

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 VIII.

We now tried to gather by companies. Of our own company only 12 men remained. Presently others straggled in until there were 20 of us assembled. There is eager questioning everywhere as each man attempts to learn about his comrade or acquaintance. Few questions can be answered, however, as each man had thought only of himself in that flight.

Driven by hunger we approached the village. The first thing we did was to hasten to the wells and drink. We drank as if we wanted to fill ourselves up with enough water to last us the rest of our lives. Only here and there were we able to find anything to eat. A few beets were left in the gardens and we ate them eagerly, without waiting to wash or clean them.

Where is our company? Nobody knows. We are the company, we 20 men. And our officers. "Somewhere surely," said a soldier, "somewhere in a bomb-proof corner."

But what were we to do? No one could decide. Presently a non-commissioned officer of the field gendarmes approached on horseback. It is the duty of this particular class of defenders of the fatherland to round up slackers behind the front.

"You are pioneers," he called to us roughly. "What are you doing here?" Then he asked us innumerable questions, which we answered as well as we could.

"Where are the others?" he asked. "Over there," said a young Berlin soldier, and pointed to the battlefield.

"The others are dead or perhaps prisoners. Several others have managed to save themselves and are somewhere, perhaps."

"Never mind," the non-commissioned officer said roughly. The conversation had become disagreeable to him. "Wait here, until I come back. Where are the officers?"

Again no one could answer. "What are their names? I shall find them. Perhaps they are in Vitry."

We told him the names of our officers. He gave us identification papers so that we might be able to prove to others inquiring why we were waiting where we were.

"I hope his horse falls and he breaks his neck," said one of our men.

We entered one of the houses which had been robbed, as were all the others, threw ourselves down upon the mattresses to sleep, sleep, sleep. How long we slept no one knew. We only knew that it was night and that some of our company had aroused us. These were newcomers who had been hunting for us for a long time.

"Come along. The captain is outside and he is very angry. He has gathered 17 of his men together and is cursing like the very devil because he could not locate you."

Sleepy, and entirely indifferent to the future, we left the building. We knew that we would be sent into action again but no longer cared. I had never before seen among a body of soldiers such an atmosphere of absolute indifference.

We came upon the captain. He saw us approach minus our headgear, our uniforms torn into shreds and without guns and knapsacks.

"Why are you running around here?" he roared. That was our reception. Nobody answered. Nobody cared. Nothing could be worse than what we had been through, but although every one among us felt keenly the injustice of the captain's attitude we all remained silent.

"Where is your equipment?—Lost—Lost—This has been a nice business. The state equips you, you rebel. If all were like you—"

He raved on for a while after this fashion, this brave fellow, who, without any action on his own part permitted the rebels to retreat while he defended his fatherland in Vitry, 4.26 kilometers behind the battle line.

We selected guns from those lying

around us in heaps and soon were ready to fight again. We stood around half asleep, leaning on our guns, and waited to be led once more to the slaughter. A shot fell in our midst. It struck a color sergeant and smashed his right hand. He cried out from the pain. His hand was quickly bandaged. He was the first.

An eyewitness told us how this had happened. He had rested his hand on the gun barrel in the same manner as did all the others except that his hand partly covered the muzzle. The orders provide that the gun be locked if loaded. Turning to the color sergeant, who was writhing with pain, the captain roared at him: "I shall report you for punishment for your gross carelessness and for mutilating yourself in the field."

The color sergeant, a non-commissioned officer, realized that his military career was at an end. We all felt for him. During the months preceding this incident he had always associated himself with the privates.

We never learned whether he was brought before a court-martial. Punishment for self-mutilation was a daily event and many severe sentences were pronounced and then made known to all the others to serve as a deterring example. The color sergeant's place was conferred upon another, after which the captain disappeared once more in the direction of Vitry.

We marched away and halted at a point northwest of the village. Here we met other pioneers who had been gathered together from various battalions and our unit was once more brought up to 85 men. The officers told us that we would not enter the battle today. Our only duty for the time being was to keep the bridges over the Marne in good condition for the German troops fighting on the other side, so that they could be used in case the battle went against us.

We then marched to our destination, which was at the point where the Saulx flows into the Marne.

We reached our destination about six o'clock in the morning. The dead lay around in heaps everywhere. We were camping on a wooded height and could overlook the country for many kilometers in all directions. We saw shrapnel bursting by the thousands. Little could be seen of the men who were fighting despite the fact that many divisions were locked in a death struggle.

Presently we saw the fighting line. The Germans were about two kilometers behind the Marne, which flowed by directly in front of us. German cavalry in great numbers was encamped along the banks of the river. Two temporary bridges in a very dilapidated condition constructed of whatever materials were at hand were located near us. Preparations had been made to blow them up with thousands of pounds of dynamite. The electric fuses had been strung to the point where we were located and it was up to us to manipulate the switches. Connected with the battle line by telephone, we were in a position to destroy the bridges at a moment's notice.

The fighting became more lively. We saw the French rush to attack and retire again. The fire of musketry increased and the attacks became more frequent. This continued for more than two hours.

We saw the French continuing to bring up re-enforcements constantly despite the German artillery fire.

