

# 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 VI.

At 12 o'clock, midnight, we were alarmed and half an hour later were on the march. The cool night air felt good, and despite our weariness, we made rapid progress. Toward four o'clock in the morning we arrived at Cheppy. It had been completely plundered. We halted here for a brief rest and watched preparations being made for the execution of two franc-tireurs. They were two little farmers who had supposedly concealed a French machine gun with its crew from the Germans. The sentence was executed in such a way that the people were shown who their real rulers now were.

The little town of Pogny, located midway between Chalons-sur-Marne and Vitry-le-Francois, fared no better than Cheppy, a fact which we discovered when we entered there at nine o'clock.

We were now considerably nearer the spot where the guns were roaring, and retiring of wounded and the muniton columns showed us that west of Vitry-le-Francois, a terrible battle raged. At four o'clock in the afternoon, we arrived at Vitry-le-Francois after a forced march. The city was filled with wounded, but the town itself was not damaged. The battle must have been going badly for the Germans because we were ordered into action without being given any rest. We were within three kilometers of the battle line, when we came within reach of hostile fire, a terrific hail of shells tore up every foot of ground. Thousands of corpses of German soldiers indicated at what enormous cost the Germans had brought up all available reserves. The French did everything they could to prevent the Germans from getting the reserves into action and increased the artillery fire to unheard-of violence. It seemed impossible for us to be able to break through this barrage. We saw hundreds of shells exploding every minute. We were ordered to run the gauntlet of this hell in single file.

Lying prone upon the ground, we saw how the first of our men attempted to pass. They ran, unmindful of the shells bursting around them, like madmen; others were buried under ground thrown up by the high-power explosives, or torn by shrapnel or grenades. Two men had scarcely reached the line when a well-directed shot from a gun of a large caliber burst directly at their feet. When the smoke cleared, there was no trace of the men.

You can imagine the feelings of those who lay on the ground not 100 feet away witnessing this spectacle, and waiting their turn.

An officer cried: "Next!" It was my turn. As if aroused from a nightmare, I sprang up, my gun in my right hand, sidarm in my left, and ran ahead. I dodged two shells just as they burst and ran close to several others, bursting the same instant. A number of times I sprang back, then ahead again, running to and fro like a madman, seeking a loophole. But everywhere there was iron and fire. I ran like a hunted animal seeking a way to pass to save myself, with a hell in front of me, and an officer's revolver always ready behind.

Throwing caution to the winds, prepared to meet death and the devil himself, I at last ran blindly ahead; ran, ran, ran, until someone seized my coat tail and shouted in my ear:

"Here we are. Are you wounded? You had better look. Perhaps you are wounded and don't know it."

I was among those of my comrades who had gotten through. Trembling all over, I stopped and looked around. "Sit down and you will feel better," said one of the men. "We also have trembled."

Presently some wounded were brought up. There were about 48 men and a sergeant took command. Nothing more was seen of our officers.

We continued to advance and passed several German batteries. Many had

suffered heavily in deed and wounded, which lay around their guns destroyed by enemy fire. Other batteries still manned were useless because no more ammunition could be gotten through.

We paused to rest. Several artillerymen approached us, and a non-commissioned officer asked them why they did not fire.

"Because we have used up all our ammunition," was the answer of one of the battery men.

"Is it impossible to bring ammunition through this barrage?"

"No," replied the artilleryman, "but there is no more ammunition. That is why we cannot get any. At Neufchateau we started like wild men after the enemy. Man and beast died from the heat, railroads and other mediums of transportation were left in their damaged condition in the wild excitement of victory, as we dashed into the heart of France. We raced on, blindly and thoughtlessly, thereby interrupting communication with our bases, ran directly into the trap set for us by the French. Before the first ammunition and other relief supplies reach us we will all be killed."

Up to this time we had trusted blindly in the invincible strategy of our great general staff. Now it was brought home to us on all sides that the French were fighting at home, close to their greatest source of supply, and had excellent railroad connections at their disposal. Further than that the French maintained a terrible artillery fire from guns of far greater caliber than we believed they owned. This led us to the conclusion that they were occupying positions which had been prepared for a long time. Yet we believed that the picture painted by the artilleryman had been too black. We were soon to know better.

As we approached the enemy's trenches, we were met with a heavy machine gun fire, and in double-quick step hurried to the temporary protection of hastily thrown up dugouts. A hard rain had set in. The field around us was covered with dead and wounded. Even our trench was filled with wounded, which made its occupation by the defenders difficult. Many of the wounded men were paralyzed from lying on the slimy ground. All were without bandages. They begged for bread and water, but we had none for ourselves. They pleaded piteously, just for a scrap of bread. Many of them had lain in this inferno for two days, without having eaten anything what ever.

We were scarcely established when the French attacked en masse. The occupants of these trenches, whom we had re-enforced had already repulsed several of these attacks. They urged us to shoot and fired wildly themselves into the ranks of the advancing masses. We responded to the exhortations of the infantry officers: "Fire, fire harder, harder!"

