

On the Road to Thiepval.

...of a Night and a Day during the Battle of the Somme. When a Little Group of "Tommys" Wanted to End Their Little Argument With the Man to Man, But the Boches' Point-Nines Cut In and Spoiled all the Fun.

CAPTAIN DAVID FALLON, M.C., of the British and Australian Armies.

On the road to Thiepval we were up in August, a year ago, at a place called Moquet Farm, which was very entrenched and well guarded every scientific instrument of war.

Our objective at this time, during the battle of the Somme, was a trench in the skyline, which enflaked the trench had been heavily fought and the position had changed perhaps a dozen times.

On August 14 we were resting on the avenue (not the one in New York) when my colonel sent for me and explained the position so far as we were able. I was given the assistance of two platoons, which were untrained, and after explaining the work to my N. C. O.'s, told them to prepare for the night's fireworks display.

The position had to be captured and held; that was all there was to it. Too many lives already had been sacrificed in the taking of the trench. When the sun had set I paraded my men and saw that everything necessary had been provided for them: three days' emergency rations had been issued. Every man carried 250 pounds of ammunition, and the reserves were each bringing up a box of Mills souvenirs (hand grenades) for Fritz.

Sandbags and guncotton had been provided to blow up any obstacle which we thought would hinder the march and to consolidate any position we won.

Everything was ready and I passed the word along for the fun to start. I led the boys through endless trenches, some in decent condition, others belled to the ground by the guns from Moquet Farm. It seemed that the Huns were aware of our advent, for no sooner had we started than they greeted us with everything they had in the way of explosive toys.

The night was illuminated by thousands of skyrockets and the flames of bursting shells and bombs, which appeared to jump out of every hole. The moon was peeping from beneath the clouds with a cynical eye, and I thought its light would be the death of us, for the success of any night operation depends largely upon total darkness. The bombardment gave the effect of a colossal fireworks display, only I had to keep

on the run the whole time, with no chance to stop and watch it. Shells, 5.9 high explosive—Fritz's favorite souvenir—and a wide assortment of bombs were distributed among us.

So far we hadn't replied, for up to then we hadn't seen a Boche—well, not a live one—and we were travelling along the land which no king or congress rules, and where graft is not attempted.

At last we caught up with the Huns. They couldn't run as fast as our boys, for they carry too much avoirdupois, and trench life is not very healthy for the slim and agile, let alone one who carries too much superfluous flesh.

We exchanged grenades as fast as one could present them, and I started to cry. "Send more bombs up!" for the reader must understand every bomb thrown must be sent up from the rear. No man can fight if he carries a rifle and bayonet in one hand and a box of "bills" in the other. Being lightly accoutred with revolver, bombs and my bayonet, I was able to keep the Huns on the run, and often I got so far ahead of my men that I found myself alone. I was all dressed up for the display, but I was running short of bombs.

The men, having to carry a box of bombs weighing about twenty pounds could not keep up with me, so the cry would reach me, "Not so fast, sir!" Now, friend, what would you have done in such a crisis? Your job when you come in touch with the enemy is to give them no time to rally and offer resistance, which would take the form of a counter attack, leaving them to collect the souvenirs and spoils of war. Sometimes I would gather a handful of bombs and pass them quickly along to the Huns. Other times I would shout words of encouragement to my boys to hurry and send up more valentines, which the Boches were not particularly enjoying.

All this time there were the whizzbangs, crumps of shells and pings from the "typewriters" (machine guns) all sending out their tune of hate. The Huns were hating, and so were we. We were strafing, and so were they, but we had the laugh on them, because we were the hunters and they the hunted.

Running through the Skyline trench, I nearly stumbled over a pair of legs which were sticking out of a funk-hole. With my left hand I gripped a leg and at the same time shouted, "Who's there?" and you could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard, "A Norfolk, sir."

Ye gods! I want you to understand that the Norfolks had captured and lost the same trench about three days before.

This unfortunate mother's son, or some one's ideal, was left "in his little wooden hut" all alone for three days.

I at once handed over my rations to him, detailed my man to look after him and sent a note on back for a stretcher. The man had had both legs shattered, and I had gripped a stump, which must have given him fearful agony.

I am thankful to say if I haven't done a good action in my life the getting away of this man and the saving of his life will, I am sure, make amends for all the deaths I am supposed to be responsible for.

As all good things must come to an end—even life and heaps of dollars do—we gained our objective and joined up with the Australians. What a small world, to be sure! Fancy meeting an old chum whom I had last seen twelve thousand miles away, not as one ought to meet, in the classroom or reunion of Old Boys, but each in tatters and in a bloody state. Remarkable to relate, we both greeted each other with, "Fancy meeting in this hell of a hole."

After a little bit of conversation we settled down to consolidate the position without any material. And wasn't it materialism and commercialism that brought us there? But our position had to be consolidated to meet the counter attack which would come as sure as death was in the air.

By all the rules of war one consolidates with sandbags filled with earth; but if one hasn't sandbags one must find some substitute, and in the military vocabulary it is known as improvisation.

Here is a problem for the mathematician, or better still, the engineer. You have a long, large hole, once a beautiful trench, which the Boches took two years to consolidate, 100 yards in length, its width varying from four to ten feet and its depth from eight to two feet. Your job is to build that hole so that you will give bullet proof cover for your men, who number at present ten, but you expect more with the coming reinforcements.

You have sent a messenger for mortar, etc. In fact, you have sent two. One somehow lost his way, care-

less follow, but such things so happen when no "coops" are about to guide us; but as yet nothing has turned up and you must consolidate quickly, for you don't know how soon the counter attack may come.

