

# "OUTWITTING THE HUN"

By Lieutenant Pat O'Brien

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## DRIVEN TO DESPERATION BY HUNGER, O'BRIEN GOES BOLDLY TO A BELGIAN HOUSE AND ASKS FOR FOOD.

**Synopsis.**—Pat O'Brien, a resident of Moline, Ill., after seeing service in the American Flying Corps on the Mexican border in 1918, joins the British Royal Flying Corps in Canada, and after a brief training period is sent to France. He is assigned to a squadron in active service on the front. He engages in several hot fights with German flyers, from which he emerges victorious. Finally, in a fight with four German flyers, O'Brien is shot down. He falls 8,000 feet and, escaping death by a miracle, awakes to find himself a prisoner in a German hospital, with a bullet hole in his mouth. After a few days in the hospital he is sent to a prison camp at Courtrai. After a short stay there he is placed upon a train bound for a prison camp in Germany. He decides to take a desperate chance for liberty. He leaps through the open window of the car while the train is traveling 35 miles an hour. His wounds reopened by the fall, O'Brien almost literally crawls through Germany and Luxembourg, traveling at night and sleeping by day, living on garbage and raw vegetables stolen from gardens.

### CHAPTER IX—Continued.

I ran up the bank of the canal quite a distance and then swam to the opposite side, as I reasoned they would not be looking for me there. I found a sheltered clump of bushes that were in a swamp near the canal and in the driest part that I could find I crawled in and made myself as comfortable as possible. The sun came up soon and kept me warm, and I planned to camp right there, food or no food, until the Hun got tired of searching for me. I think I heard them once or twice that day, and my heart nearly stopped on each occasion, but evidently they decided to look in some other direction and I was not further molested.

At the same time I figured that it was absolutely necessary for me to change my course, even at the expense of going somewhat out of my way. I decided to go due west and I kept in that direction for four days. As I was in a very weak condition, I did not cover more than five miles a night. I kept away from the roads and did all my journeying through fields, beet patches, woods, swamps—anywhere provided I was not likely to be seen and captured. Food was an important consideration to me, but it was secondary to concealment.

At last I brought up at the Meuse river at a place between Namur and Huy, and it was here that I came nearest of all to giving up the struggle. The Meuse at this point is about half a mile wide—as wide as the Hudson River at West Point. Had I been in normal condition I wouldn't have hesitated a moment to swim across. San Diego bay, California, is a mile and a half wide, and I had often swam across and back, and the San Joaquin, which is also a mile and a half wide, had never proven an obstacle to me.

In the wretched shape in which I then was, however, the Meuse looked like the Atlantic ocean to me. I looked for a boat, but could find none. I tried to get a piece of wood upon which I hoped to ferry across, but I was equally unsuccessful.

Get across I must, and I decided there was nothing to do but to swim. It was then about 3 o'clock in the morning. I waded in and was soon in beyond my depth and had to swim. After about an hour of it I was very much exhausted, and I doubted whether I could make the opposite bank, although it was not more than thirty or forty feet away. I choked



"I Kept Pulling and Crawling Up That Infernal Bank."

and gasped, and my arms and legs were completely fagged out. I sank a little and tried to touch bottom with my feet, but the water was still beyond my depth.

There are times when everyone will pray, and I was no exception. I prayed for strength to make those few wicked yards, and then, with all the will power I could summon, struck out for dear life. It seemed a lifetime before I finally felt the wet,

mud of bottom and was able to drag myself up to the bank, but I got there. The bank was rather high and I was shaking so violently that when I took hold of the grass to pull myself up, the grass shook out of my hands. I could not retain my grip. I was afraid I would faint then and there, but I kept pulling and crawling frantically up that infernal bank and finally made it.

Then for the first time in my life I fainted—fainted from utter exhaustion.

It was now about 4 o'clock in the morning and I was entirely unprotected from observation. If anyone had come along I would have been found lying there dead to the world.

