

"Over the Top"

By An American Soldier Who Went
ARTHUR GUY ENPEY
Machine Gunner Serving in France

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"On the afternoon of the fourth day of Fritz' contemptuous use of the road mentioned the captain and I were at our posts as usual. Fritz was strafing us pretty rough, just like he's doing now. The shells were playing leap-frog all through that orchard.

"I was carrying on a conversation in our 'tap' code with Cassell at the other end. It ran something like this: "Say, Cassell, how would you like to be in the saloon bar of the King's Arms down Rye lane with a bottle of Bass in front of you, and that blonde barmaid waiting to fill 'em up again?" "Cassell had a fancy for that particular blonde. The answer came back in the shape of a volley of curses. I changed the subject.

"After a while our talk veered round to the way the Boches had been exposing themselves on the road down on the chart as Target 17. What he said about those Boches would never have passed the reichstag, though I believe it would have gone through our censor easily enough.

"The bursting shells were making such a din that I packed up talking and took to watching the captain. He was fidgeting around on an old sandbag with the glass to his eye. Occasionally he would let out a grunt, and make some remark I couldn't hear on account of the noise, but I guessed what it was all right. Fritz was getting fresh again on that road.

"Cassell had been sending in the 'tap code' to me, but I was fed up and didn't bother with it. Then he sent O. S., and I was all attention, for this was a call used between us which meant that something important was on. I was all ears in an instant. Then Cassell turned loose.

"You blankety blank dud, I have been trying to raise you for fifteen minutes. What's the matter, are you asleep? (Just as if anyone could have slept in that infernal racket!) 'Never mind framing a nasty answer. Just listen.

"Are you game for putting something over on the Boches and Old Pepper all in one?"

"I answered that I was game enough when it came to putting it over the Boches, but confessed that I had a weakening of the spine, even at the mention of Old Pepper's name.

"He came back with, 'It's so absurdly easy and simple that there is no chance of the old heathen rumbering it. Anyway, if we're caught, I'll take the blame.'

"Under these condition I told him to spit out his scheme. It was so daring and simple that it took my breath away. This is what he proposed:

"If the Boches should use that road again, to send by the tap system the target and range. I had previously told him about our captain talking out loud as if he were sending through orders. Well, if this happened, I was to send the dope to Cassell and he would transmit it to the battery commander as officially coming through the observation post. Then the battery would open up. Afterwards, during the investigation, Cassell would swear he received it direct. They would have to relieve him, because it was impossible from his post in the battery dugout to know that the road was being used at that time by the Germans. And also it was impossible for him to give the target, range and degrees. You know a battery chart is not passed around among the men like a newspaper from Blighty. From him the investigation would go to the observation post, and the observing officer could truthfully swear that I had not sent the message by 'phone, and that no orders to fire had been issued by him. The investigators would then be up in the air, we would be safe, the Boches would receive a good bashing, and we would get our own back on Old Pepper. It was too good to be true. I gleefully fell in with the scheme, and told Cassell I was his meat.

"Then I waited with beating heart and watched the captain like a hawk.

"He was beginning to fidget again and was drumming on the sandbags with his feet. At last, turning to me, he said:

"Wilson, this army is a blankety blank washout. What's the use of having artillery if it is not allowed to fire? The government at home ought to be hanged with some of their red tape. It's through them that we have no shells."

"I answered, 'Yes, sir,' and started sending this opinion over the wire to Cassell, but the captain interrupted me with:

"Keep those infernal fingers still. What's the matter, getting the nerves? When I'm talking to you, pay attention."

"My heart sank. Supposing he had rumbered that tapping, then all would be up with our plan. I stopped drumming with my fingers and said:

"Beg your pardon, sir, just a habit with me."

"And a d—d silly one, too," he answered, turning to his glasses again, and I knew I was safe. He had not tumbled to the meaning of that tapping.

"All at once, without turning round, he exclaimed:

"Well, of all the nerve I've ever run across, this takes the cake. Those Boches are using that road again. Blind my eyes, this time it is a whole brigade of them, transports and

all. What a pretty target for our '4.5's.' The beggars know that we won't fire. A d—d shame, I call it. Oh, just for a chance to turn D 238 loose on them."

