

# The Confessions of a German Deserter

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

(Continued from last week)

On the other side the French began to disarm such German soldiers as stood there with raised hands. Thousands of prisoners, innumerable horses and machine guns fell into the hands of the enemy. Several of our company were just about to retire with the electric apparatus when something developed which certain of our number had suspected. An error had been made and it was too late to rectify it.

The upper bridge, which had not been used to any great extent by the Germans, should have been left standing!

It had been the purpose of the staff in command to leave this bridge so that the enemy might continue its pursuit of our troops until a certain number of Frenchmen had crossed the river. The plan was to permit enough Frenchmen to pass so that they could be taken prisoner, yet, not too large a force, lest it might prove a menace to the German arms.

After these hostile troops had crossed, the plan was to destroy the bridge to prevent their being re-enforced. That was why the sergeant spanning this switch had been kept waiting for the order to blow up the bridge. But the sergeant in the excitement and confusion thought that the cable to which his phone was connected had been disconnected and blew up the bridge on his own initiative while it was crowded by Frenchmen and long before the enemy could have had an opportunity to cut that cable.

At the same time the officer at the switch connected with the explosives under the second bridge received his orders. He afterwards said that the order he received was hard to make out and that he had lost his presence of mind and threw in the switch, thereby killing thousands on the bridge and leaving many other thousands to the mercy of the enemy.

Before there was time for more impressions our entire unit was ordered to Vitry to be assembled in front of the cathedral. With a sigh of relief we hurried away, for the French artillery began once more to send shells with much accuracy over the entire countryside. Wounded men from other detachments whom we passed on the road told us that the French had already crossed the Marne in several different places. Everyone among us voiced the same opinion. We had already sustained great losses on Belgian soil and each day brought new sacrifices. Our lines became thinner and thinner. Many companies were entirely destroyed and all units suffered heavily. These companies whose forces had been reduced to a minimum and with the survivors half starved were opposed by an army well equipped with supplies and arms. The enemy constantly brought up fresh troops while our forces became fewer from hour to hour. We realized that it was impossible to make a stand here. We were constantly learning from soldiers of other contingents that their losses in men and materials were enormous.

I thought of the God of the Germans. Had he forsaken them?

I thought it so loud that the others could hear.

"Yes," said another, "whom the Lord wishes to punish is first stricken with blindness. Probably he thought of Belgium, Donchery, Sommepey and Sulpes, and still many other places and let us run into this perdition like flying fiends."

We reached Vitry. Here the misery seemed to be still greater than ever before, for in the entire town there was not a single house that was not overcrowded with wounded. In the midst of all this misery robbery flourished. All residences had been emptied of their furnishings and everything was thrown into the streets to make room for the wounded.

The sanitary squads went over the town and took everything of any value. The munition and railroad columns followed the same practice. They had plenty of room for plunder. This was amply proven by numerous seizures afterward of parcels put in the mail, which contained gold rings, watches, precious stones, etc. The business of the marauders flourished here in Vitry. The soldiers in the supply columns encountered very little actual danger; they had an easy time as compared with soldiers fighting at the front.

We soon reached the cathedral and reported to Lieutenant Elm. He also had defended his fatherland at a safe distance and here in the city, freshly shaved and in immaculate attire he looked very presentable.

The contrast was vivid as he stood before us who were torn, dirty and covered with blood, with unkempt hair and wild eyes.

We were obliged to wait so we sat down and looked around us. The church was full of wounded; many died under the hands of the doctors. They were carried out to make room for others. The dead were carried to one side, where whole rows of corpses lay. We counted more than sixty.

On our way to Vitry we had begged some bread, but we were still hungry and our field kitchens were nowhere in sight. The crews of our field kitchens as well as our forage officers and non-commissioned officers prefer to defend their fatherland many kilometers behind the battle fronts. They did not care about us as long as they were not obliged to go within range of the artillery fire. Comradeship has its limitations with them.

Other field kitchens were near by. They had prepared more food than their companies needed. Many for whom they had cooked will never eat again. We were invited to come and get whatever we wanted.

We had scarcely finished eating when we had to march on. Presently we were joined by more members of our company. Our captain appeared. One of our officers reported to him the number missing. He stepped in front of the company and said cheerfully "Good morning, men," although it was seven o'clock in the evening. A growl was the only response. We were then ordered to go to the wagons standing at the north side of the town, where each man was to supply himself with cartridges and three hand grenades. We gathered at the wagons at 9:30 o'clock and each man took 500 cartridges, his three grenades and matches to light them. On the way to the wagons we saw everywhere formations being hastily organized from stray soldiers and we received the impression of some great activity in preparation.

The rain had begun to fall in torrents. As we took our places we saw the streets filled with troops wearing special uniforms to protect them against the weather. These uniforms consisted of a suit of weatherproof clothing, a cap, such baggage as must be taken on a march, a tent cloth, tent stakes, dishes and, with the pioneers, trench tools. Thus equipped, we stood in the rain and waited, ignorant of what lay before us.

