"OVER THE TOP"

BY

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT

ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

MACHINE GUNNER, SERVING IN FRANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—Fired by the news of the sinking of the Lusitania by a German submarine, Arthur Guy Empey, an American, leaves his office in Jersey City and goes to England where he enlists in the British army.

CHAPTER II—After a period of training, Empey volunteers for immediate service and soon finds himself in rest billets "somewhere in France," where he first makes the acquaintance of the ever-present "cooties."

CHAPTER III—Empey attends his first church services at the front while a German Fokker circles over the congregation.

CHAPTER IV—Empey's command goes into the front-line trenches and is under fire for the first time.

CHAPTER V—Empey learns to adopt the motto of the British Tommy, "If you are going to get it, you'll get it, so why worry."

CHAPTER VI—Back in rest billets, Empey gets his first experience as a mess orderly.

After dinner I tried to wash out the dixie with cold water and a rag, and learned another maxim of the trenches—"It can't be done." I slyly watched one of the older men from another section, and was horrified to see him throw into his dixie four or five double handfuls of mud. Then he poured in some water, and with his hands scoured the dixie inside and out. I thought he was taking an awful risk. Supposing the cook should have seen him! After half an hour of unsuccessful efforts I returned my dixie to the cook shack, being careful to put on the cover, and returned to the billet.

Resting Back of the Lines.

Pretty soon the cook poked his head in the door and shouted: "Hey, Yank, come out here and clean your dixie!" I protested that I had wasted a half-hour on it already, and had used up my only remaining shirt in the attempt. With a look of disdain he exclaimed: "Blow me, your shirt? Why in —— didn't you use mud?"

Without a word in reply I got busy with the mud, and soon my dixie was bright and shining.

Most of the afternoon was spent by the men writing letters home. I used my spare time to chop wood for the cook and go with the quartermaster to draw coal. I got back just in time to issue our third meal, which consisted of hot tea. I rinsed out my dixie and returned it to the cookhouse, and went back to the billet with an exhilarated feeling that my day's labor was done. I had fallen asleep on the straw when once again the cook appeared in the door of the billet with: "Blime me, you Yanks are lazy. Who in —— a-goin' to draw the water for the mornin' tea? Do you think I'm a-goin' to? Well, I'm not," and he left. I filled the dixie with water from an old squeaking well, and once again lay down in the straw.

CHAPTER VII.

Rations.

Just dozing off: Mr. Lance Corporal butted in.

In Tommy's eyes a lance corporal is one degree below a private. In the corporal's eyes he is one degree above a general.

He ordered me to go with him and help him draw the next day's rations, also told me to take my waterproof.

Every evening, from each platoon or machine-gun section, a lance corporal and private go to the quartermaster sergeant at the company stores and draw rations for the following day.

The "quarter," as the quartermaster sergeant is called, receives daily from the orderly room (captain's office) a slip showing the number of men entitled to rations, so there is no chance of putting anything over on him. Many arguments take place between the "quarter" and the platoon noncom, but the former always wins out. Tommy says the "quarter" got his job because he was a burglar in civil life.

Then I spread the waterproof sheet on the ground, while the quartermaster's batman dumped the rations on it. The corporal was smoking a fag. I carried the rations back to the billet. The corporal was still smoking a fag. How I envied him. But when the issue commenced my envy died, and I realized that the first requisite of a noncommissioned officer on active service is diplomacy. There were 19 men in our section, and they soon formed a semicircle around us after the corporal had called out, "Rations up."

The quartermaster sergeant had given a slip to the corporal on which was written a list of the rations. Sitting on the floor, using a wooden box as a table, the issue commenced. On the left of the corporal the rations were piled. They consisted of the following:

Six loaves of fresh bread, each loaf of a different size, perhaps one out of the six being as flat as a pancake, the result of an army service corps man placing a box of bully beef on it during transportation.

Three tins of jam, one apple and the other two plum.

Seventeen Bermuda onions, all different sizes.

A piece of cheese in the shape of a wedge.

Two one-pound tins of butter.

A handful of raisins.

A tin of biscuits, or as Tommy calls them "jaw breakers."

A bottle of mustard pickles.

The "bully beef," spuds, condensed milk, fresh meat, bacon and "Maconochie rations" (a can filled with meat, vegetables and greasy water), had been turned over to the company cook to make a stew for next day's dinner. He also received the tea, sugar, salt, pepper and flour.

Scratching his head, the corporal studied the slip issued to him by the quarter. Then in a slow, mystified voice he read out, "No. 1 section, 19 men. Bread, loaves, six." He looked puzzled and soliloquized in a musing voice:

"Six loaves, nineteen men. Let's see, that's three in a loaf for fifteen men—well, to make it even, four of you'll have to muck in on one loaf."