"I was trembling with excitement. From repeated stolen glances at the captain's range chart, that road with its range was burned into my mind.

"Over the wire I tapped, 'D 238 battery, Target 17, Range 6000, 3 degrees 30 minutes, left, salvo, fire.' Cassell O. K.'d my message, and with the receiver pressed against my ear, I waited and listened. In a couple of minutes very faintly over the wire came the voice of our battery commander issuing the order: 'D 238 battery. Salvo! Fire!'

"Then a roar through the receiver as the four guns belched forth, a screaming and whistling overhead, and the shells were on their way.

"The captain jumped as if he were shot, and let out a great big expressive '—a, and eagerly turned his glasses in the direction of the German road. I also strained my eyes watching that target. Four black clouds of dust rose up right in the middle of the German column. Four direct hits—another record for D 238.

"The shells kept on whistling overhead, and I had counted twenty-four of them when the firing suddenly ceased. When the smoke and dust clouds lifted the destruction on that road was awful. Overturned limbers and guns, wagons smashed up, troops fleeing in all directions. The road and roadside were spotted all over with little field gray dots, the toll of our guns.

"The captain, in his excitement, had slipped off the sandbag, and was on his knees in the mud, the glass still at his eye. He was muttering to himself and slapping his thigh with his disengaged hand. At every slap a big round juicy cuss word would escape from his lips followed by:

"Good! Fine! Marvelous! Pretty Work! Direct hits all."

"Then he turned to me and shouted: "Wilson, what do you think of it? Did you ever see the like of it in your life? D—n fine work, I call it."

"Pretty soon a look of wonder stole over his face and he exclaimed:

"But who in h—l gave them the order to fire. Range and everything correct, too. I know I didn't. Wilson, did I give you any order for the battery to open up? Of course I didn't, did I?"

"I answered very emphatically, 'No, sir, you gave no command. Nothing went through this post. I am absolutely certain on that point, sir.'

"Of course nothing went through," he replied. Then his face fell, and he muttered out loud:

"But, by Jove, wait till Old Pepper gets wind of this. There'll be fur flying."

Just then Bombardier Cassell cut in on the wire:

"General's compliments to Captain A—. He directs that officer and signaller report at the double to brigade headquarters as soon as relieved. Relief now on the way."

"In an undertone to me, 'Keep a brass front, Wilson, and for God's sake, stick.' I answered with, 'Rely on me, mate,' but I was trembling all over.

"I gave the general's message to the captain, and started packing up.

"The relief arrived, and as we left the post the captain said:

"Now for the fireworks, and I know they'll be good and plenty. They were."

"When we arrived at the gun pits the battery commander, the sergeant major and Cassell were waiting for us. We fell in line and the funeral march to brigade headquarters started.

"Arriving at headquarters the battery commander was the first to be interviewed. This was behind closed doors. From the roaring and explosions of Old Pepper it sounded as if raw meat was being thrown to the lions. Cassell, later, described it as sounding like a bombing raid. In about two minutes the officer reappeared. The sweat was pouring from his forehead, and his face was the color of a beet. He was speechless. As he passed the captain he jerked his thumb in the direction of the lion's den and went out. Then the captain went in, and the lions were once again fed. The captain stayed about twenty minutes and came out. I couldn't see his face, but the droop in his shoulders was enough. He looked like a wet hen.

"The door of the general's room opened and Old Pepper stood in the doorway. With a roar he shouted:

"Which one of you is Cassell? D—n me, get your heels together when I speak! Come in here!"

"Cassell started to say, 'Yes sir.'

"But Old Pepper roared, 'Shut up!'"

"Cassell came out in five minutes. He said nothing, but as he passed me he put his tongue into his cheek and winked, then, turning to the closed door, he stuck his thumb to his nose and left.

"Then the sergeant major's turn came. He didn't come out our way. Judging by the roaring, Old Pepper must have eaten him.

"When the door opened and the general beckoned to me, my knees started to play 'Home, Sweet Home' against each other.

"My interview was very short.

"Old Pepper glared at me when I entered, and then let loose.

"Of course you don't know anything about it. You're just like the rest. Ought to have a nursing bottle around your neck and a nipple in your teeth. Soldiers—by gad, you turn my stomach to look at you. Win this war, when England sends out such samples as I have in my brigade! Not likely! Now, sir, tell me what you don't know about this affair. Speak up, out with it. Don't be gaping at me like a fish. Spit it out!"

