

# NEW BRUNSWICK BOY'S EXPERIENCE UNDER FIRE

Mr. William J. Robinson Tells the Boston Globe a Thrilling Story—Served With British Expeditionary Force.

TOOK PART IN MANY ENGAGEMENTS

Was at Ypres When City Was Shelled by the Huns—How a British Despatch Reader Won the Victoria Cross.

As stated in the Mail yesterday, Private William J. Robinson, of Boston, formerly of this city, has consented to write for the Boston Sunday Globe an account of his thrilling experiences in France and Belgium as a member of the British Expeditionary Force. His first article appeared in the last issue of the Sunday Globe, and makes an interesting narrative.

At the outset he tells how he happened to be in England on a business trip shortly after the war broke out, and decided to do his bit for the Empire. After describing his experiences in the barracks and at the cavalry school, he goes on to say:

## Chosen for the Front.

Two days later word came around that the regiment was going to the front within a week. By that time I was covered with saddle sores and was in agony the whole time. But I decided to go with the regiment somehow and I didn't care how I went. Anything to get out of that riding school.

So I went to a captain and begged and pleaded with him to take me, and he attached me to his personal staff and took me that way.

Up to this time I hadn't thought much of what was going to happen when we got to the front, but what we got just before we sailed certainly made me do some tall thinking.

We were issued with identity discs first. These are hung around the neck and on them were stamped the soldier's name, regimental number and his religion.

Then we were given our pay books and told to write our wills in the back of them. Then the chaplain addressed us and prayed and said that a great many of us would never see our homes again. When this was over I was beginning to think that the riding school might have its advantages after all.

## Only British in Ostend.

We landed at Ostend at 4 o'clock in the morning on the eighth day of October, 1914.

As soon as we were off duty we made for the nearest "estaminet," the usual eating joint of the Flemish town. We were just putting away some eggs, coffee and bread, when the General in command of the division walked in with two of his officers. We jumped to attention and were about to withdraw, but he told us to finish our meal.

We were the only British troops in Ostend and being the first the Belgians in that part of the country had ever seen, we attracted a great deal of attention. Our horses and equipment seemed to amaze them. They would come up and handle the saddlery and ask, "Officer?" and when we told them it was just a trooper's equipment and that all the others were just the same, they would not seem to get over it.

## Leaving in a Hurry.

Although it was just after 4 o'clock in the morning, everybody seemed to be up and at work. The Belgian peasant has no interest in the 8-hour law at all. He works from before daylight until long after dark and I often wonder how on earth they can see what they are doing.

They seem to be very poor and a franc (20c.) means more to them than several dollars would to our farmers here.

We left Ostend about 9 o'clock—and in a hurry. No one seemed to know we were going and all sorts of wild rumors were flying. As a matter of fact we left at 9 in the morning and the Germans were in there at 6 the same night, but we didn't know this until afterwards.

The Belgians were most kind to us and brought us food and wine and would not take any pay.

We did most of our travelling at night, and it wasn't much fun. We were not allowed to show a light of any kind and were even forbidden to

smoke. As I said before, we had no idea where we were going, but were sure we were on our way to meet the Germans and were speculating as to when the meeting would come off.

On the morning of the third day we came to the town of Roulers. A halt was called and we went about making ourselves comfortable. I got into a house where the man spoke English. He had been in business in Antwerp and knew a great many of the firms my father had dealt with. I really felt quite at home.

## First Time Under Fire.

They asked me if I thought they had better move, or whether the Germans would ever get as far as there. I'll never forget how I scorned the idea and assured them that they were as safe as they would be in England.

That afternoon about 4 o'clock the shells of the enemy began to drop into the town and we got out mighty quick. It was my first time under fire and it was far from agreeable.

I had often wondered whether I would be scared or not. Well, I found out then that I certainly was scared. I have often wondered about that family and what they thought of me.

As we were leaving the town we could see the Germans coming over the hill about four miles away. We wondered why we didn't go to meet them. After that we knew we were running away from them instead of going to meet them.

On Oct. 5 we arrived at a little place called Zillebeke, and here we joined up with the 7th Infantry Division. Our chaps went out on patrols every day and occasionally they would run into a German patrol and there would be a scrap.

## Winging a Taube.

While we were at Zillebeke it was decided that all untrained men were to be sent back to finish their training, and it looked very much as if I was going to land back in the riding school after all.

While the matter was still undecided the driver of General Byng's car was killed, so I went to the captain and told him I could drive a car, and I offered my services. He put in a word for me and I was given the car, but only until a regular driver could be secured.

It was while driving this car that I saw the city of Ypres for the first time. There had not been a shell in the place yet and it certainly was a fine old town.

One afternoon I was waiting in the car for some staff officer in the Grand Place, when I heard a lot of shooting and shouting. I looked over in the direction of the noise and saw that some of our troops were all firing into the air. And there above was the first German taube I had ever seen.

He was flying very low and within easy rifle range, so I got excited and dragged out my rifle and began firing at him too. His machine, I heard afterwards, was absolutely riddled with bullets and he was wounded in three places. It was my first shot at a German.

## 700 German Prisoners.

It was in Ypres, too, that I saw 700 of the Prussian Guard brought in, and I must say that they were some of the finest looking soldiers I have ever seen. They were all great big fellows and our infantry chaps looked mighty small beside them.

It was soon after this that the Germans got their forces together and made their first attack on our positions outside of Ypres.

I was in the town when the first shells landed and the panic they created was something terrible to see.

