



Thrilling Adventure in Belgium

Corsham Guardsman's Escape Through German Lines

A Brave Belgian Boy

Sergeant Major Burke, who is at Corsham with the 3rd Battalion, Scots Guards, gave our correspondent a graphic account of his adventures in Belgium. He said: I have served 10 years in the 2nd Battalion, mostly at Wellington Barracks, and my father (Captain and Quarter-Master Burke) is serving at the front with his regiment, the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. It was on October 4th we left and landed at Zeebrugge. We entrained for Bruges, and then marched to Ostend. Our objective was to get the Germans to send a large force from Marne in a northerly direction to Antwerp. We took a position south of Ghent, and I was sent with two men (scouts) by the Colonel to reconnoitre the country in front of the Battalion, who were entrenched ready to meet the advancing Germans. We remained out two days, and I continually sent in reports to Captain Fox concerning the movements of the enemy. On the third night I sent a man in with a report to that officer to say there were no signs of the enemy anywhere. He returned about seven o'clock saying he had delivered the message, and the Battalion were preparing to remain in the trenches all night. He also brought back some emergency rations to last until next day.

During the night we each took turn to watch the country around the front of the position. On the fourth night I got a cycle and went in towards the Company to report to the Officer that everything was all right, when I found the trenches unoccupied by our men, and a civilian, who spoke to me in broken English, said they had hurriedly left the trenches the previous night and retired in the direction of Ghent. I immediately cycled towards Ghent, thinking I should come in contact with my own men, but on nearing the outskirts of Ghent I was stopped by a civilian and told that the Germans were already in Ghent, and had made their headquarters there. Being alarmed at the situation I was in, I cycled back to where I had left my two men, and on nearing them I was suddenly fired at from the hedge but was missed. Turning round, I saw a German soldier jumping out and run to the centre of the road, and commence firing, but I think I owe my escape to manoeuvring my cycle from side to side. When I reached a bend in the road I was safe. Shortly after, I met my men running towards me. They said: "We shall have to get back quickly, as a large force of Germans are coming in our direction, not more than a mile away." I immediately destroyed the cycle and we got off the road and went across country, but, to our surprise, found we were not more than 20 yards away from the main Antwerp road. We heard voices and the noise of wagons, and I told my men to lie down in the ditch whilst I crept towards the road, and found German infantry, cavalry and cyclists walking towards Ghent. They all looked tired, and as if they were done up from coming a long distance. I went back to my men, thinking to get away from the road, when one of them pointed out to me that a huge dog had jumped through the hedge and was coming to where we were lying. I lay down with them, and I told to lie as if dead. The dog came to us, walked across us several times, licked our hands and faces, and went away, evidently thinking we were dead.

A German officer suddenly came over the hedge and scoured the country with a pair of binoculars, but did not look down to where we lay, partly hidden with leaves and brushwood. We remained some time, and as the noise ceased I crawled to the hedge to see what was happening and found no one in the road. I was on the point of returning when two soldiers came along, and I thought these were acting as a connecting file between the advance guard and the main body, and if we wanted to get away, now or never was the chance. So we crawled along for an hour or two, halting every 100 yards or so, till we found ourselves in a wood, and, feeling tired, we huddled together and fell asleep. We were awakened by a woman, who had a plate of bacon, brown bread, and fruits, and a jug of milk, and as our appetite was good not much was left.

After resting for some time, we made a resolve to try and get into the French lines, which we knew were on our right. On our walking along, a Belgian railwayman, on the State Railway, called me over and said it was useless to go on in the direction we were going, and said it was useless to try and get away in our uniforms, and that we ought to try and get some civilian clothes. So he kindly took us to a gamekeepers' house, with great risk to himself and the keeper, and sowed us a secret hiding-place dug out under a potato field, which he had intended for a shelter for his wife and family from the Germans or shell fire. We soon got in the dug-out, which was very comfortable, the floor and walls being covered with straw. We remained there two days, when a young Belgian boy, not 18 years old, who lived near, heard we were hiding, and came to us. He could speak English, French, and German, and we felt glad that someone could understand us. He told us we should have to stay for a favourable opportunity to get away. Our only hope of getting away was to walk in the direction of Holland and try to cross the frontier line. That night the Belgian boys' schoolmaster, a patriotic old gentleman said it would be no use to try and get to Holland unless we had passports and suggested we should have one each. He took down particulars of all of us, and as the Burgomaster of Ghent was a personal friend of his, said he would beg him to sign and stamp three for us, and promised, we should have them next day.

