

The Confessions of a German Deserter

Written by a Prussian Officer Who Participated in the Ravaging and Pillaging of Belgium

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CHAPTER V.

Not far from Sommepey, the French rear guard stopped again. Four batteries of our artillery were brought into position and our company, along with machine guns, were ordered to protect the artillery. The artillery officers did not think this sufficient protection because the airplanes had discovered the presence of strong French cavalry detachments and a cavalry attack was suspected. However, a stronger guard could not be provided and there was nothing to be done but take our position and make the best of the situation. We dug ourselves in to the right and left of the batteries, in a field of small pine trees. The machine guns were set up and supplied with ammunition. We were then given instructions as to what to do in the event of a cavalry attack. An old

major of infantry, with white hair, took command. Our unit was placed with the infantry, but our "brave" officers disappeared suddenly. To them the defense of the fatherland was the business of a private. Since we had been assigned to assist infantry, our officers considered themselves superfluous and took French leave.

This state of affairs affects only "pioneer" officers who, when their units are attached to infantry or chasseur divisions, scarcely ever take part in a battle. This was the case with our officers during my whole war career. They remained far away from the gunfire in comfortable security. This is also the case with many infantry captains and almost all higher officers. Majors, colonels, etc., never take part in a storming attack. I was told, and several times I observed this myself.

Our instructions were as follows: In the event of a cavalry attack, everything must be quiet. The gun must be pointed but hidden. The machine gun must not be fired until the major in command gives the order. Then there must be a lively, quick fire. Our batteries fired violently at a biplane flying high over them which gave signals with star shells which were read only by the observer.

But the expected attack did not come, the enemy's infantry was not to be seen. We prepared to resume our march and were all ready to move when the order came to bivouac. The spot where we were to rest was as usual fixed by the staff so that they knew where to find us at any time. Hardly had we reached the place when our field kitchen, which we supposed had been lost, appeared as if it had come out of the ground. Those in charge of the field kitchen had received no knowledge of our losses of the last few days and had cooked for the old number. They were greatly surprised on seeing instead of a brave company of strong "pioneers," a lot of ragged, exhausted, crushed human shadows. We were given soup, bread, meat, apples and every one received a cigarette, which was more welcome to most of us than food and drink.

The next morning we slept until six o'clock and even though we were lying on the bare ground it was very hard to wake us. Breakfast was excellent. It consisted of mutton which had been requisitioned, vegetables, bread, coffee, a goblet of wine, and ham. Our captain told us to eat all we could as we had a hard day's march before us.

We resumed our march at seven o'clock. Everybody was in high spirits and in the course of our conversations it became apparent that we had lost track of the time entirely. Nobody knew whether it was Monday or Wednesday or whether it was the fifth or tenth of the month. This condition became more and more general. Soldiers never know the day of the week; one is just like another, Saturday, Sunday or Thursday.

We stopped to rest at noon on a large farm but were obliged to wait in the rain for the field kitchens. Meanwhile we helped ourselves. We shot

one of the cows grazing in the meadow, cut open the hide without bothering to drain the blood from the carcass. Then everybody cut off a piece of meat, still warm, which was fried in a pot cover or eaten raw with a little salt by a great many of the soldiers. This killing of cattle was repeated almost daily by the soldiers acting without orders from their superiors. As a consequence they all got stomach trouble from eating meat which was too fresh without bread or vegetables. In spite of this the practice was continued. If a soldier became hungry during a pause in the marching and found a pig, cow or lamb, he shot it, cut out a piece for his own use, and let the rest spoil.

Under a burning midday sun we marched on amid clouds of dust, along a road used by munitions columns and other units, which never gave the dust an opportunity to settle. In all the fields which we passed, fugitives had set up their camps, where they lived like poor homeless gypsies. Many came up to us and begged for scraps of bread.

We marched without resting till late in the evening and at about nine o'clock we approached the city hall of Sommepey. In and around Sommepey a battle had started. We were ordered to take a part of the north-west section of the city. It was already dark and once more we halted. The fields all around us were covered with dead. In the middle of the streets were French batteries and munition columns. Horses and drivers had been killed.

After a ten-minute rest we started again and in double-quick step approached a little forest, in which dismounted cavalry and infantry were engaged with the enemy in a desperate hand-to-hand fight.

As a subterfuge we threw ourselves into the place with blood-curdling yells. We succeeded in the darkness in reaching the enemy's rear. The surprise attack was a success and the French, startled by our yells and by the attack, threw up their hands and surrendered. Mercy was not shown them by the infuriated cavalrymen.

Whenever there appeared to be any letup of the slaughter of the disarmed soldiers by our men new horrors were enacted under the commands of the officers, who kept shouting, "No quarter, slaughter everybody." Such were the orders of our distinguished officers. We pioneers also had to take part in this cold-blooded murder of unarmed men, who had thrown down their arms when they realized the futility of further resistance. Our officers took care this time, as in many earlier and later instances, that there should not be many prisoners taken.