Possibly two hours passed before I regained consciousness, and then, no doubt, only because the rain was beating in my face.

I knew that I had to get away, as it was broad daylight. Moreover, there was a low-path right there and any minute a boat might come along and find me. But it was equally dangerous for me to attempt to travel very far. Fortunately I found some shrubbery near by and I hid there all day, without food or drink.

That night I made a little headway, but when day broke I had a dreadful fever and was delirious. I talked to myself and thereby increased my chances of capture. In my lucid intervals when I realized that I had been talking, the thought sent a chill through me, because in the silent night even the slightest sound carries far across the Belgian country. I began to fear that another day of this would about finish me.

I have a distinct recollection of a ridiculous conversation I carried on with an imaginary Pat O'Brien—a sort of duplicate of myself. I argued with him as I marched drearily along and he answered me back in kind, and when we disagreed, I called upon my one constant friend, the North Star, to stand by me.

"There you are, you old North Star," I cried aloud. "You want me to get to Holland, don't you? But this Pat O'Brien—this Pat O'Brien who calls himself a soldier—he's got a yellow streak—North Star—and he says it can't be done! He wants me to quit—to lie down here for the Huns to find me and take me back to Courtrai—after all you've done, North Star? I don't want to follow him—I just want to follow you—because you—you are taking me away from the Huns and this Pat O'Brien—this fellow who keeps after me all the time and lends on my neck and wants me to lie down—this yellow Pat O'Brien wants me to go back to the Huns!"

After a spell of foolish chatter like that my senses would come back to me for a while and I would trudge along without a word until the fever came on me again.

I knew that I had to have food because I was about on my last legs. I was very much tempted to lie down then and there and call it a beat. Things seemed to be getting worse for me the farther I went, and all the time I had before me the spectre of that electric barrier between Belgium and Holland, even if I ever reached there alive. What was the use of further suffering when I would probably be captured in the end anyway?

Before giving up, however, I decided upon one bold move. I would approach one of the houses in the vicinity and get food there or die in the effort.

I picked out a small house because I figured there would be less likelihood of soldiers being billeted there.

Then I wrapped a stone in my khaki handkerchief as a sort of camouflaged weapon, determined to kill the occupant of the house, German or Belgian, if that step was necessary in order to get food. I tried the well in the yard, but it would not work, and then I went up to the door and knocked.

It was 1 o'clock in the morning. An old lady came to the window and looked out. She could not imagine what I was, probably, because I was still attired in that old overcoat. She gave a cry and her husband and a boy came to the door.

They could not speak English and I could not speak Flemish, but I pointed to my flying coat and then to the sky and said "Fieger" (flier), which I thought would tell them what I was.

Whether they understood or were intimidated by the hard-looking appearance, I don't know, but certainly it would have to be a brave old man and boy who would start an argument with such a villainous looking character as stood before them that night! I had not shaved for a month, my clothes were wet, torn and dirty, my leggings were gone—they had gotten so heavy I had to discard them—my hair was matted and my cheeks were flushed with fever. In my hand I carried the rock in my handkerchief and I made no effort to conceal its presence or its mission.

Anyway, they motioned me indoors, gave me my first hot meal in more than a month! True, it consisted only of warm potatoes. They had been previously cooked, but the old woman warmed them up in milk in one of the dirtiest kettles I had ever seen. I asked for bread, but she shook her head, although I think it must have been for lack of it rather than because she begrudged it to me. For if ever a man showed he was finished, I did that night. I swallowed those warm potatoes ravenously and drank four glasses of water, one after another. It was the best meal I had had since the "banquet" in the prison at Courtrai.

The woman of the house was probably seventy-five years old and had evidently worn wooden shoes all her life, for she had a callous spot on the side of her foot the size of half a dollar and it looked so hard that I doubt whether you could have driven a nail into it with a hammer!