We were ordered to take the breech locks out of the guns and put those in our bread bags. The guns now were no good for shooting. We now began to understand what lay before us. A night attack was planned with bayonets and hand grenades, and the measures which had been taken were taken so that we would not shoot at one another in the darkness.

We stood and waited until eleven o'clock, when the order suddenly came to go into quarters. We did not know what to make of this after all the preparations. We could tell from the drum fire and the red glare in the sky that the battle had not lessened in violence. The sky glowed, illumined by the burning villages and farms.

On the way to our quarters we heard the officers saying among themselves that a final trial had been intended to defeat the French. This had been the



Field Kitchens Were Near By.

reason behind the preparations for the night attack which had now been called off.

Headquarters apparently had decided otherwise. Perhaps it was known there that nothing could be accom-

plished by attacking and the order was given to begin the retreat which was put into effect the next morning at six o'clock. We did not realize then that this was to be our last night in Vitry.

We were sheltered in a shed for the night. As we were very tired, we soon were fast asleep. We were aroused at four o'clock in the morning, everyone was given a loaf of bread and ordered to fill his canteen with water, after which the march began. Although we were ignorant of our destination, the inhabitants of Vitry seemed to understand where we were going and they stood on the streets throwing us significant glances.

Everywhere the feverish movement was on. We stopped in front of the town hall. Here the captain told us that because of difficulty in the terrain our troops had to vacate their positions and retire to nearby heights and occupy new defenses. With that he turned around and pointed to a ridge on the horizon.

"There we shall make a stand and wait for the enemy," he said. "No re-enforcements will arrive today and in a few days we may send picture postal cards to your homes from Paris."

## CHAPTER IX.

I must confess that most of us believed in this at the time, that we would soon be in Paris. Other bodies of troops arrived from all sides. We had marched several hours when news came to us that Vitry had been retaken by the French and that they had seized a tremendous amount of military stores, captured the hospitals, together with their medical units and patients, and that the sanitary companies also had been made prisoners. At about two o'clock in the afternoon we arrived at the heights which had been pointed out to us early in the march by our captain.

We now began to understand that something had gone wrong. Streets were filled with troops from all branches of service, trying to use the road along which we were marching. Being outnumbered, we were crowded backward. Empty munition columns raced by us in no order whatever. They were followed by canteen and other supply wagons. The greatest confusion reigned everywhere. Every minute added to the congestion until finally there was a dead halt. The drivers of some wagons left the road and tried to pass around the congested portions by traversing the fields, which had been soaked by heavy rains. Several wagons turned over and others became imbedded in the mud. The horses were unhitched from these and the wagons left behind. The waggoners mounted these horses and drove on, forgetting everything in one wild panic-stricken race for safety.

An officer rode up and handed an order to our captain. We were halted at a field close to the road. There we were permitted to stack our guns and rest. As we lay at this point we watched the passing columns, field kitchens, munition trains, sanitary columns and field postal wagons racing by in one grand carnival of confusion.

Every wagon carried wounded men. Their faces indicated clearly what tortures they were enduring as they were bumped along over the unspeakable roads upon heavy trucks. Still they were anxious to go ahead at whatever cost. They feared the fate which would befall them should they fall into the hands of their merciless enemy, which would show them the same consideration which they themselves had offered in previous encounters, in which they took no French wounded men prisoners.

Evening came on and with it torrential rain. We lay in the fields, weary and chilled through, yet no one of our unit moved, for we were utterly overcome by exhaustion. Artillery detachments now began to arrive, but few of them had their required number of six guns. Many had only three, others two, and a few proceeded with only one fieldpiece. At one time a whole row of about fifty gun carriages passed without any guns mounted upon them whatever. These batteries had managed to save their horses, but were compelled to abandon their guns to the French. Some carriages were drawn by only two to four horses instead of the required six.

There now passed before us some fifteen magnificent automobiles, the appearance of which won the admiration of everybody.

"Ah," exclaimed many of the soldiers, "the general staff—Duke Albrecht of Wurtemberg and his friends." Discontent and murmurs of rebellion went through our ranks. Everybody was mad and the accursed torrential rain had no tendency to lighten our spirits. "They have directed the slaughter of thousands and now they motor away," said one man, while we lay here in a morass in the rain. "We are not considered."

What we were to be assigned to do had not yet been told us. We were left lying in our swamp until ten o'clock that night. The troops continued to flow back in great disorganized contingents. Machine gun companies passed with empty wagons, having lost their guns. The thundering of the cannon gradually came nearer from the west. The noise along the highways became greater and a panic spread, adding to the horrors of the night. Fugitives wandered around in the darkness through the streaming rain, trying to lead their wives and children to safety, only to find death under the wheels of the wagons. The wounded were also mangled by scores; pitiable cries for help were heard everywhere. Under the strain of the traffic the roads became badly broken up and all along their sides abandoned vehicles of

We started forward at about three o'clock in the morning and soon we were with the rear guard. Infantry regiments, now merely fragments of their former strength, arrived in a fearful condition. The soldiers had thrown away their knapsacks and every unnecessary article which might be an impediment to speed.

