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OVER THE TOP

By Arthur Guy Empey, an American soldier  
From page 3

All along the German trench, at about three-foot intervals, stood a big Prussian guardman with his rifle at the aim, and then we found out why we had not been challenged when the man sneezed and the barbed wire had been improperly cut. About three feet in front of the trench they had constructed a single fence of barbed wire and we knew our chances were one thousand to one of returning alive. We could not rush their trench on account of this second defense. Then in front of me the challenge, "Halt," given in English rang out, and one of the finest things I have ever heard on the western front took place.

From the middle of our line some Tommy answered the challenge with, "Aw, go to h—l." It must have been the man who had sneezed or who had improperly cut the barbed wire; he wanted to show Fritz that he could die game. Then came the volley. Machine guns were turned loose and several bombs were thrown in our rear. The Boche in front of me was looking down his sight. This fellow might have, under ordinary circumstances, been handsome, but when I viewed him from the front of his rifle he had the goblins of childhood imagination relegated to the shade.

Then came a flash in front of me, the flare of his rifle—and my head seemed to burst. A bullet had hit me on the left side of my face about half an inch from my eye, smashing the cheek bones. I put my hand to my face and fell forward, biting the ground and kicking my feet. I thought I was dying, but, do you know, my past life did not unfold before me the way it does in novels.

The blood was streaming down my tunic, and the pain was awful. When I came to I said to myself, "Emp, old boy, you belong in Jersey City, and you'd better get back there as quickly as possible."

The bullets were cracking overhead. I crawled a few feet back to the German barbed wire, and in a stooping position, guiding myself by the wire, I went down the line looking for the lane we had cut through. Before reaching this lane I came to a limp form which seemed like a bag of oats hanging over the wire. In the dim light I could see that its hands were blackened, and knew it was the body of one of my mates. I put my hand on his head, the top of which had been blown off by a bomb. My fingers sank into the hole. I pulled my hand back full of blood and brains, then I went crazy with fear and horror and rushed along the wire until I came to our lane. I had just turned down this lane when something inside of me seemed to say, "Look around." I did so; a bullet caught me on the left shoulder. It did not hurt much, just felt as if someone had punched me in the back, and then my left side went numb. My arm was dangling like a rag. I fell forward in a sitting position. But all the fear had left me and I was consumed with rage and cursed the German trenches. With my right hand I felt in my tunic for my first-aid or shell dressing. In feeling over my tunic my hand came in contact with one of the bombs which I carried. Gripping it, I pulled the pin out with my teeth and blindly threw it towards the German trench. I must have been out of my head, because I was only ten feet from the trench and took a chance of being mangled. If the bomb had failed to go into the trench I would have been blown to bits by the explosion of my own bomb.

By the flare of the explosion of the bomb, which luckily landed in their trench, I saw one big Boche throw up his arms and fall backwards, while his rifle flew into the air. Another one wilted and fell forward across the sandbags—then blacked.

Realizing what a foolhardy and risky thing I had done, I was again seized with a horrible fear. I dragged myself to my feet and ran madly down the

lane through the barbed wire, stumbling over cut wires, tearing my uniform, and lacerating my hands and legs. Just as I was about to reach No Man's Land again, that same voice seemed to say, "Turn around." I did so, when, "crack," another bullet caught me, this time in the left shoulder about one-half inch away from the other wound. Then it was taps for me. The lights went out.

When I came to I was crouching in a hole in No Man's Land. This shell hole was about three feet deep, so that it brought my head a few inches below the level of the ground. How I reached this hole I will never know. German "typewriters" were traversing back and forth in No Man's Land, the bullets biting the edge of my shell hole and throwing dirt all over me.

Overhead shrapnel was bursting. I could hear the fragments slap the ground. Then I went out once more. When I came to everything was silence and darkness in No Man's Land. I was soaked with blood and a big flap from the wound in my cheek was hanging over my mouth. The blood running from this flap choked me. Out of the corner of my mouth I would try and blow it back, but it would not move. I reached for my shell dressing and tried, with one hand, to bandage my face to prevent the flow. I had an awful horror of bleeding to death and was getting very faint. You would have laughed if you had seen my ludicrous attempts at bandaging with one hand. The pains in my wounded shoulder were awful and I was getting sick at the stomach. I gave up the bandaging stunt as a bad job, and then fainted.

