

SAMMEES IN RUSH FOR TRENCH BATTLES

They Assume Realities of World War With Buoyancy of Spirit

LIVING UNDER THE SOIL

Soon in Heat of Fray, Sending Back Shell After Shell Answering Boche

By HENRI BAZIN

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It was the night before a certain battalion of American infantry left their billets in a village somewhere in France for top trenches of their own digging, but those which are part of a great ancient line confronting No Man's Land.

I sat at meals with the major commanding and his officers. We had eaten good American stew with hot biscuits and had washed down with coffee and pipes, and had a hot coffee. The room had been with bowls of hot coffee. The room had been with bowls of hot coffee.

The meal was eaten leisurely and amid banal conversation. With the second bowl of coffee and the cigarettes and pipes, the major stepped upon the table, and in the instant silence that followed, he began:

"Gentlemen, we go tomorrow for the first time since landing in France upon active service. It's only top training as you know, but it's active service all the same, because we will be facing an enemy and guarding trenches he would like to have within his lines."

"I want every man here to be there with the goods. I mean that I want every officer to impress upon his men that this is no light-hearted party, and that orders are issued to be obeyed cheerfully, instantly, and without comment. I want you to know the few men always to be found in shifts, company who are snickers or shiftless. You know them already, of course, but I want you to know them better. I want them particularly on the job. Their bunkies will help you see to it, because they don't like some of their ways any better than you do."

"I don't want any excuses or explanations about anything. I just want the thing done. If you need anything, come to me for it. If I can get it for you, you shall have it. If you don't get it, it's because I couldn't get it for you. Just remember that, and don't ask for it the second time. The men will work in shifts as you know. Your jobs will begin at midnight and end at the next midnight. If you miss any sleep, it's because duty demands it. Perhaps in such case you can snatch a few minutes the next day. If you can, all right; and if you can't, all right. If you miss one meal you will be all the hungrier for the next, and if you miss two, you won't remember it five years from now. I propose you shan't miss any, but there is no telling."

"I want the lay of the land as soon as we get in. You must take it—make a rough plan, and give it to me. I want you to know who is next to you on either side and to get the country from your own observation as well as the maps. I want to go out and come back with the record of faithful service for the United States to the very last ounce in you and in every man under you."

"Remember, gentlemen, active service. Have you each and all your stuff ready?" "Yes, sir," came a chorus of replies. "Who is the officer of the day?" "Am, sir," replied a lieutenant. "First call will be at 4:30; breakfast immediately afterward. 'Canned Willie' and bacon with hardback for the journey, and water. You all know that, but I mention it anyhow. I want to come back with the division record for this outfit, and with you, I can do it."

"Let's all turn in. Good night." He carried out my blanket as the sound of the bugle. It was the last time we would hear it until we returned, because bugles don't go on to the front. At fifteen minutes before 5 we were eating sizzling hot bacon, black molasses, white bread and coffee. At 5:15, the battalion formed in columns of fours and was on the way. Each man had full equipment and had exchanged his campaign hat for a helmet. He carried a full day's ration. The heavy equipment had gone on ahead.

I must not say if the journey was made by truck or train. But it took all day, which by no means indicates the distance, but rather the speed of travel. At 6 in the evening, amid a torrential rain and a blackened sky, the battalion, again in columns of fours, entered a village some kilometers back of the line. It had been the scene of heavy fighting, as many another in a long geographical line, in the early days of the war. But a few civilians still lived in it; these were part of it in more ways than mere years of habitation, and had stayed on because they had no other place to go.

Into houses showing the marks of ancient shrapnel and mitrailleuse fire, into barns and the conglomeration covered with roof in a town that has stood during the war close to the front, our battalion of Saumees were billeted for the night. Instructions from company officers issued as orders through messengers, denied the men right to a bag or a few meters from their billets. Coffee was quickly made in mess pans, and the last of travel ration eaten. By nine, save for sentries, no sign of life existed, for this village, like thousands of others near enemy fire, is as black as a tomb after dark.

Company commanders with their officers rolled up in blankets with their men. The major, the adjutant, the captain-doctor and myself rolled up in ours upon the floor of that which had been a shop of some kind before a Boche shell in 1914 wrecked it. We rested our heads against our gas mask bags and fell asleep like babies.

The following day was just a day to while away. We knew that at night we would go in as relief for the first battalions of our regiment.

It rained, just like the day before, only perhaps harder. Out of the east a keen chill wind blew. Off to points of the compass I must not name we could hear the intermittent shell fire. The sky was as gray as a nun's veil and toward dark the wind and rain increased. The hours of daylight had been put in giving the quite unnecessary additional "once over" to equipment, to rifle, to "chow," to smokes. No Saumee was permitted to wander away more than so many feet from his temporary billet.

With night—that is at about 7 o'clock—the battalion formed in columns of fours, and accompanied by mule-drawn equipment and ammunition wagons and rolling kitchens, issued into a road leading toward the front line. This road was as black as a tomb. It has in common with many another in martyred France these last three years been constantly under range of Boche artillery. I stood at a signpost corner road beside the major and watched the Saumees go by. It was an inspiring and dramatic sight, yet simple in the extreme.

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