As I sat there drying myself—for I was in no hurry to leave the first human habitation I had entered in four weeks—I reflected on my unhappy lot and the unknown troubles and dangers that lay ahead of me. Here, for more than a month, I had been leading the life of a hunted animal—yes, worse than a hunted animal, for nature clothes her less-favored creatures more appropriately for the life they lead than I was clothed for mine—and there was not the slightest reason to hope that conditions would grow any better.

Perhaps the first warm food I had eaten for over a month had released unused springs of philosophy in me, as food sometimes does for a man.

I pointed to my torn and water-soaked clothes and conveyed to them as best I could that I would be grateful for an old suit, but apparently they were too poor to have more than they actually needed themselves, and I rose to go. I had aroused them out of bed and I knew I ought not to keep them up longer than was absolutely necessary.

As I approached the door I got a glance at myself in a mirror. I was the awfulest sight I had laid eyes on! The glimpse I got of myself startled me almost as much as if I had seen a dreaded German helmet! My left eye was fairly well healed by this time and I was beginning to regain sight of it, but my face was so haggard and my beard so long and unkempt that I looked like Santa Claus on a bat!

As they let me out of the door I pointed to the opposite direction to the one I intended taking and started off in the direction I had indicated. Later I changed my course completely to throw off any possible pursuit.

The next day I was worn out from exposure and exhaustion that I threw away my coat, thinking that the less weight I had to carry the better it would be for me, but when night came I regretted my mistake because the nights were now getting colder. I thought at first it would be better for me to retrace my steps and look for the coat I had so thoughtlessly discarded, but I decided to go on without it.

I then began to discard everything that I had in my pocket, finally throwing my wrist watch into a canal. A wrist-watch does not add much weight, but when you plod along and have not eaten for a month it finally becomes rather heavy. The next thing I discarded was a pair of flying mittens.

These mittens I had gotten at Camp Borden, in Canada, and had become quite famous, as my friends termed them "snow shoes." In fact, they were a ridiculous pair of mittens, but the best pair I ever had and I really felt worse when I lost those mittens than anything else. I could not think of anybody else ever using them, so I dug a hole in the mud and buried them and could not help but laugh at the thought if my friends could see me burying my mittens, because they were a standing joke in Canada, England and France.

I had on two shirts and as they were always both wet and didn't keep me warm, it was useless to wear both. One of these was a shirt that I had bought in France, the other an American army shirt. They were both khaki and one as apt to give me away as the other, so I discarded the French shirt. The American army shirt I

brought back with me to England and it is still in my possession.

When I escaped from the train I still had the Bavarian cap of bright red in my pocket and wore it for many nights, but I took great care that no one saw it. It also had proven very useful when swimming rivers, for I carried my map and a few other belongings in it and I had fully made up my mind to bring it home as a souvenir. But the farther I went the heavier my extra clothing became, so I was compelled to discard even the cap. I knew that it would be a tell-tale mark if I simply threw it away, so one night after swimming a river, I dug a hole in the soft mud on the bank and buried it, too, with considerably less ceremony than my flying mittens had received perhaps; so that was the end of my Bavarian hat.



Diagram Showing How O'Brien Lost Precious Hours by Swimming a River and Later Finding That He Was on the Wrong Side and Had to Swim Back.

Sooner or later, I realized I would probably approach a Belgian and find a German instead, but in such a contingency I was determined to measure my strength against the Hun's if necessary to effect my escape.

As it was, however, most of the Belgians to whom I applied for food gave it to me readily enough, and if some of them refused me it was only because they feared I might be a spy or that the Germans would shoot them if their action were subsequently found out.

About the fifth day after I had entered Belgium I was spending the day as usual in a clump of bushes when I discerned in the distance what appeared to be something hanging on a line. All day long I strained my eyes trying to decide what it could be and arguing with myself that it might be something that I could add to my inadequate wardrobe, but the distance was so great that I could not identify it. I had a great fear that before night came it would probably be removed.

As soon as darkness fell, however, I crawled out of my hiding place and worked up to the line and got a pair of overalls for my industry. The pair of overalls was the first bit of civilian clothes I had thus far picked up with the exception of a civilian cap which I had found at the prison and concealed on my person and which I still had. The overalls were rather small and very short, but when I put them on I found that they hung down far enough to cover my breeches.