We fired until the barrels of our guns became red-hot. The enemy turned. The victims of our fire already lying in heaps in No Man's Land between our lines and the enemy's were increased by hundreds. The attack was repulsed.

It is dark, and it rains and rains. All about us in the darkness are heard the wounded weeping, moaning, imploring. Their cries are augmented by other wounded closer by. All called for bandages, but we had none left. We tore strips from our muddy shirts and with them covered the gaping wounds. Men are dying constantly. There are no doctors, no bandages, nothing. The wounded must be assisted, but first the French must be repulsed.

The rain falls harder constantly and we are all wet to the skin. We shoot blindly into the night. The fluctuating fire of musketry becomes strong, then weaker, then strong again.

We pioneers are scattered among the infantry. My neighbor touches me.

"Say," he calls.

"What do you want?" I ask. "Who are you?"

"Come here," he hissed.

It is eerie, alone in this devil's night. "Why are you here? Will you murder me like those over there. Soon they will return from over there and the fun will be on again. Do you hear the others weep?"

And he laughed. Suddenly he started again: "I always shoot at them until they stop weeping. That is fun."

And again he laughed, maniacally, and louder than before.

I realized finally that this man had lost his reason. A man passed bringing ammunition and I asked him to fetch the commander at once. The officer arrived, accompanied by an infantry lieutenant. I met them and reported that my neighbor had been firing on the wounded, talking nonsense, and undoubtedly was insane. The lieutenant stepped between us.

"Can you see anything?" he asked. "See! No. But I hear them moaning and weeping. As soon as I hit one he is quiet for he sleeps!"

The lieutenant nodded to me. He tried to take the gun from the man, but the latter seized it quickly and sprang back to cover. From there he fired while standing among the wounded, until a moment later, he himself fell, riddled by many bullets.

The drama had only a few spectators. It was hardly over before it was forgotten. Anything but sentiment.

The blind firing continued. The cries of the wounded became constantly louder.

Why? These wounded lying between the two fighting lines are exposed to the firing of both parties. No one can help them for it would be insanity to venture into No Man's Land.

Ever louder and with more heart-rending pleadings, the wounded called for the stretchers, for help, for water. At the most a curse or an oath is the only response.

Our trench was filled with several inches of water and underneath that, mud. In this morass lay dead and wounded, thrown together. It became necessary to make room and so the dead were thrown over the ramparts. At one o'clock in the night men came with stretchers and took away some of the wounded, but for those wretches lying in No Man's Land there was no help.

## CHAPTER VII.

To complete our misery, we received orders during the night to attack the French at 4:15 in the morning. We made our preparations under a pouring rain. Promptly at 4:15 we went over the top, jumping over corpses and wounded men. We were forced to retire before a hail of machine gun fire, and sustaining a large number of unnecessary casualties.

Hardly had we regained our trenches when the French attacked us. They came within three meters of our trench, and here their attack broke down under our fire. They too had to retire with fearful losses.

Three times in two hours the French attacked, always with heavy losses and no results. We were at our wit's end. Unless help came soon it would be impossible for us to hold the position. We were tortured by hunger and thirst as well as being wet to the skin and were so exhausted that we could hardly stand.

At ten o'clock the French attacked a fourth time. They came on in enormous numbers. Our leaders recognized the danger of our position and ordered us back, abandoning the wounded and much booty. By a superhuman effort we did manage to save the machine guns and ammunition. We retreated



We Went Over the Top.

1,000 meters and took a stand in our former trenches. The officers told us we would have to make a stand under any circumstances and that the re-enforcements would come soon.

In a moment the machine guns were set up and soon we were sending a hail of bullets into the ranks of our pursuing enemy. His advance stopped instantly. Encouraged by this success we fired harder, so that the French were compelled to seek cover.

The promised re-enforcements failed to appear. About 600 meters to our rear were six German batteries in position, but they maintained only a very weak fire. An artillery officer appeared before us and asked the commander of our detachment if it would not be well to recommend that the batteries be taken back. He said he had learned by telephone that the German line was wavering on its entire length.

Before the commander could reply, another attack en masse followed, which outnumbered us by from five to seven times. Our commander now gave up this position also. Completely demoralized, we retired in flight, leaving the six batteries (30 guns) to be taken by the enemy.

The French stopped their barrage fire because they feared to hurt their own troops. The Germans utilized this moment to bring up re-enforcements made up of all branches of the service. Scattered infantrymen, unmounted cavalry, detached pioneers, had all been assembled. Every makeshift was employed to fill the ranks. Complete reserve units apparently no longer existed on this the third day of the battle of the Marne.

Once more the command was given to turn and take a position and the unequal fight began anew. We saw the enemy advance, and seize the batteries. Then we saw him storming ahead with fixed bayonets. We fought like wild animals. For minutes there raged a bayonet fight beyond description. We stabbed through the breast, through the abdomen, and wherever else we could. This was no occasion to employ the bayonet tactics taught at drill, something which must be left for drill-ground practice only.

