

The Confessions of a German Deserter

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

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(Continued from last week)

average person feels toward a body there was no sign. My pen would balk if I tried to recall the expressions, to describe the acts soldiers as well as officers committed to determine the nationality or sex of the dead. In the meantime, the battle between our troops and the French had reached a climax. Our troops had suffered great losses but now our turn came.

The German artillery shelled as we crossed the enemy's position with great fury. Our artillery succeeded in silencing the enemy's batteries and we tried to take his high positions by storm.

When we were within 200 meters of the enemy's defenses, the French machine guns were turned upon us and we were driven back with enormous losses.

Ten minutes later, we stormed a second time and had to retire again with great losses. We again formed for attack within the shelter of our trenches, but the fighting spirit was gone. But we dared not lose courage, although the victims of our useless storming attacks covered the field and we were able to look at our dead comrades all about us.

The artillery started up again; reinforcements arrived; after half an hour, we stormed a third time, over the bodies of our fallen comrades. As we halted about 20 meters from the enemy's trench, he withdrew his entire first line. Soon after we saw the Germans advance along the whole line. The reason for this unexpected retreat was explained later when we learned that the main part of the French army had retired some time before. The heavy toll of life among our comrades was taken in a mere rear-guard action.

During the next hour the enemy abandoned all the heights of the Meuse. As we reached the crest of these heights, we could easily overlook the roads over which the French had retreated. They were departing in close formation, in long columns. Our company and others received orders to assemble and soon we pursued the fleeing enemy. It was our work to repair roads which had been destroyed so that they would be passable for our armies, a task that was harder in the burning midday sun, owing to the fact that the dead and wounded had first to be disposed of.

The dead bodies were seized by two men, one at the head and the other at the feet, and thrown into the ditch. Corpses were handled exactly as was a board to be used in building a bridge. Legs and arms were tossed likewise into the ditch. Dead horses and damaged batteries had to be removed. We were not strong enough to remove dead horses. We managed to capture a horse which was running wild and hitched him to the carcasses. Corpses hanging in the trees were left there. No one cared anything about them.

Canteens and knapsacks of the dead were searched for food and drink and whatever we found was eaten with the greatest relish.

French soldiers who had died of sunstroke covered the road. Others crawled to right and left of the road and waited there for relief or death. We did not dare to help them. The order was to advance and we had to march on and on. The captain told us we had to pursue the fleeing enemy with all our strength and much discontent was manifest on receipt of this order.

After being on our feet day and night, slaying like barbarians, taking no time to eat or rest, we continued to receive commands to maintain the pursuit with all haste. The captain understood how we felt and tried to pacify us by friendly conversation.

CHAPTER V.

Not far from Sommepey, the French rear guard stopped again. Four batteries of our artillery were brought into position and our company, along with machine guns, were ordered to protect the artillery. The artillery officers did not think this sufficient protection because the airplanes had discovered the presence of strong French cavalry detachments and a cavalry attack was suspected. However, a stronger guard could not be provided and there was nothing to be done but take our position and make the best of the situation. We dug ourselves in to the right and left of the batteries, in a field of small pine trees. The machine guns were set up and supplied with ammunition. We were then given instructions as to what to do in the event of a cavalry attack. An old major of infantry, with white hair, took command. Our unit was placed with the infantry, but our "brave" officers disappeared suddenly. To them the defense of the fatherland was the business of a private. Since we had been assigned to assist infantry, our

officers considered themselves superior and took French leave.

This state of affairs affects only "pioneer" officers who, when their units are attached to infantry or chasseur divisions, scarcely ever take part in a battle. This was the case with our officers during my whole war career. They remained far away from the gunfire in comfortable security. This is also the case with many infantry captains and almost all higher officers. Majors, colonels, etc., never take part in a storming attack, I was told, and several times I observed this myself.

Our instructions were as follows: In the event of a cavalry attack, everything must be quiet. The gun must be pointed but hidden. The machine gun must not be fired until the major in command gives the order. Then there must be a lively, quick fire. Our batteries fired violently at a biplane flying high over them which gave signals with star shells which were read only by the observer.

But the expected attack did not come, the enemy's infantry was not to be seen. We prepared to resume our march and were all ready to move when the order came to bivouac. The spot where we were to rest was as usual fixed by the staff so that they knew where to find us at any time. Hardly had we reached the place when our field kitchen, which we supposed had been lost, appeared as if it had come out of the ground. Those in charge of the field kitchen had received no knowledge of our losses of the last few days and had cooked for the old number. They were greatly surprised on seeing instead of a brave company of strong "pioneers," a lot of ragged, exhausted, crushed human shadows. We were given soup, bread, meat, apples and every one received a cigarette, which was more welcome to most of us than food and drink.

