The Confessions of a German Deserter

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

CHAPTER XIV.

The entire forest of Argonne was blown to pieces when we arrived. Everywhere was artillery, which maintained a fire on the villages behind the enemy's positions.

One of the many batteries which we constantly had to pass on our march from the camp to the front, was in action when we reached it.

I asked one of the gunners what his objective was and he replied that it was any village within range.

A substitute first lieutenant, in charge of the battery, stood nearby. One of my comrades asked him if he did not think there might be women and children in those villages.

"That would make no difference," the first lieutenant replied. "Women and children are French, so what does it matter? This breed has to be exterminated in order that this nation shall not think of war again for a century."

This day was designated for a storming attack and we were obliged to be in our positions at seven o'clock in the morning. Promptly at 8:30 regiment No. 67 was ordered to attack. Pioneers led the way. They were supplied with hand grenades. These weekly attacks were opened half an hour before the infantry went over by a storm of artillery fire. The artillery action required very careful calculation because the distance which separated our position from the enemy's was very slight. It varied from three to one hundred meters; never any more. At the point where we attacked the distance was 20 meters.

Promptly at eight o'clock the artillery started. The first three shells struck a ditch, but the following ones hit fairly, that is, right in the French trenches. Once the artillery had the proper range whole salvos of batteries descended upon them with admirable exactness. The cries of the wounded were heard once more, a sign that many had been hit.

An artillery officer acted as observer in the foremost sense and directed the fire by phone. Promptly at 8:30 o'clock the artillery fires stopped and we attacked. The eleventh company of the Sixty-seventh regiment, of which I spoke before, came under the fire of the enemy's machine guns and 18 of its men were killed after they had only proceeded a few steps outside the trench.

Dead and wounded men lay among the branches and the trees everywhere on the ground. Every man who was able to run sped forward to reach the enemy trench as quickly as possible. A part of the enemy defended itself desperately in a trench filled with water and mud. A terrible hand-to-hand fight resulted. We stood in water up to our knees.

Men, severely wounded, lay in the mud, holding their mouths and noses above the water. During the fighting they were trampled more deeply into the dirt under our feet for we could not see where we were going; we could only "roll up" the entire trench.

The section won was fortified with all possible haste. Once more we had acquired at a heavy cost in human life a few meters of the Argonne forest. This trench, which we took, had changed hands many times and even now we were preparing for the usual counter-attacks.

Presently the "jackasses" went into action. The "jackasses" are the guns of the French mountain artillery. They were so named because they were drawn by mules. They are guns of flat trajectory, kept from 50 to 100 meters behind the enemy lines. The shells from these cannon flew directly over our heads and cut their way through the branches at a high rate of speed. Because of the high velocity of the shell and the short distance it travels the detonation when the shot is fired and the noise of the explosion, sound almost at the same instant. These "jackasses" are greatly feared by the German soldiers because they are kept working day and night.

It was winter and very cold. The trenches had been filled with water and were now nothing except deep ditches of mud. Under these conditions, through the ice-cold nights, our routine consisted of 48 hours duty and 12 hours rest. Every week a storming attack was made, the success of which was entirely out of proportion to the enormous losses. In all of the four months I was in the Argonne forests we gained 400 meters. The following data will indicate how heavy a price was paid in lives for this little piece of France.

Each regiment had its own cemetery. There was the One Hundred and Forty-fifth infantry regulars, the Sixty-seventh, and One Hundred and Seventy-third infantry regulars and the One Hundred and Fifth Hirschberg battalion. On the day we were relieved from duty in the Argonne forests there were more dead in these cemeteries than there were survivors of the several regiments. The Sixty-seventh regiment had more than 2,000 dead. All the victims were members of that unit except a few pioneers, who had been assigned to duty with it. There was never a day without some loss of life, and on the days when the storming attacks were made, death had an extremely large harvest.

CHAPTER XV.

Each day in the Argonne levied its toll of victims, sometimes many, sometimes only a few. It is only natural that the morale of the soldiers should not be at its best under these circumstances. With the same indifference that the men had once gone to their work to support their wives and children they now went into action. This business of killing had become daily routine. Whenever we discussed our situation, the crown prince and the commander of the Sixteenth army corps, Lieutenant General von Mudra, fared worst.