It was perhaps three days later that I planned to search another house for further clothes. Entering Belgian houses at night is anything but a safe proposition, because their families are large and sometimes as many as seven or eight sleep in a single room. The barn is usually connected with the house proper, and there was always the danger of disturbing some dumb animal even if the inmates of the house were not aroused.

Frequently I took a chance of searching a back yard at night in the hope of finding food scraps, but my success in that direction was so slight that I soon decided that it wasn't worth the risk and I continued to live on raw vegetables that I could pick with safety in the fields and the occasional meal that I was able to get from the Belgian peasants in the daytime.

Nevertheless I was determined to get more in the way of clothing and when night came I picked out a house that looked as though it might furnish me with what I wanted. It was a moonlight night and if I could get in the barn I would have a fair chance of finding what would enter the moonlight which would enter the main part of the house, but I groped around very carefully and soon I touched something hanging on a peg. I didn't know what it was, but I confiscated it and carried it out into the field. There in the moonlight I examined my booty and found that it was an old coat. It was too short for an overcoat and too long for an ordinary coat, but nevertheless I made use of

it. It had probably been an overcoat for the Belgian who had worn it.

Some days later I got a scarf from a Belgian peasant and with this equipment I was able to conceal my uniform entirely.

Later on, however, I decided that it was too dangerous to keep the uniform on anyway and when night came I dug a hole and buried it.

I never realized until I had to part with it just how much I thought of that uniform. It had been with me through hard trials and I felt as if I were abandoning a friend when I parted with it. I was tempted to keep the wings off the tunic, but thought that would be a dangerous concession to sentiment in the event that I was ever captured. It was the only distinction I had left, as I had given the Royal Flying Corps badges and the stars of my rank to the German flying officers as souvenirs, but I felt that it was safer to discard it. As it finally turned out, through all my subsequent experiences, my escape would never have been jeopardized had I kept my uniform but, of course, I had no idea what was in store for me.

There was one thing which surprised me very much as I journeyed through Belgium and that was the scarcity of dogs. Apparently most of them had been taken by the Germans and what are left are beasts of burden who are too tired at night to bark or bother intruders. This was a mighty good thing for me, for I would certainly have stirred them up in passing through back-yards as I sometimes did when I was making a short cut.

One night as I came out of a yard it was so pitch dark that I could not see ten feet ahead of me and I was right in the back of a little village, although I did not know it. I crawled along fearing I might come to a cross-road at which there would in all probability be a German sentry.

My precaution served me in good stead for had I come out in the main street of the village and within twenty feet of me, sitting on some bricks where they were building a little store, I could see the dim outline of a German spiked helmet!

I could not cross the street and the only thing to do was to back track. It meant making a long detour and losing two hours of precious time and effort, but there was no help for it, so I plodded wearily back, cursing the Huns at every step.

The next night while crossing some fields I came to a road. It was one of the main roads of Belgium and was paved with cobble stones. On these roads you can hear a wagon or horse about a mile or two away. I listened intently before I moved ahead and hearing nothing concluded that the way was clear.

As I emerged from the field and got my first glimpse of the road, I got the shock of my life! In either direction, as far as I could see, the road was lined with German soldiers! What they were doing in that part of Belgium I did not know, but you can be mighty sure I didn't spend any time trying to find out.

Again it was necessary to change my course and lose a certain amount of ground, but by this time I had become fairly well reconciled to these reverses and they did not depress me as much as they did at first.

At this period of my adventure, if a day or night passed without its thrill I began to feel almost disappointed, but such disappointments were rather rare.

One evening as I was about to swim a canal about two hundred feet wide, I suddenly noticed about one hundred yards away a canal boat moored to the side.