After an extended pause the French made another attack, employing several different kinds of formations. Each time the waves of offensive troops were forced back. At three o'clock in the afternoon, under a blow which contained the full power of France, our troops were forced to retire, first slowly, then in wild flight. The exhausted Germans could not be rallied in the face of this blow. With



The Fighting Became More Lively.

wild confusion all tried at the same time to reach the bridges beyond which lay safety.

At this instant the cavalry which had taken cover along the river bank galloped to the bridge position. In a moment the bridge was covered with human bodies, all racing for the opposite bank. We could see this temporary structure trembling under this enormous burden.

Our officer saw the situation and he nervously pressed the telephone receiver to his left ear. His right hand was on the switch. Breathlessly he stared at the fleeing masses. "If only the telephone connections had not been broken," he muttered to himself. He knew as well as all the rest of us that he was to act on the instant that the curt order came over the wire.

It was not much that he had to do. Merely make a movement of his hands. Masses of troops continued to rush across the bridge until more than half were safely over. The bridge further above was not in such great demand, and with the lessened congestion almost all who crossed here were already safe. We could see how the first of the French units had crossed, but the bridge continued to stand.

The sergeant who manned the apparatus at this bridge became restless waiting for orders, and finally on his own initiative blew it up. Some Frenchmen and hundreds of Germans upon the bridge found their graves in the Marne.

At the same moment the officer standing next to me received the order to blow up the last bridge. He hesitated to obey, for he could still see many Germans on the other side. He could see the race for the road leading to the bridgehead as all sought safety at the same instant. There a terrible panic reigned. Many soldiers jumped into the river and tried to swim across. The pressure became greater as the thousands still on the other side tried to get back.

The message over the wire became more and more insistent. Finally the officer sprang up, rushed by the pioneer standing at the apparatus and a second later there was a terrible detonation—bridge and men were thrown into the air hundreds of meters. Just as a river at high tide races along, taking with it all manner of debris, so the surface of the Marne was covered with wood, men, torn uniforms and horses. Efforts to swim were futile, yet soldiers continued to jump into the river.

On the other side the French began to disarm such German soldiers as stood there with raised hands. Thousands of prisoners, innumerable horses and machine guns fell into the hands of the enemy. Several of our company were just about to retire with the electric apparatus when something developed which certain of our number had suspected. An error had been made and it was too late to rectify it. The upper bridge, which had not been used to any great extent by the Germans, should have been left standing!

It had been the purpose of the staff in command to leave this bridge so that the enemy might continue its pursuit of our troops until a certain number of Frenchmen had crossed the river. The plan was to permit enough Frenchmen to pass so that they could be taken prisoner, yet, not too large a force, lest it might prove a menace to the German arms.

After these hostile troops had crossed, the plan was to destroy the bridge to prevent their being re-enforced. That was why the sergeant manning this switch had been kept waiting for the order to blow up the bridge. But the sergeant in the excitement and confusion thought that the cable to which his phone was connected had been disconnected and blew up the bridge on his own initiative while it was crowded by Frenchmen and long before the enemy could have had an opportunity to cut that cable. At the same time the officer at the switch connected with the explosives under the second bridge received his orders. He afterwards said that the order he received was hard to make out and that he had lost his presence of mind and threw in the switch, thereby killing thousands on the bridge and leaving many other thousands to the mercy of the enemy.

Before there was time for more impressions our entire unit was ordered to Vitry to be assembled in front of

the cathedral. With a sigh of relief we hurried away, for the French artillery began once more to send shells with much accuracy over the entire countryside. Wounded men from other detachments whom we passed on the road told us that the French had already crossed the Marne in several different places. Everyone among us voiced the same opinion. We had already sustained great losses on Belgian soil and each day brought new sacrifices. Our lines became thinner and thinner. Many companies were entirely destroyed and all units suffered heavily. These companies whose forces had been reduced to a minimum and with the survivors half starved were opposed by an army well equipped with supplies and arms. The enemy constantly brought up fresh troops while our forces became fewer from hour to hour. We realized that it was impossible to make a stand here. We were constantly learning from soldiers of other contingents that their losses in men and materials were enormous.

I thought of the God of the Germans. Had he forsaken them?

I thought it so loud that the others could hear.

"Yes," said another, "whom the Lord wishes to punish is first stricken with blindness. Probably he thought of Belgium, Donchery, Sommepey and Sulpes, and still many other places and let us run into this perdition like flying fends."

We reached Vitry. Here the misery seemed to be still greater than ever before, for in the entire town there was not a single house that was not overcrowded with wounded. In the midst of all this misery robbery flourished. All residences had been emptied of their furnishings and everything was thrown into the streets to make room for the wounded.

The sanitary squads went over the town and took everything of any value. The munition and railroad columns followed the same practice. They had plenty of room for plunder. This was amply proven by numerous seizures afterward of parcels put in the mail, which contained gold rings, watches, precious stones, etc. The business of the marauders flourished here in Vitry. The soldiers in the supply columns encountered very little actual danger; they had an easy time as compared with soldiers fighting at the front.