The troops in the Argonne forest belonged to the Sixteenth corps, the Thirty-third and Thirty-fourth divisions. Neither the crown prince nor Von Mudra had ever been seen in the trenches. One of the members on the crown prince's staff was the old field marshal, Count von Haeseler, former commander of the Sixteenth corps, who, before the war, was considered a human fiend. These three called Clover Leaf by the soldiers, were far more despised by most of the men than were the French cannon, which sought our miserable lives.

The Hohenzollern heir did not find life hard at his headquarters several kilometers behind the battle front. It was easy for him to make himself popular with his order to go ahead at the cost of thousands of lives. He was very well liked among the high officers, with whom he sat behind a stove although the progress was not fast enough for them.

He honored Von Mudra with the order "Pour la Merite," but of the soldiers he never had a thought.

They had not seen a bed for months. They were never given a chance to remove their clothing.

They received only shells and steel and were almost eaten up by vermin. They were covered with lice. There was scarcely enough water for drinking purposes, to say nothing of water for washing their clothes.

Our hair and beards were long and when we were given some hours of rest the lice would not let us sleep. While we were in the trenches the bullets did not do much damage but daily men were killed by indirect fire. The thousands which whizzed through the air every minute flew over our heads.

They struck trees or branches and glanced off, striking the men in the trenches. Failing to pierce their object directly they tore terrible gaping wounds as they entered the men's bodies sideways. Whenever we heard

Each Day Levied Its Toll of Victims.

charges concerning dum-dum bullets, we thought of these cross-shots, although we never doubted the existence of the dum-dums.

Whether or not dum-dum bullets were made in the munitions factories I cannot say. I suspect they were. However, I did see many dum-dum bullets made by the soldiers themselves. The points were filed off from German musket shells so that the nickel covering was perforated, baring the lead filling.

The bullet flattened when it struck its object. If, for instance, it entered a man's arm, the explosive charge in it would so shatter the arm as to blow it entirely off and leave it hanging by the skin.

German soldiers were frequently seen supplying themselves with dum-dum bullets in the trenches, preparing to inflict terrible wounds.

On January 5, 1915, the Germans attacked on their entire front of the Argonne forest sector and several hundred prisoners were taken. The hand-to-hand fight continued until six o'clock in the evening.

A fellow pioneer and myself found ourselves in a bit of trench held by eight Frenchmen. It was impossible to retire so we accepted the unequal fight. Fortunately we were well supplied with hand grenades.

We cut the fuses short so that they would explode as quickly as possible. I threw one among the eight soldiers. Before the men could get out of the way of the first, the second one followed, which exploded in their midst.

We took advantage of the confusion thus created to hurl five more. Our enemies were now reduced to four men. We opened fire with our muskets, closing in on the four. Their bullets whizzed around our heads. One man was shot in the mouth. That left three. They turned and tried to flee.

In such moments as these one is in a great rage and forgets danger entirely.

We were very close to our enemies now, right on their heels when the last man stumbled and fell.

I sprang on top of him. He defended himself with his fists. My comrade went after the other two. Bleeding at the mouth, this man fought on. After I had knocked several of his teeth out he raised his hands and surrendered. I released him from my grip and looked him over carefully. He was about thirty-five years old. He showed me his wedding ring and talked to me. I knew what he wanted, he wanted his life.

He gave me his canteen that I might drink some wine and wept. Perhaps he thought of his wife and children. I pressed his hand and he showed me his bleeding teeth. I called him a fool and told him he was lucky to have gotten away with the loss of only a few molars. I was glad I had not killed him. I took him back myself, in order to protect him against being misused. As I delivered him over to where the prisoners were being assembled, he pressed my hand and smiled.

CHAPTER XVI.

The next day we received orders to march to an unknown destination. We soon arrived at the depot of Apremont where we were obliged to wait. The depot had been destroyed. The next station was Chatel. Both of these places are about five kilometers behind the front.

The prisoners were assembled in Apremont. Several of them had come from that town. Their families were still in their homes and many prisoners asked permission to visit them. I had occasion to witness such a visit in Apremont. Two reserves led one of the prisoners to the house, which he had pointed out as his. The prisoner's young wife was in the kitchen with her three children. We followed them into the house.

