

# "OUTWITTING THE HUN"

By LIEUTENANT PAT O'BRIEN

Copyright, 1918, by Pat Alva O'Brien

## CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

From the kitchen you could walk directly into the cow-barn, where two cows were kept, and this, as I have pointed out before, is the usual construction of the poorer Belgian houses. I could not make out why the caller seemed to be so antagonistic to me, and yet I am sure he was arguing with the family against me. Perhaps the fact that I wasn't wearing wooden shoes—I doubt whether I could have obtained a pair big enough for me—had convinced him that I was not really a Belgian, because there was nothing about me otherwise which could have given him that idea.

At that time, and I suppose it is true today, about 94 per cent of the people in Belgium were wearing wooden shoes. Among the peasants I don't believe I ever saw any other kind of footwear and they are more common there than they are in Holland. The Dutch wear them more on account of a lack of leather. I was told that during the coming year practically all the peasants and poorer people in Germany, too, will adopt wooden shoes for farm work, as that is one direction in which wood can be substituted for leather without much loss.

When the young man left, I left shortly afterwards, as I was not at all comfortable about what his intentions were regarding me. For all I knew he might have gone to notify the German authorities that there was a strange man in the vicinity—more perhaps to protect his friends from suspicion of having aided me than to injure me.

At any rate, I was not going to take any chances and I got out of that neighborhood as rapidly as I could.

That night found me right on the frontier of Holland.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### Getting Through the Lines.

Waiting until it was quite dark, I made my way carefully through a field and eventually came to the much dreaded barrier.

It was all that I had heard about it. Every foot of the border line between Belgium and Holland is protected in precisely the same manner. It is there to serve three purposes: first, to prevent the Belgians from escaping into Holland; second to keep enemies, like myself, from making their way to freedom; and third, to prevent desertions on the part of Germans themselves. One look was enough to convince any one that it probably accomplished all three objects about as well as any contrivance could, and one look was all I got of it that night, for while I lay on my stomach gazing at the forbidding structure I heard the measured stride of a German sentry advancing towards me and I crawled away as fast as I possibly could, determined to spend the night somewhere in the fields and make another and more careful survey the following night.

The view I had obtained, however, was sufficient to convince me that the pole-vault idea was out of the question even if I had a pole and was a proficient pole-vaulter. The three fences covered a span of at least twelve feet and to clear the last barbed wire fence it would be necessary to vault not only at least ten feet high, but at least fourteen feet wide, with the certain knowledge that to touch the electrically charged fence meant instant death. There would be no second chance if you came a cropper the first time.

The stilt idea was also impracticable because of the lack of suitable timber and tools with which to construct the stilts.

It seemed to me that the best thing to do was travel up and down the line a bit in the hope that some spot might be discovered where conditions were more favorable, although I don't know just what I expected along those lines.

It was mighty disheartening to realize that only a few feet away lay certain liberty and that the only things preventing me from reaching it were three confounded fences. I thought of my machine and wished that some kind fairy would set it in front of me for just one minute.

I spent the night in a clump of bushes and kept in hiding most of the next day, only going abroad for an hour or two in the middle of the day to intercept some Belgian peasant and beg for food. The Belgians in this section were naturally very much afraid of the Germans and I feared badly. In nearly every house German soldiers were quartered and it was out of the question for me to apply for food in that direction. The proximity of the border made everyone eye each other with more or less suspicion and I soon came to the conclusion that the safest thing I could do was to live on raw vegetables which I could steal from the fields at night as I had previously done.

That night I made another survey of the barrier in that vicinity, but it looked just as hopeless as it had the night before and I concluded that I only wasted my time there.

I spent the night wandering north, guided by the North Star which had served me so faithfully in all my travels. Every mile or two I would make my way carefully to the barrier to see if conditions were any better, but it seemed to be the same all along. I felt like a wild animal in a cage, with about as much chance of getting out.

The section of the country in which I was now wandering was very heavily wooded and there was really no very great difficulty in keeping myself concealed, which I did all day long, striving all the time to think of some way in which I could circumvent that cursed barrier.