"I stammered, 'Sir, I know absolutely nothing.'

"That's easy to see,' he roared; 'that stupid face tells me that. Shut up. Get out; but I think you are a d—d liar just the same. Back to your battery.'

"I saluted and made my exit.

"That night the captain sent for us. With fear and trembling we went to his dugout. He was alone. After saluting we stood at attention in front of him and waited. His say was short.

"Don't you two ever get it into your heads that Morse is a dead language. I've known it for years. The two of you had better get rid of that nervous habit of tapping transmitters; it's dangerous. That's all."

"We saluted, and were just going out the door of the dugout when the captain called up back and said:

"Smoke Goldflakes? Yes? Well, there are two tins of them on my table. Go back to the battery, and keep your tongues between your teeth. Understand?"

"We understood.

"For five weeks afterwards our battery did nothing but extra fatigues. We were satisfied and so were the men. It was worth it to put one over on Old Pepper, to say nothing of the injury caused to Fritz' feelings."

When Wilson had finished his story I looked up and the dugout was jammed. An artillery captain and two officers had also entered and stayed for the finish. Wilson spat out an enormous quid of tobacco, looked up, saw the captain, and got as red as a carnation. The captain smiled and left. Wilson whispered to me:

"Blime me, Yank, I see where I clik for crucifixion. That captain is the same one that chucked us Goldflakes in his dugout and here I have been 'chucking me weight about in his bearing."

Wilson never cliked his crucifixion. Quite a contrast to Wilson was another character in our brigade named Scott; we called him "Old Scotty" on account of his age. He was fifty-seven, although looking forty. "Old Scotty" had been born in the Northwest and had served in the Northwest Mounted police. He was a typical cowpuncher and Indian fighter and was a dead shot with the rifle, and took no pains to disguise this fact from us. He used to take care of his rifle as if it were a baby. In his spare moments you could always see him cleaning it or polishing the stock. Woe betide the man who by mistake happened to get hold of this rifle; he soon found out his error. Scott was as deaf as a mule, and it was amusing at parade to watch him in the manual of arms, stily glancing out of the corner of his eye at the man next to him to see what the order was. How he passed the doctor was a mystery to us; he must have bluffed his way through, because he certainly was independent. Beside him the Fourth of July looked like Good Friday. He wore at the time a large sombrero, had a Mexican stock saddle over his shoulder, a lariat on his arm, and a "forty-five" hanging from his hip. Dumping this paraphernalia on the floor he went up to the recruiting officer and shouted: "I'm from America, west of the Rockies, and want to join your d—d army. I've got no use for a German and can shoot some. At Scotland Yard they turned me down; said I was deaf and so I am. I don't banker to ship in with a d—d mud-crushing outfit, but the cavalry's full, so I guess this regiment's better than none, so trot out your papers and I'll sign 'em." He told them he was forty and slipped by. I was on recruiting service at the time he applied for enlistment.

It was Old Scotty's great ambition to be a sniper or "body snatcher," as Mr. Atkins calls it. The day that he was detailed as brigade sniper he celebrated his appointment by blowing the whole platoon to fags.

Being a Yank, Old Scotty took a liking to me and used to spin some great yarns about the plains, and the whole platoon would drink these in and ask for more. Ananias was a rookie compared with him.

The ex-plainman and discipline could not agree, but the officers all liked him, even if he was hard to manage, so when he was detailed as a sniper a sigh of relief went up from the officers' mess.

Old Scotty had the freedom of the brigade. He used to draw two or three days' rations and disappear with his glass, range finder and rifle, and we would see or hear no more of him until suddenly he would reappear with a couple of notches added to those already on the butt of his rifle. Every time he got a German it meant another notch. He was proud of these notches.

But after a few months Father Rheumatism got him and he was sent to Blighty; the air in the wake of his stretcher was blue with curses. Old Scotty surely could swear; some of his outbursts actually burned you.

No doubt, at this writing, he is "somewhere in Blighty" pussy footing it on a bridge or along the wall of some munition plant with the "G. R." or Home Defense corps.

(To Be Continued.)

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