When I came to, hell was let loose. An intense bombardment was on, and on the whole my position was decidedly unpleasant. Then, suddenly, our barrage ceased. The silence almost hurt, but not for long, because Fritz turned loose with shrapnel, machine guns, and rifle fire. Then all along our line came a cheer and our boys came over the top in a charge. The first wave was composed of "Jocks." They were a magnificent sight, kilts, flapping in the wind, bare knees showing, and their bayonets glistening. In the first wave that passed my shell hole, one of the "Jocks," an immense fellow, about six feet two inches in height jumped right over me. On the right and left of me several soldiers in colored kilts were huddled on the ground, then over came the second wave, also "Jocks." One young Scot, when he came abreast of my shell hole, leaped into the air, his rifle shooting out of his hands, landing about six feet in front of him, bayonet first, and struck in the ground, the butt trembling. This impressed me greatly.

Right now I can see the butt of that gun trembling. The Scot made a complete turn in the air, hit the ground, rolling over twice, each time clawing at the earth, and then remained still, about four feet from me, in a sort of sitting position. I called to him, "Are you hurt badly, Jock?" but no answer. He was dead. A dark red smudge was coming through his tunic right under the heart. The blood ran down his bare knees, making a horrible sight. On his right side he carried his water bottle. I was crazy for a drink and tried to reach this, but for the life of me could not negotiate that four feet. Then I became unconscious. When I woke up I was in an advanced first-aid post. I asked the doctor if we had taken the trench. "We took the trench and the wood beyond, all right," he said, "and you fellows did your bit; but, my lad, that was thirty-six hours ago. You were lying in No Man's Land in that bally hole for a day and a half. It's a wonder you are alive." He also told me that out of the twenty that were in the raiding party, seventeen were killed. The officer died of wounds in crawling back to our trench and I was severely wounded, but one fellow returned without a scratch, without any prisoners. No doubt this chap was the one who had sneezed and improperly cut the barbed wire.

In the official communiqué our trench

raid was described as follows: "All quiet on the western front, excepting in the neighborhood of Gommecourt wood, where one of our raiding parties penetrated into the German lines."

It is needless to say that we had no use for our persuaders or come-alongs, as we brought back no prisoners, and until I die Old Pepper's words, "Personally I don't believe that that part of the German trench is occupied," will always come to me when I hear some fellow trying to get away with a fishy statement. I will judge it accordingly.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Blighty.

From this first-aid post, after inoculating me with antitetanus serum to prevent lockjaw, I was put into an ambulance and sent to a temporary hospital behind the lines. To reach this hospital we had to go along a road about five miles in length. This road was under shell fire, for now and then a flare would light up the sky—a tremendous explosion—and then the road seemed to tremble. We did not mind, though no doubt some of us wished



In "Blighty."

that a shell would hit us and end our misery. Personally, I was not particular. It was nothing but bump, jolt, rattle, and bang.

Several times the driver would turn around and give us a "Cheero, mates, we'll soon be there—" fine fellows, those ambulance drivers, a lot of them go West, too.

We gradually drew out of the fire zone and pulled up in front of an immense dugout. Stretcher-bearers carried me down a number of steps and placed me on a white table in a brightly lighted room.

A sergeant of the Royal Army Medical corps removed my bandages and cut off my tunic. Then the doctor, with his sleeves rolled up, took charge. He winked at me and I winked back, and then he asked, "How do you feel, smashed up a bit?"

I answered: "I'm all right, but I'd give a quid for a drink of Bass."

He nodded to the sergeant, who disappeared, and I'll be darned if he didn't return with a glass of ale. I could only open my mouth about a quarter of an inch, but I got away with every drop of that ale. It tasted just like Blighty, and that is heaven to Tommy.

The doctor said something to an orderly, the only word I could catch was "chloroform," then they put some kind of an arrangement over my nose and mouth and it was me for dreamland.

When I opened my eyes I was lying on a stretcher, in a low wooden building. Everywhere I looked I saw rows of Tommies on stretchers, some dead to the world, and the rest with fags in their mouths.

The main topic of their conversation was Blighty. Nearly all had a grin on their faces, except those who didn't have enough face left to grin with. I grinned with my right eye, the other was bandaged.

Stretcher-bearers came in and began to carry the Tommies outside. You could hear the chug of the engines in the waiting ambulances.

I was put into an ambulance with three others and away we went for an eighteen-mile ride.

I was on a bottom stretcher. The lad right across from me was smashed up something horrible.

Right above me was a man from the Royal Irish rifles, while across from him was a Scotchman.

We had gone about three miles when I heard the death-rattle in the throat of the man opposite. He had gone to rest across the Great Divide. I think at the time I envied him.

The man of the Royal Irish rifles had had his left foot blown off, the jolting of the ambulance over the rough road had loosened up the band-

ages on his foot, and had started it bleeding again. This blood ran down the side of the stretcher and started dripping. I was lying on my back, too weak to move, and the dripping of this blood got me in my unbandaged right eye. I closed my eye and pretty soon could not open the lid; the blood had congealed and closed it, as if it were glued down.