The idea of a huge stepladder occurred to me, but I searched hour after hour in vain for lumber or fallen trees out of which I could construct one. If I could only obtain something which would enable me to reach a point about nine feet in the air it would be a comparatively simple matter to jump from that point over the electric fence.

Then I thought that perhaps I could construct a simple ladder and lean it against one of the posts upon which the electric wires were strung, climb to the top and then leap over, getting over the barbed wire fences in the same way.

This seemed to be the most likely plan and all night long I sat constructing a ladder for this purpose.

I was fortunate enough to find a number of fallen pine trees from ten to twenty feet long. I selected two of them which seemed sufficiently strong and broke off all the branches, which I used as rungs, tying them to the poles with grass and strips from my handkerchief and shirt as best I could.

It was not a very workmanlike looking ladder when I finally got through with it. I leaned it against a tree to test it and it wobbled considerably. It was more like a rope ladder than a wooden one, but I strengthened it here and there and decided that it would probably serve the purpose.

I kept the ladder in the woods all day and could hardly wait until dark to make the supreme test. If it proved successful my troubles were over; within a few hours I would be in a neutral country out of all danger. If I failed—I dismissed the idea summarily. There was no use worrying about failure; the thing to do was to succeed.

The few hours that were to pass before night came on seemed endless, but I utilized them to re-enforce my ladder, tying the rungs more securely with long grass which I picked in the woods.

At last night came, and with my ladder in hand I made for the barrier. In front of it there was a cleared space of about one hundred yards, which had been prepared to make the work of the guards easier in watching it.

I waited in the neighborhood until I heard the sentry pass the spot where I was in hiding and then I hurried across the clearing, shoved my ladder under the barbed wire and endeavored to follow it. My clothing caught in the wire, but I wrenched myself clear and crawled to the electric barrier.

My plan was to place the ladder against one of the posts, climb up to the top and then jump. There would be a fall of nine or ten feet, and I might possibly sprain an ankle or break my leg, but if that was all that stood between me and freedom I wasn't going to stop to consider it.

I put my ear to the ground to listen for the coming of the sentry. There was not a sound. Eagerly but carefully I placed the ladder against the post and started up. Only a few feet separated me from liberty, and my heart beat fast.

I had climbed perhaps three rungs of my ladder when I became aware of an unlooked for difficulty.

The ladder was slipping. Just as I took the next rung, the ladder slipped, came in contact with the live wire, and the current passed through the wet sticks and into my body. There was a blue flash, my hold on the ladder relaxed and I fell heavily to the ground unconscious.

Of course, I had not received the full force of the current or I would not now be here. I must have remained unconscious for a few moments, but I came to just in time to hear the German guard coming, and the thought came to me if I didn't get that ladder concealed at once he would see it even though, fortunately for me, it was an unusually dark night.

I pulled the ladder out of his path and lay down flat on the ground not seven feet away from his feet. He passed so close that I could have pushed the ladder out and tripped him up.

It occurred to me that I could have climbed back under the barbed wire fence and waited for the sentry to return and then felled him with a blow on the head, as he had no idea, of course, that there was anyone in the vicinity. I wouldn't have hesitated to take life, because my only thought was to get into Holland, but I thought

that as long as he didn't bother me perhaps the safest thing to do was not to bother him, but to continue my efforts during his periodic absence.

His beat at this point was apparently fairly long and allowed me more time to work than I had hoped for.

My mishap with the ladder had convinced me that my escape in that way was not feasible. The shock that I had received had unnerved me and I was afraid to risk it again, particularly as I realized that I had fared more fortunately than I could hope to again if I met with a similar mishap. There was no way of making that ladder hold and I gave up the idea of using it.

I was now right in front of this electric barrier and as I studied it I saw another way of getting by. If I couldn't get over it, what was the matter with getting under it?

The bottom wire was only two inches from the ground and, of course, I couldn't touch it, but my plan was to dig underneath it and then crawl through the hole in the ground.

I had only my hands to dig with, but I went at it with a will and fortunately the ground was not very hard.