The pioneer has a sidearm which, according to the law of nations, must not be used because the back of this sidearm consists of a three-millimeter sharp steel saw. In peace times the pioneers are not drilled with the bayonet because this sidearm should be used only for the special duties which the pioneers perform—but the law of nations is not the law of Prussian militarism.

We were obliged to use the saw from the beginning of the war. It was in opposition to all the laws of humanity. When an enemy had his saw in his breast and the victim had long since stopped every effort of resistance and an effort was made to try and remove the deadly steel from the wound an instant and horrible death resulted.

Often times this horrible weapon became embedded in the breast of a victim so firmly that the attacker, who had to have back his sidearm again would be obliged to place his foot upon the breast of his victim and use all his force to recover the murderous instrument.

The dead and wounded in horrible condition lay all around us. The moans of the wounded men would have softened a stone but not the heart of a Prussian soldier.

Not all the soldiers approved this

senseless, wanton murder. Some of those officers who had ordered us to kill the French were themselves killed by mistake in the darkness of the night by their own men. Such mistakes are still being repeated almost daily and I could cite many names and places to bear out this testimony.

On this particular night a captain and a first lieutenant met their fate. A second-year infantryman stabbed the captain in the abdomen and the first lieutenant received a stab in the back. Both died in a few minutes. Neither of their slayers felt any remorse and none of us felt inclined to reproach them. We all knew that two murderers had received their just deserts.

Another instance requires me to run somewhat ahead of the sequence of events. As I talked to a comrade of my company the next day I asked him for a pocketknife and in reaching into his pocket he pulled out three cartridges. I was surprised that he should carry cartridges in his trouser's pocket and asked him if he had no room in his belt.

"I have," he said, "but these three have a special mission. There are names of the intended victims on these bullets."

Some time later after we had become good friends I asked him again about the three cartridges. He had only one left. I thought about it a great deal and in my mind went over the noncommissioned officers, who, before war was declared had treated us like animals and whom we had hated as only human fiends can be hated. Two of these had found their grave in France.

The murder of Frenchmen who had surrendered continued as long as an enemy was alive. Then we received orders to determine if the enemies lying on the ground were all dead and unable to fight. If anyone was found simulating death it was ordered that he be killed. But the soldiers had lost some of the fever which had seized them during the battle and refused to obey this order. How they felt about it was illustrated by the remark of a member of my company:

"We had better look once more and see if the two officers are really dead and if not they ought to be killed without mercy for a command is a command."

We now advanced quickly but our part in the battle was over as the entire French line had retired to make a fresh stand, two kilometers west of Sommepey. The city was mostly in flames. The enemy artillery bombarded the town without intermission and shells burst all around.

Several hundred prisoners were corralled in the market place. Several French shells struck the prisoners but they were obliged to remain where they were. An officer of my company, Lieut. A. R. Neesen, remarked that no harm was done as the prisoners knew at least how their own ammunition tasted.

Toward one o'clock the battle south of Sommepey reached its climax. When the Germans advanced to make storming attacks on all points the French gave up their positions and retired in the direction of Sulpepe. Whether our company was no longer considered fit to fight or whether we were not needed any longer I do not know. We received orders to go into quarters. But neither a barn nor a stable could be found so that nothing remained but to camp in the open. The houses were all filled with wounded. Citizens of the town, who had not fled were all gathered in a large barn. Their houses were mostly destroyed so that they had to make use of what shelter was offered them. There was one exception to this arrangement and that was a very old little motherly woman sitting, bitterly crying, by the debris of her late home and nobody could induce her to leave.

In the barn, which served as a shelter to the civilians, were thrown together men and women, youths, children and old men. Many were wounded by shell splinters and cartridges and others had suffered burns. Everywhere was the most terrible misery; sick mothers and half-starved infants for whom there was no milk were obliged to perish here; old people died from the excitement and fright of the previous few days and last of all men and women in the prime of life slowly died from wounds because there was nobody to care for them.

A company of Hessian reserves, every one a veteran, passed with bowed heads and tired feet. They must have had a very long march. Their officers tried to make them move more lively. They ordered that a song be sung but the Hessians were not in the mood.

"Will you sing, you pigs?" cried an officer and the pitiful-looking "pigs" tried to obey this order. Faintly sounded from the ranks of the overtired men: "Deutschland, Deutschland Eber Alles, Eber Alles in Der Welt." Despite their broken strength, their tired feet, disgusted and resentful, these men sang their symphony of super-Germanism.

Several comrades who like myself had watched this troop pass came to me and said, "Let us go to the camp and try to sleep so that we might forget all this."

