

Over the Top With the Johnny Rebs

Visit to Fighting Line Shows American Individuality of Frontier Days Still Existent

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"Over the Border," &c.
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"YOU are a writer," said the "runner" as we walked along. "I've read a lot of this war stuff, but I've never seen that correctly described. How would you go about to do it?"

"That" happened to be the whistling rush of a minnenwerfer shell high overhead. While listening till it merged in a distant explosion I also realized that it had never been described—for a cogent reason; it can't be done. When I say that it is a cross between a whinny, a whine and a whistle I'm as far from the mark as the best of them. The note of a high explosive shell that followed was shriller and cleaner cut, but equally indescribable. When it plugged a big hole, like one sees in the battle pictures, close to our road I got my first real war thrill; one that was keener perhaps because I really had no business there.

Most Careful of Correspondents.

You see G. H. Q., alias general headquarters, is more careful of its correspondents than their own mothers could possibly be. Both for their sakes and that of the troops upon whom German fire might be drawn we are restrained from unnecessary movements along the front. Very politely, but most positively, I had been informed that an "observation post"—usually a few kilometers behind the front trenches—would be about the best G. H. Q. could do for me. Thanks, however, to a lucky combination of low visibility, produced by a misty rain, and a complaisant Southern Major whom I found with his staff burrowed under the ruins of a village, here was I marching along a camouflaged road to the music of bursting shells to spend the night in a front line trench.

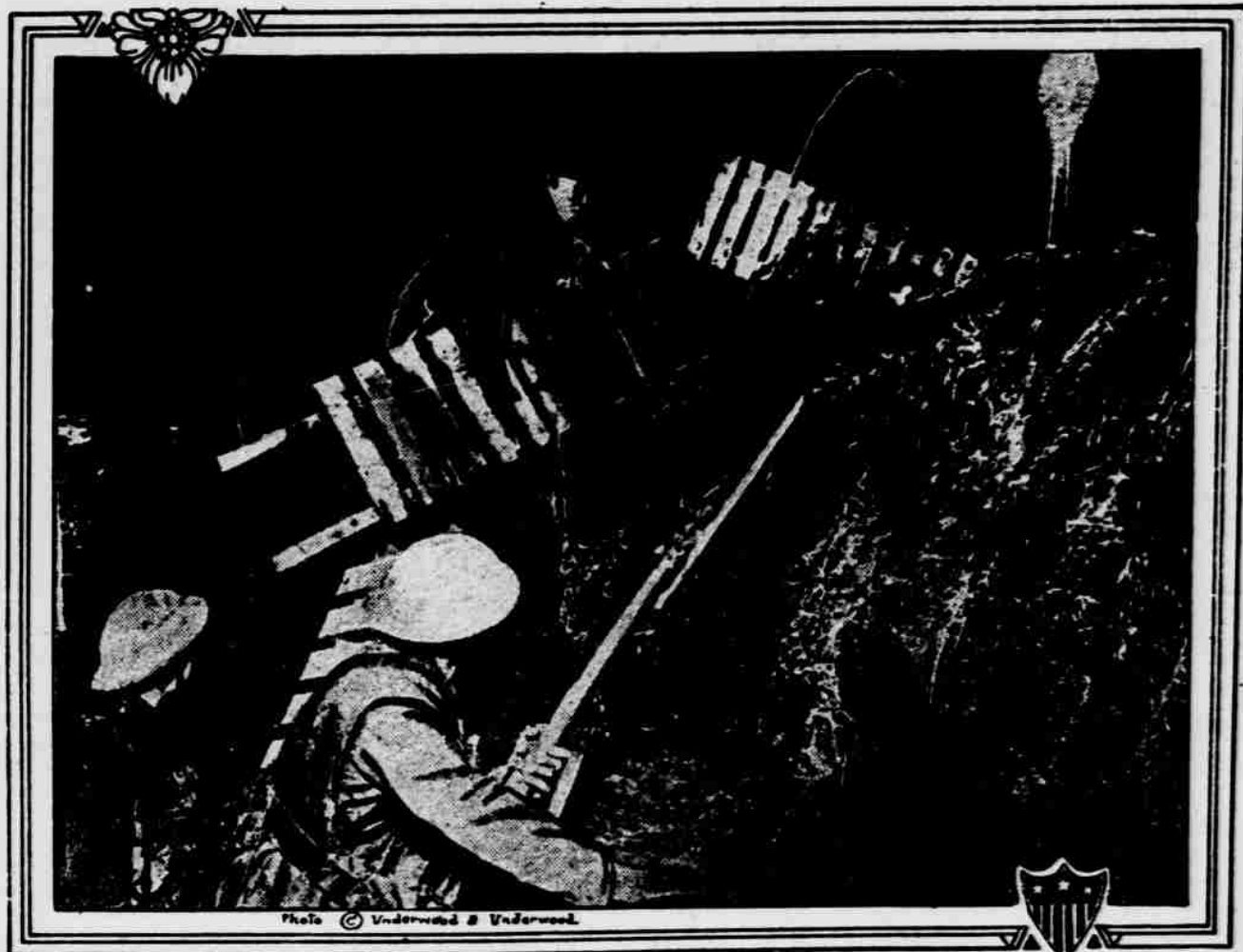
Through shell pocked fields and past shattered farmsteads the "runner" led on into a wet wood. Now than a weeping wood in winter one can hardly imagine anything more comfortless, and the prospect was not improved by zigzag lines of clayey trenches fenced with belts of rusted wire that crisscrossed it everywhere. But perhaps because of a faint resemblance to their own Southern "piney woods" the troops that held it appeared quite at home. Though it was just past 5 supper was in full swing. Blue smoke from half a hundred shacks and dugouts hung low on the wet air mingling with satisfying odors. Introduced by the "runner" at "Delmonico's," a real Bairnsfather shack, I joined a brace of Lieutenants in soldiers' chow of steak and potatoes, bread and coffee, topped off with rice and syrup.