When I had dug about six inches, making a distance in all of eight inches from the lowest electric wire. I came to an underground wire. I knew enough about electricity to realize that this wire could not be charged, as it was in contact with the ground, but still there was not room between the live wire and this underground wire for me to crawl through, and I either had to go back or dig deep enough under this wire to crawl under it or else pull it up.

This underground wire was about as big around as a lead pencil and there was no chance of breaking it. The jack-knife I had had at the start of my travels I had long since lost and even if I had had something to hammer with, the noise would have made the method impracticable.

I went on digging. When the total distance between the live wire and the bottom of the hole I had dug was thirty inches, I took hold of the ground wire and pulled on it with all my strength.

It wouldn't budge. It was stretched taut across the narrow ditch I had dug—about fourteen inches wide—and all the tugging didn't serve to loosen it.

I was just about to give up in despair when a staple gave way in the nearest post. That enabled me to pull the wire through the ground a little and I renewed my efforts. After a moment or two of pulling as I had never pulled in my life before, a staple on the next post gave way, and my work became easier. I had more leeway now and pulled and pulled again until in all eight staples had given way.

Every time a staple gave way, it sounded in my ears like the report of a gun, although I suppose it didn't really make very much noise. Nevertheless, each time I would put my ear to the ground to listen for the guard. If I heard him I would stop working and lie perfectly still in the dark till he had gone by.

By pulling on the wire, I was now able to drag it through the ground enough to place it back from the fence and go on digging.

The deeper I went the harder became the work, because by this time my finger nails were broken and I was nervous—afraid every moment that I would touch the charged wire.

I kept at it, however, with my mind constantly on the hole I was digging and the liberty which was almost within my reach.

Finally I figured that I had enough space to crawl through and still leave a couple of inches between my back and the live wire.

Before I went under that wire I noticed that the lace which the Belgian woman had given me as a souvenir made my pocket bulge, and lest it might be the innocent means of electrocuting me by touching the live wire, I took it out, rolled it up and threw it over the barrier first.

Then I lay down on my stomach and crawled or rather writhed under the wire like a snake, with my feet first, and there wasn't any question of my hugging mother earth as closely as possible because I realized that even to touch the wire above me with my back meant instant death.

Anxious as I was to get on the other side, I didn't hurry this operation. I feared that there might be some little detail that I had overlooked and I exercised the greatest possible care in going under, taking nothing for granted.

When I finally got through and straightened up, there were still several feet of Belgium between me and liberty, represented by the six feet which separated the electric barrier from the last barbed wire fence, but before I went another step I went down on my knees and thanked God for my long series of escapes and especially for this last achievement, which seemed to me to be about all that was necessary to bring me freedom.

Then I crawled under the barbed

wire fence and breathed the free air of Holland. I had no clear idea just where I was and I didn't care much. I was out of the power of the Germans and that was enough. I had walked perhaps a hundred yards, when I remembered the lace I had thrown over the barrier, and dangerous as I realized the undertaking to be, I determined to walk back and get it. This necessitated my going back onto Belgian soil again, but it seemed a shame to leave the lace there, and by exercising a little care I figured I could get it easily enough.

When I came to the spot at which I had made my way under the barbed wire, I put my ear to the ground and listened for the sentry. I heard him coming and lay prone on the ground till he had passed. The fact that he might observe the hole in the ground or the ladder occurred to me as I lay there, and it seemed like an age before he finally marched out of earshot. Then I went under the barbed wire again, retrieved the lace and once again made my way to Dutch territory.

It does not take long to describe the events just referred to, but the incidents themselves consumed several hours in all. To dig the hole must have taken me more than two hours and I had to stop frequently to hide while the sentry passed. Many times, indeed, I thought I heard him coming and stopped my work and then discovered that it was only my imagination. I certainly suffered enough that night to last me a lifetime. With a German guard on one side, death from electrocution on the other, and starvation staring me in the face, my plight was anything but a comfortable one.

It was on the 19th of November, 1917, when I got through the wire. I



Heard the German Guard Coming.

had made my leap from the train on September 9th. Altogether, therefore, just seventy-two days had elapsed since I escaped from the Hun. If I live to be as old as Methuselah, I never expect to live through another seventy-two days so crammed full of incident and hazard and lucky escape.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### Experiences in Holland.