Before long the first enemy shrapnel burst over our heads, which resulted in an even faster marching. The road used during the first march contained deep shell holes, which were filled with water. In the heavy darkness men fell into these water holes. Thoroughly drenched, we continued our march. No attention was paid to obstacles in the way over which we were constantly stumbling. Speed was the only aim. Dead men and horses lay in the middle of the road, but no one took pains to remove them.

At dawn we arrived at a little village, where we halted. We took possession and established as strong a temporary defense as possible in the time permitted. Our position was established behind a cemetery wall. New troops continued to arrive, but all were badly disorganized. Cavalry, mounted artillery and machine-gun detachments followed. These had some sort of formation and while there was some disorder the panic, which characterized the other units, was missing here. They also showed evidences of having suffered losses, but nothing in comparison to ours.

## CHAPTER X.

The enemy's shelling to reduce our position gradually grew stronger, but without effect. Some houses caught fire. Enemy cavalry patrols in strong force appeared and disappeared again. Everything became quiet. Within ten minutes matters again became lively,



Enemy Cavalry Patrol.

as large hostile columns approached. We retired some distance without firing a shot. The artillery took a position behind a village and began shelling the approaching enemy. A cavalry patrol galloped across an open field, the horses covered with foam. We heard the commander of the patrol tell a cavalry officer that the enemy were approaching from all sides. We quickly left the village. The artillery remained and the cavalry detachments occupied a position while the cannon were trained on the enemy. Toward noon shrapnel shells again began bursting over our heads, but they exploded too high in the air to do us any damage. Yet this served as a serious reminder to us that the enemy kept right on our heels, a realization of which caused our retreat to become a rout. The numbers who dropped exhausted constantly increased. It was impossible to render them any assistance, for there were no more wagons. Many soldiers used their last atom of strength to drag themselves to the side of the road. Others fell where they were marching to be crushed soon afterward under the horses' hoofs or the wheels of any vehicle that might pass. The road was strewn with equipment thrown away by the soldiers. Our detachments had long since cast aside all unnecessary impediments.

In this way we proceeded until we reached a forest which was filled with fugitives. Many of these had stretched some sort of cloth from tree to tree as a protection from the rain. There they lay, men, women and children and old men, some in unspeakable misery. This fugitives' camp was spread over the forests to the edge of the road and as we passed we could see the furrows worn into their faces by the terrible sufferings they had been through. They looked at us with weary and saddened eyes. The children begged for bread, but we had none for ourselves, even though we were tortured by hunger. The enemy's shrapnel continued to accompany us. Scarcely had we passed through the forest when shrapnel burst in it. As a consequence a camp of fugitives, now exposed to trench fire, was abandoned and its numbers sought safety in the open fields. Many tried to accompany us until the order came forbidding them the road, as their advance hindered troop movements. The fugitives, therefore, were forced into the rain-soaked fields.

Toward evening we reached a village which had previously been sacked and here we found some rest. The mayor and two citizens of this village had been seized by the Germans and taken away under cavalry escort. Just why this had been done we were un-

able to find out. We did know, however, that almost every town was obliged to give hostages. Most of the cattle were taken along and large herds were transported to the rear by cavalry.

We belonged to the rear guards, which explained why we were unable to find anything to eat. There was absolutely nothing to the village where we were now quartered. After half an hour with our hunger still unappeased we resumed our march. After we had marched about three kilometers we arrived at a spot which had formerly been a bivouac. Advancing armies had camped here perhaps eight days before. Bread, which had been plentiful then, lay strewn around on the ground. In spite of its water-soaked condition it had been gathered up and eaten with ravenous appetites. Nothing mattered how our stomachs were filled if only our hunger might be appeased.

Night now came, yet no sleep nor rest was in sight. No one knew how much farther we would have to retire before there would be a respite. The unfamiliar surroundings indicated to us that we were not returning over the road which we had traversed when, as victors, we marched to the Marne. With this and similar thoughts, hour after hour passed. Some of us ran along, others actually walked in their sleep. Our boots were filled with water, yet we had to keep on. Thus the night passed.

The next morning troops of the

main army were placed in the rear guard. They formed long columns which they opened to let us pass through, after which they closed ranks. We gave a sigh of relief, for we were at last free of hostile artillery fire. After marching about five more hours, we joined a company of infantry which fortunately had saved its field kitchen. It was not quite dark when we reached the village.

Here we were billeted in order to get as much rest as possible. But we all knew that we could rest only as long as the rear guard was able to keep back the enemy. We were placed in the village school. Because of the shortage of provisions we were allowed to use our tinny supplies, but none of us had any left. This consisted of some meat and hardtack. It had long since been eaten up and so we were compelled to lie down with our hunger still unappeased.

(To be continued)

### Stamp Perforation.

The perforation of stamps was first commenced in England in 1853, for receipt and draft stamps, and for postage stamps in 1854. Prior to that period stamps were separated by means of scissors or a knife or similar means and in some cases those who required many resorted to the use of a roulette, a kind of cogwheel furnished with small cutters, making a series of cuts between the stamps.



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