The woman turned pale as she suddenly saw her husband. They embraced. We went outside for we felt out of place there.

The woman had not had a letter from her husband for five months because the Germans were between her and her husband's army. He had been in the trenches for a month, realizing how nearby his wife and children were, yet unable to reach them and with no way of knowing whether they were alive or dead.

How he must have felt as the French shells flew over his head on their way to Apremont!

There was no way of knowing whether the glow in the sky caused by the burning of a house was furnished by his home or not. Everything became a torturing uncertainty and all of life was a hell.

Home again for a few hours; then away, a prisoner! At least he would be able to get word to his wife by letter through the field posts.

Finally he said good-by. His wife had nothing to give him, no laundry, no food.

Everything had been lost and she lived on the soldiers' bounty. She gave him her last money and he refused to take it. She accepted the money back.

It consisted of a few 5 and 10 pfennig pieces and some coppers, all she had.

Unable to endure this we took a collection among ourselves. We made up more than 10 marks, which we gave to the young woman. She refused it at first, then looking at her husband, she took it and tried to kiss our hands.

When we refused to let her do this she ran to a store nearby and returned with cigars, tobacco, matches and sausage, which she gave to her husband.

She smiled perhaps for the first time in a long while.

The children were with their father and they kissed him as he left. He had one child on each arm and his wife carried the third.

With the greatest happiness the family walked along between the two armed soldiers. When the moment of parting came all began to cry.

This was the fate of thousands of poor French and Belgian men and women, quartered near their homes yet unable to know who was dead or alive.

While we stood at the depot ten German soldiers arrived with fixed bayonets. Between them were three French citizens in civilian clothing, whom they escorted. All were elderly men. We asked an old Frenchman what this was about and he said:

"We receive our food from the German military officials but it is not sufficient to live on. The people have nothing left. All stock and food had been seized. These three men refused to work any longer for the German military officials because they could not live on what they received.

"They were arrested and are being sent to Germany. No one knows what their fate would be there. The men were being taken away by the Germans and interned in Germany."

We received orders to march to Varennes and left the next morning. As we reached the heights of Varennes about noon we saw the wide country before us and the city nestling in the valley. Farther up on the heights was Vauquois. Nothing could be seen of any houses but through our field glasses we could make out an enormous ash heap. Shells fell there continuously and we were frightened at the prospect of having to go to that spot. Scarcely had we crossed the heights when some shells burst behind us. The French artillery even singled out individuals. While Vauquois was in their possession they could co-ordinate the entire neighborhood. We understood now why this ash heap had been contested for so bitterly.

We ran down hill till we came to Varennes. The southern section of the town had been wrecked by shells and fire. Many chimneys were all that was left standing of whole rows of houses. Soldiers everywhere collected scraps of metal which were transported to Germany. The church bells were loaded on wagons and sent away. All the copper, tin, brass and nickel which could be found was gathered.

The next morning we went into the trenches. We had to reach our position before daybreak, for with daylight the French kept all the approaches under fire. There was not much of a trench in Vauquois. All that could be seen was a single stone pile. Literally, there was not, in this town, one stone left upon another. The ruins of this village had changed hands more than fifteen times. When we arrived one-half of Vauquois was in German hands. The French were in possession of the highest points from which they could overlook the country for many miles.

In default of a trench we sought cover behind the stones, for it was impossible to dig trenches here, as the artillery leveled everything. The soldiers concealed themselves behind stone walls and fired. Artillery of all caliber covered these ruins. Amid all this destruction lay an army of corpses, mostly German.

This Village Had Changed Hands More Than Fifteen Times.

(To Be Continued.)

CITIZENSHIP CASE HELD OVER

(From Saturday's Daily.)

The application for citizenship of C. H. Wigmore, when came up before Judge Duffey yesterday at a special session of court here, has been held over for 30 days. The motion to hold the application over was made by the attorney for the government, who stated that some protests had been entered which would need investigation.

John Nelson and a man by the name of Wells were successful in their petitions, their papers being granted.

The session has been continued until today to hear other cases.

DR. COE AGAIN IN THE CITY

(From Saturday's Daily.)

Dr. U. C. Coe has returned to this city after an absence of several weeks. He expects to remain here several days straightening out his business affairs, which require his attention. He states that he has successfully passed the examination for the service.