But I was not quite out of the woods.

I now knew that I was in Holland, but just where I had no idea. I walked for about thirty minutes and came to a path leading to the right, and I had proceeded along it but a few hundred yards when I saw in front of me a fence exactly like the one I had crossed.

"This is funny," I said to myself. "I didn't know the Dutch had a fence, too." I advanced to the fence and examined it closely, and judge of my astonishment when I saw beyond it a nine-foot fence apparently holding live wires exactly like the one which had nearly been the death of me!

I had very little time to conjecture what it all meant, for just then I heard a guard coming. He was walking so fast that I was sure it was a Dutch sentry, as the Huns walk much slower.

I was so bewildered, however, that I decided to take no chances, and as the road was fairly good I wandered down it and away from that mysterious fence. About half a mile down I

could see the light of a sentry station and I thought I would go there and tell my story to the sentries, realizing that as I was unarmed it was perfectly safe for me to announce myself to the Dutch authorities. I could be interned only if I entered Holland under arms.

As I approached the sentry box I noticed three men in gray uniforms, the regulation Dutch color. I was on the verge of shouting to them when they thought struck me that there was just a chance I might be mistaken, as the German uniforms were the same color, and I had suffered too many privations and too many narrow escapes to lose all at this time by jumping at conclusions.

I had just turned off the road to go back into some bushes when out of the darkness I heard that dreaded German command:

"Halt! Halt!"

He didn't need to holler twice. I heard and heeded the first time. Then I heard another man come running up, and there was considerable talking, but whether they were Germans or Hollanders I was still uncertain. He evidently thought someone was on the other side of the fence.

Finally I heard one of them laugh and saw him walk back to the sentry station where the guard was billeted, and I crawled a little nearer to try to make out just what it meant. I had begun to think it was all a nightmare.

Between myself and the light in the sentry station, I then noticed the stooping figure of a man bending over as if to conceal himself and on his head was the spiked helmet of a German soldier!

I knew then what another narrow escape I had had, for I am quite sure he would have shot me without ceremony if I had foolishly made myself known. I would have been buried at once and no one would have been any wiser, even though, technically speaking, I was on neutral territory and immune from capture or attack.

This new shock only served to bewilder me more. I was completely lost. There seemed to be frontier behind me and frontier in front of me. Evidently, however, what had happened was that I had lost my sense of direction and had wandered in the arc of a circle, returning to the same fence that I had been so long in getting through. This solution of the mystery came to me suddenly and I at once searched the landscape for something in the way of a landmark to guide me. For once my faithful friend, the North Star, had failed me. The sky was pitch black and there wasn't a star in the heavens.

In the distance, at about what appeared to be about three miles away, but which turned out to be six, I could discern the lights of a village, and I knew it must be a Dutch village, as lights are not allowed in Belgium in that indiscriminate way.

My course was now clear. I would make a beeline for that village. Before I had gone very far I found myself in a marsh or swamp and I turned back a little, hoping to find a better path. Finding none, I retraced my steps and kept straight ahead, determined to reach that village at all costs and to avenge neither to the right or left until I got there.

One moment I would be in water up to my knees and the next I would sink in mud clear up to my waist. I paid no attention to my condition. It was merely a repetition of what I had gone through many times before, but this time I had a definite goal and once I reached it I knew my troubles would be over.

It took me perhaps three hours to reach firm ground. The path I struck led to within half a mile of the village. I shall never forget that path; it was almost as welcome to my feet as the opposite bank of the Meuse had seemed.

The first habitation I came to was a little workshop with a bright light shining outside. It must have been after midnight, but the people inside were apparently just quitting work. There were three men and two boys engaged in making wooden shoes.

It wasn't necessary for me to explain to them that I was a refugee, even if I had been able to speak their language. I was caked with mud up to my shoulders and I suppose my face must have recorded some of the experiences I had gone through that memorable night.