We soon reached the cathedral and reported to Lieutenant Elm. He also had defended his fatherland at a safe distance and here in the city, freshly shaved and in immaculate attire he looked very presentable.

The contrast was vivid as he stood before us who were torn, dirty and covered with blood, with unkempt hair, with beards grown and caked with mud and dirt.

We were obliged to wait so we sat down and looked around us. The church was full of wounded; many died under the hands of the doctors. They were carried out to make room for others. The dead were carried to one side, where whole rows of corpses lay. We counted more than sixty.

On our way to Vitry we had begged some bread, but we were still hungry and our field kitchens were nowhere in sight. The crews of our field kitchens as well as our forage officers and non-commissioned officers prefer to defend their fatherland many kilometers behind the battle fronts. They did not care about us as long as they were not obliged to go within range of the artillery fire. Comradeship has its limitations with them.

Other field kitchens were near by. They had prepared more food than their companies needed. Many for whom they had cooked will never eat again. We were invited to come and get whatever we wanted.

We had scarcely finished eating when we had to march on. Presently we were joined by more members of our company. Our captain appeared. One of our officers reported to him the number missing. He stepped in front of the company and said cheerfully, "Good morning, men," although it was seven o'clock in the evening. A growl was the only response. We were then ordered to go to the wagons standing at the north side of the town, where each man was to supply himself with cartridges and three hand grenades. We gathered at the wagons at 9:30 o'clock and each man took 500 cartridges, his three grenades and matches to light them. On the way to the wagons we saw everywhere formations being hastily organized from stray soldiers and we received the impression of some great activity in preparation.

The rain had begun to fall in torrents. As we took our places we saw the streets filled with troops wearing special uniforms to protect them against the weather. These uniforms consisted of a suit of weatherproof clothing, a cap, such baggage as must be taken on a march, a tent cloth, tent sticks, dishes and, with the pioneers, trench tools. Thus equipped, we stood in the rain and waited, ignorant of what lay before us.

We were ordered to take the breech locks out of the guns and put them in our bread bags. The guns now were no good for shooting. We now began to understand what lay before us. A night attack was planned with bayonets and hand grenades, and the measures which had been taken were taken so that we would not shoot at one another in the darkness.

We stood and waited until eleven o'clock, when the order suddenly came to go into quarters. We did not know what to make of this after all the preparations. We could tell from the drum fire and the red glare in the sky that the battle had not lessened in violence. The sky glowed, illumined by the burning villages and farms.

On the way to our quarters we heard the officers saving among themselves

that a real fight had been intended to defeat the French. This had been the



Field Kitchens Were Near By.

reason behind the preparations for the night attack which had now been called off.

Headquarters apparently had decided otherwise. Perhaps it was known there that nothing could be accomplished by attacking and the order was given to begin the retreat which was put into effect the next morning at six o'clock. We did not realize then that this was to be our last night in Vitry. We were sheltered in a shed for the night. As we were very tired, we soon were fast asleep. We were aroused at four o'clock in the morning, everyone was given a loaf of bread and ordered to fill his canteen with water, after which the march began. Although we were ignorant of our destination, the inhabitants of Vitry seemed to understand where we were going and they stood on the streets throwing us significant glances.

Everywhere the feverish movement was on. We stopped in front of the town hall. Here the captain told us that because of difficulty in the terrain our troops had to vacate their positions and retire to nearby heights and occupy new defenses. With that he turned around and pointed to a ridge on the horizon.

"There we shall make a stand and wait for the enemy," he said. "No re-enforcements will arrive today and in a few days we may send picture postal cards to your homes from Paris."

(To Be Continued.)

A Woman's Heartly Recommendation.

Worry and overwork cause kidney trouble, and women suffer equally with men. Miss Sara Weston, Belvidere, Ill., writes: "I could not stoop and when down I had to crawl up by a chair. I was so lame I suffered agony. Now I feel like a new person, stronger and better in every way. I heartily recommend Foley Kidney Pills." Sold everywhere.—Adv.

SECOND CALL ON COUNTY IS MADE

TEN MEN ARE TO BE ENTRAINED FROM DESCHUTES COUNTY ON OCTOBER 7—WILL EXHAUST ALL OF 21 TO 31 REGISTRANTS.

(From Tuesday's Daily.) A call for ten men from Deschutes county to report for training at Camp Lewis has been received by the local draft board, and the list will be completed either late this afternoon or tomorrow morning. The men are to entrain here for Camp Lewis on October 7.

This is the second call to be received by the local draft board this month, the former being for 18 men. Thirteen men are now left in class 1 in Deschutes county. This includes four of 1917 classification, four of June, 1918, classification and five of August, 1918, classification.

The call of ten men for October 7 will leave but three within the list.

Four chairs at your service at the Metropolitan. No waiting.—Adv.

Dr. Turner, eye specialist of Portland, will be in Bend again Wednesday and Thursday, Sept. 11 and 12, at Thorson's jewelry store. Dr. Turner is a specialist of experience and standing and you will make no mistake in consulting him about your eyes and glasses. Headaches relieved. Cross-eyes straightened. Satisfaction guaranteed. Consult him. Don't forget the date.—Adv. 27

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