The next morning we slept until six o'clock and even though we were lying on the bare ground it was very hard to wake us. Breakfast was excellent. It consisted of mutton which had been requisitioned, vegetables, bread, coffee, a goblet of wine, and ham. Our captain told us to eat all we could as we had a hard day's march before us.

We resumed our march at seven o'clock. Everybody was in high spirits and in the course of our conversations it became apparent that we had lost track of the time entirely. Nobody knew whether it was Monday or Wednesday or whether it was the fifth or tenth of the month. This condition became more and more general. Soldiers never know the day of the week; one is just like another, Saturday, Sunday or Thursday.

We stopped to rest at noon on a large farm but were obliged to wait in the rain for the field kitchens. Meanwhile we helped ourselves. We shot one of the cows grazing in the meadow, cut open the hide without bothering to drain the blood from the carcass. Then everybody cut off a piece of meat, still warm, which was fried in a pot cover or eaten raw with a little salt by a great many of the soldiers. This killing of cattle was repeated almost daily by the soldiers acting without orders from their superiors. As a consequence they all got stomach trouble from eating meat which was too fresh without bread or vegetables. In spite of this the practice was continued. If a soldier became hungry during a pause in the marching and found a pig, cow or lamb, he shot it, cut out a piece for his own use, and let the rest spoil.

Under a burning midday sun we marched on amid clouds of dust, along a road used by munitions columns and other units, which never gave the dust an opportunity to settle. In all the fields which we passed, fugitives had set up their camps, where they lived like poor homeless gypsies. Many came up to us and begged for scraps of bread.

We marched without resting till late in the evening and at about nine o'clock we approached the city hall of Sommepey. In and around Sommepey a battle had started. We were ordered to take a part of the north-west section of the city. It was already dark and once more we halted. The fields all around us were covered with dead. In the middle of the streets were French batteries and munition columns. Horses and drivers had been killed.

After a ten-minute rest we started again and in double-quick step approached a little forest, in which dismounted cavalry and infantry were engaged with the enemy in a desperate hand-to-hand fight.

As a subterfuge we threw ourselves into the place with blood-curdling yells. We crept in the darkness in reach of the enemy's rear. The surprise attack was successful and the French were driven out of the city and by the afternoon we were all together in our

reached. Sommepey was not shown much by the infuriated cavalrymen.

Whenever there appeared to be any letup of the slaughter of the disarmed soldiers by our men new horrors were enacted under the commands of the officers, who kept shouting, "No quarter, slaughter everybody." Such were the orders of our distinguished officers. We pioneers also had to take part in this cold-blooded murder of unarmed men, who had thrown down their arms when they realized the futility of further resistance. Our officers took care this time, as in many earlier and later instances, that there should not be many prisoners taken.

The pioneer has a sidearm which, according to the law of nations, must not be used because the back of this sidearm consists of a three-millimeter sharp steel saw. In peace times the pioneers are not drilled with the bayonet because this sidearm should be used only for the special duties which the pioneers perform—but the law of nations is not the law of Prussian militarism.

We were obliged to use the saw from the beginning of the war. It was in opposition to all the laws of humanity. When an enemy had this saw in his breast and the victim had long since stopped every effort of resistance and an effort was made to try and remove the deadly steel from the wound an instant and horrible death resulted.

Oftentimes this horrible weapon became embedded in the breast of a victim so firmly that the attacker, who had to have back his sidearm again would be obliged to place his foot upon the breast of his victim and use all his force to recover the murderous instrument.

The dead and wounded in horrible condition lay all around us. The moans of the wounded men would have softened a stone but not the heart of a Prussian soldier.

Not all the soldiers approved this senseless, wanton murder. Some of those officers who had ordered us to kill the French were themselves killed by mistake in the darkness of the night by their own men. Such mistakes are still being repeated almost daily and I could cite many names and places to bear out this testimony.

On this particular night a captain and a first lieutenant met their fate. A second-year infantryman stabbed the captain in the abdomen and the first lieutenant received a stab in the back. Both died in a few minutes. Neither of their slayers felt any remorse and one of us felt inclined to reproach them. We all knew that two murderers had received their just deserts.

Another instance requires me to run somewhat ahead of the sequence of events. As I talked to a comrade of my company the next day I asked him for a pocketknife and in reaching into his pocket he pulled out three cartridges. I was surprised that he should carry cartridges in his trouser's pocket and asked him if he had no room in his belt.