It was still light when we finished and viewed through a thin haze of tobacco smoke from the changed viewpoint induced by comfortable repletion, the shacks and dugouts, clayey trenches, rusted wire tangles, even the weeping wood, appeared if not homelike at least livable. One could understand how a man can get so accustomed to shrapnel helmets, trench coats, mud boots, gas masks and other impedimenta as to feel uncomfortable without them.

Typical Southern Types Seen.

Through the open doorway I could see men passing to and fro along the duckboards that led from post to post. They were strong Southern types—mouths thin lipped and firm, eyes steady, brows broad but sloping quickly to short sharp chins. The faces, quiet almost to the point of sullenness, bore in hard print the whole story of the South, mountain vendettas, family feuds, moonshining, the Ku Klux Klan, race wars, all of that dread atmosphere which Mark Twain caught so wonderfully in "Huckleberry Finn."

"They're shuah natural soldiers." The elder Lieutenant confirmed my impression in a slow, Southern drawl. "All have twenty generations of private wa'h behind them. Very few of their ancestors, s'eh, ever died in their beds, and even yet a revenue officer isn't what you could call a good insurance risk in the back counties. Instead of a rattle their mothers gave them a gun to play with in the cradle. At 5 they'd be knocked head over heels by the



Eerie sights are witnessed in front line trenches when working parties are revealed by the light of star shells.

recoil of pop's shotgun. At 10 they'd be trailing deer in the mountains. Shuah, they're sullen fighters, and that goes a fine specimen."

In the face of the man who passed just then was concentrated all of the hardness, almost vindictive reserve, undiluted by the softer qualities that toned it in the others. Carrying his rifle in the hollow of his arm, he lounged along in a swinging hunter stride quite unmilitary. One glance at him supplemented the Lieutenant's short biography.

"He was a Tennessee moonshiner and simply can't stand discipline. But he's the finest shot we've got; can pick the eye out of a Boche at 300 yards. To get the best out of him we just gave him a pass good anywhere along the lines and let him go to it. So every day he goes on his lonely stalk Boches through No Man's Land. When he draws a bead on one it's good night, nurse, for he never lets loose till he's certain. Some day Fritz will get him, I suppose, but not before he's paid an awful price in lives."

"Raw Americans" Alarm Fritz.

"And he's not the only one," the other Lieutenant put in. "We have a dozen snipers that go out like that—not to mention the raids we pull off almost every night. Fritz over that thought he was going to have a cinch with us raw Americans. But he's found our chaps so nasty I believe he'd just about as soon change back to the French."

"They so keen for it," the other continued, "we have an embarrassing choice of volunteers for the raids. All to-day they've been sidling up to me in ones and twos and threes—'Any chance to-night, s'eh?' When I say no they look glum as a pack of girls that have been done out of a dance, but if I'd taken all that offered we shuah would have had to attack in fo'ce. If you want some action for yu' money, s'eh," he concluded, "you had better come along."

"Better come along?" I, whose ambition had been to "go over the top" ever since the beginning of the war! Lives there a correspondent who would not have jumped at the chance? I saw myself putting one over on our dear grandmother, the G. H. Q., and I took him up at once.

It was then only half past 5. The patrol would not go out till 9 and I spent the remainder of the daylight following a "runner" through the wicker lined trenches from one to another of the company's four posts. The more I saw of them the more I wondered that troops could ever be got to go up against them. Imagine thousands of miles of rusted barbed wire running in a tangled belt forty feet wide in front of a trench laid out with frequent salients that permit enfilading fire on attacking troops. Behind the first line a second wire belt, then another trench system, finally belt after belt of wire running back into the open country through which I had come.