The four that got stuck made a howl, but to no avail. The bread was dished out. Pretty soon from a far corner of the billet, three indignant Tommies accosted the corporal with:

"What do you call this, a loaf of bread? Looks more like a sniping plate."

The corporal answered:

"Well, don't blame me, I didn't bake it; somebody's got to get it, so shut up until I dish out these blinkin' rations."

Then the corporal started on the jam.

"Jam, three tins—apple one, plum two. Nineteen men, three tins. Six in a tin makes twelve men for two tins, seven in the remaining tin."

He passed around the jam, and there was another riot. Some didn't like apple, while others who received plum were partial to apple. After a while differences were adjusted and the issue went on.

"Bermuda onions, seventeen."

The corporal avoided a row by saying that he did not want an onion, and I said they make your breath smell, so I guessed I would do without one too. The corporal looked his gratitude.

"Cheese, pounds, two."

The corporal borrowed a jackknife (corporals are always borrowing), and sliced the cheese—each slicing bringing forth a pert remark from the onlookers as to the corporal's eyesight.

"Raisins, ounces, eight."

By this time the corporal's nerves had gone west, and in despair he said that the raisins were to be turned over to the cook for "duff" (plum pudding). This decision elicited a little "grousing," but quiet was finally restored.

"Biscuits, tins, one."

With his borrowed jackknife, the corporal opened the tin of biscuits, and told everyone to help themselves—nobody responded to this invitation. Tommy is "fed up" with biscuits.

"Butter, tins, two."

"Nine in one, ten in the other."

Another rumpus.

"Pickles, mustard, bottles, one."

Nineteen names were put in a steel helmet, the last one out winning the pickles. On the next issue there were only 18 names, as the winner is eliminated until every man in the section has won a bottle.

The ruffle is closely watched, because Tommy is suspicious when it comes to gambling with his rations.

When the issue is finished the corporal sits down and writes a letter home, asking them if they cannot get some M. P. (member of parliament) to have him transferred to the Royal Flying corps where he won't have to issue rations.

At the different French estaminets in the village and at the canteens Tommy buys fresh eggs, milk, bread and pastry. Occasionally when he is flush, he invests in a tin of pears or apricots. His pay is only a shilling a day, 24 cents, or a cent an hour. Just imagine, a cent an hour for being under fire—not much chance of getting rich out there.

When he goes into the fire trench (front line), Tommy's menu takes a tumble. He carries in his haversack what the government calls emergency or iron rations. They are not supposed to be opened until Tommy dies of starvation. They consist of one tin of bully beef, four biscuits, a little tin which contains tea, sugar and Oxo cubes (concentrated beef tablets). These are only to be used when the enemy establishes a curtain of shell fire on the communication trenches, thus preventing the "carrying in" of rations, or when in an attack a body of troops has been cut off from its base of supplies.

The rations are brought up at night by the company transport. This is a section of the company in charge of the quartermaster sergeant, composed of men, mules and limbers (two-wheeled wagons), which supplies Tommy's wants while in the front line. They are constantly under shell fire. The rations are unloaded at the entrance to the communication trenches and are "carried in" by men detailed for that purpose. The quartermaster sergeant never goes into the front-line trench. He doesn't have to, and I have never heard of one volunteering to do so.

The company sergeant major sorts the rations and sends them in.

Tommy's trench rations consist of all the bully beef he can eat, biscuits, cheese, tinned butter (sometimes 17 men to a tin), jam or marmalade, and occasionally fresh bread (ten to a loaf). When it is possible he gets tea and stew.

When things are quiet, and Fritz is behaving like a gentleman, which seldom happens, Tommy has the opportunity of making dessert. This is "trench pudding." It is made from broken biscuits, condensed milk, jam—a little water added, slightly flavored with mud—put into a canteen and cooked over a little spirit stove known as "Tommy's cooker."

(A firm in Blighty widely advertises these cookers as a necessity for the men in the trenches. Gullible people buy them—ship them to the Tommies, who, immediately upon receipt of same throw them over the parapet. Sometimes a Tommy falls for the ad, and uses the cooker in a dugout to the disgust and discomfort of the other occupants.)

This mess is stirred up in a tin and allowed to simmer over the flames from the cooker until Tommy decides that it has reached sufficient (gluelike) consistency. He takes his bayonet and by means of the handle carries the mess up in the front trench to cool. After it has cooled off he tries to eat it. Generally one or two Tommies in a section have cast-iron stomachs and the tin is soon emptied. Once I tasted trench pudding, but only once.

In addition to the regular ration issue Tommy uses another channel to enlarge his menu.

In the English papers a "Lonely Soldier" column is run. This is for the soldiers at the front who are supposed to be without friends or relatives. They write to the papers and their names are published. Girls and women in England answer them, and send out parcels of foodstuffs, cigarettes, candy, etc. I have known a "lonely" soldier to receive as many as five parcels and eleven letters in one week.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Little Wooden Cross.

