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## "OVER THE TOP" AN AMERICAN SOLDIER WHO WENT ARTHUR GUY EMPEY MACHINE GUNNER, SERVING IN FRANCE

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ARTHUR GUY EMPEY

### SYNOPSIS.

**CHAPTER I**—Fired by the news of the sinking of the Lusitania by a German submarine, Arthur Guy Empey, an American, leaves his office in Jersey City and goes to England where he enlists in the British army.

**CHAPTER II**—After a period of training, Empey volunteers for immediate service and soon finds himself in rest billets "somewhere in France," where he first makes the acquaintance of the ever-present "cooties."

**CHAPTER III**—Empey attends his first church services at the front while a German Pooker circles over the congregation.

**CHAPTER IV**—Empey's command goes into the front-line trenches and is under fire for the first time.

**CHAPTER V**—Empey learns to adopt the motto of the British Tommy, "If you are going to get it, you'll get it, so never worry."

**CHAPTER VI**—Back in rest billets, Empey gets his first experience as a mess orderly.

**CHAPTER VII**—Empey learns how the British soldiers are fed.

**CHAPTER VIII**—Back in the front-line trench, Empey sees his first friend of the trenches "go West."

**CHAPTER IX**—Empey makes his first visit to a dugout in "Butside Ditch."

### CHAPTER X.

#### "The Day's Work."

I was fast learning that there is a regular routine about the work of the trenches, although it is badly upset at times by the Germans.

The real work in the fire trench commences at sundown. Tommy is like a burglar, he works at night.

Just as it begins to get dark the word "stand to" is passed from traverse to traverse, and the men get busy. The first relief, consisting of two men to a traverse, mount the fire step, one man looking over the top, while the other sits at his feet, ready to carry messages or to inform the platoon officer of any report made by the sentry as to his observations in No Man's Land. The sentry is not allowed to relax his watch for a second. If he is questioned from the trench or asked his orders, he replies without turning around or taking his eyes from the expanse of dirt in front of him. The remainder of the occupants of his traverse either sit on the fire step, with bayonets fixed, ready for any emergency, or if lucky, and a dugout happens to be in the near vicinity of the traverse, and if the night is quiet, they are permitted to go to same and try and snatch a few winks of sleep. Little sleeping is done; generally the men sit around, smoking fags and seeing who can tell the biggest lie. Some of them, perhaps with their feet in water, would write home sympathizing with the "governor" because he was laid up with a cold, contracted by getting his feet wet on his way to work in Woolwich arsenal. If a man should manage to doze off, likely as not he would wake with a start as the clammy, cold feet of a rat passed over his face, or the next relief stepped on his stomach while stumbling on their way to relieve the sentries in the trench.

Just try to sleep with a belt full of ammunition around you, your rifle bolt

bitting into your ribs, infrenching tool handle sticking into the small of your back, with a tin hat for a pillow and feeling very damp and cold, with "cooties" boring for oil in your armpits, the air foul from the stench of grimy human bodies and smoke from a juicy pipe being whiffed into your nostrils, then you will not wonder why Tommy occasionally takes a turn in the trench for a rest.

While in a front-line trench orders forbid Tommy from removing his boots, puttees, clothing or equipment. The "cooties" take advantage of this order and mobilize their forces, and Tommy swears vengeance on them and mutters to himself, "Just wait until I hit rest billets and am able to get my own back."

Just before daylight the men "turn to" and tumble out of the dugouts, man the fire step until it gets light, or the welcome order "stand down" is given. Sometimes before "stand down" is ordered, the command "five rounds rapid" is passed along the trench. This means that each man must rest his rifle on the top and fire as rapidly as possible five shots aimed toward the German trenches, and then duck (with the emphasis on the "duck"). There is a great rivalry between the opposing forces to get their rapid fire all off first, because the early bird, in this instance, catches the worm—sort of gets the jump on the other fellow, catching him unawares.

We had a sergeant in our battalion named Warren. He was on duty with his platoon in the fire trench one afternoon when orders came up from the rear that he had been granted several days' leave for Blighty, and would be relieved at five o'clock to proceed to England.

He was tickled to death at these welcome tidings and regaled his more or less envious mates beside him on the fire step with the good times in store for him. He figured it out that in two days' time he would arrive at Waterloo station, London, and then—seven days' bliss!

At about five minutes to five he started to fidget with his rifle, and then suddenly springing up on the fire step with a muttered, "I'll send over a couple of souvenirs to Fritz so that he'll miss me when I leave," he stuck his rifle over the top and fired two shots when "crack" went a bullet and he tumbled off the step, fell into the mud at the bottom of the trench, and lay still in a huddled heap with a bullet hole in his forehead.

