



OVER THE TOP

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT

ARTHUR GUY EMPY

MACHINE GUNNER, LEVINSON FRANK

CHAPTER XXVI.

All Quiet (7) on the Western Front.
At brigade headquarters I happened to overhear a conversation between our G. O. C. (general officer commanding) and the divisional commander. From this conversation I learned that we were to bombard the German lines for eight days, and on the first of July the "big push" was to commence.

In a few days orders were issued to that effect, and it was common property all along the line.

On the afternoon of the eighth day of our "bombing" started and I was sitting in the front-line trench smoking "pags" and making out our reports of the previous night's tour of the trenches, which we had to turn in to headquarters the following day, when an order was passed down the trench that Old Pepper requested twenty volunteers to go over on a trench raid that night to try and get a few German prisoners for information purposes. I immediately volunteered for this job, and shook hands with Arvid, and went to the rear to give my name to the officers in charge of the raiding party.

I was accepted, worse luck. At 10:45 that night we reported to the brigade headquarters (to get our instructions from Old Pepper).

After reaching this depot we lined up in a semicircle around him, and he addressed us as follows:

"All I want you boys to do is to go over to the German line tonight, surprise them, secure a couple of prisoners, and return immediately. Our artillery has bombarded that section of the line for two days and personally I believe that that part of the German trenches is unoccupied, so just get a couple of prisoners and return as quickly as possible."

The sergeant on my right, in an undertone, whispered to me:

"Say, think how are we going to get a couple of prisoners if the old fool thinks personally that that part of the trench is unoccupied"—words kind of silly, doesn't it mate?"

I had a funny sinking sensation in my stomach, and my tin hat felt as if it weighed about a ton and my enthusiasm was melting away. Old Pepper must have heard the sergeant speak because he turned in his direction and I'm thundering voice asked:

"What did you say?"

The sergeant with a scarted look on his face and his knees trembling, smartly saluted and answered:

"Nothing, sir."

Old Pepper said:

"Well, don't say it so loudly the next time."

Then Old Pepper continued:

"In this section of the German trenches there are two or three machine guns which our artillery, in the last two or three days, has been unable to stop. These guns command the sector where two of our communication trenches join the front line, and as the Germans are so over the top to observe morning I want to capture two or three men from these guns' crews, and from them I may be able to obtain valuable information as to the exact location of the guns, and our artillery will therefore be able to demolish them before the attack, and thus prevent our being a lot of men while using these communication trenches to bring up reinforcements."

These were the instructions he gave us:

"Take off your identification disks, strip your uniforms of all ornaments, buttons, etc., leave your papers with your comrades, because I don't want the Germans to have your regiments or units; these are the only things of value to them in our attack tomorrow and I don't want you to get yourselves captured. What I want is two prisoners and if I see them I have a way which will make them through all necessary information as to their guns. You have your choice of two weapons—get any carry your two handkerchiefs or your handkerchiefs, and your tin hats will come in handy with your tin hats. These to be used only in case of emergency."

A prisoner is Tommy's nickname for a ditch started by the Germans. It is a narrow two feet long, six to eight feet and very thick at the other. The ditch was to be straddled with sharp steel spikes

while through the center of the ditch there is a three-inch lead bar, to give it weight and balance. When you get a prisoner all you have to do is just stick this bar up in front of him, and believe me, the prisoner's parities for "Destruction never Allow" takes away and he very willingly obeys the orders of his captor. If, however, the prisoner gets high-minded and refuses to follow you, simply "persuade" him by first removing his tin hat, and then—well, the use of the lead weight in the persuader is demonstrated, and Tommy looks for another prisoner.

The knuckle knife is a dagger affair, the blade of which is about eight inches long with a heavy steel guard over the grip. This guard is studded with steel projections. At night in a trench, which is only about three to four feet wide, it makes a very handy weapon. One punch in the face generally shatters a man's jaw and you can get him with the knife as he goes down.

Then we had what we called our "come-alongs." These are strands of barbed wire about three feet long, made into a noose at one end; at the other end, the barbs are cut off and Tommy slips his wrist through a loop to get a good grip on the wire. If the prisoner wants to argue the point, why just place the large loop around his neck and no matter if Tommy wishes to return to his trenches at the walk, trot, or gallop, Fritz is perfectly agreeable to maintain Tommy's rate of speed.