"I have," he said, "but these three have a special mission. There are names of the intended victims on these bullets."

Some time later after we had become good friends I asked him again about the three cartridges. He had only one left. I thought about it a great deal and in my mind went over the non-commissioned officers, who, before war was declared had treated us like animals and whom we had hated as only human fiends can be hated. Two of these had found their grave in France.

The murder of Frenchmen who had surrendered continued as long as an enemy was alive. Then we received orders to determine if the enemies lying on the ground were all dead and unable to fight. If anyone was found simulating death it was ordered that he be killed. But the soldiers had lost some of the fever which had seized them during the battle and refused to obey this order. How they felt about it was illustrated by the remark of a member of my company:

"We had better look once more and see if the two officers are really dead and if not they ought to be killed without mercy for a command is a command."

We now advanced quickly but our part in the battle was over as the entire French line had retired to make a fresh stand, two kilometers west of Sommepey. The city was mostly in flames. The enemy artillery bombarded the town without intermission and shells burst all around.

Several hundred prisoners were corralled in the market place. Several French shells struck the prisoners but they were obliged to remain where they were. An officer of my company, Lieut. A. R. Neesen, remarked that no harm was done as the prisoners knew at least how their own ammunition tasted.

Toward one o'clock the battle south of Sommepey reached its climax. When the Germans advanced to make storming attacks on all points the French gave up their positions and retired in the direction of Sulpepe. Whether our company was no longer considered fit to fight or whether we were not needed any longer I do not know. We received orders to go into quarters. But neither a barn nor a stable could be found so that nothing remained but to camp in the open. The houses were all filled with wounded. Citizens of the town, who had not fled were all gathered in a large barn. Their houses were mostly destroyed so that they had to make use of what shelter was offered them. There was one exception to this arrangement and that was a very old little French woman sitting, bitterly crying by the debris of her late home and unable to induce her to leave.

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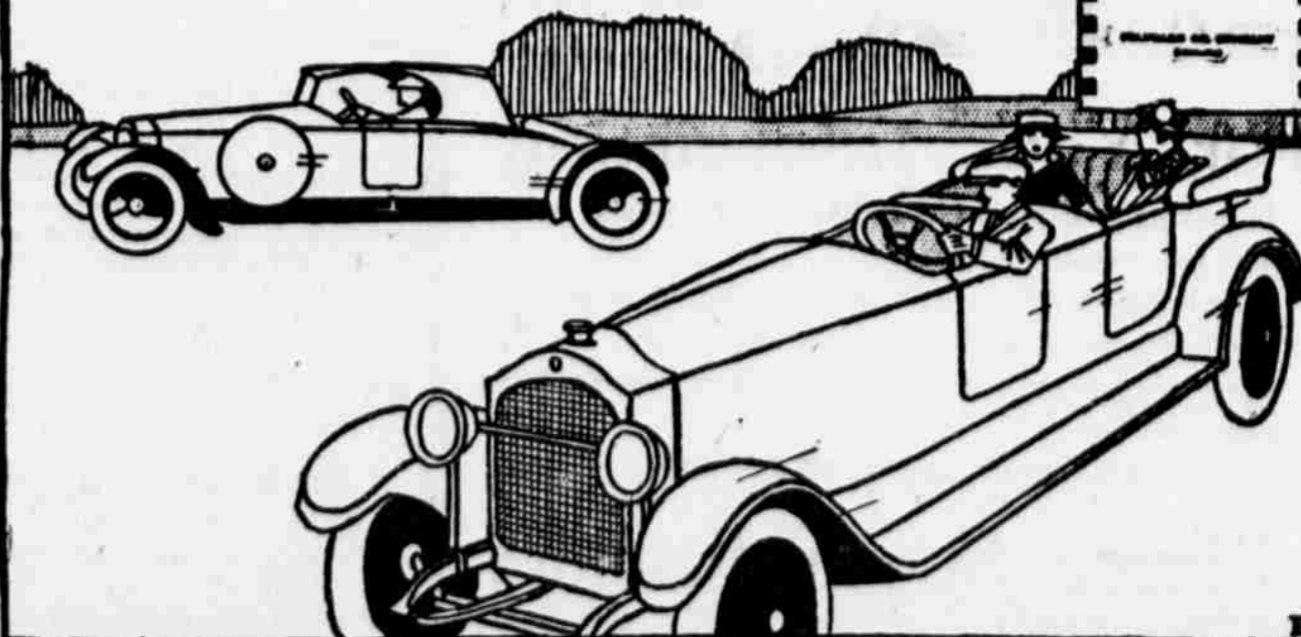
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