"I want the British consul!" I told them. Apparently they didn't understand, but one of them volunteered to conduct me to the village. They seemed to be only too anxious to do all they could for me; evidently they realized I was a British soldier.

It was very late when my companion finally escorted me into the village, but he aroused some people he knew from their beds and they dressed and came down to feed me.

The family consisted of an old lady and her husband and a son, who was a soldier in the Dutch army. The cold shivers ran down my back while he sat beside me, because every now and again I caught a glimpse of his gray

uniform and it resembled very much that of the German soldiers.

Some of the neighbors, aroused by the commotion, got up to see what it was all about, and came in and watched while I ate the meal those good Dutch people prepared for me. Ordinarily I suppose I would have been embarrassed with so many people staring at me while I ate as though I were some strange animal that has just been captured, but just then I was too famished to notice or care very much what other people did.

There will always be a warm place in my heart for the Dutch people. I had heard lots of persons say that they were not inclined to help refugees, but my experience did not bear these reports out. They certainly did more for me than I ever expected.

I had a little German money left, but as the value of German money is only about half in Holland, I didn't have enough to pay the fare to Rotterdam, which was my next objective. It was due to the generosity of these people that I was able to reach the British consul as quickly as I did. Some day I hope to return to Holland and repay every single soul who played the part of the good Samaritan to me.

With the money that these people gave me I was able to get a third-class ticket to Rotterdam, and I was glad that I didn't have to travel first-class, for I would have looked as much out of place in a first-class carriage as a Hun would appear in heaven.

That night I slept in the house of my Dutch friends, where they fixed me up most comfortably. In the morning they gave me breakfast and then escorted me to the station.

While I was waiting at the station a crowd gathered round me and soon it seemed as if the whole town had turned out to get a look at me. It was very embarrassing, particularly as I could give them no information regarding the cause of my condition, although, of course, they all knew that I was a refugee from Belgium.

As the train pulled out of the station, the crowd gave a loud cheer and the tears almost came to my eyes as I contrasted in my mind the conduct of this crowd and the one that had gathered at the station in Ghent when I had departed a prisoner en route for the reprisal camp. I breathed a sigh of relief as I thought of that reprisal camp and how fortunate I had really been, despite all my sufferings, to have escaped it. Now, at any rate, I was a free man and I would soon be sending home the joyful news that I had made good my escape!

At Einhofen two Dutch officers got into the compartment with me. They looked at me with very much disfavor, not knowing, of course, that I was a British officer. My clothes were still pretty much in the condition they were when I crossed the border, although I had been able to scrape off some of the mud I had collected the night before. I had not shaved nor trimmed my beard for many days, and I must have presented a sorry appearance. I could hardly blame them for edging away from me.

The trip from Einhofen to Rotterdam passed without special incident. At various stations passengers would get in the compartment and, observing my unusual appearance, would endeavor to start a conversation with me. None of them spoke English, however, and they had to use their own imagination as to my identity.

When I arrived at Rotterdam I asked a policeman who stood in front of the station where I could find the British consul, but I could not make him understand. I next applied to a taxicab driver.

"English consul—British consul—American consul—French consul!" I said, hoping that if he didn't understand one he might recognize another.

He eyed me with suspicion and motioned me to get in and drove off. I had no idea where he was taking me, but after a quarter of an hour's ride he brought up in front of the British consul. Never before was I so glad to see the Union Jack!

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

### When a Prisoner is Exchanged.

Ivan Rossiter, captured by the Germans and later exchanged, says in the *Farm and Fireside*: "Then I lay down, not to sleep but to think. I thought of the day when I enlisted in Canada, of leaving home, the training camps, the trip overseas to England, the training in England, going across the channel to Flanders, the terrific fighting at Ypres, of the many friends who fell on that bloody battlefield, how I was wounded and captured, the inhuman treatment I received at the hands of the German surgeons, who had four husky Germans hold me down while they cut five bones out of my wrist and amputated my middle finger at the second joint when I was wounded in the palm of the hand, the kicks and the cuffs from prison guards and the terrible stuff the Germans called food in the prison camps."

Enough matches to light all its contents are attached to a specially invented cigarette box.