An English girl dressed in khaki was driving the ambulance, white beside her on the seat was a corporal of the R. A. M. C. They kept up a running conversation about Blighty which almost wrecked my nerves; pretty soon from the stretcher above me, the Irishman became aware of the fact that the bandage from his foot had become loose; it must have pained him horribly, because he yelled in a loud voice:

"If you don't stop this bloody death wagon and fix this d— bandage on my foot, I will get out and walk."

The girl on the seat turned around and in a sympathetic voice asked, "Poor fellow, are you very badly wounded?"

The Irishman, at this question, let out a howl of indignation and answered, "Am I very badly wounded, what bloody cheek; no, I'm not wounded, I've only been kicked by a canary bird."

The ambulance immediately stopped, and the corporal came to the rear and fixed him up, and also washed out my right eye. I was too weak to thank him, but it was a great relief. Then I must have become unconscious, because when I regained my senses, the ambulance was at a standstill, and my stretcher was being removed from it.

It was night, lanterns were flashing here and there, and I could see stretcher-bearers hurrying to and fro. Then I was carried into a hospital train.

The inside of this train looked like heaven to me, just pure white, and we met our first Red Cross nurses; we thought they were angels. And they were.

Nice little soft bunks and clean, white sheets.

A Red Cross nurse sat beside me during the whole ride which lasted three hours. She was holding my wrist; I thought I had made a hit, and tried to tell her how I got wounded, but she would put her finger to her lips and say, "Yes, I know, but you mustn't talk now, try to go to sleep, it'll do you good, doctor's orders." Later on I learned that she was taking my pulse every few minutes, as I was very weak from the loss of blood and they expected me to snuff it, but I didn't.

From the train we went into ambulances for a short ride to the hospital ship Panama. Another palace and more angels. I don't remember the trip across the channel.

I opened my eyes; I was being carried on a stretcher through lanes of people, some cheering, some waving flags, and others crying. The flags were Union Jacks. I was in Southampton, Blighty at last. My stretcher was strewn with flowers, cigarettes, and chocolates. Tears started to run down my cheek from my good eye. I like a booby was crying. Can you beat it?—

Then into another hospital train, a five-hour ride to Paignton, another ambulance ride, and then I was carried into Munsey ward of the American Women's War hospital and put into a real bed.

This real bed was too much for my unstrung nerves and I fainted.

When I came to, a pretty Red Cross nurse was bending over me, bathing my forehead with cold water, then she left and the ward orderly placed a screen around my bed, and gave me a much-needed bath and clean pajamas. Then the screen was removed and a bowl of steaming soup was given me. It tasted delicious.

Before finishing my soup the nurse came back to ask me my name and number. She put this information down in a little book and then asked: "Where do you come from?" I answered:

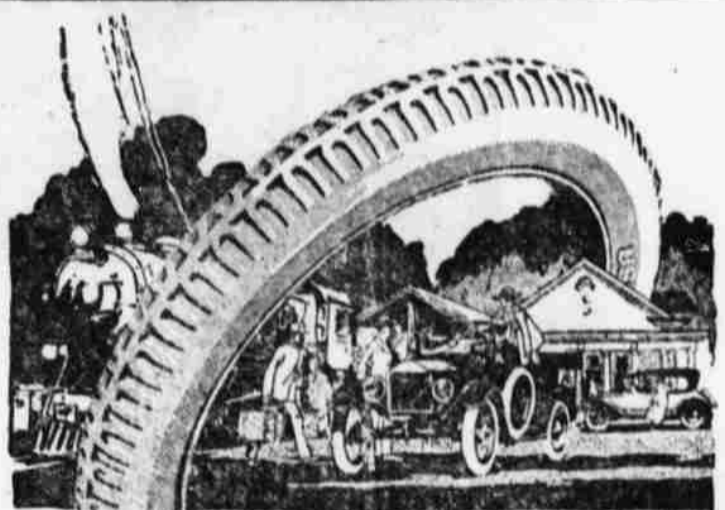
"From the big town behind the Statue of Liberty;" upon hearing this she started jumping up and down, clapping her hands, and calling out to three nurses across the ward:

"Come here, girls—at last we have got a real live Yankee with us."

They came over and besieged me with questions, until the doctor arrived. Upon learning that I was an American he almost crushed my hand in his grip of welcome. They also were Americans, and were glad to see me.

The doctor very tenderly removed my bandages and told me, after viewing my wounds, that he would have to take me to the operating theater immediately. Personally I didn't care what was done with me.

In a few minutes, four orderlies who looked like undertakers dressed in white, brought a stretcher to my bed and placing me on it carried me out of the ward, across a courtyard to the operating room or "pictures," as Tommy calls it.



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