My assumed name was Francois Bartens, and my men Gustave Plating and Yen Stevens. Next morning we had them, and we were delighted to see every person living near brought several suits of clothes to help us in any way. We soon changed and purposed coming out to make our way to Holland, when news came that we could not move, as a German patrol had called on the gamekeeper to see if he had seen three English soldiers and if he knew where they were hiding. Next morning our Belgian friend came to us and said we must be prepared to start, and another gentleman brought three large handkerchiefs filled with apples, to make us appear refugees. He cycled in front till we crossed the main road at a place called Loochristy, and on reaching the other side he wished us a safe journey to Holland. We passed a small body of Uhians, who took no notice, our disguise being too good for them. We came to the grand canal, and we would have to come in contact with German troops to cross it, as they had two companies guarding the only bridge, and if we showed any fear we should have no mercy. But as we neared the bridge a small boat was rowed from the other side, containing a lot of refugees, and, as luck happened, we offered the boatmen some money and he took us across. We no sooner left the bank, when a troop of cavalry (the Deaths' Head Hussars) came galloping along in the direction we had just come from. On reaching the other side, we made for an inn, and the Belgians found it impossible to cross the frontier without passing Germans, who were guarding the whole line. So, determined to get across, we decided to pass where they were thickest, as we should have more chance.

On nearing Salyett, we saw on the canal bank a lot of German infantry walking up and down and, as we thought it best to avoid them, we made a circle through the village and came out the other side. Just as we turned a corner a cyclist came from a public house and thought we were trying to avoid him. He cycled after us and got in front (I told my men he was coming and not to look round but walk on) when he jumped off and unslung his rifle and shouted in German what to me appeared "halt", covering us with his rifle. Our little Belgian boy stepped forward and spoke to him in German: "Why did he stop us?" He replied, pointing to us "You Engleesh, you Engleesh." The Belgian boy replied we were Belgian nurserymen on our way to Holland to stop our families from going to England and bring them back again, as we knew they would be safe where the German soldiers were. He then demanded to see our passports, which we quickly gave him and after looking at each said we were Belgians and he was sorry he had stopped us, but he only did his duty. He asked us to have a drink, but the Belgian boy said we were teetotalers and did not want to waste time, but to get on as our families might be leaving for England. The soldier tapped me on the back and called "Three cheers for the Kaiser." Of course we three could not speak a word but had our mouths filled with apple and the Belgian did the speaking.

After another long walk, and feeling hungry and tired, we came to the frontier line of two sets of railway tracks and we knew if we once crossed these we would be safe. On reaching the lines we saw a large number of German and Dutch soldiers checking everyone who passed, but fortunately for us a large number of women and children were passing with their goods etc.. And we thought we would separate and try and get through with them, hiding by the wheels of the carts and crawling on the ground. We got through and it took us some time to think we had got out of the German hands. We took train at a small place called Sas-Van-Gent to Ter Nouxen (where we found a British consul lived). We were placed amongst a lot of refugees and marched under an escort of Dutch soldiers to our respective Consuls. On seeing the Consul we begged of him to try and put us on a steamer so we could get back to England and as the steamer was in dock which was leaving that night he got us aboard as stranded British tourists. We stayed in the hold all the time and after two and a half days reached Gravesend.

We reported ourselves to the Colonel and he warmly thanked the Belgian boy for bringing us safely out of the country and was willing to do anything for him, but that brave lad would not accept anything for him but asked to join an English Regiment. This was impossible, but he joined the Belgian Army and is now in France learning to shoot and drill. When efficient he will join one of the first English Regiments that pass, as an interpreter. My two comrades are in London and I am here at Corsham but would not go through the same again for worlds.

Wiltshire Times, Saturday, 12 December 1914