The butts of the rifles whizzed through the air and any man's head which they struck was broken. Helmets and knapsacks had been lost long since. In spite of the superiority of numbers, the French could not defeat this little group of desperate men. We forgot everything around us and fought like bloodthirsty beasts, thinking of nothing else. Part of our men penetrated the hostile ranks and fought to retake the lost cannon. The enemy recognizing the danger, retreated, and tried to hold the conquered guns with all his energy. We continued to stab, to club, man for man, but the enemy held on to the batteries. Every cannon was surrounded by corpses, and every minute new victims were created. The artillerymen who were fighting with us tried to remove the breach blocks of the guns.

Three Germans fought four Frenchmen at the third gun which was just to my right. They were all that was left around that piece. At another gun 70 men lay dead or wounded. A pioneer went to the mouth of this gun and with astounding calmness pushed shell after shell into the barrel, touched them off and ran. Friend and foe alike were torn by the terrible explosion. The gun was completely demolished. Seventy to eighty men were killed for nothing.

After an hour's fight, all the guns were once more in our possession. We were now able to approximate the terrible casualties, in the battle for this battery. Dead and wounded by hundreds, infantry, cavalry, artillery and pioneers, covered the narrow strip of ground.

Once more we received re-enforcements. This time four regular companies of infantry had been taken away from another detachment. Even if a soldier takes part in everything, he can get only a very restricted view of what is going on and has absolutely no way of determining how the battle is going.

These re-enforcements had been taken from all different arms and late arrivals had been taken from a division which had been threatened exactly like ours was. This led us to conclude that we could only resist further attacks provided fresh troops reached us. If only we could get something to eat. But there seemed no way to relieve the hunger and thirst which tortured us.

Now, horses galloped up to remove the guns we had left, and at the same instant the French artillery opened a tremendous fire from guns of all calibers. The shells fell among the 30 teams comprising the column. Confusion reigned. Groups of six horses comprising each team sprang into the air, then ran in all directions, pulling their carriages with the wheels up behind them. Some of the terrified animals ran directly into the heaviest fire, only to be torn to shreds with their drivers.

The enemy now transferred his fire to the battery position which we occupied. For us it was only a question of advance or retreat. Retreat? No! The order came to retake the positions which we had lost at the opening of the battle and which the Frenchmen presumably had made ready to withstand a new attack. By this time we had been re-enforced with more cannon fodder and the insane fight could begin anew.

We advanced over a wild field, covered by thousands upon thousands of torn human bodies. No shot fell; the only firing was the hostile artillery continuing to shell our battery positions. Neither the enemy's artillery nor infantry was turned upon us. This made us suspicious and our apprehension regarding what was to come increased as we were permitted to advance unmolested.

Suddenly there was turned loose upon us the fire from a multitude of machine guns. We threw ourselves on the ground and hunted cover. An instant later we again sprang up and continued our march. Once more we encountered destruction. By this time we had lost almost a third of our men and, exhausted, we halted.

Scarcely had we taken a position before we were attacked from the front and flank. We no longer had an adequate force to successfully resist this double blow, as the enemy, in greatly superior numbers, had practically crushed our force. The left wing was completely cut off and we saw our men throw up their hands and surrender. We who were in the center were unable to come to their assistance; our ranks were being decimated from minute to minute.

"Revenge for Somme!" sounded in

## POOL WORLD'S RAW MATERIAL

CONSTRUCTION OF A GREAT MATERIAL RESERVE NOW UNDER WAY TO PAVE WAY FOR LASTING PEACE BETWEEN NATIONS

By Robert J. Bender

(United Press Staff Correspondent.)

WASHINGTON, Sept. 7. — Construction of a great raw materials reserve by the allied nations is now under way to pave the way for a just and lasting peace.

Kaiser Wilhelm recently declared that the great crisis in the west depended upon which side mastered most quickly and adequately its reserves—but he didn't figure on raw materials.

When the war is over, the side with the reserves—gold, food, coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool and clothing—will be the power to determine the peace and happiness of the world, officials here declare.

### Plan International Board.

The United States government is now taking steps to acquire that reserve. Raw materials may be pooled after the war, as now, to insure against another outbreak of Hohenzollernism, if the great war fails to drive that blood monarch from the throne.

An international priorities board will determine what nations shall receive first benefits of these raw materials. It will take care that the weak and helpless country first is al-

lowed to revive its strength, that it may not be suddenly overwhelmed while convenient by a nation whose military strength has survived the war and whose greed for expansion has not been tempered.

The foundation for this board could be the international organization already developing to direct distribution of pooled allied war supplies for fighting forces. The outcome of the war will determine whether Germany is a party to the board.

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### Finance Board, Too.

There is a movement afoot to establish an international reserve board to maintain financial stability through the period of reaction that inevitably will follow the war. This organization would operate to maintain a balance of gold among nations after the war, even as the federal reserve board now maintains a balance of credit and currency in the United States.

Through these two great international instrumentalities as much as through an armed league of nations, trade treaties could be maintained openly, secret pacts could not well survive, and no nation could hoard war supplies and build up a predominating militarism without full knowledge and restraint of its sister nations. Many authorities believe peace would be rendered absolutely lasting through maintenance of this machinery.

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