

# "Over the Top"

By An American Soldier Who Went  
**ARTHUR GUY EMPY**  
Machine Gunner Serving in France

## CHAPTER II.

### Blighty to Rest Billets.

The next morning the captain sent for me and informed me: "Empy, as a recruiting sergeant you are a wash-out," and sent me to a training depot. After arriving at this place, I was hustled to the quartermaster stores and received an awful shock. The quartermaster sergeant spread a water-proof sheet on the ground and commenced throwing a miscellaneous assortment of straps, buckles and other paraphernalia into it. I thought he would never stop, but when the pile reached to my knees he paused long enough to say, "Next, No. 217, Arris, B company." I gazed in bewilderment at the pile of junk in front of me, and then my eyes wandered around looking for the wagon which was to carry it to barracks. I was rudely brought to earth by the "quarter" exclaiming, "Ere, you, 'op it; tyke it aw'y; blind my eyes, 'e's looking for 'is batman to 'elp 'im carry it."

Struggling under the load, with frequent pauses for rest, I reached our barracks (large car barns), and my platoon leader came to the rescue. It was a marvel to me how quickly he assembled the equipment. After he had completed the task, he showed me how to adjust it on my person. Pretty soon I stood before him a proper Tommy Atkins in heavy marching order, feeling like an overloaded camel.

On my feet were heavy-soled boots, studded with hobnails, the toes and heels of which were re-reinforced by steel half-moons. My legs were incased in woolen puttees, olive drab in color, with my trousers overlapping them at the top. Then a woolen khaki tunic, under which was a bluish gray woolen shirt, minus a collar; beneath this shirt a woolen belly band about six inches wide, held in place by tie-strings of white tape. On my head was a heavy woolen trench cap, with huge earlaps buttoned over the top. Then the equipment: A canvas belt, with ammunition pockets, and two wide canvas straps like suspenders, called "D" straps, fastened to the belt in front, passing over each shoulder, crossing in the middle of my back, and attached by buckles to the rear of the belt. On the right side of the belt hung a water bottle, covered with felt; on the left side was my bayonet and scabbard, and trenching tool handle, this handle strapped to the bayonet scabbard. In the rear was my trenching tool, carried in a canvas case. This tool was a combination pick and spade. A canvas haversack was strapped to the left side of the belt, while on my back was the pack, also of canvas, held in place by two canvas straps over the shoulders; suspended on the bottom of the pack was my mess tin or canteen in a neat little canvas case. My waterproof sheet, looking like a jelly roll, was strapped on top of the pack, with a wooden stick for cleaning the breach of the rifle projecting from each end. On a lanyard around my waist hung a huge jack-knife with a can-opener attachment. The pack contained my overcoat, an extra pair of socks, change of underwear, hold all (containing knife, fork, spoon, comb, toothbrush, lather brush, shaving soap, and a razor made of tin, with "Made in England" stamped on the blade; when trying to shave with this it made you wish that you were at war with Patagonia, so that you could have a "hollow ground" stamped "Made in Germany"); then your housewife, button-cleaning outfit, consisting of a brass button stick, two stiff brushes, and a box of "Soldiers' Friend" paste; then a shoe brush and a box of dubbin, a writing pad, indelible pencil, envelopes, and pay book, and personal belongings, such as a small mirror, a deerskin razor and a sheaf of unnumbered letters, and fags. In your haversack you carry your iron rations, meaning a tin of bully beef, four biscuits and a can containing tea, sugar and Oxo cubes; a couple of pipes and a pack of shag, a tin of rifle oil, and a pull-through. Tommy generally carries the oil with his rations; it gives the cheese a sort of sardine taste.

Add to this a first-aid pouch and a long, uncainly rifle patterned after the Daniel Boone period, and you have an idea of a British soldier in Blighty.

Before leaving for France, this rifle is taken from him and he is issued with a Lee-Enfield short trench rifle and a ration bag.

In France he receives two gas helmets, a sheepskin coat, rubber mackintosh, steel helmet, two blankets, torn-shell goggles, a balacava helmet, gloves and a tin of antifoetibite grease which is excellent for greasing the boots. Add to this the weight of his rations, and can you blame Tommy for growling at a twenty-kilo route march?

Having served as sergeant major in the United States cavalry, I tried to tell the English drill sergeants their business, but it did not work. They immediately put me as batman in their mess. Many a greasy dish of stew was accidentally spilled over them.

I would sooner fight than be a waiter, so when the order came through from headquarters calling for a draft of 250 re-enforcements for France, I volunteered.

Then we went before the M. O. (medical officer) for another physical examination. This was very brief. He asked our names and numbers and said "Fit," and we went out to fight.

We were put into troop trains and sent to Southampton, where we de-trained, and had our trench rifles issued to us. Then in columns of twos we went up the gangplank of a little steamer lying alongside the dock.

At the head of the gangplank there was an old sergeant, who directed that we line ourselves along both rails of the ship. Then he ordered us to take life belts from the racks overhead and put them on. I have crossed the ocean several times and knew I was not seasick, but when I buckled on that life belt I had a sensation of sickness.

After we got out into the stream all I could think of was that there were a million German submarines with a torpedo on each, across the warhead of which was inscribed my name and address.

After five hours we came alongside a pier and disembarked. I had attained another one of my ambitions, I was "somewhere in France." We slept in the open that night on the side of the road. About six the next morning we were ordered to entrain. I looked around for the passenger coaches, but all I could see on the siding were cattle cars. We climbed into these. On the side of each car was a sign reading "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8." When we got inside of the cars, we thought that perhaps the sign painter had reversed the order of things. After 48 hours in these trucks we detrained at Rouen. At this place we went through an intensive training for ten days.

