



WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

MY FOURTEEN MONTHS AT THE FRONT

An American Boy's
Baptism of Fire

By WILLIAM J. ROBINSON

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The most graphic account of the great war that has yet been written comes from the pen of a twenty-two-year-old Boston boy, who has just returned from France, where as dragoon guardsman, dispatch rider and motor-car driver he served fourteen months under the British flag. Out of thirty-one motorcycle dispatch riders he was one of four survivors.

As we got nearer the city I seemed to have lost all feeling of fear, and in fact I didn't have any feeling at all.

I tried to think about what was going to happen to us, for it worried me that I didn't seem to have a nerve in my body. I kept telling myself that I was going to my death and that in a few minutes I would be lying somewhere in those smoking ruins. But it was no use. I didn't care one way or the other. Before one comes to the railway track just outside Ypres there is a road which branches off to the left and leads to the village of Elverdinghe. Before we came to where this road branches off the officer spoke.

"I think it would be worth while trying to get to the canal bank through Elverdinghe," he said, "and from there we would perhaps be able to leave the car, swim the canal and get through to Potijze on foot. It will take longer, of course, but the main thing for us to do is to get there safely, no matter if it takes a great deal longer. Let us try that way, anyway."

I was willing to try anything, and so we turned off the road and headed for Elverdinghe. It was only a few kilometres, and we didn't take long getting there, but when we arrived we found that we had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, for Elverdinghe was getting it hot and heavy from the German field batteries.

We rushed into the town, and as we swung into the village proper we came very near having one grand smashup. A field ambulance was moving out of the place, and the road was blocked by ambulances which were loading up with wounded. I jammed on the brakes and pulled over almost into the ditch, but the brakes stopped the car before we got clear in.

A sentry informed us that the road through the village was closed and that we would have to turn around and go back. I tried to back up, but my

two front wheels were stuck away down in the ditch, and she wouldn't pull out under her own power.

I appealed to the driver of an empty ambulance to help me, and he quickly got his towrope around my back axle, and we came out with the first heave. I noticed while we were taking the towrope off that the car was a big six-cylinder American make.

I asked the driver how he liked a Yankee car, and from the way he replied I knew that he was an American himself. I asked him where he came from, and you can imagine my surprise when he said "Boston."

I never say him again, and when I left him he was in one hot little corner of the map. I hope he gets through all right.

CHAPTER IX.

The Fate of a Spy.

WE reached Elverdinghe as quickly as we could and got out without a scratch, which is more important than anything else. We went back along the road until we came to the turning which leads to the village of Boesinghe. This village is on the bank of the canal, but it is a mighty unhealthy place to visit, as it is in full view of part of the German lines. Our plan was to go as close to the village as we dared and then leave the car and try to get through on foot. It was almost as dangerous as it would be to go through Ypres, but we figured that here we would at least have a fighting chance.

We left the car under some trees about half a mile from the village and set out on foot. We hadn't been going ten minutes when a sentry stopped us again and informed us that the road was closed and we would have to go back. The officer explained things to him and told him that it was absolutely imperative that we get through

and that this was the only way it could be done. The sentry said that he was very sorry, but he had strict orders from the assistant provost marshal and he dared not let us pass. There was nothing left for us to do but to turn back.

We went straight to headquarters, and the officer explained that it was impossible for us to get through. He ordered me to report to him the next morning and we would try again. The next day they were bombarding just as heavily, and the city was still burning, so all I had to do was to stand by and hold myself in readiness all day long.

We saw a very exciting incident that day. There was a big ammunition column near our headquarters, and it was waiting there, all ready loaded, until sent for. It had been there several weeks then, and the chaps who belonged to it were having the softest time they ever had in their lives.

About 2 o'clock in the afternoon I was standing on a corner near this column when I saw one of the police go up and speak to a chap who was walking around it with a notebook in his hand. They talked for a few moments, and then a policeman sauntered down to where I was standing and came up and spoke to me.

"Go down to the guard room," he said, "and have the corporal call in two men and bring them up here as quick as God will let him. That fellow there by the column is getting all kinds of information and putting it in his book. Now, hurry, but take your time until you get out of sight of this place. I'll look after him until the guard comes."

I was naturally all excited, but I did as he said, and it wasn't many minutes before we were on our way back at the double. Our man was still there, but the minute he saw us he got started. Our policeman pulled his revolver and fired after him. He didn't stop for a second, but he pulled a couple of guns himself and every few seconds would send a shot back at us as he ran.

