

Confessions of a German Deserter

(Continued from last week)

CHAPTER XI.

We were once more aroused at eleven o'clock that night, and with the utmost haste made ready to resume our march. The night was pitch dark and the rain continued. At daybreak we passed the city of St. Menchould. This had not been harmed. From here we turned to the east, closely pressed by the French and in the afternoon we reached Clermont-en-Argonne. Once more we managed to get a rest of several hours. Toward evening we proceeded again and maintained a forced march through the whole night. We were now more exhausted than ever, yet could not halt.

The rain had stopped before ten o'clock in the morning at which hour we left the road and made camp. There was a general sigh of relief, for this long-continued, wearing retreat had brought our troops into a state now become unendurable. We began to dig ourselves in. Before our trenches were even half completed a lateral hailstorm of shrapnel fell among us. Our losses were so great

that it became impossible to remain. We received orders to retire at once. We marched over the fields until dark when we began once more to dig in. We were now near the village of Cerney-en-Dormois. It was pitch dark and a heavy fog lay over everything. Of the enemy we knew nothing. With the utmost silence and speed we dug ourselves in deeply, stopping frequently to listen as hostile raiding parties approached, only to disappear quickly.

Here we received our first reinforcements. They arrived in long columns in the darkness. All were fresh troops—most of them reserves. The majority wore blue uniforms. This as well as the nature of their equipment, indicated to us that they had been hastily fitted out and transported. None of them had ever heard the whistle of a bullet and many asked anxiously whether it was dangerous here. They brought numerous machine guns, and in an instant we had everything prepared for defense.

At daylight the French began the attack. They made several onslaughts throughout the day but without success, for our reinforcements were large.

No one realized at this stage of the battle that it was the beginning of a murderous, exhausting struggle for positions.

We were to fight here from the same trench, month after month, without gaining territory. The wounded, who lay in No Man's Land between the trenches, were left to perish.

The French tried to rescue them under the protection of the Geneva flag, the emblem of the Red Cross, but we only sneered at them and shot it to bits. The impulse to shoot down the enemy surpassed every human feeling. The Red Cross flag had lost all its value for us when it was raised by the French. Mistrust was nurtured among us. We were told that the enemy misused the flag and that we must shoot down the men that bore it.

We repulsed all attacks until they gradually ceased. We were now able to fortify our position, which we did with the greatest care, making it as strong as possible. Half the men remained on guard while the other half deepened and widened the trenches. A lively fire was maintained continuously by both sides. The losses were very large. Most of the men killed were shot through the head, the trench protecting the remainder of their bodies.

Firing increased in intensity as night fell. Although nothing could be seen we continued firing all the time because we thought this would prevent the enemy from making any attacks. Through the night munitions and material were brought up and new men arrived. Great quantities of sandbags were sent us, which were filled and used as a protection against bullets.

The pioneers were relieved toward morning and gathered in a farmyard behind the firing line. The farm had been spared by the cannon, and even all the stock remained. This booty was soon to be consumed. Several hundred soldiers came and a wild hunt ensued for ducks, chickens, geese, pigs, etc. About five hundred of these were caught, after which everybody began cooking. Not far away 80 cows and heifers were seized and turned over to the field kitchens. Hay and grain were carried away, even the strawstacks and barns were torn down and the lumber used for firewood. In a few hours a beautiful farm had become a ruin and the proprietor a beggar. I had seen the owner in the morning, but he had suddenly disappeared with his wife and children, and nobody knew where he was.

The next night we were sent into the trenches again. There was little to do, so we talked with the men who had re-enforced us from the interior of Germany. They knew absolutely nothing of our retreat from the Marne and were astonished when we pictured to them the events of the last few days.

The following morning we left the trench before daybreak and went into quarters at Cerney-en-Dormois. We were billeted in the middle of the village in an abandoned house. Our field kitchens failed to arrive, so we prepared ourselves a meal of fowl and whatever else we discovered. Whenever anyone espied a chicken there

were twenty men racing for it. Toward evening long provision trains arrived, as well as fresh troops. They went to the front in long columns and relieved the exhausted men.

