

These two brief chapters were taken from a book entitled Over The Top, written in 1917 by Arthur Guy Empey. When World War I broke out in Europe, Empey--who was an American--quickly left the United States and joined a British unit. He served his entire two-year tour before the U.S. joined the war. By the time he returned home, Americans were in the middle of a fierce debate about whether they should play a role in the conflict, and this book was Empey's contribution to the discussion. The passage you will read describes Empey's daily life, which was typical for a WWI soldier--long, grueling, boring days in the trenches punctuated by the occasional dramatic attack.

***Note:** Empey regularly uses the slang terms "Tommy" and "Fritz." Tommy means British soldiers, Fritz means German soldiers. It is very similar to how American soldiers are often called GI Joes.*

"Over The Top," by Sgt. Arthur Empey

CHAPTER X: "THE DAY'S WORK"

I was fast learning that there is a regular routine about the work of the trenches, although it is badly upset at times by the Germans.

The real work in the fire trench commences at sundown. Tommy is like a burglar, he works at night.

Just as it begins to get dark the word "stand to" is passed from traverse to traverse, and the men get busy. The first relief, consisting of two men to a traverse, mount the fire step, one man looking over the top, while the other sits at his feet, ready to carry messages or to inform the platoon officer of any report made by the sentry as to his observations in No Man's Land. The sentry is not allowed to relax his watch for a second. If he is questioned from the trench or asked his orders, he replies without turning around or taking his eyes from the expanse of dirt in front of him. The remainder of the occupants of his traverse either sit on the fire step, with bayonets fixed, ready for any emergency, or if lucky, and a dugout happens to be in the near vicinity of the traverse, and if the night is quiet, they are permitted to go to same and try and snatch a few winks of sleep. Little sleeping is done; generally the men sit around, smoking fags and seeing who can tell the biggest lie. Some of them perhaps, with their feet in water, would write home sympathizing with the "governor" because he was laid up with a cold, contracted by getting his feet, wet on his way to work in Woolwich Arsenal. If a man should

manage to doze off, likely as not he would wake with a start as the clammy, cold feet of a rat passed over his face, or the next relief stepped on his stomach while stumbling on their way to relieve the sentries in the trench.

Just try to sleep with a belt full of ammunition around you, your rifle bolt biting into your ribs, entrenching tool handle sticking into the small of your back, with a tin hat for a pillow; and feeling very damp and cold, with "cooties" boring for oil in your arm pits, the air foul from the stench of grimy human bodies and smoke from a juicy pipe being whiffed into your nostrils, then you will not wonder why Tommy occasionally takes a turn in the trench for a rest.

While in a front-line trench, orders forbid Tommy from removing his boots, puttees, clothing, or equipment. The "cooties" take advantage of this order and mobilize their forces, and Tommy swears vengeance on them and mutters to himself, "just wait until I hit rest billets and am able to get my own back."

Just before daylight the men "turn to" and tumble out of the dug-outs, man the fire step until it gets light, or the welcome order "stand down" is given. Sometimes before "stand down" is ordered, the command "five rounds rapid" is passed along the trench. This means that each man must rest his rifle on the top and fire as rapidly as possible five shots aimed toward the German trenches, and then duck (with the emphasis on the "duck"). There is a great rivalry between the opposing forces to get their rapid fire off first, because the early bird, in this instance, catches the worm--sort of gets the jump on the other fellow, catching him unawares.

We had a Sergeant in our battalion named Warren. He was on duty with his platoon in the fire trench one afternoon when orders came up from the rear that he had been granted seven days' leave for Blighty, and would be relieved at five o'clock to proceed to England.

He was tickled to death at these welcome tidings and regaled his more or less envious mates beside him on the fire step with the good times in store for him. He figured it out that in two days' time he would arrive at Waterloo Station, London, and then--seven days' bliss!

At about five minutes to five he started to fidget with his rifle, and then suddenly springing up on the fire step with a muttered, "I'll send over a couple of souvenirs to Fritz, so that he'll miss me when I leave," he stuck his rifle over the top and fired two shots, when "crack" went a

bullet and he tumbled off the step, fell into the mud at the bottom of the trench, and lay still in a huddled heap with a bullet hole in his forehead.

At about the time he expected to arrive at Waterloo Station he was laid to rest in a little cemetery behind the lines. He had gone to Blighty.

In the trenches one can never tell,—it is not safe to plan very far ahead.

After “stand down” the men sit on the fire step or repair to their respective dugouts and wait for the “rum issue” to materialize. Immediately following the rum, comes breakfast, brought up from the rear. Sleeping is then in order unless some special work turns up.

Around 12.30 dinner shows up. When this is eaten the men try to amuse themselves until “tea” appears at about four o’clock, then “stand to” and they carry on as before.

While in rest billets Tommy gets up about six in the morning, washes up, answers roll call, is inspected by his platoon officer, and has breakfast. At 8.45 he parades (drills) with his company or goes on fatigue according to the orders which have been read out by the Orderly Sergeant the night previous.

Between 11.30 and noon he is dismissed, has his dinner, and is “on his own” for the remainder of the day, unless he has clicked for a digging or working party, and so it goes on from day to day, always “looping the loop” and looking forward to Peace and Blighty.

Sometimes, while engaged in a “cootie” hunt you think. Strange to say, but it is a fact, while Tommy is searching his shirt, serious thoughts come to him. Many a time, when performing this operation, I have tried to figure out the outcome of the war and what will happen to me.

My thoughts generally ran in this channel:

Will I emerge safely from the next attack? If I do, will I skin through the following one, and so on? While your mind is wandering into the future it is likely to be rudely brought to earth by a Tommy interrupting with, “What’s good for rheumatism?”

Then you have something else to think of. Will you come out of this war crippled and tied into knots with rheumatism, caused by the wet and mud of trenches and dugouts? You give it up as a bad job and generally saunter over to the nearest estaminet to drown your moody forebodings in a glass of sickening French beer, or to try your luck at the always present game of “House.” You can hear the sing-song voice of a Tommy

droning out the numbers as he extracts the little squares of cardboard from the bag between his feet.

CHAPTER XI: “OVER THE TOP”

In 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 book, 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 death-like 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 Pain's greatest display into the shade. The constant pup, pup, 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 eighteen-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 parados 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 barrage 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 politest 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 sand bag parapet. How I got up that ladder I will never know. The first ten feet out in front was agony. Then we passed through the 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 mid-air, 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 fine 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.