## The Flight From Ypres.

Men, women and children seemed to have but one idea, and that was to get out as quickly as possible. Old women would go staggering along with

their belongings tied in each end of a bed sheet and whole thing slung about their neck. The streets were crowded with them. Men driving pigs and chickens before them and the women leading and carrying children. The roads were littered with dead and dying, wounded horses screaming their horrible scream, and the din was terrible. Shells would burst in the roads choked with people, but the momentary gap would immediately fill the panic-stricken people would sweep over their own dead.

At the time I couldn't seem to realize what was happening. I seemed numb, and I longed to turn and fly with these people.

I remember seeing Gen. Byng coming, and I got out and started the engine. There were two horses standing just behind the car, and as the general went to step in, a piece of shell cut one of these horses clean in two, and its forequarters were blown right through the body of the other horse and we were plastered with their blood. As soon as we got clear of the town we were all right, for the shells were all directed on the town.

## Accomplishing the Impossible.

This was the first battle of Ypres, in which the 7th Division did the impossible. Day and night the Germans poured shells into us and still we held on. Then their artillery would slacken and they would hurl their superior numbers against our "contemptible little army" in a vain endeavor to crush us by sheer weight.

Our machine guns poured steel into them at the rate of 600 shots per minute and they'd go down like grass before the scythe.

And if they did reach our lines at all they never got back to tell about it, for our boys knew that if the Germans broke us here they would make but one stop between there and England and that would be at Calais.

It is my honest opinion that a man in action goes temporarily insane, for were it not so, how could any man continue to work a gun that was sending hundreds of his fellow-creatures into a heap of groaning, squirming death?

That is exactly what was happening. They were climbing over heaps of their own dead, only to meet the same fate themselves. The deeds of valor which escaped notice around Ypres would fill at least one large book.

## Three Belgian Spies.

With the end of the battle we retired to a village called St. Jean Capelle. We had not been in the town three hours before we had three Belgian peasants arrested and convicted of espionage.

There was a windmill on a hill back of the village, and as soon as we entered the village this windmill began to go though there wasn't a breath of air stirring. Investigation showed that two Belgians were signalling to the Germans in this way.

Another case was worse. One of our police stopped an old Belgian with a bag under his arm and asked him what was in it. He replied nothing but a few vegetables. On examination he found it contained two pigeons with messages giving our exact strength. These men were taken to the rear and shot at once.

About this time a new driver was found for the General's car, so that left me without any definite work.

While I was waiting to find out what was to become of me I made a trip in an armored car—that is, I went into action with it once. I was simply acting as spare driver in case anything serious happened. The body of the car is covered with bullet-proof steel, and it is bullet-proof too.

We didn't get as far as some of the cars had been, but far enough to suit me. What with the racket our gun was making and the noise of bullets bouncing off our armor plate, it was "no place for a nervous woman." The hard part for me was the inactivity—simply sitting there and waiting in case I should be wanted.

## Dodged the Riding School

At this time I was advised that the way to escape being sent back to finish my training was to be transferred to the Army Service Corps. When you join you are never sure just what you will be let in for, because an A. S. C. man is eligible for general enlistment and that means that he may be used for any branch of the service when he is needed.

It became known that I could ride a motorcycle and so I was made a spare rider to a machine gun section. These machines are motorcycles with a side car attached in which there is a little bucket seat for a gunner and a machine gun.

One night we were called to take four of the guns to the trenches in a hurry.

## Through Hell-Fire Corner.

I had had some thrilling rides in my time, but I never imagined any-

thing to equal this one. Eventually we reached the place on the Menin road known as hell-fire corner and I think the name must have been given it from its condition that night.

As the star shells would go up the whole place would be almost as light as day. The Germans were shelling the road and the air was filled with all kinds of missiles. That road was literally a death-trap and how so many came out without harm is one of the mysteries of war.

Our officer came dashing back and told us to cover the road where it led out from the German trenches.

## Mown Down in Hundreds.

We sat there for over two hours before we saw any signs of activity at all, but when it did come it came with a rush. Hundreds of Germans seemed to rise from nowhere, and that road was literally crammed with them.

Dick, the gunner, opened on them at the first sign, and the machine guns from our trenches were pouring it into them too. They went down in hundreds and while our fire checked them

somewhat, still they came on. It was certainly a terrible feeling to be pouring bullets into the Germans and to see them still coming on.

After several minutes of this the whistles blew for "cease fire," and our infantry jumped the parapet and went after them with the bayonet.

They broke the attack right there, and more than that, they took two lines of German trenches and held them until night, when they got orders to retire to their original position.

## A Wonderful Incident.

A few days after this an incident occurred that was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened. Volunteer dispatch riders for "dangerous work" were called for. About 18 offered themselves, and all were accepted. A dispatch was to be carried about two miles along a road constantly swept by German fire.

The first man was given a copy of the dispatch and started out. He was soon out of sight. We waited a certain length of time for a signal that he had arrived, and then called for

"number two." He started out, but we saw him go down before he had gone 100 yards.

Then number three started. It was pitiful to watch those poor chaps. As a man saw his turn would be next I could see him nervously working on his machine. He'd prime the engine, then open and close the throttle several times—anything to keep himself busy.

## The Luck of Number Seven.

Six of these fellows went down in less than half an hour. "Number Seven" was a young fellow whose name I do not know, but I wish I did for he was certainly the nerviest man I ever saw.

"Number Seven" was hardly out of the officer's mouth before he had his dispatch and was on his way. About five minutes later the signal came that the dispatch had been delivered.

My officer told me afterward that the French General to whom he handed the dispatch had taken the medal off his own breast and pinned it on (Continued on page 3.)

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