Soon the whole village was crowded with soldiers. After a rest of two days the regular nightly pioneer service was resumed. Every night we were sent to the front-line trenches to build wire obstacles. The French found us out by the noise required to set up the posts, so that we had fresh losses almost every night. We completed the task of setting up barbed wire entanglements in the sector assigned to us in about fourteen days. During this period we rested by day, but at night we went out regularly. But our rest had many interruptions, for the enemy artillery bombarded the village regularly. This always happened at certain hours, for instance, in the beginning, every noon from twelve to two o'clock, fifty to eighty shells fell in the village. Sometimes they were shrapnel, sent over by the field artillery. We soon grew accustomed to this, despite the fact that soldiers of other detachments were killed or wounded daily. Once or twice during this noon bombardment a shrapnel shell fell into our room and burst without doing much damage. The room would be filled with dust and smoke, yet no one would think of leaving. This firing was repeated daily with ever-increasing violence.

CHAPTER XII.

The inhabitants of Cerney who had remained, mostly old people, were all gathered in a barn because of the fear of spies. Here they were guarded by soldiers. As the enemy bombardment always occurred at a certain hour, our commander thought that somebody in the village was in communication with the enemy by means of a concealed telephone. It was even discovered that the hands of the church clock had been turned and at one time stood at six and shortly after at five o'clock. The spy who signaled the enemy by means of this clock was not discovered, neither anyone using a concealed telephone instrument. In order to catch the right one all the civilians were interned in the barn. These civilian prisoners were supplied in the same way the soldiers were, with food and drink, but were also exposed, like the soldiers, to the daily bombardments, which in time destroyed the whole village. Two women and one child had been killed in this manner and yet the people were not removed. Almost daily houses caught fire in the village and burned down. The shells were now falling regularly at eight o'clock in the evening. They were of heavy caliber. At eight o'clock promptly, when the first shell arrived, we left the town. There followed, in short intervals, fourteen to fifteen shells, the "iron ration." We believed that the French cannon sending these shells were brought up somewhere at night.

When we returned from our promenade, as we called the nightly excursion, we were sent to our places in the trenches. There we were used for every kind of duty. One evening we were called up to fortify a farm taken from the French the previous day. We had to build machine guns and place them.

Our camp at Cerney-en-Dormois was continually under heavy bombardment. Finally rest became impossible. The heavy-caliber shells struck the roofs of the houses and penetrated to the cellars. The civilians were taken away after several had been killed by shells. After about ten weeks in this country we were sent to another part of the front. Our destination was kept from us.

At the depot at Challenger we entered a train waiting for us. It consisted of second and third class coaches. The train rolled slowly through the beautiful country, and for the first time since the war began we saw the light behind the front. All the ferrets, crossings and bridges were occupied by the military. Everywhere was activity. Long trains loaded with agricultural machinery of every variety stood at the larger stations. The crew of our train consisted of officials of the Prussian state railways. They had traversed this country often and told us that there was no agricultural machine in all occupied territory. The same thing happened with all machinery of industry that could be spared. Everywhere we saw the finest kind of machinery en route to Germany.

In the evening we passed Sedan. Early the next morning we arrived at Montmedy. Here we had to leave the train and were permitted to go to the city for several hours. Montmedy is the principal base of the Fifth army, commanded by the crown prince. Enormous stores of war materials were gathered here. Added to this there was the army field post institute and the executive offices of the railways as well as a number of hospitals.

It was very lively in Montmedy. Many wounded men were seen strolling through the city and an especially large number of officers all at home were attached to single etapes. In faultless uniform, carrying riding whips, they strolled around. This point was about thirty-five kilometers behind Verdun and one hundred kilometers from our former position. As we marched away shortly after noon we suspected that we were being taken to the neighborhood of Verdun.

CHAPTER XIII.

After a march of 15 kilometers we

reached the town of Jametz. Here everything was offered us by the inhabitants. We were treated with coffee, milk and meat. We went on early the next morning and in the evening arrived at Damvillers, where we heard that we were about five kilometers behind the firing line. The same evening we advanced to the little village of Waville, which was our destination.