Fellows were joining in the chase all the time, and it was getting interesting. The end came very suddenly when two of our chaps with rifles appeared in the road ahead of the fugitive and ordered him to halt. He fired on them for an answer, so they raised their rifles and brought him down.

Examination showed that he was a German. He had on German service dress under the British uniform he was wearing. The little book our policeman referred to certainly was a gold mine of information. He had the name, location and strength of every unit in our vicinity and also the location of a good many of our batteries. He was a brave fellow, all right, and he played the game clear to the end.

The next day I reported myself as usual for the trip to Potijze, and we decided to make the try again. Even as we got near Ypres the fire seemed to slacken, and we rushed straight through without mishap.

If Ypres had been in bad condition before this I don't know how it would be described now! In the center of the town there was scarcely a building left standing. All the towers but one had been knocked off the famous Cloth hall, and the whole place had been gutted by fire. The cathedral was all down except half of the tower, and the inside of that was still burning.

The streets were littered with bodies of every description, and broken wagons, ambulances, water carts, etc., lay everywhere. The roads were almost obliterated, and we were riding over broken bricks and mortar. The shells were still coming over, but they were no worse than what we had run through before, so we did not mind them very much. We found the road the other side of Ypres about as usual, so we got up to Potijze without any more excitement.

Potijze is a very tiny place, which has seen some hard fighting from time to time. There was really very little left of the place itself, but our trenches ran just outside the village and we had dugouts all around there. On our arrival my officer told me to turn the car around and then to get into one of the dugouts and wait for him. I did as he told me, and for some reason or other I left the engine running. I shut the throttle clear down, so she was just barely ticking over.

I looked around and found a dugout not twenty yards away and went in. Two officers were there at the time, but they told me to sit down, and they went on with their work.

I found some paper and a pencil and started to write a letter. After a few minutes one of these officers got up and went out. I don't think it was more than ten minutes later that I heard a lot of running around and shouting over our heads, and I won-

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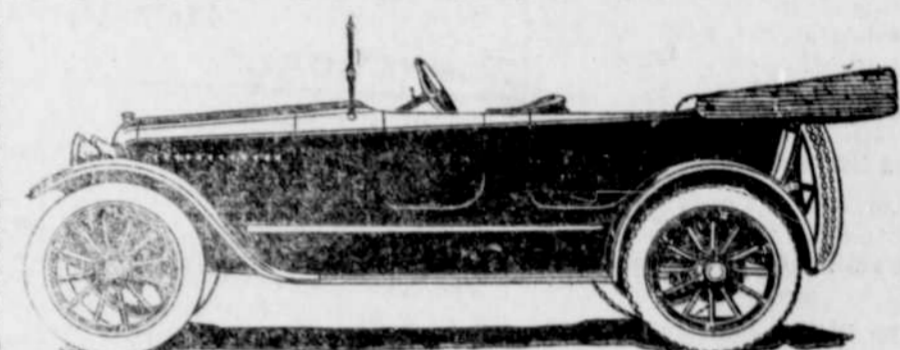
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dered what it could be.

Then I noticed that my throat and nose seemed to be burning, and my eyes commenced to water. I couldn't draw a breath without sharp pain piercing my throat and lungs. It struck



But All the Time I Had Mine I Never Saw Another Sign of Gas.

me suddenly that it was the gas. The officer who had left a few minutes before poked him head down and shouted, "Run like h—; it's the gas!"

By this time I could hardly see, and I was doing some tall old scrambling

to get out of that place. I would hold my breath as long as I could, and then I'd take another breath through my khaki handkerchief. When I got outside I found that everything was covered with a greenish yellow haze, and I couldn't see three feet in front of me.

I ran in the direction of the place I had left my car, and I struck it the first shot. Perhaps I wasn't thankful I had left the engine running! I jumped in and started down that road for all I was worth, and before I had gone 100 yards I was off the road and stuck in a plowed field. I was clear of the gas, though, and that was all I cared about.

I waited there for two hours before any one appeared, and when a fatigue party finally came along the road I had them help me get the car out. They got eight horses, and we hitched them on to the back. I raced my machine, and the horses pulled, and after half an hour's work the car was back on the road again.

No sooner had they gone than my officer showed up safe and sound and we started back for camp.

It was a terrible experience, and we were absolutely helpless, as we had not been furnished with the respirators and gas helmets at that time. We secured these things soon after, but all the time I had mine I never saw another sign of gas.

I found out afterward that those two officers who had been in the dugout were both killed by the gas.

The officer who was with me at the

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