At about the time he expected to arrive at Waterloo station he was laid to rest in a little cemetery behind the lines. He had gone to Blighty.

In the trenches one can never tell—it is not safe to plan very far ahead.

After "stand down" the men sit on the fire step or repair to their respective dugouts and wait for the "rum issue" to materialize. Immediately fol-

lowing the rum comes breakfast, brought up from the rear. Sleeping is then in order unless some special work turns up.

Around 12:30 dinner shows up. When this is eaten the men try to amuse themselves until "tea" appears at about four o'clock, then "stand to" and they carry on as before.

While in rest billets Tommy gets up about six in the morning, washes up, answers roll call, is inspected by his platoon officer, and has breakfast. At 8:45 he parades (drills) with his company or goes on fatigue according to the orders which have been read out by the orderly sergeant the night previous.

Between 11:30 and noon he is dismissed, has his dinner and is "on his own" for the remainder of the day, unless he has clicked for a digging or working party, and so it goes on from day to day, always "looping the loop" and looking forward to peace and Blighty.

Sometimes, while engaged in a "cootie" hunt, you think, Strange to say, but it is a fact, while Tommy is searching his shirt serious thoughts come to him. Many a time, when performing this operation, I have tried to figure out the outcome of the war and what will happen to me.

My thoughts generally ran in this channel:

Will I emerge safely from the next attack? If I do will I skin through the following one, and so on? While your mind is wandering into the future it is likely to be rudely brought to earth by a Tommy interrupting with, "What's good for rheumatism?"

Then you have something else to think of. Will you come out of this war crippled and tied into knots with rheumatism, caused by the wet and mud of trenches and dugouts? You give it up as a bad job and generally saunter over to the nearest estaminet to drown your moody forebodings in a glass of sickening French beer or to try your luck at the always present game of "house." You can hear the sing-song voice of a Tommy droning out the numbers as he extracts the little squares of cardboard from the bag between his feet.

### CHAPTER XI.

#### Over the Top.

On my second trip to the trenches our officer was making his rounds of inspection, and we received the cheerful news that at four in the morning we were to go over the top and take the German front-line trench. My heart turned to lead. Then the officer carried on with his instructions. To the best of my memory I recall them as follows: "At eleven a wiring party will go out in front and cut lanes through our barbed wire for the passage of troops in the morning. At two o'clock our artillery will open up with an intense bombardment, which will last until four. Upon the lifting of the barrage the first of the three waves will go over." Then he left. Some of the Tommies, first getting permission from the sergeant, went into the machine gunners' dugout and wrote letters home, saying that in the morning they were going over the top, and also that if the letters reached their destination it would mean that the writer had been killed.

These letters were turned over to the captain with instructions to mail same in the event of the writer's being killed. Some of the men made out their wills in their pay books, under the caption, "Will and Last Testament."

Then the nerve-racking wait commenced. Every now and then I would glance at the dial of my wrist watch and was surprised to see how fast the minutes passed by. About five minutes to two I got nervous waiting for our guns to open up. I could not take my eyes from my watch. I crouched against the parapet and strained my muscles in a deathlike grip upon my rifle. As the hands on my watch showed two o'clock a blinding red flare lighted up the sky in our rear, then thunder, intermixed with a sharp, whistling sound in the air over our heads. The shells from our guns were speeding on their way toward the German lines. With one accord the men sprang up on the fire step and looked over the top in the direction of the German trenches. A line of bursting shells lighted up No Man's Land. The din was terrific and the ground trembled. Then, high above our heads we could hear a sighing moan. Our big boys behind the line had opened up and 9.2's and 15-inch shells commenced dropping into the German lines. The flash of the guns behind the lines, the scream of the shells through the air, and the flare of them, bursting, was a spectacle that put Pat's greatest display into the shade. The constant pup, pup, of German machine guns and an occasional rattle of rifle firing gave me the impression of a huge audience applauding the work of the batteries.

Our 18-pounders were destroying the German barbed wire, while the heavier stuff was demolishing their trenches and bashing in dugouts or funk holes. Then Fritz got busy.

Their shells went screaming overhead, aimed in the direction of the flares from our batteries. Trench mortars started dropping "Minnies" in our front line. We clicked several casualties. Then they suddenly ceased. Our artillery had taped or silenced them.

During the bombardment you could almost read a newspaper in our trench. Sometimes in the flare of a shell-burst a man's body would be silhouetted against the paradocs of the trench and it appeared like a huge monster. You could hardly hear yourself think. When an order was to be passed down the trench you had to yell it, using your hands as a funnel into the ear of the



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