After remaining in rest billets for eight days, we received the unwelcome tidings that the next morning we would "go in" to "take over." At six in the morning our march started and, after a long march down the dusty road, we again arrived at reserve billets.

I was No. 1 in the leading set of fours. The man on my left was named "Pete Walling," a cheery sort of fellow. He laughed and joked all the way on the march, buoying up my drooping spirits. I could not figure out anything attractive in again occupying the front line, but Pete did not seem to mind, said it was all in a lifetime. My left heel was blistered from the rubbing of my heavy marching boot. Pete noticed that I was limping and offered to carry my rifle, but by this time I had learned the ethics of the march in the British army and courteously refused his offer.

We had gotten half-way through the communication trench, Pete in my immediate rear. He had his hand on my shoulder, as men in a communication trench have to do to keep in touch with each other. We had just climbed over a bashed-in part of the trench when in our rear a man tripped over a loose signal wire, and let out an oath. As usual, Pete rushed to his help. To reach the fallen man he had to cross this bashed-in part. A bullet cracked in the air and I ducked. Then a moan from the rear. My heart stood still. I went back and Pete was lying on the ground. By the aid of my flashlight I saw that he had his hand pressed to his right breast. The fingers were covered with blood. I flashed the light on his face and in its glow a grayish-blue color was stealing over his countenance. Pete looked up at me and said: "Well, Yank, they've done me in. I can feel myself going West." His voice was getting fainter and I had to kneel down to get his words. Then he gave me a message to write home to his mother and his sweetheart, and I, like a great big boob, cried like a baby. I was losing my first friend of the trenches.

Word was passed to the rear for a stretcher. He died before it arrived. Two of us put the body on the stretcher and carried it to the nearest first-aid post, where the doctor took an official record of Pete's name, number, rank and regiment from his identity disk, this to be used in the casualty lists and notification to his family.

We left Pete there, but it broke our hearts to do so. The doctor informed us that we could bury him the next morning. That afternoon five of the boys of our section, myself included, went to the little ruined village in the rear and from the deserted gardens of the French chateaux gathered grass and flowers. From these we made a wreath.

While the boys were making this wreath, I sat under a shot-scarred apple tree and carved out the following verses on a little wooden shield which we nailed on Pete's cross.

True to his God; true to Britain,
Doing his duty to the last,
Just one more name to be written
On the Roll of Honor of heroes passed—

Passed to their God, enshrined in glory,
Entering life of eternal rest,
One more chapter in England's story
Of her sons doing their best.

Rest, you soldier, mate so true,
Never forgotten by us below;
Know that we are thinking of you,
Ere to our rest we are bidden to go.

Next morning the whole section went over to say good-by to Pete, and laid him away to rest.

After each one had a look at the face of the dead, a corporal of the R. A. M. C. sewed up the remains in a blanket. Then placing two heavy ropes across the stretcher (to be used in lowering the body into the grave), we lifted Pete onto the stretcher, and reverently covered him with a large union jack, the flag he had died for.

The chaplain led the way, then came the officers of the section, followed by two of the men carrying a wreath. Immediately after came poor Pete on the flag-draped stretcher, carried by four soldiers. I was one of the four. Behind the stretcher, in column of fours, came the remainder of the section.

To get to the cemetery, we had to pass through the little shell-destroyed village, where troops were hurrying to and fro.

As the funeral procession passed these troops came to the "attention" and smartly saluted the dead.

Poor Pete was receiving the only salute a private is entitled to "somewhere in France."

Now and again a shell from the German lines would go whistling over the village to burst in our artillery lines in the rear.

When we reached the cemetery we halted in front of an open grave, and laid the stretcher beside it. Forming a hollow square around the opening of the grave, the chaplain read the burial service.

German machine-gun bullets were "cracking" in the air above us, but Pete didn't mind, and neither did we.

When the body was lowered into the grave the flag having been removed, we clicked our heels together and came to the salute.

I left before the grave was filled in. I could not bear to see the dirt thrown on the blanket-covered face of my comrade. On the western front there are no coffins, and you are lucky to get a blanket to protect you from the wet and the worms. Several of the section stayed and decorated the grave with white stones.

That night, in the light of a lonely candle in the machine gunner's dugout of the front-line trench I wrote two letters. One to Pete's mother, the other to his sweetheart. While doing this I cursed the Prussian war god with all my heart, and I think that St. Peter noted same.

The machine gunners in the dugout were laughing and joking. To them Pete was unknown. Pretty soon, in the warmth of their merriment, my blues disappeared. One soon forgets on the western front.

CHAPTER IX.

Suicide Annex.