It was at a sort of out-of-the-way place and I wondered what the canal boat had stopped for. I crawled up to see. As I neared the boat five men were leaving it and I noticed them cross over into the fields. At a safe distance I followed them and they had not gone very far before I saw what they were after. They were committing the common but heinous crime of stealing potatoes!

Without the means to cook them, potatoes didn't interest me a bit and I thought that the boat itself would probably yield me more than the potato patch. Knowing the canal-hand would probably take their time in the fields, I climbed up the stern of the boat leisurely and without any particular plans to conceal myself. Just as my head appeared above the stern of the boat I saw silhouetted against the sky, the dread outline of a German soldier—spiked helmet and all! A chill ran down my spine as I slipped to the bank of the canal and slunk away. Evidently the sentry had not seen me or, if he had, he had probably figured that I was one of the foraging party, but I realized that it wouldn't pay in future to take anything for granted.

### CHAPTER X.

#### Experiences in Belgium.

I think that one of the worst things I had to contend with in my journey through Belgium was the number of

small ditches. They intercepted me at every half mile or so, sometimes more frequently. The canals and the big rivers I could swim. Of course, I got soaked to the skin every time I did it, but I was becoming hardened to that.

These little ditches, however, were too narrow to swim and too wide to jump. They had perhaps two feet of water in them and three feet of mud, and it was almost invariably a case of wading through. Some of them, no doubt, I could have jumped if I had been in decent shape, but with a bad ankle and in the weakened condition in which I was, it was almost out of the question.

One night I came to a ditch about eight or nine feet wide. I thought I was strong enough to jump it and it was worth trying as the discomfort I suffered after wading these ditches was considerable. Taking a long run, I jumped as hard as I could, but I missed it by four or five inches and landed in about two feet of water and three of mud. Getting out of that mess was quite a job. The water was too dirty and too scanty to enable me to wash off the mud with which I was covered and it was too wet to scrape off. I just had to wait until it dried and scrape it off then.

In many sections of Belgium through which I had to pass I encountered large areas of swamp and marshy ground and rather than waste the time involved in looking for better underfooting—which I might not have found anyway—I used to pole right through the mud. Apart from the discomfort of this method of traveling and the slow time I made, there was an added danger to me in the fact that the "squash, squash" noise which I made might easily be overheard by Belgians and Germans and give my position away. Nobody would cross a swamp or marsh in that part of the country unless he was trying to get away from somebody, and I realized my danger but could not get around it.

It was a common sight in Belgium to see a small donkey and a common ordinary milk cow hitched together, pulling a wagon. When I first observed the unusual combination, I thought it was a donkey and ox or bull, but closer inspection revealed to me that cows were being used for the purpose.

From that I was able to observe there must be very few horses left in Belgium except those owned by the Germans. Cows and donkeys are now horses and mules. Altogether I spent nearly eight weeks wandering through Belgium, and in all that time I don't believe I saw more than half a dozen horses in the possession of the native population.

One of the scarest things in Germany, apparently, is rubber, for I noticed that their motor trucks, or lorries, unlike our own, had no rubber tires. Instead heavy iron bands were employed. I could hear them come rumbling along the stone roads for miles before they reached the spot where I happened to be in hiding. When I saw these military roads in Belgium for the first time, with their heavy cobblestones that looked as if they would last for centuries, I realized at once why it was that the Germans had been able to make such a rapid advance into Belgium at the start of the war.

I noticed that the Belgians used dogs to a considerable extent to pull their carts, and I thought many times



Burying His Uniform at Night.

that if I could have stolen one of those dogs it would have been a very good companion for me and might, if the occasion arose, help me out in a fight. But I had no way of feeding it and the animal would probably have starved to death. I could live on vegetables, which I could always depend upon finding in the fields, but a dog couldn't, and so I gave up the idea.

In Belgium, after weeks of hardships and narrow escapes from capture, O'Brien finally finds a man whom he believes to be his friend. Cheered by the prospect of final escape, he gains courage to continue his heartbreaking tramp through Belgium. Don't miss the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A new oil-burning apparatus heats and lights the room at the same time.