Though it had been raining for days steady pumping had kept the water below the level of the duckboards in the trench bottoms. The "runner" spoke quite proudly of their "dryness," and I suppose they were—as dryness goes in a wet wood. The dugouts, too, each had a well below the floor level, from which excess water could be pumped out. Judged by war standards these Southern troops might be said to be living in the lap of luxury.

At Post 2, from where the raid was to be launched, I looked across No Man's Land at a low ridge that marked the first Boche trench. The dull prospect, misty with rain and partially veiled in evening gloom, appeared so quiet and peaceful it were difficult to imagine the Boches over there—on sentry in their dugouts eating, drinking, sleeping, just like the men about me. But, proving their presence, a minnenwerfer shell passed overhead.

"Better not look too long, s'eh," the "runner" warned. "It's true they kain't see y'u, but they have machine guns trained on this post and turn 'em loose now and then on gen'ral principles."

In a dugout, six by five outside of the bunk, I sat out the remainder of the evening with its inhabitants, three Lieutenants. The eldest could not have been 24, but all had led night raids on the Boche trenches, and while the guttering candle lifted and lowered their bright boys' faces in and out of the gloom they drawled with the soft Southern speech of risks and dangers that if they knew of them would turn gray the hair of their friends at home.

Made Himself a Target.

One had been shot through the shoulder only a couple of weeks ago while stalking a Boche sniper out on No Man's Land. Grinning, he explained, "You see, s'eh, that happened to be two of him and just when I was about ready to draw a bead on one the other plugged me. What did I do? Run, by golly! Shuah, how I do run. A bounding buck had nothing on me. I leaped sideways and endways, just tangoed it over the tops of the bresh, for three of my snipers were squirming up behind them and I knew if they kept firing long enough something was due to happen. It did, too, for my boys got both of them."

Fine work! But fancy making a shooting gallery out of yourself for the benefit of your snipers! Though I did not catch the name I felt sure it was he the patrol was discussing while an hour later we filed along the duckboards on our way to Number Two. "He's a nery cuss, that Lieutenant. But if he don't take care Fritz is going to present him with a steel medal one of these days."

That was something of a march—through wet woods in black rain along narrow duckboards that crossed deep trench systems and threaded barbed belts of wire. Though I held on to the belt of the man ahead he was invisible. Some-

times, too, we left the duckboards and wallowed along snaggy paths that I found difficult enough to follow in broad day next morning. How the leader found his way I cannot say. But a subdued challenge presently told that he had. While we filed up to go over the top and out through the wire I grinned guiltily but delightedly as I thought how cleverly I was doing up G. H. Q. They could not stop me now. I was going over the top—even if I got sent home for it or was shot at sunrise. But, alack and alas, through that black rain G. H. Q. extended its mandate from headquarters forty miles away. The soft drawl of the Lieutenant sounded close to my ear.

"I really didn't think you were serious, s'eh. I'd shuah like to have you go with me, but I'd never fo'give myself if you got you'self killed. It's contrary to o'ders, too. If G. H. Q. ev'n found it out I'd shuah get myself co't-martialled. If it's the same to you, s'eh, I'd rather you didn't come."

Disappointed but Still Game.

I was not going to increase that fine boy's embarrassment by putting up a disappointed howl. So though it wasn't "the same to me" by any means, I shook hands and wished him good luck, then joined the sentry up above and listened to the rustle of their passing through the wire till it was drowned by the pattering rain.

It was eerie watching there hour after hour in wet black silence that was broken only at long intervals by the boom of a distant gun, shriek of a passing shell. Imagination people the utter darkness beyond the parapet with sinister shapes. Small noises took on vast importance. Once I saw the dim form of the sentry stiffen in breathless attention. Rifle at hip, leaning slightly forward, he stood rigid, absolutely motionless, for fully ten minutes. My straining ears had also picked up the sound—clip, ping! clip, ping! the exact noise made by nippers severing wire! The Boche! I know that in the sentry's place I should have fired. But he stood frozen still and soon his whisper fell down through the darkness.

"It's water, s'eh, dropping from a tree onto the wire."

Shortly thereafter a star shell on our left suddenly laid out the wood's dark outline and No Man's Land under its bright blue flare. Came the sentry's hissed whisper: "Don't move! As the light faded, he said: 'A German sniper might be out thar. If a light goes up when we're out on patrol we freeze—with one foot up, if it chances to be raised. So long as you don't move they kain't see you.'"

Just then a second star shell broke on high followed by a burst of machine gun fire, rapid in its reverberation as the ripping of canvas. For five minutes it continued, but the pictures of German at-

(Continued on Sixth Page.)