

The Confessions of a German Deserter

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

(Continued from last week)

These re-enforcements had been taken from all different arms and late arrivals had been taken from a division which had been threatened exactly like ours was. This led us to conclude that we could only resist further attacks provided fresh troops reached us. If only we could get something to eat. But there seemed no way to relieve the hunger and thirst which tortured us.

Now, horses galloped up to remove the guns we had left, and at the same instant the French artillery opened a tremendous fire from guns of all calibers. The shells fell among the 30 teams comprising the column. Confusion reigned. Groups of six horses comprising each team sprang into the air, then ran in all directions, pulling their carriages with the wheels up behind them. Some of the terrified animals ran directly into the heaviest fire, only to be torn to shreds with their drivers.

The enemy now transferred his fire to the battery position which we occupied. For us it was only a question of advance or retreat. Retreat? No! The order came to retake the positions which we had lost at the opening of the battle and which the Frenchmen presumably had made ready to withstand a new attack. By this time we had been re-enforced with more cannon fodder and the insane fight could begin anew.

We advanced over a wild field, covered by thousands upon thousands of torn human bodies. No shot fell; the only firing was the hostile artillery continuing to shell our battery positions. Neither the enemy's artillery nor infantry was turned upon us. This made us suspicious and our apprehension regarding what was to come increased as we were permitted to advance unmolested.

Suddenly there was turned loose upon us the fire from a multitude of machine guns. We threw ourselves on the ground and hunted cover. An instant later we again sprang up and continued our march. Once more we encountered destruction. By this time we had lost almost a third of our men and, exhausted, we halted.

Scarcely had we taken a position before we were attacked from the front and flank. We no longer had an adequate force to successfully resist this double blow, as the enemy, in greatly superior numbers, had practically crushed our force. The left wing was completely cut off and we saw our men throw up their hands and surrender. We who were in the center were unable to come to their assistance; our ranks were being decimated from minute to minute.

"Revenge for Somme!" sounded in my ears.

The right wing broke and carried us with it in a wild flight. Direct retreat had been cut off for us, so we ran backward across an open field, each man for himself, with a heart bursting with horror and fear as the result of the enemy's murderous fire.

After running a long time we reached a hamlet northwest of Vitry-le-Francois. Without guns, helmets, or knapsacks, the few who had been able to save themselves gathered here.

As a result of this battle the French acquired a large amount of booty. All the guns which had been the center of so much bitter fighting were lost. Of the hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers who participated in the battle, scarcely 100 were left. The others were all dead, wounded or missing. This is what was done to the invincible war machine by the French people, who, before the struggle, we had branded as cowardly and degenerate!

CHAPTER VIII.

We now tried to gather by companies. Of our own company only 12 men remained. Presently others straggled in until there were 20 of us assembled. There is eager questioning everywhere as each man attempts to learn about his comrade or acquaintance. Few questions can be answered, however, as each man had thought only of himself in that fight.

Driven by hunger we approached the village. The first thing we did was to hasten to the wells and drink. We drank as if we wanted to fill ourselves up with enough water to last us the rest of our lives. Only here and there were we able to find anything to eat. A few beets were left in the gardens and we ate them eagerly, without waiting to wash or clean them.

Where is our company? Nobody knows. We are the company, we 20 men. And our officers. "Somewhere surely," said a soldier, "somewhere in a bomb-proof corner."

But what were we to do? No one could decide. Presently a noncommissioned officer of the field gendarmes approached on horseback. It is the duty of this particular class of defend-

ers of the trenches to round up slackers behind the front.

"You are pioneers," he called to us roughly. "What are you doing here?" Then he asked us innumerable questions, which we answered as well as we could.

"Where are the others?" he asked. "Over there," said a young Berlin soldier, and pointed to the battlefield.

"The others are dead or perhaps prisoners. Several others have managed to save themselves and are somewhere, perhaps."

"Never mind," the noncommissioned officer said roughly. The conversation had become disagreeable to him. "Wait here, until I come back. Where are the officers?"

Again no one could answer. "What are their names? I shall find them. Perhaps they are in Vitry."

We told him the names of our officers. He gave us identification papers so that we might be able to prove to others inquiring why we were waiting where we were.

"I hope his horse falls and he breaks his neck," said one of our men.

We entered one of the houses which had been robbed, as were all the others, threw ourselves down upon the mattresses to sleep, sleep, sleep. How long we slept no one knew. We only knew that it was night and that some of our company had aroused us. These were newcomers who had been hunting for us for a long time.

"Come along. The captain is outside and he is very angry. He has gathered 17 of his men together and is cursing like the very devil because he could not locate you."

Sleepy, and entirely indifferent to the future, we left the building. We knew that we would be sent into action again but no longer cared. I had never before seen among a body of soldiers such an atmosphere of absolute indifference.

We came upon the captain. He saw us approach minus our headgear, our uniforms torn into shreds and without guns and knapsacks.

"Why are you running around here?" he roared. That was our reception.

Nobody answered. Nobody cared. Nothing could be worse than what we had been through, but although every one among us felt keenly the injustice of the captain's attitude we all remained silent.