The training consisted of the rudiments of trench warfare. Trenches had been dug, with barbed wire entanglements, bombing saps, dugouts, observation posts and machine gun emplacements. We were given a smattering of trench cooking, sanitation, bomb throwing, reconnoitering, listening posts, constructing and repairing barbed wire, "carrying in" parties,

"cooties" were constantly with me. "Cooties," or body lice, are the bane of Tommy's existence.

The aristocracy of the trenches very seldom call them "cooties," they speak of them as fleas.

To an American flea means a small insect armed with a bayonet, who is wont to jab it into you and then hop-skip and jump to the next place to be attacked. There is an advantage in having fleas on you instead of "cooties" in that in one of his extended jumps said flea is liable to land on the fellow next to you; he has the typical energy and push of the American, while the "cootie" has the bulldog tenacity of the Englishman; he holds on and consolidates or digs in until his meal is finished.

There is no way to get rid of them permanently. No matter how often you bathe, and that is not very often, or how many times you change your underwear, your friends the "cooties" are always in evidence. The billets are infested with them, especially so if there is straw on the floor.

I have taken a bath and put on brand-new underwear; in fact, a complete change of uniform, and then turned in for the night. The next morning my shirt would be full of them. It is a common sight to see eight or ten soldiers sitting under a tree with their shirts over their knees engaging in a "shirt hunt."

At night about half an hour before "lights out," you can see the Tommies grouped around a candle, trying, in its dim light, to rid their underwear of the vermin. A popular and very quick method is to take your shirt and drawers, and run the seams back and forward in the flame from a candle and burn them out. This practice is dangerous, because you are liable to burn holes in the garments if you are not careful.

Recruits generally sent to Blighty for a brand of insect powder advertised as "Good for body lice." The advertisement is quite right; the powder is good for "cooties;" they simply thrive on it.

The older men of our battalion were wiser and made scratchers out of wood. These were rubbed smooth with a bit of stone or sand to prevent splinters. They were about eighteen inches long, and Tommy guarantees that a scratcher of this length will reach any part of the body which may be attacked. Some of the fellows were lazy and only made their scratchers twelve inches, but many a night when on guard, looking over the top from the fire step of the front-line trench, they would have given a thousand "quid" for the other six inches.

Once while we were in rest billets an Irish Hussar regiment camped in an open field opposite our billet. After they had picketed and fed their horses, a general shirt hunt took place. The troopers ignored the call "Dinner up," and kept on with their search for big game. They had a curious method of procedure. They hung their shirts over a hedge and beat them with their trenching tool handles.

I asked one of them why they didn't pick them off by hand, and he answered, "We haven't had a bath for nine weeks or a change of clothes. If I tried to pick the 'cooties' off my shirt, I would be here for duration of war." After taking a close look at his shirt, I agreed with him; it was alive.

The greatest shock a recruit gets when he arrives at his battalion in France is to see the men engaging in a "cootie" hunt. With an air of contempt and disgust he avoids the company of the older men, until a couple of days later, in a torment of itching, he also has to resort to a shirt hunt, or spend many a sleepless night of misery. During these hunts there are lots of pertinent remarks bandied back and forth among the explorers, such as, "Say, Bill, I'll swap you two little ones for a big one," or, "I've got a black one here that looks like Kaiser Bill."

One sunny day in the front-line trench, I saw three officers sitting outside of their dugout ("cooties" are no respecters of rank; I have even noticed a suspicious uneasiness about a certain well-known general), one of them was



The Author's Identification Disk.

methods used in attack and defense, wiring parties, mass formation, and the procedure for poison-gas attacks.

On the tenth day we again met our friends "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8." Thirty-six hours more of misery, and we arrived at the town of P—

After unloading our rations and equipment, we lined up on the road in columns of fours waiting for the order to march.

A dull rumbling could be heard. The sun was shining. I turned to the man on my left and asked, "What's the noise, Bill?" He did not know, but his face was of a pea-green color. Jim, on my right, also did not know, but suggested that I "awsk" the sergeant.

Coming towards us was an old grizzled sergeant, properly fed up with the war, so I "awsked" him.

"Think it's going to rain, sergeant?" He looked at me in contempt, and grunted, "Ow's it a-goin' ter rain with the bloomin' sun a-shinin'?" I looked guilty.

"Them's the guns up the line, me lad, and you'll get enough of 'em before you gets back to Blighty."

My knees seemed to wobble, and I squeaked out a weak "Oh!"

Then we started our march up to the line in ten-kilo treks. After the first day's march we arrived at our rest billets. In France they call them rest billets, because while in them Tommy works seven days a week and on the eighth day of the week he is given twenty-four hours "on his own."

Our billet was a spacious affair, a large barn on the left side of the road, which had one hundred entrances, ninety-nine for shells, rats, wind and rain, and the hundredth one for Tommy. I was tired out, and using my shrapnel-proof helmet (shrapnel proof until a piece of shrapnel hits it), or tin hat, for a pillow, lay down in the straw, and was soon fast asleep. I must have slept about two hours when I awoke with a prickling sensation all over me. As I thought, the straw had worked through my uniform. I woke up the fellow lying on my left, who had been up the line before, and asked him:

"Does the straw bother you, mate? It's worked through my uniform and I can't sleep."

In a sleepy voice he answered, "That ain't straw, them's cooties." From that time on my friends the

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Proverb.  
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