We were hungry and on the way home caught several chickens. We ate them half-raw and then laid down in the open and slept until four o'clock in the morning when we had to be ready to march.

Our destination on this day was Sulpepe. Before the march started the following army order was read:

"Soldiers, his majesty the emperor, our supreme war lord, thanks the soldiers of the Fourth army and sends to them his full appreciation. You have saved our beloved Germany from the invasion of hostile hordes. We will not



Sitting, Bitterly Crying, by the Debris of Her Late Home.

rest until the last enemy lies on the ground and before the leaves fall from the trees we shall return home victorious. The enemy is in full retreat and the Almighty will bless our arms further."

After this talk we gave three cheers, something which had become routine for us. And then we resumed our march. We now had plenty of time and opportunity to discuss the gratitude expressed by the supreme war lord. We could not make out just what fatherland we had to defend so far in France. One of the soldiers expressed the opinion that the Lord had blessed our arms, to which another replied: "A religious man repenting such silly sentiments is guilty of sacrilege, if he speaks seriously."

Everywhere, on the march to Sulpepe, in the fields and in the ditches, lay dead soldiers, most of them with hideous-looking open wounds. Thousands of huge flies swarmed on the corpses, partly decomposed, and giving off a fearful stench. Among these corpses, unsheltered under a blazing sun, were encamped wretched fugitives, because they were forbidden the use of the roads while the armies needed them, which was practically all the time.

In the evening, after a long march, we reached the town of Sulpepe. Here our captain told us we would find numerous frank-tireurs. We were ordered to bivouac, instead of being assigned quarters, and all going into the village were obliged to take guns and cartridges with them. After a brief rest we entered the village in search of food. Dead civilians lay in the middle of the streets. They were citizens of the village. We could not learn the reason for their having been shot. The only answer to our questions was a shrug of the shoulder.

The village itself had not suffered to any noticeable degree as far as destruction of buildings was concerned, but never in the course of the war had I seen a more complete job of plundering than had been done in Sulpepe. That we had to live and eat is true, and as the inhabitants and merchants had down there was no opportunity to pay for our necessities. Therefore we simply entered a store, put on stockings, laundry, and left the old things, then went to another place, took whatever food looked good to us, and then proceeded to a wine cellar, there to seize as much as our hearts desired. The men of the ammunition column, located in the village as well as the sanitary soldiers and cavalry by the hundreds, searched the houses and took whatever they liked best. The finest and largest business places in Sulpepe served a very large rural district surrounding and therefore were stocked up on almost everything. Within a short time these places had been cleaned out. The munition drivers and train columns carried away old pieces of silk, ladies' dresses, linens, shoes, dress goods and every other article imaginable, and stored them away in their ammunition cases. They took children's and women's shoes, and everything else they could lay their hands upon, although many of these articles had to be thrown away shortly afterward. Later, when the field post was developed and gave regular service, many of these things were sent home.

A large chocolate factory was robbed completely, and chocolate and candy in heaps were trampled in the ground. Empty houses were broken into and wrecked, wine cellars cleaned out and windows smashed, the latter being a special pastime of the cavalrymen. As we had to pass the night in the open, we tried to find some quilts and entered a grocery store and a market place. The store was partly demolished, but the apartment upstairs was as yet intact with all the rooms locked. It was evident that a woman's hand had worked in this house, for everything was neat and cozy. But all this order was still surpassed by the arrangement in a large room, which apparently had been inhabited by a young woman. We were almost ashamed to enter the sanctuary. To our astonishment we saw hanging on the wall opposite the door a picture burned in wood and under it a German verse: "Honor the women, they weave a braid of heavenly roses in their earthly life." (Schiller). The owner apparently was a young bride, for in the wardrobe was a trousseau, tied with neat blue ribbons, carefully put away. All the wardrobe drawers lay

open. Nothing was touched here. When we visited the same place the next morning, impelled by some impulse, we found everything in that house destroyed. Barbarians had gone through this home, and with bitter ruthlessness had devastated everything, with every evidence of having utterly cast off the ethics and standards of civilized races.

The entire trousseau had been torn from the drawers and thrown partly on the floor. Pictures, photographs, mirrors, everything was in pieces. The three of us who had entered the room clenched our fists with impotent wrath.

We received orders to remain in Sulpepe until further notice and the next day witnessed the return of many fugitives. They came in great throngs from the direction of Chalons-sur-Marne. They found instead of the peaceful homes they had left a wretched and deserted ruin. A furniture dealer returned to his store, as we stood in front of his house. He broke down when he viewed the remains of his enterprise. Everything had been taken away. We approached the man. He was a Jew and spoke German. When he calmed down a little he told us that his store had contained merchandise worth more than 8,000 francs.