"Where is your equipment?—Lost—Lost— This has been a nice business. The state equips you, you rebel. If all were like you—"

He raved on for a while after this fashion, this brave fellow, who, without any action on his own part permitted the rebels to retreat while he defended his fatherland in Vitry, 4.26 kilometers behind the battle line.

We selected guns from those lying around us in heaps and soon were ready to fight again.

We stood around half asleep, leaning on our guns, and waited to be led once more to the slaughter. A shot fell in our midst. It struck a color sergeant and smashed his right hand. He cried out from the pain. His hand was quickly bandaged. He was the first.

An eyewitness told us how this had happened. He had rested his hand on the gun barrel in the same manner as did all the others except that his hand partly covered the muzzle. The orders provide that the gun be locked if loaded. Turning to the color sergeant, who was writhing with pain, the captain roared at him: "I shall report you for punishment for your gross carelessness and for mutilating yourself in the field."

The color sergeant, a noncommissioned officer, realized that his military career was at an end. We all felt for him. During the months preceding this incident he had always associated himself with the privates.

We never learned whether he was brought before a court-martial. Punishment for self-mutilation was a daily event and many severe sentences were pronounced and then made known to all the others to serve as a deterring example. The color sergeant's place was conferred upon another, after which the captain disappeared once more in the direction of Vitry.

We marched away and halted at a point northwest of the village. Here we met other pioneers who had been gathered together from various battalions and our unit was once more brought up to 85 men. The officers told us that we would not enter the battle today. Our only duty for the time being was to keep the bridges over the Marne in good condition for the German troops fighting on the other side, so that they could be used in case the battle went against us.

We then marched to our destination, which was at the point where the Saulx flows into the Marne.

We reached our destination about six o'clock in the morning. The dead lay around in heaps everywhere. We

and could overlook the country for many kilometers in all directions. We saw shrapnel bursting by the thousands. Little could be seen of the men who were fighting despite the fact that many divisions were locked in a death struggle.

Presently we saw the fighting line. The Germans were about two kilometers behind the Marne, which flowed by directly in front of us. German cavalry in great numbers was encamped along the banks of the river. Two temporary bridges in a very dilapidated condition constructed of whatever materials were at hand were located near us. Preparations had been made to blow them up with thousands of pounds of dynamite. The electric fuses had been strung to the point where we were located and it was up to us to manipulate the switches. Connected with the battle line by telephone, we were in a position to destroy the bridges at a moment's notice.

The fighting became more lively. We saw the French rush to attack and retire again. The fire of musketry increased and the attacks became more frequent. This continued for more than two hours.

We saw the French continuing to bring up re-enforcements constantly despite the German artillery fire.

After an extended pause the French made another attack, employing several different kinds of formations. Each time the waves of offensive troops were forced back. At three o'clock in the afternoon, under a blow which contained the full power of France, our troops were forced to retire, first slowly, then in wild flight. The exhausted Germans could not be rallied in the face of this blow. With



The Fighting Became More Lively.

wild confusion all tried at the same time to reach the bridges beyond which lay safety.

At this instant the cavalry which had taken cover along the river bank galloped to the bridge position. In a moment the bridge was covered with human bodies, all racing for the opposite bank. We could see this temporary structure trembling under this enormous burden.

Our officer saw the situation and he nervously pressed the telephone receiver to his left ear. His right hand was on the switch. Breathlessly he stared at the fleeing masses. "If only the telephone connections had not been broken," he muttered to himself. He knew as well as all the rest of us that he was to act on the instant that the curt order came over the wire.

It was not much that he had to do. Merely make a movement of his hands. Misses of troops continued to rush across the bridge until more than half were safely over. The bridge further above was not in such great demand, and with the lessened congestion almost all who crossed here were already safe. We could see how the first of the French units had crossed, but the bridge continued to stand.

The sergeant who manned the apparatus at this bridge became restless waiting for orders, and finally on his own initiative blew it up. Some Frenchmen and hundreds of Germans upon the bridge found their graves in the Marne.

At the same moment the officer standing next to me received the order to blow up the last bridge. He hesitated to obey, for he could still see many Germans on the other side. He could see the race for the road leading to the bridgehead as all sought safety at the same instant. There a terrible panic reigned. Many soldiers jumped into the river and tried to swim across. The pressure became greater as the thousands still on the other side tried to get back.

The message over the wire became more and more insistent. Finally the officer sprang up, rushed by the pioneer standing at the apparatus and a second later there was a terrible detonation—bridge and men were thrown into the air hundreds of meters. Just as a river at high tide races along, taking with it all manner of debris, so the surface of the Marne was covered with wood, men, torn uniforms and horses. Efforts to swim were futile, yet soldiers continued to jump into the river.

(To be continued)

Nicaragua is the twentieth nation to take its stand on the allied line.

BEST IN THE LONG RUN

Who Began Trench Warfare?

THE trench, which always encircled the Roman castra, or camp, was brought to France by Julius Caesar and used by him on the very battlefield where to-day the Allies and the Huns have 25,000 miles of trenches.

With rings of trenches, gradually drawn smaller, probably the first modern trench warfare, the Turks in 1667 took Candia.

Vauban, builder of Verdun, in 1673 employed the first parallel trenches, the system of the present war.

Defeat, not foresight, turned the Germans to trench warfare. But Goodrich never had to dig in.

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