DARKNESS, GAS AND SHELL TRY MEN OF AMMUNITION TRAIN

Getting Gun Fodder to Artillery and Doughboys Their Job

GYPSYING AT THE FRONT

Camping Under Fire, Ducking Boche Bullets, Just Incidents in Day's Work

Now that the armistice is in good working order, there is no harm in admitting that life for the men of the ammunition trains were not, in all strictness, a flowery bed of ease. And yet this newspaper has been asked, time and again, "what is an ammunition train?" It is a reasonable question, for the ammunition train, in its present high state of development and utility, is as much a product of the War of 1914-1918 as are gas masks and Hindenburg lines.

It is a complete military unit, created by the demands of modern warfare, with its own battalions, horses and motor, its own headquarters detachments and its own personnel and supply units.

The purpose of the ammunition train is to haul ammunition, to haul it from the ammunition dump—usually at night—to the batteries or to the Infantry. It is a true gypsy outfit, traveling here and there over the front, always under some kind of shellfire, camping wherever possible, with true regard for safety of horses, trucks and men and for the distance from those batteries which it feeds.

It is probably the most widely scattered outfit in the Army. Its motor trucks range from the coast to as far front as the roads will permit; and the motor companies themselves, of course, are widely scattered. So are the horsed companies, though not so much, as they work up close behind the front, as a rule, in a single sector.

Excitement? Here are a few high spots in the career of one horsed company which might apply with equal facility to any of the others.

Introduction to Shell Fire

Its introduction to shellfire was made early one morning after an all-night march in a cold rain. The company turned into a shell-wrecked village for the day, camouflaged its wagons, tied its horses in the houses and then tried to get some sleep amid the ruins, with shells bursting in the town and over it. The Germans were trying hard for a battery on the heights above the town, and as is usual in cases of this kind, the innocent had to suffer.

In the evening the company took to the traffic-choked road again and moved up front, clear up, past its supply bases, past its heavy artillery, to between the second and third line trenches, close to the jumping-off place for the Americans in the Argonne fight. And there, in the midst of a thick woods, pitted deeply with shell holes, and with no roads, it was ordered to camp at 10 o'clock at night.

Had the enemy only known it, a few gas shells judiciously placed, would have ended the career of half the company. But such ifs abound in war. There were no dugouts, no shelters—and the men were so exhausted that the majority of them the next morning declared they never heard the klaxons which had been sounding at frequent intervals not over 100 or 150 yards away.

The next night—it was the night of Sept. 25—three sections had their first experience in ammunition hauling, marching, without their horses, to a dump not far from the front lines and helping to load combat wagons which were taking the ammunition to the doughboys. There was a pretty fair duel going on, and the German shells fell uncomfortably close to that dump. But there were dugouts near by, and this helped.

Right Behind the Guns

When the Infantry moves up, the Artillery, of course, follows, and the ammunition train tags right along behind. And it gets a full share of adventure.

There was the time at Ivoiry, for instance, a few days after the Argonne drive, when the men drove over a plank road, winding over a hill, within full view of the German observation balloons. Shells fell when the men first struck that road and kept falling, first on one side of the highways and then the other, splashing the riders and caissons with mud and dirt.

At the batteries the men worked frantically, getting out the shells, and then whipped their horses through the screeching blasts, escaping unscathed. Here it was that the captain of this particular company, a veteran of Cuba, China and the Philippines, rode his horse deliberately to the top of a little knoll within full view of the balloon and within machine gun or sniping distance and halted there, encouraging his toiling men, until the last one had passed.

There was the time, on the Verdun front, when men and caissons, returning in the early morning from a trip and riding in comparative safety along a road, suddenly were galvanized into quivering breathlessness by a parachute star shell that flung its blinding glare directly over them, and then, an instant later the roar of a Boche plane was heard.

Sitting and Taking It

With an appalling crash, he swept down along the road, working his machine gun like mad, and the men just sat there in silence and took it, watching the little spurts of flame dart up from the stones at their horses' feet. That was the toughest part of it, taking the Boches' hell without being able to fight back.

Even in the midst of trying moments like this there have been humorous sidelights, such, for instance, as the sight of a former hard guy hiding his head under a caisson tarpaulin to escape the leaden hail; and the sight, too, of a little group huddled under a caisson, right against the electric heels of the company's most wicked mule.

And then there was the time the company suffered its first casualties, directly in front of a Red Cross first aid station, in a little village so completely blasted that a road had been built right over the ruins. There was a Knights of Columbus hut near by, and one of the K. of C. men was holding a box of cigars in his hand, giving one each to the soldiers as they passed.