We took up our quarters in a house which had been abandoned by its inhabitants. We were attached to the Ninth reserve division and the next morning went to our position. Fifteen of us were assigned to duty with an infantry company. On the entire line, as far as we could see, there was no musketry fire. Only the artillery on both sides kept up a weak action. We were not accustomed to this quietude in the trenches, but the men who had been there for some time told us that frequently not a single shot was fired for days and that no activity was shown.

Enormous forces of artillery were being mobilized. New guns continued to arrive every day and were installed without going into action. The transportation of munitions and material was also very brisk. We did not suspect at this time that this was the first preparation for a great offensive.

After four weeks in this vicinity we were sent to another part of the front, once more without being told our destination. We marched away and in the afternoon we arrived at Dun-sur-Meuse.

Hardly had we entered the town when the German crown prince, accompanied by several officers and a large pack of hunting dogs rode by.

"Good morning, pioneers!" he called out to us.

Then he inspected our unit closely. He spoke to our captain, after which one of the officers of his staff took us to a Red Cross establishment where we were banqueted and given wine.

The headquarters of the Hohenzollern heir were located at Dun-sur-Meuse. The ladies of the Red Cross treated us cordially. We asked them if all passing troops were as well treated as we had been.

"Oh, yes," a young woman answered "but only a few come here. The crown prince, however, has an especial attachment for the pioneers."

We were quartered over night. Soldiers told us that Dun-sur-Meuse was the headquarters of the Fifth army. There were gay times in the town, with an open-air concert every day. The officers often received women visitors from Germany.

After a hard march we arrived at the front positions. In a veritable labyrinth of trenches, filled with water, we had the utmost difficulty finding our way about. Finally we arrived at the very front. The French were only ten meters away and before we had been there two days we took part in a hand grenade encounter.

Some distance back we established a pioneer depot. Twenty-five of our men did nothing but assemble hand grenades. We were soon settled and ready for an emergency.

In camp we were divided among various troops. They showed us how the warfare waged at this front required every imaginable kind of fighting. There was mining, sapping, hand grenade throwing, mine throwing and light patrol battles. This went on day after day and night after night, with 48 hours in the trench and a 12-hour rest. The shortage of men made a less strenuous schedule impossible.

CHAPTER XIV.

The entire forest of Argonne was blown to pieces when we arrived. Everywhere was artillery, which maintained a fire on the villages behind the enemy's positions.

One of the many batteries which we constantly had to pass on our march from the camp to the front, was in action when we reached it.

I asked one of the gunners what his objective was and he replied that it was any village within range.

A substitute first lieutenant, in charge of the battery, stood nearby. One of my comrades asked him if he did not think there might be women and children in those villages.

"That would make no difference," the first lieutenant replied. "Women and children are French, so what does it matter? This breed has to be exterminated in order that this nation shall not think of war again for a century."

This day was designated for a storming attack and we were obliged to be in our positions at seven o'clock in the morning. Promptly at 8:30 regiment No. 67 was ordered to attack. Pioneers led the way. They were supplied with hand grenades. These week-ly attacks were opened half an hour before the infantry went over by a storm of artillery fire. The artillery action required very careful calculation because the distance which separated our position from the enemy's was very slight. It varied from three to one hundred meters; never any more. At the point where we attacked the distance was 20 meters.

Promptly at eight o'clock the artillery started. The first three shells struck a ditch, but the following ones hit fairly, that is, right in the French trenches. Once the artillery had the proper range whole salvos of batteries descended upon them with admirable exactness. The cries of the wounded were heard once more, a sign that many had been hit.

An artillery officer acted as observer in the foremost sense and directed the fire by phone. Promptly at 8:30 o'clock the artillery fires stopped and we attacked. The eleventh company of the Sixty-seventh regiment, of which I spoke before, came under the fire of

the enemy's machine guns and 18 of its men were killed after they had only proceeded a few steps outside the trench.