War is not run by any time table and if one wants a certain article and can't get it, he must get something right away and do the next best thing. And readers, especially pacifists, fingerists and materialists, read slowly what comes next. If you skip it or treat it cynically, may all your nights be as restless, and even worse, than mine. I MADE MY PARAPETS OF THE DEAD—FRIEND AND FOE.

Supercivilization had taught us that one living man is worth more than a hundred dead ones, and had I not the safe-keeping of ten priceless lives? What else was I to do?

The night passed with very little excitement during the construction of the human parapet. Reinforcements arrived and with them plenty of bombs and sandbags.

The stretcher bearers had done their work well, for the trench was cleared of all the horrors of war, as far as the eyes could see.

At sunrise the long expected counter attack came; but not with men, as one would imagine. We wanted to fight it out man to man, but no, no! We were sniped by 5.9 guns from Moquet Farm and each shell weighing about 220 pounds.

Ye misers and money grabbers, what money was wasted that day! Sunrise at that time was at four o'clock, and that was the signal for the guns to open fire.

But what could I do? How could a mere mortal fight shells which could not be seen, only heard? Whose starting place was four miles away? When they burst they consume everything, and every one, dead and alive.

What did they care, that I and the others were not prepared to die, and didn't want to die? Why should we die? We who possessed priceless impetuous youth?

Most of my men were either killed or wounded, and I did what I could to render first aid and relieve their hurts. Although I escaped so far I was not immune from the 5.9's, for at last, about six o'clock, I was hit in the shoulder and was put almost hors de combat. Still I had to carry on, for my job was to hang on and never mind the rest.

During the continuous shelling one of my mags shouted, "Are we down-hearted? Are we fed up?" and the chorus came, "No. Oh, no."

This state of affairs kept up until 6 p.m. when I was relieved by another officer and more men, and still more men were sent up to take the places of those who had taken the count. I made my way back to headquarters and reported the whole situation, and told the commanding officer that if our artillery didn't put the guns at Moquet Farm out of action the shells from the farm would put our people out. I was sent to a hospital, and during the X-ray examination the doctors discovered only seven pieces of shrapnel in me. One piece, which then refused to keep out, but which I treasure now as a keepsake, weighs one ounce, is one inch in length, one-half inch in width and is an eighth of an inch in thickness.

During my convalescence in Boulogne I received a letter of congratulation from my senior officer, informing me that I had been mentioned in despatches for my work in capturing Skyline trench, holding and consolidating it, during a heavy, continuous shell fire and rendering first aid to the wounded.

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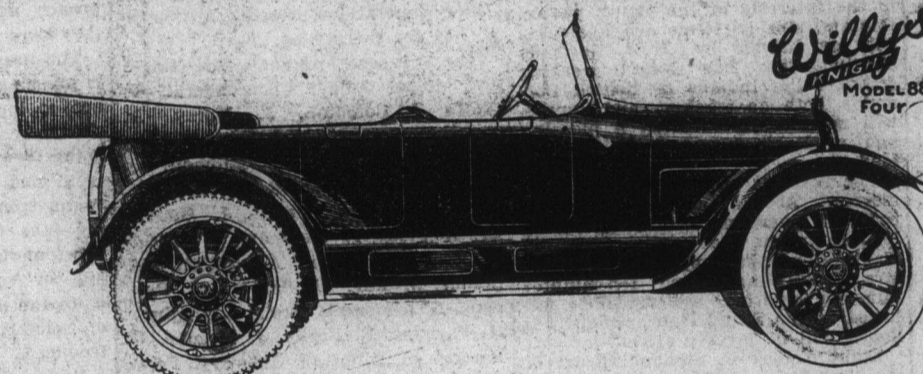
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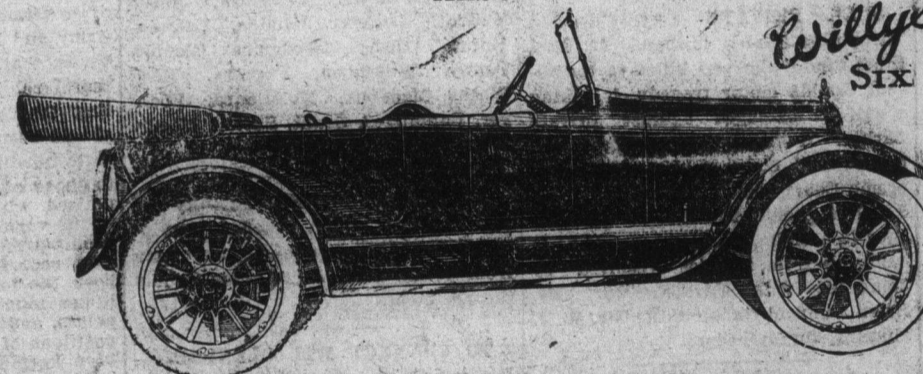
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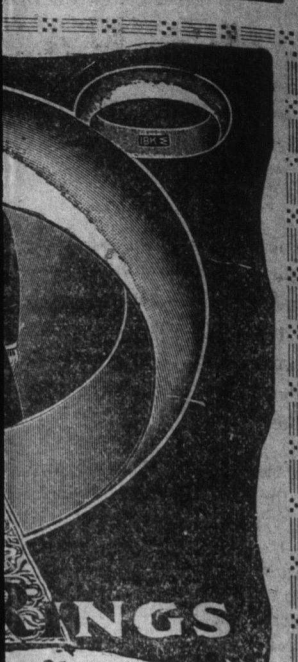
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