Came a whine and a whee-ee-ee and a terrific crash—and three French soldiers nearby, who were digging stones out of the ruins for a road, went up into the air, arms and legs spread out, helmets flying. Came another crash, directly overhead, and part of the Red Cross station disappeared; and then another, and four men and a horse dropped—the prettiest, finest horse in the company, a blue roan.

One could just catch a glimpse of a helmet knocked off, a bloody head, a torn back, and then the stretcher bearers dashed up from nowhere, placed the men on it and got out. And the K. of C. man in the doorway, with a look of wonderment on his face, still stood there (it had happened so swiftly) with an empty box in his hand and the precious cigars scattered all over the ground. Without any excitement or flurry this time, the men just whipped their animals into a trot and pulled out, adjusting their gas masks as they rode.

In the Night and the Rain

All this hauling and moving is done, in the majority of cases, at night, with the omnipresent rain coming down and being churned into mud by the thousands of vehicles passing and repassing in the blackness. Worse is it when the company is split up, some sections hauling to one battery, some to another, and then meeting again in the darkness. Getting lost is common, the only thing to do then being to find your company yourself, or with the aid of an M.P., or to lay by until daybreak in the hope of getting through safely.

There were times when a shell would drop into the road ahead of the outfit as it was on its way to a battery, necessitating a return to some fork and a few more hours' work. There were occasions when a gas shell would come wandering over stealthily and drop its lethal load into some hollow far from friendly M.P.'s or other methods of warning.

All is not soup and nuts for the ammunition train. It gets it coming and going. But not a man in the ammunition train but will say, if you ask him who has the toughest job in the army: "The Engineers and the doughboys."

COMMANDING THE THIRD ARMY

Signal Corps Photo

Major General Joseph T. Dickman, C.O. of the American forces occupying the Coblence bridgehead, was in command of the 3rd Division at Château-Thierry.

WINTER DAYS ALONG THE RHINE

Although the bridgehead woods are full of rabbits, hare, fox and wild boar, and although their sentinel's fingers itch to pull the trigger on this tempting game, the American military authorities have put into effect a closed season edict. The basis for the order is said to be that the soldiers' rifles carry too far and that some one, soldier or civilian, would be likely to get hurt if the men were permitted to range indiscriminately over the woods.

But old Farmer Hans is sorry, just the same. He claims the rabbits and hare have bred in such prodigious quantities since the beginning of the war that they are likely to ruin his crops next year if some means is not taken to curb them.

A staff car, scooting down from Dierdorf, headquarters of the 3rd Division, to Montabaur, came upon a limping doughboy, with full equipment, making his way laboriously over the icy roadway through the snowy woods. An infantry captain in the car asked the driver to slow down, and inquired of the soldier where he was going. The response was, "Up to join my outfit about 17 kilometers up the line." He had developed sore feet and had fallen out, and had been left far behind.

He was given a lift, and when the village in which his unit was quartered was reached, proud were his hand-waves and amazed were his comrades. "Sure put one over on 'em," he chuckled as he clambered out with his pack on his back (he wouldn't take it off), "but what gets me most is that this is the first automobile ride I've had since I landed—and I had to come to Germany to get it."

Speaking of firsts, they seem to be happening frequently in Germany. One of the most popular is an ice cream shop in Coblenz where many soldiers are tasting their first frozen sweets since their arrival overseas. The confection is an ice rather than ice cream.

A man without a pass—and a good one, too—has no more chance to get around Coblenz than has the ex-war lord to disturb again the peace of Europe. The town is not large, and M.P.'s are many. They rise up out of nowhere, seemingly, in the dark streets, some with fixed bayonets on their rifles, and if you have no permission to be out you join a long, long line that usually comes a-winding through the main thoroughfares about 8 or 9 o'clock (if it happens to be passing when you are stopped, and it usually does), after which follow the usual ceremonies. You join it, and get an opportunity to explain later.

The Rhine has an unusual interest for the Americans, both officers and enlisted men. Even a grizzled top kick was caught gazing reflectively over its waters recently. Perhaps the fact that it was running with a particularly swift current and rising slowly had something to do with it.

Or perhaps his statement clears it up: "Got a home in the good old Arkansas bottoms, boys. Wife and kids there—two of 'em. And if the old Father of Waters is kickin' up like this bird, I ought to be there, that's all."