Dead and wounded men lay among the branches and the trees everywhere on the ground. Every man who was able to run sped forward to reach the enemy trench as quickly as possible. A part of the enemy defended itself desperately in a trench filled with water and mud. A terrible hand-to-hand fight resulted. We stood in water up to our knees.

Men, severely wounded, lay in the mud, holding their mouths and noses above the water. During the fighting they were trampled more deeply into the dirt under our feet for we could not see where we were going; we could only "roll up" the entire trench.

The section won was fortified with all possible haste. Once more we had acquired at a heavy cost in human life a few meters of the Argonne forest. This trench, which we took, had changed hands many times and even now we were preparing for the usual counter-attacks.

Presently the "jackasses" went into action. The "jackasses" are the guns of the French mountain artillery. They were so named because they were drawn by mules. They are guns of flat trajectory, kept from 50 to 100 meters behind the enemy lines. The shells from these cannon flew directly over our heads and cut their way through the branches at a high rate of speed. Because of the high velocity of the shell and the short distance it travels the detonation when the shot is fired and the noise of the explosion, sound almost at the same instant. These "jackasses" are greatly feared by the German soldiers because they are kept working day and night.

It was winter and very cold. The trenches had been filled with water and were now nothing except deep ditches of mud. Under these conditions, through the ice-cold nights, our routine consisted of 48 hours duty and 12 hours rest. Every week a storming attack was made, the success of which was entirely out of proportion to the enormous losses. In all of the four months I was in the Argonne forests we gained 400 meters. The following data will indicate how heavy a price was paid in lives for this little piece of France.

Each regiment had its own cemetery. There was the One Hundred and Forty-fifth infantry regulars, the Sixty-seventh and One Hundred and Seventy-third infantry regulars and the One Hundred and Fifth Hirschberg battalion. On the day we were relieved from duty in the Argonne forests there were more dead in these cemeteries than there were survivors of the several regiments. The Sixty-seventh regiment had more than 2,000 dead. All the victims were members of that unit except a few pioneers who had been assigned to duty with it. There was never a day without some loss of life, and on the days when the storming attacks were made, death had an extremely large harvest.

CHAPTER XV.

Each day in the Argonne levied its toll of victims, sometimes many, sometimes only a few. It is only natural that the morale of the soldiers should not be at its best under these circumstances. With the same indifference that the men had once gone to their work to support their wives and children they now went into action. This business of killing had become daily routine. Whenever we discussed our situation, the crown prince and the commander of the Sixteenth army corps, Lieutenant General von Mudra fared worst.

The troops in the Argonne forest belonged to the Sixteenth corps, the Thirty-third and Thirty-fourth divisions. Neither the crown prince nor von Mudra had ever been seen in the trenches. One of the members on the crown prince's staff was the old field marshal, Count von Haeseler, former commander of the Sixteenth corps, who, before the war, was considered a human fiend. These three called Clover Leaf by the soldiers, were far more despised by most of the men than were the French cannon, which sought our miserable lives.

The Hohenzollern heir did not find life hard at his headquarters several kilometers behind the battle front. It was easy for him to make himself popular with his order to go ahead at the cost of thousands of lives. He was very well liked among the high officers

with whom he sat behind a stove although the progress was not fast enough for them.

He honored von Mudra with the order "Pour la Merite," but of the soldiers he never had a thought.

They had not seen a bed for months. They were never given a chance to remove their clothing.

They received only shells and steel and were almost eaten up by vermin. They were covered with lice. There was scarcely enough water for drinking purposes, so say nothing of water for washing their clothes.

Our hair and beards were long and when we were given some hours of rest the lice would not let us sleep. While we were in the trenches the bullets did not do much damage but daily men were killed by indirect fire. The thousands which whizzed through the air every minute flew over our heads.

They struck trees or branches and glanced off, striking the men in the trenches. Falling to pierce their object directly they tore terrible gaping wounds as they entered the men's bodies sideways. Whenever we heard charges concerning dum-dum bullets, we thought of these cross-shots, although we never doubted the existence of the dum-dum.

Whether or not dum-dum bullets (To be continued)

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