"Had the soldiers only taken what they needed for themselves," he said, "I would be satisfied, for I did not expect anything else. But I never would have believed of the Germans that they would have destroyed everything."

Not even a cup and saucer were left in this man's house. He had a wife and five children, but had no idea of what had become of them. And there were many more like him.

The following night, remaining in Sulpepe, we were again obliged to camp in the open "because it swarmed with frank-tireurs." Such were our instruc-



Devastated Everything.

tions. In reality nothing was seen of frank-tireurs, but by this method the enmity toward the people living in the towns along our line of march was maintained. The Germans practiced the theory that the soldiers fight better and are more amenable to discipline when filled with hatred of their enemies.

The next day we were obliged to march to Chalons-sur-Marne. This was one of the hardest days we ever had. From the very beginning, as we began our journey, the sun blazed down upon us. It is about 35 kilometers from Sulpepe to Chalons-sur-Marne. This distance would not have been so bad, despite the heat; we had already made longer marches; but the beautiful road from Sulpepe to Chalons goes with unending monotony without so much as a curve or a bend to the right or left. As far as we could see it stretched before us like a long white snake.

Many soldiers fainted or were stricken with sunstroke. They were picked up by the infirmaries which followed. That the troops who had traversed this road before us had fared worse was evident from the many dead Germans who lay along the road. The commander feared that he could not get the machine in motion again if it was halted, and permitted to stretch its weary limbs on the ground for a brief rest. And so it crept along like a snail. Only, instead of having a snail's shell on its back, there was a leaden burden.

The monotony of the march was broken when we reached the enormous camp at Chalons. This is one of the largest of the French army camps. We saw Chalons from the distance. As we halted about an hour later outside the city in an orchard, without a single exception every man fell to the ground exhausted. The field kitchens were soon brought up, but the men were too tired to eat. We did eat later and then wanted to go to town to purchase some articles, particularly tobacco, which we missed most. Nobody was allowed to leave camp. We were told that entering the city was strictly forbidden. Chalons had paid a war contribution and therefore no one was permitted in the city.

We heard the dull sounds of the cannon in the distance and suspected that our rest would be brief. The rolling of gunfire continued to grow stronger. We did not know then that a fight had begun which was destined to become fatal to the Germans.

The first day's battle of the Marne had begun!

(To Be Continued.)

Something to sell? Advertise in the Bulletin's classified column.

LABOR BOARD BEING FORMED

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVES ARE IN CITY.

Board Made Up of Three Men Will Have Jurisdiction Over Three Counties with Headquarters Here.

(From Friday's Daily.)

For the purpose of organizing a local community labor board, which will have jurisdiction over the counties of Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson, under the supervision of the federal government, F. A. Douty and O. R. Hartwig are in the city today, arriving on this morning's train from Portland. The gentlemen are the representatives from the government labor board for Oregon.

The board which will be organized here will consist of three active members and two alternates. One representative will be chosen from among the operators and one from the employes, with an alternate on either side, while a chairman for the board will be chosen from some neutral body, possibly a business man of the city.

The purpose of this board will be to make a detailed statement of labor conditions within its jurisdiction. All men employed in essential and non-essential industries are to be listed, together with the work which they are pursuing. The data compiled will be used by the government officials in determining the amount of labor available in Bend in both classes of industry.

Mr. Hartwig, in his explanation of the working of the board, this morning stated that it would act as mediator in the case of disagreements between the employers and the employes and also have jurisdiction in enforcing the rules of the work or fight order. He stated that at the present time there is an existing shortage of labor in the United States in essential industries of nearly one million men. Under the system being worked out by the government now these local boards will be prepared to fill the needs of the operators within their jurisdictions by taking men from the non-essential industries and placing them where they will be better prepared to serve the government in the prosecution of the war.

While the text of the orders for the work or fight measure to apply under the new draft have not yet been passed upon, it is presumed that in substance these orders will correspond with those in vogue for the registrants of 1917 and 1918, where men working in non-essential industries are required to either enter essential labor or sacrifice deferred classification. In that event the local board here would have the jurisdiction over these men.

MEN MOBILIZE FOR CAMP LEWIS

(From Tuesday's Daily.)

Eighteen men, a list of which was published in The Bulletin several days ago, were mobilized by the local war board this morning and will leave tomorrow morning for Camp Lewis. This is the fulfillment of the first draft call for September from Deschutes county, and the list includes practically all of the men in class 1 in the 1917 and 1918 registrations.

If

YOU KNOW OF

- A Visitor—
- A Departure—
- A Birth—
- A Death—
- An Accident—
- An Illness—
- OR—
- Any New Building—
- Social Functions—
- Meetings—
- A Real Estate Transaction—
- Any Improvements—
- OR—
- Anything that is of Interest

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The Bulletin

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