Snow in the bridgehead has brought out the sleds and skates of the children living in the hills. The sleds are crude, and so are the skates, but they work. And many a fond memory do they bring to the mind of the boy in khaki as he watches the young ones romping and yelling—and beseeching him to try it. He often does, but usually only to the extent of helping them pull their sleds to the top of the slopes or aiding them with a refractory strap.

And the M.P. at the foot of the hill is especially careful in warning passing traffic of the merrymakers' impending descent.

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BOCHE WIRE TAPPERS RUN INTO NEW CODE

Sioux Observer and Receiver Make Things Easy for Gunners

Because of the nature of the country over which American troops fought in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the Germans found it easy at times to cut in on our field telephone wires.

The commander of one brigade of artillery attached to an American division was particularly annoyed by enemy wire-tappers in a heavily wooded section of the Argonne. Code messages from artillery observers were being intercepted by Boche listeners-in, and the commander knew, as all armies know, that no code is impregnable when experts get working on it.

The artillery commander took up with the colonel of one of the line regiments the question of the Huns' wire-tapping activities. And the colonel hit upon an idea.

Two Indians, both of proud Sioux lineage, members of one of his companies, were assigned as telephone operators. One was to go forward with the artillery observer, the other to remain at the brigade receiving end of the wire which the artillery commander was certain the Germans had that day tapped somewhere along the line.

The two Sioux, both intelligent, willing men, were sent for and given instructions. Those instructions were to transmit, in the language of their fathers, all messages given them at their respective posts.

Now, when two Sioux Indians get talking together in their own tongue, what they say sounds very much like code, but isn't. Anyway, it raised hob with the code experts of certain Prussian guard units.

The Sioux stuck on their jobs for three days and nights. They and the artillery commander and their own colonel enjoyed the situation immensely. If the Germans got any fun out of it they kept it to themselves.

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SHEETS AND PILLOWS FOR ARMY ON RHINE

Blankets and Quilts Also Installed at C.-in-C.'s Bidding

There is rejoicing throughout the length and breadth of the American bridgehead at Coblenz.

For the Yank fighting man, from the highest to the lowest, shall have a bed to sleep in; and there shall be sheets and there shall be pillows, and blankets genug, and quilts. Moreover, the fixtures are to be changed as frequently as is necessary for health and comfort.

It all comes from the C.-in-C.'s recent visit to Coblenz. The general arrived so quietly that few were aware of his presence. He made some short trips of inspection. He found that many of the men were billeted in quarters strongly resembling those of wartime—real wartime—days.

Orders were issued to provide every soldier with a bed at once, and this is being done as rapidly as the consequent shifting of the civilian population can be accomplished.

Incidentally, Herr Cootie has suffered one of his heaviest blows, for each khaki fighting man going between sheets can give his clothes a thorough de-lousing the night before.

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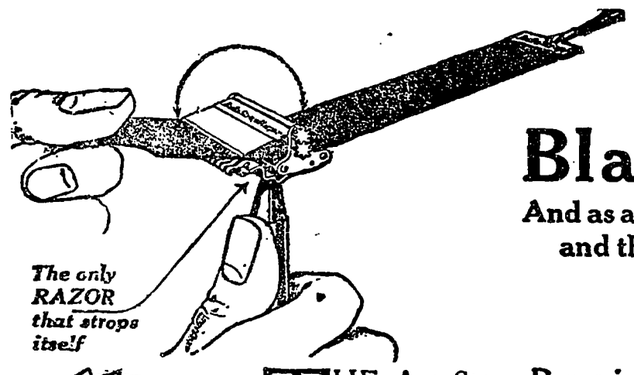

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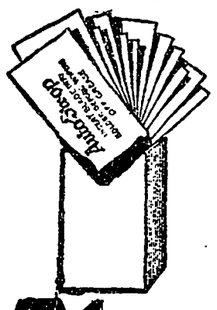

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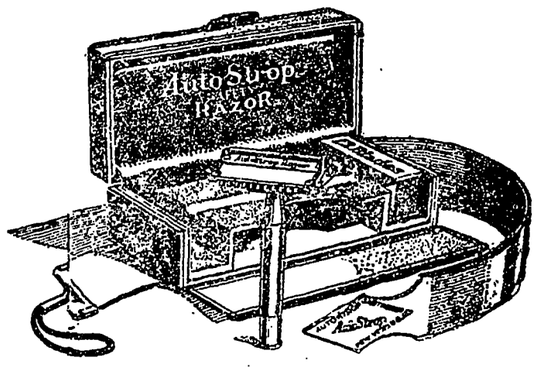

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