We were ordered to black our faces and hands. For this reason: At night, the English and Germans use what they call star shells, a sort of rocket affair. They are fired from a large pistol about twenty inches long, which is held over the sandbag parapet of the trench, and discharged into the air. These star shells attain a height of about sixty feet, and a range of from fifty to seventy-five yards. When they hit the ground they explode, throwing out a strong calcium light which lights up the ground in a circle of a radius of between ten to fifteen yards. They also have a parachute star shell which, after reaching a height of about sixty feet, explodes. A parachute unfolds and slowly floats to the ground, lighting up a large circle in No Man's Land. The official name of the star shell is a "Very-light." Very-lights are used to prevent night surprise attacks on the trenches. If a star shell falls in front of you, or between you and the German lines, you are safe from detection, as the enemy cannot see you through the bright curtain of light. But if it falls behind you and, as Tommy says, "you get in the rear shell zone," then the fun begins; you have to lie flat on your stomach and remain absolutely motionless until the light of the shell dies out. This takes anywhere from forty to seventy seconds. If you haven't time to fall to the ground you must remain absolutely still in whatever position you were in when the light exploded; it is advisable not to breathe, as Fritz has an eye like an eagle when he thinks you are sneaking at his door. When a star shell is burning in Tommy's rear he can hold his breath for a week.

You blacken your face and hands so that the light from the star shells will not reflect on your pale face. In a trench raid there is quite sufficient reason for your face to be pale. If you don't believe me, try it just once.

Then another reason for blackening your face and hands is that, after you have returned the German trench at night, "white face" means Germans, "black face" English. Coming around to reverse you see a white face in front of you. With a grayer and whispering Fritz, "the best of luck," you introduce him to your "persuader" or knuckle knife.

A little later we arrived at the communication trench named Whisky street, which led to the fire trench at the point we were to go over the top and out in front.

In our rear were four stretcher bearers and a company of the R. A. M. C. carrying a pouch containing medicines and dressings appliances. Behind a gun remained to us that our expedition was not going to be exactly a pleasure. The order of things was reversed. In addition the doctors generally come first, with the stretcher bearers in the rear and then the stretcher

men, but in our case, the stretcher bearers were leading, with the doctors trailing behind, under the immediate direction.

The procedure of the R. A. M. C. men did not seem to disturb the stretcher bearers, as they made it an intention, was passed along the stretcher, as to who would be first to take a ride on one of the stretchers. This was generally followed by a stall that, if you were to be the one, the wound would be a "ready, steady, go!"

The stretcher bearers, in fact, began to get impatient, and they were to be small and light. Perhaps they looked at the other stretcher because I could feel an uncomfortable, heavy sensation between my shoulder blades. They got their wish all right.

Going up this trench, about every sixty yards or so we would pass a lonely sentry, who in a whisper would wish us "the best of luck, mate." We would stand at him under our stretcher that Jonah phrase to be sounded very softly.

Without any committee the minister troop arrived at Bettle ditch, the front-line trench. Presently a strong party of the Royal Engineers had cut a lane through our barbed wire to enable us to get out into No Man's Land.

Crawling through this lane, our party of twenty took up an extended order formation about one yard apart. We had a tap code arranged for our movements while in No Man's Land, because for various reasons it is not safe to carry on a heated conversation a few yards in front of Fritz's lines. The officer was on the right of the line, while I was on the extreme left. Two taps from the right would be passed down the line until I received them, then I would send back one tap. The officer, in receiving this one tap, would know that his order had gone down the whole line, had been understood, and that the party was ready to obey the two-tap signal. Two taps



Receiving First Aid.

meant that we were to crawl forward slowly—and believe me, very slowly—for five yards, and then halt to await further instructions. Three taps meant, when you arrived within striking distance of the German trench, rush it and inflict as many casualties as possible, secure a couple of prisoners, and then back to your own lines with the speed of a hare. Four taps meant, "I have gotten you into a position from which it is impossible for me to extricate you, so you are on your own."

After getting Tommy into a mess on the western front he is generally told that he is "on his own." This means, "Save your skin in any way possible." Tommy loves to be "on his own" behind the lines, but not during a trench raid.