I was in my first dugout and looked around curiously. Over the door of same was a little sign reading "Suicide Annex." One of the boys told me that this particular front trench was called "Suicide Ditch." Later on I learned that machine gunners and bombers are known as the "Suicide Club."

That dugout was muddy. The men slept in mud, washed in mud, ate mud, and dreamed mud. I had never before realized that so much discomfort and misery could be contained in those three little letters, M U D. The floor of the dugout was an inch deep in water. Outside it was raining cats and dogs, and thin rivulets were trickling down the steps. From the air shaft immediately above me came a drip, drip, drip. Suicide Annex was a hole eight feet wide, ten feet long and six feet high. It was about twenty feet below the fire trench; at least there were twenty steps leading down to it. These steps were cut into the earth, but at that time were muddy and slippery. A man had to be very careful or else he would "shoot the chutes." The air was foul, and you could cut the smoke from Tommy's fags with a knife. It was cold. The walls and roof were supported with heavy square-cut timbers, while the entrance was strengthened with sandbags. Nails had been driven into these timbers. On each nail hung a miscellaneous assortment of equipment. The lighting arrangements were superb—one candle in a reflector made from an ammunition tin. My teeth were chattering from the cold, and the drip from the airshaft did not help matters much. While I was sitting bemoaning my fate and wishing for the fireside at home, the fellow next to me, who was writing a letter, looked up and innocently asked, "Say, Yank, how do you spell 'conflagration'?"

I looked at him in contempt and answered that I did not know.

From the darkness in one of the corners came a thin, piping voice singing one of the popular trench ditties entitled:

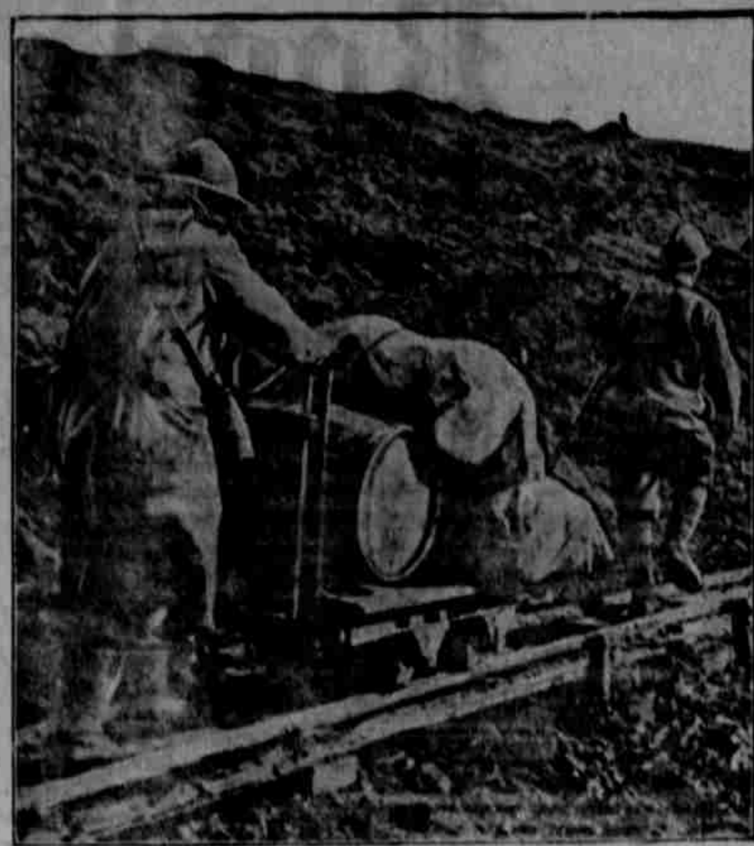
"Pack up your Troubles in your Old Kit Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile."

Every now and then the singer would stop to cough, cough, cough, but it was a good illustration of Tommy's cheerfulness under such conditions.

A machine-gun officer entered the dugout and gave me a hard look. I sneaked past him, sliding and slipping, and reached my section of the front-line trench, where I was greeted by the sergeant, who asked me, "Where in —— 'ave you been?"

I made no answer, but sat on the muddy fire step, shivering with the cold and with the rain beating in my face. About half an hour later I teamed up with another fellow and went on guard with my head sticking over the top. At ten o'clock I was relieved and resumed my sitting position on the fire step. The rain suddenly stopped and we all breathed a sigh of relief. We prayed for the morning and the rum issue.

(To Be Continued)



Taking Provisions to the Front.

Get a Magnet.

A magnet will attract a hook and eye which is liable to rust, while it rejects the nonliable ones. So a magnet is a handy tool for the sewing basket.

Literal.

"Josh Billings said he was an honest man because jail life didn't agree with him." "That was frank, wasn't it?" "No, it was Josh. Never heard of Frank Billings."—Boston Transcript.

A Billion Dollar Insurance Fund

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