



"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 Fokker 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 "Suicide Ditch."

CHAPTER X—Empey learns what constitutes a "day's work" in the front-line trench.

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 Paul's greatest display into the shade. The constant pop, pop, 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 paradox 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 man sitting next to you on the fire step. In about twenty minutes a generous rum issue was doled out. After drinking the rum, which tasted like varnish and sent a shudder through your frame, you wondered why they made you wait until the lifting of the bar-

rage before going over. At ten minutes to four word was passed down, "Ten minutes to go!" Ten minutes to live! We were shivering all over. My legs felt as if they were asleep. Then word was passed down: "First wave get on and near the scaling ladders."

These were small wooden ladders which we had placed against the parapet to enable us to go over the top on the lifting of the barrage. "Ladders of death" we called them, and veritably they were.

Before a charge Tommy is the polttest of men. There is never any pushing or crowding to be first up these ladders. We crouched around the base of the ladders waiting for the word to go over. I was sick and faint, and was puffing away at an unlighted fag. Then came the word, "Three minutes to go; upon the lifting of the barrage and on the blast of the whistles, 'Over the top with the best o' luck and give them hell.'" The famous phrase of the western front. The Jonah phrase of the western front. To Tommy it means if you are lucky enough to come back you will be minus an arm or a leg. Tommy hates to be wished the best of luck; so, when peace is declared, if it ever is, and you meet a Tommy on the street, just wish him the best of luck and duck the brick that follows.

I glanced again at my wrist watch. We all wore them and you could hardly call us "sissies" for doing so. It was a minute to four. I could see the hand move to the twelve, then a dead silence. It hurt. Everyone looked up to see what had happened, but not for long. Sharp whistle blasts rang out along the trench, and with a cheer the men scrambled up the ladders. The bullets, were cracking overhead, and occasionally a machine gun would rip and tear the top of the sandbag parapet. How I got up that ladder I will never know. The first ten feet in front was agony. Then we passed through lanes in our barbed wire. I knew I was running, but could feel no motion below the waist. Patches on the ground seemed to float to the rear as if I were on a treadmill and scenery was rushing past me. The Germans had put a barrage of shrapnel across No Man's Land, and you could hear the pieces slap the ground about you.

After I had passed our barbed wire and gotten into No Man's Land a Tommy about fifteen feet to my right front turned around and looking in my direction, put his hand to his mouth and yelled something which I could not make out on account of the noise from the bursting shells. Then he coughed, stumbled, pitched forward and lay still. His body seemed to float to the rear of me. I could hear sharp cracks in the air about me. These were caused by passing rifle bullets. Frequently, to my right and left, little spurts of dirt would rise into the air and a ricochet bullet would whine on its way. If a Tommy should see one of these little spurts in front of him, he would tell the nurse about it later. The crossing of No Man's Land remains a blank to me.

Men on my right and left would stumble and fall. Some would try to get up, while others remained huddled and motionless. Then smashed-up barbed wire came into view and seemed carried on a tide to the rear. Suddenly, in front of me loomed a bashed-in trench about four feet wide. Queer-looking forms like mud turtles were scrambling up its wall. One of these forms seemed to slip and then rolled to the bottom of the trench. I leaped across this intervening space. The man to my left seemed to pause in midair, then pitched head down into the German trench. I laughed out loud in my delirium. Upon alighting on the other side of the trench I came to with a sudden jolt. Right in front of me loomed a giant form with a rifle which looked about ten feet long, on the end of which seemed seven bayonets. These flashed in the air in front of me. Then through my mind flashed the admonition of our bayonet instructor back in Blighty. He had said, "whenever you get in a charge and run your bayonet up to the hilt into a German the Fritz will fall. Perhaps your rifle will be wrenched from your grasp. Do not waste time, if the bayonet is fouled in his equipment, by putting your foot on his stomach and tugging at the rifle to extricate the bayonet. Simply press the trigger and the bullet will free it." In my present situation this was the logic, but for the life of me I could not remember how he had told me to get my bayonet into the German. To me this was the paramount issue. I closed my eyes and lunged forward. My rifle was torn from my hands. I must have gotten the German because he had disappeared. About twenty feet to my left front was a huge Prussian nearly six feet four inches in height, a fine specimen of physical manhood. The bayonet

