"

This in order to give the fuse time enough to burn down so that the bomb

would explode before the Germans could throw it back.

Tommy read the order—he reads them all, but after he ignited the fuse and it began to smoke—orders were forgotten, and away she went in record time and back she came to the further discomfort of the thrower.

Then another order was issued to count, "one hundred! two hundred! three hundred!" But Tommy didn't care if the order read to count up to a thousand by quarters, he was going to get rid of that "jam tin," because from experience he had learned not to trust it.

When the powers that be realized that they could not change Tommy they decided to change the type of bomb and did so—substituting the "hair brush," the "cricket ball," and later the Mills bomb.

The standard bomb used in the British army is the "Mills." It is about the shape and size of a large lemon. Although not actually a lemon, Fritz insists that it is; perhaps he judges it by the havoc caused by its explosion. The Mills bomb is made of steel, the outside of which is corrugated into 48 small squares, which, upon the explosion of the bomb, scatter in a wide area, wounding or killing any Fritz who is unfortunate enough to be hit by one of the flying fragments.

Although a very destructive and efficient bomb the "Mills" has the confidence of the thrower, in that he knows it will not explode until released from his grip.

It is a mechanical device, with a lever, fitted into a slot at the top, which extends half way around the circumference and is held in place at the bottom by a fixing pin. In this pin there is a small metal ring, for the purpose of extracting the pin when ready to throw.

You do not throw a bomb the way a baseball is thrown, because, when in a narrow trench, your hand is liable to strike against the parapet, traverse or parapet, and then down goes the bomb, and, in a couple of seconds or so, up goes Tommy.

In throwing, the bomb and lever are grasped in the right hand, the left foot is advanced, knee stiff, about one and a half its length to the front, while the right leg, knee bent, is carried slightly to the right. The left arm is extended at an angle of 45 degrees, pointing in the direction the bomb is to be thrown. This position is similar to that of shot putting, only that the right arm is extended downward. Then you hurl the bomb from you with an overhead bowling motion, the same as in cricket, throwing it fairly high in the air, this in order to give the fuse a chance to burn down so that when the bomb lands, it immediately explodes and gives the Germans no time to scamper out of its range or to return it.

As the bomb leaves your hand, the lever, by means of a spring, is projected into the air and falls harmlessly to the ground a few feet in front of the bomber.

When the lever flies off it releases a strong spring, which forces the firing pin into a percussion cap. This ignites the fuse, which burns down and sets off the detonator, charged with fulminate of mercury, which explodes the main charge of ammonal.

The average British soldier is not an expert at throwing; it is a new game to him, therefore the Canadians and Americans, who have played baseball from the kindergarten up, take naturally to bomb throwing and excel in this act. A six-foot English bomber will stand in awed silence when he sees a little five-foot-notthing Canadian outdistance his throw by several yards. I have read a few war stories of bombing, where baseball pitchers curved their bombs when throwing them, but a pitcher who can do this would make "Christy" Mathewson look like a piker, and is losing valuable time playing in the European War bush league, when he would be able to set the "big league" on fire.

We had a cushy time while at this school. In fact, to us it was a regular vacation, and we were very sorry when one morning the adjutant ordered us to report at headquarters for transportation and rations to return to our units up the line.

Arriving at our section, the boys once again tendered us the glad mitt, but looked askance at us out of the corners of their eyes. They could not conceive, as they expressed it, how a man could be such a blinking idiot as to join the Suicide club. I was beginning to feel sorry that I had become a member of said club, and my life to me appeared doubly precious.

Now that I was a sure-enough bomber I was praying for peace and hoping that my services as such would not be required.

Continued next week

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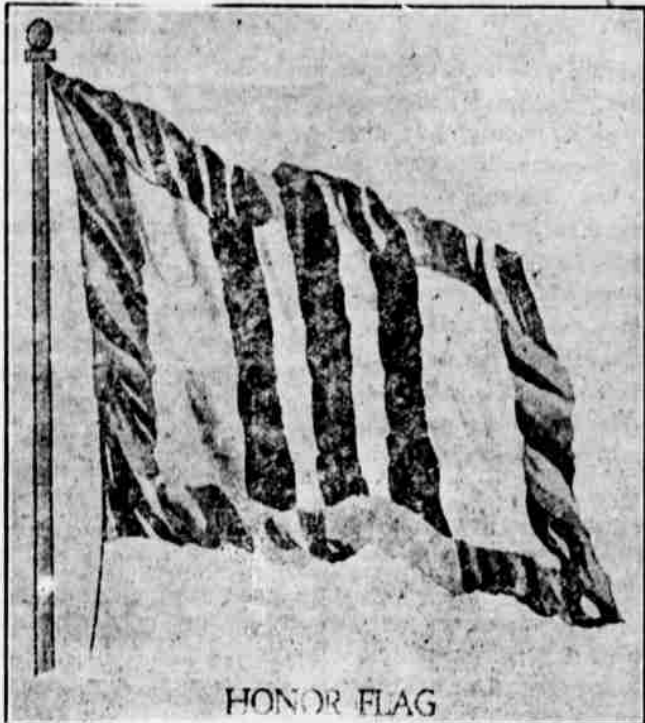
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