The star shells from the German lines were falling in front of us, therefore we were safe. After about twenty minutes we entered the star shell zone. A star shell from the German lines fell about five yards in the rear and to the right of us; we hugged the ground and held our breath until it burst out. The smoke from the star shell traveled along the ground and crossed over the middle of our line. Same Tommy succeed. The smoke had gotten up his nose. We crouched on the ground, carving the air under our breath, and waited the volley that generally issues upon the Germans have heard a noise in No Man's Land. Nothing happened. We received two taps and crossed forward slowly for five yards; to judge the officer believed what Old Pepper had said, "Personally I believe that that part of the German trench is unoccupied." By being careful and remaining motionless when the star shells fell behind us, we crossed the German barbed wire without missing. Then the fun began. I was ordered off as it is, tickish, sock cutting your way through wire when

in a line of barbed wire leading out into No Man's Land with that other lying across the parapet, awaiting every sense to see or hear what is going on in No Man's Land, besides at night Fritz never knows when a look with the nose and snout on it will come snorting through the air cloud in the direction of Berlin. The men on the right, men in the center and myself on the extreme left were equipped with wire cutters. These are equipped with soft rubber not because the German wires are charged with electricity, but to prevent the noise rubbing against the barbed wire stakes, which are of iron, and making a noise which may warn the inmates of the trench that someone is getting fresh in their front yard. There is only one way to cut a barbed wire without noise and through costly experience Tommy has become an expert in doing this. You must grasp the wire about two inches from the stake in your right hand and cut between the stake and your hand.

If you cut a wire improperly, a loud twang will ring out on the right air like the snapping of a harjo string. Perhaps this noise can be heard only for fifty or seventy-five yards, but in Tommy's mind it makes a loud noise in Berlin.

We had cut a lane about halfway through the wire when, down the cen-

ter of our line, twang, went an unexpected note. We crossed down, finding under our breath, twanging all over our shoes protruding from the strands of the barbed wire as the ground rattling for a challenge and the inevitable rattle of the fire. Nothing happened. I suppose the fellow who cut the barbed wire improperly was the one who had crossed about half an hour previously. What we stated this would never make the wire give a happy one.

The officer, in my opinion, at the side of the wire should have given the following signal, which meant, "In your own, get back to your trenches as quickly as possible," but again he must have noticed on the right that Old Pepper had given us in the instant. "Personally I believe that that part of the German trench is unoccupied." Anyway, we got off, but not so certain that we were getting a couple of prisoners as we had hoped.

During the intervals of falling star shells we carried on with our wire cutting until at last we succeeded in getting through the German barbed wire at this point we were only ten feet from the German trenches. If we

crossed the wire in a trench, the way was not off unless we were using the wire in the narrow lane we had cut through. With our hearts in our mouths we waited for the three-



Over the Top is a Charge.

Trains into Monmouth

Leave Portland 7:15 a.m.	Gettinger 10:20	Independence 10:22	Moorestown 10:50
Salem 7:35			
7:40 p.m.	Dallas 7:45		2:10
7:45	Gettinger 4:24	Independence 4:27	Moorestown 4:55
8:00	6:45	6:57	7:10
Portland 1:30	Connects with above		
Corvallis 6:45 a.m.	Independence 7:15	Arrive Monmouth 7:45	
7:15 p.m.		2:10	2:30
Dallas 7:00 a.m.	Arrive Monmouth 7:25		
Airline 8:30 a.m. and 7:45 p.m.	Arrives Monmouth 7:55 a.m. and 4:15 p.m.		

Leave Independence, 6:50 a.m. 7:35, 8:45, 10:55, 12:30, 1:30, 2:30, 3:30, 4:40, 7:10

Trains out of Monmouth

Leave Monmouth 7:05 a.m.	Independence 7:35	Gettinger 7:40	Arr. Salem 9:00
Same as above			Portland 11:10
Monmouth 1:45 p.m.	2:15	2:27	Salem 3:30
Same as above			Portland 5:30
Monmouth 4:05	4:40	4:55	Salem 5:30
3:05 a.m.	Dallas 10:30		11:30
4:30 p.m.	4:45		5:30
3:05 a.m.	Independence 10:22	Corvallis 11:20	
4:05 p.m.	6:57	7:45	
7:35 a.m. and 3:10 p.m.	Arrives Airline 8:30 a.m. and 7:40 p.m.		

Leave Monmouth 7:05 a.m. 8:15, 9:05, 10:50, 12:30, 1:30, 2:30, 3:30, 4:35, 7:10

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