from his rifle was missing, but he clutched the barrel in both hands and was swinging the butt around his head. I could almost hear the swish of the butt passing through the air. Three little Tommies were engaged with him. They looked like pigmies alongside of the Prussian. The Tommy on the left was gradually circling to the rear of his opponent. It was a funny sight to see them duck the swinging butt and try to jab him at the same time. The Tommy nearest me received the butt of the German's rifle in a smashing blow below the right temple. It smashed his head like an eggshell. He pitched forward on his side and a convulsive shudder ran through his body. Meanwhile the other Tommy had gained the rear of the Prussian. Suddenly about four inches of bayonet protruded from the throat of the Prussian soldier, who staggered forward and fell. I will never forget the look of blank astonishment that came over his face.

Then something hit me in the left shoulder and my left side went numb. It felt as if a hot poker was being driven through me. I felt no pain—just a sort of nervous shock. A bayonet had pierced me from the rear. I fell backward on the ground, but was not unconscious, because I could see dim objects moving around me. Then a flash of light in front of my eyes and unconsciousness. Something had hit me on the head. I have never found out what it was.

I dreamed I was being tossed about in an open boat on a heaving sea and opened my eyes. The moon was shining. I was on a stretcher being carried down one of our communication trenches. At the advanced first-aid post my wounds were dressed, and then I was put into an ambulance and sent to one of the base hospitals. The wounds in my shoulder and head were not serious and in six weeks I had rejoined my company for service in the front line.

CHAPTER XII.

Bombing.

The boys in the section welcomed me back, but there were many strange faces. Several of our men had gone West in that charge, and were lying "somewhere in France" with a little wooden cross at their heads. We were



Throwing Hand Grenades.

in rest billets. The next day our captain asked for volunteers for bombers' school. I gave my name and was accepted. I had joined the Suicide club, and my troubles commenced. Thirty-two men of the battalion, including myself, were sent to L—, where we went through a course in bombing. Here we were instructed in the uses, methods of throwing and manufacture of various kinds of hand grenades, from the old "jam tin," now obsolete, to the present Mills bomb, the standard of the British army.

It all depends where you are as to what you are called. In France they call you a "bomber" and give you medals, while in neutral countries they call you an anarchist and give you "life."

From the very start the Germans were well equipped with effective bombs and trained bomb throwers, but the English army was as little prepared in this important department of fighting as in many others. At bombing school an old sergeant of the Grenadier guards, whom I had the good fortune to meet, told me of the discouragements this branch of the service suffered before they could meet the Germans on an equal footing. (Pacifists and small army people in the U. S. please read with care.) The first English expeditionary forces had no bombs at all, but had clicked a lot of casualties from those thrown by the Boches. One bright morning someone higher up had an idea and issued an order detailing two men from each platoon to go to bombing school to learn the duties of a bomber and how to manufacture bombs. Noncommissioned officers were generally selected for this course. After about two weeks at school they returned to their units in rest billets or in the fire trench, as the case might be, and got busy teaching their platoons how to make "jam tins."

Previously an order had been issued for all ranks to save empty jam tins for the manufacture of bombs. A professor of bombing would sit on the fire step in the front trench with the remainder of his section crowding around to see him work.

On his left would be a pile of empty and rusty jam tins, while beside him on the fire step would be a miscella-

(Continued on page 6, column 1.)

NOTICE OF SALE.

By order of the Judge of Probate I will sell at public sale at my home on April the 20th at 11 o'clock, the personal property of M. A. Inabinett, deceased, consisting of one bed room set and furniture.

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